

## **“Equality and not about Equal Rights”: Redefining Fourth-Wave Inclusion and Intersectionality through the Digital Platform *Agent of Ishq***

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### **Abstract**

*The definition of the historically abounding F-Word, Feminism, is continuously being shifted from one notion to another, varying in accord with class, caste, and gender across generations. Starting with the website Everyday Sexism launched by Laura Bates in 2012, Fourth wave feminism has recently witnessed a paradigmatic shift from the previous waves of feminism. Currently, as we consider the fluidity of gender construction and interact with various forms of it every day, social media or representation of women on-screen has been one of the most influential factors behind constructing our ‘already gendered’ selves. As the applications of power disseminate the idea of empowerment, equality and freedom also differ alongside. Hence, today’s feminism looks up to a lot more exposure where people can put themselves out there without adhering to any kind of censorship or asceticism. This approach has been productively exercised through the online multimedia digital platform *Agent of Ishq*, directed and introduced by the filmmaker Paromita Vohra in 2015. This research will initially be focused on the way how some mainstream Indian movies, featured to be among the ‘top 10 feminist films’, formed the idea of feminism vis-à-vis how far the feminist implication through *Agent of Ishq* addresses and adheres to the current ‘wave’ of feminism in India.*

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Our job as feminists, should not be recruitment. It should not be conversion. It should be listening to the wants and needs of women that might differ from our own...it is to ask if maybe we need to pause for a moment and rethink not only our strategy but also our goals. (Crispin, 2017)

The above statement has been taken from Jessa Crispin's radical work 'Why Am I Not A Feminist', which addresses various receptions and interpretations of the F-word – Feminism. According to her, feminism, or the identity of being feminist in today's world is subject to continuous scrutiny, learning, and unlearning. As is shown in the aforementioned excerpt, it is often used in the sense of being 'recruited' and sold as a brand or a "free pass" (Crispin, 2017) which ends up undermining the political connotation of the historically enormous movement. This very identity or "badge" (Boom, 2015) enables an easy way out in comparison with the larger complexities the political term bears in hindsight. However, with the emergence of intersectionality, third-wave pluralism, and online digital manifestation, there has been a tendency to shift away from the umbrella term of universal sisterhood and a formation of groups in small alliances began. As a consequence, the very power politics is disseminated among everyone where the concept of self-empowerment and agency replaced the collective identity politics that used to be at work in the preceding waves of feminism. With fourth wave feminism and the advent of social media platforms where people subsume themselves to their private screens, the very definition of feminism is constantly facing cohorts like lifestyle feminism, hashtag feminism, choice feminism, lipstick feminism, also post-feminism being one of the most controversial stages of the movement. This research study is devoted to exploring one of such online multimedia platforms *Agent of Ishq*, directed and introduced by Paromita Vohra, the Indian feminist, and documentary filmmaker. This web project tagged with "we give sexuality a good name" (AOI, 2015) explores the other part of the self. Apart from the rigid one-size-fits-all codes, it deals with complexities, confusion, embarrassment, shame, pleasure, dilemmas, and unfiltered experience through finding a new language that is aimed to be diverse as well as inclusive. Hence, revisiting the question of justice, inclusion, and equality through some 'popular' performances uploaded and showcased on the multimedia platform *Agent of Ishq* will be the subject that this research study will explore.

"Maybe the fourth wave is online" (Solomon, 2009) stated by feminist Jessica Valenti in 2009 proved to be a convincing assertion when the fourth wave of feminism rapidly accelerated due to the widespread use of technology and social media. Significantly influenced by popular culture, this digital wave invites and stimulates various forms of (Sl)activism—giving rise to hashtag

movements (#WhyLoiter, #HappyToBleed, #MeToo), personal diaries (social media vlogs), Femvertising, 'Clicktivism' through the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and many more. All these together redefine the concept of 'Personal is political'. However, despite being severally criticized as an exclusionary concept, such 'digital feminism' gives voice and visibility to many anonymous women out there, among which #MeToo has been a ground-breaking instance. The digital space makes them experience inclusion in the existing power structure, providing them with opportunities to express themselves (even if the expression is very minute/minor) and to speak up for themselves. Laura Bates in her online web project *Everyday Sexism* advocates such an attempt. As the project aims:

to catalogue instances of sexism experienced on a day-to-day basis. They might be serious or minor, outrageously offensive or so niggling and normalized that you don't even feel able to protest. Say as much or as little as you like, use your real name or pseudonym – it's up to you. By sharing your story you're showing the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women every day and it is a valid problem to discuss. (Bates, 2012)

However, such unfiltered and unabashed exploration of the self as one of the dominant insights that fourth wave feminism promotes is reflected in the aforementioned web project *Agent of Ishq* and this paper will try to critically analyze the various nuances and perspectives of fourth wave feminism as captured in *Agent of Ishq*. *Agent of Ishq* started amidst the ambiance of unrest and outrage of people surrounding the 2012 Delhi gang rape followed by several chaotic responses. From hashtagging violence against such crime to bringing these issues to the forefront, genders of all kind were shown to be protesting with #WomenEmpowerment, #StopRapeCulture, and #WomenSafety. On the flip side, the notion about women and their bodies were constantly being observed under an apathetic light. Questions around their body, sexuality and desire were either addressed in terms of violence or as something ignominious. But as critically as such things unfold and open up new possibilities, there are also various modes of representations that hold women back or sound regressively empowered. Since this study centers around the ways feminism is being looked at and exercised through the performances of *Agent of Ishq*, some of the Indian

films are also named here and discussed. These are the films proudly celebrating their feminist badge of honor, but in reality, do little to add to the significance of the political term. The definition of empowerment ought not to be measured or equated with patriarchy, nor it is to create an alternative ideology in place of the dominant one. And to exemplify such insights, this study is on the way to particularly discuss some of the popular mainstream Hindi Cinemas showcasing the tendency of falling into the various shades of 'fake or faux feminism'. As Zinia Mitra in her book "Fourth Wave Feminism" points out:

For the women in power, media's focus is sometimes on women's appearance instead of on their policies which affectively undermines their abilities. The dichotomy that exists is that women must illustrate their femininity and be masculine enough to be successful...thus the countermovement strove to (re)appropriate women who were lacking in motivation to fight for their emancipation. (Mitra, 2020)

Numerous misconceptions and misinformation are being conveyed and shared across generations and even today films like *Pink*, *Mardaani*, *Bulbbul* are flooded with appreciation for being 'feminist' films, portraying the 'female gaze'. These films, though showcased to the world with their feminist tags, end up maintaining the patriarchal structure, suffering inherently from the complexity of male saviors and phallocentric structure. As promised, this paper will begin by shedding some light onto these films to trace the current wave/waves of feminism(s) in India.

In the thought-provoking title of the film *Pink*, we are immediately made aware of the color-binary both genders are assigned to and the film intends to stir how flexible and arbitrary these things are. Released in 2016, Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Pink* has drawn attention to one of the most important issues of gender and sexuality—the issue of sexual consent and how the standardized laws and dictums do not fit into individual life choices. The film promotes itself as one of the great examples of 'women empowerment' which aims to destigmatize the gender-segregated color binary—pink being the feminine color (likewise blue being the color representing masculinity) but significantly *Pink* does not implement this insight even for once. The film starts with three young women residing in south Delhi neighborhood named Meenal (Tapsee Pannu), Falak (Kirti Kulhari), and Andrea (Andrea Tairang) who, in due course of the film, gets

involved in relations which gradually lead to physical intimacies. The film gradually develops an ambiance of threats, intimidation, and sexism. Police files begin, a case of sexual harassment is reported and the media gets involved in the lives of the three women. Deepak Sehgal (played by Amitabh Bachhan) is appointed as the prosecutor's lawyer of the case and is featured almost as the 'savior'. Here, the male figure is not as much to the forefront as his convincing, masculine appearance is. His intense, mystical gaze and the way he stares at the women from the very beginning, the passive and almost insignificant character of his wife who meets demise towards the end, leave behind sufficient loopholes in such a 'feminist'- rated film. The patriarchal and misogynist traits Ranveer and his company carry have been countered and taken action against, but the film needed to loosen on the patriarchal frame which runs parallelly with the male saviorism complex. As we talk about gender parity, we also learn to unlearn things. The loophole where a feminist can question the film is that the solvation of the case comes from an agent who inhabits the world of patriarchy and clings to an age-old patriarchal form. The characters are portrayed in the light 'weaker sex' and an inherent hierarchical tone is continuously present as an undercurrent throughout the film. Deepak Sehgal with its staunch look, given most of the 'space' in the film, can be seen through looking as the first look of the film:



Figure 1: *Advertisement of Pink, 2016*

A tendency to equate women's empowerment and freedom based on a scale of masculine traits as contingent to equality has also variously been practiced in mainstream Indian movies. One such example is Rani Mukherjee starred *Mardaani* where the protagonist Shibani Shibaji Roy inhibits the traits of a stereotyped masculine 'hero' which the very title indicates. From the very beginning, Shibani is portrayed in an off-feminine villainous light. The film incorporates actions and language which are supposed to be the language of empowerment in a world where no law or judicial system prevails. She engineers to murder the culprit Tahir Bhasin throughout the film by instrumentalizing a 'kidnapped' child. But Pradeep Sarkar's direction of this film raises many questions about the 'authenticity' of being a woman since it carries an old tradition that dates way back. The chaos and the aggression formed at the beginning of the film by the protagonist, construct a massive misunderstanding regarding the term equality and pass a misconception about the same. Once the film gets over, questions are asked on the depiction of an unscripted and unquestioned power structure as ultimate and authoritative. The implication is that to get included in the power structures one needs to walk over the pre-existing stereotypes of male heroes which nowhere advances the primary goals and causes of the massive, significant movement. As Jessa Crispin says:

Women who conduct themselves as ruthlessly and thoughtlessly as their male peers are not heroes, they are not role models. They may call themselves feminists, getting themselves a free pass by many, but that does not mean they should be celebrated...By fighting for your own way to inclusion, you are not improving the system, you are simply joining the ranks of those included and benefiting: you, a woman, are also the patriarchy. (Crispin, 2020)

The last one on this row of popular Hindi films, which is said to have dealt with a counter gaze—the female gaze as opposed to the dominant male gaze is a much-discussed Netflix movie *Bulbbul* (2020). Laura Mulvey in her famous essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published in 1973 considered the prevalent existence of the "male gaze" as the dominant gaze where female bodies as objects to be looked at, focalized through the lens of the audience and character with an assumption that the whole community of viewers is male. Directed by Anvita Dutt, *Bulbbul* is a horror film with elements of a dark fantasy tale that has

widely celebrated the epitome of the female counter gaze as opposed to the male gaze. The female protagonist Bulbbul (played by Tripti Dimri), is a 10 years-old child who gets married to a much older man named Thakur Masai (played by Rahul Bose) and suffers from extreme sexual torture by her husband. But later her outrage for revenge overpowers her silence and through a magical superpower, she ends up diminishing the patriarchal power structure which has been dominating women for centuries. In the end, we see the female protagonist reincarnated within the figure of Goddess Kali thriving away and burning all the devil's power from life. The film, wrapped up in a feminist message, is set in 19th century Bengal with the prototype of 'big secrets' in 'Bengali manor'—the upper-class luxurious woman on the outside leading a stifling life inside. Drawn from this, the film captures Bulbbul's transformation from an innocent child-like figure to a mysterious, smirking woman, who possesses the power to control everything around her. The point where today's feminism can take a step back from claiming this film as a 'feminist' film is that the protagonist here swings between two extremes – woman as the witch, wronged woman, and the woman as possessed with the spirit of Goddess Kali which ends up over-essentializing the conception of the 'weaker sex', woman. It is high time to realize that placing women at the center does not make the movie automatically feminist. It is ponderous upon and not independent of the way the story is being told, the way the characters are being formed apart from outraging at the patriarchy or fetishizing the human called woman. Henceforth, we are to rethink the very ways in which we categorize any film as feminist and burden it with celebratory entitles to be among 'the top 10 list of the feminist film'.

This study so far has focused on Bollywood films and their formation of the idea of feminism. Now to contrast and highlight the other way in which such mass-consumed popular culture is used, this research draws its attention to *Agent of Ishq*, devoted to exploring a new language for love, desire, and sexuality. Paromita Vohra as an artist has taken the legacy of feminism to a different stature where the focus is on inclusion, flexibility and de-binarizing things, and a redefinition of intersectionality. The way she has given a new mold to documentary filmmaking apart from its 'higher purpose' is crucial in understanding her philosophy about the impossibility of separating art from activism. Vohra's aversion towards the one authoritative body, rigid realism, politics of sobriety and the idea of activism, something placed over the aesthetic

are the founding stones that gives a new understanding not only to the nature of feminism as history or movement but feminism as the way of life, gives it “a loving eye” (Boom, 2015) as she says. Her oeuvre of works includes several documentary films on feminism, moral policing, copyright, public toilet, urban life, etc. which incorporate a significant number of popular cultural elements. Apart from *Agent of Ishq*, she has also directed a web series called *Connected Hum Tum*. However, this paper deals with how an online multimedia entertainment platform *Agent of Ishq* copes with the existing ‘wave(s)’ of feminism(s) in India, what kind of mark it leaves behind and how far it furthers the job of fourth wave feminism in terms of inclusion and intersectionality in an age of ‘no, I’m not a feminist but I believe in equality.’ The online project *Agent of Ishq* divides its matters into various sub-sections, ‘menu’-ed on the web portal—they address complicated issues regarding love, desire, sex, relationship, and biology and mix them up with pleasure and humor. The very form of it is intertwined with the concepts that the characters intend to uphold through songs, dance, personal diaries, recordings, fun videos, and limitless elements to connect to people. As the director of the project Paromita Vohra says:

We asked people – do you want to be an Agent of ishq? We did not say that we want to reform them, we asked them what they wanted to be... they were not being asked to enumerate their difficulties so that they could be categorized as an identity but rather to share what they had learned from their own lives. There were no boxes and so, no hierarchies; as a result, it created a place where people meet on an equal footing without erasing their differences. (Vohra, 2015)

For instance, one of the latest videos of *Agent of Ishq*, “Main Aur Meri Body” talks about how ordinary biological functioning has been kept as a restricted domain away from the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ self of human beings. Teenagers who are open to exploring and understanding the reproductive mechanism of the human body just like any other internal body system have acted in the entire video clip. The animated photos and fun stickers have been implemented to suggest that these issues require a new form to get into the mind of growing-up boys and girls and not to be preserved as the only ‘A-rated’ domain of the world.





Figure 2: *Hormones displayed in the style of social media, 2022*

Another video clip titled “Menstruators will menstruate” is set in a slightly magical interior where the entrance to getting into the age of puberty is shown through a more self-embodied lens rather than guided by the prescribed rules and regulations of society. Three characters, ‘disabled’ by society in three different ways to talk about their specificities and deviation from the dominant norm and try to recognize their differences through self-esteem, dignity, and knowledge. The experience of getting a menstrual period in a classroom or the experience of a trans employee getting deprived of a menstrual leave is nurtured through questions and confusions. When the teacher instructs the class through setting binaries, someone speaks up: “you only speak of boys and girls, this binary is not a given. Not all women menstruate, and not all menstruators are women” which provoked the teacher to “dismiss the class” (AOI, 2022). Apart from that, *Agent of Ishq* is also devoted to dealing with the matter of relationships, pleasure, teen, sexual etiquette, laws about sexuality, LGBTIQ+, consent, erotic poetry, heartbreak, mental health, and many more. To talk about consent, two amazing videos are on the row which this research study will critically analyze. “Love in the Garden of Consent” tagged with the motto “#Marzi hain minimum” (that consent is a must requirement) starts with a ‘plate’ of choices which pave the diverse play of pluralism and intersectionality for the rest of the clip. In the first few scenes, the audience gets a glimpse of the shifting gaze of the characters.

Apart from the polarized and exclusionary binarized thinking, it portrays the female character watching over her phone and displaying the 'choices' among her male suitors. Such shifting gaze can also be seen in the first half of the video where the female employee is positioned at the center of every object around, and the male characters are seen as possessing seductive ability – “main khud apni marzi ki malik makaan, agar mein na chahu toh ishq kahan meri jaan” [I decide my moods, it's my choice , if I do not consent there is no love my beloved.]



Figure 3: *A Plate of Choices*, 2018



Figure 4: *Woman flaunting her choice unabashedly*, 2018

Again, when one of the characters in the video picks 'casual consent in sexuality' out of the choices and we are driven to the place of “dating grove”.

She chooses her likable partner on Tinder, which again ends up making the audience realize the immense agency and consciousness of governing her own body.



Figure 5: *Woman embodying agency through choice, 2018*

Another interesting clip on the row is the “Amorous Adventures of Shakku and Megha” in the ‘Valley of Consent’ understanding the matter of consent as something “complex and delicate”, handling a reluctance, and hesitation to subscribe to the binaries of ‘yes’ or ‘no’—and to explore more about the in-betweenness, about ‘maybe’ - the delicacies and vulnerabilities integrated within each human self. Megha and Shokku, performs in a Maharashtrian dance form that foregrounds the slippage of their mind. Here the confession and revelation of the character shatter many mainstream portrayals of women framed into a dominant mode, with either the women as ‘heroic’ and adventurous characters or the women as the negative, villainous, skeptical characters, and herein lies the significance of Paromita Vohra for bringing the other side of the self into the forefront and portraying it with recognition. Megha and Shokku dominate the space but never get to create a hierarchy, which is shown through the male characters in the three consecutive narratives. The confusion between Megha and Shokku regarding the ‘maybe’ in consent does not get sufficed by today’s feminist dictum ‘no means no, I don’t know means know, maybe means

also no, only yes means yes.’ Also, when Megha goes to a cinema hall with her partner to watch the movie “*Kabhi Haan, Kabhi Naa*” (as is shown in the video) it is intonated with the unfiltered expressions women are coming up with. They try to make their partner understand their undecidability, which comes with dignity and thus create a whole world to explore in what has been left unexplored, cornered, and hidden. Such is the form through which Vohra upholds that there are many gradations of consent and so is of human experience.



Figure 6: *The movie title shown in the clip, 2016*



Figure 7: *The ‘grey’ areas of consent, 2016*

Another side of feminism that today's world suffers from is, as we have discussed at the beginning of this study, feminism as being a "free pass" people, be it of any gender, indicating extreme rage against discrimination towards women, or violence against women, but remain unanswerable to any accusation made by feminists solely because they hold up a feminist liberating flag. In a digital world, the concern about women and gender discrimination does not get sufficed through the only act of 'liking' or 'sharing'. Such a façade of empowerment that comes without self-question or which is more like an identity rather than a continuous process makes the historical journey of feminism more regressive and gives rise to many misinformed or uninformed versions of feminism. As Zinia Mitra puts light on this issue saying:

It can be argued that people do not click in 'like', share status, comment, sign internet petitions or join online groups in order to actually help the person or group in need, but rather to feel good, and to feel like they have done something positive for the person or for a cause. This is kind of a virtual counterpart of wearing a pin or a badge to display one's sympathies. (Mitra, 2020)

Such a dynamic is visible in one of the performances of *Agent of Ishq*, "Sorry Thank You Tata Bye-Bye" where the conversation between the ruling body like the government, media, and the ruled ones is established. They talked about the recent inclusion of government regarding the marital age of women which is increased from 18 to 21, but question the ruling authority saying "nothing about us without us" to which the government shed a patronizing gaze – "we told you Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, take a selfie with our daughter—gave them the fit-bit of women's lib, still they complain and question and gib, the nation wants to know"—as if the entire nation has been subsumed to the autonomy of patriarchy. Such a statement often leads to enquire the steps and actions taken on behalf of women in hindsight.





Figure 8: *Politician boasting of the 'luck' of Indian women, 2021*



Figure 9: *Women exercising 'nothing about us without us', 2021*

Such instance is visibly echoed in the performance “Aika to the Baika (listen to the women)” where the lay police officer is like a reincarnation of male supremacy, inviting everyone to the police station where they solve many problems by only listening to the women named Shokku, Megha, and Akansha. When the female character Shokku comes to file a case of domestic violence or the treatment the woman named Megha gets when she complained about her rape at a night party, instead of falling under section 354 and domestic violence, the police officers categorize them to be as romantic or domestic matter and asks the

victims not to conceive of defaming their household or to stay away from the unhappy and serious feminist flag of #MeToo.



Figure 10: *Portrayal and notion regarding the MeToo campaign, 2020*

In the third case of Akansha, her individual will is placed in sharp contrast to the cultural and social etiquette of modesty and purity. Society asks her to get married and this tone also resonates with the lady police officer when she says “Get married, be clever. It’s a license for what...ever!”



Figure 11: *Society and law on marriage and settling life, 2018*

In these performances, the definition of politics as incorporating serious issues with serious form is placed in sharp contrast to the exotic and humorous elements. To render attention to such serious and in-depth issues, Vohra applies the forms and elements through an easy-to-go atmosphere. The tone seems to be an invitation to merge with the audience instead of creating a hierarchy. And herein lies the importance of the works of Vohra that dismantle the binary between art and the moral responsibility of art. Her experimentation with profound ideas of freedom, empowerment, and feminism has given a lens to the way Indians see the concept of women and feminism. She talks about how digital media formed the connection with people, and the very paradigmatic shift is a space for constant re-evaluation. The fear and confusion associated with expressing one's true self is the very motto of *Agent of Ishq*, rather than what the philosophy of feminism engages with. Apart from the feminist eye being the "loving eye" to the world, the legacy of *Agent of Ishq* does not stimulate women with templates, it does not put things into a box or indulges in political correctness, rather it talks about the experiences of people, of women where an open up discussion takes place and nobody is judged or excluded for being different. So far this research study has tried to uncover the various dimensions of feminism which might seem far-fetched from the main agenda feminism deals with. Readers might end up asking questions about how feminism is connected to sex education or does feminism extend its goals and aims to look for the 'rights' as a matter of human fairness or consider the gaze as the way of life. Coming back to the title of this paper which differentiates equality from equal rights the paper attempts to claim that not all equal rights provide a smooth way to equality. Equality is an amalgamation of both spoken and unspoken things, it questions how power operates, and what ideology it promotes and seeks new structures or forms to look at things. It is high time to realize that instead of a perfectly resolved feminist state, we should preferably ask questions about the ways of the world. Feminism is not a unitary identity but rather is a continuous process. Spreading "a loving eye" to the world, feminism strongly resists any fixity. The significance of the aforementioned performances lies in the fact that they do not set alternate ideology in place of a dominant one, rather they create a third space for inclusion and choice and thus redefines intersectionality:

We all want to tell the story of our life not as victims but as people who went through a journey and somehow these narratives about patterns and



overcoming them and they seem very productivity oriented that there is a way in which one can fix it, a solution...but actually where else we find patterns is in aesthetics so what if we thought of our patterns also as our aesthetics as who we are in some ways. (CSGS@Ashoka, 2020)

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