

## The Panorama of Female Gaze in Indian Cinema – A Case Study of ‘Parched’

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### ABSTRACT

*Indian Cinema is used to words which objectify women and portray them as someone very inferior, timid and someone who needs protection. One such portrayal is analysed by the male gaze theory of Laura Mulvey, who uses the scopophilic analysis of Sigmund Freud, which says that male gaze is predominantly used just for the voyeuristic pleasure of men. Any patriarchal country accepts such gaze filled with lust as normal as it is fed in their mind that women are meant to be objectified. Being exposed to repeated male gaze, women also start looking at other women in the perspective of a male. In this era of repeated exposure to male gaze, a new perspective to look at cinema in the point of view of female audience, which subjects to the female gaze, is the core objective of this research paper. This paper tries to analyse the ‘female gaze’ which is a feminist film theory, which represents the gaze of a female spectator. Female gaze is also being used to describe the gaze of the director or the film maker of a movie. Hence women centric movies and films which are directed by female filmmakers can be analysed under this category. Hence the movie ‘Parched’ is used a case study to analyse female gaze present in Indian cinema. The study also uses the theory of identification by Murray Smith, where audiences tend to identify themselves with the characters on screen at three different levels. Hence this research paper is an amalgamation of both the theories and an attempt to bring out the perspective of female gaze.*

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### INTRODUCTION

This research paper tries to focus its attention on female gaze by analysing how Indian women spectators identify themselves with the characters that are portrayed in the films by taking the case study of the hindi movie ‘Parched’ directed by Leena Yadhav. The film brings out age old traditions, social evils, marital rapes and evils of patriarchy. The movie highlights the story of four women in a remote village of Rajasthan which is plagued by many evil customs.

According to Zeydabadi – Nejat the action of women watching films together can be considered as an action of women empowerment. In his chapter on ‘Women’s films’ he says that women tend to identify more with the filmic characters depending on their gender role and the patriarchal influence they are structured to. This paper tries to bring out the female gaze keeping in mind Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory. It also expounds on the works of Murray Smith’s ‘identification’ towards films. While the paper is an amalgamation of works based on the theory of identification and gaze, its objective is to find out the character bonding between the filmic characters established through camera angles, the unobtrusive angles that they are characters are subjected to and the three types of gaze which the filmic characters are treated with (i.e. profilmic, audience point of view and gaze between filmic characters within the screen.) The entire movie is analysed to understand how the audience associate themselves with the main female characters of the movie by explaining Murray Smith’s concept of recognition, alignment and allegiance. These three parameters explain how

emotional response towards characters in the film is felt by the audience.

### ENGAGING CHARACTERS

Movies and texts carry meanings in them which are interpreted by the receivers. This process is called “meaning production” according to Murray Smith. He believes that the audiences interpret the meaning of the visual text or any material based on their ‘emotional identification’. These emotional identifications can be further classified into recognition, alignment and allegiance. Each level is important for the audience to slowly build their relationship with the characters of the film and get engaged with them.

Such an involvement generally begins with the first mandatory step known as ‘Recognition’, where audiences identify the individual characters of the movie. Slowly after this, the audiences try to associate themselves with the character of the movie and start to build a relationship. This is the second step which highly depends on the camera angles, the filmic aesthetics and point of view shots. Finally in the last step of engaging with the characters, the audiences try to do a moral evaluation of the character on screen. These three parameters are analysed in this study.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper uses qualitative content analysis to study female gaze present in the movie. This is done by using the male gaze theory by Laura Mulvey along with Murray Smith’s concept of ‘identification’ with films. Smith states that according to

Zeydabadi – Nejat, a woman's film or any movie on woman empowerment talks more of the evil face of patriarchy irrespective of the gender of the film maker. The movie '*Parched*' is based on this definition of women's film which tries to bring out the female gaze present in it in the feministic perspective. Hence it is selected for the analysis. The three parameters that are analysed in this movie are recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Apart from this the female gaze present in the movie is also analysed based on the type of gaze the characters are subjected to viz. profilmic gaze, audience gaze and gaze within the characters of the films and the results are given in a sequential manner.

## RESULTS

For the sake of convenience the results are given according to the three parameters that were analysed.

### RECOGNITION

The first step involved in associating with the characters in the film is recognition which is not just received through empathy with the character or its uniqueness. It is achieved through the emotional responses of the audience combined with filmic aesthetics and interacting process. In the movie '*parched*' the audience identify themselves with the filmic characters because of the amount of humiliation that they are subjected to. In general it gives an idea to the audience about the evils of patriarchy.

The film opens with a remote village in Rajasthan, which still practices age old traditions and the evils of patriarchy is at peak. *Rani* and *Lajjo* are travelling in a bus to fix marriage alliance for *Rani*'s son *Gulab* with *Janaki* by paying a price as dowry. *Gulab* is found with his friends in the bus stop where they watch obscene videos in cellphone and teases *Kishan*'s wife, an educated woman for showing her 'midrib' and walking. They comment that she dares to look at them directly in their eye and she has the courage to travel alone which is very inappropriate. later in a scene which follows this, the members of the village gather at the 'Gram Panchayat' to discuss the issue of a girl named *Champa* who has ran away from her husband to live with her parents. While the village heads and mother of *Champa* force her to live with her inlaws, *Champa* narrates that she has been subjected to domestic violence and rape by all the male members of the family including her father in law. The petrified mother who listens to this, send *Champa* again with her inlaws with a vacant expression on her face, as it is believed that after marriage a woman should never leave her inlaws. When *Kishan* and his wife who is educated try to interfere in this matter, they were ridiculed, humiliated and silenced.

Later in the same Gram Panchayat, the women representative of the village seeks permission for the instillation of satellite dish TV connection so that they can deviate the men of the village from visiting *Bijli*, an erotic dancer and sex worker. She also says that television will suppress the boredom of women when they have gone for work for many days. The panchayat heads were however not pleased with the request of the women as they feel that the images on the screen might pollute the minds of the ladies and also cited finance as another problem. When *Kishan* said that he will help in instillation of the satellite dish television connection, he was ridiculed by the men of the village for trying to liberate women.

Such a school of thought and situations are a common occurrence in many remote villages where women are denied even of their basic rights. The phrases 'educated women make bad wives' keeps repeating in the movie. Hence women who witness these scenes can easily identify themselves and empathise with the women on screen as they are exposed to patriarchy at the individual level.

### THEORY OF MALE GAZE AND THE CONCEPT OF ALIGNMENT

Laura Mulvey in her book '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' claims that there is male gaze prevalent in cinema, which completely embraces patriarchy. She asserts that male gaze is deeply rooted to the visual pleasure of the male members of the society and it signifies woman as someone who has to be looked upon either as object of sexual pleasure or someone so timid and helpless. Using the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey states that cinema is like a reflection in the mirror, where the self is revealed freely, because of the voyeuristic feeling which the dark atmosphere of the theatre gives. Mulvey also states that the camera represents the gaze in three different types of angles, viz. profilmic, audience gaze and gaze between filmic characters. These are established with the filmic time and space which are classified into scopophilic gaze and narcissist gaze. The audiences are subjected to this gaze through the camera, which mostly exhibits male voyeurism. Hence Laura Mulvey feels that a new perspective of cinema which can change the look of male voyeurism can be very welcoming.

In this paper the author tries to identify female gaze by analyzing the camera angles, which makes the spectators take the position of the female filmic character. This process is what Murray Smith refers to as Alignment. Taking each type of gaze into consideration for analysis, *Parched* has established the profilmic gaze which is the first level. The Director of the movie *Leena Yadav* tries to make the female audience identify with the female characters of the film. According to Zeydabadi – Nejat, this group of women watching movies where they identify themselves with the filmic characters can be considered as a discussion group, contrary to voyeurism. Hence it is easy for the audience to align themselves with the profilmic gaze. The next element of gaze which comes from audience is achieved through camera angles and emotional responses. While the camera angles and point of view shots makes the female audience have a subjective feeling about the filmic characters, their emotional response is aroused through their collective memory of the harmful evils of patriarchy as mentioned in few scenes in the earlier part of this paper.

To explain the concept of alignment this part of the article focuses on the positions of the camera. In many scenes, the point of view shots configure the subjective angle of the female protagonists, which establishes that female gaze is predominantly present in the movie. When the female characters are subjected to any emotional or physical trauma, the camera is shifted to the audience point of view with a tight close up, which makes the audience realize the pain and suffering of the character on screen. The scene which follows such close up shots are usually a cut away of the surrounding where they are in and again the shot shifts back to tight close ups, which allows the audience to have more empathy with the character and recognize themselves in that position. For example when *Champa* explains to her mother about the humiliation, domestic violence and rape that she is subjected to it has a close up of her face so that the audience can

emotionally connect with her. It gives the audience a glimpse of her deep hidden pain. After this the camera shifts to the *Gram panchayat* and *Champa* moving away silently towards the car. Then the camera comes to a close up of the petrified mother with vacant expression, who feels helpless to save her daughter. Similarly many other scenes have such point of view angles and cutaways which make the audience get closer to the situation and the character and emotionally connect to them. A few examples include the scenes where,

1. *Lajjo* is subjected to domestic violence by her alcoholic husband *Manoj*, for failing to conceive a child.
2. The conversation between *Rani*, *Lajjo* and *Bijli* about how conceiving a child only makes a woman complete for which *Lajjo* remains nonreactive as she has not conceived a child.
3. *Bijli* being ridiculed at the wedding night of *Gulab* (*Rani's son*), where the village elders mock at her for being present at such an auspicious event. *Rani* however does not utter a word, neither does she welcome *Bijli*. She remains silent and her silence makes *Bijli* understand that she is not welcomed at such auspicious events even if it is the wedding of her close friend's son.

There are many such scenes which make the audience align with the character on screen and such alignment was achieved through these subjective camera angles and point of view shots. There are also many low angle shots involved in the movie, as they exhibit a feeling of pain. The point of view shots that are shown especially in scenes where *Lajjo* was beaten by her husband *Manoj* makes the audience look at *Manoj* from the point of view of *Lajjo* and back again from a third person's point of view. Another scene where *Janaki's* exboyfriend who wanted to marry her but could not afford the dowry, travels all the way in bicycle to have a look at *Janaki*. Being in to marital life now, *Janaki* just goes inside the house and locks herself just to avoid him. Still the boyfriend does not give up makes repeated efforts to convince her to come with him. But *Janaki* does not step out of the house as that is where her limit lies. We see the entrance of the house as the threshold point of *Janaki's* freedom and happiness as she was also repeatedly abused by her husband *Gulab*.

Contrary to Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, which always enjoys male voyeurism and subjects women as objects to be looked upon, the movie '*Parched*' has used female gaze through many point of view shots. This female gaze helps us to look things from the feminist point of view and helps a lot in aligning with the female filmic characters.

#### ALLEGIANCE

The next level of character – audience relationship is given through allegiance, which according to Murray Smith comes from the assessment of the characters on screen by the audience. This assessment of characters comes after the audiences are aroused of their emotions when the film tries to convey the true meaning it has encoded. Thus the movie *Parched* conveys to the audience that woman can fight against patriarchy if they are willing to. To convey this message, the movie does not target one single male character as the antagonist and neither does it show that all men embrace patriarchy. *Kishan* is portrayed as an entrepreneur who respects women and he also teaches them to earn independently. She encourages them to work and also awards

them with incentives and extra wages. He shows them a way to livelihood and empowers them. It is because of *Kishan* that *Lajjo* and *Rani* are able to earn for their living and it is because of him that they have the courage to move out to other places and live independently as the dialogue goes “*Kishan* has taught us to make our living”. Hence *Kishan* is portrayed as someone who knows what real empowerment of women is and how to respect women, even in a place where patriarchy is at its heights.

At the same time we also see other men in the movie like *Manoj*, the alcoholic husband of *Lajjo*, *Gulab* - the teenage son of *Rani* who does not respect anyone, rebel in nature and spends most of the time with sex workers even by stealing money from his mother's savings. *Raju* - who wants to be a pimp for *Bijli*, while she thinks that he loves him and will rescue her from her present life. These characters are just a representation of the society, as they reflect what the men in a patriarchal society actually do. When the female audiences are exposed to such characters and situations they recollect the hardships of patriarchy which they have encountered from their collective memory. They don't evaluate the characters based upon the situation shown on screen but based on their real life hardships and agency which they went through. Hence even if *Bijli* who is a sex worker is seen to suffer on screen, she is not judged as good or bad, but she is empathized by the audience, as they see her suffering as a form of patriarchy from their collective memory.

In the last scene when *Lajjo* tells *Manoj* that she is pregnant, *Manoj* gets so wild and beats her asking her “who's sin is she carrying in her womb?” It was only then that *Lajjo* realizes that *Manoj* is aware of his impotency but kept it secretly from *Lajjo* and blamed her as reason for not bearing a child. When *Manoj* beats her repeatedly, *Rani* comes for rescue but he beats her savagely. Simultaneously outside the hut *Dassera* celebrations are also going on where a big statue of *Naragasura* was kept for Goddess *Kali* to destroy, as a symbol of destroying evil. Songs in the background score praise the beauty and greatness of womanhood and her importance in a man's life. Inside the hut *Manoj* beats *Lajjo* and *Rani* and in the course of action is burnt alive in the fire. Both *Rani* and *Lajjo* run away from the hut and meets *Bijli* and the trio move away from the village to find their own life away from the miseries of patriarchy. When finally in the end all the three women stand at the crossroad deciding which way to take to begin their life, *Rani* receives a phone call from her anonymous caller who tries to lure her. Both *Lajjo* and *Bijli* persuades *Rani* to ask him whether to take the right or the left road and *Rani* talks to him over the phone saying that from now on she will decide which way she has to choose. This scene conveys that women can be liberated from the clutches of patriarchy only when they are willing to do so.

#### DISCUSSION

This movie is a classic example to identify female gaze and the theory of identification in movies in Indian cinema. This paves way for feministic prospect and identification of the female characters with the audience in Indian cinema. Laura Mulvey's gaze theory is a strong clutch for analyzing patriarchy in films and since this movie is a woman centric movie it helps in identification with the female characters of the movie and it also helps in analyzing female gaze in the movie. After complete analysis of the movie it is understood that the three levels of gaze (profilmic, audience gaze and gaze

between the characters) are well established in the movie through which female gaze is established in the movie.

## CONCLUSION

In a predominantly patriarchal society, where majority of the films are contributed by male directors, it is quite a known fact that male gaze will be predominantly present in all the movies. Even women start to look at other women through the angle of male gaze, which often influence them in their way of dressing, look and style. Subconsciously all of us are subjected

to the male gaze and also take part in male gaze. Hence it is of great importance that the audience is introduced to other forms of gaze which are constructive. The female gaze that is analysed in this paper is one such initiative which gives a clear understanding that it can be present in the movie for empowering women and also make them bond with the characters of the movie. More such analysis of female gaze will lead to constructive criticism and more meaning in analysing films.

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