

Women Cinematographers: The Minimising Effect on Gaze

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Abstract: Women cinematographers are not a new phenomenon yet their presence is minimised, their capability to deliver is invariably in question. The low-budget producer, the first-time director and the pre-star actors readily shoot with camerawomen. It is a pattern that women cinematographers try hard to break. The same abjectness was shown to women in the days of silent cinema, a time when modern, empirical science was linked to white European men. In the early 1900s many camera women were working in the industry but every time they made the headlines, it was because of their gender. This paper argues that women cinematographers in Hindi cinema remain marginalised by design, it analyses the connection between the minimisation of women cinematographers and the dominance of the male gaze in Hindi cinema.

Key Words: Female Gaze, Women Cinematographers, Technology, Gender bias, Minimising effect

Introduction

Feminist film theory emerged in the early 1970s to understand cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity. Theoretical approaches were designed to critically analyze the sign and image of women in film as well as open up discussions of female spectatorship. The theory criticized classical cinema for propagating stereotypes of women by producing repetitions of objectionable distortions of women's identity. The research demonstrated the negative impact of stereotypes on female spectators and society at large, the theory criticized inherent sexism in the portrayal of women. The feminists discussed the possibilities of a women's cinema that allowed representation of female subjectivity and female desire. In the 1980s, the feminist film theory incorporated questions of race, ethnicity and oppositional gaze. By the 1990s feminist film theory moved away from a binary understanding of sexual differences to multiple perspectives, hybrid identities and queer sexualities. In the first decade of 2000 feminist film theory has included new theoretical approaches ranging from performance studies and phenomenology to Deleuzian studies. The feminist research moved beyond reading the meaning of film to analyzing the deep structures of how meaning is constructed, the main argument being that gender is critical in creating meaning in film. It uses insights from Marxist ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis and deconstruction to arrive at the claim that cinema veils its ideological construction by hiding its means of production.

This paper analyses the contribution of women cinematographers to the construction of a female gaze in Hindi cinema. The construction of gaze has till now been attributed to the story and the vision of the director, this paper argues that cinematographers can push for a sensitive, subjective gaze that defies objectification of bodies (both male and female) as they are the primary image makers (means of production). The paper highlights that the ecosystem in Hindi cinema minimises the presence of women cinematographers and in turn, impacts the propagation of a female gaze.

Review of Literature

A brief literature survey of filmmaking industry for the proposed study reveals that many studies have been done on directors and auteurs, content, style, technique and the cinema movements that have emerged over the past hundred years since the birth of cinema. Research has been conducted on on-screen portrayals and objectification of women. However, it is the literature on women cinematographers which has recently been discovered by the feminist that reclaims their space in a technical field. The early women camera operators are amongst the most challenging film industry roles to document as newspapers, newsreels and archives have referred to them as cameramen, crank turners, camera operators, camera maids or even photographers. The news feature writers

during the period of the 1910s and 1920s treated camerawomen as a novelty, over and over again, gender was always emphasised in the news. Grace Davison was referred to as “the only camera woman”, prolific film-maker Lois Weber was casually called “an expert camera woman”, Francelia Billington was pitched as someone who “also operates motion picture camera”, Margery Ordway was referred to as “new style in cameramen”, Dorothy Dunn was titled the “only woman photographer”, Louise Lowell was called “the First Camera Maid”, Angela Murray as the “First Newsreel Camerawoman.” This repeated labelling of “first of their kind” reflects a collective amnesia, not allowing the idea of a woman cinematographer to take hold, perhaps because it was the most technical part of the motion picture business. It seemed easy to justify the work of big, bulky cameras with men and being out of women’s grasp. (Gordon, M and Grimm, C., 2020). The first woman filmmaker Alice Guy Blache started as a camera sales woman in the Gaumont studio. This transition from cinematographer to director was easy for a brief period only, by the 1920s the studios began to squeeze out the women. One of her initial films was ‘Consequences of Feminism’ in which she reverses the role of men and women. The film objectifies men while allowing women to hold the dominant, voyeuristic gaze over the male protagonist. The film concludes with men getting together to restore the ‘correct’ societal positions. The film was an attempt to highlight the significance of solidarity and fraternity amongst women in 1906, a time when men were still making actualities.

In India, there are no records of women cinematographers during the early cinema phase. But there exist traces of women’s invaluable contribution to cinema. D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, was “supported” by his wife Saraswatibai Phalke, who punched sprockets in Phalke’s film stock, developed negatives, fed the entire crew, while assisting wherever (lights & costumes) required in all productions of Hindustan Film Company. (Mandakini Athavale interview to Babu Watve, NFAI). But Saraswatibai’s contribution is overshadowed by her husband’s achievements, which ironically would not have been possible without her support. Kamlabai Gokhale’s (first woman actor) description of women getting together to wash film in Phalke’s home, also indicates that women were involved with forms of film production and post-production that were not acknowledged as such.

India’s first woman producer and director was Fatma Begum who set up her own production company - Fatma Films (1926) and later Victoria-Fatma Films (1928). Fatma directed movies besides being a writer and actor. She delivered hits such as Bulbul-e-Paristan (1926), Heer Ranjha, Chandravali (1928), Shakuntala, Milan Dinar, Kanaktara, Naseeb Ni Devi (1929).

T.P. Rajalakshmi, the first actress of Tamil cinema and the first Tamil talkie, *Kalidas*, became the first woman director of South India. Also known as ‘Cinema Rani’, she established her own film company named Sri Rajam Talkies and directed -‘Miss Kamala’ (1936) and ‘Mathurai Veeran’ (1938).

Their contemporary, Devika Rani, a partner in Bombay Talkies produced 29 films but did not direct any. Another renowned actress, Gohar K. Mamajiwala was a partner in Ranjit Film Company but does not hold any producer credits. Kanan Devi, the first lady of Bengali cinema established her banner and produced eleven films. It is no poser why none of these talented, successful, actors could match the directional or production capabilities of D. G. Phalke who directed more than 122 feature films and shorts in two decades. He had access to education and finance, as was the privilege of his gender in those times.

The pervasiveness of gender discrimination against women has minimised their work to such an extent that only “fathers” of cinema, editing and special effects exist. There is no mention of women in cinema in textbooks that may inspire young girls to take up filmmaking. Alice Guy was the first one to make a movie with a story (1896, 1902), a time when men were still making actualities. She has not been honoured with being the “first director of narrative” cinema.

The same minimising effect can be seen in Hindi cinema concerning women technicians, especially women cinematographers. Their numbers and their oeuvre - understanding of the gaze of the camera, the protagonist and the spectator - have all been minimised.

An analysis report, O Womaniya, of the top 129 films of 2019-20 across five languages - Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada provides critical insights about the Indian film industry. The key findings of this report revealed that on the talent dimension (Direction, Writing, Cinematography, Editing and Production Design), only 8% of the key HOD positions were held by women. The results show that women were most represented in the Production Design department, where they headed 15% of the 129 films, 10% of these were written by women, women edited 7%, women directed 6% and only 2% had women cinematographers. This 2% represented only one woman - Keiko Nakahara, who worked as DoP for three films - Tanhaji, Shakuntla Devi and Total Dhamaal. (Film Companion and Ormax Media, 2021).

Objectives

1. To seek the definition of female gaze from women cinematographers and to enquire if they are in a position to push for its application as image makers in Hindi cinema.
2. To understand how the stark disparity in the ratio of men and women behind the scenes impacts concepts of gaze.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative analysis with structured interview of case studies, followed by their narrative analysis. A qualitative analysis approach was found most appropriate to explore questions of female gaze. Detailed interviews were conducted with successful women cinematographers from Hindi cinema, who had a filmography of more than five mainstream films. The women had taken formal training in film-making institutes and shot their first independent commercial film between 2000-2010. Quantitative data was collected from the cinematography departments of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) - Pune and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI), Calcutta as these two are the premier government colleges offering specialisation in cinematography. From FTII (Pune) the first woman cinematographer graduated in 1980 and the number has steadily increased over the years. SRFTI started in the year 1995 with the first batch graduating in 1999 but the first woman cinematographer graduated in 2002. To reference private colleges, the scholar has taken data from a premier private college, Whistling Woods International since their inception in 2006.

Significance of the Study/ Discussion

As the secondary data collection above shows, women cinematographers are the least represented talent (2%) in Indian cinema. It is not for lack of education, as there are hundreds of trained women cinematographers in India, who are trying to find a foothold in the industry. A sample survey of premier film institutes in North India suggests that 47 women from FTII, 16 women from SRFTI and 54 women from Whistling Woods International (private institute) have graduated in Cinematography since the beginning of respective programs. Besides these institutes there are other

private institutes in different parts of the country offering training in cinematography. Women from those institutes are also trying to find a foothold in the industry but the 2% representation does not justify their presence in the film market.

The significance of women cinematographers lies in the production of images and the creation of gaze. According to Laura Mulvey, “this eroticization of women on the screen comes about through the way the cinema is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes: there is the look of the camera in the situation being filmed (called the pro-filmic event); while technically neutral, this look, as we’ve seen, is inherently voyeuristic and usually ‘male’ in the sense that a man is generally doing the filming; there is the look of the men within the narrative, which is structured to make women objects of their gaze; and finally there is the look of the male spectator ... which imitates (or is necessarily in the same position as) the first two looks.”

It is the *look of the camera* that (is the focus of this research) changes when a female cinematographer replaces the conventional eye of a male Director of Photography. The concept of the "female gaze" refers to the idea that how women experience the world and their surroundings is different from how men do, and that this difference is reflected in the art and media that they create. In the context of cinematography, the female gaze refers to how women cinematographers approach their work and the perspectives that they bring to the images that they create. The case studies affirmed this definition of the female gaze as the excerpts reproduced here prove.

Case Study 1 was instrumental in bringing the all-women-technical crew together for the 2002 movie, ‘Mitr, My Friend’ by director Revathi. The story, screenplay, music, editing, cinematography and direction, all top technical credits are held by women, it is the world’s first all-women-technical-crew movie. It is her first independent project as a cinematographer after graduating from FTII in 1998, the film bagged three national awards. In discussing the look of the camera, she emphasizes that it is a pro-female character instead of being voyeuristic.

In *Mitr, my friend*, the main lead character is a homemaker, the camera explores her world. The cinematographer had to understand the inner limits of a homemaker that conflicted with her willingness to be outwardly and adventurous to prove her agency to her family. The DP (Director of Photography) cannot make her into a radical because that is a character in which the protagonist is functioning, her domain is a home and a very routine life. The cinematography in the film requires an understanding of space – the safe space as represented by home but also a space where the protagonist is invisible to her family. It is the DP’s role to accord her a loving and respectful gaze. The camerawork achieves that by not putting her down for her being a homemaker in any sequence of the film. It is a gaze which accords dignity to the character’s experiences, maybe in that sense, one can say that there are male DPs also, who bring dignity to the female characters if the scope is there for it, therefore, gaze is also a part of the art. What is the art, artistry about?

Case Study 2 is the DP behind action films like *Airlift* (2016) and *Pippa* (2023). Action films account for more than 30% of box office revenue collection in Hollywood, the corresponding figures for Hindi cinema can be judged from the success of *Pathaan*. The action spy film alone contributed to 13% of overall collections in 2023. The action genre is traditionally perceived to be a male domain as the plot revolves around male saviours. The only two exceptions have been *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, both directed by women. In India, women directors are yet to

claim this genre. But a woman cinematographer has delivered two commercial successes, breaking the typical perception of gender and genre, gender and technology. The cinematographer points out that DPs can get the best results when Directors are in sync with the sensitivity of the situation. In essence, the concept of the female gaze is more humane and mindful of individual reactions including anger and violence.

In *Airlift*, it was the discussions between the director and cinematographer that helped in conveying the emotional vulnerability of the hero. In one of the sequences the hero comes back to a home destroyed by the army and his family is missing. The cinematographer recalls that the production designer had done an incredible job of recreating the street to home. The design was unbelievably aesthetic and would have been easy to shoot that sequence in the conventional style. Despite that something inside her pushed her to speak to the director and tell him that that's not where this story needs to be pulled from. It is internal, the hero is about to go home and realise his family is missing, and that is what is building up. If we do this, then we will just see this big fat street and then turn away. The cinematographer uses the phrase, '*I was lucky to have a director who trusted the way I was looking at stuff!*' The cinematographer and her team then designed a new remote head to shoot the sequence, reflecting the ease with which she merges her creativity with technology, a quality that women are not expected to possess as technology is seen to be the domain of male gender. She shot the sequence sitting in the trunk of the car, a completely improvised sequence that captured a sense of claustrophobia and helplessness. '*So, yeah I am proud of it because there was a carrot dangling, the beautiful, big street. A DP would want to go out and show it. And I think to just restrain yourself and rein in the vanity!*'

She describes the female gaze thus:

Women see the world from very different places, she agrees. So, a cinematographer would influence the gaze tremendously. Do women not sometimes adopt the male gaze or pursue the generally accepted male gaze, she muses.... Yes, we do. The female gaze is still very limited and very small in terms of what we see out there. But does a woman see the world differently than a man does? Of course! Does she see it with less of a sense of entitlement than a man does? Do I take less things for granted? Yes, so would that affect my gaze? It would. But the problem is I don't only have a female gaze, I also have an individual gaze, which is who I am as a human being. So how that would affect my work, I find it very hard to answer.... But when I am hired to shoot a film where the male gaze is an important part of the narrative, I would shoot it like that, because that's the kind of story I am telling....

Case Study 3, another FTII graduate and Director of Photography behind hits like *Badrinath ki Dulhaniya* (2017) and *Rashmi Rocket* (2021) suggests that the gaze in cinema is based on the story and its characters. A woman cinematographer has to choose her projects carefully.

Female gaze per se, in my perspective is not limited to a woman's gaze of looking at things. It is a well-rounded way of looking at things without giving somebody a higher ground and power position. Social hierarchy objectifies women, so a sensible DP, who comes with the right perspective in life would probably deal with women as delicately as women deal with them. Right? The second thing is, if, once you are in a project, the DP has to work according to what the subject is and the story. So, at this stage in my career, I'm only taking projects in which

already, from the script level, there is a certain amount of respect for the women characters from the word go...

Women cinematographers agree that there is a big shift in the stories that Hindi cinema is telling. Their concerns are many:

1. There is diversity in choice of stories but the stories are still being told from a male perspective. They agreed that the objectification of women will remain till the representation of women behind the scenes does not increase.
2. Women cinematographers have to work twice as hard to be noticed and 'perform' as gender-neutral beings which is in direct conflict with their contribution towards the female gaze.
3. There are many qualified women cinematographers in the industry but the glass ceiling exists perhaps because of the trust deficit amongst producers and directors.
4. It is suggested that the question of missing cinematographers be answered by directors, including women directors as they are the team leaders. They must choose to work with more women technicians wherever possible.
5. The problem lies in equal opportunities as the male DPs have access to the scope of growth which may or may not come to women DPs because a bro-code exists in the industry even to this day. In such a scenario it is difficult to even say that there is bias, if one is not even considered for the position there is no rejection.

Women in Cinema throughout the world have risen to showcase themselves and their work through fraternities, they have come together to form associations and platforms to share, promote, mentor, advocate, agitate and network. Fowzia Fathima and Priya Seth took the lead in setting up the Indian Women Cinematographers Collective (IWCC), a platform that brings together profiles of women cinematographers to create opportunities for them by increasing their visibility. It is a progressive step towards building an ecosystem where upcoming talent can find mentorship and work opportunities. The collective is bound to have an impact on gender representation in cinema in the years to come.

Conclusio

Women cinematographers' position in a technical field was attributed to 'novelty' whereas cameramen acquired the position of 'normativity', in the early days of cinema in the U.S.A. In India, women cinematographers emerged on the scene in the first decade of the 21st century. Women directors and editors had already marked their presence. B. R. Vijaylaxmi, India's first woman cinematographer earned her first credit for the mainstream Tamil movie 'Chinna Vedu' in 1985. She shot over 20 Tamil films, learning the art on the job but all headlines projected her as an 'exception' as they reported mostly from the perspective of her gender instead of her gaze. Today there are more than a hundred women cinematographers working or seeking work in the industry yet they remain marginalized. They are not trusted with big-budget and big-star cast movies because the gender of technology is seen to be male, as was the mould a hundred years ago. Their minimization is in practice even today. Sexism prevails behind the scenes and it is a reason that the male gaze dominates in Hindi cinema.

The director-cinematographer collaborations are not new, Himanshu Rai worked with Franz Osten, Satyajit Ray with Subrata Mitra, Guru Dutt with V.K. Murthy, Mani Ratnam with P.C. Sriram or Santosh Sivan. As the means of cultural production are controlled by men, the output is a masculinised narrative. The women cinematographers discuss a more nuanced approach to image making by adapting technology, light and mis-en-scene to the requirements of a realistic portrayal of women and men. They are aware of presentation of women as objects of desire and pleasure,

they have refused projects that reinforce the cultural power structures where a woman's value stems from her body. Women cinematographers argue that a paradigm shift is possible if they have equal opportunities to be co-creators of cultural products. Women producers and directors may usher a change in storytelling through solidarities with women technicians, it is the way to break away from the male gaze and the minimising impact.

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