

Chapter 5

Conclusion

There is a long tradition of women's filmmaking in India going back to the silent era while focusing on the works of Aparna Sen, Manju Borah and Kalpana Lajmi. However, academic focus on the works of the women filmmakers has been far from abundant. Though studies have been done on the works on filmmakers like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chadha and also some on Aparna Sen, there is dearth of academic attention on the many women filmmakers in the regional cinemas (Pudasaini 2009; Anitha). While the prevalent studies have concentrated on the subject matter of their cinema, their place as filmmakers in the cinema world deserves a methodical exploration. This study is an attempt to locate the women filmmakers in the domain of cinema. As the filmmakers deal with the issues of women among various other social issues, there is a need to explore them from the feminist perspective. The study does not claim that they are feminist filmmakers as straightjacketing could be creatively limiting, but feminist agenda is clearly discernable in their films.

Use of subversive strategies such as intertextuality is not exclusive to women filmmakers alone. Male filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino, Vishal Bharadwaj have made ample use of subversive strategies. However, very rarely have these been used as political tools, particularly to highlight the gendered representation of women in 'mainstream' cinema. On the other hand, these three filmmakers make use of intertextuality to critique the situation of women. They refer to the religious rituals, customs, literature and other forms of media to critique how those have affected the social position of women. Aparna Sen brings in references to other forms of media in her films. In *Parama*, Rahul publishes Parama's photographs in the *Life* magazine without her prior knowledge. The photographs offers Rahul's point of view of Parama as an object of beauty to be captured in his 'art'. This specific reference to this particular magazine may be read as an allusion to the fact that the emergence of the glossy magazines has added to the objectification of women with their morphed and

airbrushed images that set unreal standards of physical beauty. Thus the present study is an attempt to look at the subversive strategies used by women filmmakers in their quest for a new language with which to communicate women's experiences.

As per the arguments forwarded in feminist theory, representation of women as weak, meek, vulnerable, foolish and unreasonable reflects the social situation that denies her power and other socio-political, economic rights. And these representations in the cultural texts like theatre, television, cinema, music and painting demonstrate the status of women in the power struggle with stereotypes (Nayar 2010: 83.). The history of filmmaking has been replete with examples of stereotypical and formulaic projection of characters and stories (Benshoff 2016: 73). Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen considered that films reflect the society and the representation of women in films is a reproduction of how society treats them and leaves out what they really want (White 2000: 116). Describing about Marilyn Monroe in *From Reverence to Rape*, Haskell, writes that, Monroe gave life to the image of the women who would serve the male fantasy without wanting anything in return. She was the quintessential beauty who would attend to the needs of her men but was herself devoid of any sexual desire (Haskell 1991: 256). Cinema often revolves around the extremes of patriarchal notions of the normative woman or its polar opposite, so much so that the sexual identity of the women would be divided between the coy and the brazen. As cinema echoes the anxieties of what women should be, it also teases, belittles and rejects achievements of real women to weave a tale of stereotypes. The strains on improbable standards of physical beauty and perfection of behaviour are other indications of patriarchy's fetish with the quintessential women that may be present only in myths (Dutt 2014: 3). Thus we see the binary depiction of women on screen—the damsel in distress or the vengeful vamp.

Women as adornments to the screenplay and the male 'heroes', are best seen in the popular Bollywood entertainers. This role is further accentuated in the

glossy song and dance sequences, now popularly known as the 'item numbers'¹¹. It is, perhaps, no surprise that the most popular 'item numbers' of Bollywood are abundant in male directed films. The lack of emphasis on songs and dance numbers by the filmmakers that I have studied is another interesting dimension. Generally, in Indian cinema songs and dance sequences have become a way of objectifying the women's bodies in films. In the films of Aparna Sen there is no use of these sequences. Manju Borah introduces song and dances for *Anya Ek Yatra*, which can be called her only venture into popular form of filmmaking. Though Kalpana Lajmi makes use of songs and dances, she refrains from the formulaic presentation of these sequences. In *Rudaali*, these sequences add dimensions to the protagonists and her story. For example in the song *dil hoom hoom kare*, the picturisation plays out the uneven balance of power between Sanichari and Lakshman Singh, highlighted through the high angle and shadowy shots of Lakshman Singh. The difference of the caste and class hierarchies between Lakshman Singh and Sanichari is depicted in the film by the positioning of the characters where the former is always in a higher platform looking down at the latter. This may be read as another hint at subversive filmmaking where the segments that would generally be used only for entertainment, is used to further problematize the concerns depicted in the film. Again, she relies on the 'offbeat' music providers like Bhupen Hazarika for most of her film music, a trait which takes her away from the regular Bollywood entertainers.

As the songs and the dances in the drama films are alleged of objectifying and typecasting the female form, the action films sometimes create the illusion of a female strong enough to fight the adversaries but a careful examination will reveal how she is in need of the male "savior" to rescue her, even though momentarily. This role is rarely reversed and if done on an instance or two, it is hard to miss the comic overtones. The distinction in the male and female roles is noticed in genre division of films as well with women being in the centre of romantic comedies, comedies and melodramas (ibid. 7).

¹¹ Song and dance sequences in films that are essentially not a part of the storyline. They are in the film with a aim to only entertain the audience.

The problematic representation of women in films is the result of the patriarchal notion that defines women as the 'other' or as 'not-male' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011), to put in the language of Simone de Beauvoir. Thus, as Mulvey had said, they become the object of gaze in patriarchal cinema in the spectacle as well as the narrative. If the male characters are glamourized at all, it is an attempt to depict the perfect and powerful form in control of his situation (2009: 14-21). Feminist film theory contested the notion of cinema that addressed the male spectator. There has also been an emphasis on the 'the look' and its influence in constructing the 'point of view' in understanding the subject in films. Cinema is an organized network of various elements that can at least figuratively be related to language. Feminist film theory that emerged under the influence of various schools of thoughts like Marxism and psychoanalysis, have offered a variety of choices to read and understand cinema (Mayne 1985: 85). Cinema has been an arena for the play of sexual politics with its preoccupation with the male spectators and with an urge to satisfy their "superior" ego (ibid. 87-89). It is not only the male spectator in the theatre that directs their look at the female 'object'; it is also as Mulvey has pointed out, the male characters within the narrative who cast their glances on them (Brainbridge 2008: 35).

To put a break in making films that strives to objectify the body and stories of women while catering to the needs of the spectator, it is important that women involve much more vigorously in the process of filmmaking. But it has been far from easy for women to be actively involved in the process of filmmaking. Placed in comparison with the male filmmakers, the women professionals and even the three women filmmakers that I have studied, fail to hold ground when numbers of their creations are counted. It is only occasionally that the film going audience are exposed to the point of view of a woman filmmaker, and more so, a woman spectator to that of her own kind. Thus it is important to mark their work as unique in order to locate them in the vast realm of cinema. Giving authorial signature might be one way of establishing the women's perspective in cinema.

It is also at the same time important to understand the conjuring of various forces that work together to produce the gendered images, and pose as hindrance in women's entry into the process of filmmaking. If statistics were to be followed we understand that the percentage of women producing and directing films is much lower than their male counterparts and the failure of the majority filmmakers to put women's stories and characters in the forefront of the screen is far from being just an accident (Berman 2016). Women's scarce presence in the active process of filmmaking is a reflection of her position in the socio-economic and political situation. The patriarchal mind set of placing women as the weaker sex has been replicated in the world of cinema not only through the images of representation but by accounts of sexist encounters faced by women professionals (Cochrane 2010). Women started off as prolific writers, directors and actors during the early days of cinema. However, the trend slowed down with the introduction of the studio system and the predominance of commercial interest in cinema. Among other prejudices like not being 'talented' enough, the perception that women cannot handle finances is reflected when most big studios or banners cringe from distributing films made by women and it is mostly the independent companies with lesser financial strength which distribute women's cinema (Smith et al 2015: 3-5). Nonetheless, women have been successful in making big budget and financially successful films, though the numbers are still fewer.

Above all, women's cinema has been one platform to 'create a metaphor for an alternative public sphere' (Mulvey 2010: xvii) and make films that narrate different tales. Mulvey called for a feminist counter cinema that would disrupt the pleasures of looking. Her *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and Sally Porter's *Thriller* (1979) are examples of the kind of cinema that she advocated (Smelik 2007: 492:493). Though all woman filmmakers have not come up with radical filmmaking forms, it is important to recognize that they are trying to present a different picture working within the dominant form through subversion.

Various cultural texts have been by and large a product of the patriarchal society where the perspectives of women are limited. Virginia Woolf argued against the patriarchal education system and stated how its reading practices

prevented women from reading 'as women'. Also language in feminist perspective is patriarchal and sexist (Nayar 2010: 87). Thus to break the cycle of stereotypical images and narratives it is important for women to take up the job of writing (creating). Women's cinema, thus, is a breakthrough in shattering the series of gender hierarchies and patriarchal discourses in cinema.

Women's cinema might also be read as being comparable to literature. While reading literature, it is also often encouraged that a work be read in relation to the author to understand the interdependent relationship that the work has with its creator. The author is more than just a writer; 'author' is a term used to designate a person who creates a work (Felski 2003: 61). The female author is one who has been disparaged, trivialized or ignored in the history of writing and when one tries to find the experiences of the real women in literature, it is almost invisible. Thus Gilbert and Gubar brought in the imagery of the madwoman who represents the anxieties of the woman writer, who in turn would serve as the literary foremother and narrate her experiences (ibid. 62-66). Within the works of the women writers are written their histories that are 'socially unacceptable and even subversive' and it is the job of the feminist critic to uncover the layers of truths and meanings from these works (ibid. 69). As Nancy K Miller puts it, reading as a woman is a different experience. The woman puts her experience into context while reading and in the process search for her identity in the stories and the texts (1985: 292).

Miller is of the view that sexual difference indeed shapes 'the actual production of reading material, to the scene of reception, the reading of the letter, and the glossing of its text' (ibid. 295). While writing about the experiences of the woman, it is necessary to find someone that is like her 'in her desire for a place, in the discourse of art and identity, from which to imagine and image a writing self "absorbed, drudging, puzzled"; at a desk, not before a mirror'. (Borsa 2015:172). According to Miller, women's 'historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production' are not similar to that of men. And it is these differences that make it important to recognize authorship in women's writing. Men who have written could not 'historically or structurally, adequately or justifiably' represent the voice of women. It is from a separate subject-position that women

must write (Wilson: 3). It is in the landscape of the imagery that woman creates from her perspective and films provide with the backdrop (with the images, the narrative and the fictitious environment) to build their discourse. In its vast scope the cultural boundaries are crossed over and the politics of representation over-turned (Brainbridge 2008: 185-186). As women filmmakers make a conscious effort to address the concerns of the feminists/women, their cinema cannot be sort of anything but an auteurial statement (ibid.) made in an alternative language in contradistinction to the patriarchal cinema that we are so familiar with.

The idea of auteurism started in cinema with Alexandre Astruc's claim that the filmmaker must be able to say 'I' just like the novelist or poet does (Stam 2000: 83). To Francois Truffaut, films resonate their maker through the uniformity in style. It is this distinguishable style that prompted critics to address Hitchcock as one of the greatest auteurs ever. Auteurism in cinema is in fact a product of the persistence to equate it with all other forms of art and a response to the initial rejection of cinema by some literary intellectuals (ibid. 87). The main point of auteurism is to establish the director or the film's maker as the author. As the auteur brings in his singular style to the film, he also brings with him the experiences and perspectives of his gender and sexuality. However, influenced by the gender division of labour in the film industry where most filmmakers are male, it is the male auteurs who are generally spoken of (Hollows et al 2000: 45). It is then a patriarchal subjectivity that is manifested in the films and feminist film critics argue that auteurist concerns were primarily a male discourse and feminist filmmaking tried to bring a language into cinema that would challenge this discourse. As a result many avant-garde and experimental films were made by women (Benshoff 2016: 73).

If the women auteurship has to be defended from the point of view of the traditional concepts of auteurism, there are a few points that I would like to mention with reference to the work of the three filmmakers that I have studied. First, these filmmakers have not only directed these films but are the writers (story/screenplay) of the films in the fashion of the master who has absolute control over her creation. Second, the films of these women filmmakers can be

read as their autobiographical journeys (or of other women filmmakers): the journey that they have undertaken as women and as women filmmakers in a world dominated by men. To illustrate the second point, I take the example of Manju Borah's *Joymati* and Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*. While the first actor to play Joymati on screen, Aideu Handique, was ostracized by society for calling a man '*bongohordeu*' (addressing as husband) in the film, women in Assamese cinema in the present times are being appreciated even in the international circuits. While the presence of women in world cinema was not appreciated the women filmmakers today are churning out commercially and critically successful films. It is the changing socio-economic and political conditions that have affected women's positions and have eased their explorations of the seventh art, if not ensured an egalitarian environment. In *Goynar Baksho* the journey of women through different socio-economic and political time is presented through the three generations of women. It is autobiographical in the sense of positioning the filmmakers in the socio-political history of Bengal or India. Third, it is prominent that the filmmakers refrain from casting the 'celebrity' figures in their films. The films are carried forward by the sheer power of the narrative and performances but devoid of the presence of a 'star' who would bring in the hints of glamour and popularity into the film text. Though, Kalpana Lajmi has on a few occasions cast a popular actor, the character role is stripped of all the traces of glamour. Fourth, it is understood that the filmmakers do not make films aiming at popular entertainment. They are hardly seen to create the buzz of excitement in the audience or the popular film reviews as well. However, there is a class of cinema viewer that is pulled to the theatre just by the fact that it is a film made by Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi or Manju Borah. The audience knows what to expect from the films and make their choice by their sheer appreciation of the filmmaker or a precedence set by her works.

A glance at the individual works of each of these filmmakers will reveal their unique style. Though they share some common concerns regarding various socio-cultural and gender related issues, their style of filmmaking is far from being identical. Aparna Sen's films reflect a distinctive feature, free from any

application of visual effects. Her films are characterized by crisp framing and generous use of close shots. She avoids dramatization and melodramatic presentation in the films. Her films are also marked by references to other arts, artists of eminence, literature as well as philosophical deliberations. There are thus mentions of people like Tagore and Satyajit Ray and their works without disturbing the internal narratives of the films. Aparna Sen's films reflect the image of a politically conscious filmmaker. She is not only concerned about the issues but situates them in a realistic socio-cultural context. Her films also reveal her fondness of some actors. Thus, actors like Soumitra Chatterjee, Rahul Bose and her daughter Konkona Sen Sharma make recurring appearances in her films.

Though Kalpana Lajmi's films do not always reveal a uniformity of style, their narrative strategy marks them out. Prominent women characters and women-centric narratives mark Lajmi's films. Further, the motif of the mother is evident in *Rudaali*, *Daman* and *Chingaari* in which she becomes the central figure. It is as if Lajmi seeks to explore the joys and pains of motherhood in film after film.

Manju Borah's films bear the mark of a socially aware filmmaker. She makes films with an agenda to address social concerns. Though her film *Anya Ek Yatra* was more inclined towards the "mainstream" commercial genre, one cannot miss the attempt to make a statement about disillusioned youths, social corruption and the problems of insurgency tormenting the state of Assam. Manju Borah's films are free of the excesses of visual effects. The framing of her films are mostly wide and the acting is sometimes affected by dramatic expression. This can be read as the influence of the rich tradition of stage theatre in Assam from which perhaps no filmmaker is free. Like Aparna Sen, Manju Borah also makes repeated use of some actors like Bishnu Khargharia and Pranjal Saikia in her films. This reflects the filmmaker's trust on these actors to present the character more convincingly than others.

But true auteurship would not be reflected if women were to be trapped in the patriarchal bias of cinema, dominated by male professionals and used the standardized language of filmmaking. The women filmmakers are to make use

of a different language. As Luce Irigaray has pointed out, women must bring their bodies and their experiences into writing. In cinema too women must be concerned with presenting their experiences on the screen. Manju Borah, Aparna Sen and Kalpana Lajmi all narrate the tales of their own kind and it is in this sense that these filmmakers form a unity to be collectively addressed as auteurs. It also important to mark women's contribution to filmmaking and to do so, it is necessary that they be recognized as the authors who have written a different history in an alternative language in cinema and challenged patriarchal biases in representation. This subculture of women's cinema is similar to the alternative language that Luce Irigaray speaks of. It is necessary, as she puts it, for history to stop repeating,

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history (Irigaray 1985: 205).

To be the woman auteur one has to look beyond the canonical in language or style. Her language or style should come from all over. It is in her capacity to narrate a different story in her own way that she becomes the author/the auteur. The women must write and write about herself. This is what the women filmmakers of the present study do —they make films with whatever resource is available, they refer to other texts, they subvert the dominant ideologies and systems of beliefs to tell their own stories. There is in fact no need for her to conform to the tenants to be called the author of her text or her creation. There is no need to learn the language. Women already know their language by the very fact of their existence; there is no need to infuse or mark a new language.

It's our good fortune that your language isn't formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once.....Your/my body doesn't acquire its sex through an operation. Through the action of some power, function or organ. Without any intervention or special manipulation, you are a woman already. (Irigaray 1985: 209-211).

There is more than one subject that concerns these filmmakers alike. They are the women who have been under social sanctions and left out of their religious folds. Thus they question the practices sanctioned by religious beliefs, point out their dichotomies and subvert them. For them the ultimate woman is not the

one who tirelessly shuffles between roles, but the one who upholds her identity. They problematize the concept of the all sacrificing woman; when the woman sacrifices, it is for the larger good with a vision for the future (as Joymati does). The expectations are reversed and put to contemplation when Umi dies with the uprooted tree that she was married to. While making an attempt to subvert the stereotypes, the filmmakers make perceptible use of silence. As Aparna Sen does a critical exploration of the concept of *sati*, the protagonist of the film is presented as a mute girl. Umi goes on by her will all day long without being required to answer the questions. Her 'disability' in fact puts her in a spot where the transgressions are overlooked. While Umi's inability to speak gives her some immunity from the prying surroundings, Parama and Akashitora deliberately choose silence to mark their rebellion. By choosing not to speak they prevent others from getting into their mind, the place of their freedom.

The filmmakers are aware of the fact that when the physical beauty of the woman is emphasized, her desires are relegated to the background. Thus, while depicting the hardship of the lives of women, the female protagonists are located in their socio-economic contexts. Thus it becomes very important for Parama to earn her own living and Sanichari manipulates the system to steer her life. Sanichari presents an interesting case of a female protagonist shorn of all artificiality; she represents woman in her true self devoid of any trace of glamour. Dimple Kapadia, who plays the role, was then a Bollywood celebrity in her prime. However, she is made to appear in a completely deglamourized role of a social outcaste.

As women in the films rise against the forces that work against them, they also emerge as the 'hero' of the narrative. But the understanding of heroism in regard to the popular films is reversed here. The idea of heroism is subverted and defined in new ways. The 'hero' here is far from being a flamboyant display of strength and physical power and suffers from insufficiencies of authority. It is the heroism of the soul and the awareness of their situation that marks them different. As Joymati sacrifices her life for the interest of her nation and husband, she is also aware of the fact that her husband finds meaning in a new relationship with another woman. Likewise, Sanichari does not have the means

to take on the system; she instead decides to manipulate it. In *Laaz*, Ila struggles against poverty to keep pace with her education when her supposed triumph is cut short as she does not have 'proper' clothing to go to school. It is her struggles that make her the hero and not her triumph. The concept of the all prevailing hero is upset when Mrinalini succumbs to a stray bullet after she decides to make peace with her life.

My focus is to see how the filmmakers have used the medium of films to narrate their tales. They have used the medium of films to bring forth their experiences. They are not bound by syntax and have the liberty to play in the vast realm of cinema without adhering to rules. The fear of perfecting the cinematic grammar will not stop them from making these films because it is their story and they tell it their way. There is no fear of faring well or badly because that cannot be defined. There is no anxiety of perfection; they just seek to explore. It is the language of imperfection or of no adherence to code; their search for alternative languages takes them beyond debates of 'fidelity to the original'. The experiences of a woman are so vast that they will never 'stop expanding'. In the vast landscape she can discover and reveal her many facets and many voices to express herself spontaneously. She is not under the compulsion to invent and use a standard formula. It will come to her with her own experiences and thus she will tell her own story (ibid 213-214). For a fuller appreciation of women's cinema it is necessary that we are aware of the fact that what we have here is an alternative form with its own language and agenda; this is the only way in which these stories of women could ever be told. Otherwise, we are faced with the prospect of being unaware of alternative ways of looking at life.

Let our imperatives be only appeals to move, to be moved, together. Let's never lay down the law to each other, or moralize, or make war. Let's not claim to be right, or claim the right to criticize one another. If one of us sits in judgment, our existence comes to an end. And what I love in you, in myself, in us no longer takes place...(ibid. 217).

The thesis is thus not a critique of their filmmaking styles or an attempt to brand them as auteurs. It is the understanding of their journey and experiences that they have undertaken and the empathy they have felt for their kind that is

the primary focus. It is an effort to tell their own stories in a way best suitable to them. My endeavour has been to study the narrative style instead of focusing on the cinematic codes or aesthetics. Further the absence of the politics of production of big banners and without the temptation of box office profit that commercial cinema brings, the three women directors have produced a new breed of cinema. They are not the popular commercials (in)famously known as the *masala* films, neither do they reflect Indian art house or neo-realist traditions. They are a new breed of auteurs who live and create through their experiences even though they do not display a uniform style in their films. Creating within the system they reject conformation with the conventional principles and theories of filmmaking. They are the subversive auteurs.

While there is an attempt to articulate an 'alternative language' in cinema, the medium itself can be read as an alternative language. The other art forms have already been monopolized by the traditions of patriarchy but cinema is a new art which though influenced and molded by patriarchy, can be shaped to transverse within the paths of gender fluidity. There is a need to do further research on the subject and trace the interconnections of women's cinema across different cultures. The concept of the 'alternative language' for women in cinema would hold good only if different cinemas revealed the lived experiences of the women on celluloid.