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### DESIRE, DISTRESS, AND DOMINATION: A FILM REVIEW OF 'LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA' BY ALANKRITA SRIVASTAVA

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#### Abstract

Do we engage in critical analysis every time we watch a film? How do Bollywood film industry portray and perpetuate the concept of the male gaze? Do we ponder over the kind of messages these movies portray? In response to this inquiry, I have undertaken an examination of the film critique concerning "Lipstick Under My Burkha," a cinematic piece renowned for its multifaceted narratives that prompt introspection and lets us think. "Lipstick Under My Burkha" by Alankrita Shrivastava boldly challenges the confines of the male gaze and champions feminist narratives through its portrayal of four women defying societal norms in pursuit of their desires. Through its unapologetic exploration of female agency, the film breaks stereotypes and emphasizes the importance of female solidarity.

**Keywords:** *body, male gaze, women, feminist, sexuality*

**Film Name:** Lipstick under my Burkha

**Director(s):** Alankrita Shrivastava

**Producer(s):** Prakash Jha Productions, JB Angels

**Cast:** Aahana Kumra as Leela,

Ratna Pathak Shah as Usha Parmar,

Konkona Sen Sharma as Shirin Aslam,

Plabita Borthakur as Rehana Abidi.

**Screenplay and Story:** Alankrita Shrivastava

**Release date:** 21 July 2017

**Length in minutes:** 132 minutes

**Film Genre and type:** Drama/Comedy

**Language:** Hindi

**Subtitles:** Available

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* is no utopic film. However, the film unquestionably attempts to shed some light on the idea of desire by joining the dots between female agency, identity, and sexuality. Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick under my Burkha* delves into the lives of four different women to highlight the pretense of pre-conceived gender roles and sexuality. These women have varied adoptions, varied perceptions, and varied comforts. They are independent yet dependent, loved yet subjugated. The very title of the film etches in the minds of audience – the question of whether *Burkha* being conventional hinders women's agency and whether *lipstick* translates itself into enablement and ascendancy.

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The film was first screened at the Bombay Film Festival and Tokyo Film Festival in 2016. Though it was initially denied a release after CBFC's<sup>1</sup> report, it was finally released on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2017. CBFC stated that Alankrita Srivastava's *Lipstick under my Burkha* has both audio pornography and sexual scenes which are lady-oriented, and hence detrimental to the society.

As ironic and unfortunate as it sounds, the Ministry of I&B<sup>2</sup> banned all kinds of condom commercials till 10 pm at night in the year 2017, as they can disfigure women and their bodies. In this pursuit, we come under the debatable impression that anything involving sex/sexuality is untimely and indecent for the society. Question remains, how do the depiction of *Sati Savitri* wives and their torturous subjugation on silver screens be any less harmful than women who have finally realized their desire and are fighting for their agency? As an answer to this question, *Lipstick under my Burkha* paints a picture of four different women who root against their identifiable constraints and pressures – pressure to marry early, pressure to have children, pressure to handle households, and pressure to tolerate cold and offensive husbands.

Usha Buaji, a motherly figure for the residents of *Hawa Manzil*, is found to be attracted to her swimming instructor Jaspal and observes him with longing and desire. However, it is quite unfortunate that society considers Usha's sex chats with Jaspal as distasteful. Usha blames her 'jawaani ki bhoot' a few times for not leaving her not so 'jawaan body'. However, later we see, Usha, wearing a sleeveless blouse and waxing her armpits which breaks all labels in one go. Shirin, a mother of three boys works as a salesperson<sup>3</sup> and incessantly tolerates her sexually governing husband who considers Shirin as nothing but a body that can be raped and consumed. Leela, working in a beauty parlor, is torn between her lover and her fiancé. She has a sharp sexual hunger and is found to be having sex with her photographer on the day of her engagement. Similarly, Rehana typifies the quintessential conservative household whereby she is seen wearing a burqa to her college forcibly and ridiculed by her classmates. But, being an ardent lover of pop music, she protests against the ban on jeans in the film saying, "*darte yeh humari azaadi se*" (Srivastava, 2017).

Henceforth, a critical evaluation of this film would require its audience, first to understand the feminist standpoint that revolves around the lipstick. While Rehana yearns to wear jeans and lipstick, it is the Burkha that is forced upon her. And it is the same lipstick that parks Rehana to jail. Similarly, Usha narrates her '*lipstick wale sapne*' (Srivastava, 2017) to revive her desire. So, this is where *Lipstick under my Burkha* begins and ends - the disposition of women to take risks, only to fight for their unrecognized desires.

Following a similar line of discourse, one may question what does a feminist film look like. Here, multiple schools of thought are likely to befall. While some might say, the battles fought by the women protagonists in the film might have been fought directly and verbally in the open air, others might point out how difficult it is for women to come out<sup>4</sup> and withstand the social angst, face to face.

Hence, as a part of the critical audience, I argue that a single film need not act as a weapon to fight against all kinds of socio-historical and sexual subjugations against women, that have been happening since time immemorial. A single film need not erase all disagreeable women and frightened women at once, as - depicting flawed women and their hidden stories can also help in making the audience understand the long-fought battles they have been struggling with, from the closed quarters of their homes.

Also, in my opinion, despite the bold storyline and plot making, a few scenes in the film feel a bit futile. For instance, four women smoking together to portray liberation might seem a bit forced, at certain times. But the space or the room where they meet, gossip, and smoke holds a special significance. It symbolizes a space where they can be themselves and evade the torment of society. This reminds us of Teresa De Lauretis who, in her renowned book '*Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*' asserts that, "For the feminist critique is a critique of culture at once from within and from without, in the same way in which women are both in the cinema as representation and outside the cinema as subjects of practices" (Lauretis, 1984).

But, if the picture would have been turned upside down, would it be the same film? I'm afraid, it wouldn't. *Lipstick under my Burkha* has been debarred time and again, be it CBFC's report or the common masses, only because it delves into four different stories of women who want to explore more about their sexual desires and agency. Hence, it becomes undoubtedly a sore and uncomfortable subject. However, had it been a film about four men trying to explore their agency of desires and identity, perhaps it would not have been as uncomfortable as the former one.

When the renowned feminist and literary critic, Gayatri Spivak Chakravarty proclaimed about '*borderless feminism*' (Spivak, 2000), what she meant was how female bodies cannot be confined within boundaries, instead, they will explode, transfer and redefine their own selves. Similarly, since *Lipstick under my Burkha* does not aim towards any one-size fits all purpose towards male hegemony, Spivak's narrative of bringing women back to their own bodies yet not confined within any boundaries, speaks volumes about why we need films on the female gaze.

Also, what we fail to understand is that films showing an extraordinary success of women in the field of sports, coming from small towns and etching their names in inter/national sports is not the only kind of empowerment women seek for. The choice of having sex, agency, rights, desire, sexual fantasies and expressing the same should also be considered, as empowering as the former one.

For instance, when Ushaji says her name aloud instead of being identified as Buaji or mother, we get here an idea of a different kind of women empowerment. The empowerment that points out how older women - are not at all shapeless, have a separate identity, are not only a mother figure, and are sexually desirable identities. Hence, the idea of shapelessness need not attend the idea of older woman, as always.

Bollywood silver screens have always shown films and stories from a male-centric perspective. But in this case, Alankrita Srivastava turns the male gaze upside down and portrays how the female gaze instead observes the entirety. Following a similar line of discourse, Laura Mulvey, years back, commenced with the idea of 'male gaze', in her renowned work on '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' (Mulvey, 1975). The primary tenet of her theoretical narrative was the amalgamation of psychoanalytic theory and feminist film theory, to give birth to a new slant of examining female representation in film. In her research, Mulvey stated that a continuous blatant objectification of women in terms of the male gaze will eventually make women 'images of meaning rather than the maker of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975).

Within the rubric of this larger argument, I argue 'burkha' to be such a symbol in the film, which is responsible for inverting the male gaze in the movie whereby women protagonists are looking out their burkhas and protesting against of 'being looked at'.

Alankrita Srivastava's *Lipstick under my Burkha* borrows indirectly from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Real Durwan* (Lahiri, 1993). While Boori ma gets thrown out of her home in the story, Buaji in the film gets thrown of *Hawa Manzil* with all her belongings, as a part of her reprimand.

The film reminds us of the long-debated dichotomy between tradition and modernity. While Burkha is portrayed as a symbol of tyranny; lipstick, pop music, and cigarettes get translated into empowerment and ascendancy. So, while the film delves into how four women try to turn the dominant male-centric chronicle upside down, it also questions us whether we can redefine the margins of cultural narrative, tradition, and modernity.

To conclude, *Lipstick under my Burkha* lends us an unapologetic impression of what women's independence may look like. And this is where, we are taken aback by two different sets of narratives. The first one delves into questions that the feminists have been asking for decades and the second delves into how there are several other arenas of women's empowerment including sex, desire, pleasures, and fantasy - made to stand beyond the propaganda of institutional politics. Alankrita Srivastava's *Lipstick under my Burkha* acts as a juncture between the two.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>Central Board of Film Certification

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

<sup>3</sup>I prefer saying salesperson as this negates biases and upholds gender neutrality

<sup>4</sup>To appear and become known.

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