

**WOMEN'S BODY: A SITE OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL  
EXPERIMENTATION**

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**Abstract**

Cultural Studies as a genre has taken the world by storm and made its place brilliantly while dealing with the current contemporary issues. It has claimed and made itself known and read as a vital part of World literature meanwhile turning Media into a very strong tool of communication. Media helps anyone, and everyone puts forward their opinions and thoughts and even presents their distaste towards anyone or anything. It would not be wrong to say that it rules the minds of millions. It has always been a matter of debate among teens, adults and old ones because of the way they significantly affect our mundane routine. And it would not be an exaggeration to say that they not only add but act as 'spice' in people's lives, especially when it comes to the projection of women. The growing field of media in one way or another has tried to objectify women and presented them as either a 'Goddess' or a 'hyper-sexualized being' with absolutely nothing in between, which not only is wrong but unhealthy as well. The entire paper focuses on the image that South Asian media has constructed of women and around women and how their bodies have become a tool of capitalist society. To build and support my argument I have dealt with various television soaps, films, songs, magazines, and advertisements of South Asia. The current paper problematizes the very basic issue of women being used as objects in the patriarchal world meanwhile challenging the norms set particularly for women. The paper further delves into the political usage of women's bodies while concentrating on a reel and real life and how media is playing a vital role in the formation of the status of women by imprinting a wrong image of romance in the upcoming generation's minds through films by romanticizing 'stalking of a woman as something natural and well-liked and the effect it has on the collective conscious psyche of people.

“It is far more difficult to murder a phantom than a reality”  
-- Virginia Woolf

“Cinema is a beautiful medium that reaches out to millions. Through film, we can implant idea in people’s mindsets which can bring about significant changes”  
-- Kangana Ranaut, Bollywood Actress

Feminism, a movement which started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to liberate women and to achieve a common goal of equality of sexes has failed miserably in these two centuries. If we were to ask ourselves, can we really say women are free? We may have broken through legal and material hindrances but Media has weighed us down through the set images it has made of women. Media and power have always been synonymous. The media has the power to reach out to millions of people at the same time in no time. Media is not just a source of entertainment but works as a culture shaper in a way. Cinema, one of the major forms of media, as we can see rules the minds of billions whether it’s through films or soaps or songs or advertisements. As strong as a medium Media is, it has a big responsibility for the amount of audience it caters to. But what is more intriguing and common in all these is the role and projection of women. Since time immemorial, women have been a subject of constant attention. Cinema has always been a matter of debate among teens, adults and old ones because of the way they significantly affect our mundane life. And it would not be wrong to say that they act as a source of *masala* in our lives, especially the women actors. The media, if not always, has mostly tried to objectify women. For example, why is it necessary for the Axe deodorant makers to show that applying this particular perfume will attract women? Women are used as a prop in most of the advertisements, for instance, the most recent ad of Sunny Leone is where she is seen on a beach in minimum clothes in the most erotic form to publicize the use of flavoured condoms. It is, however, the need of the hour to inform people about the use of various protective measures, but what doesn’t make any sense here is the usage of Leone’s body in the advertisement. She is not used to spreading awareness but only as a marketing instrument. Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* writes,

Women, in this sexual imagery, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. ...But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 25)

Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty of Myth* writes,

The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; ‘beauty pornography’-- which for the first time in women’s history artificially links a commodified ‘beauty’ directly and explicitly to sexuality--invaded the mainstream to undermine women’s new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth. (Wolf, 1991, p.10)

Media, if it’s informative at one point, it surely is deceptive most of the time. For example,

propagating creams to whiten the skin, popular advertisements that we all see every day, are nothing but a lie and many ads have been banned due to making wrong promises. Advertisements in South Asia are not only derogatory but are sexist as well. The progressive attitude that some of the ads boast about are mostly regressive. In these ads, working women are also expected to do their household work which is not wrong if their male counterparts invest just as much time in their house. After all, is it not the responsibility of both? One such Surf Excel ad shows a working woman coming late at home who is expected to wash clothes, cook and clean the house while at the same time her husband is seen sitting on a couch, asking for coffee and relaxing. Some ads in the name of propagating their products show a fair and pretty woman taking shower while some profess that using a certain cream will make them fair and insinuate that fairness is directly related to getting hired for a job. Such ads mostly inculcate self-hatred, self-loathing, physical obsession and fear of ageing. Advertisement like these not only gives away wrong information but also sets a wrong precedent for women by calling a fair girl beautiful while completely dismissing the darker ones propagating the idea of not sharing responsibilities between partners. Wolf writes,

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth. It is the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution. As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control. (Wolf, 1991, p.10)

One of the earlier ads of Mercedes-Benz where used women's breasts to give away the idea of comfort which did not just shamelessly objectify and commodify a woman's body but also took away her right to be human. What else would the display of women's body parts such as breasts, thighs, or buttocks mean, if not commoditization of her body? The nonsensical use of the female body in most of the movies is just a decorative muse, while in ads, showing a man and a woman in the same shirt but in a different pose altogether where a man's shirt buttons are all closed while the women's all wide open is nothing but a political tactic in order to increase the sales rate and profit. Byerly and Ross in their book *Women and Media: An Introduction* mention that,

The macro-level is associated with finance and investment, and the macro-level with relations of production, including the day-to-day decision-making concerned with policy-making and creation of products. The micro-level is associated with media content, particularly the representation of women as subjects and the coverage of issues relevant to women's lives. (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 76)

Women in any society have to fight for their rights, be it in the West or India. In the writings of the post-colonial literature, women are seen on the periphery, they remain subaltern because of the way they have been treated in a patriarchal society. Suniti Namjoshi, a feminist fabulist, in her fable 'The Mothers of Maya Diip', highlights two different societies, one where there are no men just women and all of them are addressed as mothers. Namjoshi here presents us with a dystopian world in which these women live in a lesbian society and to give birth, they

milk young boys of their semen and drown them in the sea which highlights the problematic issue of girl-killing in our society. On the other hand, there is another society, which does milk the boys of their semen but instead of killing them, they keep them and designate them as mothers, again a problematic situation because in the process they are manipulated into living as what they are not, stripping away their identity. The twist comes in when a young girl named Jyanvi enters this place and she falls in love with a woman who is a part of this dystopian set-up named Saraswati who is also a mother. The problem comes when Jyanvi refuses to take care of Saraswati's child and just wants to be her lover. Namjoshi questions this matriarchal society which outcasts Jyanvi because she does not fit in the conventional idea of being a mother. Namjoshi, through her work tries to show the problems with the matriarch rule and is directly emphasizing the problems that are there in the patriarchal world.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work, 'If I Were a Man', projects a woman who fantastically turns into her husband and finds out that she has 'pockets', that she is now financially independent. Gilman, like Virginia Woolf, shows the importance of letting a female work, she might be much more talented than the man, but the patriarchal society decided otherwise and devoid her of any chance altogether. Gilman goes on to make people understand the loss of identity with which a woman suffers when she is not even considered worthy of giving chance. She is expected to fit in the roles of a daughter, a wife, and a mother and if she deviates from these assigned stereotyped roles, she is to be only considered a prostitute.

Margaret Gallagher's (1979) UNESCO-funded study emphasized the underlying reason why women's image would continue to concern women for decades to come: "The . . . media are potentially powerful agents of socialization and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviors, encouraging stereotypes. (Qtd in Byerly& Ross, 2006, p. 17)

Concentrating on the projection of women in ads, we see that a woman only gets married when she is taken to a jewellery shop because of course it's a womanly trait to look pretty and be materialistic. This is not just limited to the ads but songs as well. "ChitiyaKaliya" loosely translated as *White Arms*, became an instant hit and one of the loved songs for the young generations, is another example, where Jacqueline Fernandez (Indian actor) is seen dancing on the streets, showing off her white arms, and asking her man to take her to movies, shopping and the like instead of doing it all of that herself. There are various songs where women are compared to an Indian sweet that is 'Jalebi', or a firecracker that is 'Patakha', or is even compared to a 'bomb'. And these are only the decent ones. One such singer whose popularity rests on objectifying women is Honey Singh, an Indian Rapper. One of his songs that went viral is 'Blue eyes', which not only reduces women to mere objects through words but also through video. The woman is seen not as a human but only as a body to be used for sexual gratification, her body is compared to a bomb, an explosive used to kill people, a nasty comment is made about the way she is dressed up, and to grab her attention the man is luring her by showing off her white Ghini Car, not only this the girl is then subtly asked if she would like to go to a club or to the man's house.

Another very disturbing characteristic of Bollywood is its 'Item' numbers. As normal as the word 'Item' sounds, one would be surprised that this particular word is used in relation to

women who dance off wearing minimal clothes and the only reason for casting these women in the film is to add spice. The most disturbing part of this whole show is that the film industry projects it in a way that whatever is being shown in the dance, be it twenty children dancing with a half-dressed female lead or forceful sexual acts, is enjoyed by women. And for a particular part of society, this is the ultimate truth that whatever is shown by the media is gospel truth and hence, it later governs their actions. Now this only results in sexism, but also contributes to the collective psyche of men and they assume that only the women who stay at home are chaste and those who do not are impure and are available for them. Because media through its films, ads or soaps show women as the weaker sex, this then plays a larger role in issues like low pay, freedom of choice, and difficulty in getting equal career opportunities or education. As Ritupurna Chatterjee writes,

[i]t will be highly presumptuous to assume that Hindi cinema is the root cause of a spike in sexual assaults. But Bollywood and regional cinema in equal parts, because of their reach, scope and influence, have a larger role to play in assuming responsibility for the message it sends out to millions of audiences — some highly impressionable. (Yasin, 2013)

Television soaps comparatively have adopted a very progressive attitude by propagating a woman's career, widow re-marriage, by showing resistance towards child marriage and the like yet they fail to realize the loopholes and continue to be very dogmatic. One very popular show feature on Star Plus, "*Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*", loosely translated as "It is Love" is well-liked, and is run in almost every household in India and Pakistan. This television soap is a story of a woman who faces problems in getting married because she is infertile; she has been rejected several times before getting married. And eventually marries a divorcee who has a child. She is settled with a man who is not even interested in her and the only reason he and his family accept her is because of his daughter who loves this female. The female protagonist who hails from a good family is beautiful and financially sound but one biological weakness which is not even her fault makes her settle in a relationship where the man is not concerned with her being. The situation of women from before has not changed much. Women of today are still expected to do the job designed for them at home, even if she is working outside without complaining. In the age of media where people seldom read history books, it becomes highly insensitive and irresponsible to present a distorted version of anything. When talking about representation, "*Padmaavat*" by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, a film loosely based on the epic poem by Malik Muhammad Jayasi calls itself a historical drama yet misrepresented history by portraying Khilji's character inappropriately. Khilji who according to historical records was a tyrant but a great administrator is shown as a one-dimensional character that is a 'lustful barbaric meat eater'. The history of Khilji has not just been turned upside down but has been distorted. This particular film has not only altered Mughal history but has invoked Islamophobia, and homophobia and is gender biased which has contributed to the already fixed generalization that all Muslims are terrorists. Be it the much-talked-about the omission of the TajMahal from history books by the Uttar Pradesh government or the controversy of declaring the TajMahal, a Temple and not a Tomb or be it sending every Muslim to Pakistan, if he or she points to one fault either of Indians or its system. In the age where Indian politicians are trying to divide India using its religious

diversity, Media then becomes a weapon and hence, should be conscious enough to fight back communalism and show an unbiased version of history or life. Rana Safavi, a remarkable author and historian in an interview says,

Lot of people have written historical fiction and they have been taken as actual truth. We are in the age of twitter, we are in the age of hundred and forty characters, we definitely do not want to read books, seeing videos and consuming movies is far easier. So, the visual medium is the most successful and which has the biggest reach. So the filmmakers and people who make videos have a lot of responsibilities that they should not show anything which so completely distorts history....because they (protagonists) both belong to different religions, that sets up a clash of civilizations which is not what Jayasi definitely wanted because his book starts with *Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*. (Safavi, Hindustan Times, 2018)

Safavi in her interview further mentions that Jayasi has talked about Mansarovar, a lake fed by the Kailash glaciers, and goes on to say that the world has been made by Allah for Muhammad, the last Prophet. Safavi mentions how beautifully Jayasi combines it all to create a unity between Chistees and Nath Pantis and she goes on to say that Bhansali has missed the entire point of the poem 'Padmavat'. She says,

The poem *Padmavatis* a fight between Ishq-e-Haqiqi which is divine love and Nafs (ego). ... Khilji was no doubt cruel and tyrant but he was not a barbarian. He was in fact a very astute administrator, his agrarian and land and market reforms have been followed by many, in fact his land reforms were followed by Akbar and Sher Shah because he cut off the intermediary between the cultivator and the State and took direct tax from them. So, he reduced the burden on them as well as increased taxation because he needed to maintain an army. (Safavi, Hindustan Times, 2018)

Safavi further adds that he did all these things because,

he needed to defend his borders and strengthen the army. The Mongols were standing just at the doorstep of the Delhi sultanate, and they had already devastated most of central Asia, in fact Baghdad, Samarqand and all these places had been destroyed by the Mongol horde and its under Alauddin Khilji that he kept Delhi safe that art and culture flourished, men of learning came here and Delhi in fact started to be called Baghdad of the east. (Safavi, Hindustan Times, 2018)

Bhansali's film only showed a part of Khilji's character of him being a tyrant and a bisexual, all the while dealing with the subject insensitively, but forgetting to keep the rest which makes it highly stereotypical. Another failed character Malik Kafur played by Jim Sarbh has been turned into a "lovesick buffoon". Bhansali has failed to acknowledge that Kafur was in fact a very successful General who not only handled the Deccan campaign but the Mongol campaign as well. Its main female lead played by Deepika Padukone, kills herself along with many other women in order to protect their honour. Bhansali could have portrayed a strong character by making her fight but he succumbed to the stereotypical image of women being weak. Such portrayal of one-dimensional caricature not only contributes to the hatred but also strengthens the very idea of stereotype.

Media is only making films, soaps and advertisements which show women as either damsel in distress or item numbers or somebody who is a heartbreaker or a mother or a slut. Women are either shown in the light of White or Black. What they fail to realize is that women are more than their face, body or colour. It is equally disturbing to see young women doing everything in their power to look flawless by opting for face-lift surgeries, breast enlargement, and starving themselves to get a zero figure due to the nailed-down image that media has made of women by showing that only flawless women get a job or a man to like them. Advertisements are using women as goods, they are used as bait for their profits, setting unjust standards for other women and men to follow. The beauty which every man and woman is striving for keeps changing and with every decade new standards come up. Earlier beauty was all about being fair skinned, people with darker skin were associated with the working class and fair with an elite, voluptuous body is considered to be a sign of fertility and now people pay to get tan skin and spend hours in the gym to get that perfect slim body. Irigaray writes,

Why are men not objects of exchange among women? It is because women's bodies-through their use, consumption, and circulation-provide for making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown "infrastructure" of the elaboration of that social life and culture. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 171)

The media shows women as damsels in distress, always in need to be of help and protection just like in most Disney movies. We tell stories of princesses to our daughters which make them believe that they need their prince charming to protect and rescue them which later in life results in a weaker psyche in young girls and does not let them take charge of their lives.

But the media, as a wonderful and dangerous weapon that it is, forgets that what it shows in reel becomes a real-life tragedy for many. For instance, projecting stalking as romance. In the 2015 Bollywood Blockbuster Film, "Tanu weds Manu Returns", starring R. Madhavan, is seen following a girl who is his wife's look-alike. It showed Madhavan (Manu) in all its innocence, as a victim of the story and her wife as a vamp, while neglecting the fact that the wife (Tanu) in the movie has been expected to follow the rules set by the patriarchal society. Tanu, who is different from a conventional woman, is left alone by her husband while her husband, Manu's love interest shifts to another girl whom he stalks. 'Stalking' which is a crime in many countries is shown as a romance in the film; Manu stalks this new girl (Kusum). The film is well-liked by people across the country and beyond, the director however without realizing sends a message of stalking as a normal activity and that it should be followed by any man who wishes to woo a girl. And if this was not enough it also encourages 'kidnapping' which is a crime all over the world. It doesn't only put a normal friendship in a bad light but also conveys that 'kidnapping' is okay. It boasts that kidnapping should be done if the girl you wish to marry doesn't reciprocate your feelings; you have the authority to kidnap her and make her yours by force. The character of Deepika Padukone from the 2012 movie 'Cocktail' is a girl who drinks, has had relationships, and is not very conventional so to say according to Indian standards, undergoes a complete transformation in order to be accepted by his love interest. Another such movie, which again was a huge success, is a 1993 film, 'Darr' loosely translated as 'Fear', where we see Bollywood's romantic king Shahrukh Khan in love with Juhi, which in reality is a movie of a stalker and a psychopath who is in dire need of medical treatment. Next on the list is Kundan's character from the 2013 film 'Ranjhana', another hit, is a story of an innocent boy who loved a girl with all his heart and died without getting his love reciprocated and the blame for his unrequited love is

finally put on the girl. Meanwhile, we see the audience coming out of the theatre, crying their hearts out while young girls curse Zoya (Sonam Kapoor) for not loving the hero back. What slips from the minds of these young people is that Kundan was nothing but a psychopath who followed Zoya everywhere and could never accept and come to terms with the fact that she also has right to choose whom she loves. The idea of romance, relationships, independence, beauty, and acceptance in these films is nothing but dark. The image that the media has created of women is the reason why we are in dire need of women's empowerment.

It is now high time for us people to understand the difference between chivalry and cheapness, between love and stalking, between being moody or taking space, between weak and strong, between progressive and selfish, understanding what lies within and what lies beyond and not everything that media shows should be followed blindly. Harassment is not loved, for what this generation falls prey to. One must understand that the idea of beauty differs, it is not fixed but is very much relative to what after all beauty is and should we give this idea of beauty so much power so as to ruin lives? As women, we do many things which give us the satisfaction of approval from others, but in order to earn the respect of people, we change ourselves, where our greatest weakness lies. As Kangana Ranaut stated in The World Summit in London, "You have to be confident of who you are. Others' opinions of you will always shift" (Ranaut n.p). Because we are not our hair or lips or body, because we are more than just spice, because we are HUMAN.

Thus, women's secrets I've surveyed  
And let them see how curiously they're made,  
And that, tho' they of different sexes be,  
Yet in the whole they are the same as we.  
For those that have the strictest searchers been,  
Find women are but men turned outside in;  
And men, if they but cast their eyes about,  
May find they're women with their inside out

-- (The Works of Aristotle in Four Parts, 1822, p.16)

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