

of utter shock, he protests, “She knew everything. You knew everything. What about me? Shouldn’t you have told me?” (*Lust Stories 2* 00:58:59–00:59:10). Sharma not only subverts the male-dominated plot here but also completely castrates the male agency by making him a mere object of pleasure for both Seema and Ishita. In the end, when both women reconcile and Ishita asks Seema why she continued despite knowing she was watched, Seema unhesitatingly replies, “Because I used to enjoy it too” (*Lust Stories 2* 01:02:43–01:02:48). Both the women smile, nod, and realize each other’s sexuality, providing sexual agency to each other through their respective acceptances.

### **The Foucauldian Framework: Power, Class, and the Collision of Alliance and Sexuality in Domestic Spaces**

Michel Foucault’s analysis in *The History of Sexuality* fundamentally challenges our understanding of how sexuality operates within power structures. Foucault rejects the repressive hypothesis, arguing instead that power actively produces sexuality rather than simply prohibiting it, “Where there is desire, the power relation is already present” (81). Foucault defines power as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate” (92). Characterizing the ubiquitousness factor of power and how it constantly emerges in everyday interactions, he writes, “The omnipresence of power... not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything... but because it is produced from one moment to the next... in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93). The employer controls when, where, and how sexuality can be expressed, showing how power organizes rather than suppresses desire. Thus, utilizing the Foucauldian framework, this article argues that it is not despite the class difference in the employer-maid dynamic but because of it that sexual relationships emerge between them.

In Akhtar’s segment, it is the power imbalance between Sudha and Ajit that creates the circumstances for their sexual relationship. Ajit, being established in society, exercises his power to initiate and control the relationship, while Sudha’s agency remains limited—she never demands public recognition and maintains the employer-maid dynamic in public. Sudha’s immediate return

to her domestic duties after the sexual encounter reaffirms her social position. The bed-to-floor shift visually reasserts class hierarchy between them, revealing how desire operates within rather than outside existing power relations. Ajit maintains sexual intimacy privately while enforcing social distance publicly because his class position gives him this power.

Similarly, Sharma's "The Mirror" illustrates how class relations actively generate sexual possibilities within the employer-maid dynamic. When Ishita accidentally sees Seema and her husband having a sexual encounter in her house, she doesn't dismiss them. Rather, she watches them secretly and derives sexual pleasure from it. Ishita uses her class position to watch rather than dismiss them, exercising power over her own space. However, when Seema, fully aware that she is being watched, continues to "perform" her sexuality, she exercises her power and makes a deliberate choice, despite having the option to stop. Although both women enjoy this arrangement, Seema's power remains limited, as the arrangement continues only as long as Ishita permits it. When both the maid and the employer confront each other due to accidentally being caught, Ishita not only denies that she used to watch them but also insults and dismisses Seema. This shows Ishita has the power to control the maid's sexual limitations through her social hierarchy, which allows her to permit and dismiss the arrangement at her own will.

Ajit and Ishita's sexual access exists through their economic relationships, not apart from them. This class difference complicates the hierarchical structures in which both the employers' and the maids' agency is negotiated—and often constrained—by the very systems of power that make those relationships possible. This ultimately demonstrates that power shapes sexual possibilities not by merely prohibiting them, but by structuring the conditions in which they emerge.

Both Zoya Akhtar and Konkona Sharma further challenge the conventions of mainstream cinema by exploring the sexual agency of women in their respective segments through Foucault's concepts of the deployment of alliance and sexuality. Foucault distinguishes between the "deployment of alliance"—traditional regulation of sexuality through "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions" and the "deployment of sexuality," which emphasizes "the sensations of the

body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions” outside traditional family structures (106). The deployment of alliance operates through “rules defining the permitted and the forbidden,” while the deployment of sexuality operates through “mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power” (106). This article argues that both the directors show how contemporary Indian women navigate between the accepted social norms (deployment of alliance) and their individual desire (deployment of sexuality) to find a sexual agency of their own.

In both narratives, the employers—Ajit and Ishita—maintain conventional hierarchies publicly, reflecting the deployment of alliance through adherence to social roles. Ajit ensures Sudha’s invisibility in social contexts, while Ishita maintains her superior position publicly. The maids’ deployment of alliance operates through them being aware of their social boundaries. While Sudha accepts the class difference publicly, Seema’s sexual relationship, occurs within marriage and in the domestic space that represents proper family structure, reinforcing the deployment of alliance.

Conversely, the deployment of sexuality is exercised when Sudha and Seema prioritize their personal desires over social norms. Sudha’s involvement with Ajit is based on erotic desire rather than reproduction or alliance-building, while Seema’s deliberate choice to continue her sexual engagement despite knowing she is watched exemplifies the deployment of sexuality in action. Sharma’s segment further empowers Ishita’s sexual agency through her voyeuristic observation, driven solely by her own desire. Through navigating between the deployment of alliance and the deployment of sexuality, all three women—Sudha, Seema, and Ishita—establish sexual agency without necessarily disrupting societal norms.

### **Performing Alternative Femininity: Butler’s Theory of Subversive Gender Performance in Working-Class Women**

Butler’s theory of performativity in her remarkable essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” provides an essential paradigm in understanding how both Zoya Akhtar and Konkona Sharma challenged the concept of conventional femininity and gave sexual agency to their protagonists. Butler’s theory of performativity

argues that gender is not an innate, fixed, or essential identity that we are born with, but instead, is a constructed “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” that are culturally and socially regulated (519). Gender, according to Butler, does not express a pre-existing identity but instead brings that identity into being “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” creating an illusion of a stable gender identity (523). With time, these “performances” get normalized, and, as Butler argues, gender becomes “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment that the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520).

Sudha and Seema, being working-class maids, are expected to perform the act of being silent, invisible, and asexual. However, they are neither naïve nor powerless. Both the women willfully and passionately engage in their sexual encounters and subvert the concept of accepted female sexuality, where women are expected to be passive and asexual. Ajit and Sudha’s sexual encounter is shown only once in the film, but it’s clear it wasn’t a one-time thing. Rather, the ease with which they engage with each other establishes the idea that they have repeatedly and regularly been involved. Seema’s intense sexual encounters are also shown to occur regularly, as indicated by the repeated scenes and the changing dates on the calendar, which mark the passage of each day. This performative repetition of sexual involvement subverts their assigned identity and creates what Butler would argue to be “the possibility of a different sort of repeating” which would promote “in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (520).

What is significant in Sudha’s portrayal is that she does not demand public recognition or romantic involvement from Ajit. Instead, Sudha embodies a femininity that prioritizes desire over emotional dependence, demanding acknowledgment of her desires and identity, even if only in private. Again, Ishita’s voyeurism doesn’t make Seema shy or submissive. Instead, Seema transforms herself from an object of observation to an active performer who derives pleasure from being watched.

As Butler argues, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (531). Both the women thus

construct an alternative gender reality—one where they assert their agency and challenge the passive, desexualized role traditionally assigned to them.

### **Theoretical Intersections: The Paradox of Marginalized Female Agency**

While the previously mentioned theories individually contribute to the framework for understanding the sexual agency of women across class boundaries, it is at the intersection of these theories that the paradox of marginalized women's agency is revealed. When read through the lens of class difference, these three theories together expose how Sudha and Seema's agency is present yet constrained by the very factors that give them that agency. Analyzed from a Foucauldian lens, it is the class difference that creates the sexual possibilities, but at the same time it is the very difference in their class that also marginalizes them. Butler reveals how the repeated performativity that identifies them as working-class women is the same performative mechanism that makes them desirable subjects, and even though these films subvert Mulvey's argument of women being the objects of the narrative, it is through the understanding of Mulvey's lens that we realize the visual reality of these women's objectification within patriarchal class structures. The narrative makes them the subject, but the patriarchal reality within the narrative objectifies them.

As discussed in the Foucault section, it is not “despite” the class difference but “because of it” that the employer–maid dynamic enables these sexual relationships, which in turn grants sexual agency to both Sudha and Seema. Yet, paradoxically, the same power structure that enables their agency simultaneously constrains it—denying Sudha public recognition and cutting off Seema's agency the moment their arrangement is disturbed.

As already analyzed in Butler's section, the paradox in Seema and Sudha's identity takes place through their repetitive performance—the same repetitive acts that construct their sexual agency also reinforce their working-class identity, publicly reducing them to silent, invisible maids while privately recognizing them as desiring women. Their agency is thus real but conditional, existing only within the boundaries their class permits.

This article has established that both directors subvert Mulvey's objectification theory by centering these women in their narratives. Within

every other frame, we see Sudha and Seema's desire for pleasure along with their emotional turmoil, which drives the narrative. Yet, through this visual language of both the films, the reality of working-class maids in a patriarchal society is also revealed. With her worn-out clothes and bucket, and mopping the floor without any social recognition, Sudha is treated merely like an object in the background, even though she is the one who is central to the plot. In Seema's case, she is objectified through Ishita's eyes, who takes advantage of her own class privilege and secretly watches Seema. Even though Seema is empowered through her deliberate choice of being watched, this particular moment in the film also reveals her position in a patriarchal society. Women like Seema will be gazed upon, enjoyed, and objectified irrespective of what they want—and finally dismissed when their use is over or disturbed. The paradox of these women's identity being the narrative's subjects but patriarchy's objects is thus revealed through Mulvey's analysis.

Isolated reading of these three theories, even though it highlights their respective analyses in this article, does not capture the full complexity of marginalized women's agency. The intersectional reading, however, provides a clear understanding of the paradoxical nature of sexual agency for working-class women. Individual readings argued that both films provided sexual agency to the working-class maids, but the intersection reading reveals that the sexual agency that is gained is not only paradoxical but also liminal and functions conditionally.

### **Problematizing the Cinematic Angle: Format, Platform, and Representational Limits**

In mainstream Indian cinema, working-class maids have always appeared as either comic reliefs or moral contrasts to upper-class heroines. But Akhtar and Sharma, by making Sudha and Seema the protagonists in their narratives, created a new cinematic category—that of the desiring working-class woman—which did not exist before. In other words, both directors legitimized the existence of working-class maids as protagonists in cinematic narratives. However, this newly produced category still functions through existing social hierarchies, which determines the format, the release platform, and the audience.

Thus, even though a new category is formed through empowering working-class maids, it is still structured by old power relations.

The fact that both the films appear in the anthology format, extending up to 25-30 minutes, raises questions about whether these progressive narratives would be possible as mainstream full-length films, outside the anthology format. The release platform being OTT, Netflix to be specific, and not theatrical distribution, clearly determines the urban, English-fluent, upper-middle-class as the audience of these films, effectively denying access to working-class people in general. The irony is quite evident: the OTT platform operates as a class-segregated space where progressive narratives circulate among elites while remaining inaccessible to the very subjects they employ in their houses and represent in their films. One thus questions whether these films really challenge social hierarchies or whether they simply feed into privileged viewers' progressive content consumption—offering cultural validation without material transformation.

## Conclusion

Even though most mainstream Indian films “just end up replicating a damsel-in-distress stereotype of Indian women,” OTT platforms in India have begun to shift this representation (Sen 203). Chakraborty observes that, “A common and recurrent image that is often visible in various original web series and films released on SVOD platforms in India is that of a modern, empowered Indian woman. She appears to be independent, self-confident, and sexually liberated” (82). Yet representations of modern, empowered working-class women remain paradoxical—their sexual agency enabled and limited by the same class hierarchies. The films' release format and distribution mechanisms further deepen this paradox by denying working-class women access to content centered on their own experiences.

Released on the OTT platform Netflix, both Akhtar and Sharma thus challenge the patriarchal structures of mainstream Indian cinema by creating films that are women-centered. Sudha and Seema, despite their marginalized positions, defy societal expectations by prioritizing their desires, thereby claiming a space for female sexuality that is neither passive nor shameful. These narratives destabilize the patriarchal gaze and reimagine the politics of looking, acting,

and desiring from a female perspective—offering a significant yet constrained intervention in contemporary debates on gender, class, and sexuality in Indian cinema.

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# In Search of Women's Collective: The Interplay between Individuality and Solidarity in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*

Garima

## Abstract

The themes of sexuality and censorship have been perennial ones among feminists and progressive groups in the Indian context. It has its impression on cinema as well. This article is an attempt to closely examine the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), directed by Alankrita Shrivastava. The film revolves around four women: Leela, Shireen Aslam, Rihaana Abidi, and Usha Parmar (*Buaji*). The filmic-text unpacks the everyday struggles of these characters situated across diverse strata (class, caste, and religion). The article argues how the cinematic technique of Rosie's voiceover overlays these fragmented narrations into a search for a collective. Moreover, this particular voiceover technique throughout the narration elucidates the repressed sexual desires of women characters while juxtaposing it with the uncertainty of the situation as the narration culminates and hence consequently avoids their identification by the male gaze. Interestingly, it also led to the issue of censorship during the film's release. In a similar vein, this constant juxtaposing between their unrestrained desires and patriarchal daily lives underlines the interplay between individuality and collective. Hence, the article underscores how the solidarity among these women stands out as a paramount condition for the making of any such collective.

**Keywords:** Collective; Solidarity; Agency; Sexuality; Individuality

## Introduction

The global field of feminist film studies has been broadly grouped into three major aspects: women as filmmakers, women on the screen, and women spectators. The issue of the representation of women has been one of many sites for debate and disagreement among feminists and progressive groups,

whether concerning beauty pageants, media, fashion, advertising industries, or pornography. On the one hand, some feminists attacked the 'commodification of women' in such industries and believed that such representations of women reinforced the patriarchal structure through commodifying the women's body, and in addition to this, it has a potential to induce men to violence and rape. This group of feminists believed that such representation of women reduced them merely to a 'commodity.' On the other hand, other feminists argued that such representations of women should be approached not as acts of women's subjugation but through the framework of freedom of expression.

It is evident that Bollywood, in the last few years, is providing more space to women's questions, their anxieties, their fears, their choices and desires. In the neoliberal era, a significant facet of feminist discourse emphasizes on the female's independent identity and individuality. This prominent shift highlights the ongoing struggle of these women characters to seek their own independent identity or individuality. They portray characters undergoing a transformative journey, learning to assert their agency while challenging established societal norms related to marriage, such as Rani in *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2014), Tara in *Shuddh Desi Romance* (Maneesh Sharma, 2013). Such films exemplify women's autonomy, focus on their self-discovery and exploration of unconventional romantic choices. Moreover, they search for their individuality, face both physical and psychological exploitation in a patriarchal society (Mehak Deo in *Phobia*, Pavan Kirpalani, 2016; Kumari Pinky in *Uda Punjab*; Abhishek Chaubey, 2016). In their quest for independent identity, they also speak out against their sexual exploitation within the family (Veera Tripathi in *Highway*, Imtiaz Ali, 2014). It is explicit that the struggle for and desire to attain an independent identity is the core theme on which these films are premised. The question of individuality or independent identity is deeply connected to the question of marriage, sexuality, and work and at the same time, these themes are inter-related.

This article conducts a detailed study of the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* as it foregrounds the politics of sexuality and its connection to the other two themes. Simultaneously, it explores how the film depicts bonding among women that goes beyond class, caste, religion, and other social identities

and hence, illustrates the interplay between individuality and solidarity among women.

How does the film depict women's sexual agency in respect to its characters? What does the cinematic technique of voiceover amount to, and how does it become a ground for interplay between individuality and collectivity? How does the film underscore women's sexuality as a site for liberation as well as oppression in today's time? How is solidarity a paramount precondition for the realization of liberation against patriarchal oppression?

This article demands a rigorous understanding of both gender studies and film studies in order to justify some of the fundamental concerns related to film as a visual medium and concerns related to gender. In this regard, first, discourse analysis as a method, seems more apt to understand the politics of sexuality, as it can open up a space for us to analyze the extra-cinematic elements such as promotional and distribution strategies, controversy around the film's release, interviews with filmmakers and actors, etc. Secondly, we will employ textual analysis as a method to engage critically with the film-text through sequence and script breakdown. By adopting these methods, the article aims to uncover the latent dimensions of patriarchal and feminist assertions embedded within the film's narrative.

Let us begin with the most renowned essay in Feminist Film Studies, namely, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"<sup>1</sup> by Laura Mulvey, published in 1975. In her work, she incorporates a psychoanalytical approach to theorize the image of women in classical Hollywood narrative structure<sup>2</sup>. She quoted cult director of Hollywood, Budd Boetticher:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concerns he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (Mulvey 488)

She argues that the woman in the classical Hollywood narrative structure merely exists as a sexualized body. It is through the main male protagonist's perspective that the spectators enter into the narration. The hero is the active controller of the look, whereas the heroine is the bearer of the gaze of male protagonists

and of spectators (irrespective of their actual gender). Woman, on screen, symbolizes the castration threat by the absence of a penis. She herself does not have any importance but only works as the signifier to the penis. The image of the woman destabilizes the narrative and merely exists as a visual pleasure. Heroines in these films seem 'individual' (or, one can say, a property of the family) before meeting the hero but after meeting him, she ultimately becomes his. She has no individuality. In contrast to this, Film historian Miriam Hansen raises a few substantial questions in her article "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" published in 1986. Hansen incorporates Mary Ann Doane's distinction to make her point. Doane clearly opens up at least three illustrations in which identification operates in the spectator's vision. Firstly, there can be identification with the representation of a person (character/ process), which can take place when there are possibilities of the female spectator as the transvestite (changing their dress, crossdressing). Secondly, she talks about "recognition of particular objects, persons, or actions as such (stars, narrative, images)" (Hansen 269). In this case, there will be a possibility for the female spectator to have a passive narcissistic identification with the female star as an erotic object which has been created by the industry. Thirdly, "identification with the 'look' with oneself as the condition of perception" (Hansen 269). Mulvey, in a way, stressed on the 'masculinisation' of the gaze of spectators irrespective of their actual sex. Hansen questions this kind of analysis, drawing from 'women-oriented films' of the 1940s. Do all the 'masculine' genres take away the agency of the female spectator? Does the genre like action foster a more narcissistic identification with the female character as compared to other genres such as the musical or romantic comedy? These fundamental questions shaped the discourse within the feminist film studies and remained pertinent in the context of Hindi cinema too. With regard to Hindi cinema, the question of women is related to themes such as nationalism, sexuality, censorship, culture, and other related themes. Our attempt would be to highlight the primary debates in Hindi cinema that majorly focus on the representation of women.

M. Madhava Prasad discusses the image of women and its relation with nationalism and sexuality in 1970s films in his chapter "Guardians of the View: The Prohibition of the Private."<sup>7</sup> His work gives us one way of showing how

film analysis connects with the questions of the state and the ideology of the Indian family to make arguments about the representation of women's sexuality on screen. He commences with a report from 1969 that claims the prohibition of kissing scenes in films was based on an 'unwritten rule.' There were no set rules for showing lovemaking scenes on screen. There appeared to be a 'ban' on kissing scenes linked with the nationalist culture. It was seen as an alien to Indian culture, regardless of where the film was shot. Kissing scenes were deemed a Western concept. It was thought that there would be unity among filmmakers to eliminate the 'ban.' However, some prominent film personalities opposed the kissing sequences in the films. The heroines also tried to maintain their purity and chastity by refraining from kissing on screen. While providing examples from several films of how kissing was kept out of sight in the cinema, Prasad raises several questions about what was problematic about showing the kiss on screen. Why could other forms of sexual display be passed without any difficulty by the censor? He brings forward the contradiction between the kissing scenes (which is an unwritten ban) and the idea of a sexualized female body in the dance numbers. How is it that the female body has been a spectacle for the public and is not part of private representation? This is because, firstly, the voyeuristic song and dance sequence has conventionally been considered as part of public discourse/representation. Secondly, these have been worked out as Mulvey pointed out in terms of visual pleasure. Sexualized female bodies in the dance numbers are not censored as they exist in a public zone. With the passage of time, the family system has moved to the nuclear family, and the plot of the films has shifted to the couple. Nonetheless, kissing scenes between the couple have been deemed as a private act, and so it should not be shown to the audience which occupies the normative position of society, and hence supportive of the feudal structure of Indian society. Prasad's analysis, therefore, questions the representation of sexuality in the context of his notion of the feudal family, where it is prohibited to represent the private. In today's neoliberal and globalizing context; one is, therefore, tempted to ask whether the feudal family and its prohibitions are a thing of the past in contemporary Bollywood. Why, in present-day cinema, kissing and sexual relations between couples have become so common? How are ideas of national identity still attached to the representation of women on screen? Does the 'new woman' of today's time have the responsibility to maintain the kind of honor of Indian customs?

These were the questions that can be important to discuss further; however, this article will focus on *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and how it had to face censorship initially. Why was it treated differently? We will discuss these questions further in this work.

In the above context, Ranjani Mazumdar differentiates between the heroine and the vamp discussed in a chapter on *Desiring Women* from her book *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, published in 2007. The image of vamp has symbolized a Western intrusion into Indian films with her hypersexual and illicit personality as compared to the heroine who represents 'Indian' women. On the one hand, the image of the heroine signifies purity, chastity, or 'Indianness' and in contrast to it, the vamp figure exists to break relationships, occupies the outside space such as the night club, dances provocatively, is sexually active, and hence, gains a distinct identity from the Indian women. The distinction between the vamp and heroine dominated Bombay cinema till the 1980s. However, during the era of globalization, this binary disrupted when the heroines began to perform these item numbers and opened up a new space for desire and sexual discourse, for instance, Madhuri Dixit performed an item number in Subhash Ghai's *Khalnayak* (1993).

The above literature foregrounds how the distinction between the heroine and item girl was disrupted and almost diminished in the post-liberalization period and the women's sexuality was one of the primary aspects to distinguish between the two. Now, let us come to the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* that does not create any kind of dichotomy, moreover, it subverts the notion of sexuality with respect to women.

### **The Autonomy of Erotica Against the Violence of Censorship**

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* is a notable film that marks a critical moment in discussions around women and sexuality in Indian cinema. The film delves into the lives of four women navigating their desires and identities in a patriarchal society. It was produced by Prakash Jha and JB Angels. ALT Balaji, Balaji Motion Pictures, and Star Synergy Entertainment distributed it. It received significant attention at the global level, screened at several film festivals, and received awards such as the Oxfam Award for Best Film on Gender Equality at the Mumbai Film Festival in October 2016, and among others. However, it

was officially released in India on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2017, amidst significant controversy. Initially, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) refused to issue the certificate. It stated, “The story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life. There are continuous sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society, hence, film refused under guidelines 1 (a), 2 (vii), 2 (ix), 2 (x), 2 (xi), 2 (xii) and 3 (i)<sup>2</sup>.” It is worth noting that the accusation of audio pornography, and the depiction of fantasy above life could be linked to Rosie’s voiceover as *lipstick waale sapne* (lipstick-coloured dreams). While discussing the film, Abhija Ghosh outlines the metaphorical usage of burkha and lipstick in the title as she writes:

The burkha, at once identifiable as the stereotyped mark of gendered conventions and traditions of a religious community, becomes a leitmotif in the film and draws women across religions under its metaphoric and material fold. On one hand, the film uses it, almost cheekily, as an incredible mode of social mobility, personal aspirations and **reversal of the male gaze**. The lipstick on the other hand remains **a code for erotica and fantasy**. For the women in *Lipstick*, their bodies are neither limited by their sexual lives nor can they be shamed for their desires. Instead, they are driven by many kinds of desires and aspire for many forms of freedom. (332, emphasis added)

It would be significant to delineate how lipstick as a code for erotica and fantasy makes the reversal of the male gaze possible, while placing the voiceover as a particular technique overlaying *lipstick wale sapne* throughout the film. Therefore, it seems crucial to inquire into the unsettling effects of this technique in the filmic-text. The contestations between Pahlaj Nihalani, the chairperson of CBFC, and Alankrita Srivastava is a symptomatic description of entrenched patriarchy, thanks to this unsettling effect. Nihalani stated that the film served as propaganda to grab attention. In this tussle, the director strongly asserted, “it’s feminist film with a strong female voice which challenges patriarchy. I think that’s why they don’t want to certify it. As a filmmaker, I stand by the story and will fight for it till the end<sup>3</sup>.”

Feminists, more generally, and those who have been closely engaged with analyzing specific films have addressed the issue of censorship from different

perspectives over an extended period. An early site of debate related to 'the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act' was implemented in 1986. It came into existence after considerable demand from a section of the women's movement. Many feminists had been insisting on some regulation over the 'indecent' representation of women. The objective of this law was "to prevent the depiction of the figure of a woman in a manner which is derogatory to women or denigrating women which is likely to corrupt public morality" (Agnes 138). Additionally, in her introduction to the book *Gender and Censorship*, Brinda Bose sees a close link between censorship and the state's interventionist policies. She argues that it is the female body that has been so critical in acts of state censorship of sexuality, since the female body is the site of honour as well as the shame for the nation. This has taken on heightened visibility with the current agendas of that time to protect the image of the Hindu women. They created the image of Indian women to preserve sexual purity, which symbolizes the mythical image of what India is. On the other hand, the Indian women's movement must rethink who the Indian woman is. Documentary filmmaker and film theorist Shohini Ghosh believes that feminists and minorities will gain rather than lose if they demand more diverse representation and more discussion, rather than remaining silent or seeking ban. At the same time, she made a point that one must understand the difference between sexual explicitness and sexism in debates over censorship, since, it is sexism rather than sexual explicitness that is the source of harm. So, we need to keep this difference and discussion in mind while examining the autonomy of *lipstick wale sapne* as explicit (censored) desires of these characters. While revealing contradictions between desire and reality, the film portrays censored desire from the very beginning. Shrivastava, in this way, endeavours to represent what is prohibited, censored, and ignored in society. Censorship became a perennial theme for feminists in India, especially after liberalisation. S. Ghosh discusses several controversies over advertisements, films, and songs. There was a particular controversy that occurred in the year of 1993 over the song "*Choli ke peeche kya hai* [what is behind the blouse]?" from the film *Khalnayak* [Villain], where she sees a convergence between right wing and certain feminist groups over the song's obscenity, including an inability to distinguish between different versions of the song in question. On this, Ghosh writes, "The protesters demanded censorship not of the version that actually

depicted violence against women but one that represented sexual agency on their part” (Ghosh 261). However, with the intensification of liberalisation, the question of sexual agency has mutated to what amounts to my body, my choice, depicted in a 2-minute-long Vogue video featuring Deepika Padukone. Namrata Rele Sathe, in her recent book *The Neoliberal Self in Bollywood: Cinema, Popular Culture and Identity*, unpacks the ideology of choice deeply embedded in neoliberal feminist subjectivity (2). While unraveling the class character of #VogueEmpower India Campaign, she writes:

Vogue India envisages emancipation as reflected in its own audience: upper class women who can afford to buy an English-language magazine that costs INR 150 (approximately USD 2.50) per month. I will not be too hasty in dismissing the Vogue Empower advertisement as it raises pertinent questions with regard to a woman’s freedom and engages in the politics of sexuality, but the ideas expressed in the video are embedded with the economic context of neoliberalism. (2)

One needs to keep this neoliberal context in mind while discussing the controversy around *Lipstick Under My Burkha*; nevertheless, it is pertinent to underline that the film tries to delve into diverse levels of social stratification across class, caste, and religion. Additionally, by keeping Burkha in the very forefront, the film has invited notorious attention from the Muslim community as Bhopal’s All India Muslim Tyohar Committee (AIMTC) issued a notice to boycott the film and claimed that this film hurts the religious sentiments of the community by presenting the *burkha* in a bad light<sup>4</sup>. The president of AIMTC said, “How narrow can a person think? Those who have scripted and directed this movie have insulted our religious sentiments. AIMTC’s Mumbai unit have already initiated a legal action on the matter. The protest will be taken to highest possible level<sup>5</sup>.” Despite the controversy surrounding the film, the media largely supported it and underlined its ‘women-oriented’ elements within the framework of neoliberal feminist subjectivity as we discussed above. They found it absurd that the film was denied certification on the grounds of being ‘too women-oriented’ and for showing women as sexually active. It garnered significant attention from the media and public, who supported the film on various social media platforms as a carrier of neoliberal socialization. Eventually,

it was released with an 'A' certificate by the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT), albeit with a few cuts. Prominent investors such as Prakash Jha and Ekta Kapoor got involved in the film and further contributed to its eventual release.

### **Solidarity Among Fragmented Individualities: Women Across Social Stratification**

In her long essay *Fire: A Queer Film Classic* (2010), Shohini Ghosh notes that the representation of female bonding has been excluded from popular Indian cinema, unlike male bonding. Films like *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Humjoli* (1970), *Mandi* (1983), etc., could represent female bonding, but only to a limited extent, due to the centrality of the male protagonist in the narrative structure, even within the courtesan's films. Ruth Vanita, extensively, records the world of the courtesan in Bombay cinema<sup>6</sup> in *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* (2017). She writes, "Films do not depict courtesan's relationship with one another in detail, even though in real life these were usually their longest, most stable relationship" (Vanita 39). Vanita also argues that the bonding among women is less idealized or usually remains invisible. Adding to this, Ghosh explores how *Fire* provided an eye to appreciate the homosocial or homosexual relationship in popular cinema, allowing one to "see without looking." Films like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Masti* (2004), *Men Not Allowed* (2006), *Dostana* (2008), etc., in which homosocial or homosexual relationships appear, usually present an ambivalent or homophobic attitude towards homosexuality. Without going into the in-depth study of these films, the central point for Ghosh is that female bonding in the Hindi cinema became more visible in popular Hindi cinema post *Fire*. There are various films today that explore female bonding such as *Parched* (Leela Yadav, 2015), *Angry Indian Goddesses* (Pan Nalin, 2015), *Veere Di Wedding* (Shashanka Ghosh, 201) etc. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is one among them that explores gender dynamics across social stratification: religion, class, caste, and so on. Nonetheless, a kind of friendship can be observed among the characters regardless of their socio-cultural identities. They are not marked as women who carry a 'good' or 'bad' character. They are just women, and to fulfill their dreams, even though this may be contradictory

to their families, these women support each other without any excuses or need for reasons.



Image: 1



Image: 2



Image: 3



Image: 4



Image: 5



Image: 6

As an audience (Image 1 to 6), we first see these women sitting together on a rooftop, an open space where Leela runs her beauty parlor. The peculiarity of this space is that it is the common space for these women to share their experiences, not merely their happiness or their sorrows, but also their sexual lives, which otherwise remain hidden. Here, it is essential to examine the social relationships between these women. *Buaji* is sitting and secretly reading an erotic book. Leela's mother is giving *Buaji* a leg massage and praising her decision, saying that even God Ram himself could not have thought of a better groom for her daughter, Leela. Then another unknown girl sitting with them adds that even Leela does not have to go too far after marriage, since her home will be nearby. Anyone can go whenever they feel like getting waxed or other services done at the parlor. This instance conveys women's desire to go out and not confine themselves to the four walls of the house. On the other hand, there is Rihaana, who is among these women, but rarely engages with others and remains silent in a corner.



Image: 7



Image: 8



Image: 9

The film portrays a unity among these women from different social strata. *Buaji* maintained unity among these families. The image 7 above depicts *Buaji* who has created a ‘family’ in which neighbors are considered ‘equal’ within the family, irrespective of their class, caste, or religious differences. The women of these houses share a bond where they hide each other’s secrets and share each other’s pain. For instance, *Buaji* and Leela know that Shireen has been working as a saleswoman, going door-to-door to sell her products, and that she has not even told her husband. In another instance, when the shopkeeper taunts *Buaji*, while she is buying a swimming suit, Shireen helps her buy one. Leela drops Rihaana off for her late-night party and also prepares *Buaji* for the Diwali party by coloring her hair black, applying wax, and so on. In addition to these narrativized instances, this is the story of the dream, *lipstick wale sapne*, which, with its eroticized fantasy embedded within their bitter realities. With this, the film seemingly suggests that the key to fulfil their dreams is fettered in the very social constraints that they are part of. No need to say though, that Rosie’s voiceover unsettles these social constraints by deploying ‘censored desires.’ In the filmic-text, this becomes a cinematic technique that constellates fragmented experiences of women across diverse arenas within their conflictual reality. This amounts to strong homosocial relationships in the film which have been missing from Indian cinema for so long. One can say, following Shohini Ghosh’s insight, that these homo-social relations, particularly among women, have become a prominent trend in recent cinema, especially post-*Fire*. Interestingly, this has not been a concern in earlier cinema, including in alternative cinema (though these are exceptions as well like *Mirch Masala*), as Shamita Das Dasgupta mentioned it in “Feminist Consciousness in Woman-Centered Hindi Films” published in the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1996. Dasgupta pointed out that Hindi cinema has been a victim of androcentricism, in which

women either have to compromise with the structure or die within that structure. In contrast to this, Shrivastava leaves the characters and hence, spectators unsettled by the short-circuiting of desire (Rosie's voiceover) with the bitter reality of *Buaji*, who is thrown out of her household. This could be marked as the decisive conjuncture of solidarity among fragmented individualities. There was a little room for exploring individuality or the independent identity of women during the period discussed by Dasgupta. Nonetheless, it is a contemporary cinematic expression that is providing more space for the independent identity or individuality of women. Moreover, the women characters in the film under consideration seek independent identity or individuality irrespective of their socio-economic location. With this, the question of agency becomes pertinent here, which can be further explored in the following section.

### **The Sexual Explicitness in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*: A Question of Sexual Agency**

Shohini Ghosh mobilizes sexual explicitness against sexism as we have seen in the earlier section. The peculiarity of this explicitness lies in its autonomy against any relationality imposed on women's sexuality by ideological rationality. Whether it is patriarchy, capitalism, or nationalism. This explicitness in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* becomes the central theme, which led to controversy surrounding its release. It faced opposition for showing sexuality, quite unlike the other film, for instance, *Queen* where the character of Rani kisses a French guy to show that Indians are not lagging behind even in kisses and on the other hand, she dreamed of losing her virginity after marriage with her lover. It depicted a monogamous marriage structure. It even incorporated sexuality through reinforcing a form of femininity that could glorify the nation (*Queen*, 1:58:41-2:01:15). On the other hand, the most controversial aspect about *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was the question of women's sexuality, which gave it massive publicity as well. The filmmakers also asserted the sexuality aspect on various platforms, which is even depicted through the poster of the film, where we can see a middle finger to patriarchal society. This seems to indicate a new moment where sexuality can be popular, unlike the controversy seen in earlier cinema. This film is primarily centered on four women: Leela, Shireen Aslam, Rihaana Abidi, and Usha Parmar (*Buaji*). Unlike the disciplined character of Rani (*Queen*), the female protagonists here openly explore their

sexuality at different ages. The pertinence of this film lies in its depiction of sexuality as an act for the liberation of a woman, but simultaneously, it is also a point of exploitation and oppression. This corresponds to the final sequence of short-circuiting of voice-over with a visual depiction of four downtrodden but seemingly determined women for their dreams.

Leela works as a beautician, runs her own beauty parlor and is financially independent. She stays with her mother on rent at *Buaji's* house. She has a Muslim boyfriend, Arshad (played by Vikrant Massey), with whom she openly engages in a sexual relationship, unlike *Queen's* Rani who has not even kissed her fiancée before marriage. Nevertheless, Leela has been forced to marry Manoj (played by Vaibhav Tatwawadi), who can provide her with financial security, unlike her boyfriend, who does not have his own house. The groom has been chosen by her mother. Leela's mother works as a model for the artist. The condition of Leela's family is evident in one of the film's crucial sequences in which Leela's mother is sitting nude and posing for the artist. There is one discussion between Leela and her mother when Leela reaches her mother's workplace to refuse the marriage.

Leela: *Kal gusse mein jyada bolg ayi. Amma mujhe shaadi nahi karni hai.* [I said too much in anger last night. Amma, I do not want to get married].

Leela's mother: *toh uss Mussale ki rakhel banna hai? Ya meri tarah? 17 saal se yahi baithi hu. Sardi, garmi, mahina lage tab bhi.* [So, you want to have an extra marital affair with that Muslim man, or you want to be like me, who has been sitting here for 17 years when it is extremely cold, hot, and even during periods].

Leela: *Toh chhod de na. Main sambhal lungi.* [So, leave it, I will take care of everything].

Leela's mother: *Tera nashedi baap kitna karzch hod kar mara tha pata hai tujhe?* [Do you know how much your drunkard father borrowed before his death?]

Leela: *Amma main business karungi, main paise kamaungi,*

*main ghar chalungi...* [Amma, I will do business, earn money, I will run the home...]

Leela's mother: *Kitna bhi kamayegi, ghar toh nahi kharid sakti na? Manoj mere liye ghar kharid raha hai.* [Whatever you will earn, but can't buy a house. Manoj is purchasing a house for me]. (53:03-54:33)

The aforementioned sequence shows that Leela has been forced by her mother to marry a man who can afford her a house and can provide a luxurious life in which she will not have to work after marriage. Leela, and even her mother, would not be able to afford such a house in their entire lives because of the debts left by her father. Her mother had to pose nude in front of artists for her livelihood for many years. In this circumstance, Leela's marriage can provide a better life for Leela and her mother. Her mother also refers to Leela's lover, Arshad, who can only have an extra-marital affair with Leela instead of marrying her because of the difference in religion.

In another sequence of about one minute, Leela enters a poorly lit space. She lies down near someone and starts kissing (1:24:39-1:25:38). Then we hear Arshad's voice, asking how she got there. Leela assertively says that she is going to get married, wouldn't he stop this? Will he let it go like this? She then takes him to the washroom. It is absolutely unclear in the film what kind of space this was, since it does not look like Arshad's home, but rather some sort of shared space with a large number of men sleeping there alongside Arshad. Leela does not care about those men; she kisses Arshad desperately and insists that he go to the washroom with her. Then we see Leela and Arshad are sexually involved with each other. Leela tells Arshad that she has booked tickets for Delhi for both of them (1:26:19-1:28:09). Arshad angrily asks, "Why don't you go with your fiancée?" She answers that she does not want to stay there. She wants to go to Delhi with him (Arshad). Arshad replies that he is fed up with all this. Apart from this, Leela constantly insists that Arshad have sex with her. Arshad gets angry and says that she wants only sex and nothing else. Should he call those four boys inside to have sex with her? Leela slaps him for this, and he angrily tells her to get out. So here, doesn't Leela's insist on having sex disrupts the dominant sexual gaze of the patriarchal society that considers women as just passive sexual subjects? The eroticised landscape of

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* makes it possible by focusing on the act of looking (onto Arshad) by Leela within a dimly lit up space surrounded by a number of men. With this cinematic intervention, Shrivastava provides a critical space to spectators where one can identify with the assertive gaze of Leela and hence, negates the manipulative male gaze. From Hansen's perspective, we can definitely call it the reciprocity of gaze against male gaze. This is precisely the point where we can notice how there was a consensual sexual relationship between Leela and Arshad. Simultaneously, we need to think about how the sexual agency of the woman can turn into oppression at any point of time. A disrespectful abuse by Arshad is a short-circuiting of the bitter reality of male gaze with the assertive sexual agency of Leela. Therefore, sexual agency of a woman cannot be the sole vehicle for empowerment or liberation because of the subordinate position of women. There is a complex relation between sexual agency and sexual exploitation in the case of women. Similarities can be observed in the other characters too. Shireen Aslam is a mother of three sons and secretly works as a saleswoman. Her husband stays in Saudi Arabia most of the time for business and returns for a few days. It appears that the relationship between Shireen and her husband is mainly limited to forceful intercourse. At one point of time, during their intercourse, Shireen asks if she could get money a little early this time, but her husband says that she should not interfere in the matter of money (20:20-56). In between, Shireen says she is feeling pain but her husband asks why she did not get it before. Is it only after coming from Saudi Arabia that she is getting pain? At another point of time, Shireen visits a doctor who advises her to use a condom otherwise it would be risky for her life. Shireen replies that her husband forgets everything when he is emotional. There is a scene where her husband raped her as punishment for secretly doing a job, for speaking in front of her husband, for questioning his agency or authority in the house. Likewise, there is the interesting case of *Buaji*, Usha Parmar, who plays the role of a widow, after losing her husband in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Director Alankriti Shrivastava, on one hand, depicts an older woman indulging in phone sex/ masturbating with a younger man, a theme on which there has been a long silence in cinema. Shrivastava also shows how a woman has to pay back for such an act when *Buaji* was thrown out of the house by her nephew, Ram. Rihaana Abidi, another Muslim woman, is a college going girl who dreams of becoming a

singer like Miley Cyrus. She starts interacting with her college friend, Dhruv. Eventually, Dhruv leaves her when the police come to arrest Rihaana for stealing from the mall. This is the point when Dhruv says he does not recognize her, and Rihaana's college mate tells her how she (her friend) got pregnant. In the case of Rihaana, she found out that Dhruv had dumped the girl after making her pregnant, and this could happen to her as well. So, in the case of all the characters, we see that their desire for a sexual relationship with their lover or husband makes them conscious of being the inferior sex. While they definitely can enjoy their sexual agency through hiding themselves from the family or society, sexual agency, in the case of women, does not just lead to pleasure or liberation, but can result in oppression or suppression for them.

Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* places the audience in a critical position as the film appears to be a feminist film, a claim that the director has also made. The instances described above suggest that these women tried to explore or practice their sexual agency, and they were able to do so to some extent, but, at the same time, had to confront their subordinate position as women. Shireen's situation is depicted somewhat differently. We do not know what her sexual desires might be, but she is reduced to a suppressed partner in her sexual relations with her husband. She had to undergo multiple abortions. Usha was thrown out of the house, and Rihaana was stopped from attending college and forced to marry. These women tried to explore their sexuality but had to encounter the social consequences. They were humiliated for practicing it. It shows how, in the case of women, sexuality can be a point to liberate them, but also an act of exploitation and oppression. Here, it would be significant to bring Silvia Federici's penetrating gaze, which unravels sexuality in terms of work in 1975's essay "Why Sexuality is Work." She explicitly mentions that sexuality is repressed in older women, and according to her, this repression is a function through which the women's sexuality has been controlled socially. She writes:

... the main reason why we cannot enjoy the pleasure that sexuality may provide is that for women sex is work. Giving pleasure to man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman.

Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly, it is important that we