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The Ever-Evolving *She* in a Predominantly Male World: Exploring a Distorted Feminine Identity through an Overwhelming Sexuality in Netflix Originals’ “She”

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Abstract:

Movies lie at the centre of reality and fantasy similar to any other art form. With the ever-increasing appetite for *moving pictures* (also known as movies) there is no dearth of media to be consumed especially on all those streaming platforms which have gained immense popularity and wider recognition and acceptance as compared to any other form of entertainment media post pandemic. Web series have become quite the rage these days; overthrowing daily soaps and even big banner movies. Due to several factors such as affordability, variety as well as the added luxury of not having to step out of the comfort of one’s home, series happened to have become the easy go-to-option for thrills and amusement.

In this paper, I shall be focusing upon the web series titled “She” which is available on the streaming platform *Netflix* to understand various issues such as sexuality, identity, gender fluidity, etc with respect to the construction of a liberated modern woman.

Keywords: Fantasy, reality, gender fluidity, sexuality, identity.

In a country like India that is strictly governed by a certain set of ideologies and principles handed down from one generation to another, sex is primarily considered a taboo especially in the lower

middle class families which form the lion's share of the country's population. The nature of taboo further intensifies when the question of women is brought into the equation. Women, even in the present times, are denied rights over their own bodies. Shedding light upon the situation which prevails even in a modern day India, Leeza Mangaldas-a popular sex educator-talks about the disheartening scrutiny and abject criticism she was subjected to on deciding to speak openly about sex and female sexuality. People blatantly accused her of being an adult movie star. From such questions raised on her intentions one can easily understand that *she* is to remain a prude; having no inclination or desire towards sex. It is only he who has a certain right that can be yielded over *she* when matters related to sex are concerned.

This train of thought lays the foundation of the Netflix originals' "She" (2020) where the audience is made aware as to how the many she's of the country are subjected to multiple layers of abuse in the physical as well as the emotional domain. "She" is co-written by Imtiaz Ali and Divya Johri. And the credit for direction is shared jointly between Arif Ali and Avinash Das. Bhumi Pardeshi (played by Aaditi Pohankar) is the *she* in/of the story and in a span of two seasons, this series unravels the varied ways in which abuse occurring within the private space of marriage affect both the personal as well as the social life of a woman. In the first episode of the first season, the viewers are shown glimpses of Bhumi's marriage and how her husband, Lokhande, leaves no stone unturned to convince Bhumi that she is sexually incapable. He hurls all kinds of derogatory and vile remarks at her to break her mentally. He compares her to a living corpse who can never excite a man nor give him any sexual gratification. He stops in the middle of the act and touches himself to show sex is beyond her ability and prowess.



This habit of cornering women from the terrains of sex is not limited to the cultural practices of India alone. In many African societies such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, etc there still exists an age-old tradition of female genital mutilation (FGM). A practice of such nature can lead towards a very painful death of those who have to undergo it. It is also believed that the rising trends in immigration have taken this act out of the geographical confines of Africa to other parts of the world as well. One of the primary reasons contributing towards FGM, as identified by Dorkenoo, is a belief that a genitally mutilated woman is more likely to stay true to her husband.

Through such an argument, it can be concluded that the female body is a mere commodity for a patriarchal society which exists to serve a specific purpose. It is of no concern what the body undergoes in the process of serving. Her voice or her feelings are not important enough to be heard or to be understood. *She* is greatly discounted from every narrative and position. In her book titled “The Woman’s Voice” Patsy Rodenburg equates body language to ideas pertaining to power and a lack of it. On closely observing her many female students, she could trace a common behavioural pattern comprising of a set of eyes lacking any possible kind of engagement coupled with voices being traced back to their source of origin. Her observation is crucial in understanding the position of most women who demonstrate through their bodies what they cannot reveal through their muted voices.

Bhumi Pardeshi, in the initial stages of the series, refuses to engage in any conversation gearing towards her gender with her male colleague at the police station. The refusal mainly stems after the trauma that has developed from being called a man repetitively by her husband. She ties her hair neatly in a bun, doesn’t initiate conversation with either of the two genders and all of these

point towards a desire of not being noticed for the *male gaze* has already undone her and she is yet to heal. She discovers both her identity and gender much later in a distant hotel room all alone. When hidden from the penetrative and destabilizing gaze of a man, she dresses in soft satins accentuating her femininity. She lets her hair down which might be taken as a symbol of lowering her guards.

This transformation might be of an innate quality however the sequences leading to it are quintessentially external. Bhumi is forced to stay in hotels for an undercover operation which requires her to assume the role of a sex worker. When Bhumi is forced to be alone and at the whims and fancies of a lecherous pervert named Sasya-played by Vijay Verma-she is shown to have flashbacks of her abusive marriage and this makes things extremely unsettling for her. But she gains control of the situation eventually and helps in getting Sasya arrested. Sasya's dicey arrest pushes Bhumi further into the undercover operation from which there seems no point of return. From there onwards, Bhumi gets pulled deeper and deeper into a staunch patriarchal set up comprising of senior officers, gangsters and hired muscles. Bhumi shows similarities with Mother Courage who enters an all-men zone to support herself as well as her family.

However, one needs to both acknowledge as well as understand no one uses force upon Bhumi which she yields to; neither her senior officers at work or the drug lord (Nayak) she is to play a plausible seductress to. What, rather, propels things forward is a kind of *discourse* which is both authoritative as well as patriarchal. In "Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices" discourse is defined as a "group of statements which provide a language for talking



about a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (44). The society, at large, is constructed as well as construed along the lengths of such discourse and discursive practices.

So, when a low-ranking officer such as Bhumi is summoned to her senior’s room and told, in a specific tone, she is to camouflage her identity and pose as a sex worker, she is to understand the tone bears no room for any considerations or even consent, for that matter. Although there’s no physical force, unlike the kind her husband had subjected her to, yet there’s a kind of unavoidable and inescapable power to which she is to submit or surrender. Foucault, or what remains of him in the form of Foucauldian studies, might object to such an argument by claiming how one always remains in power even while being reduced to a mere *subject*. Yet a woman like Bhumi who is responsible to put food on the table as well as to care for her ailing mother does seem to have limited say over many things that unfold in her life. There seems to be little left outside the domains of accepting and submitting whatever comes towards her without making much of a fuss.

However, there’s another side, or what can be called a flip-side, to *discourse* that is explored in the series as well. Fernandez (played by Vishwas Khini) singles Bhumi out for a job that, as suggested by everyone, surpasses her potential. He is shown to have immense faith in Bhumi when the rest is plagued by doubt and disbelief. Later, he grows suspicious of Bhumi’s intentions but initially his belief paves the way for Bhumi’s alter-ego. An alter-ego that is discovered while she dons the aura of a sex worker who lures customers in without uttering a single word. Alter-ego, as an idea, has been explored in many commercially successful movies such as *The Spiderman*, *The Batman*, *Krrish*, *Mr. India*, etc. with a common intention of an ordinary hero figure transforming into a breathtaking phenomenon who embarks on a noble journey of restoring peace and balance

in the society by constantly battling evil forces. Another usage of alter-ego involves underscoring unaddressed/unexplored aspects of the personality that remains buried under a seemingly innocent persona, as explored in movies such as *Darr*, *Deewangee*, *Primal Fear*, etc.

Bhumi is placed at the intersecting point of both the above discussed uses- she impersonates a sex worker to forge a connection with the powerful drug mafia Nayak (played by Kishore Kumar G) so that she can bring him under the radar of the police department. And, in doing so, she is also to address sides and layers of her personality that have always been hidden and suppressed. Through this freshly assumed identity, Bhumi discovers her sexuality, her gender. She is to untangle herself from the vicious remains of a tragically abusive past that had robbed her off her identity. She is to discover the woman who was always denied her existence by a suppressive husband and apathetic male colleagues. As an extended/external part of her newly gained identity, Bhumi is to adorn her face with colours and her body in glittery apparels. All these are strikingly novel for Bhumi who has never paid much attention to either what she wears or how she looks. She is shown to have cast surreptitious glances at her younger sister, Rupa, who acts as a character foil to Bhumi. Rupa (played by Shivani Rangole) is both aware as well as confident of her sexuality, her femininity. She owns it unabashedly and doesn't allow anybody to make her feel humiliated about the same. She wears lipsticks and lets her long tresses flow effortlessly down her back. In a nutshell, she's everything Bhumi is mocked for not being.

The contrast between the two sisters is further used as a tool for the purpose of social commentary in the hands of the writers of the series. This disparity among women and how it leads to a sort of disrupted self-image has its roots in the family unit of an individual. Bhumi discusses this in



moments of vulnerability with Nayak stating how Rupa has always been the better one in the eyes of their father. She claims to be envious of Rupa or rather her feminine beauty that always grabs eyeballs wherever they go. Under such confessions, it is safe to conclude that Rupa is the *other* in Bhumi's story. The concept of the *self* and the *other* is inseparable from issues pertaining to race, identity and gender. W.E.B Dubois, in his book "The Souls of Black Folk", cites this very practice of segregating other and the self as a primary reason for a mutilated understanding of the self. He writes:

"After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman,
the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh
son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in
This American world,—a world which yields him no true
self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through
the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation,
this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at
one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's
soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused
contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—
an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts,
two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in
one dark body, whose dogged strength alone
keeps it from being torn asunder." (3)

The “veil” in Bhumi’s story is the *ghunghat* which has cultural connotations in Hindu religion and the “other world” is the transitioning from a single woman to that of a married (Du Bois 3). Under such a transition, Bhumi is forced to undergo an unjustified realization of a “two-ness” that could be a man residing inside her body (Du Bois 3). And consequently, she is made all the more self-conscious of her distinction from women like Rupa. Women who are desirable and, hence, seen and perceived a certain way. Furthering this idea of a double-consciousness that DuBois talks of, Angie-Marie Hancock writes how “double-consciousness has extended it’s philosophical reach....[to be] an explanation for a certain kind of alienation experienced by marginalized people of many ethnicities and nationalities” (88,87). In Bhumi’s story, the margin is drawn between sisters at home first and then extends towards other women in the streets. What happens to Bhumi as a direct aftermath of constantly being pitched against Rupa is a constant fixation upon how she is perceived by others and how it all points inwards; causing a ruptured understanding of her own gender and sexuality. Because she never had the scope to discover either, she understands both in terms of the interpretations and judgements imposed by others.

Bhumi’s gender is largely dictated and shaped by a “set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” which Judith Butler explains in her seminal work titled “Gender Trouble” (25). When she repeatedly hides herself through her body in clothes without a proper structure, the message that she feels conscious, even uncomfortable about her own body is conveyed. In a society which is “highly rigid” in terms of its judgement and evaluation of people, especially women, Bhumi is barely noticeable (Butler 25). If one tries to understand gender in terms of certain acts that are performed before a certain audience, as proposed by Butler, clothing is of paramount importance. In “Clothing: A Global History”, Robert Ross outlines several functions that clothing



serves- social, environmental as well as cultural. He views clothes as an unspoken communication between members of different racial/cultural/social/professional groups affirming belonging and inclusion. Under the light of such connotations and implications, it is easy to locate the point of difference between Bhumi and her younger sister, Rupa. In turn, such deviations cause a very ruptured understanding of that brand of sexuality which is accessed directly through gender in Bhumi.

Despite her initial discomfiture, Bhumi learns the mannerisms of a sex worker rather fast. Assuming a different identity seems to have opened a whole world of possibilities for Bhumi. Every day when she sits down for her make-up she undergoes a novel and thrilling sensation which she was devoid of so far in her life. Hidden from any wandering gaze, she caresses her own body as if discovering it for the very first time in her life. The more she is pulled into the *other* world, the bolder she becomes. She challenges men with her gaze, inviting them in only to toss them aside moments later withholding and denying pleasure. At broad daylight, Bhumi draws margins in the police registrars and at night she blurs those margins- between the seductress and the seduced, police and the criminal, professional and the personal. She reclaims power from her male superiors who pushed her into the game and starts playing it by her own rules. The further the series progresses-to go as far into a second installment-the difficult it becomes to keep track of Bhumi's motives. Whose side is she really playing from? Does she even have a side?

There is one world where Bhumi has a monotonous white-collar job which helps put food on the table and covers the medical expenses of her perpetually sick mother. It has very little scope for Bhumi to realize her true potential nor it offers any exciting outlets for Bhumi to expand her

horizons. On the other hand, through this inconsequential job Bhumi is pulled into another world filled with gangsters, guns, danger and thrill. During the day she is a law-abiding citizen who ensures others follow the path of law too. Whereas, at night she finds herself at the other side of the road where she dines and converses with hardened criminals. The other world is that of Nayak's - the infamous drug lord whom the police are desperately trying to catch. Nayak's role in Bhumi's story is of paramount importance. Bhumi experiences the pleasure stemming from a consensual physical union between a man and a woman through Nayak. She claims her sexuality, which was previously ruptured, from gaining control over Nayak. And in doing so, she uses sex as a primary bargaining tool. Nayak, unlike Sasya, doesn't try to impose upon Bhumi allowing her to lower her defenses around him.

However, Nayak's role is not limited to making Bhumi aware of how her body is capable of both receiving as well as enabling pleasure. He makes Bhumi feel seen and heard too- something which has always been lacking in her life. Bhumi dresses beautifully around Nayak. She wears flowers in her hair allowing it to flow past her shoulders in soft waves. She no longer hides her body in clothes lacking a definite structure. She embraces her body and solidifies her gender through a newfound confidence which is extended into her other aspect of her being too- the white-collar day job. Unlike before, Bhumi chooses not to tie her hair in a bun while going to the police department. Her open hair coupled with a certain gait that she adopts while communicating with her senior is suggestive of a transformation that she has undergone while on the undercover mission. Bhumi is no longer afraid or uncomfortable about being seen. As a matter of fact, she urges people to take notice of her implementing all the knowledge she has gained during her training as an undercover agent. It is the *other* Bhumi (who comes alive only during the night) who



approaches Amey (played by Ravish Desai) even though he has no role to play in her undercover operation. With Amey, Bhumi breaks her rules openly mixing business with pleasure. Unlike Nayak, Amey is not to be connected with sex as a bargaining tool or a means of gaining control. However, Amey is not to be mistaken as a lover either for he serves another purpose in Bhumi's life.

Amey follows a strict rule in life- of never paying to have sex. And this poses a great challenge before Bhumi as she wants him to break his rule for her sake. Bhumi's act of seducing Amey and leading him into paying for sex communicates her need to feel power; something she has grown addicted to under the thrilling company of Nayak. Bhumi is shown to be in awe of Nayak, or rather, the power he holds. But she also resists when Nayak tries to guide her into becoming more like himself so that they can be one in spirit beyond the physical terrains. Her first act of resistance is secured through the denial of having to kill Amey. The idea of power and resistance is played with on multiple dimensions in connection to the two contrasting lives Bhumi is shown to live. The first tangible layer of power would come under the formal domain as identified by French and Raven. This is the legitimate form of power that translates into the "legitimate right of other individuals or groups to prescribe behavior or beliefs of a person" (Keltner et al. 265). The police department where Bhumi works exercises that kind of an established understanding of power. Bhumi is legally tied to the police department and under strict vigilance to ensure a certain behavior is always expected. On the other hand, what Nayak exercises over Bhumi is informal by nature. Such power doesn't require one to hold any authoritative position. Although Nayak is at the top of hierarchy in his world (that opposes Bhumi's), yet Bhumi is not a subordinate to him who is required to act a certain way out of duty-bound obligations. However, Bhumi allows him to dictate her acts to a

greater extent out of a sense of admiration and respect. Nayak exudes a “certain charisma, energy, stamina, political strength, gift of gab, vision, or some other characteristic” which urges a certain response in Bhumi (Bolman and Deal 2003). She constantly expresses the desire to be like him and Nayak, too, assures her that she has the potential. He constantly reminds her that they are not very different from one another. In a fashion similar to Fernandez, Nayak too takes notice of the natural instincts and abilities of Bhumi.

And between these layers of power lies the true desire of Bhumi- to break free and forge an identity of her own. And Bhumi gets this opportunity when a group of sex workers approach her for guidance and support. It is only after Bhumi had suffered terrible violence at the hands of their shared pimp for daring to go beyond convention and dealing with customers minus the influence of a pimp. The violence that was inflicted upon her body had a specific purpose to serve- to break her spirit of independence as well as to warn others against committing such futile acts of bravery. Such instances where violence is used to control behavior are not entirely unheard of. As observed by Michel Foucault in “Discipline and Punish” corporeal punishment served as a great tool in the 18th century to crush any form of anomalies rising out of undesirable social behavior. Criminals were subjected to torture without much consideration as a part of investigation. Although Foucault claims the nature of modern disciplinary actions show a great deviation from the brutal and harsh physical condemnation that it previously used to be but in a society comprising of sex workers the implementation of such measure remains at best questionable. There’s a lot of stigma and shame associated with the world made of sex workers in countries like India. The law, somehow, refuses to reach out to them as the profession is yet to be legalized. Although discussions and questions



are raised on prestigious platforms such as mock interviews for IAS yet nothing tangible has come out of it on the ground level.

Bhumi and the group of sex workers who had approached her were not operating from a particular or specific location such as a brothel. In “Designing out vulnerability, building in respect: violence, safety and sex work policy” Campbell and Sanders underscore the multiple points of danger and threat sex workers are subjected to on a regular basis. In addition to that, they distinguish between two different categories of sex workers based on their place of operation. In the first category, workers have a specific domain such as a brothel from which they operate. And the other category involves workers who do not require any specific place to operate. They are responsible for locating potential customers and they have greater mobility too. However, Campbell and Sanders stress upon the necessity to have a kind of managed and regulated environment to address the basic needs of the sex workers under both the circumstances. And guided by such a need the women accompanied by their pimps approach Bhumi only after the latter refused to budge under a collective act of violence committed by the same people who now seek her help. Bhumi is made aware of how her plight was not unseen by Nayak when the pimp grovels at her feet for forgiveness. Bhumi is also conscious of being doubly watched- by the police department as well as Nayak.

Under Nayak’s guidance Bhumi is able to build a regulated premises for all women workers who had previously approached her. The pimp, too, is given the position of a manager having earned Bhumi’s forgiveness. Bhumi presides over them all, reigning like a queen of the underworld. However, she is not unaware of the unabashed control that Nayak exercises over her nor the

compromised life she is leading by being torn between two identities. Her sartorial choice bears a striking resemblance to this in-betweenness that she feels trapped in. She wears a form fitting shirt with loose, free-flowing lowers. While the upper half has a proper structure which accentuates the curves and silhouettes of her body, the lower half attempts to hide and camouflage.

In the finale, these two contradictory sides of Bhumi clash for one last time. And the result is narrated first in the voice of Bhumi and later in Fernandez's declaration. Owing to the latter, "She" is criticized for adhering towards the same patriarchy that is intended to expose and target. However, one needs to understand Fernandez's voice is that of an observer who has always watched over Bhumi from the other side and beyond gender he represents justice and fairness. His sole intention was to track down Nayak and, in sending Bhumi, to do his bidding he acknowledges his responsibility in pushing an ordinary girl to turn into a scheming criminal. Bhumi retaliates by saying she was destined to do this, and his involvement had very little role in how things turned out.

The focus never drifts away from Bhumi subverting all possible narratives to tell her story on her own terms which goes on to demonstrate how Ali's "She" can locate herself in a predominantly male-centric world.

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