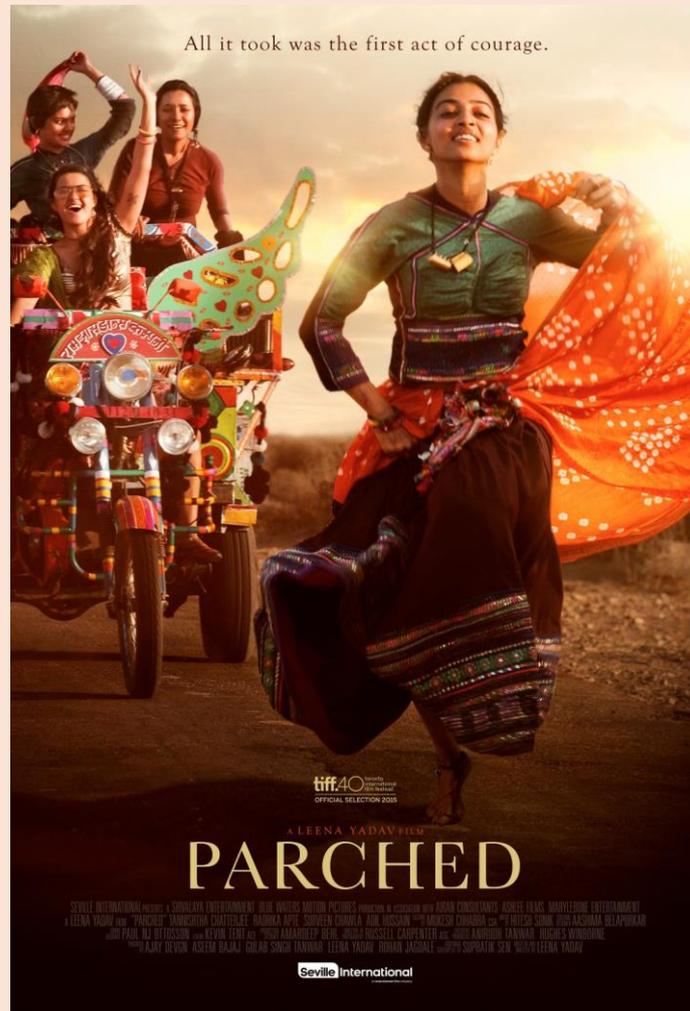


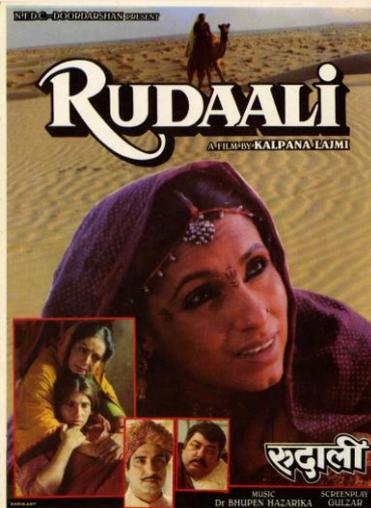
Article  
Rita Dutta

## Female Gaze: A Paradigm Shift



*Parched*

2012 Cannes film festival witnessed massive protest by the attendants especially the feminists as they found in their dismay that there are no films from women directors. So, there is an absolute question of sexism in the selection process. The website change.org came up with the headline 'Where are the Female Directors' created quite a stir among the festival goers. Cannes is a 'popular' festival besides being overtly artistic. Its popularity is often intertwined by the 'red carpet' agenda. Women are all over but in a lesser & frivolous way. There is



mostly no ‘brains’ involved. The problem does not only lie in the conspicuous absence of films by the women film makers in the official competition of Cannes but also the severe dearth of women film makers in the whole world. This does raise an eye brow? It is kind of difficult to believe that no films from female directors was worthy of inclusion. May be the festival does not want to see a feminist point of view. Is not it sheer sexism that the festival shuts aside the perspective of

half of the world? [Melissa Silverstein]. British director Andrea Arnold pointed out ‘It’s true the world over that there are just not many women directors. Cannes is small pocket that represents how it is there in the world.’ As the festival opened the news paper ‘Le Monde’ carried a protest letter from the feminist collective ‘La Barbe’, which was signed by notable French female film makers, including Virginie Despentes, Coline Serrau and Franny Cotlencon. ‘Men love their women to have depth but only when it comes to their cleavage’ the letter argued. Jane Campion who won the Oscar awards back in spoke about the need for women to have a mere prominent

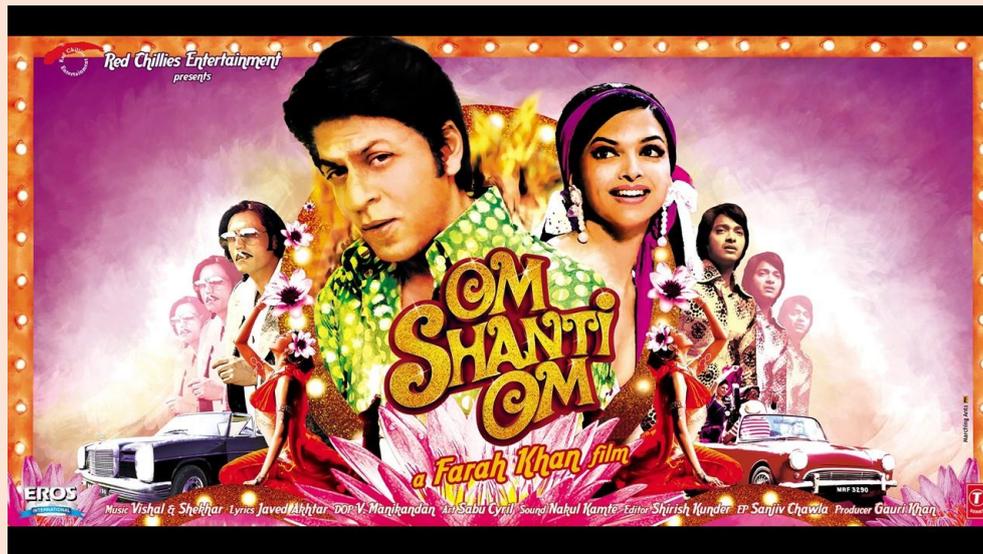


voice in films also added ‘One of the betrayals of the females is that they want to see themselves through male eyes’. Here comes the notion of ‘male gaze’ propounded by famous scholar Laura Mulvey in her ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in the 70’s in terms of classical Hollywood cinema. Though primarily ‘gaze’ the term had been initiated by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, he proclaims that gaze is a part of desire for completion of oneself through the others. Sartre and Foucault also used the term in their own philosophical ways. Sartre’s gaze has broader applications, it is not the actual eye he is ashamed of, but suddenly believes an unexpected presence of the other. For Foucault, gaze is a particular dynamic in power relations which enable the distribution of power in various institutions of

society. For him, people modify their behaviour under the belief that they are constantly being watched even if they cannot watch them. Thus self regulation occurs under systems of surveillance. Interestingly, Mulvey stated that films, especially in Hollywood, follow the models of voyeurism and scopophilia. She also argues that in a typical patriarchal order, a male gaze takes precedence over the female gaze, reflecting an underlying power asymmetry. Mulvey also said that the female gaze is the same as the male gaze. Male gaze, for a feminist, is about following the norm of already existent inequality between sexes. Women by their gaze actually use the existent Directors' chair to challenge the patriarchal order. So, it's about the tussle between the two categories of film making: as critic Suzan Moore said. Many men have a 'fear that the female gaze will soften everything in its path' a fear that is certainly born out with limp films like 'You've got mail' by Nora Ephron or mere macho films like 'Hurt Locker' by Kathryn Bigelow which is certainly less critical of Americans at war.

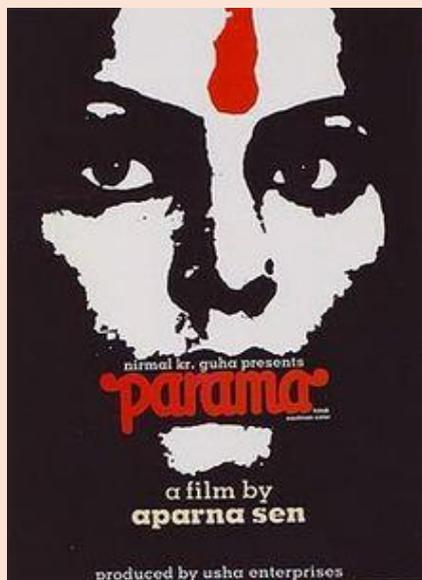
Woman film is a genre though not 'pure' as it is crossed by other genres such as melodrama, film noir, horror film etc. Woman films though designed to appeal to female audience it also expects to tag along the whole family. Woman films usually adhere to the concept that a woman's job is that of being a woman [Jeanine Basinger: Cinema Historian]. Basinger also notes that woman's films were often criticized for reinforcing conventional values. These women films are films that are made for women predominantly by male screen writers and directors whereas women's cinema encompasses films that have been made by women. Some of the most distinguished women directors have tried to avoid the association with women's cinema in the fear of marginalization and ideology of controversies. Since the beginning of sound cinema, with very few exceptions, the films of women had been absent from the mainstream cinema. Most of them made and are making independent films because 'feminist' issues are passé and women with women centric issues are looked down upon as an extension of their own political agenda loaded with no entertainment. And even major success as an independent women filmmaker may go unnoticed, making it difficult for them to make

films, let alone with big budget. To avoid these paraphernalia, female directors now-a-days are venturing into mainstreams. Even then when women filmmakers succeed, credit accrues to everyone but the directors (Redding and Brownworth, 148). Probably the new women directors don't want to be defined or confined by ideological stances, rather they want to spread their wings to understand what life is all about.



The picture is not totally different in India. With an industry producing nearly 2000 films per year, women directors are still miniscule in number. Most of them either have a proven family lineage in the industry or have been associated with films in some capacity before they took direction. The trajectory of Indian female film makers like their western counterparts are still finding it difficult to make it big in the patriarchal social system where 'one is not born woman, rather becomes one.' Now this socialization process is faulty. Women are brought up to negotiate in a different way from men, which is problematic in a male dominated environment. A lack of female film maker also seems to have made it difficult for financiers to imagine women in charge. Film is a big business, filled with financial risks and so 'the whole industry is based on demonstrable success', unless something has worked in the past, it is very rare that people will take a risk. There is also a perception that, traditionally, it is a man's role so we won't back a film of a woman and by the woman. In India there has been an interesting paradigm shift in terms of women

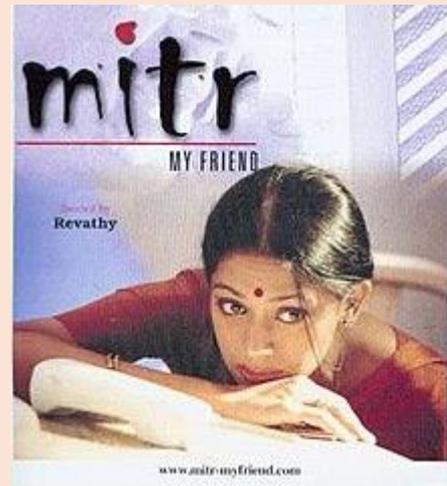
film makers and psyche and it is some how associated with market capitalism, globalisation and the fall of ideology . Before the 90's women film makers of India, be it regional or national, usually used to harp on women related subjects. From 1947 to 2012 names of female feature film directors are known to all. Makers like Sai Paranjapee, Kalpana Lajmi (*Rudali, Daman*), Prema Karanth (*Phaniyamma*), Aparna Sen (*36 Chowringee Lane, Paroma, Yuganto* and others) Satarupa Sanyal (*Anu*), Urmi Chakraborty (*Hementer Pakhi*), Revathi (*Mitr My Friend, Phir Milenge*) are women centric films, some of them are also critically acclaimed & award winners. Most of their association with film industry started much before as actresses or associate directors/ film script writers/ theatre directors. These directors started their careers at a juncture when second wave



feminism was in vogue and Indian Film Finance Corporation and subsequently NFDC started producing films just to establish the newly independent 'socialistic' pattern of society. Vijaya Mehta's *Pestonjee* is a product of that hour. Arundhuti Devi in Bengal was a powerful actress and wife of legendary film maker Tapan Sinha. She hoisted the flag of women film making by her acclaimed *Chuti* (1967), *Megh-o-Roudra* (1969), *Podipishir Barmi Baksho* (1972) *Deepar Prem* (1983) all had women of substance as the central character.

Aparna Sen's *Paroma* (The Ultimate Woman, 1984) is a land mark in Indian film history for questioning the middle class hypocrisy. All the above mentioned films not only posit its women on the forefront but enable the viewers to accept the various crisis faced by the women. Interestingly with the fall of any overarching meta narratives in history, market emerged as the new doyen in the world. Therefore, women centric films were no more in the agenda, rather it became a 'saleable' product which can be actualized by anybody. Since 90's, it has found a place in the domain of male film makers. *Astitva* (2000) is a complete women oriented film directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. *Satta*

(2003), *Page3* (2003), *Chandni Bar* (2001), *Fashion* (2008) all had strong female characters as lead roles. Therefore, women centric films are no more the prerogative of women film makers. There is no more any question of ideology. If the story is market friendly a female gaze is not required especially in a country where patriarchal order is everywhere. Even female film makers have gleefully accepted that. Rather following the rule set by Kathryn Bigelow, who suffered ‘troubling authorial signature’ as she works with primarily male driven narratives and traditionally masculine genres such as the action film named *Point Break* (1991), the thriller *Blue Steel* (1990) and most recently the war film *The Hurt Locker* (2008). One of the central ideological strains in Bigelow’s work has been the privileging of androgyny, they have also likewise embraced the patriarchy of consumerism and focussed more on showing ‘male six packs’ to collect big dividends in the box office mullah. Farah Khan’s *Om Shanti Om* (2007), Puja Bhatt’s *Jism 2* (2012) and Zoya Akhtar’s *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) are not aimed to emancipate the world. Like *Ladies in Vengeance*, they are hell bent down to prove that they can wear their men colleague’s hat as directors. Rather they are experimenting on myriad themes from action to wholesome family entertainment.



In Tamil film industry Soundarya Rajnikanth directed a period Film *Kochadaiyaan* (2014) which is expected to be a 3D film. Her sister Aishwarya Rajnikanth directed a chick flick called *3* (2012). Still over in the bustling maiden of commercial Bollywood, women directors are rare creatures. Making occasional minor splashes before vanishing back in the shadows most of them remain ‘one film wonders’! *Om Shanti Om* was a typical Bollywood masala film by Farah Khan and another woman coming from the film industry clan is Zoya Akhtar. Her *Zindagi Na Milega Dobara* grossed over 19 million USD in three weeks proving the fact that women can handle big budget films and the fate of their films are no lesser than their male

counterparts. Therefore, market is not determined by the gender of a filmmaker. Kiran Rao, wife of Aamir Khan did produce an arty film called *Dhobi Ghaat* (2010) but still wishes to put a strong woman character in her next project. Therefore, the whole issue of dearth of women filmmakers in India vis-a vis international cinema can be pinned down in a few cardinal points. The expected role performance of a woman as a mother-daughter-wife is almost the same everywhere. A lot of women with talents are still finding it's difficult to make it big in their battle against archaic perceptions and gender stereotypes. Sometimes, filmmaking is accused of being a physically tasking job, difficult for women to handle. Though to prove the people at large wrong, women filmmakers are stepping into genres like action, sci-fi, horror or psychological thrillers to tread on mainstreams. The female



gaze is incorporated in an amusing way. Farah Khan highlights on the six pack abs of SRK with a sweet vengeance as well as serves Katrina Kaif's 'Sheila Ki

Jawani' to titillate the male/female audiences quite unapologetically. She also honestly rules out critics views as she found them useless when it comes about her films doing great business.

Gender discrimination is still there in the film industry in its fullest way. Zoya tells aspiring young woman filmmakers' 'We are big girls, deal with it. If you can make a movie, you can also tell someone to, ahem! Get lost'. Tanuja Chandra has directed films like *Dushman* (1998) and *Sangharsh* (1999) revealed candidly '...the only currency that has any significance in the film industry is the box office. Commercial success is the main language of communication, so anyone who brings that is sought after, whether male or female'. In this way, the women point of crisis goes lost in the abysmal void of

market and issueless ness! Anu Menon who directed *London-Paris-New York* (2012) says ‘There might be a section of people who feel more comfortable to see men calling the shots, and that’s true for most industries’. Chandra says ‘I do wish there are many more women filmmakers in the industry. Unless and until half of the directors are women, one won’t really be able to say there is absolute gender equality in the movie business. She also added ‘at that time, perhaps the pay structure will change too and women will earn as much money as men, whether actresses or women directors.’

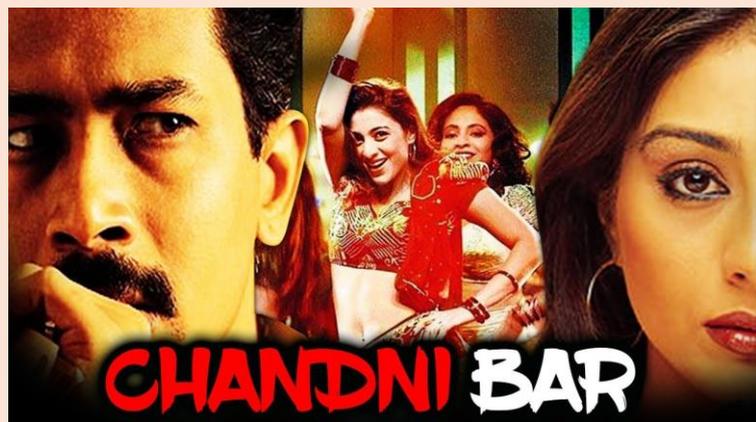


*Margarita with a Straw*

Nevertheless, the situation is not that bleak. Besides, women with ‘filmy’ background are there like Bela Sehgal, sister of acclaimed filmmaker Sanjoy Leela Bhansali; Gauri Shinde, R.Balki’s wife; Divya Kumar, wife of T-Series owner Bhusan Kumar and it’s easier to break through any profession with right ‘connections’ and if it comes from inside the family, nothing like that. Yet, there is also a strong parallel new bred of women directors with no direct connections with the industry started venturing into the foray with their mostly quality films. Bhavna Talwar’s *Dharma* (2007) which won the Nargis Dutta Award for Best Feature Film on National Integration at the National Awards of India is based around the theme of communal harmony which was premiered at the 60<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival as the closing film of the world cinema section. This is the way the younger breed of female directors venturing out cutting across the comfort zones of familiarity. Alankrita Srivastava’s *Lipstick under my Burqa* (2016) and Leena Yadav’s *Parched* (2015)

turned our eye again to these obscure species. What a relief to watch these films amongst the typical commercial hullaballo! Another women director Shonali Bose, after her critically acclaimed *Amu* (2005) delivered another gem with Kalki Koechilan *Margarita with a Straw* (2014).

Similarly, Anusha Rizvi's *Peepli Live* (2010) is a satirical take on issues plaguing the countryside such as rural indebtedness and farmer's suicide. She is planning to make her next on Amitava's Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies'. Sometimes, it does irk the filmmakers to be clubbed in the league of female directors whose subject is women oriented? They no more want to be associated with the feminist agenda, they are more open to the other sides of the life. But also successfully putting a distinctive female gaze into it and thereby either submitting or subverting the existing patriarchal order of every field. Jane Campion rightly said 'consequently I want to enquire into how other women live their lives.....I think this is the main reason why men tell stories predominantly about men. I cannot imagine the story of a man. I don't know why I should either. Although I am curious about their world....I still prefers to be in the centre of my imaginary world myself'.



Although this view is still strongly making their presence felt in the international arena, back home, every woman director is trying to carve her own oeuvre to be distinctive. When Anjali Menon made *Manjadikury* (Lucky Little Seeds, 2008), it won FIPRESCI award in the Kerala International Film Festival and also the award in the South Asian International Film Festival New York. She dealt with the story of a 10 year old boy who returns to his village to attend the funeral of his grandfather. She explored basic human conditions which go

beyond any cultural barriers. In Tamil Nadu Nandhini JS, V. Priya are making blockbuster commercial films. Bengali cinema for the last two decades has not witnessed any significant rise of women filmmakers.

With their films and exploration of new horizons, new questions of post feminism are coming up. While in general, direct political references to feminism is rare, there are films by women filmmakers which undermine our understanding of biologically ordained 'natural Category'. They are also addressing new family patterns that new productive alternatives ensure and they are also conscious about women friendship and transgender figures which destabilize the very normative and essentialist definitions of gender.

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**Rita Dutta is a Member of the Fipresci-India.**