



VOICES VEILED: UNVEILING THE GENDERED NARRATIVES OF DISEMBODIED VOICE IN THE AUDITORY LANDSCAPE OF INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract: Female voice is a neglected concept within the ambit of feminist film theory. The feminist critique of cinema has largely been concerned about the image track---the ways in which woman is represented as an object of male gaze. Laura Mulvey, for instance, in her groundbreaking article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', argued that the spectators are encouraged to identify the look of the male hero and turn the heroine into a passive object of erotic spectacle. The concept of female voice, however, is explored by the American film critic, Kaza Silverman. In her book 'The Acoustic Mirror' she argued that in classical narrative cinema, women's voices are invariably tied to their corporeal anchor, presented as 'thick with body'.

The present paper seeks to show that in cinema gender discrimination operates not only through visual image but also through soundtrack. In Indian cinema female voiceovers are never heard narrating from a disembodied, omniscient perspective outside the diegesis as some male voiceovers do. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism, and film theory (especially the works of Michel Chion and Kaza Silverman) this paper also intends to offer a critique of the Indian cinema, with special reference to Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* and Ashutosh Gwarikar's *Lagaan*, for its complete absence of disembodied female voice.

Keywords- Male gaze, female voice, diegesis, Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism, disembodied female voice.

INTRODUCTION

Female voice is a neglected concept within the ambit of feminist film theory. The predominant focus of feminist critique of cinema has historically centered around the image track, commenting on the ways in which women are depicted as objects subjected to the 'male gaze'. Laura Mulvey, for instance, in her groundbreaking article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', written in 1973 and published in *Screen* in 1975, argued that the spectators are encouraged to identify the active look of the male hero which reduces the heroine into a passive object of erotic spectacle (Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* 31)). However, only a handful of scholars explored the discourse of female voice in cinema. Notably, American film critic Kaja Silverman, in her landmark book 'The Acoustic Mirror', argued that in classical narrative cinema, women's voices are consistently tethered to their corporeal existence, presented as "thick with body." This perspective prompts a critical examination of the auditory representation of women, challenging the prevalent focus on visual imagery.

This paper contends that gender discrimination in Indian cinema extends beyond the visual realm and operates through the soundtrack. In Indian films female voiceovers never narrate from a disembodied, omniscient perspective outside the diegesis as some male voiceovers do. There are ample instances in mainstream as well as art house Indian cinema [Ashutosh Gwarikar's *Lagaan*, Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, and Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* for example] where a complete absence of disembodied female voice can be noticed.

In the early 1970s, in reaction against the sociological film criticism which focused on the 'Images of Women' in cinema, the British film theorists turned to psychoanalysis and other new waves of theoretical approaches namely semiotics, and Althusserian Marxism. Among the other pioneers of British feminist film theory, Claire Johnston was the first to deploy psychoanalytic theory as a tool for her analysis which, she believed, allowed her to ask not what

films mean but how and why. These British film critics led by Johnston shifted our attention from the sociological 'Images of Women' criticism to the theoretical analysis of film as a signifying practice. Johnston, for instance, argued that cinema functions as a means of communication or representation, rather than as a window allowing a glimpse into the world outside. She, moreover, interrogated the idea of realism in mainstream cinema of Hollywood. For realism, as Sohini Chaudhuri puts it, "is a construction, one that uses its codes and conventions to conceal its constructedness" (Chaudhuri *Feminist Film Theorists* 23). To a spectator a classic Hollywood film offers a seamless flow of action presenting a seemingly transparent 'window' into the 'real' world outside. To achieve this effect the film adopts a number of mechanisms including the axis of action (180-degree rule), eye-line match, and 30-degree rule. All these techniques contribute to maintaining the illusion of a smooth spatial and temporal flow between shots, concealing the constructed nature of the film. Similarly, art house cinema employs its own codes of realism, distinct from Hollywood's, incorporating elements such as long takes or direct addresses to the camera. These too represent codes within the ideological framework of realism. By using the theoretical tools such as semiotics, Althusser's theory of interpellation, and psychoanalysis Johnston and other feminist film theorists contended that the spectators not only participate in the construction of a film's meanings, but also are themselves constructed by the process of this meaning making (Chaudhuri *Feminist Film Theorists* 24). This provided the groundwork for the feminist analysis of Woman as a sign signifying the myths of patriarchal discourses and diagnosed that woman as woman remains the "unspoken absence of patriarchal culture."

Psychoanalytic Film Theory: The Symbiosis between psychoanalysis and Cinema

Psychoanalysis, as a theoretical framework developed by Sigmund Freud, has endured as a crucial cornerstone in comprehending human behaviour and the intricate functions of the mind. It is quite evident from the above discussion that it has proved itself as an effective tool of film theory by offering scholars a nuanced lens through which they can meticulously explore and unveil the complexities inherent in characters, narratives, and the visual language of film. A central tenet of psychoanalysis' contribution to cinema studies rests in its keen exploration of the unconscious mind, an aspect vividly illuminated by scholars such as Laura Mulvey in her 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Drawing upon Freudian concepts, Mulvey skilfully elucidates the gaze and the power dynamics inherently woven into the act of looking within cinematic contexts. Her assertion that cinema functions as a manifestation of unconscious desires resonates profoundly with Freud's seminal ideas on the uncanny and the repressed, thereby establishing a bridge between psychoanalysis and the cinematic medium.

Apart from Freud, the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan have proven crucial in dissecting the language of cinema, introducing concepts like the mirror stage and the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real order. Lacanian insights delve into the construction of identity within the cinematic framework and underscore the role of language in shaping subjective experiences. According to Lacan, the cinematic image operates as a mirror, reflecting the spectator's own fragmented sense of self, a notion that further intertwines psychoanalysis with the visual artistry of film. Slavoj Žižek, building upon Lacanian principles, extends the relevance of psychoanalysis to cinema by probing the ideological dimensions of film.

When in the 1970s British film theorists adopted Jacques Lacan's theories to promote their understanding of cinema, their focus was narrow (McGowan, *The Real Gaze* 1). They were particularly interested in an essay titled 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic experience'. The essay reflects Lacan's notion of the Imaginary and the formation of the ego, an idea, as it corresponds to the relationship between film spectators and the image projected on the screen. In the mirror stage essay, Lacan argues that the child acquires its first sense of self-identity through seeing its image on a mirror. For Lacan, this experience metaphorically captures a stage in the child's development when the child forms a sense of completeness and anticipates a mastery of the body that it lacks in reality. The ideal of the body as a unity over which the child has mastery emerges as the illusion produced through the mirroring experience. Thus, in the essay, Lacan stresses the illusory nature of the mastery that the child experiences while looking at the mirror. According to the early Lacanian film theorists, the spectator inhabits the position of the child looking in the mirror (McGowan, *The Real Gaze* 2). Like the child, the spectator derives a sense of mastery based on the position that the spectator occupies relating to the events on the screen. The cinematic experience allows the spectator to overcome temporarily the sense of lack that we endure by existing as a speaking subject in the symbolic order. As Jean-Louis Baudry points out, "the arrangement of the different elements- projector, darkened hall, screen- reconstructs the situation necessary for the release of the 'mirror stage'". By perpetuating this reconstruction, the cinema leads spectators into self-deception. According to the early Lacanian film theorists such as Metz and Baudry, cinema, like the mirror stage, is imaginary. As Lacan conceives it, the imaginary creates an illusion of completeness in both us and what we perceive. Lacan's use of the term 'imaginary' thus plays on both the meanings we associate with it: it is at once visual and illusory. Cinematic identification, Baudry argues, takes place

on two distinct levels in the cinematic process. First, the spectator identifies with the images on the screen. Second, the spectator identifies with the camera itself. Film and the cinematic apparatus, therefore, enact the Lacanian dialectic of absence and presence. The spectator is at the same time absent as perceived but present as perceiver.

Interrogating the Marginalization of Soundscape in Cinema Studies: The Context and Scope of the paper

Cinema's perceptual richness as a medium owes a great deal to its ability to offer an illusion of reality. Along with image, Sound too plays a significant role to create this illusion. In fact, it is the perfect marriage between the image and the sound, the rule of synchronization that creates the illusion. This perfect matching of sound and image frame by frame gives the illusion that the sound is spoken directly without mediation from the whole machinery of cinematic production. Thus, the realism of cinema is created through the functioning of particular codes, such as continuity editing, 30-degree rule, 180-degree rule or the line of axis, eye line match, voice synchronization and so on. The image and sound, or the blend of the two, thus, appears coded and with the help of psychoanalysis and other theoretical tools, the feminist film critics attempt to uncover the processes of disguise and displacement.

Only a handful of critics showed their interest in demystifying the coded 'sign' of sound in cinema and a fewer of them took the pain of exposing the gender discrimination inherent in the soundtrack. While scholarly literature has extensively delved into the analysis of the gaze in Indian cinema and the broader cinematic context, it is noteworthy that the voice has not received the theoretical attention it deserves. This paper seeks to fill this gap by offering a theoretical exploration of the deployment of the voice in Indian cinema, particularly focusing on what Michel Chion, the French film theorist, terms as the *acousmètre* or the *acousmatic voice*. The *acousmatic voice* refers to a voice without a body, a disembodied voice, where a character's vocalization emanates from off-screen space, detached from a specific physical presence.

In Indian cinema, both art house and mainstream genres provide fertile ground for applying Chion's theory of *acousmatic sound*. Taking, for instance, Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* or Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, two exemplary pieces of art house cinema, the films offer instances where voices seem to transcend their physical embodiments. The *acousmatic voice*, as theorized by Chion, could be employed to analyze moments in the film where dialogues emanate from off-screen, emphasizing the detachment of the voice from the character's visible presence. This application of *acousmatic sound theory* enriches our understanding of the auditory dimension in Ray's cinematic narrative. In mainstream Indian cinema, too, such as Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*, the theory of *acousmatic sound* can be applied. The film utilizes disembodied baritone of the omniscient narrator to offer a kind of awareness or knowledge about the historical background the film has been set against. Analyzing such instances through Chion's framework enhances our appreciation of how mainstream filmmakers employ *acousmatic voices* to create tension, suspense, or narrative complexity, thereby showcasing the versatility and universality of Chion's theoretical concepts.

This paper aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse on Indian cinema by underscoring the often-overlooked aspect of the voice, employing Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmatic voice* and Kaza Silverman's idea of 'acoustic mirror'. Through the application of these theories to notable films like *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, *Bhuvan Shome*, and *Lagaan*, we can deepen our understanding of how *acousmatic sound* operates in both art house and mainstream Indian cinema, ultimately enriching our comprehension of the auditory nuances within these cinematic realms.

Chion and Lacan: The Idea of Acousmatic Voice in Feminist Film Theory

Michel Chion was a renowned French composer and film theorist. In his seminal work 'The Voice in Cinema' (*La voix au cinema*, 1982), Chion has talked about a voice whose source or origin is obscured from the visual field and he has termed it as *acousmetre* or the *acousmatic voice*. It is a voice that is not anchored to any bodily presence. Thus, it is a disembodied voice, freely floating for a place to settle. Different forms of *acousmatic voice* operate in cinema, such as, the complete or partial *acousmatic*, radio-*acousmatic*, commentator, telephonic and the already visualized. If the *acousmatic voice* is finally attached to any particular body, the voice becomes *de-acousmatized*. Chion posits that the *de-acousmatization* of the voice transforms the *acousmatic voice* into a cinematic object which is no less powerful than the images that emerge. Thus, in Chion's framework, the *acousmatic voice* assumes a potency comparable to the visual images that pervade the cinematic screen. In referring to this elusive object-voice in cinema, the *acousmatic voice*, Chion connects it to Lacan's theory of the voice as object. Lacan argued that a child at the mirror stage learns that a few objects which it initially believed to be inseparable from it are actually separate. Voice is one of them. Lacan called these objects 'object petit a' or 'part objects' or objects with a little otherness. The Lacanian 'object petit a' is not the object of desire but the object-cause of desire. As Žižek notes it, "Object petit a, the object cause of desire [is] an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself" (*Looking Awry* 12). Lacan's notion

of the voice as *objet petit a* provides an important supplement to Chion's concept of acousmatic voice as Lacan foregrounds the dimension of desire in the voice and its ability to function as a love object.

Chion establishes a nuanced connection between the acousmatic voice and Jacques Lacan's theory of the voice as an object. Recognizing Lacan's theoretical contribution to the conceptualization of the voice as an object, Chion asserts that Lacan expands the Freudian partial object list to include the voice and gaze. The Lacanian *objet petit a* represents a partial object that is separable from the body, and Chion's theory aligns this with Lacan's inclusion of the voice as an object-cause of desire. The voice, as *objet petit a*, operates as a distortion of the aural field, perceivable only through the ears influenced by desire. Chion further underscores the significance of Lacanian theory by highlighting the crucial distinction between the desired object and the object-cause of desire. The Lacanian *objet petit a*, including the voice, constitutes the latter – an elusive feature that triggers or sustains desire. Drawing upon Žižek's articulation, Chion emphasizes that the voice as *objet petit a* is discernible solely through an aural perception shaped by desire's distortions. In this context, the acousmatic voice intertwines intimately with Lacan's conceptualization of the object-cause of desire, establishing a connection that underscores the voice's potential as a catalyst for love.

Michel Chion's exploration of Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the voice encounters a significant complement in Lacan's notion of the voice as *objet petit a*, providing an enriched perspective on Chion's acousmatic voice. While Chion delves into Lacan's conceptualization of the voice as a psychoanalytic object, Lacan's formulation accentuates the voice as *objet petit a*, emphasizing the dimension of desire inherent in the voice and its capacity to function as a love-object. This nuanced perspective becomes particularly pertinent when examining the manifestation of desire in the female voice within the context of Indian Cinema.

Lacan's conceptualization foregrounds the logic of desire inherent in the voice, a logic that operates prominently in the invocatory drive. This intersection sheds light on the multifaceted nature of desire encapsulated within the realm of cinematic voices. A parallel may be drawn between Lacan's concept of the voice as *objet petit a* and Chion's acousmatic voice through the technological apparatuses that facilitate this dimension of the voice. Lacan identifies the presence of the voice as *objet a* in objects that can be cataloged in the form of gramophone records or reels of tape on library shelves. Early technologies like the radio, gramophone, tape-recorder, and telephone played a pivotal role in rendering the voice acousmatic, whereby the voice emanated from these instruments, concealing the true source. The technological apparatus, as mentioned by Lacan, particularly in the gramophone or reels of tape, concurrently represents both the voice as *objet petit a* and the acousmatic voice. The convergence of Chion's acousmatic voice and Lacan's concept of the voice as *objet petit a* offers a comprehensive understanding of the psychoanalytic and desire-laden dimensions of the cinematic voice.

In one of the initial sustained applications of psychoanalytic film theory to the auditory dimension of cinema, Kaja Silverman, in her seminal work 'The Acoustic Mirror', published in 1988, directs our attention to the role of the female voice within classic cinema. Drawing a parallel to the feminist gaze theories of the 1970s, particularly Laura Mulvey's Screen theory, Silverman places emphasis on the male gaze, positioning the female voice as a critical locus of analysis. Her examination critiques Michel Chion's approach to the cinematic voice, asserting that Chion's exploration lacks sufficient engagement with the gender dynamics inherent in classic cinema. Silverman contends that Chion's forays into the realm of sexual difference appear primarily motivated by a pursuit of poetic embellishments, lacking critical scrutiny and self-awareness. Silverman particularly challenges Chion's discussion of the voice, asserting that it often operates within existing gender demarcations, assuming the symptomatic value of Hollywood film conventions. While Chion acknowledges that most acousmètres, or disembodied voices, are masculine, Silverman underscores that the female voice in classic cinema is frequently relegated to the spectacle of the female body. Despite Chion's acknowledgment of the gendered nature of acousmatic voices, Silverman posits that he fails to fully address the implications of this gender dynamic, particularly in terms of power and authority. Within the context of classic cinema, Silverman contends that the female voice and body are persistently confined within the diegesis, with the male subject positioned as seemingly discursively external, identified with mastering speech, vision, or hearing. The locus of authority and power, according to Silverman, resides in the disembodied voice, typically male, functioning as either voiceover or voice-off, which speaks while remaining unseen. Conversely, the female voice tends to be embodied within a visible character, a narrative device that effectively disempowers women within the cinematic framework.

‘Lack’ of Female Acousmatic Voice in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema has several footprints that have shaped its ethos over decades. However, in words of Ashish Nandi, it has focused on “primacy of maternity” which is more of appropriation rather than cause for celebration thus amounting to discrimination. All narrative discourses have grown out of cultural roots and hence the spectatorial pleasure is grounded more on the image than in the sound. What is now famously termed as ‘active spectatorship’ or for that matter, the purposeful participation of audiences has not been able to decipher the complete absence of a female non-diegetic voice over for negotiating meaning. Hence the sustained ambiguity between narrative and performance remains. Canonical films like *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Bhuvan Shome* or *Lagaan* do not launch any female voice over, as if, that has the potential to dilute the cause of the film or take away the gravity of a male baritone voice over, losing the male vigour in the process. Even identity of the film, in its entirety, craves, albeit silently, for a commodity fetish that accepts image for consumption but discards sound as a distant, non-negotiable ‘other.’ The nondiegetic voice, that is to lead into the film without its body, ethereal in its experience, has not had the honesty of a frankness that may shamelessly claim a woman’s voice to be ‘incapable’, ‘weak’ and not grounded in tradition. Indian cinema, consciously fails because image can be consumed and enjoyed, so too can be non-diegetic voiceover, though the asymmetrical relationship between the image and the voice continue to haunt the process of film making and consumption of the same. For all reasons, efforts and experiments, the Indian cine-spectators continue to fetishize a female body and a male voice.

But Silverman opines that the rule of synchronization is forcefully applied to women’s voices. In classic cinema a voice has power and privilege to the extent that it has no bodily complement in the image. The moment a voice is synchronized with its speakers’ moving lips it loses its power. At its logical extreme Indian cinema pits the disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice. With its omniscient vision and audition, the disembodied voice over speaks with utmost authority. Its voice is that of the law. It has the transcendental properties of the enunciator. Indian cinema deprives women of that status. *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, *Bhuvan Shome* and *Lagaan*, all the three films start with a male non diegetic voiceover, and coincidentally that of the famous baritone of Amitabh Bachchan. To provide audience with a story of history or narrative, more faith is entrusted with a male voiceover, apparently capable of handling the responsibility of ‘serious narration’ because a woman’s voiceover in this context shall render history sink with its own ‘gravity’ because it is unable to rely on the weak, inefficient and non-reliable woman. So, can be it said that the voice as object cause of desire, finds acceptance only in male nondiegetic voice? Indian cinema seems obsessed with voice as a guiding principle that generates cause of desire through a vigorous male proclamation.

In Indian cinema, one notable exception to this trend is the film *Lunchbox*, which offers one of the most poignant and subtle depictions of urban isolation in Hindi cinema. In this film, directed by Ritesh Batra, we hear a disembodied female voice engaged in everyday chat, gossip, and exchange of recipes with one of the protagonists of the film, Ila. Though we only hear and never see this character, Mrs. Deshpande, we know that she exists in Ila’s world. Thus, Mrs. Deshpande’s voice, though disembodied like the voiceovers of *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, *Bhuvan Shome* or *Lagaan*, is diegetic. this diegetic nature of that voice distinguishes it from the non-diegetic, disembodied male voices in other films. The diegetic use of the female voice in *Lunchbox* aligns with Chion's concept of diegesis, where the source of sound is acknowledged within the narrative. However, this exception underscores the overarching pattern of gendered soundscapes, as the non-diegetic, disembodied voices, which lack a direct connection to on-screen characters, consistently adhere to a male perspective.

Conclusion

The observation regarding the predominance of disembodied and non-diegetic and diegetic voices in Indian cinema, both in art house films or artisanal films such as Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* or Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, and mainstream or industrial films such as *Lagaan* raises significant questions about gender discrimination within the realm of cinematic sound. This phenomenon, where non-diegetic, disembodied voices are consistently male, reveals an interesting aspect of Indian cinema's auditory landscape. While the visual field has been extensively scrutinized for gender biases, the realm of sound has largely been overlooked in critical discourse. The absence of theoretical endeavours addressing the gender discrimination inherent in the discourse of sound in Indian cinema becomes more apparent when compared to the wealth of literature on gender bias in the visual field. This silence within critical discourse on Indian cinema regarding gender discrimination in the realm of sound deserves attention as it may perpetuate the unconscious reinforcement of traditional gender roles, contributing to the normalization of male voices as authoritative or authorial in the cinematic context.

Michel Chion's concept of the acousmatic voice or disembodied voice as explained in this paper is particularly relevant in this context. The acousmatic voice is detached from a visible, on-screen source, creating a unique auditory experience for the audience. In the case of Indian cinema, the consistent use of male voices in this disembodied manner suggests a gendered dimension to the construction of cinematic soundscapes. Chion's work on the psychology of sound emphasizes the impact of voice on our perception, making the male-dominated disembodied voices in Indian cinema a noteworthy area of investigation. An in-depth exploration of the gender discrimination inherent in the discourse of sound in Indian cinema reveals a significant gap in scholarly engagement. By incorporating theoretical frameworks such as Chion's acousmatic voice and Silverman's gender analysis into discussions on cinematic sound, scholars can shed light on the often-overlooked auditory dimensions of gender representation. Addressing this disparity not only enriches our understanding of Indian cinema but also contributes to a more comprehensive and inclusive discourse on gender in the realm of audiovisual storytelling.

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