Desiring Otherwise: Ethical Subversion and Affective Feminism in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

There are moments when watching a film made by a woman feels like discovering a new language, one that doesn't just *show* the world differently, but *feels* it otherwise. This article emerges from that space of affective disquiet and intellectual urgency, interrogating how women filmmakers in India are reclaiming cinema from ornamental representation to insurgent articulation, where female subjectivity is no longer relegated to subplots of sacrifice or shame, but recentred as the very axis of the story. In Rao's *Laapata Ladies* (2024),the protagonist's hunger for education is not a rebellion but the most ordinary yet radical form of survival. Yadav's *Parched* (2015) stages a ferocious reclamation of sexuality amidst brutal patriarchy. Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) resurrects the ghost of a greedy, sharp-tongued matriarch who refuses silence even in death, complicating the politics of inheritance and agency. Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020) transforms the trauma of an abused child-bride into the mythology of a vengeful deity, where the supernatural becomes feminist resistance cloaked in crimson. Diverse in tone and geography, they converge in their feminist ethic: rendering desire not as a moral problem but as an epistemological force. This article insists how they reconfigure aesthetics and ethics of Indian cinema, and reveals the dangerous, dazzling possibilities of wanting otherwise.

Keywords: Affective feminism; Gendered Desire; Feminist Film Theory; Technologies of Gender; Cinematic Resistance

Introduction

There are films that entertain, and then there are films that disarm. The latter often do not announce themselves with cinematic grandeur or self-important gravitas, but instead enter quietly, like memory, like an ache. Indian cinema has, for too long, relied on a moral grammar that punishes female desire. It has

given us an ample number of mothers who suffer in silence, wives who wait without protest, widows who just exist in vacuum. The architecture of mainstream cinema has largely consigned women to the margins: as muses or femme fatales, damsels in distress or moral lessons. But in the last decade, a new affective terrain has begun to emerge, charted by women filmmakers who seek neither pity nor permission. Their works do not merely place women at the centre; they reconfigure the camera's desire, the script's logic, and the very syntax of storytelling.

This article is an inquiry into that reconfiguration. Through four feminist films, *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), *Parched* (2015), *Goynar Baksho* (2013), and *Bulbbul* (2020), it examines how female subjectivity is repositioned, not as ornamental subplot, but as the generative axis of narrative and ethical inquiry. It tries to locate how female filmmakers, or films consciously crafted through feminist ethos, disturb, to borrow from Teresa de Lauretis, the "technologies of gender (de Lauretis 1)." These are not redemption tales of docile heroines overcoming hardship with quiet strength. Instead, they offer us women who are lost yet self-driven, vengeful yet unrepentant; not as tropes, not as moral caution or data, but as epistemic agents. Their agency is not always heroic; sometimes it is inconvenient, sometimes even monstrous. But it is always urgent.

The theoretical scaffolding of this article rests on two critical feminist thinkers: Teresa de Lauretis and Sara Ahmed. De Lauretis, in a way to extend Butler's gender performativity, reminds us that gender is not a fixed identity but a "process" enacted through cultural and representational technologies (de Lauretis 2). This article borrows from her notion as to how cinema can be complicit (or subversive) in the production of gendered roles. Sara Ahmed's work furthers this argument by turning our attention to affect, to the stickiness of emotions, and to the cultural politics of discomfort and rage at the centre of feminist knowledge-making. She argues that emotions are not private psychological states but "cultural practices" that stick to bodies and imagine futures (Ahmed 10). Together, these thinkers allow us to read cinema not just as text, but as atmosphere, as something we feel in our skin before we decode it with theory.

The cinema examined here embodies both: gender as performative refusal, and emotion as insurgent structure. What happens, these films ask, when women do not return home, do not smile when asked to, and do not suppress their

longing or their rage? What happens when ghosts speak, when goddesses burn, when brides get lost and do not wish to be found? In choosing these films, I am also choosing to think from the *periphery*: peripheral Gujarat, rural Bengal, haunted haveli, lonely railway station. These are not polished metropolitan films about feminism in accented English. These are dusty, emotionally messy tales carved in local textures that refuse easy resolution.

The Right to Want: Everyday Feminism and Erotic Hunger

What does it mean for a woman to 'want' in a world where feminine desire is either domesticated into obedience or punished as deviance? And what happens when that desire is not for men, or even for love, but for breath, for solitude, for a higher education degree, for a room with a view? In *Laapataa Ladies* and *Parched*,'wanting' becomes a political act. These films reject the overambitious arc of liberation and instead dwell in quieter insurgencies, in moments when a woman simply takes a detour, or decides not to apologize for what she feels in her body. They construct feminine subjectivity not as the outcome of universal code of emancipation but as a terrain of ongoing, lived, everyday assertion.

Laapataa Ladies, for instance, inhabits two distinct but overlapping registers of feminine desire where the brides' accidental deviation from their in-laws' houses is a detour into selfhood. The film performs an ethical inversion, where the loss of the bride is the gain of the girl. Jaya and Phool, though thrown into each other's narrative accidents, do not seek the same future. Jaya has always known she cannot stay; she is ambitious, confident, and already familiar with the cost of disobedience. The family she is mistakenly placed in offers her temporary warmth but not the permission to be anything 'more.' Jaya's decision to stay in this borrowed home, to forge a lie, is not a con but a survival strategy. It grants her time to arrange her real departure, to chase her real desire: an education in organic farming in Dehradun. The film does not mock her for this choice. Organic farming, often registered as 'non-ambitious' in today's rapidly growing AI and data-driven industry, is another feminist frontier; and can be metaphorically read in terms of soil as grounded sovereignty, and sustainability as persistent rebellion. Jaya's lie becomes her shelter, not because it's convenient, but because truth is too expensive. Kiran Rao crafts this narrative without irony. Jaya's struggle, though inspirational, is exhaustive.

Her resistance is not loud or immediate. Instead, her strength lies in clarity, in persistence, and in the tedious manipulation of administrative paper work. Each bureaucratic evasion is a step toward a world she has not yet entered but believes might exist, aptly fitting to Judith Butler's claim that gender is "a doing" rather than a "being" (Butler 25). Jaya cannot afford to step outside the system, so she performs from within its loopholes, exposing its fragility in the process.

Phool's journey unfolds along a different axis. The village station where she is stranded becomes the crucible for a kind of awakening that is neither intellectual nor transactional. Her education begins not in books, but in observation, in listening to Manju Maai who runs the tea stall and lives by a philosophy that defies every lesson Phool has absorbed as a girl raised to be someone's wife. Maai doesn't offer lectures; she models another way of 'being.' Smoking, selling *bread pakoda*, living on her own terms, she embodies a life where men are not gods and women are not pilgrims. Under her gaze, Phool begins to understand that survival is not obedience; it is a choice, at times even a pleasure. Phool doesn't articulate dreams of studying, earning, leaving. But she begins to notice the shape of her silence. She questions the rituals she once followed without thought. One morning she prepares to cook, then stops. She has no words for this gesture, but the camera lingers. Kiran Rao does not force clarity; instead, she allows ambiguity to become a kind of feminist method. As Sara Ahmed notes, feminism is homework. It is something we do at home. It is about how we live, how we think, how we move (Ahmed 7). Phool does not become someone else; she returns home different, and that difference is visible only to herself.

Parched shifts the terrain from the tentative to the urgent. Its women are not lost, they already know what is missing. They have learned to live without expectation. What remains is raw desire, stitched into the everyday with both shame and tenacity. Leena Yadav places Lajjo, Bijli, and Rani in a landscape where patriarchy is not abstract, but is evident in dowry, in loud bruises, in a son's slap. And yet, like the desert they inhabit, they persist with a resilience that is not romantic but feral.

Lajjo, mocked for her infertility, initiates her own bodily investigation. Her sexuality is not framed as scandal but necessity. She sleeps with a traveling bangle-seller not just for affection but for information, to test if she can bear

life. Her pleasure is not ornamental, it is diagnostic. The erotic here transgresses the trope to become the epistemology. When she says she feels beautiful afterward, it is not because she has been complimented. It is because she has entered her own body through another's, and found it intact. Bell hooks writes "when we love the body, we claim the space it occupies" (Hooks 27). Lajjo's love is forensic, she claims her body back from a man who only ever saw it as a lack. Bijli, meanwhile, refuses to be narrative collateral. The sex worker who watches everyone more sharply than she is watched, Bijli performs for money but never for approval. She dances because it feeds her, but she also knows the choreography of male hypocrisy. Her one-liners slice through the film's sentimental edges. When she tells Lajjo and Rani that men want to touch but cannot handle what they hold, she is not joking; she is documenting. Her wisdom is not moral; it is archival, and devastating for the patriarchal sexual confidence.

Rani begins as the enforcer, the one who marries off her son's child bride with a practised detachment. She calls it duty. But patriarchy, as hooks reminds us, teaches women to become its handmaidens. When that same son abuses his wife and robs Rani of her savings, the betrayal is more structural than personal. She begins to see what she has enabled. And in that realisation, something shatters. Her decision to flee with Lajjo and Bijli is more residual than redemptive. It is what is left when everything else has broken. Yadav's visual choices echo the politics of technology. Sand, cloth, bangles, blood: objects recur as motifs, for symbolism, for texture. The world is built from fragments. The women don't walk away into the light; they drive into the unknown, tired but together. Their journey is not shown as triumphant;it is merely possible. And in this possibility, a different feminist grammar emerges: one that Ahmed might call a "non-performative promise," where survival itself is a form of critique (Ahmed 152).

Haunting as Herstory: Spectral Women and the Politics of Inheritance

In *Goynar Baksho* and *Bulbbul*, the female subject does not undergo rehabilitation within patriarchy. She returns after death to haunt the world that mutilated her. The ghost and the *chudail* do not emerge as narrative climaxes: they exist throughout, embedded in the cinematic fabric as affective disturbances. They haunt because the structures that silenced them remain intact, thereby

their haunting itself becomes historiography.

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* refuses the logic of reverence. Pishima, the cranky, razor-tongued widow who guards her jewellery with an unmatched ferocity, dies early in the film. But her presence intensifies after death. Her ghost visits Somlata, the wide-eyed daughter-in-law, not to dispense grandmotherly wisdom but to demand collusion, rebellion. Pishima, expected to offer her comfort, instead offers her a plan. Her jewels are not meant for sentimental mourning or sacrificial dowry. She wants them claimed and weaponized. Her afterlife is not spent in prayer, but in plotting. The *goynar baksho*, that is the jewellery box, an ostensible family heirloom, is a container of history, desire, rituals, and deferred agency. Pishima's demand that Somlata use the jewels to secure her independence is not just about accumulating wealth, but about legacy, about who gets to inherit and on what terms. Rather than looking at it as an act of benevolent matriarchy, we can call it a feminist redistribution. Pishima doesn't care about harmony; she wants revenge, not in blood, but in inheritance. Her ghost recalibrates the logic of the household, and in doing so, rewrites the script of feminine agency passed down through generations. Somlata learns not through didactic monologues, but through interaction and interruption. Every moment of her hesitation and modesty is ridiculed by Pishima until something harder begins to form beneath Somlata's innocence. Somlata's transformation is not to chase liberation from the family, but a negotiation with it, learning how to perform domesticity while subverting its core demands. She does not break away from the role of the good daughter-in-law; she repeats it with slight variations, until it fractures.

Sen places this domestic ghost story within the larger framework of Partition and economic disintegration. The family loses property, rituals collapse, and class hierarchies erode, but the ghost remains. Avery Gordon describes haunting as "a constituent element of modern social life," (Gordon 7). Pishima is the residue of a femininity that was never allowed to speak while alive. Her ghostliness should not be romanticised; it is practical. More than being simply remembered, she wants to be obeyed. Unlike the tragic female spectres of horror cinema, Pishima's ghost is not in pain. She is in power. She is also funny, rude, sarcastic, and political at the same time. Her presence disrupts not only the momentum of normative family but also the viewer's expectation of what it means to grieve a woman whose afterlife is both tragic and strategic.

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* operates in an entirely different key. Where Sen gives us satire and wit, Dutt gives us myth, iconography, goosebumps, and crimson-gothic. Yet, both films use the feminine afterlife as a terrain for ethical subversion: their ghosts do not haunt only corridors, but haunt beliefs. Bulbbul's transformation into a *chudail* is not a consequence of madness, as society would have us believe. It results in the emergence of another cosmology. The men call her a witch; the camera suggests she is a goddess. Framed within the melancholically beautiful, twilight-soaked interiors of an actual 250-year old *jomidaar baari* (zamindar's ancestral estate) in late nineteenth century Bengal, the film turns feudal architecture into a visual treat. Bulbbul was married as a child, brutalized for imagined sins, raped by her brother-in-law, and left to walk with broken feet, until she stopped walking altogether. Her floating presence, marked by inverted limbs, functions as an iconography of vengeance; she is wronged, but she refuses to be pitied or mourned. The village assumes a *chudail* is killing men. The viewer, much like Satya, begins by fearing this spectral presence. But as the narrative arc circles back and around again, the logic alters. The killings are beyond horror, they are horizon. Every time a man dies, a possibility opens, a wife lives, a girl survives, a her-story begins. Bulbbul's vengeance, as the audience could feel, is not hysterical, it is divine. Her transformations under the red moon invoke the Devi, *Maa Kaali* to be precise, in rage, in fire, in blood, in ritual violence. But the film does not reduce her to goddesshood. It does not offer sanctification or sacralization as compensation for pain. Bulbbul's power, much like Rani in *Parched,* is residual, as she carries within her the cold rage that Dutt herself identifies as the impulse behind the film. Rage not performed for spectacle, but nurtured as afterlife. Sara Ahmed reminds us that anger is not only about what has happened, but about the refusal to let go of the injury" (Ahmed 170). Bulbbul's refusal is not pathological, it is more pedagogical. The film asks us not to sympathize with her; but to watch her, to imbibe her, to witness her reclaim agency. To look away is to betray her.

Where *Goynar Baksho* stages the afterlife within the comedic apparatus of Bengal social realism, *Bulbbul* veers into the uncanny. Yet both films share an insistence that dead women are not done speaking. Hélène Cixous's claim that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing" finds haunting resonance here (Cixous 875). These films write women as more than just metaphors; they let them burn the metaphors to ashes. Satya's

inability to recognize Bulbbul's painful truth until it is too late mirrors a larger failure: the *Bangali bhadrolok's* Enlightenment desire to categorise, name, understand, and then correct. His grief, like the fire he sets, is unproductive. He weeps not for *her* suffering, but for *his* own failure to locate her within reason. His idea of rescue is masculine-conditioned and colonial-coded. He wanted to *save* a woman, what he got instead was a woman who had stopped asking to be human.

In both films, death is not the finality, but an ongoing method. Ghosts and goddesses are not tragic consequences, but tactics. Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, that is the state's power to determine who may live and who must die, operates in associative reversal here. It is the woman who decides; logically, not through law, but through legacy. Not through bloodlines, but through blood. These women do not wish to be worshipped or mourned. They want to be believed. Their haunting in itself is a feminist historiography: one that remembers what the living are eager to forget. In *Goynar Baksho,* memory comes coloured in paan stains and insults. In *Bulbbul,* it arrives with inverted feet under a bleeding sky. The afterlife, in these films, is not a question of superstition. It is the reckoning, the refusal to be buried. It is the Freudian return of the repressed.

Conclusion

Feminism, so far, when told cinematically, often arrived wearing the high robe of dignity, unwilling to be immoral or unkind. But lately, the women in these films do not chase righteousness. They lie, vanish, erupt, haunt. They aren't all empowered yet, but they are in the process. And this refusal to be complete, to be palatable, to be digestible, to be named and categorized into designated registers, is precisely where their radicality lies. The figures who inhabit these stories, of disappearance and drifting, do not become legible through tropes of dreamy resistance, but by staining the screen. They move in ways that fracture the familiar coordinates of genre, temporality, gender performance, and even hauntology. If traditional cinematic womanhood functioned as emotional infrastructure: reliable, repetitive, but ultimately forgettable, these films hollow out that scaffolding and install instead what might be called a poetics of deviation: deviant in structure and in ethics.

What binds these narratives is not genre but pressure: the pressure of

bodies trying to live 'otherwise.' It is in this 'otherwise' that a new vocabulary begins to crystallize: one that has the potential to exceed the restrictive contours of feminist film studies. The figure of the *chudail*,for instance, can no longer be confined to plain horror. Having transgressed the allegory, she is now affect, archive, architecture. She belongs as much to monster studies as to hauntology, not because she embodies the grotesque, she doesn't; but because she suspends the very notion of the 'human!' More than a feminine deviation, she is a breach in ontology. Desire in these films is never narratively stable; it is often partial or simply illegible. But it is precisely in this illegibility that politics begins to form. Feminist theory has always tried to return to the wound, at times to heal, at times to examine what festers, but mostly to allow the wound to stay open, to make space for the ache. Feminist narratives, as this article argues, have evolved from asking women to transcend, to asking them to stay with the mess. And the viewer on the external edge, is offered catharsis as well as cohabitation.

Within disciplines such as gender studies, monster theory, and postcolonial hauntology, the films explored here in this article complicate what it means to see, to feel, to remember. *Laapataa Ladies* and *Parched* remove women from the household where they were eternally fashioned to bear the weight of patriarchy, recruited, and trained to become its gatekeepers. *Goynar Baksho* and *Bulbbul*, in contrast, drag the ghost back into the household and the goddess down from the altar. Instead of merely revising representation, they recode affect. What emerges is not a passive doctrine to follow, but an invitation to witness and to question: to follow the lies, to peek into the privacy, to unlearn conditioned docility, to trace the smoke of the red sky. To *desire otherwise*, then, should not be a conclusion, but must remain a demand without a deadline.

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