

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE FILM *GUNJAN SAXENA: THE KARGIL GIRL (2020)*

By

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Abstract

*Gender stereotype is a generalized socially constructed notion regarding the qualities and attributes women or men or any particular group of people and communities are supposed to have or the certain roles they are expected to perform in a society on the basis of their gender. In a male-dominated society, gender biases, patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexism, stereotyping, and male-chauvinism, have always been a subject to manifest through texts or films. Nevertheless, mainstream cinema and television series have always been a powerful and effective medium to convey the message it wants to convey to its audience across the globe. Women's role and their presentation on the celluloid have evolved broadly over the years. Earlier, the popular visual media portrayed women in the emblematic image of subservient in terms of virtue embedding them with the dominant patriarchal cultural values, who were supposed to be obedient and submissive throughout their entire lives. Notwithstanding, the same celluloid successfully represented them in the iconic image of new women as emancipated and independent women. Thus, the paper intends to focus on subverting gender stereotyping through the Bollywood film, *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl (2020)*, directed by Sharan Sharma, starring Janhvi Kapoor as Gunjan Saxena. It is a Hindi biopic film, based on the life of Gunjan Saxena, one of the first Indian women air-force pilots in combat. The film reflects how socially constructed gender identity is still problematic to women as well as men when they come either to lead life the way they want or to choose a career in various socio-occupational fields for being in the same social domain. Hereto, the paper aims at reading critically using different lenses in terms of psychoanalytic, gender studies, Marxist, and feminist theories to show how Gunjan Saxena rises above all odds making her own space, defying the same patriarchal social structures.*

Keywords: *gender, stereotype, patriarchy, male-chauvinism, emancipation, cinema*

Introduction

With the inception of film as an art, many changes came out within the

social realm like other art forms and it emerged as an imperative field of cinema studies. In the late twentieth

century, it witnessed a shift from existing issues and subject matter the way subject matter began to be treated and projected on screen. Philosophers, academicians, scholars and theoreticians started delving into the philosophy of film in order to know what exactly film is all about? The journey of cinema has been glorious and revolutionary in the context of bringing change in day-to-day life. Indian cinema has marked its dominance across the globe with its rich literary and cultural heritage. A great many filmmakers appeared on the literary and cinematic screen, changing the socio-cultural scenarios. They include Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Bimal Roy, Gautam Ghosh, Guru Dutt, Ketan Mehta, Jabbar Patel, Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Vijay Anand and many others. They left an indelible mark with their art and craft of filmmaking. Apart from social and real issues, their films reflect a strong voice against women's atrocities and oppression which contribute to the discourse of feminist film studies.

Historically, mainstream cinema has been obvious in projecting women with existing traditional and

patriarchal values. The film media is evident for treating women's issues realistically. Films have emerged as an important discipline in recent years wherein cinema is read as texts. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen in *Film Theory and Criticism* (2009) interprets, "Films are texts to be "read" and reading them requires our initiation into the specific conventions and ideological biases of cinematic discourse" (Braudy and Cohen, 5). Thus, film as a written text, suggests to be acquainted with the conventions and biases about the language of film and cinematic narrative. The concept of art as a discourse with respect to women's cinema is evident from Sue Thornham's *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (1999). She notes:

The idea that art is universal and thus potentially androgynous is basically an idealist notion: art can only be defined as a discourse within a particular conjuncture for the purpose of women's cinema, the bourgeois, sexist ideology of male dominated capitalism. It is important to point out that the workings of ideology do not involve a process of

deception/intentionality (Sue, 36).

Hindi cinema witnessed the universality of art that transcended gender norms which is idealistic. Women's cinema has often been embedded with the prevailing bourgeois and sexist ideology of male-centered capitalism. It denotes how the impact of such ideology is often not deliberate but ingrained and rooted in the very structure of cinematic narratives and the film industry. This advocates for the significance to critically challenge the implicit prejudices and biases in movie-making, specifically in the context of women's on-screen roles and representation. Women have often been projected as subordinate, obedient and had been placed in their secondary role compared to their male counterparts. Over the years, the film industry brought a shift in women's depiction on cinematic screen. It witnessed a transition from the emblematic image of submissive and subservient women to the portrayal of 'new women' as emancipated and independent. These films include *Queen* (2013), *Page 3* (2005), *Parched* (2016), *Neerja* (2016), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017),

Secret Superstar (2017), *Ribbon* (2017), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Margarita with a Straw* (2015), *Dangal* (2016), *The Last Colour* (2019), *Article 15* (2019), *Thappad* (2020) and many others. Hereto, the film *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020), directed by Sharan Sharma stars Janhvi Kapoor as Gunjan Saxena. The film is a significant portrayal of gender stereotyping and the advocacy of women's empowerment through feminist lens.

The literary classics, including Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* and Judith Lorber's *The Social Construction of Gender* throws light on women's oppression and their subjugation to patriarchy. These texts also trace historical evolution of patriarchy and gender and its impact on women's roles and societal structure, providing a foundation for a nuanced understanding of how gender roles and stereotypes are perpetuated both on-screen and off-screen. Likewise, Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work *Visual and Other Pleasure* (1989) introduced the notion of the "male gaze" and women's objectification in films. Bell Hooks's *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, discourses the

intersectionality of race, class, and gender in cinema. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer's *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (2011) examine multifarious feminist approaches to film analysis, giving insights into representation, ideology, and narrative structure. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism* (2009) is a broader overview of film theory for understanding different approaches to film analysis as well as feminist perspectives. Sue Thornham's *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (1999) is a significant resource for feminist film theory. Molly Haskell's *from Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* examines women's on-screen roles and the historical evolution of portrayals, from the silent era to contemporary cinema. Thus, these foundational texts offer an understanding of the historical and theoretical groundwork of gender, stereotyping, patriarchy, and feminist film analysis. Thus, the research will be based on these texts for analyzing *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* from feminist lens.

The film is a real story depiction of Gunjan Saxena as one of the first

Indian women air-force pilots. The film advocates to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms in a male-driven profession like the Indian Air Force. It reflects how a woman defies societal barriers and patriarchal structures, fulfilling her dreams. Gunjan Saxena symbolizes women's empowerment and determination, voicing against gender-based discrimination. The research critically analyzes the film. *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* adopting various feminist lenses, including psychoanalytic, gender studies, Marxist, and feminist theories. Moreover, it showcases how the film dismantles gender stereotyping, portraying the protagonist's multifaceted journey as a bold, empowered and independent individual. In her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), Gerda Lerner observes, "I expected to find economic changes leading to changes in ideas and religious explanatory systems. Specifically, I was looking for visible changes in the economic, political, and juridical status of women" (Lerner, 7). This is how economic shifts impact people's mindsets and beliefs which leads to altering women's appearances with regard to their economic, legal

and political realm. Lerner further opines regarding the notion of patriarchy:

I began with the conviction, shared by most feminist thinkers, that patriarchy as a system is historical: it has a beginning in his-tory. If that is so, it can be ended by historical process. If patriarchy were "natural," that is, based on biological determinism, then to change it would mean to change nature. One might argue that changing nature is precisely what civilization has done, but that so far most of the benefits of that domination over nature which men call "progress" has accrued to the male of the species. Why and how this happened are historical questions, regardless of how one explains the causes of female subordination (6).

Lerner is of the view that patriarchy is a historical, not a natural system and it can be altered through history. Hence, patriarchal ideologies are limited and there should be holistic inclusion of women's insights equally as that of men. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen in *Film Theory and Criticism* (2009)

unearths how the cinematic narratives uses women differently while the same serves for men:

Feminist psychodynamic approaches to film in general were launched by Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey's model presupposes a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective and draws upon key Lacanian conceptions of castration anxiety and visual fetishism, and the association of the "Law of the Father" or patriarchy with such traditional film features as narrative order. Mulvey argued that narrative forms characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema differentially use women and serve men(Braudy and Cohen, 628).

Laura Mulvey observes that mainstream Hollywood cinema often projects women in such a way which caters male audiences and serves the interests of the male, creating a gender imbalance in the film narrative. This can be seen in the context of Bollywood mainstream film as well. Moreover, patriarchy, gender and society has often played an integral

part in portraying a character and assigning the role to women. This research is also an attempt to assess the influence of cinema in the context of feminist discourse, adding to the debate about women's empowerment and gender equity. It also gives insight into how mainstream film serves as a platform for voicing feminist messages breaking the existing societal barriers. Furthermore, it not only aims at highlighting the challenges and obstacles faced by women in male-dominated professions but it also uncovers the role of cinema in influencing societal perceptions and attitudes toward women. As women's roles in cinema have emerged stronger and more vibrant as the time passes by. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (2011) states, "To fail to question the models of femininity that cinema produces and circulates would be to subscribe to a post-feminism that posits the second wave modalities as outmoded and unnecessary" (Radner and Stringer, 4). Hence, if women's portrayal in film remains uninterrogated, it would lead to fostering the ideology of women's

misrepresentation. Unlike, Molly Haskell in her classical text titled *From Reverence to Rape : The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1973) denotes that historically women enjoyed more freedom and independence in classical Rome, yet they were not well-depicted in the drama at that point of time. She also points out that, be it film or literature, heroines often are from privileged class and hardly from ordinary background. In view of Molly Haskell, this brings disparity in on-screen portrayals of women. She says:

Women had greater latitude in the society of classical Rome, but they were not well represented by the drama. Nor have the outstanding heroines of film and literature come from the political Left—from the revolutionary cinema of Eisenstein, the polemics of neorealism, Marxist, or Third World cinema. They have come instead from the ranks of the upper-middle classes, the "decadents." These are the "haves" rather than the "have-nots," those with the luxury of choice (Haskell, 290).

The narrative of *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* focuses on the female protagonist, Gunjan Saxena, analyzing scenes and dialogues from the film. Through a psychoanalytic perspective, it examines her motivations, desires, and conflicts. It also manifests the protagonist's identity and her psyche breaking the prevalent norms. Gunjan Saxena's strong ambition to become a pilot, despite societal norms imposed on women, reflects her assertion of individual desires and identity. Hence, the film unveils how Gunjan recognizes her autonomy and individual aspirations which denotes that a woman can surpass societal restrictions, accomplishing her ambition. Regarding the complexity and contradictory dynamics of gender roles and power dynamics, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen opines:

'Femininity' is primarily a social construction and, moreover, a construction made by men. Yet it is a construction men often find hard to cope with—it is the category onto which they project more fundamental fears about gender, which one can conceive psychoanalytically in terms of castration or socio-historically in terms of

men's power over women and simultaneous dependence on them (Braudy and Cohen, 485).

The storyline of the film begins in flashback, as fifteen years back wherein Saxena aspires to be a pilot in a society that considers women's place being confined to the household. Her family too, believes in the same social structure except her father; they consider women to be inferior to men in abilities. In this context, *The Social Construction of Gender* (1991) by Judith Lorber and Susan A. Farrell also brings into light women's status in a male chauvinist world. She states, "Women have had to prove that they are morally deserving (their dependence is assumed); whereas men have to prove they are legitimately dependent" (Lorber and Farrell, 196). This statement throws light on gender disparity. It suggests how women in any society are often expected to demonstrate their moral values since their dependence is assumed. While on the other hand, men must prove they have a legitimate need for dependence. Hence, it highlights societal expectations and women's stereotyping associated with gender roles and dependency in a male-

centered domain. When Saxena first shares her dream of becoming a pilot to her brother, he bullies her saying, "Girls don't become pilots. Nevertheless, her father encourages her ambition saying, "Whether it's a man or a woman flying the plane, they're both called pilots. And if the plane doesn't care who's flying it, why should you? You can be anything you like" (*Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, 1:45:15-1:45:02). Her father's support for her dream and aspirations is a counter-narrative to traditional patriarchal domains, wherein a father is often seen to be strict with traditional norms for his daughter. Despite the increasing support to women's education and career, women have to face societal pressure. As they are expected to succeed in life and career adhering to traditional femininity. In this regard, Beauvoir points out on how the dual societal expectations imposed on women:

It is becoming more and more normal to encourage her to pursue her education, to devote herself to sports; but she is more easily excused for not succeeding; success is made more difficult for her as another kind of

accomplishment is demanded of her: she must at least also be a woman; she must not lose her femininity (Beauvoir, 343).

Nevertheless, Saxena's father as a supportive figure to his daughter's dreams is significant, emphasizing the role of familial support empowering a woman. There are people like her father in the same social domain, who seek no difference between men and women and give equal opportunities to their children irrespective of gender. In her article with respect to the women's choice of career, Ann Vetticad points out, "Many Hindi films over the years have revolved around sexual violence, but rarely has one chronicled social conditioning in women's career choices" (Vetticad, 2020). On being admitted to the Air Force, her brother shows her a picture from his passing out parade of Air Force officers before her leaving. He asks her to count officers in the photographs and she says eleven. On this, he says: "Ten Air Force officers and one girl. That's how the world thinks, Gunjan. I can't change the way the world thinks. But I can tell you. Please try and understand (*Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, 1:05:56-1:05:39). However, Saxena comes out

of home to accomplish her dream avoiding her brother's opinion. On her reaching to the academy, the high commander asks:

Get ready officers. Udampur is about to see a big change. A change unlike any you have seen before. Every officer is surprised with Gunjan Saxena's entry; This is it. Ms. Change. The first female officer at Udampur base, Gunjan Saxena (1:03:45-1:03:38).

Gunjan Saxena herself shared in *The Hindu*, "Whenever there is a major change happening in any organization or in any field for that matter, it is never easy - there are troubles" (Saxena, 2020). Saxena's struggle starts when she finds no space for herself as the male officers create a discomfort zone for her. Gunjan constantly struggles to stand against the patriarchal mindset of the officers over there. Everyone's training is held except her. Her all sortie is canceled as no fellow officers want to go for sortie to the air. Gunjan says, "Sir, I was in a boy's school. I've never even spoken to a girl on land. What will I do in the air? Save me, Sir please" (*Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, 56:48-56:42). She has

to face accusations without her mistakes and continuously she is targeted and berated. As in a male-driven society, women have often been an easy target. People's view regarding Gunjan is the same as before. But, Saxena changes her way to accommodate herself and to deal with the situation in her own way. From the perspective of gender studies, the film showcases how gender roles and identity are formed and how the same impacts a woman's choice and societal expectations and how women are not limited merely to traditional roles. Here, *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020) unearths how social constructs of gender roles can be brutal and oppressive in a male-driven professions such as the Indian Air Force. In this regard, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen in *Film Theory and Criticism* (2009) points out:

Because society dictated the proper, and severely restricted, domain for women, those who didn't "fit"—the "extraordinary women"—were tortured and frustrated; hence, the "neurotic woman." Finding no outlet for her brains or talent except as wife and mother, she dissipates her

energies, diverts them, or goes outside society. Of such women, literature gives us two basic types, one European, the other Anglo-Saxon (Braudy and Cohen, 505).

This is the harsh truth of a society where women with their restrictive roles as wives and mothers remain inexpressive to some extent. While women with exceptional potential have often faced atrocities frustration, even coming out in a label of “neurotic.” Beauvoir through her path breaking *The Second Sex* (2010) shows how historically women have been kept as dependent. She denotes:

History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy’s earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep women in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other (Beauvoir, 193).

Saxena has to suffer the troubles and tortures created by her male counterparts. Nevertheless, she understands that the societal rules are

only to create troubles in her dream, therefore she herself makes a space over there. It’s very common in a male dominated society to target a woman’s progress with their character which is quite evident when officers pass comments over her performances; “If it keeps going this way, we’ll be taking orders from Madam soon” (*Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, 46:19-46:13). It doesn’t end here, her ability is tested and questioned constantly in public domain and the same time she is humiliated by the High commander:

There’s no place for weakness in defense. We want people who will shed blood, not tears. An innocent face and big eyes do not change the enemy’s mind. You have to fight. Our duty is to protect the country, not to give you equal opportunity. Understand? Remember that the next time you have a question (43:17-42:55).

In this way, Saxena is shattered for the way she is humiliated regarding her abilities by hosting an arm wrestle with another male pilot to prove her capabilities for being a pilot. Though, she knows that she doesn’t need to prove her worth being an arm wrestler

as she wants to fly the plane, not to carry them. The rest she believes in what she was taught at her home:

In fact, I've been made from the start. I am made to think that if I work hard and become a good pilot, I can be part of this unit. It's not just me, my father's, too! Her father always said gender doesn't matter in a cockpit, that men and women are both pilots (41:40-41:25).

She finally understands that the problem is not her weaknesses. It's their fear, who is scared that if this "Madam" becomes a "Sir", they will have to salute her. And that will be the end of their masculinity. Gunjan even gives them surety that giving respect to her will not mean any less respect for them. But they remain silent for their hollow manliness. Laura Mulvey in her *Visual and Other Pleasure* states on women's place in men's opinion in a patriarchal-driven society:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through

linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey, 15).

Likely, Saxena gets defeated by the patriarchal structure of the society that suppresses her desire and aspirations for being a woman pilot. She is the only woman in her training batch who faces skepticism from her senior male officers. Hereto, the film critiques patriarchy as it projects how Saxena's non-traditional career questions patriarchal structures, as she faces discrimination, and a hostile environment with the Indian Air Force. She gives up her dream owing to being discriminated against and humiliated severally on the basis of her gender. She congratulates them for their narrow-mindedness, their fear, that party and their hollow male pride that throttles her dream. Benita Benjamin made a remarkable observation on this in her article, published in *Feminism in India*:

"a sincere portrayal of the biased and gendered society that breaks her determination and prompts her to give up her dream, if the family is not already a hindrance

or if she emerges unscathed by the trammels of the family” (Benjamin, 2020).

Saxena suffers gender discrimination in various contexts. Nevertheless, Saxena’s determination and resilience to overcome gender biases reflects her desire to challenge and change the phallogocentric norms in such man-made society. With respect to the same phallogocentric norms Mulvey’s ideologies are obvious from the following:

The paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated women to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies (Mulvey, 14).

Nevertheless, her father doesn’t let her be a victim of gender-based discrimination and he tries his best to make her realize the importance of her existence rather than others’ opinions. He says, “That I don’t know how

difficult the world is for women? But the solution isn’t to shut yourself in a cage, but to free yourself of the cage and fly” (*Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, 33:11-32:54). Ultimately, she is accepted by all as being one of the best pilots in the cadets. And the officers who underestimated her on every step of her journey, now salute her bravery and abilities and for the way she rescues other male officers’ lives. Her journey of success against class-based power structures is significant to be economically self-reliant. Analyzing the film through Marxist feminist lens, it scrutinizes how Gunjan Saxena’s economic and social empowerment are screened and in-between how class, power dynamics and patriarchy impacts the process. Moreover, Saxena’s aspiration to make her career in the Indian Air Force leads to delving into how class and economic hierarchy intersect with gender. Renuka Vyavahare very well observed regarding in *The Times of India* about the film touching upon the prevalent issue of the society. She remarks:

Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl is a deeply moving tale of a feminist father and his feisty daughter. It wages war against patriarchal

mind-set and discrimination, and identifies it as a bigger threat to progress than the one we perhaps tackled in 1999 (Vyavahare, 2020).

Likewise, Saxena succeeded in defying the existing gender norms with her abilities against a conservative and a patriarchal system, earning respect for herself in the same society. Her transformative journey parallels the notion of conservative cinema projecting norm and deviation. While progressive cinema challenges and subverts such norms, questioning the differences between normal and monstrous. In Saxena's case, her abilities and potential were initially taken a deviation from the existing norm but ultimately it challenged the prevalent conventional notions. Here, *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (2011) by Hillary Radner and Rebecca Stringer advocates regarding:

Broadly speaking, conservative films endorse the ideological status quo as normal and literally demonize deviations from the norm as monstrous; by contrast, progressive examples of the genre challenge these values, either by

making the monster sympathetic or by showing normal society to be in some way monstrous in itself, problematizing any easy distinction between normal and monstrous (Radner, and Stringer, 284).

Incorporating multiple feminist theoretical frameworks including psychoanalytic, gender studies, Marxist feminism, the study analysed how Saxena emerged as an expressive individual personality in course of coping up with the title existing society. It brings into light the understanding of femininity which emphasizes how masculinity and its counterpart are also a subject of discourse in terms of gender roles and expectations. Hillary Radner and Rebecca Stringer says, "Contemporary deliberations about femininity throw into relief the ways in which masculinity as its analytic other is itself an unstable and contested category" (Radner, Hilary and Stringer, Rebecca, 5). Moreover, in the views of Rohan Nahaar in an article published in *Hindustan Times* says, "He structures the film almost like a superhero origin story. Gunjan suffers hardships despite her obvious talents, but she develops

her skills patiently, until she is called upon to unleash her powers in battle” (Nahaar, 2020).

Conclusion

The narrative of the film concludes by overriding all barriers in terms of gender, social, cultural and traditional. *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020) is immensely significant for interrogating gender stereotyping and breaking the glass ceiling which contributes to ongoing feminist discourse about the roles of women in society. The narrative stands for empowering women in terms of

encouraging their individual dreams and aspirations, regardless of social barriers. The film voices not only for Saxena but also for those women who face discrimination based on gender with non-traditional careers in a male-centered society. This is how she thrives and evolves from a young traditional woman to a confident pilot who doesn't let society dictate her choice and decision. In a realm where gender discrimination persists, Saxena stands bold, empowered, independent and confident which suggests the ideology that a woman can make her destiny rising above all adversities.

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To cite this article

Sweta Kumari. (2023). Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Feminist Perspectives on the Film *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020). *John Foundation Journal of EduSpark*, 5(3), 1-16.

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