

# *All We Imagine As Light* as Existentialist Feminist Art

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*All We Imagine As Light*, 2024, 2h 3m, directed by Payal Kapadia, produced by Petit Chaos (France), Chalk & Cheese, Another Birth (India), BALDR Film (Netherlands), Les Films Fauves (Luxembourg), Pulpa Films (Italy), Arte France Cinéma

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Film still from *All We Imagine as Light*, 2024, directed by Payal Kapadia, courtesy of Janus Films

Much has already been said about Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, which came to attention following its Grand Prix victory at the Cannes Film Festival in 2024,<sup>1</sup> which proved only the first in line of many international accolades that the film has received.<sup>2</sup> Many critics have commented on its excellent qualities, including a heartening focus on class issues, some fine acting, its unhurried pace, the arresting and memorable visuals, and so on.

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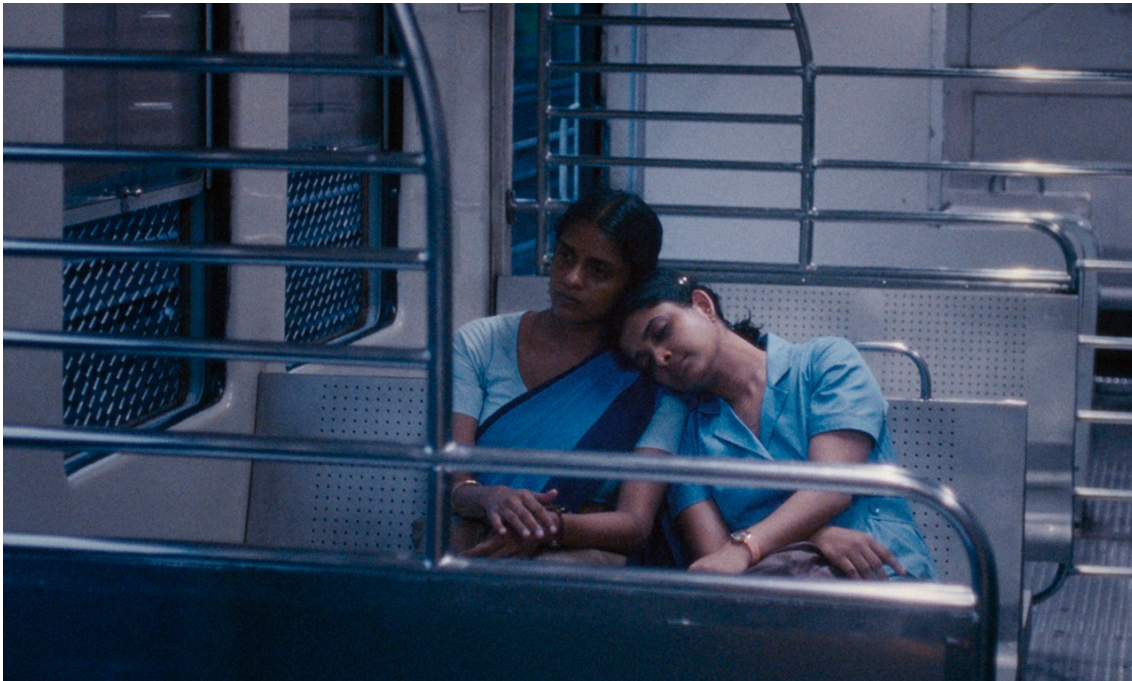
<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Arjun Sajip, 'All We Imagine As Light: Payal Kapadia's graceful vision of Mumbai marks her out as a filmmaker of significant promise', on the BFI website, 26 May 2024, [www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/all-we-imagine-light-payal-kapadias-graceful-vision-mumbai-marks-her-out-filmmaker-significant-promise](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/all-we-imagine-light-payal-kapadias-graceful-vision-mumbai-marks-her-out-filmmaker-significant-promise); and Justin Chang, 'The Georgous Mumbai Rhapsody of "All We Imagine As Light"', *The New Yorker*, 14 November 2024, [www.newyorker.com/culture/the-current-cinema/the-gorgeous-mumbai-rhapsody-of-all-we-imagine-as-light](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-current-cinema/the-gorgeous-mumbai-rhapsody-of-all-we-imagine-as-light)

<sup>2</sup> See 'All We Imagine As Light Awards' on [www.imdb.com/title/tt32086077/awards](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt32086077/awards)

## Feminism at the Heart of *All We Imagine As Light*

I want to focus here on the strand of feminism that the film showcases, in particular the decision to place female friendships centre stage. The film's director, Payal Kapadia, has shared her thoughts on this and many other aspects of the film in several interviews.<sup>3</sup> Kapadia stresses the power of acceptance and non-judgement in friendship, and as she says, one of the aims of the film is to portray women's relationships with each other in a very different light than the mainstream media usually does.

*All We Imagine As Light* is emphatically a female-centred film that is *not* about the men in the lives of its women protagonists. It is women-centred all the way through, and thus it is much more radical than it may appear on the surface. This is one of the most notable features of the film: it wears its radical social vision, and ultimately its radical politics, lightly.



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I was more than once reminded of Martha Nussbaum's pathbreaking book on feminist theory-praxis, *Women and Human Development*,<sup>4</sup> while watching and thinking about *All We Imagine As Light*. In this book, Nussbaum's develops her capabilities-based view of justice by referring to the real-life experiences of women affiliated with social cooperatives in Kerala and Gujarat (such as the Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA, for example). These women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and often from 'low' castes, have broken the binds

<sup>3</sup> See Shahamit Uddin, "'I Like to Be Ill-defined': Director Payal Kapadia on *All We Imagine as Light*", an interview with Payal Kapadia in *Interview*, 27 December 2024, [www.interviewmagazine.com/film/director-payal-kapadia-on-all-we-imagine-as-light](http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/director-payal-kapadia-on-all-we-imagine-as-light)

<sup>4</sup> Martha C Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2012

of oppressive marriages and chosen to live away from their husbands and their husbands' families, supporting their children and giving and receiving support from other women in small to medium-scale social networks.

These ties go well beyond economic help. In fact, they create a new form of life for these women, with a whole spectrum of new relationships in which they are themselves the makers, unlike with the received traditional norms that bind them. These women's groups show that capabilities (including the capabilities for recreation and relaxation) can be found (and refound) outside the binary of alienating ultra-individualism or restrictive traditional communitarianism.

Kapadia's characters are self-sufficient and have the potential for full realisation within all- or mostly-women networks. They don't need men to complete their lives, to help them achieve their goals, or even to fight against the enveloping oppression of patriarchy or robber-baron capitalism, as alluded to by the builder-politician nexus that conspires to deprive one of the central characters of her modest dwelling. These women try to move beyond heteronormative mores such as the family norms (ie man, woman and children, or sometimes larger kinship-based networks) forming the basic social unit. The film asks: why cannot other social forms, such as a group of friends, irrespective of gender identities, be normal and basic as well?

At its core, *All We Imagine As Light* is a film about agency, as all three central characters are engaged in an ongoing existentialist struggle to take charge of their lives, despite a raft of significant challenges. What makes the film distinctively feminist is their non-reliance upon male crutches (whether real or hoped-for) as they struggle to exercise a measure of control over their lives. The aspect of struggle runs through the film, not only in terms of the struggle for survival in a harsh, even merciless (outside of friendships) environment, but also with each character's individual struggle in claiming their own agency. One of the most evocative scenes in the film has the lead character, Prabha, clutching a rice cooker (ostensibly a gift from her estranged



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husband) as if it is a newly-delivered baby. This comes soon after a graphic scene depicting the placenta new mothers have delivered. Prabha's actions highlight her plight in a pointless marriage: she is suffering, and her desires are thwarted by an absent husband – yet the struggle goes on.

The film is existentialist in eschewing an ending or a solution, choosing only a temporary resolution in an ongoing struggle. Sisyphus struggles against the given order of things, by rolling his boulder up the hill, even though he knows it will inevitably come down. His freedom, as Camus noted,<sup>5</sup> lies precisely in this struggle, despite knowing that he is ultimately powerless by himself to change the order of things. The film's Felliniesque ending is very much in the tradition of this optimistic strand of existentialism.

## An Indian Film

Amusingly, a bureaucratic jury in India, while deciding not to nominate *All We Imagine As Light* as an 'official entry' (why should such a category even exist?) to the Academy Awards, said that they felt that they were 'watching a European film set in India'.<sup>6</sup> Given the sheer excellence of European arthouse filmmaking, it would be excusable to think that this was meant as high praise, but alas, in Narendra Modi's 'New India', this was meant to dismiss the film as inauthentic. There was a suggestion that the film had been made to cater to 'foreign audiences', and worse, to please the foreign juries at all those fancy film festivals.

To the contrary, *All We Imagine As Light* is, in many ways, as Indian as it gets. It is very Indian for a Bombay-based and raised filmmaker, who is not Malayali or Malayali-speaking, to make a film about Malayali nurses, which is mostly in the Malayali language. Kapadia had native speakers helping her with the language at various stages of the process, as she has said in interviews.<sup>7</sup> It is very Indian to draw heavily and freely upon a host of references, cinematic and otherwise, from South Asian sources as well as sources from all over the world. Being informed by an eclectic array of sources is, it seems to me, at the core of whatever definition you want to apply to being Indian. *All We Imagine As Light* is highly pluralistic, and just like its women-centredness, this pluralism runs all the way through, from the diversity of its characters' choices to the art and literature that have knowingly and unknowingly informed the artistic vision of its creators. So much so that the feminism at the heart of *All We Imagine As Light* bears close

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<sup>5</sup> See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Justin O'Brien, trans, Vintage Books, New York, 1991 [1955], p 121

<sup>6</sup> See 'Film Federation of India calls All We Imagine As Light "a European film", reveals why it wasn't India's entry to Oscars', *Hindustan Times*, 1 October 2024: [www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/film-federation-of-india-calls-all-we-imagine-as-light-a-european-film-reveals-why-it-wasnt-indias-entry-to-oscars-101727753200635.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/film-federation-of-india-calls-all-we-imagine-as-light-a-european-film-reveals-why-it-wasnt-indias-entry-to-oscars-101727753200635.html)

<sup>7</sup> See Shahamit Uddin, "'I Like to Be Ill-defined": Director Payal Kapadia on *All We Imagine as Light*', op cit

connections to a powerful and praxis-oriented strain of Indian feminism, which Nussbaum helped bring to global attention but which has existed in the work of Indian feminist writers and activists such as Devaki Jain and Ela Bhatt (among others), for several decades.



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## Philosophical Soundness and Success at International Fora

Some may wonder about the film's success at prestigious international festivals and awards, such as Cannes, or the Golden Globes, or the BFI's Sight and Sound.<sup>8</sup> After all, many other Indian films, recent and not so recent, have focused on class issues and life at the margins, as *All We Imagine As Light* does, without receiving anything close to the success that the film has managed.

This line of thinking misses the point that *All We Imagine As Light*, apart from its many technical qualities and its relevant theme, is at its core *philosophically compelling*. While the film is influenced by many sources, the vision it offers is pluralistic, empowering and ultimately coherent. The makers are sure of what they want to say, and they have taken care to assemble it in a way that can be rendered into a theoretical picture. This is a very impressive achievement, which, sadly, has not been a particular strength of much Indian cinema, even arthouse cinema, albeit with some notable exceptions. I am reminded of the great filmmaker Satyajit Ray who, in an otherwise laudatory review of Shyam Benegal's first feature *Ankur* (1974) had advised

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Payal Kapadia on winning Sight and Sound's best film of 2024 poll with *All We Imagine is Light*', *BFI Sight and Sound*, [www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/news/payal-kapadia-all-we-imagine-light-poll-winner](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/news/payal-kapadia-all-we-imagine-light-poll-winner), 6 December 2024

the then young Benegal to avoid quadrangles in the future, due to the inability of the film to satisfactorily resolve its central dilemma.<sup>9</sup> Ray, I suspect, would have said that Payal Kapadia and her co-creators get the *geometry* of their film right: *All We Imagine As Light* succeeds not only on the surface but is also successful *structurally* in advancing a coherent and radical social vision. This makes the film a rewarding and thought-provoking experience fit for multiple viewings and dissection. In other words, it is a genuinely good film. The mixture of technical sophistication, radical social vision and an understated mastery of the grammar of storytelling herald Kapadia as a major new voice in Indian cinema, and there will be much anticipation regarding her artistic direction from here on.

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<sup>9</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Our Films Their Films*, Hyperion, New York, 1994 [1976], p 103