

Women Behind the Camera: Women Filmmakers and the Politics of Feminist Cinema in India

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Abstract:

Cinema is not merely a form of entertainment; it is a powerful cultural institution through which a society imagines, represents and interprets itself. Films do not simply reflect social realities; they actively participate in constructing ideas about gender, class, caste, sexuality, family, labour and identity. Therefore, discussions on the representation of women in cinema cannot be restricted to the number, visibility or nature of female characters on screen. Such discussions must also extend to the people who control the processes of storytelling, production and visual representation. Who writes the story? Who directs the camera? Who decides whose experiences are made visible? Who controls the creative and technical processes of filmmaking? These questions are central to understanding the politics of representation.

1. Introduction:

Historically, cinema has been structured through predominantly male-dominated systems of creative and institutional authority. Direction, screenwriting, cinematography, editing, production and other major technical departments remained largely controlled by men, while women's participation was often concentrated in acting and other visible performance-oriented roles. This gendered division of labour was not simply a matter of professional inequality. It reflected wider structures of patriarchy in which authority, technology, creativity and decision-making were culturally associated with men.

The presence of women behind the camera therefore has significance beyond employment or numerical representation. When women enter positions of authorship and creative authority, they potentially alter the conditions under which stories are produced and images are constructed. They bring into the cinematic field experiences, memories, desires, anxieties, labour and perspectives that have historically remained marginalised or invisible.

A statement widely attributed to filmmaker Ava DuVernay suggests that “when a woman makes a film, it is a radical act.” Whether understood literally or metaphorically, the statement draws attention to the political significance of women's creative participation. The question is therefore not simply whether women are represented in cinema, but whether women participate in deciding how they and the world around them are represented. Participation in filmmaking and decision-making is thus as important as, and in many contexts even more consequential than, on-screen representation.

2. Feminist Film Theory and Women's Visual Representation

Feminist film theory has provided important conceptual tools for examining the relationship between cinema, gender and power. One of its most influential interventions came through Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which introduced the concept of the "male gaze." Mulvey argued that mainstream narrative cinema frequently organises visual pleasure around a masculine subject position, constructing women as objects of looking and desire. Within conventional cinematic structures, the camera, narrative and spectator may be positioned in ways that privilege male experience. The female body is frequently fragmented, eroticised or presented as an object to be looked at, while male characters are more often associated with action, agency and narrative progression. Women therefore become visible, but their visibility does not necessarily mean that they possess narrative power.

This distinction between visibility and agency is crucial. A woman can occupy a central position on screen and yet remain trapped within a representational structure controlled by patriarchal assumptions. Feminist cinema, consequently, seeks not merely to increase the presence of women but to question the structures through which women become visible. The emergence of women filmmakers has created possibilities for challenging these established visual conventions. However, it would be problematic to assume that every woman filmmaker automatically produces feminist cinema. Gender identity alone does not guarantee a feminist aesthetic or politics. Women filmmakers, like all filmmakers, operate within particular industrial, cultural, ideological and economic structures.

Bell hooks's concept of the "oppositional gaze" further expands the discussion of spectatorship. In *Black Looks*, hooks emphasises that looking itself can become an act of resistance. Audiences do not passively consume cinematic images; they interpret them through experiences shaped by race, gender, class, history and social location. The politics of cinema therefore exists not only in the production of images but also in the ways those images are viewed and interpreted. Teresa de Lauretis similarly demonstrates how cinema participates in the production of gender itself. Gender is not simply represented through cinema; cinematic technologies and narratives also contribute to producing cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity. Feminist cinema therefore has the potential to intervene in these processes by disrupting familiar narrative patterns and creating alternative subject positions. Thus, feminist cinema attempts not only to represent women differently but also to transform the relationship between image, spectator and power.

3. Women Behind the Camera: Authorship, Labour and Authority

The question of women filmmakers must also be understood through the concept of authorship. Traditional film history has often celebrated male directors as auteurs while rendering the contributions of women and other workers in cinema invisible. Even when women participated in filmmaking, their labour was frequently treated as secondary to the supposedly central creative authority of the director. The category of "women behind the camera" therefore includes more than directors. Screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, producers, sound designers, costume designers, art directors,

makeup artists and other technicians contribute significantly to the construction of cinematic meaning. Their work determines how stories are seen, heard and experienced.

This makes the question of representation inseparable from the question of labour. Who has access to expensive equipment? Who is allowed to work on film sets? Who gets opportunities to lead technical departments? Who receives funding? Who gets to make decisions? Who receives institutional recognition? These questions reveal that gender inequality in cinema is also a question of access to resources and creative authority. The politics of feminist cinema must therefore address both representation and production. A truly democratic film culture requires not only diverse stories but also diversity among those who possess the power to produce those stories.

4. The Growth of Women Filmmakers in Indian Cinema

The history of Indian cinema demonstrates a gradual but significant expansion of women's participation in filmmaking. In the early decades of Indian cinema, women faced considerable social and institutional restrictions in entering creative and technical positions. Cinema itself was often regarded as an unsuitable or unconventional profession for women, particularly in departments involving extensive travel, irregular working hours and interaction within male-dominated professional spaces. Nevertheless, women gradually established themselves as important creative voices. Filmmakers such as Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjpye, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta expanded the possibilities of women's storytelling in Indian cinema.

Aparna Sen's films frequently explore women's identities, intimate relationships and conflicts within changing social structures. Her cinema demonstrates how the domestic and personal can become important sites of social and political inquiry. Sai Paranjpye brought a distinctive sensitivity to everyday middle-class life. Her films demonstrate that feminist concerns need not always appear through overt political declarations; they can emerge through the representation of ordinary relationships, aspirations and social expectations.

Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta expanded the geographical and thematic boundaries of Indian women's cinema. Their works connect questions of gender with migration, sexuality, social inequality, family structures and cultural identity. Their films also demonstrate how Indian women's experiences can enter global cinematic conversations without being reduced to a single cultural narrative. The later generation of filmmakers, including Kiran Rao, Farah Khan, Alankrita Shrivastava and Sudha Kongara, further diversified the cinematic landscape through different genres and narrative strategies. Their films engage with questions of personal freedom, professional ambition, sexuality, friendship, social inequality and individual identity. The importance of these filmmakers lies not simply in the fact that they are women. Their significance lies in the fact that they have occupied positions from which they can determine cinematic narratives and participate in defining whose experiences deserve cinematic attention.

5. Women Directors in Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam cinema provides an especially significant field for examining the emergence of women behind the camera. The history of women directing Malayalam cinema can be traced through the work of Vijaya Nirmala, who directed *Kavitha* in 1973. She subsequently established an extraordinary record as a woman director, entering the Guinness World Records for directing the highest number of films by a woman director. The emergence of women directors in Malayalam cinema has gradually expanded the thematic and aesthetic possibilities of the industry. Filmmakers such as Anjali Menon, Geetu Mohandas, Vidhu Vincent, Ratheena, Shruthi Sharanyam, Indu Lakshmi and Indu V. S. have brought diverse perspectives into Malayalam filmmaking.

Anjali Menon's *Manjadikuru* (2008), for instance, employs a child's perspective to explore family, memory, domestic relationships and social hierarchies. The film's narrative perspective subtly displaces the conventional patriarchal centre of the family and allows seemingly ordinary domestic experiences to acquire significance.

Geetu Mohandas's *Liar's Dice* (2013) foregrounds the vulnerability of a migrant woman and child within a landscape marked by displacement and uncertainty. Its restrained visual style, sparse dialogue and emphasis on vulnerability challenge the conventional heroic masculinity associated with mainstream narratives of travel, migration and conflict.

Vidhu Vincent's films engage with questions of labour, caste, gender and social inequality, while other contemporary women filmmakers have explored sexuality, identity, family, institutional structures and the complexities of contemporary life. Their cinema demonstrates that women filmmakers do not necessarily make films only about women. Rather, their presence can transform the ways in which human experiences themselves are approached. Domestic labour, bodily autonomy, workplace inequality, caste, migration, motherhood, sexuality and social expectations can acquire new cinematic forms when conventional narrative hierarchies are questioned.

6. Beyond the “Women’s Film”

An important distinction must be made between films made by women and feminist films. A film directed by a woman is not automatically feminist, just as a film centred on women's issues does not necessarily challenge patriarchy. Women filmmakers themselves operate within structures shaped by commercial cinema, market demands, star systems, censorship, funding mechanisms and audience expectations. They may therefore negotiate, compromise with or reproduce certain dominant structures even while attempting to challenge others. Feminist cinema should consequently be understood as a political and aesthetic practice rather than simply a category based on the filmmaker's gender. It involves questioning established forms of representation, challenging unequal power relations and creating space for women and other marginalised subjects to appear as complex, autonomous individuals. The significance of women behind the camera lies partly in the possibility of introducing different questions into filmmaking. Instead of asking only how a woman looks, feminist cinema can ask what she thinks,

what she desires, what she remembers, what labour she performs, what structures constrain her and how she understands the world around her.

7. Feminist Cinema as Social Intervention

Cinema possesses the ability to move private experiences into the public sphere. Experiences that are often treated as individual problems can acquire social and political meaning when represented through cinema. Domestic violence, unpaid care work, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, reproductive choices, migration, economic dependence and restrictions on women's mobility are not merely private concerns. They are connected to broader structures of power. Women filmmakers have contributed to making some of these experiences visible. Their interventions can challenge the assumption that the personal belongs outside the political. In this sense, feminist cinema participates in what can be described as a politics of visibility. At the same time, visibility alone is insufficient. A marginalised experience can be made visible without challenging the power structure that produced it. Feminist cinema therefore requires a movement from visibility towards agency, from objectification towards subjectivity and from representation towards participation.

8. Women's Film Festivals: Creating Alternative Publics

Women's film festivals emerged as important cultural and political spaces during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. The first international women's film festival was held in New York in 1972, followed by similar initiatives in Canada, Germany, France and elsewhere. These festivals were not simply alternative exhibition spaces. They created what may be understood as alternative publics for women's cinema. Films that struggled to find space within mainstream commercial circuits could reach audiences interested in different forms of storytelling. Such festivals also provided opportunities for networking, discussion, criticism and solidarity among women filmmakers and audiences. They challenged the assumption that mainstream cinema represented the universal human experience.

By creating spaces for voices excluded from dominant cinematic institutions, women's film festivals became part of the broader politics of cultural representation. They redirected attention towards everyday experiences, social inequalities, marginalised communities and alternative modes of storytelling.

9. Women in Cinema Collective and Workplace Politics in Malayalam Cinema

The formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) represents a significant development in the politics of gender and labour in Malayalam cinema. Rather than approaching discrimination as a series of isolated individual experiences, WCC created a collective platform through which women could articulate concerns related to safety, dignity, equality and professional rights. Its significance extends beyond the demand for better working conditions. WCC has contributed to a broader discussion about who has power within the film industry and how institutional structures can be made more accountable. The collective has emphasised that women should not be understood merely as performers or subjects of cinematic representation. They are also writers, directors, producers, editors, technicians and decision-makers. This shift from visibility to participation is central to the politics of feminist

cinema. The demand for safe workplaces, equal opportunities, professional dignity and institutional accountability is therefore also a demand for democratisation. It questions an industrial structure in which creative authority and professional power have historically been concentrated. The significance of such collective action becomes clearer when cinema is understood as labour rather than merely art. Film sets are workplaces, and questions of safety, wages, working conditions, dignity and institutional redress are therefore integral to the politics of cinema.

10. Intersectionality and the Future of Women's Cinema

The category "women" cannot be treated as a homogeneous category. Women's experiences are shaped by caste, class, religion, sexuality, disability, region, language and other social locations. A feminist cinema that focuses only on the experiences of relatively privileged women risks reproducing other forms of exclusion. This makes intersectionality an important dimension of contemporary feminist film criticism. The question is not simply whether women are represented, but which women are represented, whose experiences remain invisible, and who gets access to creative authority. Indian cinema, with its enormous linguistic, cultural and social diversity, provides a particularly important context for such a discussion. The future of feminist cinema must therefore involve greater representation not only of women but also of diverse women and marginalised communities within filmmaking institutions.

11. Conclusion

The history of women behind the camera is, ultimately, a history of the redistribution of creative power. Women filmmakers have not merely introduced new characters into cinema; they have contributed to new ways of seeing, narrating and interpreting the world. The politics of feminist cinema therefore extends from the screen to the film set, from representation to production, and from visibility to decision-making authority. It asks not only how women are represented but also who has the power to represent them. The increasing participation of women in filmmaking is consequently not merely a gender issue. It is an essential component of creating a richer, more diverse and democratic cinematic culture. Women filmmakers have expanded the boundaries of what can be represented, whose experiences can become stories and whose voices can participate in shaping visual culture.

Yet equality remains an unfinished process. Women continue to negotiate institutional structures, market pressures, workplace inequalities and deeply embedded assumptions about gender and creative authority. The emergence of women filmmakers, feminist film movements, women's film festivals and collective initiatives such as the Women in Cinema Collective has nevertheless transformed the possibilities of Indian cinema. The future of cinema depends not simply on placing more women in front of the camera, but on creating conditions in which women can write, direct, produce, edit, shoot, design, critique and decide. The question is ultimately one of power: who gets to tell the story, who gets to look, and who gets to decide what the world will see.

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