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Blending the Performer, Redeemer and the Femme Fatale: A Structural Analysis of the Three Women in Christopher Nolan's "The Prestige"

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Movies have consistently disseminated the dominant ideologies girdling the structural sovereignty of an epoch. Since time immemorial, women representations in movies have been put to question. The dearth as well as misrepresentation of women in Hollywood had indefinitely raised quantitative layers of uproar and outcry. Though the roads of feminism had partaken enormous measures to enhance feminine experience and female manifestations through movies, the ultimate effects had often been disparaging and denigrating.

Being perceptible channels, movies can very often reverberate the camouflaged intentions of a director. The plot of a movie governs his/her repressed ideologies as well as opens up directly to the unfathomable subconscious. An in-depth analysis of Christopher Nolan's movie *The Prestige* will transparently bring out the mechanisms used in representing the women characters. Nolan's women are either over-glorified, undermined or sexually objectified while his men bathe in as tragic heroes pulling sympathetic abundance

through their character magnification. Though Nolan has been largely appreciated for the finesse of his directorial skills as well as his artistry in the expanse of mind games and puzzles, his representation of women had been hardly judged. The main endeavor of this piece of writing is to fill the critical void in the assessment of Nolan's female representations. A scrutiny of these female characters through Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* published in the year 1975 would shed light into the disappointing tentacles through which their characterizations are diminished.

Released in the year 2006, Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* is a pastiche of obsession, deceit and trickery. Set in Victorian London, the movie narrates the endless rivalry between two great magicians, Alfred Bordon and Robert Angier. Though the puzzle movie with its most intimidating climax won millions of hearts, the misrepresentation of female characters had reaped undesirable repercussions to the evolving current social structure.

It takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. (Mulvey 1)

As Laura Mulvey, the most popular British Film theorist and Feminist opines, the pivotal idea behind a movie is to establish the existing social order – the patriarchal society – through sexist ways thereby permeating visual pleasure to the masculine orb. Nolan spreads flesh and blood to his three women characters in *The Prestige*, namely Julia, Sarah and Olivia.

Irrespective of the role, screen presence and character orientation, all these three characters can be identified through the same mechanisms. The first female image that

Nolan portrays in the movie is that of Julia McCullough, a stage performer and the wife of Robert Angier. Played by the American actress Piper Perabo, the role of Julia is ineluctable to the whole context in which the plot of the movie spins on. Apart from being Angier's wife, she is a stage performer and coalesces and brings substance to the unified performance of John Cutter and his co-assistants Robert Angier and Alfred Bordon.

If we are to read her through the lens of Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Julia, without a doubt, is an instrument owing visual pleasure through her physical charm to the male spectators. Her physical appeal is put to maximum use as Nolan portrays her. She is showcased on screen for the first time as an elegant piece of attraction on stage. Her short costumes and her bare thighs to which Angier plants a kiss makes her an object of gratification not just to the male figures on stage, but even to the spectators present for the stage-show as well as the real spectators of the movie. Thus her sexual presence disseminates three layers of masculine glances - the men on stage, the men watching the magical performance and the real spectators of the movie.

Mulvey's essay sets in motion with this sardonic hypothesis of the social structure in which women are placed in various filmic segments only to please the male imagination. Thus the established norm of a filmic structure is to entertain a man with women as its objects.

Thus, Julia either remains as a common object on stage pleasing the audience or as the sole property of Angier-the hero in his bed chamber as his mate. In both cases, she is narrowed down to the role of a pleasure-bringer and is hardly being shown with the merits of a performer. As Mulvey states, "looking itself is a source of pleasure" (Mulvey 3). To exemplify this, Julia's physical attractiveness is made

use of. Julia is the one who sets the story of the movie in motion and triggers the emotion of rivalry and revenge in the minds of the two great magicians. Despite her pivotal role in the movie, she retracts as a revenant and never comes back even through memories after her death.

While Julia is a clear-cut object in the hands of the director, the second character named Sarah is a prototype of a woman configured within patriarchal norms. She is an ordinary young lady who happens to meet Bordon during one of his stage performances. She falls in love with the great magician and sacrifices her entire life for him.

The main idea behind representing Sarah in the plot is basically to create a foil to the other two female characters and to prove how a traditional family-woman should be as per the codes of a male dominated society. Sarah's physicality is not exposed as with the case of the other two women. Her costumes are more traditional and it fits accurately for a traditional home-bound woman whose entire devotion goes to her husband and her home. She is seen more fastened to household activities like cooking and cleaning up his home, dressing up his wounds and being in the market to fetch household goods. While Julia and Olivia are stage performers, Sarah is more tied to the household chores, taking care of their only girl child, Jess.

We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed. Motherhood and how to live it, or not to live it, lies at the roots of the dilemma. (Mulvey 1977)

Sarah is good looking though not as attractive as Julia or Olivia. Sarah fits exceptionally into her role with the accustomed coding of the family. The concept of family has been encompassed within the structure of mainstream global cinema since its early inception and the ideology behind the

concept is to strengthen the women's oppression and to exemplify her weakness in general.

The political mechanism behind introducing the concept of a family is to establish the hierarchical relationships, the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The presence of the family is to establish the values of the society through the suppression of women. Sylvia Harvey in her essay *Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir* in Ann Kaplan's book opines thus.

The representation of women has always been linked to this value-generating nexus of the family. The value of women on the market of social exchange has been to a large extent determined by the position of women within the structure of the family. Woman's place in the home determines her position in society, but also serves as a reflection of oppressive social relationships generally. As Engels suggested, within the family 'she is the proletarian, he is the bourgeois.' (Harvey 36)

However, it is quite disdainful that Nolan has introduced Sarah to make her a symbolic representation of a family, a microcosm of the society. The determinates of dominance and subordination which is the essence of a larger society is represented through Sarah. The methodical mechanism through which Nolan establishes a family into Sarah's character is largely a cause to bring in a balance to the current society and in pulling women back to homes through the male perception. Thus Sarah is a representation of the female archetype – the woman as the redeemer. She is totally tied to her family – her husband and her daughter. We do not particularly see a world of Sarah distinct from this. The scene where Bordon gifts her with the key of a new house is a clear indication of trap to cage her within the so called patriarchal order. She commits suicide halfway through the movie and in a way sacrifices her own life to safeguard her husband's magical tricks. Sarah becomes an epitome of self-sacrifice and

devotion, making herself a total foil to the other women characters of the story. She is seen as a nurturer – a redeemer throughout the movie.

Olivia Wenscombe, played by Scarlet Johansson is the third female character as well as the only woman character with the lengthiest screen presence in the movie. Olivia, unlike Julia or Sarah, interacts and spends her days and nights with both Angier and Bordon and therefore is a character who knows all the men in her circle better than anyone else. Olivia is extremely attractive in her appearance with her long blonde hair, blue eyes, pouted lips, make-up and jewellery. Her attractiveness is greatly put to use as she performs as a stage assistant with Angier initially and with Bordon lately. Even John Cutter, the one who organizes stages for Angier brings Olivia as an assistant by stating thus. “A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection” (00:36:52). Cutter presumes that the seductiveness of Olivia on stage can, to a great extent misdirect the audience even when things go wrong on the stage. Her cleavage as well as her bare long legs – a symbol of a Noir woman/Femme Fatale – is displayed frequently to quench the visual desire of the male ego. This intention connotes with what Mulvey states in her essay.

Similarly, conventional close-ups of legs or a face integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the renaissance space, the illusions of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon other than verisimilitude to the screen. (Mulvey 7)

Olivia is partly a Neo noir woman constructed by Christopher Nolan. Nolan has consciously subverted the norms of a pure Noir woman and has made her character quite distinct with her own attributes. She is not completely a

Femme Fatale disturbing the family circle of the man she is behind. At the same time, she is bold and independent to a great extent and is highly demanding in her nature. She opens up about those things which she can't chew in and reacts vehemently in very many occasions.

Like a Noir Spider woman, she is not completely diabolical and does not try weaning the men from their families. Sarah's death affects her and she believes she is partly responsible for the unfortunate incident. When Bordon talks about Sarah in the most detached manner, she responds in a bitter way without knowing that this is Fallon and not Bordon. "Its inhuman to be so cold" (01:39:31).

Nevertheless, the consistent visual motif is not necessarily the entire meaning of an image, says Janey Place in her essay *Women in film Noir*. A spider woman is in fact a sexual woman who operates and functions under her sexuality. Apart from the common origins of a Femme Fatale, a sexual woman in any context of any movie is multi-dimensional. Thus Olivia through the lens of Christopher Nolan is multi-dimensional as she partly identifies herself with a few traits from the Femme Fatale in Noir movies.

However, the extreme independence possessed by these women is often rewritten in the name of absorbed narcissism and as a result, the woman often gazes at her own reflection in the mirror. This kind of a self-interest rather than utmost devotion to the male figure is one reason why she is disdained.

Olivia is neither a deadly seductress nor a rejuvenating redeemer. Her visual dominance and her spatial independence often makes her similar to a Femme Fatale. With his classic deviations and abundance in the skill of character crafting, Nolan has created his own space in

representing Olivia partly with Noir features. Beyond the door of the theories, Nolan has specifically designed the character of Olivia by subverting her Noir traits to please all the men on screen and undoubtedly, the male spectators, as long as they immerse themselves into it.

Women are often forced to fit into the concepts and ideals of femininity to satisfy men's needs. The misrepresentation as well as objectification of women on screen can only fuel the existing disparity and gender inequality in our society. The recurring female deaths in Nolan's movies have definitely chiseled a set notion about women in the mindset of the audience. When women's refrigeration happens constantly and continuously from the great directors like Christopher Nolan, the ultimate consequence that it sprinkles down will be heavily devastating and disparaging.

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