

Dualistic Visual Narrative Approach of Woman Film Maker in Representing Women With Reference to the Film ‘Lipstick under My Burkha’

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ABSTRACT

Ideas and cultures are molded by the art of storytelling through visual narratives. Stories had been the conscious and sub-conscious representatives of the society for decades. Film is a medium which was adopted by the storytellers to orate their ideological perspectives in a more influential way. Gender has its own role in dominating this narrative platform. Women film makers independently attempt to carefully reflect the lives of women through the lens of reality. Alankrita Shrivastava is one such film maker who revealed the hidden desires of four conservative women of different walks of life via ‘Lipstick under My Burkha’ (2016). The primary aim of this research paper is to study the narrative structure of the women oriented film ‘Lipstick under My Burkha’ using the theory dualism. The theory of dualism segments individuals into physical body, physical mind, non-physical body and non-physical mind (Descartes, 1639). In this research, woman characters and the film plot are critically discoursed through four elements of dualism.

Keywords

Storytelling and Gender, Dualism, Film Analysis, Women Narrative Structure, Lipstick under My Burkha.

1. Introduction

“There’s a lipstick and a Burkha that exists in the life of every woman and a shade of Rosy who lives deep beneath every soul” – (Shaw, 2017).

Film is one of the most beautiful and powerful storyteller of the society. The narrative structure of film equips it to be easily consumed by the film viewers consciously and sub-consciously. Indian film industry is diverse and unique due to the representation of combined languages, tradition, culture and heritage. This unique attribute had begotten multi-dimensional genres where, women-oriented films are one such. Social, Cultural, Political and Economic lives of women came into light after the Women’s Liberation

Movement (1960’s). Western countries experienced a drastic change and development in the status of women, which gradually spread all over the world. In India, the socio-political movement ‘Navnirman Movement’ (1974) encouraged women participation to challenge against economic crisis and corruption. Women gradually began to step into several fields and film industry is one such.

Fatma Begum is the first Indian women film maker, who was an actress, writer and producer as well. Her continuous dissatisfaction towards the roles provided to her by the male directors, provoked her to create the film *Bulbul-E-Paristan* in 1926 (Atanumohapatra & Sumankumar, 2014). This fantasy film required special effects set to recreate the fairy land ‘Paristhan’. Since then, tremendous stride and progress have been achieved by the women film makers in the Indian film industry, through their inconspicuous contributions. Film screens seize the power to disseminate diverse ideas and perceptive stories. The reality and artificiality of the world is reflected and represented as filmic images in definite patterns, to touch and influence the viewer’s state of mind (Banegas, 2009). Men and women have had their own level of participation in the visual storytelling screens. But, in case of women it is their physical look more prioritized over their acting skills. Gender inequalities in screen representation have transmuted women to be viewed only as products in real life.

The present study concentrates on the women-centered film ‘Lipstick Under my Burkha’ directed by the woman film maker ‘Alankrita Shrivastava’ in 2016. The storytelling structure revolves around the hidden desires and dreams of four women, who are bounded to the male dominated society. Voice of the director can be heard throughout the film as narrations, conveying the inner thoughts of the characters from a novel storytelling perspective. The word ‘Lipstick’ symbolizes the desires and dreams of the four women protagonists, whereas the word ‘Burkha’ symbolizes the veiled and male dominated society. Five different stories evolve and revolve around the four women, who are forced to veil their dreams. These four women are looked upon as sinners at the moment their veil of desire and dreams get torn by the

patriarchal society. Story comes to an end, when they gather together and laugh at each other's situation, reading the mismatched titles of several torn novel cover pages.

This research paper explores the storytelling structure of 'Lipstick Under my Burkha' through dualistic approach of Descartes. Visual narrative form of the film is dissected into four categories as physical body, physical mind, non-physical body and non-physical mind. These four elements are underpinned to explore the four woman characters, the voice of director (narration) and the story plot from a dualistic aspect. This study is based on qualitative methodology, where visual content analysis technique is employed for in-depth exploration.

2. Review of Literature

Film from the beginning portray women through 'undermined lingering close-ups' that reveals their curvy figure and body-fit clothes which serves as a treat to male audience (Mulvey, 1975). Laura Mulvey's concept 'Male Gaze' from her research work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) gave birth to a new approach of studying the representation of women in films through psychoanalytical theory and feminist film theory. Camera angles and movements serve as dominant storytelling text. For decades these visual dominant text have been communicating 'sexist ideologies through active male gaze'. Women characters are put to display on visual screens to attract the male audience. Mulvey concluded her research stating that, this manner of continuous women screen representation will make them 'become the images of meaning rather than the maker of meaning'.

Annette Kuhn argued in her book 'Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema' (1982) that women's productized representation in film screen oppresses them 'not just economically, politically but they are also symbolically oppressed'. This single-authored book explores the strong relationship between women and film through cultural, historiographical, psychoanalytical and feministic approach. Kuhn suggested that continuous reading and production activism had pulled women into the field of filmmaking; therefore feminism has no single definition.

Film narratives have a fixed formula in conveying familiar stories about women. The contribution of film, structures our perception about the world and specifically our perception about women through genre films (Dutt, 2014). The dissertation entitled 'Behind the Curtain: Women's Representations in Contemporary Hollywood' of Reema Dutt in 2014, serves as a curtain raiser for analyzing women's portrayal in top-grossing Hollywood films. Visual analysis of salient semiotics used to represent women characters in the films - The Avengers (2012), Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2 (2011) and Toy Story 3 (2010) were studied. Though women are represented as powerful characters in action-adventure films, there remains a curtained stereotype in every single story plot (Dutt, 2014).

Any study on society is not complete without studying the position of women in that society (Sharma, 2018). There are several acts and laws to check on gender equality, but still women are looked upon by men in family and social construction. Women are labeled by the society for the freedom they achieve. The research work 'Analyzing 'Lipstick under my Burkha': An Enquiry into the Labelling of Women' (2018) of Nitakshi Sharma brings forward the various ways in which women are labeled. This study compares the same analysis to the present society concluding that, men easily label women who chase their dreams and desire irrespective of age or status.

3. Methodology

The world we live in is surrounded by stories of all kinds. Every medium from advertisement to movies and from smartphones to social media is filled with images which act as storytellers. Visual images are vital for the cultural construction of social life (Rose, 2001). Visual perception comes before words; a child sees the world before it can speak (Berger, 2008). Film is a dominating visual form that can strike the head of viewers with power information. Images seen on the film screens carry tremendous weight, as they inject a particular idea indirectly in an entertaining manner (Dutt, 2014). This research paper visually analyses the storytelling structure of the film 'Lipstick Under my Burkha' (2016) underpinning the theory Dualism.

Dualism theory was formulated by Rene Descartes in 1638. This theory was known as body-mind problem. According to Descartes, the mind and body are two different substances. Mind was identified as a non-physical material with consciousness and self-awareness, whereas brain as a physical material with intelligence. Body was considered to be a non-physical material when a person is dreaming; human body takes the position of physical material only during full consciousness. There are several new contributions and controversies done on Descartes's Dualism theory. This research paper strongly focuses on Epistemological Dualism which is otherwise known as Representationalism or Indirect Realism. From the context of Epistemological Dualism, the world that is perceived in consciousness is not the real world but a 'miniature virtual-reality replica'.

Films are also miniature virtual-reality replicas which create an internal representation of the narrative world to the audience. The storytelling structure of the film 'Lipstick Under my Burkha' is dissected into four segments i.e., physical body, non-physical body, physical mind and non-physical mind. Physical body is the physical action performed by the four women characters and non-physical body is the hidden desire that's related to their physical body. Physical mind can be associated

to the thoughts and words of the four women characters and non-physical mind to the thoughts of the woman director Alankrita Shrivastava, which travels along with the narrative plot.

3.1 Research Objectives

Below stated are the primary and secondary objectives of this research paper:

1. This research intends to figure out the visual narrative structure employed by the woman director using the Dualism theory.
2. This study attempts to understand the role of the four women protagonists in representing the women of Indian society with hidden desires and dreams.

4. Data Analysis

The film 'Lipstick Under my Burkha' is the sample of this research. The film data is analyzed using the four elements of Epistemological Dualism theory. The four women characters i.e., Usha Parmar (55 year old widow), Rehana Abidi (Burkha worn teenager), Leela (young and vibrant beautician) and Shireen Aslam (Burkha wearing young house-wife) are visually analyzed along with the erotic pulp novel character Rosy's story which serves as the voice of director throughout the plot.

4.1 Physical Body

Physical Body is the real action performed by the four women characters in the storytelling narrative. The narrative structure revolving around the four women are separately analyzed below.

The story narrative begins with the character Rehana Abidi, a Burkha wearing teenager, stealing a red lipstick from a mall and running towards the bus station to board a bus. She feels a great sense of relief only after escaping into the bus. In the later part of the story, Rehana Abidi a Miley Cyrus fan, rebels against the ban of jeans and gets jailed. After her return, her parents express their disgrace to have begotten a girl like her. Her desires and dreams of dancing, singing and being modern remains veiled behind her Burkha. She gradually learns to smoke and continues stealing modern dresses to get affiliated with peer group. Rehana Abidi is known only as a modern girl, who wears jeans to the outside world. In reality, she is a girl behind the black Burkha. The moment she gets caught by the police for stealing attires from mall, her peer group sees her as person with fake identity. At the end of the story her parents' house-arrest her in their Burkha shop, asking her to work as a tailor, putting an end to her education.

Leela, a young and vibrant beautician acts hyper in all situations. She veils a hidden sexual affair with a photographer and attempts to start a business with him. Her mother, a nude model, enforces Leela into marrying an innocent guy to retain their house. On the night of Leela's engagement, she has physical relationship with her lover in her own house and gets caught by her mother. Leela's mother slaps her and brings her back to the engagement area. There arises a conflict between Leela and the photographer, after which he starts ignoring her. Due to the plead of her mother, Leela accepts to marry the person of her mother's choice. At the same time, she continuously attempts to get back with the photographer but fails. She sells her yellow scooter to flea with the photographer. All her attempts fail, which makes her to accept her fate. Leela starts to hang-out with her fiancé, who figures out her sexual affair at the end.

Shireen Aslam, a Burkha wearing young house wife yearns for love and compassion from her husband. At the beginning of the narration, she is visualized as a thief and later shown as an enthusiastic sales girl. She enters strangers' house to sell products to support her family without the knowledge of her husband. The only time her husband Aslam spends with her is during the night in their bed. After the serious warning of the gynecologist, Shireen approached the medical shop to purchase a condom, due to uterus infection. The same night, Aslam knowing the medical risk factors throws away the condom and continues to engage in the physical relationship with Shireen. One day Shireen cheerfully attempts to reveal her achievement in the field of marketing to her husband. Aslam ignores Shireen's talk by asking her to hand over the television remote and orders her to sexually satisfy him. Shireen acts boldly while she tracks her husband's illegal relationship in the veil of sales girl. The moment her husband figures out her as a working women, he rapes her the night physically and mentally.

Usha Parmar, an old widow had lost her husband at a small age, longs for companionship. She runs a large Halwa company in Bhopal and owns several houses around the neighborhoods. Usha boldly faces the large companies and government agencies that pressurize her family to evacuate their property. Her hands always hold a Hindi romantic pulp novel titled 'Lipstick Dreams' hidden under another weekly novel. Every day and night, Usha reads the story of Rosy and her longing for the imaginary prince. One day she meets a young swim trainer Jaspal, who calls her by her name Usha. She develops a secret love for Jaspal and starts to converse in the name of Rosy through phone. Their conversation gradually transforms into sexual talk. Jaspal figures out the veiled identity of Rosy to be Usha Parmar and reveals it to her family. Considering the act of Usha as a disgrace, her family forces her outside the house.

The story narration comes to an end while all the three women come together to support Usha Parmar. They settle down in Rehana Abidi's tailoring shop and laugh at each other. Gradually they pick up the torn pages of Usha's pulp novels and read out the mismatched titles. Usha requests Rehana to read out the left over pages of the book 'Lipstick Dreams'.

4. 2 Non-Physical Body

This section analyses the hidden intention or motive associated with the physical body of the four women characters separately throughout the storytelling narrative.

The first character Rehana Abidi narrated in the film Lipstick Under my Burkha has a hidden passion for modernity and music. Her incapability to achieve the desire of modernity forces her to engage in the anti-social act of stealing expensive attire and cosmetics from Shopping Mall. The character's physical body (action) is forced to remain under the veil which her non-physical body (desire) feels to be restricted. Whenever, the physical body of Rehana hits a chance, she opts to step out of the physical body and transform into non-physical body. This is evident in the narrative where, Rehana rushes towards the college bathroom and removes her Black Burkha before entering the college premises. Rehana is only known as a modern girl who links modernity to femininity. The moment she is asked to give a byte regarding 'Jeans Ban', her non-physical outburst irrespective of the place. She feels her non-physical body i.e., the desires to have wronged her physical body, the moment she finds her boyfriend cheating on her in spite of the situation. Rehana's non-physical body meets death the moment her parents' house-arrest her in their Burkha shop.

The second character Leela is narrated to be living with her non-physical body without any restriction, as she enjoys the moments with her secret love and moves around freely. The moment she forcefully gets engaged to a stranger makes her non-physical body to engage in the act of having physical relationship with her secret love the same night. Her extreme desire for her boyfriend can be clearly seen as physical relationship throughout the narrative. When her boyfriend ignores her, she uses the physical body to overcome her non-physical body. She sends a picture revealing her shoulder to her boyfriend with the intention of gaining his attention and love back. The moment she accepts the fate of her physical body to live with her fiancé, her non-physical body struggles to live a restricted life inside his house surrounded only by television and people.

Third character to appear on the screen is Shireen Aslam, a mother of three boys. Shireen's non-physical body longs to serve for her family inside and outside the household. This desire makes her to work as sales girl without the knowledge of her husband. Her non-physical body feels independent and powerful while working. On the other hand her non-physical body longs for love and compassion of her husband. Shireen's non-physical body outburst when she finds that her husband loves another girl. At this situation, her non-physical body forces her to track the girl. She feels her non-physical body to be worthless, the night she gets raped by her husband for secretly working outside the house and for questioning his illegal moves.

The last character entering the narrative is Usha Parmar. Her physical body is narrated as a strong, bold and empowering woman who maintains the entire family and households. But, her non-physical body is stuck to the pulp fiction 'Lipstick Dreams' which fascinates her thoughts and desire to meet an imaginary prince. In spite of her age, her non-physical body forces her to engage in sexual talk with a young swim trainer through phone. The moment the swim trainer calls her by her real name Usha, transforms her non-physical body to have a soft corner for the guy. The moment she is forced outside the house, her non-physical body feels no regret as she boldly collects her thrown things.

At the climax, all the four non-physical bodies meet to support each other.

4. 3 Physical Mind

Physical mind is the thought process and words uttered by the four women characters in the story narrative. The thoughts and words associated to the story narrative of the four women are analyzed under this section.

Rehana Abidi's physical mind races for liberation which forces her to rebel in every action and words uttered. In the story narrative her parents restrict her from dancing, her physical mind rebels, which she expresses by dancing crazily in her bedroom. Being a girl from a conservative family, her physical mind forces her to engage in the brave act of participating in the protest against the ban of Jeans. Though she gets caught by police, her physical mind holds remains calm and acts bravely.

Leela's physical mind longs for empowerment. She attempts to gain the love of her life through physical relationship. Her physical body is independent as she roams around in her scooter, whereas her physical mind is dependent over her lover and mother.

Shireen Aslam's physical mind works bravely tricking her customers into her products. Her physical mind wishes to gain the love of her husband. Shireen physical mind remains calm even though she finds her husband's secret lover. Physical mind hits a transformation where she rebels when her husband rapes for working outside the house and questioning him.

Usha Parmar's physical mind revolves around the pulp fiction character Rosy. In several situations, Usha lives the physical mind of Rosy. This adaptation makes this character feel young, romantic and persuades her physical mind to live a fantasy life inside the fictional story of the novel.

The four physical minds feel rebellious and failure at the end of the story.

4. 4 Non-Physical Mind

The non-physical mind is the non-existing thoughts of the character. In this study, non-physical mind is associated to the fictional character Rosy. The story of Rosy from the pulp novel 'Lipstick Dreams' can be heard throughout the story narrative. This non-physical mind can be associated to the thoughts of the director Alankrita Shrivastava.

The non-physical mind travels revealing the story of Rosy, her desire for Lipstick and imaginary prince. It indirectly reveals the thoughts of the woman director about women in the Indian society. Women have the longing for love and desire irrespective of age. The non-physical mind narrates that society makes women to veil their thoughts, desires and dreams. The story of Rosy travels in a rebellious and erotic structure linking all the four women characters and their lives.

5. Conclusion

Women representations in films have faced a strong gender inequality. Women are usually productized for their body and looks. The films directed by Women Directors representing women have a different approach in reflecting their lives. Lipstick Under my Burkha is one such film, which reflects the true lives of four different women in Indian society. Every woman can superimpose their life events with these represented women on screens. The storytelling structure of the film reveals that books feed women with false dreams but they feel empowered at least to be able to dream.

Dualistic theory brings forth a different approach to film narrative analysis. The four women characters reflect the physical body, non-physical body, physical mind and non-physical mind of the women in Indian society. The futuristic approach of representing women on screens will experience a new dimension with the entry of more women filmmakers in structuring the visual storytelling narrative.

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