The Politics of (Fe)male *gaze* in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

This study attempts to produce an account of women's subjectivity in Hindi cinema by primarily dealing with the politics of the male gaze and the female gaze. The male gaze is the objectifying gaze and the female gaze touches on the issues of women's representation. This article largely deals with the politics of Hindi cinema and its evolution. The changing status of Hindi cinema coincided with the change in the socio-political climate of Indian society. This article lies in countering the stereotypes catered to by the heterosexual male gaze and looks at the narratives in Hindi cinema that align with the politics of the female gaze. The shifting gaze in Hindi cinema was brought by the New Wave Indian Cinema that originated in Bengal with Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964). This film earned a reputation for producing a female-centric narrative that allowed the expression of female experiences, autonomy and emancipation.

Keywords: Indian cinema, male gaze, female gaze, gender stereotypes, women's agency, New Wave Indian cinema, directorial perspective.

Introduction

This article is on the politics of the *gaze* or the ways of *seeing* and presents the case of the male gaze and the female gaze in Hindi Cinema. In the context of the cinematic gaze, the 'male gaze' refers to the sexualization or fetishization of female bodies in cinema. On the other hand, the 'female gaze' foregrounds the issues of women's representation and speaks of autonomy and emancipation. Tracing the evolution of Hindi cinema, this article is a compilation of cinematic narratives that are examples of the male and female gaze. Popular Hindi films provide a rich study of the female protagonists as 'mythified' figures where Indian women symbolized the nation (Virdi, 2003). Writings on the portrayal of women in popular Hindi cinema are split into the 'Madonna' and the 'vamp' (Virdi, 2003). Chatterjee (1989, 1993) reminded us how Indian women are subordinated by the nationalist patriarchy. In the context of Hindi Cinema too, Indian women are 'doubly vitiated' as a consequence of the nationalist patriarchy (Virdi, 2003). The 'mythification' (the 50s and 70s) and the 'hyper sexualization' (90s and early 2000s) of Indian women in Hindi cinema give an account of stereotypical representations of Indian womanhood. On the other hand, the female gaze is the response to the objectifying male gaze and speaks for the freedom of expressing female sexuality, desire and experience. The literature indicates a gradual change in the portrayal of female subjectivities in Indian films throughout the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. These changes coincide with the changes in the socio-political status of Indian society. Also highlighted, is a lack of women's representation in Indian cinema, both onscreen and in the roles behind the camera. The censorship battle in Indian cinema is closely tied to the politics of the gaze and is deeply rooted in the regressive values of society.

Theoretical Background: The role of *gaze* in Indian cinema

There are four types of *seeing* or *gaze* in literature - the gaze between the characters of the film, the gaze of the camera or the filmmakers, and the gaze of the spectators. John Berger (1972) introduced the concept of 'gaze' to analyze the 'nude' in European paintings. He explained how the social presence of a woman is different from men. For him, a man's presence is dependent on the power he embodied, and a woman's presence always involved surveilling herself. He wrote,

> "By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, and taste - indeed there is nothing she can do that does not contribute to her presence…A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger 1972, p.46).

Laura Mulvey (1975) coined the 'male gaze' in contemporary usage. The study uses a psychoanalytic framework in the context of Hollywood Cinema and identified how the films represented the female sex. She looked at the depictions of women as sexualized figures and gazed at by the male spectators. Her analysis highlights the pleasure of identifying with the protagonist's experiences. This is the result of the camera's gaze that obscures the conditions of the film's production behind the lenses. She coined the camera's gaze as "the fourth wall". Lutgendorf's (2006) study saw the 'Indian way' of filmmaking. He focused on *darsana* which originated from the Sanskrit *darsan*, meaning, "to see" or "to look at". The *darsanic* contact is the exchange of gaze through eyes and is an auspicious symbol that includes two ways of seeing: to "give *darsan"* or to "take *darsan"*. Similarly, *nazar* or *nigah* meaning, "to look" or "to glance" are other terms

that originated from Arabic and Persian words that symbolize the "love at first sight" moment between lovers. Yet another "dangerous" way of seeing is noted by the *buri* (bad/evil) or *kali* (black) *nazar* (Lutgendorf, 2006).

The 'female gaze' validates people and their emotions. In 2016, Joey Soloway gave a keynote address at the *Toronto International Film Festival* and explored the context in detail. For Soloway (2016) the 'female gaze' is a way of *feeling* and *seeing* and is a direct response to Mulvey's male gaze theory: 1) "the feeling camera" (prioritizing emotions over actions), 2) the "gazed gaze" (how it feels to be an object of the gaze), and 3) the "returning gaze" (or "I see you seeing me"). Their keynote address also linked the "Intersectionality" theory by Crenshaw (1989) highlighting the intersecting oppressions of women, queer folk, people of color, and disabled individuals perpetuated by the privileged cis-gendered, heterosexual men. They stated that "protagonism is a propaganda that protects and perpetuates the privilege" (Soloway, 2016, 16:25-16:40). They clarify that the female gaze is not exactly the opposite of the male gaze. it does not mean objectifying men or women replacing the roles of male protagonists. The female gaze is intended to show that sexual desires or fantasies can exist without objectification.

Indian womanhood and Nationalism: The 'mythified' women of the 50s.

The 1950s were the period of Nehruvian socialism that led to the dissemination of the hegemonic nationalist discourse in Indian films. On the other hand, in the 1970s we saw more films asserting the eastern and western cultural dichotomy. The East was a symbol of piety and the modern practices characterized by the west were ridiculed. It is said that popular Indian films became the "architects of Indian womanhood" and are replete with references that hallmark

women as 'mythified' figures. The vision of Indian women in the popular imagination was of a sacrificing and resilient mother (Virdi, 2003). Prasad (1998) read popular Indian Cinema as the maintenance of the Indological myth. For him, Indian films are "evidence of unbroken continuity of Indian culture and its tenacity in the face of the assault of modernity" (Prasad, 1998, p.15). According to Virdi (2003), the representation of women in Hindi cinema deified and personified the nation. Mother India (1957) is a classic example. Directed by Mehboob Khan, this film is a remake of the director's earlier film *Aurat* (1940). Set in the backdrop of the Nehruvian socialist movement, the film invokes powerful socialist symbols that include tilling the soil, working the field, and the sickles. The film's title and poster itself invoke a nationalist allegory of Bharat *Mata.* The multiple subtexts of the film allude to the presence of the "Sita myth" that displayed Radha as an ideal woman. Jain (2006) conveyed that the film evoked the *pativrata* (piety) and insinuates *agnipariksha[1]*. The film touched on motherhood and female sexuality but also showed Radha as the protector of *dharma*. As a suffering mother, Radha's image is venerated, and her sacrifices are glorified, and the film does not resist the underpinnings of patriarchal oppression.

The duality of the *madonna* and the *vamp* of the 70s

In the face of emerging nationalism, men occupied the material world (*bahir*) and the women preserved the home (*ghar*). The 'new women' of Bengal or *Bhadramahilas* ranked superior to western women, traditional Indian women, and lower-class women (Chatterjee, 1989). The "new women", were a "modernist reinvention of the traditional women tempered by the mix of dominant Victorian and upper-caste Brahmanical values" (Virdi, 2003, p.62). They were criticized for behaving like English *memsahibs* and stereotyped as irreligious, brazen and

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[1] Agnipariksha means ordeal of fire. The term is used metaphorically here.

promiscuous and argued how they had access to western education but were confined to the private space of their homes. So, "new women" were suppressed under the weight of the new patriarchy (Chatterjee, 1993). This "modernist reinvention" of womanhood was seen in the 70s as well (Virdi, 2003).

According to Deshpande (2007), Indian cinema rigorously deals with the bourgeoisie, the architects of the modernization drive in the country. Historically, this class was produced because of a continuous interaction of colonial rule with the traditional elite. For him, "the Indian bourgeois male practiced westernization (read modernity) in the Indian context. Liberated women, both white and Indian, threatened Indian family solidarity" (Deshpande 2007, p. 97). India in the 20th century posed secularist concerns when the passage of Personal laws (against the Uniform Civil Laws) was debated. After independence, the Indian National Congress led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with the aid of Dr B.R Ambedkar codified and reformed the Hindu Code Bills, which was an incomplete project of the British colonial rule. The controversy surrounding this bill intensified when the reformation was looked over by a Dalit Leader. The opponents of the bill drew the image of the ideal woman inspired by the orthodox *Manusmriti*. "Post-partition tensions around Hindu-Muslim integration center around each community's right to retain control over 'their' women. The Shariat and the Hindu Marriage Act ossified patriarchal law", claimed Virdi (2003, p. 72). The post-independent Hindi cinema disavowed the communal rift and used the idealized women figure to connote a unified nation (Idem, 2003).

In the 70s, more actresses bagged the role of the central protagonists. *Purab and Paschim* (1970; East or West), is an example of the madonna-vamp portrayal in Indian cinema. The film features Saira Bhanu as Preeti and is Bharat's love interest settled in England. She is shown clad in a leather mini-skirt, consuming alcohol, and smoking a cigarette. At one point in the film, Preeti

is enthralled by Indian customs and is visibly transformed by the essence of Indian culture. So, Preeti is instantly 'mythified' in this narrative.

The male gaze in Bollywood cinema (the 90s and early 2000s)

The reputation of the Bollywood industry grew as the neo-liberal economic movement opened up markets and encouraged the free flow of media and information. Shahrukh Khan emerged as a glittering new face of the post-global Bollywood cinema when his 1995 film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* appealed to the non-resident, diasporic Indian masses (Ganti, 2012). On the other side of the coin, Bollywood is accused of imposing unrealistic and hypersexualized portrayals of women (*DNA India*, 2014). To Mulvey (1975), the male gaze views women as 'sexual objects' where men "bear the look" and women are "to be looked at" (Mulvey, 1975, p.809). Her analysis of the cinematic gaze includes three points: the gaze of the camera/cameraman, the characters, and the director of the artistic work. She referred to "scopophilia" (Freudian theory) which is the pleasure involved in looking at other's bodies or Voyeurism, including narcissistic tendencies (identifying with the ideal ego). She also reflected upon Freudian phallocentrism to suggest that films deny female agency and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.

Bollywood is criticized for encouraging casual sexism catered to by the voyeuristic heterosexual male gaze (*Kool Kanya*, 2020). The Indian films include extravagant song-dance sequences breaking away from homogenous narratives. Bhattacharya and Mehta (2010) claim that the song-dance sequences in popular Indian films "sterilize" the love scenes and are diegetic representations of sexual desire.

"...the song and the dance sequences stand-in for sex scenes. The focus is particularly on the heroine, the fetishized female sexualized through the close attention to her costumes,

graceful body movements, and carefully angled shots that heighten scopic pleasure…they feign unawareness of their sexualized bodies and the camera's voyeuristic gaze" (Virdi, 2003, p. 146).

The opening scenes of the iconic song, *Tip Tip Barsa Paani* from the film *Mohra* (1994), directed by the male director Rajiv Rai, showed Raveena Tandon (the actress) in a yellow saree and bangles, dancing in the rain. In the first twenty seconds of the song, we see the actress swaying her waist gracefully and the camera focuses on the body features such as the hip, hands, back, and lips that bring out her sensuality. The song showed the hero (Akshay Kumar) shying away from the heroine at first but anyway romances her. Throughout the song, the hero's gaze is fixed on the heroine while he romances her. The diegetic representations of female desire managed to escape prudery and skillfully skirted away from the censorship battle.

Gender parity in Indian cinema

The film industry reveals an appalling gender parity on-screen and behind the camera. There are only a few studies that highlight less representation of women in the diverse fields of filmmaking. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (with UN Women and The Rockefeller Foundation) commissioned a study in 2014 that analyzed popular cinema across the globe, from 2010 to 2013. The study showed that Bollywood cinema ranked high in sexualizing women. The study also showed that about 35 per cent of women in Indian films were shown with nudity. The data from the study also indicated that gender prevalence behind the screen included a gender ratio of 6.2 males to every one female in the Indian film industry (*The Hindu*, 2014).

O Womaniya! 2021, (collaborative project of Ormax Media and the Film Companion) presented a seminal report on the representation of women in Indian films. The key findings of the

study included the analysis of male and female representation in five of the key departments in filmmaking: Direction, Cinematography, Writing, Editing, and Production Design. The analysis was grounded on 129 Indian films between 2019 and 2020[2]. The 'box-office footfalls' were used as a parameter to analyze theatrical films and a combination of YouTube views, and the Ormax Advocacy (likeability) score was used to analyze OTT films. The study mentioned that about 92 per cent of men filled in as HOD in five of these departments. The remainder 8 per cent were filled up by women. The study found 94 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women in Direction, 98 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women in cinematography, 90 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women in Writing, 93 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women in Editing and lastly, 85 per cent of men and 15 per cent in Production Design. The Cinematography Department saw the lowest representation of women in films between 2019 and 2020. The report identified only one cinematographer, Keiko Nakahara, recognized majorly for her work in Bollywood films such as *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020), *Shakuntala Devi* (2020), and *Total Dhamaal* (2019), constituting the 2 per cent. The report further revealed that women formed only 1 per cent of HOD positions in South Indian cinema; far worse than representation in Hindi Cinema (16 per cent). Women's representation in film marketing remains low as well. The report revealed that the male characters 'outspoke' female characters by more than four times.

In an interview with *O Womaniya*, Anjali Menon (Malayalam film director and screenwriter) commented, "We have fewer female directors because of investor confidence. Mainstream filming has a certain set pattern that people are very unwilling to break. They like to sit within their comfort zone. They think that a person's gender is what they direct from which is

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[2] 100 films released in theatre, 29 films on OTT platforms.

such a weird assumption to make! People tend to be judgemental of what shape, form, and size you come in. Whoever has the power is definitely biased" (*O Womaniya*! 2021).

The existing gender pay gap is another concern among women in the Indian film industry. The South Indian actress Samantha Akkineni commented, "It's very sad that despite being among the top 3 actresses, an actor who's not even in the top 20 will still get paid more than you. It's considered 'very cool' when a hero hikes his remuneration. But when a woman does the same, she's looked at as 'problematic', 'demanding' and 'too ambitious'" (*O Womaniya*!, 2021). In one of her interviews, Meera Nair (Indian American film director), stated that the Indian film industry is "patriarchal" and "sexist". She recalled her battle with the censor board that issued censor cuts on her 1975 film, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*. She specified that censorship in Indian cinema has reached a "draconian level" (*The Week*, 2013). The hypersexual representation of women on screen places unrealistic body expectations. In an exclusive interview with Pinkvilla, actress Vidya Balan uncovers her own experiences of facing the sexist Indian film industry. Her interview sheds light on the ugly truths of the casting couch that constantly made her feel "ugly" for months (*Pinkvilla*, 2020).

The embodiment of the 'female gaze' in New Wave Indian Cinema

The male gaze in Indian cinema showed idealism rooted deeply in the patriarchal culture. The 'female gaze' inverts this to focus on the agency of the female body. In feminist scholarship, the theory could be traced back to Ettinger's (1995) theorization of the "Matrixial gaze"; a psychoanalytic study in response to Mulvey's male gaze theory. However, an American television creator, director, and writer, Joey Soloway attempted to define the concept at their keynote address at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016.

The experimental and avant-garde cinema movement was an imaginative space for women filmmakers to explore and portray lived experiences. The early 20th century saw women's involvement in the avant-garde genre of filmmaking. Representations of taboo topics such as sexuality and resistance to the patriarchal culture in films coincided with the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s. Early feminist films were based on personal experiences (Enelow, 2017). Sisterhood bonds were shown in the latter part of the 20th century (Hollows, 2000). The subject topics of women's suppression and the ideas of femininity were also explored in the film. During the movement, feminist cinema was represented as a counter-cinema (Cook and Smelik, 2007). However, the female gaze could be unfolded in the context of New Wave Indian cinema. The earliest known reference to the female gaze in Indian film.was Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964). The new wave of Hindi cinema of the 1970s and 80s led to the rise of strong feminist icons such as Shabana Azmi, Deepti Naval, and Smita Patil. The films made by women were labelled as 'art' films (Verma, 2005).

The 'female gaze' in Ray's *Charulata* (1964)

The Indian cinema witnessed a new wave movement in the 1950s that broke free from the stylistic conventions of popular cinema and engaged with realism. The New Wave movement in Indian Cinema or alternatively known as the Parallel Cinema was inspired by the ideals of the French New Wave and the Italian neo-realism. The art films of Bengal in 1950 comprehended some of the distinguished pioneers of parallel cinema including Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Rithik Ghatak, etc. Satyajit Ray, known as one of the greatest filmmakers of all time, was inspired by *Bicycle Thieves* by Director Vitorio De Sica (1948). His celebrated works include *Pather Panchali* (1955), *The Apu Trilogy* (1955-1959), *The Big City* or *Mahanagar* (1963),

Charulata (1964), and *Ghare Baire* (1984). Ray's women are based on Rabindranath Tagore's short stories. Both Tagore's and Ray's women are feminists who resisted the age-old socio-cultural norms and customs at the height of the social reform movement. *Charulata* (1964) is recognized for depicting Ray's female gaze. The story captures Charu's internal and external realities of her life. *Charulata* was Ray's favourite film he had directed (Robinsin, 1989, p. 157), based on Tagore's *Nastanirh* ("The Broken Nest"). It is a story of a lonely housewife in late nineteenth-century Bengal.

The opening scenes of the film have a remarkable significance to the understanding of her loneliness. The scene starts with Charulata embroidering the initial B (for Bhupati) on a piece of cloth, then proceeds to read a book. The silence in the first scene registers her loneliness. She opens the shutters and gets her binoculars (which is an important motif in the film). The camera is focused on the binoculars when she walks through the bannisters. She strives for her husband's attention, but he does not even acknowledge her. The end of the first scene shows *Charulata* observing her husband through her binoculars (refer to Image 1). Her expressions in the frame give us a sense of her realization that her husband may be physically close to her, but emotionally far. Her sadness and helplessness force her to bring her binoculars down and the camera zooms out from her. The camera sees her and represents her world, and her gaze is mediated through the binoculars. A guest, Amal (Bhupati's cousin) arrives at the couple's residence and keeps Charulata's company as they share common interests in literature and poetry. The film shows Charu's affection now transferred to Amal. He does not reciprocate his love for her out of guilt and leaves the house to pursue higher studies in England and to marry. Bhupati realizes Charulata's truth and is left heartbroken. Towards the end of the film. Bhupati came back to the house and extended his hands to meet

Charulata's. The camera is focused on the hands attempting to meet but the frame freezes before they meet. The shot implies the *broken nest* that is attempting to fix itself.

Ray's sensibilities traced the nuances of emotions that Charu fights to recognize. Ray brings out Charu's gaze in an unforgettable scene when Charu gazes at a woman and a child through her disconcerting binoculars and realizes the undeniable truth of her feelings for Amal. In Charu, we see a glint of liberation that she struggled to identify until she realizes the truth of her forbidden love. Ray's camera captured her ethical suffering almost indiscreetly.
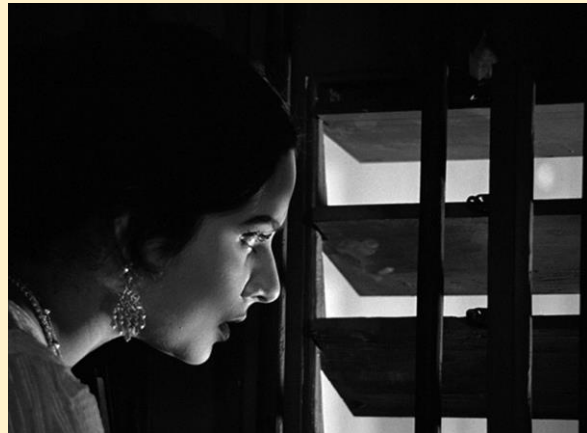

Image 1   Image 2

Source: Satyajitray.org

The "angry young women" of the 1970s and 1980s

The 70s and the 80s were the eras marked by significant changes in Indian Cinema. According to Bhaskar (2013), the New Wave Indian Cinema is "radically different, both thematically and formally, from contemporary filmmaking practices will clearly indicate the characteristics of this new cinema, and the reasons for the discourses they generated. Shot on

location, with mostly unknown actors and new fresh faces, these films were inventive and formally experimental" (Bhaskar, 2013 p.21).

The Bengali parallel cinema travelled to the Hindi cinema that saw distinct portrayals of women. The eras saw stellar portrayals of women by mostly male directors, such as Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), *Bhumika* (1977), *Mandi* (1983), Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982), and Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1987). These films spoke of women tortured by the gaze of the patriarchal society. The 1970s and 1990s marked portrayals of strong independent women by actresses Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, and Deepti Naval who went on to become stalwarts of the Hindi Parallel Cinema. In 1981, *Stardust,* a very reputed film magazine brought these three women together for a photoshoot (refer to Image 9). The magazine described the iconic trio as "The New Wave Glamour Queens". The *Cinestaan* (2016) unearthed the old photos of these actresses in one frame from *Stardust*'s archive that had taglines written in bold; *Revolt!* and *The Year of the Women!* (refer to Image 10) and the three women emerged as "feminist icons"[3]. The *Stardust* introduced the iconic trio by mentioning, ".... today's girls, the industry's truly liberated women in the sense of self-sufficiency and self-esteem. They are aggressive, demanding, ambitious, too proud to accept the back seat just because of their (weaker) sex. They are all out to give themselves a fair chance, and fight shoulder-to-shoulder against the actors, for supremacy. The industry is in for major upheaval and Shabana-Smiti-Deepti are making sure it happens in their time…and to their advantage" (Magna Publications via *Cinestaan*, 2016).

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[3]Cinestaan (2016). *Star Portraits: When Stardust brought Shabana, Deepti and Smita together*. Star Portraits: When Stardust brought Shabana, Deepti and Smita together.

In the 1980s four women, filmmakers kickstarted their careers with the following films: Sai Paranjpye directed *Chashme Baddhoor* (1981) and *Katha* (1983), Mira Nair directed *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Aparna Sen directed *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and *Paroma* (1995) and Kalpana Lajmi debuted as a feature film director in 1986 with *Ek Pal*. They continued to challenge the dominant patriarchal norms and more women took lead as directors in the Indian film industry (*Homegrown*, 2018).

Women's Cinema in India

The New Wave Indian cinema sharply declined in the 1990s due to multiple reasons. *The National Film Development Corporation* (NFDC) of India did not pay much heed to the distribution of these films and suffered losses as mainstream cinema never accepted films that lacked the spice or the *masala* (Bhaskar, 2013). Parallel cinema found its voice again in the off-beat films of Indian cinema in contemporary times at the margins of commercial success. It is only recently that Indian women took lead in the roles behind the camera. Women's Cinema recognized films contributed by women across the globe. The recognition was mainly through screenings in film festivals and awards. Butler (2002) stated that "Women's cinema is a complex, critical, theoretical and institutional construction" (Butler, 2002, p. 1-3). She explains that many female filmmakers preferred to keep a distance for the fear of being embroiled in ideological controversy. Mulvey (1989) noted that the experimental and avant-garde genre of films accommodated woman-centric films that dealt with feminist politics. The mainstream Hollywood films rejected realism and the avant-garde cinema was indeed a political tool for women to assert their rights (Mulvey, 1989). The Indian film industry experimented with Parallel cinema, against the formulaic "masala" films in the popular genre. The films by women directors were sidelined as art films. Moreover,

Indian women filmmakers did not have the same access to filmmaking funds or publicity as their male counterparts. As a result, women drifted away from the popular genre of filmmaking (Verma, 2005). Tapping into the scenario of Indian cinema today, the taboo topics associated with women about sexuality are openly portrayed. It does not mean that it is equally welcomed among the masses. Women experience multiple layers of complex emotions that are unacknowledged. The free will of women in cinema has come to be curtailed.

Conclusion

The significance of this paper lies in dislocating from stereotypical representations of Indian womanhood. The paper aimed to look at ways to counter the stereotypes. The female gaze allowed the characters to embrace their flaws and even went to the lengths of normalising discussions on taboo topics. The feminist icons of the New Wave Indian Cinema played a huge role in shifting the gaze to freely express the female experiences and exercise autonomy and achieve emancipation. The female gaze embraces diversity. The concept has been misconstrued to be portrayed by only female directors. Male directors like Ray also explore the female gaze. However, the woman directors know their way into the heart of their female protagonists who have experienced the burdens of patriarchy. The women-centric films directed by men could be explored at greater lengths too. Lastly, one's personal experiences inspire one's body of work, in this context, filmmaking.

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