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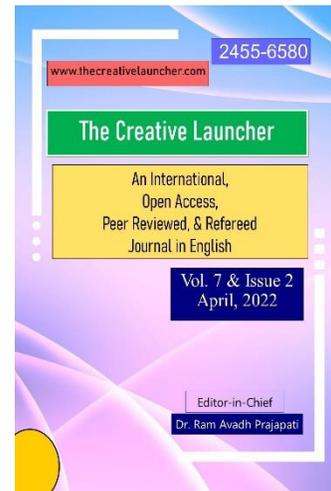
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☞ Research Article

Oh! Guileless Passion! Understanding Indian women's ambivalent sexuality and gender performances post Feminism in India

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Abstract

Cinema is a powerful archive; an extension of the human perspective, where the nuanced human existence is dissected and laid bare for the spectators to find their realities. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) does that. The four women characters coming from lower-middle-class families of Bhopal, India, are shown to be trying to live their lives on their own terms; but the fetters of norms, gender regulations and patriarchy binds their wings. Foucault further claims that “a norm belongs to the arts of judgment and that although a norm is related to power, it is characterized less by the use of force or violence than by, as Ewald puts it, “an implicit logic that allows power to reflect upon its strategies and clearly define its objects. This logic is at once the force that enables us to imagine life and the living as objects of power, and the power that can take 'life' in hand, creating the sphere of the bio-political”. A melody as honest as this one requires a leitmotif - Passion. As the movie unfolds on screen that makes the viewer recall a vague sense of doomsday, the lyrics in the background confess, “Passion, you ruined my life without ever asking me first.” Deep in the confines of a beauty parlour, one woman tells another, “You know what our problem is? We dream too much.” The film closes with four women marvelling at erotica, where the oldest tells the youngest to have the courage to dream, even as her demeanour sits heavy, recovering from shame. Female Passion (sexual, emotional, career-driven etc.) in a patriarchal, small-town circumstance gives each woman the courage to come alive - and yet, each time they do, Reality shakes the dreams out of their eyes, making them die a little more inside. As with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the confines of a woman’s identity allow her acceptance in society, where she navigates her secret desires in utter isolation (i.e. turning into a symbolic Mr. Hyde) now and then, but always returning to her “respectable face” (i.e. the symbolic Dr Jekyll) until it becomes impossible to separate the two, leading to her downfall. This ambivalence in female identity then seems deeply rooted in a culture of shame, where more “feminist” desires may only be pursued by being “shameless” - she steps forwards in the community to enact the performance of a lifetime (her oppression is, literally, a life-sentence) as she slips from one persona (an actor’s mask) to the next, finding and losing herself in the stolen moments between them. The film then appears as a commentary on sustenance - the Female, in less-privileged societies, helpless in their despair, may only come alive in split persona. Their stories are all the same. Their lipstick (self-expression, autonomy) is hidden away under their (both symbolic and literal) *burkas*.

Methodology: Textual analysis of the film through the lenses of Feminism and understanding how Gender roles are negotiated to dream and renegotiated to confines of acceptance.

Keywords: Gender Performance and Undoing, Feminism, Culture, Sexualities, Patriarchy, Symbolic, Dualities

Introduction

India's history of women's movements and feminism has dragged itself through an impressive timeline of doing and undoing of its constituents. One might recall the status of Indian women under the Brahmo and Arya Samaaj; dating back as early as the 17th and 18th centuries in Travancore-Cochin Regions, as well as the states of Mysore and Baroda, where women were extremely learned and employable with the option of free-choice marriages. The permeability of Western Feminist Movements later in time led to a careful re-examination of what autonomy signified, and how gendered the conventional, traditionalist social structures have always been - women facing natural disadvantage in every last one of them.

Yet, despite the recent developments in Feminism and its many phases, the language we speak of Female Liberation, remains inherently Masculinist. The lifestyle or practices recommended under this Liberation aren't culturally appropriated - an anomaly that is all too visible in India's treatment of content that hints at exploring the rich, passionate inner lives of women, but with infinite stealth and caution. The focus remains on making them likable, instead of making them real. Additionally, there is a noticeable disconnect between Urban and Rural realities; the lack of information and patriarchal hierarchies towering over Women's expression and identities, as it becomes impossible for her to exist as an individual outside the definitive constraints of her relationship with Men (she's always someone's daughter, girlfriend, mother, sister etc.) and consequently, her relationship with her assigned gender. Liberation is not quite the luxury non-men can afford without succumbing to social seclusion or a vicious circle of shame that is then transferred from one generation to another; in the same way that folklore is kept alive in communities. A tale as old as time retold over and over again in new jackets - and yet, the rot at the center of each story remains the same: Patriarchy, which affects certain genders a lot more than others.

The gaping hole between Idealized Notions and the practice of women's liberation in India is crucial to the theme of Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, which attempts to explore the maddening duality of four women's lives in a modest neighbourhood in Bhopal. Aside from its four protagonists, the film is wrought with the appearances of several other female characters who observe, aid and critique the leading ladies - sometimes scandalized by their actions, other times, with scornful contempt of their choices. It is an extensive portrayal of how gendered violence can take several forms in society; from the repression of sexual autonomy, quashing one's sense of self-preservation, to manipulative gaslighting and molestation (case in point: marital rape). The debate about birth control and how family planning is often solely focused towards a singular sex is also touched upon; alongside several nuances of heterosexual relationships and their implications for the female counterpart. The four protagonists, at different walks of their life, are constantly in conversation with each other: the passionate spinster, the sexually-empowered bride, the weathered wife, and the do-gooder widow - redefining women's relationships with themselves, even when they do not pause long enough to explore the depths of each other's despair.

Robert Louis Stevenson puts forth the idea of moral binaries (Good and Evil) coexisting within the same person in his much-acclaimed literary work, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

The story is one of ambivalent identity; Dr Jekyll is a smart fellow with an incredible reputation in society who has a penchant for the dualities of human psychology, which leads him to explore moral ambiguity and freedom as an alter ego: Mr Hyde. The latter is guiltless, shrewd and whimsical, with no remorse even in murder or violence - the very contradiction of Dr Jekyll, and yet, they are both the same person.

With reference to the paper, Stevenson's characters, Jekyll and Hyde are in direct relation to the line of segregation between traditionalist and modern expressions of women and their lives; seeking to further explore and explain this difference - how self-identity, empowerment and equality becomes a misnomer in the context of such women, despite the existing provisions of education and lawful protections against violence. A community cannot advocate for their recognition in society if they fail to recognize themselves in the first place - who they *are* outside of who they are *forced to be* - and consequently, who they would like to *become*.

Characters

With the presence of a consistent, overarching narration in its background, the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* begins on the note "In every girl's life comes that moment, when she craves to become a woman." Is it then hinting at perhaps a *tone*? Is it foreshadowing; a prequel to what this "becoming" would entail? The script draws a metaphor comparing the omniscient protagonist Rosy's "aching youth" to thorns, speaking of internal pain that scars her insides. It is interesting then, how the metaphor stretches on to include pain of several kinds as the narrative blossoms into a complete story; a line of rude awakenings that are integral to the process of becoming a woman; in a society that is still steeped in patriarchal norms despite feminism having touched the Indian soil; where Grassroot emancipation remains an aspiration. As the film defines its protagonists, it becomes clear how women belonging to this segment can neither comprehend their sovereignty and voice their individuality, nor grapple with the elite feminism (March 5th 2017, Is # feminism, elitist in India?) at any age whatsoever - since the trauma of "becoming" a woman, learning to subdue desire with shame with the knowledge of how 'unbecoming' they are - is ever-present. The characters introduced, Leela, Rihaana, Usha and Shirin all un-become in the eyes of their surrounding spectators, thus undoing their gender performances.

The act of disassociating from her very primal personhood and being split into a kaleidoscope of blacks and whites is an act of un-becoming - integral to her transformation into a Being with existential rights and then perhaps a woman of her own making. It is to learn that certain things (in this case, her true nature) are not acceptable to society at large, and must thus be kept under wraps. This understanding is quite innate, and far from academic, since literature such as Betty Friedman's *The Feminine Mystique* is inaccessible to this segment; however, their questions, while ignorant and diverse, are not far from the typical American middle-class women, asking themselves 'Who Am I?' (*Feminine Mystique*) - this urging of *who am I* and *what I want* and *what I desire* compel these women of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* to *hamartia* - the Famed Shakespearean Fatal Flaw in every Hero that eventually leads to their downfall. For Rihaana, it's her shoplifting, for Leela, it's her indecisiveness, for Shirin, it's her silence, and for Usha, it's her sexual desires.

The film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is but a reflection of the lower-middle-class women of Bhopal, a city in the state of Madhya Pradesh, India. The lenses that view it are often with good humour, solidarity and taste; in an attempt to place an aspiration to emulate, as well as a reality to identify with. The middle class of India is 28% of the total population of which a total of 14% is the lower middle class. This lower middle class has its own set of patriarchies and gender norms. *Lipstick Under my Burkha* is a story of four women, two belonging to the Muslim community and the other two to the Hindu community, all residing as rentees in a large dilapidated house belonging to Usha, one of the leading ladies of the film. Usha is a widowed matriarch, living with her extended family of nephews and their families, while Leela lives there with her mother. Shirin lives with her three young children and her husband works in Saudi Arabia; he visits Shirin for three months a year. Rihana lives with her parents. Her father runs a tailoring shop where she and her mother lend hands. Leela works in a 'beauty parlour' and her mother works as a nude model for artists.

The characterization of each woman is a structure that takes into consideration a number of factors; her age, interests, background and nature. This is where the film differs drastically from its Bollywood counterparts, the heroines are not treated with the performative masculinization of "leading ladies" and nor are they given the same stardom. Instead, they seem closer home, identical to a family member whose grief or vulnerability brings a different, raw sense of ache to the viewer. It makes dramatization or usage of the camera unnecessary; every scene is too real, too jarring, too static as if in a standstill; the delivery makes for a pause in motion.

i) Rihana:

The youngest starts the show; as the act of stealing seems an easier alternative to having to work, pay and fight your way for things one may never achieve in the end, despite their efforts - as some circumstances are tougher than others. Rihana's shoplifting is a reflection of how she adjusts to the intolerance in her world - if one considers the lipstick as symbolic of her freedom - the opening scene establishes that she cannot buy it, or directly have access to it in the first place - she has to *steal* it. Much like her freedom in real life, she lives only in "stolen moments" - her theft is not just lipsticks and boots but also the aspirations that come along with it. Rihana's personal "potion that aids her transformation" from Jekyll to Hyde, is her burqa.

The irony lies in the piece of clothing both protecting her from the wrath of society; acting as an instrument for her to shape shift easily into a different person, while also, simultaneously suppressing her true colours that dull under the unassuming plain blacks. Which is perhaps why, on being exposed as a shoplifter and called a "Fake" later - this demands more thought into what this pretense even signifies - as she is her true self only outside of her confines, (just as Mr Hyde parades the streets at night, only to return to his "nicer" persona by daylight) and yet, she lives in a diaspora; neither here nor there (neither accepted by conservative society nor by the modern one).

The confines of her little room aren't large enough to fit her Hannah-Montanaeque aspirations, whereas the outside world is too large for her to navigate. She dances her frustration out because Miley Cyrus (the millennial symbol for the sexually liberated artist) is an aspiration/someone she hopes to be; a motivation that helps her cope, as well as an act of rebellion

against her confines. Jeans, for her, are also a symbol and not merely an item of clothing. Her ideological message comes from a place of lived experiences - because, as with her peers, jeans aren't something she grew into, it's a choice she made.

Rihana goes through her college life being given an opportunity in female solidarity with the "popular girls" — which is broken apart because of men again. The instance of women being segregated from each other due to men being taught to either view each other as competition or police each other on behalf of that patriarchy makes solidarity in their own lives impossible. She has to be “not like other girls” to appeal to them or catch their attention; and yet, being different and standing out is glaringly objected to in her world. She must blend in, make herself as insignificant as possible so that people around her might feel comfortable.

ii) Leela:

Speaking of blending, there could perhaps never be a tragedy greater than a bright presence having to dull down due to their surroundings. Passionate, chirpy and opinionated, Leela's introduction makes the observer feel this will be the story of some airheaded girl madly in love - one is promptly taken aback when the “couple in love” turns out to be an affair. In a way, Leela's story speaks of the way a woman's societal reputation is still determined by her affiliation with the male presence in her life. For a young bride, the normally vibrant prospects of weddings, the dreaminess of its grandeur is largely missing from Leela's eyes - for they only light up when she's asked to be known or understood; when she's guided in passions instead of being held back on them.

This is a story with darker roots: her engagement lacks the naiveté of a new bride - the image associated with her is far more gritty, her steel-will and passion showing despite her obvious obligations. When Leela's lover calls her *baby doll* while pounding her in secret, it is vaguely reminiscent of Shirin being treated as just an instrument for sex; and makes one wonder if she ends up with the same fate. Her mother, in the consequent scene, “dolls her up” to be married as she seems to be the ticket to both their freedoms. This emulates a mechanical approach to how her life is going to be — she's either the property of one man or another, while she's so desperately trying to be her own, first.

Leela absent-mindedly caressing her ring at the dead of the night reminds one of prominent feminist writer and poet, Adrienne Rich's “*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*”; the lines “*when aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / still ringed with ordeals that she was mastered by~*” implying the lie of a happy marriage, and the laying down of female exhaustion. Her spirit is mastered by the reins of patriarchy - all packed into that wedding band which sits so heavy on her third finger, both literally and metaphorically entangling her in a structure full of limitations and rules and binding promises which an otherwise free-willed girl would never willingly tread into.

While Leela's peers believe her “choices” are many, she knows how cumbersome that decision is - the shelter comes with golden cages and lack of personhood; whereas the adventure comes with poverty, and... the lack of personhood. The illusion of choice is ever-present; the destination remains unchanged; she has to be dumbed down or dulled to fit in somewhere, she suffers misbehaviour and violence at the supposedly “loving hands of a lover.” Leela's life rings true for

most women regardless of social status or positioning; she is policed by her mother too, a personal wound perpetuating the culture of violence and trauma passed on from mother to daughter. Her isolation, much like the other three, is a #felt moment - she rides home on her scooty with quiet tears.

iii) Shirin:

The most jarring factor of each story is perhaps how each woman is blindingly aware of her subordination - this awareness cannot be credited to modernity alone, it is also a result of small acts of courage that bring momentary relief. This is Shirin's story in clarity and detail - labelled "small acts of courage" that keep her alive.

Shirin Aslam is the literal hawker who lives her Hyde persona selling dreams from door to door. Here, as a saleswoman, she seems to have a solution for everything, a new dream to sell every day - while her own life remains a waking nightmare. It is established early, unlike her other peers, that Shirin is a trifle reserved, withdrawn and gently traditionalist in her own way. She isn't unconventionally loud or flashy - she is plain, quiet and unassuming, till her wits and skill-set are brought into question. The viewer catches on to the fact that Shirin is smart; smart enough to know, while selling her products, that she sells an aspiration, and thus must transform into the part. Smart enough to get promoted, earn money, and simultaneously balance the juggle of personalities, three kids and a husband.

In a brilliant scene where she's selling pest control, her customer (a woman) points the spray-gun at her husband's picture hung on a wall, (*does it remove all kinds of pests?*) almost implying that power dynamics and the loathing is the same everywhere, in all strata of society. However, Shirin subtly dodges the question saying her "pest" stays under control even without the gun - she is smart enough to know her actual trauma would dull the alluring sparkle of the brightest of her marketing plans. It is then ironic how, soon after the viewer comes to realize that she can sell the obscurest of products to strangers, and yet cannot sell the idea of her well-being, or a condom, to her husband.

The viewer gets a glimpse of her inner turmoil - a glimpse reserved not for the customers, but only for the external audiences to understand her story better: she comes to clean cockroaches but there are a few inside her bag as well, right beside her phone. It implies how she carries the same pain, secrets with her, hidden away from view. Her life is far from a lottery: she's policed about everything by male highhandedness: *don't worry about money or rent; don't worry about wearing the pants in the relationship, don't buy a condom*. In this story, there is always an angry man in the house, which almost makes the viewer wonder who her three children would grow up to be. Despite the ample presence of sex, Shirin's story is heartbreakingly traumatising to witness - it isn't consensual sex, it is jarring rape that treats her as a non-person entity.

iv) Usha:

Enter now, in a feminist film, the picture of a matriarch: Usha (*aka, bua-ji*) is a widow but also the decision-maker of *Hawa-Mahal*. The viewer's expectations from Ratna Pathak's character must then be quite similar to the conventional expectations from a peppery old woman; which she quickly shatters as the viewers now recognize The Erotica Reader's voice. Owing to her age, Usha

does make off-colour remarks; women giving up work after marriage, little tidbits about body-negativity - yet, even at her age, she too is on the receiving end of the same structural prejudice. Her encounter with an old man at the electricity booth speaks for how men are treated with respect to romantic affiliations - "*he has his entire life ahead of him*" is a qualifying statement for potential partners who could be a decade younger; as compared to her life that ended at 55.

Affiliation, Identity, Individuality - these are concepts central to the themes of Lipstick under my Burkha women. In Usha's case, a defining moment in her life is recalling her name; the act of gradually erasing it from everyone's tongues is also erasing who she was as an autonomous individual, for she is now simply someone's something, a subpar identity and a role she plays to perfection. Her identity is no longer her primary instinct, and she has to search for the name she hasn't been called for years - as well as the person behind that name who has become all but a stranger and is recognizable no more.

Usha's discovery of masturbation, and her journey of phone sex touches a personal nerve as people begin to envision older women as sexual beings too; the story evolves as sex-positive behind heavy curtains and mobile towers. Her beginnings are humble - there is no manual on how to do it right, especially when the community monitors her every move and feels entitled to her time. The moment that role is broken, she is kicked out of her own home and society, implying the fall of the matriarch by the male gaze. Pursuing one's dreams and discovery sounds like bad news here. Occasionally she pauses to look at the day when she got here (her snapshot as a bride) when she was once young, and who was foreshadowed by who people wanted her to be; in a split second, the viewer feels a little twitch of emotion; less ownership, more nostalgia. The quotas for desirability are clear, even if her memory of her name might be foggy: it takes her a long time to muster the courage to be able to make that first call because she is reminded of who she is in the mirror. Finally, when she musters up the courage to make that call, she introduces herself as Rosy; someone who exists only on that telephonic dimension and is everything Jaspal wants her to be. Somebody who isn't bound by age or the nuances of society; here where everything is allowed, because imagination is the only limit.

Rosy, who talks about Lipstick Dreams; dreams that teach women to be bold. Dreams that are also shattered when the matriarch falls; removed from the very Castles in The Air (Hawa Mahal) that she had so firmly protected all her life.

The institution of Dreaming, too, is a frivolous luxury that modern feminist terminology often confuses with Strength or Ambition. Much of women's representations in media, and discussions of those representations are based around references to the past; the history of what it meant to be a woman in a certain timeline and how those categories have undergone transformations over time.

The question of who is the Ideal Liberated Woman seems redundant then; for Indian Society ponders more upon what an Ideal Woman Isn't. At the beginning of the film, the protagonists are revealed in all their duality; the persistent theme of homelessness for each of these women is laid bare; so is the question of their true natures. As the film progresses, they keep re-veiling themselves

(or veiling themselves again) implicitly showing wasted potential. This may be linked to Feminist Exclusions; a character like Shireen would perhaps never hypothetically call herself a feminist, and yet, her acts of rebellion, sustenance and solidarity hint at the very ideals she wouldn't normally be quick to embrace. This brings one to the question; what has Feminism got to do with Modernism; and how far is subaltern skepticism of western and global concepts linked to "modernity" as compared to more "traditionalist" ways of life? Is the reluctance to accept a new method because they can identify early how it does not fit, or because of natural disdain or scorn? How much of Modern Feminism is even "affordable" to this section; is it too far-fetched, too unrealistic a dream?

To understand this, one must take a quick peek at Abraham Maslow's theory. Maslow's five-tier pyramid classifies a bottom-to-top hierarchy of needs; clearly stating how an individual must first satisfy their deficiency needs (physiological, safety, love and esteem) before they can reach their growth needs (self-actualization). It is understood that any upwards progress might often be disrupted due to failure to satisfy one of the deficiency needs. Interestingly, the four women of Lipstick under my Burkha seem to represent one tier each of the D-needs; Rihana, a teenager who needs her family's financial support, thus is stuck at a physiological tier; Leela, while financially independent, is stuck at the Love and Belonging needs; Shireen, while married with kids, is raped in her own home, thus stuck at Safety needs, and Usha, despite being a matriarch, struggles with self-esteem.

It is unrealistic, then, how any of them could reach for the self-actualization needs at the very pinnacle of Maslow's pyramid, where Feminism sits on a throne and beckons at all the folk down below - an aspiration quite visible, encouraging them to dream, and yet completely, realistically out of reach. Interestingly, the deprivation of these basic needs is an outcome of patriarchy as the film repeatedly emphasises, which, as postcolonial Feminism points out, one can only fight once these women (and everyone else in the vicinity) reaches the growth needs.

The initial tryst with the destiny of the Male Gaze in cinema was first introduced by Laura Mulvey; the concept of being watched onscreen; followed by John Berger, who famously wrote, *"Men look at Women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women themselves."* Margaret Atwood, in her work, *"The Robber Bride"* once expressed how every seemingly independent female decision is assumed to be a catered male fantasy. She writes,

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. Margaret Atwood,

Subversion under Patriarchy can have many metaphors: the Trenches of Male Gaze being one of them. You may choose your stair, but you're always beneath the ground: a brilliant example would be Shireen's husband's affair. The degree of this relationship is unclear, but the viewer sees enough of his misogyny and can pick up on his anger issues to know that he wouldn't drastically change for another woman. The game of courting seems one he plays quite well, however, even that appears shrouded in lust instead of real dependability. Consequently, in the case of Rihana, her boyfriend had already ruined her friend's life; the issue of unsafe abortion has been discreetly addressed on screen. Mistresses and wives, lovers and leavers; the nature of heterosexual relationships, and consequently the man's relationship with the woman is never bereft of some form of threat. Some kind of submission.

The need for complete emancipation from this Gaze is a lofty goal, dreamt of, and seldom fulfilled. Often, it is what places itself on the periphery of every female interaction in the film where they size each other up to assess where each belongs. There is not as much *venom* in this glance as there is *vulnerability*; this quick once-over each woman does to create a mental checklist of personal shortcomings. This experience, too, unconscious at best, is dictated to non-men by the male gaze; when Bollywood once sung "*aap ki nazron ne samjha pyaar ke kaabil mujhe*" - where does one look for the intrapersonal gap between the consciousness? Where does an external opinion start to become an internal one?

When facing a ban upon its initial trailer release, in addition to a censorship certificate approval that took six months to materialize (note: for a film with limited to zero pornography in it, while films like *Dirty Picture* and *Kabir Singh* pass the test) the positioning of its context as "anti-women" versus the global appreciation it received from people across different cultures brings one at a crossroad: how "tolerant" is it that free cinema allows the objectification of the female character as long as the spectatorial position (apparatus theory) is Male; however, when the Female is switched as a Subject from an Object, such perspective or exploration is deemed suspicious and morally scandalous? The rampant controversy surrounding *Lipstick Under My Burkha's* media image would then have one wary about X-rated content, but audiences who hoped to watch some porn were severely disappointed. Quote, a review that called its direction quite tasteless; "The biggest disappointments of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* are its sex scenes. Devoid of any heat, photographed in the most unimaginative manner, and 'calculated' to a fault, the sex scenes in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* have the power to wean both women and men off sex," In an interview with Anupama Chopra, Director Alankrita Shrivastava mentions, "...there has always been enough sexual content anyway... but in this case it just wasn't catering to the male gaze at all."

There seems to be an ever-present pressure for female characters to be complete or perfect in some way; *Lipstick under my Burkha* wasn't the first of its kind in terms of being a "lady-oriented film" - however, it was one of the few that has been called out for it; presumably so, because its characters are complex individuals, much like *Real Women with actual flaws* who make mistakes and harbour human failings and tendencies - which is drastically unlike the prop-like/pedestal stance that Indian society rushes to impose on a "good, sanskari aurat." This same pressure to be doll-like,

perfect without a crease, contributes to a massive gap in self-identity and self-image, often ending up in self-punishment and guilt: an ordeal the film has aimed to break. Being herself in such a society feels like an act of rebellion that scares and scandalizes people, eyebrows raised: she always owes someone something, it's either her parents or society in general, who often make her question her authenticity as a woman due to certain gendered roles in society. Not performing them is resultant in a certain fall from grace. Even in the scene of marriage, it's like her sexual autonomy belongs to her man. In the scene where Leela and Rihana dance together; the treatment of women across cultures is just the same; this cuts across religion and gender inequality. There is much terror in the utterance of such *Lipstick waale sapnein* - her favourite dreams are waking nightmares for other people.

The film is punctuated by moments of female solidarity, which on a broader perspective are both separated and yet so intrinsically joined with each other. Every time the woman gathers any courage, it is hammered out of her. Such is the Indian woman; they stand themselves up, survive a great many bruises and treat each others' wounds with much tenderness and empathy. It is visible in their interactions: Shirin sorting swimsuits for Usha with a kindness that is rare to come by; Leela dropping off Rehana to a party where they smoke cigarettes on the way; they dance together at Rehana's wedding; Rehana waxing off Usha's underarms and colouring her hair and so forth - they are all witness to each other's alter egos, and accepting or indifferent of the fact that they do not confirm, because, to them, it isn't out of the ordinary.

The idea of prince charming has now been engraved within their minds so much that they actively look for it in every man they meet because there are no wrong places to look for love. And yet, none of these men rise to the occasion; they all disappoint. They all walk scot-free in case of disaster, while women end up punishing each other for it. The final day of celebration is the true climax of the film: the day they all put on lipstick together, taking control of their destinies for even just a few hours; turning into complete Hydes - this is the day everything else fell apart. The final day blurs the distinction between Hyde and Jekyll. It is at this blurred line of identity that she is reminded of her place in society - because nobody else accepts her darker parts which are as much a part of her - she must be ashamed of who she is. The weight of her guilt is strong, drowning her small acts of courage under them.

Much is taught and learnt about Heroes in Fiction; Film Theory designates a complete five-point structure for an average narrative to progress: The Exposition, Rising Action; Climax; Falling Action and Denouement. The same cannot be said for a Woman's Lifetime: its structure isn't quite so balanced or defined; their introductions/voices are often stolen, hushed and frequently interrupted; Crisis strikes when one least expects it to, various power structures function at the very heart of a patriarchal narrative making a triumphant "victory" or vindictive "denouement" quite impossible. This would explain the absence of a conclusive scene in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*; put simply, the lipstick *stays under*, and one continues to hope for miracles. Except for when, in rare moments of courage, they create their own. There are no loud monologues, only small joys. Much of language,

fairytale and storytelling then seem masculinist, for women like these do not get happily-ever-after, and despite searching for tropes to fit into, Fiction seems to run out of enough categories.

Even outside of the gendered disconnect that is identifiable at a glance, the lofty idealism that White Feminism preaches at an educational level does not seem to offer a solution to poverty. It succeeds only in raising the bar for The Liberated to a level; only people who qualify that challenge may further progress. Even pro-feminist spaces do not allow access to everyone; as has been pointed out in the case of Rihana's university friends; it took ripping her jeans at a protest and confirming to certain aristocratic pre-conceptions to "win" her peer's approval or "qualify" herself for a space. The instance is reflective of the performativity of university-level theorization of inclusivity - often, as Rihana later realizes, people from her surroundings with the same socio-economic backgrounds prove better allies in her struggles of self-actualization than the ones who are all-too-familiar with the language and rhetoric of Modern Feminist Theory. Additionally, there have been countless examples of institutional harassment, drop-outs and murders of the marginalized in such university spaces, where the question of intersectionality may have been introduced, but exclusionism is still practised. Empathy in these spaces often exists out of preached political correctness, instead of lived experience.

There seems to be a certain dilemma in the definition. Ambivalence, the word refers to the simultaneous presence of opposing ideologies/values. This implies a kind of coexistence; not the absence of either ideology. For women such as the protagonists of the film, feminism itself is ambivalent in nature. It is human instinct to be split into polarities, such that no singular definition is ever inherently complete. It is almost impossible to wear the weight of one's identity as non-men lightly - there is a world of exclusionist politics at play. However, while one scampers and scourges to explain identity, and even as critics take up the question of "have women's rights gone too far?" one must understand the film's central message: the bane of some shared melancholy has always been systemic patriarchy. It manifests itself when it punishes Rihana for something as simple as dancing in a public function; when it takes away Leela's autonomy to choose her own partner; when it reduces Shireen's worth from a bright saleswoman to an object; and when it punishes Usha for desires that are applauded in men older than herself: the being of a woman bring guilt that they rush to escape, but it catches on. It is an association with an Identity: an identity societally assigned, not personally chosen. The sign of one's exclusion isn't picked by the excluded group, nor is the meaning associated with it: it is also the reason why one cannot get rid of that identity, or function in isolation from it.

As the Wollstonecraft dilemma patiently explains, "Feminism is a politics of identity, the identity woman, which has, more recently, been pluralized, to reflect the many and varied women for whom the movement speaks. Only recently has it made space for intersectionalism; the prevalence of micro feminist movements by certain groups that might exist with good intentions, but all the same, have a derogatory effect on further fragmentation of these women who cannot theorize their struggle quite as much. The question of "Where do movements draw their perimeters of included actors and how do we account for fractures?" and the question of "Are all exclusions

similar? Whose exclusion is legitimate? And whose framing of legitimation has value?” (same source) are valuable queries, and hold relevant to the Indian context, when a movement acts both as the unifying as well as the dividing factor, making it hard to reconcile differences.

The intensity of this ambivalence in the Film does not have an outcome quite as dramatic as Stevenson's characters. For one thing, their deaths would certainly not erase the problem at large, nor contribute specifically to it. The vicious circle of being split into multiples for women who cannot explore their individualism in circumstances that do not allow it is the very reality of rural India. And yet, in a combination of aspirational elements as well as a realistic portrayal of present society at large, the film emerges in fine balance with its central theme; representation. It tells a story, it tells the truth, and it tells it well. It talks about downfalls; about how they happen as a spectacle but also in secret. It talks about courage that remains a sole lifeboat, albeit an “immoral” one. The curtain call gives each character a moment to herself; united by the tragedy of their situations, they finish the story together, learning that the one who saves you isn't always who you fantasize it to be. Often, it's just you and your silly little pulp dreams against the rest of the world. The last part is an aspiration, an ideal world where she is readily accepted for her Mr Hyde persona. They smoke despite not liking it all that much - it is a bonding moment, and it is in these little moments that they can come alive, away from the world with each other. The story doesn't end in a conclusive statement because such stories may never be resolved within three hours and poetic justice.

Conclusion

After all, Justice isn't a feminine word. And their worlds are full only of women who have either lost autonomy over themselves or are still actively fighting for it. There is no space for a Room of Your Own in Bhopal, for they cramp together on the floor and smoke the night away, an act of courage so they can wake up the next day.

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