

**(Re) Negotiating
the Spectacle:
Gender, Body and
Discourse in Films**



Edited by:
Dr. K.M. Johnson
Dr. Rajesh M.
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with compliments

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English Language

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Films**

Collection of essays edited by: Dr. K.M. Johnson, Dr. Rajesh. M and
Vishnu .N

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“It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.”

— Laura Mulvey

Editors' Desk

Gender is a cultural construct performed by individuals through "repeated and stylized acts." One acquires gender through one's "performance" in social space. Body has evolved culturally through the images from a physical corpus into a signifier that constructs certain meanings of reality; to a text that can be subjected to hermeneutic interrogation; into a discourse where ideologies can be inscribed. The cultural signification of body is circumscribed by the context in which it is situated and the signifying practices adopted by the spectators. For example, a body in a ritualistic context is markedly different from the same body explored in an advertisement. In the former, the body signifies an institutionalized cultural practice whereas in the latter, the body is an object of gaze appropriated to conceal the process of labour and to lure the consumer with the product which is objectified labour. Therefore, the signification of the body changes with the cultural context in which it is placed or viewed. Though there is no correspondence between sexed body and gender, the gendered body is a performing subject in the cultural context. But the gendered body performs only certain forms of subjectivity or ideology permissible within the normative views of society conditioned by its hegemonic practices

It is in view of its significance that an attempt is made to collect, edit and publish the papers that were presented as part the international seminar organized by the Post Graduate & Research Department of English under the title "*(Re)Negotiating the Spectacle: Gender, Body and Discourse in Films*". The papers have dealt with various aspects of presenting gender and body in films. Hence, the papers varying in depth and scope of enquiry.

Foreword

The Department English and Centre for Research, Sacred Heart College (Autonomous) has made it a practice to organize international seminars on topics of current relevance on a regular basis. The latest edition of International seminar delved deep into the representation of body, gender, and discourse in the films as well the production of these categories through the narrative, visual and textual grammar of films. The presence of Laura Mulvey and several others added energy to the gathering and the discussions, in whose vibrant presence the students and faculty members from various colleges could deliberate on various issues associated with the theme, like the terminology, politics and impact on society etc. The students of the department and the teachers who guided them to conduct such a relevant seminar deserve special commendation. These seminars help to build up the organizational skills of the students in addition to developing their research aptitude. The effort in bringing out an edited volume of the papers presented will serve to bring the discussions to a wider audience. I wish the endeavor all success.

Rev. J Prasant Palakkappillil CMI, Ph D

Principal

Sacred Heart College (Autonomous)

Thevara, Kochi.

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Cinematic Imaginations, Diasporic Interventions and Female Transgressions: An Analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Elements Trilogy*

Dr. Jeeja Ganga

Abstract

It is an established fact that the nation state is vehemently a masculine entity with rules of patriarchy writ large on it. The leading male theoreticians of the nation conceived the nation as "a male-constructed space ... a male terrain, [and] a masculine enterprise" (Boehmer 22-23). Benedict Anderson's imagined community of the nation was thought of as a fraternity and a "deep, horizontal comradeship" of men (7) rather than as a sisterhood of women. The nation was predominantly a masculine project, within which women had only limited roles and were denied full citizenship rights like the right of franchise and the right to hold property. As Joane Nagel puts it, "The idea of the nation and the history of nationalism are intertwined with the idea of manhood and the history of manliness.... nationalist scripts historically have been written primarily by men, for men, and about men" (900).

Ironically, the masculine construct of the nation is very often symbolized and represented as a woman and predominantly as a mother. The symbolic abstraction of a woman as a mother places her on a higher plane of morality and purity, wherein she is "desexualized" and "regulated" and "the boundaries of her body" come to represent safety and purity (Eisenstein 43). Women are assigned roles "as mothers of the nation, as vessels for reproducing the nation, as teachers passing the national culture to new members" (Nagel 909). National

symbolic boundaries, like moral boundaries, are engaged in the "the creation and enforcement of the rules of citizenship; the surveillance, apprehension, and punishment of national deviants or "traitors"" according to which women, who do not abide by the dictates of purity prescribed by the masculine nation and break its rules of purity and propriety, pose a problem and are susceptible to being designated as deviants or traitors (Nagel 900).

Taking a cue from Western conceptions of nation, the nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in India was also increasingly obsessed with the "discourse of the purity of the nation and the preservation of Indian womanhood" (Ratna Kapur 124-25). The inner spiritual domain of the home was opposed to the outer material world and became the rightful place for women. Documenting the emergence of the new woman at the time of the freedom struggle in the early twentieth century, Partha Chatterjee points out how women were imbued with a spiritual quality and were regarded as the stake holder's of the family's and the nation's honour (126). Women's bodies became and still are "sites on which various versions of scripture/ tradition/ law are elaborated and contested" (Mani 115).

Key words: Film studies, Diaspora, Cultural studies.

Cinema, which audio-visually imagines the nation into being, has always been a masculine project that relegates women to the margins. The gendered imagination of the nation that began during the

colonial rule persists even today and Indian cinema, which came into being as a legacy of the colonial rule, took up the practice of regarding women as upholders of national culture and honour. Even a superficial study of Indian cinema attests to the fact that it is deeply grounded on the discourse of purity which pertains mostly to the bodies of women. Jyotika Viridi in her book *Cinematic ImagiNation* equates Indian cinema to the imagined nation (accounting for the capital 'N' in *ImagiNation*), and regards the family as the "most important trope" or metaphor used by Hindi cinema to convey the idea of the nation (229-230). Since the family and the nation are patriarchal institutions on which hierarchies of gender inequalities are sharply etched out, the heroine and the other women characters of Indian cinema are portrayed as the ones who always make sacrifices for the well-being of the family. They are conceived of as ideal Indian women who are feminine, gentle, sacrificing and uncomplaining and who keep intact the values of the family and the nation.

As against the usual representations of women in cinema, Deepa Mehta, the Indo-Canadian film maker, born in Amritsar, Punjab and residing in Canada, has created films that portray the deviant woman and this is especially true of the characters in the *Elements Trilogy*, comprising the films *Fire*, *Water* and *Earth*. *Fire* and *Water* had stirred up much controversy in India for the subject matters that swerved from the status quo and which depicted women as transgressors of national codes of behaviour. Jacqueline Levitin, one of the editors of the book, *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, succinctly describes Deepa Mehta as a filmmaker with the "ability to manipulate content, aesthetics.

Creation and Innovation: Undoing the Male Gaze With Reference to the Tamil Movie, Aadai

Dr. Rosa Juju Abraham

Abstract

Every discipline of art uses its own special language to communicate. Movies are a form of creative expression which primarily employs a visual medium of communication. Once this visual culture penetrates the cultural fabric of our society, there occur a synergy between the word and the image as a form of art which in turn presents soul-searching encounters with self and others. In a world fragmented by negations of people with different identities, women's concept of oneself, trigger the foundation for feminist inquiry and feminist political action.

Key words: Male gaze, Tamil movies

With the advent of psychoanalytical examinations of phallogentrism based on the works of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, especially in film criticism, feminists have strikingly critiqued sexist and misogynist ways of seeing and thinking and categorizing women as bearers of meanings rather than makers of meanings. Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," argues that the unchallenged, mainstream film form is coded into the erotic language of the dominant patriarchal order which derives pleasure from voyeurism and narcissism:

Woman then stands in a patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through

linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey 58)

Gender difference, produced, not innate, becomes a matter of structuring of a genderless libido in and through patriarchal discourse in women. Women consider themselves to be a part of a group and their identity is derived intimately and powerfully from being a part of this group. The underlying assumption is that discourses, though self-perpetuating, are also continuously blurred at the boundaries by the subjects constructed by discourses. This view of the subject, derived from poststructuralist theory, suggests diverseness, disruption and resistance at the very nodes of power controlling centres. This is not to say that women do not comply with the cultural norms that both create and coerce them but it is to say that the self is bombarded by multiple forces and is continuously engaged in creating anew both itself and the world in which it is inserted.

According to the English art critic John Berger, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (*Ways of Seeing*) This famous explanation of male gaze sums up implicitly the working of the gendered power dynamics of spectatorship in art. The dominant male gaze has always been established as the 'universal cultural gaze.' Laura Mulvey has described this gaze as scopophilic, as male erotic pleasure is derived from voyeurism:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and

passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (62)

Psychoanalysts of movies have used the term scopophilia to identify and describe the aesthetic and emotional pleasures and other unconscious mental processes that occur in the minds of the spectators gazing at a movie. Voyeurism is a term normally associated with a male who observes somebody secretly and according to Mulvey cinema provides voyeuristic pleasure for the male by watching others who do not know that they are being observed, thus totally relegating the female audience to passivity. The male narcissistic identification Mulvey talks about can also be applied to the female who gazes at her own voyeuristic objectification to derive pleasure from the power she feels she can indirectly wield on a male audience. Women placed as spectacles to be objectified, manage to subvert the male gaze, in which, they do not become just objects of male desire but transforms themselves into females who are desired by men.

The masculine gaze is still commonplace though modern filmmakers make an attempt to defy the male gaze at every turn by giving women characters complex back stories, strong motivations and an active role in the plot of the story. Operating by habit and obedience rather than by reason leaves women unable to respond to new

situations. So to emerge as a strong character, a woman must not only be male-like but she should also be feminine without being beguiling. When complex women fill the frame, the frame naturally has to change. The film now represents a new wave of compelling, complicated, female protagonists.

The director is the creative force that holds a movie together and movie lovers strongly believe in this dictum. The camera offers a particular point of view towards the action or the subject in the film. The shots constitute the raw material of the film and operate visually, emotionally and intellectually. Mulvey calls for a new 'feminist avant-garde' filmmaking that would rupture the narrative pleasure, by women not having to bear the burden of sexual objectification, to keep the story line going.

In the Tamil movie 'Aadai,' a Rathna Kumar film, the character Kamini has more grey cells than just being a voluptuous female individual and is portrayed as somebody who is willing to go beyond limits set by society as to how women should behave. The general notion is that women of old times were sacrificial and suffered in silence. The male director Rathna Kumar of this film excels in his genuine approach, for when commercial gain is considered most directors tend to produce hero centred movies. The selling point here is that the 'hero' or protagonist of the movie is Kamini, a bold, dauntless, adventurous, brash female.

The film has a strong feminist core with the prelude in the beginning that shows graphically the sickening practice of how women belonging to the lower caste in Kerala were banned from covering their

breasts and had to pay breast tax, until Nangeli, a head strong woman, made a colossal sacrifice to bring about a sea-change. Nangeli, who is believed to have lived in the early 19th century in Cherthala rebelled by cutting off her breasts against this atrocious practice. She died with excessive blood loss, while her husband committed suicide by jumping into her funeral pyre. Can one call it Sati, in the reverse? Following Nangeli's sacrifice, breast tax was annulled in Travancore. The narrative ends with an omniscient ring; all rights to the freedom that one enjoys now, have a blood-stained history.

Kamini is a woman who hates to wear sari's, is constantly clad in torn jeans and is a bike riding, joint-smoking woman who defies everything that is traditional. She even changes the traditional name, Suthanthira Kodi, her parents have given her, to a more sexually explicit one 'Kamini.' Kamini took the literal meaning of 'Sunthanthira,' (freedom) encapsulated in the word and chose her own free style of living. The first half of the movie effectively builds up the heroine's character very strongly. In the opening scene one sees Kamini as television prankster series director engrossed totally in its creation and having no qualms about the victims who fall prey to it. In the next frame Kamini wakes up to a nightmare where she sees herself clad in traditional sari, as a typical "Tamil Ponnu" a concept she totally detests. She is very close to her mother but hates her mother's traditional views on morality and femininity. Kamini, the aggressive and tomboyish character reveals herself headstrong nature as each frame progresses.

Kamini loves challenges and goes to any length to win bets she constantly keeps waging at every convenient opportunity. Taunted both

by her mother and her friend Jenny she slyly worms her way to become a newsreader, a role which, according to them, requires an amount of dignity and discipline; and here Kamini comes out triumphant. The birthday party she holds for her friends the same night in the empty office space was wild and extravagant with boozing and joint-smoking and here she proclaims:

“Are we human beings born with a dress? No (Her friends cry out jointly)

So when we remove all our dress, our body becomes our actual birthday dress.”

Here she is again challenged by her friends and she begins to strip. Then there is a gradual blurring of scenes as everyone gets high on the joint smoked. The movie then takes a different turn and soon it is about Kamini waking up the next day in a deserted mall naked and completely at a loss as to how to overcome the situation and as to how she got into the situation.. The camera from then on focuses on Kamini's naked body very aesthetically without any titillation. The camera as it focuses on Kamini, becomes the gaze that defies gazing:

With feminist body art, in fact, women artists appropriate and flamboyantly perform the very activity of artistic production. Driven by compulsion to fuse the outer body, which for women in patriarchy is objectified into a “picture” through male desire, with the inner self (the acting cogito—the intellect, the psyche), they enable themselves by enacting the

feminist axiom" personal Is political." (30) Amelia Jones.

In an era where films objectify women's bodies at every given opportunity Aadaï's gaze remains unflinchingly dignified. The nude sequence is the movie's high spot. The cinematographer Vijay Karthik and the director have been extremely innovative in charting out camera angles to capture Kamini in the most elegant manner. The carefully engineered sequence is a lesson in perspective. The first object Kamini picks up to cover herself is a mirror, the glass window she smashes in order to alert by-passers. The mirror is held up to the audience and what each in the consequence' sees is a reflection of one's own perspective, and one immediately recognizes how important that respectful gaze is:

Important . . . is the fact that it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the 'I' of subjectivity. This is the moment when an older fascination with looking . . . collides with the initial inklings of self-awareness. Hence it is the birth of a long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience. (60-61)

Having spent the whole day trying to escape and failing in all her attempts, Kamini ventures out into the deep night, to a garbage bin outside but is chased by dogs before she could find anything to cover herself with. She runs back to the abandoned building still being chased

by a group of dogs. She falls down again and injures herself with broken glass pieces and locks herself in the toilet feeling hopeless and crying. She convinced herself about her fearless nature and silently promises her mum that she will come out of this situation with her honour and dignity unscathed. Finally she finds a tissue roll in the toilet which she uses to drape herself modestly. She comes out of the building to find herself stranded in the rain. She finds police cordoning off tapes and secures herself confidently and ventures out in seek of help. The story from here takes a different twist that in a way spoils it for being too preachy and one feels that the director is unsure of the message he actually wants to convey.

The intersubjective relationships that lie between the person watching a movie and the object is always loaded with personal biases and all becomes a part of the scene one sees. The dogs that try to chase Kamini when she comes out of the building is a telling symbol of amorous men. Language is abstract, cinema is a temporal form, Cinema gives you the illusion of either visual or auditory reality and we see the world through conventions.

Amala Paul, portrays Kamini, the complex woman of the movie who instantly appeals to everyone as real. Sans make up she dares to pull off a role like Kamini which is physically and mentally demanding. Amala has walked that extra mile to make Kamini so believable that the entire narrative is about a quest for women's total liberation and when the camera alights on Kamini, it goes beyond the male gaze, smashing it entirely. This paper is an attempt to consider

cinematography as the epitome of human being's sensitive creativity without splitting it into two worlds: man and woman.

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Gender is a cultural construct performed by individuals through “repeated and stylized acts.” One acquires gender through one’s “performance” in social space. Body has evolved culturally through the images from a physical corpus into a signifier that constructs certain meanings of reality; to a text that can be subjected to hermeneutic interrogation; into a discourse where ideologies can be inscribed. The cultural signification of body is circumscribed by the context in which it is situated and the signifying practices adopted by the spectators. For example, a body in a ritualistic context is markedly different from the same body explored in an advertisement. In the former, the body signifies an institutionalized cultural practice whereas in the latter, the body is an object of gaze appropriated to conceal the process of labour and to lure the consumer with the product which is objectified labour. Therefore, the signification of the body changes with the cultural context in which it is placed or viewed. Though there is no correspondence between sexed body and gender, the gendered body is a performing subject in the cultural context. But the gendered body performs only certain forms of subjectivity or ideology permissible within the normative views of society conditioned by its hegemonic practices.

This text envisages an examination of the representation of body, gender, and discourse in the film as well the production of these categories through the narrative, visual and textual grammar of film.

Edited by:

Dr. K.M. Johnson | Dr. Rajesh M. | Vishnu N.

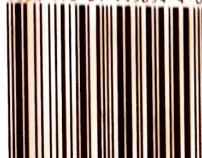


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