

Erasure of the Intellectual Feminine in Biopics: The Politics of Representation in *Iris* and *The Iron Lady*

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Abstract

*Memory is central to our sense of self, it serves as an anchor, and when it begins to fade, identity disintegrates. When memory slips away, identity becomes vulnerable and maybe increasingly controlled, remembered, reinterpreted or reconstructed by others. In the absence of memory, identity becomes a contested space. This paper will focus on the cinematic representation of the cognitive decline of two iconic British women—the author Iris Murdoch and the politician Margaret Thatcher in the films *Iris* (2001) and *The Iron Lady* (2011) respectively. The study will explore how gender, power/authority and memory intersect in these biopics. It will trace how these women who once held positions of power are subtly recast into vulnerable, passive and fragile roles in cinematic depictions of their lives. Throughout history we have witnessed the cultural discomfort around the visibility and voice of formidable women in positions of power. The paper explores how it is not just dementia that marks a collapse of their identity, rather their dementia becomes a subtle tool that media uses to silence and even erase their intellectual and political contributions, thus regulating cultural memory. Their decline becomes a gendered erasure and symbolic undoing of their authority. The methodology adopted will be a close textual analysis through the lens of feminist literary criticism and memory studies.*

Keywords: Gender, Power, Identity, Memory, Dementia

Memory is a multifaceted phenomenon, it is not merely a passive retrieval of facts but a complex narrative reconstruction that is socially and culturally framed by family, nation, gender, and class, ultimately contributing to the construction of selfhood. We build a sense of self by telling stories about our experiences and when the thread of memory is disrupted, the sense of self is destabilized, fragmented and disempowered. Absence of memory creates a void and silence leading to a lack of coherent self-narrative and gradual degeneration of the self. It also exposes the fragile and precarious nature of the self. When memory is lost, identity is post-remembered, curated, mediated and controlled by others, it becomes a field of competing narratives. This brings to the forefront the question of ethical responsibility and the possibility of misrepresentation.

In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), Judith Butler presents ‘framing’ as a political act that renders some lives and memories as more visible than others and something that controls and heightens affect, thus highlighting what gets distorted or erased in public memory: “The frame...seeks to contain, convey and determine what is seen...” (Butler 26) Cultural and

political narratives, and media ‘frame’ certain lives as worthy of recognition. But, the frame always keeps something out- what is remembered or erased in public memory is determined by the frame. The question is not whether to accept media representations as final or true but rather to consider what kind of reality they produce and how they control the frame. Biopics are gendered memory sites that contribute to cultural memory and historical recognition. When we consider the biopics of women achievers who have defied normative gender roles, many interesting aspects of representation come to light. While the storytelling in biopics celebrate iconic women, rendering them visibility and giving them an afterlife, they are often embedded in the politics of gendered representation—thus shaping how the achievements, intellect, identities and bodies of the subjects are narrated and remembered. Biopics are thus responsible in curating cultural memory. When the dementia of a female subject, once strong, intellectual, and authoritative, is portrayed in cinema, it becomes a metaphor--a stark representation of erasure. The ‘reconstruction’ of her story is rarely neutral, depending on who controls it. In this context, Judith Butler’s concept of ‘framing’ as an analytical tool becomes increasingly relevant. It provokes us to investigate ‘how’ and ‘why’ certain aspects of the subject’s life are chosen for representation and others left out. In attempting to answer these questions, one is easily led to uncover the underlying ideological impulses.

The biopics, *Iris* (2001) and *The Iron Lady* (2011) are cultural scripts of dementia and ageing that devalue formerly powerful women—the novelist Iris Murdoch and British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher respectively. While *Iris* is based on John Bayley’s memoir *Elegy for Iris* (1999), *The Iron Lady* is loosely based on John Campbell’s biography *The Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, from Grocer’s Daughter to Prime Minister* (2009). In both the films the subject’s decline with age, loss of memory and cognitive impairment are dramatized to the effect of reducing their former intellectual prowess. The story of the cognitive deterioration in women is often told differently than the story of the cognitive deterioration in men. Women’s decline (Murdoch, Thatcher), is often portrayed as silencing, and symbolic of societal discomfort with powerful, intellectual women. Murdoch and Thatcher are culturally contained by their illness—reduced to helpless figures post-power. The larger implication being, when women fail to perform power owing to cognitive decline, they can be conveniently erased from cultural memory. By contrast, male decline is granted complexity, subjectivity, and even redemption. In *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) for example, memory and delusion are obstacles that are overcome and the protagonist, the mathematician Nash retains agency. Age researcher Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in her book, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), explores cultural myths around ageing and in Part II of the book focuses on women and ageing as represented particularly by media. She warns against falling for the ‘false decline narratives’ in the hands of media. In the very telling of the story, the self is produced, even though the story is about the final years of life when one confronts ageing, illness, loss and dependency. Hence, it is important to identify how the story is told/framed. Depending on how the story is told/framed the self stands either triumphant or defeated. As opposed to the decline narratives of Murdoch and Thatcher told by the films in question, we have the story of the last ten years of the life of Jean-Paul Sartre who battled with loss of vision, loss of memory, and waning mental faculties, as told by Simone de Beauvoir in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (1984). Though he is at the mercy of someone else’s narration, Sartre is not depicted as a person who sees himself in his final years as a type or a category. He recognizes the adversities confronting him, and he still feels that he is progressing, that he is himself. Gullette appreciates such a life narration as sustaining. Through the examples taken from memoirs and literature, Gullette draws attention to the fact that we live in a hyper-cognitive world where medical science has reduced the mind to only the brain—memory however, is only one aspect of the mind (Gullette 200).

Iris and *The Iron Lady* are biopics that centre around the cognitive decline of women who once held positions of power, in the field of literature and politics respectively. The literary canon as well as politics have been dominated by men and while biopics on women writers and politicians are reassuring, it is also important to delve deeper in order to examine if the films engage in the gendered politics of adaptation.

The film *The Iron Lady* focuses on the later years of the life of Britain's first female Prime Minister, the formidable Margaret Thatcher, as she battles dementia and memory loss. As a woman in the male dominated world of politics, Thatcher was a source of fascination, and controversy, she continues to exist in cultural memory as both a celebratory and derogatory figure. A biopic on such an icon can multiply the already complex responses around Thatcher because as a genre, the biopic is known to feed fantasies of national identity. Since the life of Thatcher is extremely well documented, we are left wondering how another biopic would throw new light on her life. Moreover, Thatcher's whole life revolved around the axis of her political career, as such, one is bound to ask, what is the purpose of making a film on her private life, so many years after she has stepped down from her power position as a political leader? Also it is pertinent ask what is at stake in using the dementia narrative framework in case of Thatcher, a very controversial political persona.

The films visuals focus on projecting the spectacle of bodily decline and vulnerability to re-frame the viewers' expectations—in place of the iron lady, a public figure of authority, we encounter a frail woman who seems to have lost her identity. It is therefore important to be critical of film's representational strategies that dangerously re-inscribe ageing as deterioration and reinforces the loss of agency. The opening scene features an elderly woman, confused and fumbling with coins, standing in a queue to buy milk. The public image is made to collapse right at the outset and in its place we encounter an elderly woman engaged in everyday domestic banality. As the camera focuses on her hands struggling to grasp the milk bottle, we confront her bodily vulnerability that strips her of her political identity. The audience is urged to sympathise with her as an ageing individual. The film's signature structural device is the use of mirrors and windows that literally splits Thatcher into two images divided by glass. This editing technique is not only employed to deliver the transition from youth to old age, but more importantly to communicate a fractured, double identity that freezes the visual experience in moments of deliberate tension. On the other hand, major policy episodes, strikes and riots is handled with rapid news-reel style montage cuts delivered at the faster pace than the personal scenes. By contrast the pace slows down in scenes of her present isolation that forces the viewers to linger more in her loneliness than in her political career.

Thatcher's conservative, right-wing ideological stance and key political decisions are largely left out. Her tenure (1979-1990) was marked by aggressive policy changes (Thatcherism—emphasis on privatization, curbing of trade unions, introduction of the 'poll tax') that heavily affected British society. Her political decisions made her a controversial figure—her supporters applauded her for reviving the economy and curbing inflation, whereas anti-Thatcherites condemned the sharp rise of economic disparity and unemployment. The miner's strike was another key moment in her political career that the film reduces to a few quick montages--street riots, angry protests, burning of cars, newspaper headlines. The mob protest fades into the background and the camera stays on Thatcher's expressionless face staring out of the car. Her response is a flat -"They just don't understand" that minimises the human suffering behind the unrest and projects her as a misunderstood, lonely visionary.

Again, in a flashback sequence, the Prime Minister is portrayed as confronting her male Cabinet ministers in a heated discussion as they question her economic decisions. In this scene it is important to note that though she replies in a commanding tone, her response is

merely rhetoric: "... the medicine is harsh, but the patient requires it." What is missing is her conviction and her defence of her political decisions, there is no debate on privatization or rising unemployment, only a strong-willed woman with a determination. By domesticating her political decisions as a personality trait--stubbornness and will-power, the film privatises her story. Thus, Phyllida Lloyd transforms the turbulent politics of Thatcherism into an affective story of personal resilience.

In several flashbacks the film juxtaposes her younger self struggling to balance ambition and motherhood. The scenes of maternal compromise frame Thatcher as a woman who failed as a mother as chose political power over family. Later when her daughter Carol visits her to check on her health and asks her to let go of her dead husband's belongings, Thatcher confuses past and present and insists that Denis is alive. She clings to her dead husband and fails to recognise her living daughter. Through dementia the film dramatizes her emotional neglect and maternal distance—the message conveyed is that she paid a heavy price for her success. When the Prime Minister learns that her child Mark has gone missing during the 1982 Paris-Dakar Rally, she is momentarily shaken but quickly resumes work. Her composure is represented as maternal coldness yet again and Denis mocks her 'iron' persona. Thus her repeated hallucinations of Denis throughout the film acts as a moral penance and representation of her dementia domesticates her political image into tragic tale of loneliness, guilt and suffering in old age.

The film stages Thatcher's 'Iron Lady Persona' carefully as a deliberate performance rather than an innate quality—the camera's accent falls on voice coaching, posture rehearsals before the mirror, costume and comportment built up step by step—blue suits, the pearls, the handbag, and the lowered voice register. The Cabinet room scenes strategically convey her isolation—dark wood panelling, rows of men in dark suits with Thatcher seated at the centre, visually enclosed by uniformly dressed male colleagues. The visuals are enough to make the point explicit without any supporting dialogue—the 'first woman in the room' isolation is loudly audible. Class hierarchy is also spatially conveyed by contrasting the high ceilings of Downing Street and Westminster with the cramped spaces of the 'grocer's shop' of her childhood. Negative space is used with great precision in several present-day interior shots where Thatcher visible occupies small space leaving large stretches of empty walls, floor and furniture around her single figure, serving to accentuate an emptied-out life that is hers.

The public realm collapses into the private realm time and again. In the marriage scenes and private moments with her husband Denis, her politics is framed as the outcome of domestic dynamics and given a gendered, moral dimension. Denis tells her "You can't be one of them, you have to be better." In the resignation scene, when her cabinet turns against her, she is visibly wounded and wonders "Where is loyalty?" Her downfall is portrayed melodramatically as a personal tragedy rather than the consequence of failed policies. Betrayed by men, she returns home with a feeling of victimhood--an aged woman wronged by patriarchy. As the ghost of her husband leaves, we see her performing the humble chore of washing a teacup and the nation's turbulent history fades like a distant memory. The purging of political memory is thus completed and the viewers are invited to empathise rather than critique the complex political career of Thatcher. In the closing moments, the scenes cross cut between her packing up to leave Downing Street and decades later when she is sorting through Denis's belongings to give way—this in a way marks the two separate loses into a single emotional experience thus treating them as similar kinds of departures/closures.

In *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*(1992), George Custen examined more than three hundred biopics to study their particular construction and world view that shaped the way history was viewed. He observed how Hollywood often constructed a code of history based on the producer's own ideology and vision of what constitutes greatness:"The Hollywood biopic

brand of history is constructed almost exclusively around a single concept: fame.” (*American Biopics* 137) Comparing the studio-era biopics with the post studio-era biopics he further points out that despite several changes, the one thing that remained constant was that it was still overwhelmingly ‘male’, ‘white’ and ‘American’: “61 percent of all biopics in this period were about individual male figures; in the studio era, this figure was 65 percent (*Bio/Pics*103). In the 1960s and 70s non-American subjects started occupying the stage owing to the rise in foreign markets and due to the popularity of the action heavy blockbusters with minimal dialogue well received in the non-English speaking world. Thus, it is indeed a sign of great change that in the contemporary times biopics on women have increased in number. The two biopics chosen for this study, *The Iron Lady* and *Iris* are therefore useful test cases that intensify Custen’s view of biopics as a genre that has historically been gendered in a specific way because the films frame their subjects as victims through the trope of dementia narratives.

Dennis Bingham in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010), examines the crucial gender divide in how biopics represent lives and thus shapes cultural memory: “The male biopic celebrates achievement; the female biopic dramatizes suffering.” (Bingham 2010, 10). While male biopics like—*A Beautiful Mind* (2001) or *The Theory of Everything* (2014) frame the heroes as agents of history, female biopics like *The Iron Lady*, *Iris*, *Frida* (2002), *Sylvia* (2003), and *The Hours* (2002) to name quite a few, portray their subjects on a downward trajectory. When media adapts real lives, it often erases complexity and encodes cultural ideologies around gender, illness, creativity, thus generating cultural myths which then influence collective memory. The portrayal in the film may be more real to viewers than the historical person—the author.

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) was a philosopher-novelist who taught philosophy in Oxford, University. She was a woman of extraordinary intellectual power, who received many honours and awards for her academic achievements. She was an accomplished philosopher, novelist, playwright, poet and literary critic. Despite being passionately devoted to metaphysical truths, she remained mostly invisible as a woman philosopher. In her article, “After Cursing the Library: Iris Murdoch and the (In)visibility of Women in Philosophy”, Marije Altorf rightly states that biographical portraits of Murdoch--- by John Bayley, Peter Conradi, and A.N. Wilson,--- have failed to explore her contribution as a philosopher (Altorf 384-402). Philosophy which is traditionally held to be anchored in rationality, we cannot forget, has been, a male domain from which women have been excluded from time immemorial. Murdoch’s invisibility as a philosopher mirrors the continuing exclusion of women from being recognised in the discipline of philosophy. Despite her access to Oxford, her legacy as a philosopher remains obscure. On the contrary, her public image has been largely shaped by her Alzheimer’s, her love life and her sexuality, thus, reinforcing stereotypes of women being defined by their bodies rather than intellect.

The brilliant career of Murdoch came to an abrupt end with the dying of the intellectual light that came with cognitive decline. The decline of her mental faculties is the theme of the 2001 biopic *Iris*, directed by Richard Eyre. The film is based on John Bayley’s *Elegy for Iris* (1999) and *Iris: A Memoir* (1998) and is narrated entirely from the perspective of her husband John Bayley. Thus, it is entirely filtered through a male consciousness and raises questions about authorship and gendered subjectivity. Since memory is never a passive retrieval but an active reconstruction, the male gaze here functions as a mode of narrative control—an epistemic, memorial gaze that involves active selection and interpretation according to the narrator’s cultural framework. The film’s back and forth movement—shuttling between the author’s youth (played by Kate Winslet) and old age (played by Judy Dench), parallels the non-linear, fragmented memory frame of Bayley’s memoir instead of playing out Murdoch’s own consciousness. This problematizes the biopic as a gendered representation and a portrait

of loss. As a person Murdoch resisted the notion of a biography throughout her life, she greatly treasured her privacy: "There are not many whom one wants to know one," she stated in her journal (quoted in Lewis). Moreover, Murdoch was still alive when her husband John came up with the first volume of remembrance which had undignified details of her illness. The narrative of a life of loss and care is certainly not one which she herself would have wished to be told to the world.

Bayley's memoirs of Iris Murdoch is ground-breaking work in many ways—it documents the very complexity of the experience of mourning which might begin even before the loss happens. Its value also lies in the way it shows the function of writing in the negotiation of grief. Bayley's work has also been greatly appreciated as a detailed and useful case study of Alzheimer's disease. The could be interpreted in both ways---as an attempt to de-stigmatize Alzheimer's disease as well as a distanceless biography and grief memoir that aims at self-aggrandizement as much as it mourns the loss of mental integrity and death of Murdoch. It is also in certain ways self-serving. In his memoir, there are many cultural aspects of the disease that Bayley narrates of which the most pertinent is the decline of language in his relationship with his wife. Though they exchange words the essence of communication is lost, what remains is merely a shadow and outer shell of the person that was once Iris Murdoch. He divides her life into the 'Then' and the 'Now' in which she is reduced to a person who spends her mornings watching children's programmes like *Teletubbies* and who fails to frame sentences that have meaning. As a primary care-giver, he dressed, bathed, fed and tidied her but at the same time he wrote an uncompromising narrative of her decline which many readers found offensive and painful as it is an image that powerfully lingers with readers ever-after.

Biopics are sites of performativity---every portrayal operates within what Judith Butler calls 'frames'---frames that determine whose lives are narratable. In *Iris* the narrative frame follows the trope of the 'suffering woman' foregrounding memory loss and decline, Murdoch is read through her illness rather than her vibrant intellectual achievements. The structure of the film, frames her later life in contrast to her youth--the achievement of her youth is thus backgrounded by her affliction. In *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life*, Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe observe how two posthumous portraits dominate the afterlife of Murdoch—the one associated with her old age is that of the 'Alzheimer's Poster Girl' and the other that reconfigures her youth is that of the '*Femme Fatal*', a sexual predator who led a promiscuous life in her youth even while she was married to Bayley (Martin and Rowe, 164).

As the film swings between 1950s and 1990s, the young Iris enacted by Kate Winslet is primarily represented as an object of desire, the emphasis is more on her attraction and sexuality than her intellectual engagements with philosophy and literature. The courtship scenes portray her as sexually assertive, what attracts John to Iris is her magnetic physical charm. He is in awe of her, she is a muse and an enigma to him. The later scenes in contrast reduce Iris to a decrepit, abject female body, she has lost her cognitive powers and lives in a muddled state of confusion, utterly dependent on her husband's caregiving. The reversal in the balance of power in the Murdoch-Bayley relationship is something that Richard Eyre crucially focuses on. The film systematically wipes out her public image as an author and at the same time establishes a stark contrast to her charming and desirable younger self. Instead of Murdoch the writer we see more of Iris the woman. The elegiac narrative of dementia and loss, the gradual fading away of memory and cognitive powers, threatens to transform Murdoch into a kind of dementia-symbol.

Each key moment in the film can be read as a cinematic frame starting with the opening scene. The film opens with a young Iris swimming naked in the river, the camera lingers on her body in motion, the sunlight and the rippling water---she is portrayed as carefree, sensual,

young, intelligent and vibrant. This is followed by a cut to the older Iris—frail, vulnerable, decayed in body and mind—a spectacle of loss and pathos. The film returns time and again to the river imagery—contrasting the older Iris—confused, hesitant, trembling, as she steps into the water; with the youthful vitality and sensuality of the past. The editing jumps and parallel frames bring temporal spaces together and uses memory as a structuring device—the past and present, youth and old age, Winslet and Dench, Bonneville and Broadbent—are brought together in one frame. Such a cinematographic strategy is designed to create a sense of fluidity in which Winslet is not entirely estranged from Dench and similarly Broadbent is an extension of Bonneville. While human life is categorized into the binary of youth and old age, the sense of continuity is conveyed through a paradoxical blurring of boundaries so that the audience accepts these characters as same, but persons changed by the passage of time. One of the film's best parallel editing strategies, places the young author's swift, fluent handwriting against the older woman's halting hand that fails to produce a single word. Editing is also calibrated according to the phases of her life—scenes focussing on her youth jump quickly between conversations, swimming, multiple suitors, intellectual restlessness conveyed through rapid succession of ideas. In contrast the older timeline is all about longer takes particularly in scenes where she can no longer track a conversation or comprehend the speech of others around her, thus drawing us into her loneliness and isolation. Costumes also carry the film's argument forward—while the young Iris is often unconventionally dressed and often barefoot, a marker of her unconventional intellectual and sexual life, the older Iris can no longer choose what to wear, she is helped by John who dresses her in practical cardigans and dull colours showcasing her dependency. The camera intrusively frames the spectacle of the female body as seen through Bayley's eyes—alternatively fixing the gaze on the sensuality and passion of youth followed by the decay of old age. There are close shots of Judy Dench's wrinkled hands in the act of writing in one particular scene. The camera moves upward to focus of her sad and puzzled face and the hand pauses in mid-sentence—the scene is a clear foreshadowing of the Alzheimer's attack. The woman's body thus turns into the text of memory and man's gaze becomes the archive.

Bayley himself felt that if he wrote "something about her that was interesting, more people would want to read her books, which are so good" he stated to *Telegraph* magazine in 2001 (later quoted by Elaine Woo in *The Sunday Morning Herald*, 26 Jan 2015). In reality though Murdoch's fame as a writer was established much before the onset of Alzheimer's or the publication of the memoir. The memoir on the contrary served only to divert attention from her fame as a pre-eminent writer and philosopher to a miserable and helpless victim of dementia. Murdoch's voice often dwindles and almost disappears at times—she is depicted as a silent sufferer. Unlike Bayley, Murdoch's biographer and friend Conradi states that his objective was to place the author's work 'in the context of the cultural/intellectual life of the mid-twentieth century' (Conradi xxv). As such he focuses a great deal on the most fertile years of the writer's life. The period 1919-1956 which Conradi stresses upon is 'least discussed in John Bayley's memoirs' (Conrad ixiii) and could run risk of soon disappearing from public attention. The problem that started with Bayley's memoir is only intensified further in Richard Eyre's cinematic dramatization of the same—it shrinks a brilliant writer and thinker into an Alzheimer's victim. About Murdoch, Kate Winslet said that she was a great fan of her's but hadn't read any of her books. This statement redirects attention to how biopics allow us to 'know/consume' someone as a 'cultural image' without knowing the subject in the true sense—in this case through her ideas/philosophy/works. Murdoch's youth is a repetition of the trope of a free-spirited, young woman defined by her sexuality, unpredictability and unconventionality, and her old age is a repetition of the trope of the suffering woman. In other words, this is the politics

of commodification. Kate Winslet is thus a fan of the idea of Murdoch—the myth and not the author. Murdoch's voice is not just mediated through a male perspective, she is also made to fit into consumable gendered archetypes—her intellectual life is quietly erased and replaced by stardom culture, charisma and spectacle.

Looking at the biopics of artists a trend that is observed is that many of the subjects are disabled, afflicted by psychological conditions or mentally impaired. Among these are *Frida* and *An Angle At My Table* (1990) based on the lives of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, author Janet Frame. These films have in some way or the other render disability in the context of artistic creativity as they draw the inner lives of their subjects. The subjects are not helpless in the conventional way that the disabled are often depicted, they are shown as both accepting and resisting their impairment simultaneously. In *Iris* Judi Dench as the older, mentally disabled Murdoch renders both the elegiac mood and the passionate defiance exceptionally well. In one later scene she runs with a notebook in her hands towards the sea in a childlike manner. We see her sitting on the beach and tearing out pages from the notebook which she carefully arranges in rows and places large pebbles on them. This scene clearly suggests that she has started existing in a different reality, a different world of her own. Her act of creating her new reality is suddenly interrupted when Bayley and Janet intervene in an attempt to take her back to their own familiar world. They extend her a pen and request her to sign her last work by holding out the page of the book she has authored. But Iris refuses or is perhaps no longer in a position to make any sense of the book or the significance of signing the book or perhaps she has now forgotten how to sign. She ends up releasing the blank pages she had arranged with a stone on each as a paper weight so that they are blown seaward by the wind. We never see her trying to write again in the film. This is a rather symbolic scene which tragically shows her complete loss of identity as a writer. The colours used in this scene are dull and gloomy, grey and dull blue predominate and isolated and distanced, her back towards Bayley and Janet. The only way to relate to her for anyone is by living in the moment. When Bayley nostalgically states 'Such things you wrote' it only increases the pathos of her intellectual decline in a film that ultimately shows her systematically reducing to mere body. The vibrant yet soft sunshine and bright hues of Winslet's world visually contrasts with the increasingly dim light, cluttered, circumscribed, dusty and shadowy spaces of Dench's world which is totally disordered. Silence, solitude, estrangement, disability, portrayal of darkness and dim spaces, wordless frames, constitute a part of the narrative of dementia, ageing and the dreaded decline. Old age, senility and mental decline are seen as literal darkening portrayed by the dimly lights and dull shades.

Referring to the portrayal of women in media, Guye Tuchman calls this underrepresentation/misrepresentation a 'symbolic annihilation'. Symbolic annihilation may happen in three ways—'omission' wherein women are historically most often absent in areas of public life; 'trivialisation' wherein their roles portrayed as insignificant and finally 'condemnation' wherein women who do not conform to traditional roles are portrayed negatively. Tuchman also examines how media perpetuates gender stereotypes. Women in media are usually reduced to domestic roles, dependent figures, or sexual objects of desire. We can look at several biopics that repeat the pattern-- Monroe in *Blonde* (2022) is framed within the victimhood narrative and the suffering women trope, Thatcher is depoliticized in *The Iron Lady* and Murdoch is domesticated in *Iris*—both of them (Thatcher and Iris) subjected to frames that portray their vulnerability through illness, memory loss and dependency. In *Frida* the biopic of Kahlo, the Mexican painter, the 'suffering body' is the primary frame and like *Iris*, it is mediated through her positioning in a male script-- Diego Rivera's. Similarly, the Virginia Woolf biopic, *The Hours* frames her within the narrative of mental illness and suicide.

Such a pattern as identified is clearly also evident in biopics of women—the analysis of the

films *The Iron Lady* and *Iris*, demonstrates a clear pattern of symbolic annihilation. One of the ways then that mass media misrepresents women who are successful and famous is by underrepresenting them in their public roles. The tagline for the film *Iris* states---‘Her greatest talent was for life’. Thus, what is taken away is their agency-- not only are successful women less visible, they are often subjected to stereotyping when they are visible, which limits our perception of their capacity to succeed against all odds. Biopics thus recycle clichés like the trope of the madwoman (the mad genius); the angel in the house (domesticated)/femme fatale (promiscuous); the muse/victim (her creativity linked to suffering). The complex historical figure is not only flattened by such tropes and stereotypes, but also transformed by the celebrity text which shapes the author’s cultural afterlife. Thus, biopics speak through ideological filters of the culture that produces them. The cinematic apparatus frames Thatcher and Murdoch within the narrative of illness, suffering and decline. Their voices are subtly erased in the Spivakian sense where representation is a type of ‘speaking for’ and ‘violent reversal’. In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), Spivak introduces the concept of ‘epistemic violence’ wherein certain groups/individuals are systematically denied the right to formulate their own epistemologies by dominant discursive structures. Although *Iris* and *Thatcher* do not occupy the position of the ‘subaltern’, the films produce a similar paradigm where their intellectual authority is displaced by narratives of others. Rather than allowing the Murdoch’s philosophical writings and Thatcher’s political discourse to function as primary sites of meaning, the films mediate their legacies through the perspective of others. Moreover, through strategic cinematography, mise-en-scene and story-telling, ‘frame’ the viewer’s perception of female intellectuality in a certain way. While not wholly excluded, the intellectual feminine is made peripheral by a frame that renders decline more visible than thought. Thatcher’s politics and Murdoch’s complex inner life of the mind are neatly kept out of the frame. Thus, biopics of women are sites of symbolic annihilation where erasure is often disguised as homage. Narrative framing becomes the primary tool in erasing the power of these women-- frames not only produce cultural myths, they determine what we perceive as reality. Through symbolic annihilation, patriarchal framing and the politics of representation, women author biopics expose the cultural anxiety around powerful/intellectual women because such women continue to challenge patriarchal hierarchy, are not contained within their domestic identity and assert their intellectual power—their presence is thus a threat. Finally, these biopics heavily rely on the star image to feminize their subject. The star becomes a cultural filter that mediates the historical subject and reshapes how she is represented, received and understood.

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