



# No More Sweeping under the Carpet Repressed Feminine Desires and Sexuality in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*

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**Abstract**— This paper aims to analyse Alankrita Shrivastava’s film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) in terms of its narrative technique and the handling of a sensitive topic in the context of H el ene Cixous’ *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) which introduces the concept of * criture feminine*. In the process, characters, various themes, associated symbols and censorship is scrutinized to prove that the condition of every woman despite of age, sexuality, religion and social background is the same in terms of repression of desires and denied the freedom of expression. It’s only through women raising their own voices will help better the situation with women’s narratives demanding their space amongst the pool of male-dominated narratives in the popular culture. The stories now need to be narrated from the female gaze.

**Keywords**— Freedom, Expression, Repressed Desires, Censorship, Feminine Voice, Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) is a women-centric Bollywood film revolving around the lives of four women who on their quest for freedom face various cultural and social obstacles. Written and directed by Alankrita Shrivastava and produced by Prakash Jha, the film stars Ratna Pathak, Konkana Sen Sharma, Plabita Borthakur and Aahana Kumra in the lead roles while Shashank Arora, Sushant Singh, Vikrant Massey, Vaibhav Tatwawaadi and Sonal Jha are in the supporting roles.

H el ene Cixous’ concept of * criture feminine* is a style of writing for women and by women as a revolution against the prominent creation of masculine group identity in popular culture and demands to replace it with feminine embodied experience. She urges women to voice out and create narratives that lie outside the conventional rules of the patriarchal setup.

### The Common Dream of Women

Set in a small town of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, the lives of the four protagonists though independent and different from each other, are intertwined with the common dream amongst them, that is, freedom in the expression of desires. The plotline follows the story of Usha Parmar

(Ratna Pathak) referred to as Buaji throughout the movie, the matriarch of the family residing in the ancestral home ‘Hawai Manzil’ who under the disguise of a powerful widow lives a lonely life and is lost in the world of erotic pulp fiction. Shirin Aslam (Konkana Sen Sharma) lives as a tenant in Buaji’s home and is married to a conservative and oppressive husband Rahim Aslam (Sushant Singh). In the neighborhood lives Leela (Aahana Kumra) who wants to start her own business and is in love with a Muslim photographer, Arshad (Vikrant Massey) but is forcefully engaged to Manoj (Vaibhav Tatwawaadi). Rehana Abidi (Plabita Borthakur) is a young college-going girl in the neighborhood who aspires to be a singer and live a modern lifestyle but feels trapped with orthodox parents. Alankrita Shrivastava tells the story and struggles of these four women who are constantly in a flux of their identity battling between their ideal ‘socially constructed’ images and their repressed aspirations and desires.

### The Feminine Voice

“It’s not like we don’t see women at all, we see women but often the sexuality and storyline...serves the purpose of the male protagonist,” says Konkana Sen Sharma in an interview with BBC News. Cixous in her essay also

emphasizes “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away...” (Cixous). Alankrita Shrivastava overcomes this by presenting it to us as a woman’s narrative. The stories of these four women run parallel to Rosy’s story from the erotic pulp fiction titled ‘Lipstick Dreams’. Whether the author of this fiction is a male/female remains unknown to the audiences but the fact that we receive it from a woman’s perspective does it justice.

The director and writer herself a woman incorporates this narrative technique to beautifully overpower the dominant male gaze and presents the story to us through narration by Buaji in the film. By doing this Shrivastava not only manages to move away from the classical representation of women through the male gaze but also achieves depth and realness in characters, relatability and reliability for “She doesn’t provide us with answers, or with superficial solutions, but just offers us a narrative, bold enough to arouse a woman’s hidden desires and valiant enough to question the patriarch mindset” (Tulsiani).

#### **Closeted Desires – Usha Parmar**

Buaji’s topless scene where she engages in a sexual phone conversation with her swimming trainer Jaspal (Jagat Singh Solanki) is the boldest and hard-hitting scene of the film portraying the societal idea of rendering a woman asexual owing to her age. In the process of pretending to be the ideal religious woman she suppresses her sexual desires and loses her identity. Like Cixous argues in the text “...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard,” Buaji’s closeted desires come out after Jaspal refers to her as Usha Ji, her identity which she lost somewhere in being referred to as Buaji throughout her life.

On one hand, the masculinity and sexuality of the trainer are glorified “And down below, immersed in the water, his long manhood” (*Lipstick* 52:43), on the other Buaji loses all respect, is dragged out of her home and blamed for sexually exploiting the trainer when her desires and fantasies are revealed. “Lewd books, indecent clothes. Such obscenity at this age! A 55-year old widow!” (*Lipstick* 1:46:53 – 59:00) represents the ideal way of living ascribed to each gender and age group by the society suppressing to an extent that one looks in the mirror only to feel guilty and ashamed.

#### **Behind the Closed Doors – Shirin Aslam**

Shirin Aslam is represented as a bold woman and a talented saleswoman who earns to run the family and yearns for love at home but is only used as an object for Rahim’s sexual urges rendering her a non-human sex machine identity. The glorification of male sexuality is highlighted again and is also evident in the conversation that

takes place between Leela and Shirin in the beauty salon where Leela confronts Shirin about having sexual intercourse which lacks love and affection (*Lipstick Under My Burkha*). Her identity as a saleswoman is quite ironic as she convinces everyone with her products quite as she convinces herself of being in a happy marriage.

“You’re a woman. Don’t try to wear the pants. Turn down the job offer and sit home quietly” (*Lipstick* 1:45:36 – 47:00). After her job is revealed to Rahim, she is physically assaulted and raped by Rahim even though he cheated on her and lied. Rahim when realizes her power in questioning him and her achievements as a bread-earner of the family while he has no job, hurts his male ego and he suppresses her voice and asserts his power through sexual dominance.

Through this, Shrivastava brings to light the silenced issue of domestic violence and marital rape and renders it an everydayness. She holds a mirror to society, asking them to question the patriarchal setup in which women are so used to marital rape that they almost take it as a normal part of their responsibility in being married to someone!

#### **Veiled Identity – Rehana Abidi**

Rehana Abidi, a confused adolescent girl, who cannot even dance openly because it brings the family name down, feels trapped in an orthodox family. Her identity when she leaves home in a burkha and changes to ripped jeans when she reaches college is symbolic of her fluctuating between the clutches of traditional living and sewing at home, and her aspirations to have a modern lifestyle and dream to become a singer.

“There’s no end to rules in a girl’s life. Don’t sing, don’t dance, you’ll shame us. Don’t walk like that, people will stare. Keep your eyes down, what will people say? Don’t breathe, you’re heaving chest will attract attention! Don’t wear lipstick, you’ll have an affair! Don’t wear jeans, you make scandals! I want to ask the authorities, what exactly will happen? Why does our freedom scare you so? Don’t we have the right to live freely? We want our right! Our right to jeans! Our right to live!” (*Lipstick* 24:50 – 25:24)

This dialogue of Rehana forms the crux of the movie, a woman voicing out the demand for freedom to live, stemming from the frustration of being surrounded by endless norms that society hands over to women as a rule book for being and living as a woman. It is evident of the juggling in Rehana’s life where she fought her internal battles to find her identity in the modern competitive world while also fighting against her socially conditioned controlling father.

### The Rebel – Leela

Leela is ‘the rebel’ if defined from the society’s perspective for she unlike Rehana challenges the rule book and exerts complete right on her body engaging in sexual activities with the love of her life while being engaged to someone else. She feels suffocated by the rules and limitations of the world she lives in. Her character is the one protesting against the orthodox society and its endless norms.

Forced by her mother (Sonal Jha) who works as a nude model for artists, she gets engaged to Manoj. Manoj takes her to visit their future home where he tells her that another TV would be installed in the living room and hence she could have her entire world here without the need to step out of home (*Lipstick* 1:21:17 – 24:00). This highlights the normalized idea of women’s world being limited to television soaps and household chores. This hits Leela hard and she plans to elope with Arshad for she desires to live and take her career decisions on her own terms.

### Suppressed Desires – Rosy

Rosy is a symbolic character through whose story the struggles and repressions of not just these four women but all women are beautifully portrayed. Rosy is the voice of the woman accompanied by the visuals of Buaji, Shirin, Rehana and Leela, without whose presence the story if looked at from the male gaze would have been entirely different and the issues highlighted as a problem would have been rather celebrated. Buaji is Rosy in her desires not just sexual but even to learn new things for she engages in swimming lessons, thus going beyond the socially created boundaries of age. Shirin, in finally voicing out her opinions and freeing herself from the shackles of patriarchy and normalized domestic violence, is Rosy. Leela unapologetically demands her physical desires be fulfilled and openly challenges the norms created by society while Rehana breaks through her boundaries, steals and finds herself in the process thus both identify with Rosy. In dealing with their ordinary lives in an extraordinary way, these women overpower the dominant male narrative and their power of expression demystifies stereotypical gender roles which are ingrained into women since birth.

### Symbols of Repression

Shrivastava uses the use of symbols as well along with the narrative technique. There are various symbols used throughout the movie that represent and bring to the surface the various thematic concerns. Apart from Rosy as a symbolic representation of women in general, the stories too are a strong symbol. In the ending, where the four women come together tired of the suppression by the patriarchal setup, Rehana mentions “These stories mislead us. Promising us that we too can live like Rosy” (*Lipstick*

1:51:50 – 56:00). Although the story throughout was narrated by Buaji, the fact that all of them commented on Rosy’s situation like it was their own proves that Rosy’s story is the story of every woman. Also, the last three pages being read together by them is a confrontation to the fact that though the journey of Rosy has been decided by the patriarchal setup of which one is a part, the story is yours and you decide the climax. This aligns with Cixous’ theory where she insists that women can make an effort to reject the language of oppression, tell the stories “differently” and the reality will start to transform too.

In response to Rehana’s dialogue about misleading stories, Buaji responds that though the stories are misleading, they do give women the courage to dream (*Lipstick* 1:51:56 – 52:05). Dreams are another prominent and recurring symbol in the movie where all the women dream of is freedom – to live and to express themselves. Midway in the story, Leela shows women a mirror by saying, “You know what our problem is? We dream too much” (*Lipstick* 59:58 – 1:00:03). Even the confrontation of four women, in the end, is a discussion of various dreams satirized through the names of the books in putting forth how these dreams can only remain dreams for women in the current scenario.

The iron bars of the window are something that is repeated time and again in the narrative symbolizing the window to be a cage that holds the women from flying towards their dreams and also blocks the wider perspective of the world by confining them in the societal boundaries. Towards the end, the iron bars at the window cannot hold Rosy back now (*Lipstick* 1:52:44) symbolize the clutches of society that were holding these women back.

The most outright symbol is present in the poster and the title of the movie, lipstick and the burkha. The poster portrays the middle finger of a woman’s hand in the form of lipstick and the tagline says ‘It takes balls to be a woman’ wherein the word ‘balls’ has been crossed. This indicates a revolution against the prevalent patriarchy, gender roles, female subjugation and domination by women and the tagline is a strong and outright message against the male dominance in this society. The title *Lipstick Under my Burkha* speaks for itself in that the word ‘my’ represents the direct voice of every woman stemming from her experiences as demanded by Cixous. Also, it’s the women putting it out there, that we all have been oppressed over the years and it has reached the brim, its about time that we take off the veil of silent suffering and raise our voices against it symbolized by the lipstick being under the burkha which isn’t visible. The lipstick having various shades represents that we have a color – an answer for every societal norm

imposed upon us and most associated with red which is sometimes considered to be representing revolt.

She won't veil her desire (*Lipstick* 1:52:40) states Buaji in the end symbolises burkha represents not a piece of clothing but a wholesome representation of boundaries inflicted upon a woman to be ideal by family, society and patriarchy at large. Simply put it works as an antonym to freedom in the film more like curtaining women's desires.

The other symbols used are that of the mannequin that falls from the table in the end symbolizing the fall of these women after which they confront each other. It is picked up and put alongside them in the last scene can be representative of the society's handling of women as a puppet and its internalization by women in Rehana doing it. Or it can represent women standing and supporting each other which aligns more with the whole narrative. There are other symbols used in the form of waxing and sewing representing the stereotypical gender roles. The symbol of rose blooming is associated with the blooming youth and the desires that accompany it. And jeans like lipstick becomes another symbol demanding freedom. Religion is dealt with wit by Shrivastava in ascribing the protagonists' various major religions thus putting forth the idea that the situation is the same in every culture and also avoiding controversy.

Thus the women from various constructed and categorized identities go through a collective consciousness of repressed desires, sacrificing and trying to achieve a balance in their identity. Be it the old, married, engaged or millennial, all go beyond the societal norms in either hiding, lying, cheating or stealing to regain their lost self and find their liberation and equality.

### Censorship

The film after its first official trailer release in 2016 was denied release in India because the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) refused the certification on the grounds that the film is 'too lady oriented' and contains 'sexual scenes', 'audio pornography' and 'abusive words.' The irony lies in the film winning the Oxfam Award for Best Film on Gender Equality before its official release on screens for it premiered at Tokyo and Mumbai Film Festivals. The film being denied the certificate itself validates Cixous' theory of prominent male-dominant narratives being socially and 'legally' acceptable.

Dr Sarita G in her notes on Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* states that "The truth is that men are intimidated by female-sexed texts." It proves that the movie has the potential of upsetting many people in this patriarchal setup for it is unsettling, relatable and holds a mirror for society. The women relate to them with their experiences even if they haven't experienced it to the extreme levels and is

unsettling for even men as it hits them that they have been playing a major role in denying freedom to women unconsciously. Kriti Tulsiani in an article about the review of the film justifies Cixous' belief stating that "The film is a 'fictional' woman's perspective on sexual-exploration and hidden desires of women, who often resort to non-stereotypical ways, is helmed by a woman director and features four non-conformant women as leads – of course, it had to be termed 'lady oriented'" and this explains why it bothered CBFC.

### CONCLUSION

The film is far away from the categorical identities of women, it talks about all women living in the shadow of oppression. Each of these women lives a life of duality, one that conforms to society and the other is their desired and pleasure life. The fact that it has been naturalized to an extent that women feel guilty for Cixous herself has accepted that she had been ashamed in opening up about her deepest desires. Hence, it's time that women voice out their opinions for if this story or any feminine experience continues being told from a male gaze the oppression will continue and freedom of expression would be denied to women eternally. This story if looked at from a male gaze is the story of every household and hardly anyone has been moved by it unless presented to us in the form of this movie from the lens of the female. It is interesting how the trajectories of all the stories culminate into the climax demanding freedom from social, cultural, and bodily clutches representing the quest of every woman.

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