

## 2. A Feminist Interpretation of Film “What Will People Say”

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*Original Title: Hva vil folk si (original title)*

*Time duration: 1h 46min*

*Genre: Drama*

*Release Date: 6 October 2017 (Norway)*

*Cast: Mariah Mozhdah, Adil Hussain, Ekavali Khanna, Rohit Saraf, Sheeba Chaddha, Isak Lie Harr*

*Director: Iram Haqq*

*Write: Iram Haqq*

*Languages: Norwegian; Urdu*

*Produced by: Maria Ekerhovd*

### **Abstract**

*The present paper is based on a feminist interpretation of the film which is about a sixteen-year-old girl Nisha who lives a double life. When out with her friends she is like a common Norwegian teenager but at home she is the perfect Pakistani daughter who is supposed to abide by the cultural norms of the family. She tries to balance her life in the west and her parents' ethnic culture. One day when her father catches her alone with her boyfriend, the girl's two worlds brutally collide. Under the pressure of the community, her parents decided to send her to live with her extended family in a small town in Pakistan. She was forced to get adapt to the rigid cultural norms of that new environment that denies her freedoms she once enjoyed and from here her struggle starts against social laws and conventions that are essentially patriarchal in nature, enforcing sexism in all of its institutions*

**Key Words:** Gender norms, ethnic culture, Social stigma, Family honour, Masculinity

### **Introduction**

*What Will People Say* is a psychological horror tale of a sixteen-year-old teenage girl of South Asian descent who is torn between the life she wants for herself and the one her parents are set to levy her to with or without her consent in the name of culture, traditions, family honour and morality. The movie raises many questions such as whether stereotypical gender norms override the women’s agency or women’s freedom of choice as an individual; why women are



the prime victims of constant cultural appropriation in diasporic South Asian communities in particular and how the stereotypical gender norms more strictly and rigidly followed overseas in the garb of culture, traditions, institutional sexism and morality and why a girl has to compromise between the ethnic culture of parents and the western world where she is born and brought up. In short, the purpose of the review of this film is to raise very important question as to how enforced cultural appropriation hampers the basic rights of women, and the evils of patriarchy and sexism.

The film chronicles the journey of Nisha, played by Mariah Mozhdah, who, after an adolescent mishap, finds her life gradually turning into an ever-worsening nightmare as her family grows antagonistic under the pretext that "we only want what's best for you." Young women are most often used as scapegoats by society's scrutiny and shame, especially Nisha in this film, who leads two lives—as a normal Norwegian teenager outside the house and as a Pakistani daughter living at home. The protagonist, who struggles to balance her life in the west and her parents' ethnic culture, is introduced to the tone of reverse orientalism. Little does she realize what awaits her when these two worlds merge, and institutional sexism becomes more blatant. The movie has a recurrent subject of "What Will People Say," with Nisha's parents acting in ways that are motivated by their fear of what others would think of them.

Nisha is the heroine who confronts repercussions well beyond her imagination when her father, Mirza (played by Adil Hussain), discovers her with a boy in the middle of the night, causing all hell to break out. When the neighbours contact the police after hearing a brawl, Daniel (Isak Lie Harr) is beaten severely, while Nisha is abused and threatened. With the help of Child Welfare Services, Nisha is placed into their care away from her parents, and a reconciliation meeting is scheduled, but Mirza demands that Nisha marry Daniel before she returns. Nisha disagrees, which fuels Mirza's rage and causes him to falsely accuse her of infidelity. Nisha is summoned home, but she never arrives. Mirza and Nisha's elder brother Asif (Ali Arfan) take her on a "small drive" instead, which turns spine-chilling as she is ignorant but gets suspicious of her father and brother's plans. She keeps asking them, "*Hum kahan jaa rahe hain?*" (Where are we going?) yet all she receives is silence. Soon, she finds herself on a bus crawling through the terraneous hills of Pakistan, until arriving at her paternal aunt's combined household.

As the events unfold, she is jerked awake by the emotional and mental pounding of her father's departure. She understands she has been kidnapped. After several futile attempts to contact her friends and Child Welfare Services overseas, we see a dramatic shift in Nisha's psychological well-being as she is alienated by her parents first, followed by dismissal and cultural appropriation by her extended relatives. When circumstances deteriorate, she begins to seek solace in a guy her age, Amir (played by Rohit Saraf). On an awful night, Nisha and Amir are caught at a dimly lit street corner by loitering police officers.

They compel Amir to strip nude Nisha while videotaping and masturbating in front of the poor girl, who is screaming and begs for her freedom. The following morning, they parade the pair in the street, accusing her of being shameless and blackmailing them for money. At this time, Nisha is shattered and emotionally immobilized. When Mirza comes, the family accuses Nisha of seducing and misleading their son. Mirza then leads her to a cliff and begs her to commit suicide by jumping off. Nisha pleads for her life, and Mirza breaks down and returns her to Norway.

Nisha experiences more severe criticism from her mother and more stringent rules at home. After returning from school one day, she discovers her family completing a marriage proposal on her behalf and exclaiming, "This marital engagement will shut people's mouths" (*Yeh shadi ki khabar sunte hi, sabka muh band hojaega*). That evening, Nisha leaves in the chilly night, refusing to submit to her parents' whims and fantasies anymore. Mirza is forced to see his daughter escape on his own.

### **Interpretation of Issues from a Feminist Lens**

The film highlights Iram Haq's genius; it's not just about portraying Nisha's despair; it's also about creating the kind of interactions between a South Asian-born father and his daughter that elevate the picture from a fictionalized account to a genuine one. *What Will People Say* is a mirror to ugly realities, featuring everything from monologues and dialogues that resound in every South Asian home to sharp glances that silence a child, family setups that support institutional sexism being propagated in the name of culture and traditions, and social evils like domestic abuse, forced marriages, honour killing, and rape that is very occasionally heard.



It powerfully evokes empathy and anguish in the hearts of the viewers, not just for Nisha, but also for Mirza, who, despite his love towards his daughter, is forced to act in a demonic manner against her. The reason for this is the film's genius: social laws and conventions are essentially patriarchal in nature, enforcing sexism in all of its institutions, beginning with one's family. The film strongly brings out the concept of women bearing the 'honour' of the family, the category that can thrive only under the wings and permission of her guardianship, i.e., her father or brother, who, as the Head of the household, the one in control and authority, assumes the finality of his word and belief over anyone else's.

Further, the film gives a strong message of patriarchal control over women's body and reflects the dominance of traditional norms that a woman must be controlled by a male and also in the event that even if a male is proven to be at fault, society finds a way to accuse a woman of leading him astray, and she is condemned to punishment or, at the at least, insults and exclusion from society, whilst the guy is cleared of all charges and culpability. The implications of an action, whether moral or immoral, are disputed, but they invariably include a woman and rarely a male. Women are subjected to stricter morality, honour, and appropriation as a result of this agenda, whilst males are free to roam without being held accountable. While this is true for almost all social institutions, the film depicts the situation in a diasporic setting where patriarchy and sexism are at the root of social structure, and fear of social and cultural exclusion leads to policing of women in the name of "what will people say?"

However, it is important to point out certain themes and subthemes from the film which enforce cultural appropriation and how it interferes with women's basic rights, as well as the horrors of patriarchy and sexism:

### **Concept of Family Honour and Masculinity**

The concept behind the query, which appears in every nook and cranny of a mohalla or, more generally, in South Asian houses, is the concern that society would reject an action, belief, or person. The film depicts how Nisha lived a normal life and had a normal relationship with her parents, being told to help her mother with dishwashing, being scolded for not wearing decent-enough clothes, and being frowned upon for failing to arrive home before sunset, until she is



verbally, physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused when a boy is discovered in her room at night. When a woman carries the family's "honour" flag alone, she must be corrected. That is not where the terror ends; rather, it begins there. She is now called a "slut," a "liar," ridiculed and berated by her own parents, accused of having "sex" by her father, and denied any opportunity to be heard. She is also emotionally blackmailed the entire time, which feeds her guilt for betraying her parents. Eventually, she is abducted and sent to live in Pakistan as a punishment to try to make amends and avoid having to face the question of "what will people say?" by keeping the "bad seed" hidden from their current community in Norway.

While Nisha's world was collapsing, her older brother Asif was observed engaging in constructive dialogue and acting without stimulation. He keeps an upper-stiff lip and an unfurrowed brow while discussing getting into medical school, the cost of doing so, purchasing his ideal automobile, and joining his father in kidnapping Nisha. This indicates how other male family members and members of the public community might turn into passive bystanders to acts of violence and injustice committed against women. They are the enabling hands of their dads and male elders before taking on their own power. Even though his sister was being abused, Asif continued to conform to toxic masculinity standards by acting cold-blooded, restrained, and emotionless.

Nisha's mother, played by Ekavali Khanna, is another victim of patriarchal culture who contributes to her daughter's maltreatment and kidnapping. Women in society are taught that their role is to raise children and cook for their families while submitting to the supposed authority of the head of the family. They are held accountable for the proper upbringing of children in accordance with their customs, traditions, and religion, and as a result, women acquire a judgmental attitude toward other women and girls who do not properly comply to the rules. Throughout the movie, Nisha is shown as being very wary of strangers, getting emotional and verbal abuse from her mother and paternal aunt, and having her clothes and friend choices questioned by Norwegian local aunties.

### **Dilemma of Indian Diaspora and Women's Subordination**

The manner that Iram Haq depicts a modest nuclear family of Pakistanis residing in Norway is fascinating. It shows how people in this society value togetherness, fidelity to their heritage, and a strong sense of community and culture. However, the problem this raises is mostly due

to patriarchal ideas, which suggest more stringent rules for women. In contrast to south Asian civilizations, the west is stereotyped as being diverse, untamed, and free-willed.

The problem comes, though, when it adopts a reverse orientalist discourse in diasporic families, believing that their children should be "saved" from western lifestyles and ideas that contradict their religious beliefs, such as drinking alcohol, going out late at night, smoking, allowing both sexes to mix freely, and being liberal in both thought and behaviour. The movie does a great job of illustrating this, with Mirza raising his kids in the same environment as Westerners yet expecting his "daughter" to adhere to a culture of his own. Such methods of punishment are never observed for Asif (son). Is he permitted to observe how the "*firangs*" live? Or does his family never meddle in his life, making it impossible to know? Due to the fact that women are prone to cultural appropriation and blame, this is an example of how women are subject to cultural norms.

Another significant conundrum that diasporic families face as they want to create an exclusive kind of society among themselves is the idea of "us" vs. "them," which conflicts with the prevailing modern lifestyle and limits "their women's" ability to do all essential tasks. It also highlights the contradictions between "conservatism" and "free will," as well as between "social identity" and "personal identity," which Nisha encounters throughout the movie. She finds it challenging to comprehend the conservative guidelines that govern both her imposed social identity and her private identity, which demand her free will. In order to conform to what society has decreed is appropriate for violators, Mirza heedlessly applies the "punish-to-discipline" guideline on Nisha, no matter what. The overwhelming societal stigma of blaming the woman overcomes Mirza when he decides to accuse his daughter of adultery that she did not do, kidnaps her, ostracizes her, and wants to kill her in fear of "what will people say" about the family's morals and upbringing.

### **Shaming, Abuses and Coping with Trauma**

It is the night of the mishap when Nisha ceases to be a daughter. She is now just a burden, a piece of luggage, and a bad seed that Mirza must either eliminate or settle with. Mirza publicly states that he no longer wants a daughter like her when she rejects his demand that they wed David. The effect of the atrocities on Nisha's wellbeing must be acknowledged. It may be traumatizing for a parent to reject their child. The film portrays Nisha's realization of her error





and her recurrent apology, while also demonstrating her unwavering resistance to her father's baseless allegations. However, this implies that her family should continue to humiliate and shame her. In an attempt to get her back after the terrible night, her parents used a variety of tactics, including beating her and threatening to force her into marriage. They also emotionally blackmailed her into returning home in order to deceive the Child Welfare agency into thinking she was not in their care and then abducted her to Pakistan and left her there.

Meanwhile, they were publicly humiliating her, mistreating her verbally, emotionally, and mentally to make her think that she had done something when she hadn't. She is frequently criticized and faced with prejudicial opinions in Pakistan on her demeanor, her candor, or her convictions. It is cultural appropriation for her to cook, clean, pray, and dress nicely. She is again accused of betraying the boy after being raped, and her family starts a witch hunt against her. In public, Mirza spits on her. To discipline his daughter, Mirza employed a variety of methods, one of which was punishment. This provides a useful and deep gender perspective on how society views women as the only group that has to be fixed. Similar to how Amir, who saw Nisha harassing him sexually, gets rescued by his own family, who blame Nisha for misguiding their son and for Nisha's own horrifying and unsettling testimony of being sexually abused going completely unreported. Despite this, Nisha continues to follow and admire her father in the same manner she did previously, when she followed him to the edge of the cliff, unaware of her father's plans for her.

Maria Mozhdah shows Nisha's dejection and sadness, astonishment and devastation throughout the disasters that strike her in a delicate and moving manner. Nisha is a joyful kid at the start of the film who goes to her father's business, where she is given money and proudly introduced to clients as Mirza's daughter. Nisha loses her identity not only as a daughter, but also as a self-assured woman whose voice is muffled throughout the film. She begins to see and feel meek, saying briefly, nodding yes, and remaining silent. This is merely the visible manifestation of the horrors she endured. The spectator may feel the psychological and mental agony in the lengthy gazes, muddled thinking, lost faces, terror and uncontrollable screaming, as well as the fruitless attempts to run. Nisha's infinitesimal experiences, ghoulish, serious, or eerie moods in the scenes, dark tones in the surroundings, and creepy, horrific silence in scenes depicting her plight and suffering are some of the cinematographic techniques that contribute to the



hollowness and numbness of her deteriorating mental state. However, Maria emphasizes Nisha's perseverance throughout. When Nisha is confronted with a circumstance, she bends but does not break; she never loses trust in herself, but instead seeks an opening, an exit, or a call for aid in her will to endure with dignity.

## CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to show the situation of women who are assaulted in their own homes in an empathic manner in the film "What Will People Say". The movie offers a compassionate portrait of parents who sacrifice their daughters' lives to uphold social mores and conventions in order to deny them their fundamental rights. Fear of "what will people say" is a social stigma that arises from sexism, patriarchy, and societal structures that conspire to oppress women in society and in their personal lives. The narrative of Nisha has similarities to the experiences of women in South Asian societies, where it is common for women to be held accountable for sexual assault, and criticism of a woman's behaviour, demeanour, or choice of attire, social circles, or even speech level, to be seen with contempt. An equally pervasive societal evil is honour killing. When women decide to defy their parents' desires, they are frequently killed by members of their own family.

The movie is a psychological nightmare that makes the viewer envision the terrible suffering that exists in society. The impact on a woman's mental health can be long-lasting and worsening, ranging from larger evils like honour killing, sexual harassment, and kidnapping to smaller, lesser-known evils like victim-shaming, forced marriages, insulting, blaming, ostracizing, disowning, emotional blackmailing, and torturing. In the film's climax, Nisha manages to escape her home and escapes in the middle of the night, the night she was forced to get engaged to a man of her parents' choosing. The fact that Nisha chose to live her life on her own terms and refused to accept her fate as decided by others, despite suffering through hell and back and failing to receive much-needed support, understanding, and love from her own family after naively trusting them, showed how resilient she was.





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