

Witnessing Through the Lens: Feminist Cinema and the Transformative Power of the Gaze in India



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Cinema, as a powerful vehicle of cultural production, has long shaped public conceptions of gender, identity, and justice. As the world's largest producer of films, India occupies a significant position in global cinematic culture. With its vast and diverse audience, Indian cinema functions not only as a major entertainment industry but also as a critical site of social discourse. Increasingly, feminist filmmakers are leveraging cinematic language to challenge patriarchal ideologies and reimagine the relationship between film and audience.

Drawing on feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992) and affect studies (Marks, 2000; Sobchak, 1992), this paper examines how select Indian feminist films employ testimonial aesthetics, spatial intimacy, silence, and narrative disruption to subvert the objectifying gaze and foster critical empathy. These formal strategies shift viewers from passive consumption to emotional and ethical engagement, echoing Judith Butler's (2009) concept of a "politics of witnessing."

The paper addresses the normalization of gender-based violence in mainstream Indian cinema, where women's suffering is often aestheticized without accountability. In contrast, feminist films intervene in this visual culture by redirecting spectatorship toward recognition, responsibility, and social engagement.

This study investigates how feminist Indian filmmakers disrupt conventional portrayals of women and transform audiences into ethical witnesses. What cinematic strategies facilitate this shift? And how might such spectatorship cultivate a more critically engaged feminist consciousness in global cinema?

By positioning cinema as a space of critical pedagogy, the study affirms its role in shaping public discourse on gender justice.

Biography:

Nisha is a doctoral student in the department of Transcultural Studies in Taiwan, originally from India. She holds a bachelor's and master's degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi and has a background in journalism. Her research interests include cinema studies, transcultural narratives, feminism, and gender studies. Passionate about feminist film theory, she explores how visual culture both reflects and challenges dominant ideologies. Through her work, Nisha investigates the power of cinema as a space of resistance and transformation, focusing on how feminist narratives in film reframe perceptions of identity, culture, and womanhood across borders.