



Research Paper

Veiling and Unveiling Desire: The Use of Burkha as a Motif in the Bollywood Movie ‘Lipstick Under My Burkha’

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ABSTRACT: *This cine-text probes into the complex world of female desire where women are circumscribed by the hegemonic masculinity but dreams of a double life hiding behind the veils. The social norms and sanctions curb the desire of these women to become ‘the women they really are’ but they tend to be accountable to the socio-sexual subjectivity which impinges on them in such a way as to stick to the notion of being the ‘second sex’ (Beauvoir) making them culturally dependent and helpless. Instead of leading the lives the way they want to, they become trapped in the normative conception of being women in the patriarchal society and the veil is a reification of this.*

The director examines this devastating critique of female desire, showing how women untangle themselves from the web of artificial restrictions of gender roles that conceals their ‘real self’. This movie empowers women to take control of their lives throwing away the socially inveigled veils of invisibility constraining their freedom. This paper is an attempt to critically analyse the movie and identify the counter hegemonic force that women would require to bring a change in the structure rather than hide behind the veils of oppression.

The movie courageously and openly discusses women’s quest for identity by challenging the patriarchy and the nuances of female desire seeking freedom- social and sexual which is considered a taboo. The contradictions proliferate especially in an Indian scenario. The director has made a bold attempt in displaying the lives of four women from different sections of the society who belong to different age groups, follow different religions but all these distinctiveness welds them together in reinventing womanhood.

KEYWORDS: *feminism, oppression, patriarchy, identity, desire*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In ‘Lipstick Under my Burkha’, Alankrita Shrivastava successfully captures the reaction of a society built on a patriarchal mindset where male supremacy feels violated when they find out how women tend to behave like women when they are not clad in the burkha of social and ideological constructs. “Women are trapped in cultural ‘values’ that offer no scope for individualizing the self.” (Kannan) This perspective on women’s reality was, however, banned in India, Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in a letter wrote, “The story is lady oriented their fantasy above life. There are continuous sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography and a bit sensitive touch upon one particular section of society, hence film refused under guidelines (sic).” (Lohana)

This paper attempts to go through each character portrayal to establish the displacement of women by the reification of burkha, the veil which acts as a link between the phenomenal world and the imaginary world the women traverse. The innermost desires and fantasies of these women are confined within the veil which is used as a motif to show the concealment and revelation. Random as they seem, the four women lead separate lives but follow the same pattern revealing their propensity for freedom.

The setting is a small village in Bhopal chosen rightly to show how women are treated in an Indian context. “The story of women in India in general depicts a continued one of exploitation and discrimination. Society refuses to recognize their potentialities, hard work and contribution to the welfare of society. They are called the ‘fair sex’ and are shown ‘unfair’ treatment.” (John) Woman is always categorised as a mother, a wife or a widow always in connection with man but woman as an individual gets hardly portrayed and this gets infused in the mind of women that they are ‘the other’, inferior to men.

II. ANALYSIS

The movie revolves around the narration of an erotic pulp fiction 'Lipstick Dreams' and the protagonist of the novel Rosy becomes the secret admiration of a 55 year old widow Usha Parmar. She is the owner of the Hawaii Manzil, an elderly matriarch who is constantly reminded of her age by being called 'Buaji' by the residents. Physically and mentally this gets infused into her psyche that she wears cheap cotton sarees, a full-sleeved white blouse and become a motherly figure to people around her. The residents respect her for her piousness of attending religious ceremonies which is expected of her age and for her deftness in not selling the manzil to be built into a mall. However, deep inside she pretends to be the Rosy, who has feelings for her swimming instructor, the only one who calls her name and sees her as an individual rather than a gender role. The late night talks in the bathroom, flirty telephone chats and a masturbation scene show the distressing state of a widow who puts on the veil of a Buaji and restrains her desires. The unveiling happens when she dresses up to woo the instructor only to receive the blow of consciousness from the so-called patriarchal society.

Shirin is a married woman, a mother of three who is an embodiment of Indian women whose duties are child bearing, child rearing, being a submissive wife to a male chauvinist husband who demands sex and performs it mechanically without any emotional involvement. She undergoes abortions and takes birth control pills. She urges her husband to use condom when she contracts uterus infection but in vain. She has no control over her body as he enters her as and when he feels like showing his authority and ownership. She wears the burkha to transform into a secret sales girl who delivers products door to door with much enthusiasm. She earns for her family and is proud of the fact that she excels in what she does but hesitates to disclose this to her husband. When he finds about her job he cruelly punishes her by raping and silencing her saying that she is a woman.

Leela is an unmarried woman who has an affair with a photographer but her mother forces her to get married to a financially stable man who promised to buy her mother a house. She is ambitious and passionate, her sexual trysts with her boyfriend shocks her mother, her fiancé and even her boyfriend who says what she all ever want is sex. When she finally makes up her mind to marry her fiancé and wear the veil of repression her boyfriend comes back out of envy and not love-showing his supremacy and authority. Leela realises her helplessness as a woman when she exclaims "You know what our problem is? We dream too much." (Kumra)

Rehana is a college going girl, idolizes Miley Cyrus, likes to go out with friends and party but her parents have a patriarchal mindset that puts a ceiling on her teenage explorations by making her wear the garb of restriction- a burkha. Born and brought up in a conventional muslim family, she is not allowed to mingle with people, or dance at wedding ceremonies; she is rebuked by her mother who follows strict orders of her husband. When she withdraws to her room, she feels liberated, becomes her real self who dances, sings, have posters of musicians who she adores which shows her concealed world within the world. She is forced to live a traditional life sewing burkhas and wearing burkhas. But this becomes a blessing in disguise when she uses it to unleash her hidden desires. In college she finds her voice when she protests against the society lashing out loud and clear. "There's no end to rules in a girl's life. Don't sing, don't dance, you'll shame us. Don't walk like that, people will stare. Keep your eyes down, what will people say? Don't breathe; your heaving chest will attract attention! Don't wear lipstick, you'll have an affair! Don't wear jeans, you'll create a scandal! I want to ask the authorities, what exactly will happen? Why does our freedom scare you so?" (Borthakur)

III. CONCLUSION

The four women in the movie are identifiable and relatable; they are the women we see around us leading double lives in the metaphorical burkhamouflaged and forced to manifest their allegiance in a society tinged with patriarchal values. The climax of the movie befits the entire plot when women no longer fear being themselves, as they smoke, read and laugh they become one – the woman. This sisterhood and finding their voices to fight back the social subordination imposed by the patriarchy, realising it as a social construct which needs to be rewritten stating that women are no longer their property to be controlled or exploited, becomes the counter hegemonic force for women.

"Women in patriarchy were regarded as socially, intellectually and physically inferior to men, a consequence of various discriminatory, sexist practices, practices which illegitimately presumed that women were unsuited for or incapable of assuming certain positions. This belief was fostered not only by oppressive external constraints but also by women's own compliance with and internalization of patriarchal sexual stereotypes." (Gunew) There are several examples of such women in the movie like Rehana's mother who believes women's position is secondary to that of men, the lady who seeks alliance from young 30 year old brides for her 56 year old widower brother, Leela's mother whose solution to have financial security is to get her daughter married. These women are caught in the cobweb of patriarchy losing their individualities in the whole process of assimilation.

The systematic propaganda the patriarchy imposes on women cannot be better explained than how Kate Millet does in 'Sexual Politics'. "It is interesting that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning." (Millet) When women directors like Shrivastava make such films the female spectators become the social audience as Annette Kuhn distinguishes 'in taking part in the social act of consuming representations, a group of spectators becomes a social audience' (Kuhn) where real and reel life becomes legitimate points of intervention. "For the feminist critique is a critique of culture at once from within and from without, in the same way in which women are both in the cinema as representation and outside the cinema as subjects of practices." (Lauretis) Shrivastava has cleverly utilised the veil as a motif to establish the dual life of women to go beyond patriarchally defined ideologies and perspectives.

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