

NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURQA*

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Feminism is instrumentalised, it is brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means. Freedom is revitalised and brought up to date with this faux feminism. The boundaries between the West and the rest can, as a result, be more specifically coded in terms of gender, and the granting of sexual freedom. (Angela McRobbie)

The gender politics discussed in the film *Lipstick Under My Burqa* (2016) by Alankrita Srinivasan converges with the western neoliberal perspective of oppression, freedom, choice, and liberation, which in alliance with the multinational corporates, global marketplace and media, had succeeded in projecting political and ideological discourses emphasizing consumerist culture concealed under the garb of individualism. It is quoted as an example of film festival space constituting an arena to emancipate narratives of gender-based repression, sexual violence and abuse to an international audience (Devasundaram 40). The film was screened at UKAFF 2017 but was subjected to ban and censoring in India by Central Board for Film Certification (CBFC) which initiated further discussions on the same.

Lipstick Under My Burqa revolves around the lives of four women: Usha Parmar aka Buaji, Leela, Shirin Aslam, and Rehana

Abidi. The film begins with a *burqa*-clad Rehana in an expensive cosmetic store displaying international brands like Dolce & Gabbana, Versace and Gucci. The setting of film is Bhopal, where the lower middle class lives of the crumbling Hawaai Manzil contrasts with the city filled with multiplexes and pubs. Later, we see that a construction company is trying to take over the old mansion for their new mall. The female characters are in search of the new world outside the suffocating confinement of religion, patriarchy, and traditions, represented by Hawaai Manzil.

The film begins with the voiceover of Buaji reading from the erotic fantasy novel *Lipstickwale Sapne (Lipstick Dreams)*: “In every girl's life comes that moment when she craves to be a woman...,” while Rehana makes use of her anonymity provided by a *burqa*, and shoplifts an expensive red lipstick from the mall. She slips to her college, removes her *burqa* and transforms into a modern teenager with a loose T-shirt, tight jeans, messy hair, and 'red lipstick.' The moment she removes the *burqa* and applies lipstick is translated as a movement of 'liberation.' Buaji continues to read: “Rosy stood trapped behind the iron bars of the window. Through the binoculars, she watched the dazzling city lights. Jeans-clad girls, clinging to their boyfriends, rode freely on motorbikes” (00:02:41-52).

In contrast to her orthodox Muslim parents, who earn their living through their small *burqa* shop, Rehana is a free-spirited youth, who loves Miley Cyrus, Led Zeppelin, and all fineries of life. She wants to be part of the college band. Like the other characters, Rehana also lives a double life, in which she is a traditional daughter at home and a modern teenager at college. But when Rehana is caught by the police for theft, her father shuts her up in the *burqa* shop, her studies are put to an end, and they decide to marry her off soon.

Leela is introduced by the lines from the same book:

“Through the binoculars, Rosy now sees new images. Far from these crowded lanes, riding a Harley Davison, her hair flying in the wind” (00:04:16-25). She is an aspiring youngster who dreams to start her wedding-honeymoon event management venture, with her boyfriend, Arshad, who is a photographer. Leela is creating a luxurious fantasy and trying to sell it for making it real in her life. Her desire stands in opposition to her mother, who wants to marry her off to someone who is in a better financial position. During the engagement ceremony, she rebels, making love with her lover and recording it, in case he backs off from the relationship. Her mother slaps her and puts lipstick over her lips and brings her back to the stage as if nothing had happened. The lipstick moment here hides Leela's broken dreams.

Shireen is the submissive housewife of Rahim Aslam. She is introduced like a robber with a pistol in a *burqa*, who tries to intrude into a rich household, but she is a salesperson from Magic Products and is trying to sell a pest pistol. Her employment as a salesperson is unknown to Rahim and is now offered a better position as a sales trainer. As she tries to reveal this great achievement to Rahim, he sexually harasses her. She is forced to have unprotected sex every day, which turns out more like marital rape. Thus, she has three children and has no right to family planning. Even when she discovers Rahim's adultery, she remains trapped in the abusive relationship.

Usha Parmar is a fifty-five-year old widowed matriarch who runs a sweetshop. She is seemingly the co-owner of Hawaii Manzil and lives with her nephews. She has deep-buried desires to love and to be loved. In fear of losing respect from the family, she assumes the identity of Rosy, the fictional character from the book she had been reading, and indulges in a secret relationship with her young swimming instructor, Yashpal, via phone. The lipstick gives colour to

Usha's dreams. She imagines herself as beautiful and capable of becoming the object of Yashpal's love, but when he comes to know that his sensuous lover Rosy is only the old *Buaji*, he is shattered.

The climax happens in the *burqa* shop, where Rehana, confined by her father; Leela, abandoned by both her lover and fiancé; Shirin, abused by her husband, and Usha, thrown out by her family, all come together. They try to put together the pieces of Usha's book cover, torn by her nephews, which reads *Lipstickwaale Sapne*. They share a cigarette and laugh. The voiceover reads: "She won't veil her desires anymore, the iron bars at the windows cannot hold her back now" (01:52:40-46)

The film's parallel narrative is the sexual fantasy titled *Lipstickwale Sapne*. The four female characters are evaluated on the backdrop of the repressed desires of Rosy, the protagonist of the novel. Her desires are codified by city nights, motorbikes, desirable men, high heels, jeans, flowing hair and, most importantly, the lipstick. Rosy's desires reflect the desires of these four characters. Their desires altogether fuse into the 'lipstick dreams.' Like Rosy, these four characters are caged inside their own bodies. Unlike the women in western societies, Indian women are caught inside the intricate network of familial ties, which are portrayed as the primary oppressive force in their lives.

As Judith Butler states in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), the political ideologies which assume a universal basis for feminism is accompanied by the assumption of a universal hegemonic structure for patriarchy, and these forms of feminism tries to explain gender oppression as a form of non-western barbarism (3). Some special categories of 'women's oppression' in non-western countries were highlighted by Neoliberal feminists through Western NGO-sponsored media, social workers,

and writers. *Lipstick Under My Burqa* specifically points towards these kinds of codified oppression, especially inflicted by Muslim men on their women.

The Muslim men are stereotyped recurrences, where Rahim is a typical chauvinist husband and father, whom we can see in a couple of other Bollywood films like *Gadar: Ek Premkadha* (2001), *Veer Zara* (2004), and *Secret Superstar* (2017). He treats his wife like a sex slave, whom he uses according to his demands, and does not care about any of her feelings. While he indulges in adultery, he wants Shirin to be shut inside the home. He is against family planning and insults Shirin for buying condoms. He condemns women who are employed. Arshad is a philanderer who does not have any commitment to his relationship, and inflicts both verbal and sexual abuse upon her. Leela's mother is unhappy about her relationship with him, and asks her: "You want to be the plaything of that Muslim?" (00:55:29-31). Rehana's father is portrayed as a tyrannical and unfeeling father, who tries to restrict Rehana's movements, and expects her to wear *burqa* outside, like Shirin.

Muslim women are projected in a paradoxical way where, at the same time, they function as a threat to public order and submissive victims of Islamic patriarchy. Rehana, we see, is a regular shoplifter. We see her stealing an expensive lipstick, a branded dress, and a pair of shoes from the mall. She tricks her parents, attends parties at night, and participates in protests. She is once arrested for participating in a protest and, another time, for theft. Shirin is also shown as a potential agent, who has the ability of intrusion and spying. She lies to her husband and hides her job. She is also portrayed as a person who adds to the already growing population. The sales trainer at her company asks her: "Is popping out babies your only plan? Or do you want something more?" (00:41:31-33). The gynecologist despises her for

using contraceptive pills instead of protection. Here, *burqa* enables them to flout societal norms but, the same time, it also subjugates them. *Burqa* becomes synonymous with the iron bars of windows in the book read by Usha. It is the veil for their real persona, dreams, and desires. It also hides the 'dark lives' they are living.

The neoliberal feminists maintain that religious patriarchy was primarily responsible for the predicaments of Muslim women, who could be saved and integrated to the western cultural landscape by denouncing Islam altogether or at least by the erasure of its visible marks. Shirin's and Rehana's possibilities of liberation are marked by the disavowal of religious barriers. When Rehana removes her *burqa*, she is empowered, and has the voice of resistance and protest. She yells to the media person: "Right to jeans, right to live" (00:25:17-19). Here, 'jeans,' juxtaposed with *burqa*, is translated respectively as the 'modern' juxtaposed with the 'primitive.' The lipstick turns out to be the metaphor of empowerment of all these female characters. The projection of cosmetics and western outfits as female empowerment had even led to the coinage of the term 'Lipstick Feminism.' The liberation envisaged in this strand of feminism discreetly serves the western capitalist beauty standards and cosmetic industry. The lipstick, which remains hidden under the *burqa*, is the mark of liberation suppressed under orthodoxy. Only the removal of the veil can facilitate the subversion of traditional submissive roles assigned to Muslim women through her religion. The liberated women, for Rehana, are figures like Miley Cyrus, who are endowed with all possibilities like wealth, fame, and sexual freedom, which a Third World Muslim woman can only dream of.

These celebrities and their images are used to sell the brands which, in turn, fetishizes these products. Through imitating Miley Cyrus, dancing, drinking, smoking and getting involved sexually

with her boyfriend, Rehana tries to transcend the barriers of both her religion and society. As Sara Farris points out in her work, *In the Name of Women's Right: The Rise of Femonationalism* (2017), the journey of a Muslim woman toward autonomy is defined not only as a path which will eventually make her conscious of her rights, but also as a journey toward unveiling, or taking off *burqa*, which in western European imagery has come to symbolize oppression and lack of independence (130).

Shirin's emancipation is linked to her employment. All her efforts are directed towards proving herself a good employee, which she expects will earn dignity to her. The definition of reproductive work in the household as disempowering and of waged work as an emancipating condition were appropriated by most feminists (Farris 134). Thus, employment becomes a precondition for Shirin to be liberated. The workplace becomes a joyful and fulfilling experience for her which is opposed to the dark, abusive, and suffocating space of home.

Shirin's talents are not encouraged by her husband and three children, who constantly demand most of her time and attention only to receive abuse and insult in return. She forgives Rahim for his adultery whereas the latter responds violently upon knowing that she had been involved in a sales job.

Neoliberal feminism creates a binary which defines oppression and emancipation. Here, the concept of emancipation is narrowly constructed, reducing it to the single definition of 'Body Liberation,' which was only one of the movements belonging to the second wave of Feminism. Even at the point of time when Poststructuralist Feminism had given way to Decolonial Feminism, for building a more pluralistic approach towards women's

experiences, the film tries to present a myopic view of feminism. As Saba Mahmood argues in her work, *The Politics of Piety*, the narratives surrounding the oppression of Muslim women are often filtered through the western liberal feminist notions of individualism, agency and freedom, which define freedom as only subversion or re-inscription of the existing system. The film projects capitalist consumerist practices as the only form of resistance, tactfully ignoring the exploitation under these systems. This also nullifies all the political struggles of Muslim women and erases all other forms of marginalization experienced by them. It reiterates the oriental prejudices which imagines Muslim woman as a hidden universe of intense desire, violence, and threat. When alternative portrayal of Muslim women becomes possible through films like *A Separation* (2011) by Asghar Farhadi, which brings forth the political scenario of Iran and the way individuals exist and perform inside the matrix of religion, ethics and emotional ties, the discourses formed through films like *Lipstick Under My Burqa* subject the cultures of Third World again to the scrutiny of the neoliberal feminists, especially, its Islamophobic tendencies, which it deems as nothing less than primitive and barbaric.

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