

Paper

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**Reclaiming the Everyday: Loiter, Leisure, and Love
In Arun Fulara's *My Mother's Girlfriend***



Abstract

Directed by Arun Fulara, *My Mother's Girlfriend* explores a day in the lives of Renuka and Sadiya, two elderly working-class women in love. While they are celebrating Renuka's birthday, Mangesh, Renuka's son, spies on them. The latter part of the movie deals with confrontation and strained resolution. This article investigates the concepts of 'loitering' articulated by Shilpa Phadke and the act of leisure, exploring how these tiny acts of autonomy function as crucial ways of resistance and creative expression. The paper attempts to situate the short film within the rich and diverse cultural history of queer Indian cinema, examining its counter-narrative treatment of love and desire by employing the framework of the female gaze.

Keywords: *female gaze, loitering, queer movies, female leisure, agency*

Introduction

Mazhya Aaichi Girlfriend/My Mother's Girlfriend (2021) is a 15-minute short movie directed by Arun Fulara, with a screenplay by Fulara, Shreyas Chougule, and Pratik Kinnarimath. The narrative revolves around

two elderly working-class women, Renuka, played by Sushama Deshpande, and Sadiya, portrayed by Anji Alva Naik, who are in love in Mumbai. In the movie's opening scene, Sadiya meets Renuka, who sells vegetables. Sadiya is younger than Renuka and is more

reserved and concerned, especially about the future, a worry that Renuka hardly shows. Together, they embody the contrasting relationship dynamic where one is a free spirit living in the moment, and the other is a meticulous planner looking ahead. They devise plans for the next day, which marks Renuka's birthday. The next day, while they are out enjoying each other's presence, Renuka's son Mangesh gets suspicious, spies on them at night, and catches them in the act of love, much to his shock. While Mangesh and Renuka argue, Renuka suddenly falls ill, prompting Mangesh to seek urgent medical assistance. Perplexed by his mother's sudden deterioration of health, he calls Sadiya his mother's girlfriend. While Sadiya attends to Renuka's recovery, Mangesh begins to come to terms with the bond or companionship they share. The movie adheres to the traditional cinematic narrative, where sickness or mortality often serves as a diegetic catalyst to facilitate thematic resolutions. The article attempts to delve into the depictions of leisure and loitering in the movie while also focusing on the female acts of love, desire, and agency, exploring how the film employs the female gaze as a cinematic technique to offer a counter-narrative that reclaims and reimagines the perspective of women's experiences and subjectivities.

Exploration of Queer Love and Desire in *My Mother's Girlfriend*

Several Indian films have thoughtfully explored the complexities of same-sex female friendships and love, delving into themes of identity, desire, and societal constraints with increasing nuance and sensitivity. *Fire* (1996), directed by Deepa Mehta; *Sheer*

Qorma (2021), directed by Faraz Arif Ansari; *The Married Woman* (2021), directed by Sahir Raza; *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar; *Girl Friend* (2004), helmed by Karan Razdan; *The Booth* (2018) directed by Robin Raveendran Nair; and *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, are notable films that explore LGBTQ+ themes, particularly the love between two women in Indian cinema.

The societal framework that positions women as possessions to be claimed or as dependents needing protection and guidance—initially from their father or brother and later from their husband and son—remains deeply embedded in Indian society. *My Mother's Girlfriend* makes use of Mangesh's gaze literally as the camera focuses on his disturbed eyes to make sense of the patriarchal gaze that follows a woman, citing honour and protection, no matter her age. Troubled by insecurity and equipped with the affirmation of his sense of 'ownership' over his mother, he spies on her to uncover the truth about their relationship despite his lack of mental preparedness to confront it. As he closely observes his mother's body language and her growing fondness for the 'other woman', he realises that this woman has made it to be his mother's top priority. Witnessing his mother and her girlfriend together in a state of intimate ecstasy deeply stirs him for life. When he notices Sadiya approaching his side of the road, he quickly withdraws his gaze with a sense of aversion. In stark contrast, the same gaze remains fixed on his mother's bed as he enters her house to confront her. He reminds her of her status as a widow and the

responsibilities she has neglected by prioritising her desires, which would otherwise make her a 'good enough' role model for her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Despite his gentle tone, he raises the fundamental concern that permeates many Indian households—'What would others think?'

Popular culture often desexualises mother figures and elderly women. *My Mother's Girlfriend* challenges these idealised stereotypes by presenting a rare and radical depiction of a woman whose existence is defined not by societal norms but by pursuing her desires. The patriarchal system that creates a culture of shame rarely celebrates elderly women lovers on screen. The film presents a subversion of these conventions, enabling a more nuanced depiction. The short movie adopts a muted and earthy colour palette, interspersed with occasional pops of colour to convey the joy and affection the characters hold for one another amidst the realistic setting. Their hands gently brushing for reassurance, the quiet tenderness in their eyes as they sit side by side on the beach, Renuka's soft caress of Sadiya's hair, and Sadiya's comforting presence when Renuka falls ill—all of these moments weave together an intimate portrayal of love and companionship, highlighting the warmth and depth of their bond without reducing them to mere objects of desire.

After enduring an abusive marriage until her husband's demise, Renuka's choice to remain unmarried signifies her rejection of conventional norms and a patriarchal family order that has once pushed her into a life of oppression. Renuka no longer feels bound by the need to preserve the family's honour or

adhere to societal norms. Instead, she fully embraces her homosexual identity, affirming her true self with courage and clarity. During her day out with Sadiya, Renuka shares her food cravings, ranging from *pav bhaji* to *egg burji*, *samosa*, and *pani puri*. Sadiya worriedly asks Renuka if she wants to celebrate her birthday or die on the same day, hinting at the potential health complications that come with age when one gives in to cravings. Renuka is a woman who approaches life with the perspective of savouring each day. This perspective contrasts starkly with the stereotypical portrayals of women her age commonly seen in the media. Renuka rebels against the restrictive roles imposed upon her by prioritising her desires—be it food or carnal desire. In the film, the son finds it difficult to comprehend his mother's psychosexual needs, and it is made even harder for him, given the fact that she is in a same-sex relationship. When he troubles her with questions regarding their future strategy concerning this 'problem,' he pushes her to an alternative action plan, anticipating her giving up her relationship. She replies composedly and in denial, much to his annoyance. At this juncture, the film adopts a definitive tone as Renuka declares her autonomy by stating that her choices at this latter stage in life should not concern him.

Narrative Subversions: Female Gaze Employed in the Movie

The title of the movie directly suggests the inherent gaze in the film. The gaze, or point of view, is that of Mangesh, Renuka's son. Critic Alicia Malone observes how the male gaze, as articulated by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, depicts women as passive

sexual objects. Mulvey argues that this intrinsically 'male gaze' positions male subjects in roles of dominance while relegating female characters to an inferior position of "being looked at." In several queer movies, despite the plot's focus on the female leads, there are instances where the male gaze overshadows the plot and objectifies the female lead to appeal to the audience, as hinted in Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 film *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. Malone identifies the male gaze as a byproduct of an imbalanced world where men hold the majority of power. She engages with the concept of the 'female gaze' (Malone 12) to foster a dialogue about the experience of viewing and being represented in film, particularly for individuals who do not identify as white, cisgender, or male. In the movie, the visual composition and framing shift focus away from objectifying the female protagonists when they share moments of intimacy. Rather than portraying their bodies as objects of desire, the visuals emphasise their love, subjectivity, and tenderness. Renuka, unafraid to express her agency and stand by her actions, subverts the son's assumed cultural dominance, the patriarchal male gaze, and its inherent power.

The motif of 'being looked at' and seen is woven throughout *My Mother's Girlfriend*. Natasha Chuk critiques the theoretical ambiguity of the female gaze, expressing concerns about its lack of a singular definition and what she considers as the 'reductionist thinking' that simplifies the subversion of the male gaze to a mere binary reversal. She also emphasises that the female gaze requires a thorough dismantling of the technical and socially established methods used to depict

fictional characters and their plots rather than merely highlighting the female creator's contribution or the overpowering presence of a female character on screen (Chuk 48). The movie's resistance is evident in the key moments where the women experience the most unapologetic fun despite the intruding gaze. In the film, Renuka declines her son's request to celebrate her birthday with his family. Renuka is clever enough to use her age as an excuse to distance herself from her son's family and spend time with the person who truly celebrates her. Despite Mangesh's confusion over his mother's unfamiliar spiritual self, he accepts Renuka's excuse. She argues that, given her age, it would be more appropriate for her to visit a temple to seek blessings and cleanse her sins, a practice that most sons typically expect their mothers to undertake after a specific age. When Mangesh calls to check on her when she is at the beach, assuming she is at the temple, she instructs him to end the call as 'the goddess is waiting,' alluding to Sadiya, who appears to be searching for her. In another instance, as they make plans, Sadiya expresses her concern about how to justify her absence from work. Renuka proposes that she claim it is a '*ladies problem*,' implying she could use menstruation as an excuse, as she won't be asked further questions because of the taboo attached to it. She defies the system with a tongue-in-cheek wit in such candid ways, outsmarting it at its own game. Despite the lack of a resolution in the movie regarding Mangesh's acceptance of their relationship, his attentiveness to her is a positive indication.

Reclaiming Public Spaces: Loitering and Feminine Leisure as Acts of Resistance

Conventional gender roles restrict women's access to leisure activities. Boundaries between work and non-work activities often distinguish men's leisure time, facilitating leisure opportunities and relaxation (Rojek et al. 216). However, when it comes to women, "some obligation" is present in leisure situations, as a result of which even their leisure activities are not completely free from constraints (Shaw 20). This distinction emphasises the impact of traditional gender roles concerning acts of leisure. Karla A. Henderson and Susan M. Shaw underscore how women's leisure is socially constructed and influenced by prevailing ideologies and societal norms surrounding femininity, motherhood, and familism. Shaw suggests that leisure activities, environments, and relationships can potentially disrupt existing power dynamics, thereby framing leisure as a political practice. Consequently, choosing leisure is a source of empowerment and resistance for women.

On Instagram, leisure takes on a distinct cultural spin, reflecting unique aspects of Indian visual practices and lifestyles. Surabhi Yadav, a gender issues advocate, popularises 'Women at Leisure' as a phrase and gaze in mainstream media. Her Instagram page-based photo project 'Basanti: Women at Leisure' captures moments of leisure and rest for the women around her. The page uses hashtags #AuratonKaAaram or #WomenAtLeisure. In the movie, because both Renuka and Sadiya are working-class women, their quest for happiness and desire takes a radical turn. The sight of these two

women taking a day off to mark a special day—despite losing pay—to claim their time, enjoy the streets of Mumbai, eat *golgappa* and fried food, and play by the sea is a subtle act of resistance. As pointed out by Yadav, though many women fight with men in the workplace, the battle for pleasure has only just begun. She makes the case that leisure—or maybe more significantly, the option to do nothing at all, particularly in public—is a fundamentally feminist issue. It signifies a claim to the city—the right to enjoy, socialise, and be a part of it. She asserts that when we engage in discussions about oppression, freedom, and rights, we often concentrate on violent acts and overlook how oppression manifests itself in everyday situations, such as regulating one's food choices, social interactions, romantic relationships, and modes of expression. Therefore, when oppression involves restricting one's freedom of being, leisure is an effective solution (McDonald).

While the idea of female leads taking time for themselves and leisure is not new to cinema, certain contemporary films stand out for their portrayal of it. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* (2024), which won the Grand Prix at the 77th Cannes, also deals with the everyday mundanity of Mumbai city, explores the idea of leisure as the characters Prabha and Anu journey outside Mumbai to accompany Parvaty, who is forced to depart. As they withdraw to a quieter, serene place, in contrast to their everyday toil in the city, they experience moments of relaxation. Anu and Parvaty dance to an old song with a fleeting sense of joy. Though not entirely a leisure moment, Neeraj Ghaywan's short film *Juice* (2017) presents a noteworthy act of defiance,

as the lead character, Manju, confronts male entitlement at a house party by taking a break from her endless kitchen duties, fetching a seat, and joining her husband and the other men in the drawing room, sipping juice. Her quiet yet assertive presence upsets the menfolk, leaving them stunned and uncomfortable. In Raj Rachakonda's *8 AM Metro* (2023), the character portrayed by Saiyami Kher, a homemaker, seizes a moment for herself immediately after her husband and kids depart for work and school. She prepares filter coffee at a leisurely, contemplative pace, suggesting that, more than a routine act, it is her cherished ritual. This act is reminiscent of the renowned Taj Mahal tea advertisement, which encourages the protagonist to 'steal some time away' and relish the experience of savouring tea. ("Taj Mahal Tea—Fursat Walli Chai"). ("Taj Mahal Tea – Fursat Walli Chai").

In *My Mother's Girlfriend*, Renuka, who appears to be in her early 50s, cares deeply about spending time and masti with her female companion. The work: *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* explores loitering as a radical act. Despite the frequent entry of working-class women into public spaces for employment, where they engage in domestic labour, sales, street vending, or factory labour, their presence in public spaces is primarily limited. As an act that subverts conventional ideas of public space, the act of loitering questions the limitations that society places on women. 'Since the very act of being in public without purpose is seen as unfeminine, loitering fundamentally subverts the performance of gender roles' (Shilpa Phadke et al.183). Although there are ample examples of urban

settings systematically marginalising working-class women from areas such as parks, malls, and other "aspirational" locales intended for affluent classes, the film depicts Renuka and Sadiya asserting their joy and leisure on their terms and calls for the possibility of reclaiming the public space by transforming it from a site of exclusion to one of dignity and belonging. These actions, frequently regarded by outsiders as trivial or silly, acquire deep significance when viewed from the perspective put forward by the movie.

Conclusion

With *My Mother's Girlfriend*, Arun Fulara sets out to create a world that is sensitive, mature, and centring on the female characters' drive for happiness. The film maintains a realistic storyline, gently defying the traditional patriarchal family order in its denouement. The tenderness in the suggestive gaze of the lovers, their desire for each other, and their reluctance to submit to the patriarchy reflect a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. The narrative's use of the female gaze has aided in depicting the working-class women characters as subjects of agency and desire. Though the female gaze is traditionally associated with films made by female directors, it can be argued that the techniques used to craft the visual experience—such as the framing of the female body and the narrative focus—ultimately shape how women are perceived. Consequently, the identity of the auteur becomes less relevant compared to the visual perspective of the film, which encourages the audience to adopt it.

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