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Em(body)(men)t of Women: A Feminist Cultural Reading of *The Dirty Picture*

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Abstract:

The article entitled Em(body)(men)t of Women: A Feminist Cultural Reading of *The Dirty Picture* analyses the play of instinct rather than the intellect of the viewer by taking into account the 2012 National Award winning female oriented movie *The Dirty Picture*. This article focuses on the prominence attributed to the body of women by men – em(BODY)(men)t. It tries to draw attention to embodiment, objectification and commoditization aspects of movies in general and *The Dirty Picture* in particular. The first part of the title can be connected with a dialogue from *The Dirty Picture* “Film need only three things to sell: Entertainment! Entertainment! Entertainment! This can be modified as the male spectator requiring three things: Embodiment! Embodiment! Embodiment! Along with this the article draws attention to the harsh reality of women remaining the prime object of discrimination and social prejudice. The article makes use of *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger and *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey. The objective of the article is to place the film in a better light adding a new dimension to it using feminist cultural reading.

Keywords: objectification, commodification, male gaze, embodiment.

The relationship between fiction and cinema has been close and significant. The film has become an art of today just as drama was in the earlier years, making it impossible to neglect it as a semi-textual genre. Many critical and serious issues are raised and analyzed through films. One of the important reason for the popularity of this genre is its capacity to move across the barriers of class, literacy, religion and language. It has also become successful in revealing society's unconscious positioning of woman and the preconceptions that work in contrast to her freedom. Film criticism has a value in literature now a days and feminist film theory regards film within a larger framework.

According to Pramod K Nayar, feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions where she doesn't have power, is treated as sex objects or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused. All these aspects are taken into account in the article. Feminist cultural reading, the philosophical and analytical approach that employs political position to feminism to read cultural practices like art/literature, is also applied. It argues for the prevalent gender roles as they are represented in various cultural forms like literature, cinema, advertisement etc. As an approach, it focuses on how such representations reflect and are

connected to actual life and social conditions. As far as Indian cinema is concerned, there are only a few films with strong female protagonists (*Queen, English Vinglish*). The movie under consideration *The Dirty Picture* is a female oriented movie that bagged many National Awards in 2011 including the best actress.

The Dirty Picture directed by Milan Luthria, produced by Alt Entertainments revolves around Reshma (Silk) who cherishes to become a movie actress and about three men in her lives: one lusting for her, another who falls in love with her and the last one who hates her. The movie from the very beginning has captured the attention of the audience. (A movie in which the leading lady gained weight). It portrayed the meteoric rise and fall of screen sensation Silk Smitha, a South Indian movie actress known for her erotic roles. The movie opened new vistas in feminist literary discourse. This movie through the fictional character of Reshma (Sik) focuses on how an actress who provided entertainment to millions died a lonely and tragic death. As reported by Times of India, “*The Dirty Picture* will not focus on the sleaze but the tragedy behind the mask of sex symbol, who provided titillation to thousands of viewers, but died lonely and tragic death”.

The central character in the movie, Reshma, is presented before the audience as an item girl, an erotic women offering her femininity for the pleasure of the male spectator. It is here that the gaze theory finds its application. From time immemorial, female stars are inevitably the object of this male gaze; a theory popularized by John Berger through his essay *Ways of Seeing*. According to him women look at themselves being looked at. The surveying woman is man, the surveyed woman is a woman and by this the woman objectifies herself as a subject of male gaze which is the meaning of Ways of Seeing – echoing the idea that there are diverse ways of seeing man and woman. Berger was of the view that women were still depicted in a way different to men “because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be a male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him”. (Berger)

Male gaze is placed in film with importance for most films are made by men mostly for the male audience who seeks to control and indirectly possess the female figure. The gaze provides a kind of pleasure - the voyeuristic one. Reshma was a product of this male gaze. She was gazed at through the camera which served as a second eye. Role of camera is undisputable in male gaze. See what Berger has to say about the invention of camera.

“When a painting is reproduced by a film camera, it inevitably becomes a material for the film maker’s argument. A film which reproduces images of painting leads the spectator through the painting to the film maker’s own conclusions. The painting leads authority to the film maker.” (Berger)

The male gaze is invited to certain parts of the body selectively considered sexual – the eyes, the lips, the breasts, the navel, the buttocks and the legs. To make them look vulgar and sexy, women are shot from a high angle or low angle showing the contours of her body. This makes it clear that the central criterion for female stardom continues (even now) to be their physical beauty. The women are seen just as a spicing element in the films. This is clearly echoed in the following dialogue from the movie by the hero “Spice it up Abraham spice it up. Add some sex.

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Have Silk dance to a number or two whatever you like” (*The Dirty Picture*). Here we can notice the selling aspect in the films, making the body saleable. Yes, it is the selling of sex, literally! The male spectator does know that it is easy to get the attention of men using women’s bodies and this serves as an important feature in using her as a selling product. Unfortunately, the heroines have unknowingly become part of this discreditable act. In the movie under consideration, Reshma was not offered a single chance to exhibit her acting skills but to dance and that too ripping off her clothes. Sex appeal was always seen as a selling point. This made Reshma finally get equated with sex. Silk for sex!

“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. Actresses are merely fetishistic object of the spectator and the voyeuristic male gaze and the female actor serves only as a gazer- an identification figure for the spectator”. (Mulvey)

The women displayed here has functions of two levels: as erotic objects for the characters within the story or as an object for the spectator within the auditorium as in the song “Ooh lala....”. Here both looks are unified through the show girl.

“Men act, women appear. Men look at women watch themselves being looked at” says John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. This quote says Bindhu Nair in her essay *Female Bodies and Male Gaze: Laura Mulvey and Indian Cinema* suggests the position of women in Indian cinema. The first part “Men act, women appear” points out that in films women have been neglected to the passive position in film after film as “bearer, not maker of meaning” merely an appendage to the man, the wielder of power. As far as film is concerned, the placement of women remains central (visually only). It means that the focus remains on their bodily exposure. How the actress has been objectified is clearly evident from the dialogue in *The Dirty Picture* by the producer “This girl will set the screen on fire”. Reshma is dressed up in a way as to instantly grab the attention of the viewers, to cheer up the male audience and to create an uproar among them. Thus cheering up the audience is the only function assigned to a girl. This is a remainder of Prospero’s words to Miranda in *The Tempest* “You were just a little girl to cheer me up” (Act 1 Scene 2).

Reaping of huge profit alone has become the key aim of film makers now and the finest way to attain this is to make a beautiful girl dance for “Beauty is the greatest seducer of man” as Paulo Coelho says in *The Alchemist*. For example in the item number “Oohh lala...” the actress(Silk) mimics sexual movements - heaving of breasts and the like - to cheer up the mood of the dirty fans and is given costumes often dazzling with sequins or metallic finish brightly coloured so that people would look at her like marinated chicken. The men in fact make her dress in such a way because classic masculine fantasy dictates the nudity’s most appropriate expression in some gauze materials. The stereotypical representation of women capable only of arising lust comes from this: “The meaning of many images has been obscured by academics, changed by photographic reproduction and distorted by monetary value”. (Berger)

Now look at the name presumed to Reshma. She was given the name Silk – the name of a material that sticks to and soothes the body. This becomes another instance of objectification. She

was exactly her name suggested – Silky. Silk was truly Silky! The producer once said of her “This girl is my biggest discovery” again pointing to the characteristic of objectification. The selling and commoditization aspects in the film is also revealed through the trailer of one minute thirty two seconds. The trailer had unprecedented number of hits within hours of being released online.

To get a chance to act, Silk had to offer sexual favours to the leading actor (Suryakanth). The intensity of bodily hunger is quite evident from this. Here too it is the body that matters – em-BODY-men-t. When Reshma, now Silk, danced with the leading hero for the first time, she missed the beat. When the choreographer started to say “cut” the producer (ideal male spectator) said to him “To hell with the beat, look at the heat, she will set everyone on fire”. This implies that it is neither the song nor the dance that is important but the projection of body parts.

Men asserted their power over her body as if conquering her body conquers her absolutely. In the first chapter of *Theory of Sexual Politics* titled *Instances of Sexual Politics* Kate Millet refers to Henry Miller’s celebrated *Sexus* “She was just like a bitch in heat, biting me all over, panting, gasping, wriggling like a worm on the hook”. All these can be ascribed to Reshma too. She intoxicated the audience with her performance. When Silk danced, the male viewers were lost in admiration and wonder. She was treated in such a way that they wanted her to be a part of his will- subjecting her to their pleasure. Reshma became a product of spectral identification, pleasure and desire.

“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 fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly”. (Mulvey)

Actresses are not considered as actors, but as people acting in dresses. Act-dresses.

Now let me move to the concept of embodiment. The Oxford English dictionary defines embodiment as “a person or thing that represents or is a typical example of an idea or quality”. Embodiment as a feminist concept pertains on how one lives one’s body. The concept of embodiment can be connected with *The Dirty Picture*. In the film Reshma says “Film need only three things to sell: Entertainment! Entertainment! Entertainment!” This can be rephrased as the male spectator requiring three things: Embodiment! Embodiment! Embodiment! Yes Reshma became embodiment of sexuality and male gaze.

The word can be re-written like this: em-body-men-t showing that it is the body (objectification and commoditization) that matters.

Molly Haskell and Marjoire Rosen by using the term reflection theory considered actresses merely as embodiments of social stereotypes that control definitions of femininity in a male dominated culture. Reshma was made the embodiment of sexuality, male gaze and voyeuristic pleasure of male chauvinists stereotyping her as capable of acting merely certain roles.

There are three things that human brain cannot resist noticing- food, attractive people and danger. Thus by using women, film makers play on the instinct rather than the intellect of the viewer. They know that the audience could not say ‘no’ to the aesthetic body display of Vidhya Balan. The dirty mind of the people is evident from the following comments to the post by Balagi
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Motion Picture CEO Tanuj Rag. The post was like this “The censor board felt that a few scenes and words in the trailer might not be appropriate for television and for the people watching a U/A film in cinemas. On the other hand, we were clear that we needed a U/A. Hence we compiled with their requests”. The various comments included: “The trailer had nothing bad” “Come on, you cannot cut those scenes. It is our right to watch those scenes.....If they give an A certificate take it” “Don’t delete the scenes yar....”. The dirty mind is thus exposed through their comments. This reminds me of what Shashi Deshpande says in *The Binding Wine* “Men’s mind are like public lavatories, full of dirty pictures”. Well said author!

Ways of Seeing analyses the manner in which men and women are culturally represented and the subsequent results these representations have on their conduct as well as on mutual perception. The cultural reading shows that the cultural presence of women is still much different from that of the man. A man’s presence in the world is related to what he can do and a women’s presence in relation to what cannot be done by her. The film clearly shows how the society looked down upon Silk and denied her respect while the hero was worshiped and elevated to the level of God. The social attitude holds women as solely responsible for everything.

It seems that women need only three things to act in films: Compromises! Compromises! Compromises! A simple example from the movie shows that Reshma could not raise her voice and that she had to go for compromises. Here is it. Silk when could not perform well was called by Suryakanth. He told her that she is just like a plastic cover in a cigarette box. It does not matter whether the cover exits or not, it is the cigarette that matters. To this Reshma replies “When there is moisture outside if there is no plastic cover, the cigarette would not even lighten up”. All of a sudden the hero utters “Pack up”. Then she had no other way than to seduce him to continue acting in the movie. This clearly demonstrates the pathetic condition of an actress- a bird trapped in a cage unable to raise her voice, unable to resist. It also makes it clear that the actresses who violate the conceptions of the male spectator will be rejected inhospitably.

“These opportunities do not come by again and again, they will only pass on to someone else” (*The Dirty Picture*). This was a trap set by male chauvinists and poor Silk, she fell for the trap and it continued till she met with death. Her condition is similar to Tess in Hardy’s *Tess of d’Urbervilles* “Once victim, always victim”. Poor Reshma! She was transformed from a glamorous doll to a helpless victim at the end whereas the people who made her do all those dirty things remained esteemed.

The transformation of Reshma to Silk was colossal. A simple village girl to a sexy actress! But though to the world she was a queen of sensuality, she was not so. According to me, she was really a victim. Yes she was in the real sense of the term. Even though she made a mark of her own in the film industry, in dog years she was on the verge of being back to zero. This is clearly shown in the film because Reshma encountered at the end of the film was dissimilar from Reshma at the beginning.

“I can do anything to become an actress” said Silk and this was used by the male spectators to reap maximum profit out of her. She believed that whatever she did in front of camera was

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acting. She was least bothered about the comments and criticisms of journalists like Naila (in the movie). She was never perturbed by film makers like Abraham and women groups who protested against her movies “Down with Silk”. She ignored all the brickbats. But towards the end there was nobody to support her not even the producer who once told her “Join hands with me and the world will praise you with hands joined”.

The society labelled her dirty and lewd. They blamed Silk for the cinema becoming lowest of the low. Journalists trashed her in print, happily forgetting all the individuals who made her do so. Simon de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex* “To become a woman means at least in part learning what society expects of you as a woman”. Silk never cared about the society and this led to her downfall. She thought that she would remain as a star all the time. The truth was that she was accepted in the darkness of the auditorium but never in the society, because accepting a girl like Reshma was considered a taboo as she was labelled by majority as dirty, vulgar and disgusting. The cultural reading finds an application here. Why was she alone blamed?

In spite of all the criticisms and protest, many people including those who raised voice against her, could not take their eyes (and hands) off her body because as Kalidasa says in *Abhinjanasakuntalam* “Extra ordinary beauty is appealing under all conditions” (Act 2 Scene 1). A similar reference can be found in *Meghadutha*. “For who can bear to leave a woman, her loins bared/once having tasted her body’s sweetness” (Section 43 7-8). They used her with a policy they created for themselves. “When God has blessed her so abundantly, there is no harm in taking a pie” says Suryakath who used her all-out for his sexual pleasure.

Silk was not a queen of sensuality but a victim in the real sense of the term. She was an innocent girl unaware of the world of men. This brings to my mind what Tess says to Angel Clare in *Tess of d’ Urbervilles* “I was a child... a child when it happened. I did not know anything about men”. Silk was hooked by the male chauvinists. “Past reason hunted and no sooner had/ past reason hated as swallowed bait”. (Shakespeare sonnet CXXIX). Thus it becomes obvious through the film that Silk was a product of pure industrial manipulation and of the entertainment society. The male spectators were using her by capitalizing her body, showing an absolute imposed authoritative power of male.

Though Silk was a victim, she can be seen as a liberating woman too. The most appealing feature of Silk was her courage and passion to achieve whatever she has ever dreamt of. Irrespective of the discouragement and criticism she became a legend of her own kind and as Abraham says in the film “If she was not born, the world would not have known that woman would also be like Silk”.

The film exhibits the position of a heroine in an Indian movie through this dialogue of Suryakanth. “Heroines life is like an elected government. The party lasts for five years, after that it is there for support. Sometimes left, sometimes right and sometimes even center”. Yes, it means that woman in herself has not the slightest importance. She is always seen as an entertainment part of every film. Reshma’s dialogue from the movie “I am the entertainment” pinpoints to this aspect.

Let us look at the position of an actor. It can be found that Indian film need only three

things: Actor! Actor! Actor! I find it quite interesting that change which is applicable even to nature is not applicable to actors. They continue acting in middle age (old age too) whereas the life of heroines is short-lived. Let me illustrate it with an example. A girl who acted as the heroine of Suryakanth in her debut film was made to act as his mother in her next film in which he played the leading role of a college student!

The over emphasis given to hero is also evident in various scenes of *The Dirty Picture*. It is the hero who makes changes in the film. When a director narrates the story, Suryakanth who is the protagonist of that film asks him to make certain alterations to the script projecting the hero who is nobody but he himself! This is a remainder of the character Saroj Kumar in the well-known Malayalam satirical movie *Udayananu Tharam* by Roshan Andrews.

The director has tried to highlight the treacherous nature of men through Silk. She was considered as a dirt. Society started telling “Selva (producer) made his movies out of dirt”. So the movie shows how the male society controls and influences every aspect of female actors through the character of Silk. It exposed the dirty and biased Southern industry in eighties where heroines are nothing but card board cut outs. The belittling of the acting talents of female stars is evident from the following dialogue by the hero to Reshma “You can act only in a particular movie”.

The movie serves as an eye-opener. It attempts to illustrate that it has become high time to change the stereotypical representation of women. It tries to undo the ideologies created by films among the audience especially the false messages perpetuated among the youth. They think that the role of every woman is to entertain them ripping off her clothes. The film also raised many questions. Why can't a women become an actor like men not just appearing but performing?

Thus *The Dirty Picture* which pictured the struggle of a girl who tried to create a space of her own was prepared neither to justify nor to disapprove Smitha's life but for the audience to understand her life, to make the audience realize that there exists power play and gender discrimination even in the most celebrated genre film too. It basically wants the audience to “see into the life of things” as Wordsworth says in *Tintern Abbey Lines*. The movie was added to the list of long running Hindi movies. The film provided entertainment, entertainment and more entertainment!

Indian cinema has tremendous appeal but it must also set the stage for a social change. Women need to redefine and recategorize herself. Only then can the female characters become alive on screen. Until then they shall continue to be what they are- mere fictional constructs, one- dimensional figures who are distant from ordinary real life woman and a product of male gaze.

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