

Women and Film-making in India: Paromita Vohra Interviewed by Antonia Navarro-Tejero

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Paromita Vohra is a film-maker, writer and media activist whose work has focused on issues of gender, politics, urban life and popular media. Her years in film-making have included work in documentary, television drama and music shows, feature film and short fiction. She has written, produced and directed *Morality TV and the Loving Jihad: A Thrilling Tale* (2008), (Best Short Documentary, IVFK (International Video Festival of Kerala), 2008); *Q2P* (2006), (Best Documentary IFFLA (Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles), 2007); *Where's Sandra* (2005); *Work In Progress* (2004), (for WSF (World Social Forum) India Trust); *Cosmopolis: Two Tales of A City* (2004), (for the Kala Ghoda Festival), which won an award at the Indo-British Digital Film Festival (2004); *Unlimited Girls* (2001), (Best Documentary WFFIS (Women's Film Festival in Seoul) and Aaina, Bhuvaneshwar); *A Short Film About Time* (1999); *A Woman's Place* (1998), and *Annapura: Goddess of Food* (1995), (made for the Beijing Conference). Her work as a scriptwriter includes *If You Pause: In a Museum of Craft* (Sameera Jain, 2005); a series of short fiction films on communal conflict for the People's Decade of Human Rights Education (PDHRE) (2005); *Khamosh Pani (Silent Waters)* (Sabiha Sumar, 2003), (Best Screenplay award at the Kara Film Festival, 2003), and the documentaries *A Few Things I Know About Her* (Anjali Panjabi, 2000) and *Skin Deep* (Reena Mohan, 1998). This interview took place in New Delhi on 10 October 2008.

Do you believe that gender equity is the basis for a democratic and free country, the first step for social change? Is that the reason why you address gender issues in your work?

I do believe that gender equity is a matter of human fairness—so yes, it's the basis for a democratic and free country and a country or society can't call itself that if it doesn't have gender equity—but frankly it's a lot more basic. It's a simple matter of right and wrong (and that's the only part that's simple in it).

Could you tell us what the 'A Woman's Place' project, which you coordinate, is about?

'A Woman's Place' Project is a collective of women from different countries using media to make social change. It grew out of a documentary film project begun by my colleague in the US, Maria Nicolo. The film project looked at women from different countries shifting the paradigms of power. Our first episode, shot in India, South Africa and the US and focusing on the law aired on PBS, but we also held hundreds of screenings. At the time we felt that while making alternative images in the media was important and necessary, it was not

sufficient. We needed to work on the way people interacted with these images, in particular the way women internalised the conflicting messages of 'woman power' but only within a consumer context and repressive sexual images, rather than expressive ones. So we began to work on a media education program with teenage girls. The program emphasised an analytical relationship with the media and the developing of a political framework through creativity. We did not focus all our energies on producing video as is common, but rather on a variety of creative forms—radio, video, writing, art.

Do you consider yourself a feminist film-maker?

Yes, I do. This is not at all a matter of using film to amplify a feminist message. It is a matter of creating forms which are feminist, which embody the feminist eye turned upon the world.

As a woman director, did you have to struggle with extra-difficulties when getting your films produced?

No, I don't think so. In fact, the bigger difficulty is one of making sure you are not ghettoised—a woman film-maker only facilitated to make films about 'women's issues'. The reality of funding is that there is funding available for women's issues within a certain space—not the mainstream of course—but within the alternative space. But the question is, what is considered women's issues? What sort of films are acceptable to a liberal funder?

Have you ever faced censorship, like Deepa Mehta when she tried to shoot Water in Varanasi?

No, I haven't. The task of the artist is to be subversive, to challenge and change the approaches in a culture, and not facing censorship is in my opinion the greater sign of success.

What is the reaction to your films in India; is it different from what you get abroad?

That's a question with many answers. It's not a matter of India or abroad. It's a matter of types of people in both spaces. In India I would say my films are popular, people like them, enjoy them and, it is my hope, claim them. I think when the films are shown abroad, it's the same with regular, mixed audiences. Then I think there's a certain orthodox left that thinks documentaries should be made within a certain agit-prop or developmental convention and they feel ambivalent. They enjoy my films and for that very reason feel perhaps they aren't all that serious. There's also a certain ambivalence in dealing with any discourse which is not a pan-Indian discourse; the national-level discussion. This is an approach I consciously avoid because otherwise it seems to me that it's the same as the government's in form, just a little different in content, so it does not alter the paradigm of the debate. Similarly, they may have a set theory of what are appropriate (hence truly) political topics. So that becomes an area of contention for them. And abroad there are always people who are more comfortable with a similar construction of India as a place of essentialised

politics and rough-hewn forms. For the big festivals, some funding sources have fixed notions of form and content. But I think it's also changing so there are more independently minded festivals and funders both.

What is the history of the representation of Indian women in the cinema?

I am afraid that's not a question I can answer just like that. It's worthy of a book after all and it is very complicated.

What about foreign women, how are they represented?

Well, foreign women have conventionally been represented as being on the one hand sexually desirable for their fair skin and their toned bodies—but it's double edged because they are seen as being sexually loose. This makes them both desirable and contemptible, and an emblem for all that is seen as negative and threatening about Western culture—sexual liberation/promiscuity and loss of family values as well as the idea of women being outside the home and sexually active.

Fair skin color seems to be a positive characteristic for female actors, even in South Indian movies. Why is it idealized in the cinema industry?

For the same reason it's idealised in life: Colonialism, caste and race. Brahmins as well as the British were usually fairer skinned. So that's what's considered desirable I suppose, a sign of racial superiority and purity.

What stories are the most demanded ones by the Indian audience?

I think a survey of films will show you there is no one answer to this question—there are several Indian audiences, and several types of films that cater to their needs, from action to comedy to family dramas. There are several distribution territories in India and there is a perception of what cinema works in regional cultures as well as urban/semi-urban/rural contexts.

How is your process of scriptwriting?

My process of scriptwriting sort of criss crosses between the systematic and the instinctive I'd say. I do a certain amount of research. But very soon in the research process I begin to perceive a certain mood I would like to go with, a central idea I become interested in exploring and explicating. So often, the script is almost like an exposition of how I came to understand a certain idea. I don't believe in making documentaries which try to be comprehensive. For me, it's a very passionate form, in which I try to speak of my impressions of the world, my relationship—political, aesthetic and emotional—with the particular subject I have chosen, but also in relation to the moment I find myself in historically, the context I happen to be working in. Once that idea begins to be clearer, it drives the structure of the script. This is true of all my films, but beyond that, at a technical level, different films have different degrees of specificity in the scripts—*Unlimited Girls*, *Where's Sandra*, and my newest film, *Morality TV and the Loving Jihad: A Thrilling Tale*, were quite strongly scripted

after the research process and the script guided the shooting process. Nevertheless one has to remember, the script is a guideline, it's not written in stone. If your central approach is clear to you, if you know what you are basically feeling interested by, then you will be open to the spontaneous development or turn of events. And you will also realize the shortcomings of the script as you shoot, and compensate for them by finding something else that is needed. And then there's a third stage of scripting in the editing, because documentary film shooting is a very dynamic process and your understanding constantly evolves—both of the subject and your own art. At this point, there will of course be a lot of restructuring, re-orienting of the material, and there may be new aesthetic elements introduced—like a commentary or animation. As opposed to this, *Cosmopolis: Two Tales of a City* and *Q2P* were made quite differently, with no real scripts. But, as otherwise, the central idea of the film and the aesthetic approach were clear. *Cosmopolis* had fiction in it so that had to be written after the non fiction was shot, because it was the interstitial material. *Q2P* was constructed intuitively, part by part. So for that there would only be one page treatments for each sequence that we would use as a talking tool for the crew and then try to go out and shoot to the mood of each piece. I basically believe it's about a sensibility, a feeling that you take out with you, honestly and openly. And you allow the reality outside you and the sensibility within you to interact with each other, and allow whatever emerges from that equation to be the film. The script is a set of steps that guide this dance and interplay.

Which movies would you recommend for an overall idea of women's situation in India?

Of mainstream fiction films, almost none. Of documentaries lots and lots. There are too many to name. You could look on the website of freedomfilmsindia.org as well as delhifilmarchive.com to get some sense of the variety of films and issues and approaches.

In your teaching, how do you relate film-making with women's empowerment?

Well, it's not about women's empowerment and film-making. There's no direct connection. If a woman makes a film this does not automatically make her empowered—certainly not if she replicates ideas that aren't hers, that are not critical, original, passionate. This is true of men, women, children, activists and artists. Film-making is an art. Art is an intuitive way of understanding and expressing the world. It is a place which allows for ambiguity, for ambivalence, for observation and percolation as you try to make sense of the world, to develop and present a political response. In some sense I would say feminism, like art, also privileges this sort of intuitive approach, this theorizing from experience and so the two have an innate, genetic sort of link and kinship. So for me, to practice your art in a true sense is to be an empowered individual and one who hopefully allows for the empowerment of others—those in our films to whom we accord complexity and humanity. That's what I teach my students: I teach them to search for the individual voice and the unique gaze which is theirs and to join it to the larger conversation of the world. To learn the skill of writing or film-making well and not imagine that it is sufficient to feel politically indignant or to be a woman and speaking of women. It is about being refined and diligent

in one's approach. And to respect the language of your chosen form—writing or film-making or whatever else and to believe that the way in which you speak impacts the world. I do believe that it's a very masculinised notion—this notion of the revolutionary film-maker who goes around changing the world with his agit-prop cinema. I don't have a whole lot of interest in it—although I concede it's validity and importance for a certain political moment. But history shifts and our language must shift and change to clearly record as well as respond to it.

Skin Deep is defined as being a mock-umentary. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

Well, this question is best addressed to the director really. But in the scriptwriting process the film tried to approximate the modes of documentary, to present a sort of frame which is talking about appearances, about how reality is constructed, and this was parallel to the subject of the film which was about women's relationship with their appearance and how that constructs their self-identity.

Are there many Annapurnas, women and goddesses united by food?

Well, I certainly have two films which feature her in different ways. My first film, *Annapurna*, was about a woman's organization of food workers. The other, *Cosmopolis*, was a diptych in which one of the parts is about food politics and is called *Defeat of a Minor Goddess*. In the film, Annapurna, goddess of food, and Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, battle each other for primacy over the city of Bombay. But in a sense Lakshmi is only another version of Annapurna—Annapurna signifying the idea of plenitude through food, an idea which later gets recast as wealth/money. And goddesses in that sense are versions of each other in mythology.