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Femininity Through the Lens: Narrating Sexual Politics and Women's Emancipation in *Parched* and *Lipstick Under my Burkha*

Mujaffar Hossain

Abstract

Storytelling is an effective art of forging new ideas and cultural practices. Cinema, being a story teller through visual narrative plays significant role in representing social norms and thoughts. It mirrors the socio-cultural and political issues in conscious or unconscious ways. Cinema as a part of popular cultures, not only entertains the spectators but narrates the rising social problems, injustices, discriminations and projects solutions to the problems by instilling new ideas and thoughts in the minds of the mass. Apart from Bollywood and Tollywood, India have many regional film industries where woman film makers attempt to map the position of women and their psychology through the Lens. The main objective of this research paper is to study the oppression of women and their resistances in their subaltern condition with special reference to the two-woman film maker's film *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. Women in these films protest against the patriarchal dominance and gender inequality. They rise from their adverse positions and discover a path of emancipation by fighting the prevailing patriarchal hegemony. The result of the study shows that the women reject their subalternity by creating their own discourse and resolve a new purpose in life. The study asserts that being mistreated and discriminated in a phallogocentric society; women should not think themselves as subaltern. Women have to rise above the hegemonic discourse by asserting their self-identity. The analysis is made through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* along with the other feminist's perspectives.

Keywords: Gayatri Spivak, Hegemonic, Phallogocentric, Psychology, Patriarchy.

Introduction

In India, cinema is the most popular and easily accessible part of mass communication, which can be a medium of entertainment and social assessment. With the advancement of science and technology, in film industries, India is becoming one of the flourishing countries. Film is the seventh form of art along with architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, music, and performance. Like any other form of art, films are the reflection of cultures, values, and customs of society. Its influences are seen in construction of identities, selfhood, and ethnicity of our daily lives. Cinemas have effective power to transmit the cultural and material frameworks of our society. Since the 1970s, Indian cinema made a turn towards the socio-political issues presenting very sensitive and radical views against the traditional norms and beliefs. In the beginning, the leading roles were given to male actors and they were shown as the love-makers and protectors of females. Females were playing passive roles becoming an object of love, obedient wife and loving mother or a caretaker of in-laws. Women, in the films

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of those times, were portrayed as they were in the male-dominated social order. But as soon as women started rebelling against their subordinate status, the scenario of Indian cinema begins to transform. Especially, through the various phase of the feminist movement, the role of women in films get more priority and has got an active presence. Now in many films women are portrayed as a leading character and presented their lives in their own ways. Women of the days do not want to follow the rules set by men and what in the *Laws of Manu* states about the status of women, "her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her son guards her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence." (Walsh, 2004, pp 53-54). However, in this twenty-first century, women are not fighting for their right to suffrage and constitutional equality or their right to higher education, but they are proclaiming their given rights from the patriarchal society; where women are unlawfully oppressed by a kind of hegemonic discourse. In this research paper, I urge to present the pictures of protesting femininity and women strive for emancipation with the references of two Bollywood movies *Parched* and *Lipstick under my Burkha*.

The objective of this paper is to study the subalternity of women and their struggle to come out of this inferiority asserting their supremacy and potentiality. The subaltern theory of Gayatri Spivak (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is used for in which she talks about the epistemic violence towards women i.e. the patriarchal way to see the women as inferior to men despite looking at them from the positive angles that will prove the women as able as men. The essay also points out the fact that women will be subalterns as long as they think themselves as subordinate and dependent. Another postmodern feminist Kate Millet's (1968) in her *Sexual Politics* established the historical patriarchy in a modern context. In Millett's terms, in a male-dominated social structure, men are free to sexually possess women and they are not an agent, merely objects in this activity. She categorized human personality into two strict groups Masculine and Feminine. Masculine personality represents violence, intelligence, power, and efficacy while feminine personality presents passivity, illiteracy, submissiveness, virtue, and inadequacy. Millett further classifies the masculine role as stereotypically concerning leadership and ambition and the feminine role connecting to domestic servitude and childbearing.

Now a critical analysis will be made of the two films regarding the above-mentioned theories to show the subordination of women and their fights to overcome the oppression. The narrative of the film *Parched* is centered on the lives of four women, named Rani, a thirty-five years old widow, Bijli an erotic dancer and prostitute, an infertile wife, Lajjo and a newly wedded minor girl Janaki. From the outset of the story, the movie starts to show its true colour of femininity, and the feminine wish of exploring herself through the character of Lajjo in the very first scene featuring in a bus who is feeling the touches of free wind unveiling her face. As the story forwards, we find many instances of feminine sensibility, many unbearable degradations of women and their persistent opposition against patriarchy.

The film *Parched* first premiered in 2015 written and directed by Leena Yadav. The plot of the film begins with an event of a girl child marriage with a spoiled boy, Gulab, the only son of Rani. Gulab represents the patriarchy, by possessing the unbound freedom of doing everything he wants to do. To Gulab, the girl to whom he is going to be married is just an object that can be exchanged if anything unacceptable is discovered. On the other side, Janaki is obedient to his parents who does not possess the freedom of asserting her love for her lover and silently and very passively agreed to marry without having a look at her groom. In another plot the story depicts newly married Champa who has left her ignorant husband to live with her parents. However, the patriarchal society cannot agree with her rejection of marriage and a panchayat meeting organized that forces her to go back to her husband reminding her that the house of the husband is the real address for a woman. But Champa does not agree to the verdict

and protests against that decision asserting her equal right in the village. She rejects the social rules set by men by saying “This village is as much mine as much it is yours ” and “their (male) support can go to hell” (Yadav, 2015, 13:40). Thus, the character of Champa ignites the main issues of the film that is the fight for women's rights.

As the story progresses, the various aspects of male domination are portrayed with effective representation through the female characters. The dictatorship of patriarchy and the oppression in married life is presented through the character of Lajjo and her husband Manoj. Manoj is an alcoholic, whose only job is to drink and beat his wife just because she is thought of as an infertile woman. Lajjo is the only bread earner of the house, she is a skilled worker, works in Kishan's handicraft factory. She has been awarded for her extraordinary skills in handicrafts. But she never gets an appreciation for her skills and economical contribution to the family from her husband as it is against the societal rules being an earner as a woman. Attaining mutual love in married life become an unattainable thing for Lajjo. Whenever she is beaten by her husband, Lajjo runs to her friend Rani for consolation. It seems that no man can conciliate their hearts in this world except woman. Absence of love and compassion in married lives forces Lajjo and Rani to develop interest in homosexuality. As the script of the movie suggests it seems that it is not the matter of sex that human beings physically demand but it defines the mutual love which is not given to the wives by the male protagonist in this film.

Another boldest and most liberal female character in the film is Bijli, the dancer, and prostitute by profession. She is proud of her profession and thought to be free from male domination by this means. Prostitution is projected in the film as an apparatus of women to dominate the men as only a prostitute woman can direct a man. Through her character and the dance group in which Bijli works, the reality of man is presented of the society. Men are always allowed to have a sexual relation with any other girl or woman though they have wives at home, the reverse will not be allowed in any condition. Rani, 32 years old widow cannot think to make such a relation with any other man. The excitement and desire of Rani to have such a relationship is shown more than one time in the film. Women like Rani, Lajjo, Bijli need a Sharukh Khan whose phone calls make a feeling of dignity in the heart of Rani. He can love Rani and gives her the feelings of values and place she deserves as a woman. But Bijli's concept of being free by not getting married to any male also proven ineffective; she also bound to the shackle of men. The owner of the dance group does not leave her to live a life of her own. People in our society love to go to enjoy the visual pleasure of an erotic dancer in the dark night but the same one cannot bear the presence of her in the daylight. People think the female dancer as nothing more than an object of enjoyment. She cannot have a dream of a beautiful life of self-respect and self-identity. A woman's identity is always defined by men; every movement of women seems to be ruled by men in the movie.

In the narratives of the films, it is found that women of every stratum and status are oppressed and dominated by men and the patriarchal system of the society. But it is significant to note that, no female characters in the film are silently follow the patriarchal discourses created to subordinate the women. From the very beginning, the grandmother of Janaki says to one of her Daughter-in-law that why did not she stop her husband to produce so many children by making her a machine? (Yadav, 2015, 7:00). Lajjo, does not think herself as barren and to prove her fertility she goes to another man's bed breaking all traditions of her society. In the latter part of the film, she even does not try to save her despot husband who is burning by catching fire. Rani protests against the dependency of women on men by sending away his son from the house. Though Gulab warns her by saying “I want to see how you women can survive without a man” (Yadav, 2015, 1:38:54). First of all, Bijli breaks the myth by proving that not only women but men also can be barren and it adds a new dimension of protest against the male discourse. She also changes the slangs where only feminine words are used to offend by using masculine slangs.

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The film *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, another version of *Parched*, is a Hindi language film, written and directed by a woman director Alankrita Shrivastava first premiered in 2016. The visual narrative opens with a very tender story of women's confined lives, their restrictions that prevent them to express their dreams and fantasies. Buaji, an aged women character of the film, reads out the protagonist's fantasies of her romance novels and eventually, the protagonist becomes the representor of the things the four women long for. The narration of the story directs to the fact that every human being, irrespective of gender, has wishes to live in a self-determined way with their dreams and desires. But the problem is that freedom of living upon own determination is given only to the males and females are supervised by male's provisions. There are endless rules in our patriarchal society that control every aspect of women's lives. Similar interference of males is so unbearable and unwelcomed to the females that one of the characters in the movie called her husband as 'pest'

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha* four types of distinct female characters have been portrayed in different stages of life and films their different struggles to defeat the subaltern conditions to achieve emancipation from the male discourses. The character of *Buaji* is the most active, who narrates the story of Rosy that provides a series of unconscious desires of women, especially of a young girl. The fantasy of getting a free life to meet a suitor and getting too much closer to her man of likeness but she cannot do all she wants due to her imprisoned existence. *Buaji* also shows the identity crisis of women while she takes a few seconds to remember her name before the swimming coach. Commonly women are identified with males as someone's wife, mother, aunty, and the daughter they seldom possess their own identity by their names. It is the men who has their identity and authority over women. Females are always subordinated and dominated by masculine personalities. She explores her femininity by joining the swimming course and wearing a swimming costume.

The disgraceful and dominated lives of housewives are exactly shown in the movie through the character of Shirin Aslam, mother of three sons. How a wife has to sacrifice her all wishes, dreams, and hopes at the demands of her husband. It seems that she cannot have any requirement for her own. The sexual act also depends on the needs of her husband there is no value of her mode and comfortability. She plays the role of a doll, a sex doll for her husband. She is not allowed to do anything to develop her personality that will help her to be economically independent. The only ambition of a woman is to satisfy the husbands' sexual appetite and give birth to children. It is unfair to interfere in money matters for a wife in the masculine family. However, the feminine desire to become self-dependent to get the economic freedom from the male-dominated world is beautifully shown by secretly continuing her job in the Magic Product company.

Rehena, a college girl plays a dual role in the film a submissive Muslim girl wearing a burkha in home and a modern free spirit who demands the women's rights of wearing jeans in college. Her protesting speeches attract the attention of every conscious audience. She points out the clutches of life of women "There are no ends of rules in a girl's life; do not sing, do not dance you'll shame us; don't walk like that people will stare; keep your eyes down what will people say; breathe carefully your heaving chest will attract attention; do not use lipstick you'll have an affair" (Shrivastava, 2016, 55:22). She does not share her dream to become a pop singer like Miley Cyrus with her conservative parents who like to see their daughter with the sewing-machine, a profession given to the women. Reversing, the system of male-oriented sexual discourses Leela makes sexual advances to her boyfriend, playing a dominant role in that act. She runs a beauty parlour and has a great business plan. Leela rejects her marriage with a man who wants to turn her a cage-bird providing all the things she needs. She wants to lead a self-dependent free life by marrying her loved one, Arshad.

Conclusion

The study found that both the films project women's subalternity in the field of education, familial life, profession and the code of dressing. Men play a dominant role in the life of women taking the positions of father, husband and head of the society irrespective of village or town. Men judge the women by the very conservative ways that have been coming since the immemorial ages. Everything has changed, people fly to the moon but the condition of women almost remain the same in our social scenario. Even today, they are unable to gain equal status to men, just because of men's particular system to see women as inferior. In a patriarchal system, a woman has just a few stereotype roles to play under the supervision of men. Men disregards the superiority of women because it will snatch away their dominant power, the authority that they enjoy since the civilization came into being. The two films *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* are the true voices of the women who are protesting against their subaltern position. Every female character in these movies is oppressed but they never stop dreaming. They do not follow the dictate of patriarchy silently, again and again they try to assert their self-existences. If we look very carefully, we will find that every female character of the films doing some works for their livings. It is the ability to earn own bread that will help to bring independency to women. No female characters of the films remain imprisoned inside the home, they all come out to learn the way of the world by themselves. Getting no way to stop women to come to the centre men desperately abuse them sexually. Lajjo in *Parched* and Shirin in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* are victims of marital rape by their prejudiced husband. The husbands feel a sense of dishonour and indignity while their wives go out and earn money to run the family. At the end of the movies, all the female characters declare their complete rejection of patriarchal supremacy with the dreams of establishing their own discourses. Where the 'lipstick' that represent the free will and wish of women will not be covered with 'Burkha' that is the symbol of male control.

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Bio-note

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