

# Post-Feminist Narratives in Cinema and Web: a Study of Zoya Akhtar's Female Characters

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## Abstract

The entertainment industry has evolved with digital technologies making a foray in the film and video production. Ease of production and distribution have facilitated entry of various marginalized sectors in the industry. With representation from these segments, video story telling has become more inclusive of diversity and expansive in terms of featured narratives. The web is emerging as an alternate storyteller and is hosting narratives that are breaking the traditions of narrative hegemony.

The study in context analyses the works of a popular female Hindi film maker and producer, Zoya Akhtar. Her filmography is short but expansive in terms of themes depicted as well as profits at the Box Office window. Her female characters are synonymous with being strong headed, relatable, desexualized and much more than the merely supporting Hindi film heroine. The stories are not of female emancipation or social issues unlike other internationally acclaimed Indian female film makers like Mira Nair or Deepa Mehta, but a social commentary through slice of life.

Akhtar's work is also significantly remarkable as she is one of the few storytellers who have ventured into the arena of web series as well as films. Comparative study of both the mediums and narratives helps in analyzing and differentiating between the work produced for the silver screen and thus for a larger mass audience and for the web and thus for a niche literate audience. In a diverse country like India, it is imperative to acquire a transdisciplinary approach and study different media platforms in order to be able to comment on unfolding of a movement.

The paper utilizes Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 1993) as a method of inquiry into the text, films and web series in this case, to study the characters, their motivations and actions. The study focusses on her films 'Luck by Chance' (2009), 'Zindagi Na MilegiDobara'(2011), 'DilDhadakne Do'(2015), 'Gully Boy'(2019) and the web series 'Made in Heaven'(2019).

The study places the works under the lens of Post feminism (Gill, 2008) (McRobbie, 2009), and position Akhtar as an Auteur, with characters catering to the Male and the Female Gaze (Mulvey, 1989) (Stacey, 2013). The work concludes with situating Akhtar's films at the helm of a new era in Hindi cinema.

*Keywords: Post feminism, Narrative analysis, identity, Hindi cinema, Zoya Akhtar.*

## Introduction

Entertainment industry is seeing rapid changes with the advent of digital technologies. As a result, video story telling has become more inclusive of diversity and expansive in terms of featured narratives. While women film makers have been far and few in the Hindi film industry, their choice of narratives has always triggered discourses on the movement of feminism in India (do Vale, 2017). A film with women centric issues was seldom seen to be a box office success, barring a few exceptions like *Mother India*(1957) and *UmraoJaan*(1981), but they have attracted critical attention and acclaim, awards and academic interests, for e.g. *Damini*(1993), *Fire*(1996), *Lajja*(2001) to mention a few. But since the past decade, with the emergence of female film makers like Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar and Gauri Shinde, female film makers have also become bankable names for the mainstream producers and financiers (Jose, 2017).

On the other hand, the web is emerging as an alternate storyteller, hosting narratives which are breaking narrative hegemony. Digital technology, censor free acquiring of content and niche audience bases are primary reasons for popularity of web shows and films. Looking at the International markets, *Orange Is The New Black* (2013-19), *Sharp Objects* (2018), *Big Little Lies* (2017) have been a few examples which have not only gathered critical acclaim but have proved to be profitable ventures for the Hollywood giants to take notice of the web (Richard, 2019).

With the availability of means of production to the masses, many undiscussed issues started coming to limelight through the narratives of film and web. Women centric issues comprised a large portion of these. From film's stories, to crews, to pay packages of the stars, to the recent #metoo movement, the industry is being looked at through a gendered glass. With the herald of the fourth wave feminism and thereafter post feminism, a lot of discussion is rising about the portrayal and inclusion of women in web series and mainstream cinema as well (Marciniak & Imre (2007), (Day, 2018).

Popularity of the chick lit genre signaled that merely having a central strong career oriented female character would not make a film feminist (Harzewski, 2011). Theories of intersectionality, testing the speech models and content analysis of even the costumes were new methods being ascribed to film studies as a paradigm to arm the researchers. As the movement of feminism saw various ups, downs and revivals, the fourth wave feminism became synonymous with Post Feminism or simply put; aftereffects of feminism (Mibler, 2018).

### **Post Feminism**

Post feminism is defined as an afterthought on the various movements of feminism. According to McRobbie, it is an ongoing process, learning and expanding from all experience (McRobbie, 2004, 2009). As the ideology has been so widely discussed, contradicted and reflected upon, post feminism is a yet a proposed framework to study the aftereffects of the movement.

Firstly, Post feminism takes in account the geographical expanse and spread of the feminist movements and the diversity and heterogeneity it brought to the narratives. It takes into the account the intersectionality that comes along with different nationalities, aftereffects of colonialism and lately, Global migration (Kassabian, 2017).

Secondly, it also covers the social movements related to gender and acknowledges the gender fluidity being discussed in the public discourses. Gill also propounded that gender did not just exist in binaries but as a linear paradigm, and the popular media saw a rise in characters coming out of closet and finding acceptance in the narrative building (Gill, 2016).

Thirdly, while feminism questioned sexuality being imposed, post feminism suggests embracing sexuality for liberation. This revised the suggested male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) as well, as the female characters were by now well aware of it (Jose, 2017). Fourthly post feminism also discusses the repercussion of women stepping out of the house, something feminists fought for. It discusses the burdens that also brought upon the women, as the basic patriarchal framework of the society did not shift. The movement also criticized equality in terms of economics or work atmosphere as this had put woman into a position to juggle three roles, of a wife, of a mother and of a career woman (Bryson, 2016).

Films have always reflected the movements of feminism, internationally and indigenously as well. Hindi film industry was also not untouched by the movement of feminism and its various waves. This paper discusses if the mainstream narratives were shifting towards a post-feminist stance by picking up the case study of the films of Zoya Akhtar. Akhtar's work has not only gained commercial success but has also garnered critical acclaim for nuanced characters and storytelling.

### **Review of Literature**

While feminism and women's rights in cinema have been a long-standing topic in the research circles, post feminism is a relatively new topic of discussion. Some literature that touched upon this topic was extensively reviewed for the purpose of this study.

Ponzanesi in her paper 'Postcolonial Chick Lit: Post feminism or Consumerism?' discussed how an eruption in the genre of chick-lit in literature and films has led to open discussions on female emancipation, their struggles, sexual pleasure and career ambitions for women more freely. While seen as an effort to tap a rising consumer market of women, with spending money, the narratives have also shifted from a male centric one to female centric ones (Ponzanesi, 2014).

Butler and Desai in their paper discuss how rising topics of career, romances and realistic social issues were dotting the popular narratives of women. No longer did the female character have a suitor whose views and ambitions she had to align with. They discuss this in reference to the south Asian literature of the past 10 years. They term this movement as transnational, heteronormative and neoliberal (Butler & Desai, 2008).

Comparing the application of feminist and post-feminist theoretical frameworks in studying films, Antonia in her study states that Feminist dissections looked at the existence of male gaze and binomial power bastions in cinema, while post-feminist perspective would discuss Racial discrimination, effects of globalization and identities associated with gender (Antonia, 2018).

Zubair in her paper Item songs in Hindi Cinema and Post Feminist debate studies two item songs of recent times to elucidate the sexual liberation of women and its depiction on screen. She argues that the lines between 'vamps' and 'heroines' were starting to blur as the new female lead was 'sexually active, independent and agentive' (Zubair, 2017).

Schwan's work on changing ideas of spectatorship in *Orange is The New Black* also discussed the post-feminist ideas of gender fluidity and female gaze in cinema. Calling post feminism a genre in itself, Schwan studies how it is expanding and including Prison genre as well in the series, something unexperimented with till date (Schwan, 2016)

Ciecko in her paper elucidated on Akhtar's technique of acquiring a female perspective without victimizing it for glorification. She recounted that victimization of the female character has been imperative in Hindi Cinema, before making heroes out of them. She also argued that Akhtar shifted the spectator dynamics by doing so, from a male specific gaze to a relatable female one (Ciecko, 2014).

Anwar in his paper discussed how capitalism and consumerism have affected women, with a case study of Hindi cinema's popular films where women have been burdened with upholding the moral capital. Comparing Akhtar's work, he stated that female characters were as flawed as the male ones, thus more relatable (Akhtar, 2019).

While these studies on Akhtar's work discusses how it is markedly different on its take on various issues, but they have not been studied through the Framework of Post feminism. Thus this study is being proposed to fill in the gap.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This paper is aimed at studying the narrative and the characters in Zoya Akhtar's films and analyzing them through the lens of Post-Feminism. The specific objectives of the paper include answering the following research questions for the study:

1. How do Zoya Akhtar's characters identify with female gaze in cinema?
2. Are Zoya Akhtar's narratives foreshadowing a wave of post-feminism in Hindi Cinema?
3. How does the characterization in cinema differs from that on web?

### **Methodology**

In order to comment on the narratives, a Thematic Narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was employed for the research. It discusses the what and why of the story in detail. This model aligns with the Formalist school of cinema, which states that the form of the film dictates its content and thus the meaning (Bazin 1967 & Bordwell, 2012). Underlining themes, plot and the arterial sub plots, character arcs and motivations were studied deeply in order to comment on the narrative style and strategies.

Zoya Akhtar's filmography was picked up as the case study. She made her directorial debut with *Luck By Chance* (2009), followed by *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) and *Gully Boy* (2019). For the web, Akhtar produced, directed and wrote *Made in Heaven* (2019). It had 8 episodes, out of which two were directed by Akhtar herself, while she was the writer and producer for the rest of them.

These five works were reviewed critically and analyzed through the thematic narrative analyses. Issues discussed, characterization of male and female characters, and their impact on the narrative was studied carefully. These character sketches were then checked for the parameters of post feminist theoretical framework. Features of Post Feminism, as elaborated and discussed by scholars like Spivak, McRobbie and Gill etc. helped in analysing the text.

## Theoretical Framework

Post-feminism is a relatively a new social movement and thus of academic interest as well. Despite this, a number of researchers were found to be exclusively writing about the movement and what characteristics it entails. Few important writers were Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie and Gayatri Spivak.

Few characteristics that emerged clearly across the writing of different researchers were:

1. Inclusivity: Not only geographic spread of the feminist movement led to rise in inclusivity, but post colonialism also became a factor affecting as the third world also saw a spread of feminism. Inclusivity of all genders also played a role. Gender was no longer discussed as a binary, but as a fluid entity. This led to rise in discussions around LGBTQ communities(Gill, 2016).
2. Sexual freedom: While the movement of feminism criticized women being used as sex objects, post feminism discussed that women were aware of being sexualized and could choose to use it to their advantage. This choice of freedom also meant the breaking down of the Madonna and whore complex. Women were not bracketed anymore because of their sexual choices and number of partners(Banet-Weiser, 2018).
3. Economic freedom - while feminism fought for women's right to work and equal pay, post feminism discussed the burden it created for the women. Now they had an added role to their already existing mother and wife roles, of a career woman. So while a working woman had economic freedom, she also had to juggle many roles(Tasker& Negra,2005).

Through this, the movement started criticizing the 'equality' achieved by Feminism movement and discussed its lopsided after-effects(Spiegel& McRobbie, 2007).

4. Humanism - a lot of researchers not agreeing with the aftereffects of feminism, propounded that women should not be discussed separately, but as humans, under the umbrella term Humanism. Their rights and duties were not different from other humans, men. They were allowed to be as good and as bad as men, thus accepting grey shaded characters in popular narratives.

(Banet-Weiser, 2018) (Lewis, Benschop& Simpson, 2017).

## Data Collection and Analysis

*Luck by Chance*(2009) garnered good reviews by the critics but fared average on the box office. The film narrates the story of two struggling actors in Mumbai, the male lead, Vikram, played by Farhan Akhtar and the female lead, Sona, played by Konkona Sen Sharma. While both are talented, it is their choices, decisions and opportunities which mark their journeys differently. Vikram lands up a role, gets romantically involved with the opposite actress and becomes a part of the gossip mill of the film industry. Sona knowingly becomes a victim of casting couch in hope of getting a role but is not able to land up with one. The film ends with both of them on their separate journeys while the audience is left with a question, whom to cheer for, the one who found success with questionable means or the one who is far from it but has his ideals intact. Tracing the working of the Hindi film industry, the film showcases the hypocrisy and the dark side of the industry and how it affects the individuals.

*Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*(2011) was Akhtar's second film tracing the story of three friends who reunite for a road trip before one of them(Kabir, played by Abhay Deol) gets married. The other two friends(Arjun, played by Hrithik Roshan and Imran, played by Farhan Akhtar) have been out of touch for many years. Kabir has said yes to his wedding due to pressure from his fiancée Natasha played by Kalki Koechlin, Arjun is a workaholic who has not had any time for leisure for a while and Imran is a commitment phobic who has been raised by a single mother and wants to meet his father for the first time during this trip. During the course of the trip, the three resolve issues within themselves and within the group while they come face to face with their fears.

The film is essentially about these three men, but through its course, we meet several characters, who display their own flaws and qualities. First female lead is Laila, played by Katrina Kaif, who plays a scuba diving instructor whom the friends meet on the trip. She makes Arjun realize what he was missing in life by devoting time only to work. Kalki Koechlin played Natasha, a possessive fiancé but an understanding friend. Deepti Naval played Rahila, Imran's mother, who got pregnant before marriage and raised him alone when the father refused to take up any responsibility. The film did a good business at the ticket window and is remembered as one of the best coming of age and bromance films of Hindi film industry in recent times.

*DilDhadakne Do*(2015) traces the journey of a rich family, Mehra, aboard a cruise to celebrate the lead couple's 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They are taking their friends and social circle along on the cruise for the celebrations. The head of the family is Kamal Mehra, played by Anil Kapoor, Shaifali Shah played his wife Neelam, Priyanka Chopra played the daughter Ayesha and the son Kabir is played by Ranvir Singh. Kabir falls in love with Farah, played by Anushka Sharma, a dancer in the troupe performing on the ship.

Kamal Mehra is a patriarch who has had a number of affairs while neglecting his wife. He did not support his daughter's thriving business and forced her to stay in an unhappy marriage. He was also not supportive of his son Kabir's dream of becoming a pilot as he wants him to handle the family business. The mother Neelam did not have a say in family affairs and lived in the shadow of her husband. The siblings support each other but are afraid to come out in support of each other, due to their father. The narrative takes us through each character's personal struggles and how as family they come together to resolve the issues.

*Gully Boy* (2019) is about a rapper Murad who rises to fame from streets of Dharavi to the music scene of Mumbai. Inspired by real life stories of rappers like Naezy and Divine, the story focusses on Murad, played by Ranveer Singh, and his struggles. While the lead is a male character, his relationships with his mother, stepmother, girlfriend and a music producer define his struggles and journey. Apart from doing well at the ticket counter, the film was also critically acclaimed and was India's entry to the Academy awards in 2019. The film had a feisty Safeena, played by Alia Bhatt, who is Murad's childhood sweetheart and a doctor in making. She is a possessive girlfriend who does not shy away from being aggressive with women who hit on her boyfriend.

Lastly, *Made in Heaven*(2019) is an Indian web series streaming on Amazon Prime Video India. The story is about two friends Tara and Karan who run a wedding planning agency in Delhi. Tara is from a poor background who marries up in the society and is now struggling with the adjustments and expectations from her. Karan is a closeted homosexual who is struggling to come out. Entire first season follows the story of Tara and Karan and how they are struggling with their own relationships; Tara in her marriage with Adil and Karan in coming to terms with his homosexuality. Together with their team, they meet a different couple each episode to organize their wedding. Each episode deals with some aspect of Indian marriages, ranging from traditional to modern to familial to personal. Ranging from dowry to second marriages to extra marital affairs, the show is a peek into the what India loves the most; weddings and family dramas.

### **Findings and Discussion**

**Independent, not supporting:** Hindi cinema has had two primary segments of female characters. First segment is larger, with the pretty heroine who is a supporting character to the lead actor. She does not have any struggles in her life apart from the romantic ones and all her energy is directed towards fulfilling her role in the hero's journey. The second segment is of the women who have been wronged by the society and have to raise a fight against patriarchy. These films generally result in the female character rising from ashes to avenge herself.

Akhtar's female characters are neither. Even if not in the lead, they have their own struggles, their own lives, their own character trajectories. They are not merely instruments in the male protagonist's story. Nor are they dedicating their lives fighting the clutches of patriarchy like the films of the second segment discussed above. These characters are fighting for their foothold and are very well aware of their position in society due to their sex. In *LBC*, while being instrumental to the male lead's success as well, Sona's journey also sees promises of highs and lows. She refuses to reconcile with a cheating partner, even after he apologizes because she realizes that the apology is to make him feel better. Female lead refusing the hero of the film, on the grounds that she does not see herself becoming a part of his life is new for popular Hindi Cinema.

Laila from *ZNMD* is not bound by societal expectation from her. She believes in falling in love and does not stop from following her heart. Neither she inhibits herself from indulging in flirting with the hero's friends, nor she judges other women, who appear to be insecure of their own relationships. While she plays the calming influence on Roshan's Arjun, who is a workaholic, she refuses to bear the brunt of taking his responsibility. In a scene she chases the male lead to proclaim her love for him and lets him go after a kiss depicting that she does not want to tie him, or herself down. Being a romantic lead, she is not even wishing for commitment,

*DDD*'s Ayesha is struggling to make her business run, despite her parents being against it. She refuses to hide in her husband's shadow, unlike her mother. In a marking scene, her mother in law asks if she wants to divorce her husband because he does not give her money to go shopping. Subtle dialogues and situations like this not only inject humour in the situation but also highlight the flimsiness with which society treats women's issues. So

while modernity and liberation of women is projected as societal progress, the futility of issues that are discussed associated to women, how they feel, their identity and struggles related to it lets the steam go off.

Gully Boy's Safeena is studying to be a doctor. She assists her father in his practice and her main concern while her parent's look for a groom for her is, if she will be allowed to work post marriage. While acting as the hero's source of support, she does not situate her life around him and his goals. All these characters have ego, pride and are extremely aware about their feelings. These women are not afraid of being vocal about their demands and expectations and the fulcrum of their universe does not reside on any male character.

**Ambitious - Sacred workspace:** A woman with a career in Hindi Cinema was initially seen as a novelty, later on as a plot device. She would conveniently switch to a less demanding job, or hours as soon as she settled down. Struggles of her work place would create plot such as Madhur Bhandarkar's *Chandni Bar*(2001), *Page 3*(2005), *Corporate*(2006) etc. These films would end with these characters giving up a corrupt life for simplicity. In a way, women were projected as people who could not cope up with the badness in the world, assuming how good they were. They would have to make use of their sex appeal if they had to equal men, only brains and no brawn was not enough.

On the other hand, Akhtar's characters not only normalize the women working, they also define these characters with their professions. Sona from *LBC* is a struggling actor and has walls of her domestic space adorned with film posters to symbolize that her professional ambitions invade her personal space as well. Despite this infiltrating passion, Sona does not mar her personal relationships due to her ambitions, unlike Vikram. She is seen going to extents to fulfill her dream, her actions hurt only herself and no one else in the endeavor. Laila from *ZNMD* is a scuba diving instructor and carries on her responsibilities without letting her chemistry with any of the characters come in way. Other female lead, Natasha, played by Kalki Koechlin, plays an interior decorator. Headstrong and tempered, Natasha comes across as manipulative in the beginning, but her character history justifies her actions.

Ayesha from *DDD* is an entrepreneur against her family's wishes. Another character Farah is a dancer on the ship's troupe. She admonishes her suitor, film's male lead, when he comes to see her during her work hours. Lastly, Neelam played by Shefali Shah, is established in contrast as she has been dependent on her husband all her life. She has been shown as a person who has no say on anything, be it her husband's affairs, her daughter's marriage or her son's career plans. Gully Boy's Safeena is an apprentice studying to be a doctor. On the other hand, Sky or Shweta, played by Kalki Koechlin, is a student at the Berklee, studying music. Her work gets her to meet Murad in the film. Lastly Tara in *Made in Heaven* owns a wedding planning agency. While she started as an employee in her husband's company, she now helms her own company and struggles to come out of her husband's shadow to establish herself as an entrepreneur.

These all characters are leading their own lives trying to achieve their own goals and ambitions and are not centered or pivoted on the central male protagonists. We do not see the female characters give up their goals and ambitions in order to settle into the traditional Hindi film narratives. In fact, they reprimand the heroes when they try to invade their professional space.

**Sexually Liberated:** Hindi cinema has also had a share of virginal heroines who are chaste and saving themselves for the hero, after marriage. Sex before marriage has been a taboo topic while a woman who indulges in bodily pleasures is termed cheap and easy. So, while the film will have a leading heroine who refuses to kiss, an item dancer would have to put in to titillate the audience as well.

Akhtar's characters are aware of their sexuality. They are aware of the effect they have on men and may choose to use it to their benefit. In *LBC*, Dimple Kapadia's Neena, a yesteryear's actress is very well aware of how women are perceived in the industry and tries to train her own daughter to survive the industry. She is also willing to use the grapevine for popularity and uses the news of Nikki's affair with Vikram in order to sell the film while Sona is having an affair with a film producer in hopes that he will land her a role. Both the characters, Sona and Neena know that a woman's sexuality can play a role in success in professional life and are not afraid of using it to their advantage.

*ZNMD*'s Laila, the Scuba diving instructor and is shown giving lessons to the male characters. This could have been a perfect opportunity for the film maker to have the actress wear a two-piece bikini in order to sexualize her. But Akhtar chooses to focus on Laila as a person, and not merely as a body. The audience first sees her on a beach, through the perspective of Imran, who is already established as a flirt. Kaif as an actress has worn bikini and done item dances in other films. But Akhtar does not give us close ups of her body, or her coy smile or lets the

camerawork over her body following Imran's gaze. It instead focusses on the person Laila is, letting the audience see her interaction with Imran to know her even closer.

DDD is comparatively a film made for family audience, but a song 'Girls like to swing' has the female dancer pick up another female character instead of a male one to dance on the stage. This gesture, combined with the lyrics, loudly hints at women choosing their romantic partners. On the other hand, physical incompatibility is one of the reasons a character wants to divorce her husband.

Kalki Koechlin's Sky in Gully Boy is not scared of making the first move on the male lead, while the girlfriend Safeena is not refraining from indulging in violence when she realizes her boyfriend is being hit on by another woman. Even the hero's mother, after the father gets another wife, asks him if he ever cared for her sexual satisfaction.

While these are mainstream films, and refrain from showing the lead female characters in highly sexualized light and making them use their sexuality, the web series Made in Heaven's Tara seduces her husband to get married and move up in the society. She is not afraid of any scandal and knows that a scandal would rather help her in her situation.

**Gray shades:** Hindi cinema has also not had female characters with grey shades. The actresses would either be in charge of the moral capital and would be the embodiment of all that is good, or they would be evil and be rewarded with death at the hands of the protagonist. The golden hearted prostitute, who would sell her body but has a heart of gold and would die at the end. Or the vamp, who falls in love with the hero and dies saving him.

On the other hand, Akhtar's characters display a range of emotions and do not lie in the starkly black or white areas. They would indulge in things that are condemned by the society. There are no typical Hindi film villains in Akhtar's films, no characters that strive for world domination or killing the hero and abducting the heroine. The characters are motivated by their own success, mostly professional and stick to their own value sets. The producer in LBC is driven by the market forces, so when he takes up a misogynist view, it is due to what he knows sells in the market. This makes the audience relate with the character more and understand the motivations behind his actions.

Natasha comes across as a manipulative insecure girlfriend, but as her character history is revealed, one understands her point of view and sympathizes with her. Kamal Mehra in DDD is a typical patriarch head of the family, who earns and thus believes that he should have the last say in all matters. He forgets that a head of the family does not only have to provide for financial but emotional support as well. Manav, played by Rahul Bose is another example of a man whose belief system is rooted in patriarchy and thus shapes his treatment of his wife. In one scene, he tells a gathering of friends that his wife Ayesha is doing well as a businesswoman as he has allowed her to work. This dialogue highlights the deeply imbued patriarchy in the characters' mind as another, albeit male character asks him, that why does he use the word "allow", because that signifies a position of authority.

Gully Boy's Moin is initially portrayed as a villain as he hires children as laborers. But with revealing his character history, Akhtar manages to get the audience to empathize with this character as well. Made in Heaven starts with establishing Tara as a protagonist, witnessing all sorts of evils in Indian society through glimpses of weddings. Towards the series finale, it is revealed that she has also indulged in corrupt behavior and scandal to gain social position and power.

Akhtar's male characters are also humane and not the Adonis like heroes. They are flawed and vulnerable. So, while Vikram will do anything that leads him to success, Manav is born out of a patriarchal society, Kabir is driven by the capitalistic materialistic economies and Imran has problems committing due to his childhood. Adil has no qualms having an affair while Murad's father confesses that his economic insecurities have stopped him from dreaming big. These men are not saving the day by rescuing women or killing villains. They are dealing with their own insecurities and fighting their own battles.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Mulvey's seminal work on Male Gaze(1989) suggests that the audience is considered by far a male entity, and the characters and the story is told in a manner that is deemed suitable for male viewing(Mulvey, 1989). Thus, the female characters are depicted in an attractive sexual light and rarely have anything to add to the plot except complimenting and supplementing the male protagonist. Post feminism, as discussed earlier, acknowledges and utilizes this gaze. While gaze was suggested at inanimate objects, for visual pleasure, the audience is not merely

gazing at Akhtar's characters, but is also engaged with them. They merely do not provide visual pleasure but play important role in the narrative. Akhtar's characters are flawed, have their own agendas and thus are more relatable to the audience.

Also moving a step further, their struggles are beyond just romantic or domestic in nature. They have their own ambitions, goals and achievements to worry about. And thus, while the audience may be taken in by the gaze, captivated by casting good looking actresses, Akhtar works on building the personality of the character thus engaging the audience further.

Moving on, Akhtar also manages to invoke empathy for the characters. We sympathise with the characters in feeling with, rather than being with, as discussed by Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy propounded that most of the feelings generated for the female characters on screen comes through how the protagonist sees her. In case of Akhtar's characters, the audience empathizes with the characters for their struggles, not for how the protagonist sees her (Galt, 2008) (Derrida, 2005).

Lastly, building the relationship between the audience and the characters, Smith's structure of sympathy comprised of three different levels of engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition is when the spectator can imagine the character belonging to the real world, they could recognize them, or at least bits and parts of them. Alignment is when the story teller acquires a perspective to understand and see the characters motivations, inspirations and emotions. Allegiance is a position of sympathy acquired by the viewers in order to root for the character (Smith, 1995).

So while Akhtar's narratives are inclusive, ranging from stories set in Dharavi to cruises across the world, from characters that are homosexuals, to the ones who normalize heteronormativity. The characters have economic and sexual freedom and their issues and personalities are not different from the men around them.

The narrative and characters on the web embody these traits again, but in a starker way. This could be due to the fact that web allows for greater experimentation as a format and the narrative thus could break away from more stereotypes.

Thus we can place Akhtar's characters and her narratives in the post feminist paradigm of narratives, as they acquire new perspective on characters, their relationships with each other and their contribution in the narrative.

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