

STREE: A READING IN MULVEY'S FEMINIST FILM THEORY CONTEXT

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Abstract –

Present research paper is an attempt to interpret Hindi movie Stree (2018) in the context of Feminist Film theory in general and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1970) in particular. In her essay Mulvey has explained how the subconscious effect of patriarch mentality affects the making of a movie. Bollywood movie Industry is an effective illustration of Mulvey's argument about the correlation between patriarch society and film producers. Movie is a significant mode of expression that influences the masses and classes equally. Hindi movie, Stree (2018) substantially projects the arguments pointed out by Mulvey in her essay as well as sets a prominent example to create awareness about the same.

This paper is divided into three parts. First introductory part reviews the notion of feminist film theory that has been in practice from more than 20 years. Second part informs about the Hindi movie Stree (2018) and third part of the paper applies some ideas by Mulvey from her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1970).

Keywords : *Stree, Feminist, Film Theory, Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*

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Introduction-

In her article, 'What does feminist film theory say?' Priyanka Singh talks about the role of cultural factors, ideologies from India and West in engineering the category of woman. This role forms a significant portion of feminist theory. She has minutely discussed how notions of patriarchy, feminism do not emerge from nothingness rather they are revealed through culture, social system and various modes of expression. She also opines that cultural construct of womanhood is influenced by the undercurrents of ideologies prevalent in class, caste and gender. Singh further argues that feminist film theory effectively brings forth a feminist way to perceive a movie, may be from Hollywood or Bollywood. She refers to Laura Mulvey's coinage, 'for men by men' to address the domain of movie (1)

Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' –

Published in 1970 in 'Screen', Laura Mulvey's essay discusses the role of psychology as social, political instrument to perceive how male dominance interferes the making and watching of a movie. Mulvey's core objection is that Hollywood (actually almost all movie industry on this globe) is a 'dream factory'. The crew involved in film making is male dominant. Hence they are enthralled in projecting and even directing such images of women that will quench male thirst of 'visual pleasure'. Mulvey underlines some critical issues in her essay such as – male gaze, objectification, fetishism, objectification and spectatorship. She concludes that, 'male subconscious consistently deals with either by being attracted to or fearing the woman, both of which require some form of masculine desire.' (2)

Feminist film theory analysis of Bollywood movie *Stree* in Mulvey's context-

Stree (woman), a Bollywood Hindi Comedy Horror film, directed by debutant director Amar Kaushik, produced in 2018, is a whiplashing satire on the hypocrite patriarchy and its de-masking. Based on an urban legend (*Naale Baa*) from Karnataka, the movie Stree illustrates and evidences Mulvey's objections and criticism of patriarchal impact on social psyche of human beings. The movie at a time supports and contradicts Mulvey's objections and conclusion, how female figure is estimated as paradoxical- on one hand beautiful and luring and on the other hand, precarious and gruesome. Kaushik's movie can be perceived paradoxically- harassing patriarchal social practices to a woman on one hand and deification of woman to save their skin from her wrath, on the other hand.

Movie content-

The movie's time of action is very small- first four nights of *Navratri* (Festival of Goddess celebrated on nine nights) in illusory town- *Chanderi* in M. P. the place is haunted by a female ghost- *Stree*. Every year, she approaches to the town during the first four nights of Navratri. She visits every house for capturing a male. To avoid her entry, all house walls are painted with a line, '*O Stree kal aana*' (Hey woman, come tomorrow). It is assumed that she reads the line and turns back. To save from her clutches, if ever men come out of house in the night, they wear saree. In the movie a character in female costume shown walking on the streets in the night, shouting loudly, '*O stree kal aana. Yahaa koi mard nahi hai*' (Hey woman, come tomorrow. No man stays here). The dialogue sarcastically challenges '*mardangi*' (manhood) in the presence of female ghost. The director has substantially conveyed male fear for the horrifying appearance of female ghost and also male lust for female body even on such horrendous background through the party arranged by the youngsters in the town. The sarcasm gets double edged when a man in the house hides behind the doors and within the threshold, asks his wife, who is fearlessly going out to the temple in the night, to come back home early saying that, '*muze bahot dar lagata hai*' (I am quite afraid)- a typical cliché expression usually uttered by women to their men in real life. The same expression uttered by a man in movie heightens cinematic and dramatic effect.

Appearance of a young nameless beautiful girl during the same period (enacted by Shradha Kapoor) thickens the mystery element in the movie. A skilled young tailor, Vicky's falling for her represents the ancient masculine desire for female body. Though the movie attacks patriarchal narrow mind of society, the Director could not avoid the temptation of using, 'male gaze' to cater audiences' anticipation of visual pleasure (probably that's why the lead male cast is a tailor by profession who needs no measurement tape as he is skilled enough to measure the female customers with eyes and hands) Vicky's friends Bittu and Jaana represent the eclectic passion of common men for woman- fear and lust. Rudra, another male character, narrates the story behind a woman turning into a ghost but does not know how to get rid of the ghost as the last page of the story book is missing. Meanwhile, the female ghost keeps on stalking isolated men on the streets in the night, calling them lovingly. They could not face the temptation of looking at the woman and as soon as they look into the ghost's eyes, they disappear leaving behind their clothes. When Jaana disappears in the same manner. Vicky, Bittu and Rudra decide to deal with Stree to bring Jaana back. The young nameless girl too joins them as she too has lost her and dear one at the hands of Stree. They all visit the story writer- Shastri- to know the remedy to rescue their friend. The story writer who is still lingering in the realm of emergency (reference to the Iron Lady of India). He narrates the story of Stree that she was a town dancer who fell in love with a man. He too wanted to marry her but the town people did not allow a town dancer to become a respectful married woman. They killed the man on the marriage day. The town dancer committed suicide and turned into a ghost, wandering across the town seeking revenge. Shastri gives a solution in the form a puzzle to get rid of her. Vicky seems to be the key to that puzzle as later on it is found that he too is a son of a prostitute. They all make a plan to invite the Stree to Vicky who will enact as her groom, to celebrate '*suhaagraat*' (first marriage night) with her at a deserted place. This is planned under the typical male impression that the woman turned into ghost because she could not enjoy *suhagraat*. They feel that want of physical pleasure has turned her into a ghost. Once it is gratified, she will be happy and will give up her anger against the town. When Vicky encounters Stree during

the execution of plan, Vicky realizes that Stree does not desire carnal pleasure, she demands honor and respect that a woman from good family gets. He feels compassion for her, denies to stab her as advised by the nameless girl who has prepared a spell proof knife to kill the ghost. The girl then asks Vicky to cut the ghost's plait to weaken her power. Vicky does that. On their way back, they get the disappeared people emerging one by one from the dark place.

Next year, when the Stree approaches the town to seek revenge, she stops at the town gate to see her statue with a line- '*O stree raksha karana*' (Hey woman, protect us). Stree goes back after reading the line.

The movie exemplifies all the criticism by Mulvey in following terms-

1. Male gaze- the term 'male gaze' denotes working of camera in a movie. The camera is always handled by Director of the movie, who is usually a male. The camera lens strolls over female body showing the parts of her body in slow motion so as to excite the male protagonist/ other male characters and the audience as well. Laura Mulvey traces how main stream films appealed to a male gaze because the industry has been dominated by men who inevitably, constructed representations of Women from a masculine view point. (3)

However, over the last two decades, Hollywood and Bollywood movies have been deliberately picturizing shirtless male protagonists probably to inculcate and popularize 'female gaze' (?) to lure female audience or to compensate the criticism for 'male gaze'. Credit for the same also goes to male actors who allowed to be 'gazed' in the movie.

Mulvey further states that in cinema, men being majority in the very process of movie production, decide how women are encoded in the text at each stage of the production. Mulvey underlines that female bodies are often, 'stylized and fragmented by close ups' so that the audience would more see their curves than their characters. Mulvey emphasizes 'voyeuristic' influence caused by the 'male gaze'. The movie Stree too amply and elaborately showcases physical beauty of the nameless girl. Item song in the movie is nothing but carnivalization of female body and male responses which is very common practice and strategy in

Bollywood and even Tollywood movies to give visual pleasure to the audience.

Robert Stam too has criticized such kind of 'anti-corporeality' i.e. disgust for the way cinema engages with the body of audience and thus causes degradation. (4)

Virginia Woolf even goes a step ahead and argues in her essay 'The Cinema' (1926) that cinema and particularly film adaptation of literature were responsible for the moral waning and vulgarization in modern society (5)

2. Objectification- objectification denotes the action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object. Bollywood, Tollywood has surprisingly set the tendency of objectification of female characters either as dancer or vamps or even the lead characters. The propensity of item songs in the movies has been declining the status of women in the movies vice versa number of women actors are willfully doing the seducing kind of dances wiping out the blur line between a woman of status and a woman of street. The movie presents the same through the item song as well as scenes between Vicky and the nameless girl.
3. Spectatorship- it is an act of watching and engaging with a film. The movie Director makes his best (?) efforts to keep his audience completely engrossed in watching movie, partially on the influence of storyline but mostly on the seducing influence of male gaze. As pointed out by Stam, such act is done on purpose to engage not only the eyes and mind of the spectators but by enticing his complete body which obviously results into actions highlighting moral degradation in real situations. Stree partially fulfils the demands of spectatorship which is usually interpreted not only by actors, Directors but even by actresses as 'demand of the scene and script' or to 'give the feel of real'. Fact is that – reel scene is very easily practiced by the rogue audience members in the form of real sin.

It can even be concluded that male gaze effect results into objectification of female as well as spectatorship.

But the movie also contradicts Mulvey's objections in the sense, the director has sarcastically disparaged patriarchal practices through the actions and

dialogues of Rudra's character. Seemingly funny man, Rudra's comments on certain issues do expose hypocrisy of society in general and men in particular. For instance when he is guiding Vicky, Bittu and Jaana, how to escape from the clutches of Stree, he tells that Stree calls unaccompanied man on the street in the night from behind three time, last call is very ensnaring. One of them asks why the Stree calls from behind. Rudra answers, she is not a man (the way men attack women). Similarly when Vicky learns that his mother was a prostitute, Rudra very innocently consoles him that he should not take it to his heart. Just as someone's mother is nurse or teacher, his mother was a prostitute. It is also noteworthy to remember that the town is aware of the fact but no one has teased or insulted him for the same and it is the same town that had not allowed in the past a town dancer and a gentleman to marry and settle. The director underlines the change that has been brought in the mind set of people of the same town in the course of time. It may be because the town has experienced the wrath of a woman turned into a ghost. Vicky's father represents the element of male loyalty, who has brought up a prostitute's son without making him aware of the fact and has remained without marriage after her death. In a way the director wants to be didactic to bring people on the right path by showing the ghastly consequences of female wrath. *Ramcharitmans* contains a line – '*Bhay binu hoi na preeti*' (one cannot get respect without creating fear). Will women get respect only after creating fear?

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