It's About Me!: Un(dress)ing Hindi Celluloid Feminine Subjective I-dentity

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Abstract

Contemporary women's *Hindi* films play a critical role in constructing feminine subjective *I-dentity* by contesting discursive models rendering current feminism to be "*it's about me*!". Appropriation of this post-feminist framework builds upon the semiotic understanding of the process in which the reflective use of dress and dressing-up has been seminal in constructing self-oriented choices and corporeal practices. Therefore, dress leads to the possibility of exploring significant scope in disentangling the contentious post-feminist developments in emergent women's *Hindi* films. With a locus on the post-feminist framework as posited by Rosalind Gill, Michele M Lazar, Angela McRobbie, and the nuanced semiotic scaffolding of use of dress as hypothesized by Roland Barthes, Malcolm Bernard, Joanne Entwistle, et al., this article examines select women's *Hindi* films like *Margarita With A Straw* by Shonali Bose, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* by Alankrita Shrivastava and *Aisha* by Rajshree Ojha to forward embryonic post-feminist approaches.

Keywords: Corporeal, dress and dressing, postfeminism, subjective *I-dentity*, women and *Hindi* film

Introduction

Since its inception, the representation of women in *Hindi* films[1] has been within the trope of patriarchal, nationalistic agenda, confined within the degenerative socio-cultural stereotypes. Thus, women are depicted as dutiful sacrificial mothers, ardent homemakers, devoted daughters, or as vamps, debauched whores, avenging vigilantes, and deprived of individuality and identity. Articulating about the dualistic representation of women Jyotika Virdi in her book *Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* observes that "Gender was mobilized as a sign to unify the "Indian" against the

"western" (p.13). Virdi further elaborates that the portrayal of women has primarily been "passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, resilient" (p. 60). Added to that, the domination of male filmmakers has incessantly represented women and their bodies in an objectified manner while blatantly playing to the male gaze. This established the male-centric narratives' domination, bereft of sensitive representations of female subjectivity in *Hindi* films. M K Raghavendra (2008), while discussing the development of the depiction of the feminine over the decades in *Hindi* films, states that the modern emancipated portrayals of women decreased and "we find popular cinema becoming more conservative about sexual mores" from the female point of view (p. 150). However, this non-inclusive pattern gradually altered in the last decade of the twentieth century and dynamically from the commencement of the new millennium.

The female representation gradually broke away from the stereotypes, and "in the mire of subdued, suppressed and tamed female protagonists, there was the few who chose to break the mold and simply be" (Somaaya et al., 2012, p. 164). Thus there was a definite "emergence of a desiring female subjectivity in the cinema of the 1990s" (Mazumdar, 2007, p. 90). A Kumar (2018) writes about shifting towards more women-specific films that materialized depicting women's transformed societal positions. The continuing alteration in the representation of women in *Hindi* films close to the nineties and the new millennium is credited to some specific reasons discussed further. Chaudhuri (2017) analyses that an obvious manifestation of women in films and popular culture is credited to a period preceding the nineties. This period witnessed the achievements of the women's movement in India and the passing of the Indecent Representation of the Women's Act[2] pertaining to media, economic liberalization[3] and the significance of media reach in contemporary Indian society.

Additionally, *Hindi* film-making processes were hugely impacted by globalization[4], economic liberalization, and modernization in the perspicuous purview of westernization (Ganti, 2012; Raghavendra, 2014; Dwyer, 2014). These developments heralded urbanization, the coming up of malls, theaters, the emergence of new demographics of film-going audiences, the digitization of film-making, increased entry of foreign films, channels through digital sources in the Indian landscape greater reach. Thus it rendered a nascent platform to the new form of independent *Hindi* films, which led to the emergence of a vast gamut of women filmmakers with active agenda to foreground women's positions (Devasundaram, 2016). In this new space and pompousness of globalization, economic liberalization, and neoliberalism[5], reconfiguring the women-oriented perspective in films was a significant off-shoot. With a strong reflection of the transnational modernity focus on individuated feminine subjectivities, self-oriented choices, material indulgence, and corporeal practices were planned and executed to challenge

existing stereotypical discourse on the portrayal of women on celluloid. The re-contoured understanding of women's viewpoint in the mentioned phase as reflected in media and *Hindi* films theorized as postfeminism[6] has contributed to the "construction of selfhood that celebrates self-enterprise, pleasure, and sexuality and posits it as women empowerment" (Chaudhuri, 2017, p. 223). In that sense, women are now free to go ahead and achieve and seek what they desire. In the backdrop of globalization and neoliberalism, women's *Hindi* films observe an increased representation of women (Anitha, 2017; Sen, 2017) and their concerns. This transformation towards an emerging representation of women in a developing perspective demands detailed scrutiny.

Such contemporary *Hindi* films exemplify feminine subjective "*I-dentity*" (Lazar, 2014, p. 206) and subjectivity (Gill 2007) by rendering the current feminism to be "*it's about me*!" (Lazar, 2009, p. 375). Gill (2007) elaborates on subjectivity by articulating that women have been actively expressing and exercising their subjectivity, based on the choice of more narcissistic self-oriented focus where the emphasis is on pleasuring the self and highlighting gender-based exclusivity (p. 152). *I-dentity*, as discussed by Lazar (2014), is focused on the "heightened sense of self," and being "unabashedly I-centered" asserting the self (p. 206). In her other article on post-feminist developments, Lazar (2009) states that women are increasingly exemplifying "*it's about me!*" where women are seeking an identity "supported by consumer culture, which satisfies women's needs and desires through commodity consumption" (p. 375). It centers on a wanton, self-satisfied lifestyle based on consumerism[7]. These postulates of postfeminism explicitly take their insights from McRobbie (2007), where she discusses feminism as proclaimed in the second wave feminism, has passed away. This, in a way, brings into its foray the depiction of Indian women in recent *Hindi* films that are impacted by globalization and economic liberalization. Postfeminism's ideas do not have much to do with the real feminist understanding that preceded the nineties, highlighting a strong signification of the capitalistic commoditization agenda routed through the west, which prescribes women's accomplishment more invested in the self. In a definite measure, these representations of female and feminine in *Hindi* films challenge the rigid deductions of the gender-biased *Hindi* film women characterizations, bringing in a pastiche of subjective diversity. Thus women's desires, wants, positions are represented through the perspectives of subjectivity, *I-dentity*, "*it's about me!*" to seek a more nuanced, subversive post-femininity as represented in the select women's *Hindi* films for this research. In cognizance with the accurate depiction of Indian women in the globalized, neo-liberalized times, such films signify "the new woman" (Oza, 2006, p. 25). This woman, essentially, successfully negotiates between the conflicting bifurcation of the tradition and the modernity seeping in from the westernization (Fernandes, 2000).

In the accurate depiction of the times and tandem with the globalized and the neo-liberalized society, there is an upsurge in the orientation of the self, subjectivity, and interplay with commodity culture. This phenomenon was also fueled by the beauty regimes, dressing up[8], fashion[9], and the cosmetic industry, further registering the significance of dress[10] and costume[11]. This was important for creating identity, personality formation not just in the social milieu but also within the representation of feminine identity in *Hindi* films. The depiction of "the new woman" in the neoliberal times, inspired from the natural counterparts, has shifted towards subjective feminine sartorial and lifestyle choices, which convincingly threatens the women's subversion through the regressive clothing[12] on them. Dress, therefore, constructs feminine identity, but dress theories also locate a considerable scope to examine the contentious post-feminist developments in the analysis of emergent women's *Hindi* films. Roland Barthes (2005) connects clothing to the essence of an individual as he states that "the psyche of the person wearing the clothing: clothing is supposed to express a psychological depth" while he elaborates on the semiotic understanding of the meaning generated through clothing (p. 24). Taking this further, communication through dress or fashion is a perspective that ideas, feelings, or emotions inside someone's internal psychological framework get externalized through the choice one makes through clothing and dress (Bernard, 2007). Also, dress in context to gender and identity has been theorized as "the most immediate and effective examples of how the bodies are gendered, made 'feminine' or 'masculine" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 141). The dress has also been understood as instrumental in adding cultural connotation and meanings to the wearer's identity, and when used in films, clothing and costumes become an essential tool in the identity creation process in the mise-en-scene and film's storyline. Clothing and costumes provide an efficient and expressive device to traverse and support narratives onscreen with communicative discretion and codified depictions of incised identities (Wilkinson- Weber, 2014; Bruzzi, 1997; Street, 2001).

Thus, appropriating the understanding of dress theories and bringing it within the ambit of post-feminist discourse provides a practical analysis to understand the women's *Hindi* films in the post-liberalized times proclaiming women's issues. This research brings this perspective to the conservative Indian scenario within the socio-cultural setting of suppression of women in the patriarchal setup, where the agency of women's choice to express her individuality through clothing and other self-oriented corporeal culture is confronted contextual. Thus, with the secondary research method, the objective of this article is to analyze the changing paradigms of the representation of celluloid feminine subjective *I-dentity* with the sharp use of dressing up and costumes in the select women's *Hindi* films. The article also concomitantly argues that how the contentious post-feminist implications on the *Hindi* films

and the portrayal of women are critiqued strongly (Kaur and Sharma, 2016). With strong contrast, the strident vision of women directors with the post-feminist strands provides for a combative tool to challenge the stereotypical representations through dress and costumes that women characters have been subjected to in *Hindi* films even in recent times.

Emerging Representations of Hindi Celluloid Agentive Femininity: Forwarding Post-Feminism

Angela McRobbie (2007) exposes postfeminism as "a movement detectable across popular culture" (p. 255), including films. Elaborating on her insight, McRobbie associates postfeminism with the rejection of prior notions of feminism in the post-liberalized and globalized environment prevalent from the last decade of the twentieth century. Recent *Hindi* films highlighting the reconstitution of women's representations resonate with McRobbie's postulates and evidence centralizing the contentious post-feminist strands. The prominence placed on femininity typified on post-feminist feminine subjective *I-dentity*, where female characters dominate the film narrative with "it's about me!" feminism, coupled with self-oriented choices corporeal indulgence, has emerged as a characteristic feature, resonating with neoliberalism. The characterized representations of women with costumes and dress disentangle these post-feminist tropes and focus on Bruzzi's (1997) lexicon. These narratives look "at" instead of "through" clothes to reposition femininity (p. 36). Impacted by the effects of neoliberalism, postfeminism is drawn from recent *Hindi* films with the way its leading women's perspectives are depicted. Their dress is shown as "stylistically Indian but tailored closer to the body and less conventional by combining it with Western fashion elements" (Strubel and Josiam, 2016, p. 321), rejoicing feminine subjective *I-dentity*.

A clear example can be drawn from *We Are Family* (2010), a *Hindi* film set in Australia woven around a divorced mother who primarily wears western clothing. However, during certain traditional events like Diwali and her daughter's wedding in the film, she is depicted in traditional Indian garments. In many other recent *Hindi* films and reflective of this framework is the example of Dostana (2008) and its protagonist, Neha, played by Priyanka Chopra, primarily costumed in revealing western attires. Even when she dances to the tune of a popular song in the film, she is represented in a saree, designed with an emphasis to reveal and fitted close to her body.

Representing the real women from the society emphasizing "*it's about me!*", these women are consumed in the "culture of jeans and spaghetti straps and reinterpreting physical exposure as enabling, rather than commodifying" (Chowdhury, 2010, p. 55). These films depict "the new woman" in western dresses and represent them as granting themselves to the male gaze as she

reveals her body with acceptance. Thus the representation of such women decrys the notion of an Indian woman while maintaining her position as a leading women character. The acceptance of fusion dresses, where Indian silhouettes are altered and westernized, underline the emerging lean towards the transnational identity of Indians, echoing the neoliberalism mediated through post-feminist reinforcements. These films represent a transformation in the representation of women in recent *Hindi* films from an approach from a regressive Indianness to a modernized Indian identity accentuated by commodification and "renegotiation of women's traditional gender role expectations" (Strubel & Josiam, p. 321). The prominence is on individualism and liberalism, and these celluloid women are using the dress to negotiate these modifications in gender roles. The dress styles deployed to represent the women in such *Hindi* films show them opting for western silhouettes. At the same time, westernization and modernity itself are seen as a pattern to discern women's indulgent self-oriented desires and consumerism through commodity embodiment in liberalized times. Consumerism which is indexed as an underlying trope of post-feminist *I-dentity,* is ceaselessly heightened in recent *Hindi* films in a manner where commodities are symbolized as a tool to assert confidence and agency in leading women characters, highlighting the "visual beauty of wealth and limitless acquisition" (Wilkinson-Weber, 2006, p. 153). As argued by Wilkinson-Weber(2006), earlier only the vamps had the space to exercise her autonomy in wearing gaudy, skin-tight, despicable westernized wardrobe resonating with modernity, greed, and sin, which was denied to the righteous heroine and was set well within the permitted sartorial limits (p. 138).

In recent *Hindi* films, post-liberalization, this explicitness has been extended to the heroines, who express her assertions, with the profuse use of consumption and "betoken glamour, sophistication and wealth" (Wilkinson-Weber, 2006, p. 147) with their dressing up and costumes. Moreover, it locates consumerism within the contours of refashioned commodified "Indianness," using international and Indian garment brand names to dress the agentive women characters within the films even before these brands were available in India to buy.

This emergent representation of women in such *Hindi* films is usually considered liberating and accentuates freedom for women. However, it has been argued that such portrayals of women by mainstream filmmakers, especially male filmmakers, are generally commercialized under the garb of forwarding women's choices. The impetuous projection of liberation as a narrative ruse camouflages the indulgence of commercialization of women representation through "dress and behavior" (Kaur and Sharma, 2016, p. 371) within the voices of individuality and self-control. Perpetrating the male perspective in the empowering feminist façade, Gehlawat (2015) argues that such forms of politics and assertion of feminine agency further the patriarchal

norms of playing to the hegemonic male gaze inadvertently, and a need for a feminine representation sans objectification is glaringly evident (p. 57). Contrary to the commercialized heinous patterns formed by the dominant section of filmmakers, especially males, made way for select women filmmakers in the recent times of post-liberalization to have formed a cachet as they are formidably forwarding the gendered mediations with nuanced finesse and a solid women-centric vision to get ahead in the androcentric film-making practices. In contemporary times, the set of women filmmakers have up-scaled themselves triumphantly to the "cultural dialectics of the new era" (Anitha, 2017, p. 112). Post globalization within the schemes of commercialization ruling the roost, the concerns of the women can be addressed through the pertinent engagement of women as the filmmakers at the helm, including Bollywood[13], using their position for resistance (Datta, 2000), and bringing into command the tools of film-making like costumes and dress to effectively communicate their vision. Women *Hindi* filmmakers selected for this research embody the creative vision and use their agency as filmmakers to challenge the gendered norms of hegemonic *Hindi* film-making. Their films draw from the post-feminist tropes to elicit women characters subverting stereotypical representations rooted in society. The recent *Hindi* women filmmakers with their adept visual discoursing through costumes ranging from Shonali Bose with characters like Laila and Khanum in *Margarita With A Straw* (2015), Alankrita Shrivastava and her women protagonists like Leela, Rehana, Shireen, and *Bua Ji* in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), and Rajshree Ojha's lead women characters like Aisha, Shefali and Pinky in *Aisha* (2010) thread the feminine subjective *I-dentity* incisively, fashioned around self-oriented desires.

"It's About Me!" Dress Authorizes Femininity

The paradigm of *"it's about me!"* as a postulate around femininity, as a subject effect of "entitlement," brings femininity that is formulated around the tropes of "self-indulgence and pampering," merited on "pleasuring the self" with a celebration of "women-only spaces" and unbridled commodity consumption (Lazar, 2009, p. 375). *Margarita With A Straw* (2015), *Lipstick Under My Burkha*(2017), and *Aisha*(2010) bring to fore a scope within which women characters style up femininities which silhouettes well-deserved *"it's about me!"*. Shonali Bose, Alankrita Shrivastava, and Rajshree Ojha use dress to establish a visual discourse through the narratives fashioned around women in select films to garb their individual choice hedonist authorized enjoyment. Endowing the women characters with gratification, these filmmakers create a bricolage of self-absorbed femininities through dressing up by the interplay of the explicit, well-deserved worth of such women characters.

In *Margarita With A Straw* (2015), Shonali Bose, in coordination with the semiotic application of dressing up by the costume designer, personifies Laila by dressing in an incised feminine look and exploring pleasing and pampering herself. In multiple scenes, she is seen indulging in corporeal beauty, which imbues her penchant for self-seeking desire and pampering spontaneously. Reverberating with the neoliberal ethos and globalized understanding, the film embodies main female characters, including Laila and Khanum, in various sequences in modes of beauty culture and fashioning, emphasizing that a women's body is a site of femininity to engage with the fun-filled activity. "Costume" is used as a "key element of the plot" (Street, 2001, p. 28) when both Laila and Khanum are in garments like the orange sleeveless, fitted party top, trendy denim jacket, girlish ensemble with bright pastel colours, youthful make-up, and accessories in a scene in a restaurant where they are seen enjoying. The dressing up in another sequence in the park accentuates Laila's and Khanum's affinity for self-indulgent pampering as a glorification of a "me-time" (Lazar, 2009, p. 376) with well-deserved self-worth and the projection of a gender-based exclusive space. Constructing narcissist confidence and in a representative narrative juncture of the film, Laila is shown in a feminizing custom of dabbing lipstick in a reflective concupiscent mood, with a feminine colored, floral printed top which silhouettes her age and feminine wants to fit her age group articulately. Towards the ending of the film, a sorrowful Laila finds solace in commodity and corporeal consumption, resonating "*it's about me!*" narrative as an endorsement of neoliberal times after she has lost her mother and her love interest Khanum. In this scene, she is represented settling at the beauty parlor, decidedly transforming her hairstyle, dressing herself up in a bright orange-colored dress with a coordinated, elegant purse. In the entire length of the film, Laila's and Khanum's detailed assortment of stylish and trendy garments, accessories, adornments, and make-up implies respite through commodity, alluding to modern, urbanized, transnational sensibilities of postfeminism.

Enunciating the entitlement through "*it's about me!*" for women, Alankrita Shrivastava in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), represents four female characters exploring their choices and desires, fantasies, and emotions while they conceal them from society. Shrivastava forwards a women-oriented narrative with a convincing sensitivity and a female point of view. *Burkha* mentioned in the film's title symbolizes an age-old regressive norm. The four women characters in the film vehemently reject, as they negotiate their fantasies and desires symbolized through the Lipstick in the title. Costume "provides ample scope to become the central agency" (Street, 2001, p. 56) to use it in narrative and shape the women characters. The filmmaker sets the film's tone right at the onset with the perceptive use of the tool of dressing up to delineate the moral and psychological contours of these women with

communicative expertise. In the very first scene of the film Rehana, a character hailing from a conservative Muslim lower-middle-class family, is portrayed going around scheming in a mall, trying a Gucci perfume displayed attractively on the shelves in the high-end perfume section while gazing on to other brands like Givenchy, Versace, Giorgio Armani. Consequently, her character develops to unravel her self-indulgence where she highlights "respite is possible only through brands" premised on the "problem-solution schema" (Lazar, 2009, p. 377) as in a scene, she covertly acquires a lipstick and applies it after dumping her *burkha*, self-surveils her attire comprising t-shirt, jeans and settles her hairstyle as she goes on to embody and sing a Miley Cyrus song to her college peers. The costume is used as a meaningful tool to highlight the implication of normative femininity through consumption as Rehana's character, in a quest to escape from the realities of her family to embrace temporary relief and liberation, is depicted to steal fashion attires and accessories habitually.

The facets of necessitated female claim to self-oriented pleasure are etched out through the presentation of the central women characters in a scene in the film where Rehana, Leela, *Bua Ji,* and Shireen are shown on the rooftop before the upcoming marriage of Leela as they are indulging in "pleasure women themselves derive from wearing cosmetics" (Lazar, 2009, p. 379). The soiree of the four, along with another set of women while they explore and converse about their yearnings, underlines that arousing senses is predominantly related to pleasure. In another scene from the film Leela, the girl running a beauty parlor and brashly in love with a budding photographer, in a romantic and physically demonstrative mode with her love interest, to get a portfolio through photoshoot complete with a variety of coordinates of garments, creates various options with dressing up. Juxtaposing the fusion of the Indo-western look to silhouettes fitting very close to the body and from using western-influenced accessories and traditional wedding bangles to contrasting colored prints to fur, from oversized sunglasses to beach hats, the filmmaker uses costumes to mark out Leela's penchant for commodity indulgence for seeking a self, full of materialistic dreams.

As it is evident in such films made in neoliberal, globalized times, "women protagonists can fashion feminine identities in ways that eschew the process of conspicuous consumption" (Gilligan, 2011, p. 168), and dress is idealized as a tool by which post-feminist subjectivities can be constructively re-imagined and performed. In a similar spirit, celebrating femininity to the complete and threading in the women characters with the self-seeking strands, Rajshree Ojha in Aisha utilizes creative tools like dressing-up to position the women-centred characterizations in the plot while detailing their asspirations, lifestyle, and globalized neoliberal influences. In this context, in the backdrop of globalization with its "new ethics of individualism, freedom, and enjoyment" (Gautam Basu Thakur, 2010, p. 76), delineates a logic that privileges independent desire. Film scholars like Thakur articulate that the adage of

development and advancement that outlines globalized India gives scope for a culture of enjoyment. The globalized Indian has the right to enjoy. "Enjoyment" seems signifies to be able to "jive to popular music, wear fashionable clothes, and live a certain life of fantasy." Aisha and Pinky, lead women characters in the film, "depict women as liberated and globally aware, leading transnational lifestyle" (Sandhu, 2014, p. 82). Unquestionably similar to *Sex and The City*, which aired in the later years of the nineties and *Confessions of the Shopaholics* (2009) et al., Aisha and Pinky in *Aisha* visit shopping malls, polo matches, art exhibitions, enjoy weekend getaways. Symbolizing a debauched life, both are appropriately groomed in the designer attires from Manish Arora to Gucci, with aesthetics complying with the urban and affluent families of south Delhi.

Dazzling Aisha with her gang of girls incessantly indulges in feminine with all the details of the costume, accessory and a color scheme which is "carefully coordinated" to construct an unending panorama that signifies with a "walk in the museum, brimming with objects d'arts" (TNN, 2016) with a strongly crystallized style quotient. Specifically reminding of neoliberal women, Aisha along with Pinky dressed in chic attires in an imposing plot to find a groom for Shefali transform an otherwise unfashionable girl into a fashionable diva, splurging inexpensive designer label outfits and accessories like Dior, Armani being sold out from a luxury shopping mall, along with transforming her single plait to a voguish hairdo. The commodity is seen as an ultimate tool to self-assert. Aisha's glamourous off-shoulder one piece off white dress, black beret cap, heavy goggles and Pinky's shorts, trendy top, high heeled boots, and designer clutch bag contrasts symbolically with the muted long traditional salwar kurta, flat *chappals,* essential tote bag of Shefali as she is observed in a seeming disparity of fashion quotient. This builds up the post-feminist necessities in the narrative ploy to bring forward the importance of unrestrained acquirement of upscale ensembles, beauty culture to appropriately groom Shefali for her dream of a suitable marriage match. Thus, costumes connected to styling up filmic characters are fashionable and judged in global standards, and dressing up links the film to a "larger global flows of fashion and commodity goods" (Wilkinson-Weber, 2003, p. 122). In a similar vein, the self gets defined by Aisha as she discusses with Shefali the importance of choosing an elite and rich husband to attach value to life, while both are on a spree of screening expensive clothes at a Dior Boutique. This sequence becomes a visual metaphor for "entitled femininity" (Lazar, 2009, p. 374) while Aisha is represented in a black and white chic dress and a glossy get up. Shefali's fashionably evolving persona becomes a filmic mark for these female characters' adherence to Lazar's postulate of entitlement, weighed by formidable worth. In its entirety, dress plays a crucial role in fabricating an identity centered on proclaiming *"it's about me!"* replete with fun and enjoyment.

Dress Constructing I-dentity: Celebrating Individuality

The previous section's premise of *"it's about me!"* underlined with entitlement goes ahead in substantiating a basis in indexing the "post-feminist *I-dentity*" with the strands of "autonomy and agency" marking a heightened "self-confidence" accepting "contradiction and plurality" and "commodity embodiment" as elements to mutually formulate the female characters with the commodity itself (Lazar, 2014, p. 208). Film costumes scholar Sarah Street (2001), while writing on identity getting woven in films through costumes, elaborate that dress surpasses the requirements of the narrative also by iconizing "detailed aspects of identity to characters' desires" (p. 59). Roland Barthes (2013) has also posited that the chief idea behind the psychological aspect of clothing is "self-expression," as though the significant aim of clothing is to assemble and harden the self, "confronted by a society wishing to swallow it up" (p. 24). The select sets of filmic texts indicate an embryonic pattern of the mentioned themes and their comprehension through visual imagery, including dress and adornment. The three women filmmakers selected for this research etch out *I-dentity* in a way that the dress is seen to be cementing the relationship between femininity and clothes to the extent that "clothes seemed able to impose rather than absorb meaning" (Bruzzi, 1997, p. xii). Women filmmakers for this research adopt the dress and their relationship to creating feminine agency, confidence, and celebration of contradiction as chief indicators.

The idea of *I-dentity* gets into play through the language of clothes as Shonali Bose in *Margarita With A Straw* (2015), with the protagonist of the film Laila, a teenaged, college-going disabled girl who has cerebral palsy, mostly on a wheelchair, embodies clothes to register autonomy, marking her clear resistance against her designated position in stereotypes. Laila, in the film, triumphantly subdues her disability to foreground her feminine subjective *I-dentity* through the multiple explorations of relationships, exploring her vocation as a youthful singer, and following her academic studies and goals. In a post-feminist stance and to subvert the conformed behavior perceived of a disabled girl, Laila celebrates her autonomy in exploring her personal youthful "normative femininity" (Lazar, 2014, p. 207) as she is seen dressed in a trendy t-shirt, denim jacket while performing with her band. In another scene, while celebrating the birthday of her love interest and college peers, Laila is seen in a net-like bright green crocheted top coordinated with canary yellow brief tops and styled in one-sided modish braids. As posited by Lazar, the self-belief of the post-feminist subject is grounded on the hybridized dual traits of feminist aspects and the reclaiming of the traditional gendered femininity to indulge in girlish elements, where both coalesce to supplement each other. In a similar spirit in this film, if any other friend of Laila's did such youthful and attractive representation, then it would instead remain as an ordinary

occurrence, but this enlists the disabled girl, Laila's active participation in the "clothes dialogue" (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 61). Thus it is communicated as unconventional and certifying subjective individuality. This brings into focus the depiction of women as autonomous and agentive, who exercises choice. As Lazar posits, "optimism and certitude are reflected in female subject's attitude" (Lazar, 2014, p. 211), focusing on I-centered self. In addition and her admission Shonali Bose also, in an article, states that "I am very woman-oriented" and categorizing her films as progressive and elaborates that "the gender is huge" (PTI, 2015) for her.

The cultural meaning of the dress, as articulated by Joanne Entwistle (2000), renders clothing as a feature of culture, and it is a critical aspect "in the production of masculinity and femininity" and layers the body with cultural connotations (p. 143). This meaning can be further expanded in realizing the interpretation of identity in the context of costumes in films when Sarah Street (2001) explains that films can present an intricate and nuanced exploration of feminine identities uncovering through their costuming "a wide spectrum of difference, fluidity, and possibility" (p. 70). In this context, the film by Alankrita Shrivastava notably emphasizes this, as Rehana shuns her *burkha* imposed on her by her family as she secretly transforms to blend with her peers from the college in torn jeans, graphic printed t-shirt, accessories, Converse shoes, and unisex shoulder bag. While focusing her view on the camera to protest against the ban of jeans trousers on the college campus, Rehana symbolizes women's desire represented through clothes of their choice. Here, the agency and confidence to project an *I-dentity* is foregrounded as the nuanced use of dressing up is brought to application to formulate femininity, which negotiates the clothing stereotypes for a young Muslim girl in a second-tier city Kanpur to celebrate self-assertions. *Burkha,* traditionally perceived as feminine, is replaced with jeans, trousers, and t-shirts to be more appropriate for a college-going girl in a globalized, neoliberal environment in which women are reconsidering their desires solid feminist reverberation. Exploring the strand of individuality, Leela, in another illustrative scene in the film on her engagement day to a prospective successful man, is seen video recording herself while indulging physically with her love interest. The idea of the gaze of the camera controlled by Leela and the celebration of her sexuality seems that the "post-feminist confidence" (Lazar, 2014, p. 211) is an assured sense of conviction with the self. The traditional *lehnga* (ankle length skirt) with coordinated traditional jewelry is paradoxical to her agentive behavior. It seems like a narrative highlighting the societal regression being imposed through clothing norms on women with complex shades of character. Concomitantly employing dress in this scene, in the narrative formation, the traditional *lehenga* at the hands of Leela seems to become a symbol of undermining of regulatory sartorial norms enforced on women as a dress "becomes an ambiguous signifier of femininity" (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 60).

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In the representation of the self-assured and domineering *I-dentity* of *Bua Ji* in the film, costumes become valuable not just for suggesting that costume is capable of changeability but also provides for "exploring an individual's pursuit to fix identity through appearance" (Street, 2001, p. 35). While secretly exploring feminine subjectivity in a quest to indulge in her desires to befriend a much younger swimming instructor, *Bua Ji* visits the mall to purchase a one-piece swimsuit with feminine, pastel-colored floral prints. In a subsequent scene from the film, she sees transforming herself from a woman her age dressed in a light colored saree with a trademark white-haired look as an overshadowing matriarch to a woman's identity with romantic and feminine desires. Transforming from a staid and aged woman, she mutates with bright pink colored saree, black sleeveless body-hugging blouse, black dyed hair, and a rose settled in the hairstyle to depict her plurality and the personality with the obstrusive use of dress. It becomes the key to the discourse on *I-dentity*. All the four women characters, including Rehana, Leela, Shireen, and *Bua Ji,* are emblematic of subverting the stereotypes through their individualistic feminist desires. Still, at the same time, they do not stand up against the pressures of their families, reflecting inconsistencies and inability to decide. They are shown in the last scene to celebrate their incapacities as they enjoy a joyful moment together in women-oriented space and the insights of Lazar (2014), "as an embodiment of feminist/feminine qualities" (p. 215), depicting that typical contrasts in such cases are paradoxically not stark opposites but "interdependent pair" (p. 215). The semiotics of the dress variety of the women characters in the film ranging from *burkhas, sarees, salwar kurtas* to jeans, t-shirts, tops, swimsuits index this plurality.

In addition to the film narratives of Shonali Bose and Alankrita Shrivastava, Rajshree Ojha in *Aisha* also characterizes the postulate of *I-dentity* intertwined with the strands of autonomy, self-confidence, and commodity embodiment. She achieves this through the montage of designer garments, extravagant and elite fashion aesthetics, upscale coordinates of garments and accessories, Indian and international couture attires, luxury clothes brands signifying neoliberal women aptly personified through Sonam Kapoor, the lead protagonist of the film and the epitome of fashion in Bollywood in post-liberalized India in recent times. Her personality dazzles of being a modern youth icon, representative of global ambitions of the Indian middle class, a powerful agent of growth in liberalized India (Vishwamohan, 2014, p. 74). Her fashion sensibilities and stardom have added to the narrative composition quite an effortless manner of forwarding her post-feminist *I-dentity* in the film. Underlined also by Wilkinson-Weber (2003) as she recognizes Sonam Kapoor's "distinct fashion sensibility" (p. 166) and thus the featuring of Christian Dior and Chanel in the film in a manner to mark out commodity

embodiment through the character of Aisha. In her project, like a mission to plan out Shefali's transformation from a gauche girl to a snobbish elite, Aisha demarcates herself as a confident and self-assertive fashionista. Dress this contrast between Aisha and Shefali forwards, thus creating a need for the transformation required for Shefali, in true post-feminist ethos. Definitely in a clear emergent pattern, as seen in these three films, *I-dentity* as a marker of the feminine subjective choices is unraveled adroitly through the use of dress and costumes. Thus, the broadened capacity of current *Hindi* filmic texts made by women filmmakers with a deepening concern for women's choices and individuality to use the post-feminist frameworks significantly plays a critical role in constructing women's subjectivity with nuanced excellence and sensitivity.

Conclusion

Analyzing the three filmic texts *Margarita With A Straw (*2015), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), and *Aisha* (2010) by women filmmakers in recent times through the interdisciplinary lens of post-feminist strands of "*it's about me!"* and subjective feminine "*I-dentity*" and dress theories on the tropes of gender and identity determines that clothing provides for an immense scope to disentangle embryonic post-feminist developments. It is also helpful for a semiotic understanding of these cultural texts, leading to actively formulating meaning and disrupting stereotypes. Appropriating postfeminism in the backdrop of transnationalism and bringing the neoliberal women into the ambit and "the new woman" in the select films, it is understood that costumes forge their dynamic individualistic exploration as they determinedly invert the dress codes imposed on them by the society. A multi-model clarification through the frameworks of this research exposes the presence of beauty culture, self-indulgent pampering through commodity indulgence, pleasuring of the self through feminizing rituals, creation of women-only spaces, and exercise of agency and autonomy with confident self-assertion, a celebration of pastiche of feminine identities and coalescing of female subject and commodity in such films as these aspects get crystalized through dressing up and costumes. The women characters like Laila, Khanum envisioned by Shonali Bose eloquently represent the detailed layers of disabled girl's subjectivity with semiotic scaffolding of the costumes. In a related focus through the characters like Rehana, Leela, Shireen, and *Bua Ji*, Alankrita Shrivastava positions the voice of the women while adhering to post-feminist underpinnings and using costumes to aid in their pursuit of subverting stereotypes. Aisha and Pinky, with their relentless fashion splurge, pursue unbridled consumption in celebrating feminine entitlement, fun, and enjoyment.

In such a scenario, it is relevant to observe the recent *Hindi* filmic practice specifically being explored by women filmmakers. Instead of the males and other commercial filmmakers, they create women representations rooted in the women's point of view, desires, and choices with nuanced expertise. These *Hindi* women filmmakers charter a realistic course instead of the perils of the other mainstream Bollywood representations where the problematic construction of women characters is based on objectification. They go ahead and dislocate the male-centric approach and thus highlight the concerns of women. Diverging from the perceived image of celluloid women, a definite element of opposition has been crafted in such films compelling the audience to challenge their suppositions about Indian women. Based on the criticism of feminist activism, this sort of discourse seems to establish a model which assuredly makes an affirmation through entitling women with femininity, corporeal practices, schemes to glamourize the self-indulgent *I-dentity* and feminizing "*it's about me!*" while integrating it with a feminist ethos.

Notes

[1] As analysed by film scholars like M K Raghavendra, after 1947, *Hindi* films indicate the whole nation or can be classified as national cinema, which other language films can boast of, owing to its sheer reach. Jyotika Virdi asserts that *Hindi* films can be understood within popular culture and an analytical point of cultural location. Its stories provide us the premise on which our society rests its patterns of constructing meaning for itself.

[2] The Indecent Representation of Women Act was formulated in 1986, conceived by the parliament of India, was made to prohibit indecent representation of women through various forms of media like advertisements, writings, paintings, figures, or in any other manner. If individuals are found to be breaching the law, then they would be punished.

[3] The term refers to the curtailment of government regulations and rules to allow private companies to partake in the economic process more emphatically. It can also be understood as the withdrawal of authority to push economic progress and is pertinently linked with neoliberalism.

[4] Globalisation is the term that explains the upsurge in the linkage of the globe in the context of socio-cultural and economic angles across the population. It formulates modern everyday life.

[5] Neoliberalism can be understood as a political outlook that stresses capitalism, a free-market economy, deregulation, and government control and spending reduction in the economy.

[6] Postfeminism has been theorised by scholars like Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, and Michele M Lazar as a backlash to feminism, precisely second-wave feminism; it's a so-called redundant binary lookout, its conflicts, essentialism, perspective on sexuality, its view on the correlation between feminism and femininity. It abhors the concept that total gender equality can be achieved entirely or in real terms.

[7] Consumerism is a theory that can be understood as the escalation of consumption of goods that is considered to be economically desirable. Therefore, it is a constant indulgence in the buying of consumer goods.

[8] Dressing up is the personal mode with which an individual selects, adopts, and performs dressing to wear dresses, accessories, etc., to align with the socio-cultural norms.

[9] Fashion pertains to dresses, clothing, footwear, accessories, make-up, etc., which specialists have developed, is cyclical, depends on the zeitgeist, and is popular at a specific time. It is a popular creative expression and is considered a social signifier of status, class, gender, femininity, etc.

[10] As defined by Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B Eicher, the dress includes a collection of the modifications of body and/or the supplements to the body, including garments, jewelry, accessories, and modifications like tattooing, piercing, hairdo, and make up that can be chosen as a group or also as individuals within the group (1992,1). It is a tool through which meanings are communicated to establish the identity of the wearer.

[11] Costume refers to clothing items, garments, accessories, makeup used as an ensemble by actors, dancers, performers to represent specific characters. It can also be worn for special events, Halloween, masquerade, etc. As per the costume scholar and designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis, the purpose of the costume is to "support the narrative by creating authentic characters" (2012, 8). It should be assimilated by the story of the film and be intertwined with the narrative in a harmonious manner

[12] It refers to the article of dress that covers the body. The purpose of clothing is to provide modesty, protection and is a social norm. It can be used for dressing up as well as for costumes.

[13] Bollywood as a term signifies the transformation in the Hindi cinema since 1991 as articulated by film scholars like Rachel Dwyer, more in context to economic liberalisation and globalisation and its impacts. The term indicates the high profile, commercially viable global, and popular cinema, which is at the core of the burgeoning entertainment industry. Indicating to films in the last twenty years, it represents glossy films aimed at the overseas audience, positioned at the top end of the economic pyramid.

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