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Jugaad Auteurism: Alankrita Shrivastava and Feminist Bollywood

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> 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.
>
> –Alankrita Shrivastava

Alankrita Shrivastava is a filmmaker in Bollywood whose sensibilities as a feminist auteur have been prominent in her work since her very first film. Her oeuvre consists of three feature films (*Turning 30*, 2011; *Lipstick Under My Burkha,* 2017; *Dolly, Kitty Aur Who Chamakte Sitaare*, 2020), a short anthology film (*My Beautiful Wrinkles*, 2020), the Amazon Prime series *Made in Heaven* (2019), and the Netflix Series, *Bombay Begums* (2021). She wrote and directed all her films and collaborated with other female writers and directors for the Amazon Prime and Netflix series.

"I am always doing *jugaad*!" Shrivastava laughingly says in her interview to indicate how she must hack the system in order to make it as a filmmaker because she doesn't make the kinds of films that usually get a lot of funding (Arora, Sanos, and Siddiqui 2022, 85). The term, however, is precisely how I have long thought of her auteurism that comes across particularly via her characters in her films. *Jugaad* is a slang term used in India for a technology "hack." While the term has been appropriated by management discourse, the roots of *jugaad* are with the rural, working-class people without power. Amit S. Rai (2015) discusses its use by those that are dispossessed and explains that *jugaad* "comes out of subaltern, or 'nonelite' strategies of negotiating conditions characterised by extreme poverty, discrimination, and violence, which . . . are experiments in getting over the next hurdle confronting socially and economically disadvantaged communities" (986). I have elsewhere (2021) argued that Shrivastava's female protagonists in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* hack a patriarchal system set up against them and navigate their own agency via this *jugaad* (85-87). And so it seemed serendipitous that Shrivastava uses the same term to explain her own practice. In the film, women use technologies of oppression as workarounds to fight back and to escape from the normalized violence and exploitation that they experience. This aspect of surviving via negotiation in male-dominated spaces (of family, society, the corporate world) can be extended to her other protagonists as well. *Jugaad* then is a form of guerilla warfare where those lacking power find a way to use the dominant system to negotiate their own spaces within it.

The term fits Shrivastava's feminist filmmaking practice which is operating within the mainstream and yet working against its dominant ideologies. In so doing, she blurs the lines between mainstream and independent, instead treading a middle path between the popular and the counter-cultural. As such, Shrivastava's films could be described by the term *hatke*, a local North Indian Hindi slang term that implies alternative. The term has been applied to many New Bollywood films which are alternative to mainstream Bollywood in various ways—they can be stylistically experimental, ideologically different, oppositional to the mainstream, or a combination of them. Shrivastava's films, however, along those of other new directors, raise questions about the form and category of *hatke* films. In the interview, Shrivastava's refusal to see her films as *hatke* points to the diverse geography of New Bollywood and to how she understands *hatke* as truly independent cinema instead of something that straddles the boundaries of the popular and the

independent. While focused on funding and production, she clarifies that all the filmmakers are really trying to access funding from the same pot; not everyone gets the same share, and it is harder for some than others. Her films are not made on a shoestring budget and are not independent of corporate backing, but she does have to constantly try to figure out different ways to fund her work. Hence, her use of the term *jugaad,* that she applies to how she must find her way through the system. Her films aren't really experimental at the level of form either, she claims, and thus do not fit within the *hatke* umbrella.

Shrivastava's experimentation with form as well as her focus on alternative representations, particularly of gender, continue a trend about changes in Bollywood's form (including *hatke* cinema) that began at least a decade ago. Scholars discussed the multiplex film (Sharma 2003) or the songless Bollywood film (Garwood 2006) which often depart from the form of popular Hindi films that have an average runtime of 180 minutes and contain elements like song and dance numbers, etc. that are integral to the form. Instead, these films are closer to international films, particularly from the West, with shorter lengths and tighter narrative structures. Sangita Gopal's (2011) work on New Bollywood is also relevant here. In her book, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*, she discusses that gender has been the site of biggest change in New Bollywood films. Irrespective of their inclusion of song and dance numbers, experimentation with representations of gender and sexuality have become more common.[2] Shrivastava's work participates in both of these trends.

While it may not be strictly *hatke* in the ways in which Shrivastava qualifies the term, it does have a serious commitment to undoing dominant ways of representation, particularly of women, in mainstream cinema. In every single one of her works, Shrivastava's protagonists shape how viewers watch their lives and worlds unfold on-screen, whether via narrative point-of-view or voice-overs (such as in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Bombay Begums*) or through cinematic points of view that express their interiority. Often, hers is the auteurist signature given that she envisions the characters, writes the scripts, and is the director of the work. Her female authorship and feminist politics interrupt the patriarchal unconscious that dominates Bollywood and generate an interpretive universe that is counter-cultural. Her films are disruptive because they are about female desire—bodily desire, autonomy, financial stability, career, survival, equality, and self-respect—in a world that is very real and messy and where the odds are stacked against her protagonists. It is a world where male relatives prey on vulnerable women, husbands are rapists, old women have sexual and romantic desires (often toward young men), and women are fully aware of their own struggles because of patriarchy and yet think nothing of enabling oppression against other women.

Shrivastava's first film, *Turning 30*, is about a privileged middle-class, well-educated woman who has to grapple with the patriarchy as it affects the institution of marriage and the corporate world. The film reverses the rom-com formula by beginning with a depiction of the genre's traditional happy ending: the protagonist, Naina, has a successful job in an advertising company and is in a happy relationship with an imminent proposal expected at the start of the film. But then the story unravels in ways ideologically opposite to the rom-com and charts a journey from happy couple, to single unhappy woman, to a woman who is happy to be single. Naina is disappointed in both aspects of her life; nepotism and sexism at the workplace forces her to leave her job, and her boyfriend breaks up with her to marry another woman who would bring a large dowry. The film, however, has an alternative happy ending as Naina, single now by choice, becomes a writer who has just successfully published her book titled *Turning 30*. In doing so, she has become the author and therefore the person in control of her own narrative as a woman. The name of the book Naina authors is a mirror to the name of the film, and thus also points to Shrivastava's auteurist control of female and feminist narratives as a rejection of the narratives of romance that end with ceding a woman's control via marriage.

In her interview, Shrivastava emphasizes that strong female characters are central to how she imagines and writes her protagonists. The subtle complexity in characterization is obvious in the various

non-stereotypical representations of her female protagonists. While *Turning 30* seems post-feminist in that the class privilege of Naina's life is what allows for her relative autonomy, attention to Shrivastava's various protagonists since that first film reveals a sensitive representation of female characters from several walks of life, not only in terms of class, but also caste, region, religion, and age. For instance, her *Bombay Begums* Netflix series is about the lives of five women: Rani, the CEO of a bank; Fatima, who works for Rani and holds a high position in the bank; Ayesha, an entry-level worker; Lily, a bar dancer; and Shai, Rani's stepdaughter. Like Naina, Fatima and Rani are middle/upper-middle-class, ambitious women working in a patriarchal corporate environment and must negotiate their personal as well as professional lives. Their bodies are displayed as sites of struggle as Fatima, who is finally pregnant after having gone through several fertility treatments, chooses her career and a promotion over a life as a stay-at-home mom. Rani was molested and suffered various advances by men to maintain her job and career prospects. While Shrivastava thus renders the problems attendant on women who have class privilege, she also creates further layers with characters like Ayesha, who has moved to the city from a small town, and Lily, a Mumbai slum-dweller and bar dancer who is willing to resort to blackmail to secure a good education for her child.

Since they are web series and not individual films, *Bombay Begums* and *Made in Heaven* contain a diversity of female protagonists and are able to tackle intersecting concerns of power and privilege that allow for, or obstruct, agency. *Made in Heaven* is a collaborative series that Shrivastava co-wrote with other well-known women writers and directors, Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti. The show uncovers the ugly face of patriarchy in all its manifestations by using rich people's weddings as its organizing trope. Tara and Karan start the business "Made in Heaven" which plans all aspects of weddings for the rich and famous. In the process, the show takes on concerns of dowry, molestation, caste, and homophobia. The weddings expose the kind of awful power that class and gender can inculcate and reveal the systemic nature of by exploring the matrices of money, class, law, etc. that come together to uphold it. On the other hand, the show also privileges the lives of the victims, the people who are the othered face of this patriarchy. This includes central protagonists like Tara who comes from a middle-class family, and Karan who is gay. It also includes characters like Jazz who works for the team but doesn't belong in this upper-class world; she is lower middle-class and is struggling to provide for her family. The trenchant critique of class and patriarchy is also apparent in the focus that is given to minor characters that appear in individual episodes. The show refuses to give any happy answers and repeatedly reveals the ways in which agency has to be understood within a given context. For example, in episode 7, "A Royal Affair," the young working-class woman (the henna designer at the wedding) who is molested by the groom's father chooses to take the hush money offered by the family to clear up his name instead of fighting the case.

Lipstick Under My Burkha and *Dolly, Kitty, Aur Woh Chamakte Sitaare* also represent women from lower middle-class families and from small Indian cities like Bhopal; and the economic and regional pressures of patriarchy in their cases are different. Leela's trajectory in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is of constantly trying to get out of Bhopal and make it in the big city. Raised by a single mother who poses naked for artists, her ambition is to have a successful business of her own. In *Dolly, Kitty, Aur Woh Chamakte Sitaare*, Kitty moves out of her cousin Dolly's place to escape the unwelcome advances of her brother-in-law but has to work at a call-center for a dating app, which requires her to engage in phone-sex, to be able to afford a bed in a girl's hostel. Rehana and Shireen in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* work with and against the restrictions of Muslim patriarchy to find their own voice and agency unlike Faiza in *Made in Heaven*, who seems to be untouched by either religious or other kinds of patriarchal impositions because of her wealth or because she's independently wealthy.

Furthermore, Shrivastava's attention to older women and their desires, often neglected in mainstream cinema, is noticeable in several of her works. She restores and grants centrality to older adults' right to sexual and romantic desire, particularly women. *My Beautiful Wrinkles* (part of the anthology

series *Modern Love, Mumbai*) provides a sensitive portrayal of the growing attraction between Dilbar, an older woman, and a young man. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, Usha *buaji* loves reading romances and starts a phone courtship with a young swim instructor. Her voice-over in the film uses sections from the romance novel and is narrated over scenes that make explicit her desire for the young man, for example when she watches his swimsuit clad body from across the pool.

The interview makes it clear that Shrivastava's aesthetic investment in her films is geared towards developing strong female characters that are narratively as well as cinematically rendered as alternative to mainstream representations of women. Of particular interest to me here is her own conception of the female gaze and the work she must do to find DPs (directors of photography) who understand it. In other words, most cinematographers have internalized unconscious patriarchal ways of filming female bodies. In her seminal essay, Laura Mulvey (1975) discussed how the three looks in Classical Hollywood cinema[3]—that of the camera, of the audience, and the male protagonist—are often sutured together to privilege male visual pleasure. As a result, the camera, even when disconnected from the point of view of the male protagonist, continues to fetishize and objectify the bodies of women. Shrivastava talks about the female gaze as one where female subjectivity is visualized. Her camera "lingers" on her protagonists; it "stays on them, stays with them" (Arora, Sanos, and Siddiqui 2022, 87). The strong characters thus are followed by an equivalent cinematic representation which refuses the objectification of their bodies and instead focuses on their agency as desiring subjects. At the same time, as is evident in the case of Usha *buaji*, the camera does not shy away from her perspective and fetishizes the object of her desire, the body of the swim instructor. She becomes "the active controller of the look" rather than any male character.[4]

Shrivastava's feminist approach represents women who are flawed and yet deserving of equality. In addition, it depicts aspects particular to the local contexts within India. She is therefore able to make explicit the differences and connections across these divides of gender, class, caste, age, region, and religion and show a nuanced representation of what agency looks like given the particular constraints attendant on each. There are no unrealistic happy endings although the first season of *Bombay Begums* ends with suggestions of a feminist utopia where women are in control at every rung of the ladder. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* perhaps has the most powerful ending where all four women have failed and they sit together, sharing a cigarette, and laughing—an act that marks the inevitable power of systemic patriarchy and of their continued solidarity and resistance against it. Nothing perhaps underscores the importance of her work more than the fact that the Censor Board of Film Certification at first refused to certify it (2017) saying amongst other things, "The story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life." In other words, the film does exactly what Shrivastava sets out to do in all her films; it is about women and their desires for a life beyond what is prescribed for them.

Notes

1. New Bollywood is a term used by scholars for what Sangita Gopal (2011) calls the post-2000 "new cinematic order." Corporatization of the industry in 1998 and the multiplex boom resulted in experiments with and changes to the usual form of Bollywood.

2. Scholars of Indian cinema like Sumita S. Chakravarty (1993), Jyotika Virdi (2003), and others have noted the ways in which gender has shaped the national imaginary, particularly as women often become the sites of Indian culture in post-independence (1950s) cinema. Rosie Thomas (1995) looks at the melodramatic mode of Hindi cinema in the films from the 1970s to discuss the trope of the mother as representative of the nation, a trope that many scholars have also identified in films from the 1950s like *Mother India* as well as later films. While Lalitha Gopalan (1997) analyzes the avenging women in Indian cinema and Virdi examines the departure from the familial and

national burdens placed on women in the 1980s films, Monika Mehta (2005) looks at how changes brought in by globalization and economic liberalization in the 1990s result in a conservative neo-liberal turn where gender is again associated with the nation and female characters become the beholders of a certain gendered notion of Indianness. These films grapple with the idea of Indianness outside of the borders of the nation. While there have always been filmmakers working against these dominant trends, the post-2000 landscape marks a clearer shift that results in diverse representations of women. Shrivastava's films eschew the cool global trends and anchor her protagonists squarely in their local and cultural milieu.

3. Laura Mulvey (1975) focuses on films from Classical Hollywood cinema (studio era films), in particular Alfred Hitchcock's films.

4. Mulvey argues that in these films, men are the active controllers of the look.

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