

“Forget my creative expression, I can tell other stories, but can you imagine being a part of a society that thinks that you should not exist?” – Zoya Akhtar

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In March **Zoya Akhtar**, eminent Bollywood filmmaker who is known for making films that are critically acclaimed and commercially successful such as [Luck By Chance](#) and [Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara](#), attended the Economic Forum of LSE Conference to speak about Indian cinema and what makes the box office and industry tick. During her visit, she spoke to Sharanya Shriram about the BBC 'India's Daughter' documentary, censorship, and the representation of sexuality in Indian cinema.



In a previous interview you had mentioned that as a woman you are more aware of the way you etch out female characters because you have a feel for how the general male audience in India perceives certain images of women, so would you, as a female writer and director from India, have approached the BBC documentary India's Daughter in a different way?

You could take any filmmaker on the planet, and it would have been a different documentary. It's your personality, and not just where you're from that affects how you approach a movie. As a filmmaker closer to home, yes, I would have addressed certain things differently, but the again maybe I wouldn't have had the stomach for certain aspects. At the end of the day, it's about what you are after, what you're trying to say, and what you perceive to be the truth.

About having done things differently or better, I don't know what went into it to making it what it is, so it wouldn't be fair on my part to say that I would have done so and so part better. Though having said that, I feel that the documentary just skimmed the surface, and there was a lot they could have dug deeper into.

What is your opinion on the Censor Board's list of forbidden words, more so the muting of the word 'lesbian' in Dum Laga Ke Haisha? Does the Censor Board have a problem when we portray India accepting homosexuality, as opposed to portraying 'psuedo-homosexuality' for comic relief?

I find it ridiculous! I personally don't believe in censorship. The Censor Board is not the be all and end all, they are following laid down guidelines. They do not make up the rules, they just follow them. There have been various Censor Board Chiefs over the years who have been more lax and more understanding, have a certain sensibility and can therefore negotiate things better. The new Chief's sensibilities make no sense because, as of today lesbianism doesn't exist in Indian cinema. You have a government in power who doesn't want homosexuality to be legal, so there will be a trickle-down effect.

It is not just about my creative expression, THERE ARE LESBIANS IN INDIA! What about them? Forget my creative expression, I can tell other stories but can you imagine being a part of a society that does not acknowledge your sexuality at all, and thinks that you should not exist! We are trying to keep people in the closet, it is tougher on them, than on me.

The Board needs to suggest cuts according to what certificate the filmmaker wants. If you want a 'Universal' certificate you have to make these cuts, if you want a U/A certificate you have to make these cuts or changes, if you want an 'Adult' certificate you should do this. Now you have a Board that is deciding even what adults can and cannot watch. It is weird!

You mentioned that if you had made Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara with 3 female leads instead of 3 male leads you wouldn't have got the production budget you wanted and the film would have been labelled a 'chick

flick’ – So is commerce an excuse for pushing male-dominated scripts and movies?

No, not really. I mean, I can't go to a producer and say, "Oh I do not subscribe to your patriarchy, so give me 50 crores I want to make a film about women." The producer will just tell me to put my own money in. The producers are not movie buffs, it is just a business to them. If a filmmaker wants to tell women-centric stories, there is a certain way of going about it. There are female stars like Deepika Padrone, Vidya Balan, Priyanka Chopra etc. who are really big and bring in considerable revenue for the producers, but one cannot get the same budget as one would with a Hrithik Roshan or a Shah Rukh Khan. It would just be a losing proposition, and does worse for the cause, than better for it. One needs to approach this in a smart way with strong content and a strong cast. Also, at the end of the day it has to be the audience as well. One cannot put the onus on filmmakers. The audience has to subscribe to it, and unfortunately, they don't. The audience has to decide that they want to watch a certain kind of film. When the audience starts showing interest, the producers will automatically start allocating bigger budgets for such films.



Sharanya Shriram with Zoya Akhtar at EFIL 2015

You said you had an issue with the way women are wooed in Bollywood cinema, that these male characters are “sexually harassing the female character”, so would this dominant narrative influence those who are not part of the nuanced, elite (i.e. the rural population, the more blatantly patriarchal strains of society), would this reinforce their perception or notion of how a woman is to be wooed?

They are stalkers! When I was growing up in the late 70's to 80s, we never saw consensual sex on screen, we only saw rapes, and that has to have affected at least two generations of movie watchers. Consensual sex wasn't allowed, because whenever it went towards anything that was tender, soft, consensual and adult, it went behind two flowers or two birds or in a song, but the movie would have a four minute rape scene, and this permeates into the people, because at the end of the day, even filmmakers are people who are a part of the same society as the audience.

We don't seem as shocked or our morality does not get so rattled when we see rape in movies, but it gets rattled if our neighbour's daughter is having consensual sex with someone. As people we get more offended by instances like that than we do with sexual abuse, and this is what gets reflected in cinema. This is where we live! I did not even realise this while I was growing up. It is only now when I look back at all those movies and realise that there was no real lovemaking, I was just watching rape. So what must that do to you, and what must that do to your psyche, watching a situation where a woman is supposed to say no? Rape is the only representation that you see. You cannot show anything beyond that because, then the girl is seen as a slut. It does affect people's psyche.

It is a very fine line, because on one level you are worried about portraying this stalker behaviour, this machismo, this grabbing a woman and kissing her and she falls in love with you, and on the other hand I may have a story where I write a female character who just wants the man to grab her and push her against the wall and kiss her and she may fall for that, but you're so worried about how that might come across. You don't want all your women to be bra-burning feminists, because at the end of the day you are a writer, and you are telling stories, and all the women can't be the same. It is a tedious job. I'm a storyteller, an entertainer. If your intent is okay, then it will not come across as wrong. Say if I show you a bikini shot in my film, and it is a part of the story, you won't even think about it, but if I put a bikini scene for no reason, and the camera moves up from her legs to her torso, then yeah it will come across as weird. It is all about intent.

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

About the Authors

Zoya Akhtar is an award winning film director known for her path breaking ideas in Indian cinema. After completing her education at St Xavier's College, Mumbai and the New York University Film School, Zoya began her career as an assistant director working with her brother Farhan. Her critically acclaimed debut movie *Luck by Chance* won her the Filmfare Best Debut Director award in 2009 while her next movie, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* was a major box-office hit and won many 'Best Film' awards as well as 'Best Director' for Zoya.



Sharanya Shriram is a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is currently pursuing an MSc in Media, Communication and Development. Prior to joining the LSE, she worked for two years as the Public Relations Officer for AMMACHI Labs (Amrita Multi Modal Applications and Computed Human Interaction), on projects funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, that have provided computerised vocational education and training with life enrichment education to over 3000 women in rural and tribal India. Her focus is on media and communication for development campaigns and initiatives.



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