

Chapter 12

“Rosy Ki Khwaheeshein”: Scripted Romance and Acquaintance Rape in Alankrita Shrivastava’s Oeuvre of Female Desire

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Abstract

In this essay, I study Alankrita Shrivastava’s *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* (2020), and *Bombay Begums* (2021), to understand how her cultural productions explode the politics behind the scopophilic representation of female sexual desire by invoking certain widely marketed and frequently censored genres of erotic expression (erotic novels and telephone sex catered through dating apps) and then exposing their disturbing social underbelly where sexual violence resides. Shrivastava’s agentive female characters rupture these commercialized pulp sexual narratives and the fetishized figures of their heroines, replacing them with a far more problematic female voice of desire that speaks the truth about acquaintance sexual violence—subject to legal challenges and the result of our misogynist sexual culture (Francis 1996; Pineau 1989; Fraser 2015; Viki et al. 2004; Kahan 2021)—in all its various (unregulated/unrecognized) formats, whether marital rape, intimate partner sexual violence, sexual harassment, or intrafamilial sexual abuse. With reference to sociological and legal scholarship (McGregor 2005; Santhya et al. 2007; Anderson 2010; Conly 2004), I discuss how these works portray the distressing and unlegislated reality of acquaintance sexual violence—revealing the complex nature of sexual consent (which can be partial, subjective, and temporary), the varieties of nonconsensual sex (which can be unwanted/unwelcome even when not forced, and psychologically coercive even when not physically forced), and the grimmer impact of acquaintance assault as compared to stranger rapes (Drakulich 2015). I will argue that this mordant critique is lodged in the new Indian Indie current—which, as critics have noted, spells the demise of the archvillain and transformation of the familiar ‘heroine’—and that it consequently stages socio-political intervention by demolishing the stereotypical ‘romantic hero’ and subversively projecting the figures of the sexually desirous woman and the acquaintance rapist.

Keywords: New Indian Independent Cinema, Cinema on Sexual Violence, Acquaintance Rape, Female Desire

In this essay I study the work of Alankrita Shrivastava, with a focus on her films *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* (2020), and her recent web show *Bombay Begums* (2021), to understand how her cultural productions explode the politics behind the scopophilic representation of female sexual desire by invoking certain widely marketed and frequently censored genres of erotic expression and then exposing their disturbing social underbelly where sexual violence resides. I also showcase her centrality within the post-2010 rise of the new Indian Independent (Indie) cinema to show how the exposition of censored desire and uncensored rape is located within a generically defined trajectory of female-centred protest. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, the desires of the four primary female characters is embedded into a titillating narratorial voiceover drawn from erotic pulp fiction and. And in *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare*, Dolly and Kajal's expressions of sexual desire are constantly juxtaposed against the scripted telephone sex catered through dating apps, in one of which Kajal is employed. Shrivastava's agentive female characters, however, rupture these commercialized pulp sexual narratives and the fetishized figures of their heroines, replacing them with a far more problematic female voice of desire that speaks the truth about acquaintance sexual violence—subject to legal challenges and the result of our misogynist sexual culture (Francis 1996; Pineau 1989; Fraser 2015; Viki et al. 2004; Kahan 2021)—in all its various (unregulated/unrecognized) formats, whether marital rape, intimate partner sexual violence, sexual harassment, or intrafamilial sexual abuse. With reference to sociological and legal scholarship (McGregor 2005; Santhya et al. 2007; Anderson 2010; Conly 2004), I discuss how these works portray the distressing and unlegislated reality of acquaintance sexual violence—revealing the complex nature of sexual consent (which can be partial, subjective, and temporary), the varieties of nonconsensual sex (which can be unwanted/unwelcome even when not forced, and psychologically coercive even when not physically forced), and the grimmer impact of *acquaintance* assault as compared to stranger rapes (Drakulich 2015). This mordant critique is lodged in the new Indian Indie current—which, as critics have noted, spells the demise of the archvillain and modifies the predictable template of the familiar 'heroine'—and replaces existing gendered prototypes, demolishing the 'romantic hero' and projecting the figures of the sexually desirous woman and the acquaintance rapist. As such, I will suggest that this intervention by the female protagonists into the existing templates of marketable sexual script embodies the larger subversive intervention that this composer-filmmaker^{vi} (?) stages within mainstream cinematic portrayals of romantic love and female sexuality in Bollywood. Implicitly, Shrivastava's works also function rebelliously within the masculinist setting of Indian media production—a field that has registered frequent sexual harassment cases and scandals both internationally and nationally—to replace (the desire for) romance with (the achievement of) rights.

Upon release, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (*LUMB*) met with the censure of the CBFC which labelled it too "lady-oriented"—a euphemism for its depiction of raw female sexuality—which triggered the middle-finger campaign where, following the film's publicity posters, the film's lead female actors held up a lipstick ("a code for erotica and fantasy" and female desire; Ghosh 2019, p. 332) so that it aligned with their raised middle finger, implying the obvious irreverence of this gesture in response the institutional censure of their film. *LUMB* tells the story of Usha Parmar, Rehana Abidi, Leela, and Shirin Aslam, all of whom are located in Bhopal and strive to contest their fate through the expression of their individual sexual desires. Usha, a woman in her late 50s or 60s, secretly enjoys reading popular erotic novels and discovers a passion for a young swimming instructor with whom she engages in phone sex. Leela negotiates the turbulence between an exciting lover, Arshad, and a fiancée (Manoj) who promises no escape from the small-town familiar duties after marriage. Shirin works a secret sales job without the knowledge of her disapproving husband, Rahim, who works for long periods of time in Saudi

Arabia and only returns for brief spells during which he forces sex and unwanted pregnancies upon his wife. The *burkha*-clad Rehana labours inside her parents' tailoring shop, a reality she hides from her fashionable college friends in front of whom she seeks celebrity as a singer and courts the attentions of Dhruv, a boy from the college band.

Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare (DKCS) tells the story of Dolly and her husband Amit who have no sexual compatibility, and Kitty (or Kajal) who seeks a job at Red Rose App, a dating company that sells telephone sex, after being molested by Amit. Dolly tries to seek passion in Usmaan, a food delivery person, and Kajal in one of the clients of the dating app, Pradeep. Pradeep turns out to be a fraud with an existing marriage. The film ends dramatically with the death of Usmaan and with the birth of a friendship between the cousins (Dolly and Kajal) founded on admissions of disturbing truths. The continuing strand of radical feminist subversion that connects all of Shrivastava's work is interestingly suggested in *Bombay Begums* through the carefully chosen episode titles, each of which refers to canonical works of feminist literature. "Women Who Run with the Wolves," "The Color Purple," "The Bell Jar," "The Golden Notebook," and "A Room of One's Own" reference works by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Alice Walker, Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, and Virginia Woolf respectively that deal with a whole range of representations such as that of the mythological wild woman, the reality of African American women's systematic domestic sexual abuse, repression-induced female clinical depression, episodes of acquaintance (date) rape, twentieth-century sexual liberation and women's movements, and the patriarchal structuring of society, education, and the arts. *Bombay Begums* is the story of a group of central female characters: Rani—the powerful CEO of the Royal Bank of Bombay, Fatima—the high-ranking executive fighting the pressures of pregnancy unsuccessfully, Shai—Rani's step-daughter who faces rejection in her infatuation with Imran and discovers love for her step-mother, Ayesha—the new girl in Bombay who gets sexually assaulted by a high-ranking executive (Deepak Sanghvi) she admires, and Lakshmi Godbole (Lily)—the sex worker who tries to extort money and stability out of Rani in order to set up a better life for her son.

Scholars like Gohar Siddiqui have analyzed the work of Alankrita Shrivastava to establish that she represents the new Indian Independent cinema that rose to prominence after 2010—which has important structural implications for the representation of female desire, sexual violence, and women's rights. The template of the new Indian Indie and the conditions that birthed it are crucial for the way they define the subversive directions of filmmakers such as Shrivastava. Studying this genre in detail through a monograph and then an edited collection, Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram offers a useful map on which to plot Shrivastava's work. Devasundaram notes that a "foundational transformation" has taken place in the field of Indian cinema "through the emergence of a new wave of urban independent films since 2010" (Devasundaram *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid* 2016, p.1), further observing that "the prodigious abundance of Indie films . . . are now a normalised feature of India's annual cinematic output" (Devasundaram *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood* 2018, p.1). This "new filmic form, currently alluded to as new Indian 'Indies'" arises from the nation's current turbulent state—"a tumultuous neoliberal restructuring characterised by a commitment to consumer capitalism, foreign multinational investment and an inexorable thrust towards a global free market economy," "punctuated by a paradoxical retrenchment of right-wing Hindu religious and nationalist ideology" (Devasundaram 2016, p.2). Even while arising from within these currents, "filmmakers . . . use independent cinema to combat the combined repressive forces of socio-cultural orthodoxy and politico-religious dogmatism." (Devasundaram 2018, p.2). In these indie films, the push "to articulate alternative, secondary and tertiary narratives that challenge the status quo and ruling power becomes paramount" (Devasundaram 2018, p.2). This genre fractures the "meta-hegemony" of Bollywood—a term Devasundaram coins to explain the predominance of Bollywood within India along with a

simultaneous subservience vis-a-vis Hollywood (Devasundaram 2016, p.4). Toppling the Bollywood supremacy and its formulaic pattern, Devasundaram explains that “the new Indies narrate micro-narratives – the minority and alternative stories of nation excluded from Bollywood film representations” (2016, p.2). “[C]ompris[ing] of polymorphous, heterogeneous and individual strands that converge in their unique ability to present parallax or unconventional perspectives of modern India,” the Indies offer “a non-Bollywood’s-eye view” (Devasundaram-2018, p.3).

Explaining the unique historical trajectory of the Indian Indies, Sudha Tiwari notes that these films continue “the legacy of the New Cinema movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s, in a new avatar,” sharing “the [same] cinematic agitation and anger against established structures and status quo exhibited by the films of the 1960s and ‘70s” that were state-funded through NFDC and FFC, but are funded by commercial establishments in a post-liberalization India (Tiwari 2018, p. 40-1). However, Tiwari observes a crucial shift noting that the “elementary definition of an Indie film gestures towards a low-budget film by small studios, made by filmmakers independent of commercial film establishments,” and while the state-funded New Cinema—was indeed “truly independent of the commercial film establishment, to the extent of posing a strong opposition to it,” the new “Indie cinema of the 2000s may be independent of the state, but is totally at the behest of market forces” (Tiwari 2018, pp. 40-41). Thankfully, despite these Indie filmmakers’ dependence on the market—“on national/international private and corporate bodies for production, distribution and exhibition” — “this has not yet led to any significant compromise on the form and content of these Indie films” (Tiwari 2018, p.41). In fact, as Tiwari explains, the Indies are unapologetic about this dependence, “not averse to taking funding and distribution assistance from corporate bodies or the government,” because of the larger moral purpose underlying its filmmaking—the “mak[ing of] films that tell alternative stories it thinks must be told” (Tiwari 2018, p.41). Gohar Siddiqui notes how Alankrita Shrivastava, as an Indian Independent filmmaker, draws on the possibilities of this channel to critique the construction of femininity in mainstream Indian cinema. Siddiqui identifies an earlier shift from the representation of conventional Indian womanhood to the New Woman of the post-liberalization decades (1990s), and then the later shift that registered with the post-2000 Indian Independent films. In the earlier phase, corporatized post-liberalization Bollywood emerged “a crucial player in the representation of the New Woman” and the “construction of new womanhood . . . intensified since the 1990s,” producing the “New Woman [who was] . . . a consuming and laboring subject in a capitalist economy as well as a female citizen and a member of patriarchal institutions like the nation-state and family” (Siddiqui 2021, p.81). Regarding the post-2000 phase that Sangita Gopal calls the “new cinematic order” or “New Bollywood” (Gopal 2011, p.2; qtd in Siddiqui 2021, p.81), Siddiqui notes that “post-2000 [the] economic landscape shifted in favor of independent filmmakers, resulting in several *hatke*/alternative women-centric films” (Siddiqui 2021, p.81). This “space created for niche cinema then allow[ed] for filmmakers like Shrivastava to make socially conscious feminist films like *LUMB*, which self-consciously play with the tropes of new womanhood to visibilize the conflict between empowerment and containment” (Siddiqui 2021, p.81). Devasundaram notes how “the Indies [serve] as a bastion for strong female roles both behind and in front of the camera” to the extent that “[s]everal Indies could be classified with confidence as ‘F-Rated’ (female rated)—a moniker traceable to Bath Film Festival Director Holly Tarquini’s coinage for films featuring a female director, scriptwriter and actors” (Devasundaram *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood* 2018, p.3). Occupying this space of ‘F-Rated’ Indian indie cinema, Shrivastava’s work harnesses the radical potential offered by the template not only in the two films that she has directed but in the webshow that she has produced, co-directed, and co-written—which, for the purposes of this essay, I will consider

part of her Indie oeuvre, despite its variant format, because of the similar independent market channels of funding and the shared preoccupation with women-centric subversive social change. Srivastava uses the Indie format to foreground polemical issues strategically relegated to silence in public discourses on sexuality and mainstream cinema representations—female sexual desire and acquaintance rape. The unapologetic asseveration of sexual appetite in her oeuvre takes place through some of the most well-known but socially marginalized scripts of sexual intimacy—erotic fiction and telephone sex-talk. This is followed by a powerful overturning of these erotic scripts to expose the reality of sexual violence underlining these professions of love and intimacy.

Expressing Desire: The Power of Female Sexual Agency

Shai's voiceover perhaps offers the most succinct expression of the urgency of female sexual desire in Srivastava's work: "Some women secretly aspire to be queens. *Lie about their desires*. I don't want to lie mummy" (*Bombay Begums*; emphasis added). The theme is treated at length in *LUMB* where the template of an erotic novel is adapted into a cinematic voiceover that strings together the lives of the four central female characters—Usha Parmar, Rehana Abidi, Leela, and Shireen Aslam. Defined and united by their erotic fantasies, these characters speak eponymously through Rosy—the titular character of the romance series that Usha Parmar, or "Buaji" (Aunty), devours secretly as we move through the film. The narrative leaves us in no doubt about the centrality and celebratoriness of female desire as it opens defiantly with this manifesto:

There is that moment that arrives in every girl's life when her desire to become a woman gets awakened. Rosy's desires were also blooming like the rose. Outside the cage of life, faraway dreams were making Rosy restless. And in the blooming garden of her body, her youth was pricking her as a thorn.

The woman, apparently singular (Rosy) but collectively representative of all the female protagonists, is defined by her sexual longing and her lack of access to consumption, both material and sexual—the intertwining of which is also emphasized from the start. As Rosy's desire is highlighted in this story of the erotically charged woman, desperate in her sexual loneliness, the visual is of the *burkha*-clad Rehana secretly smuggling a lipstick out of a clothing outlet in a lavish mall, and then changing into fashionable clothing in her college washroom before making an appearance in the freshly applied stolen lipstick. The unapologetic and reckless efforts to secure and consume market accessories in order to enhance appeal and ensure the satisfaction of desire is a persistent strand in the film. The woman's longing for sexual intimacy, within the framework of fashionable consumption, is further explained:

Rosy would stand behind the bars of her window, a pair of binoculars glued to her eyes, watching the shining lights of the city. Jeans-clad girls, hugging their boyfriends closely, would roam around on motorcycles openly. Their throbbing sounds would unleash Rosy's fantasies.

The next character, Shireen, is similarly entrenched in market consumption patterns, invested in rising through the ranks of the job she holds and determined to peddle the household appliances that she is assigned to sell to customers through door-to-door marketing. Just after we see her close a sale for a 'pest-control gun' to a homemaker, she has to rush home because her irate husband calls. The narrative at this point, however, chooses to describe her immersion

in sexual desire in language that—through the reference to the “shop” and the following image of a street lined with shops—also evokes the desire for material consumption:

The curtains were thick. No one could see Rosy in the dark. Rosy’s screams could not be heard in amidst the cacophony of the street. And the doors to Rosy’s shop would close even before opening. Rosy was incarcerated in a closed room of a rundown down—all alone with her young, colourful desires. Only the shadows of men reached her window. It felt like her body’s thirst would never be quenched. Because the key to her locked door had been lost for ages.

Soon after, female sexual desire is again evoked through Rosy’s story as Usha heads to the swimming pool—where she would soon discover her passionate craving for the swimming instructor—and sits by the side of the splashing waters reading this romance novel from which the continuous (Rosy) voiceover draws. The camera zooms in to show Usha secretly devouring the book and the narration continues:

Today was the first rain of the monsoons. And the drops of youth were calling out to her. The tempest within Rosy’s body was more frightening than the storm outside. Rosy had become fully drenched in the flood of desire. Her white kurta [long shirt] had become transparent. Each and every inch of Rosy’s body was soaked in the drops as if she was drowning in the tornado of lust. Her binoculars were slipping from her hand. In the opposite window, the new tenant was showering—completely naked.

Later in the night, we see her read more about Rosy’s pulsating desire for the tenant outside her window: “Rosy wanted to shower with him. She wanted the tenant to shampoo her thick hair with his hands. She wanted his slippery fingers to incite her youth.” As the film progresses, Usha slips into the titillating nightly episodes of calling the swimming instructor, speaking to him anonymously as ‘Rosy,’ initiating phone sex, answering his eager questions about herself with the promise that he could always see her in his “lipstick dreams” and eventually masturbating to the sound of his lascivious words.

And the fourth protagonist of the film, Leela, attempts to pursue her dreams with abandon, wishing to break free of the small town and escape to Delhi with her boyfriend, Arshad, with whom she engages in passionate sex, even filming themselves in the act (partly) to enhance the sexual thrill.

In *DKCS*, Radha Yadav, or Dolly, develops an attraction for Osmaan—the delivery person for an online food delivery app (Ippy) —and his disarmingly honest ways. This involvement, that finally culminates in an episode of passionate lovemaking, emancipates Dolly from the accusations of sexual frigidity that she had internalized and of which she had spoken to Kajal in a critical scene: “I’m frozen . . . You know how they say in English—frigid. I do not feel anything. If anyone tries to put it inside it pains, and I am never in the mood.” Having discovered her right and ability to seek or enjoy sexual pleasure through her relationship with Osmaan, Dolly defiantly removes from her bedroom all the stockpile of oils and lotions recommended as cures for frigidity (“Japanese Oil” bottles), and declares to her husband in a moment of fulfilling self-discovery, “I am *not* frigid.” Dolly’s cousin Kajal, whose screen name on the dating app where she is employed is Kitty, is disappointed and cheated by her love interest, Pradeep. Her intimacy with him is rough, unfulfilling, and anti-climactic for her. In a shocking twist, Kajal approaches DJ Gurjar Teja for sexual gratification—a man whom she had seen pleasuring her friend, Shazia, during a night of raucous love-making when they had

all been sharing the same bedroom. Startling the audience into recognizing the untameability of her desire, she unflinchingly seeks out the one man from whom she hopes to derive not love or romance but sexual pleasure. In a culminating moment of the film, both women are seen deriving their much awaited sexual pleasure in partners of their choice—Dolly with Osmaan and Kajal with DJ Gurjar—whose candid sexual purpose in their lives lie outside frameworks of not only conjugality but also romance. As if to enshrine this realization through art, the end of the film shows a carnival where an acclaimed artist (Damayanti) unveils her massive magnum opus, an art installation titled and resembling the ‘Yoni’ (vagina) in view of a large audience in the middle of the celebrations. Challenging this spectacular creative literalization of the principle of female desire (“the metaphoric feminine,” as Damayanti announces), the installation is attacked by right-wing political goons attempting to raze to the ground what they consider “an offence to Indian culture.”

In *Bombay Begums*, sexual desire is once again briefly but strongly endorsed by Shai when Rani’s sexual adventure with Mahesh Rao is suggested by the news media and flashed across screens. As Rani’s step-son, Zuravar, calls her a “slut” and “the most fucking immoral person,” accusing her implicitly of shaming the family through her escapades, Rani turns to Shai expecting only the worst kind of mordant disapproval and is greeted instead with substantive moral support, albeit delivered with complete indifference: “It’s a free world. You can sleep with whoever the fuck you want.” Shai’s own trajectory through the web show also delineates the biological principle that undergirds sexual desire—extracting it from the morality discourse and reinstating it within the organic and physiological. Her teacher explains in class, as Shai looks coyly at the object of her infatuation, Imran, and later proceeds to stain her skirt red to attract his raw sexual attention:

Love is a mere chemical reaction in the body. The human body is designed to ensure that we, as a species, grow and multiply. . . . Males, naturally, instinctively find women more attractive when they are fertile. Especially when they are ovulating. . . . In fact, some studies show that males think their mates smell the nicest when they are in the most fertile phase of their menstrual cycle.

However, as I will show in the following section, the perils of such boundless passion remain undeniable for the fearless woman who dares to venture forth—only to be greeted by lovelessness, sexual disciplining, or sexual violence.

Prohibitions of Desire, Impossibility of Love, and the Reality of Rape

This free expression of female sexuality is met with several templates of censure and ridicule in Shrivastava’s work. For instance, in *DKCS*, uninhibited female desire is impeded by societal convention surrounding the appropriateness of specific kinds of sexual expression. When Dolly’s husband returns home, after her brief secret outing with Osmaan, she initiates sex and mounts him in what is shown to be her first attempt at passionate rekindling of their fire. In response to this, the societal reproval of such frank and assertive female expression of desire is implied when the husband turns her over and proceeds to mount her, symbolically crushing her attempt at agentive sexuality—a move that leads her to withdraw and sends him off into his routine masturbation. As Shai says in *Bombay Begums*—ostensibly about the custom of ‘*karva chauth*’ but with a wider metaphorical import—offering a commentary on society’s censorship of female sexual expression and its simultaneous validation (and even valorization) of male sexual aggression: “Hungry women, all of us. The men, of course, have their bellies full. How is our hunger going to benefit the men we love.” She defies the cultural obstruction of female desire, asking angrily:

“[A]nd why should anything be forbidden anyway? I don’t like that the world blames Eve. Wasn’t she free to eat the fruit she found most juicy? . . . There’s a beauty and a madness when Eve steps out of her body and slowly watches her heart breathing, loving, breaking. . . , forgetting that the forbidden fruit is poisonous.”

Sexual satisfaction, as a template of tender love, is evoked, and rendered as meaningless and unattainable as a chimera when Shirin and Leela have an intimate chat in *LUMB*. Leela, who had just been harshly rebuffed by her lover (Arshad) in a manner unfaithful and disrespectful to the many intimate moments and conjugal dreams they had shared together, vents to Shirin while caught in an arranged marriage against her choice. As she does a bikini wax for Shirin at her parlour, she watches Shirin’s eyes well up and pauses to ask with intuitive insight, tender concern, and tragic self-identification: “He [Rahim] never touches you lovingly down there, no? Has he ever kissed you till date? . . . You know where our fault lies? We see too many dreams.”

Rani is greeted with this loveless abyss when in one of her final conversations with Mahesh Rao, she realizes that Mahesh had also imagined their relation to be a sexually manipulative one where Rani derives professional favours in exchange of intimacy. When she reminds him that she had never asked him for any favours, not even to get herself the position of the CEO, he answers shrewdly: “But it didn’t hurt that you were seeing me . . . You know its advantages.” Stunned and dismayed, Rani corrects him: “Actually, for me, this was just about you.”

Referring to this loveless suffering of women, Shai says in her voiceover, seemingly about Rani’s (queen’s) ‘karva chauth’ or ‘fasting for love,’ but actually about the agony of women’s unreciprocated love and unmerited suffering: “Love is a lonely pursuit. And if queens have to suffer for their love too, where does that leave us, mere mortals?”

Instead of a romantic hero who reciprocates the woman’s pulsating passion and offers her engaging romance—of the kind scripted into and promised by erotic novels or telephonic sex-chats—what the film highlights is the impossibility of such equality of desire. What emerges disturbingly in place of this is the ubiquity of acquaintance rape—a form of sexual violence characterized by some specific advantages of access and authority on the part of the assaulter, and very particular kinds of trauma and debilitation for the survivor. The studies on acquaintance rape observe how it has typically been received with less seriousness, socially as well as legally, resulting in a larger number of acquittals of the rape accused. Scholars attempt to redress this injustice by reinstating acquaintance rape as equivalent to stranger rape, both in numbers and seriousness. Works by Peggy Reeves Sanday, Leslie Francis, Lisa M. Cuklanz, Jody Raphael, and Joan McGregor fall under this category. The legal challenges surrounding acquaintance rape are highlighted in this secondary literature. Studies observe that the law “still grapples with a woman’s ‘yes’—what it means and how it should be defined,” and “[n]ever is the murky nature of consent more evident than when a woman indicates that she agreed to some sexual activity on the occasion of an alleged rape” —as is the case in acquaintance rapes (*Acquaintance Rape and Degrees of Consent* 2004, p. 2341). Thus, in a legal sense, a “limited notion of consent” is problematic (as opposed to the otherwise mainstream “notion of generalized consent”), and this makes acquaintance rapes, such as marital rape, difficult to prosecute (p. 2341). Such scholarship not only emphasizes how acquaintance rape is a legitimate form of sexual violence that must receive the kind of social and legal censure that is typically reserved for stranger rape cases, but also highlights how our misogynist sexual culture is particularly responsible for the ambiguity surrounding acquaintance rape jurisprudence. McGregor argues that consent is a performative, not a mental state, and that (sexist) laws that require showing both force and

absence of consent for conviction needs to be replaced with a vision that specifically includes *nonforcible yet nonconsensual sex*—a concept specifically useful for understanding acquaintance rape (McGregor 2005). Michelle J. Anderson argues that while rape in the American imagination is by a (Black) stranger in an unsafe public space, the “typical rape in the United States”—and by extension elsewhere—is inflicted in the vast majority of cases by “[a]cquaintances and intimate partners,” and is carried out through a combination of “verbal coercion and pinning,” unaccompanied by a “valiant physical resistance on the part of the victim” (Anderson 2010, pp. 646-7). Dan M. Kahan argues that cultural cognition—or “the tendency of individuals to conform their perceptions of legally consequential facts to their defining group commitments” —defines the way acquaintance rapes are perceived, and “cultural predispositions have a much larger impact on outcome judgments than do legal definitions” resulting in the understanding of acquaintance rapes as not the kind of legitimate crimes that stranger rapes constitute (Kahan 2021, p.729).

Viki, Abrams, and Masser study a group of people noting how individuals with high levels of benevolent sexism attributed less blame to acquaintance rape perpetrators and vice versa (Viki et al. 2004, p.295). Similarly emphasizing benevolent sexism, Fraser notes that the epidemic of acquaintance rapes is largely ignored today. Sexual violence is understood only in the context of “misogyny” but the “other facets of sexism, including ostensibly ‘benevolent’ sexism (or chivalry)” is ignored for the role it plays in “normaliz[ing] this violence” (Fraser 2015, p.141). Leslie Francis’s *Rape on Trial* draws on Lois Pineau’s article (1989) and notes how the problem of acquaintance rape is the prevailing idea of consent. The concept of consent “is entangled in a number of mutually supportive mythologies which see sexual assault as masterful seduction, and silent submission as *sexual enjoyment*”—the latter being a crucial aspect that can be assumed and therefore established much more easily for acquaintance rapes (Francis 1996, p.6). Therefore, this literature not only establishes the legal discrepancies that problematize acquaintance rape convictions but also investigates how our sexual culture is responsible for the ambiguity surrounding this category of crimes. Thus, literature has mostly centred on establishing the equal gravity of acquaintance rapes when compared to stranger rapes, and therefore on broadening out of our gendered understanding of ‘consent,’ ‘force,’ and ‘desire’ in order to bring acquaintance rape within the legal and conceptual purview already in place for stranger rapes.

Located against this backdrop of socio-legal perception, even amongst the most progressive echelons, the contribution of Shrivastava’s work is paramount because of how it stages acquaintance rape to demonstrate that it is in fact *not* equivalent to stranger rape in the circumstances that lead up to it and the trauma that results from it. The unique situations that surround acquaintance rape are emphasized rarely in secondary scholarship. One example is Sarah Conly who cites the famous debate surrounding Alec’s rape/seduction of Tess in Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, noting how scholarship has been divided on whether Tess was raped or seduced by Alec who, after being repeatedly refused sexual access by Tess, is found to have secured it on one final occasion when Tess was fatigued and asleep. While the detail is intentionally excluded by Hardy, leaving the text ambiguous in its sexual and ethical implication, Conly argues that even while lacking the knowledge of this specific evening, we still have “no reason to think that she has undergone a change of heart, even if at this moment she stops resisting.” Conly’s rationale and argument stemming from this is that not just “physical force or the threat of physical force” but “psychological force” is a legitimate mode through which rape can be inflicted (Conly 2004, p.97). Drakulich addresses the understudied aspect of the impact of acquaintance rape on its victims, problematizing the assumption that stranger crimes are more fear- or concern-inducing than acquaintance crimes (Drakulich 2015).

In fact, based on the responses collected, Drakulich suggests that acquaintance sexual assaults evoke more concern—or as I argue with respect to Shrivastava’s work—more anxiety and trauma. Alankrita Shrivastava’s oeuvre performs crucial cultural work in this field by portraying the deep trauma that characterizes the aftereffect of the crime of acquaintance rape, the rhetoric of love that obfuscates the right to complain, the social understanding of male love as male aggression, and the confusion that the woman experiences while framing her responses during the assault because of her societal gendered training to be docile, considerate, and all-yielding in social and personal relationships. Shrivastava examines the most prominent subsets of acquaintance rape—marital rape where rape becomes an extension of wifely/motherly duty, sexual harassment where the power dynamics of the situation disqualify the woman from even the ability to voice consent (or the lack thereof), and intimate partner rape where the crime is obfuscated by the rhetoric and dream of ‘love.’

One of the most eviscerating varieties of acquaintance rape and among the most outrageous lacunae of the Indian legislative system is marital rape (Stellina & Raste 2006; Santhya et al 2007; Editorial 2013)—a composite sexual crime that is shown (or suggested) in detail throughout Shrivastava’s work. In the most direct case, Shirin Aslam is brutally raped by her husband multiple times in *DKCS*. The depiction of this crime is designed to highlight the futility of female sexual assertions in other parts of the film. For instance, one of the first occasions where we witness this assault, or its aftereffects, is in the form of Shirin’s damaged sexual health and scramble for a doctor’s check-up. Interestingly, it follows one of the most explicit assertions of female sexual appetite and the self-sufficiency of the woman when it comes to satisfying it. In this passage, the eponymous lead of the romance novel, Rosy, unsatiated by her male lover, turns to masturbation:

The lane would become quiet at night. Wearing a thin nighty, Rosy would lie down on the bench lining the window, and would close her eyes and watch her secret dreams. Clasped to the Prince’s body, she is flying in a plane among the stars. Inside the plane, the Prince is kissing every inch of Rosy’s body with his wet lips. Watching the fantasies of the Prince, Rosy would stroke her own body, keeping the pillow over her face to stifle her screams.

This narration shows the listlessness of all four women as they awaken to the incarceration of their desires—Rehana who had just been chastised by her parents for dancing openly in public, Usha who had realized her unacceptability as a sexual partner even to a same-aged man who seeks a younger woman, Leela who had been reprimanded by Usha for her sexual relationship with her lover (Arshad) while being (forcefully) engaged to someone else, and Shirin who had just been raped by her husband despite her complaint of how much it hurt and burnt during intercourse. Immediately following this fantastical account of Rosy’s lonely yet fulfilling self-gratification, and demolishing its unrealistic promise of gender equality, a distraught Shirin is shown opening a box that contains several files of emergency contraception, and popping an IPill. Shirin’s trajectory of repeated marital rape, serious sexual infections, unplanned pregnancies, and multiple abortions is etched in all its grim violence for the viewer. Both Shirin’s doctor and her immediate superior at her sales job warn her against the repetition of this pattern to guard against serious medical danger and to facilitate her advancement at her job. When Shirin tries to verbalize her pain at the forced sex, Rahim taunts her for this newly developed sensation now that he has returned from Saudi Arabia. On another occasion, when she attempts to persuade Rahim to use a condom, and hopes to bypass his initial anger at the thought of her having purchased it from a store by lying, he continues to rape her after throwing the condom aside. In the most disturbing sequence, Rahim vents his rage after finding out that

Shirin has a secret job by violently raping her for “trying to be a man” —turning her over and penetrating her anally, while lashing out the injunction; “You are the wife, do not try to become the husband.”

While the remaining examples in Shrivastava’s work are not portrayed explicitly as marital rape, they are shown suggestively to indicate how the encounters are founded on disinclination or disrespect, a legitimate template for understanding nonconsensual sex as ‘unwanted’ if not ‘forced’ (Santhya et al. 2007, p. 124). Dolly’s sexual approach towards her husband is suggestive of her complete unwillingness, and though Amit withdraws ultimately at her lack of sexual response, his repeated efforts to engage her sexually, his refusal to recognize the problem, and the final imposition of the allegation of frigidity upon Dolly suggests the arc of toxic masculinist aggression in the face of female sexual disinterest. The arc of assault is extended to include the assault on faith and the abuse of trust within intimate relationships. Even Rani’s marital sex with her husband, Naushad, is shown to end with Rani’s sense of betrayal as her husband continues to climax time and time again with orgasmic iterations of his dead wife’s name. As such, the full and necessary framework of human rights—the right to safe sex, the right to sexual health, and the right to safety from marital rape—are foregrounded to heighten the audience’s horror, indignance, and conscience at a form of acquaintance rape that is mired in the impossibility of protest, both because of the societal expectation of wifely love/duty and the routine, silent, and seemingly unremarkable nature of this violence.

Outside of marital rape, other forms of acquaintance rapes are represented, including ones that centre on the erosion of romantic and sexual trust such as in the case of sex on false assumptions. In a brief moment, we see the abusive nature of sexual intimacy carried out on false pretext or in half-clarity when we see Namrata, who the film suggests is Dhruv’s ex-girlfriend, rising from the hospital bed—suggestively after having an abortion—and weeping profusely at the sight of the Facebook update on Dhruv and Rehana’s relationship. A similar abuse of trust is suggested in Lakshmi Godbole’s relationship with Haider, a married man who visits her from Dubai and sleeps with her on promises of love and a new married life in Dubai. Towards the end, Lakshmi is disillusioned to discover that he intends to stay in his existing marriage while continuing his sexual liaison with her in secret by setting her up in a different part of Dubai, away from his primary conjugal living unit—an arrangement that her son also finds distasteful. Depicted more overtly, Kajal’s first sexual encounter stages this sexual dishonesty and the abuse of sexual emotion. As she passionately consents to the start of sexual activity with Pradeep, her disinclination midway becomes painfully evident when her declaration of love for Pradeep is not reciprocated by him except when explicitly requested by Kajal. Even in the middle of the act, he continues to call her “Kitty” —Kajal’s screen name in the dating app and only a commercialized, sexual fetishization of herself. Pradeep barrages her with the most cruel insult when, pausing for a brief moment, he derisively asks if she has any other “client” (of the dating app) on her mind. Shattered and demeaned, Kajal’s face amplifies the emotional and physical pain that she feels and the burden of the sexual act that she feels obligated to complete. As he climaxes with indifference towards her, she gazes with evident disbelief, indignance, and agony on her visage, and then leaves the place after washing the stained bedsheet with his assistance. The violence of such intimate partner abuse is projected in all its perilousness and brutality through Leela’s relationship with her boyfriend which veers between Arshad’s sexist imputations of her ‘excessive’ sexual appetite—what has conventionally been labelled ‘nymphomania’ in misogynist pseudo-scientific discourse since the nineteenth century—and direct threats of sexual attack. After Leela’s turbulent breakup, that follows her mother’s setting up of her marriage with a financially stable man, Leela tries to woo Arshad back by suggesting a bright future in Delhi, away from the small town of

Bhopal, and by proposing sex. Surprisingly, Arshad expresses indifference and disgust at his long-time partner (“I can’t take your nonsense anymore”). Not only does he attempt to shame her through a sexist slur, saying that she was “always . . . all about sex,” he even aggressively threatens gangrape as punishment: “If you want it [sex] so much there are four more boys outside I can call.” Another most visible representation of acquaintance sexual assault is to be seen in Amit’s attempts to sexually molest Kajal. The film even opens with this disturbing visual where Amit tries to inappropriately touch Kajal as she poses for a photograph with Dolly’s family at a carnival. Soon after, we see Kajal, forced to live at her sister’s place because of her shortage of means, eyeing her bedroom door nervously as she prays before bedtime. The threat looms over her palpably throughout the film, and we witness her visible discomfort as he tries to grope her secretly while in the presence of others. While Dolly tries to deflect and deny this truth when Kajal confides in her, the film climaxes with Dolly’s unflinching allegation towards her husband: “You tried to touch Kajal, that was *wrong*.” When Amit tries to equate it with Dolly’s extramarital relationship, she responds by categorically clarifying the principle of consent and highlighting the sexually violent nature of his act: “It [my relationship] was consensual.”

This issue of consent is portrayed most powerfully in *Bombay Begums*, which provides the most sustained engagement with the theme of acquaintance sexual violence through the depiction of workplace sexual harassment. When Lakshmi, the eye witness to Ayesha’s assault at the hands of Deepak, registers this complaint to the senior administration of Deepak’s company, and when Rani and Fatima proceed to interrogate the visibly traumatized and petrified Ayesha, Lakshmi vouches for the veracity of the incident beyond all alleged suspicions, implicitly referring to her traumatizing experiences as a sex worker: “[It is] not possible [that I misread the situation], because I hold a PhD in non-consensual sex.” The actual episode is portrayed in quick flashes in the show, suggesting more than demonstrating. Deepak offers to drop Ayesha home and then assaults her in his car—kissing, groping, and then fingering her vagina, before forcing her to gratify him with her hand and/or mouth, saying to her as she struggles, “You’re such a tease, I could feel your eyes on me all evening.” The emotional trauma that follows acquaintance rape—the feelings of self-debasement, helplessness, betrayal, and disillusionment—are shown in sensitive detail. Ayesha washes herself vigorously that night to cleanse herself from her own sense of pollution, and thereafter withdraws into a shell, shutting down all communication channels, suppressing the incident altogether, and even denying its reality when it is brought forth by Lakshmi, ultimately reaching out to an anonymous person (Karuna Vishwanathan) who admits to a similar experience in the company. As Shai’s voice says in the background: “Sometimes what we want is to push it all away. To forget, to pretend that it never was. But the memory---it stays alive inside of us, like a living, breathing thing.” The condescension, anger, and disbelief with which everyone treats the incident—from senior management (Rani, Fatima) to Deepak’s wife (Nalini)—is portrayed in excruciating detail to highlight the systemic corruption that surrounds workplace sexual harassment. Ayesha is frequently barraged with questions by Rani and Fatima in an attempt to intimidate and guilt her into withdrawing her complaint. In a final twist, the most shocking revelation is made by Rani herself. She is shown feeling disturbed while being recorded at a press interview with her legendary mentor—Pradyuman Jamwal, where he boasts about the working equation he always enjoyed with his protégé, Rani. He recollects that he was “quite the taskmaster” and that it was “Rani’s hunger that made her such an asset” because “[s]he always said yes,” to working late nights and weekends—“[w]hatever [he] . . . needed her to do, she took it in her stride.” Visibly uncomfortable, Rani concludes: “If I didn’t, I would be in trouble.” “Shaken out of denial and indifference, she first confesses to Shai in a poignant moment of traumatic recollection that she had been sexually assaulted by her boss

when she had “just joined JDR bank,” was “relatively new in Bombay,” and had felt like she must obey when her “boss expected [her] . . . to spend time with him after work.” Eventually, she says, breaking down:

And then started touching me. When it happened for the first time I was very confused. I was very scared but I thought that’s just the way it is. I wanted success, at any cost. . . . So I kept shut. . . . But then it didn’t stop! It just went on and on and on . . . It was horrible, Shai. I can still feel his breath on my face. I can still feel him inside me. There’s not a single day when that nightmare doesn’t come back to haunt me.

Empowered by the female and familial solidarity offered by Shai who strokes her head as she crumbles into tears, and fully cognizant of the trauma acquaintance sexual assault can inflict on its victim, Rani defiantly announces at a press conference that she was sexually harassed by Pradyuman and that with the arrest of Deepak this circle of silent victimization must end. She declares: “But now no more. It is time for us women to come together and raise our voices and say no to sexual harassment.” Bringing the continuing discussion of acquaintance sexual violence in all of her work to a definitive end in this final episode of her latest cultural production, Shrivastava cements the necessity of caution and protest. Voicing the urgent need for larger human concern, pragmatic strategy, and ethical intervention surrounding this issue, Rani tells Shai: “Shai I want you to tell me if any of the boys at the party touched you inappropriately . . . If you do remember later, you must tell me. . . I want you to know that you don’t have to do anything to please a man.”

In its final summation, Shrivastava’s works posit the community of suffering sisterhood as a source of consolation and strength to women who have been individually victimised. Each of Shrivastava’s cultural productions culminate with a moment of female solidarity where disparate or disagreeing characters bond in a silent realization of collective suffering, victimization, and power. At the end of *LUMB*, the dishevelled and dishonoured Usha sits surrounded by the other three disgruntled female characters, all disillusioned but relentless in their pursuit of “lipstick waale sapne,” or “Lipstick Dream.” As Rehana discredits the promises held out by these dreams, deriding the suggestion that their lives could ever be like Rosy’s, Usha reminds them that though false these narratives give women the strength to dream. The film ends with this community of women, sprawled out on the floor, laughing and smoking, while Rosy’s narrative drops the curtain: “Rosy jumped out beyond the threshold. The key to the locked-up dreams were after all within her heart.” In *DKCS*, a little before the end, we see Dolly and Kajal bond over their recognition of men who cheated and violated them, Amit and Pradeep, drinking and then cuddling into a peaceful nap in a moment of quiet partnership that gives them the strength to pursue their own independent paths. In the latest and the most finished treatment of this theme, Shai’s voiceover suggests that suffering is perhaps even *constitutive* of womanhood and of the all-too-familiar female survivorship, a source of strength for women who brave the scars and develop the power to survive it. As the show ends, the blood from (violent sexual) wounds and menstruation is drawn into a common metaphor and Shai’s final illustration shows multiple women with a channel of blood flowing through and connecting them, echoing the previous scene where Rani’s menopause coincides with Shai’s first period. Rani welcomes Shai into the trajectory of angry suffering and defiant vocal protest, talking about her period: “It’s a long journey—mine is on its way out.” To this Shai responds, “I guess you’ve passed it on to me.” Shai’s guiding voiceover sums up: “To own my life means to own my wounds, to let the blood flow. To wear my scars with pride and survive.”

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