



Voyeuristic Study of Bhansali's Bajirao Mastani

Aiman Imran^{*}

M. Phil English Literature Scholar, RILL, Riphah International University Lahore Campus.

60061@students.riphah.edu.pk

Muhammad Saleem

Department of English, RILL, Riphah International University Lahore Campus.

Tahir Ghafoor

Department of English, RILL, Riphah International University Lahore Campus.

^{*}Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the role of cinematography including camera angles, lighting and framing to foreground voyeurism in Bhansali's Bajirao Mastani. This research builds a bridge between a Western film theory and a subcontinent film. It sheds light on the implicit manners in which camera and lighting are employed together to produce voyeuristic effects on the bodies of Mastani and Kashibai. The researcher has conducted this research which is qualitative in its nature by visually analyzing mise-en-scene of Bajirao Mastani through the lens of Laura Mulvey's voyeurism. This research accentuates the intricacies of multiple camera shots and intensity of lighting to present women in voyeuristic manner by taking their close-up shots and presented their body parts in chunks to make them visually appealing for the male spectators who forget that there is a gap of screen between them and those females while sitting in the dark cinema hall.

Keywords: Male gaze, voyeurism, cinematography, visual pleasure

INTRODUCTION

A feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, proposes the concept of the voyeurism in her well-known essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" published in 1975. Voyeurism is a significant concept through which women are presented as passive objects for the pleasure of male viewers. Mulvey analyzes the portrayal of women as a source of pleasure in entire patriarchal cinematic structure.

Just like Steve Neale says, “Voyeurism is not confined to the representation of women but structures the entire cinematic experience.” (Neale, 1983, p. 4). Sanjay Leela Bhansali is an acclaimed Indian director, producer, filmmaker and screenwriter. He is famous for his meticulous components and details, opulent cinematic insight, affluent story-telling and fathomless knowledge of Indian culture and history. He has inscribed a niche of his own in Indian cinema with his phenomenal visual elegance and larger than life characters.

Bajirao Mastani (2015) is a passionate and tragic love story of two warriors i.e. Bajirao and Mastani. The movie highlights the themes of love, war, honor and sacrifice among the political turmoil. Bajirao, a top warrior, gets married to Kashibai who is a loyal wife besides his ardent cheerleader. When Bajirao fights for the survival of Bundelkhand empire along with Mastani, a daughter of Raja Chhatrasal, he gets impressed with Mastani’s warrior skills and falls head over heels in love with her. Bajirao’s family does not accept Mastani, but Bajirao remains steadfast and stands beside Mastani. At the end of the movie, Mastani is imprisoned by the authorities of Maratha Empire and embraces death in the prison. Outside the prison, Bajirao hallucinates about Mastani while fighting a battle and died. Their death on the same time illustrates their eternal connection and reunion beyond this cosmos.

Analyzing *Bajirao Mastani* from Mulvey’s lens of voyeurism via camera movement, the picturization of female characters will be observed. Through meticulous observation of mise-en-scene and shot composition, the researcher investigates to which extent *Bajirao Mastani* adheres to the dynamics of the voyeurism in contemporary Indian cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An article by Dr. Jyotirmay Deb under the title “Male Gaze and Indian Cinema” in which she explores the influence of the male gaze which is prevailing rapidly. She gives an idea of the male gaze embedded in the history of Indian cinema where males are not only progressing the storyline, dominating screen and narratives of the films but they are also ruling the minds of the male audience. The consequences of females’ objectification are beyond reel life, making their place in the real world where it is affecting the self-image, confidence and identity of females in a negative manner as well as elevating the stereotypical gender norms. She argues how different male film directors shoot Indian films according to the patterns and styles given by the patriarchal society. Mostly, women in Bollywood are confined to their roles portraying physical attraction, glamour and roles that are provocative.

Muhammad Nawaz in his research article “Concept of Male Gaze in Sara Suleri” discusses the permeating influence and domination of patriarchal norms in Pakisani society with reference to the Memoirs of Sara Suleri named *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will Be Boys*. In *Meatless Days*, Mair Jones who is the mother of Sara, is an embodiment of subservience. Her obedience reflects adaptability within patriarchal scenarios. Iffat is the symbol of resistance and the challenges faced by women who dare to stand against the stereotypical roles of women, but ultimately she meets with

terrible consequences for showing resistance. In another memoir, *Boys Will Be Boys*, Pip, Sara's father, symbolizes typical patriarchal man exercising his power on his subservient reflecting the impact of male gaze on women's agency. He concludes his article that the works of Sara Suleri are a clear mirror to understand the gender inequalities in a Pakistani society.

Smita Rane in her article "Unveiling the Male Gaze in Bollywood Movies: Deconstructing Objectification and Stereotyping in Hindi Cinema" critically analyzes the manifestation of male gaze in Indian cinema and its contribution to the persisting objectification of female characters. Extracting from Mulvey's concept of Male Gaze, this approach not only sexualizes female characters but also emphasizes patriarchal dogmas that portray woman through passivity. This article traces the evolutionary representation of females on screen from 1950s to 1970s. Films like *Guide*, *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Mother India* highlight the alignment of female characterization with societal expectations where their worth is linked with their beauty and submissiveness. This narrative was fortified by different cinematic strategies like music, camera and costumes where women play passive role in the progress of storyline. With the evolution of film industry, the objectification of females has become more explicit.

Theoretical Framework

Mulvey states that the shift of any film from being scopophilic to voyeuristic takes place in the premises of the movie theater, where "the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9) The characters are unaware of audience's presence and actions are reciprocal and improvising. "Voyeurism involves distance, control and separation, all of which are organized through cinematic narration." (Mulvey, 1989, p. 32). This sense of detachment between audience and performers leads audience to satiate their voyeuristic fantasies.

Mulvey states that a world where women are treated as passive objects and not the active agents of driving action, story and narrative in any movie. It is the male gaze that decides what kind of women are to be shown on the screen because they are mere source of pleasure for men and they do not have their active agency. As Mary Ann Doane, "The female body becomes the privileged site of visual pleasure and voyeuristic scrutiny." (Doane, 1982, p. 78). Voyeurism is when the pleasure of males determines how the characters, makeup, costumes, movements, actions and camera angles of female characters are fabricated to provide pleasure to men's gaze.

In their conventional exhibitionist role, women are picturized as both seen and consciously flaunted, they themselves try to grasp attention of male spectators. They start looking at themselves from male spectators' perspective. A conscious effort is devoted to make them look physically attractive and sexually appealing on screen. The objectification of women is a source of pleasure for males in the form of pin-ups and striptease. In traditional movies, women are dually objectified: they are the objects of their male co-stars' gaze as well as the spectators' gaze. Although the

role of women in a narrative film is indispensable yet her role is neither active in the progression of storyline nor in providing the meaning to the actions of the film. As Teresa de Lauretis states, "Cinema works as a technology of gender, producing pleasure through regulated forms of looking." (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 3). Their presence on the screen is used to pause the actions and instigate the erotic desires. While picturizing a show-girl or dancer in the film, it seems that this dance scene is naturally flowing out of the plot. Then there are movies where the scenes of women's dance clearly show that they are not sprouting out of the plot. The body of women are not shown in a single shot in these unnecessary dancing scenes rather it is taken in a distorted way; close-up shot of belly, thighs, face, neck, legs and hips. The picturization of female body in multiple fragmented shots depict that her body parts are shown as the objects of visual pleasure.

Data Analysis

Voyeurism is another proposed concept of Mulvey stated in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". According to her, it is defined as: "voyeurism... has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 21). For Mulvey, voyeurism is a way of seeking pleasure from secretly looking at other person, and the person who is being watched should remain unaware of the onlooker's gaze. "The cinema spectator is a voyeur by situation: the observed object does not know that it is being observed." (Metz, 1982, p. 15). The hidden gaze while looking at the person is a source of satiation for the person who is looking. While watching films, the patterns of voyeurism can be traced out when the camera moves and gives us the sense of spying on others when they do not know that the audience and other characters are looking at them. If one character is looking at another character without its knowledge the camera picturizes both of them in different frames, they both do not place in the same frame rather in one scene it shows a person who looks and in another scene it shows a person who is looked at. John Berger says, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (Berger, 1972, p. 47). The onlooker looks at a person from a hidden place; it can be another room, through binoculars, a crack of door or keyholes, and from behind a curtain, a window or blinds. Point of View (POV) shots, long shots and high angle shots are used to illustrate voyeurism in the film, where the subject who is being looked at is at distance from the person who is looking at the subject.



There is a scene where Bajirao is in one frame walking on the red carpet in court after getting nominated as an emperor of Maratha Empire whereas in another frame Kashibai is standing with other girls on the balcony of the court to see the ceremony, so there is another emotional distance as well as spatial distance. While witnessing the ceremony, she has tears of happiness and pride in her eyes for the triumph of Bajirao which indicates emotional voyeurism. She is looking at him from distance because he is in the court and she is standing at the balcony. In the very next scene, his mother Ruhani Bai also looks at him from another little balcony where she is captured through close-up shot and in the next close up shot, Bajirao is framed through a close-up shot. They both also do not share the same frame; one frame is ruled by Ruhani Bai and Bajirao holds another. Her case is different from Kashibai because she is having affective voyeurism replete with affection due to her motherhood. Her emotions are not verbalized but visualized because she passes a smile to him and assures her presence with her hand having teary eyes. When Bajirao sits on the throne, Kashibai has painful facial expressions when Bajirao brushes his thumb on the sharpened edge of sword and his blood starts coming out of his thumb. The internal pain felt by Kashibai is aestheticized because she does not utter a single word rather expresses her pain through in a non-verbal manner. The audience secretly feels her pain when she looks that the thumb of Bajirao is bleeding.



There is a scene where Bajirao is leading his army to help Mastani in saving her father's kingdom, it not only highlights the narcissistic scopophilia because of the praise Bajirao gets from Mastani, but it also highlights emotional voyeurism because this scene also emphasizes the secret gaze of the male audience looking at the silent admiration of Mastani for Bajirao which is observed when both of them are fighting in the battlefield against Muhammad Khan Bangash's army. During that fight where Bajirao and Mastani are rushing towards the army of Bangash, there is a moment when Mastani looks at Bajirao and admires the unsurpassable and exceptional skills of Bajirao being a warrior. This scene is shot in slow-motion to highlight the heroic stature of Bajirao and meticulous look of Mastani towards Bajirao. There is a scene which highlights emotional voyeurism in the sequence of the song "Mohe Rang Do Laal", where Mastani is dancing in Bajirao's honor after what he did to save the empire of Bundelkhand. Her actions in that song determine that she is seeking Bajirao's attention and affection. There is a scene where she forwards her right hand towards Bajirao and looks at him with teary eyes pleading for his attention. In this scene, when Mastani and Bajirao are into each other though not intimately still Mastani is addressing to him in an emotional way and they both are captured in different frames. In one frame there is a Mastani seeking his attention having tears in her eyes and in another frame Bajirao is captured looking at Mastani controlling his desires and emotions for Mastani. The audience feels pleasure in looking at them who are connected to each other.

Voyeurism is not found in its typical sense of nudity and sexual activities, there are some intimate scenes that support the idea of erotic voyeurism in its broader spectrum because audience is peeping into their private moments which they spend with each other and audience are the secret on lookers because they are intruding into the privacy of Bajirao and Mastani. As John Ellis says, "Cinema offers privileged access to moments of private emotion, turning intimacy into a public spectacle." (Ellis, 1982, p. 90). Mastani goes to meet Bajirao in order to give him paan (beetle nut chewing) and it is the time of night and the sky is dark outside. She uses candle holder to find her path towards the room where Bajirao is staying in her palace. Before handing over the paan to him, she bends over him and kisses him near his lips on the cheek and then sits in his feet. While looking at them, male viewers forget this thing that they are invading their privacy.

Another moment of erotic voyeurism is observed when Bajirao is sitting topless on a stone and taking shower with the help of steel mug, his body is wet having drops of water. Kashibai looks at his body from behind while standing in the door and Bajirao is having his back towards her. Apart from intimate scenes, voyeurism is also indicated in the movie when the two characters are not in the same frame and one of them is looking at other character being in another frame. Just like Kashibai looks at him from the threshold of another room. Later, in the scene they become intimate with each other when Bajirao comes closer to her after filling his mug with water, she tries to save herself from him and slowly pours water on her hair. Her blouse and saree get wet with water pouring on her blouse by her

husband. He holds her in his arms and starts walking towards the large stone on which he was taking shower a few moments ago. He makes her lie down on that stone and bends on her in an intimate position. While being in that position he applies soap on her face, then rubs his thumb on her lower lip and moves his hand on her neck. While looking at this scene, audience is secretly peeping into their private moments staying on the other side of the screen. The wet blouse and fall of saree are making her body parts prominent. Her arousing emotions are evident from her facial expressions and body movements when her husband kisses her neck and grabs her pelvic area in his hand; the way she moves her face from one side to another, her mid-opened eyes, her wriggles in his arms, the movement of closing and opening her lips, the way her back uplifts from the stone and the way she drags her hand on his body.

The song “Ang Laga De Re” in the movie *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* highlights voyeurism as the male spectators are looking at the body of the female protagonist, Leela as well as the intimate moments of Leela with Ram from the other side of the screen. The moments when ram is holding her in his arms Leela’s body is picturized through medium shots and close-up shots to make her a passive viewer and her body a source of pleasure for male spectators. Her backless cropped shirt with deep neck reveals her body and her seductive dancing movements look more appealing sexually with the smoke elevating from the pot, she is holding in her hand. Bajirao and Kashibai are enjoying their private moments and once again male audience being a silent and secret onlookers intrude into their moments which they are enjoying within the four walls of their room. While sitting at a distance, people are looking at them and they are not aware of the gaze of audience. They both were talking to each other and in the spur of moment, Bajirao laughs out loud and pulls her closer to him to hold her in his arms.

In the song “Deewani Mastani” Sanjay Leela Bhansali constructs voyeurism as a multilayered phenomenon where male voyeurism and female voyeurism are developed and existed simultaneously to explain the position of Mastani as an object of desire and visual pleasure for the male audience and the position of Kashibai as an observer who is displaced. Male voyeurism is observed from the perception of Bajirao and the female voyeurism from the perception of Kashibai. The primary layer of this song is male voyeurism which is developed on Bajirao who is employed within the narrative of the song as the conscious recipient of Mastani’s performance. With the help of over-the-shoulder shots, point-of-view shots, reaction close-ups, the camera highlights his perspective and involves audience with his act of looking. Mastani’s body is picturized in medium close-ups and extended tracking shots where the spotlight on Mastani illuminates her face from the rest of the court filled with dim light. This creates a more visually attractive view of Mastani for Bajirao as well as extra diegetic audience. Bajirao is gobsmacked while looking at the immaculate beauty and fluid performance of Mastani without blinking his eyes and having a continuous pleasing smile on his face.

“The spectator’s pleasure derives not only from looking at bodies but from

witnessing emotional exposure without responsibility.” (Kaplan, 1983, p. 52). Parallel to male voyeurism, there is another inaugurated phenomenon of female voyeurism. It is introduced in the film through the character of Kashibai, while sitting in the balcony when she silently observes the intimate visual exchange as well as verbal exchange between Bajirao and Mastani, and later when he hands her over the paan in the name of special hospitality for his special guests. Kashibai has to force a smile on her face in which she is failed badly because her husband is talking to another girl and touching the hand of her. Her gaze is forced not an invited one because she is experiencing a visual connection between her husband and the dancer, Mastani, because she is excluded by them. This is the example of tragic voyeurism where Kashibai is the victim of heartbreak because of Bajirao and Mastani. Her gaze, while looking at them, is the result of exclusion and emotional suffering rather than her erotic satiation.

It is an act of voyeurism because Mastani and Bajirao possess a different frame whereas Kashibai is captured in different frame sitting in the balcony behind its railing. She sits at a distance from the sphere of golden aura and dim lighting where Mastani is performing. When Bajirao has a profound smile on his face and Kashibai looks at him, she feels restless and heartbroken because her husband has a meaningful smile on his face throughout her performance. She has a forced smile on her face to pretend that she is happy in her husband’s happiness. She looks at Mastani when her reflection is shown in the mirrors of the roof of Aaina Mahal.



In another sequence where voyeuristic pleasure is enhanced with the help of rain, using it as a cinematic technique to accentuate the emotional turbulence of Bajirao and Mastani when they are engaged with each other. It is the sequence where Bajirao is embracing Mastani whole heartedly without any fear of social, religious and familial constraints. The rain is making their clothes, face and hair wet which become the source of eroticizing their body without making them nude. The lighting is reflective due to the moisturizing effect fabricated on their face with the help of rain. This effect allows the onlookers to bring their special attention towards their corporal contact when they are hugging each other and they are captured with

the help of close-up shots. Close-up shots are used to isolate them from the rest of the background and down pour happening in the cosmos. Bajirao comes to meet Mastani in extreme rain and storm on the boat by putting his life at stake. His clothes are fully wet in rain making his physique prominent and audience intrudes in the moments of Bajirao and Mastani when they come closer to each other. Mastani as teary eyes while talking to him because of her sentimental condition and later Bajirao holds her hand and takes her outside the place where rain is falling on them directly.

Once again water is used as a strong cinematic tool and effective framing device to create a complex and double layered voyeurism as well as to enhance the eroticization of their bodies and make their romance more vivid. The fountain water, in this scene, is not only a decorative object rather it plays a significant role of a partial screen or a veil at two levels; diegetic as well as extra diegetic. Firstly, it is a see through screen at diegetic level because the water of fountain is falling between Mastani and Bajirao whereas they both look at each other while standing on the different sides of the fountain. It is making their gaze more intense and passionate. Secondly, it is also used as a partially concealing and revealing screen between audience and the characters; Bajirao and Mastani. The audience is secretly looking at them when they both are getting romantic with each other. It is a scene where Bajirao comes to meet Mastani after winning his negotiation with Nizam, and he embraces Mastani in his arms. Their intimate hug is captured through visceral high angle shot and sweeping tracking shot where they stand inside the fountain and they both are at the vulnerable state of emotions being in arms of each other. The blushed cheeks of Mastani and shine in her eyes while being in her lover's arms, their closeness as well as uninterrupted eye contact are captured through close up shots.



A multilayered voyeurism also exists in the scene where Kashibai is secretly looking at the intimate moments of Bajirao and Mastani, there audience is also peeping into their romance. It is a tragic voyeurism at the level of Kashibai who feels deceived and heartbroken after looking at her husband who is hugging another girl for a long span of time. From her shocking facial expressions and teary eyes, slightly opened lips, forced smile and her sigh, it can be inferred that it is actually very

difficult for her to accept this fact that her husband is into another girl physically and emotionally. They are so much emotionally involved and hug each other so passionately that it is difficult for them to separate themselves from each other. Kashibai looks at them from the mirror and piece of cloth installed in her room to look at Bajirao whenever he stands on that point of Aaina Mahal. Her act of burning that cloth with eyes full of tears which are ready to come out of her eyes actually reveals her shattered self because Bajirao, whom she used to trust blindly, has breached her trust. At the same time audience also enjoys their intimacy while hiding themselves in the dark cinema hall. They also look at them hugging each other and enjoying each other's closeness.

CONCLUSION

The researcher has also come to this point that the film reflects voyeurism but not in its core sense of nudity and sexuality, as mentioned by Mulvey in her famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It has observed by the researcher that multiple nuances of voyeurism like tragic, emotional, cinematic and affective are illustrated through cinematography. As Jean Louis Baudry says, "The cinematic apparatus creates a specific form of voyeurism in which the spectator is isolated from the spectacle while dominating it visually." (Baudry, 1974, p. 42).

A stratified voyeurism has observed in the scenes of the movie when the characters are looking towards each other but the characters who look and the characters who are to be looked at, they are in different frames, they are not in the same camera frame. Once the camera captures the person who is looking and in the very next scene it captures the person who is looked at by the person. Voyeurism, at another level, is linked with audience when these male spectators peep into the private moments of male and female protagonists as uninvited onlookers. They secretly intrude the privacy of male and female protagonists. Moreover, there are intimate scenes of male protagonist with both female leads where they get entangle with each other and wrap their arms around each other, and the audience looks at them sitting in the darkness of the cinema hall.

REFERENCES

- Baudry, J.-L. (1974). Ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus. *Film Quarterly*, 28(2), 39–47.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London, England: BBC & Penguin.
- Bhansali, S. L. (Director). (2013). *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* [Film]. Eros International.
- Bhansali, S. L. (Director). (2015). *Bajirao Mastani* [Film]. Bhansali Productions.
- Deb, J. (2023). Male gaze and Indian cinema. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies*, 9(5), 106–111. <https://doi.org/10.29032/ijhsss.v9.i5.2023.106-111>
- Doane, M. A. (1982). Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator. *Screen*, 23(3–4), 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74>

- Ellis, J. (1982). *Visible fictions: Cinema, television, video*. London, England: Routledge.
- Kaplan, E. A. (1983). Is the gaze male? *Camera Obscura*, 1(1), 46–62. <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-1-1-46>
- Metz, C. (1982). The fictional signifier. *Screen*, 23(1), 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/23.1.14>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema: Afterthoughts. *Screen*, 30(1), 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.1.30>
- Nawaz, M. (2019). Concept of male gaze in Sara Suleri. *Global Scientific Journal*, 7(4), 596–621. <http://www.globalscientificjournal.com>
- Neale, S. (1983). Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema. *Screen*, 24(6), 2–17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/24.6.2>
- Rane, S., & Roy Chowdhary, S. (2023). Unveiling the male gaze in Bollywood movies: Deconstructing objectification and stereotyping in Hindi cinema. *Shodhak: A Journal of Historical Research*, 52(2), 255–263.