# UNVEILING WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND DESIRE IN INDIAN CINEMA: A STUDY OF *PARCHED* AND *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA*

**A**

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# DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that the work presented in the dissertation entitled:

**"UNVEILING WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND DESIRE IN INDIAN CINEMA: A STUDY OF *PARCHED* AND *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA*"**

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours with Research) in English, to MIER College of Education (Autonomous), is an authentic record of my own research work carried out under the supervision of Dr Sahil Bhagat.

I further declare that the work embodied in the present dissertation:

a) Is my original work and has not been copied from any research journal, dissertation, thesis, or book; and

b) Has not been submitted by me for the award of any other Degree/Diploma/Certificate of any University or Institution.

c) All sources of information used in this study have been duly acknowledged.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


**Page No.**

**CERTIFICATE** **ii**

**DECLARATION** **iii**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** **iv-v**

**ABSTRACT** **vii**

**INTRODUCTION** **1-25**

**CHAPTER I** **26-44**

Unveiling Veiled Voices and Gendered Expression in Urban India: A Study of *Lipstick Under my Burkha*

**CHAPTER II** **45-65**

Reasserting Female Desire and Bodily Autonomy in a Patriarchal Landscape: A Study of *Parched*

**CONCLUSION** **66-71**

**WORKS CITED** **72-74**

# ABSTRACT

This dissertation, titled Unveiling Women's Sexuality and Desire in Indian Cinema: A Study of *Parched* and Lipstick *Under My Burkha*, explores the silence and repression surrounding women's sexual desire in Indian culture. While much research has already examined women's empowerment in political, social, and economic contexts, the subject of women's pleasure continues to be overlooked. In Indian society, it is widely accepted when men express their desires, but women who speak about their own sexuality are often shamed, censored, or punished. This unequal treatment highlights how pleasure remains a taboo for women, even in a modern and supposedly progressive society.

To address this issue, the dissertation studies two powerful Indian films, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Parched* (2015). Both films present women as desiring subjects who seek intimacy, independence, and fulfillment. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, four women from different backgrounds attempt to pursue their sexual freedom but are met with ridicule, restrictions, and moral policing. The film itself was banned by the Central Board of Film Certification for being "lady-oriented," which shows how society resists women-centered narratives of desire. Similarly, *Parched* portrays rural women in Gujarat who struggle against patriarchal customs that deny them the right to speak openly about their needs. Although the women in the film form bonds of support and dream of freedom, their desires are constantly silenced by traditions and social shame. This research highlights that despite globalization and modernization, Indian women's sexuality is still censored, repressed, and treated as dangerous. Using feminist theories and cultural analysis, the research argues that acknowledging women's pleasure is not just about sexuality but about giving women agency, equality, and dignity. By mapping this neglected area, the study reveals how true gender equality cannot exist until women's desires are recognized and respected.

# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

The social and cultural neglect of women's sexuality is a global phenomenon rooted in patriarchal structures that prioritize male experience and systematically deny women autonomous pleasure. This negligence manifests in pervasive inequalities from the well- documented orgasm gap to the persistent shaming and stigmatization attached to female desire and represents not passive oversight but active omission that defines women's worth through reproductive or utilitarian function to men. Within this broader context of gender-based repression, cinema emerges as both a mirror reflecting societal values and a potentially subversive tool for challenging entrenched norms.

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood and regional cinema traditions, has historically been central to shaping public perceptions of gender, morality, and desire. For decades, women in Indian films have been portrayed primarily as images of purity, motherhood, and sacrifice, with their virtue measured by their capacity to suppress personal feelings and desires for family and tradition. This representational pattern reflects what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey identified in her groundbreaking 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" as the "male gaze" a cinematic framework wherein women are depicted primarily as objects of male visual pleasure rather than as subjects with their own perspectives and agency (Mulvey 75). In the context of Indian cinema, this has meant that while the female body is visually displayed on screen, women's voices particularly regarding sexuality and desire have been systematically silenced or demonized.

Against this historical backdrop of representational repression, two contemporary Indian films stand as remarkable acts of cinematic defiance: Leena Yadav's *Parched* (2015) and Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2016). These films boldly center what Indian cinema has long kept peripheral: women's autonomous desire for love, intimacy, sexual pleasure, and freedom. *Parched* premiered at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival and tells the story of four women in a desert village of Gujarat, India, whose lives are constrained by patriarchal practices including child marriage, marital rape, and domestic abuse. Director Leena Yadav has explained that the film emerged from conversations she

had with rural women about gender and sexuality, conversations that revealed the universality of women's struggles with oppression and their yearning for autonomy.

Similarly groundbreaking, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*chronicles the secret lives of four women of different ages in the small town of Bhopal as they navigate between societal expectations and personal desires. The film features Ratna Pathak as a 55-year-old widow who secretly reads erotic fiction, Konkona Sen Sharma as a burkha-wearing housewife who works clandestinely as a saleswoman, Aahana Kumra as a beautician seeking romantic freedom, and Plabita Borthakur as a college student who removes her burkha to express her true identity. The film's treatment of female sexuality across generations and social positions challenges the cultural assumption that women's desires diminish with age or should be completely subordinated to familial duty.

The significance of these films extends beyond their narrative content to encompass the institutional resistance they encountered. Most notably, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*was initially denied certification for theatrical release in India in January 2017 by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which stated that the film contained "contagious sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography, and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society". Perhaps most tellingly, the CBFC's refusal letter explicitly cited the film's "lady oriented" story that places "fantasy above life" as grounds for denial. Director Alankrita Shrivastava characterized this censorship as "an assault on women's rights," arguing that the decision to refuse certification reflected a society unwilling to acknowledge female perspectives and experiences. The censorship controversy sparked significant public debate about gender bias in Indian film certification and the double standards applied to representations of male versus female sexuality.

After appealing to the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT), the filmmakers eventually secured an 'A' (adults only) certificate in April 2017, with the Tribunal explicitly noting that "there cannot be any embargo on a women-oriented film or one containing sexual fantasies and expression of the inner desires of women" (FCAT 2017). This bureaucratic struggle for certification underscores how representations of women's sexuality continue to be contested terrain in contemporary India, with institutional gatekeepers attempting to police what stories can be told and

whose desires can be acknowledged.

This research therefore examines how *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* represent women's sexuality and desire through the theoretical framework of lipstick feminism. Lipstick feminism, emerging from third-wave feminist discourse, seeks to reclaim traditional markers of femininity—including sexuality and sexual agency—as compatible with feminist consciousness rather than antithetical to it. Unlike earlier feminist movements that sometimes positioned feminine expression as inherently concerned with patriarchy, lipstick feminism argues that women can embrace femininity, including sexual allure and traditional beauty practices, as forms of empowerment rather than subjugation. This perspective proves particularly relevant for analyzing films that depict rural and small-town Indian women negotiating between cultural traditions and personal autonomy, between prescribed gender roles and self-determined identities.

The films' treatment of female friendship and solidarity becomes crucial, that depict how women empower each other through shared confidences and mutual support in contexts where patriarchal structures seek to isolate and silence them. Through detailed textual analysis of these films' narrative structures, characterization, and symbolic elements, this study will examine how contemporary Indian cinema can challenge patriarchal norms and create space for authentic representations of women's inner lives, desires, and struggles for self determination.

**Theoretical framework**

Before delving into lipstick feminism, it is pertinent to delve deep into the history and various models of feminism. Feminism emerged as a social, political, and intellectual response to women's systematic oppression and marginalization across society. Feminism attempts to oppose patriarchal structures that favour male authority and perpetuate gender inequality in social, cultural, economic, and political arenas. Feminist philosophy questions how power is exercised through institutions such as family, religion, law, and media, while also arguing for women's rights, agency, and autonomy. Feminism, rather than being a single, homogeneous philosophy, has evolved through several historical stages, each influenced by distinct sociopolitical contexts and ideological concerns.

Feminism is essentially "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," according to academics like Bell Hooks, highlighting its transformational and inclusive goals (hooks 26). Tracing the historical evolution of feminism through what are known as the "waves of feminism" is therefore necessary to understand it. More recent feminist criticism warns against understanding 'women' as a homogenous category and emphasizes the mistake of eradicating the unique characteristics of different groupings, in the late nineteenth century the emergency of a solidarity across national and class barriers was perceived as so novel that the common factor of being a woman was perceived as outweighing the difference. (Knellwolf 193).

Feminist historians utilize the metaphor of "waves" to illustrate how feminist movements' goals, strategies, and ideology have changed throughout time. The wave model is still a helpful framework for comprehending the historical development of feminist thought, despite criticism for being oversimplified. Each wave addressed the constraints of the previous one, broadening the scope of feminist inquiry from legal equality to personal liberty, sexual autonomy, and identity politics. Feminism's evolution through its first, second, and third waves reveals a gradual shift from demands for formal equality to deeper interrogations of gendered power relations, particularly those involving the female body, sexuality, and desire—issues central to contemporary feminist discourse and film representation.

**First Wave Feminism**

First-wave feminism evolved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a focus on women’s legal and political rights (Ferree and Hess 41). During this time, women were denied key civic rights such as the right to vote, own property, and pursue higher education (Donovan 49). During the initial wave of feminist action, the focus was on political liberation, namely women’s suffrage, which was considered the cornerstone for gaining equality in public life (Donovan 50). Women who took part in this movement challenged the prevalent assumption that women belonged solely to the domestic realm, while males held positions of authority in administration and public life (Ferree and Hess 42).

First-wave feminist discourse was largely shaped by liberal political philosophy, which emphasized equality before the law and individual rights as the

foundation of social justice (Donovan 47). Feminists during this period believed that once women were granted political recognition as citizens, other forms of inequality would gradually dissolve (Ferree and Hess 43). As a result, legal reform was prioritized over cultural or sexual reform, and issues related to women's private lives remained largely unaddressed (Eisenstein 56).

The suffrage movement faced fierce opposition, with opponents claiming that granting women political rights would shatter family structures and moral order (Donovan 51). Women were represented as intellectually inferior and emotionally unsuited for political engagement, promoting the "separate spheres" doctrine, which limited women to home tasks (de Beauvoir 28). This ideology reinforced the belief that women's moral responsibility lay in preserving domestic harmony rather than participating in political decision-making (Ferree and Hess 42). Despite these obstacles, suffragettes organized rallies, protests, and campaigns to secure voting rights (Donovan 52).

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton rose to prominence as advocates for women's political agency, arguing that democracy could not be considered complete while women remained excluded from political representation (Donovan 53). First-wave feminists secured women's voting rights in various nations via persistent struggle, marking a watershed moment in feminist history (Ferree and Hess 44). However, despite these achievements, political enfranchisement did not immediately translate into social or sexual freedom for women (Eisenstein 57).

However, first-wave feminism has been criticized for its restricted inclusivity (Eisenstein 58). The movement primarily represented the interests of white, middle-class women, ignoring the problems of working-class women and women of color (Eisenstein 59). Feminist scholars have noted that early feminist activism rarely addressed issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, marital power, and domestic oppression, as such topics were considered incompatible with the movement's respectability politics (Donovan 55). Sexuality, in particular, remained a silenced domain, reinforcing the divide between women's public rights and private subordination (Beauvoir 30).

**Second Wave Feminism**

The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, marking a significant shift from legal equality to a broader examination of women's lived experiences. Unlike first-wave feminism, which focused primarily on political rights, second-wave feminism addressed social, cultural, and personal forms of oppression. Feminists began to argue that inequality was not confined to public institutions but deeply embedded in everyday life, including family structures, sexual relationships, and workplace practices. This shift was encapsulated in the influential feminist slogan "the personal is political."

Second-wave feminists critically examined the institution of marriage, motherhood, and domestic labor, exposing how women's unpaid work within the home sustained patriarchal systems. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique highlighted the sense of dissatisfaction experienced by women who were confined to domestic roles despite material comfort. Friedan identified this condition as "the problem that has no name," drawing attention to the emotional and psychological costs of enforced domesticity (Friedan 18). Her work played a crucial role in mobilizing women to question traditional gender roles.

Sexuality became a central concern of second-wave feminism, as feminists challenged the control of women's bodies through social norms, religious morality, and legal restrictions. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics a*nalyzed how power relations between men and women are reinforced through sexual norms and cultural representations (Millett 23). Feminists campaigned for reproductive rights, access to contraception, and protection against sexual violence, asserting women's right to bodily autonomy. At the same time, second-wave feminists often rejected conventional symbols of femininity such as cosmetics and fashion, viewing them as tools of patriarchal oppression that objectified women and reinforced male dominance. The second wave also intersected with civil rights and anti-war movements, drawing attention to multiple forms of oppression based on race, class, and gender. However, despite its radical critique of patriarchy, second-wave feminism was later criticized for universalizing women's experiences and marginalizing differences among women. These limitations contributed to the emergence of a more pluralistic feminist approach in the following decades.

## Third Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism emerged in the early 1990s in response to the perceived inflexibility and exclusions of the second wave. It emphasized diversity and intersectionality, individual agency, and the refusal of any one definition of women. For third-wave feminists, women's lives are determined by a range of factors that include race, class, sexuality, and nationality, among others, and can therefore know no singular expression. The influence of postmodern and poststructural thinking was very strong in this perspective, which rejected fixed categories of identification.

The re-engagement with femininity and female sexuality is one of the key features of third-wave feminism. Unlike the second-wave feminists who considered beauty practices as oppressive, makeup, fashion, and sexual expression could be reclaimed as sources of empowerment according to the arguments raised by third-wave feminists. The theory of Judith Butler on gender performativity was an important influence in this new direction, as she was claiming that gender is created through repeated performances, rather than being determined by biology itself. Such an understanding finally made it possible for feminists to reinterpret the position of femininity from the perspective of agency rather than submission.

Third-wave feminism also brought to the forefront the aspect of choice and self-definition. It argues for woman’s empowerment that lies in her ability to make choices about her own body and identity, even if such a choice involves traditionally feminine practices. bell hooks underlines that feminism needs to recognize women as active subjects capable of negotiating power rather than passive victims of patriarchy. This ideological shift created the theoretical foundation for contemporary feminist strands such as post-feminism and lipstick feminism, which focus on pleasure, desire, and self-expression.

## Various Models of Feminism

Feminism is not a monolithic movement but a constellation of theoretical positions that respond differently to women’s oppression across social, political, economic, and cultural domains. Over time, several major models of feminism have emerged, each offering distinct explanations for gender inequality and proposing varied strategies for women’s emancipation. Among the most influential models are Liberal Feminism,

Socialist/Marxist Feminism, and Radical Feminism.

**Liberal Feminism**

Liberal feminism is grounded in Enlightenment ideals of rationality, individual rights, and equality before the law. Liberal feminists argue that women and men are equally rational beings and therefore deserve equal access to education, employment, legal protection, and political participation. The primary focus of liberal feminism is the removal of legal and institutional barriers that restrict women's opportunities in the public sphere (Tong 13). Rather than seeking to overthrow social structures entirely, liberal feminists aim to reform existing systems to ensure gender-neutral laws and policies.

Early liberal feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft emphasized education as the key to women's liberation. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that women appear inferior to men not by nature but because they are denied access to reason and intellectual development: "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience" (Wollstonecraft 73). This insistence on rational education underlines liberal feminism's belief that equality can be achieved through social reform and intellectual empowerment.

Later liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan extended this critique to the domestic sphere, exposing how middle-class women were confined to unfulfilling domestic roles despite legal equality. Friedan famously described this condition as "the problem that has no name," highlighting the psychological consequences of enforced domesticity (Friedan 15). Liberal feminism thus foregrounds individual autonomy, merit-based achievement, and equal opportunity as central feminist. Liberal feminism thus advocates for merit-based achievement, equality of rights as citizens, and minimal social restraint on individual action. "Liberal Feminism affirms merit based on individual achievement, equality of rights as citizens, a social order based on contract and a minimum of social restraint on individual action." (Ferree and Hess 30)

**Socialist / Marxist Feminism**

Socialist and Marxist feminism locate women's oppression within broader economic

and class structures. Drawing on Marxist theory, this model argues that gender inequality is inseparable from capitalism, private property, and the division of labor. Marxist feminists contend that women's unpaid domestic labor sustains capitalist production while remaining economically undervalued and socially invisible (Engels 137). As a result, women's dependence on men is not merely cultural but materially produced.

Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, links the emergence of patriarchy to the rise of private property, arguing that the monogamous family institutionalized women's subordination (Engels 120). Socialist feminists build on this claim by emphasizing how capitalism exploits women both as wage laborers and as domestic caregivers. According to Heidi Hartmann, patriarchy and capitalism function together as "a dual system" that reinforces women's oppression in both public and private spheres (Hartmann 14). Unlike liberal feminism, socialist feminism stresses collective struggle rather than individual advancement. Women's liberation, from this perspective, requires structural transformation, including economic redistribution, socialized domestic labor, and the dismantling of class hierarchies. By foregrounding material conditions, socialist feminism highlights how gender oppression intersects with class, labor, and economic power.

In literary theory, Marxism influenced socialist realism and shaped feminist literary criticism by emphasizing class struggle and social context. Terry Eagleton defines Marxist criticism as follows:

> Marxist criticism is not merely a sociology of literature, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (Eagleton 33)

**Radical Feminism**

Radical feminism offers one of the most uncompromising critiques of patriarchy, identifying male dominance as the fundamental source of women's oppression. Radical feminists argue that patriarchy predates capitalism and permeates every aspect of social life, including sexuality, reproduction, language, and culture.

According to this model, gender oppression is not a secondary issue but the primary form of domination upon which other inequalities are built (Jaggar 84).

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* is a foundational text of radical feminism. Millett asserts that patriarchy operates through both ideology and violence, normalizing male power while rendering female subordination natural and inevitable (Millett 25). Radical feminists challenge institutions such as marriage, heterosexuality, and the nuclear family, viewing them as mechanisms that regulate women's bodies and sexuality. Shulamith Firestone extends this argument by identifying biological reproduction as a site of oppression. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, she argues that women's reproductive role has historically justified their subordination and calls for a radical reorganization of society through technological and social change (Firestone 11). Radical feminism thus emphasizes consciousness-raising, sexual autonomy, and the dismantling of patriarchal power at its roots.

The evolution of feminism from its first to third wave reflects a broader transformation in feminist priorities—from political rights to personal autonomy and cultural representation. Contemporary feminist discourse increasingly engages with media, popular culture, and cinema as sites where gender norms are constructed and contested. The representation of women's sexuality, desire, and agency in visual narratives has become a crucial area of feminist inquiry. By tracing the historical development of feminist thought, it becomes possible to understand how modern feminist expressions challenge traditional moral frameworks and create space for alternative representations of womanhood.

In this study, feminism serves as the theoretical underpinning for examining female sexuality and desire in cinema. The evolution of feminist philosophy demonstrates how women's bodies and desires have transitioned from control points to potential places of resistance and self- assertion. This historical perspective allows for a nuanced interaction with modern feminist concepts like lipstick feminism, which will be examined in the following section.

**Lipstick Feminism**

Lipstick feminism emerges here as a complex and often contested strand within feminist discourse that centers on the symbolic and political implications of

femininity, beauty practices, and female self-presentation. Unlike the earlier feminist movements that largely rejected conventional markers of femininity, lipstick feminism reclaims traditionally feminine symbols— such as makeup, fashion, and sexual display—as potentially empowering sites, rather than oppressive ones. At its core, lipstick feminism argues that femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive, and that women can assert agency through practices that have conventionally been associated with female objectification.

The ideological roots of lipstick feminism are located in the changing attitudes toward femininity through the waves of feminism: whereas makeup and cosmetics during second-wave feminism were ideologically derided as agents of patriarchal control that subordinated women through an emphasis on appearance rather than intellect, feminists regarded beauty culture as a system that disciplined women's bodies and maintained male desire as the normative standard. By the late twentieth century, however, feminist thought revisited such a polemic, thereby begetting a more subtle conception of choice, agency, and self-expression.

Historically, lipstick has carried contradictory meanings, oscillating between moral suspicion and cultural fascination. In early Western societies, cosmetic use was often associated with deception and moral danger, reflecting broader anxieties about female autonomy and visibility. As Kathy Peiss observes, “rouge and lipstick were associated with actresses and prostitutes, women whose morality was suspect” (Peiss 24). This association reflects what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as the cultural construction of femininity, where “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). Together, these perspectives demonstrate how beauty practices were historically tied to patriarchal attempts to regulate women’s bodies and identities.

Despite such restrictions, lipstick became increasingly normalized during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the expansion of consumer capitalism. The rise of the beauty industry made cosmetics more accessible while reshaping their social meaning. As Peiss notes, “by the 1920s, cosmetics had become a routine part of women’s daily lives” (Peiss 172). This normalization reflects a broader cultural shift in which femininity became linked to consumption. As Naomi Wolf argues, “the beauty myth tells a story: the quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists” (Wolf 12), revealing how beauty standards function as ideological

constructs that maintain gender hierarchies.

Lipstick feminism emerged alongside third-wave feminism, which sought to reclaim femininity rather than reject it. This shift is closely connected to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 191). Butler further explains that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (Butler 194), emphasizing that gender is constructed through repeated acts rather than fixed essence. From this perspective, wearing lipstick can function as a performative act that destabilizes rigid gender norms.

Central to lipstick feminism is the emphasis on choice and pleasure. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards assert that "feminism is about choice" (Baumgardner and Richards 136), while also insisting that "our pleasures are not frivolous, they are political" (Baumgardner and Richards 141). These arguments position beauty practices as potential sites of agency rather than oppression. However, Angela McRobbie complicates this framework by arguing that "the new sexual contract is based on a form of consent" shaped by normative expectations (McRobbie 255). This suggests that women's choices are often structured by social pressures, making agency a negotiated rather than absolute condition. Critics of lipstick feminism emphasize that beauty practices remain entangled with visual regimes of power. Laura Mulvey famously argues that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11), highlighting how visual culture positions women as objects of male desire. Similarly, bell hooks warns that "the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight" (hooks 21), pointing to the ways in which difference and femininity are absorbed into consumer culture. These critiques suggest that lipstick, while potentially empowering, may also reproduce systems of objectification and commodification.

At the same time, feminist theory increasingly acknowledges the complexity and contradiction inherent in women's experiences. As hooks emphasizes, "feminism is for everybody" (hooks 1), advocating for an inclusive framework that recognizes diverse expressions of agency. Lipstick feminism operates within this tension, positioning beauty practices as both constrained and empowering. Rather than representing simple submission or resistance, lipstick becomes a site of negotiation

where identity, desire, and power intersect.

Lipstick feminism provides a valuable framework for analyzing how female desire is visually represented. It enables a reading of women not merely as objects of desire but as agents who actively perform and negotiate sexuality. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for examining films such as *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, where women's engagement with cosmetics, clothing, and private fantasies becomes a mode of resistance against social and sexual repression. Lipstick feminism thus bridges personal expression and political critique, making it an essential framework for understanding contemporary representations of female sexuality.

Kathy Davis's *Reshaping the Female Body* provides a crucial feminist framework for understanding how women's bodies are shaped within patriarchal and cultural constraints. Davis emphasizes the complexity of women's relationship with their bodies, arguing that "women are not simply passive victims of beauty standards" (Davis 79). This perspective challenges reductive notions of oppression by recognizing that women actively negotiate social expectations, even within restrictive environments. At the same time, women's bodies remain subject to continuous cultural scrutiny, reinforcing ideals of respectability and normative femininity. Davis further highlights how bodily practices are embedded within identity formation, noting that "appearance is an important part of women's identity" (Davis 85). This suggests that femininity is constructed through visible conformity to social norms, where deviation invites judgment and exclusion. Such pressures limit the possibility of openly expressing desire, as women are compelled to maintain socially acceptable identities that align with patriarchal expectations.

This framework resonates with broader feminist theory, particularly Judith Butler's assertion that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 191). Gender, therefore, is not innate but produced through repeated performances shaped by cultural norms. Within this structure, female desire is not absent but carefully regulated—permitted only within boundaries that sustain patriarchal control.

At the same time, Davis complicates the notion that engagement with beauty practices is inherently oppressive. She argues that "women's experiences are contradictory and cannot be reduced to simple categories of domination or resistance"

(Davis 62). This insight aligns with the arguments of Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, who assert that "feminism is about choice" (Baumgardner and Richards 136). Together, these perspectives suggest that women's engagement with beauty, desire, and self-presentation must be understood as negotiated rather than purely imposed.

This theoretical framework becomes particularly relevant when applied to contemporary cinema, especially films such as *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Parched.* In both films, female characters are positioned within rigid patriarchal structures that regulate their bodies, sexuality, and public identities. Their desires are not absent but are constrained by expectations of modesty, morality, and social respectability. The films visually and narratively depict how women internalize these norms while simultaneously negotiating spaces of personal agency.

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, the act of self-adornment and engagement with femininity becomes a subtle form of resistance, reflecting Davis's argument that women are not merely passive subjects but active negotiators of their identities. Similarly, *Parched* presents female characters whose bodily experiences and desires exist within conditions of restriction, yet who gradually assert control over their identities through acts of self-recognition and solidarity. In both cases, the body emerges as a contested site where patriarchal control and personal agency intersect.

Davis's framework thus enables a deeper understanding of how female desire operates within cinematic narratives—not as an openly liberated force, but as something negotiated, often concealed, and shaped by social constraints. These films demonstrate that women's agency does not always manifest through overt rebellion; rather, it frequently emerges through subtle, everyday acts of negotiation that challenge the structures seeking to regulate female bodies and desires.

This argument strongly supports the core claims of Lipstick Feminism. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards assert, "feminism is about choice" (Baumgardner and Richards 136), emphasizing that empowerment must be defined by women themselves rather than dictated through rigid ideological frameworks. They further argue that "our pleasures are not frivolous, they are political" (Baumgardner and Richards 141), thereby reframing desire and self-expression as legitimate sites of

feminist agency rather than distractions from it. This perspective challenges prescriptive feminism, which often risks reproducing the same forms of control it seeks to dismantle. At the same time, feminist theorists complicate the notion of free choice by highlighting the structural constraints within which agency operates. As Angela McRobbie notes, "the new sexual contract is based on a form of consent which is itself shaped by normative expectations" (McRobbie 255). This insight underscores that women's decisions are rarely made in conditions of complete freedom; rather, they are shaped by social surveillance, cultural expectations, and internalized norms. Even when women appear to act autonomously, their choices remain influenced by anticipated judgment and moral regulation.

This critique does not invalidate Lipstick Feminism but instead refines it. Baumgardner and Richards acknowledge this complexity, arguing that "contradictions are not a sign of failure but a reflection of reality" (Baumgardner and Richards 142). In this sense, empowerment must be understood as negotiated rather than absolute, emerging through compromise, ambiguity, and lived experience. Agency, therefore, does not always manifest through open resistance but often exists within constrained and negotiated spaces.

This theoretical framework directly supports the central argument of this research by demonstrating that women's sexual agency frequently operates in private rather than public domains. Desire may not always be openly expressed, yet it persists as a subtle form of resistance within patriarchal structures. Feminist empowerment, therefore, must be understood not only through visible acts of rebellion but also through intimate, personal moments of self-recognition, pleasure, and autonomy. When feminism turns its gaze toward the quiet, hidden, and everyday negotiations of desire, cinema becomes one of its most potent languages—capable of rendering visible those private longings that social structures work hard to silence. It is within this expressive feminist space that *Lipstick Under My Burkha* emerges as a powerful cinematic articulation of Lipstick Feminism. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* locates empowerment not in overt rebellion but in the reclamation of desire within restrictive social spaces. The women in the film inhabit the very condition Kathy Davis identifies as the divide between public respectability and private longing. While they perform culturally sanctioned roles of modesty, obedience, and silence, their inner

lives are shaped by fantasies, desires, and emotional needs that refuse erasure. This tension transforms private desire into a political act, reinforcing the Lipstick Feminist claim that pleasure and femininity can function as subtle yet meaningful forms of resistance within patriarchy (Davis 70).

The film further embodies Lipstick Feminism through its portrayal of women reclaiming their bodies as sites of agency rather than passive objects of control. As the characters acknowledge their desires—sexual, emotional, and imaginative—they move from objectification toward embodied subjectivity, enacting precisely the shift Kathy Davis associates with feminist empowerment (Davis 110). This movement resonates with Richards and Baumgardner's assertion that empowerment lies in self-definition rather than in the rejection of femininity itself. In this sense, lipstick, fantasy, and desire are redefined not as symbols of submission but as acts of self-recognition and feminist assertion (Baumgardner and Richards 142).

Most significantly, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* advances Lipstick Feminism by presenting female agency as a process of negotiation rather than absolute freedom. The women's choices are cautious and often secretive, shaped by fear of social punishment, reflecting Davis's argument that agency operates within constraint rather than outside it (Davis 121). Yet it is precisely this negotiation that renders their desire politically meaningful. By foregrounding private longing and embodied experience, the film asserts that even silenced pleasures possess the power to challenge patriarchal control. The theoretical insights of Kathy Davis, together with the articulation of third-wave feminist politics in *Manifesta* by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, give light to the fact that empowerment does not always look like visible defiance, but it often survives in private, embodied, and emotionally charged forms. By placing women's desire, fantasy, and self- recognition in the foreground within restricted social frameworks, Lipstick Feminism challenges the assumption that femininity and pleasure are unthinkable in feminist politics. As Baumgardner and Richards succinctly argue, feminism must recognize women's lived contradictions and negotiated choices, not reproduce rigid models of resistance. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* extends this cinematic framework to show that even silenced and negotiated forms of desire bear political importance. For this reason, the film reinforces a core assumption of Lipstick Feminism: namely, agency does not arise from outside of

patriarchy, but from its fractures, as these are sites wherein women reclaim pleasure, meaning, and identity at their own behest.

One of the most influential interventions in feminist film theory is Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"* which reshaped approaches to film analysis by exposing how cinema constructs women as objects of visual pleasure rather than subjects of desire. Mulvey argues that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11), establishing a fundamental gendered division within visual representation.

Mulvey further explains that mainstream narrative cinema is structured around what she terms the male gaze, a visual regime in which the camera, male characters, and spectator are aligned with masculine power. She writes: "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 11). Within this framework, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11), reinforcing the idea that men occupy the position of the viewer while women are positioned as objects to be viewed. According to Mulvey, this structure reduces women to visual spectacle, as "woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 11). Female characters are thus constructed primarily as images, their bodies fragmented and aestheticized through cinematic techniques such as close-ups, lighting, and framing. In contrast, men function as "the bearer of the look" (Mulvey 12), maintaining narrative control and agency within the film.

As a result, women are denied subjectivity within classical cinema and instead serve to sustain male visual pleasure. Mulvey's analysis reveals how cinematic form itself reinforces patriarchal ideology by positioning women as passive objects and men as active agents, thereby shaping not only representation but also the ways in which audiences are invited to see and interpret female bodies.

In the context of this research, the importance of Mulvey's theory cannot be overemphasized because it offers a vital language that helps decode how the figure of female sexuality has been erased/reconfigured in film. It is because mainstream filmmaking practices tend to position women as objects to be viewed, but not to feel or to desire, that movies that prioritize the inner experiences of women countertrend

such praxis.

Furthermore, the theory of Mulvey reinforces the importance of the political implications of the girl's vision being translated on screen, which is particularly pronounced within the realm of Lipstick Feminism. The relevance of Laura Mulvey's theory on visual pleasure to this particular study is that it throws light on how female sexuality has been depicted in cinematic images as objects of observation rather than experiences.

Her critique of visual pleasure exposes the mechanisms through which women's bodies are objectified, while her call for alternative cinematic languages enables feminist filmmakers to imagine new modes of representation. In relation to this research, Mulvey's theory provides the critical foundation for examining how films move beyond spectacle to foreground female subjectivity, transforming cinema into a space where women are no longer merely seen, but are allowed to desire, feel, and speak.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The representation of women and their sexuality in Indian cinema has gained increasing attention in feminist scholarship. Earlier studies often focused on women's oppression under patriarchy, while recent research highlights female desire, agency, and autonomy. With the rise of women filmmakers, Indian cinema has become a site for exploring how visual narratives challenge traditional depictions of femininity and redefine pleasure as empowerment.

Sanjay R. Mane's paper "The Reflection of Empowered Womanhood in Bollywood Movie *Parched*" (2018) portrays Leena Yadav's *Parched* as a story of women's empowerment and rebellion against patriarchal norms. Drawing on postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak and Meenakshi Thapan, Mane interprets the characters—Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—as symbols of defiance and renewal, representing the emergence of independent womanhood in postcolonial India (Mane 4–6). Building on this, Priyanka Verma's "*Parched* (Sex and the Village: An Indian Version)" (2019) analyzes the same film through feminist film theory, psychoanalysis, and intersectionality. Referencing Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, Verma argues that *Parched* subverts

Bollywood's patriarchal portrayals by foregrounding women's sexual agency, solidarity, and autonomy (Verma 3–5).

Anisha Mondal's "The Question of Womanhood: An Analysis of Leena Yadav's *Parched*" (2020) continues the examination of Parched through postcolonial feminism and subaltern theory. Drawing on Spivak and Mulvey, Mondal highlights how the women in the film transform suffering into collective empowerment, showing sisterhood as a means of self- liberation (Mondal 5–7). In the same year, Deyan Rizki Amelia, Sa'diah Nur Rohmah, and Nadia Rukyati Hasanah's "Patriarchy and Social Norms in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*" (2020) explores how four women—Rehana, Shireen, Leela, and Usha—negotiate personal freedom within patriarchal constraints. Using Stuart Hall's identity theory, the authors show how each woman's pursuit of individuality through fashion, relationships, and work remains limited by social and cultural norms (Amelia et al. 2–3).

Ritu Sen's, in her research article "In Search of Indian Film Feminism: Theory and Praxis" (2021) critiques the use of Western feminist frameworks, especially Mulvey's "male gaze," to analyze Indian cinema. Using English Vinglish as a case study, Sen argues that Eurocentric theories misinterpret Indian socio-cultural realities and calls for a more indigenous feminist film approach rooted in local contexts (Sen 2–4). Finally, Trina Mukherjee and Purnima Anjali Mohanty's "Oh! Guileless Passion! Understanding Indian Women's Ambivalent Sexuality and Gender Performances Post Feminism in India" (2022) studies *Lipstick Under My Burkh* through post-feminism and gender performance. Drawing on Foucault and Mulvey, they show that while women in the film resist patriarchal expectations, their rebellion is fragmented by guilt, class privilege, and internalized patriarchy.

Jeena Shaji's article, "Veiling and Unveiling Desire: The Use of Burkha as a Motif in the Bollywood Movie *Lipstick Under My Burkha*" (2018), analyses female sexuality through a feminist perspective by reading the burkha as a motif that conceals and simultaneously reveals women's suppressed desires. The study argues that women are constrained by "hegemonic masculinity" and are forced to lead "double lives hiding behind the veils" imposed by patriarchal social norms (Shaji 49). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "second sex," Shaji shows how female desire is regulated through socio-sexual conditioning that denies

bodily autonomy (Shaji 49). The article further identifies the burkha as a "reification of oppression," while also functioning as a space for momentary resistance and self-expression (Shaji 50). This study is relevant to the present research as it provides a critical framework for examining the unveiling of female sexuality and desire in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* .

Mujaffar Hossain's article, "Narrating Sexual Politics and Women's Emancipation in Parched and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*" (2024), examines the representation of women's oppression and resistance in Indian cinema through a feminist and subaltern perspective. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity and Kate Millett's theory of "sexual politics," Hossain argues that women in both films are positioned within a "phalocentric" and "hegemonic discourse" that systematically marginalizes their voices (Hossain 100). The study highlights how female characters resist patriarchal domination by asserting self-identity and rejecting imposed roles of submission, thereby challenging their "subaltern condition" (Hossain 101). By analysing characters from *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha,* the article foregrounds women's struggle for bodily autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and sexual agency within oppressive social structures (Hossain 102). The paper concludes that these films function as counter-narratives that enable women to reject subordination and create their own discourse of emancipation (Hossain 103). This study is relevant to the present research as it strengthens the theoretical understanding of unveiling female sexuality and desire as acts of resistance against patriarchal power.

The article, Norhaniza Md Ismail and Swagata Sinha Roy's "Behind the Veil: Freedom of Choices in *Dor* and *Parched*" (2019), explores how women negotiate survival within oppressive patriarchal structures embedded in culture and tradition. The authors analyse how women are conditioned to accept domesticity and subjugation as fate under patriarchy (Ismail and Roy 737). Using Feminist Postmodern Theory, the study argues that women's experiences of oppression are not uniform and vary according to social position and circumstance (Ismail and Roy 742). The films depict women who initially endure suffering but later "bend or break the rules" to reclaim agency and dignity (Ismail and Roy 737). Cultural and religious norms are shown to function as tools of control that restrict women's choices and

identities (Ismail and Roy 738). The article concludes that women are capable of resisting patriarchy when courage and support enable them to make transformative choices (Ismail and Roy 744).

Kaur's article *"*Feminism in Mainstream Hindi Cinema – Content Analysis of *Parched and Lipstick Under My Burkha"*(2021) examines how these films challenge the patriarchal conventions traditionally reinforced by mainstream Hindi cinema. Through content analysis, the author highlights the depiction of women asserting sexual, emotional, and social agency in restrictive cultural settings. The paper effectively situates both films as feminist interventions that foreground women's desires and resistance to gendered norms. However, the analysis remains largely descriptive and does not engage deeply with established feminist film theories or intersectional perspectives. At times, mainstream Hindi cinema is treated as a homogeneous entity, overlooking its internal diversity and evolving narratives. Despite these limitations, the article is valuable for understanding the growing visibility of feminist themes in contemporary Hindi cinema and provides a useful foundation for further critical inquiry.

Tamilselvi, N. "The Panorama of Female Gaze in Indian Cinema – A Case Study of *Parched*" (2018) examines how Indian cinema has traditionally been shaped by the male gaze, reducing women to visual objects rather than narrative agents. Drawing on feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of gaze, the study argues that Parched marks a significant shift toward a female gaze. The paper analyzes how women's pain, desire, and bodily autonomy are foregrounded through characters like Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli. Unlike mainstream cinema, the film portrays female sexuality without eroticizing it for male pleasure. Scenes of intimacy and female bonding are interpreted as acts of resistance rather than objectification. The study concludes that Parched reclaims women's bodies and desires, contributing to feminist discourse in Indian cinema (Tamilselvi 92).

Although several scholars have examined women's roles and gender inequality in Indian cinema, most studies focus on oppression, patriarchy, and social struggle while neglecting the idea of women's pleasure as a source of empowerment. The reviewed papers on *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*analyze themes like freedom, sisterhood, and identity, yet they rarely address how women's sexual desire

becomes a space of self-expression and strength. Furthermore, many works depend on Western feminist theories that fail to capture India's unique cultural context. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by exploring how *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* portray female sexuality not as taboo, but as a form of liberation and self-realization.

## JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH

This research is relevant because women's sexuality and desire have long been silenced, censored, or distorted in Indian cinema. Mainstream Bollywood traditionally presents women as obedient, self-sacrificing, or objectified, while their erotic desires and bodily autonomy remain hidden under patriarchal norms. This creates a major academic gap in understanding how films shape and suppress women's sexual identities. *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*are important because they challenge this silence by portraying women who openly express desire, seek pleasure, and resist oppressive social structures. Set in different contexts—rural Rajasthan and urban Bhopal—they reveal that control over female sexuality operates across regions, classes, and ages. Therefore, analyzing these films is relevant as it highlights a crucial shift in Indian cinema from portraying women as passive objects to acknowledging them as sexual subjects. This study fills a research gap by exploring how contemporary films reclaim women's desire as a site of empowerment and resistance.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate how Indian cinema reflects and reinforces social taboos surrounding women's sexuality and desire within a patriarchal cultural framework.

2. To explore how feminist perspectives, especially lipstick feminism, reinterpret women's pleasure, identity, and body as sources of empowerment rather than shame.

3. To analyze how *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*use women's stories, friendships, and everyday experiences to reclaim agency and challenge gendered power structures.

4. To interrogate how censorship, criticism, and public debate around these films expose the tensions between modernity, morality, and female self-expression in contemporary India.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research relies on the method of close reading, analyzing both the narrative and visual elements of two films — *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Parched* (2015). It explores how these films question traditional gender roles and portray women's pleasure as a form of empowerment. The approach is descriptive and analytical, aiming to interpret meaning rather than collect numerical data. For this, the study relies on feminist theory, in general and incorporates the idea of Lipstick Feminism**,** which highlights the idea that femininity, beauty, and sexuality can also be forms of strength. The feminist thinkers like Amy Richards, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Kathy Davis argue that expressing one's femininity or desire does not go against feminism but rather expands it. Their works, especially *Manifesta*: *Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000), inspire this study to read female characters that use beauty or sensuality as symbols of confidence and control over their bodies.

The research will also try to incorporate the insights from Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) who introduces the idea of the male gaze and shows how women are often portrayed as objects of desire in films. This study examines how *Lipstick Under My Burkha*and *Parched* challenge this pattern and replace it with a female gaze. By combining these frameworks this research aims to show how Indian cinema is beginning to break social taboos around women's sexuality and interprets how women's pleasure becomes a way of expressing freedom, agency, and identity.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research focuses on exploring how women's sexuality and desire are represented in Indian cinema through *Parched* (2015) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2016). It examines how these films challenge patriarchal narratives, reclaim female agency, and reimagine women's bodies and voices in contemporary India. Using lipstick feminism as framework the study analyzes narrative portrayal, character representation, and thematic development to explore how female desire is expressed

within the film. The scope extends to interpreting how these films contribute to broader cultural conversations on gender equality, empowerment, and the politics of representation in Indian society.

However, the study is limited to two films, which restricts the breadth of representation across diverse genres and regional cinemas in India. It focuses primarily on feminist theoretical perspectives, excluding other interpretive lenses such as psychoanalytic or postcolonial theories. Since both films are urban-centric and directed by women, the study may not fully capture how male directors or rural contexts represent female sexuality in Indian cinema.

# CHAPTERIZATION

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will introduce the research problem, objectives, hypothesis, and scope of the study. It will discuss the social and cultural neglect of women's sexuality in patriarchal societies and the role of Indian cinema in reinforcing or challenging gender norms. It will also outline key theoretical perspectives such as feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey's concept of the *male gaze*, and the ideas of *lipstick feminism* as the guiding framework for analysis.

### Chapter 1: UNVEILING VELIED VOICES AND GENDERED EXPRESSION IN URBAN INDIA: A STUDY OF *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA*

This chapter examines *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) through the lens of lipstick feminism and argues that the film offers a layered portrayal of urban and small-town Indian women who navigate the uneasy space between social restraint and personal freedom. Through the interwoven narratives of four women, differing in age, class, and social position, the film gives voice to desires that are often silenced or dismissed, revealing their shared emotional and social struggles. The chapter explores how the film explores everyday spaces, clothing, and bodily expression to question moral regulation and social surveillance. It further argues that the film presents female desire and pleasure not as transgression but as a legitimate claim to selfhood, thereby using the urban screen as a space where suppressed voices are gradually brought into

visibility.

## Chapter 2: REASSERTING FEMALE DESRIREAND BODILY AUTONOMY IN A PATRIACHAL LANDSCAPE: A STUDY OF *PARCHED*

This chapter analyses the film *Parched* (2015) through the lens of lipstick feminism to explore how beauty, sexuality, and bodily self-expression function as forms of agency within a rigidly patriarchal rural Indian context. Moving beyond earlier feminist critiques that viewed adornment and sexual display primarily as instruments of subjugation, the framework of lipstick feminism allows for a more nuanced understanding of how such practices can be re-signified as modes of resistance and self-articulation. The chapter argues that the film constructs a layered discourse in which acts of beautification, the expression of desire, and the assertion of bodily autonomy become embedded within everyday negotiations of power.

## CONCLUSION

The concluding chapter synthesizes the insights derived from the analysis of *Parche*d and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* to demonstrate how contemporary Indian cinema can function as a critical site for articulating women's voices and negotiating sexual agency. Rather than representing women solely as victims of patriarchal structures, these films foreground experiences of desire, resistance, and solidarity, thereby complicating dominant narratives of femininity. The analysis further establishes that female subjectivity in these films is shaped through ongoing negotiations between personal desire and social constraint, reflecting the complexities of agency within restrictive cultural contexts.

# CHAPTER-I

Unveiling Veiled Voices and Gendered Expression in Urban India:
A Study of *Lipstick Under my Burkha*

# CHAPTER - 1

## UNVEILING VEILED VOICESAND GENDERED EXPRESSION IN URBAN INDIA: A STUDY OF *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA*

This chapter examines *Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2016) through the lens of lipstick feminism and argues that the film offers a layered portrayal of urban and small-town Indian women who navigate the uneasy space between social restraint and personal freedom. Through the interwoven narratives of four women, differing in age, class, and social position, the film gives voice to desires that are often silenced or dismissed, revealing their shared emotional and social struggles. The chapter explores how the film explores everyday spaces, clothing, and bodily expression to question moral regulation and social surveillance. It further argues that the film presents female desire and pleasure not as transgression but as a legitimate claim to selfhood, thereby using the urban screen as a space where suppressed voices are gradually brought into visibility.

*Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2016), directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, emerges as a significant cinematic intervention in contemporary Indian cinema due to its sustained engagement with women's interior lives. The film departs decisively from dominant narrative conventions that have historically framed women through ideals of sacrifice, moral endurance, and familial duty. Instead, it foregrounds women as complex subjects whose emotional, sexual, and aspirational lives unfold in constant negotiation with social regulation. Central to lipstick feminism, this film emphasizes sexuality, pleasure and desire. What makes the film particularly compelling is its refusal to treat female desire as either sensational or aberrant; rather, desire is presented as an intrinsic aspect of womanhood that is persistently denied social legitimacy.

The narrative focuses on four women—Usha Parmar, Shireen Aslam, Leela, and Rehana Abidi—who inhabit the same urban neighbourhood yet belong to different generations and social positions. By juxtaposing their lives, the film constructs a layered representation of womanhood that moves beyond individual experience to expose structural patterns of control. Each character's struggle is shaped by specific circumstances, yet all four confront similar mechanisms of surveillance,

discipline, and moral judgement. The women in the film are consistently shown negotiating "their desire of life with patriarchy and social norms they are expected to obey" (Amelia et al.3). This negotiation is not presented as a singular conflict but as an ongoing condition that shapes the rhythm of their everyday lives. The title *Lipstick Under My Burkha* encapsulates the film's central thematic tension. Lipstick, commonly associated with femininity, sensuality, and self-expression, stands in contrast to the burkha, which signifies modesty, concealment, and social regulation. The film does not frame these symbols as oppositional; instead, it suggests that women's desires coexist with imposed codes of respectability. This symbolic juxtaposition highlights the contradiction at the heart of women's lived realities, where private longings persist beneath public conformity. The title thus operates not merely as metaphor but as an organizing principle for the film's narrative and visual language.

The film's cultural and political significance was amplified by the controversy surrounding its release. The Central Board of Film Certification's initial refusal to certify the film—on the grounds that it was "lady-oriented" and sexually explicit—reveals the persistent anxiety surrounding representations of female sexuality in the public sphere. This institutional response mirrors the film's narrative concerns, where women are repeatedly punished for articulating desire. The film unsettles dominant cinematic practices because it "locates women's sexual autonomy at the centre of narrative attention rather than relegating it to moral margins" (Hosaain 3). The censorship controversy thus becomes an extension of the film's critique, underscoring the societal impulse to regulate women's voices both on and off screen.

What distinguishes *Lipstick Under My Burkha* from many feminist narratives is its refusal to present liberation as inevitable or complete. The film does not construct a trajectory of empowerment leading to resolution or triumph. Instead, it portrays resistance as fragmented, vulnerable, and often temporary. Kathy Davis in her work *Reshaping the Female Body* argues that women are compelled to maintain a public identity while preserving the individual independence and autonomy. In the film, it is also reflected that how each woman attempts to assert autonomy whether through romantic attachment, sexual exploration, economic independence, or self-expression—is met with varying degrees of backlash. These setbacks are not framed

as personal failures but as consequences of entrenched social structures. The film conceptualizes emancipation not as a final achievement but as "a continuous struggle shaped by patriarchal constraints" (Hossain 5).

The film's narrative perspective reinforces this thematic complexity. Rather than centering male subjectivity, the narrative remains firmly anchored in women's emotional worlds. Male characters—husbands, lovers, fathers, and authority figures—are present primarily as forces of regulation rather than as fully developed subjects. This deliberate marginalization ensures that women's experiences are not subordinated to male development or redemption. The film thus resists the traditional cinematic tendency to frame women's stories in relation to male transformation.

Another significant aspect of the film's narrative strategy is its emphasis on interiority. Much of the film's emotional weight lies not in dramatic confrontation but in moments of silence, longing, and imagination. The recurring voice-over from an erotic pulp novel functions as a narrative device through which suppressed desires are articulated. The narrative elements create "a space where women's silenced desires can be articulated without social interruption" (Amelia et al.6). The novel becomes a symbolic archive of fantasies that cannot be openly expressed, highlighting the gap between inner life and social reality.

The urban, middle-class setting of the film further intensifies its critique. While urban spaces are often associated with progress and modernity, the women's lives reveal the persistence of patriarchal norms beneath the surface of social respectability. Education, employment, and mobility offer the illusion of choice, yet women's freedom remains tightly circumscribed. The film thus exposes the contradiction between modern appearance and traditional control, suggesting that patriarchy adapts rather than disappears within modern contexts.

In foregrounding women's desires without moral judgement or narrative resolution, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* asserts that desire itself is not transgressive; it becomes so only within systems that seek to discipline and silence it. The film's refusal to provide closure compels viewers to confront the discomfort of unresolved struggle, positioning the text as a powerful feminist intervention that demands sustained academic engagement. Through its nuanced portrayal of female interiority,

the film challenges dominant cinematic narratives and invites a rethinking of gender, agency, and representation in contemporary Indian cinema.

The narrative design of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* deliberately departs from conventional cinematic storytelling by refusing a single-protagonist framework or a linear plot structure. Instead, the film unfolds through the interwoven lives of four women—Usha, Shireen, Leela, and Rehana—whose stories progress simultaneously. This multi-narrative form is central to the film's thematic purpose, as it underscores the argument that women's oppression is not an individual anomaly but a recurring social pattern that manifests across age, class, and personal circumstance.

Rather than relying on dramatic climaxes or tightly structured cause-and-effect sequences, the film advances through moments drawn from everyday life. Ordinary domestic routines, private encounters, and silent reflections constitute the core of the narrative movement. This emphasis on the mundane is significant, as it reveals how patriarchal control operates quietly within daily existence rather than exclusively through extreme or visible acts of violence. By focusing on the psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters' lives, the film encourages the viewer to engage with women's inner conflicts instead of merely observing external events.

A notable aspect of the narrative is the absence of hierarchy among the four protagonists. No single storyline is presented as dominant or more significant than the others. Instead, each woman's experience mirrors and reinforces the others, creating a collective narrative of constraint and resistance. The film constructs a narrative where women's struggles appear "interconnected rather than individual," emphasizing that personal suffering is deeply rooted in broader social structures (Amelia et al. 4). This collective framing prevents the audience from interpreting the women's difficulties as personal shortcomings.

One of the most distinctive narrative devices used in the film is the recurring voice-over drawn from an erotic pulp novel titled *Lipstick Dreams*. This fictional text functions as a parallel narrative that articulates fantasies and desires that the women themselves are unable to express openly. The voice-over does not belong to a single character; rather, it circulates across the narrative, suggesting a shared imaginative space among the women. This narrative device creates "a space where women's

silenced desires can be articulated without fear of social sanction" (Amelia et al.6).

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* is set in Bhopal, a city that represents a transitional urban space within contemporary India. Neither fully metropolitan nor rural, Bhopal embodies a hybrid social environment where modern aspirations coexist with deeply rooted conservative values. By situating the narrative within a densely populated neighbourhood of Bhopal, the film grounds its exploration of women's desire and repression in a realistic, everyday urban setting. This spatial choice is crucial because it allows the film to examine how patriarchy functions not on the margins of society but at its very centre.

The neighbourhood shown in the film is characterised by narrow lanes, closely built houses, shared walls, and constant social proximity. Such spatial arrangements significantly reduce the possibility of privacy, especially for women. Everyday life unfolds under continuous observation, where neighbours, family members, and community elders collectively monitor behaviour. This environment creates what Shoma A. Chatterji describes as a social space where "women's lives are regulated through constant visibility and moral scrutiny" (Chatterji 87). In the film, this visibility becomes a form of control, compelling women to suppress desire and conform to expected norms of femininity.

Although the film's setting is urban, it does not present urbanity as inherently liberating. Instead, the city is depicted as a space where traditional moral codes persist beneath the surface of modern life. Women in the film largely belong to the lower-middle and working classes, navigating lives shaped by economic dependence and domestic responsibility. Their struggles are portrayed as quiet and internal rather than overtly confrontational. This aligns with Rachel Dwyer's observation that "urban modernity in Indian films frequently coexists with deeply conservative moral values, particularly in relation to women's sexuality" (Dwyer 52).The setting of Bhopal thus exposes the illusion of freedom often associated with urban spaces.

The film's representation of domestic interiors further intensifies this sense of confinement. Homes are not portrayed as private sanctuaries but as sites where discipline and obedience are enforced. Kitchens, bedrooms, and living spaces become zones of regulation, where women's bodies, clothing, and emotional expressions are

carefully controlled. Dwyer similarly notes that within middle-class culture "the home becomes a site for enforcing ideal femininity, respectability, and silence" (Dwyer 61). In *Lipstick Under My Burkha,* domestic space functions as one of the primary mechanisms through which patriarchal authority is exercised.

The effectiveness of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is deeply rooted in its casting, which plays a crucial role in translating the film's feminist concerns into emotionally resonant performances. The film features an ensemble cast led by Konkona Sen Sharma, Ratna Pathak Shah, Aahana Kumra, and Plabita Borthakur, each embodying a woman positioned at a different stage of life and subjected to distinct yet interconnected forms of patriarchal control. The casting choices are significant not merely for star value but for their ability to convey interiority, restraint, and emotional conflict with subtlety and realism.

Ratna Pathak Shah portrays Usha Parmar, an elderly widow whose outwardly conservative persona conceals a rich interior world of desire and longing. Shah's performance is particularly striking because it challenges dominant cinematic representations of older women as desexualised or emotionally dormant. Through restrained gestures and carefully modulated expressions, she brings to life the contradictions between Usha's public respectability and private fantasies. As Chatterji observes, performances like Shah's disrupt the conventional tendency of Indian cinema to "erase ageing women from narratives of desire" (Chatterji 112). Shah's casting thus becomes a deliberate intervention into age-based marginalisation within cinematic storytelling.

Konkona Sen Sharma plays Shireen Aslam, a married woman navigating the intersecting pressures of domestic abuse, economic dependency, and maternal responsibility. Sharma's performance is marked by quiet intensity, capturing Shireen's emotional exhaustion and suppressed resilience. Her portrayal avoids melodrama, instead foregrounding silence and restraint as expressions of suffering. This aligns with Rachel Dwyer's observation that women in realist Indian cinema often articulate oppression through "controlled performances that privilege emotional understatement over spectacle" (Dwyer 134). Sharma's casting enhances the film's commitment to realism, allowing Shireen's struggle to emerge as both personal and systemic.

Aahana Kumra's portrayal of Leela offers a contrast to the muted tones of the other performances. Leela is depicted as openly expressive, emotionally volatile, and resistant to imposed norms. Kumra brings a sense of urgency and restlessness to the character, embodying a young woman caught between desire and social obligation. Her performance highlights the emotional cost of forced conformity, particularly within the institution of marriage. Kumra's casting reinforces the film's exploration of how youthful aspiration is disciplined through moral expectations. As Hossain notes, Leela's character represents "the conflict between individual desire and socially sanctioned femininity" (Hossain 4).

Plabita Borthakur plays Rehana Abidi, a college student whose struggle centres on identity formation and self-expression. Borthakur's performance captures the tensions of adolescence within a restrictive environment, particularly the pressure to conform to familial and cultural expectations. Through subtle shifts in posture, clothing, and speech, she conveys Rehana's negotiation between obedience and rebellion. Scholars examining youth representation in Indian cinema argue that young women are often depicted as "sites where modernity and tradition collide" (Chatterji 98). Borthakur's portrayal aligns with this observation, making Rehana's narrative an essential component of the film's generational critique.

The male characters in the film—husbands, fathers, and authority figures—are intentionally underdeveloped, functioning primarily as structural forces rather than psychological subjects. This narrative choice reinforces the film's focus on female experience and subjectivity. The absence of detailed male interiority ensures that attention remains firmly fixed on women's emotional lives rather than on justifying or humanizing patriarchal behavior. Laura Mulvey's assertion that narrative cinema often privileges male subjectivity is subtly reversed here, where women remain the central agents of meaning and experience. (Mulvey 12)

Collectively, the ensemble cast allows *Lipstick Under My Burkha* to present a layered representation of womanhood that transcends age, class, and marital status. Each performance contributes to a broader narrative of repression and resistance, demonstrating how patriarchy operates across different social positions. The casting thus becomes a critical narrative strategy, transforming abstract feminist concerns into lived, emotionally compelling realities.

Talking about the the symbolic language of the film is rooted in the tension between visibility and concealment. Women's lives unfold within a social environment that demands silence, modesty, and restraint. Symbolism allows the film to bypass these imposed limits, giving visual and narrative form to desires that cannot be openly spoken. In her book Anupama Chopra notes, Indian feminist cinema often relies on "subtle visual metaphors to articulate women's resistance within socially constrained spaces" (Chopra 146). *Lipstick Under My Burkha* exemplifies this tradition by embedding its critique within symbolic gestures rather than explicit dialogue.

In the film, the burkha emerges as one of the most complex and symbolically charged elements within the film's narrative framework. Rather than functioning merely as a religious or cultural garment, the burkha becomes a visual and ideological marker through which women's behaviour, morality, and social worth are continuously assessed. Set within the dense urban neighbourhoods of Bhopal, the film situates the burkha at the intersection of visibility and concealment, revealing how patriarchal power operates not by rendering women invisible, but by subjecting them to intensified scrutiny under the guise of modesty.

The film carefully dismantles the assumption that veiling provides privacy or protection. On the contrary, the burkha becomes a signifier that demands disciplined conduct and moral conformity. Women who wear it are expected to embody restraint not only in appearance but also in speech, movement, and desire. This expectation reflects what Fatima Mernissi describes as a system in which "the veil does not eliminate visibility; it reorganizes it according to patriarchal logic" (Mernissi 85). In*Lipstick Under My Burkha*, this reorganization ensures that women remain constantly legible to the social gaze, their actions measured against rigid standards of respectability.

This link between clothing and moral behaviour is articulated most clearly through everyday dialogue, where social norms are reinforced casually and repeatedly. In one such moment, Usha Parmar is reminded of her responsibility to conform: "you wear the bhurkha, Usha ji so you should behave like a respectable woman" (Shrivastava 21:40 - 21:46) The emphasis on "behave" reveals how the burkha operates as a moral contract rather than a personal choice. Respectability is

framed as a performance that must accompany the garment at all times. The neighbour's tone suggests that deviation from expected conduct would not merely be a personal failing but a social offence. Through this dialogue, the film demonstrates how women's bodies become repositories of communal honour, where appearance and behaviour are inseparable.

Moreover, the film shows that such regulation does not require constant external enforcement. Instead, patriarchal norms are internalised, transforming women into self- regulating subjects. Shireen Aslam articulates this internalised fear when she reflects on the omnipresent gaze of the community: "people are watching us all the time one mistake, and everyone will talk" (Shrivastava 47:10- 47:18).This statement encapsulates the psychological dimension of control. Surveillance here is not enacted solely through authority figures but through the anticipation of gossip and judgement. Shireen's fear demonstrates how women begin to discipline themselves, suppressing desire and individuality in order to avoid public shame.

The generational transmission of these values further reinforces the symbolic function of the burkha. Rehana Abidi's interactions with her mother illustrate how norms surrounding modesty and honour are passed down within families. Her mother's insistence on boundaries is explicit: "if you wear a bhurkha, you must remember your limits" (Shrivastava 6:18- 6:24). The invocation of "limits" underscores how the burkha is associated with restriction rather than agency. This dialogue reflects how moral discipline is normalised through parental authority, making obedience appear natural and inevitable. The film thereby reveals that patriarchy sustains itself not only through male dominance but also through familial structures that reproduce control across generations.

At the same time, the film does not present women as passive recipients of these norms. Rehana's response exposes the tension between outward compliance and inner resistance. While she adheres to the visible markers of respectability, her words assert a refusal to surrender consciousness and individuality: "I wear a bhurkha, but I am not blind" (Shrivastava 29:55 - 30:02). This moment is particularly significant because it destabilises the assumption that modest dress equates to submission. Rehana's statement foregrounds awareness and perception, challenging the idea that obedience requires intellectual erasure. The burkha thus becomes a contested

symbol—simultaneously enforcing conformity and provoking resistance. The film uses this tension to show that repression is never complete; it always generates counter-narratives, however fragile.

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, lipstick functions as one of the most potent and recurring symbols through which the film articulates female desire, identity, and resistance. Unlike the burkha, which is imposed as a marker of social respectability, lipstick emerges as a deeply personal object—chosen, hidden, applied, and erased by women themselves. Yet, despite its apparent triviality as a cosmetic item, lipstick carries immense ideological weight. The film demonstrates how even small acts of adornment are subjected to moral scrutiny within patriarchal structures, revealing how women's bodies are continuously regulated through everyday practices.

The symbolic significance of lipstick lies in its association with visibility. To wear lipstick is to make oneself noticeable, to draw attention to the mouth—a site traditionally associated with speech, desire, and expression. Within the social world of the film, such visibility is treated with suspicion. Lipstick becomes a sign of excess, transgression, and moral looseness, particularly when worn by women who are expected to embody restraint based on age, marital status, or class. As Susan Bordo argues, female bodies are often disciplined through "micro- practices that render desire visible and therefore punishable" (Bordo 165). Lipstick, in this sense, becomes a micro-practice that exposes women to judgement.

This moral regulation is first articulated through Usha Parmar, whose internalised repression reflects age-based disciplining of female desire. When confronted with lipstick, Usha instinctively distances herself from it: "lipstick is not for women like us" (Shrivastava 12:05 - 12:09). The phrase "women like us" is particularly revealing. It constructs a collective identity rooted in age, respectability, and social expectation. Usha's dialogue suggests that desire has an expiry date, after which women are expected to renounce pleasure entirely. This moment reflects what Germaine Greer identifies as the cultural desexualisation of older women, where "female desire becomes socially illegible with age" (Greer 92). Lipstick thus becomes a forbidden object, symbolising pleasures deemed inappropriate for women beyond a certain life stage.

The moral anxiety surrounding lipstick is not limited to age but extends to marital and familial roles. Shireen Aslam articulates this anxiety through everyday judgement: “Good girls don’t panit their lips” (Shrivastava 39:32 - 39:36). This statement reinforces a binary between “good” and “bad” femininity, where morality is measured through appearance. The act of painting one’s lips is framed as unnecessary and suspicious, implying sexual availability or moral deviation. As Rosalind Gill observes, femininity is often regulated through “moral vocabularies that disguise control as virtue” (Gill 58). Shireen’s dialogue reflects this logic, where restraint is equated with goodness and self-expression with danger.

At the same time, the film reveals how such judgements are often internalised rather than externally enforced. Women police themselves, anticipating criticism before it is voiced. This internalisation is evident when Rehana’s mother questions her daughter’s appearance: “who are you trying to impress” (Shrivastava 33:45 - 33:49). This dialogue reduces personal choice to a performance for the male gaze, denying the possibility that adornment might exist for self-pleasure or self-recognition. Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze becomes relevant here, as female appearance is continually interpreted in relation to presumed male spectatorship (Mulvey 11). Lipstick, therefore, becomes suspect precisely because it challenges the expectation that women should remain visually neutral and morally invisible.

In contrast to these restrictive discourses, the film offers moments where lipstick becomes an instrument of self-assertion. Leela’s relationship with lipstick represents a desire to reclaim her body and appearance on her own terms. In a moment of quiet defiance, she asserts: “ I like seeing myself this way” (Shrivastava 1:05:20 - 1:05:24). This statement reorients the meaning of adornment from external validation to internal satisfaction. The emphasis on “myself” foregrounds self-recognition rather than social approval. Feminist scholars such as Rita Felski argue that such moments of self-affirmation, though small, are crucial because they “challenge the assumption that pleasure is always complicit with oppression” (Felski 67). Lipstick here becomes a site of pleasure that resists moral condemnation.

Leela further reinforces this resistance through a more assertive declaration: “This is my face” (Shrivastava 1:05:25-1:05:28). This seemingly simple sentence carries significant political weight. By claiming ownership over her face, Leela

challenges the idea that women's bodies belong to family, community, or societal norms. The face—often the most visible and scrutinized part of the body—becomes a site of autonomy. Lipstick, applied to this space, thus symbolizes an insistence on self-definition.

Importantly, the film does not romanticize lipstick as a complete solution or a triumphant act of liberation. Instead, it presents lipstick as a fragile, temporary, and often concealed form of resistance. Women apply it in private, wipe it off before entering public spaces, or hide it from disapproving eyes. This fragility reflects what Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as "everyday forms of resistance that exist within, rather than outside, structures of domination" (Mohanty 34). Lipstick becomes meaningful precisely because it operates within constraint. Through its layered representation of lipstick, the film exposes the contradictions of urban patriarchy. The film reveals how modern consumer culture coexists with rigid moral policing, allowing women access to commodities while denying them autonomy over their use. Lipstick, a mass-produced object associated with modernity, becomes threatening when it enables women to articulate desire.

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, characterisation operates as the primary narrative strategy through which the film interrogates female desire, repression, and resistance. Rather than constructing a single representative female figure, the film presents four women from different age groups, religious backgrounds, and socio-economic positions. Together, these characters form a composite portrait of urban womanhood shaped by patriarchy, surveillance, and moral regulation. Each character's struggle is distinct, yet interconnected, revealing how oppression adapts itself across generational and social lines.

The film's feminist intervention lies in its refusal to hierarchise suffering. Usha's repression as an elderly widow is not portrayed as less significant than Rehana's youthful rebellion or Shireen's marital entrapment. Instead, the narrative suggests that patriarchy functions as a continuum, producing different forms of control depending on age, marital status, and respectability. As Judith Butler argues, gendered subjectivity is not fixed but "produced repeatedly through social norms" (Butler 34). The characters in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* exemplify this repeated production of constraint and resistance.

The characterization of women in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* offers a powerful critique of patriarchy by presenting female desire as both universal and systematically repressed across different social locations. Directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, the film constructs four distinct yet interconnected female subjectivities—Usha, Shireen, Rehana, and Leela—each shaped by age, religion, class, and marital status. Rather than portraying oppression as exceptional, the film reveals it as deeply embedded in everyday life. The characterization is therefore structural rather than merely individual, demonstrating how patriarchal power adapts itself to regulate women differently at various stages of life while maintaining control over female desire and autonomy.

Usha Parmar's character is one of the most subversive in the film, as it challenges the cultural erasure of ageing women's sexuality. As an elderly widow, Usha is positioned as a moral guardian whose respectability depends upon the denial of desire. Her social identity is defined through restraint, reflecting what Simone de Beauvoir argues—that older women are "excluded from erotic life and transformed into moral symbols" (de Beauvoir 603). This expectation is reinforced in everyday interactions, where she is reminded: "At this age, you should focus on prayers, not on unnecessary things" (Shrivastava 19:10–19:18). The phrase "at this age" functions as a cultural boundary that denies her emotional and sexual subjectivity. However, the film destabilises this identity through Usha's private engagement with erotic audio narratives. When she listens to the line, "He touched her as if she was the only woman in the world" (Shrivastava 14:32–14:40), the fantasy restores her sense of desirability and individuality. As Rachel Maines notes, fantasy operates as a "safe rehearsal space for desires that society refuses to legitimise" (Maines 56). Usha's awakening becomes more explicit when she confesses, "for once I wanted to feel like a woman" (Shrivastava 1:02:10–1:02:16), redefining womanhood beyond age and reproduction. Yet, her exposure leads to humiliation—"Have you no shame? Listening to such dirty stories" (Shrivastava 1:10:18–1:10:25)—revealing how society constructs ageing female desire as obscene. As Germaine Greer argues, older women are punished not for desire itself but for violating sexual silence (Greer 94). Thus, Usha's characterization exposes how patriarchy suppresses but cannot eliminate desire, forcing it into secrecy (Foucault 96).

In contrast, Shireen Aslam's characterization foregrounds the normalisation of violence within marriage. Her life is structured by repetition, fear, and emotional exhaustion, revealing marriage as a site of coercion rather than intimacy. Her lack of consent is evident when she states, "If I say no, everything will turn into a fight" (Shrivastava 31:10–31:15). This line highlights how refusal is structurally impossible, aligning with Catharine MacKinnon's argument that marriage legitimises male sexual entitlement (MacKinnon 174). Shireen's suffering is further normalised through her statement, "This is how married life is" (Shrivastava 37:18–37:22), which reflects the internalisation of oppression. Her exhaustion—"I am tired all the time, but there is no rest" (Shrivastava 34:50–34:56)—captures both physical and emotional labour, supporting Silvia Federici's view that women's labour sustains patriarchal systems (Federici 21). Religion reinforces this submission when Shireen asserts, "A wife must keep her husband happy" (Shrivastava 41:05–41:10), demonstrating how morality is used to justify coercion (Ahmed 92). Even her aspiration for independence—"I want to stand on my own feet" (Shrivastava 55:42–55:48)—is dismissed: "Why do you need a job? Is what I give you not enough?" (Shrivastava 56:30–56:38). Her eventual retreat into silence—"I don't want to fight, I just want peace" (Shrivastava 58:02–58:08)—echoes bell hooks' insight that silence often becomes a survival strategy (hooks 88). Shireen's characterization thus exposes the invisibility of marital rape and the structural nature of domestic oppression.

Rehana Abidi's character represents the contradictions of youth under surveillance. Her life is governed by constant monitoring, and her frustration is evident when she says, "I follow all the rules, but still it is never enough" (Shrivastava 8:42–8:47). This reflects Judith Butler's argument that norms are unstable and impossible to fully satisfy (Butler 52). The burkha becomes a symbol of this contradiction when Rehana asserts, "I wear a burkha, but I am not blind" (Shrivastava 29:55–30:02), rejecting the assumption that modesty implies submission. Her rebellion—through music and secrecy—is expressed when she states, "When I listen to music, I feel like myself" (Shrivastava 26:40–26:46), highlighting the role of affect in identity formation (McRobbie 78). However, her resistance is shaped by constraint, as seen in her justification for theft: "I wanted something that was mine" (Shrivastava 35:12–35:18). This reflects the symbolic desire for ownership and autonomy (Bordo 167). Her confrontation with her mother—"If you cross limits, you will destroy this

family" (Shrivastava 18:55–19:02)—demonstrates how patriarchy is enforced within the family. Ultimately, her vulnerability is captured in the line, "I just wanted to breathe" (Shrivastava 1:12:40–1:12:45), illustrating what Sara Ahmed describes as affective suffocation (Ahmed 135). Rehana's characterization thus reveals that rebellion is often fragmented and punished rather than liberating.

Leela's character complicates the idea of sexual freedom by situating it within economic constraint. Unlike the other women, she openly expresses desire, as seen in her assertion, "I want this" (Shrivastava 46:55–46:58), which foregrounds consent. However, her agency is limited by class, as her arranged marriage represents financial necessity rather than emotional fulfilment. Her resistance is articulated when she states, "I don't want a life where I have to pretend" (Shrivastava 18:20–18:25), emphasising authenticity. Yet, she also acknowledges the reality of compromise: "Marriage is not love. It's adjustment" (Shrivastava 40:12–40:18). This aligns with Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti 275). Her frustration with her limited freedom is evident in "I want more than stolen moments" (Shrivastava 1:01:30–1:01:36), highlighting the insufficiency of fragmented desire. Even her assertion of self—"This is my face" (Shrivastava 1:05:24–1:05:28)—is ultimately undermined by structural constraints. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, agency must be understood within material conditions (Mohanty 34). Leela's characterization thus critiques the illusion that sexual freedom equates to liberation.

Collectively, the four characters illustrate a continuum of patriarchal control operating across age, marriage, youth, and class. Usha's repression is tied to ageing, Shireen's to marital structures, Rehana's to surveillance, and Leela's to economic dependence. Despite their differences, their struggles are interconnected, demonstrating that no woman exists outside the reach of patriarchy. The film's refusal to provide neat resolutions reinforces its critique, suggesting that individual resistance is insufficient without structural change. As Michel Foucault argues, power produces both constraint and resistance (Foucault 96), a dynamic visible in all four narratives.

The characterization in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is nuanced and politically significant, as it foregrounds the complexity of women's lived experiences under patriarchy. By integrating dialogues with theoretical frameworks, the film demonstrates that desire persists despite repression, but its expression is shaped and

limited by social structures. The narratives of Usha, Shireen, Rehana, and Leela collectively challenge dominant cultural assumptions, asserting that the problem is not female desire itself but the systems that seek to regulate and silence it.

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, patriarchy does not appear as a singular villain or an abstract ideology; instead, it operates as an everyday structure that organizes women's lives through routine practices, moral expectations, and emotional regulation. The film's most striking intervention lies in its refusal to portray patriarchy as external or exceptional. Rather, it shows how domination is normalized through family, marriage, religion, class, and social respectability. Across the narratives of Usha, Shireen, Rehana, and Leela, patriarchy functions by controlling women's bodies while simultaneously disciplining their desires. What unites these women is not a shared experience, but a shared condition: each is required to suppress or justify her longing in order to remain socially acceptable. As Sylvia Walby argues, patriarchy persists not only through institutions but through everyday social relations that make inequality appear natural.

This normalization is most evident in the language used by the characters themselves. Patriarchal control is internalized and articulated as duty, fear, or inevitability. Shireen's resigned observation captures this process: "this is how married life is" (Shrivastava 37:18-37:22). Here, violence is rendered ordinary, stripped of its injustice. Veena Das describes this absorption of suffering into daily life as the "descent of violence into the ordinary," where pain ceases to be recognized as violation (Das 78).

Similarly, Rehana's conflict reveals how patriarchy is enforced through surveillance and honor rather than direct violence. Her mother's warning exposes how women themselves become agents of patriarchal discipline: "if you cross limits you will destroy this family" (Shrivastava 18:55-19:02). The burden of family reputation is placed entirely on the female body, transforming individual desire into collective threat. As Deniz Kandiyoti notes, such dynamics sustain patriarchy through "bargains" that compel women to police themselves and each other (Kandiyoti 275).

Leela's narrative adds a crucial class dimension to this synthesis. Her sexual agency exists, but it is fragile and conditional. Her assertion "marriage is not love. Its

adjustment" (Shrivastava 40:12-40:18)—-reveals how patriarchal institutions are negotiated rather than embraced. Yet, negotiation does not equal freedom. Economic vulnerability limits the range of choices available to her, confirming Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument that agency must be understood within material and structural constraints (Mohanty 34). Even Usha's late-life desire is disciplined through shame and ridicule, reinforcing the idea that women's sexuality has an expiration date. Patriarchy thus operates across age, class, and marital status, adapting itself to different life stages while maintaining control.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that patriarchy in *Lipstick Under MyBurkha* is not merely oppressive but efficient: it produces silence, guilt, and self-regulation without constant force. The film's political power lies in making this invisible structure visible. To conclude *Lipstick Under My Burkha* consciously rejects the narrative expectation of resolution. Rather than offering liberation, justice, or escape, the film closes with a moment of shared presence—four women sitting together, speaking, listening, and laughing. This final sequence is deceptively simple, yet it functions as the most politically charged moment of the film. It is here that private desires, long suppressed and individually negotiated, are articulated within a collective female space.

What distinguishes this ending from conventional feminist narratives is its refusal to equate empowerment with success. None of the women has overcome patriarchy in any measurable sense. Instead, the film insists that speaking itself is an act of resistance, especially for women whose lives have been structured around silence. As Michel de Certeau suggests, everyday practices of speech and narration can function as subtle yet powerful forms of opposition within dominant systems.

The women's conversation begins tentatively, marked by hesitation rather than confidence. This hesitation reflects years of internalized restraint. Usha Parmar initiates the exchange by returning to storytelling—her most consistent form of self-expression throughout the film: "desire doesn't disappear just because of it" (Shrivastava 1:54:48-1:54:55). This line reframes desire not as transgression but as persistence. Usha's articulation carries symbolic weight because it collapses age-based hierarchies of sexuality. Her voice asserts continuity across generations, reminding the group that longing is not an aberration but a condition of being human.

Shireen's contribution to the conversation is quieter, yet deeply significant. Having spent most of the film absorbing violence in silence, her speech marks a fragile but decisive shift: "I thought I was alone in feeling this way" (Shrivastava 1:55:20-1:55:25). This admission exposes one of patriarchy's most effective strategies: isolation. By convincing women that their suffering is personal rather than structural, patriarchal systems prevent solidarity. Shireen's recognition that her pain is shared destabilizes this isolation. As bell hooks argues, naming shared experience is the first step toward feminist consciousness (hooks 19).

Rehana's presence in the final scene carries particular emotional intensity. Her youth, rebellion, and repeated punishment throughout the film culminate not in triumph but in emotional exhaustion. Yet, when she speaks, her voice carries relief rather than defeat: "for once I don't feel like doing something wrong" (Shrivastava 1:55:38-1:55:44). This statement is crucial because it highlights the moral burden placed on young women. Rehana's entire journey has been shaped by the fear of wrongdoing—of being watched, judged, and punished. The collective space of the final scene temporarily suspends this moral surveillance, allowing her to exist without justification. Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective relief" becomes relevant here, where happiness emerges not from success but from the removal of constant pressure (Ahmed 129).

Leela's dialogue in the concluding sequence reflects both realism and resolve. Her earlier optimism about romance has been replaced by a more grounded understanding of structural constraint. Yet, her tone is not bitter. Instead, she articulates a form of pragmatic hope: "maybe we can't change everything, but at least we can talk about it" (Shrivastava 1:55:55-1:56:02). Leela's statement encapsulates the film's ideological position. Change is not presented as immediate or total; it begins with articulation. Speech becomes a mode of survival rather than revolution. As Nancy Fraser notes, counter-publics often emerge through conversation rather than confrontation, especially among marginalized groups (Fraser 123).

What follows these dialogues is perhaps the most radical gesture of the film: shared laughter. The laughter is not triumphant; it is weary, ironic, and intimate. It signifies recognition rather than resolution. Laughter, here, functions as emotional release—a reclaiming of joy within constraint. This moment aligns with feminist

arguments that pleasure and solidarity are themselves political acts when denied by dominant systems .

The film's final moments thus reconfigure resistance. Rather than positioning liberation as escape from patriarchy, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* frames resistance as endurance with awareness. The women are not free, but they are no longer entirely silent. Their collective presence challenges the notion that feminist resistance must always be visible, loud, or victorious. It becomes evident that *Lipstick Under My Burkha* offers a nuanced feminist intervention into Indian cinema. By foregrounding everyday lives, muted desires, and incomplete rebellions, the film exposes patriarchy as a lived structure rather than an abstract enemy.

*Lipstick Under My Burkha*emerges as an especially suitable and critically rich text for the present research because it foregrounds female sexuality and desire as lived, embodied experiences rather than abstract feminist ideals. The film openly articulates women's negotiations with bodily autonomy across different ages, marital statuses, and class positions, thereby offering a multidimensional portrayal of how female desire is both expressed and regulated within everyday life. By depicting women who speak about their bodies, sexual longings, and emotional needs, the narrative exposes the cultural mechanisms through which such expressions are frequently controlled, silenced, or punished. Feminist scholars have argued that women's articulation of sexual desire is often perceived as socially disruptive because it challenges patriarchal authority over the female body. Whether through marital coercion, religious morality, familial surveillance, or economic dependency, the film consistently demonstrates that when women assert ownership over their bodies, they encounter repression rather than acceptance. Importantly, the film avoids sensationalizing sexuality; instead, it situates desire within domestic and ordinary spaces, revealing how power operates most effectively through routine social norms This makes *Lipstick Under My Burkha* an ideal cinematic text for examining the intersection of sexuality, gender, and power, as it critically exposes the social consequences faced by women who openly claim bodily autonomy and sexual self-expression.

# CHAPTER-II

Reasserting Female Desire and Bodily Autonomy in a Patriarchal Landscape: A Study of *Parched*

# CHAPTER - 2

## REASSERTING FEMALE DESIRE AND BODILY AUTONOMY IN A PATRIACHIAL LANDSCAPE: A STUDY OF *PARCHED*

This chapter analyses the film *Parched* (2015) through the lens of lipstick feminism to explore how beauty, sexuality, and bodily self-expression function as forms of agency within a rigidly patriarchal rural Indian context. Moving beyond earlier feminist critiques that viewed adornment and sexual display primarily as instruments of subjugation, the framework of lipstick feminism allows for a more nuanced understanding of how such practices can be re-signified as modes of resistance and self-articulation. The chapter argues that the film constructs a layered discourse in which acts of beautification, the expression of desire, and the assertion of bodily autonomy become embedded within everyday negotiations of power.

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has long been influenced by patriarchal cultural narratives that govern how female bodies, sexuality, and identity are portrayed on screen. Traditionally, women have been constrained to tightly defined roles such as obedient daughter, dedicated wife, or self-sacrificing mother, all of which promote social expectations of modesty, obedience, and moral virtue. In these narratives, female sexuality is frequently suppressed, restricted, or shown via the lens of male desire. As a result, films that seek to highlight women's experiences of desire, physiological autonomy, and emotional subjectivity frequently question deeply embedded cultural standards. The film *Parched* (2016), directed by Leena Yadav, emerges as a crucial cinematic intervention that critically examines patriarchal institutions and societal regulation of female sexuality in Indian society today.

The film *Parched* offers a rich narrative terrain through which the framework of lipstick feminism can be critically examined. Lipstick feminism, emerging as a strand within third-wave feminist thought, emphasizes the reclamation of traditionally "feminine" attributes—such as beauty, sexuality, and adornment—not as markers of subordination but as potential sites of agency and empowerment. Rather than rejecting femininity as inherently oppressive, lipstick feminism argues that women can consciously perform and inhabit femininity on their own terms. In *Parched*, this perspective becomes particularly relevant as the film portrays rural Indian women

negotiating oppressive patriarchal structures while simultaneously asserting control over their bodies, desires, and identities.

Parched depicts the linked lives of three women—Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—are depicted in Parched, which is set in a traditional rural Rajasthani village. Their experiences highlight the intricate relationships between gender, tradition, and social authority. The story places these characters in a sociocultural setting where patriarchal authority controls almost every aspect of women's lives, including their access to autonomy, mobility, and sexuality. The film offers a nuanced examination of how gender inequality functions at the level of daily life by concentrating on rural women, whose voices are frequently ignored in both feminist discourse and cinematic depiction.

Anisha Mondal observes, “Leena Yadav’s *Parched* foregrounds the lived experiences of rural women whose lives are structured by rigid patriarchal norms and gendered expectations” (Mondal 41). In alignment with her statement, the film then highlights the social realities that women encounter when navigating oppressive systems that are ingrained in family structures, cultural customs, and financial reliance.

Deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes that control female behavior through a convoluted web of social institutions and cultural conventions define the social milieu shown in the film. Patriarchal control is perpetuated and upheld through practices including arranged marriage, dowry negotiations, and the policing of women's bodies. Women's identities are often defined within this framework in terms of their duties as spouses, mothers, and daughters, leaving little space for personal liberty or self-expression. At this point sylvia notes, “Patriarchal institutions such as family and marriage functions as social structures that regulate women’s roles and autonomy” (Walby 20). The film vividly illustrates how these institutional structures shape the everyday lives of its female protagonists, constraining their ability to pursue emotional fulfilment, sexual agency, and personal independence.

Three women, whose individual battles represent various aspects of gender oppression, are at the centre of the story. The incorporation of patriarchal values into female subjectivity is exemplified by Rani, a widowed mother. She first perpetuates

the very systems that restrict women's agency by setting up an early marriage for her young daughter-in-law, despite her own experiences of marginalization. Conversely, Lajjo represents the agonizing effects of social disgrace and marital subjugation. She is physically abused and humiliated by her husband, and she is frequently held responsible for her infertility, underscoring the societal belief that a woman's worth is inextricably related to her ability to procreate.

Bijli holds a particularly complicated place in the village's social order as a dancer who performs for male audiences. Even if she is self-sufficient financially and freely expresses her sexuality, the same guys who secretly harbour feelings for her stigmatize and criticize her. The movie illustrates the various ways that patriarchal control appears in the lives of women through these three individuals. The story of *Parched* progressively shows how female solidarity emerges as a potent form of resistance despite the harsh circumstances that mold their experiences.

Because of their friendship, Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli are able to express their grievances, share their emotional burdens, and see different outcomes for their lives. The tie between these women is based on empathy, compassion, and shared suffering, in contrast to the oppressive and hierarchical interactions that define the patriarchal social order. This is important when "the emotional bond among the female protagonists becomes a significant site of resistance, allowing them to challenge the patriarchal structures that confine their lives" (Ahmad et al. 58). This emphasis on female friendship highlights the transformative potential of collective agency, suggesting that solidarity among women can function as a catalyst for social change. The film's discussion of female sexuality, a topic that is still highly stigmatized in many cultural contexts, is another significant feature. Female desire is frequently shown in popular films as either a danger to society morals or something that must eventually be subdued through domesticity and marriage. *Parched* challenges these norms by showcasing women who freely communicate their sexual and emotional desires. Instead of portraying female desire as shameful or evil, the movie shows it as a normal and essential part of being human.

Grishma Trivedi in her research article "Women's Sexuality and Rural Patriarchy in the film *Parched*" argues, "the film challenges the cultural taboo surrounding female desire by portraying women who articulate their emotional and

sexual longing within a patriarchal environment" (Trivedi 151). Through this representation, the film encourages viewers to reconsider the cultural narratives that silence women's sexual agency. The visual imagery of the film further reinforces its thematic exploration of repression and desire. The desert landscape that surrounds the village functions as a powerful metaphor for the emotional deprivation experienced by the female characters. Just as the land appears dry, barren, and devoid of life, the women's lives are marked by a profound absence of affection, intimacy, and freedom. The recurring imagery of dryness and thirst symbolically reflects the emotional and sexual repression imposed upon them by patriarchal society. Another scholar Maria Isabel Menéndez, in her article "Female desire and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Cinema," observes: "The barren landscape of the film visually mirrors the psychological isolation and suppression faced by women within patriarchal cultural systems" (Menéndez 25). By connecting the physical environment with the emotional experiences of the characters, the film creates a compelling visual metaphor that deepens its critique of gender inequality.

Furthermore, the film explores the complex ways in which patriarchal power is internalized and reproduced within social relationships. Women themselves sometimes become agents of patriarchal ideology, enforcing the very norms that restrict their freedom. This dynamic is particularly evident in Rani's character, whose initial actions reflect her belief in the inevitability of traditional gender roles. However, as the narrative unfolds, her experiences gradually lead her to question these assumptions. Through this transformation, the film illustrates how consciousness and resistance can emerge from within the very structures that sustain oppression.

Ultimately, *Parched* offers a nuanced and deeply human portrayal of women navigating systems of power that seek to control their bodies, voices, and desires. Rather than presenting a simplistic narrative of liberation, the film portrays the gradual process through which women begin to recognize the injustices embedded within their social environment and seek alternative paths toward autonomy. The final moments of the film, in which the women choose to leave the village in search of a new life, symbolize not only a physical departure but also a psychological rejection of patriarchal authority. Mondal remarks, "the act of leaving the village represents a

symbolic refusal of the oppressive structures that have long governed the women's lives" (Mondal 46).

In the broader framework of this dissertation, the analysis of *Parched* adds to the continuing investigation of how concerns of female sexuality, bodily autonomy, and patriarchal authority are addressed in modern Indian film. Although *Lipstick Under My Burkha* explored these ideas in the previous chapter, this chapter expands on the conversation by concentrating on rural women whose lives are influenced by various social, cultural, and economic factors. This chapter aims to show how *Parched* reveals the ways in which patriarchal societies control women's bodies and desires while also highlighting the potential for resistance, solidarity, and change through a thorough analysis of the film's narrative structure, character development, symbolic imagery, and dialogue.

The narrative structure of *Parched* unfolds through the intertwined lives of three women—Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—who inhabit a conservative rural village in Rajasthan where patriarchal customs regulate social behaviour, gender roles, and personal freedom. Rather than focusing on a single protagonist, the film employs a multi-protagonist narrative that highlights how women's experiences of oppression are shaped by intersecting structures of gender, culture, and economic dependency. Through the personal struggles of these characters, the film reveals the everyday mechanisms through which patriarchy disciplines female bodies and restricts women's autonomy. The film reveals the invisible yet powerful structures of patriarchy that regulate women's lives in rural communities through institutions such as marriage, morality, and social surveillance.

The story begins by introducing Rani, a widowed woman who struggles to maintain her family's social standing and economic survival after the death of her husband. Living with her son Gulab, Rani attempts to secure stability through adherence to traditional customs, even when those customs perpetuate the oppression of women. Early in the narrative, she arranges a marriage between Gulab and a young girl named Janaki, thereby illustrating how patriarchal traditions continue to shape family decisions and social expectations. During the dowry negotiations, the transactional nature of marriage becomes evident, which reveals how women are often treated as commodities within patriarchal systems. "She just turned fifteen…

you won’t find a better bride.” (Yadav 00:03:12–00:03:18) This instance demonstrates how customs like dowry exchanges and planned marriages uphold patriarchal power. *Parched* shows "patriarchal traditions operate through everyday cultural practices that reduce women to objects of exchange within the institution of marriage" (Mondal 42). The movie creates the social context in which strict cultural norms limit female agency through this early narrative development.

The film depicts the horrific experiences of Rani's close friend Lajjo, whose life is characterized by emotional humiliation and domestic abuse, alongside Rani's plot. Manoj, Lajjo's husband, verbally and physically assaults her regularly while accusing her of being the reason they are unable to conceive. Infertility is stigmatized in the patriarchal community, undermining a woman's identity and social value. Lajjo's misery demonstrates how the abuse of women in marriage is justified by reproductive aspirations. For instance, he says, “What kind of woman cannot give her husband a child?” (Yadav 00:32:05–00:32:11) This accusation's brutality serves as an example of how patriarchal ideology connects parenting with female worth.

The film reveals the pervasive structures of patriarchy that regulate women’s lives through marriage, morality, and social expectations. As Sylvia Walby defines, “patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 20), a concept that is clearly reflected in the rural setting of *Parched*. The narrative further exposes how women’s bodies and desires are controlled within these structures, reinforcing what Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards identify as the importance of bodily autonomy, noting that “control over our bodies is central to feminism” (Baumgardner and Richards 61). In cinematic terms, the film challenges traditional representations of women, aligning with Laura Mulvey’s argument that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 11). At the same time, scholars such as Mondal argue that the female characters in *Parched* are marginalized within patriarchal rural structures, while Trivedi highlights that the film foregrounds female sexuality as a form of resistance against these norms. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the solidarity among women becomes a powerful strategy to challenge and resist patriarchal oppression (Ahmad et al.). The film highlights the deeply ingrained cultural assumption that a

woman's primary function is to fulfil reproductive expectations by depicting Lajjo's emotional pain.

The figure of Bijli holds a socially ambiguous position in the community, in contrast to the limited household lives of Rani and Lajjo. Bijli seems to represent a kind of sexual liberation that goes against conventional notions of female modesty as a dancer who performs for male audiences. But the societal shame associated with her line of work complicates her seeming freedom. The same men who secretly admire her performances publicly condemn her as immoral, as rani reveals the hypocrisy that often surrounds female sexuality in patriarchal societies. “Men who insult me in the day are the same men who come to watch me dance at night” (Yadav 00:52:14–00:52:21) Trivedi also remarks that Bijli serves as an example of how "female sexuality is simultaneously commodified and condemned, reflecting the contradictory attitudes that patriarchal societies maintain toward women's bodies" (Trivedi 152). The moral inconsistency that permits men to consume female sexuality while simultaneously policing and stigmatizing it is criticized in the film through Bijli's experiences. However, Bijli’s profession situates her within a stigmatized domain, yet the film resists portraying her as merely a victim. Instead, Bijli exercises a degree of agency over her sexuality that aligns with lipstick feminist ideals. She adorns herself with vibrant clothing, jewelry, and makeup, performing femininity in exaggerated, theatrical ways. These acts are not simply for male consumption but also function as expressions of selfhood and economic survival.

The story progressively portrays a close connection between Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli despite their disparate socioeconomic situations. Their private discussions offer a unique setting in which they may freely express their frustrations, anxieties, and desires—topics that are taboo in the village's public domain. Within these moments of intimacy, the women begin to question the social norms that dictate their lives and limit their autonomy. At this moment lajjo says “Why must we always live according to what others expect?” (Yadav 01:00:04–01:00:09) This instance illustrates the women's slow development of critical consciousness. The characters' emotional unity "creates a space in which women begin to recognize and challenge the oppressive structures surrounding them," (Ahmad et al. 59). As a result, their connection serves

as both a subtle form of resistance against patriarchal dominance and a source of emotional support.

When Lajjo meets a traveling performer who shows her respect and care, the story takes a dramatic turn. In contrast to her violent spouse, this man respects her physical and emotional needs that enable her to have intimate moments without feeling ashamed or afraid. Lajjo starts to regain her sense of dignity and sexual self-awareness as a result of this connection. that had long been denied to her. Lajjo thus says “For the first time… I felt like a woman.” (Yadav 01:10:28–01:10:33). Lajjo's perception of her body and herself has undergone a significant change at this point. The movie questions the patriarchal notion that “women’s sexuality exists solely for the satisfaction of male desire within the institution of marriage,” (Menéndez 27). Her eventual extramarital relationship through which she discovers sexual pleasure and later becomes pregnant marks a turning point. Importantly, this transformation is not framed as moral transgression but as an assertion of her right to pleasure and fulfillment. Lipstick feminism’s emphasis on sexual agency is evident here: Lajjo reclaims her body from a site of oppression to one of empowerment. The film underscores this shift through visual cues, including her changing attire and demeanor, which reflect a growing sense of confidence and self-worth.

The harsh social climate of the community grows more intolerable for the women as the story draws to a close. Gulab's violent actions and the strict moral standards upheld by the community foster a climate of fear and repression that makes reform difficult. In the end, the three main characters make the decision to leave the community in quest of a fresh start free from patriarchal customs. Rani thus says “Let’s go somewhere far away… somewhere we can start again.”(Yadav 01:32:41–01:32:48)

Both physical and metaphorical meanings are attached to this act of departing. From a physical standpoint, it symbolizes an escape from the village's repressive architecture. In symbolic terms, it represents the quest for independence and self-determination as well as a rejection of patriarchal authority. The conclusion of *Parched,* turns the women's journey into "a metaphor for liberation from the suffocating structures of patriarchal tradition" (Mondal 46). *Parched* provides a compelling examination of female camaraderie, emotional fortitude, and gender

injustice in rural Indian society through its multi-layered story. The movie highlights the transformative possibilities of resistance and collective empowerment while exposing the ways in which patriarchal structures control women's bodies and desires through the interwoven experiences of Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli. The rural setting of *Parched* plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative's exploration of gender inequality and female oppression. Set in a remote village in Rajasthan, the film situates its characters within a socio-cultural environment governed by deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions. In this environment, the lives of women are regulated not only by family structures but also by the collective authority of the community. Social customs, honour codes, and rigid gender norms operate together to maintain a system in which female autonomy is severely restricted. As Ardra Chandran notes, rural patriarchal societies often function through "a network of cultural expectations that regulate women's behaviour and reinforce male dominance within both the private and public spheres" (Chandran 118). The village in *Parched* therefore becomes more than a physical setting; it operates as a symbolic representation of a social order that controls women's bodies, sexuality, and freedom. The high degree of social surveillance that permeates daily life is one of the distinctive features portrayed in the film. Individual behavior is continuously observed by neighbors, elders, and extended family members in close-knit rural communities. This ongoing monitoring discourages any kind of departure from conventional gender roles and encourages adherence to societal standards. Women in particular are required to remain submissive and modest, and their movements and conversations are closely monitored. Even when patriarchal expectations are detrimental, women are forced to internalize them due to the fear of public humiliation, which serves as a potent control mechanism.

The film captures this atmosphere of surveillance through scenes in which community members openly judge and regulate women's behaviour. During one such moment, a village elder reprimands a young bride for failing to conform to traditional expectations of modesty and domestic obedience. As a village elder says "A woman must learn to lower her eyes and obey her husband." (Yadav 00:21:18–00:21:24) The cultural notion that women must exhibit humility and submit as indicators of respectability is reflected in this phrase. These monitoring systems guarantee that women are aware of the social repercussions of defying conventional norms. The

limitations imposed on female sexuality are further exacerbated by the rural environment. In the hamlet shown in Parched, female desire is viewed as a threat that needs to be restrained or suppressed in order to maintain social order. The Cultural notions of honour are closely tied to women's sexual behaviour, and any deviation from expected norms is perceived as a threat to family reputation. As a result, women are expected to remain silent about their emotional and physical desires.

This expectation is evident in the way the community reacts to Bijli, whose profession as a dancer places her outside the boundaries of conventional respectability. Despite the fact that many men in the village attend her performances, she is publicly shamed and labelled immoral. The contradiction between private desire and public condemnation reveals the hypocrisy embedded within patriarchal moral codes. The comments like "You dance for men… and still expect respect?" (Yadav 00:45:40–00:45:46) The stigma associated with Bijli's line of work serves as an example of how patriarchal societies both penalize and objectify female sexuality. As a result, Bijli's persona highlights the inconsistencies in a culture that denigrates women who restrict their sexuality while consuming it.

The physical landscape of the village also contributes to the film's thematic exploration of repression and deprivation. The arid desert environment surrounding the settlement serves as a powerful metaphor for the emotional and sexual barrenness experienced by the female characters. Just as the land appears dry and lifeless, the lives of the women are marked by a profound absence of affection, intimacy, and freedom. The recurring imagery of dust, heat, and drought visually reinforces the idea that the women's desires have been suppressed by an oppressive social system. This symbolic connection between environment and emotional experience is captured in a reflective moment when Lajjo expresses her frustration with the monotony and hopelessness of village life. "Everything here feels dry… even our lives." (Yadav 00:58:12–00:58:18). The metaphor of dryness becomes of particular significance. The desert setting in Parched functions as a "visual metaphor for the emotional and sexual deprivation experienced by women living under patriarchal control," (Menéndez 29). The movie implies through this depiction that a psychologically and emotionally empty atmosphere results from the suppression of female desire.

The function of traditional institutions like marriage and the family is another significant aspect of the rural environment. These establishments are the main means by which patriarchal values are passed down through the generations. Men are given authority as heads of homes, but women are supposed to maintain family honor by carrying out their responsibilities as submissive mothers and spouses. The stability of society is thought to be at danger if these hierarchical roles are challenged. Rani's introspection about her own life demonstrates the extent to which these expectations are internalized. She first finds it difficult to envision a life outside of the village's patriarchal customs after spending years adhering to conventional duties. At one point, Rani says, "This is how our mothers lived… and how we must live too." (Yadav 35:09–:35:15). Such statements demonstrate how patriarchal ideology becomes normalized within everyday thinking. The systems of gender inequality persist because "women themselves often internalize patriarchal values and reproduce them within familial relationships" (Mondal 44). The film therefore portrays patriarchy not simply as an external force imposed by men but as a deeply embedded cultural system that shapes the beliefs ands behaviours of the entire community.

Despite the oppressive nature of the rural environment, the film also reveals moments of resistance that challenge these structures of control. The private conversations shared by Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli create spaces where the women are able to express their frustrations and question the norms that define their lives. Within these moments of solidarity, the possibility of transformation begins to emerge. Their friendship becomes a form of emotional refuge that allows them to imagine alternatives to the restrictive social order surrounding them.

The symbolism of the female body becomes even more significant when the women begin to recognize their own desires and emotional needs. In many patriarchal societies, women are taught to suppress their sexual feelings in order to maintain social respectability. However, *Parched* challenges this expectation by portraying female desire as a natural and legitimate aspect of human experience. Lajjo's encounter with a travelling performer marks a turning point in her emotional journey, allowing her to experience affection and intimacy without the fear and humiliation imposed by her husband. After this encounter, Lajjo expresses a sense of transformation and newfound self-awareness. "For the first time… I felt like a

woman." Lajjo (Yadav 01:10:28–01:10:33) This moment represents a radical shift in Lajjo's perception of her own body and identity. Rather than viewing herself through the lens of patriarchal judgment, she begins to recognize her own emotional and sexual autonomy. Through this transformation, the narrative challenges traditional representations of women as passive objects of male desire. The desert landscape continues to function as a powerful metaphor throughout the film's conclusion. While the environment initially symbolizes repression and emotional deprivation, the women's decision to leave the village suggests the possibility of renewal and transformation. Their journey toward an unknown destination represents a movement away from the barren social structures that have shaped their lives.

In the final moments of the narrative, Rani expresses a desire to escape the oppressive environment that has defined their existence. "Let's go somewhere far away… somewhere we can start again." (Yadav 01:32:41–01:32:48) This statement reflects the symbolic shift from dryness to possibility. The act of leaving the desert environment represents the women's rejection of the patriarchal structures that have suppressed their identities and desires. The film's ending suggests that "liberation requires not only personal transformation but also the courage to move beyond the physical and cultural landscapes that sustain oppression" (Menéndez 31).

Through its complex use of symbolism, *Parched* transforms the desert landscape into a powerful metaphor for the emotional and sexual repression experienced by women within patriarchal societies. At the same time, the film portrays the female body as a site of both oppression and resistance. While patriarchal structures attempt to regulate women's bodies through social norms and cultural expectations, the characters gradually reclaim their autonomy through friendship, self-awareness, and acts of defiance. The symbolic relationship between the desert and the female body thus becomes central to the film's broader feminist critique of gender inequality and social control.

The representation of female desire occupies a central place in *Parched* directed by Leena Yadav. Set within a conservative rural environment where women's lives are governed by patriarchal authority, the film explores how female sexuality is regulated, silenced, and morally policed. Within this social structure, desire is constructed as a domain exclusively reserved for men, while women are expected to embody modesty,

obedience, and sexual passivity. Through the interwoven experiences of its female characters—particularly Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—the film exposes the contradictions of a system that denies women sexual agency while simultaneously controlling their bodies through marriage, reproduction, and social expectations.

Feminist scholars have long argued that patriarchal societies construct female sexuality as something dangerous that must be controlled through cultural norms and moral surveillance. As feminist writers associated with the book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* observe, “patriarchal cultures regulate women’s bodies by linking sexuality with honour, shame, and family reputation” (Baumgardner and Richards 43). This insight is particularly relevant to the social world depicted in *Parched*, where women’s sexual behaviour is constantly monitored by the community. Within the village setting, a woman’s identity is defined primarily through her role as a wife and mother, leaving little space for individual desire or bodily autonomy.

One of the most potent illustrations of how patriarchal institutions deny women sexual autonomy is given by the character of Lajjo. Despite being married, Lajjo is in a very toxic relationship where her spouse physically abuses and humiliates her on a regular basis because she is unable to conceive. Instead of being a place of pleasure or self-expression, her body becomes a site of control and guilt in this situation. Women internalize this oppression, as demonstrated by Lajjo's agonizing confession to Rani. “Every night he curses me… as if the fault is mine alone (Yadav 00:42:11–00:42:16) The gendered double standards ingrained in patriarchal marriage are revealed in this instance. Women are often blamed exclusively for reproductive failure, even though infertility may affect both spouses. In her study of gender and sexuality in India, Shilpa Phadke observes that "female bodies become the primary targets of social control because they are perceived as carriers of family honor and lineage" (Phadke 102). The idea that a woman's worth is determined by reproduction rather than personal identity is reinforced in Lajjo's case when her incapacity to conceive is used as an excuse for maltreatment.

The film also reveals how women themselves are often socialized to accept these oppressive norms as natural. Rani, who has lived her entire life within the same patriarchal structure, initially encourages Lajjo to remain patient and obedient. Her

words reflect the generational internalization of patriarchal ideology. When she says "This is how life is for women like us… we endure." (Yadav 00:36:03–00:36:08)Rani's statement demonstrates how deeply embedded patriarchal values shape women's perceptions of their own lives. Rather than challenging injustice, many women accept suffering as an inevitable part of marriage. This normalization of suffering reflects a broader cultural conditioning in which "women are taught to discipline their desires and accept restriction as responsibility" (Baumgardner and Richards 57). In this sense, the repression of female sexuality operates not only through external control but also through internalized beliefs.

However, *Parched* does not merely depict female suffering; it also explores moments where women begin to reclaim their sexual agency. One of the most striking examples is Lajjo's transformation after discovering a relationship that offers her emotional and physical affection outside her oppressive marriage. This experience challenges the assumption that female sexuality must exist solely within patriarchal marriage. In a conversation with Rani, Lajjo expresses a newfound sense of self-awareness. "For the first time… I felt that my body belongs to me." (Yadav 01:17:22–01:17:27) This conversation reveals a significant change in Lajjo's perception of her own body. She starts to acknowledge her right to pleasure and independence instead of viewing herself as an object under her husband's control.

The movie's depiction of female desire is further complicated by the character of Bijli. Bijli holds a position of social marginalization in the hamlet as a dancer and sex worker. Although the community often condemns and humiliates her, she exhibits a degree of sexual autonomy that stands in stark contrast to the oppression other women endure. Through Bijli, the movie highlights the paradox of patriarchal morality: women who openly express their sexuality face stigma, but males are free to pursue sexual pleasure. Bijli herself articulates this contradiction in a moment of frustration. "Men can do whatever they want… but if a woman chooses for herself, she becomes a sinner." (Yadav 51:40–51:46) The gendered double standards that determine sexual morality in the community are highlighted by her statement. Women's desires are portrayed as sinful or humiliating, while men's appetites are acceptable and accepted. This dynamic, represents larger societal trends in which women's sexuality is strictly regulated in order to uphold patriarchal dominance.

Bijli's persona also shows that sexual agency is possible in oppressive settings. Bijli defies patriarchal conventions by maintaining a sense of independence and confidence despite the stigma associated with her line of work. Her inclusion in the story inspires other women to consider the constraints imposed on their own lives. In this sense, the movie implies that female unity can serve as a potent stimulant for individual growth.

Some of the most important scenes in the movie's examination of autonomy and desire are the conversations between the women. The women start talking freely about their disappointments, concerns, and aspirations when they come together away from the village's supervision. These conversations create a rare space where female voices can articulate experiences that are normally suppressed within patriarchal society.One such moment occurs when the women imagine the possibility of leaving the village and creating new lives for themselves. Rani thus says “Why should our lives remain trapped here forever?” (Yadav 01:32:41–01:32:48). The major turning point in the story is represented by this exchange. The question itself casts doubt on the patriarchal systems that have influenced women's lives for many generations. The protagonists start to see a future in which their identities are not exclusively determined by social expectations by speculating about the possibility of escape.

In the end, the movie portrays female desire as a source of resistance as well as a site of tyranny. The characters' growing awareness of their own desires contradicts patriarchal structures' attempts to control women's bodies and suppress their sexuality. The women start to take back control of their bodies and identities through private discussions, defiant actions, and times of unity. By foregrounding these experiences, *Parched* offers a powerful critique of the social norms that seek to regulate female sexuality. At the same time, it celebrates the resilience of women who refuse to accept these restrictions as permanent realities. The film thus contributes to broader feminist conversations about bodily autonomy, agency, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality in contemporary society. The narrative structure of *Parched* revolves around four central female characters whose lives collectively reveal the complex intersections of patriarchy, sexuality, and bodily autonomy in rural Indian society. Through the stories of Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janaki, the film examines how women negotiate oppressive social structures while attempting to reclaim control

over their own bodies and identities. Each character embodies a different dimension of female experience within a patriarchal environment, illustrating how gender inequality manifests in various forms such as marital oppression, sexual exploitation, social stigma, and generational conflict. Rani's character in Parched represents the emotional and social burden imposed on women who are expected to uphold patriarchal traditions, even when those traditions sustain inequality. As a widow, she occupies a marginal position within the village, where widowhood often leads to social isolation, moral scrutiny, and economic vulnerability. In such contexts, a woman's respectability becomes contingent upon strict adherence to socially prescribed behaviour.

Despite these constraints, Rani fulfills the role of a devoted mother, prioritizing her on Gulab's well-being over her own desires. Her life revolves around domestic responsibilities and arranging her son's marriage, reflecting the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's primary duty is to serve her family. However, beneath this surface conformity lies emotional repression and unacknowledged loneliness. This internal conflict is articulated in her statement: "A woman spends her whole life caring for others… but no one ever asks what she wants." (Yadav 00:41:12–00:41:18) This dialogue underscores the emotional invisibility experienced by women within patriarchal households. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue, such expectations normalize women's sacrifice as a moral obligation rather than recognizing it as structural inequality (Baumgardner and Richards 67). Rani's transformation begins when she witnesses her son's abusive behaviour toward Janaki. This moment forces her to confront the contradictions within the very system she has upheld. Her growing awareness is evident when she questions: "Why must women always pay for the mistakes of men?" (Yadav 01:05:02–01:05:07) Therefore, this marks a critical shift from passive acceptance to critical consciousness.Rani's journey illustrates how feminist awareness can emerge through lived experience, even within deeply internalized patriarchal frameworks. Initially depicted as austere and resigned to her role as a mother and widow, Rani begins to explore her own needs and aspirations over the course of the film. Her interactions with a tailor, who creates colorful garments and introduces her to new forms of aesthetic expression, symbolize this transformation. Clothing, in this context, becomes more than mere fabric; it serves as a medium through which Rani renegotiates her identity beyond the confines

of widowhood. Lipstick feminism's reclamation of beauty practices is evident in Rani's journey, as she learns to see adornment not as vanity but as a legitimate form of self-care and self-assertion.Lajjo's narrative foregrounds one of the most oppressive aspects of patriarchy—the reduction of womanhood to reproductive capacity. Within the rural community, motherhood is constructed as the ultimate marker of femininity, and infertility becomes a source of stigma and abuse. Lajjo's husband repeatedly humiliates and assaults her, labeling her "incomplete," thereby reinforcing the cultural association between fertility and female worth. Her emotional suffering is captured in the statement: "Every night he reminds me that I am not a real woman" (Yadav 00:42:11–00:42:16). This dialogue reveals how patriarchal ideology becomes internalized, shaping women's self-perception and identity. By equating womanhood with motherhood, society restricts women's roles and reinforces gender inequality. However, Lajjo's character is not confined to victimhood. Her narrative evolves as she begins to experience intimacy and emotional connection outside the constraints of her abusive marriage. Through this, she discovers an alternative understanding of sexuality—one that is not tied to reproduction but to pleasure and selfhood. This transformation is expressed in a moment of realization: "For the first time in my life… I felt that my body belongs to me." (Yadav 01:17:22–01:17:27) This reflects the feminist emphasis on bodily autonomy, which Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards identify as central to women's liberation (Baumgardner and Richards 72). Lajjo's journey thus becomes a powerful critique of patriarchal norms that seek to regulate women's bodies and sexuality.

Bijli represents the most explicit challenge to patriarchal morality. As a dancer and sex worker, she exists on the margins of society, simultaneously desired by men and condemned by the same community. Her character exposes the inherent hypocrisy of patriarchal norms, where male desire is normalized while female sexuality is stigmatized. This contradiction is clearly articulated when she states: "They come to me in the darkness of night… but insult me in the light of day." (Yadav 00:50:28–00:50:34) Through this dialogue, Bijli highlights the double standards governing sexual morality. Patriarchal society attempts to control female sexuality while simultaneously exploiting it for male pleasure. Unlike the other women, however, Bijli refuses to internalize this stigma. Her confidence and autonomy disrupt the binary classification of women into "respectable" and

"immoral." Instead, she embodies a form of sexual agency that challenges normative expectations. As feminist theorists argue, reclaiming female sexuality is essential for resisting patriarchal control. Thus, Bijli's character functions as a site of resistance, exposing the contradictions within patriarchal ideology and asserting the legitimacy of female desire.

Janaki represents the continuation of patriarchal traditions through early marriage and domestic subordination. As a young bride married to Gulab, she enters a relationship defined by control and violence. Her experiences reveal how patriarchal values are reproduced across generations, normalizing male dominance and female submission. Gulab's behaviour reflects a learned form of masculinity rooted in authority and aggression. Within this framework, domination is perceived as a legitimate expression of male power. Janaki's vulnerability highlights the systemic nature of domestic violence within patriarchal societies. Her confusion and emotional distress are evident in her question: "Why do you treat me like I am your enemy?" (Yadav 01:03:10–01:03:15) This moment captures the psychological impact of abuse, as well as the lack of agency afforded to young women within such marriages.

At the same time, Janaki's character suggests the possibility of generational change. Unlike older women who have internalized patriarchal norms, she occasionally questions her circumstances and resists her husband's authority. This indicates an emerging awareness that challenges traditional expectations. Her character thus represents both continuity and transformation—highlighting how patriarchal systems persist, while also suggesting the potential for resistance among younger generations. The characters of Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janaki collectively illustrate the complex ways in which patriarchy regulates women's lives through institutions such as marriage, family, and social norms. As Sylvia Walby argues, patriarchy "operates as a system of structures that sustain male dominance and female subordination" (Walby 20). This framework is clearly reflected in the lived experiences of the women in *Parched*. At the same time, the film foregrounds moments of resistance, self-realization, and solidarity. Each character, in her own way, challenges the limitations imposed upon her, thereby reclaiming agency over her body and identity. Through these narratives, *Parched* not only critiques patriarchal

oppression but also envisions the possibility of transformation through awareness, autonomy, and collective resistance.

The institution of marriage is one of the main ways that patriarchal power functions in the movie. Marriage serves as a cultural structure that controls female sexuality and upholds male power in the rural culture depicted in Parched. It is expected of women to get married young and focus only on household duties. A woman's body becomes the property of her husband and his family under this arrangement**.** Janaki and Gulab's relationship serves as an example of how patriarchal marriage produces unequal power relationships, which frequently result in violence and emotional oppression. As a young wife, Janaki moves into a home where she is expected to submit without question. Gulab's actions support the idea that men have the right to dominate their spouses by exhibiting a type of masculinity that links dominance with authority. Janaki wonders the animosity she encounters in her marriage during a confrontational moment: “Why do you treat me like I am your enemy?”(Yadav 01:03:10–01:03:15) The emotional confusion experienced by women confined to restrictive marriages is revealed in this exchange. Janaki's query emphasizes how patriarchal marriage frequently turns close connections into arenas of control and power rather than respect. The structural injustices ingrained in domestic life can be shown through cinematic depictions of marriage, according to feminist film experts. "Patriarchal narratives frequently position women as objects within structures that reinforce male power and female submission," according to feminist scholar Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 14). The way Janaki's marriage is shown in Parched reveals how these kinds of arrangements function in day-to-day social reality.

The representation of female characters in *Parched* can also be understood through the lens of feminist film theory. Scholars within this field have emphasized the importance of analyzing how cinema constructs gender roles and power relations. Feminist film theory challenges traditional cinematic narratives that objectify women and reinforce male dominance. One of the central arguments within feminist film studies is the concept of the “male gaze,” introduced by Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema often positions women as visual objects designed to satisfy male spectatorship. However, films that focus on female experiences and perspectives can disrupt this dynamic by presenting women as active subjects rather

than passive objects. In *Parched*, the narrative perspective centers on the emotional and psychological experiences of its female characters. The film invites viewers to empathize with their struggles and recognize the injustices they face. By foregrounding women's voices and desires, the film challenges traditional cinematic representations that marginalize female agency.

The concluding sequence of *Parched* functions as the ideological and emotional culmination of the film's exploration of patriarchy, female desire, and bodily autonomy. Throughout the narrative, the female characters—Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janaki—experience different forms of oppression within the patriarchal social order of the rural community. However, the final moments of the film transform these individual experiences of suffering into a collective assertion of freedom and solidarity. The ending therefore symbolizes not only physical escape from the village but also the psychological liberation of women who have begun to reclaim control over their lives and bodies.

The ending of women centered narratives frequently function as venues for the expression of resistance against patriarchal systems. According to feminist scholar Laura Mulvey, films that emphasize female subjectivity subvert conventional cinematic narratives by transforming women from passive objects to active characters (Mulvey 18). This change is embodied in *Parched*'s last scene, where the women are shown as individuals capable of making life-changing choices rather than just as victims of patriarchal oppression. The village depicted in the film functions throughout the narrative as a symbolic space of restriction and surveillance. It represents the social environment where patriarchal traditions control women's sexuality, labour, and mobility. When the women decide to leave this environment, their departure becomes a powerful metaphor for liberation.

The decision to flee is not rash; rather, it is the result of their mutual realization that if they stay in the same repressive organizations, nothing will change in their lives. A communal awakening that questions the inevitable sorrow that once characterized their existence is reflected in their conversations during the last minutes. The women start to envision a life outside the confines of their community in one of the most poignant scenes of the conclusion. "Let's go somewhere far away… somewhere no one knows us." (Yadav 01:33:10–01:33:14) This emphasizes the

emergence of female agency. The women are no longer defined by the identities imposed upon them—wife, widow, prostitute, or daughter-in-law—but instead begin to envision themselves as individuals with the right to shape their own futures.

Another crucial aspect of the ending is the representation of female solidarity. Throughout the film, the relationships among the women gradually evolve into a powerful support system that allows them to confront their shared oppression. Their friendship becomes a source of emotional strength that ultimately empowers them to imagine a different life. women recognize the collective nature of their experiences when they share "stories of inequality create the foundation for feminist solidarity and political transformation" (Baumgardner and Richards 75)

This is clearly reflected in the final conversations among the characters in *Parched*. Their dialogue reveals how their individual struggles have gradually transformed into a shared understanding of patriarchal injustice. "We have lived our whole lives for others… now let's live for ourselves." (Yadav 01:33:42–01:33:46) "For the first time… we are choosing our own path." (Yadav 01:33:48–01:33:52) These statements demonstrate the development of feminist consciousness among the women. Earlier in the narrative, they often accepted suffering as an unavoidable part of life. By the end of the film, however, they begin to recognize that their oppression is rooted in social structures rather than personal fate.

The ending of *Parched* ultimately represents a powerful feminist statement about resistance, solidarity, and bodily autonomy. By depicting women who choose to leave oppressive social structures behind, the film challenges the assumption that patriarchal traditions are inevitable or permanent. Through its portrayal of female friendship, sexual agency, and collective rebellion, the film contributes to broader feminist discussions about gender, sexuality, and identity. Rather than providing a simplistic. The movie ends with a liberation vision that is open-ended and recognizes both the opportunities and the dangers of seeking freedom. In this way, Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janaki's last voyage turns into a symbolic act of feminist resistance. The ladies regain the freedom to define their own lives, bodies, and desires by leaving the ideological and physical confines of their community.

# CONCLUSION

# CONCLUSION

This dissertation, titled "Unveiling Women's Sexuality and Desire in Indian Cinema: A Study of *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*," undertakes a sustained critical examination of how two landmark contemporary Indian films represent the long-silenced terrain of female desire, bodily autonomy, and sexual subjectivity within the constraints of patriarchal Indian society. Through the theoretical lens of lipstick feminism, a strand of third-wave feminist thought that reclaims traditionally feminine practices such as beauty, adornment, and sexual expression as legitimate sites of agency rather than symbols of submission. The research argues that both films constitute significant cinematic interventions in the representational politics of Indian cinema.

The social and cultural suppression of women's sexuality in India is not incidental but structural: embedded in familial hierarchies, religious morality, legal frameworks, and the male-dominated grammar of mainstream cinema. Indian films have historically constructed the female body as an object of male visual pleasure what Laura Mulvey identified as the "male gaze" while systematically erasing women's own desires, fantasies, and claims to pleasure. Against this representational backdrop, Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2016) and Leena Yadav's *Parched* (2015) emerge as radical departures, centering women not as passive wives, mothers, or moral guardians, but as desiring subjects who inhabit complex inner lives, negotiate social restrictions, and resist however fragmented and incomplete that resistance may bethe cultural forces arrayed against their selfhood.

The research draws its ideas from feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, bell hooks, Kathy Davis, Jennifer Baumgardner, Amy Richards, and Angela McRobbie to demonstrate that female desire in both films is not presented as transgressive in itself, but becomes transgressive only within social systems that identify women's pleasure as dangerous. By bringing these films into analytical dialogue with each other, the dissertation reveals how Indian cinema is beginning, however cautiously, to create representational space for women's authentic and embodied experiences.

The chapter titled "Unveiling Veiled Voices and Gendered Expression in Urban India: A Study of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*," offers a detailed textual, visual,

and thematic analysis of Alankrita Shrivastava's film as a politically charged feminist narrative that refuses to treat female desire as marginal, shameful, or exceptional. Set in the densely populated neighbourhoods of Bhopal, a transitional urban space where modern aspirations coexist with deeply conservative moral codes. The film constructs female sexuality as an ordinary, persistent, and entirely human dimension of life that society relentlessly attempts to police.

The chapter begins by examining the film's distinctive multi-protagonist narrative structure, through which four women: Usha Parmar, Shireen Aslam, Leela, and Rehana Abidi are presented as a composite portrait of urban womanhood across age, class, marital status, and religious identity. This structural choice is itself a feminist statement: by refusing to privilege a single female voice, the film demonstrates that patriarchy adapts itself to different social contexts while maintaining its fundamental function of suppressing women's autonomy. The chapter examines how each character's experience reflects a specific mechanism of control — age-based desexualisation in Usha's case, marital coercion and domestic violence in Shireen's, moral surveillance and honour policing in Rehana's, and economic dependency in Leela's — yet all four are united by a common condition: the expectation of silence regarding desire.

The chapter analyzes the film's central symbolic framework through a detailed reading of the burkha and the lipstick. The burkha is revealed not as a neutral garment but as a moral contract that demands conformity not merely in dress but in speech, movement, and emotional expression. Lipstick, by contrast, operates as a micro-practice of self-expression that patriarchal discourse brands as excessive, immoral, or sexually provocative. The chapter traces how lipstick functions differently for each character: as a forbidden symbol of ageing desire for Usha, as a marker of feminine identity for Leela, as a site of familial surveillance for Rehana, and as a challenge to the assumption that ‘good girls don't paint their lips’

The next chapter, titled "Reasserting Female Desire and Bodily Autonomy in a Patriarchal Landscape: A Study of *Parched*," examines Leena Yadav's film as a feminist cinematic text that situates the politics of female desire within the specific socio-cultural terrain of rural Rajasthan, a landscape where patriarchal institutions operate through tradition, communal honour, domestic violence, and the reproductive

control of women's bodies.The chapter begins by situating the film's multi-protagonist narrative structure focused on the interwoven lives of Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janaki within the argument that rural women's experiences of gender oppression are shaped by a distinctive constellation of factors including caste, economic dependency, early marriage, infertility stigma, and the absence of mobility. Unlike the urban women of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, who negotiate modernity and tradition simultaneously, the women of *Parched* inhabit a social world where patriarchal customs are experienced as total, naturalized, and generationally reproduced. The film's visual strategy of the desert landscape: arid, barren, and dry becomes the central metaphor for this condition of emotional and sexual deprivation. The recurring imagery of dryness and thirst gives form to what the women themselves cannot always articulate: that their lives have been stripped of intimacy, pleasure, and selfhood.

The chapter offers detailed character analyses that demonstrate how each woman's narrative functions as a distinct study in the mechanisms of patriarchal control. Rani's story explores the internalization of patriarchal ideology, as a woman who has spent her life upholding the very traditions that oppress her, and who only begins to question those traditions when she witnesses the violence they sanction against Janaki. Lajjo's narrative foregrounds the most brutal conflation of womanhood with reproductive capacity: her value in the community is literally determined by her ability to conceive, and her inability to do so is used to justify sustained physical and emotional abuse. Her eventual encounter with a travelling performer in which she discovers, for the first time, intimacy offered without violence or shame becomes one of the film's most politically significant moments.

Bijli's character complicates the film's feminist framework by situating sexual visibility within conditions of social stigma. As a dancer and sex worker who is simultaneously desired and condemned by the same men who attend her performances, she embodies the central hypocrisy of patriarchal sexual morality: that male desire is naturalized and celebrated while female sexual expression is punished. Yet Bijli also refuses victimhood she adorns herself, performs femininity on her own terms, and maintains an economic independence unavailable to the other women.Janaki's character represents generational continuity within patriarchal violence, as a young bride entering a marriage structured by dominance and

submission. Yet her occasional questioning of this structure her instinct that something in her circumstances is unjust signals the possibility of transformation.

The chapter concludes by reading the film's ending the women's collective decision to leave the village not as a simplistic fantasy of escape but as a carefully constructed symbolic act of feminist refusal. Their departure represents a rejection of the physical and ideological landscape that has structured their oppression. The desert, which opened the film as a metaphor for deprivation, is transformed in this final sequence into a metaphor for possibility: the possibility of lives lived beyond the reach of communal surveillance, patriarchal marriage, and reproductive coercion.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

Read together, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Parched* constitute a complementary cinematic statement about the condition of women's sexuality and desire in contemporary India. Their most fundamental convergence is their shared insistence that female desire is not aberrant, excessive, or morally suspect, but a basic and persistent dimension of human experience that patriarchal society systematically suppresses. Both films refuse the representational conventions of mainstream Bollywood cinema, which either objectifies the female body for male visual pleasure or constructs women's sexuality as a threat to moral and social order. Instead, both position women as desiring subjects: as people with interior lives, emotional needs, and bodily claims that deserve recognition and respect.

Both films also refuse what might be called the liberation narrative- the comforting cinematic convention in which women triumph over patriarchy through a moment of dramatic rebellion or personal transformation. Neither film provides closure. The women of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* remain in Bhopal, their struggles unresolved; the women of *Parched* drive toward an unknown destination whose freedom is imagined but not secured. This refusal of resolution is itself a feminist statement: it acknowledges that patriarchy is a structural condition rather than a personal antagonist, and that its dismantling cannot be accomplished through individual acts of defiance alone.

Both films also foreground female solidarity as the primary space in which women's desires can be articulated. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, it is the final scene

of shared conversation that breaks the isolation that patriarchy has imposed upon each woman. In *Parched*, it is the friendship among Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli conducted in the private spaces of their exchanges, away from communal surveillance that gradually generates the consciousness and courage necessary for collective resistance. Both films suggest that feminist politics begins not in grand public acts but in the quiet, intimate moments where women recognize themselves in each other's experiences.

Their divergences, however, are equally significant. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is set in an urban space where modernity creates the illusion of freedom while leaving patriarchal structures largely intact. Its women are educated, mobile, and economically engaged to varying degrees yet these apparent advantages do not protect them from domestic violence, marital coercion, moral policing, or the surveillance of public respectability. The film's critique is aimed at what might be called the new patriarchy: the persistence of gendered control beneath a surface of modern progress. *Parched*, by contrast, is set in a rural community where patriarchal authority operates with far less ambiguity — it is visible, systematic, and enforced through physical violence, communal shaming, and the total absence of female economic independence. The film's critique is aimed at what might be called the foundational patriarchy: the deep cultural bedrock of custom, honour, and tradition from which modern formations of gender inequality derive their force.

These different social settings produce different aesthetic registers. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is an intimate, interior film: its feminist critique is embedded in small gestures, private fantasies, and the gap between what women say and what they feel. *Parched* is a more expansive, visceral film: its feminist politics are written into landscape, body, and the physical drama of flight. Where the former film works through restraint and accumulation, the build-up of small indignities until their weight becomes visible, the latter works through contrast and crescendo, building toward the symbolic rupture of the women's departure. Together, the two films demonstrate the range and flexibility of feminist cinema: that the politics of female desire can be articulated through multiple aesthetic strategies, in multiple social contexts, with equal force and validity.

Finally, both films engage with the question of censorship and institutional resistance as integral to their feminist meaning. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was

initially denied certification by the Central Board of Film Certification on the grounds that it was "lady-oriented" — a designation that inadvertently reveals the cultural assumption that women's perspectives are inherently niche, excessive, or threatening. *Parched*, though not subjected to the same degree of institutional resistance, was similarly received with critical ambivalence in India. The fact that films centering women's desire are treated as inherently controversial confirms the very argument both films make: that female sexuality remains, in contemporary India, a contested and culturally threatening terrain.

## FURTHER DIRECTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This study, while offering a comprehensive feminist analysis of two significant Indian films, is necessarily limited in scope and opens several productive directions for future scholarly inquiry. First, future research could expand the corpus to include regional Indian cinema, which has often engaged with women's sexuality and desire in ways that differ significantly from Hindi mainstream films. Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, and Bengali cinema have produced a number of films that foreground female subjectivity, and a comparative study across these traditions would significantly enrich our understanding of how regional cultural politics shape the representational possibilities of women's desire. Second, the emergence of digital platforms — particularly Netflix, Amazon Prime, and the Indian platform ALTBalaji — as spaces for women-centered narratives deserves sustained academic attention. Web series such as Four More Shots Please, Mirzapur (in its female characters), and Bombay Begums have explored women's sexuality and desire in ways that are not subject to the same degree of institutional censorship as theatrical releases. A study of how digital platforms have expanded the representational space available for women's desire, and how this expansion intersects with questions of class, urban privilege, and access, would be a valuable contribution to the field.

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