No Female Agency In The Female Orgasm. Thanks Pop Culture!

By Sahima Gupta

After observing the representation of the female orgasm in pop culture, many questions come to mind. However, from all these questions, one, in particular, stands out: does pop culture allow the female orgasm to belong to women?

We have the 2010 release Blue Valentine starring Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams where the former is seen performing oral sex on his wife. This movie was rated NC 17, a rating for graphic content.

On the other hand, we have The Wolf of Wall Street, American Psycho and Hostel Part 2, which were rated as R. Now what is the catch, people?

All the three movies were high on male sexual conquest, dominance, drug abuse and violence against women. Yes, all of this was considered less offensive than women enjoying the pleasure of sex.

Because, how can the idea of sex revolve around a women’s pleasure?

In one statement, Ryan Gosling brilliantly summed up the situation:

“You have to question a cinematic culture which preaches artistic expression, and yet would support a decision that is clearly a product of a patriarchy-dominant society, which tries to control how women are depicted on screen. The MPAA is okay supporting scenes that portray women in scenarios of sexual torture and violence for entertainment purposes, but they are trying to force us to look away from a scene that shows a woman in a sexual scenario, which is both complicit and complex. It’s misogynistic in nature to try and control a woman’s sexual presentation of self. I consider this an issue that is bigger than this film.”
Female climaxing is a prop to satisfy the voyeuristic male fantasy. A result of misogyny and patriarchal set-up. Hollywood sells movies by using sex and female orgasm as a joke.

In a scene from Sex and the City, a show popular for being allegedly empowering towards women portrays Samantha’s sexual pleasure as nothing but a jest! Take another example, the 2009 release The Ugly Truth uses it for a comic effect. Ultimately, it becomes a comic-prop.

Female climaxing is suppressed, demonized, and portrayed unrealistically in the pop culture. The portrayal of female orgasm in movies stereotypes the experience of orgasm in the real life.

In movies, it is shown in a strikingly similar and consistent manner. But the truth is, that orgasm is a very personal experience and may differ from person to person. What women see on the reel, has the power to distort the understanding of their own orgasm and lower their self-esteem.

Most women are shown screaming their lungs out. In one scene from Sex and the City, Samantha screams loudly and then sings. At times, they do not show a single grimace, take for example Ygritte’s face while hooking up with Jon Snow in Game of Thrones indicates an absolute state of euphoria.

In various other scenes, when the sex starts, women are shown to be relaxed, staring at one direction, with their eyes closed without any expression on their faces. Furthermore, the time shown for women to reach an orgasm is also wrong. Within minutes or second after sex, women are shown to have an orgasm. Mostly, they do not show any usage of toys or foreplay.

Furthermore, it is shown that they can only get it through vaginal penetration.

In reality, a woman can reach an orgasm through clitoral stimulation and not just vaginal penetration (which is what is mostly shown in the movies). Plus, she does not reach an orgasm so quickly, it requires twenty to forty minutes of arousal and touching.

It is absolutely ridiculous to think that the experience of female orgasm is common for all! Some might be quiet, some may scream, others could concentrate at one point and a few might frown or make grimaces. This is the reason why the orgasm is such a personal experience. Each of them is
a unique one and has a possibility of changing over time as one encounters different sexual experiences.

The ‘classic female orgasm face’ is stereotyped. There is too much focus on the female expression because the physical needs to be translated into a visual format and to make it look pleasurable for the audience.

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Now, how does this fake orgasm face impact women? By visually seeing it they wonder why they can’t reach an orgasm so quickly. In reality, we know it takes time and various sorts of stimulations for women to achieve it. This narrow and limiting representation makes them question their own sexual experiences.

Further, they wonder, ‘do I sound sexy enough?’, Should I make more noises, or keep it low? Do I look good enough or what is my partner thinking about the noises?’

The extra focus is obviously there because of the unrealistic standards set up by pop culture. This takes away from them full freedom and pleasure while having sex.

Most expect it to be like in knee-jerking, a crazy-moaning scene from When Harry Met Sally where Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm. It is highly dramatized and unrealistic. The enjoyment of women depends upon how loud she is during sex.

Even shows such as Game of Thrones, Fifty Shades of Grey and Scandal demean female climaxing. Have you ever seen a man’s orgasm face? Well, most probably not. This is because most of the female orgasm scenes are to fulfil male fantasies and indulge in male voyeurism.

From the camera, everything is shown from the male point of view. This way, a woman’s face is always in focus, and they are always made to be objects of sexuality, as opposed to men who are always the sexual agents.

In an interview with Movieline, Greta Gerwig of Greenberg in an interview said that “If they show sex, it’s usually... the moment his penis goes into her. She arches her back, and it looks so weird and fake.”
Most of the producers, directors, and writers in Hollywood are men. They write, direct and create reel content. They portray the popularized version of female orgasm as in what they think it is like or would want it to be like. This is the reason why everything that we see is really from the male perspective. Thereby, creating, a misinformed mental picture in men of what female climaxing looks like.

Behind the camera – there’s a man. So the camera adopts the dominant male gaze. Plus, whether Hollywood or Bollywood, the idea of women climaxing is always a result of the man being good at sex.

In India, films such as Jism, Ragini MMS 2, Murder 2, Hate Story and The Dirty Picture all depict male voyeurism.

Jism, the erotic thriller, portrays Bipasha Basu as a sex-starved nymphet who achieves an orgasm in the most unrealistic way possible.

Or take Ragini MMS 2, where Sunny Leone can be seen screaming loudly for an orgasm sequence, but the scene is made to be aesthetically pleasing in order for the film to make money at the box office.

But, thankfully, things are changing.

There is a ground-breaking scene is from Black Swan where Nataline Portman, who plays Nina is shown masturbating. Here she does not need to feed male fantasies. She masturbates for herself, to make herself feel good – now that’s a change, a good change.

Further, Indian movies like B.A. Pass and Lipstick Under My Burkha are also setting a new trend.

In BA pass, actress Shilpa Shukla can be seen shaking up the long-standing notion of a man providing pleasure to a woman. Here, she has an upper-hand and is leading sex according to her pleasure. What’s more? She is providing pleasure to the man, and not the other way around.

There is a dire need for more female sex-driven scenes. We need female orgasms that look real for a change. We are on a dangerous path where the female orgasm and women who have them do not get to have a place in narratives.