

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A STUDY ON THE MITIGATION STRATEGIES OF VIOLENCE IN HINDI WOMEN CINEMA NARRATIVES

\*Rashmi Raja V.R. and Dr. Velayutham, C.

Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai – 600025, India

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2017  
Received in revised form  
26<sup>th</sup> August, 2017  
Accepted 04<sup>th</sup> September, 2017  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2017

#### Keywords:

Women Cinema narratives,  
Mitigation strategies, Gender equality,  
Character arc. Human rights.

Copyright©2017, Rashmi Raja and Dr. Velayutham. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

### ABSTRACT

Gender scholar Michael Foucault when quoting about Justice says that, “Justice must always question itself, just as society can exist only by means of the work it does on itself and its institutions.” (Foucault, 1978) There has been a sudden upsurge in women centric or women oriented films in the recent past which brings them carrying out positive roles, taking up challenges that reminds the audience of how strong they are. Hence this study aims to analyse the narratives of chosen women centric Hindi films and understand how the women characters try to mitigate the social violence they undergo. The study also touches upon the human rights issue faced by the women characters to analyse the violence against women and how gender equality is achieved in the narratives. Analysing the narrative strategies, mapping their character arcs, scrutinizing human rights issues and identify how violence is being mitigated are the objectives of the study.

## INTRODUCTION

Cinema in India is more than a hundred-year-old. Reports suggest that India has a mammoth film industry which produces as many as 1600 films per year with variety of narratives within. Yet, it never fails to evolve by the means of technology, storytelling technique and also by the different representational strategies given to it where at times, it also becomes the voice of the voiceless. When the case of gender discourses is considered, women were always considered as the weaker sex, more vulnerable, and cannot be independent throughout in most of the films. Very few films have been vocal enough to talk about women issues, violence against women which are generally considered to be minority crisis in mainstream cinema. Needless to mention about the recent ban on the film “Lipstick under my Burkha” by the CBFC, India who had quoted the reason for the ban as “the story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life” which proves India is still very far away in terms of gender equality. But the recent trend shift of Hindi films in terms of representation of women and their issues should be mapped, which previously showed them as only “damsels in distress”. The timeperiod after 2010 especially saw many women related cinema if not Women centric cinema. Examples can be No one killed Jessica (2011),

English Vinglish (2012), Kahaani (2012), Queen (2014) etc. This paradigm shift was radical enough to put women into picture and many women conflicts which were previously trivialized got represented. This paper, studies the selected women centric films in order to understand the agenda set by the society, as the films made are generally societal themes which are fictionalized.

### Review of literature

Andre Bazin who is a renowned and influential French film critic and theoretician states that “The cinema substitutes for our gaze a world more in harmony with our desires”(Bazin, 1960). For a world we desire, we tend to add more colours and drama to it, thus becomes different forms of storytelling which later evolves into a cinema. On talking about the analysis or the studying functionality of films, David Bordwell, in his essays on cinema states that “Film analysts and theoreticians often seek functional explanations; for e.g.: how x and y work together at a given moment to create z. The interpretations of films often include the non-obvious meanings that one can find in films. But the overall significance of a film is around making of meanings”. (Bordwell, 2000) Thus the analytical study is nothing but scrutinizing of the process of meaning making the films have created within. There have been many feminist film theorists and scholars who have traced the causes and reasons for the movie texts to be reiterating on the subordinate image

\*Corresponding author: Rashmi Raja V.R.

Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai – 600025, India.

of women. Second wave feminism promoted a myriad scholars of this pertinence of which Laura Mulvey has a lot of predominance. Her works are those inspired in order to critique Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Mulvey states that "women are typically depicted in a passive role, which provides visual pleasure through *scopophilia* which she later explains it as the pleasure of secretly looking at the actions of a woman's activities of private nature. "(Mulvey, 1975) This implication even holds good in many of the films today which glorifies stalking. There is a very thin line between stalking a woman and make her fall in love according to many mainstream films. None other than Sigmund Freud can teach with variety of implications with reference to *Voyeurism*. He characterizes voyeurism as a pattern of behaviour which makes one indulge in sexual arousal by observing others when they are disrobing or involving in any sexual activities. To-be-looked-at-ness can also be a synonym for Voyeurism, and in most mainstream film narratives this is always subjected to the women characters of the cinema.

The concept of *male gaze* has also been explored in detail by many feminist film scholars of various time period of which Budd Boetticher throws light on the techniques of classical filmmaking. He summarizes it as "What counts is what the heroine provokes. She is the one whose love or fear inspires the hero, or maybe the concern the hero shows towards her. In herself, she has no importance." (Boetticher, 1990) Yet another classic feminist scholar argues about the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema. Kaja Silverman states that "voice and accent are very important factors to be considered especially for a woman. If they are not considered to be as beautiful or pleasing as their looks are, the characterization gets distorted. "(Silverman, 1988) This can be viewed as a main reason of hiring of dubbing professionals for female actors even if they do not have a barrier of speaking the particular language. Talking about women's cinema, it can have overlapping definitions. The possible meanings are, women in cinema, or cinema about women. Scholar Alison Butler in her book *Women's Cinema: the contested screens* talks in detail about how the mainstream cinema represents women and her repressed sexuality. She also talks about the identity crisis of women filmmakers. She argues that "women's cinema is a complex, critical, theoretical, and institutional construction. The concept itself has had umpteen criticisms thus making many female filmmakers who distanced themselves fearing about their marginality. "(Butler, 2002)

### Theoretical framework

The present study uses the theoretical framework of Claire Johnston's *Realism and Counter cinema*. In her essay during 1979, Johnston quotes that "Women's cinema can be treated as counter cinema, which questions the mainstream treatment of characterization in the narrative films and documentaries by different means such as the means of rejecting of its content and means of production." By rejecting the existing representation and by countering it with a different narrative and ideology, realism can be mapped through the picturing of women in mainstream films as well, she argued. Many female filmmakers and technicians 'entry to the mainstream cinema in order to make the spectator question about such a translucent and manipulative techniques of filming can also be seen as an expressionism of counter cinema.

Johnston argues that "Despite the enormous emphasis placed on women as a spectacle in cinema, the woman as woman is largely absent" This can be proved by looking at the share of women filmmakers compared to the males in the industry even today.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used for this study is Qualitative content analysis of 4 films which are carefully selected within certain criteria.

### Criteria for selection of movies

- Films of Hindi Language which were released during the year of 2015-2016.
- Films which are well received by the audience, a box office hit.
- Films in which women characters play the leading, progressive, game changing roles.

The chosen films for analysis are

- *Mardaani* (2015),
- *NH10* (2015),
- *Neerja* (2016),
- *Pink* (2016).

### Synopsis of the movie

1. ***Mardaani***: Shivani Sivaji Roy, a brave policewoman is behind Karan, the villain who is involved in many illegal activities like drug dealing, child kidnapping and sex trafficking. Shivani tries to save a girl who is a forced sex slave thus sets a trap through a common enemy of the villain Karan. She finds out a brothel house full of young girls who are not more than 15 years old. Shivani singlehandedly wins over the villain's gang and hands over the villain to the girls who beat him to death.
2. ***NH10***: Meera and Arjun are upper middle class couple who wants to go on a road trip from Delhi. But situations turn sour for them and thus they happen to see an honour killing and become witnesses in it. Thus the gang wants the couple killed in the course of time Arjun gets mercilessly killed. This makes Meera retaliate the gang and thus everyone ends up getting killed by her.
3. ***Neerja***: Based on a true story, Neerja Bhanot is a Pan Am flight attendant. A very passionate, career oriented woman as shown is in the aircraft which is being hijacked by a notorious terrorist organization. Situations worsen when the terrorist release fire on random passengers when one of them lie about a Pakistani radio engineer resulting in merciless killings. Thus Neerja rises up to the occasion, opens the rear entry for the passengers, who ends up getting killed while saving a group of children. While Neerja's mother receives her body, she is very proud of her daughter's bravery who was initially not happy with her daughter for have chosen such a career.
4. ***Pink***: Minal, Falak and Andrea are a group of girls who stay together in a city. They'd been to a rock concert

with friends whom one of them is backed by a political party. It is later learnt that he had tried to molest one of the girls, where she had hit him with a bottle in defence. All the three girls are made to face so many threats, in the meanwhile where they get kidnapped, stalked and one ends up losing her job. Later in the movie, Minal gets arrested who seeks help from advocate Deepak, played by Amitabh Bachchan. The movie ends with a high note saying, "If a girl says no, it definitely means only a NO".

### Parameters to analyse the films

#### 1. Narrative strategies:

- Main themes within the movie
- Story and plot elements
- Polarities within the plot( Root cause and proximate cause)
- Problem solving and movement through time and space
- Realism and symbolism within the story.

#### 2. Characterization of women:

- Make-up, costume and on-screen presentation
- Marriage as an institution
- Education level of women characters
- Decision making ability
- Career orientation
- Religious or ritual following of the characters
- Language used by the women characters
- Usage of dubbing artistes for the women characters

#### 3. Mitigation of gender inequality :

- Character transformation vs. Conflict of the story
- Mainstreaming the "other" women: Women who smoke and drink and their sexual advancements in the films.
- Social, psychological, legal and economic freedom based mitigation techniques employed by the women characters
- Violations meted out by the women in film
- Women rights in the film.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- The main theme within the movie is good vs. Evil. The scheme within the pattern of good vs. Evil can be looked at as also the binary opposites between the genders. i.e.: Woman Vs. Man. But in all the four films analysed, the lead woman characters are confronted by a man/group of men and at the same also helped by a man.
- The story elements include the usage of flashbacks, the presence of the narrator and liner/multi narrative technique. All of the movies have employed linear narrative technique, are narrated from a woman's point-of-view which almost lacked for so long in Hindi cinema, and out of 4 films, 2 have employed flashbacks in order to tell the audience the transformation of the women characters.

- In all the 4 films analysed, the women characters are shown to be very calm and composed during the introduction, whereas after the conflict stage, they are the game changers of the film. The common binary opposites found in the films analysed are Justice vs. Violence, Sacrifice vs. Revenge, Good vs. Bad, innocence vs. Corrupted, young vs. Old, above all which dominated by the female-male dichotomy.
- Filmic time and space in the 4 films analysed have been manipulated in such a way that they look to the audience more realistic. The filmic time is shown to be ranging from that of 1 day to 3 months. 2 movies out of 4 are shown to move within 1 day with the usage of flashbacks to show the previous synopsis, whereas the remaining 2 which progresses even slower do not use any flashback sequences. In order to pace out filmic space, 2 out of 4 movies have employed montage techniques in their end credits in order to manipulate spatial relationship between the film characters and audience.
- In all the 4 films analysed, symbolism plays a vital role throughout. There are scenes which show the women characters of the film are either trying to climb a huge rock/wall/ a man-made construct, in order to symbolize that "it is not easy being a girl in the society". And also in all the films analysed, the lead women characters chose light, pastel colours during their introductory scenes to show how calm and chirpy they are, whereas later in the movies, black colour( after the rising action) in order to denote their change in nature, something very bold or even death at times.
- All 4 films analysed have been directed by male filmmakers, although it does do justice to the women issues woven within it.
- In all the four films analysed, the conflict between the women character and society are well lit. For e.g.: The women characters had to face their share of criticisms from the society who never fail to pass comments such as "Why should the girl go out late in the night, why is she staying away from her parents, Why should she invite problems by dressing up inappropriately" etc. This thus adds to the realism part, which shows the society also promotes gender inequality in many ways.

### Beginning middle end

- Hence the similarity in the plot polarities would be, the character remains calm in the first act, there is a loss of a person or a conflict faced by the character, and thus the women showcase their circumstantial bravery in the third act.
- Presence of social themes within the movie can be seen in all the four films analysed. Themes such as Child trafficking, honour killing, terrorism, women's consent were present wherein women issues such as gender inequality, dowry deaths were also intertwined.
- The makeup, costumes are kept low in order to maintain the realism of the films. All the four films analysed do not employ any designer's clothes. In all the four films analysed, there are scenes with women characters covered with blood on their faces, and parts of the body. According to the book, *Interpretations of dreams* by Sigmund Freud, dreaming or showing of blood can also

### Story and plot structure

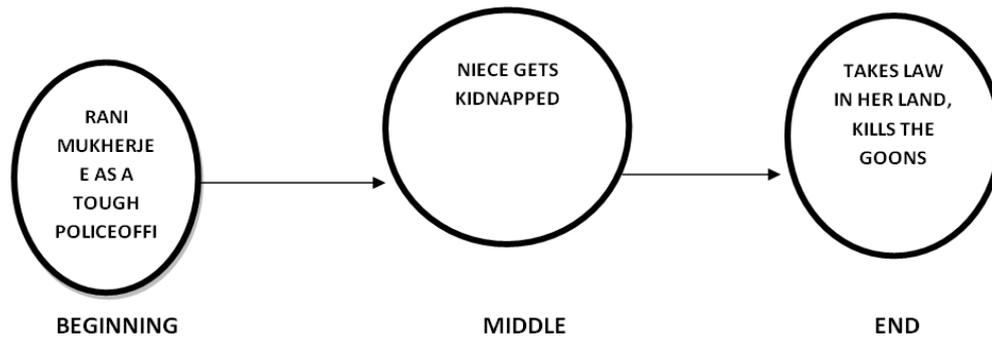


Fig. 1. Mardaani: Plot polarities

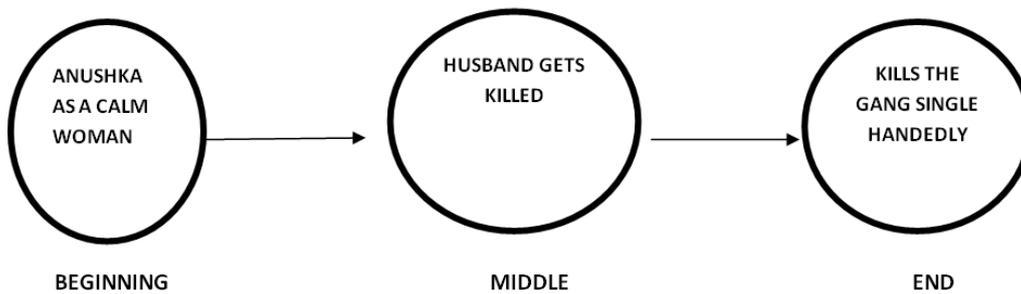


Fig. 2. NH10: Plot polarities

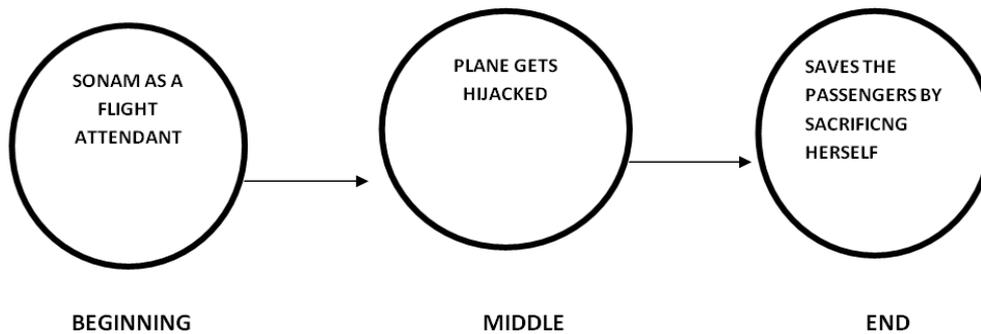


Fig. 3. Neerja: Plot polarities

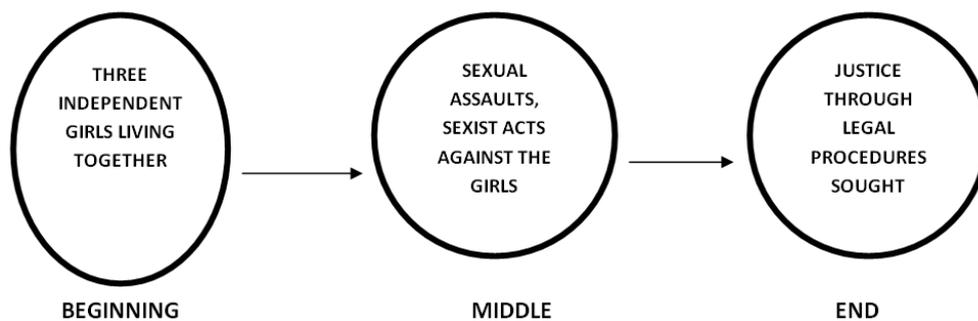


Fig. 4. Pink: Plot polarities

be decoded as menstruation. He also says that men fear women for their ability to reproduce. Thus these scenes can be seen as mainstreaming of menstruation.

- Marriage as an institution is not given much importance in all of the four films analysed. Live-in relationship, failed marriages, divorces; flings also are shown through the films. The reason behind not recognizing of

marriage can be seen as the women characters of the films are more career driven. Hence scenes which shows them as servers of the men community, are not much visible, instead the women are more vocal to their male counterparts.

- All of the women characters of the film are educated, independent, goal driven, career oriented, also skilled.

**Table 1. Characterization of women in films analysed**

Attributes/ Films	Makeup/costume	Concept of marriage	Education level	Smoking/ drinking	Sexual advancements
<i>Mardaani</i>	Realistic	Recognized	Educated	Smoking	Absent
<i>NH10</i>	Realistic	Not recognized	Educated	Both	Absent
<i>Neerja</i>	Realistic	Recognized/failed	Educated	Smoking	Present
<i>Pink</i>	Realistic	Not recognized	Educated	Both	Present

They even drive their own cars; do not wait for a man to pay their bills. This show the characters do not need assistance from the men around them. But they also go approach men during their crisis, and seek help from them in few scenes.

- The prominence of timely decision taken by the women characters are seen in all four films analysed. In *Mardaani*, the lead woman sets up a trap through her mastermind, in *NH10*, it is the lead lady's idea which makes her escape the problem, in *Neerja*, the decision of the main woman character saves the whole aircraft's passengers, fetching her many bravery awards, and in the last movie for analysis, *Pink*, it is again the leading character's circumstantial decision to hit the perpetrator of sexual violence in order to defend herself from the danger.
- Religion and rituals are not of much importance to the women of characters. They are more science based than religion based in the movies analysed. They are very skeptic, they reason out the course of events, and thus question the validity. Hence the beliefs on religion and institution are not depicted through the films analysed.
- Foul language used by the women characters can be seen in all the four films analysed. Popular beliefs of the society see swearing as part of male's culture. Women are always advised to have an additional control over the language, which can also be seen as foundation of misogyny. Thus women who swear are seen in the films predominantly, there creating a gender reversal mechanism.
- The usage of dubbing artistes for women characters are completely absent in all the four films analysed. Dubbing artistes are generally hired especially for women characters of Hindi films to either actors who do not know the language or in order to make the lady sound sweeter, huskier than real life whereas men generally tend to use their own voices. The analysed movies do not use them in order to maintain the tinge of realism in it.
- In all four movies analysed, the women characters are shown to be either smokers or those who consume alcohol and also have advancements sexually in their lives. Although the habits of smoking, drinking or sexual advancements cannot be justified, the films generally tended to silence such "manly" habits and prohibit them from women. Hence the concept of mainstreaming the "other" women and also making her the lead roles are seen in prominence in the films.
- The mitigation strategies employed in order to fight gender equality can be seen through different reasons such as social, psychological, legal and economic freedom of the women characters of the films. Out of four films analysed, three films take up vigilantism, where the women lead roles become the outlaw and

mitigate the gender inequality and also bring certain social issues to equilibrium. The other film showcases the woman character standing up against terrorism hence can be seen as a role who believes in national integrity and justice.

- There were numerous situations of violations meted out by the women characters of the films. Common ones to be mapped were sex trafficking and compelled prostitution, honour killing, abetment, rape threat, attempt to murder, dowry harassments, sexual harassment, molestation, lewd comments, slander and libel.
- The four films analysed discuss in detail about various women's rights within its text. The rights which are prescribed are mainly right to bodily integrity and autonomy, the right to be free from sexual violence, to have equal rights in family, right to work, right to hold public office, the right to get married after an appropriate age and the right to have her consent.
- The important question of authenticity in female centric films is answered in all the four films analysed. The female sexuality when repressed, how can the consequences be, how realistic it can be shown, how the normative ideas of femininity have changed over the course of years etc have been discussed. The traditional message bore by the Hindi cinema which expresses females to be a subordinate of their male counterparts in terms of acceptance of gender roles, mainstreaming of domestic violence, trivializing women issues in family etc are broken in order to promote gender deconstruction.

**Table 2. Mitigation strategies by women characters of the films**

Films	Strategies
<i>Mardaani</i>	Social, psychological, beyond legal.
<i>NH10</i>	Social, psychological, beyond legal.
<i>Neerja</i>	Social, economic, legal
<i>Pink</i>	Legal, social, moral, economic and psychological

**Table 3. Violence meted by women characters of the films**

Films	Violent activities
<i>Mardaani</i>	Sex slavery, child trafficking, kidnapping
<i>NH10</i>	Sexual violence, lewd comments, honour killing. Attempt to murder
<i>Neerja</i>	Molestation, sexist comments, dowry harassment, Murder
<i>Pink</i>	Stalking, molestation, attempt to murder, libel.

**Table 4. Women rights discussed in the film**

Films	Women's rights
<i>Mardaani</i>	Right to be free from sexual violence
<i>NH10</i>	Right to be free from sexual violence, Right to choose your partner, right to work, right to hold public office
<i>Neerja</i>	Right to bodily integrity and autonomy, the right to be free from sexual violence, to have equal rights in family, right to work
<i>Pink</i>	Right to bodily integrity and autonomy, the right to be free from sexual violence, Right to have a woman's consent.

## Conclusion

The women on screen look like they have finally been backed up by narrative strategies which have made parts of spectators to realize that cinema does not always need a hero and a hero worship. Although there are also certain questions like “Why do the audience not want to believe it is a real movie if the hero does not have much role to play”. The women centric films analysed have their agenda of putting them into place to mitigate their sexual violence and gender inequality through various strategies in myriad courses of storytelling, proving on the ideology of “You are your own person”. The analysed movies depicted realism in different ways through mitigating the gender violence and gave the women characters their voices they had lost. The films analysed acted like counter cinema, by giving the women lead roles and also vigilantism is promoted through the women characters in two of the films analysed. Although there is no gender bias by saying no woman needs a man, because in all the films there had been supporting men roles played too. In all of the films analysed, the women lead roles are independent, career driven, goal oriented who have their own thoughts and aspirations. They question anything that comes in their way and they know that their consent is important. If they feel that their femininity is being mishandled by someone in the film, or be it the society, they teach a lesson through the same violent method they were made to face (in three films) or sacrifice themselves in order to let them know (in one film). In short they do not go with the flow. Also their costumes and make-up add life to them (mostly worn are modern, non-designer outfits) The number of violent activities meted out by the women characters are almost near 14 out of which 8 relates to sexual violence and harassments which still touches on the grave reality of how women are treated down in society. The mitigation strategies that the women handle are mostly social and psychological as shown in the films, which prove the inadequacy of our Indian Judiciary system.

## Limitations and Suggestions

The present study is complete when it takes it to the female spectatorship of the audience as part of the analysis.

It can thus be validated as to how the women represented on the celluloid carry realism within them, whether they are able to relate with their characterization or does it add to a pseudo-patriarchy system. As far as the realism and counter cinema theory is considered, it welcomes more female scholars, theorists and film makers so that the voice can be represented with more valid arguments and insider information. But as far as the movies analysed are considered, being all of them made by male filmmakers still it requires more justice to be done in order to discuss in detail about the women conflicts within the film text and the society inside and outside the film.

## REFERENCES

- Bazin, A., and Gray, H. 1960. The Ontology of the photographic image, *Film Quarterly*, Vol.13, JSTOR, 4-9.
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. 2004. *Film art: an introduction*. Boston, McGraw-Hill.
- Butler, A. 2002. *Women’s cinema: The contested screen*, Wallflower press, London and New York.
- Dudley, A. and Bazin, A. 1976. *In the Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. By J. Dudley Andrew, New York: Oxford University Press, 134–178.
- Freud, S. 2003. *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Penguin books, UK.
- Johnston, C. 1979. *Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema. Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*. Patricia Erens, ed., New York: Horizon Press
- Lauretis, D.T. 1987. *Technologies of gender: essays on theory, film and fiction*, Indiana University Press.
- Modleski, T. 2005. *The women who knew too much: Hitchcock and feminist film theory*, Taylor & Francis group LLC.
- Mulvey, L. 1999. *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, *Film theory and criticism :Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP1975; 833-44.
- Silverman, Kaja, *the Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 1988; Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

\*\*\*\*\*