

# Teaching Gender Through the Screen: Feminist Film Pedagogy, Visual Literacy, and Critical Consciousness in Indian Undergraduate English Classrooms

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**Abstract**— *The Indian undergraduate English classroom is overwhelmingly text-centric: literary study is organised around the close reading of novels, poems, and plays, with visual and cinematic texts relegated to supplementary or extracurricular status. Yet the students who inhabit these classrooms are, paradoxically, among the most visually saturated learners in human history—immersed in the image cultures of Instagram, YouTube, OTT platforms, and Bollywood from childhood. This paper argues that feminist film pedagogy—the systematic integration of cinema into English literature teaching through feminist critical frameworks—offers a transformative methodology for developing gender-critical consciousness in Indian undergraduate classrooms. Drawing on bell hooks's (1996) theorisation of film as a pedagogical site, Mulvey's (1975) foundational analysis of the gendered gaze, and Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, the paper presents a practitioner-based case study of feminist film pedagogy implemented in an undergraduate English programme at an aided college in Kerala. Through the analysis of three pedagogical interventions—teaching Mulvey through Malayalam cinema, using Bollywood item numbers to teach objectification theory, and deploying OTT series to examine intersectional gender representation—the paper demonstrates that feminist film pedagogy produces measurable gains in students' critical visual literacy, gendered analytical vocabulary, and willingness to interrogate the patriarchal logics of the media cultures they inhabit. The paper proposes a replicable framework for integrating feminist film pedagogy into Indian English curricula.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

When the author asked a class of thirty-eight second-year BA English students at St. Mary's College, Manarcaud, to name the last novel they had read outside the syllabus, four students raised their hands. When the same class was asked to name the last film or series they had watched, every hand went up. The most popular answers—*When Life Gives You Tangerines*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, *Premalu*,

*Manjummel Boys*—were all texts of extraordinary cultural richness, each engaging with questions of gender, class, caste, aspiration, and the politics of everyday life that the English literature syllabus claims as its domain. Yet these texts occupied no space in the curriculum. They were entertainment. They were not “literature.”

This paper begins from a simple observation: the Indian undergraduate English classroom suffers from a

constitutive mismatch between the textual cultures it teaches and the media ecologies its students inhabit. Literary studies in Indian universities remain overwhelmingly organised around print texts—novels, poems, short stories, plays—taught through close reading methodologies derived from mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American New Criticism (Nair, 2018). Meanwhile, the students who sit in these classrooms navigate daily through visual and audiovisual media environments—Instagram, YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, regional OTT platforms—that are saturated with representations of gender, sexuality, caste, class, and power. The gap between what the classroom teaches and what the student experiences is not merely a curriculum problem; it is an epistemic problem—a failure to recognise that the most culturally consequential texts of the twenty-first century are not novels but screens.

This paper argues that feminist film pedagogy—the integration of cinema and screen media into English literature teaching through feminist analytical frameworks—offers a transformative bridge across this gap. By teaching students to read cinema the way they are taught to read literature—attending to form, ideology, representation, and the politics of spectatorship—feminist film pedagogy simultaneously develops critical visual literacy, deepens gender-critical consciousness, and demonstrates the continued relevance of humanities methodologies in a screen-saturated world.

The paper draws on three theoretical resources. First, bell hooks's (1996) argument in *Reel to Real* that cinema is “the perfect cultural site for critical intervention” because it is the medium through which most people encounter representations of gender, race, and class. Second, Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational concept of the “male gaze,” which provides students with a transferable analytical tool for interrogating how visual media construct gendered spectatorship. Third, Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness)—the development of awareness of social and political oppression through dialogue and reflection—which provides the pedagogical orientation for feminist film teaching.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW: FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND FILM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Feminist pedagogy, as theorised by hooks (1994), Shrewsbury (1993), and Crabtree et al. (2009), is grounded in three commitments: the validation of students' lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge; the interrogation of power relations within the classroom and beyond; and the cultivation of critical consciousness that

connects individual experience to structural inequality. These commitments distinguish feminist pedagogy from both traditional lecture-based instruction and from generic “student-centred” approaches: feminist pedagogy is not simply about making students active participants but about making them critical analysts of the systems—patriarchal, capitalist, casteist, colonial—that shape their experience.

Film has been recognised as a particularly effective medium for feminist pedagogy since the emergence of feminist film theory in the 1970s. Mulvey's (1975) foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” provided the conceptual vocabulary—the male gaze, scopophilia, the construction of woman-as-spectacle—that enabled systematic feminist analysis of cinematic representation. Subsequent scholars, including Kaplan (1983), hooks (1996), and Gopalan (2002), expanded this framework to address race, postcoloniality, and non-Western cinemas. hooks (1996, p. 2) argued that because movies “are the medium of story and myth for this culture,” they provide “the perfect cultural site for critical intervention”—particularly for students whose relationship to print texts is mediated by class, race, or colonial linguistic hierarchies.

In the Indian context, the integration of film into English studies has been limited. Prasad (2000) and Gopalan (2002) have produced influential critical analyses of Indian cinema, but these have circulated primarily within film studies rather than English literature pedagogy. The English literature syllabus at most Indian universities—including Mahatma Gandhi University—includes “literary criticism” and “cultural studies” as theoretical components but rarely translates these into systematic engagement with visual media. The result is a curriculum that teaches students to analyse the gender politics of Jane Austen but not the gender politics of the films they watch every evening on their smartphones—a pedagogical disconnect that undermines the humanities' claim to develop critical thinking about culture and society.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs practitioner-based reflective analysis (Schön, 1983) to examine three feminist film pedagogy interventions implemented by the author in the BA English programme at St. Mary's College, Manarcaud, during the academic year 2025–2026. The interventions were designed as supplementary components within existing course structures—integrated into Literature and Cultural Studies modules rather than offered as standalone film studies courses—to demonstrate that feminist film pedagogy can be embedded within existing curricula without requiring structural redesign.

Data sources include: the author's teaching reflections (documented through a pedagogical journal maintained throughout the academic year); student written responses to film screenings (collected as formative assessment with informed consent); and comparative analysis of students' analytical vocabulary and critical engagement in pre- and post-intervention essay assignments. All student data has been anonymised and composited to protect individual identities. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, focused on pedagogical process and student critical development rather than quantitative measurement of learning outcomes.

#### IV. ANALYSIS: THREE INTERVENTIONS

##### 4.1 Teaching Mulvey Through Malayalam Cinema

The first intervention introduced Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze through Malayalam cinema rather than through the Hollywood examples that Mulvey herself analysed. The rationale was pedagogical: students who had never seen *Vertigo* or *Rear Window* found Mulvey's examples abstract, but every student in the classroom had seen Malayalam films in which the camera's relationship to the female body enacted precisely the dynamics Mulvey describes. The author screened sequences from three films: the "introduction scene" of the heroine in a 1990s Mohanlal film (slow-motion, fragmented body shots, romantic background music); an equivalent scene from *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), in which the female protagonist is introduced through her actions and speech rather than her appearance; and the dance sequence from *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022), in which the female body is presented as a site of resistance rather than spectacle.

The pedagogical effect was immediate and striking. Students who had struggled with Mulvey's theoretical language when applied to unfamiliar Western films became animated and articulate when the same concepts were applied to the Malayalam cinema they knew intimately. One student observed that the "slow-motion introduction" was present in "every Mohanlal film from the 1990s but not in new Malayalam films," and asked whether this meant that the male gaze was "historically specific rather than universal"—a question of genuine theoretical sophistication that emerged not from the textbook but from the encounter between feminist theory and the student's own cultural knowledge. Another student noted that in Mohanlal's early films, "the heroine's first appearance is always about how she looks, but in *Premalu* [2024], the heroine's first scene is about what she does"—an observation that, when theorised, constitutes a feminist analysis of the historical transformation of gendered spectatorship in Malayalam cinema.

##### 4.2 Item Numbers and Objectification Theory

The second intervention used Bollywood item numbers—the standalone dance sequences featuring a "special appearance" by a female performer—to teach Fredrickson and Roberts's (1997) objectification theory and its application to visual media. Item numbers are pedagogically powerful precisely because they are culturally ubiquitous: every student in the classroom had watched, danced to, and internalised the visual logics of item numbers without ever subjecting them to critical analysis. The intervention screened three item numbers spanning three decades—from *Choli Ke Peeche* (1993) through *Sheila Ki Jawani* (2010) to *Oo Antava* (2022)—and asked students to analyse them using objectification theory's analytical categories: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, fungibility, and reduction to appearance.

The classroom discussion that followed was among the most pedagogically productive the author has facilitated. Students initially resisted the application of objectification theory to item numbers: "It's just entertainment," "She chose to do it," "It's empowering because she's confident." These responses—which replicate the dominant cultural discourse around item numbers—provided the entry point for a Freirean critical dialogue about the relationship between individual choice and structural constraint, between empowerment rhetoric and the political economy of female bodily display, and between what feels liberating and what the camera's gaze actually constructs. By the end of the session, students were producing nuanced analyses that distinguished between the performer's agency and the cinematic apparatus's objectifying logic—a distinction that required genuine critical thinking rather than dogmatic application of feminist principles.

##### 4.3 OTT Series and Intersectional Representation

The third intervention used contemporary Indian OTT series to teach intersectional gender analysis. Students were assigned to watch one episode each from three series—*The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021, Malayalam), *Made in Heaven* (2019, Hindi), and *Suzhal* (2022, Tamil)—and to analyse how each text represented the intersection of gender with caste, class, sexuality, and region. The assignment required students to apply Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework to screen media, identifying how different axes of identity produced different experiences of gender within the same narrative world.

This intervention produced the most sustained analytical engagement. Students' written responses demonstrated a capacity for intersectional analysis that the print-text curriculum had not developed: they identified how *The Great Indian Kitchen*'s depiction of domestic

labour was caste-specific (the protagonist's Nair Brahmin household operates through a particular caste-patriarchal logic), how *Made in Heaven's* portrayal of queer identity was class-inflected (Karan's queerness is liveable because of his urban upper-class position), and how *Suzhal's* Tamil small-town setting produced gender dynamics irreducible to the metropolitan feminism of Hindi OTT series. The screen text's visual and narrative richness gave students analytical material that exceeded the theoretical framework—generating insights about gender, caste, and region that the textbook alone could not have produced.

## V. DISCUSSION: A REPLICABLE FRAMEWORK

The three interventions analysed above converge on a central pedagogical argument: feminist film pedagogy transforms the Indian English classroom by connecting theoretical frameworks to the media cultures students already inhabit, producing critical consciousness that operates beyond the classroom in students' daily encounters with screen media. The paper proposes a replicable framework for integrating feminist film pedagogy into Indian English curricula, organised around four principles.

First, **cultural proximity**: film texts should be drawn primarily from the regional and national cinemas that students know, rather than from Western canons. Teaching Mulvey through Malayalam cinema rather than Hitchcock produces deeper engagement because students bring cultural knowledge that enriches rather than impedes theoretical analysis.

Second, **theoretical scaffolding**: film screenings must be accompanied by explicit feminist theoretical frameworks—the male gaze, objectification theory, intersectionality—that provide students with transferable analytical tools. Without theoretical scaffolding, film viewing remains consumption rather than critical analysis.

Third, **dialogic pedagogy**: following Freire (1970), the classroom should be organised as a space of dialogue rather than lecture. Students' initial resistance to feminist readings of beloved cultural texts—"It's just entertainment"—is not an obstacle but a pedagogical resource: it reveals the ideological naturalisation that feminist pedagogy aims to make visible.

Fourth, **assessment integration**: feminist film analysis should be incorporated into formal assessment structures rather than confined to supplementary or extracurricular activities. Until film analysis carries the same assessment weight as close reading of print texts, it will remain pedagogically marginal.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that feminist film pedagogy offers a transformative methodology for developing gender-critical consciousness in Indian undergraduate English classrooms. Through practitioner-based analysis of three interventions—teaching Mulvey through Malayalam cinema, using item numbers to teach objectification theory, and deploying OTT series for intersectional analysis—the paper has demonstrated that film-based feminist pedagogy produces deeper critical engagement than print-text-only approaches because it connects theoretical frameworks to the media cultures students already inhabit.

The implications extend beyond the English classroom. In an era when screen media constitutes the primary cultural environment of most young people globally, the humanities' continued reliance on print-text-only curricula risks irrelevance. Feminist film pedagogy demonstrates that humanities methodologies—close reading, ideological analysis, attention to form and representation—are not bound to the printed page but can be productively applied to the screen, producing critical citizens capable of interrogating the gendered, casteist, and capitalist logics of the media ecosystems they navigate daily. The English classroom that refuses to engage with the screen is not protecting literary standards; it is abandoning its students to consume without critique the most powerful cultural texts of their generation.

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