

# ELLE RADAR



## Lipstick service

*Meet Alankrita Shrivastava, whose film is the latest subject of gender-parity discussions in India*

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* is a film about women trying to create a space for themselves within the confines of daily life and crushing morality. So, obviously, it has been duly banned by the censor board for being too “lady oriented”, turning its director, Alankrita Shrivastava, into the latest poster child of the resistance. “In Hollywood, the big conversation is about more women getting to direct films. In India, the bigger concern is the representation of women in films—it’s a real battle,” she says.

The film follows four women in India—played by Konkona Sensharma, Ratna Pathak Shah, Aahana Kumra and Plabita Borthaku—who give vent to their sexuality, ambition and personal desires with small acts of rebellion, like wearing lipstick. “The title itself is metaphorical. It refers to veiled desires, hidden dreams. It means women will never stop dreaming, no matter how suppressed they are or how stifling their lives are,” she says.

The film has won praise at film festivals from Tallinn to Tokyo, and courted controversy here in India. “The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) is interfering with our freedom of expression,” says Shrivastava. “It is silencing women.”

Before it became a vehicle of discourse, the film was simply a personal story. “Apart from Sensharma’s character, which is vaguely inspired by a landlady of mine, the other characters emerged as real, intimate extensions of me. And they have resulted from the many conversations I have had with women across ages, professions, classes and communities over the years.”

Shrivastava, whose mind was shaped early on by the writings of Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison, is prepared for a long fight. “We are trying to change the status quo. It won’t be easy.” After the CBFC verdict, her mentor, film-maker Prakash Jha, told her, “You’ve made the film. Now you have to stand by it till the end. Whatever it takes.” Judging from the buzz it is generating, she’s not going to be standing alone.

— NEVILLE BHANDARA