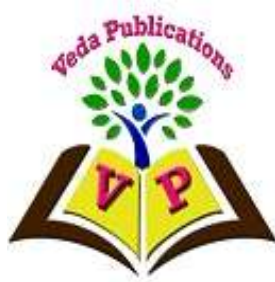


**THE TALE OF ROSIE AND OTHERS: FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY CONFLICT IN THE CINE-TEXT “LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA”**Violet McHardy^{1*}, Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury²^{1*}(Research Scholar (Ph.D),REVA University, Bengaluru)²(Professor & Director,School of Arts and Humanities,REVA University, Bengaluru.)**ABSTRACT**

The agency of patriarchy is deeply rooted in every section of the society irrespective of the border or frame of spatiality or temporality. Modern India despite its high claims of urban modernization is still fighting a lot of independence struggles in the domain of local or domestic politics largely playing on the gender roles in a negative manner. Alankrita Shrivastava slams on the face of patriarchy her debut work of visual or cine narration named “Lipstick Under my Burkha” where four generations of women from different socio-economic, religious and cultural background are portrayed with a sheer mark of dominant reality in the context of apparently modern and quasi-liberal new India. While the different women are easily distinguishable in terms of their varied age and cultural spheres, the forces working against their barely negligible claims of defying the oppressive norms can be easily identifiable as patriarchy, an agency of domination that crushes every remarkable as well as nearly invisible signs of liberty from specific gender roles. The agencies such as marriage, motherhood and even conventional sexual bondage try to crush the individual entities of women forcing them either to settle with webs of lies or immature yet significant fantasies. This paper probes into the covert as well as the pointedly prominent politics of patriarchal operative that reduces any chance of the freedom of women physically, emotionally and also sexually. It shall further delve deeper into the causes that supports the oppressive structure of patriarchy and in relation to the film text also analyse the possible solutions or alternate counter-politics much needed to evade the tentacles of its authoritative domination.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Normative Politics, Feminism, Domination***Citation:**

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Feminism in India has always been within the praxis of pre-colonial and post-colonial changes and is still not detached from the many patriarchal influences. The male voice shouts out from the behind of the dark veils of restrictive clothing, from the smeared vermilion across the forehead, the plain white clothes of the widowed aunty or the vindictive classmate who cannot stand divided attention.

Much before feminism, western feminism made its foray into India, several changes were happening in Britain. Mary Wollstonecraft who is regarded the godmother of Feminism published one of the first feminist treatises, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she advocated the social and moral equality of the sexes. Since it was just the beginning, the basic requirement was that women take the first step, which in this case was mainly the campaign for the women's vote. Most of the early feminists were more moderate and conservative than radical or revolutionary. Therefore, they focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality. During the post-Independence period, feminism in Indian English literature was largely a part of the western feminist movement. The freedom struggle brought women out of their homes and into the limelight that eventually opened up new avenues of education, employment opportunities and laws for women's rights. With the advent of the third wave of Feminism, there was a need to challenge the established identity of the woman. According to Surbhi Sachdeva,

"The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism."

(The Financial Express)

The subjugation of woman is a central fact of history and it is the main cause of all psychological disorders in society. While Indian feminists have fought against cultural issues within the patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and practice of widow immolation known as 'Sati', unlike the western feminist movements, India's movement was initiated by men and then joined by women. The feminist literary criticism spent most of its energy describing how women were represented in literary works by both men and women writers. Women writers believe that art is a major weapon for social change. Many of the women writers have moved towards the noble profession of activism through art.

Film-making is one of them. Alankrita Shrivastva has chosen a very middle class setting in Bhopal, and has used four characters from different generations to show the ill-effects of patriarchy and its invisible vice-like grip on the mental and physical consciousness of the women. The four characters on whom Shrivastva's movie centre are Usha, Shirin, Leela and Rehana. Usha is the oldest of them all, a caring mother figure (*Buaji*) for the residents of Hawai Manzil. She owns a halwai shop, may be the best in Bhopal with its name in the Limca Book of Records. Shirin is a simple homemaker, secretly working as a sales girl during her free time. Leela, a bubbly adventurous woman, works in a beauty parlour to support her widowed mother while struggling under the debt left by her drunkard father. Rehana is a college girl who is in love with western pop music while she serves her strict father at his tailoring shop.

Buaji or Usha as she is popularly known is the elderly matriarch of the Hawa Manzil. In her washed out cheap white cotton sarees, accompanied by an equally pristine full-sleeved white blouse, a lone black bindi, she is the epitome of the female agony aunt whose only aim in life is to sort out the problems of the people around her. We are introduced to the peeling walls and the dim aangan of the Hawa Manzil where one of the tenants, tries to convince her to sell the manzil so that a mall could be built. Buaji played by Ratna Pathak Shah is deft and quick to reply that it is not for sale, and she continues to move ahead with the days' activities. Whatever she might be, yet deep inside she is Rosie of the cheap romantic flicks. As the Rosie from the books discovers her sexual love for the prince of her dreams, Usha too removes herself from the hustle and bustle of Bhopal dust-ridden din, the pungency of red chillies drying on the roof, the stench of stale oil from the deep fried samosas, and transports herself into Rosie. When the lights go off during a celebration, she stumbles into Bhaiyaji who appears to show some interest in her, but again who is forced to call her the popular term 'Buaji', reminding her of her place in society. Yet Usha meets the prototype of manliness in her swimming teacher, the first person who refuses to call her Buaji, thus giving rise to her dormant sexual urges. Thus, begins the saga of hidden late night talks in the bathroom, flirty chats, a poignant masturbation scene that only highlights the basic urges that are repressed due to several factors. In accordance with this so called fair sex and the categorization of its needs, Judith Butler makes some startling yet brutally honest remarks. The idea of gender roles is a political construct that has been designed to curb naturally occurring urges that can



be the demand of the human body. Social constructs seek to repress this phenomenon and allots certain urges, emotions and reactions to a specific gender. Butler observes here how ultimately, "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time." (Butler 1990:353)

Shirin is seen juggling with her husband and a secret sales girl life. Alankrita Shrivastav covers her in the garb of restriction which also acts as her secret weapon and under the veil she transforms into an active, sprightly woman who sells Magic products from door to door. Shrivastava adds a moment of suspense when Shirin draws a gun on the house owner and turns the scene into a complete hilarity when Shirin starts squeezing it to chase away the cockroaches. The very next moment her life is transformed when she goes to pick up her three kids and returns to her drab day which ends with her husband on top of her, as she lies there voiceless and motionless. The body politics seem to be at play here, as Shirin has to undergo numerous abortions and has to consume pills to keep another pregnancy at bay. An attempt to introduce her husband to condoms is futile as he casually throws it away and enters her body's helplessness without the slightest concern. Her husband embodies every aspect of male centric domination and control. Every movement she makes towards her husband is filled with hesitancy and fear. He embodies male patriarchy that sets out set rules for men and women, where the man is the breadwinner – he fails even at that – and the woman stays at home. What is ironic here is that she is the one who manages the household with her income and is even promoted at work where her true capabilities are recognized. Her plight is only made worse when she discovers his secret affair and is unable to confront him directly because of the deeply-rooted idea that men can do anything and women cannot or rather must not. Shirin will never be the man, in spite of the fact that she is the true breadwinner of the family. When she does try to fight back, he shuts her mouth with his hand and thus symbolically shuts out her identity. He states, 'Biwi ho, Shauhar banne ki koshish mat karo.' In fact the kind of oppression that Shirin faces in her own house is reflective of the kind that society made a norm. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* had explained how sex gave authority to man and rendered the woman powerless. Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different and this is crucial. Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the

parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression. This sexual politics further serves as a basis for all other forms of oppression. She states

"Thus all the mechanisms of human inequality arose out of the foundations of male supremacy and the subjugation of women, sexual politics serving historically as the foundation of all other social, political and economic structure." (Millet 2016:21)

Like Millet herself, Shirin's values were in conflict with those that were established by society. Even Wollstonecraft has been openly critical about this imposition of femininity on the body. Wollstonecraft writes against conception of women and femininity as defined primarily by the ability to arouse male sexual desire. (Wollstonecraft 2008) In a similar strain, Elizabeth Inchbald says – "deprive us of souls and insinuate that we are beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the sense of man...." (Inchbald 2007:394) Her vision of women's emancipation can be summed up thus in her own words - "from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short-sighted desire...has subjected them" hinges on a notion of "natural freedom". (Inchbald 2007:112) From Wollstonecraft's perspective, women were to be "governed by reasonable laws" (Wollstonecraft 2008:112) rather than the "despotism" (Wollstonecraft 2008:291) that has characterized men's treatment of them; they might accede to that state of liberty and moral dignity which is so often denied to them – "the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form of the heart....to enable the individual to achieve such habits of virtue as will render it independent". (Wollstonecraft 2008:86) Thus, she is harshly critical of the intense sexualization of femininity.

Leela is a wild child and ambitious considering the kind of city she lives in. She attempts to start a business with her photographer boyfriend. Her mother, on the other hand, is neck deep in the debt left by their father, and resorts to the simplest of solutions to solve that – getting Leela married to a financially stable man. Yet, Leela is not one to give up, and engages in a passionate sexual display of intimacy with her lover while her fiancé is waiting outside during the engagement celebrations. Upon discovered, her mother reprimands her, touches up her makeup and sends her out to the vast ocean of



societal expectations and pretentiousness that sums up every one's life amidst the starry lights and incessant chanting of semi-folk music. However, when things go awry with her boyfriend who obviously cannot handle her arrangement with another man, she is reduced to pleading with her mother not to let the marriage happen. Her mother shuts her up with one argument – that her fiancé is buying her house. The fiancé's house itself is crowded with immediate and extended family members and he expects her to stay at home, which again highlights the conundrum almost every educated married woman has to face in India. When she is finally ready to accept her life with him her lover wants to run away to Delhi with her, thus, leaving her in confusion.

Rehana Abidi symbolises conflict and lives two lives. When she is not cooped up in the corner of her father's shop stitching together pieces of clothing, she is busy weaving gradual threads of her unborn desires by stealing cosmetics or shoes, participating in college music competitions, protesting the ban on jeans, going clubbing or getting arrested. She is a teenager who is trying to find her true identity in life but is caught in the trap of tradition. Even a simple act of dancing at a wedding, has her mother dragging her from there and locking her up in the room. The boy she falls in love with refuse to be associated with her and even asks her "Who are you?" When her father drives her home from jail he is not concerned about her, instead he asks her, 'Tumhe burkha pehenne mey sharm hai?' And the best solution here is marriage.

The climax of the movie is as real and brutally honest when all the characters converge in the 'mela' and they are all looking for their true selves in the brightly lit, noisy, fun-filled atmosphere. Emotions are running high, and the excitement of the audience is piqued when Usha finally meets Jaspal her phone lover; Shirin's husband, Rahim, discovers who she really is; Leela's lover is ready to fly away with her while her fiancé discovers the mms she had made with her lover; and Rehana shares a passionate kiss in the giant wheel. There is a glimmer of hope and everyone is hoping that it is time to wrap up the loose ends when just like the gloomy silence before the impending storm, Rehana is arrested for shoplifting, Leela's fiancé discovers her mms, Shirin's husband asserts his male dominance by raping her and Usha ji; well Usha's cover is blown by Jaspal who had mistaken Rosie for another woman and resorts to avenge himself by telling her nephews. In a flash of a moment, Usha is turned from a house owner to a dirty woman. They accuse her of promiscuity and

dump her outside. The question here is what has promiscuity to do with property rights? She is laid bare like the peeling walls of the Hawaii Manzil, when the other three tenderly take her to another room. After a moment of silence they continue reading Rosie's story, and comment on the uselessness of stories. Yet, in spite of her recent humiliation Usha states, "At least, stories give us hope." In the background, the narrator's voice drifts off into the distance, while praising Rosie's courage to take a step forward, while the four women casually ignite the embers of their latent desires and smoke away their problems for the time being.

The cine narrative highlights the struggle of four women from different cultural backgrounds, and leaves the audience to choose a life for them. Alankrita Shrivastav's main goal is to stir up the thoughts that have crossed so many educated minds, but which have been sent to a deep corner since they were not relevant. This is not a film where one just laughs away Buaji's humiliation by the young swimming teacher, or where one is merely pitying young Rehana's imprisonment in her own house. Also, the imprisonment and helplessness of Shirin within her own body and Leela's daunting financial problems are an eye-opener for so many women made dependant on men for their daily conveyances. In true Virginia Woolf style they recognized the importance of a woman being financially independent, but they are caught in the quagmire of familial and social bonds. In this tale of love, loss, and freedom these women and their interwoven lives are hanging in the balance. The job of the artist is to influence, yes, but most importantly it is also to leave an impression that will further ensure a step is taken towards improvement in any little way. The cine text does not in the end provide any viable solution to the problems faced by these women. Rather it leaves the audience to decide what they would do or think in a similar situation. The stories of each if these women are as personal as they are informative. They are not mere fictional characters created to stimulate latent ideas; they are in fact a reflection of society at its dirtiest, murkiest, and darkest layers of existence, just like the streets of Bhopal and the walls of the Hawa Manzil.

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