Research Article

Shipra Tholia*, Amar Singh

Recontextualizing the Cinematic Code: The "Female Gaze" of Sai Paranjpye in *Sparsh*, *Chashme Buddoor*, and *Katha*

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Abstract: A central concern of the article is to examine how the female gaze is evident in the films of Indian film director Sai Paranjpye. More specifically, this research article analyses the ways, how female gaze asserts itself by playing with established cinematic codes while keeping the political and social condition of the time in the foreground. In this article, the focus is on examining the reflexive disposition of Sai by recontextualizing the conversant tropes popularized in Hindi films. This article also explores the ways in which a film itself participates in defining the "gaze" or, in other words, in questioning the cultural training of viewing. For the article, three films, *Sparsh*, *Chashme Buddoor*, and *Katha*, are taken as case studies. Using these three films as examples, the article explores how narrative techniques can be used to challenge established cinematic codes while making the female gaze distinguishable. The examples discussed are chosen in such a way that, on the one hand, they occupy cases of a broad continuum of cinematic narration specific to Bollywood, and on the other, they introduce a semiotic approach.

Keywords: female gaze, cinematic code, semiotic, Bollywood, narrative techniques

Hindi cinema, or Bollywood as it is famously known, has always found itself in a dire state when representing women on screen. The dark yet luminous space (the silver screen) of a movie theatre playing a Hindi film reflects, like any other space, the "history of *powers*" (Foucault 149). Hindi cinematic tradition is enamoured by empowered men to whom the contorted description of women is being "offered as spectacular objects of desire" (Sengupta et al.). The tradition "invites narrative punishment" (Bhaskar) to any deviance of women expressing themselves as "autonomous, modern individuals" (Mittal 280) by either submitting them to be a "domesticated creature or by ousting them as a prostitute" (Thoraval 118). The perverted cause has further been encouraged in Hindi films by stimulating fascination of traditional feminine archetypes by suturing women either with religion (Dimitrova), nation (Virdi), or by exposing female characters to sexual assaults whereby via eroticizing violence, male viewers are asked to identify with the heroes (Derné; Manohar and Susan L. Kline; Dasgupta and Radha Hegde). Hindi cinema, since its inchoation, thus, has been responsible for participating in fashioning false impressions of women figurines, engendering the methods of looking at them.

These methods of looking and being looked at have sporadically been challenged until recently, where the negative aspects pertaining to women have confidently been embraced by Bollywood actresses (see *Bollywood's New Woman*). Nevertheless, there have been rare attempts in Hindi cinema that challenged the

*** Corresponding author: Shipra Tholia,** Department of German Studies, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, 221005, India, e-mail: shipratholia@bhu.ac.in
Amar Singh: Department of English, MMV, Banaras Hindu University, India; Postdoctoral Researcher at Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Germany

coded language of the dominant patriarchal order. One such attempt has been by the director Sai Paranjpye whose films *Sparsh* (1980), *Chashme Buddoor* (1981), and *Katha* (1983) not only challenged the established cinematic codes but also contributed to "some of the best onscreen depictions of the Indian man" (Chintamani). In these films, the audience finds one of the first instances of the conscious female gaze in Hindi cinema's history, which is in complete awareness and possession of its existence while gazing at the gaze back.

The general understanding says that the term "gaze" focuses on the aspect, how an observer views a film, whereas the success of a cinematic "code" depends on how well it is understood by the observer. The comprehensibility of a code predominantly depends on three main factors: expectations, conventions, and usages. The cinematic aesthetic of Hindi cinema is defined by various cultural codes that have been conventionalized by repeated usages over time. As an example, the meeting of two flowers represents neither the blowing of the wind nor the blossoming of the flower but becomes a symbol for lovemaking. The repeated use of this symbol in Bollywood films has established it in a code, which is easily understandable to the viewers of Hindi films. However, the objection to conventionalized code emerges from the fact that the underline message is often mediated through the biased lens. Of course, the article takes into consideration that it is not the individual code, but the interplay of several codes and their positioning in the narration determine the final message. By positioning McLuhan's approach of the media study, which "considers not only the "content" but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (McLuhan 3), this article engages primarily with the question, how the female gaze makes its presence visible in Sai Paranjpye's films. More specifically, this research article analyses how the female gaze asserts itself by playing with the established cinematic codes while keeping the political and social condition of the 1980s in the foreground. For the same purpose, three films, *Sparsh*, *Chashme Buddoor*, and *Katha*, are taken as case studies. The examples are drawn from these three films for investigating the techniques of making the female gaze distinguishable. The examples discussed are chosen in such a way that, on the one hand, they occupy cases of a broad continuum of cinematic narration specific to Hindi cinema, and on the other, they introduce a semiotic approach.

Female Gaze: A Perspective

The term "male gaze" has dominated the discourse in academia and popular culture ever since Laura Mulvey's iconic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in 1975. The essay has guided umpteen studies since its publication exposing myriad ways with which the male gaze subverts the audience's sensibilities into accepting the language of the dominant patriarchal order. Through this essay, Mulvey was able to bring out a truth asymptote to people who remained ignorant of the same. The article took "its starting-point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (14). Like any power structure, mainstream cinema reflects the power that men control. The visuals guide us to see from the perspectives of male fantasy, which turns women into an object connoting "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (19). Unaware of the reason, we tend to side with the hero as he represents our utmost fantasy, someone who epitomizes power, control, and dominance, the identified traits of masculinity (see Mackay 119). Thus, cinema tutors us into "doing" gender, in the absence of which "it becomes hard to understand people without it" (122).

Recently, scholars and filmmakers have turned their interests in figuring out, could there be a "female gaze" that exists in answer to the male gaze? If yes, what features does it entail? The director Jill Soloway, a name famous in American television, identifies three traits of the "Female Gaze":

a. It is about "feeling seeing," i.e. the subjective camera attempts to get inside the protagonist. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing the characters.
b. The Female Gaze uses the camera to take on the very nuanced task of showing how it feels to be The Object of the Gaze.
c. The Female Gaze dares to return the gaze. It's the gaze on the gazers. It's about how it feels to stand in the world, having been seen our entire lives. (Soloway)

The Film Society at Lincoln Center, New York, in 2018, endeavoured to bring an array of films shot by female cinematographers to ascertain the elements of the female gaze. Ashley Connor, the cinematographer of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post,* distinguishes the female gaze like Soloway's, "namely a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful" (Telfer). There were as many opinions on the female gaze as there were participants, which Tori Telfer condenses in her article that this gaze is "emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than objectify. (Or not.) It's respectful, it's technical, it hasn't had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it's feminine and unashamed, it's part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back" (Telfer).

Around the time when Laura Mulvey introduced the idea of the "male gaze" to the world, the performance artists were doing the same through their crafts. One such artist has been Marina Abramović, who in 1974 performed *Rhythm 0*, lending herself entirely into the audience's hands for 6 h. She stood in the middle of the space and put some objects ranging from pleasure to pain to death. For a couple of hours, the audience toyed with her seeing if she broke her character. As the audience gained confidence, a certain section became too aggressive with her where she feared that they might even kill her. Finally, after the harrowing experience of 6 h when the performance ended, she walked through the room naked with tears in her eyes. The audience could not cope with what they had done to her and left the room straight away.

This performance embodied the three elements that Jill Soloway mentions about the female gaze. First, the space which Abramović occupied became a refuge for the audience to expose their actual beings. They were able to feel their feelings and see them put into action. Second, the same space for Abramović became an exposition of the hegemonic exhibition as to how power wavers from safe to lethal. Finally, she realized that likewise the number of people who willed to hurt her, there were people to protect her as well. Third, the audience felt Abramović's feminine gaze gazing back at them when the performance ended. Unable to confront their actions, everybody left the room hastily. German author and art critic Silke Tobeler pens her views regarding *Rhythm 0* and similar performances that by presenting their vulnerability, "women regain the right to self-determination over their bodies and their lives. They do not seek a confrontation with the ruling system or a balance between the different forces but offer a new perspective on their work and the social issues it contains" (2–3; translation of German text).[1] Tobeler further provides her views on the female gaze that while the male gaze comes from a patriarchal society that is changing, "the female gaze proposes emancipation which on the one hand calls on the man to leave entrenched structures and – even more so – wants to induce women to self-confidently visualize the strength of their femininity and make them the source of their own artistic creation and to make your own view of the world" (3).[2]

Recontextualizing the Cinematic Codes of Hindi Cinema in Sai Paranjpye's Films

It is hard to tantalize the masses' consciousness that has grown numb by witnessing the same sets of ersatz narratives provided. As noted by Yves Thoraval, the hitherto Hindi films "followed some set rules and formulas where the distinction between subjective and objective could not be deciphered in the common

1 Indem Frauen ihre Verletzlichkeit präsentieren, erobern sie sich das Recht zur Selbstbestimmung über ihren Körper und ihr Leben zurück. Sie suchen nicht die Konfrontation mit dem herrschenden System oder einen Ausgleich der unterschiedlichen Kräfte, sondern bieten eine neue Perspektive auf ihr Werk und die darin enthaltene gesellschaftliche Thematik an. (In Tobeler, "FEMALE GAZE," 2–3.)

2 Der Male Gaze entspringt einer patriarchalen Gesellschaft, die sich im Wandel befindet. Der Female Gaze propagiert eine moderne Form der Emanzipation, die einerseits den Mann dazu auffordert, eingefahrene Strukturen zu verlassen und – viel mehr noch – die Frau dazu veranlassen will, sich selbstbewusst die Stärke ihrer Weiblichkeit zu vergegenwärtigen und diese zur Quelle eines eigenen künstlerischen Schaffens und eines eigenen Blicks auf die Welt zu machen (ibid. 3).

dreams and desires of a frustrated public" (115). The popular Hindi cinema transformed itself into pure escapism to "satiate – on screen – the frustrations of the majority" (116). People identified with the heroes and heroines, who provided "an exposition to their desires and a means of satisfying them, which has no connection with the painful reality" (117). The exhibition of the patriarchal structure was rarely challenged in these films. Countering the fantastical, escapist cinema that Hindi films became, evolved New Wave cinema that sorted itself out as "iconoclastic" (Roy 1188). There arose an array of filmmakers in Hindi cinema – Basu Chatterjee, Basu Bhattacharya, Shyam Benegal, Mahesh Bhatt, Vijaya Mehta, Kalpana Lajmi, to name a few – who questioned the established narratives by presenting the stories of commoners belonging to different strata of society. These filmmakers frequently dealt with subjects concerning women's predicaments, reflecting the myriad ways the hegemonic system is affecting them. However, as Sehdev Kumar Gupta critiques the "New Wave" filmmakers by stating that their films are not easy to grasp by the audience "for they radically revise the traditional concepts of tragedy and comedy of heroes and villains, of "good" and "bad." Thus, a comedy becomes "black," villains go unpunished, "heroes" seem ordinary, conflicts remain unresolved and nobody lives happily ever after. This new cinema of "realism"... is certainly as untheatrical as the commercial cinema is melodramatic" (Gupta 25). The "New Wave" filmmakers in Indian Cinema who attempted to raise social reality through their films, their reliance on aesthetic purity proved to be irrelevant as the audience never connected with the "esoteric language" (25) they were narrating their films.

At the onset of the eighties emerged Sai Paranjpye, who unlike New Wave filmmakers, made an instant connection with the audience of commercial cinema. In contrast to the other arthouse filmmakers with whom the audience felt disconnected, Sai's films were recognized by the general film-going audience. Although a hypothetical proposition because no one can guess where the audience's taste would land, embracing both commercial cinema and arthouse films shaped her narrative style.

Her films redefined parallel cinema and entertainment as she took the tropes of mainstream cinema and tweaked them. Her narrative style, which can also be defined as a critical appraisal of Bollywood films aesthetic, allows her to question the narrative tropes of Hindi cinema. She challenges the fantastical and the cinematic reality as well as the notions about male and female protagonists by providing a parallel from the real-world experience. The female gaze in her film focuses on expressing the feelings rather than describing them. The camera became pen in her hands, "developing a mind of its own" (Paranjpye *A Patchwork Quilt* 296). She uses a parafoveal, i.e. non-focalized approach for addressing the confusion prevailing at the political and personal level while assigning maximum realism to her characters. Her narration strategies of highlighting fiction versus factual by constantly using inter-textual references and critical remarks reinterpret the conventional cinematic codes. In fact, the title of one of her films, *Sparsh*, translated as "the touch," is an apt introduction to her narrative style, which touches the tender emotions rather than blowing away with a barrage of spectacles.

Much like Marina Abramović's theatrical space in *Rhythm 0*, the cinematic screen becomes a "hybrid space"[3] for Sai, where she carves out the silhouettes of emotions. Sai barely challenges the societal system in her films, let alone seek to dismantle or transform it. What she does, however, through her films is to metamorphose her audience from being a mere "spectator" to an "observer"[4] of the cinematic text. Her first years as a director saw Sai Paranjpye balancing the load of baggage associated with the conventionalized system of rules of Hindi mainstream cinema. The *masala*[5] of these commercial films became "cinema" representing "to most minds an ensemble of traits common to *all* films" (Metz 61). By making her narrative

3 For Homi Bhabha, hybridity "is the "third space" which enables the histories that constitutes it, and set up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom." (In "The Third Space," 211.)

4 Jonathan Crary makes the distinction between a spectator and an observer, which most dictionaries "make little semantic distinction." (In *Techniques of the Observer*, 5–6.)

5 Meenakshi Shedde writes for Indian commercial films that "In a country that is still largely poor (and considerably rich, but then India is full of contradictions), and people lead tough, grueling lives, these films are an escapist fantasy. The *masala* attitude in films – let's have it all at once – is deep-rooted in the Indian psyche, and is also reflected in Indian cuisine." (In "Bollywood Cinema," 24.)

style evident of female gaze, Sai attends to the paradox inherent in the fashioning of the previously known and established topoi in the mainstream Bollywood cinematic aesthetic convention. This paradox is illustrated by inverting the gaze or, to put it in a more colloquial term, by presenting the alternate versions of "how it is shown" (desire) in films versus "how it is" (reality). The paradox works like Roland Barthes" "punctum" (see Barthes *Camera Lucida* 51–53), offering proxy paradigms, shaking the normative vision of the observers who are habituated into the "elaborate code"[6] of genre Hindi film requiring a low level of syntactic prediction. Sai extracted her *speech*, i.e. "the individual act of selection and actualization" (Barthes *Elements of Semiology* 14) from the coded language of mainstream Hindi films. However, she knew not to be too inventive by going beyond the established codes of mainstream films as it would render her message ambiguous, leading to "no communication, only noise" (Eco 592). Therefore, rather than introducing new codes, she makes the underlying message of the established codes ambiguous for the viewers by playing with the positioning of the set patterns.

India entered the market economy, liberalization, and telecommunications in the 1980s. Considering the competition that Hindi cinema faced from television during the 1980s, it was also a curious time for experimentation in Hindi cinema. Around 1976, people were limited with a few television programs a few years back – either watching Mrs Indira Gandhi cutting ribbons or consuming programs related to films (see Mitra). [7] In the next few years, the dispersion of television changed how people were consuming products, including films. Sai quickly picked up on the changing consumers' behaviour of how "images" were influencing their lives implicitly. "The advertising age had started" (Paranjpye *A Patchwork Quilt* 304) writes Sai reminiscing her memories of the events directing *Chashme Buddoor*. Sai's films represent "a model of gendered media work that is constitutively intermedial" (Gopal). The changing social realities became an integral part of her films' narratives which could be seen in the *Chamko* soap episode, James Bond's reference, or in the medley of Bollywood songs, like *Chitrahaar*, performed beautifully by the late Ravi Baswani and Deepti Naval.

She took it a notch above in *Katha,* where the character of Bashudev, played by the late Farooq Shaikh, is obsessed with maintaining the image that allows him to manipulate others for his benefit. As Sai's films echoed the societal reality, the audience reciprocated positively as they could easily navigate through her messages. It was visible through her films that "whatever cinema *is*... it functions within a network of image systems, each implicated in the virtual construction of our lives" (Isaacs 61–62).

Sai always felt uneasy with the conventionalized patterns of mainstream cinema, such as a hero and heroine "breaking into a song and running around trees at the slightest provocation" (Paranjpye *A Patchwork Quilt* 305). Sai is a director with a distinct voice and avoids copying the elements of commercial Hindi cinema for her purpose. The biggest challenge was how to shake the "distracted"[8] (see Benjamin 18–19) audience passively consuming such films that have grown into their habits? For achieving the same, she developed specific narrative methods. Firstly, she introduces the audience to the conventional semic codes of the commercial films. As soon as the audience identifies and remembers the codes, she modifies the underline meaning to shake the sensibilities of her audience.

The following analysis of her three films shall demonstrate how the female gaze embedded in her narrative style played with the conventional codes of mainstream cinema while at the same time shifting the gaze of the audience from passively consuming to actively observing the onscreen narratives. The methods incorporate the three features of the female gaze elaborated by Jill Soloway, i.e. "feeling seeing," "being an object of the gaze," and "gazing the gaze back."

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6 See Peter Wollen's essay "Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact," where he explains Bernstein's concept of "restricted code" and "elaborate code," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (University of California, 1976), p. 489.

7 Doordarshan was termed "Devidarshan," and the slogan was raised "Tedium is the message." There were only a few programs to watch in 1976, namely *Chitrahaar* (mélange of songs from popular films), *Phool Khile Hain Gulshan Gulshan* (a talk show on film personalities) and weekly Hindi feature film. (See Mitra, "Indian Television.")

8 The term is used by Walter Benjamin, similar to Jonathan Crary's notion of "spectator" and "observer," where the distracted audience is akin to a spectator who passively "absorbs the work of art." Benjamin opines that films exploit the audience by habituating them to consume their products without much thinking. (See Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 18–19.)

The Film *Sparsh*

The film *Sparsh* is fashioned around a love story between a blind man Anirudh Parmar (played by Naseeruddin Shah) and a sighted woman named Kavita Prasad (played by Shabana Azmi).

Sparsh is an example of how a film itself participates in defining the "gaze" or, in other words, in questioning the cultural training of viewing. The narrative of this film is set in two worlds: a world with-gaze and without-gaze. Navjivan Andh Vidyalaya is a boarding school for blind students, with its premises representing the "gaze-less" world, whereas the gazed world lies outside the school's premises. As the narrative unfurls, the viewer steps into the Navjivan Andh Vidyalaya and discovers students solving a jigsaw puzzle, playing the music instruments, crafting designs, shouting, singing, etc., similar to any other school. In this school, students are treated with affection but are not pitied. The school principal, Anirudh, despises the very notion of being patronized and pitted for blindness. The film addresses the discourse of the blind and the sighted represented by the lead characters and redefines the divide between emotion and perception. In this film, the cinematic use of the subjective camera that generally follows the gaze of the male protagonist is being replaced by sound. As Mulvey states that, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (Mulvey 20). Through the portrayal of the main protagonist as blind, Sai pushes the male gaze into the background and makes the female gaze the focus of attention in terms of the emotions and feelings expressed. The blind male protagonist, with whom the spectator may and may not identify, represents the absence of "gaze." In its unique way, this film contributes into shaping a sense of what it means to view without a biased gaze. This is further elaborated in the film at several instances, which shall be discussed in the following sections.

The Concept of Beauty for a Gaze-less Viewing

This scene is filmed in a romantic setting, in which both female and male protagonists are seen relaxing on the grass patch surrounded by thick green trees during the dusk hours of the day. The sound of birds chirping during the sunset in the background highlights the scene's serenity. The blind man Anirudh asks Kavita, how beautiful are you? At this point, the camera zooms in and focuses on Kavita's face to showcase her look. Kavita defines herself as good-looking based on societal parameters ranging from skin colour, eye colour, and thick tresses. The close-up shot helps in pointing out that the male gaze generally focuses only on the physical aspects. The camera zooms out as soon as Anirudh rejects these parameters by calling them insufficient and useless. He says he finds her beautiful because of the alluring fragrance of her body and hair. He finds her beautiful because her voice is like the sound of a guitar, her touch is tender like velvet, and above all, the sense of belongingness that he derives in her company, makes her beautiful. The zoom-out function of the camera allows a wider angle not only for the shot but also for inserting the emotional and spiritual aspects, which is also known as the perspective of the female gaze. The film sensitizes the audience on how the concepts and their understandings are based only on one sense, i.e. "sight," which generally represents only the physical aspects. Anirudh, through his arguments, reveals other ways of seeing and understanding the concepts such as "beautiful" by focusing on touch, hearing, smell, and emotions. Thus defining the superficiality of societal notions, which are limited to biased gaze. This scene is followed by the sari-buying scene, in which Kavita tries to exercise her new understanding of seeing beauty. She chooses a saree not based on the visual appearance but on how the material felt through her fingertips. By placing these two scenes one after another, Sai provides an example of practicing the female gaze, where the focus lies on the touch and emotions.

Questioning the Patriarchal Notion of Chivalry and Masculinity

Although the blind protagonist is free of the biased gaze, he is still blinded by the patriarchal notion such as the belief that being physically abled is synonymous with manhood. An example can be the restaurant

scene. To celebrate the school function's successful completion, Anirudh invites Kavita for dinner. By using the continuity editing process, a restaurant setting is constructed, in which people are shown eating, chatting, and dancing. To highlight the consistency of narration across both time and physical space, after placing the order for food, Anirudh is shown narrating the famous nursery tale *Three Blind Mice,* and both parties seem to be enjoying the conversation and ambience. As soon as the soup arrives, Kavita tries to unwrap the napkin for Anirudh, which he finds somewhat patronizing and insulting. The scene becomes tense again when the waiter presents the bill to Kavita. Anirudh angrily queries how can the bill be delivered to a woman? The waiter reasons it by saying he gave the bill to Kavita because she can see as was the case with the menu, which Kavita happily read for Anirudh. On hearing this, Anirudh shouts angrily at the waiter, whereas Kavita remains silent.

Nonetheless, the scene throws an intriguing question. Is Anirudh's ego simply an ego of a blind person, or is it an ego of an ordinary man burdened by the societal notion of masculinity? Anirudh's anger and assertiveness are indeed an expression of his constant contest to prove his ability as a man, and this includes not being dependent on anyone, especially on a woman. Being burdened by the patriarchal notion of masculinity, he must display strength, courage, independence, assertiveness, and chivalry. His idea of masculinity may not be as extreme as that of Western straight masculinity, which propagates "a man was really a man to the degree that he was not feminine" (During 181). But the fact cannot be ignored that the patriarchal notions hinder Anirudh from "seeing" the affection and love of Kavita. The very thought of him being dependent on Kavita makes him uncomfortable. Sai's work consists of questioning societal expectations placed on men and women from an early age.

She attends to the paradox inherent in the patriarchal notion of chivalry and masculinity by screening a dream scene in which a young schoolboy Paplu imagines himself as a prince who rescues a princess from the clutches of the demon. The dream scene presents a typical chivalric story involving a man saving a woman in need, but the twist is that the man is played by a young child named Paplu, while the woman is portrayed by an independent, self-conscious female teacher named Kavita. The dream, a narrative tool of meta-theatre, triggers uncomfortable laughter as it raises doubt on the notion of chivalry, masculinity, and the image of a fragile woman, depicted in films and fictions by simply showing the considerable age difference. These notions are integrated into the culture of Indian Cinema, and societies as observers have become accustomed to them without questioning their rationality, to the extent that they have become burdensome. Through these scenes, Sai successfully conveys to the viewers the irrational nature of such concepts in an Indian context.

The Film *Chashme Buddoor*

The audience knows they are in for a different kind of film from the moment the opening credits roll. Cut-outs of Gandhi, Bertrand Russell, G.B. Shaw, Vivekanand, etc. are replaced with the pin-ups of bikini models in glamour shots, who cause them to go wide-eyed. Through this, Sai declares to the audience that what they will see will not be just any social commentary but an out and out comic brawl with moral values draped within. In the film, Farooq Shaikh, Rakesh Bedi, and Ravi Baswani play three bachelors cum roommates named Siddharth, Omi, and Jai, whose lives turn when they meet a beautiful girl named Neha (Deepti Naval). Seeing the girl, Omi and Jai wagered a bet between themselves to win her, only to fail miserably later. A romance ensues between Siddharth and Neha, who is unaware that she is the same girl on whom his friends had betted before. In fear that their remarkable although false stories of wooing Neha will be shared, they seed doubts in Siddharth's mind about Neha's character when they discover he is dating her.

Many films have explored the theme of an eligible boy falling in love with a pretty girl, where misunderstandings arise between them only to be resolved in the end with help from friends. Going with the same plot allows Sai to provide a scathing commentary on those films and show the audience how these films frame reel-reality, which they end up believing to be real. Akira Kurosawa once mentioned about

framing a particular shot in *Ran* that if he had bulged his camera a little to the right or the left, it would have captured within its frames such modern objects that would have defeated the purpose of his period film (see Lumet ix). By using the reflexive technique in this film, Sai, however, comments upon the formal qualities of the film by taking the audience into the dreamscape of romance while at the same time framing the shots, she creates "narrative intransitivity,"[9] which both shocks and produces comic by showing the familiar in reality but unfamiliar on screen.

The following subsections focus on the reflexive disposition of Sai, where she recontextualizes the conversant tropes popularized in Hindi films for her audience. There are two tropes to discuss here: the Garden and the Chase Scene.

Garden as a Trope in Indian Cinema

Garden or park, like film theatre, is such space that is "both public and private" (Menon 149) as it provides "elements of public parade and private pleasure" (149). Hindi films have always dug into the "cultural memory,"[10] which is "a form of collective memory shared by a number of people forming their collective identity" (Assmann 110), invoking the imagery of garden as haven bringing "face to face with desire, with sex, with everything that we obsess about but do not want to be seen as obsessing about" (Menon 149). In the film *Chashme Buddoor*, one of the first instances of garden tropes occurs when Omi describes how he courted Neha. When he is "flashbacking," he imagines himself to be Saleem (the famous Mughal Prince) and Neha as Anarkali (the beautiful courtesan and Saleem's love interest), speaking *shayaris* during their conversational exchange. Their boating escapade is accompanied by the song *is nadi ko mera aaina maan lo* (consider this river as my mirror), which is picturized depicting the familiar shots of romantic songs characteristic of Indian films. As noted by Natalie Sarrazin, the courtship or meeting song, i.e. principal duet, is a musical representation of "love-in-union" or *sambhoga*: "Principal duet is often picturised in pastoral settings involving nature, lush fields, and flowers. Cinematographically, along shot and panoramic view capture the lovers in mountains, in fields, by oceans, waterfall and other sensual settings" (399).

However, the comical element is introduced when the romantic shots give way to the images of a herd of buffalo bathing in the river instead of two flowers meeting. The prototypical elements such as a boat, river, flowers, and male and female characters dressed in ethnic attires used in picturizing songs in mainstream films do not permit shots of buffalo bathing as they do not trigger a romantic ambience and hence should be cropped. This switching of the codes makes this scene more realistic and amusing since it gives the impression that this is how a romantic scene would look in real life.

The debate of filmic fiction versus reality is extended in the second example to be discussed here, which takes place between Neha and Siddharth in a public park. The serene surroundings of the park prompt Neha to suggest that they should now sing and dance as in films. The discussion follows as to how when hero and heroine sing, no one is in the garden except them. Also, from where does the music begin to play, and that too by an orchestra? With this scene, Sai Paranjpye intelligently disseminates the facts behind the making of cinematic realism in her analysis of Bollywood songs. Cinema is an effective tool to engender heteronormative practices. Through films, masses are taught to practice "sex in public" (Berlant and Michael Warner) as well as to display intimacy in such locales as parks (or theatres) that offer a mirage of safety to distract "citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives" (553). It becomes

9 "Narrative is rendered intransitive when the chain of causation that motivates the action and moves the plot is interrupted or confused, through spatial and temporal fragmentation, or the introduction of alien forms and information." (Siska, "Metacinema," 286.)

10 In the chapter "Parks" of her book *Infinite Variety*, Madhavi Menon explores how parks and gardens have always played a role in the Indian imagination of a safe space for leisure as well as romance. The Muslim rulers built pleasure gardens where they could stroll and meet their lovers in secret. Many Hindi films have parlayed this imagery, such as when two flowers fall over each other, implying intimacy between hero and heroine.

difficult, still, to avoid the reality they portray, given the charm and popularity these commercial Bollywood films enjoy. As is also seen in this sequence when Neha and Siddharth, with all their awareness and criticism of Bollywood songs, could not resist singing and dancing around the bushes. Unlike Hindi romantic songs, Sai does not abruptly end the song scene using hard cut, but rather shows how people have gathered around them in the park, enjoying their activities, and then when they are finished, yell out, "Aren't they embarrassed? They are singing and dancing in the park" (1:19:28–1:19:32; English subtitles).

The Chase Scene Formula of Hindi Films

Who can forget the opening chase scene of the film *Sholay*, in which the bandits on horse chased the train? This chase scene became more remarkable because it was accompanied by top-notch action, urgency in dialogues, and tense music. The popularity of chase scenes in Hindi films turned them into a tested formula for last-minute rescue finale and thrilling climax. One more reason for the popularity could be derived from the fact that the chase scene offered a possibility to the male protagonist to prove his masculinity by rescuing a feeble female protagonist. Sai also implements the chase scene formula in *Chashme Buddoor* but makes "chase into an object of parody" (Chion 31). In this scene, Jay and Omi devise a trick to make Neha fall in love with Siddharth based on their training of Hindi cinematic code. Hindi films over the years have designed bravery for a man to be fighting a gallant battle with the villain, rescuing his love, which ultimately leads him to her heart. The repeated use of this narrative has made it into an "acceptable" reason for a woman to fall in love with her rescuer – the hero.

In this scene, the audience is aware of Jai and Omi's plan of staging a Hindi film style fake kidnapping. Jai and Omi construct the same filmy scenario, in which Neha is being abducted in a taxi and Siddharth is chasing to rescue her on his motorbike. The twist occurs as soon as Jai and Omi appear on stage disguised as kidnappers and ask where Neha is. The realization of their failed schema follows with tense chase music where Siddharth chases the "real" kidnapper's taxi on a motorbike stupendously. To increase the intensity, the camera zooms on the tires to show the acceleration. Whereas, the two buffoons, Jai and Omi, who are confused and waving toy guns in their hands also join the chasing without knowing where they are heading. The scene contains all prototypical filmy elements such as bike, taxi, guns, old hill, one-line dialogues *bachao* (rescue) and *chor do mujhe* (spare me) that have been repeatedly used in films for staging a perfect kidnapping chase scene. Sai picks up these tropes that recur repeatedly in Hindi films and turn them into comedy. In this scene, the humour arises from inserting funny dialogues *bachao nahi pakdo* (not rescue but chase) from the supposed rescuers with a tensed background music. This miss-match of funny dialogues into a supposedly action-packed scene creates laughter. With this thrilling last-minute climax of a typical Indian film, Sai also ends her film with a known happy ending, in which Siddharth, with the help of another character Lalan Mia and police, rescue Neha. However, with the use of multiple characters, which are helping the male protagonist in rescuing the female protagonist, Sai is successful in taking the focus away from the exhilarating sense of power displayed through the masochism of the male protagonist and shifts the focus on the message contained in the cinematic code.

The Film *Katha*

The narrative of the film *Katha* takes place in the backdrop of a chawl. A chawl is usually a microcosm of a miniaturized community living together like a joint family. By setting the story in a Mumbai chawl, a famous trope of Indian urban cinema, Sai achieved the goal of demonstrating how a community can exercise the "male gaze" on others as well as be influenced by the same. The story is loosely based on the classic tale of "The Hare and the Tortoise." However, it plays on Sai's observation of how the hare no longer loses in the modern world where images sell: "The adage "Slow and steady wins the

race" is no longer valid in today's day and age. It no longer suffices to merely possess sterling qualities and virtues. You must be able to skilfully flaunt them. Fancy packaging matters more than the content. In this era of advertising, one must constantly blow one's trumpet or be ignored" (Paranjpye *A Patchwork Quilt* 319).

The tortoise of this story is scrupulous Rajaram P. Joshi (played by Naseeruddin Shah), a resident of the chawl, works as a cleric in a shoe company, and secretly loves his neighbour Sandhya (played by Deepti Naval). One day, at the chawl, the hare of the story emerges in the form of Rajaram's long lost friend Vasudev (played by Farooque Shaikh), or Bashu as he prefers to be called, charming everyone including Sandhya with his smooth talk. Bashu illustrates how the most crooked can manifest divine presence only to cheat people in modern times. Bashu has the habit of spinning the keychain like a disc. Sai cleverly mingles this trait in his character to evoke the similarities between him and the Hindu mythological figure of Lord Vishnu, who dawns *Sudarshana Chakra* to punish the evil and evildoers. His appearance at Rajaram's door with all sorts of rich promises invokes another mythological tale of Lord Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) visiting the doors of his impecunious friend Sudama. However, this time in the garb of *leela* (divine play), this fake god is only going to deceive Sudama's trust. He exudes the same deceitful charm similar to false promises of Bollywood dream industry, which manage to captivate people despite their untrustworthiness.

Sai wastes no time getting to the subject she takes on in the film. Like *Chashme Buddoor*, the film's animated opening credits introduce to the audience what kind of characters they shall be interacting with while the world of hare and tortoise unfolds in front of them. Although the whole film cleverly outpours Sai Paranjpye's feminized gaze, to which an entirely new paper can be devoted. Yet, to limit the discussion within the limited space, there are three scenes valuable for discussion.

Questioning the Normalization of the Eve-teasing in Hindi Films

In the film *Katha*, Sai incorporates a scene that portrays an advertisement for Footprint Shoes. Similar to her previous film *Chashme Buddoor*, Sai satirizes the decision-making processes involved in the creation and approval of an advertisement, which has nothing to do with the actual product. The scene opens with the Censor Board certificate for an advertisement titled "Joota Ho To Aisa" (Shoe must be like this). An eve-teaser is shown harassing a girl sitting in a park. Agitated, the girl sprints through the park while he follows, singing a Bollywood song. As he grabs her scarf, the girl picks her sandal and slaps it on his face. First, the shot cuts to the girl's face, who smilingly advocates, "If you wear a sandal, wear Footprint. Useful for every moment. A shoe must be like this" (36:28–36:34; English subtitles). Next, the shot cuts to the eve-teaser who appears happy having been beaten by the Footprint sandal and proudly exclaims, "if you have to get beaten, it should be Footprint. A shoe must be like this" (36:35–36:40; English subtitles). As the advertisement ends, the shot cuts to a room where everybody except Rajaram congratulates the supervisor of Footprint shoes. When enquired, Rajaram says that he feels the commercial is childish and that the product would be mocked. The supervisor turns his comments down, who says he knows little about "art."

With this parody, Sai sarcastically ridicules the "creativity" of the filmmakers who trivialize even a serious subject of Eve-teasing. Bollywood has its part in normalizing and encouraging such acts as could be seen how the abuser is enjoying hackling the girl while at the same time singing a popular Hindi song "Lal Chadi Maidan Khadi" from the 1965 film *Janwar*. Sai puts into the foreground for the audience the disconnect between the content and the message of what they are fed in the name of "art" through films and television programs. Women are required to be "hyper-aware" of their surroundings, as Meredith Tax notes in her essay "Woman and Her Mind": "Walk down in a city street without being tuned in and you're in real danger; our society is one in which men rape, mug, and murder women whom they don't even know every day" (Tax 24). The scene illustrates the way Bollywood films have normalized the heinous practice of Eve-teasing by ignoring the choices of women completely.

Rajaram's Nightmare – A World Dominated by Women

The audience is exposed to a complete change of perspective in the following scene – "the nightmare of Rajaram." In this scene, Sai gives a glimpse to the audience of how it would feel if women were to bully and harass men as they suffer on a regular basis. The dream sequence commences with the shot of a comely flower, the sight of which pleases Rajaram. Next, the camera tilts upwards and pauses to a shining apple where a woman appears and plucks the fruit while a seductive voiceover plays "A for Apple." The plucking of fruit and the voiceover sequence runs on a loop a couple of times. With this sequence, Sai bends the Biblical reference of Satan tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Here, the twinkling eye of the woman who plucks the fruit suggests her plan of similar mischievous. Next, Rajaram is seen adoring the fruit, while four women wearing zebra stripes clothing appear in the scene. They are Rajaram's office colleagues who tease him and take advantage of his courteous nature. Suddenly, his dream turns into a nightmare as he finds himself surrounded by these women who hackle and eve-tease him. They call him *bulbul* (nightingale), a reference which men use to praise (or harass) women. Aghast by the harassment, Rajaram pleads, "Aren't you ashamed? Don't you have brothers or a father?" They laughingly answer it, "No" (1:00:52–1:00:56). Petrified, he runs and hides while they search for him. One of the women says that she has cured many men like him. As he is caught, they make him eat the apple while tearing his clothes asunder.

This nightmare sequence is comical to the extent of producing uncomfortable laughter, especially for men because it relates to the routine occurrences of a woman living in a patriarchal society. Rajaram is further saved by Sandhya, who rescues him like a hero (or to say a shero) – a typical role reversal from what routine cinema has oriented the audience. Sai Paranjpye admits that she added this episode as a payback: "Having witnessed countless innocent maidens eve-teased and molested on the silver screen, I did my little bit as a woman director to have the tables turned. A little attempt to give the machismos a taste of their own medicine" (Paranjpye *A Patchwork Quilt* 331)!

It is unclear whether Sai Paranjpye knew of the works of French female director Alice Guy-Blaché, the first female director in cinema's history, who in 1906 directed a short film titled *Les Résultants du Féminisme* (The Consequences of Feminism) in which she imagined a similar world as crafted by Sai Paranjpye in the nightmare sequence – a world dominated by women. The parallel that exists in between Sai Paranjpye's nightmare scene with that of Guy-Blaché's short film presents a critique of the patriarchal tyranny, which for the first time in the history of Hindi cinema has been projected by a female director, styled as hokum to show how nonsensical men's world is.

Sandhya's Guilt – An Example of Female Spectator Identifying with Male Gaze

After writing the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey turned her concern towards the effect of the male gaze on the female spectator and how they identify with it. In an "Afterthoughts" to the essay, she addresses the aspects of women unconsciously "enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides" (Mulvey 29). However, since the grammar of the film places spectators "*with* the hero" (30), for female spectators, the situation becomes complicated as their identification with the masculine "point of view" mandates them to suppress the "demand for correct femininity" (37). With the climax of *Katha*, Sai Paranjpye similarly touches upon the idea of how a woman is influenced by the notion of her performance faithful to masculine "point of view." She raised this issue in *Sparsh*, where Kavita is burdened with the idea of "duty" that she should perform by marrying Anirudh. By doing so, she would honour the memories of her first husband to whom she "loved." The ambiguity arises from the fact that her love for Anirudh now is the same as her love for her deceased husband once was. However, the idea of confessing so would fill her with feelings of guilt, as she would be perceived as being unfaithful to her first husband. As a result, she makes this guilt into a mission, a duty, which she aspires to fulfil with Anirudh.

In most cases, women are found carrying the baggage of patriarchal notions draped in terminologies like duty, honour, morality, chastity, etc. In *Sparsh*, Kavita is overwhelmed with the struggle between emotion and duty. Sai extends this debate with Sandhya in *Katha*, who finds herself unworthy of Rajaram when she is left on the altar by Bashu. Earlier in the film, Sai shows the audience the desire palpating within Sandhya for the kind of man she seeks to be with. When her parents discuss her marriage, she says that she wants a man who is "manly & smart," and at that moment, the camera focuses on Bashu, who is smoking on the terrace, and smilingly waves at Sandhya. By using the camera to show the aspiration of a woman, something which men have done umpteen times fantasizing of women on screen, Sai not only presents Sandhya's desire but also how the masculine point informs their view. She wants a man who is "manly" enough, a quality which Rajaram fails to satisfy. It is only in the end that she realizes how misguided she is. However, she believes that now she is not worthy of being with Rajaram, whom she believes is ready to "sacrifice" himself to save her reputation. Rajaram replies that it is not out of sacrifice but love that he wants to be with her. She quizzes that he should have told him earlier, allowing her to see him differently. Rajaram says that he tried, but she ignored his messages. The conversation highlights how the "male gaze" in the form of reason blinds people to the "feminine intuition,"[11] something which has assisted humans in leading the right course throughout history.

With the scene, Sai gazes the gaze back by presenting the misinformed expectations that masculinity demands from people. Not only Sandhya misjudged Bashu, but the whole chawl participated in celebrating his figure. Sandhya is unsure how to interpret the desire she entertained for Bashu. It begs the question of who instituted such a want for masculine affirmation in the first place? It is the ill-begotten societal norms that are to be blamed here. The notion that once a man rejects a woman makes her unworthy of another, Sai questions this here. However, Sai does not paint Bashu as evil and Rajaram as a saint. Bashu too is the product of this society where he understood what kind of being a "man" would yield success. On the other hand, men like Rajaram have to stand to correct such false perceptions.

Conclusion

The 1980s is counted as a time that paved the way for liberalization and market economy in India, with a focus on the telecom industry. The transition into liberalization demanded a new understanding of the existing concepts. In her films, Sai makes use of the female gaze to offer a different interpretation of Hindi Film's conventionalized codes. Sai employs narrative techniques to challenge the underlying message of the conventionalized code of Hindi cinematic aesthetics. By using multiple characters and multiple versions of the same story, by purposefully depicting hollow, base characters, who lie, borrow money, buy cigarettes without paying, etc., she shifts the focus on the message of the film rather than the plot. She sensitizes the observer of the times they are living in by placing Gandhi's poster in the background while the base character speaks of truth and values. With her heightened sense of intertextuality, Sai draws references from mythology, Bollywood films, songs, as well as literature, assigning the intertextual references a new meaning. She makes the underlying message of the established codes ambiguous for the viewers by playing with the positioning of the set patterns and by combining it with new imagery. As an example, an intimate scene between hero and heroine is not followed by the touching of two flowers but by sight of the herd of buffalos bathing in the river. Sai's narrative style, infused with the techniques of the female gaze, brings emotions to the forefront while redefining and questioning societal expectations imposed on women by Hindi cinematic tradition.

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11 James Lovelock writes in his book *Novacene* regarding "feminine intuition" which he believes is going to be the primary force in leading human civilization in future. (See *Novacene*, 19–20.)

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