Films, Web Series, and the Feminist Fourth Wave: Alankrita Shrivastava's Bombay Begums and Dolly Kitty Aur Voh Chamakte Sitare

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Films, séries web et quatrième vague féministe : Bombay Begums et Dolly Kitty Aur Voh Chamakte Sitare, d'Alankrita Shrivastava

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine " le genre et la ville " sous l'angle de la quatrième vague féministe en Inde (FFW). Tout d'abord, j'explore l'effacement de l'autonomie des femmes qui a été intensifié par le tournant néolibéral du pays dans les années 1990. Deuxièmement, je me penche sur la montée en puissance, dans les villes indiennes, d'une politique féministe intersectionnelle, radicalement nouvelle. Elle est basée sur les médias sociaux et inspirée par un vocabulaire mondial des droits et des modes de protestation, appelant à la libération de l'oppression sexuelle, de caste, religieuse et capitaliste. Troisièmement, j'étudie le corollaire culturel de cette FFW à travers une enquête sur le film *Dolly Kitty Aur Voh Chamakte Sitare* (DK) (2020) d'Alankrita Srivastava et sa série web *Bombay Begums* (BB) (2021) qui remettent en question les notions hétéropatriarcales du binaire bonne fille/mauvaise fille en mettant l'accent sur les questions de choix, de sexualité et d'agentivité.

Mots-clés: féminisme, néolibéralisme, médias sociaux, modernité, sexualité

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Abstract

In this paper I examine "gender and the city" from the lens of the feminist fourth wave in India (FFW). First, I explore the erasure of women's autonomy that was intensified by the country's 1990s neo-liberal turn. Second, I look at the rise in Indian cities of a radically new social media-based intersectional feminist politics inspired by a global vocabulary of rights and modes of protests, calling for freedom from sexual, caste, religious, and capitalist oppression. Third, I study the cultural corollary of this FFW through an investigation of Alankrita Srivastava's 2020 film *Dolly Kitty Aur Voh Chamakte Sitare* (*DK*) and her 2021 web series *Bombay Begums* (*BB*) that challenge the heteropatriarchal notions of the good girl/bad girl binary by centering the questions of choice, sexuality, and agency.

Keywords: Feminism, neoliberalism, social media, modernity, sexuality

Introduction

Postcolonial India has historically had an ambivalent relationship with the idea of the city that lives in a state of tension between modernity and tradition. One of the key sites of this intersection, exacerbated by India's 2000 neo-liberal turn, relates to non-normative sexuality. While increased privatization and welfare cutbacks worsened income disparities, neoliberalism also led to a massive job expansion for women in cities. The resulting financial autonomy and freedom, that came with women moving away from extended families and frequently living alone in large, anonymous cities, weakened traditional restraints on them and opened the possibilities for their sexual agency as "an iconic right that comes to symbolize a larger fantasy of what it means to be free" (Bhattacharya cited in Tambe, Tambe 2013: 496). The presence of educated, working, and sexually confident women in cities and their representation in the media triggered a massive backlash from patriarchy targeting women with increased disciplining, moral policing, sexual violence, and restriction of access to public places (Bannerji, 2016; Krishnan, 2017; Kaul, 2021; Wilson, Loh, Purewal, 2018). Betrayed by the state and spurned by the society, young women didn't look to the state or the law for help. Inspired by a global vocabulary of rights and modes of protests, they launched a new kind of a social media-based politics that I refer to as part of the feminist fourth wave in India (Kurian, 2017, 2018; Ray, 2018; Jain 2020). This new feminist wave stems from the activists' production, circulation, and mass mobilization of ideas via Web 2.0 technologies to promote gender and other forms of social justice (Kurian, 2017; Tazi, Oumlil 2020). The FFW in India denounced sexual violence as a criminal act, rejected the rhetoric of shame and honor, asserted women's right to public places and gender equality on the basis of constitutional morality, foregrounded the spirit of pluralism and inclusivity, and succeeded in mobilizing unprecedented support by means of the Internet. The 2012 nation-wide unparalleled agitations against "public sexual violence" (Gupta, 2016) in response to the brutal rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in a moving bus in Delhi represent a continuum of this kind of feminist activism.

I unpack the meaning of this new feminist politics through exploring the following questions:

- How did the nexus between modernity, neoliberalism, globality, and the Internet trigger the FFW?
- In what ways is the FFW located at the crossroads of gender, class, and the city?
- Given its digital accessibility through online streaming platforms, how can cinema help us understand questions of citizenship and rights that animate the core of the FFW?

Feminist Fourth Wave

"If you want a free society, just give them internet access" (Khamis and Vaughn 2011.) While the Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim made this statement in the context of the 2010 Arab Spring uprisings, he might have well been referring to a radically new anti-sexism feminist movement in India born long before the 2017 #MeToo movement. It borrowed a vocabulary of rights and modes of protests used by youth movements across the world – e.g., Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street – where social media was central to shaping, planning, and successfully mobilizing peaceful political debates and protests (Howard, 2011; Khamis, 2011, 2012; Tan 2013; Suh 2016) and visiblised those whose voices have historically been silenced and marginalized.

An exploration of the conditions created by India's 1990s neo-liberal turn, that fundamentally transformed women's relationship with the country's urban metropolises, is key to understanding the birth of this new movement in India. The arrival of the global capital in India happened conjointly with the growth of the Hindu right, welfare cutbacks, privatization, labor impoverishment, and forcible removal of indigenous people (Adivasis) from their mineral-rich ancestral lands. The confluence of privatization, deprivation, and globalization in turn had a completely unforeseen cultural outcome. The growing demand in Western countries for cheap labor greatly expanded job opportunities for women in Indian cities. Women's subsequent financial independence fundamentally changed their priorities and personal aspirations (Tambe, Tambe, 2013.) Further, the arrival through satellite TV of images of sexually confident Western women into Indian households, transformed the meaning of sexuality in Indian feminist discourse so that their focus wasn't just about sexual violence but also an examination of sexual desire "going beyond the bounds of heteronormativity" (Menon and Nigam 2007: 93). The feminist politics of a couple of decades ago switched from censoring women's explicit or non-heteronormative images[1] to protesting Hindu right's sexual policing on the grounds of women's right to express consensual sexual desire and pleasure. The arrival of this "westernized femininity" reproduced within the Indian context, triggered a moral panic among conservative sections of the society. It must be noted that while there were earlier appearances of this kind of femininity, such as that embodied by the 1970s film stars like Zeenat Aman or Parveen Babi, it hovered mostly in the realm of cinematic fantasy. The 1990s watershed decade, however, was different in that one began seeing this autonomous and sexually confident modern Indian woman in the public sphere, i.e., on the streets, in college campuses, and at the workplace. It unleashed a counterattack on women, policing and controlling what they wore, ate, drank, watched, or who they married. Examples range from

attacks on Valentine Day celebrations, inter-caste/faith couples, women dressed in Western clothes or consuming alcohol, and on bar dancers and nightclub workers (Tambe, Tambe, 2013: 495).

I draw on Ratna Kapur (2012) to explore the internal "hemorrhaging" within the Indian feminist movement that resulted in the younger feminists to break away from what she refers to as the "dominance or structural" basis of the mainstream Indian Women's Movement (IWM). Gender equality for the IWM has historically focused on women's civil rights, viewing gender from the developmental perspective of housing, food, education, wages, marriage, reproductive rights, etc. While it militated against misogyny, its politics became unsustainable as it read gender from a male/female "biological binary" framework, essentializing women's victimhood, and reducing them to a rape-able / un rape-able body hierarchy (Kapur, 2012). Inspired by the anti-colonial imagery of Indian femininity as self-sacrificing, dutiful, and chaste, dominance feminism advocated for modesty in dress, speech, and sexual behavior among women, disparaged those seeking unconditional freedom as individualistic and Western-centric, inviting rape, linked sex singularly with sexual violence and not sexual desire or pleasure, and dealt with sexual harassment by protecting, disciplining, and policing women. The new, state-sponsored Hindutva-laced communal rhetoric of Muslim men as sexual aggressors further exacerbated the protectionist and restrictive ideology (Kapur, 2012). While its earliest campaigns did succeed in raising awareness about the extent of the rape problem in India (Gangoli, 2007; Murthy, 2013; Biswas, 2018) it did little to change the cultural discourse from where to denounce sexual violence or changing the legal definitions of rape, consent, and sexuality to ensure women's constitutional right not to be raped (Kapur, 2012; Dutta, 2013; Lodhia, 2015; Biswas 2018).

The younger women felt betrayed by the nexus between patriarchy, communalism, and capitalism that relied on their labor for the country's economic expansion but used illegitimate law enforcement methods to restrict their autonomy and self-expression in the name of their honor and safety (Kapur, 2012; Agnihotri, 2021). Paradoxically, the idealization of market principles and competitiveness that shaped the relationship between the state and consumer citizenship, was hand-in-glove with a regressive moral agenda so that neoliberal conditions simultaneously enabled and circumscribed women's sexual agency and desire (Cheng, 2012-13). Moreover, the paternalistic logic of dominance feminism was ineffectual in dealing with women's increasing sexual vulnerability at the hands of feudal India that saw their presence in public places as an act of provocation and targeted them with a "continuum of violence" (Geetha, 2016). Further the dominance feminism refused to engage with the younger women's demand for unconditional freedom, the autonomy of their bodies, and access to public places

as equal and political subjects (Shivam, 2013; Shakil, 2013; Nigam, 2014; Wilson, 2013). Social media provided that crucial space for feminist conversations for these urban-based women to connect with and share experiences with each other, creating the first forum for the FFW. The 2002 #BlankSpace, 2009 #PinkChaddi, and 2011 #WhyLoiter campaigns embody some of the milestones of this movement. Amplifying their demand for unconditional freedom and laying claim to cities and towns across the country, millennial feminist resisters turned these locations into Habermasian "wild, anarchic public spheres" of protest, incivility, and civil disobedience (Haselby, 2018). This millennial feminist activism reached a boiling point in the immediate aftermath of the 2012 Delhi fatal gang rape, sparking an unprecedented, nation-wide public outcry. The mass street protests led the state, historically known for its lethargy, to make several important legislative changes on sexual violence, representing the fastest shifting public perception of and activism on gender-based violence (Biswas, 2017).

Critics have disparaged the 2012 protests advocating for blood-thirsty retributive justice as an urban phenomenon of frivolous clicktivism and "narcissistic self-indulgence" of a politically apathetic middle class that wouldn't have been moved as much had the victim belonged to a subaltern class (Roy, 2012; Dutta and Sircar 2013). It's true that the self-righteous middle class, has often been oblivious to its own privilege. However, completely discrediting this social class scarcely advances our understanding of its complexity given that it has successfully mobilized many social movements and feminist and human rights grassroots campaigns, and has long been central to India's civil services, politics and the media (Casals, 2019; Robinson, 2009; Basu, 2009 ; Haarstad, 2011; Chaudhury, 2014). The significance of this autonomous rights-based FFW stems from a multitude of politicized, young, tech-savvy women, tapping into the power of the new Web 2.0 technology to create their own narrative, exposing how guaranteeing political, civil, and economic rights to women is meaningless in the absence of a fundamental transformation of socio-cultural behavior towards women. The FFW offers a new postcolonial feminist theoretical positionality centering women's sexual agency and autonomy and initiating a public conversation on rape by calling out sexual violence and putting the spotlight on the body of the rapist, regressive societal attitudes, and monopolistic virtuous feminism and its outmoded gender analysis (Kapur, 2012; Das Gupta, 2016) that, moreover, elides questions of caste and indigeneity.

Gender and the City

Drawing on Brinda Bose (2011), this section explores the idea of public modernity that is shaped by cultural debates and discussions on the tensions and anxieties stemming from the clash between national and transnational forces in neoliberal

India. It explores the reasons why sexuality is central to the formation of public modernity in this shifting terrain of urbanity. It looks at the ways in which one makes sense of and reproduces, circulates, and disseminates this intersectional idea. It examines cinema, recognized as the most important "location of culture" (Bhabha, 1994), as a medium that visibilises this public modernity through representing the nation's ambivalent relationship with modernity, urbanity, and new sexualities and helps complicate our understanding of India's urban spaces (Bose, 2011).

Despite the propensity of mainstream Hindi cinema (and its regional avatars) for using its financial and organizational resources to make claims about representing India's national culture, and notwithstanding its near universal appeal, critics have faulted this cinema for being simplistic and one-dimensional (Mitra, 2020 ; Karandikar, 2021). Alternative cinema, on the other hand, has been lauded for its more complex and nuanced representation of India's pluralistic cultures. Further, its close association with the middle-class and its frequent preoccupation with the city, alternative cinema tends also to structure its narratives around urban stories. In this context, it would be helpful to look at a new genre of alternative - indie or *Hatke* – cinema and OTT web series that have transformed the conversation on the neo-liberal gendered equation in urban India. Set in big cities and small, this media represents the shifting values of young people and their relationship with urbanity as they assert the freedom of their modern and sexualized lives, subverting in the process, the obsolete discourse of tradition, morality, and honor.

India's upcoming feminist writer and director Alankrita Shrivastava's work exploring gender and space from a position of liminality, offers an interesting case study. Her 2016 directorial debut *Lipstick Under My Burkha* takes the audience into the secret lives and desires of lower middle-class women trapped in an overcrowded and traditional small-town India. Given their heavily policed and monitored lives, they play out their aspirational desires, sexual fantasies, and social transgressions (Ghosh, 2019) under the anonymity of the burka or from the other side of a telephone line. But there is only so much that their clandestine mini rebellions can help them contend with patriarchy that publicly shames them for their transgressions. In her 2019 *Dolly Kitty Aur Voh Chamakte Sitare* (*DK*) and the 2021 web series *Bombay Begums* (*BB*), Shrivastava's characters make the journey from small-town India towards the country's urbanity. However, while liberation from small-town patriarchal constraints in neoliberal cities brings about their so-called freedom and autonomy, their journeys are riddled with pitfalls that come in the shape of neo-liberal corporate patriarchy. In *DK*, Shrivastava intensifies her characters' liminality through a complex reproduction of their inability to get to the city, locating them instead in the in-between grey zones that are neither urban nor

rural, but supposed steppingstones towards India's metropolises. In *BB*, Shrivastava explores the challenges women face once they do manage to transition to the city and gain a professional foothold.

Border-Hopping

In postcolonial India that defines citizenship from a majoritarian lens, I explore the figure of the working-class migrants – border-hopper - around whom coalesces the ideology of belonging and otherness. Seen as threatening outsiders, migrants are stigmatized and discriminated as aliens inside their own country, forced to live in dehumanizing conditions in unsafe open public spaces, risking violence, eviction, and even erasure[2]. Seen therefore as the "other," the "excess," or the "trouble-shooter" intent on subverting the dominant norm for hovering on the nation's periphery, they are therefore denied access to rights and benefits and subject to control and regulation (Kapur, 2010: 138). In both *DK* and *BB*, Shrivastava troubles this pre-modern definition of normative citizenship and belonging from the point of view of female migrants given that they are the ones who are most at risk. And second, she debunks the essence of dominance feminism as victim feminism through her characters' non-normative behavior despite their liminality, humili-ation, and dehumanization.

The psychological, economic, physical, and sexual brutality experienced by Shrivastava's characters represent a "sovereign residue … of all that has happened in the nation's power centers" and the horizontal spillover of the violence from Delhi (Sinha, 2013: 135) due to the neoliberal city's failure to deliver on its promise of emancipation vested in the city. Seduced by the success story of a Western-centric urbanization model, the Indian state, its bourgeoisie, the marketing industry, and the media have been luring people away from their settled locations across the nation into what's turning into urban dystopias. Unlike the Western urban theory that treats cities as centers of economic growth and social transformation, Indian cities are incommensurate with the complexity of people's lived reality. Faced with rising unemployment, poverty, hunger, and overpopulation (Duijne, Nijman, 2019; Patnaik, 2007; John, E. 2020) cities are moreover clawing into neighboring agricultural lands, destabilizing an already fragile village economy triggering youth disaffection, rising crime, and lawlessness (Kapoor, 2015).

Dolly and her cousin Kitty (whose real name is Kajal) are part of that exodus that pays the true price for the lies spawned by this dream machine. Having risked the certainty of their lives in the village for the chance of a better life in the city, Dolly and Kitty find themselves in the "paranoid, fractured land" (Kapoor, 2015) of

Greater Noida, an industrial/rural satellite zone located along the outskirts of Delhi, where they will never find decent jobs or homes. With its unfinished high rises, and shopping malls that no one visits, and lumpen men stalking women, unlit potholed roads, (Shrivastava, Newslaundry), life in this "gritty underbelly of globalizing India" (Sinha, 2013: 136) is anything but ideal and turns the immigrant dream into a nightmare. Kitty is trapped in the uncaring Dolly and her sleazy husband's cramped apartment, works at a paid dating app to phone service men's sexual fantasies, a place that is ransacked by the Hindu right moral police. The money paid by Dolly for a better apartment is swindled by the building contractor. A professionally qualified Ayesha's experience in *BB* is equally nightmarish. She escapes arranged marriage in Indore but faces homelessness, professional harassment, and sexual abuse in Mumbai. As a bi-sexual single woman, feared by homeowners as unruly and deviant, she shuttles between her boyfriend and girlfriend homes. Stigmatized as a Tier 2 city girl, she is underemployed and sexually abused by her manager. Her female CEO responds to her sexual harassment complaint with expulsion. Shrivastava's work rejects therefore the false binary of tradition/modernity and faults the deeply exploitative corporate sector that undermines women's autonomy, promotes their underpaid labor, and uses surveillance and violence against women in the name of religion and culture (Krishnan, 2017).

And yet, while the socio-economic context of Dolly, Kitty, and Ayesha's lives appears to be shaped by the dominant class, caste, and gendered politics, and although they fit this definition of social and gendered liminality, it is useful to see the ways in which their subalternity springs, in fact, from their deliberate transgression. As they struggle to find a home or a professional foothold in India's metropolises, they succeed nevertheless in performing "an act of reclamation," a defiance of regressive account of citizenship and of the narrative of the subaltern as victim "or less than full subjects of autonomous dominant discourses (Kapur, 2010: 139). Paradoxically enough, this is enabled because of their presence in the city, a place where their lives had apparently been falling apart. In order to understand this puzzling contradiction, I turn to Florida's celebration of cities as home to art and creativity, where the diversity of populations, elaborate social networks, opportunities for spontaneous gatherings, and financial and organizational structures, spawns new ideas and their implementation (Florida 2013). Other scholars too applaud cities as dynamic sites for fostering new political identities that have in turn challenged and redefined the meaning of citizenship from scratch. National, and international exodus driven by globalization bring together people from different social, cultural, and political provenance into cities that become battlefields for imagining new definitions for citizenships. Rather than a legal term, citizenship here symbolizes the ways in which, anonymous and previously subalternized people assert their ownership, on their own terms, to

the physical space they inhabit as well as to all the rights that come with these new ways of belonging (Swerts, 2017).

Kitty finds a space she can call her own at a surrogate mothers' home, makes peace with her work at the dating app as just a job to pay her bills, socializes with her workmate Shazia, and defends her choices in terms of agency and consent, disregarding the moral panic that her choices trigger in the wider society. And when the Hindu right destroy her workplace, she mobilizes support for starting a similar dating app for women. Left alone, and terrified of unemployment and homelessness in Bombay, Ayesha is encouraged by the bar dancer Lily to file a case of sexual abuse against the perpetrator. Clearly, both Ayesha and Kitty succeed in finding female alliances and solidarity of the kind that they would not have been able to if they hadn't border-hopped into the city – an enabling space – precisely because of their unconventional moral positionalities and class differences.

This #MeToo rights-based intersectional moment in *DK* and *BB* suggests that genuine change can only happen by believing in and supporting all women. Encouraged by other victims of sexual violence, and in the teeth of opposition, threats, and gaslighting by her female colleagues, Ayesha refuses to withdraw her sexual harassment complaint. In the end, not only does she win her case but also inspires her boss Rani to publicly out her own sexual abuser of years ago. On the one hand, Ayesha's example helps women critically reflect on their internalized class, caste, sexual, and patriarchal biases that pit women against each other. On the other it gives them the courage to come out of their "whisper circles," stop rationalizing sexual violence as an inevitable phenomenon, and hold men accountable for their abuse. It is useful to compare the narrative arcs of Rani, Ayesha, and Fatima, three women raised in Tier-2 cities and who break into the hard-to-penetrate Bombay's financial sector heavily policed and guarded by masculinity. While Rani naturalizes her own experience of sexual harassment as a necessary part of professional compromise, Ayesha and Fatima, joining the same workspace in a different temporal space, exercise their choices differently. They enter into sexual relations based on mutual consent and desire, i.e., political choices, that unlike in Rani's case, are completely divorced from professional roles or power.

Loving, Working, Mothering

Working and living alone in the city, Shrivastava's characters are alienated from traditional customs and ways of being and reject regressive definitions of femininity. As a result of the material changes stemming from the country' neoliberal economic boom, they choose financial independence and love over arranged marriage, and sexual intimacy and freedom over motherhood, a phenomenon that helps understand

the powerful intersection between economic globalization and feminism (Menon and Nigam 2007). By discarding outmoded practices of sexual abstinence and self-discipline, they choose pleasure and freedom over safety, seeking to be "sexual in more visible and daring ways" (Vance, 1984: 1-2). As they navigate their lives in vast, crowded, and anonymous urban places, Shrivastava's characters engage with pre-marital sex, adultery, infidelity, queer sex, and sex work.

Rani, Fatima, and Ayesha in *BB* are not victims, and their sexual transgression scripts their choice, pleasure, and self-affirmation, without the guilt of conventional morality. They balance their private sexual lives with demanding jobs in a ruthless world of corporate finance marked by emotional blackmail, ridicule, gaslighting, and sexism in their stride. i.e., strategies used by patriarchy faced with the presence of competent women at the workplace. And they also deal with the materiality of their biological processes at the workplace and the demands made on the female body – miscarriage, motherhood, infertility, surrogacy, and menopause.

Rani doesn't have biological children and longs to be accepted by her arrogant stepchildren. When Fatima miscarries, her husband is more upset at the loss of their baby than Fatima herself who quickly moves on to focusing back on her career. Moreover, she rejects the societal demands on her reproductive body and celebrates her sexualized body through adultery. The sex worker Lily wants to set up her dream factory. By suggesting the idea of children as trouble and by being conflicted about having children, characters in *BB* open a conversation on motherhood whose image has historically been romanticized as a metonymy for the nation, but which in fact functions as an ideological smokescreen for naturalizing sexual division of labor and naturalizing women's domesticity (Bagchi, 2017).

There are tears, regrets, and forgiveness. New relationships are formed or not, and life carries on and women are not judged by conventional sexual morality. In *DK*, Kitty hops from one sexual relationship to another whereas Dolly rejects middle class aspirations, sleeps with a much younger delivery man Osman, walks out on her sex-less marriage, acknowledges her son's transsexuality, and forgives her adulterous mother. *DK* and *BB* tease apart the gaps and fissures within heteronormativity and offer an alternative set of complex masculinities, more tender and reflective rather than violent or punitive. Moments of heartbreaks, slanging matches, recriminations, confusion, scandals, gossip, and break ups are offered as spaces for self-reflection. Rani's husband acknowledges his psycho-sexual shortcoming, Arijai is more the homemaker and fatherly and recognizes Fatima's unconventional womanhood.

The "sexual subaltern" centers her queerness, disregarding the marginalization of her sexual identity by mainstream society and the assumed normalcy or morality of heterosexuality (Legg, Roy, 2013: 465). She invites us therefore, to an alternative conception of gender and sex "where sex is not inserted and merged into a structure of domination and submission and gender is more than just about anatomical differences" (Kapur, 2012: 9). In short, de-romanticizing heterosexual sentimentalism, and by normalizing normative and non-normative sexual relationships based on consent, choice, and agency, the filmmaker's feminist gaze delinks sexuality with morality, making a major departure from mainstream cinema and heteropatriarchal norms.

Loitering

Some of the most enduring images in Shrivastava's films are those of her characters' presence in public spaces. They are not going to or from home/work, doing household errands, making a run to the shops, picking up medicines, or taking a child to school or the hospital. Instead, they are out and about on the streets, traveling by car, scooter or bus, in a shopping mall, a café, a park, a museum, or music concert or exhibition, alone, with a lover or with a group of mixed gender friends. They don't look very rich and are well-turned out in jeans, skirts, t-shirts, or a sari, with sunglasses, or flowers in their hair. They are contemplating, smiling, or laughing. Their bodies look relaxed, faces radiant, eyes joyful. In short, women in these films are shown to be loitering or simply having fun, i.e., "an array of adhoc, non-routine, and joyful conducts … a metaphor for the expression of individuality, spontaneity" (Phadke, 2020: 283), something that is not afforded to women to be in public urban spaces in India. Shrivastava brings out this troubled relationship between gender and the city where women's presence in urban public places is seen as suspect or an act of provocation, and for which they are held to account both by the civic society and by law enforcement bodies. She does this by normalizing her characters having fun and juxtaposing these scenes with those of religio-nationalist-patriarchal attacks on women in public places, evoking sympathy from the audience in the process.

Against this background, on the face of it, Dolly and Kitty's aimless wanderings asserting their unconditional freedom and bodily autonomy on the streets is liberating and therefore transformative. But, at a deeper level, the re-negotiation of their relationship with the hostile city that it involves, suggests an open defiance of the patriarchal prerogative to colonize public places and a reclamation therefor of citizenship (Phadke, 2020: 286.) In this manner, the film furthers the agenda of the 2014 #WhyLoiter movement that argues that "hanging out in public without

purpose - might be one of the ways in which all citizens, marginal or otherwise, might be able viscerally to claim public space." Towards the end of the narrative in *DK* though, during the Hindu right's violent attack on a community fair celebrating the female body, it is the Muslim Osman and Shazia who are shot dead in the commotion that ensues. This poignant moment in the film highlights the ways in which the ownership of public spaces is shaped not only by class and caste but also religious positionality that leads to the exclusion and even erasure of the marginalized "other" from the dominant discourse of citizenship. It also adds to the wider conversation launched by the #PinjraTod movement against state-endorsed sexist university policies and curfews whose rhetoric of safety ends up saving women from their own autonomy (Kapur 2014, Krishnan 2019). It's a rejection of the discourse of safety, which in itself is a kind of violence in a country where women are denied control over their own bodies. The anti-street harassment Blank Noise project carries out similar public performance such as "Meet to Sleep," "I Never Asked for it," "Action Sheroes," "On her Own, Unapologetic, Free. They also maintained that women claiming "fun as feminism" or carrying out routine activities that men do in public places challenged, instead of supported, what some - including feminists - claimed smacked of western-centric neoliberal middle-class individualism (Phadke, 2020: 282).

Conclusion

This article examined the ramifications of India's 1990s neoliberal turn on the relationship between gender and the city. It claimed that in its eagerness to embrace aggressive capitalism, not only did India weaken the existing social fabric of the society but didn't see cultural fallout of the country's economic transition coming. It explored the rise of feminist fourth wave asserting women's constitutional right to freedom and to be seen and acknowledged in the entirety of their humanity and not simply as metaphors for the nation. And finally, it looked at how cinema visibilises the complex journey undertaken by women in their search of autonomy and sexual desire.

It explored Alankrita Shrivastava's cultural work that debunks the centrality of the victim-subjectivity of "dominance feminism" by centering non-normative, aspirational, and sexualized female characters. Dolly and Kitty in *DK* choose transgression over the hypocrisy of middle-class notions of respectability. Rani, Fatima, and Ayesha in *BB* are not biologically determined and their sexual transgressions in response to desire that "like a flame, courses through" their bodies, script their choice, pleasure, and self-affirmation, without the guilt of conventional morality. And having found a foothold in the city, they are prepared to do what it takes to

survive in a place that can kick women in the gut to get the best out of them. The endless possibilities afforded by Bombay is encapsulated in Ayesha's sometime girlfriend Richa's songs "We can be anything we want to be, living free in the city of dreams" and are willing to pay the price of loneliness that comes with it.

Running through the narrative in *BB* is the voiceover of the adolescent Shai located at the cusp of puberty. While she is eager to embrace womanhood, at the same time, she is beset with doubts about losing her freedom as her sexualized body prepares to engage with the domineering patriarchal world. In a way, her voice becomes the medium through which to center the questions, doubts, assertions, and longings articulated by a range of aspirational, sexualized, and desiring women. They have all coalesced in the city of Bombay in search of freedom, an enabling city of dreams and possibilities. And since Bombay changes everyone, the women are prepared to change themselves too and do what it takes to make a success of their lives in this city. In the midst of these battles for survival, Shai also meditates on other possibilities afforded by women's bodies, wondering why they shouldn't free them and give them pleasure and why they shouldn't embrace love and desire rather than be "forbidden to eat the juiciest of fruits?" "Why should women's bodies be sites of great conflict and confusion? Shouldn't what we want to do with our bodies be our choice? Why must the memory of abuse linger even if the body wants to forget it? Why can't I own my own body, like a queen?" she asks.

Making a clear break from mainstream cinema in terms of form, content, and complexity, Shrivastava's work is significant therefore in the way she de-romanticizes women's journey from the village to the city as a seamless translation of dreams into reality. Second, she rejects the dominant feminists' victim discourse in favor of women's lived experience that challenges patriarchal reduction of women to their reproductive and sexed bodies. Third, the feminist dissidence that animates her narratives reflects the organizing principles, language, and modes of operation of many of the FFW campaigns. Setting her characters in these situations of liminality, from the unflinching gaze of her feminist lens, she watches the debris that falls from the clash between conflicting worlds and does this using the tropes of border-hoppers, loiterers, lovers, and mothers, all of them scattered along the contested terrain of a gendered spectrum. Shrivastava's narratives surface the ways in which by asserting their constitutional right of freedom and choice, the female characters prioritize freedom over the meaningless rhetoric of tradition and respectability that only thrives on the erasure of women's autonomy and rights. If visual images shared across social media have the power to trigger a human rights movement, then the visuality and politics of Shrivastava's intersectional cinematic oeuvre work must be seen as a cultural corollary of the wider feminist dissident politics of the Feminist Fourth Wave.

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Notes

1. For example, against the organizing of the Miss World pageant in Bangalore or the screening of the film *Fire* on same-sex love (Tambe, Tambe, 2013).

2. Their "fugitive-like condition" (Jain, Jayaram, 2021) and precarity was surfaced during the Covid-19 lockdown in the country in 2020 when having lost their jobs and livelihood overnight, they were uprooted from their temporary residence in urban India and forced to walk back home in small towns and villages, at times across thousands of miles away.