



***Parched* (Sex and the Village: An Indian Version)¹**

By Priyanka Verma

I examine the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema '*Parched*' in terms of the vectors of gender, class and sexuality.² I claim that since its inception in 1913 Hindi cinema has portrayed women as submissive in films after films within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural narratives³, women struggling to break the glass ceiling of patriarchal and stereotypical ideologies of class and sexuality which denied their individuality. These stereotypes of the ideal mother, sacrificing wife, obedient sister, dependent daughter, immoral prostitutes, occur in the early phase of Hindi cinema and gave women slight importance.

I offer an analysis of the representation of power and abuse in *Parched* (2015) directed by Leena Yadav. *Parched* is a story of four women living in a village in Gujarat or Rajasthan, India. The deserted village and the society suffer from social and patriarchal practices such as child marriage, marital rape, dowry and domestic violence. Four women boldly talk about men, sex and life as they struggle with their own personal wars against patriarchal society. The film challenges the very notion of what it means to be a woman in a rural setting of India, as well as exploring different variations of womanhood.

Traditionally Bollywood cinema narratives offer a representation of two kinds of women: first, ordinary woman whose options have been excluded by institutions like marriage. Female characters are defined by their limitation rather than their aspirations. The second kind is ordinary woman becoming extraordinary where women rise through their pain expressed in a directorial sense of sympathy and style. This piece advocates treatment of women in cinema and the notion of the portrayal of women in films, articulating that how far *Parched* goes in asserting independence and freedom for women.

To explore this further, I will discuss the two key concepts. The first one is the introspection of the space created for the desire of freedom by the characters of *Parched* which will be scrutinised later using psychoanalytical film theory devised by Laura Mulvey in her ground-breaking article⁴ signifying the way the unconscious of

¹ This paper is based on my ongoing PhD research. Various parts have been taken from my unpublished thesis titled '*Towards Better Bollywood: Contemplating Women Representation, Authorial-Directorial Voice and Cultural-Religious Frameworks*

² I speak from a position of a woman of colour and an inter-disciplinary film scholar

³ It is worth mentioning K.Moti Gokulsing and Dissanayake who reminds us that, '*Manusmriti* (a law book of Hindu religion) administered the lives of Hindu women and the same ideology somehow found its place in Hindi films, especially Hindi popular cinema. (Gokulsing&Dissanayake:75-76)

⁴ '*Visual pleasure and Narrative in cinema*' (1975)

patriarchal society has shaped the film and experience of watching a film (1975:57). The second key concept is the analysis of ‘triumvirate’- race, socio-economic class and gender portrayed in *Parched* and embedded in Hindi cinema considering the notion of intersectionality, a concept first formulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the late 80s and 90s. I want to analyse this film, to explore the important notion of intersectionality in an Indian setting. Agnieszka Piotrowska⁵ (2019) takes a cue from Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and Sara Ahmed identifies intersectionality as a ‘tool’ that has an ability to fight all forms of prejudices against women of colour. It is important to note that this ‘tool’ can be used to identify minority women facing various forms of oppression in India which are particularly relevant in an Indian setting like child marriage, dowry, etc. In this follow Desai (2004:26), an Indian scholar has also examined intersectionality and developed it further, focusing on the kinds of oppression and their respective relevance. Leena Yadav, through *Parched*, highlights the oppression encountered by the rural women; some oppressions which are not relevant in the western settings nor in the cities of India. Gokulsing & Dissanayake (1988:80) asserts that directors associated with ‘new cinema’ portray women in a new light. In these new cinemas, women are no longer presented as the eye candy to men instead they have agencies.

Before I proceed, I would like to ask pertinent questions: how are women being portrayed in *Parched*, how is women character is portrayed vis-à-vis male counterpart? This study is based on various strands of feminist film criticism which have enriched our understanding of women on screen. Many feminist theorists contributed to the discipline of media in relation to objectification, silence and exclusion of cinema underlying certain aspects which can be highlighted by disparagement, introspection and scrutiny. Born under the influence of social movement, feminist film theory emerged in 1970s, acclaimed authors like Laura Mulvey (2000[1975]), Annette Kuhn (1994[1982]), Molly Haskell (1987), E. Ann Kaplan (2000) and more recently Lucy Bolton, Emma Wilson or Agnieszka Piotrowska to name but a few, offered a route to not only comprehend the cinema but to change it. Laura Mulvey has asserted, women are displayed in cinema for enjoyment and men as protagonists control the narrative of the film⁶. In other words, desire portrayed was that of a man’s desire represented through the male gaze both in authorship and in spectatorship. Conversely in *Parched*, which is a cinematic text written and directed by a woman, it is both conscious and unconscious female desire that is at play. The gaze is female. Film in the beginning, recognised as a system of binary oppositions in the sphere of semiotic theory, cemented the ideology as a paradigm to understand the cinematic representation. *Parched* is distinct as the female voice drives the narrative and it depicts the treatment of women in rural parts of India.

The narrative has depicted the treatment of women in rural parts of India. Rani is a single widow of thirty-two-years-old who wants to marry off her teenage son Gulab to fifteen-year-old Janaki. Lajjo is Rani’s friend who cannot have kids and

⁵ Piotrowska (2019:123)

⁶ Mulvey, 2000:40

suffers domestic violence daily. Bijli is an independent and strong-willed prostitute and stage dancer.

Molly Haskell in her work has recognised a category of fiction of an ordinary woman becoming extraordinary (1987:61). *Parched* belongs to this category as it is a depiction of women rising through pain while swirling through emotions. The film is expressed in directorial style and sympathy, showing women interpellated into the patriarchal ideology of the rural systems and having difficulties in attaining the independence yet depicting ordinary women becoming extraordinary through the vector of ability.

The story is about women struggling to attain the basic freedom rights in a male-dominated society. The film presents the hardship faced by these four women to fight for their own subjectivity, identity, and the sense of self as well as their own sexuality within the confines of male-dominated society. The film is set in difficult world which is clearly familiar to the viewer. The film depicts a world where two words ‘wife’ and ‘whore’ are used synonymously. It has portrayed a world where raping a teenage girl is seen as a rite of passage exposing the stress on race and sexuality – two of the vectors of intersectionality. Education is relentlessly frowned upon. “Girls who read make awful wives” is said many times in the film. It has portrayed a world of misogyny.

The four characters Bijli (Surveen Chawla), Lajjo (Radhika Apte), Rani (Tanishta Chaterjee) and Janaki (Leher Khan) are different in their own ways but share the pain caused by patriarchal ideology. The women’s lives are interlinked through various connections. As the film opens with Rani and Lajjo boarding a bus, the camera focuses on the picture of Lakshmi Devi (Indian goddess) displayed in the bus. The opening of the film is ingrained with the irony; the Indian goddesses are highly respected in the Indian culture whereas female lives are engrained with prejudice in the same society. Characters of Lajjo and Rani are a part of patriarchal society and they sustain the male-controlled system. Despite Rani’s own experience of arranged child marriage, Rani, a widower, takes a loan to get her 15-year-old son Gulab married, thus she fragments the patriarchal practice of child marriage⁷.

⁷ Rani sustain the patriarchal system by finding a young bride for her fifteen-year-old son Gulab. Thus, interpellating into the patriarchal ideologies.



Figure 0.1 Lajjo (Radhika Apte) and unnamed sage (Adil Hussain) in Parched (Leena Yadav 2016)

To my mind it is Lajjo's journey which is most important in terms of female desire. She struggles with infertility and the abuse from her husband that is a result of her apparent inability to conceive a child (which is not entirely true as she gets pregnant later in the film and her husband is the one who is infertile). We see both Rani and Lajjo longing for freedom of erotic desire. This desire for freedom is forbidden culturally; this forbidden desire is not appropriate in the realm of patriarchy. Rani talks to a mysterious man on phone and experience sexual fantasy and Lajjo defies the patriarchal system by having intercourse with an unnamed sage to get pregnant and test her fertility. Rani hopeful for a wonderful future for her son Gulab finds a young bride Janaki. Janaki loses her hair before wedding due to lice. According to Indian culture, female beauty is defined by the woman's long, dark and lustrous hair, Gulab and Rani get distraught reiterating the idea that women are of only transactional value. In contrast to the others, the character of Bijli is independent, witty and intelligent. Bijli is a prostitute and a carnival dancer. She is bold and acts as an advisor to Lajjo and Rani. She openly talks about sex and does not feel shy to point out the gender indifferences in the society.

The painful landscape helps the message of the film, which to me is hope and holding onto small joys of life. Humorous jokes on patriarchy exchanged between female characters in the films points to a growing consciousness of intersectional bonds. *Parched* is dissimilar to other films as it acts as a vehicle of escape from the dominating society and patriarchal ideologies. *Parched* is a story of women friendship exploring the ideas of misogyny influenced by traditions and culture. In my opinion, the film has succeeded in portraying Lajjo, Rani, Bijli and Janaki, their presentation as more than just a stereotypical character that Indian audience usually sees in contemporary cinema. They sustain the patriarchal society with feminised lust, love

and trust. The narrative depicts the difficulties of the male characters in their quest to free themselves from patriarchal domination.

The film focuses on body and gesture in space. The setting in emotional moments appears dark, which created the sense of fear and sadism. Desert and barren lands are used for setting, which can be termed as a conventional choice to emphasise the rotten thoughts prevailing in male-dominated society. The film is about women and their share of struggles with their respective lives. The film has a rational purpose to entail women's struggles within male-dominated society. Scenes of rape, domestic violence, and abuse are repeated throughout the plot to emphasise the degree of oppression faced by women in male-dominated society.

In one incredibly poignant scene, Lajjo and Rani sit on the floor in Rani's kitchen and Rani applies herbs on Lajjo's bruises her husband has given her. The representation suggests that both female characters are accepting sexuality as while applying medicine on Lajjo's body Rani gets intimate with Lajjo. There are few close-ups of Lajjo's breast and hands of Rani touching them depicting eroticisation.



Figure 0.2 Lajjo (Radhika Apte) and Rani (Tanishta Chatterjee) in *Parched* (Leena Yadav 2016).

Parched offers a space in which a significant change happens. The film *Parched* produces an explicit statement about the hardships female characters face in the Indian patriarchal setting.

It is important to consider psychoanalytic film theory formulated by acclaimed author Laura Mulvey. We remain indebted to Laura Mulvey for her ground-breaking essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Mulvey has used psychoanalysis to understand films and how they are shaped by the influence of the patriarchal society. The woman as icon [is] displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look. [...] fetishistic scopophilia builds up the physical beauty

of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. [...] Fetishistic scopophilia [...] can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone. (1990:35). Forty-five years ago, Mulvey has recognised the existence of a sexual imbalance in society. Women are displayed as a stimulating object within the screen story and for the audience in the auditorium; woman's character is displayed relating to arouse sexual desire and excitement. According to Mulvey, the active and passive division between men and women controls the narrative of the film. Men are responsible for the progress of the narrative in the film. He is the one who makes things happen and takes the story forward. Whilst this is still relevant in many films made within the patriarchal demand in Bollywood, I would argue that *Parched* is different and the female characters drive the narrative – clearly because of the female authorial voice. The space in *Parched* is dominated by female characters, the empowering camaraderie between female characters offers a profound space against the traditional narrative structures and the patriarchy. The female are no longer objects of desire, rather they have agency; they take decisions which are radical and crucial.

The scene is controversial as two women are getting intimate and expressing their sexual desires which could be interpreted as lesbian. The scene involves a sharing of pain sharing between both characters. This scene is erotic and can eroticise women in the audience, but at the same time it can make the female audience feel the pain that the female protagonists are going through in the narrative. There is a powerful connection of desire, trust and love depicted in the scene. What happens between Lajjo and Rani in a closed room is socially unacceptable in an Indian setting. Perhaps their true desires were uncovered in this very scene. Freud famously did not understand female desire, including erotic desire.⁸ One can also argue that a forbidden erotic desire was at the heart of the hysterics which Freud and Breuer treated.⁹ Piotrowska in her recent book writes extensively about hysteria and ‘modified hysteria’. In Piotrowska words, ‘The suffering and the physical ailments of the hysterics, their lack and in some way weakness, is replaced by a more resolute nastiness’ (2019:33). Piotrowska continues to address films which have female protagonists who take robust action against patriarchy. Lajjo and Rani, victims of patriarchy shares the pain, perhaps their sexual desires which is against patriarchy.

Female desire threatens patriarchy. It is in this context that I want to mention the second scene which I personally find fascinating in the film and it is the scene when Lajjo had intercourse with an unnamed sage as a gesture of defiance and despair. She suspects that her husband is the one who is infertile. She is deeply unhappy about violence he metes out towards her as a punishment for her not able to conceive. In this scene, Lajjo reclaims her sexuality and in due course conceives, which becomes the proof that her husband is the one who is infertile. The scene includes many close ups as to emphasis on Lajjo accepting other man’s touch, and the pleasure it gives her, and through that defying the norms of Indian culture and society. She enjoys the sexual encounter for her own sake in this scene, and not only in order to either please the man

⁸ See the famous note to his contemporary female friend and colleague Marie Bonaparte in which he says ‘what does a woman want?’ (cited in Jones 1953:421)

⁹ see Piotrowska (2019: 18)

or become a mother. Lajjo gets amused and confused when the man offers her respect before initiating the sexual act. This surprise signifies the lack of respect woman receives in patriarchal structures to which she has been used to. The filmmaker (Leena Yadav) begins to suggest different way of approaching one's sexuality, not as a sex object but as the subject.

Parched, I claim therefore, is an important film with many scenes which not only portray women longing for much awaited freedom but also show them taking decisive action to 'do things differently'. In conclusion, despite its narrative conservatism and here are many scenes which portray women longing for much awaited freedom. The film is important for Hindi cinema as it talks about the oppressions faced by women through the range of characters going behind the stereotype of an ideal mother, sacrificing wife, obedient sister, dependent daughter, immoral prostitutes. It deals with many social issues including child brides, marital rape, domestic violence, sexual violence etc.

The film narrative towards ending depicts the festival of 'Dussehra' when good wins over evil. The scene is compiled between two settings, one when deity of Ravana is getting prepare to be ignited in fire and in other Lajjo and Rani fights with Lajjo abusive husband and the scenes ends up with Lajjo's husband getting burned. The film ends on an oddly optimistic scene, three women on a brightly coloured rickshaw escape from the village signifying their momentary freedom from patriarchal ideologies. There is a tremendous sense of hope. The bright rickshaw standing in the middle of dull and dark sands signifies their desire of freedom against the stereotypical patriarchy.

In *Parched* in women characters, subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, ability and sexuality. Their sexual desire is acknowledged and even celebrated in defiance of patriarchal norms. While these remain subject to patriarchy, there is a sense in the carnivalesque ending of the film, that this will, sometime, be over thrown.

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