



Original Article

Individualization and sexuality of aging women in contemporary women's cinema of Bollywood

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Abstract

The depiction of aging women's sexuality has undergone a decent transformation in popular culture. In film studies, Women's cinema intervenes in the stereotypical depiction of women on screen and discusses various topics that have not been discussed exhaustively. Sexuality is one of the crucial topics among them. In Bollywood, Alankrita Shrivastava is one of the women directors who stood out among her peers. She discussed aging women's sexuality comprising urges, desires, and fantasy, focusing on their identity, individuality, and self-actualization. The films discussed all these complexities of aging women's sexuality with endearing sensitivity and delicacy. Using Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) Individualization and McRobbie's (2004) Female Individualization, this paper examined the sexuality of aging women depicted in the two films of Alankrita Shrivastava-Lipstick Under My Burkha (2017) and Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare (2020). This study also analyzed these characters' individualization of sexuality, which breaks the conventional barriers and their journey

Keywords:

Aging women, Female individualization, Women's cinema, Bollywood

Introduction

Sexuality is a complex and fluid term that has been discussed for ages. It is an obscure and essential relationship between sex and truth. The term

sexuality deliberately carries various implications and encompasses multiple aspects such as biological, physical, psychological, emotional, socio-political, and spiritual^[1] and has a reciprocal relationship with culture, politics, legality, philosophy, moral codes, ethics, and religious aspects of life.^[2] It is one of the crucial parts of human existence, regardless of age,^[3] which comes from culturally endangered sexual expressions that are recognized as 'sexual enactment'.^[4] Jackson and Scott^[5] deepened the meaning of sexuality by highlighting its connection with emotions, which take it away from more than just a 'sex act' or a sexual identity. Freud connected sexuality with pleasure, showing the tendency of humans to achieve it.^[6] However, some studies defined sexuality in a restricted, heteronormative, and

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genital-focused manner, which ignores individuals' subjective experiences.

Female sexuality is preferably changeable and variable across social contexts. The orientation of female sexuality tends toward relational and partner-centered.^[7] However, Studd and Schwenkhagen^[8] discussed the contrary condition back then in medieval times when men had an anxiety towards female sexuality, which continued till the beginning of the 20th century. In the Indian subcontinent, female sexuality was incompatible.^[2] The invasions in different times in India restricted women from expressing their sexuality openly and became stereotyped, prejudiced, and taboo for ages. In the mid-20th century, there were proliferating changes in the sexuality of women, especially their depiction by society, which enabled them to express their sexuality more openly. During the 20th century, there was increasing evidence of change in women's expression of sexuality. It leads to considerable variability in women's sexuality and the expression of sexual activity and desire for sexual pleasure.^[9]

Beck's theory^[10] of individualization emphasizes the freedom and choice of an individual and eventually studies the development of an individual's personal and social biography. This theory is grounded in second modernity or reflexive modernization, which explicitly discusses the ability of a 'person keeping the traditional categories behind'^[11] while emphasizing the notion of a life of one's own'.^[10] Individualization comprises breaking the 'old' lifestyle structure with the emergence of individual choice^[12] with 'self-monitoring practices'. It discusses public life freedom, such as societal and professional freedom, and private life freedom comprising their personal, intimate life, such as sexuality and relationships.^[11] McRobbie adopted Beck's and Giddens' work into 'female individualization'^[12] and spoke directly to the post-feminist generation, which encompasses women's free desires discussing priorities, individuality, and self-actualization. In female individualization, women write their biographies by selecting 'choice biographies' to almost predetermined 'standard biographies' and getting individual exposure and autonomy. The discussion of new femininity and female sexual autonomy is explicitly discussed in

female individualization; analyzing women's sexuality leads to being individualized.^[12] McRobbie's female individualization encompasses women's free desire, emphasizing the ability of women to 'brazenly enjoy their sexuality' without being fearful of the sexual double standard associated with earning one's living.^[12] Haug connected individualization with female sexuality, termed 'female sexualization', and identified how women live for themselves in bodily terms and determine their relationships with other human beings and the world. It projects an inclusion of the female subject in sexual ordering.^[13]

Female sexuality is highly discussed in popular culture, especially films that provide insight into how sexuality and gender are perceived.^[14] Numerous studies have researched the depiction of female sexuality in Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, as authors discussed the sexualization of young women^[15] but lacked the depiction of aging women's sexuality in Bollywood films. However, the scenario changed after 2010 as the women film makers in Bollywood initiated the discussion of the sexuality of aging women on screen. Nevertheless, there are still lacunae in the research of depicting the sexuality of aging women as this field of study remains untouched and can be more robust.

Taking this gap into account, we analyzed the depiction of aging women's sexuality in two Bollywood films, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare* (2020) by woman filmmaker Alankrita Shrivastava, one of the prominent women filmmakers in Bollywood who has discussed aging women's sexuality on screen. She focuses on previously undiscussed women's non-normative issues, such as their aging women's sexuality and desires, depicting the women who break the constraints of age and gender roles that hide their uniqueness and authentic selves. Her films have been crucial for expressing substantial changes in women's characterization and the emergence of female individuality. By using the theory of 'Female Individualization' proposed by McRobbie.^[12] This study focuses on the aging characters 'Buaji' and 'Dolly' (Radha) of the films *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare* (2020), respectively. The study

discusses the transformation of these aging women from hiding their sexuality from society to breaking the conventional barriers to achieving self-autonomy.

Methodology

This paper is descriptive and analyzes the depiction of aging women's sexuality concerning their sexual desires, fantasies, needs, and the societal perspective and consequences faced by these women in the women's cinema of Bollywood. Drawing from McRobbie's (2004) *Female Individualization*, the women characters 'Buaji' and 'Dolly' (Radha) from *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare*, respectively, are examined. The study uses narrative analysis and studies the narrative structure of these two films and the use of symbolic and technical elements on the subject of the aging female characters. This analysis is well-stepped forward by discussing how the theory of "Female Individualization" combined with 'sexualization' can be applied in the depiction of aging women's sexuality in Bollywood films.

Lipstick Under My Burkha

Lipstick Under My Burkha (d. Alankrita Shrivastava, 2017) shows the secret lives of four women at different stages who live in Bhopal. The film shows their journey of hiding fantasies, pain, desires, happiness, and anger under a veil and being forced to lead double lives due to socially constructed patriarchal pressures. The film shows how the inner and outer realms affect their lives, sexual fantasies, and personal choices. The central character of this film is a 55-year-old widow named 'Usha Parmar' aka 'Buaji', the owner of a 100-year-old building, 'Hawai Manzil'. She is a matriarch with authority and a decision-maker of the family and her tenants, who respect her. She secretly reads 'Lipstick Wale Sapne' (Lipstick Dreams), the story of Rosie and others from 'Ashleel' (obscene) pulp fiction novels, her favorite pastime, decoded her sexual urge and a multi-faceted personality. This elderly character becomes used to being addressed as 'Buaji' (Aunty), as she has forgotten her name but misses her old self, which she has buried for the responsibility.

Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare

Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare (d. Alankrita Shrivastava, 2020) is the story of two women, 'Dolly' (Radha) and 'Kitty', (Kajal), who live in Noida and work in a government office and dating app, respectively, tracking their prickly dynamics to dreadful secrets, dreams, desires, and freedom. The film shows their journey of wanting to come out of love and the need to live independent and liberal lives. 'Dolly' is one of the two protagonists, a middle-aged, disenchanted married woman who carries an unsatisfied marriage and searches for her sexual desire, which she is not getting from her husband. Eventually, she becomes attracted to a young food delivery boy, 'Osman', and finds love and sexual satisfaction in him. The title *Chamakate Sitare* connects to the five-star rating for the service provided by Osman to Dolly and for 'Kitty' on the Red Rose dating app for her customer service.

This study focuses on the two aging women 'Buaji' (Usha Parmar) from *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (d. Alankrita Shrivastava, 2017) and 'Dolly' (Radha) from *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare* (d. Alankrita Shrivastava, 2020) who get sexually attracted to younger men than them. These women desire their sexual urges and want to fulfill their sexual needs, which is comparatively non-normative and socially taboo.

Aging women's sexuality-hiding from society to individuality

Aging is one of the significant factors where women's sexuality is highly impacted. The double standard towards aging in our society is so pervasive that it enters our self-image without us being fully aware. In many instances, societal constraints on aging have a more significant inclusive impact on older persons' sexuality than do practical or functional ones.^[16] According to Rice^[17], aging women, unlike men, lose their freshness as they age as ageism diminishes their physical beauty and ability to entertain and amuse others. Their devaluation as asexual with a lack of vitality declines cognitive and decrepit.^[18,19] However, in a recent study, Curley and Johnson^[6] highlight the contrary statement, which focuses on the incorporation of sexual wisdom, sexual experience, and sexual diversity as aspects of positive aging.

The popular media, especially film, have been identified as a site of increasing visibility for aging female sexuality,^[20] which shows the overshadowing of older women's sexuality and is presumed to have lost one of the significant measures of femininity, and thus, their values in society became only bearers of children and the caretakers of the family.^[21] Numerous older people are generally under-represented in the media studies.^[22, 23, 24] Their sexuality was primarily muted, and their bodies were displayed as objects of ridicule rather than objects of desire. In Hollywood, aging women were represented only under two categories: 'Madonna' as a mother figure and 'Whore', the more sexualized image.^[21] According to Curley and Johnson^[16], Media portrayals may perpetuate societal expectations of the asexual older adult or show the "sexy oldie". Their representation became double marginalized by their age and gender.^[21] Contemporary English-speaking films have been celebrated for positively validating older women's sexuality. The Australian film *Innocence* (d. Paul Cox, 2000), the Hollywood film *The Banger Sisters* (d. Bob Dolman, 2002), the Canadian-American film *Cloudburst* (d. Thom Fitzgerald, 2013), the British film *45 Years* (d. Andrew Haigh, 2015), *Calendar Girls* (d. Maria Loohefud and Love Martinsen, 2022), and *Good Luck To You, Leo Grande* (d. Sophie Hyde, 2022) represented sexually active older women.^[25, 26] Their approach to the sexual identities of older women distanced itself from strict traditional perceptions. It became more permissive regarding a greater variety of representation of older women.^[21]

Nevertheless, the scenario of depicting aging women in Bollywood films is not the same as in English cinema. The representation of older women's sexuality is presumed to have lost one of the significant measures of femininity. In the post-liberalization era, Bollywood cinema emphasized the idea of individuality. Their sexuality is either not represented at all or occasionally manifests itself as derision. Some examples can be found in the older female characters in films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (d. Karan Johar, 2001), *Jaane Tu... Ya Jaane Na* (d. Abbas Tyrewala, 2008), *English Vinglish* (d. Gauri Shinde, 2012), *Tribhanga* (d. Renuka Shahane, 2021), and many films portrayed older women who are viewed as being limited to the duties of mothers and

grandmothers, as well as bearers of cultural and familial values.^[27] The portrayal of their sexuality, pleasure, and desires was suppressed and symbolized a humorous element. Nonetheless, the situation gradually changed when filmmakers from Bollywood considered the equal importance of older women's current prominence in film and the efforts made to depict their actual lives and sexuality and experiences that highlight their issues^[28, 29, 30] and described the elderly sexualized female characters entirely in contrast to the dutiful, obedient, and traditional persona of womanhood in Bollywood films.^[15]

Alankrita Shrivastava is one among these filmmakers who showcased individualized aging women expressing their desires, sexuality, and living their fantasies, which is non-normative. The protagonist, 'Buaji' (*Lipstick Under My Burkha*), is an aging widow and matriarch who struggles to achieve individualization and sexual autonomy. She gets attracted to a younger person, 'Jaspal', despite knowing the forbiddance from society.^[31] The depiction of older women's widowhood in Bollywood was quite different as the filmmakers stressed the portrayal of their neglect, mistreatment, abandonment, and social ostracization of widows^[32] through films such as *White Rainbow* (d. Dharan Mandrayar, 2005) and *Water* (d. Deepa Mehta, 2005) instead of discussing their individuality. The contrary depiction of the old widowed women can be seen in an American film, *The Mother* (d. Niki Caro, 2023), which concentrates on older sexually active women who are stuck in an asexual niche and want to revive repressed needs for physical love and intimacy.^[21] This can be directly linked to the Bollywood film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) by Alankrita Shrivastava, where the older woman 'Buaji' is portrayed as free to seek more satisfying sexual relationships presented as conflicting with their desires.

The middle-aged woman's sexuality and her extra-marital relationship are also discussed by Shrivastava and break the customary rule that Indian women are generally expected to maintain a quiet demeanor while interacting with males outside of their home and to be selfless spouses and mothers who sacrifice their personal needs and always think about the betterment of their families,

especially their husbands.^[33] The middle-aged woman, 'Dolly', is depicted as sexually individualized and can choose her partner for the sake of getting satisfied. Dolly hides her painful intimacy with her husband and gets intimate with her young boyfriend, 'Osman', when no one is home to avoid inevitable consequences in her marital life and to save her marital alliance.^[34]

These women's psychosocial circumstances forced them to hide their sexual desires from their families and society to avoid dishonor from society and family, which might be a reason for distressing their image in people's eyes. Since their expression of sexuality could lead to taboo or humiliation of societal norms. However, these characters' personal space encouraged them to be individualized by living their own lives.^[10] 'Buaji' becomes individualized in her bedroom. Despite being an authoritative and happy woman in public, she represents her inner sadness and loneliness, hides her fantasy, and walks alone in her journey of desires. Resultantly, 'Buaji' projects the profile of an aging woman who conceals her urge to be young and sexualized as she has compromised her sexuality and youth due to her early age widowhood and responsibility towards her late brother's children. 'Dolly's' demanding intimacy from her husband also takes her step towards individuality. Here, filmmaker Shrivastava intervenes in the stereotypical image of a married woman who is sacrificial without any demand, either physical, mental, or sexual, and shows a middle-aged woman with self-autonomy^[10] who drives her sexuality.

Individualization through sexuality

For older women, social stigma, guilt, and cultural stereotypes regarding sexuality and aging force them to become 'desexualized' and restrict them from being 'sexualized'. This de-sexualization of older women is depicted through 'Buaji', where her family expected her to concentrate on worship, charity, and looking after family and grandchildren as her widowhood, layered with aging, ultimately made her desexualized in the eyes of her family. On the other hand, in *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare*, 'Dolly', despite desiring more sex demands from her husband, she got a denial from him in the name of age, midlife crisis, and preferring the upbringing of children over privacy and intimacy. Her husband's negligence towards intimacy caused

an unsatisfactory marital relationship. It led to disputes between the couple and her resentment towards her husband, which led to emotional and relational stress in Dolly's intimate life.

However, these women could not hide their sexuality from society for so long; claiming to be desexualized made them more sexually individualized. 'Buaji' gets attracted to the muscular body of young swimming coach 'Jaspal'. She buys a swimming costume to wear to meet Jaspal every day at the swimming coaching center, provoking her sexual urge, which was forbidden to her for years. Her individualized self opens up in the bathroom, where she makes an erotic conversation on the phone every night with 'Jaspal' but with a different identity as 'Rosie', who is young, beautiful, and erotic, again shows her need to hide her own identity for the sake of her self-doubt about her looks and gray hair, rejection from 'Jaspal' and to avoid defamation from society as they might think that this is not an 'age-appropriate behavior'.^[35] Hence, hiding her own identity and accepting another imaginary identity denotes her approach to being free and making her own choices.^[12] Night-time represents an open door for living her desires. The darkness of night became a metaphor for society's blindness, while the light allowed 'Buaji' to transform herself from living for others to living for her desires.^[12] Representing her masturbating and getting an orgasm is another peak for individualization of sexuality.

Altogether, 'Dolly's' individualization of sexuality is depicted through her orgasm from intimacy with her young partner. Their closeness, followed by intimacy, made Dolly realize that her lack of sexual satisfaction with her husband Amit was not due to a clinical disorder but to a lack of desire. The film also discusses 'Dolly's' mother's struggle for individualization. The unwanted meeting of 'Dolly' with her mother, who ran away with her boyfriend by leaving her young daughter 'Dolly' in childhood, preferred her happiness and satisfaction over her family and children. The psychosocial factors, such as lack of relationship satisfaction and emotional support, affected her sexual functioning.

'Buaji' (Lipstick Under My Burkha, 2017) and 'Dolly's' (*Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare*, 2020) depictions resemble the recent film *Good*

Luck to You, Leo Grande (d. Sophie Hyde, 2022) opens to sex complexities and explains sex as a medium of healing and cathartic fun.^[36] In her film, Shrivastava counters the elderly women's portrayal surrounded by stigmas of 'weakness', 'vulnerability', and 'unattractiveness' and intervenes in the old dual morality, which forbids women to think about their sexuality. This became a trigger for women to prefer their selves.^[12] Through the portrayal of these individualized aging characters, Alankrita Shrivastava breaks the convention that sexuality might degrade the social standing of women, which was treated as a stain in society. These women struggle with ageism, stigma, and shame stemming from perceived social disapproval of their sexuality.^[37]

Breaking barriers: Journey to autonomous development

According to Beck^[11], breaking the 'old' lifestyle structure, consisting of barriers, leads to autonomous development. It provides the emergence of freedom of individual choice. Bollywood cinema shows the sexuality of aging women by breaking normative rules through films and web series such as *A Death in the Gunj* (d. Konkona Sen Sharma, 2016), *A Suitable Boy* (d. Mira Nair; Shimit Amin, 2020), *My Beautiful Wrinkles-Modern Love Mumbai* (d. Alankrita Shrivastava, 2022), and *Darlings* (d. Jasmeet K. Reen, 2022). The aging women 'Buaji' and Dolly are depicted as courageous in breaking barriers and coping with distress, which makes them individualized. 'Buaji's' transformation from wearing a faded saree to a pink saree, black dyed hair, red lipstick, and pink rose-in hair while meeting 'Jaspal' at 'Diwali Mela' (Exhibition for Diwali festival) shows her journey towards autonomous development. The narration "Rosie ne kudaal uthai aur kabristan mein us jinda sapne ko dhundane nikal padi" (Rosie picks up the spade and sets out to search for that living dream in the graveyard) shows the courage of Buaji, who dug up her desires which she had been buried since years due to her responsibility and societal pressure. This firmly enunciated her transformation from a 'normal biography' to a self-determined 'reflexive biography'. However, her step towards self-autonomy led to humiliation resulting in being thrown out of her home by her family unceremoniously, along with some clothes and

erotic novels found in her room by saying, "Humara nahin toh apne umar ka toh khayal kiya hota tumne, 55 saal ki budhiya vidhwa". (If not us, you should have thought about your age, a 55-year-old widow) She meted out the most brutal punishment for this pitty theft of the moment of sexual pleasure experienced by her.

On the other hand, her husband humiliates Dolly by saying, "Ek bacche se ladke ko lover banake pagal ho gayi ho tum" (You have gone mad by making a kid like a young boy as a lover) shows the family's denial and rejection towards her expression of sexuality. However, her husband accepts her in the societal fear. She tried to make herself realize her 'Galati' (mistake) and asked her to start a new life.

These incidences of rejection and realization obligate the two women to propose an independent self-presentation lifestyle.^[38] They prefer two different ways of resentment. By being optimistic, 'Buaji' prefers cigarette smoking, while by refusing to live with her husband, 'Dolly' prefers to leave home. These steps made their individualized achievement sufficient to overcome the social constraints^[39] and reinforced them to be self-realized with personal autonomy. The psychosocial circumstances of these aging women affected their social relationships and mental processes that support the connections between these aging women and their social world.

Conclusion

Alankrita Shrivastava's films *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakate Sitare* (2020) discussed the sexuality of aging women through their characters 'Buaji' (Usha) and 'Dolly' (Radha), which was agonizingly invisible on screen up until now. These films focused on female individualization concerning sexuality, which deeply stressed the identity, individuality, and self-actualization of sexualized aging women. The main focus of Shrivastava's films is not only depicting the sexual desires, fantasy, or non-normative sexual relationships of these women with younger partners but also their openness, rebellion, and endurance to breaking the barriers for their self-autonomy. The films highlighted all these complexities of aging women's sexuality with endearing sensitivity and delicacy.

They enunciated aging women's journey from 'living for others' to a 'life of one's own' by focusing on their sexual urges and needs, which they have buried due to various circumstances, including their family and society. The individualization of sexuality of these aging women is analyzed through the journey from hiding from society to breaking the barriers for autonomous development, which leads to individualization and makes these women the authors of their own lives.

The portrayal of aging women's sexuality through these films produces social and personal change. It helps to shape the psychosocial perspective of society as people can understand the sexual urge of aging women is one of the fundamental and essential things in their lives. As the depiction of aging women on screen has gradually changed, it will help change the social attitude toward older women's societal position. It can build up their relationship status with their family and social peers. These films can help to break the stereotypical social stance that leads to social taboos. The films could encourage society to consider the sexual liberation of aging women and help to normalize the gradual awakening of sexuality among them. The open discussion of the sexuality of aging women, which was taboo, can now change to a visible and open depiction of it. These films may also empower to make individual changes among elderly women and imbibe reflexivity. These kinds of films may encourage older women to normalize their sexual urges without feeling it taboo.

Meanwhile, future research can be conducted on the social perception of aging women's sexuality on screen, which discusses the actual perspective and its impact on people for shaping their attitudes. Further, both qualitative and quantitative design would give more insights and scopes to examine the socio-cultural factors in analyzing the individualization of aging women's sexuality.

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