

# Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

---

Volume 24

Issue 1 *Asian Feminisms and Youth Activism:  
Focus on India and Pakistan*

Article 15

---

11-1-2022

## Review of Lipstick Under My Burkha by Prakash Jha Productions.

Urusha Silwal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Silwal, Urusha (2022) "Review of Lipstick Under My Burkha by Prakash Jha Productions.," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol24/iss1/15>

This Media Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact [DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu](mailto:DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu).

## CHAPTER 17

---

### Media Review

## Review of Lipstick Under My Burkha by Prakash Jha Productions 2017

**Urusha Silwal**

### Independent Scholar

How do ordinary women find ways to exercise their personal and sexual rights in a society full of restrictions? To what extent they must go to live and breathe freely? All these questions and more are answered by Alankrita Shrivastava's second directorial film *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. This movie shows how sexual desires and fantasies of four women are suppressed by men both verbally and behaviorally in a small town of India. It is a conversation starter about gender equality, freedom and women's identity.

Burkha is enveloping outer clothing that covers the whole body which is mostly worn by women practicing Islamic faith. In this movie, lipstick is used as a metaphor for sexual freedom and Burkha is a metaphor for the restrictions imposed on women. Although only two leading women wear Burkha in the movie, all four women are seen wearing lipstick depicting commonality in diversity.

Patriarchal values and social norms have embedded gender inequality in the South Asian society. And Bollywood is no exception to this phenomenon. The movie is centered around the male protagonist's life and what he wants. In Bollywood, women-centric movies are often ignored, and women's characters are relegated in the background, except for very few movies. Bollywood is star-driven, so the popularity of the male actor and their fan-base determines whether a movie will be commercially successful or not. The amount of women-centric films is very low, let alone a movie that explores the sexual freedom of women. In this scenario, even making and releasing a film like this in India was a huge accomplishment by itself.

The movie is shot in Bhopal, the capital city of Madhya Pradesh state of India, which is on the verge of becoming a metropolitan city. Bhopal is considered an unsafe city for women. The film features four main female characters. Each of them comes from different social status and privileges, battling their struggles and hiding it from the rest of the world.

Usha Parmar played by Ratna Pathak is a 55-year old widow, highly respected in her neighborhood, everyone calls her Buwa Ji (aunty). She is deemed asexual because of her age. There is a wonderful scene in the movie where she is asked for her name, and she feels like she has forgotten her name and identity for many years. She reads her erotic novel- "Rosy's lipstick dreams" in secre-

cy. She owns the residential building “Hawaimanjil” where the other three protagonists live as tenants. Leela, played by Aahana Kumra, is a beautician who works in a local beauty parlor. She wants to move outside of Bhopal, to pursue her dreams. She likes to have sex, wants to elope with her Muslim boyfriend (Vikrant Massey) but is engaged to a guy forcefully by her widowed mother who wants to marry her off to a reputed and privileged family.

Rehana, played by Plabita Borthakur, rebellious in nature, is a freshman in college, helps her family in sewing burkhas. Obligated to wear burkha all the time, she is seen stealing clothes and make-up products from the mall and wears jeans and t-shirts, against her religious norm, in college. She is a fan of Mylie Cyrus and listens to Led Zeppelin which deems her interesting enough to be approached by a rich guy in college. Shireen Aslam, played by Konkana Sen Sharma, is a mother of three, secretly works as a successful door to door salesmen against her husband’s wish. She is too scared to say no to her husband’s sex urges and thus becomes a victim of marital rape.

### (Spoilers ahead)

The story of four women runs parallel to the voice-over done by Usha of the erotic pulp-fiction Hindi pornographic novel- “Rosy’s lipstick dreams” The story is told by Rosy who is the main character of the book. The narration of her sexual longing and fantasies have been used as a premise to introduce the lead characters and important scenes in the movie. As the movie progresses, Usha develops sexual fantasies for her grandchildren’s swimming instructor. To gain his attention, she joins swimming classes offered by him. It is fascinating to see the efforts she takes in secrecy just to make her first trip to the mall and buy a swimming costume. Later, she engages in phone sex with the same swimming instructor by using pseudo-name-Rosy, who is the lead character of the novel that she reads every night. In the end, she is kicked out from the house after, what her family members think, is a shameful and disgraceful act.

Leela, on the night of her engagement, makes a sex tape with her boyfriend. She faces rejection in a job interview and is humiliated by her boyfriend. After finding out that her soon-to-be fiancé wants to keep her as a housewife after marriage, she makes arrangement to elope with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend condemns her for wanting to have sex every time and she starts building a cordial relationship with her fiancé. In the end, her fiancé finds that sex tape and is disappointed in her.

Rehana tries to audition for the college’s popular band. She joins her colleagues in protesting the ban of jeans for women in the college. And in an interview talks openly about the oppression of women in society. She openly questions the authority in this video. This grabs the attention of the rich kids in school and Dhruv, the college band’s drummer, who she later becomes close to. In the end, in charges of protesting and stealing clothes, she is sent to jail. Her father bails her out of the jail, scolds her for showing dishonorable behavior and does not let her step out of the house.

Similarly, Shireen gets a warning from her doctor to take care of her reproductive health and to convince her husband to use condoms. She gets a promotion offer to become a sales trainer. While she is thinking of ways to disclose this to her husband, she finds out that he is having an extra-marital affair. In the end, her husband finds out she accepted the offer and she is working outside the house. Instead of praising her, he rapes her and tells her not to work anymore. That moment is so heart wrenching that it brought tears to my eyes.

Things do not get better at the end. There is no solution given or shown. The climax is open-ended and open to interpretation. The reality does not change for all the four women. They simply learn to accept it openly. From one perspective, I feel that the ending could have been better. It didn't do justice and gave a full closure to the conflict presented in the story. From another perspective, I also understand that in reality, positive changes do not take place overnight. Changing the mindset of people and making them aware of gender equality is not an easy task. That's when I realized that the movie is simply wanting to act as a mirror representation of contemporary society.

This movie invokes different emotions in the viewers. The credit must go to the four protagonist's tremendous acting skills. Ratna Pathak steals the show with Usha's character. Her character makes you feel almost uncomfortable thinking about how her society is suppressing the desires of senior citizen widows in India. The vulnerability with which she portrays the character is truly commendable. You will start to see older people from a new perspective after watching this movie.

Leela's character reminds you of the dichotomous and hypocrite social norms of the society. It is the same norm that preaches women's education and freedom, but it's the same norm that does not let women come out of their shell. Although her character is loud and fierce, her anger and frustrations do not feel exaggerated. There is a subtlety to it. Rehana's character reminds you of your rebellious teenage years and to what extent women have to go to India, just to wear and do something that they want. Her performance made me visualize a bird that is dying to come out of the cage and fly. Konkana Sen Sharma does full justice to Shireen's character. Her character is layered and acting is very nuanced. She makes you empathize with all the women who are treated as sex-objects in their own homes. It is amazing to see her switch from a happy saleswoman to a detective-natured woman to a helpless and emotional wife.

Unlike typical Bollywood movies, the characters are so relatable that the audience of Indian women watching this movie can relate to at least one character maybe more. Because of these features of characterization and storytelling, this movie is not just relevant in India, but it has a universal appeal. The bravery shown by Shrivastava to tackle the issue of women's sexual rights with exceptional writing is commendable. The story and screenplay both written by Alankrita Shrivastava, are the highlights of the movie. It is wrong to say that this film is immaculate. There are several details that needs refining. Some secondary plots feel unnecessary. The scenes of shop-

lifting without getting caught, four women smoking together to show liberation feel contrived. What makes this movie refreshing are the tiny moments of satirical humor that is used to lighten up the serious tone that focuses on heavy social and feminist issues. The dialogues are very appropriately written according to the dialect of Hindi spoken in Bhopal. It incorporates the colloquial nuances and slangs of the local language.

Breaking the stereotype of a typical Bollywood movie, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* places a woman's desire at the forefront of the movie. It is because of this reason the movie got into controversy and was denied release because it was "women-centric" and people misinterpreted it as an obscene movie when its first trailer released on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2016. The film released all over India only on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017. Despite going through several controversies, the movie was critically acclaimed for its unique story and exceptional acting performances of the lead cast, not just in India but worldwide. It managed to grab many international movie awards and premiered in many film festivals. The four main actors received several nominations and awards for this movie.

In conclusion, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is a story written by a woman, about women, and for women. The women in this movie are not aiming for world domination. They just want to be happy and live independently. It is an honest depiction of women's everyday struggles not just about their sexual life but basic human rights like the right to equality and the right to happiness and identity. This movie might not bring about a radical change in society, but it will let the viewer observe the sensitivities of a women's world transparently.