

“Lipstick Under My Burkha tells stories that have simmered under the surface for a very long time. They need their space.” – Ratna Pathak Shah

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/03/04/lipstick-under-my-burkha-tells-stories-that-have-simmered-under-the-surface-for-a-very-long-time-they-need-their-space-ratna-pathak-shah/

2017-3-4

Following the CBFC decision to ban Alankrita Shrivastava's new film *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, **Ruhi Khan** speaks to lead actress **Ratna Pathak Shah** about the treatment of her latest work, women's issues in India and the role of the creative industries in holding a mirror to society.

Bollywood veteran actor Ratna Pathak Shah is astounded that the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) did not give her new film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (*Lipstick Waale Sapne* in Hindi) even a fighting chance before they deemed it unfit for release in India. So while the film is met with rave reviews at film festivals across the worlds, audiences will be deprived of watching it at Indian cinemas.

I met Shah on the set of her next project in London the day after CBFC's decision to ban the film on grounds that it was "too lady oriented", contained "sexual scenes" and "audio pornography" (phone sex). Shah spoke candidly about the unfair treatment meted to the film by a 'male chauvinistic' board; how regressive policies are destroying the future; and how she (and others in the industry) will fight against it.



RK: 'Lipstick Under My Burkha', a provocative name no doubt, but it's not an alarming declaration metaphorically or realistically is it?

RPS: (laughs) No absolutely not. More women wear lipstick under the burkha than one can imagine actually. As a society we like to hide such things and have a façade of piety, but we are not a completely homogenous society, nor will we ever be. The film revolves around the lives of four women living in close proximity, it's just four women but their lives can be replicated into so many more because of the similarity of experiences and aspirations. *Lipstick* is not a sexy film, sex is not the focus. It is a story of women's lives which talks about real issues like employment, respect, life's choices etc. It talks about how even as a breadwinner of the family, women still don't get respect.

In a patriarchal society, women are supposed to follow a script of the second sex – man as the 'absolute', woman as the 'Other'. Has this changed in urban India?

Of course, it is changing in urban India in all sorts of ways. More and more people are more vocal about issues that were considered sensitive before. The number of campaigns and voices on important issues has increased and there is greater diversity. In the past a film like *Sairat* would have been impossible to make. But it was made and it was hugely successful. The recent films *Masaan* and *Court* fall into the same category, and this is a deeply hopeful trend.

But yes, every society is patriarchal and that won't change easily. On the other hand, society has been organising against patriarchy and this change is disturbing for many. It's not easy to fight patriarchy worldwide, the goal posts keep shifting but painting men as villain is not going to help our case. We need to talk to people with reason and humour.

But Indian society still finds it uncomfortable to listen to women's issues – from periods to

sex, from molestation to marital rape – a lot of these topics are still taboo.

The last 60 years have been a period of great debate in India and, also across the world – Britain, America, France, Japan – it's very healthy and every society should go through that. And all those societies now are going backwards. The last year has been so depressing for me because I thought we had won those wars – race, gender, caste. I thought we sorted those problems and we had made those laws. I'm here because those laws made it possible for me to do more than be a housewife. I had never imaged that we would go backwards but now I find my daughter is in the worst situation.

Given that scenario, how important is it for creative industries to explore these issues?

We need to find ways to change mind sets. Art is one way to do that so we should encourage it. Even if there is no encouragement, what the hell, we will do it. Iran does it, look at the kind of films that they make! And if they can do it, then we can certainly do it in India. After all India is a democracy, we have all our freedoms in place. We are supposed to talk about things that others don't want to talk about, hold a mirror to society and record what's happening around us. We are supposed to give the audience a chance to reflect on that and make up their minds. *Lipstick* has been appreciated everywhere else in the world. Those that screened our film and those that watched it had wonderful things to say. I am overwhelmed by the support we got.

The decision to ban your film came as a surprise to many. Is the censor board a chauvinistic male?

I don't know if there were any women on the board but it seems that the board looked at the film through the male gaze and deemed it too 'ladies oriented'. I'm not entirely surprised by this, but I am astounded by the reasons given. I did expect that, by talking about the issues that people would rather brush under the carpet, the film would offend some members of our society, but I thought they would give us a fighting chance at least! They have just gone ahead and said we are not giving you a certificate, no questions, no reasons or very strange reasons. I'm very disappointed the way the board has behaved. They have decided to be a Big Daddy saying '*beta* (son) you can't see this, *beti* (daughter) you can definitely cannot see this'. They have decided they are keepers of our morals and until that changes it's not going to be easy for people to make such films.

Is this a feminist film?

I personally don't like labels or polarising issues and putting them in categories because it only makes it difficult to discuss them. Over and over again, these issues come up, whether it is gender, caste, communal disharmony, all these things exist in our country. But we don't want to talk about it and pretend that everything is hunky-dory and life is a Bollywood movie.

But I guess you could call it a feminist film. It talks about women the way the women perceive themselves. It's going to make people uncomfortable there is no doubt about it, but the fact is we have got so much support – look at the number of people that have come out to protest this repression! It might be one step forward, five steps back but even that one step is important.

So how would you describe this film and how would you like us to define it?

Lipstick Under My Burkha is telling stories that have existed and have simmered under the surface for a very long time. But they are just emerging and they need their space. They are going to surprise you and what will surprise you is not the sexual element. They are just stories of four women in a close living space and within that there are such completely different worlds. There are 50 crore more stories out there and each story has value. I hope people

will just see it with an open mind. I think they will be very surprised.

Cover image credit: [Paul Caudell](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Ratna Pathak Shah has worked in Bollywood and Indian television since the 1980s. She is most known of her role as Maya in the comedy sitcom Sarabhai vs Sarabhai; the social worker mother of Imran Khan in the film Jaane Tu Jaane Na and the uptight Rajput Maharani in Sonam Kapoor's Khoobsurat. Along with her husband, veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah, she co-founded the Motley Theatre Group in 1979. They are often called the 'first couple of Indian theatre'.



Ruhi Khan has worked as a journalist for Indian and UK media for over a decade. A Jefferson fellow at the East West Center, Hawaii and recipient of Mary-Morgan Hewitt award for women in journalism; she has a MA- International Journalism from City, University of London and is doing her second postgraduate degree in the Media & Communication department at LSE. She tweets [@khanruhi](#).



- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics