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VERTIGO' (1958) AND FEMINISM: DISSECTING THE HITCHCOCKIAN CLASSIC USING THE FEMINIST FILM THEORY

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Abstract: It would be erroneous to dub 'Vertigo' (1958) as just a movie (Hitchcock, 1958). It is much more than that. 'Vertigo' redefined the cinematic art form in all its dimensions. Be it the screenplay, be it the cinematography, be it the editing or be it the production design – 'Vertigo' set new benchmarks. Alfred Hitchcock had truly created a reel benchmark through the enigmatic thriller. No wonder that the famed *British Film Institute's* (BFI) Sight & Sound critics' poll ranked the noir masterpiece with a psychological undertone as the greatest film ever made in 2012 (BBC, 2012). However, like everything else, 'Vertigo' also is beset with a distinctly dark compartment – the decidedly demeaning way it projects women and womanhood. For anybody who is aware of Hitchcock's works, this revelation shouldn't come as a major surprise. Hitchcock has often been accused of misogyny. Film after film, Hitchcock has shown women in his movies through not a very kind lens. Be it 'Rebecca' (1940) (Hitchcock, 1940) or 'Notorious' (1946) (Hitchcock, 1946) or 'Strangers on a Train' (1951) (Hitchcock, 1951) or 'Psycho' (1960) (Hitchcock, 1960) – the projection of women in Hitchcockian classics has been a subject of intense feminist debates. Through this essay, the researcher tries to dissect 'Vertigo' using the Feminist Film Theory and arrive at clear conclusions vis-à-vis the projection of women in the movie.

Keywords: *Vertigo, Alfred Hitchcock, Hitchcockian, Feminist Film Theory, Misogyny*

Introduction: Laura Mulvey, probably the best known name in the world of film and feminism, explored the concept of cinematic male gaze in great details. Her seminal work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' could be considered to be the base of the Feminist Film Theory (Mulvey, 1975). According to her, cinema positions men and women differently. While men drive the narrative of a cinematic story, women constitute just the subject of male desire. This conjecture would be the foundation of the current study.

Having introduced the Feminist Film Theory as the governing dynamics of the current study, it is equally important to introduce the subject of the current study – 'Vertigo'. It is a film analyst's nightmare to categorize 'Vertigo'. The movie bears the traits of multiple cinematic genres – noir, thriller, psychological saga and romantic drama. The narrative, though, is melancholy, dark and haunting. The end result is a gem of a movie that has

continued to arrest attention even six decades after it was released. A unique cinematography and an innovative editing pattern enhance the charm of the movie.

The movie is about a retired detective, who follows a woman and eventually falls in love with her triggering a plethora of events. Along the course of the movie, the director unabashedly sets San Francisco as the setting. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to note that the city constitutes a meaty part of the narrative. The movie trudges along the familiar paths of romance, fidelity and a deep sense of loss. The fact that the seemingly hopeless detective suffers from vertigo constitutes the reason for much of what ensues. There are two primary women characters in the movie, both apparently in love with the detective. The first woman, who also happens to be the ex-fiancée of the detective, seems to be in one-way love with him. However, the movie revolves around the misdemeanours of the other woman with whom the detective is clearly in love. While there is a love triangle that permeates through the layers of the movie, the narrative is driven by a seemingly peculiar relationship between the detective and the second woman.

The movie ends in tragedy as the detective's love interest dies. However, along the way, Hitchcock dabbles with psychological obsession. Alternatively, 'Vertigo' could be looked at from the angle of male sexual aggression and conditional affection as well. 'Vertigo' is also an exploration of the twin concepts of masculinity and femininity. Hitchcock successfully portrays the masculine expectations of femininity. However, what is striking is the fact the filmmaker seems to somehow normalize female exploitation in the name of affection. This is exactly where feminists have a problem.

The renowned film critic Roger Ebert is candid when he tries to analyze the unsaid tendency of Alfred Hitchcock to humiliate women through all his creations (Ebert, 1996). Ebert says that Hitchcock could be considered to be the most controlling director of his era and the same is particularly true when it concerns women. Both the women in 'Vertigo' are beautiful and fashionable and both of them elicit sexual desire among men. In very simple terms, both the women had the capacity to mesmerize men.

However, both the women are also psychologically vulnerable and are hopelessly in love with the protagonist. Thus, as with his other movies, Hitchcock ends up humiliating the women characters in 'Vertigo' as well.

Objectives of the Study:

1. Critically dissecting 'Vertigo' using the Feminist Film Theory.
2. Pinpointing the exact elements in the movie that potentially degrade the women characters.

Methodology: The researcher does a narrative analysis of the movie and uses the Feminist Film Theory in doing so. While conducting the study, the researcher makes it a point to separately do a character analysis of the principal female characters in the movie. The researcher extensively uses Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in critically analysing the movie.

Dissecting 'Vertigo' Using the Feminist Film Theory: Madeleine clearly inspires the protagonist – Detective Scottie. The entire movie is about how Scottie feels for Madeleine in the first half of the movie and Judy in the second half. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to note that the woman makes him act the way he does. If the relationship between Scottie and Madeleine a.k.a. Judy is dissected, multiple problematic elements tumble out. The way Scottie falls in love establishes femininity as an object of desire. Scottie just sees Madeleine and is charmed by her grace and beauty.

Throughout the initial sequences, Scottie follows Madeleine everywhere and convinces himself that he needs to protect her. The visuals that accompany seem to reassert the necessity of a man protecting a woman. The second part of the movie is equally dismissive of woman. Scottie in his efforts to convert Judy into Madeleine treats her absolutely like an object. The possibility that Judy can have a mind of her own is outright rejected.

Now, it is important to look at the movie from another angle – the angle of visual pleasure. Not only is the premise of the movie decidedly voyeuristic, the filmmaker also makes the audience take part in the movie's ingrained voyeurism. Scottie stalks Madeleine with contempt and with no consequences. The diegesis makes us feel as if it is the right of

Scottie to nonchalantly follow Madeleine. Extending the logic, it becomes very obvious that the filmmaker is directing the audiences to also stalk the primary female character in the movie. In the process, the woman is the one who is getting judged and evaluated. The stalker and the audience are not judged.

'Vertigo' could actually be considered to be a confessional movie when it comes to the filmmaker. The movie is primordially about how the filmmaker feared, used and controlled women. Scottie could be considered to be the cinematic personification of what the filmmaker wants to be. Scottie is an infirm man – an ill man and a man with apparent fear of heights. He falls in love not with a woman but with the idea of a woman. In his efforts to have the woman of his dreams, he tries to mould an apparently different woman. In the process, Scottie isn't concerned about the woman he is trying to mould. It is more than obvious that Scottie is more concerned about his own desires than the woman he claims to love.

The movie makes it clear that the women that Scottie desires and the woman he shapes are the same. He is enraged when he finds that out. He understands that he merely fell in love with an idea that another man created. This creates a peculiar albeit obvious moral dilemma. Scottie does the same thing to a woman that Gavin, the antagonist, already did – the act of shaping a woman. In the meantime, Madeleine turns to Judy and changes her role from someone who is working for money to someone who is deeply in love with the protagonist. While the allegiance of the woman changes in the movie, the allegiance of the men remains the same. While Judy converts herself into Madeleine, it becomes obvious that both Judy and Scottie have become slaves to the image of Madeleine, someone who doesn't even exist.

'Vertigo' is also about placing women in impossible positions. Most importantly, the movie is indicative of the shortage of acknowledgement of women by the men they love. Throughout the movie, Scottie fails to understand the importance of Madeleine or Judy until it is too late. This particular aspect harps on the traditional relationship between men and women. Unfortunately, Hitchcock delves only in conventionality and

thereby degrades women even when he might not deliberately want to do so.

'Vertigo' also projects that the ultimate destination of women is to love men. The independent entity of neither Madeleine nor Judy is ever given any importance throughout the diegesis. The entire movie is all about Scottie and how he is deceived. The movie doesn't get into the quintessential feminine struggles that are ingrained within the narrative. Eventually, it is the woman character in the movie who has to pay with her life thereby once again establishing the primordially of masculinity. Patriarchy in 'Vertigo' is neither subtle nor incidental. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration if it were said that the movie is unapologetic chauvinist in nature.

As noted earlier, 'Vertigo' is a perfect case study of the male gaze. Consequently, the superstructure that is created is that of patriarchal hegemony. Women in the movie are constantly objectified, sexualized, victimized and violated. This, in a way, is also representative of the world view of the filmmaker. It is essential to understand that patriarchy acts both on the surface and below the surface. In 'Vertigo', the filmmaker didn't even consider to make a distinction between the two. The broader worldview espoused by the movie is that of unlimited male domination, male control and male centrism.

According to renowned psychoanalyst and philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the movie in a way reemphasizes on the adage that the only good woman is a dead woman (Žižek, 2012). It would indeed be worthwhile to look a little deeply into the philosophy. 'Vertigo' constantly makes insinuations about death. While Scottie is miraculously saved even when hanging from a rooftop towards the beginning of the movie, Madeleine deceptively falls to her death and Judy truly falls to her death. This is clearly indicative of the filmmaker's obvious cinematic statement that the life of a man is more important than the life of a woman.

It is also essential to look at the perspective that 'Vertigo' presents and forwards. The perspective is unmistakably that of Scottie. The women in the movie aren't even given a fair chance to present their versions. While Scottie and Gavin shape the women characters in the movie, they drive the

plotline as well. Both Midge and Judy are incidental and behave the way the more powerful male counterparts want them to. There is an unequal power structure in the movie that anybody can identify. The emphasis is purely on how Scottie is deceived by Madeleine. However, the film doesn't take any stand on how Scottie constantly manipulates Judy so that she converts herself into Madeleine.

Elements in 'Vertigo' that Degrade Women:

1. Femininity and women are reduced to mere objects of desire in the movie.
2. The movie gives the impression that it is men who always need to protect women.
3. Voyeurism is the primary glue in the movie. It is obvious that both Scottie and the audience stalk Madeleine throughout the first part of the movie.
4. The movie is about how Hitchcock as the filmmaker feared, used and controlled women.
5. The movie creates a feminist moral dilemma. The protagonist unwittingly does exactly what the antagonist does.
6. The movie is indicative of the shortage of acknowledgement of women by the men they love.
7. The movie projects that the eventual fate of any woman is to love a man.
8. 'Vertigo' is a perfect case study of how the male gaze works in any audio-visual creation.
9. Vertigo unapologetically propounds that any woman is always subject to critical questions when it comes to her character.
10. The women characters in 'Vertigo' are never given a fair chance to present their versions.

Conclusion: 'Vertigo', having enthralled scores of viewers over more than six decades, is rife with feminist problems. The worldview that it propagates can't really be called progressive. It needed a careful probing, something that would open up its problematic interiors. This study does exactly that and pinpoints some of the elements that create the problems. Not only does the male gaze create a patriarchal reel world, it also digs up some very pertinent questions vis-à-vis the impact of male chauvinism on viewers. The fact that Hitchcock made 'Vertigo' doesn't help the

proposition for the simple fact that Hitchcock has often been accused of being misogynistic in his approach. That said and with the problems being acknowledged, 'Vertigo' undoubtedly remains one of the finest creations in the history of cinema.

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