

FIFTY SHADES of PINK - EVOLVING FEMALE SEXUALITY in INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract: This paper analyses the changing patterns of how women's sexual desires and ambitions are portrayed in Indian Cinema. The characters in my study portray the women of power, ambition and lust. They are not just puppets in the hands of the traditional norm of the society but strong women who are crazy and not emotional wrecks, who are courageous and not meek, and represent the ambitious, headstrong girls in Indian cinema who can make it happen.

Introduction:

Patriarchy has often set norms to control female sexuality. The sexuality of women is considered passive in Indian society and if she expresses her sexual desires she is considered to be a pervert. Female sexuality has been ignored in Hindi Cinema but after the advent of globalization many film makers with liberal attitudes have raised their concern over the issue of female sexuality and most of the films have covered this aspect by putting forward the sexual desires and the need for sexual autonomy. The three films discussed in the paper represent women who express their sexual desires and challenge the patriarchal norms.

We have come a long way from dancing sunflowers and depiction of the birds and the bees, to showing sexuality as a weakness or entertainment for men. Women are still not as human as men in their upbringing and perception, they are something that is their 'darkest desire'. A woman is perceived more as an object of fantasy and less of a human with other aspects and potentials; someone who is an emotional wreck but not an asset to the society.

My study talks about three strong female characters- Vidya Balan's Sullu in *Tumhari Sullu*, Taapsee Pannu's Shabana Khan in *Naam Shabana* and Vidya Balan's Silk in *The Dirty Picture*. These women are not the consorts of men around them, but take charge of their lives and those of others around them. These women set an example for channelizing the ambitions of today's women, who can have desires and ambitions for herself and hence need financial independence or a sense of worth and purpose in life.

Sullu in *Tumhari Sullu*

Sullu is an ambitious housewife who lives happily with her husband and her son. Things change when she wins a contest and auditions for a night show at a radio station. She does not have high educational qualifications, but does not consider herself lesser than anyone. She is not bogged down by the societal norms of female sexuality which must be subtle and hidden. She is vocal about her desires, and shares an active, almost demanding sexual relationship with her husband. Trying her luck in radio competitions, she wins home appliances which shows that such shows are targeted for female audiences who are generalised as housewives and her needs are generalised to be household appliances. The first plunge Sullu takes is when she asks the RJ to not give her a pressure cooker, and then after repeated lottery victories she meets the producer essayed by Neha Dhupia. This shows that the radio station was dominated by women. Dhupia allots Sullu a late-night radio slot when she expresses her desire to be a radio jockey. Sullu accepts the job, where she has to use a sexual voice to appease late-night tuners and callers on the show. Her predecessor was a poet who was not able to rake in good listenership numbers, and Sullu was seen as an experiment for the commercial media which capitalises on female sexuality. Ironically, this concept is propelled by a female producer.



Fine difference between woman and Superwoman

The film chalks out problems of a woman working outside for a living, and yet expected to manage the house even when both the spouses work. A woman shares her life with a husband, and her entitlement to the child's future; but she has unequal powers and responsibilities- the power and share of positive credit of the husband in the patriarchal society more and the responsibilities and accountability for any mishap on the wife. This leads to a rise in problems for the woman in establishing a work-life balance. The society wants women to be empowered, but criticises them for working outside. Here, the role of a husband as a partner, a friend and as a co-parent and lifelong support and sharer of the woman's life is determinant of the intensity of her troubles.

The society outlines time and again the dependence women have on their husbands or fathers. Entitled to his support initially, Sullu continues her engagement with the radio station through competitions and hampers, but since his own job is taxing and the society programs men in a certain mind-set of having certain traits fairly unacceptable and unforgivable; followed by the emotional dependence even men have on the female figures in their life like mothers and wives who fend for them- he is irritated when the dinner is not on time and Sullu struggles to balance her work and life.

There is an aspect of competitive spirit among spouses, which turns more about gender ego and the fact that a man cannot concede defeat from a woman in any aspect- especially when she is his wife.

Women working outside in rural areas, in the service sector; and in the wee hours even in metropolitan cities of India are still seen as characterless even after so much evolution in gender roles and the increasing demand of workforce irrespective of gender in both the service sector and the family system.

An important aspect in this cinema is the concern of male gratification. Even when a woman is not available sexually, he gets gratified by imagining about her, looking at her images, hearing her voice, and/ or by talking to her. Companies cash in on this aspect, which is visible in advertisements to Bollywood films and now web series.

Women when shown wearing skimpy clothes provide an underlying win-win situation for both genders. While for women this aspect is portrayed as modernising and liberating; it is shown as desirable and gratifying, to the extent of satisfying men who are often raised to materialise women for selfish needs - first a mother who runs around the man as a servant, replaced by the wife who gratifies him and complies to his childish whims like the mother did. A capitalist degradation of the society ensues, and directors fully utilise any chance to attract the worst lot of such audience who is sadly still a majority especially in rural India.

Men who get gratified by seeing such models may never be able to get them as a partner, but this false consciousness and creation of lust through sexually appeasing media is a successful money-making model for decades now; only intensifying as availability of content is rising and the bar is higher for men to feel gratified sexually by imagery and virtually.



Bollywood is catering to male fantasy by item songs.

The trend of item numbers in films has captured Bollywood. Madhuri Dixit in Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani's *Ghaghra* opposite the much younger Ranbir Kapoor, to Priyanka Chopra in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Ram Leela (Ram Chahe Leela)* shows that male gratification has been one of the keys for a community of cinema goers who sees cinema as a means to live a surreal reality and get entertained by all means. Such audience will never spend a buck if the film teaches them something important but will surely empty their wallets for an 'item song' for sexual gratification. This is the case with films like *My Name is Khan* and *Swades* which stuck to a meaningful purpose but were not received well in the box office for the same reason- they did not offer viewers 'visual gratification'. Directors see the presence of item songs as an audience puller for that aspect of society that is often morally and socially retarded, and not developed to accept women as something more than a submissive wife, either in the household or in the bed. The goal is to attract 'balls'- eyes and anatomically.

This needs to be turned around- men like women taking the lead sexually, though still get intimidated by the sexual freedom women enjoy. Women's sexuality is appealing to men, but when used in interesting ways and purposeful as in films like *Naam Shabana*, or *Tumhari Sullu* they reveal a new potential of this prowess- it is a weapon for a purpose. While for *Naam Shabana* it is national security, for *Tumhari Sullu* it is ambitious fulfilment of potential and supporting the household financially, while also acting as a vent for the pent-up aspirations of a mother and housewife. In society, it is shown often that men even in their 40s and 50s may have desires, but a woman when replaced in this equation can result in raised eyebrows.

Sullu is a radio jockey; whose show is in a late-night slot. She has to appease men by her voice and talks to earn her bread, and get the show and station running in the wee hours. Men staying away from home, with irregular marriages and pent-up desires, are in no dearth to be sonorous audiences of such shows. Sullu speaks to the callers that tune in, but there's a fine line between flirtatious tones and men who try to get too personal. So, when a man asks for Sullu's number, she tells him that its 100(police helpline).

Vidya Balan's image after *The Dirty Picture* (2011) turned into a plump, insatiable, desirous woman which was encashed in *Ghanchakkar* as well. *Tumhari Sullu* is an addition to this trend, where Balan as Sullu demands a lot of romance and intimacy from her husband, creating situations and using cheesy pickup lines for seduction. The tables turn here – her sexuality turns in her favour and give her ambitious gratification and financial support. What appears as a conflict here is when parents work late at night and the couple's son ends up being in bad company. He begins objectifying women and seeking sexual content through blue films at a small age. This results in sexual pervasiveness.

Women dominate the radio space where Sullu works- they party, they dominate men, but outside in the society this is a far-fetched ambition. Sullu is undermined for being a grade 12th failure, where at one end in the society it is believed that a woman without much schooling can live a decent life as a housewife, the truth is that ambitions do not see gender and aspirations are insatiable. Sullu has an indomitable spirit; she does not give up. Hence, towards the end the couple come to a consensus seeing the suffering work-life balance - they do not agree on a fifty fifty work-life balance, which was discussed and rejected thrice in the film by both; but it ends with the husband quitting his job and working in a tiffin service with the wife and keeping the son with them. This serves as a rightful end for the husband as well as for Sulu who are exploited at workplace.

Shabana in Naam Shabana

Naam Shabana is a film by Neeraj Pandey as a prequel to Taapsee Pannu's role in *Baby*. The strong female agent has an intriguing backstory.

A man gets killed in an altercation with some goons, who were teasing a woman. Later, the woman turns out to be Shabana Khan, who gets a call offering help to avenge the man's death provided she agrees to join a secret intelligence agency. The film received rave reviews but ended up specifying one message - a woman can go heights to avenge her love, and instead of the emotional wreck that she is portrayed to be through age old cinema as a widow or a heartbroken lover, she uses her emotions and utilises them for a greater good.

The film shows the original story of Shabana Khan (Taapsee Pannu), who ends up working as a proficient field agent with Ajay Singh (Akshay Kumar). It begins with two Indian agents working under Ranvir Singh (Manoj Bajpai) chasing an international arms dealer named Mikhail, but he kills them both and escapes.

After a year as a college student trained in Judo Shabana is under the agency's radar and is being followed by them as a potential recruit. Her friend and love, Jai (Taher Shabbir), confesses his love for her on a date out. When asked about her past, she tells him that she was in juvenile jail for killing her father who was abusive to her mother physically and emotionally. This event brought her under the agency's attention. During their ride back home, Shabana is eve teased by some drunk rogues in a car, a fight starts and Jai gets killed and the rogues flee. Being influential they are not punished by the court.

With the police of no avail, Shabana receives a call from an unknown number asking her to avenge Jai. The caller, agrees to help her if Shabana joins a secret agency. Shabana agrees and receives information and gets the assured help to kill the rogues. She then reaches Goa, where the killers are laying low. Watching the killers in a club, she is protected by another agent, who is their best. She gets apprehensive about the help she gets, but Ranvir assures her that as she is the best they will help her to the best. She decides to kill the main assailant and leave the others for the fear of lives. After she kills the guy, Ajay, who protected her at the club, helps her to escape.

With the success of this endeavour, Shabana is recruited into the agency probationary; she gets rigorous training in fighting and learns new combat techniques. An arms dealer Mikhail comes into the picture and 3 Indian agents try to track down Tony, Mikhail's main assistant. Tony instructs them off to a German doctor who has surgically changed Mikhail's face. The agency tries to contact the doctor to find out how Mikhail looks now, but Tony kills all the three agents and escapes, revealing that he himself is Mikhail. Ranvir discovers about Mikhail's plan to undergo another plastic surgery to change his face.

Shabana is now sent to kill him with Ajay Singh and Om Prakash Shukla's (Anupam Kher) help. Shabana goes to the operation theater as a patient and as she was about to kill Mikhail, she finds that he is awake as he had refused to take anesthesia. During the fight where Mikhail almost strangles Shabana, she finally manages to kill him (Prithviraj Sukumaran) and escape from the police with Ajay's help.

The film received rave reviews for 'tracing back an unneeded story', but the truth is that we need female characters who are crazy and not emotional wrecks, who are courageous and not meek, and Taapsee represents the ambitious, headstrong girl in Indian cinema who can make this happen.

Silk in *The Dirty Picture*

Directed by Milan Luthria, *The Dirty Picture* is a representation of sexuality and the corpus of texts surrounding it. The film is widely believed to have been inspired by the life of Indian film actor, Silk Smitha. Played by Vidya Balan, Silk is shown as a small-town girl who makes it big in the film industry by her licentious and daring sexuality. She threatens to topple the very foundations of the industry by flouting notions of what 'sells' and giving the male consumer, what he wants. Without any expression of shame or guilt she is free to sell her body and turn the oppressive male gaze to her benefit to further herself in the capitalist enterprise of the film industry. Such a vocalization of sexuality by Silk prompts reactions from various quarters of the media – feminist groups within the film brand her as lewd, film magazines describe her as indecent and A-list film stars refuse to be publicly associate with her. Silk, however, through her unapologetic embrace of her sexuality calls loud on the heavily sexualized film industry and is seen as exposing its duplicity. Thus, the film can be seen as making a strong political statement on society's attempt to regulate female sexuality.



A bold assertion of dreams and desires.

S.Visvanathan, in his article titled *The Dirty Picture: Free, Sexual and Female*, writes: “*The film is a celebration of life, an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. This is a woman who enjoys sex and whose sexuality exudes power and freedom. The woman's body becomes her way of being herself.*”

Most would contend that Silk existed in a largely manipulative industry that allowed little space for women and her explicit sexualisation and objectification by the industry was not an aspect that was negotiable. An example of this is the representation of the instances of men, who come to her with several offers like that of employment, looking at Silk lasciviously or the light-hearted manner in which the casting-couch of the industry is represented. In the case of *The Dirty Picture*, the character of Silk manages to seduce an A-list actor, Suryakanth which then opens up a plethora of

opportunities for her in terms of her career. The consequence is that within the manipulative industry, this is the only form of agency that she could exercise.

Silk's life is a memoir of freedom. A woman wishing to live her own way of life, arguing her right to her sexuality, while being confined by the hypocrisy of the society and of the male fantasy. She is a celebration of the liberating power of her sexuality. She signifies that a woman's body is not just an object but a way of being herself. *The Dirty Picture* is also a great film from cinematography angle. s Silk says in the film beautifully, that she is not an element of biology, her parents didn't create her. She was only born when the film was shot on her, when the lights were thrown and the audiences liked and appreciated her. Between the film and the public, a star was germinating.

This underlines both her triumph and tragedy.

The male gaze discovers her, consumes her, generates her and Silk lives on in the eyes of millions of her spectators. In the end, Silk realises that this is the vulnerability of the actress. She tries to be contingent on the eye. To be seen is to exist. Stars without movies are forgotten stories. The film portrays the element of male hypocrisy, but most importantly the portrayal of how sexuality liberates women.

Last but not the least these women are strong and ambitious, indomitable and clear about their wants. These women are unaverred from their objectives no matter how much they are swayed and rattled by society emotionally. Films portraying such strong characters is a celebration of life, an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. Such pivotal characters depict sexuality as oozing power and freedom. The woman's body becomes the way of being herself. When the body precedes and speaks its own language, the world watches and listens.

