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Filming Women: A Conversation with Alankrita Shrivastava

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Alankrita Shrivastava
Photo by Komal Gandhi

Anupama Arora, Sandrine Sanos, and Gohar Siddiqui (JFS): You have spent almost two decades in the film industry, and we thought we would begin by asking you about your journey as a filmmaker in the industry, and especially as a feminist filmmaker.

 Alankrita Shrivastava (AS): I moved to Bombay [Mumbai] in 2003 and I started assisting Mr. Prakash Jha on the film, *Gangaajal* (Holy Water, 2003).[1] I was a sort of trainee or intern. I had just finished my Master's in Mass Communication from Jamia Milia University (in New Delhi); and I had moved to Bombay after that. I worked as an assistant director on several of Mr. Jha's films such as *Apharan* (Abduction, 2005) and *Rajneeti* (Politics, 2010). And, in between, I was an executive producer on two films (*Dil Dosti Etc*, Love and Friendship, 2007; *Khoya Khoya Chand*, Lost Moon, 2007). I also made a short film in the meantime called *Open Doors*. While I was working on *Rajneeti*, there was a four-month gap in the schedule, and that's when I shot my first feature film, *Turning 30*. Everyone thought I was crazy in just going ahead and shooting a film in that time frame. The film was produced by Mr. Jha.

I don't think I had a plan that I want to be a certain kind of filmmaker, but I think who you are as a person often determines the stories you are drawn to, the stories you want to tell, the stories that you're passionate about, and the stories that you write. When I made *Turning 30*, I had been so busy working that I didn't really have any time to think about what I was making; I was just doing. I took just a few weeks off—barely three weeks—to write the first draft of the script.

I think school and college were strong influences on me: I had gone to an all-girls boarding school (Welham Girls' School, Dehradun) and to a girls' college in New Delhi, Lady Sri Ram College (LSR); and then to Jamia Milia Islamia (Mass Communication Research Centre) for my post-graduation. My boarding school played a big part in shaping me because it was the sort of school where, if you were seeking it, there was a lot of education about feminism and exposure to the idea of women being equal to men but the law not giving that equality. So, I think these are thoughts and ideas that were very clear in my head for a long time. I also read a lot of literary fiction written by women about women, and I think that has been a huge influence in my life. And I come from a family where women had been very strong, like protagonists of sorts. I'm a third generation working woman in my family; even my grandmother was a working person. All this has shaped me a lot because I wasn't brought up with the idea that I have to follow a particular gendered path and there were no expectations of what I should do, or whether I should marry or not, or what kind of life I should lead. That gave me a lot of space to just figure out what I wanted to do and just pursue it without having any baggage of having to fight with my family. I feel that, from that perspective, I've been very privileged.

"I don't know what a half-hearted reading is:" World-making

JFS: We noticed that there are a lot of intertextual references to literature in all your films. A lot of your female protagonists read; and books mediate one's engagement with the world. For instance, in *My Beautiful Wrinkles* (from *Modern Love Mumbai*)*,* Dilbar is an avid reader. In *Turning 30*, Naina is also a reader, and becomes a writer herself at the end of the film. Reading romance is also at the heart of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. Could you speak to this prominent featuring of reading and books (literature) in your work?

AS: I am a reader and not that much of a watcher. So, it's very weird, because everyone who talks to me is always asking me about my cinematic influences. I inhabit some other world; I'm always just much more influenced by what I've read. I love reading. I'm always reading.

But I don't necessarily randomly insert characters (or women) reading in my films just because it should be there. A lot depends on what the character is like, and I feel that if a character reads, then it will be an important element of who they are, and they will be shaped by that. I guess that comes from my own experience. I don't know what half-hearted reading is. I am sure that there are a lot of people who read but I just don't understand how it doesn't impact their lives. If you are truly reading and have an appetite for books, then you are spending so much time being occupied by those words, thoughts, ideas, and stories that it has to influence your life (I guess in the same way that now people talk about how social media is influencing people's lives). If it is organic to the character to read, then definitely something of that just emerges. It's never planned in my movies or shows. For example, in *Turning 30*, I didn't plan that Naina's character will be sitting and reading in that montage where she's reading Doris Lessing, who is one of my favorite writers. It was just organic when I was writing the script.

It's just that then I feel the need to visually show that this reading is in some way affecting their lives. For instance, we see this in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, where Usha's character reads romances. I never read too many Mills and Boons romances. There was just one summer where I read maybe 30-40 of

them during the holidays. I was reading them so fast. But I had read other writers like Danielle Steel and Barbara Taylor Bradford, which kind of perpetuated these ideas that love is greater than anything else. I think those books influenced me because I was quite young (maybe in class 8, 9, 10) when I was reading them. These books were influencing my idea of how I looked at love and all of that; and then I felt that actually this kind of reading can influence people at any age. So, in Usha's life, it plays a big part because she has now been reading these sorts of romance books for some time, and it's starting to take on a life of its own.

In my film, *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare (*2020), I didn't really have any of the characters reading because I didn't feel that these were characters who read. There's Dolly's husband who reads a health magazine. Besides that, there aren't a lot of other references to characters reading because I felt that, in that world, with those characters, they are not reading. They are on their phones. There are other things that are influencing their lives.

Even in *Bombay Begums*, I didn't feel like there were any characters who were readers, although I was excited to name all the six episodes after books.[2] There's the character, Shai, who's the youngest female character; and she draws, which is the space where she expresses herself; and her thoughts are also there in the voiceover. Even in *Dolly Kitty*, the character of Kajal (or Kitty) has a scrapbook in the agency where she works; she wasn't reading, but there was something tactile, which is in the form of a book that she was sort of connecting with. It comes down to these different things in different works.

In the case of *My Beautiful Wrinkles*, Dilbar's best friends are actually her books because she loves reading; and then she also has this whole thing about how she never became a writer. In her case, the books were a very important layer to Dilbar's character. While one never saw a particular book doing something in the film, she was always reading. And then the thing that was bothering her or making her feel envious of her college friend was the fact that this friend had sat down and put pen to paper and written those books, even though she didn't like the college friend's books. So, overall, a lot is dependent on the character. It's not that I decide that I'm going to have the books or references. These elements come in once you figure out who the character is, what the character's motivations are, how they live, what they do, and so on.

"Forms of rebellion" and "flawed desires:" Intersectional Feminism

JFS: What we love about your films is how complex, rich, and subtle the characters are. They have complicated, conflicting lives; there's a lot of nuance in your depictions. They also belong to various regions (village, small town, or city), different class strata, religious backgrounds, and so on. For example, there's someone like Jazz in *Made in Heaven* (2019) who has a lower middle-class background; or there's Dolly or Kitty in *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* from Bihar who have moved to the big city (or its outskirts); or the different women in Bhopal in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, one older, two Muslim. Is it a conscious choice or investment to have this sort of diversity or complexity in the characters?

AS: My journey started with *Turning 30*, which was my first feature film, where the character of Naina was very easy for me to outline, sketch, and fill out because she is closest in terms of socioeconomic or educational background to mine; and maybe some characters from my show *Bombay Begums* who are much closer to my world in terms of social strata or level of education, and so on. With *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, I was very consciously looking at telling a story of women who don't come from the same background as I do but who might, in different degrees, and in different circumstances, have struggles that are universal to women. I don't approach anything *per se* starting with the theme. I like to first think of characters and the world that they inhabit; and the more I think of the characters and where they live, who they are, what is their world, then everything emerges from that. So, I knew that *Lipstick Under My Burkha*

was going to be about four women characters, and their secret dreams and desires, the kind of opposition they face, and the ingenious forms of rebellion they use to try to get what they want, to some extent. For me, it was very specific and detailed and I think everything comes from that, because I need to start feeling like I'm inhabiting the character's mind and life. I don't know much about the plot also when I'm starting. When I start writing, I'm just thinking about who these people are, and their world. That world is really very important for me because obviously, for instance, Dilbar's character from *My Beautiful Wrinkles* will not behave like Usha's character in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. They are both women, and maybe not very far apart in age, but they will behave very differently. For me, it's important to try to get to the heart of the characters and the worlds they inhabit.

Also, I believe that money or your financial circumstances make your decisions and concerns different. It's very easy to take the moral high ground on a lot of things when you have economic privilege. That is something I really try to explore with Lily's character in *Bombay Begums* or Kitty's character in *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare*. With Kitty's character, I still don't have the answer to whether someone like her should get on this semi sex-phone-chat service, or should she not do such a thing? But, if you're in those circumstances where that air conditioner, that food, that car that will take you to work, that money in your bank account, all of that can change your life, then you know, it is the right thing because you're physically safe. You just have to act on the phone. Another example is Rehana's character in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, where she shoplifts because there's a sense of aspiration. So, a lot of morality needs to be contextual and that's something I feel very strongly about. I don't think that something is good or bad, right or wrong, in a vacuum. It depends on the circumstances. And things are so hard for women across the board, so they have to do things to make life work out for themselves. So, it's fine if they do certain things which, in other circumstances, might not seem to be the correct moral or ethical choice. I'm very interested in that—how the circumstances that you inhabit changes you, and they might not also, but they do change you. I find playing with that very interesting, because I don't think that it's black or white.

From that perspective, I am very conscious of what my characters do, depending on what their circumstances are or what their ambitions are. One can't rid oneself of the social reality of characters. My characters don't exist outside of the social and economic reality that they inhabit. Which is why, for instance, in *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte*, the film is as much about the two characters as it is about the city and the changing city, where there is aspiration; and then, there's the rise of the saffron wave.[3] And, also, what does it mean to be on the periphery of this growing city, and want to be a part of it. It's all very specific to what's going on. It's about the characters and that world, and how they interact; and this impacts the decisions they make.

And, as I explore in *Bombay Begums*, sometimes, even if you have power, it's confusing and you might make flawed decisions. For instance, Fatima's character in *Bombay Begums* can't believe that her mentor would sexually assault a young banker. That is also another kind of decision that comes from her own sense of privilege. She feels like many women do when they think that, well, since he didn't do it to me, so, he's not that kind of guy.

I make conscious choices, often in terms of the world in which I want to set something. With *Bombay Begums*, I was very sure that I wanted one character who is much more of an outsider than even the youngest character Ayesha who, sort of, has the least amount of financial privilege or social privilege within the bank where she works. But I still wanted a character—Lily—who really comes from the outside to reflect on the lives of these women, and it provides something of a counterpoint. I knew that I didn't want the show to only inhabit the lives of those women in the banking world, but also have something of another life which different and with a lot of challenges. It is a conscious choice to work with characters who reflect a certain reality and depending on what one is trying to explore.

JFS: You said that your background is very similar to the main character in *Turning 30*, so it was easier to sketch her out. What about the other characters in your films and shows that come from backgrounds that are so varied?

AS: I spent a lot of time in small towns in India, for instance, in the state of Bihar, because my father worked for the government. I have a fair idea of life in a small town. I've also spent a lot of time in the city of Bhopal (which is the setting of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*); I spent a lot of time there when I was working on *Rajneeti*. For a whole year I was traveling all over the state of Madhya Pradesh and prepping the crowds for the film. And then I was stationed there and we were shooting there for so long; as a result, I'm very familiar with the city of Bhopal. With *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitaare*, it's set in Greater Noida (in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and just outside of the capital region). I've spent a lot of time there in the past because my mom has some real estate/property there and she lives in Noida. I know about these hostels where girls live, like Kitty does in the film. Also, I'm the kind of person who loves having random conversations with people; when I go to the beauty parlor or salon, I'll just talk to the girl who's doing my waxing and ask her so many questions. I love people-watching. I love hearing what's going on in people's lives. A lot of all this informs my films and their worlds.

But, of course, for specifics and details, one does have to do some research. For instance, in *Bombay Begums*, Lily's character is an ex-bar dancer. So, in the beginning, I spent some time with a family of dancers. We used to go out and spend time with them, hang out, chat, take pictures, eat with them, and get to know what that life was like.

My mother studied management at Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad, and that gave me a lot of ideas for *Bombay Begums* as well. Actually, I got the idea for the show when I was talking to her and she told me that there were very few women in her batch at IIM and none of those women actually ended up with corporate careers. My mom was in the development sector and another woman from her batch was teaching. She said it was weird that all the guys from her batch were top CEOs around the world. But none of the women from her batch followed corporate careers, although all of them are professional women. That got me thinking a lot about that sector [of banking] and gender. On the other hand, while I think there is a certain amount of research one has to do to figure out the details of what happens, and for authenticity and specifics, a lot of it is also instinctive. I wouldn't say that I'm led or driven by research. I research mostly to fine-tune what I'm planning and what I'm thinking.

A lot of it also comes from memory. For example, even the idea of widowhood came from what I'd seen a lot of when I was young; and I only realized this later that all of this was lodged in my memory very clearly. Usha's character in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* comes from there—this idea of the widow treated by the neighbors as if she is a part of their family but also seen as an asexualized person. When I used to live in the city of Patna (in Bihar), there was a family who used to live in one of the houses on the top floor. There was one lady, who was the aunt and she would look after the kids; she wasn't the matriarch of the family or anything. But I remember she would always wear white because she was a widow, and it seemed that she was being positioned as this very sanitized version of what a woman should be. I think all this kind of percolates into my work.

"Making Patriarchy Uncomfortable:" Mainstream & *Hatke* Cinema

JFS: During an interview about *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, Ratna Pathak (who plays Usha in the film) noted how some people were accusing the film of being titillating. She said that the film is not titillating: "all the scenes that are supposedly titillating are supposed to make patriarchy uncomfortable." They make people uneasy; so, there's something about the aesthetics of your films, that is not the same as

mainstream films where there is titillation or objectification of women. And these are cinematic choices as well. Could you speak broadly to the independent vs *hatke* vs mainstream cinema4 scene in India as well as how/where you see your work fitting or belonging? Can you speak about the form of your works, which is ideologically and aesthetically different from mainstream?

AS: I want to start by saying that India does not really have a proper system for funding independent cinema. What happens is that the resources are the same for mainstream and other cinema. We're all going to the same studios and the same producers to get money for our films; and we're going to also release them in the same space. It's the same distributors or exhibitors; and if you do a TV release, it's the same satellite channels; it's the same streaming platforms, and all of that. We don't have a separate chain of cinemas, as in Europe; and, also unlike Europe, where there is a proper independent financing system and grants and so on, which is a parallel network kind of a thing, there is no such thing in India. Whatever your film is, you are fighting for the same economic resources. It's very difficult nowadays to define what is independent cinema and what is mainstream cinema from the perspective of where the financial resources are coming in and where the distribution is happening. It was different, say in the early eighties, because NFDC was financing a lot of the independent films, and that's how the parallel cinema movement took off.5 From that perspective, it's very hard to distinguish now; there are simply big budget films and small budget films. And for the kinds of films that I make, I'll never get as much money as anyone else because, again, the system is so skewed that everyone turns around and says that these sorts of films will not get that kind of financial returns.

And they are right because the system has been created with a male hero-centric universe. All resources—marketing, production, distribution money—have gone into creating male heroes who are the center of the film industry. The more the idea of the male hero has been perpetuated, the harder it is; and with the perpetuation of the male hero is the perpetuation of the male gaze, resulting in a very patriarchal kind of cinema with less space for any alternative points of view. And then that very fact that all the resources have gone into creating that kind of universe is used as a reason to still not give space to alternative voices. From that perspective, now, financially, it's all just a differentiation between budgets and the kind of stars you're casting. If you cast someone like Deepika Padukone,6 then obviously it's not an indie film because then the budget will be very different. So, this differentiation between mainstream and non-mainstream also has to do with whether it has stars or not, which is also then about the budgets. That's one way of sort of differentiating; and, of course, my films always fall on the side of where there's not that much money. It's not the same with shows; because, with series, it's a little more blurry, but even there, you know it's different if Ajay Devgan is starring in a show versus if Pooja Bhatt7 is in the show.

For me, honestly, I find it very hard to slot myself, because I don't think that I identify fully with independent cinema that is really a very strong cinematic form which is very divergent from a mainstream aesthetic. It's the kind of film that'll travel to a lot of festivals, and it's much quieter. I don't think that I even fit in there fully because I don't think my work is like that in terms of form or pace, or anything else either, because I like a lot of density and a lot of things happening, with a lot of characters. I also don't necessarily shoot in a way which is very unconventional. It's very hard for me to slot myself because I can't say that I am an art-house kind of director or a mainstream director.

I feel that I'm just trying to make the films I want to make. I am always doing *Jugaad*.8 I'm just trying to figure out: what is it that I want to make; and how can I get money to make it? Who can I *fasao* [rope in]; i.e. who's going to back it? Who will fund it? How can I get it out into the world? I am not even thinking about where I am on the landscape; I'm usually thinking project to project, film to film. I'm just so focused on that, that I really don't have the mindspace also to categorize myself. I definitely know I don't belong to either also because I haven't done films with really big stars. And I don't have that kind of pulsating need either. I just feel like I want to cast actors who I feel will be right for the part. So, I guess I'm

somewhere in the middle; and I'm happy to inhabit whatever space can be carved out for me to tell the stories that I want to tell.

Another part of your question is about gaze determining aesthetic. In a certain sense, there are a lot of things that people just have taken for granted in mainstream cinema in terms of how they are shooting women, in terms of how they use the camera on the female body. For instance, there's the item song[9] that objectifies women; the name itself is problematic. This type of song has no connection with the narrative; there are just shots of the woman's body, accompanied with weird lyrics and a group of men trying to maul the woman; and this is supposed to be entertainment. This sort of male gaze has shaped popular Hindi cinema for decades. There have been too few women who have been behind the camera[10] and obviously everyone, including me, have consumed the male gaze and normalized it in many ways. So, there is a lot of unconscious unlearning one has to keep doing in terms of not just perpetuating the status quo. Well, luckily, it doesn't take that much effort. I have to keep telling technicians sometimes that they should not shoot in a certain way. Some editor friends of mine have told me how sometimes it's so hard when they're editing a mainstream film where, you know like, there aren't any close-ups of the female actor. The editors say it's insane; there's that much of that gaze going on you don't feel like you know she needs space.

"Embodying a Life Lived:" Feminist Aesthetics and the Female Gaze

In my cinematic world, it's a very female universe. The stories are told from the point of view of the female characters. They are the protagonists; and we see the men in the way the women experience them. We see little of the men outside of how the women are experiencing them, and I don't have the time or the space to get really into the journeys of the men; it's more about how the men are coming in or going out of the lives of female protagonists. We see the men as the women see them. That has been a conscious decision because I feel that if I want to tell the stories that I want to, whatever has to be understood is through the female character. The point of view is the point of view of the female protagonist or protagonists. There are very few scenes in my work which don't involve the female protagonist; it's very much about how they are seeing life.

Coming to the question of how the aesthetic of my films is different from the mainstream. For instance, it's in how I use the camera; so, for example, I won't randomly just show the woman's cleavage. It must play some narrative part, not like just randomly taking the camera up and down a woman's body. I also make sure to give women space. But that also happens instinctively, because that's what the script is; that's how the whole world is being created. I think it's important to give actors time and space to perform those parts in as lived a way as possible. There are other aesthetic choices one makes in terms of tonality, and that depends from film to film.

I would also add that the gaze is not just about mainstream vs independent film. I think gaze is a much more of a differentiating thing between the male gaze and the female gaze. You can be mainstream and have a very female gaze; and you can be an independent filmmaker and still have a very male gaze. I think that those two things don't necessarily go hand-in-hand, because there are some male filmmakers like Shoojit Sircar or Neeraj Ghaywan, who have a gaze that is very sensitive. A gaze that is more sensitive to the female point of view can be something that is practiced by a male director as well, just as there can be female directors who just perpetuate the patriarchal status quo.

JFS: We wanted to think more about the idea of the female gaze. In her canonical work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey has written about the cinematic apparatus, and how the camera often occupies the point of view of the male protagonist and the resultant objectification of the female body, the splintering of the female body, etc. How would you define the female gaze? Is it cinematic?

The female characters in your work often have voice-overs; it's their story, their narrative point of view. But with the gaze, we're also talking about the eye, and what gets shown. How would you define a female gaze?

AS: I think, in a very similar way, in the sense of how the filmmaker is seeing the characters: how are the women being shown; how is the camera showing them; how much space they get, in terms of physical, visual space? Of course, how much space they're getting is determined obviously also by what the story is. And, then, therefore, how are you encouraging the audience to view them? It flows in ways very much similar to the theoretical idea of the gaze but you just do it in a way that women have space, they are being seen, and they have agency. For me, it's very important to spend time with the protagonist, even when they're not saying anything or doing anything. I like for the camera to linger on them and just show them doing their own thing, sometimes in the quietness of when everybody has gone off to sleep, or they are left alone in a room. I stay on them, stay with them. Another thing is that I don't ever feel the need to beautify them. I don't feel that they have to always fit into a certain conventional idea of glossy-pretty. I'm very happy for them to just look more unvarnished and more just how they would be. Even in terms of body size and so on, I'm not fixated on that aspect for characters, unless it's a requirement for the character for them to be a particular size and shape. I like characters to just be, rather than fitting into stereotypes. While there are films about women, there's a certain body type of all the female protagonists in a lot of these other films: they'll all be very svelte, leggy figures.

I'm not thinking if that Dilbar's character (in *My Beautiful Wrinkles*) could have been more like a Dimple Kapadia. But I chose to cast in a certain way and have a certain idea of her physicality also embodying a life lived and carrying that. I think it's about being able to see women in their fullness and their complexity, as full human beings, and I guess not seeing them just aesthetically. Even some of my friends, some male filmmakers, and who supposedly are very sensitive, have a very conventional idea of the aesthetic of how the female characters should be. I argue with them so much because that is exactly what that gaze is; because you're not being able to see beyond the physicality of a particular character. The female gaze is being able to embrace the idea of being female in a way that doesn't all have to fit into a stereotype of what this amazing, beautiful protagonist must be like, even in terms of makeup, hair, costumes, and things like that. The female gaze is about how you see the women, and then, therefore, that's how you encourage your audience to see them really. And then, of course, you have to get your team to be on the same page. I mostly work with people who really get it because it's not possible for me to work with people who don't instinctively understand that there is this idea of objectification.

Censorship and "Vanilla Films"

JFS: We wanted to ask you about the issue of censorship and audiences as related to the idea of censorship on various platforms. The CBFC (Censor Board of Film Certification)[11] refused to certify and then banned your film, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, which resulted in social media uproar and support for your film. Could you speak to the aspect of censorship in general and how it has affected you as a filmmaker, whether as an institutionalized system or as internalized or self-imposed censorship? Has it affected how you imagine your audiences as you write your scripts? Also, how does it influence content on streaming platforms like Netflix?

AS: First, I want to say that, honestly, I don't think about the audience. I know a lot of filmmakers, especially the big mainstream filmmakers, do. And I guess that's why their films are very "massy." For me, I just need to write a film that makes sense to me; and that I would want to watch. That's my main criterion and I just run with that because I find it very difficult to think from a third person's perspective. It's a different matter, of course, to see if something is working or not. You get your friends who're filmmakers in

the industry to watch stuff and give you feedback. But per se, I'm not thinking that there's this audience and this is what they like right now, and this is what they'll react to. I just ask myself – do I think this is funny or dramatic? Is it making sense? Am I moved by this? There are, of course, successes and failures in everything that one writes and makes. So, you thought one scene was funny and then when you ended up shooting it, it's not that funny; or you thought it was not very moving when you shot it, and then after you edited it, it's very moving. These kinds of things keep happening. I just try to stick to the idea that whatever I'm doing should make sense to me. I also feel like I don't have too much of a precedent in terms of where I'm going. For instance, if you're doing genre films or something, then there are a lot of genre films that exist, and you know that path. I feel like I'm kind of hurtling through not a very explored space in the Indian context. I do believe that when you try to make whatever you're doing with honesty, and you try and do your best, the audience does come, and the audience keeps growing. I can't stress out too much about the audience. Some works will have more of an audience, and others will have less of an audience.

Also, to answer your question about censorship, I feel that when India became democratic and freed itself from the British regime, I don't know why we continued with the idea of censorship which was really a gift of the British colonizers to us and why Indian filmmakers accepted it. I don't know why we continued with the Indian Cinematograph Act, and with this system of the Censor Board, that can tell filmmakers to cut words, scenes, change things. Basically, we have always had censorship. And censorship is just an accepted thing in the Indian film culture space with filmmakers and producers. Censorship is not a new thing. We have just been living with it and, of course, I've been facing censorship right from the time I made *Turning 30*. I had some censorship issues in the promotions of that film. The censor board didn't some of the promos on TV, such as one dialogue in the promos where the female protagonist says to a boyfriend that, just because she's slept with him doesn't mean she wants to marry him. Then there was another promo where the women go for some bachelorette-type thing where there are guys dancing on stage. We don't even show the guys naked or anything, but it's implied that the guys are stripping, and the censor board didn't want that in the promo. I had a fight with the censor board; they said we can't pass these promos. The film did get certified, and that one is a "vanilla film," but it got certified for some reason as an "adult film." But for the promos which were going to appear on TV, I had a lot of problems.

And, with *Lipstick*, I didn't expect it at all, but the censor board initially banned the film, and then I had to fight this long battle to get that decision reversed. I did expect that they might ask me to cut some scenes or change some words, but I didn't expect that they would just refuse to certify the film. Because I've worked on so many other things and I've dealt with the censor board right from the time that I was an EP and an assistant, I know that there are censor screenings and sometimes you have to go to the tribunal and all of that.

Now, in retrospect, I think that at least with theatrical films, you know that there's a censor board and you know how it works; and if you need, you fight it out. There's some logic; there is some system, and you can work through that system, and then you get a censor certificate which allows you to release your film. But nowadays, it's a free for all. You put your film out, and anyone starts protesting; anything can happen. It's become a very problematic thing. I feel that as an Indian filmmaker who has lived in India all her life, there's a lot of self-censorship that happens (in one's head in any case), and it's at a very subconscious level. For instance, I won't think of showing a scene where there is nudity. I'll just not, because I know where I live. I feel like there's already a lot of filters; and that all filmmakers have that internal censor board functioning at full capacity all the time.

Personally, for me, I'm just not into the censorship thing. I feel like I've got to write what I've got to write; I've got to make what I'm making; and then we'll figure out what has to be done. And if some issues come up, then I'll have to figure out how to get around it. It's not like you can make anything and put it on the streaming platforms at all, because, especially because of social media, there's so much trolling; and

anyone can start protesting anything. Even streaming things have to be vetted legally before you start filming. There are a lot of issues but I'm not too fazed by these issues because I just feel that India, as a culture, just embraced censorship with such joy right from the beginning that now we are just stuck! I really wish, because I feel we are a democracy, supposedly, we should have a space where everything is just certified according to age. But I don't see that time coming, and I think that censorship is just something that we as filmmakers will just have to live with for the time being and keep negotiating. And it's become harder now, because it's not systematic. You just don't know what's coming at you where, when, how. Nowadays there are also boycott trends, and the streamers get obviously scared. There was a whole controversy with *Tandav* on Amazon Prime.[12] I just feel it's hard. I'm just saying that it's not all rosy in the streaming space. Actually, in the streaming space, it's more complicated because you just don't know what's coming at you.

"A certain way of looking at films:" Collaboration

JFS: You co-wrote and directed episodes of the Amazon web-series *Made in Heaven (2019)*, which is a groundbreaking show in so many ways, especially in how it tackles myriad issues–homophobia, dowry, surveillance, religion, etc.–by upending the romantic associations with the form of the Indian wedding. Can you talk about the experience of working collaboratively with other well-known women directors and writers such as Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti?[13]

AS: I had a lot of fun working on *Made in Heaven*. In fact, I'm working on the second season right now. I have a great working relationship with Zoya and Reema. I have to credit them for setting the tone for that. They've been amazing; the two of them had been writing together for years but we had never worked together. I didn't know them socially either or anything when they reached out to me and they wanted to work with me. We got along well, and we had lots of ideas which we sort of fleshed out and argued about and thought through. Also, there are four different directors for the series, and we had such a great time working together between Zoya, Nithya, Prashant, and me.[14] I think it's important for the person who's the creator of the show or the head of the show to create that kind of atmosphere where everyone can do their best. And definitely I think that the fact that we all have a certain way of looking at life helped us connect and enabled us to actually work together well. I think it wouldn't have worked out if we had a different worldview, not just like a film view, but a worldview.

JFS: One last question: what are you working on right now, and what are future projects that you're excited about?

AS: Right now, I'm busy working on the edits of season 2 of *Made in Heaven*. I've also done an anthology which I'm excited about; it has four films on female friendship by female directors. I'm doing the post-production on it. It's at a very early stage; it hasn't been announced yet. I've nothing else planned, which is a very new stage for me after a long time. There's some stuff that I'm writing; there's a film that I'm trying to make on Qandeel Baloch.[15] I'm working on that script. I'm also developing some other scripts. I've been so busy, so now I'm just trying to spend some time writing; and once I've written out a couple of these scripts, I'm just going to see what takes off first.

JFS: We look forward to seeing what you do next. Thank you so much for taking out the time to talk to us.

Notes

1. Prakash Jha is an Indian auteur best known for films such as *Damul* (1984), *Gangaajal* (2003), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Rajneeti* (2010).

2. The six episodes of *Bombay Begums* are titled after well-known works by women writers such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*; Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*; and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

3. "Saffron wave" refers to the rise of Hindu nationalism in India.

4. *Hatke* is a Hindi word that means "different"/"a little different;" it has been used to refer to multiplex films whose aesthetics are different from mainstream cinema. See Rachel Dwyer (2011).

5. NFDC refers to the National Film Development Corporation of India, which was set up by the Indian state to finance and produce films of high artistic content, made on small budgets. The NFDC played an important role in the 1970s and 1980s in the development of parallel cinema or New Indian Cinema with a social realist aesthetic in contrast to the more melodramatic fare of mainstream cinema which included big stars, song-dance sequences, and lavish sets.

6. Deepika Padukone is one of the highest-paid female actors in India, who has won numerous awards for her performances.

7. Ajay Devgn and Pooja Bhatt are both well-known male and female actors respectively of popular Hindi cinema.

8. *Jugaad* is a North Indian Hindi slang word that refers to a resourceful approach, that uses skill and imagination, to solve a problem.

9. "Item number," is a journalistic term used in Bollywood for song and dance sequences by female performers ("item girls") outside the larger diegesis of the film and initially associated with "B-grade" actresses in skimpy clothes dancing provocatively and gyrating suggestively in settings such as the nightclub or discotheque or bar (settings previously associated with the vamp).

10. Besides Alankrita Shrivastava, some other female writers, directors, and producers in Bollywood are: Zoya Akhtar, Farah Khan, Gauri Shinde, Gazal Dhaliwal, Rajshree Ojha, Tanuja Chandra, Leena Yadav, Gauri Khan, Reema Kagti, and Kiran Rao – to name a few.

11. The Censor Board of Film Certification is a statutory body that handles film certification in India; it was set up under the Cinematograph Act of 1952. The practice of censorship was initiated by the British in 1918, and continued in postcolonial India. In order to have a theatrical release, every film has to be cleared and rated by the censor board. For more on censorship, read Monika Mehta (2011).

12. The Amazon Prime Video series, *Tandav* (2021) was in a controversy over hurting the religious sentiments of Hindus over the show's depiction of Hindu Gods.

13. Both Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti are prominent women writers and directors in Bollywood. Zoya Akhtar has written and directed critically acclaimed and commercially successfully films and shows such as *Luck By Chance* (2009), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), *Gully Boy* (2018), and *Made in Heaven* (2019). Kagti's directorial oeuvre consists of films such as *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (2007), *Talaash* (2012), and *Gold* (2018).

14. There are nine episodes in season one of *Made in Heaven*; episodes 1 and 2 are directed by Zoya Akhtar; episodes 3,4, and 7 are directed by Nitya Mehra; episodes 5 and 6 are directed by Prashant Nair; and episodes 8 and 9 are directed by Alankrita Shrivastava. All episodes are written by Alankrita Shrivastava, Zoya Akhtar, and Reema Kagti.

15. Qandeel Baloch was a Pakistani social media star known for her spunky attitude and candid thoughts – on the role of women, religion, and other aspects of Pakistani society – which irked the conservatives. She was murdered by her brother in an "honor killing" since he saw her as bringing dishonor or disrepute to their family.

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