



MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: FILM TEXTS EARTH AND WATER UNDER THE LENS OF FEMINIST FILM THEORY

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Abstract

Ever since its birth, cinema is dominated by men. Women's bodies have been used as decorative pieces. It was the women's movement which gave a spark to the feminist film theory. The early film feminist theory centered round the power and function of images. Woman is presented stereotypically. Patriarchal representation of women was the core of both mainstream and radical feminist theory. The same idea was propounded by film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, and Barbara Creed who opened up a new and distinctive approach to study the films. Their works passionately advocated the important issues of feminism in the films. The feminist film theorists of the time were influenced by civil right movements, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, gay-liberation, and counter-culture. These ideas energized women who lived in these times. The feminist film critics came forward and lobbied to represent women in a more favorable and positive light. They reacted against the objectification of women in the films. They argued that women are constructed around the visible criteria of beauty and attractiveness. The Film theory is an academic discipline closely allied with critical theory which aims to find out the essence of the cinema and provide conceptual frameworks for understanding film's relationship to reality, the other arts, spectators and the society at large. This is not an independent field of study. It is associated and borrows ideas from other branches of study. It is an integrated study associated with psychology, feminism, philosophy, art theory, linguistics, cultural theory, literary theory, social science, economics and political science. The present paper focuses to study how the women are portrayed in cinema? How they are invisible despite being excessively visible? How men and women are differentially positioned by cinema? How women are presented as objects of masculine desire and fetishistic gazing? How women's voice is silenced? The paper is an attempt to explore the film texts *Earth* and *Water* under the lens of feminist film theory.

Keywords: Feminism, Film theory, Feminist film theory, Male gaze.

Introduction

Film theory has its birth during the period of silent cinema (1895-1929). The film theory evolved

slowly but surely being influenced by the works of eminent directors, film critics and film theorists such as Hugo Munsterberg, Rudolf Arnheim, Louis Delluc,

Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein, DzigaVertov, Lev Kuleshov Bela Balazs and Siegfried Kracauer etc. But during 1960s and 1970s, film theory broadened its scope by importing and assimilating the already established disciplines like psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, semiotics, linguistics and other literary theories in its fold. Film theorists like Laura Mulvey gave a new aspect of gaze to be used in film analysis. It has now branched out into several other specializations because of various other approaches to study it. One such approach is to study it under the lens of feminism. This approach gave birth to Feminist film theory.

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory had its origin in the 1960s. But the year 1972 seems to be the watershed year for the feminist film theory. Stating about the development of feminist film theory, Rengin Ozan writes: "The feminist film theory was influenced by second wave feminism and the development of women's studies within the academy. Feminist scholars began taking cues from the new theories arising from these movements to analyze films. Initial attempts in the United States in the early 1970s were generally based on sociological theory and focused on the function of women characters in particular film narratives or genres and of stereotypes as a reflection of societies views of women". (74)

'Women's Cinema As Counter Cinema' by Claire Johnston and the article of Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and narrative Cinema" are considered and widely accepted as the first theoretical studies of feminist cinema. Claire Johnston's *Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema* (1973) is perhaps the earliest piece of writing about feminist film theory. She shows how women have been stereotyped in the films ever since the days of silent films. She argues and challenges such a narrow conception dominated by male vision. A woman is merely presented as spectacle. Stating about woman's representation in the films, there are scholars who are of the opinion that despite having an enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, they are largely absent. Analysis of films how the women are portrayed in

broader historical, sociological and stereotypical depiction are taken into account. Laura Mulvey's influential essay expands it further. It brings to the surface the concept of passive representation of women in the film. She argues about 'male gaze'. In this regard, Annette Kuhn in her book *Women's Pictures* writes: "In North America, a number of women's film festivals – the first New York International of Women's Films (1973) - coincided with the publication of the three books of feminist film criticism: Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1975), Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Joan Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* (1974)." (72)

These were the books with revolutionary ideas about the inclusion of women in the films. Laura Mulvey's now-classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [Mulvey, 1975] was that the men and women are differentially positioned by cinema. Scholars like Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell are of the opinion that the women are portrayed in Hollywood as madonnas, whores, vamps, bimbos, scatterbrains, gold diggers, school teachers, nags and sex kittens etc. Annette Kuhn also emphasizes the same point as she writes: "Arguments have been put forward regarding, for example, certain kind of stereotypical images of women marketed via women's magazines, television advertisements, and other media" (5). Kuhn further says, "This analysis of images of women is represented as object-victims, particularly in media specially addressed to male audiences" (6).

Feminist film scholars not only presented women in a favorable light but also felt the need to change the basic structure of cinema. In this paper film texts the *Earth* and the *Water*, are studied under the scanner of feminist film theory.

Key Concepts of Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory embodies in it the multifaceted character of feminism. The methodologies adopted are from within or outside the sphere of feminism. The first of its kind has its origin from socio-cultural roots. In the present paper, the film texts *Earth* and *Water* are first analyzed based on these models. Feminist film theory is directed to look at socio-cultural products

and institutions led by patriarchal society which conspired to exclude women's voice in the films. Talking about silences of film texts in relation to women, Angela Martin asserts, "the exclusion of woman's voice and her position within the text as object" (12). The focus lies on highlighting how women's voice is silenced despite being shown excessively. Socio-cultural forces dominated by patriarchal society converted women to mere objects. Feminist film theorists tried to draw attention to matters which go unnoticed in the film text.

Making visible the invisible focuses the attention of reading the film text by pointing to the ways in which women are constructed in film media. Feminist film theory works at dual level of text as well as context. Place and Burton express a similar idea. According to them, the feminist film theory should "Develop and use analysis of our culture that includes a political perspective, knowledge of political conditions, and the role of ideology. Second, feminist [theory] must be both able and willing to analyze films themselves. The entire dynamics of narrative structure must be considered and the tools for comprehending films must be utilized by the feminist critic" (56). In this connection several things are to be taken into consideration while studying the film texts in the purview of feminist film theory. Julia Lesage another writer asserts: "A good theory includes an explanation of the mechanisms operating within the film (form, content.etc) and the mechanisms that go beyond the product that is the film such as the film industry, distribution, audience, expectation etc."(13). With the passage of time, Feminist Film Theory grew considerably giving birth to several concepts centering round the portrayal of women as objects and disempowered members and subjected to man's desires.

But the most-quoted film theorists is Laura Mulvey, who in her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, introduced the concept of the gaze to describe how Hollywood cinema typically assumes a male perspective in the cinematic process. Because of this mode of viewing, the treatment of films in general and women in particular always had patronizing and erotic undertones.

According to Mulvey, there are three basic types of gazing or looking. The first is that of the camera as it records what happens in the film. The second is that of the audience as they watch the film and identify with the main character. The third is that of the characters as they deal and interact with each other in the course of the film. In all three types of looking, the look originates from a masculine point of view. This assigns the role of the active looker and storyteller to the male gender, thus giving them power or control within the movie. Women, on the other hand, are forced to take the passive and therefore powerless role of the one being looked at. They are relegated to just being the object of the male gaze.

As Sharon Smith, a noted film scholar in the first issue of *Women and Film* writes that women, in any full human form, have almost completely been left out of film. She is of the opinion that women are represented merely as objects only to be looked at. In male-dominated, cinematic culture, a woman is represented as a man desires her to be. Despite being over spectacted she is largely absent. The women are identified with the roles assigned to them such as child woman, whore, bitch, wife, mother, secretary, cold and frigid career woman. In this regard, Sholini Chaudhuri writes: "Since its inception in the 1970s, feminist film theory has provided the impetus for some of the most exciting developments in film studies. "Feminist film theory became the orthodoxy of film theory; such was its influence in the field. Its impact began to be felt in film making itself, with a number of avant-garde and independent and some main stream films linking theory to practice". (1)

Film texts *Earth* and *Water* under the Lens of 'Male Gaze'

Women in Deepa Mehta's films *Earth* and *Water* are not merely decorative pieces, they are fighters. They do fight with all their grit and gumption. They refuse to submit. Be it Ayah and Lenny in the film *Earth* or Shakuntala, Kalyani and Chuyia in the film *Water*. Despite that the final saviour in the films is always shown as the man. As in the film *Water*, it is not Shakuntala who rescues Chuyia but it is Narayan (John Abraham) in whose

arms Chuyia is shown safe and secure. In the film *Earth* all major male characters are shown virile, strong and powerful. All are involved in some form of violence. Be it Dil Nawaz, Hassan, Cook, Mr. Singh, Co. Barucha etc. Ice-Candy-Man exhibits his male potency and vigour. Let us put both these film texts under the lens of male gaze.

Ayah (Nandita Das) in the Film *Earth*: An Object of 'Male Gaze'

In the film *Earth*, the main female character, Ayah is always looked at by the male gaze. Her body movements are displayed for the male's visual pleasure. Her presence accentuates her to be an object for men's sexual gratification. The woman is shown to be endowed with physical assets. The male is supposed to seek pleasure from looking awhile woman does have power to attract men. Ayah's role in the film is a good example falling within the concept of the Male Gaze Theory. She is viewed by male gaze as a sexual object. Wherever she walks, talks and stops she is looked as an object of sexual desire. Even the stub-handed beggars do not lag behind. As Sidhwa writes: "Up and down, they look at her. Stub-handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretences to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes." (ICM 3) Wherever Ayah moves, covetous eyes always followed her. Ayah is watched by all her admirers with passionate desire. Ayah's body is dehumanized solely based on the body during both in love and chaos. In *Earth*, the greedy male gaze towards Ayah's body is captured in the park scene where male admirers from different religious communities (Hindu, Muslim, and Sikhs) sit circling Ayah. When her Sari slips unconsciously from her chest, exposing her breast partially, all the men are taken aback and kept looking at her breast with silent lust and desire.

Kalyani (Lisa Ray) an Object of Male Gaze in the Film *Water*

Kalyani, a woman character too is portrayed as object of male gaze in the film *Water*. In the film text the *Water*. She too is treated nothing more than a sexual object. In the film she is portrayed wearing

white *sari*, exposing her round limbs. Kalyani too is object of male gaze. Ever since the priest Sadanand has assumed his duties as a young priest, he has been attracted by the widows. He lusted for their flesh. "He lusted for the young, the middle-aged and, except for the old, even the elderly" (Water 79). This is male gaze; even the priest fancies to bury his face in their necks. He simply cannot resist the voluptuous joggle of their flesh. And the eroticism of these religious hawks was heightened by vulnerability and availability of widows. He justifies this by saying that if the Gods lusted and got what they wanted, how was he, a puny mortal, to resist the allure of these women? Kalyani is forced into prostitution. Her body is used not only a sex-object but an object of exchange. She is forced into prostitution. In this regard Maureen Turim asserts: "The female body is not only a sex-object, but also an object of exchange; its value can be sold (prostitution) or it can be incorporated in to another commodity which can be sold" (56)

Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) in *Water*: A Portrayal as an Object of 'Male Gaze'

Shakuntala is another middle aged widow in the film *Water*. She too is an object of male gaze. She is constantly watched by Sadanand, the priest. "He idly watched Shakuntala fill the pot and walk up the ghats with holy water. As the light shone through her damp sari, it outlined her thighs and legs. It gave him pleasure to watch her. Not for the first time, he observed the grace in her strong, shapely body. Her waist was slender above the rounded flare of her hips, her stomach flat. Her high breasts made shapely mounds beneath her handsome shoulders, and her neck sat straight above the indentations of her collar bones; he wished he could bury his lips in the hollows." (Water 156) When Kalyani commits suicide, the void created by her is to be filled by Chuyia. The process of patriarchal brutality will continue.

Conclusion

For a very long time, women were not characters in their own right. They had stereotyped images such as princess locked in tower, the damsel in distress, the ailing queen, and beautiful girl offered as prize to the hero by her father or guardian

offered as a payment for hero's service. But at occasions a hero might possess the object of his desires. In that case this prize is offered to someone else. In most of the films, women are used as show pieces in the films. Films are able to make business by showing women as the objects of male desire with their perky legs, bouncy breasts. Mulvey in her celebrated essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' narrates that male acts an agent of the look and the female as an object of spectacle through the mechanism and voyeurism and fetishism. Feminist film theory certainly enriches our experience about films, provides us with many tools for analysis and regards women not 'just the sources of entertainment', but as humans with all their strengths and weaknesses. They are not mere showpieces.

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