



Women in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Socio-Historical Critique of *Mirch Masala* (1987)

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ABSTRACT

Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1987), set in a colonial Gujarati village of the 1940s, presents a powerful feminist narrative that challenges patriarchal oppression through the resistance of women like Sonbai and Saraswati. This paper offers a socio-historical critique of the film, analyzing its portrayal of women as agents of defiance within a feudal, male-dominated society. Through a feminist lens informed by Michel Foucault's theory of power and Doreen Massey's spatial politics, the study examines how *Mirch Masala* subverts traditional gender roles, critiques the commodification of women, and foregrounds collective female agency. By situating the film within the socio-historical context of colonial India and its significance in contemporary Hindi cinema, this paper underscores its enduring relevance in addressing gender dynamics, power structures, and women's empowerment through labor and solidarity.

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1. Introduction

Mirch Masala (1987) directed by Ketan Mehta is a milestone in Hindi cinema and it provides a feminist analysis of entrenched patriarchal oppression in a socio-historical perspective. Placing the film in a 1940s colonial Gujarati village, the film revolves around Sonbai, who takes a stand against the lust of a tyrannical tax collector (Subedar), and Saraswati, who defies conventions by fighting for the rights and education of women. In contrast to commercial 1980s Hindi cinema's relegation of women to the secondary or decorative status, *Mirch Masala* represents women as participating in acts of resistance,

reworking normative gender roles and politicking the intersections between colonial and patriarchal authority. This paper examines the film as a feminist text and mobilises Michel Foucault's notion of power as a 'complex strategic situation' (Foucault, 1978) and Doreen Massey's spatial politics theory (Massey, 1994) to consider the ways in which *Mirch Masala* challenges the feminism's ability to critique the objectification of women, portray solidarity among women, and explore women's social roles in Hindi cinema. Through grounding the film in colonial India as a social-historical backdrop, this analysis highlights the film's importance for current feminist debates in Indian cinema.

2. The Social History Behind *Mirch Masala*

The backdrop of the film being a pre-Independence Gujarati village is a mirror to the feudal set up and the colonial exploitation which was rampant in India of the 40s. The Subedar, a colonial revenue official, is the very embodiment of how business and patriarchy interact as he uses his power to collect heavy taxation and seek sexual favors. This reflects the political situation in the greater society of colonial India, where local power structures frequently joined forces with the colonial government to subjugate rural populations, especially women. In depicting the women's resistance, particularly through Sonbai and Saraswati, the film reflects early feminist movements in India (specifically the All India Women's Conference in 1927) arguing for female education and rights during colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Setting its tale in rural feudal India, *Mirch Masala* looks at the systemic oppression of women and their collective voice (and potential agency), a theme that is proving to be very relevant to contemporary Indian feminist battles against gender-based violence and inequality.

It also addresses the socio-historical role of Hindi cinema in the construction of cultural tales. In the 80s, the typical bollywood film dragged its feet more often than not showcasing regressive patriarchal attitudes by casting women as romantically appealing or melodramatic. *Mirch Masala*, though, follows the parallel cinema tradition that aimed to deal with social concerns and question mainstream attitudes. What sets it apart from the urban centric narratives is both its focus on rural women's resistance and an indictment of colonial and patriarchy power structures that is as pertinent in today's Indian cinema.

3. Feminist Study of the Main Characters

Mirch Masala challenges the depiction of women in Hindi cinema through the characters of Sonbai and Saraswati, centered as they are on resistance that is autonomous and collective, against male domination.

3.1 Sonbai: Sonbai: The Catalyst of Individual

The handsome village woman Sonbai, whose husband has migrated to the city to earn a living, catches the eye of the Subedar and he aims to have her. Her refusal to accept with the slap in the face makes her an icon of individual resistance. In contrast to the typical image in Hindi cinema of the rural woman as illiterate, servile woman, Sonbai is clearly agency in action, not just in her taking flight to the spice factory where she changes from an on-the-run woman to a leader among the woman workers. The film's now-iconic poster, in which Sonbai levitates herself from mounds of red chilies, turns her into a kind of fulminating organic catalyst of resistance. Her question, "The fault is in your beauty— Not in his eye?" subverts the patriarchal misogyny that holds women accountable for men's desire, revealing that it is the male gaze that oppresses. It is consistent with Laura Mulvey's (1975) feminist film theory of the objectifying gaze of women within visual media. Sonbai's insistence on not being commodified means that she becomes a feminist archetype; rebuffing the Subedar, and the coercions of the village to "sacrifice" herself for their safety.

3.2 Saraswati – Saraswati: The Archetype of Feminist

Saraswati, the village headman's wife, emerges as the film's "actual cynosure," embodying a radical feminist awareness. Her refusal to submit to her husband's power- by aiding Sonbai, feeding the young women of the factory and sending her daughter to school- undermines the patriarchal structure in a society plagued by male dominance. In a village where anyone who teaches a girl is considered "mad" because educated women won't find suitable husbands, Saraswati's behavior is nothing short of revolutionary. Her heroism is her willingness to risk personal cost, including her husband's violence, in the interest of collective emancipation. To parade around the village while beating the metal plates to muster support against the Subedar was actually an act of leadership demonstrated by Saraswati as she stood in solidarity with the other women. Her concern for her daughter's education foreshadows feminist notions of empowerment through intellect, a belief Schellinger (1966:5), in citing a passage from Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking work *The Second Sex* (1949), coins as education's role in the liberation of woman. Saraswati's personality is not narrowly contained as Sonbai's individual resistance was, but symptomatic of a larger call for systemic transformation.

3.3 Collective Female Agency and Solidarity

The film's climax in which the women of the factory are seen throwing chili powder into the Subedar's eyes is an image of collective female resistance. By doing so, they turn an everyday working object into a weapon, emphasizing the subversive danger in women's labor. The unity among the factory women under the leadership of Saraswati and the protection of Abu Mian stands in stark contrast to the male villagers' cowardice and complicity. The women's collective attempt to rebel, decentre and disorder the fatherly models is a defiance of the patriarchal structures and fit bell hooks' (2000) view on feminist solidarity as a way to unravel the oppressive grip.

The multiple reactions from the factory women, some indifferent, even one graciously accepting a few trinkets from the Subedar, engage the tangled web of internalized patriarchy, but their final act of solidarity underlines the possibility of collective resistance. This image of Sonbai wielding a sickle amidst chili powder blinding the Subedar represents the film's feminist subtext: when women unite, they use unconventional weapons to resist male domination.

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4. Power Dynamics and Patriarchal Oppression

Inspired by Michel Foucault's understanding of power as a "complex strategic situation" (Foucault, 1978), *Mirch Masala* shows power as in constant flux between imposition and counter imposition. The Subedar's power inverts social relations, based as it is on colonial and patriarchal privilege, in which women are objectified as the objects of male desire—his demand for Sonbai, his men bringing back women for his tent. His spirit of imperialism—that all things are for grab—represents a colonial mindset of pillage and exploitation. The commodification of women is the target of its critique, as we see in Sonbai's refusal to become a "sacrifice" for the village's protection, and with it the ethical debate about the role of individual versus collective morale. Is Sonbai allowed to predate the village by surrendering herself or are the villagers just exploiting her for their own safety? Implied through the

above, are these questions. Gratuitously speaking in metaphoric allusions, director Mike Wiluan and a team of three screenwriters want the audience/viewer to ponder about the limits of tyranny resistance.

Sonbai's female villagers' readying to hand over Sonbai to satisfy the Subedar reveals their moral bankruptcy and complicity in patriarchal torture. The village headman's "break [her] leg" threat and him defending adultery as a "manhood" marker are examples of toxic masculinity within conventional societies. Whereas the factory watchman Abu Mian symbolises a different kind of masculinity – the duty-bound, resistant one. His words, "*Zimmedari oopar vala jaane; hum to sirf farz jaante hain*" (I leave responsibility to God; I know only my duty), reveal his refusal to succumb to fear, unlike the villagers who are the weak, spineless men. This contrast reveals the film's criticism of patriarchal power relationships counting on the cooperation of its fellow men.

5. The Role of Labour and Spatial Politics in Empowerment

The spice factory becomes a significant site of presence, a refuge from which women, especially Sonbai, derive agency through work. The weaponization of chili powder reflects the transgressive power of women's labor, as well as a broader contestation of the monolithic category of women's work as domestic and servile. This is supported by Doreen Massey's (1994) theories of spatial politics which suggest that policed space becomes the means through which the marginal can exercise agency. The factory, a realm dominated by women, forms a sharp contrast to the patriarchal village, where women are entirely under male control. Locked in the factory, the women carve a place of resistance against the "predatory males" of the society. This spatial autonomy is crucial to the film's feminist movie: work and solidarity within a space isolated from patriarchal structures allow women to confront systemic oppression.

The weaponization of chilli powder in the film serves as another example of the subversive potential of mundane objects. Instead of representational shields to protect themselves, like the ones the male heroes use—actual guns and knives—this symbol of resistance that chili powder represents, as a product that results from women's labor, is their shield: their gun, so to speak. This metaphor questions the gendered stratification of power, and proposes that the work of women, whatever its marginalized character, may be an instrument of emancipation. The factory is, in this way, the physical and metaphorical site where women construct new positions for themselves, making choices that are theirs.

6. Relevance to Contemporary Hindi Cinema

Mirch Masala is remarkable in the context of this study— mainstream Hindi cinema in the 1980s suppresses or commoditizes women as part of romance or action, and so here is something different. Unlike the ‘item song’ trope or the subservient heroine of movies like *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), Sonbai and Saraswati are agents and resisters – fitting for the parallel cinema movement, which was known for its concern with social problems. The film anticipates the later feminist films such as *Dangal* (2016) that glorifies women's empowerment through sport, and *Pari* (2018) that elaborates on female agency in the off-kilter narratives. *Mirch Masala*'s insistence on the struggles of rural women is still resonant in terms of the imperative to address gender violence and patriarchal subjugation in India, highlighted by recent movements such as #MeTooIndia and campaigns for women's education.

Its criticism of commercialization and victim-bashing sound decrees sounding aloud in contemporary feminist debates, especially in India with its shifting gender ethos. The depiction of women as active agents rather than passive victims in *Mirch Masala* challenges the male gaze and provides a model of feminist storytelling in Hindi cinema. Its focus on collective resistance and negotiating space is a model for addressing systems of oppression, and it has become a touchstone for feminist film studies.

7. Conclusion

Mirch Masala (1987) is a landmark feminist film in Hindi cinema, a biting socio-historical comment on male oppressive patriarchy viewed from the perspective of women's agency. Sonbai and Saraswati, along with the women from the factory and Abu Mian challenge the materialization of a woman, and the ethical cowardice of the patriarchal community. Through transferring labor and elements of the everyday into acts of resistance, the film highlights how women are empowered through solidarity and labor. Its deployment of spatial politics – the ‘safe haven’ of the factory – underscores the counterhegemonic significance of the female domain. It is the film's complexity in its representation of gender, and its demand for a unified challenge to entrenched tyranny that keeps it a resonant and significant addition to the feminist traditions in Indian cinema. In an age when Hindi commercial cinema is trying to address gender and power differences, *Mirch Masala*, with all its flaws, is an echo of a committed cinema, a film that teaches us not to belittle the outrage of women put behind bars, an outrage that will go down in history.

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