

Chapter 4

Subversive strategies in the films of Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi and Manju Borah

4.1 Understanding subversion:

Subversion is a political tool to overthrow or transcend the system and its antecedents from within. Subversion is 'the reversal of established values, or the insertion of other values into them' (Grindon 2011). It is about upsetting the status quo by using the very resources (say, various rituals and symbols) of the dominant culture. For instance, in literature, subversion may be manifested through the thematic content or by the characters. In situations where arduous censorship is present, subversion may be covert (Makaryk 2000: 636). Intertextuality, as we have explored in the previous chapter, can also be a powerful strategy of subversion.

Subversion is used to meet a desired end, carried out with the belief that anything in both the material and the transcendent world can be overturned (Goya and Ocha 2012: 3). Talking about subversion in myths, Goya and Ocha said that there can be three types of subversion—subversion of the narrative, subversion of the structure and subversion of a superior (or dominant) character (ibid. 4-7). In the film text characters and themes are subverted through the introduction of humour and parody, a phenomenon noticed in the spoof films (Swirk 2015). These films give new readings to the original texts, very often unsettling the expectations of the audience. Films like *Vampires Suck* (2010) and *Scary Movie* (2000) are not only intertextually related to the earlier films and the original book source but give a parodied picture of the heroism that are celebrated in the earlier texts. The subversion of the standard ideas of sexuality and the stereotypical female are toppled in the popular magazines. Discussing about the glossy women's magazine, David Gauntlett opines that these magazines in fact encourage women to be 'sexual actors' than being the

'sexual object', rejecting passive femininity and 'openly desire others' (Gauntlett 2002: 206-207).

The act of subversion however has been understood differently in different contexts. It is a tool for rebellion in the political-institutional discourse used to label the activities of the anti-institutional doings aimed at overthrowing the authorities. To the artistic avant-garde discourse, subversion is a process in artistic movement. In the subcultural discourse subversion lets one be distinct in the minority position (Ernst 2014: 1); thus, it allows one to break free of the traditional binds of the tradition within which one works. In the face of a dominant culture regarding race, ethnicity, class, sex and language, subversive subcultures of fashion, music, drugs and sexuality emerge. Within the purview of theoretical approaches like Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Postcolonial Studies that describe culture and identity as a construction of the hegemonic discourses, subversion can be achieved through strategies like 'travesty and parody' (ibid. 1).

Mikhail Bakhtin accounted for subversion as a 'popular festive form, which embodies the social world-consciousness of marginal or subordinated groups' (Makaryk 2000: 636). While describing carnival, Bakhtin opined that laughter and excesses displayed in it put away the solemnity and the orders of formalities of life. Carnival topples the imposing authority of language and values and carves spaces for variety of meanings and voices. The space for multiple meanings blurs the boundaries of both the physical and abstract world. In a carnival people engage in spontaneous activities of eating, drinking, laughing and shouting; processes that let them not only to take in but also communicate with the 'outer' world. These interactions thus point to the fact, according to Bakhtin, that nothing is fixed and that things evolve. The interactions and excesses of carnival subvert the sanctioned dominant authority (Elliot 1999: 129-130).

To the New Historicists, subversion is not just a resistance to power but is power in itself. They have taken Foucault's idea that power is omnipresent and subversion is a process in the discourse of power. According to them texts are

tools of politics as within it is woven the social, political and cultural structures. Texts are thus not only the carriers of power but have the potential of subversion within it (Jie-xiu 2014: 614).

To Louis Althusser, subversion, on the other hand, is 'self-defeating' as it works outside the awareness of the dominant agents. To his student Foucault, power is a metaphysical entity and it is power that restrains subversion (Makaryk 2000: 636-637). Foucault believed that wielding of power happens through a set of principles and by creating and separating the 'normal' from the 'abnormal'. Those which are viewed as the 'abnormal' – the insane, the sexually deviant, the criminal subsequently become objects for 'normalization' which are to be constantly controlled. Neither the 'normal' nor the 'abnormal' are thus outside the realms of power; 'normalcy' as a category is always defined in terms of the social parameters of the 'standard'. Even if any subversive acts are carried out they are still products of the social power and do not exist beyond it (Thiem 2008: 81-82).

Judith Butler's notion of subversion comes from her belief that gender is performance and resistance is possible through a parodied performance of gender (Gauntlett 2002: 140-146). Butler deviates from the binary separation of gender restricted by the biological body and vouches for a concept where gender is seen as fluid that shifts and changes in different contexts and situations (Gauntlett 2014). Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, that the binary division of sexuality restricts the subversive possibilities that would 'disrupt heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies' (1999: 26). She further writes,

[t]he subversion of paternally sanctioned culture cannot come from another version of culture, but only from within the repressed interior of culture itself, from the heterogeneity of drives that constitutes culture's concealed foundation. (ibid. 109-110)

In the following sections, all these ideas will be alternately used to explicate the working of subversion in films. The bottom line is that subversion can be an effective tool for political protest and this is what I intend to explore in the present chapter.

4.2 Subversion in films:

The film text has been the ground for experimentation of various narratives. Films borrow from all other art forms and create a fresh version of the stories on celluloid. We may take the example of Tim Burton and his fascination for the gothic and turning around plots of well-known tales. His *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012, produced) give us altered storylines. Likewise cinema has also been the medium to register protest against dominant and overbearing cultural practices. It has stood for the socially marginalized, voiced gay rights and promoted ideas of gender equality within its form. To be the medium to voice the concerns of the marginalized, cinema has often taken recourse to various strategies of subversion.

Talking about the dismissal of Underground Cinema as an 'adolescent phase' of avant-garde, Duncan Reekie goes on to establish that it is in fact a subversive trend in film making opposed to the binaries of popular cinema and experimental cinema. By embracing different views from 'radical structuralism to mysticism, revolutionary politics to pop culture and auteurism to collectivism' Underground Cinema is a subversive and revolutionary trend in filmmaking (Reekie and Seargent). Discussing Pixar's animated film *WALL-E* (2008) as an example of subversive filmmaking, Brian Mattson writes,

Subversion is the act of telling a familiar story, one that "everybody knows" with a moral or lesson "everybody knows," but making subtle changes and introducing new themes, elements, and symbols that point to a different conclusion than the one the audience was expecting. (Mattson)

According to Mattson, *WALL-E* is subversive because it goes on to establish how humans are important for the survival of the earth, against the popular assumption that it is human consumption and materialism that have degraded the planet. As the credits roll we see the re-creation process of culture on earth and the depiction of great events in human civilization like ancient cave paintings and Renaissance drawings (ibid).

Gender roles are changed in cinema through 'non-patriarchal modes of female spectatorship' as women found their 'own pleasures in inevitably-sexist cinema'

(Gauntlett 2000: 40). The patriarchal tradition of filmmaking allows women the opportunity to indulge in subversive reading of the film texts. Though popular commercial cinema is far from creating ideal feminist roles the 'action heroines, detectives, cow-girls and empowered music stars' provide for a rethinking of the role of women. Jodie Foster in *Panic Room* (2002), Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and Ming Na in *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) take women away from the image of the meek damsel to the clever, tough and resourceful women. These films are examples of role subversion for women from the frightened to the powerful, from the imprudent to the shrewd and from the unwise to the intelligent (ibid. 72). Gauntlett quotes Butler to state that gender performance can be reversed even without waiting for a revolution or a social awakening (ibid. 140).

According to Butler, if a society experiences unpredictable and random performances of identity, it would change the popular perception about gender and the binaries of gender would break. Thus it is important to bring in different strategies for 'alternative performances' of gender identity (ibid. 141-142). The idea of subversion is to use the tool of oppression against itself. Women when viewed as sexual objects have the opportunity to make excess of it and thus topple the system that strives not only to enjoy but also to control them. Cinema makes way for such alternative performances of gender roles and helps create new readings of the prevalent stereotypes.

4.3 Subversion and the feminist agenda:

Feminism aims to disrupt the patriarchal society for a more gender neutral one. To revolt and stand against the misogyny of society has been the work of the feminist movements. While scholars like Virginia Woolf have called for women to have a space of their own in order to unleash her individuality, others have been vocal for a larger part in the socio-economic and political system. But standards and traditions that the society has carved out through centuries stand in the path of the path of gender equality. While resistance might be a difficult path to tread, subversion of the system from within provides an interesting alternative in the process of gender equality.

To Judith Butler it would be wrong to interpret gender as the cultural construction of biological sex. According to her, it is the notions of gender which produces the “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” (1999: 11). Gender thus becomes a string of performances subject to the laws of society (ibid. 33). The set performances of gender can be challenged through a set of subversive strategies or performances. Language, which according to Lacan, is structured by paternal law and restricts multiplicity of meaning, can be challenged by poetic language that can ‘disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law’ (ibid. 101-102). Butler further argues that the binaries of gender division can be challenged and subverted by transcending the boundaries of heterosexuality (ibid. 143-144). Butler emphasizes on the use of drag and parody to surpass the gender norms and writes,

The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility qua possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that already exist [...] Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness (ibid. 189-190).

While attempting to subvert the patriarchal cannon of gender stereotypes, the female crusader may either opt for the carnivalesque or the parodied forms of the prevalent narratives. To Julia Kristeva, the carnivalesque is a way to stay away from the ‘literary, political or social norm’ (Becker-Leckrone 2005: 153). In order to move away from these norms Judith Butler suggests the use of parody. To her, parody can serve to redefine the gender norm by their very nature as a failed copy. The performances of gender as any other is exposed to every form of censure and self-mockery and over statement. The fantasy that gender is a stoic identity is challenged by its parodied form (Butler 1999: 186-187).

Writing about the subversive trends in modern television E. Ann Kaplan mentions the use of rapid montage in MTV programs. According to her the rapid cuts gives an opportunity to move beyond the classical narrative patterns in television and the urgency of the business limits it from associating limited sets of signifiers to the binary genders (1988: 35-36). The muddled up images thus

allows for a free reading of the narrative content to the audiences. On the other hand, the subversive power of parody lies in replaying the already existent modes of representation and cultural forms. Pop star Madonna's recital in *Material Girl* makes not only makes intertextual reference to Marilyn Monroe's performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; in fact the overplaying of female sexualisation challenges the patriarchal control over female sexuality and it is done using the already prevalent facade of cultural construction of gender (Gauntlett 2000; Kaplan 1988).

In *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion*, Leslie Bow examines how women have been charged of betrayal, infidelity and these traits have been labelled innate to their nature. To add to these features, inconstancy and the capacity to entice have been used as markers of her character. Bow however suggests that an act of betrayal can be used as a subversive strategy against the authority that has been domineering and authoritarian, determined on upkeeping the rigid boundaries in identities and roles (Bow 2001: 3).

Just like the betrayer, the trickster can also be seen as a figure of subversion. The trickster is dubious and ingenious and is able to achieve her goals through con, deceits and violation of rules. Through her camouflage, impersonations and crossing over of gender and class, the trickster is able to disrupt the standard norms (Landay 2010: 54). Lori Landay takes the case of the popular television sitcom *I Love Lucy* of the 1950s and analyses the leading character Lucy as an act of subversion. She states that Lucy is a trickster in the American culture of the 1950s who could cross between spaces of home and the community, truth and pretence and the rigidity of gender performance (ibid. 54). Landay further writes,

[B]y using conventionally female tactics like makeup, emotional manipulation, and sex appeal in addition to the trickster tactics of disguise, parody, feigned submission, impersonation, and deception, Lucy highlights the inconsistencies of the gender system. (ibid. 55)

To turn the traditional and stereotypical systems and beliefs upside down have become a weapon to overcome the severity of gender norms. In a subtle way

these subversive strategies are an attempt to create a new narrative outside the confines of patriarchal discourses.

4.4 Points in subversion:

Giving an introduction to his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, Amos Vogel writes,

[It] is about the subversion of existing values, institutions, *mores* and taboos—East and West, Left and Right—by the potentially most powerful art of the century (Vogel 2005: 1).

With these opening lines of his book, Vogel gives us an idea about the influence of cinema on the society and its ability to provide a platform for the growth and development of new philosophies. The medium of cinema itself becomes a subversive strategy for the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi. His films were banned in the country and he was barred from making films and also placed under house arrest in an attempt to restrict his activities. Panahi nevertheless went on to make a film on his house arrest (*This Is Not a Film*, 2011) with the help of a fellow filmmaker Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. The film that reflected on Panahi's loss of intellectual and corporeal freedom during the period of house arrest was met with critical acclaim in the international arena drawing attention to his state and leading to his regaining of freedom to continue to create films within the boundaries of his country (Gates 2015).

Films, by the sheer advantage of technological portability, have the power to transgress not only geographical boundaries but also make divergent statements about various socio-cultural and political issues; they can provide messages that can be promptly communicated to a larger audience. The filmmakers under study take the medium of cinema to take a nonconformist standpoint about the issues that concern them. There is an attempt by these filmmakers, especially to make statements regarding the status of women and provide alternate readings about their situations that seem commonplace and ridden by patriarchal prejudices.

The film *Chingaari*, while narrating the story of Basanti, presents the lifestyle of the lowly paid female sex workers. Their loud personality and brazen sexuality

present an undeclared resistance to the exploitative system sanctioned by the temple. Their carnivalesque existence subverts the gender roles that women are supposed to adhere to. Bhuwan Panda's saintly proclamations are set for mockery as he indulges in amorous pleasures with Basanti. Basanti due to her class status, is prohibited from praying to the goddess but roles are reversed when she takes it on herself to end the priest's reign of terror and people rally behind her. The 'goddess' thus appears in her mortal frame.

Darmiyaan questions society for the gender binaries that it swears by. Immi in the film is a question and a challenge to the rigid gender definitions that one is supposed to adhere to. As Judith Butler has said, it is by disobeying the rigidity of gender norms that it can be challenged (1999: viii). The transgender population thus provides natural resistance to the gender stereotypes and Lajmi speaks for the marginalized gender of the society. Immi struggles for recognition and denies to be typecast in a specific role and maintains her individual identity by neither being a part of the *hijra*⁹ community nor conforming to the standards of gender roles.

It is in *Rudaali* that Kalpana Lajmi's vibrant feminist agenda comes to the fore. She takes on Mahashweta Devi's short story to render it into a film. Deviating from the original story, Lajmi provides Sanichari all decisive power. She is free from the influence of any external counseling agent. Sanichari makes good of the social position and gender expectations and learns to exploit the very system that has so far oppressed her. As is expected she becomes a '*rudaali*' and cries fake tears to earn her living. As Bhikni has taught her it is her performance that would earn her the authority to negotiate through the system that is designed to subjugate her.

While silence is supposed to be something handed over to the weak, Manju Borah in *Akashitorar Kothare*, makes it the tool for resistance. Silence demonstrates and focuses on the class politics in action in maintaining the hierarchies of gender (Brainbridge 2008: 59). As the French feminists talk about

⁹ The *hijra* community in India consist of the transgender people—identifying themselves as with the female gender. As per the 2014 notification of the Indian Supreme Court they are now officially recognised as the 'third' gender.

employing the body in writing by women, Luce Irigaray specifically mentions the use of silence in breaking gender hierarchies of language. Silence becomes a strategy to communicate and as Showalter opined a subversive strategy in the 'male-dominated discourse' (Weldt-Basson 2009: 19-23). Akashi's silence might be read as a resistance to her defined role. While her mother and mother-in-law seem to accept the roles and duties that are defined for them, Akashi's mind denies accepting the same. She suffers because she cannot accept the situation that she is forced into. Her silence is not one of acceptance but of denial and disapproval. It is through silence that she narrates her anguish and her sufferings. Her silence becomes a powerful weapon for her through which she maintains her status and dignity. Akashitora speaks not with words but with her silence and in final rejection to all the compromises she adores death. Silence works perfectly for Umi in *Sati* who is mute and her inability to speak is her strength. She does not have to explain the reasons for her actions to anyone. Tough subjected to neglect because of her physical disability, she roams around in free spirit while the other women of her age are confined to the margins of domesticity. The filmmakers' use of silence can be equated with the silence of the character of Elinor Dashwood in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* as described by Michal Beth Dinkler. Elinor establishes her supremacy by being silent that is not only a method of self-defense but also her social victory (Dinkler 2004).

Further death that is considered to be the ultimate destructor becomes the weapon of subversion for the filmmaker. Death may be read as the 'catastrophic' event that Baudrillard argues for. The 'catastrophic' pushes the system to its limit and winds the system down leading to a phase of transition (Robinson 2012). Thus, in death she does not perceive defeat but a new freedom that would take her protagonist away from the binds of patriarchy. With death Akashi soars to heights that have been otherwise constrained for her. In death lies her victory whereby she denies the pleasures of domination to her oppressor. In a similar manner, Umi triumphs in her death. Death takes her away from the disapproving gazes of the society cast at her due to her physical vulnerability, her inferior class status and her faulty horoscope.

In *Joymati*, Manju Borah does not allow Joymati to be trapped in the image of the all-sacrificing woman, the *sati*. Her depiction of Joymati adds to her popular image of being a brave martyr to a visionary political figure. Her bravery is in fact put in direct confrontation to two of the most famous figures of the Ahom dynasty—Godapani, her husband and Lachit Borphukan. Manju Borah looks critically at the idea of her all-sacrificing, unquestionable heroism. Lachit first denies fighting in the Battle of Saraighat¹⁰ fearing the loss of lives and property. He is however persuaded by another noble, Aton Burhagohain to march ahead for the sake of a secured future. Godapani on the other hand is on the run and lives his life in disguise in anticipation of overcoming the political turmoil to establish a stable political regime. His helplessness is depicted in the scene where, the woman who sheltered him is dragged away by the soldiers of the king. This scene in the film is immediately followed by the scene of Joymati being tortured. Her pain becomes a spectacle as people throng to witness it. Her face shows no signs of fear or unease of physical pain. She is replete with realization on the feebleness and fragility of her torturers. It also leaves viewers pondering over the fact that while she suffers, Godapani, though in disguise, spends time in the company of another woman. Her fearless and stoic personality stands in complete opposition to the horrors reflected on Godapani's face having witnessed the excesses of the monarchy.

In *Laaz*, a little girl fails to pursue her education due to the lack of proper clothing. Her problems are not individualized. The filmmaker points out that her poverty and its subsequent implications on her and her family are a result of an unjust society that creates chasms between people on the basis of class, caste and gender. Thus it is the shame of the society that a little girl is in a state of deprivation. While as it usually happens in cinema audience expectations are usually of some dramatic happenings. On the contrary, this film depicts that a matter that might seem 'ordinary and small' has tremendous consequences to the one suffering. The film ends as it upsets the common understanding and expectations of the cinema goers.

¹⁰ A battle fought in 1671 between the Mughal Empire and the Ahom Kingdom on the banks of the Brahmaputra. The Ahom army defeated the Mughals under the leadership of Lachit Borphukan.

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* is an adaptation of a novel of the same name. Jewelry and its association with women becomes a pivotal matter of discussion in this film. While popular narrative presents women's love for jewels and ornaments almost as a weakness in their nature, the box of jewelry in the film empowers three generations of women. Here Rashmoni is an old woman, widowed at a very young age. The jewelry that was presented to her during her wedding to adorn her beauty becomes her leverage to live with dignity as a widow. Shomlata establishes her business by mortgaging the jewels and saves the family from plunging into bankruptcy. As Shomlata's daughter, Chaitali grows up, the box is passed on to her. She joins the Bangladesh liberation movement and worries about funding the revolutionaries. Rashmoni's ghost that now visits her, tells her that she always has the jewelry box to fund her adventures.

The film also plays with the idea of the supposed timid nature of women. Shomlata is the typical coy and nervous woman that would remain within the shadows of her husband. But it is with coyness and cunning that she coaxes her husband to join her in the venture that she wanted to establish and then takes to success. Shomlata's husband character can be read as a subversive gender role that the filmmaker has attempted in the film. As Judith Butler has suggested, it is by disobeying the norms that the rigid cultural perception of gender perceptions can be toppled. While Immi in *Darmiyaan* and Chintu in *Chingaari* are the images effeminate male, Joydeep in *15 Park Avenue* and Raja in *Mr and Mrs Iyer* are far from being the fearless male. They sail with the situation and display no superpower to turn over the situation. Similarly, Budhwa in *Rudaali* displays no trace of self-worth and is happy to be looked after his mother. His judgements are overpowered by others including his wife and when circumstances turn rough, he prefers to run away.

As the set standards are questioned in the films, Aparna Sen in *Sati*, mocks the concept of *sati*. The protagonist Umi is married to the tree around which she spends much of her day playing. As Umi is denied shelter inside the house on a stormy night she goes to the huge tree to hide from the rages of nature. But the storm uproots the tree and Umi is fatally wounded; her lifeless body is

discovered on the next dawn. To go by the beliefs, she dies with her husband and thus becomes a *sati*. But this is perhaps not the version of *sati* that the priest and others wanted. With a gaping red wound resembling the vermilion on a wedded woman, the question on the status of being a *sati* is put to question by the filmmaker. As in *Goynar Baksho* and *Parama*, Aparna Sen gives her heroine the space to explore her sexuality. Umi who lives a lonely life devoid of affection and care of the family, is taken advantage of by a friend of the family. While her consent is violated, Umi also discovers the pleasures of a basic human desire and makes further trips to explore her sexuality.

Parama presents the journey of a woman who discovers her identity away from the multifarious roles that she is supposed to play. Opposed to the myth of a multi-performing Durga, the filmmaker presents her reading of the 'ultimate' woman who can define her own identity. *Parama* transcends the many performances to emerge as the individual, the ultimate woman. Silence again becomes a tool for subversion in the film. Parama denies talking to people during her stay at the hospital. She prefers to remain silent and instead writes her thoughts in a journal. Silence gives her the power to shun the external world and distance herself from the surroundings that is constantly demanding her to perform various roles. Parama thus reflects upon herself and focuses on what she wants and establishes her individuality.

Vogel, much akin to Mulvey, describes how the darkness of the theatre and the interplay of light and images aided by technology produces an illusory effect on the spectator. The spectator is transported from the real time to a reality of the screen. And it is during those moments that the director has the authority to play, control and manipulate the vision of the spectator. No matter how real the images seem, it is actually a 'distortion of life' according to Vogel (Vogel 2005: 4). It is this characteristic of cinema that gives it the power to be subversive in nature.

While Mulvey said that the darkened theatre aid in distancing the audience and help them achieve the voyeuristic pleasure and project their desire on the screen/images, to Vogel it (cinema) can be used for subversive purposes.

Cinema thus becomes a tool for the women filmmakers to perform subversive reading of accepted viewpoints and drive from their messages. Cinema becomes a medium to state the unstated with the aim of affecting the human subconscious and as a result,

[T]heir ability to influence masses and jump boundaries, that has(ve) forever made the cinema an appropriate target of the repressive forces in society -- censors, traditionalists, the state. While the result has often been its inability openly to project fundamental human experiences or insights, neither repression nor fear seem able to stem an accelerating, world-wide trend towards a more liberated cinema, one in which all previously forbidden subjects are boldly explored (ibid 5).

'Expanded Cinema' by playing with the modes of film projection—theatre, light and celluloid, and by incorporating intermedia elements tried to break the traditional concept of time and space in cinema (Export 2003). Though these filmmakers have not gone to the extremities of film production techniques, they have introduced the intervention of another media into the time line to give a break to the time and space rigidity. Space and time continuity breaks when Manju Borah makes use of *bhaona* and other performing art forms within the frames of cinema. These insertions, in spite of their metaphorical meaning, transports the audience out of the reality of the screen and provide them the space for introspection about the message that she is trying to deliver through her films. Likewise, Aparna Sen borrows images of violence and social unrest from different (news) media in *Mr and Mrs Iyer*. In addition to the film narrative, these images expose the audience to the horrors of growing fanaticism and lack of harmony. The audiences are aware that these are not happenings in celluloid but in their living very space that they inhabit. Similarly in *15 Park Avenue* the television images of Iraq war, not only add to the distortion of the time space relationship but also builds a consciousness of Mithi's schizophrenia. By breaking the codes of conventional cinema, the filmmaker gains the freedom to express her visions in a diverging time and space continuity (Vogel 2005: part 1: 4)

With heightened emotions and dramatic cinematic presentation—close ups, crisps dialogues and flamboyant characterization Kalpana Lajmi's films *Daman*,

Chingaari and *Darmiyaan* can be placed in the category of melodramas. As it happens in melodramas, the will of the women to challenge their given position takes them through sufferings. In *Chingaari*, Basanti does not give into the whims of Bhuwan Panda and other social sanctions and falls in love. Her lover is killed. In *Darmiyaan*, Zeenat does not let the standards of the film industry define her. She prefers to die poor rather than come down from her pedestal. Durga's formidable spirit in *Daman* subjects her to more humiliation at the hands of her husband. In melodrama they must be punished for their transgressions but the women here triumphs. It is their resolute self that remains. Though Zeenat embraces death it is not same as defeat. She loses her mind and in the illusory state she remains the 'heroine' that she was. Mulvey had said that women's melodrama looks at things from women's perspective. In women's melodrama the heroine finds herself in a position where she is not understood where she comes to a position in opposition to the society. Though she suffers in the process of her transgression, she does not meet the often fatal end of the tragic hero (Cook 2005: 78-79).

The medium of cinema being used for subversive purposes can also be noticed in the use of long shots at the end of the film. The medium of cinema, as is understood, is set to capture the imagination of the audience and transport them to a world of constructed reality. However, these constructed images are broken at the end of the film as it ends not only by making an endearing statement but also by using a long shot too in the last scene before the screen blacks out or the credits roll. The long shot moves the audience away from the emotions of the character to make room for their own reactions to seep in. Thus by combining their story telling agenda with technical operations, the filmmakers disrupt the style of traditional film narrative that would send the audience home with a tale from the screen spinning around their heads. The films allow the viewer to place themselves within the narrative and introspect about their own situation. All the three filmmakers have made use of long shots in their films. Aparna Sen ends her films *15 Park Avenue*, *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *Iti Mrinalini* with long shots. Kalpana Lajmi's makes use of it in *Rudaali* and *Darmiyaan* and Manju Borah uses the long shot ending in *Joymati* and *Laaz*.

Long shots serve the purpose of giving a comprehensive idea of the location around the character. The use of different shots allows the filmmaker to manipulate the audience's field of view (Moura 2014). Thus the filmmakers make an effort not to individualize the story of their character but to place them in the socio-cultural reality and also take them away from a particular character, through which the story is narrated, to place the tale in a larger perspective.

These films justify Vogel's argument that the medium of cinema and the environment where it is projected captures full attention of the audience and affects them at the subconscious level. The flamboyant presentation in these films drives home the message about what is wrong with the practices. In the dark theatre the audience is transported into the world of the characters where they witness these horrors and the medium of cinema itself become subversive for the filmmakers. These women filmmakers have made conscious efforts to turn around popular narratives and establish systems of belief to present a new saga. They offer different perspectives of the known tales and ideas through their films.

4.5 Resisting stereotypes:

Cinema, has narrated many tales, depicted reality and built dreamscapes. But one aspect that cinema has been accused of is of stereotyping—race, class, caste, gender has been perhaps some of the most common stereotyping entities. Stereotyping leads to a one-dimensional understanding of a community and the way it is represented in cinema (Mitra 1999: 22). This kind of one dimensional understanding or representation of gender has been a common sight in cinema, where the female body has been used to build and represent constructs of the patriarchal society. Thus, a stereotypical representation of women in cinema would emphasize on her physical characteristics, behaviour and mannerisms, and the adornment that she uses (ibid. 23).

The representation of women onscreen is more often than not, the male director's notion of the roles women ought to be playing (Nandkumar 2011: 2). Such portrayals are influenced by the filmmaker's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what he wants his viewers to see. The frame of reference of the

audience is shaped both by the beliefs, attitudes and values of the society within which they live and also the cinematic competence acquired by them. Generally, there is uniformity in what is projected on the screen and what the social norms tend to dictate. It is the affinity of a member of the audience to his environment that makes him look for entertainment that conforms to an existing system of beliefs, attitudes and values in the socio-cultural context that he lives in. This tendency is explicitly replicated in Indian cinema, particularly when it comes to gender roles. The stereotypical representation of women in the image and quintessence is influenced by social structure and cinema has built its narratives conforming to the prevalent beliefs (ibid.).

It is a noticeable fact for mainstream Indian cinema that the female protagonists are hardly projected from a woman's point of view. Her role is the reprisal of the already prevalent stereotypes as a lover, whore, wife, mother, vamp etc. with liberal adjectives attached to them (Agarwal 2009: 86). While writing about the portrayal of Muslim women in Indian cinema as a doubly marginalized class whose position in the narrative is influenced by strong environmental factors of society that are mostly under men, Supriya Agrawal hints at the patriarchal social setting putting a leash on the representation of women in cinema.

Women's roles in Indian cinema have been more passive than active and the woman has been the 'bearer of the look than the creator' (Nair 2009: 52). As Bindu Nair writes:

The stories played out on the screen are the men's—their conflicts, their dreams, their aspirations, their tragedies, their revenge, their desires and their heroism. The women exist only in relation to the men, as their mothers, their wives and specially their lovers. It is hard to find even one story revolving around a single unattached woman. And of course there is the worship of youth and beauty. (ibid. 52-53).

The spectacle that women are in cinema is visible in the form of glossy song and dance numbers that are designed to focus on their physical beauty and also in some cases, to eroticize or to mystify. The hair, dress, make-up, the camera and the narrative as well come to build a persona of the woman that supplements the dominant sequence of event. The overemphasis on the physical beauty in cinema has perhaps served only two purposes, as Mulvey has pointed out, to be

an object of voyeuristic pleasure for the spectator and also for those within the narrative. The image of the women is either the object of desire or personification of the lack. Women are thus on screen worshipped, become a subject for fetish or are relegated to the level of a vamp that ought to be punished (ibid. 56). Bindu Nair takes the example of a female actor being shot at a particular song and dance number from the film *Jung*, where “it would become clearer, in terms of the way her body is shot, the way her body emerges on the screen, the use of the gun, which is again quite phallic” to emphasize on Mulvey’s assertion that pleasure in looking has been split between active male and the passive female, thereby projecting the phallic phantasy on the female (ibid. 57). She concludes by say that while her intention is not to strip the pleasure from looking, ‘one must remember that there is a power inscribed within that, and when predominantly one sex is constituted as the spectacle and the other as the bearer of the look, there is a cause for concern’ (ibid. 57-58).

As a representation of the image of women that is held in the patriarchal society, Indian cinema is seen to project the role of the mother (mother goddess) and the secondary support system of being a wife, daughter or lover (Mathur, 2005: 65). Even with these roles, she is one to be possessed and not one existing as a different self. As a wife or a beloved she is in the proud possession of a man – belonging to him and fulfilling his desires (Sharma 2009: 114-115).

As the glamourized subject the female form also become the object to be looked at in cinema. As Mulvey has put it, “cinema poses the questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by dominant order) structures the ways of seeing and pleasure in looking”. To borrow from Mulvey, cinema moves ahead of the obvious physical traits of a woman to build the ways how ‘she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself’. It is the gaze that cinema produces by controlling the dimension of time and space and cinematic codes that the illusion of a desire (a figure) is engraved (Mulvey 2009: 14-26).

It is not only cinema in India that has been accused of lopsided presentation of the female on screen. World’s famous movie making industry in Hollywood, USA has been under the examination for their stereotyped representation of women

in cinema. The problem of Hollywood with gender is that the films it makes grossly underrepresent women and portray them in ways that place them as second fiddle to their male costars. The tendency to portray women in the second lead may be attributed to the notion that viewers preferred only male leads. To go by statistics, women counted for only 15 per cent of leading roles in 2013, Hollywood of which only about 30 per cent had roles that carried forward the script. A criticism is that even those characters are seldom decisive and has little power over their destinies (McKinney 2015).

While the kind of character and personality trait that women portray in Hollywood cinema is debated, it is also noticeable that female characters were younger than male counterparts (Carroll 2014). These characters are often subject of the glamour and blitz of the industry. As Stephen Gundle puts it,

The subjects of glamour, which may be things or people (usually transformed through a process of manufacture), seduce by association with one or more of the following qualities (the more the better): beauty, sexuality, theatricality, wealth, dynamism, notoriety, leisure. To this list might be added the feminine, because display and consumption have been heavily connoted as feminine since at least the nineteenth century. Femininity, moreover, is often considered to be a masquerade, the construction of an image that matches cultural expectations (Gundle, 2006: 8). As Jeanine Basinger (1993: 129) observes, 'a woman is her fashion and glamour, rather than her work'.

Films are now a part of the commodity culture where the purposes of allegory, metaphor and desirability are usually attributed to the female ensure that femininity, rather than masculinity, is supplied in the visual imagery. This imagery however did not place the female form at the highest levels of glamour. As Gundle has observed, "They were sexualized in the context of a sexualized, commodity-laden marketplace, but they were at the bottom rather than the top of the glamour hierarchy" (Gundle, 2006: 11-13).

Mulvey records three kinds of 'voyeuristic-scopophilic looks' that are associated with cinema. The first is that of the camera as it records the events, the second is that of the spectator and the third is that of the characters within the narrative. Cinema tries to subordinate the camera and the spectator of the consciousness of look by which they may analyze the event on screen. Instead by underplaying

the two and highlighting the gaze of the character on the screen, cinema produces a surrogate and passive experience that the spectator may enjoy with passionate detachment (ibid.).

But with women in the active process of film making, there is a hope that such one sided representation gives way to a more holistic approach to gender and cinema. Writing about women in the process of film making, Dan Li says, “in most films written by women, the cult of true womanhood was identifiable and evident” (2014: 303). Besides writing for the screen, women also had a greater presence in directing. As per film historian Anthony Slide, during the silent era, women were all round the film industry. There were over thirty women directors prior to 1920 which is more than at any other period of film history (2012: 114). They were considered equal to, if not better than, their male colleagues and women like Alice Guy Blanche and Lois Weber, were versatile in writing, directing and producing various projects thus showing their authorship and creativity. These women had powerful presence in Hollywood, held multiple positions and also owned production companies (Li 2014: 303).

The women filmmakers can take on the roles and stereotyped portrayal of the female figure and carve out a new narrative. The women directors have challenged and contested these projections. To quote Mulvey,

It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. (2009: 26)

The three women directors under study make an attempt to break the labeling of the female characters in their cinema. An attempt is being made to transform the female body from being an object of voyeurism and impart identity and depth to their characterization as well as their onscreen projection. The female forms in the films carry their own story and history that they challenge the narrative and provide the audience with a fresh reading of their predicament. It does not need any explanation that in all the films the woman is behind the steering wheel of the script. Her role is not a subsidiary to the plot and other characters (that may be usually male). Though an attempt is being made to highlight various social discrepancies (gender and others) the women do not

play victim in these films. They have their independent set of agendas that they must pursue. They grow and transform in character and experience as they come in contact with the external (physical world) as well internal (the mind) universe. They are witty enough to rebel and subvert the conditions to assert their self. The women would rather choose death than conform to the designs of a universe that do not count her presence. They also refuse to be an object of the gaze that cinema has been accused of so often. The highlights on the physical beauty are the least pondered regions for these directors. What is noticeable is that they break down the spectacle by deglamorizing the heroine and shattering the myth of beauty.

Paramita Ek Din is about the bonding of the two female characters—the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. It is these two women who take up the maximum narrative and cinematic space. Paramita and Sanaka not only steer the story forward but are also very much in control of their lives. *Parama* on the other hand, is about the individual and her conflicts. She not only fights a battle with the expectations but also goes through an internal struggle to finally discover herself. *Parama* (the woman) as the object of desire has been explored through the characters of her husband and her lover. She is ripped of her glamourized self as she moves from various roles to come to terms with her own individuality. *15 Park Avenue* moves away from expectations of a super woman handling life and word. Here is a woman Anu who has to maintain her personal as well as professional life. Anu has shortcomings and it is what makes her humane and realistic. She was never the ‘super woman’ that *Parama* was in the eyes of her family. The director takes care from the very beginning to portray her as a person with strengths as well as shortcomings. Violet in *36 Chowringhee Lane* is lonely and susceptible and is perfectly able to lead life on her own. Though she craves for company she is far from being dependent; old age and dwindling finances are issues that Violet can manage without the presence of a super individual. *Goynar Baksho* is another attempt by Aparna Sen to comment on social prejudices. Here the box of jewelry becomes a metaphor for the many aspirations that Rashmoni cherished in her heart. She is placed in contrast to the new bride Kamala. While *Parama*’s cropped hair and

deglamorized look is in the defiance of the gaze, Rashmoni's garb is a reflection of the gender biased society where it was the norm to curb a widow's aspirations by sanctioning various restrictions.

These age old sanctions become the cause of concern for Manju Borah in *Akashitorar Kothare*. Akashitora is a modern woman battling a dominating marriage. It is through this character that the director chooses to deliberate on the collective consciousness that shape up the beliefs and values. Here the woman cannot accept the position and place that she is put into. She is in a constant but silent war: a war she dwells within her mind. But in *Joymati*, the protagonist is a strong woman undeterred by the looming political coup. She defies with her body as well as her mind. Joymati would not let the soldiers touch her but marches to the king's court: a depiction hinting at an obvious reversal of the power structure which remains intact in Jyoti Prasad's Agarwala's portrayal of 'sacrificing wife' being sent off by the women folk (Chaudhuri). She is vocal in her rebellion and is aware of the consequences that her resolution would bring. The Ahom princess in Manju Borah's *Joymati* is just not a sacrificing wife but a tall political figure. Manju Borah's depiction of Joymati may also be read as a metaphorical presentation of the change in women's socio-political positions. The independent women in the contemporary times are also seen in Borah's film *Baibhab* that apparently does not deal with a women's issue. Though *Baibhab* delves into various aspects about the modern society, the female figures in the film are self-determining and aware of themselves and their surroundings.

In the projection of gender and its role on screen, Kalpana Lajmi's films deviate from the mainstream media portrayal. In *Rudaali*, we have a woman who lives on the margins of society making her gender a complex issue. Sanichari and Bhikni learn to however change their positions, which are produced by the culture and society they live in, and carve a niche for themselves. In an attempt to do away with the gaze, here too the woman rips off the colourful dresses and dons on plain garb as she moves from self-realization to aspirations. She now has the consciousness to intrude into the same system that kept her impoverished. In *Daman* and *Chingaari*, the women deny playing victims. Here

they overcome their fear and inhibition to establish their will. Both the films end as they dare to take on both the oppressive systems and the oppressors.

While patriarchal ideology has generally influenced the depiction of women in films, a feminist narrative (films) would enable the forthcoming generations of women to believe in the power of their expressions and tales (Ramanathan 2006: 168). Films provide space for women to explore themselves and write their own stories. The experiences of the women in the socio-cultural space thus find expression on the celluloid through the films of these women filmmakers. The films of these three directors create camaraderie of the women characters though the mother daughter bonding and one deriving support from another of her kind. In *15 Park Avenue* the mother and her two daughters tread their lives together despite many misfortunes that they suffer. The men come to their lives and leave and hence have little influence in their lives. Paramita and Sanaka find companionship in each away from the men in their lives. The only constant companion that Mrinalini had throughout was her Kamala di, while many admirers and lovers came and left. In *Parama* it is the daughter and the friend who reveal their non-judgmental selves and come to her side. As *Miyagi* from *The Japanese Wife* makes her way to India, she is welcomed by Sandhya, a young widow who had been living with Snehamoy and his *maashi* whose liking for her is obvious. *Maashi* encourages Sandhya to dress well, as it is not her in-law's place, and does all she can make her happy. The old widow does wish for a contented life for Sandhya who could be seen as her alter ego.

This solidarity and the sense of belonging (to the same body) are carried forward by Kalpana Lajmi and Manju Borah as well. *Durga* in Daman is found and nursed to health by a woman. Basanti's confidante in *Chingaari* is *didi*, who runs the prostitute house. In *Rudaali* Sanichari finds friendship in Bhikni who not only gives her some moments of happiness but also teaches her the craft to survive amidst the harsh environment. Finally, when Sanichari cries, it is to mourn the separation from the mother for whom she had waited all her life. It was as though she was for the first time separated from the body of her mother exposing her to unknown surroundings. As she is split from the maternal body; she moves from the biological to the social; she moves from

nature to culture that has given her roles to perform and shaped her as the 'cursed' Sanichari.

As Joymati is tortured by the royal guards, Chulikfa's (the young king) mother begs for mercy. She feels in solidarity with the woman and emphasizes with the woman whose destiny is unsure. Akashitora's daughter sees through her veils of cover and urges her to think for herself. The daughters of Akashitora and Parama can be read as the 'feminist avengers' who take side to with their mothers whom they love even if that love is subject to insecurity within the patriarchal family where maternal celebrations are limited (Oliver 2010: 2). The emotions of motherhood are very evident in the films of these filmmakers. The mother yearns for the child and would stop at nothing to shield her child from any threat. The 'passion' of the mother is most prominently highlighted in Manju Borah's film *Aai Kot Nai*, where it is this passion that thrives amidst the excesses of men. The film ends with a series of montages depicting women nurturing their children to reflect the Kristevian idea that it is in motherhood that the connection to another becomes love. These emotions of the mother however do not dissolve her identity and her maternity is a part that stands along with her individuality that may prepare her on the path of rebellion as Basanti does in *Chingaari*. As Kristeva writes,

The arrival of the child, on the other hand, leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other. [t]he slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself. The ability to succeed in this path without masochism and without annihilating one's affective, intellectual, and professional personality such would seem to be the stakes to be won through guiltless maternity (1981: 31).

Traditionally, narrative cinema creates an audience that is a passive receiver of the film spectacle. The audience is served images that are a product of the male gaze and defined by the patriarchal norms of society. The women on the screen are either the projections of male fear or their fantasies (Mulvey 2009: 156).

The female form has been represented in cinema in various ways. She becomes the epitome of beauty to be admired and desired by those within the script as well as the spectator. She is virtue personified and tradition's living legend

bearing the armour of righteousness. While the popular and mainstream strives hard to glamourize her aesthetic appeals and reinforce stereotypes, the films of these women filmmakers endeavor to take a different path. They are far from being shy victims but exercise decisive powers in the course of their life and action. They deny being the subject of voyeur. As Geetha Ramanathan points out, there is a constant effort by the women filmmakers to shun patriarchal images, rewrite stereotypical representations and narrate tales voicing the concerns of their gender. It is up to these female filmmakers to rewrite the 'cultural narratives' and give counter arguments to ideas that have so far not been questioned and in the process establish women's authority by rejecting patriarchal boundaries (2006: 204-205).

The women filmmakers make an effort to give divergent voices space in their films and aim to subvert the patriarchal projections in cinema. By introducing a mix of media in their films they have allowed the audience to escape from the gripping narrative of the socio-cultural realities that they thrive to understand and uncover and also to come up with an interpretative viewing. This type of cinema represents a subversive trend in filmmaking that functions to create an active audience.