

# IN SEARCH OF INDIAN FILM FEMINISM: THEORY AND PRAXIS

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“In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not.”

—Albert Einstein

## Abstract

*In line of the debate on Theory and Praxis, this paper hypothesizes the current English classroom in India, and also its conference halls which are mired in the Euro-centric strategies of theoretical reading and analysis. Indian films, which are an integral aspect of mass cultural representation, are often analyzed within the ambit of literature and generally the same reductionist methodology of analysis, which is fed by modern European theory, is utilized to interpret them. This interpretation is insufficient, to say the least, and insidiously dangerous in the long run. When the Indian academia interprets texts and inter texts within the Indian cultural subsystem, but utilizing deracinated western tools to do so, the results are often misleading and demand tangential inspection.*

The paper attempts to therefore examine a case study from contemporary Indian cinema and trace the representation of the Indian woman as object and subject of discourse, keeping the theory of the ‘cinematic gaze’ as a point of central reference. The research shall examine the critical commentary on the films in India and juxtapose the same against dominant European feminist film thought which is being taught in the critical studies classroom through Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1989). The paper aims to collude a reading of the Bollywood film, *English Vinglish* (2012) and Mulvian film theory and argue that the notion of the cinematic gaze (as ascribed by Mulvey’s theory), is insufficient to read the Indian ‘feminist’ film genre (The feminist position as anointed by the film critics in India<sup>1</sup>).

Differing from the above critical claim, the paper further hypothesizes that the case study further cements the masculine moulds of femininity, thereby undercutting the liberal stance, it boasts of projecting. The research aims to prove that a more substantial counter-narrative to the above said ‘feminist-film’ genre is required which needs to create a new lens of focus to the feminist issues in India.

To prove the hypothesis, the paper uses the first point of reference as a recent news report from Outlook India which states, “In a step towards their empowerment, women of Bibipur village in Haryana will soon be reading Hindi translations of books by Virginia Woolf and Malala Yousafzai besides 2,500 other writings on feminism” (*Outlook India*).

The news story carries a quote from the village *sarpanch* who states, “The library for women is an effort to make the women aware about their rights through literature”. He further clarifies, “If women want liberation,

then they must have the desire in their hearts for freedom and knowledge. To make women free from all kinds of social shackles, they first need to be aware about their problems. Right now, they don't even know themselves." (*Outlook India*). Thus, books are clearly established as a *supposed* means of liberation, and in particular the feminist ideologies of Woolf and Beauvoir are seen as a source of deliverance from societal oppression.

As a counter to the above report, a telephonic interview with the *sarpanch* Sunil Kumar Jaglan revealed that though the books have been provided to the women, they need a mediator to understand the complex weave of thoughts. Secondly, he states that the women prefer the works by Taslima Nasreen and Mahatma Gandhi over those by Beauvoir and Woolf. Thirdly, the *sarpanch* emphatically states that he has found films to be the most effectual means of persuasion within his jurisdiction and often uses films like *Mother India* (1957) *Mirch Masala* (1987), *Kahaani* (2012) and *English Vinglish* (2012) to assert the need for female liberation. The second point of reference is the seminal study by Abbas and Sathe which instates films as the single dominant source of 'inspiration and education' for the Indian masses: In a country where less than 5% buy or read newspapers and books, the Hindi film is the only popular form of literature and art for the vast masses of the common people. Hence, the importance of the talkie is that it can educate and inspire the people even while entertaining them (Abbas and Sathe, 69).

The third point of reference is the first-ever UN sponsored global study of female characters in popular films across the world, commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, with support from UN Women and The Rockefeller Foundation which reveals that India "tops the chart in showing attractive women in its movies and as much as 35 per cent of these female characters are shown with some nudity" (Davis). The study further reports that Indian films are marked by "deep-seated discrimination, pervasive stereotyping, sexualisation of women and their underrepresentation in powerful roles." (Davis).

To now collate the above three aspects, it is apparent that films are evidenced to be the most 'inspirational' tool of persuasion as against books/newspapers for the Indian masses. Films, however, are marred by 'discrimination and sexualisation' of women which in turn becomes an ethnographic trend setter which transfers the above said 'sexualisation' from films to society. Finally, films like *Kahaani*, *English Vinglish* and *Queen* are allegedly breaking the pattern of stereotyping and discrimination and offering an alternative to the uni-dimensional, sexualized representation of women.

The fourth point of reference is the analysis of film feminism in India, which centers on the notion of the 'male gaze' which originates theoretically in Laura Mulvey's influential study *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and continues to be a significant benchmark. Mulvey iterates three diverse 'looks' associated with conventional Hollywood cinema: (1) that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event (2) that of the audience as it watches the final product and (3) that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion.

Mulvey explains: The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth (Mulvey 25 emphasis mine).

Moreover, Mulvey comments on the spectator's advantage of 'invisibility'— looking without being looked at. The look of the 'camera' and the spectator seem subordinate to that of the characters – the male protagonist's point of view. The article further argues how in the dominant patriarchal system of visual representation, sexual difference demarcates the active/passive, looking/looked-at split. As Mulvey comments:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 19)

With Laura Mulvey and others taking the lead in the 1970s, feminist film theory was characterized by debates around 'male gaze' which resulted in arguments about spectatorship, especially female spectatorship. The above genderisation has been criticized by critics like Mayne and Guiliانا Bruno and Mary Ann Doane. Mayne states:

Following Mulvey's argument of male gaze, the spectator is essentially positioned as male. These aspects of male gaze and spectator (ship) of 1970s feminist film theory cannot answer adequately questions like how do women in the audience occupy that spectator position. Is there something called female spectator? What kind of pleasure does a female spectator have? Is this male spectator position, whose origins lie in the (especially Lacanian) psychoanalytical subject, biologically defined? (Mayne).

Female spectator is conceived alternatively by theorist Mary Ann Doane who claims: "I have never thought of the female spectator as synonymous with the woman sitting in front of the screen, munching her popcorn.... It is a concept which is totally foreign to the epistemological framework of the new ethnographic analysis of audiences.... The female spectator is a concept, not a person" (Doane 142).

It is imperative to note that the Mulvian theory of the gaze is not based on an empirical study of actual film viewers but on her intention to make 'political use' of Freudian psychoanalytic theory (in a version influenced by Jacques Lacan) in a study of cinematic *spectatorship* (Chandler). Thus, truly the idea of the female as object and subject is entirely conceptual and not ethnographically tested. Therefore, though it is evident as Jonathan Schroeder notes, "Film has been called an instrument of the male gaze, producing representations of women, the good life, and sexual fantasy from a male point of view" (Schroeder). It is equally clear that this 'evidencing' is theoretical and not empirical. Further, the theory has no provision for the female visualiser of the screen (director) as well as the articulation of an important 'fourth gaze' that of the male viewer on the female co-viewer.

To explain the above two tangents, the paper shall now analyze *English Vinglish* paying attention to the differential visualization of the female director and the operation of the 'fourth gaze' and prove that contrary to projection, the film plays into the pre-conceived notions of femininity and is far from breaking the 'social shackles' which are all-pervasive in Indian society, rural and urban.

Sudish Kamath from *The Hindu* claims that *English Vinglish* is “a fantastic tribute to motherhood and womankind” (Kamath). Contrary to this, actress Tilottama feels that “though the Bollywood woman has progressed from pious goddess to the sexy, sexy *mujhe log bole*, to the assertive kissing heroine, to the self-assured entrepreneur, in truth, these are just mild variations of each other. The intolerable change has been in the hypersexualisation of the female body to make profit” (Chintamani, emphasis mine).

*English Vinglish* is the story of a neglected housewife, Shashi Godbole, who runs a home-based business of selling *laddoos*, but in spite of her successful stint as an entrepreneur, she is constantly ridiculed by her husband and daughter for her lack of English speaking skills. This derision leads to an inferiority complex which she counters through an English speaking course which she enrolls for on a visit to the United States. In the above said course, she interacts with a cosmopolitan batch of students, one of whom, a French chef, Laurent, falls in love with her, though she does not respond to his advances. Towards the end of the film, she thanks Laurent for “making her feel better about herself.” The primary tangents of the story revolve around these three coordinates: cooking as a source of positive self-image, English as the medium of power and the housewife as the balancing apex of the triad. Cooking alone does not centralize her position within the family, it is fluency in the ‘language of power’ which moves Shashi from the margin to the centre of the family, the classroom, and the film.

To focus on the Mulvian theory of the gaze, the film clearly uses Shashi as the central point of narration. She is being looked at by the camera, the other characters of the film as well as by the audience. However, the gaze, in all cases but one (Laurent’s) is non-erotic. Shashi is not overtly ‘hypersexualised’ and remains attired in simple cotton sarees with minimal make-up. Her body language is conventional and her demeanor echoes the conservative ethos she emerges from. This then is perhaps the influence of the female eye behind the camera, Gauri Shinde, the writer and director of *English Vinglish*. Shinde asserts, “It’s true for 90 per cent of the women that while a woman gets love, what she does not get is respect” (Gupta). Applying this thought to the visualization of the female as subject and object of the cinematic gaze, the sensitivity of the director as well as her femininity, become apparent. Shinde comments: “I understand the duality of my position as female and as a director. There are no cleavage shots in my film, no bare midriffs and no voyeurism” (Gupta). Thus, it is established that the operation of the gaze is dependent on the gender and socio-cultural location of the director/writer.

The second point of focus is the ‘fourth gaze’ generated by the film, which operates between the male viewer and the female co-viewer. From a cinematic point of view, *English Vinglish* offers multiple, inter-connected, ‘web-like’ exchanges of the gaze.

One scene in particular, played out in a cinema hall, captures all the students of the English speaking course watching an old English romance. Shashi sits immersed in the film, her gaze lovingly fixed on the images on the screen as she attempts to follow the English dialogues. Another female student, Eva, sleeps, obstructing the gaze altogether and Laurent stares at Shashi, indicating the fourth gaze. The screen shows the heroine of the meta-film embracing and then the camera pans to the movement of Laurent’s eyes from the screen to Shashi.

Thus, initiating from the Mulvian stance of transference of desire for the female character from the male character to the male viewer, the film shows the further transference of desire, from the female character to the female co-viewer. This transference is pertinently true in India, where low literacy rates colluding with the intensely patriarchal setting, allow the male viewers to freely transit from voyeuristic desire for the female character to the 'active' desire for the female co-viewer. This perhaps partly explains the plethora of cases of sexual violence which may have a genesis in filmic titillation.

Finally, the third point raised by the research deals with the point of differential feminist representation which *English Vinglish* claims to represent. A female director, a female crew (more than 70% of the cast and crew were women) and a film positioned towards a female audience, do these numbers conspire to remind one of the Woolfian interpretation of feminism? Is a feminist work by a woman, for a woman and of a woman? Or is it one that breaks the pre-conceived patriarchal stereotypes which exist in society. *English Vinglish*, Shinde says is a film made to "say sorry to my mother" (Gupta). She explains that as a teenager, she marginalized her mother, ridiculing her inability to converse in English and drawing a sense of inferiority from her mother's lack of socio-lingual incompatibility. The autobiographical leanings of the film notwithstanding, the narrative primarily shows a married middle aged housewife who only manages to assert herself when she learns the language of 'power', of masculinity and exteriority: English. She only gets the license to demand a 'Hindi' newspaper aboard an international flight when she has learnt to phrase her question, unhesitatingly in English. Moreover, her skills as a cook are acknowledged by one and all, but not her husband and daughter. They continue to take her talent for cooking for granted. It is only her climatic speech in English which wins Shashi the interest and appreciation of the duo. The above facts put to question then, the feminism the film imparts. Is a woman only to be heard when she discourses in the masculine, exterior language? What about the interiority of her dialogue? What about the little spasm she emits when she needs to disrupt her morning coffee in order to make tea for her husband? Does the film promise that such demands will cease? Shashi, having learnt the language of power, having realized her potential as 'entrepreneur', having established her physical and social self as desirable, returns to the same house. Though the husband and daughter shamefully hang their heads when Shashi speaks of home as a space of liberation, where we "have the freedom to be ourselves" and of marriage as a relationship of "equality", the film speaks of the second wave of feminism, which is still hankering for equality, homogenizing the cultural, economic, social and spatio-temporal differences between women. Perhaps, in the Indian context, the film would have been a true feminist film if it asserted the need for heterogeneity along with equality. If it allowed Shashi to not pass with distinction but still win the approval of her family, based on her skills as a cook, a care-giver and a loving spouse. In its attempt to eulogize the 'working woman', the film undercuts the role of the house-wife. It is pertinent to remember, that Shashi has to move outside the geographical and emotional boundaries of her nuclear family and her nation for her to find liberation. The above said linguistic 'make-over' is not fashioned within the familial or national domain.

To conclude, the paper argues that the Indian academia and society, by extension, needs to fashion its own feminist ideology, placed at a tangent from the European (Bouverian, Milletian, Gilbertian and Mulvian) way of analysis. The use of imported theories just adds to the 'isms', delineating rather than discussing.

Indian feminism, including film feminism, needs to develop as a distinct language, firmly located within the socio-cultural paradigms of the Indian subcontinent. Effectually, if Theory and Praxis desire to attain a symbiotic mean, it is essential that the above said theory be tailored to suit the cultural climes of its location. Just by virtue of being theory, it cannot help the reader/viewer to decipher the text, intertext and subtext better. It just allows the above said viewer to modify her thought in accordance with the current 'ism'. Perhaps we need to move beyond the zone of being mere purveyors of theory. Most importantly, we need to learn and teach our students, to critically evaluate their intellectual and spiritual inheritance from the inside, not exclusively through the prism of deracinated European theory.

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