

Women in Control: Contributions of Women as Film Directors

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Abstract: This article is more than singing paeans to the few, but prominent, yet sidelined dabblers of the art of filmmaking. Setting apart space for them collectively, throws light on the impact and importance of this creed of film directors, both foreign and Indian – be it for the accolades they have won or for the issues they have highlighted. The article ruminates on the historical evolution of women film makers. It traces the progress of the female directors across continents. It delves on the achievements of women film festivals. Then the scenario shifts to the Indian Cinema in section two. The article expounds in detail the shift from the initial tentative stages of filmmaking by women in India to a more mature transformation. It categorizes women directors into four – the early romantics, the mature middle cinemas, the NRI daredevils and the new breed of experimenters. The article also looks into the contribution of regional women film makers.

Keywords: women directors, silent era, French experimental filmmakers, film festivals, Aparna Sen, theatre activism.

Filmmaking is an industry that has always been dominated by men. Forays of women into this fiefdom have not at all been encouraged nor their even fewer attempts given a patient hearing or recorded in the annals of history. Being a part of this entertainment industry is not an anomaly because in the other corridors of this phantasmagorical world, the inputs of women are equally negligible. The empress of television, Ekta Kapoor, the luminary of editing, Beena Paul and screenplay writers like Anjali Menon and Reema Kagti are a rarity. Still the strong hold of the magical world of filmmaking has had occasional encounters with women that are revealing of their collective wisdom as well as creative abilities. History of women participation in filmmaking reveals that they were in the hot seat even during the era of silent films. The first female filmmaker is French born Alice Guy- Blache (1873-1968) who directed *La Fee aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*). She produced 300 movies and formed her own company Solax in 1910. To her credit is the title of one of the beginners of narrative film. So is Lois Weber who is the 'unheralded inventor of neorealist cinema'. Elvira Notari from Italy too directed around 60 feature films and owned a production company known as Dora Film which thrived the period 1906 to 1930. When the silent movies were replaced by talkies in the 1920s, women involvement in the film industry was curtailed as the big industry trusted men from New York, who had Hollywood membership. Women were barred from directing until the 1960s and 1970s and their contribution remained on the fringes known as alternative filmmaking. G A Foster in her *A Short History of Film* sadly notes that many films histories ignore the contribution of women in cinema history. Alice Guy-Blache's work "went unnoticed until the late

1970s, when feminist historian began to reintegrate her life work into film history and scholarship.”(p 13). She notes with regret on Lois Webber that though she was well known and respected by other directors in her own time, “she was subsequently consigned to an insignificant footnote by film historians seeking to create masculine heroes in the industry's narrative history” (p 27). But the likes of Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino stood their ground in the stronghold of the male bastion of filmdom. Lupino was the only female member of the director's fraternity and owned a production company called Emerald Production. When the world war broke out, it was an uncongenial atmosphere for the thriving of cinema. Despite the odds, Leni Riefenstahl, as a staunch supporter of Nazi regime went on to shoot awe inspiring films that are much in demand even now as a study on the epic scales in which the film were created, especially the covering of Berlin Olympics of 1936. She remained active, even making a documentary on “Underwater Impression”, in 2002 when she was 98. The early French experimental filmmakers included Germaine Dulac, Louis Dulac and Mary Epstein. Each made their own mark as feminist theorists, promoters of first cine club and pioneers of female avant-garde filmmaking. Their 20s legacy was carried forward by Agnes Varda, directing movies in the avant- garde mode before the established names of Godard and Truffaut were celebrated. In 1970s, Chantal Akerman, a Belgian rose to fame through her unconventional method of filmmaking and signature long takes. In Italy, Lina Wertmuller shared the passion for avant-garde plays and her themes centered on gender questions. All these directors continued filmmaking into the 21st century. There are only nominal list of women directors from other European countries like Yugoslavia and Poland. Though a bit late in picking up the trends of filmmaking in Africa and Asia, the medium flourished among women like no other. The first Sub-Saharan African woman to make a feature film is the experimental feminist film director Safi Faye from Senegal. The film is titled *Letters From My Village*. It is shot in the form of a letter from a villager to his friend and mixes documentary with fiction. She marks her characterization with the back up of ethnology. In Afghanistan, in March 2013, the first ever International Film Festival on Women to mark International Women's Day was held at Herat. Roya Sadat, Afghanistan's leading women director pushed for the idea of a film festival to take place in her home town so that women could step out of their conservative homes and enjoy the freedom of watching films. In Saudi Arabia, where showing film in public is illegal, and there is no culture of filmmaking, a woman director, Haifaa Al Mansour, courageously and surreptitiously engraved her film *Wadja*, on a girls effort to own a bicycle. In Pakistan, Iram Parveen Bilal has directed *Josh-Against the Grain*, on a tedious journey of a school teacher to unveil the truth of her housekeeper's disappearance. In Iran, where patriarchy and religion are the norms, the women play decisive role in many of the themes depicted in Iranian films. Not only men take women-centric films, but women themselves direct films that have been appreciated in many film festivals like Tehmineh

Milani, Raksham Bani, Marzieh Meshkini, Samira Makhmalf, Hanna Makhmalf. Samira became the youngest director to be invited at Cannes. Korea's first women filmmaker is Pak Nam-Ok who directed the film *Mirmangin* (The Wisdom) in 1955. In Japan, it was in 1977 that the first ever woman director Shinya Yamamoto directed the film called *The Horrific Torture of Japanese Women* (Nihon Zangyaku Onna Goumon). Naomi Kawase, a foremost Japanese women director won the prestigious Camera d'Or at Cannes and the FIPRESCI prize at Rotterdam, at 29 years of age at 1997, for her feature film *Mae No Suzaku*, a tragic family history set against the backdrop of economic recession, shot in her hometown. Shohei Imamura, director of *Unagi* (The Eel) is a two time winner of the Palme d'Or. It might come as a surprise to many that some of the very popular films, by which it means that these films have become commercial success or won international awards and fame, have been directed by women. The film *Lost in Translation* (2003) has been directed by Sofia Coppola. The film won Golden Globe awards for best film, Cesar award for best foreign film, Bafta award for best actors, New York Film Critics Circle award for best director and Oscar award for best original screenplay. The film features the cultural divide between two countries America and Japan. It also showcases generational divide. The film *The Piano* (1993), directed by Jane Campion not only won awards at Cannes but also won critical acclaim for its portrayal of a dumb pianist and her daughter and the multilayered emotional upheavals and their tumultuous relationships. Nora Ephron wrote the screenplay and directed the film *When Harry met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. They were favorites with the audience and Nora was nominated for the best screenplay for these movies and for *Silkwood*. She was the rare woman to write, direct and produce Hollywood movies. But of them all, Kathryn Bigelow stole the limelight by being the first women to win in the category of the best director in the academy awards of 2008. Her latest *Zero Dark Thirty*, establishes her as a veteran of war movies. She won the best director award competing against her ex-husband James Cameron. Julie Taimer's film *Frida* (2002) was nominated for Oscar in six categories. Japanese film director Naomi Kawase who won the best debutant award for her film in Cannes won critical acclaim and Grand Prix award for her film *The Mourning Forest* in 2007.

Film festivals showcase women director's films. Germany's biggest summertime film festival, the Muenchen Film Fest, 2013 emphasizes on films by women. The opening film was by an Oscar winning director Caroline Links film *Exit Marrakech* and it was its world premiere. The film fest showcases 36 films directed by women. The festival director is Diane Iljine. At the same time, Cannes jury member Andrea Arnold commented on the absence of women directors in the competition for the coveted Palm d'Or for best picture, whereas there were 4 women featured in the main line up in 2011. She reflected that this lack was due to global problem than sexism. In India, the Inko Centre in Chennai conducts

women film festival since 2008. Taking cue from women's festival at Seoul, this film festival “apart from serving the cause of women and their endeavors in the field of film, would also be the beginning of an annual tradition where women from various parts of the worlds will be able to showcase their films, have discussions and thereby create an awareness to women's films in particular and women's cause in general in the film viewing audience (Vasanthi Shankaranarayan). Women filmmakers are promoted even by regional states. The recently concluded women's documentary fest held under the auspices of Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, served as a platform for featuring short films pertinent to issues not only related to women, but core issues like water scarcity, degradation of agriculture and exploitation of tribal folk.

II

In the other parts of the world, especially Europe, filmmaking by women was closely associated with the different phases of feminism and experimentalism. The films were a reaction against domination, be it male, European, bourgeoisie, colonialism, gaze and sexual orientation. In India, women filmmakers did not succumb to the waves of feminism. In fact, it had its own unique environment born out of its cocooned cultural existence and ethnic experience. Chalking the history of women filmmakers of Indian cinema, particularly while celebrating the centenary year, seems relevant in a situation where women's position in the society slips down inch by inch each year. In the initial decades of the 20th century, the society was even more rigid than today and cinema was an unsuitable profession for women. But many women have “made illustrious contribution to Indian cinema despite the constraints they faced and the fundamental machismo of a trade that even today has difficulty in accepting women except as actresses, musicians and increasingly film editors. The torch bearer of Indian legacy was Fatma Begum, mother of actress Zubeida of *Alam Ara* fame, who directed *Paristan-e-Bulbul* (1926). She was followed by Devika Rani Choudari, wife of Himansu Rai, who owned the Bombay Talkies; Durga Khote, belonging to upper caste Maratha Hindus; Jaddan Bai (1936), mother of Nargis; Bhanumathi, a popular actress, producer and studio executive; Shobhana Samarth, mother of Nutan and Tanuja and T.P. Rajalakshmi, the first woman producer-director in Tamil. Bhanumati Ramakrishnan was active, producing and directing films from 1953-1992. Arundhati Devi and Manju De were two other successful directors. Filmmaking in initial stages, were launch pads for the acting careers of the daughters of women directors, who themselves were established heroines. Basking in the fame acting got them, these actresses took to direction as a natural progression of graduating from acting. The ensuing years from 60's to 70's were barren for female aspirants of filmmaking as the industry had got bigger and commercialized. But what awaited in the 1980s was a blossoming of talent and sharpened sensibilities of women filmmakers, whose films could easily outmatch their male counterparts. Among them in numero uno position, blazing the trail, is Aparna Sen, with an array of award

winning films. She entered the fray with 36, *Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and this film proved path breaking in her career. The film won rave reviews and the Golden Eagle at Manila and broke the moment of déjà vu, making her realize her true calling - that of direction. All her subsequent films like *Paroma*, *15 Park Avenue*, *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, up till her latest Bengali film *Goynar Baksho* (2013), in which her daughter Konkona Sen acted, offer a multiple perspective that makes them difficult to categorize, thereby displaying the craftsmanship of the director. She is probably one among the ten best filmmakers of India and truly an auteur. Along with Sen, in the 80s, a quiet 'feminist revolution' took place as Vijaya Mehta, Sai Paranjpye and Prema Karanth, all steeped in theatre activism, made a cross over to the silver screen. Only that it was not a full fledged feminist revolution. Their insights in theatre overflowed into cinematic language. Mehta's *Smriti Chitre* (Memory Episodes, 1983) a memoir of Lakshmi Bai Tilak, Rao Saheb (1986) and *Pestonjee* (1987) are reformistic in spirit and are representatives of their community. Prema Karanth's one film venture *Phaniyamma* (1982) is about a historic figure of Malanad. At the FIPRESCI award, Mannheim, '83, the film was commended for its dramatic dynamism and militant humanism and the search for liberation for Indian women. Sai Paranjpye stands out among the other three, as her genre of filmmaking is comedy that she derived from the Maharashtra's folkform - Tamasha. After dabbling in telefilms, she gravitated to children's films. Be it *Sparsh* (1979), *Chasme Buddoor* (Beware of the Evil Eye, 1981) or *Katha* (the Tale, 1982), she stuck to a satirical take on mirroring issues of society that others would deal with too seriously. Kalpana Lajmi's *Ek Pal* (1986) and *Rudali* (1992) were stunning in capturing the locales of Assam and Rajasthan.

Along with such veterans of theatre and films, another set of filmmakers exist, who can be categorized as diasporic/NRI filmmakers based on their expatriate life experiences and orientation which reflect on their worldview or rather westernized view of India. Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* shot to fame not only for its realist documentation but for the winning of Camera d'Or at Cannes. Mira's canvas encompasses Indian community spread world over as can be seen in *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Perez Family*. It is with all candidness and boldness that she took *Kamasutra, A Tale Of Love* (1997). Deepa Mehta has burnt her fingers as well as screen with her trilogy *Fire* (1997), *Water* (2000) and *Earth* (1998). Her subjects of concern openly question certain basic assumptions that are blindly practiced among a community that is regressive, and make it time warped in the modern times. Gurinder Chadha is concerned about Indian women's plight in British and American communities. Her films *Bhaji on The Beach* (1993), *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice* are teasers that play on the vanity of Indians and their inflated honour in the face of grave tragedies. Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children* and Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are adaptations of Salman Rushdie's novel and Mohsin Hamid respectively. These adaptations are skillfully visualized saying volumes about the two filmmakers. Now that the twentieth century is gone and the new century is rung in, the older

thespians relegating their chairs, a new crop of filmmakers with new sensibilities with changed perspectives, technology savvy, foreign educated and bold attitude, attuned with the times are calling the shots. Their themes are fresh and many are screen writers. They are no more in the margins dealing with experimental films, but donning the mantle of directors they make big budget movies with top slot stars for film houses that are on the lookout for a draft of fresh air. Farah Khan's *Om Shanti Om* hit the jackpot when it was released and so did Zoya Akhtar's *Luck by Chance* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Doobara* and Reema Kagti's *Talaash*. Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* which was a humourous take on a house wife's plight with rudimentary knowledge of English, Anusha Rizwi's *Peepli Live*, a work of condemning the insensitiveness of society towards an individual, Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat* and Sonam Nair's *Gippi* on the insecurities on a young obese teenager, are tales told endearingly and refreshingly. Young and daring they stood shoulder to shoulder with their compatriots shouldering the responsibilities of their film unit and the risk of success and failure. The current breed of filmmakers excel not only in Bollywood entertainment industry but in artistic films with a social message and lingering meanings. Nandita Das's *Firaaq* (Quest), a story on communal riots, Sooni Taraporewala's *Little Zizou* on Parsi community, Kavitha Lankesh's *Deveeri* (1999) on an orphan boy and his lost sister, Chitra Palekar's *Maati May* (2006), a tale of mother defying social custom, Bhavana Talwar's *Dharm* (2007) on a Pandit's Love for his belief juxtaposed with his love for his adopted son, Kalpana Lajmi's *Dhaman* (2000), a film on domestic violence which won awards for the actors, Aruna Raje's *Tum* (2006) on illicit relationships and Tanuja Chandra's *Zindagi Rocks* (2002) on rock n roll exposed in an epic style and *Sur* (2006) on music leading to bonding between two people. Revathy's *Phir milenge* (2004) on AIDS, Fareeda Mehta's *Kali Sakhar* (2002) on loneliness and despair of a prostitute and Sumitra Bhav's *Vaastupurush* (2002) on a nostalgic trip to home, seem a long bucketlist of wishes on themes for any director. The relevance of this list is comprehended when one becomes aware of the unapplauded presence of women, pushing for a cause, a cause that lays bare the worm eaten core of the society that male directors might have ignored or downplayed. A relief of the themes reveals a gamut of emotions, issues, instincts, relationships, questionable practices and women juggling roles as victims, perpetrators, subjugated and fighters. Regarding regional cinema, the state of Kerala needs to be dealt with as a case-study for movie buffs, whose passion for films are so extreme as to armour themselves with film data and offer them as conversation topics. The spectators of Kerala are knowledgeable of films as much as they are of politics. A special mention therefore needs to be made of Malayalam women director's contribution as even they may develop an oversight. Anjali Menon has made her presence effectively with her film *Manjadikuru* as the many laurels she has won for her movie. The recently released adaptation of Malayattoor's *Yakshi* as *Akam* by Salini Usha Nair is a brilliant take on psychological thriller capturing the ethereal quality of the heroine and the obsession of the hero. Like

Pratibha Parmar's film *Khush* (1991), Lijjy Pulappalley also overtly makes a case for lesbian love in her film *Sancharam* (2001). It has made its share of rounds in the international film festivals. Revathy. A. Varmha who has made a Tamil film *June 6* (2006) and a Sri Lankan film *Yashoda Kanna*, enters Malayalam film industry with her film *Maad Dad*. Lines and boundaries blur for film as did when Malayali actress Revathy directed *Mitr, My Friend*, an English film with an all woman crew behind the scene and *Phir Milenge* in Hindi. Sharada Ramanathan's *Sringaram* (2007) in Tamil on devadasis, Manju Bora's *Baibhav* (1993) on identity crisis and *Laaz* (2004) on girl child's education, in Assamese, Pamela Rooks' *Train to Pakistan* (1997) in Hindi, Suhasini Mani Ratnam's *Indira* and Janaki Vishwanathan's *Kanavu Meipada Vendum* (2006) share a common recognizable and relatable undercurrents that are easily identifiable to the Indian masses. Women directors who had a humble beginning in their career as typists, journalists, photographers, cashiers, puppeteers, stage managers, set designers, ghost writers for radio and TV, assistants to directors have risen up from the low rungs to the top through sheer perseverance, passion and honest to core belief in their ability. It is not an easy task to even cause a ripple in the established tradition, to shake the smugness of the patriarchal hegemony imposed upon since ages, to decimate the encoding of established visual language and spew out unflinchingly, personal preferences because the society is keeping a surveillance tag and verdicts get passed pronto. It is easier to stay less visible. But like the little drops of water making the mighty ocean, these relentless and continuous trickling of effort, keep at bay, the pitying condescension, the gross homogeneity, the body domination and gaze issues, and promote an alternate perspective of human life. An eye sweep of the contribution of women directors alone, *in toto*, would account for the achievements made by a handful of women in terms of consciousness building and perspective orientation. They have carved out a niche in the universe of machismo. The graph of the current history of women filmmakers seems to be on the upswing as newbies unhesitantly and unapologetically carry forward the heightened sensibilities of self and sisterhood.

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