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THE MOVIE 'PADMAAVAT' - 2018 AND THE SPRING FESTIVAL OF FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Swara Bhaskar is an award winning actress in the Hindi film industry whose filmography includes the critically acclaimed *Anaarkali Of Aarah* (2017), the critical-commercial success *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016); superhit blockbuster films *Prem Ratan Dhan Paayo* (2015), *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), *Raanjhanaa* (2013) and *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011).

She is also an occasional writer and columnist and her short stories and articles have appeared in *The Little Magazine*, *Seminar*, *The Himal Southasian*, *The Hindu* and the *Indian Express*.

In her own depiction Swara Bhaskar described herself as 'Desirous of Life' and 'sexuality' as well. This is her candid confession which exhibits her extreme boldness and fearlessness. She regarded Sanjay Leela Bhansali (SLB) with high esteem, respected his filmographic calibre. But she dares to offer some modest criticism and choose to ventilate her frank criticism(s) of the movie on some solid philosophic grounds.

Mr. Sanjay Leela Bhansali is a very reputed Bollywood Director with a high degree of excellence in the capacity of Director. He has a theoretical bent of mind for which he does not only emphasize on cheap and/or gaudy entertainment. By the inherent nature of his personality he attaches much importance to theoretical aspects of the filmography. He is particular about the story-line, whether it is a historic event or a myth or a fiction of popular kind is his weighty consideration. Thus the film turns into both an educative and entertaining one to the wide band of the audiences.

The article presented here, is not intended as any specific film review (like, 'Padmaavat') here. Rather this to be viewed as an assortment of the sharp opinions of some serious movie-goers movie-viewers.

Keywords: Feminism, Female Body and Sexuality, 'Sati', 'Jauhar', Vagina, Vulgarity, Fringe Group, 'Carni Sena', Censor Board, CBFC.

1.1: Preamble: In defence of Feminism

The debate over equality, its meaning and how or if it may be achieved, and its relevance to women's liberation – a debate that is often referred to in feminist writings as the equality-difference debate – is, as was argued in the introduction, central to feminist analysis and discussion. This equality-difference debate is all the more difficult to overcome as it is a debate whose terms are not easily defined. Put crudely, it is a debate over whether women should struggle to be equal to men or whether they should valorize their differences from men. But the terms equality and difference are themselves contested terms with a multitude of meanings, and so the equality-difference debate is a highly complex one. If women are claiming equality with men, then with which men should they be claiming equality? And on what issues? Should they claim equality of opportunity or equality of

outcome? And if women want to valorize their differences, then are these natural, biological differences or differences that are the result of particular social and economic conditions?

These are just a few of the many questions that are provoked by the equality-difference debate and they illustrate why it is such a difficult debate for feminists and why it has led, at times, to a seeming impasse between feminists on opposite sides of the divide. Some have tried to overcome this divide by using postmodernist or poststructuralist critiques to argue that the binary division between equality and difference should itself be deconstructed. This idea (which will be discussed further later in this chapter), or that of a 'third way' between equality and difference, may seem to be attractive in that it promises to rid feminism of one of its perennial conflicts. However, other feminists maintain that the division between equality and difference is one that is here to stay and that in any practical discussion of women's position in society there is no escaping the divide. In discussions on how to treat women's claims for maternity rights, for example, feminists are divided between those who think that maternity benefits should be special rights granted to women on the basis of their specific biological capacity to have children and the particular social role of maternity that they have been assigned in Western societies, whereas others argue that maternity benefits should be subsumed under the general category of sickness benefits so that pregnant women are treated the same as men who have an illness which prevents them from working for a period of time (Bacchi 1991; Bock and Thane 1991).

It is this type of question that leads feminists to argue again over the existence of women's biological and social differences from men and about the best strategies for ending women's subordinate position in society, either through claiming equality or stating their difference. Clearly, this debate is also complicated by differences among women themselves (a question that we will return to in Chapter 5), differences of class, race, age, sexual orientation and so on. And an additional complicating factor in this debate is the fact that women's supposed differences from men have been used over the centuries to justify discrimination against women and their exclusion from full social and political citizenship. Thus, those feminists who argue for difference risk seeming to support the theoretical tools of patriarchal exclusion. As Segal (1987: xii) contends: 'There has always been a danger that in re-valuing our notions of the female and appealing to the experiences of women, we are reinforcing the ideas of sexual polarity which feminism originally aimed to challenge.'

So, what is meant by sexual difference? Feminists have pointed to the way in which, historically, a natural difference between men and women assumed, and have analysed the ways in which this difference was given various social, political and economic meanings in different societies and civilizations. They argue that one constant of this differentiation, however, has been that women have been given an inferior or secondary status in societies because of this assumed natural sexual difference. As Sherry Ortner (1998: 21) argues: 'The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.' And as she goes on to explain, this secondary status of women can be explained by the fact that within the multiplicity of cultural conceptions and symbolizations of women that exist and that have existed in different societies, there is a constant in that women are seen as being 'closer to nature' in their physiology, their social role and their psyche. Whereas women have been seen as 'closer to nature', men have been perceived as 'closer to culture', more suited for public roles and political association. For this reason, women have been relegated to a secondary status in society, often confined to roles in the home rather than able to accede to powerful public positions. It is understandable, then, that, as soon as feminists began to campaign against women's secondary social status, they began to question the assumed natural differences between men and women, and the consequences of these assumed differences on social organisation. The question then arose of how to challenge this assumption of difference. Should women deny sexual difference and claim equal rights on the basis that they are the same as men? Or should they, on the other hand, argue that they are equal but different, and that their specific 'feminine' qualities are as valuable and as important as 'masculine' attributes. This equality-difference debate is one that has remained central

to feminism, and has become even more complex and varied with modern social and scientific developments. The development of effective means of contraception and of new reproductive technologies, for example, has meant that women are no longer tied to the biological function of reproduction in the same way as they once were, and for some this may signify the opening up of new possibilities for the attainment of 'equality' [1].

1.2: Outline of 'Feminism'

As Snitow (1990: 17) argues, this divide is fundamental at various levels of analysis – material, psychological, linguistic:

For example, US feminist theorists don't agree about whether post-structuralism tends more often towards its version of essentialism (strengthening the arguments of maximizers by recognizing an enduring position of female Other) or whether post-structuralism is instead the best tool minimalists have (weakening any universalized, permanent concept such as Woman). Certainly poststructuralists disagree among themselves, and this debate around and inside post-structuralism should be no surprise. In feminist discourse a tension keeps forming between finding a useful lever in female identity and seeing that identity as hopelessly compromised.

Here we find the heart of the problem for feminists: in trying to fight for women's emancipation and for 'equality' for women (however that equality is defined), feminists identify women as a specific social group with a collective identity that forms a basis for struggle. In pointing to a collective identity among women, however – an identity that is different from that of men – feminists risk reproducing, albeit in differing forms, the definitions of difference that have kept women subordinated for so long.

The biology debate: sex and gender

One central factor in this equality-difference debate is the question of the relevance of biological differences between men and women. For centuries, biological difference has been the starting point and justification for the creation of different social roles for women and men. Not only was women's biological capacity for childbirth and breastfeeding and their generally lesser physical strength seen as determining their social role in the home, occupying themselves with domestic chores and bringing up children, but it was also claimed that these biological differences made them unfit to participate in the public sphere. Women were judged to be less reasonable than men, more ruled by emotion, and thus incapable of political decision-making, for example. These types of assertions by philosophers and political theorists were supported by anatomists and biologists who, as scientific knowledge of the human body advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, began to use data such as measurements of brain size to establish a difference in intelligence between men and women. Although this crude type of scientific differentiation between men and women is now almost universally acknowledged as worthless, there is a continuing attempt to provide empirical scientific data to support the idea of innate biological differences between men and women. As Lynne Segal (1999) points out, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a resurgence of social Darwinism, scientific theories that seek to explain male and female behaviour in terms of the demands of human evolution and survival, and that therefore dismiss the idea that masculinity and femininity are social constructs in favour of purely biological explanations. Segal (1999: 82) quotes, for example, the scientist Robert Wright, who she says:

*throughout the 1990s has consistently ridiculed feminists seeking equality with men as doomed by their deliberate ignorance or foolish denial of the 'harsh Darwinian truth' about human nature ... As Wright likes to reassure himself and the many readers of his best-seller *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*, feminists have managed to procure legislation against sexual harassment, and even elements of affirmative action for women, but they will never share power with men because they lack men's genes for competitiveness and risk-taking behaviour.*

Faced with this supposedly scientific justification for women's exclusion from large areas of social participation, feminists began to question the link between different physiological characteristics and a 'natural' differentiation in social roles for men and women, and began to

formulate ways of overcoming it. For many feminists this has involved a denial of the relevance of biological differences between men and women for the organization of society. This has led to a distinction in much feminist theory between physiological 'sex' and social 'gender'. This distinction can also be expressed by the terms 'female' and 'feminine', 'female' being the biological category to which women belong and 'female' behaviour and roles being the social constructions based on this biological category. Thus, many feminists have argued that whereas biological sex is a 'naturally' occurring difference, all the roles and forms of behaviour associated with being a woman have been created historically by different societies.

This distinction between biological sex and social gender is clearly present, although it is not made explicitly in those terms, in a book that has had an important influence on feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) (1949). De Beauvoir's famous assertion that 'one is not born a woman: one becomes one' encapsulates an argument that women's inferior position is not a 'natural' or biological fact but one that is created by society. One may be born as a 'female' of the human race but it is civilization which creates 'woman', which defines what is 'feminine', and proscribes how women should and do behave. And what is important is that this social construction of 'woman' has meant a continued oppression of women. The social roles and modes of behaviour that civilizations have assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. This means that women are not like the working classes in Marxist ideology: they have not emerged as an oppressed group because of particular historical circumstances, but have always been oppressed in all forms of social organisation. De Beauvoir does not, however, argue that there is no biological distinction to be made between men and women. Although she maintains that the physiological and behavioural aspects of 'sex' are the products of patriarchal cultures and not the inevitable products of biological differences, she argues that there is an irreducible biological difference between men and women. Woman is a biological and not a socio-historical category, even though all the behaviour associated with femininity is clearly a social construction. The liberation of women thus depends on freeing women from this social construct of the 'eternal feminine', which has reduced them to a position of social and economic inferiority, but it does not depend on the denial of 'men' and 'women' as biologically distinct categories. As she argues (1949: 13):

To refuse the notions of the eternal feminine, the Black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that there are today Jews, Blacks, women: such a denial does not represent for the interested parties a liberation, but rather an inauthentic flight. It is clear that no woman can claim, without bad faith, to be above her sex.

De Beauvoir's distinction between biological sex and the social creation of the 'eternal feminine' is a precursor of the distinction between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory. As Oakley (1997) explains, the term gender originated in medical and psychiatric usage where, from the 1930s, physiologists used the word gender to describe people's physiological attributes without linking these to men and women. In 1968, Robert Stoller, a psychiatrist, published *Sex and Gender* – a book about how children who were biologically (according to chromosomes) of one sex seemed to belong to the other sex. Most commonly found were babies who were genetically female but who were born with male external genitalia – these babies could be brought up as either male or female and would develop the 'appropriate gender identity'. Gender was thus used by Stoller to refer to behaviour, feelings, thoughts and fantasies that were related to the sexes but that did not have primary biological connotations (cited in Oakley 1997: 31). This use of gender to refer to attributes that are related to the division between the sexes but are not primarily biologically determined was adopted by feminists to separate innate biological differences between men and women, and socially constructed differences. Oakley, for example, made a distinction between sex and gender in her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, first published in 1972, and argued that:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. (Oakley 1972: 16)

The use of gender, and more specifically the distinction between sex and gender, as a tool of analysis has clearly helped feminist theory to advance on the question of difference, separating the biological from the social and arguing that the two are distinct categories. This has enabled feminists to argue against biological determinism of all kinds and to move the emphasis away from physiological differences between men and women and on to the social processes that shape masculinity and femininity. This process of social construction was a principal focus for many classic feminist texts of the 1970s and 1980s, as Oakley (1997: 33) explains:

Many classics of feminist writing during this period are hard-hitting elaborations on the basic theme of social construction; society, psychology, sociology, literature, medicine, science, all 'construct' women differently, slipping cultural rhetoric in under the heading of biological fact. It is cultural prescription – gender, not sex – which explains why women fail to have proper orgasms, are ill-fitted to be brain surgeons, suffer from depressive illness, cannot reach the literary heights of Shakespeare, and so on and so forth ... During this period, even/especially influential theories such as Freud's about the origins of 'sexual' difference came to be restated in the language of 'gender development'.

Thus the concept of gender seemed to open up whole new avenues of thought and analysis for feminists, bringing with it the hope of huge theoretical advances in the analysis of women's oppression [2].

2: Start of the Controversy: An excerpt

In an open letter to *Padmaavat* director Sanjay Leela Bhansali (SLB), actor Swara Bhaskar decries glorification of *Sati* and *Jauhar* which deny women the right to live

Dear Mr. Bhansali,

At the outset Sir, congratulations on finally being able to release your magnum opus 'Padmaavat' – minus the 'i', minus the gorgeous Deepika Padukone's uncovered slender waist, minus 70 shots you apparently had to cut out.. but heyyyy! You managed to have it released with everyone's heads still on their shoulders and noses still intact. And in this 'tolerant' India of today, where people are being murdered over meat, and school children are targets for avenging some archaic notion of male pride, that your film even managed a release – that is Swara Bhasker guess commendable, and so again, congratulations.

And Swara Bhasker (SB), genuinely believed what she said. She genuinely believed and still believe that you and every other person in this country has the right to say the story they want to say, the way they want to say it, showing how much ever stomach of the protagonist they want to show; without having their sets burnt, their selves assaulted, their limbs severed or their lives lost.

Also, in general, people should be able to make and release films and children should be able to get to school safely. And the author wants you to know that she really wished that your film turn out to be a stupendous success, a blockbuster breaking box office records, whose collections itself would be a slap in the faces of the *Karni Sena* terrorists and their ilk. And so it was with great excitement and the zeal of a believer that she had booked first day, first show tickets for *Padmaavat*, and took my whole family and our cook to watch the film.

Perhaps it is because of this attachment and concern that she had for the film that she was SO stunned having watched it. And perhaps that is why she take the liberty and have the temerity to write to you. She will try and be concise and direct though there is much to say.

- Women have the right to live, despite being raped sir.
- Women have the right to live, despite the death of their husbands, male 'protectors', 'owners', 'controllers of their sexuality'.. what ever you understand the men to be.
- Women have the right to live – independent of whether men are living or not.
- Women have the right to live. Period.

It's actually pretty basic.

Some more basic points:

- Women are not only walking talking vaginas.
- Yes, women have vaginas, but they have more to them as well. So their whole life need not be focused on the vagina, and controlling it, protecting it, maintaining it's purity. (Maybe in the 13th century that was the case, but in the 21st century we do not need to subscribe to these limiting ideas. We certainly do not need to glorify them.)
- It would be nice if the vaginas are respected; but in the unfortunate case that they are not, a woman can continue to live. She need not be punished with death, because another person disrespected her vagina without her consent.
- There is life outside the vagina, and so there can be life after rape. (I know I repeat, but this point can never be stressed enough.)
- In general there is more to life than the vagina.

You may be wondering why the hell the author is going on and on thus about vaginas. Because Sir, that's what I felt like at the end of your magnum opus. I felt like a vagina. She felt reduced to a vagina-only. She felt like all the 'minor' achievements that women and women's movements have made over the years- like the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to education, equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, the Vishakha judgement, the right to adopt children..... all of it was pointless; because we were back to basics.

We were back to the basic question – of right to life. Your film, it felt, had brought us back to that question from the Dark Ages - do women - widowed, raped, young, old, pregnant, pre-pubescent... do they have the right to live?

One has to understand that *Jauhar* and *Sati* are a part of our social history. These happened. One has to understand that they are sensational, shocking dramatic occurrences that lend themselves to splendid, stark and stunning visual representation; especially in the hands of a consummate maker like yourself – but then so were the lynchings of blacks by murderous white mobs in the 19th century in the US - sensational, shocking dramatic social occurrences. Does that mean one should make a film about it with no perspective on racism? Or, without a comment on racial hatred? Worse, should one make a film glorifying lynchings as a sign of some warped notion of hot-bloodedness, purity, bravery - I don't know, I have no idea how possibly one could glorify such a heinous hate crime.

Surely Sir, we agree that *Sati*, and *Jauhar* are not practices to be glorified. Surely, you agree that notwithstanding whatever archaic idea of honour, sacrifice, purity propels women and men to participate in and condone such practices; that basically *Sati* and *Jauhar*, like the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Honour Killings, are steeped in deeply patriarchal, misogynist and problematic ideas. A mentality that believes that the worth of women lies in their vaginas, that female lives are worthless if the women are no longer controlled by male owners or if their bodies have been 'desecrated' by the touch of ; or even the gaze of a male who doesn't by social sanction 'own' or 'control' the female [3].

3: Swara Bhaskar on *Jauhar* and *Sati*

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Ranveer Singh-Deepika Padukone starrer *Padmaavathas* turned out to be the most talked-about film of the past one year.

The film that's opened to an encouraging box-office response continues to dominate the news cycle as new layers colour the existing narrative.

While the very brave Karni Sena (who orchestrated an attack on a bus carrying school kids) has recoiled to wherever it came from, a raging debate is underway about Bhansali's choice of depicting a hyper-glamourised version of *Jauhar*, or self-immolation.

Bhasker, in her letter published by *The Wire*, called him out for romanticising a regressive practice that took years to ban. "Women have the right to live, despite being raped sir. Women have

the right to live, despite the death of their husbands, male 'protectors', 'owners', 'controllers of their sexuality'.. whatever you understand the men to be."

Predictably, she was trolled for voicing a contrarian opinion.

Bhansali's past collaborators, the writing duo Siddharth-Garema, have hit back at her, saying Padmini did Jauhar out of her own free will (btw, in the film, Deepika's character seeks her husband's 'permission' to, well, die. "*Aap ke ijaazat ke bina hum marr bhi nahin sakte*"). They even called Bhasker a 'road-block' for feminism.

Here's their letter, presented in full:

Feminism: The advocacy of woman's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.

Now that's the dictionary definition of the word. But how can anyone advocate about 'equality of the sexes'? A woman has a vagina, the door to life. It has the power to procure 'life', which no man, however hard he tries, can ever do. The question of equality is settled there, once and for all.

There are some film-makers, artists, actors who feel they are the torch-bearers of 'feminism' in the new-age cinema.

So here is what the 'true' & 'real' depiction of feminism in recent films – A woman, betrayed by the lover/groom picks up a bottle of alcohol and walks the streets while an old 'hindi' song plays in the background...she managed to do something that men have been doing when betrayed. So that's equality. Men – 10 women – 1 (the films have just begun to become progressive so please don't mind the score). Just forgot to mention, in the same movie a dialogue goes – "Jab aadmi aurat se pareshaan hota hai ye daaru hi usey sahara deti hai. Isi liye shadi ke baad har mard peeta hai, biwi chillaati rehti hai par aadmi ka gham kaun samjhe" (This is the gist of the dialogue, not the exact dialogue)

In a recent short film, a woman, tired of doing the daily chores in the kitchen, pulls a chair and begins to sip on juice (a la her husband and other 'men'). Equality achieved. Men-10... women – 2

In another film a daughter smokes and shares a cigarette with her father (which only a boy could do till now) is lauded and celebrated as feminism. Equality again. Men -10 Women – 3

Now coming to the people who found Padmaavat regressive and found their feminism challenged by it.

Did they feel like a 'vagina' when Rani Padmaavati almost orders her husband, who obliges, to throw out the lecherous priest? She takes a decision, as a vagina.

Did they feel like a 'vagina' when Rani Padmaavati decides to show her face to Khilji in a mirror? Though it was her decision, as a vagina.

Did they feel like a 'vagina' when Rani Padmaavati goes to 'rescue' her husband who had been abducted? Again, a decision against the system, as a vagina.

They must have felt like a 'vagina' when she chose 'fire' over 'rape'? It was her 'call', her 'decision' as a vagina. Right, wrong, strong, weak is up to you to interpret as a 'penis' or as a 'vagina'.

The word feminism is so misused and so mis-interpreted off late that it feels like an abuse. To women, to the 'vagina'... to the great feminine power. To the only gender that has the power to procure life.

Films, ads, opinions that portray women doing things that men do are lauded and celebrated as 'feminist'. Feminism is reduced to women smoking, drinking, gambling etc on screen. Abey aadmi toh hamesha se 'fucked-up'rahe. Ab auratein equality ke chakkar mein 'fucked-up' ho gayi. Ho gayafeminism. Men – 10. Women -10. Lo daal lo equality jahan daalni hai.

Yes, women were repressed and India was patriarchal, it still is. But feminism is not about women doing things that men do [4].

4: 'On Feminism': Swara Bhasker's Tips

- (i) Feminism is not about special or more rights for women.

- (ii) Feminism is not a Religion whose rules are laid down on a holy slab of concrete or contained in a holy book. It has no fixed rules.
- (iii) Feminism is not about disempowering men or chopping anyone's balls off or about taking over the world.
- (iv) Feminism is not a desire to have the chair pulled out for you and the door held open for you your whole life literally and metaphorically i.e. Feminism is NOT about sops.
- (v) ""Feminism is not (only) about reserving seats in buses and public transport for women".
- (vi) "Feminism is not (only) about burning bras and whatever else was burnt".
- (vii) Feminism is not limited to the choice to or not to exfoliate body hair.
- (viii) Feminism is not a conspiracy to entrap men in fake dowry cases and fake rape cases ... [5]

5: A candid Interview with Swara Bhaskar by IANS

Q. Your performance in "Anaarkali Of Aarah" is spectacular. Would you say it is the most well-received performance of your career so far?

Yes I think so, and I must confess that I'm quite overwhelmed. Happily overwhelmed but still overwhelmed. I had a lot of faith in the story, in Anarkali's journey and in the intention and spirit with which we made the film. I was hopeful that audiences will connect with the tale but I didn't expect this level of praise and such accolades. Swara felt both vindicated and blessed.

Q. How difficult was it for you to play a woman who is so unapologetic about her sexuality and so unabashed in her contempt for the lustful male gaze?

Honestly, the unapologetic nature of Anaarkali was not that difficult, because that's how I feel as a woman about my own body. Being unapologetic about her body, her sexuality, her life's decisions is a political belief that as a feminist I strongly espouse. What was difficult for me and her real challenge was to preserve and express the fact that however feisty Anaarkali may seem, she is still vulnerable.

Because ultimately she is a woman, and a woman considered not worthy of societal respect in an obviously male-centric patriarchal world. So keeping that vulnerability of Anaarkali alive, was my real challenge.

Q. Was it difficult for you to perform the raunchy dances and lip sync the double-meaning lyrics? How have you managed to make the performance so free of inhibition and vulgarity?

The difficult part was not so much the raunchiness of the steps as just the live dancing. I've never done a proper Bollywood dance number. And even though I've trained in Bharatanatyam, Bollywood dancing as a form is totally different. I think credit should actually go to Shabina Khan for being able to keep the choreography rustic and sensual and yet not vulgar. I think credit also goes to my dance guru Padma Shri Leela Samsonji, whose rigorous training perhaps enabled me to perform raunchy, bawdy and fairly overtly sensual choreography without it being cringe-worthy.

Q. I believe the dances were shot in front of actual live audiences?

Yes, while shooting sometimes the challenge became the all-male crowd, local to Amroha (where we shot), who I think began to enjoy the shoot as if it were a real show and passed those kinds of comments -- (smiles) some of those comments were pretty vulgar and offensive but I reacted like Anaarkali would.

I believe shedding inhibitions is step 1 for any actor to get into any character, so that, I guess I did as part of my great faith in this script and this part.

Q. This is an important film, perhaps extending further the idea that a woman saying no must be respected even if she is part of an inherently disreputable profession. As a vocal supporter of gender equality and an opponent of patriarchal perversity, where do you place your character in this film?

Absolutely. This was one of my non-negotiable requests to my director Avinash Das-ji when he was writing. We were certain that there will be no doubt about our intention and message in this film, that it doesn't matter what the woman does, what her character is, loose or slutty or whatever... She may be a prostitute, but even then consent is paramount.

I think our bravest move was to make Anaarkali actually characterless or loose from the point of view of a middle class morality. We offer no explanation, apology or justification for the fact that she may have casual sex -- but on her own terms. That makes the whole question of consent totally non-negotiable. I think that is our greatest victory in this film.

Q. Swara, your career has so far demonstrated an assertive will to choose the unconventional. Would it be correct to say the unconventional is the conventional for you?

Perhaps! See as an actor, and moreover an outsider with no Godfather within the industry, I don't have a whole lot of control on what kind of roles are offered to me. But I can control what I choose. And I like to choose tough roles that I haven't done before and roles that make me grow as an actor by challenging me.

Q. As an outsider in Bollywood, what has your journey so far been like? Have you encountered prejudice, bias, cynicism and how have you tackled them?

It's been a pretty wholesome journey. Tough and disappointing in parts but also very fulfilling in parts, so a pretty complete experience of Navarasa in that sense [6].

Waluscha De Sousa's Celebration of Women's Day 2017

- 1) My life has been a journey. A journey that included a successful career, meeting a man I thought was the love of my life and a wrong decision.
- 2) It all seemed happy on the outside but when you look closely, you will realise emotional abuse is very real.
- 3) I was regularly demeaned, my ideas, my opinions, my thoughts and my needs were always disregarded.
- 4) I was made to feel unworthy and bad about myself. I was made to feel like I couldn't make my own decisions. And I needed permission to ever leave the house or do things that made me happy.
- 5) I was told I was always WRONG. My flaws were constantly pointed out. I was called names and given labels.
- 6) I face subtle threats and negative remarks were made in order to threaten and control me.
- 7) All I was to say is understand what emotional abuse is.
- 8) This women's day, rise up, find your voice and be bold for change.
- 9) Be Bold for change. Aren't these words inspiring? March 08, 2017. [7]

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