

THE ENABLED SPECTACLE AND NARRATIVE OF THE FEMALE UNCONSCIOUS IN SELECT WEB SERIES ON VIDEO STREAMING SERVICE: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper is premised on Laura Mulvey's observation (on mainstream Hollywood films) that the female body is the spectacle of the male gaze, and the narrative that enables the male hero's control over the events on the film or the diegesis. The argument claims that the select web series namely **Four More Shots Please** Season 1 and 2 present an alternate spectacle and narrative in their own right, and display a polaric contrast to the spectacle and narrative of mainstream films. The claim is substantiated by a finding that the alternate spectacle and narrative is enabled by the dynamics of the 'New Media' with its users. As the brainchild of internet technology, New Media has redefined the rapport between the visual text and its reception by the audience/user.*

Mainstream film as one of the many cultural constructs legitimizes patriarchal outlook and ideology - "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form." (57). Spectacle, according to Mulvey, is the projection of the female body on the screen as an object of erotic pleasure and narrative designates the power vested with the male hero to carry the plot by rescuing /protecting/ forgiving the female protagonist in the film. Mulvey's proposition is founded on the Freudian perception of sexual difference and phallocentrism. In fact she intends to use psychoanalytic theory as a 'political weapon', that 'demonstrates the way the unconscious of the patriarchal society has structured the film form. (Mulvey 57). This intention to use psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon is problematic because Mulvey deems, and rightly so, psychoanalysis

*itself as a tool of patriarchy. However, she seeks to understand patriarchy (through film-reading) and fill the gap in the 'female unconscious'. The present paper relates Mulvey's hypothetical vision of an alternate spectacle and narrative with the way female sexuality is (re)presented in select web series. **Four More Shots Please** Season 1 and 2 are the samples selected for the argument and analysis.*

Key Words: Spectacle and Narrative, Video Streaming Service, the female unconscious, female sexuality, male gaze, phallogentric

THE ARGUMENT

Mulvey's vision of an alternate representation of the female sexuality has materialized in the said web series, and that their medium (known as the New Media) revolutionized by internet and software applications has remarkably changed the reception of the said text – the dynamics results not in the spectator identifying him/herself with the male hero on the screen, as it was in the case made by Mulvey about Hollywood mainstream films where the female body represented the erotic spectacle and enabled the action of the film. Quite contrarily the spectacle and narrative in the said series constitute what Mulvey foresees as the surfacing of the female unconscious.

The present paper seeks to establish the possibilities (conjectured by Mulvey and many other feminist critics) of affirming and locating the existence of female unconscious within the framework of psychoanalysis, as well as outside the Freudian outlook. The conjecture is inconceivable and inarticulatable, as the Freudian unconscious is structured like/by language, which is/was yet another patriarchal construct. The very articulation of the female unconscious is problematic because it needs a medium as language: “how to fight the unconscious structured like a language... while still caught within the language of the patriarchy.”(Ibid 58)

The possibilities of locating and defining the female unconscious has engaged feminist critics for long, and the problem is centred on the attribution of passivity to femininity and activity to masculinity in the phallic symbolic order – “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as 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 bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” (Ibid 58)

Mulvey claims that *scopophilia* or the pleasure of looking is the connecting point between the Freudian framework on sexual difference and the male gaze on Hollywood mainstream films. The viewer (irrespective of sex) becomes the surrogate of the male hero looking at the female body signified by male gaze as an object of pleasure. The camera positions itself according to the attitude of the male hero looks towards the female character (which explains the zoom in shots on select parts of the female body). The viewer’s look is conditioned by the camera, to *look* at the female body the same way the hero does. Mulvey claims that the cinema as a dark, enclosed space enables the viewer to become the hero’s surrogate and signify the female character as an object of pleasure, which Mulvey calls ‘the spectacle’. The representation of the female body on films is not just about the spectacle alone. The female body becomes the triggering factor of the narrative/plot/*diegesis* of the film. The female body represents ‘castration anxiety’ in the male hero and he assumes an active role as ‘the main controlling figure’, to escape the anxiety. The male ego deals with the anxiety by holding the female body guilty (of evoking the fear of castration in the male ego) and the guilt is either forgiven or punished - the act of forgiving/punishing is what forms the action or narrative of the film. The spectacle and narrative is the defining principle of Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Films have structured the ways of seeing and visual pleasure, not innocently: Mulvey claims that the magic of the Hollywood style at its best arises from ‘its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure’... because “Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (59)

However Mulvey foresees the possibility of an alternate medium that should redefine the unconscious and visual pleasure and articulate the female unconscious and ‘the new language of desire’. “The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.” (59)

Web series on Video streaming software come close to what Mulvey visualizes as an alternative to the male gaze on women that projects her as the passive spectacle of pleasure. Studies on the influence of media have followed and analysed the ways visual material affect the audience. The rapport between the screen and the audience had been close, consistent and deterministic. Media texts once catered to movie-going audience, and times changed when television narrowcasted (Burton) visual material to select audience at a select time slot. Satellite channels intensified the narrowcasting with specialized channels for specific genres, as in *M TV* for music, *Star Movies* for movies. The idea of audience was fragmented in to micro groups. The video-streaming software has isolated the audience as solo viewers, who are now known as ‘users’.

The present paper attempts to underline the difference between (a) the spectacle and narrative of female sexuality on mainstream films, and on the web series on video streaming applications like Prime video and Netflix, which difference will throw light on (b) the difference between the reception of an erotic spectacle by a viewer in the cinema hall and the same on Prime video or Netflix. The difference specifically has a bearing on the spectacle and narrative, and its effect on the audience/user.

The software enables the audience to view movies at a time, space and medium that is not restricted or enclosed. Unlike the dark cinema hall, the viewer/user has the freedom to choose the text, time, medium and space. The present paper analyses the web series *Four More Shots Please* as a sample to claim that the freedom enjoyed by the user on electronic media has transformed the way of looking, and has effected corresponding shifts in the reception behaviour of visual texts and their narratives. The representation of woman on the new media does not objectify the female body as the castrated sex nor as a threat to the male ego, on the contrary, the said web series signifies female sexuality outside the phallic field where the male sexuality bifurcates the masculine self and the feminine other. The series enables the possibility of defining female sexuality characterized by signifiers that are not confined to the male/female (binary) difference. Sexuality in FMSP breaks down the confines of masculinity, femininity (or homosexuality), so as to fill in the ‘the great gap’ - the Freudian gap. In Mulvey’s words; “We are still separated by a great gap from important issues for the female unconscious which are scarcely relevant to phallogocentric

theory: the sexing of the female infant and her relationship to the symbolic, the sexually mature woman as a non-mother, maternity outside the signification of the phallus, the vagina.” (Mulvey 58)

FMSP articulates the important issues for the female unconscious listed by Mulvey, through a new spectacle and a new narrative. The argument that the new spectacle and narrative is enabled by new media entails Mulvey’s claim that the spectator in a dark cinema hall becomes the surrogate of the male hero. The diegesis of the said web series is enabled to feature Mulvey’s prophetic “new language of (female) desire” only because of the new interface between the visual texts on video-streaming software and the user/viewer. The temporal and spatial differences between mainstream films in cinema halls and the web series on the video streaming services has set off a number of changes in the way the visual contents are produced and perceived. The focus of the argument is on those changes that have made woman-centric plots possible: plots that critique the phallogocentric symbolic order. One such series is the case in point, namely *Four More Shots Please* Season 1 and 2. As a series written, produced and catered to Indian viewers FMSP sets itself as a *new* spectacle to the viewers who have been accustomed to phallogocentric female representations on (the big) screen, that projected woman’s body as an object of pleasure or a threat to the male ego. NY Times columnist Alisha Haridasani Gupta observes this scenario as;

Across two seasons, the four women grapple with complex gender issues, from the country’s barely scratched corporate glass ceiling to homophobia, mental health and taboos around female sexuality — a sharp departure from the content offered in mainstream Indian entertainment.

(www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/arts/television/four-more-shots-please.html)

She adds saying, “The Amazon series has become a hit in India for its frank depictions of modern Mumbai women and sex, in a country where even kissing has been rare onscreen.” (Ibid)

The series depicts the lives of four women at odds with the male-centric order characterised by seemingly unbreakable norms on the female physique (slim, fair), so-called angelic manners (feminine, soft-spoken, vulnerable, chaste, maternal), marital graces etc.



Figure 1: Poster of the series

The protagonists -Damini, a journalist, Anjana, lawyer and single mother, Umang, lesbian and physical trainer and Siddhi, a single child from a rich household who makes her way to become a stand-up comedian, resist patriarchy in all forms. The film articulates the female voice by enunciating the female, outside the phallic order within which the female self stands for all that is negative and castrated (in the Freudian sense).

The fact that FMSP is 'a sharp departure from mainstream Indian entertainment' makes the series a reality that was foreseen by Mulvey against the Hollywood films in the western context. However, FMSP hailed as India's '*Sex and the City*' has given voice and form to what Mulvey calls 'the important issues for the female unconscious', namely (i) the sexing of the female infant and her relationship to the symbolic (ii) the sexually mature woman as a non-mother, (iv) maternity outside the signification of the phallus and (v) the vagina.

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The series has a couple of scenes where the kind of women the protagonists, become is located in their childhood or the kind of families they grow up in, thereby filling the Freudian gap about the growth and gendering of the female. Damini's ambition to boldly accomplish her job as an investigative journalist, Anjana's decision to get out of her marriage and her commitment to her career, Siddhi's decision to forgo the prospect of her wedding to her childhood friend and a happy ending and hesitation Umang has to tell her family that she is a bisexual lesbian, form a strong ground for the kind of woman they become in the society and their relationship to the symbolic order.

‘THE SEXUALLY MATURE WOMAN AS A NON-MOTHER’

To the protagonists in FMSP, motherhood is a choice and not a prerogative. Anjana has a daughter but her maternal role is not the ultimate defining factor in her life.

‘MATERNITY OUTSIDE THE SIGNIFICATION OF THE PHALLUS’

Damini decides to have the child she has of her relationship with Dr.Amir Warsi, her Gynecologist, and raise it all by herself. Anjana is a single mother.

‘THE VAGINA’

Freud's conception of the phallus as the absolute signifier implies the female genital as a lack, whereas in FMSP vagina is acclaimed, strongly and frequently, by the protagonist as the signifier of female sexuality and not as a non-male phenomenon. The creator has consciously conceived a scene where Anjana shouts out ‘vagina’ while hanging out with the friends by a road.



Figure 2: Anjana shouting out 'vagina'

The series in many ways redefines masculinity as much as it underpins female sexuality. Milind Soman who plays the role of Dr. Amal Warsi is cast as a gynecologist. Given the image that he has had in his career as a model and actor, it doesn't seem an innocent decision to cast a macho, muscular actor as Milind Soman to play the role of a doctor specialized in the treatment of female reproductive system. Umang a young woman is cast as a gym trainer.



Figure 3: Actor and Model Milind Soman as Dr. Warsi, the Gynecologist

In another scene when Siddhi accidentally punches the nose of a suitor, for want of a bandage, she offers him an unused sanitary pad to dab his bleeding nose.



Figure 4: Siddhi offering a sanitary pad to her suitor

Quite interestingly the Hindi phrase ‘cutting one’s nose’ (*naak katwana*) means blowing up one’s ego. The presumptuous suitor looks down upon Siddhi for her size and weight, and ends up bruising his nose.

The argument of the paper that these important issues on the female sexuality would never have found their way to the feature film to be viewed by the audience in a cinema hall is premised on the fact that the cinema hall is a microcosm of the society, one that has been constructed by/within the phallic order. Therefore the dynamics between the viewer and the visual text in the cinema hall would be one conditioned by the phallocratic confines of gender difference, where any discourse on female sexuality is a taboo. On the contrary the rhetoric of female sexuality takes life and form in the video-streaming service only because it gets performed on a personal space and, on a plane outside the phallic order.

The pleasure of looking or *scopophilia* springs from the phallic conception of woman as the object, which entails the notion that woman/the female body becomes the spectacle of pleasure, which explains the close-up shots on specific parts of the female body in main stream films. It is

interesting that FMSP has no zoom-in shots even as there are cleavages and short dresses. Psychoanalytically the female body signifies castration and the women on screen represent both pleasure and the fear of castration to the male gaze. Damini makes a reference to the gaze saying, "What's with men and looking?" and nails an attack directly at the act of looking by the male gaze. The most noteworthy feature of the series is the fact that there are no male rescuers in the series. The woman rescues herself, when three other women stand by her, which on many occasions calls for Four More Shots when they meet at the Truck Bar.

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