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## Unveiling the Secret of *Secret Superstar*: A Feminist Approach

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**Abstract:** In most parts of the world, females have always been the victim of oppressive patriarchy and male chauvinism since ages. This problem has been represented by many people through various forms of creation be it art, literature or films. Films are purportedly the most popular visual medium of entertainment through which a large segment of people can be approached. Like literature, film is also a work of art which mirrors the society; it also depicts the reality of the society though it has some fictionality in it. Being a visual medium of presentation, a film creates an instant, direct and more convincing impression on its audience, fulfilling its dual purpose of entertaining as well as of sensitizing the audience. A lot of movies based on social issues are now being made to create awareness among people about the issues besides entertaining the audience, which is perhaps the foremost purpose behind the making of a movie. Domestic violence is one such important issue which has been taken as the main theme in many movies. Films are considered as cultural artefacts and therefore the directors find it the as one of the best mediums of representing the social and cultural reality of the domestic life of women in most of the Indian households. Advait Chandan's directorial debut, Hindi movie *Secret Superstar* is a realistic film which deals



with the issues of domestic violence and oppressive patriarchy. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the movie *Secret Superstar* from a feminist angle and explore the suppressed desires of a woman's life. Patriarchal sufferings of womenfolk have been dexterously represented in the film by two major characters-- Insia and Najma, the mother and the daughter. The former is forced always to abide by the rules and regulations of the patriarchal society and the latter who even performs her womanly duties faithfully is the victim of domestic violence. These two characters vividly foreshadow the pangs of two generations.

**Key Words:** Movie, Women, Patriarchy, Domestic-violence, Female-foeticide, Child- Marriage.

### **Introduction**

According to Butalia (1984), Indian Cinema is the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and close to 12 million people watch films every week in cinema houses and theatres (p. 108). When Indian Cinema has such a large audience then it also becomes the moral responsibility of the film directors of realistic movies to make more and more movies related to deeply rooted social evils which that need to be eradicated for the smooth functioning of the society. The film *Secret Superstar*, released on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2017 and directed by Advait Chandan, is a movie which is based on the theme of patriarchy and domestic violence. Set in a locality named Akota, in Baroda (Gujarat) the movie is the story of a Muslim teenage school going girl Insia Malik, who is deeply interested in singing songs with aspirations to become a singer and her mother Najma who is entrapped in a troubled and violent marriage and is a victim of domestic abuse by her husband Farookh Malik. In the movie, Farookh, the father of Insia, is dominant characters who treats women as inferior and always tries to subjugate them. He thinks that women after their marriage become the sole property of their husbands. They don't have their own individuality and their husbands, being their sole master can treat them in whichever way they deem fit and can do anything to them as they have authority over their wives:



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‘Shauhar hoon tumahara- tum meri permission key bina yahan se hil nahi sakti’

(I am your husband; you are not supposed to move from this place without my permission.)

Since the beginning of the movie, the dominance of Farookh can be seen in the family. When Insia asks Najma, her mother for the permission to participate in the Inter School Singing Competition, she replies- ‘le lo par abba ko mat batana’ (participate but don’t tell your father). The statement of the mother signifies the dominance of the father, who does not like Insia’s association with music and singing. When Insia tells her mother if selected for final round, she will have to go to Mumbai for the finale, Najma refuses her by saying- ‘baat baat par tere abbu guitar todne ki baat karte hain’ (Your dad constantly threatens to break the guitar). In the first major violent scene, the tyranny of Farookh can be seen when he becomes infuriated and throws away the food plate just because mistakenly Najma puts less salt in the dal (lentil). He is enraged over her when she begs sorry for her mistake and says:

‘Sorry se pet bhar lun, agar ek baar aur sorry bola to plate nahi tumhe utha k phenk dunga’

(Shall I feed myself with your sorry? If you repeat the word sorry, I’ll throw you out instead of the plate)

Regarding the terror of the father, Anna Vetticad rightly says in the review of the movie that:

*Secret Superstar* plants the issue unequivocally at the centre of its universe, building up an atmosphere of such terror around Farookh, that every knock on the door signalling his return home becomes a moment of dread, a dread so real that it is almost a separate character in the screenplay. Farookh is a typical, abusive patriarch, who treats his wife and daughter in a humiliating, oppressive and violent way. The domestic violence can be of many types. Mere physical violence is not the only kind of violence; verbal and psychological violence can also be forms of domestic violence. Farookh always taunts his wife for being a failure in life. In one of his dialogues, he says, ‘Anpadh gawar ladkiyo ki shaadi karne me bahut dikkat hoti hai, mai phans gaya hu aur koi nahi phansega’ (It’s very hard to find husband for illiterate girls, I’m stuck but others won’t get trapped) which is an indirect barb to Najma who is not a well-educated lady. By his statement – ‘mai phans gaya hu’ (I am trapped), Farookh ridicules Najma in front of his children and his mother, as if, it’s



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he who has been entrapped by marrying Najma, who is a simpleton and thus inferior to him. On the one side, Farookh indirectly says that he is providing education to Insia so that she may be married in a good household to a good husband. On the other side, he also advocates child marriage of his daughter. He wants to marry his fifteen year old teenage daughter, Insia to Nazaq, a Saudi based businessman. The movie hints towards child marriage, which is still prevalent in this modern society, despite various laws and measures taken by the government to abolish it. Even today, in most of the marriages, the girls don't have the freedom to choose husband on their own. In several cases, they are neither consulted nor even asked for their consent. In an oppressive patriarchal setup, it is the father or the male member of a family who decides everything and the girl has to abide by that. Insia couldn't do anything except accepting what is to befall her fate. Her father has declared that he will marry Insia with Nazaq as soon as the family settles in Saudi Arabia. When Insia resists and revolts against her father's plan, Najma's pain comes out in the following words when she says-

'Mere abba ne nikah karaane se pahle mujhse nahi pucha, yahi meri duniya hai aur yahi teri duniya bhi'(My dad had not consulted me before getting me married, this is my story and now yours too.)

Najma's helplessness can be seen from the above dialogue of the movie. There are many women and girls, who fall victim to the patriarchy but their cases often go unnoticed. Patriarchal society usually discriminates between a girl and a boy. A male child is always favoured in a patriarchal society over a female child because of the patriarchal mind-set that boys bring name and fame to the family; they are considered the harbingers of wealth and prosperity and also they carry forward the family's name, generation after generation. On the other hand, girls have to go ultimately to their in-law's home and therefore they cannot bring prosperity, rather they take away wealth from their father's family to their in-laws' in the form of dowry. Farookh, being a patriarch, prefers his son Guddu over Insia. He didn't want Najma to give birth to Insia.

'ladki paida kar ke kya karogi, gira do'

(What will you get by giving birth to a girl? Abort it!)



But Najma struggles to keep Insia alive and flees away from the hospital where she was admitted for abortion. The movie also hints at female foeticide where Farookh wanted Najma to abort the female foetus which was developing in her womb. The pathetic condition of women can be inferred by the dialogue between Insia and her grandmother, where the granny says:

‘arey hum raat din yahi socha karte hain humari ammi ne hume pet me hi kyun nahi maara, humne kya kar liya’

(I wonder all the day & night, why my mother didn't kill me in her womb? What was I born for?)

The constant suppression and abuse by the patriarchal figure Farookh in the family leads to the creation of a counter canon of female figures. The strong relationship between the mother and her daughter, as portrayed in the movie is a good example of this phenomenon. Insia always asks her mother seek divorce from her father because of his tyrannical nature. She attempts to free her mother from the clutches of her father. Insia wants Najma to leave the male dominated household helmed by her cruel father Farookh and therefore, inspite of getting a handsome fee from Shakti Kumar (the music director cum singer who gives her the first break) for her song, she persuades him to arrange a lawyer for her mother's divorce case. Similarly, it is Najma who supports Insia. She secretly allows Insia to follow her passion in spite of her husband's strong dislike. She understands well the need of love, care and freedom in one's life and tries to give her daughter the same which she never had got in her life. Mothers are mostly caring and supportive towards their children. A mother can go to any extent to fulfil the dreams of her children. A mother who has a first-hand experience of patriarchal suppression would never allow her daughter to suffer the same, therefore she will try to advocate her daughter's education and vocation, so that she may stand on her own feet and may not suffer the humiliation, exploitation or patriarchal suppression in her future life. Najma, who is a battered housewife, entrapped in the shackles of a loveless and violent marriage, tries her best to give as much freedom and opportunities to her daughter Insia as she could. She sells her gold necklace to buy a laptop for her daughter. It was the laptop, which helped Insia to become an overnight Internet sensation, Secret Superstar, as she uploaded her singing



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videos on You Tube with the help of the laptop. Just because of Farookh's threat, Najma advises Insia to upload her tunes on You Tube wearing burqa and not to disclose her name so that her identity may not be revealed and her conservative, hot tempered father wouldn't come to know about the Secret Superstar. But when Farookh realizes that the laptop has been bought by selling the gold necklace, he brutally beats Najma and compels Insia to throw her laptop down from the second floor of the house. Farookh's action reflects his patriarchal mindset, where he doesn't believe in giving freedom to his daughter to follow her vocation. This also implicitly hints at his rigidity and his indifference towards modern ways of communication that can provide an alternative medium to realize one's goal in life. It is quite pertinent to record here the observation made by Anna Vetticad:

The claustrophobia and extreme fear that Insia experiences every second that Farookh is around or how even the air in their house seems to breathe freely when he is away. Each tiny occurrence within the four walls of that cramped middle-class home has the potential to cause an explosion: a geyser that Najma forgot to switch on, less salt in the dal she cooked. Farookh's response to any slip-up is to bash up his wife. (Vetticad)

Unlike the heroines of Madhur Bhandarkar's films, who despite being bold and empowered, conform to the social norms or end up as a sufferer, Najma and Insia finally assert their grit in the end by transforming drastically from being fragile and submissive to strong and bold characters. Najma, who earlier was a weak and meek character before her dominating and abusive husband, dares to speak at his face at the end of the movie. She revolts against his chauvinism by signing the divorce papers and threatening him to file a police complaint against him, if he physically assaulted her anymore. Her marching out of the airport symbolises her renunciation of the loveless marriage where she was a passive sufferer. She prioritizes her responsibility towards her daughter and not her husband who wants her to conform to the social norms. She shows her maturity by exposing her husband in public and subverting his plans of settling in Saudi Arabia. The signing of divorce paper explicitly reflects a mother's bold decision in favour not only of Insia but of a new generation. Her daring step towards her daughter is a harbinger of change which is on the anvil.



## Conclusion

Thus, a serious interpretation of the movie *Secret Superstar* reveals that Insia and Najma are representatives of all women in general. The word secret in the title of the movie *Secret Superstar* is very symbolic. While the word 'secret' on the surface level refers to Insia who becomes a superstar hiding her identity but implicitly the word also refers to the pitiable condition of all women in a patriarchal society which is mostly conservative and not openly known as is the case with Najma in the movie. The purpose of cinema is not only to entertain its audience but also to sensitize them towards the evil practices still extant in the modern society. This movie 'Secret Superstar' not only portrays the realistic picture of women who are the victims of patriarchy and domestic violence but also sensitizes the audiences against various social evils like women abuse, child marriage, female foeticide etc. It gives a strong message by showcasing, the pride and honour that girls can bring to the family, through the character of Insia, who is a talented girl and in the end becomes a famous singer despite many unfavourable circumstances. Najma takes a bold and defiant step by walking out of her suffocating and violent married life, although a fictitious character can still be an inspiration to many other women. The movie ends with a dedication "To Mothers and Motherhood" signifying the dedication to all women who are mothers and who face all kind of suppression and violence throughout their lives but stand strongly against all odds when it comes for the betterment of their children. The trend of Indian cinema is now changing through the production of such movies, where stereotype image of woman as a submissive and docile creature suffering silently, traverses to the image of a new woman who raises her voice against her suffering and emerges victorious.

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