

# Defamiliarizing Desires: Decoding *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

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## Abstract of the paper

Defamiliarization tries to manifest on the artistic process of presenting the common things in an unfamiliar or strange way. The spectator or reader, who perceives the process, thereby enhances their understanding of the familiar. The familiarity of desire submerged in sexuality seems to be a huge question of unfamiliarity when it comes to female which marks the margins created by patriarchy. In addition, patriarchy defines what to be portrayed on optical illusionary world and staged in an existing real world. Women who defend themselves are naturally deemed down by men and are condemned as deviant women. Meanwhile, any narrative that gives them an assistance to present themselves will be banned in the long run. The desire of a woman is never acknowledged by the society as part of herself. Her desires are meant to be suppressed and gently laid down by the patriarchal indoctrination. Through the medium of media her swings of desire get represented onscreen while their impulse radiates through characters that are being depicted in movies, documentaries and so on. Visual narratives hereby become a springboard for unleashing the innate aspects pertaining to womanhood and sexuality. The foci of the research concern on how Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* seeks to direct the female sexuality in an unfamiliar manner making it simply complicated. The radical movies did aggravate fire and fury amongst the common folk, when the directors meant to showcase the saga of ordinary Indian women of different ages. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* depicts the

lives of four liberated women who deal with their ordinary lives in an extraordinary way. Moreover, the power of expression demystifies stereotyped roles, implanted in women from birth, in the name of gender and religion. Mehta's *Fire* delves into the womanhood and carries away the viewer to the labyrinthine ways. Eventually, the film interrogates the want to exist in a male dominated world, and the need to have a space of one's own. The paper attempts to analyse the two visual narratives that evoked varying reactions and draw the trajectory of desire represented in them. The peculiar propositions in the movies hovers the beholder engaging them in a critical banter that reveals the double standards perpetuated in a society and the inequality faced by women.

**Keywords:** defamiliarization, desire, patriarchy, visual narrative, inequality

Defamiliarization is the manifestation of an artistic technique through the process of presenting familiar things to an audience, in an obscure or grotesque way, so as to deepen the perception of the obscure by the spectator. The term was coined in 1917 essay, 'Art as Technique' by Viktor Shklovsky, the prominent exponent of the movement in literary criticism known as Russian Formalism. According to Shklovsky, any work of existing art enables us to retrieve the sensation of life, to make us feel things, to make the stone stony. Therefore, when we defamiliarize an ordinary thing in an optical illusionary world, it makes the spectator uncomfortable. The foci of the paper unravel on the note of defamiliarizing desires, THE DESIRES OF WOMANHOOD! Reiterating the words of Simon de Beauvoir "One is not born but becomes a woman"( Beauvoir 283). It is the patriarchal indoctrinations which define even the desires of women. The most common word 'desire' seems unfamiliar for women. The desire to flap her wings seems to be a long cherished dream still. Why?

The black comedy film, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is a bold attempt to weave the anthology of stories, of four females who long to be liberated from the circumstances they are conditioned to live in. The plot germinates while Usha Pawar reads a novel titled *Lipstick Dreams* through the lens of the character, Rosy. Rosy intertwines with each character represented in the movie thus narrowing all of them to a common intersecting point with various desires hitherto been suppressed. We are also introduced to the major characters Usha Pawar, Rehana Abidi, Shireen Aslam and Leela. Usha Pawar, an old lady in her mid-fifties addressed as Buaji (Aunty) who has lost her own name traversing the years and occasionally gazes at a self-portrait from her youth. Rehana Abidi, a graduate who lives in the same locality, sewing burkhas for her family store. Rehana steals accessories needed for makeup to wear at college, a place where she has the freedom to take off her burkha- which she forcefully wears and transforms into a jeans-wearing singer who adores Miley Cyrus. Leela, a young beautician who runs beauty parlour and dreams to travel the world with her beloved Arshad, a photographer. Shireen Aslam, a housewife and mother to three boys, whose secretly has to work as a sales girl. Her partner Rahim dominates her sexually and prohibits the use of contraceptives. She is taken for granted as a child bearing machine. Above all, Rahim stands aloof in giving her affection and uses her only to please his sexual urges. The movie comes to an end when Usha alias Buaji's belongings undergo censor board certification by her own family members by digging her cupboards and bags; she is ridiculed for reading erotic novels unacceptable to the family board standards and is condemned for sexually exploiting her swim instructor. Hence Buaji's belongings like erotic novels and swimsuit considering to being a shame are thrown out of the house. Leela, Shireen, and Rehana comes to Usha's aid and in the final scene Rehana is reading the last three pages of *Lipstick Dreams* at the request of Buaji, wherein Rosy becomes a resilient woman due to her circumstances and decides to follow the desires of her own heart.

*Lipstick Under My burkha* gathered momentum in headlines when the Central Board of Film Certification demanded for a stay on the release of the movie in India. The CBFC reasserted its decision in April 2017 stating that the film was too “lady-oriented” and it would “hurt the religious sentiments of certain community” and above all for its “contagious sex scenes.” Later on, The All India Muslim Tehwar Committee leaders called for boycott instigating that the film mocked the Islamic culture. Although ostracized by the Indian Board the film was chosen as the official Hollywood ...at International Film Festival in Los Angeles

In addition, the impulse of homogenizing the desires of womanhood through the fictional character Rosy, the heroine of an erotic pulp fiction novel titled *Lipstick Dreams* read by Usha (Buaji) should be taken into account: “In every girl’s life, comes that moment when she craves to be a woman. Rosy’s desire was blooming like a rose. Dreams from beyond her caged body were driving her crazy. And the garden of her body, her aching youth, bore into her insides. Rosy trapped behind their iron bars of the window”. (*Lipstick Under My Burkha* 2.31)

Rosy is rosy is rosy; Rosy the fictional character represents each woman with unfulfilled desires. Rehana is Rosy who desires the freedom of being herself when she steals high heels from the mall and runs away with it, thus unleashing her desires to the family. Once she is caught her father accuses her of stealing materials from other shops despite having one of their own. Buaji is Rosy who craves for things unknown, despite of her age; she is a simple woman who wishes to learn things which she had never tried before. Her take on joining for swimming classes posits that she is a woman with desires which can never be curtailed in the name of age. When Jaspal the swim instructor enquires about her name to be added in the list of learners, she remarks herself as Buaji. Meanwhile, when the instructor demands for her real name she smiles sheepishly and says Usha. The desires of women body is beyond age and can never be caged. Furthermore, the tables are turned when it is Leelawho

demands for sex from her male counterpart. Leela is Rosy when the garden of her body demands for what she wanted without any fear or hesitation. Shireen is Rosy, as in she is a caged bird beating her wings for desire, to break the iron bars of the window created by her husband.

The female face is the richest repertoire of visual signals and the major one among them is the lips.

Intuitively, the females of early societies began to exploit this lips/labia mimicry. Prostitute in Egypt used red ochre to heighten the colour of their lips. There is a papyrus drawing dating from 1150 BC that shows a scene in a Theban brothel where a semi-naked young woman is holding up a mirror and applying lip colour with a long stick. A balding client with a large erection is depicted in the act of moving his hand towards her genitals. The connection between reddened lips and erotic activity is therefore more than 3,000 years old. (Morris 81)

The poster of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was meant to be a “new rebellious poster” which depicted a middle finger flowering into a lipstick. The thought provoking poster was meant to be a tongue in cheek reply to the CBFC for banning the film. The slogan ‘lipstick rebellion begins’ was carried about in social medias and in the trailers which followed them. On the other hand, Desmond Morris in his book traces down the social importance of lips through human history wherein we see the lipstick rebellion began years ago and is still in momentum. The papyrus drawing mentioned by Morris and the poster draws us to a realization that the poster was not only a mere attempt to counter the CBFC but subsumed a huge history of sexual male domination faced by women throughout centuries.

The Canadian romantic drama film, *Fire* is again a bold attempt to depict the lives of two women Sita and Radha. Sita, is a young woman who gets married into a clustered New Delhi family that runs sundries and videostore. The family which Sita is married into consist of her husband Jatin, her brother-in-law Ashok, his wife Radha, the ancient matriarch Biji, and Mundu, the servant who watches over the old woman during the day. Sita gets married to Jatin in an arranged marriage but later on realizes her husband has a mistress named Julie. Moreover, she comes to know that it is only because of the compulsion of his brother Ashok, Jatin got married. Slowly she moves closer to Radha the wife of Ashok, where she discusses her frustration with her sister in law. She finds out that Radha's family life is devastated too. In the course of the movie, the two wives share their discontent while looking out over the city from a rooftop verandah. Ashok depressed by his wife's sterility choses the life of celibacy by following the teachings of a swami who advises him to follow the path of chastity. Meanwhile seeking solace in their frustrateion the two sistersinlaw develop a romantic affair and involve in a physical relationship.

The movie *Fire* is loosely based on IsmatChutgai's 1942 story "Lihaaf"(The Qulit). The movie was first screened on 13 November 1998, and ran well for almost three weeks. Later on, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, more than 200 Shiva Sena members ransacked Cinemax theatre in Mumbai, breaking the glass planes, burning posters and marching out with slogans. They forced the managers to refund the tickets to the audience. Meanwhile, a similar incident happened on December 3 in Regal theatre, Delhi. Surat, Pune stopped screening of the movie and in Calcutta when it was forced to shut down the audience retaliated and the movie stayed open. Chief Minister Manohar Joshi supported the actions to shut down, saying, the film's theme is alien to our culture. On 5 December director Mahesh Bhatt and movie star Dilip Kumar, submitted a 17-page petition to the Supreme court,

referencing articles 14,19,21,25 of the Indian Constitution, which promise the right to equality, life and liberty, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of conscience, free expression of religious practise and belief, and the right to hold peaceful meetings. Almost after three months fire got re-released by the Central Board of Film Certification on 12 February 1999.

The movie *Fire* carries away the spectator to discover the desires of woman. Ashok exercises to restrain his desires by condemning the desires of his wife, Radha. Radha finds her desire awakened while sharing the overwhelming emotion about her husband, Sita kisses Radha. Their state of discontent seeks resolution by mutual satisfaction that the sisters-in-law exchange through a physical relationship. Sita's assertion "there's no word in our language for what we are, and how we feel for each other" (*Fire*) is worthy to be mentioned. The traditional figure of dutiful housewife is shattered when Radha exhilarates her liberated self from Ashok proclaiming "You know, without desire I was dead, Without desire there is no point in living, and you know what else...I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again." (*Fire*)

Myth deals with existence of our life, treading through the myth of agni-pareeksha from Ramayana where Sita has to prove her chastity. Radha in the film establishes her chastity when towards the end her sari catches fire and she manages to escape it. Thus, asserting that even Agni has given his verdict of approval. Mehta depicts the purification of desire from fire in lens of Radha rather than choosing Sita thus stating that Radha is Sita. Here again we see the impulse of homogenizing the desires of womanhood from myths to optical illusionary world.

In conclusion, by comparing the two movies *Lipstick Under My Burkha* by Alankrita Shrivastava and *Fire* by Deepa Mehta, the spectator is made to devour in an

unfamiliar manner the most common thing every human undergoes, the desire. The two visual narratives draw the trajectory of desire from the impulse of homogenizing desires. Moreover, by derivation of the main elements in desire like 'lipstick' and 'fire' women strive to find their voices. Usha, Rehana, Leela, Shireen from *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and Radha, Sita from *Fire* are ordinary Indian women curtailed from their desires. Desire, seems to be a long cherished dream of Indian women even today. Traversing also the controversies *Fire* had to face in 1996 and later on, after two decades by *Lipstick Under My Burkha* in 2016, only because of depicting the desires of Indian womanhood shows that there is still inequality in visual narratives representing women.

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