

The Image of the Female Body in Commercial Indian Films

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Introduction

In *Movie*, one of India's many "film" magazines, the aspiring actress Pooja Bedi conducts a - for western eyes - mild form of strip-tease. Under the title *From Odhni to Bikini* we see the young woman alone on a deserted beach, shedding her clothes until she finally stands in front of the camera wearing a one-piece swim-suit (*Movie*, January 1991: 32-33). In another magazine, *Star & Style*, the same actress displays her body in much the fashion of a 1950's American pin-up model: sitting in a puddle of brown water and wearing a sort of *bandanna* around her hips and a yellow shirt, thus displaying her long legs (*Star & Style*, August 1989: 80-81). These are two examples of how Indian actresses, especially young ones, are portrayed and sexually exploited in magazines and newspapers.

In most Indian movies of the 1980s the leading actress, or at least the leading minor actress, has to face a scene in which she is humiliated - usually through rape - in order to give the leading actor a reason to take revenge on the criminals. In some movies, however, the actress has to face a rape scene which has no connection to the story of the particular film.¹ The scene is incorporated into the movie because Indian directors feel that they can not do without. A rape scene is the epitome of the construction of female characters in present-day Indian cinema. Other favorite constructions are scenes with the actress taking a shower under a waterfall, or dancing while the camera moves just short of under her

1 One example is a movie I once saw in India. The movie starts with a scene in which a young girl is threatened to be gang-raped. Suddenly a motorbike-rider appears. He/She chases the gang away. Suddenly the action stops, and it is revealed that this was just film in film, meaning that a crew was shooting another movie with a rape scene. The rest of the film is a rather boring comedy (!).

skirt,² or taking part in a fashion show of short skirts or bikinis. These are examples how actresses (female bodies) are sexually exploited in movies .

In a country like India, where each film is censored by government-appointed committees according to fixed guidelines, showing nude female bodies seems strange. The more so, as those guide-lines specify, that:

visuals or words depicting women in ignoble servility to man or glorifying such servility as a praiseworthy quality in women are not presented.

Scenes involving sexual violence against women, like attempt to rape, rape, gang rape, murder or any form of molestation, or scenes of similar nature shall be avoided ... (Patil, 1990: 22).

As countless Indian movies of the last years show, the censorship guidelines are, to say the least, not very effective. The issues I want to address are: (1) How women are generally portrayed in Indian cinema; and (2) Why violence against women on the screen is acceptable for the cinema audience. I see the portrayal of women and men in films as a cultural construct. In Indian cinema the construct of women on and off screen is part of a larger discourse in Indian society. I will show that Indian films reflect to a certain degree the ambiguities and frictions of Indian society in general. Women in Indian cinema are part of two phenomena: (1) the construct of a female character in a film, and (2) the construct of actresses as role models in modern Indian culture. My aim is to show that the question of which roles women play on and off screen is influenced by the traditions of Indian culture, by economic pressures on the film industry, by a gradual change in the relationship between male and female in Indian society, and, finally, by psychological processes in the mind of the film makers and of the audience.

2 Jain (1991) maintains that: "A great deal of the new sexuality is being expressed through lewdly choreographed dance numbers. Indian dance directors are matching suggestive lyrics with simulated sexual movements" (Jain: 33). The camera has become a voyeur, argues director Arun Raj, who goes on: "It charges towards the heroine, sticks to the swaying hips and bouncing bosoms in slow motion. The woman's bosom heave and heave until she comes to the camera" (Quoted in Jain, 1991: 33).

The Name of the Game ...

In the year 1912, the actor/magician/producer Neelakanth Phalke, produced, directed and acted in the first Indian movie. Phalke's movie was a huge success in a society which had seen Anglo-American films since 1896. These first Indian movies were based on the religious epics, and told the myths surrounding India's many gods.

Over the years India developed into the world's biggest film-producing country. While the exact number of films produced is not exactly known (systematic data on the feature film industry is not gathered), estimates place the yearly production at approximately 900 feature films, each ranging between 3 and 4 hours in length.³ The film industry is the ninth largest in India, employing some 2,25 million people in production, distribution and exhibition (Pendakur, 1990: 229). In 1981, the total estimated investment was 8,000 million rupees. In the same year some 13 million tickets were sold each day (!) in the 13,000 theaters nation-wide. To connect the huge rural population with the commercial cinema produced in the big cities, touring cinemas - which are temporary structures built for one or two showings - tour the rural areas.

Unique to India is the fact that there are three major centers of production: Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. Bombay is the main center of production for the Hindi Film. Madras produces films in Telegu and Tamil, and in Calcutta films are produced in Bengali. Hindi films are the only ones which are shown nation-wide. They form the focus of this paper.

Besides the division of film production in linguistic categories, there is also a division between the commercial film and the art-film. The latter is often subsidized by the national and state governments, and is often more popular outside India than in the country.⁴ Films of the

3 900 according to the TAZ (TAZ, 1990), with reference to the year 1985. Pendakur (1990) puts the annual output of the Indian film industry at around 800 films per year. Rahman (1988) counts some 150 Hindi films in the year 1987. As can be seen, the exact number of films is not known. I maintain that there are approximately 900 Indian films produced each year, the number which reaches the audience is much smaller however. Censorship, economic reasons, the wald-out of stars etc, constantly lead to the abortion of productions. The estimation of 900 films per year should be understood as the number of film productions started during a particular year.

4 The fact that art films hardly find a distributor in India should prove the point. Directors like the late Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, or Mrinal Sen and their movies are not well known outside of certain intellectual circles. Mrinal Sen's movie *Mirch Masala*, for example, won the prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1985, but was

commercial kind are popular in other South Asian countries and the Middle East.

Production costs have escalated considerably since the 1980s. While in the 1970s the average Hindi film was produced for approximately 1 million rupees, the cost today is some 7.5 million (Pendakur, 1990: 231). A star-studded film may cost anything between 20 and 30 million rupees, a low budget film may still cost some 2.5 million rupees (*ibid.*).

The reasons for this extravagant rise in production costs are manifold. The industry has to import all of the raw film material, making the producers dependent on market forces over which they have no control. Video and television have penetrated deep into the film market: some 2 to 3 million video libraries and parlors, plus the million privately owned VCRs and TV sets today compete with the cinema halls (Rahman, 1988: 42). The annual turnover of the video market is estimated at around 1,000 million rupees, as much as the gross collection of the nation's cinema theaters. This competition has diminished the chances of films reaching their break-even point through showings in the cinemas. Moreover, the video-market is flooded with illegal reprints of the few hits. High taxes (state governments take 50 percent of the net return from ticket sales) cause producers additional anxiety about their returns, and thus an additional effort to bring the audience back into the cinema. This usually means more shooting on location, and more special effects, which increases the cost. Finally, the wages of the leading actors have risen to a spectacular level: leading male stars today take approximately 4 million rupees per film, leading female stars about half that amount (Rahman, 1988: 41).⁵ The combination of these factors contributed to the emergence of a unique formula.

The average Hindi film works with a basic set of ingredients. The plot is usually of the "poor boy meets rich girl" variety, and is surrounded with a wide range of subplots, which deal with everything from a "criminal" to a "comical" text. The plot does not usually progress linearly, but is interrupted with dance-sequences.

In the early 1970s additional *masala* was provided by the "angry young man"-character and the theme of revenge. (Amitabh Bachan, the

shown in Bombay only after it had won in Cannes, and then not at one of the commercial cinemas, but at the Indian Film Director's club.

5 Besides the influence of the star-system on the production costs, there are other measurable influences of stars on a film. Sarkar (1975) argues that: "the mere egotistical ones [stars], who insist on being permanently in focus, cause stories to be twisted. The tantrums of established stars are common knowledge" (Sarkar: 35).

first to play such a character, evolved into an integral part of film-making and was for a long time the one star who guaranteed profit in any movie he played in.)

In the 1980s this formula was extended. Instead of one male and one female star, the movies began to feature several stars (for example *Khuda Gawah* (Mukul Anand, 1989, starring Amitabh Bachan, Dimple, Sridevi, Farha, Sanju, and Shaheen). The "multi-starrer" led, as one of its many effects, to an increase in violence on screen, as the leading heroes needed more enemies to deal with. Part of this violence is directed against the female, mostly in the form of rape and torture. Before this form of violence is discussed in detail the other roles women play in these movies must be described.

The dominant female character in Indian society and in Indian movies is that of the mother. In the realm of politics, Indira Gandhi was praised by her followers, and by herself, as the "mother of India". Women have a high position inside the family as married wife and mother. This existing structure is reflected in Indian movies, and the mother-figure is one of the basic ingredients of the formula mentioned above. It also ensures the employment of older actresses. As the plots in Indian movies often take place within a family, other basic female characters include wives, sisters, female servants etc. It should be made clear that none of these characters are the agents in the plot; this role is usually reserved for the male actors.

Not all female characters in Indian movies are as unimportant as the "sister/wife/servant" role. An important female character is that of the village belle. The importance of this character can be seen in its function within the plot, where this woman is the direct antagonist of the heroine. The village belle is everything the heroine is not. She is sure of her sexual identity, she is usually out to lure the hero into her fangs, she symbolizes uncontrolled sexual desires and thus places the hero in a dilemma: he must choose between the sexuality of the village belle and the controlled "love" of the heroine, a decision which carries strong moral undertones. The hero, although attracted to the open sexuality, usually opts for the "hidden qualities" of the heroine. Female sexuality, especially in this context, is to be feared and not to be condoned. If the hero chooses the village belle, it is after she has been subdued by the hero who has shown her the virtue of true love. An additional twist in the average plot usually punishes the open sexuality of this character: either she falls in love with the "evil" character, or she is punished through rape or torture.

A second important female figure is the character of the dutiful wife for which I chose the term *Sita character*.⁶ In the film *Pati Parmeshwar* (R.K. Nayar, 1988), the actress Sudha Chandran plays what I consider the archetype of this character: the devoted Hindu wife. Her husband spends most of his time with his mistress. Instead of leaving him, the wife tries to make the marriage work, to the point of self-sacrifice: when her husband is paralysed after an accident she takes him to the mistress and serves them. In the end the husband returns and she accepts him. Consider now the following plot:

... Anasuya was a very obedient wife and an ideal *pativrata* At her husband's bidding she once proceeded to carry him on her shoulders to the house of a dancing girl. On the way the love-torn husband kicked an angry sage, who was passing near him, and the latter forthwith cursed him to die before (the) sunrise. Anasuya proceeds to render the curse inoperative by prohibiting the sun from rising. (Altekar, 1987: 109)

This is not a remake of *Pati Parmeshwar* in a "fantasy" environment, but part of a tale by the Indian poet Kalidasa, who lived around 400 AD. This sermon argues for the wife to be obedient, selfless, and virtuous even when the husband is none of the above. Besides the obvious relationship between the two plots, this example also shows that the roles women play in movies have a rich literary and religious heritage. The Sita character might be the most conservative one, but it is not an exception.

The influence of present-day Indian culture on female characters can best be seen in the recent evolution of the female dacoit (female outlaw). Since the northern Indian female outlaw Phoolan Devi made the headlines by her defiance of a male-dominated rural community, this character has risen to a very popular level. The mythologization of Phoolan Devi as a sort of female Robin Hood provided the material for a number of movies in which the main character/heroine is the leader of a band of outlaws.⁷ This character, however, is not the perfect role-model for the Indian woman. The character is an outlaw, standing outside of society. Usually the character stepped outside society to get revenge for past

6 For descriptions of Sita see Meyer (1989) who discusses Sita as the perfect ideal for Indian women in a cultural context.

7 One example is *Sherni* (Bombay, 1988), starring Sridevi, who plays the daughter of a small farmer. Her parents are killed by a gang under the command of a land speculator. Sridevi survives, and takes revenge. Another example is *Makhali* (Bombay, 1989), starring Farha.

humiliations (as was the case with the real Phoolan Devi⁸). In order to make the outlaw sympathetic, the woman has to return into society by the end of the film. This solution is reached either through repentance via imprisonment, in the case of an additional love-interest via marriage, or through the death of the female heroine who repents her criminal activities with her last breath. The female dacoit is thus one of the strong female characters, but this strength is deconstructed by the outcome of the plot.

Modern urban culture has led to a variety of other female characters. It is, for example, now possible to see a female character with a job. The woman can be a teacher, or she can work as an assistant manager in a service industry.⁹ But her qualifications in the public sphere are never the most important ones. The plot usually emphasizes the real duties of the woman, which are child care and servility to her husband or partner.

The last female character is that of the heroine. While the heroine can play all the characters mentioned above, her character is still formed by its own guidelines. Sarkar (1975) starts her description of the heroine with the outward appearance:

All heroines of the Indian screen (even if they are married), must imperatively give the appearance of youthfulness. Youth, even if the image belies the fact, is an essential pre-requisite for the heroine. There is presumably no romance after the first bloom has worn off, and virginity is an end in itself. (Sarkar: 33-34)

On the level of the plot one can find a consensus among the film-makers: the more suffering, the more injustice heaped on the heroine's shoulders

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- 8 Phoolan Devi was repeatedly raped by the sons of a Takhur family in her home-area. Being partly expelled by society, and partly unable to cope with her suffering, she dropped out of society, became the member of a local gang of outlaws, and the lover of the gang leader. When he was killed, she took command and revenged herself on the Takhur family. For about a year she repeatedly managed to escape the police, until she finally gave herself up in a surrender ceremony. For many Indians she was a classic heroine, resisting and fighting against an unjust society and fooling the corrupt police force. However, her real personality has all but disappeared behind the image the media built of her.
 - 9 In several films of the 1980s the heroine, or the independent female character plays a professional. Das Gupta (1980) argues that this constitutes an acceptance of reality on the part of the filmmakers: "Inevitably there is a greater tolerance of realities. Divorce, the working woman, the unwed mother, even the "other woman" are not sneered at. City women and Westernized people are no longer absolute villains" (Das Gupta: 34)

the better. The Indian heroine thus suffers most of the time, she is a plaything of fate, but she accepts all her suffering with a stoical calm. A few lines of moralizing usually reflect this so-called inner strength.

The tenor of the game then is that a heroine must suffer in order to prove her virtue to the hero and the audience. The female co-characters usually suffer without this redeeming quality, solely for the purpose of moving the plot along and giving the male hero a reason to take revenge on all the "baddies" involved.

Sex or Adult Love

There is a breathless silence in the packed New Delhi movie hall that is showing the Hindi film *Hum Se Na Takrana* (Don't confront me). The audience, predominantly male, is transfixed by a scene in which two sons of a rich landlord have cornered a pretty, well-endowed maid in their bedroom. "Let me go," she implores, but the men move towards her. The camera magnifies the suggestion of what is to come but never allows the scene to turn graphic; there is no nudity, but there is much screaming and leering. When the deed is done, the audience lets out an almost audible sigh of relief. or is it pleasure? (Pratap, 1990: 43)

As previously stated, a rape scene is today regarded as a basic ingredient for the commercial Hindi film. The passage quoted above shows how such a scene is received by the audience. Is the audience shocked by such a scene, or is it enchanted?

Feminist film criticism speaks of the iconography of women in cinema as akin to the "absence of man". The male protagonist in the text carries the action and is the object of identification for the audience. The female character in the text "is represented as what she represents for man" (Johnson, 1977: 410).

Mulvey (1977) considers the combination of the physical and psychological experiences of seeing a movie. on the physical level the darkness of the cinema-hall is juxtaposed with the brilliance of colors on screen. The separation of the spectators from each other, the conditions of screening and the narrative conventions in the film, create the illusion that the spectator is really looking in on a private world. on the psychological level, the spectator uses two strategies of seeing:

The first, scopophilic, arises from the pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. (Mulvey, 1977: 417)

In Indian society which is, as Mulvey would argue, ordered by sexual imbalance, both strategies are split between the active/male and the passive/female. The male gaze projects male fantasies onto the female figure. Again the male gaze is split into the gaze of the male actor on screen, and into the gaze of the male spectator in the cinema hall. The spectator, who identifies with the male hero, takes part in the erotic fantasies inside the narrative through identification with the male protagonist, and he projects his own erotic fantasies on the women on screen. Mulvey argues that:

Each mode of representation of women in film is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis. (Mulvey, 1977: 421)

The average Indian movie begins with the heroine as the object of the combined gaze of the male actors and of the spectator. She is glamorous, and sexualized. During the course of the plot she loses this sexual independence as she falls in love with the male hero. In the end she literally becomes his property. Her eroticism is subjected to the male star. The spectator, identifying with the star, can thus possess her. The independent female character, for whom the script does not provide a happy end in the arms of a male partner, finds her open sexuality punished in the course of the plot.

In the case of a rape sequence these processes become even clearer. Consider the following plot of the movie *Insaaf Ka Taraazu* (Scales of Justice, Bombay, 1990).

In this film, the woman starts out as a part-time fashion model. At one fashion show, a man makes sexual advances towards her which she rejects. He starts following her around, proposing to her. When he finds out that she already has a steady lover, he rapes her. In the ensuing courtroom drama, the woman is victimized once more, as the courtroom audience, the judges and the lawyers destroy her credibility. In the end she resorts to killing her rapist. This is an interesting plot, offering cer-

tain chances. But in this movie, everything goes wrong from the beginning. The rapist is played by the actor Raj Babbar, who usually plays heroes. The rapist thus possesses the personality not of a sexually deranged man, but, thanks to the earlier roles of the actor, that of a hero. The relationship between the woman and her lover is portrayed as casual; all interaction between the lovers takes place on the telephone. When the rape takes place, the audience is thus inclined to side with the man. After all, no average Indian woman would work as a fashion model, would invite a strange man into her apartment, and would pursue a relationship with anybody else than an Indian movie hero. On the textual level the woman is portrayed as immoral and the rape appears justified.

On the film level, the gaze of Raj Babbar is always present. We constantly see Raj Babbar's eyes, followed by a cross-cut to the complete body of the woman. Nearing the rape, the cuts increase. When this climax is finally reached, the camera moves in and partly adopts the perspective of Raj Babbar. The dominant position of the camera during the scene is above the two actors, thus making the male gaze even more dominant. In two instances the camera moves away from the two bodies, only to reveal paintings on the wall which show naked women in chains, with dragons and knights in the background. Thus the character of the woman is complete: she secretly longs for male domination (she would like to impersonate one of the women in those pictures, to be chained and to wait for the hero - or the dragon).¹⁰ Raj Babbar is excused for his actions, as he only fulfills the woman's secret desires. The spectator will constantly think of these pictures throughout the court-room drama. Additional scenes with cutbacks to the rape scene ensure this connection.

In other movies similar strategies are used. The heroine, who usually can not lose her virtue through rape, is saved at the last minute. While it is the independent female character who usually has to undergo the humiliation. There are exceptions. In *Pradighaat* (Chandra, 198?) the heroine, a teacher in a small town, is humiliated by being forcefully undressed in the middle of the town. Here too the camera moves into a higher position, so as to make the submission of the woman complete. In two recent films *Phool Bane Angarey* and *Vishkanja*, the heroine is raped in the presence of her husband and daughter.¹¹

10 These paintings and their subject are of course part of a larger male fantasy of how women should be. In the film these levels of male fantasy merge in the rape sequence.

11 Cf. Jain (1991), page 28.

In all of these movies, the female body is displayed and sexualized in a degrading manner. The spectator is invited to join the scene through identifying with the male actors. How far this process goes is made clear in the statement of a New Delhi professional, interviewed by Anita Pratap:

Rape [in a film] is enjoyable because in men's fantasies force is the only way to get women who are otherwise out of reach. (Pratap, 1990: 43)

Are rape scenes in Indian movies then only a way of satisfying the sexual fantasies of the audience? And if so, where do these fantasies come from? In a culture in which rape as a fact in real life is not endorsed, why do films portray rapists in a favorable light?¹² The answer lies in part in the portrayal of sexuality and of sexual relationships in Indian movies.

The subject of the movie *Sach* (Vinod Pande, 1989) is the affair of a married man with a separated woman. In the words of Rao (Rao, 1989), the movie is ambitious because the director attempts to:

explore the nature of truth - the truth of conventional marriage, the truth of the perfect, rare marriage of true minds and the truth of moral fibre tested in the most trying circumstances. (Rao, 1989: 22)

The truth of conventional marriage consists, in this movie, in the relationship between a good-natured, sensitive editor and his bitchy wife. The marriage between the true minds occurs when the editor meets Hansa, who is separated from her husband. In flashbacks, the audience is introduced to Hansa's story: she is a successful businesswoman/ex-model; she defied her rich and authoritarian father to marry a tennis player, who betrayed her by making love to her sister next to her while she is pregnant; she decided to leave her husband with her daughter and moved away. Additional spice in this constellation is provided by a murder in the hotel where the editor and Hansa meet to share a few private minutes. They are witnesses, but are afraid to tell the police as this would lead to the discovery of their relationship. In the end, Hansa takes a stand, appears in court and confesses to their love affair.

12 This should not be mistaken with the sloppy and slow reaction of the law-enforcement agencies in cases of rape; often enough members of those agencies are accused of being rapists themselves.

Sach is an ambitious movie, because it tries to show that men and women have sexual feelings not necessarily restricted to their spouse. But the movie fails. Hansa is everything the editor's wife is not: she is young, beautiful, smart, loving, sensible, understanding, etc. The tennis player, in turn, is the exact opposite of the editor: a drunkard, insensitive, cruel, egoistic, etc. In this case, the audience is prepared to condone the extra-marital affair, because the marriage partners do not provide a credible alternative.

In the average Hindi film, however, even such attempts to portray reality are not to be found. While male infidelity has generally been taken for granted, women, once they are married, are not dealt with.¹³ As stated above, the heroine must look and behave like a virgin in order to be credible. This imbalance has contributed to the lack of maturity in Indian films when it comes to sexual relationships.

Contributing to this immaturity is the policy of the censorship boards. As quoted in the introduction, this should ensure that the female body is not seen nude on screen. For a long time (until the 1970s) Indian film-makers respected the censorship guide-lines and developed the most "erotic film language in the world" (Sarkar, 1975). But this long, successful censorship of scenes with open sexual connotations in fact hindered the evolution of a mature handling of sexual relationships by the film-makers.¹⁴ Even Raj Kapoor, the don of Indian cinema who made some of the classics of Indian films, resorted to the "girl taking a shower under the waterfall - theme" in the 1970s with the hope of luring his audience back. Sexuality is thus treated not as a basic human need but as a prolonged fantasy in a dream world. While the society at large

13 Jain (1990) argues that Indian directors have in fact taken a fresh look towards female sexuality. He says that: "Film-makers are examining a woman's sexuality, her physical and emotional needs" (Jain: 67). The examples he uses, however, fall into the same category as *Sach*, and are therefore hardly perfect examples of a new trend in Indian cinema. I argue that this shift to a more liberal stance towards "adult female sexuality", is influenced by the same hypocrisy as the other films. Ironically Jain himself inverts his argument in stating that: "Love and the married woman certainly seem to be seducing many a film maker" (ibid.).

14 Cf. Pendakur (1990), pp. 242-244. See also Sarkar (1975), who argues that the censorship policy forbidding physical intercourse between the sexes on screen led to a rise in sadism. Sarkar points out that the "no kissing policy" led to a change in narrative structure in the movies. Instead of kissing, which was not allowed, the hero slapped the heroine. In the movie *Dharam Veer* (Bombay, 1979), Dharmendra whips his female partner after having tied her to a tree. This Nietzschean philosophy proves successful in the further course of the movie, when she first forgives, and then finally marries her tormentor.

remains puritanical, while young couples seldom have the space, privacy or cultural tolerance for sex, the cinema creates images of sex which are highly exaggerated.

Not only has censorship hindered the film-makers from becoming more mature, it also affected the audiences response to sex, albeit in a way not necessarily intended. As contact with the Anglo-American cinema is still restricted to the owners of VCRs, the mass audience has only the ten international film festivals held in India each year to become acquainted with the international world of film.

But the mass audience has been interested in festival films only to the extent of paying a premium, any premium, for films with explicit sex scenes. To the vast mass of office clerks and shop keepers of New Delhi, a film festival, being free from censorship, is synonymous with pornography ... (Das Gupta, 1980: 34)

As the Indian audience was not considered mature enough to deal with scenes of sex on screen, and as the film-makers are not mature enough to produce intelligent scenes with sex, the Indian film on a whole has dealt with sex in a hypocritical, childish manner. Hence, to incorporate a rape scene into a story is often the only chance for a film-maker to show a nude female. If nudity was as common on the Indian screen as it is on the American, rape scenes would certainly be less often.

A third factor is a sociological shift in the structure of the audience. As the quote of Pratap's description of the New Delhi cinema hall shows, today's audience is predominantly male.¹⁵ This was not always the case. A few years ago, cinema was the one pastime for the whole family. With the advent of TV and video many people stay at home. They have good reasons for doing so: the cinema halls are run-down, their sanitation is questionable, the air-conditioning seldom works, etc. For many of India's

15 Cf. Pratap (1990), p. 43; compare also with Stein (1983) who describes the Indian audience and the role of the heroine as: "Male moviegoers predominate in Indian theaters. They spend an average of ten hours a week ogling Indian films. The heroines of 95 percent of these films spend 35 percent of their time on screen running around trees singing songs" (Stein: 28). Finally Jain (1991) argues that: "the biggest shift has been in the composition of the audience in cinema halls. The front benchers - those who go to whistle and leer at double entendres and bare skins - now extend to the dress gallery, while the more genteel folk stay home and watch video. ... The halls are overflowing with young men who want something new, exiting and fast-paced. The new generation wants *hangama* films (B-picture quality) they have to be sexy, they have to be full of life and energy, raw energy". (Jain: 28-29)

young men, however, the cinema hall is the only chance to participate in the cultural discourse of their community. The young men bring with them not only manners which are deemed intolerable by the older generation, but also sexual frustrations. As Indian society remains largely intolerant and puritanical, the permissive, yet hypocritical, Indian film serves as a safety valve. Here the young Indian male can finally possess a woman, through identification with the male actor.¹⁶ Once the young man has experienced this pleasure, he wants more, and Indian filmmakers are happy to oblige. Rape scenes are thus one way of satisfying the sexual needs of the audience.

This impact of rape scenes on Indian society is not glossed over in the discourse on violence on Indian screens, but it is usually hidden safely in a classist approach. Patil, for example, cites the new director of the Bombay censorship board, an ex-director general of the police, who laments:

Have we nothing good in our society? Have we no normal subjects which can create pure entertainment? Must we teach our goondas [outlaws] more and more imaginative ways to kill and torture their victims? Must we have bad language, arrogance and defiance from young people? Must such films corrode even what remains of our values and our devotion to excellence in all endeavors? Must films spew a message of blood and revenge? (Patil, 1990: 24)

According to this argument Indian cinema is guilty for teaching its audience the evil of the world. In contrast, the defenders of Indian cinema argue that they are influenced by reality:

Two hundred killed; three hundred butchered; an eight-year old raped; a family burned to death. This is what is happening all around us. That is why when a film is made on violence there is immediate identification. Social identification is very important, very necessary for a film to click with the masses. (Prem, 1987: 21)

Both sides cite examples to prove their point. Both sides are partly right and partly wrong. Cinema, as the most successful commercial medium in India, has a certain responsibility towards society when it comes to subjects such as race, religion, politics, etc. But cinema as an art committed

¹⁶ See Pendakur (1990), page 243; see also Jain (1991), pp. 28-29.

to realism (a camera after all makes realistic pictures of reality) is of course influenced by the values and ideologies of culture.¹⁷

On the film level, woman in India's movies is sexualized. She is a victim of a male-dominated society, of which the world of film is but a part. On the level of film as text, sexual relationships between man and woman (not to mention homosexual relationships¹⁸) are usually treated in a problematic way. The woman, if not married, has two parts to choose from: 1) as the heroine, her sexuality must be controlled so that there will be no threat for the hero; and 2) as the independent female character, her sexuality is the dominant feature, and is "justly" punished in the course of the film. If the woman is married, and her husband is beyond the pale as regards moral behavior, she may be allowed an extramarital affair with a happy ending; usually, however, the married woman has the function of reflecting the male protagonist's anxieties and is therefore seldom allowed her own sexual identity.

The problem of violence against women on the screen must be seen in the light of the various peculiarities of Indian film-making. The long and successful censorship has led to an immaturity of both the makers and the audience when it comes to the portrayal of sex. The parallel evolution of video as the chief competitor, and the introduction of uncensored American pictures on a large scale, has led to: 1) a shift in the sociological structure of the audience to young, frustrated males instead of families; and 2) a rise in the demand for nudity on the Indian screen up to the point of perversity (a poster for the English-language film *Crime Time* carried the promise: see first-time underwater rapes on

17 Patil sites one incident in her article (Patil, 1990), in which a female student in the town of Ulhasnagar was burnt alive in the examination hall by her alleged lover. "The crime was committed in broad daylight, with other students and the girl's sister, as well as guards and policemen standing outside" (Patil: 19). She argues that this crime was influenced by a similar scene in the movie *Awargi*, in which the hero douses the heroine with kerosine. Salim Khan, a screen writer argues however, that real incidents influence the narrative of a movie: "There was a time we knew nothing about smuggling, about the underworld crimes. Smuggling became known, we started making films about smuggling" (Prem, 1987: 21). A similar process can be seen in the figure of the female dacoit, or the wave of art films showing dowry death.

18 Homosexuality is still glossed over in Indian society, and if it is mentioned at all, than only in a derogatory way. In the film world, homosexuality between actors or actresses has recently become a "hot topic". As usual the magazines are the first to hop on the train, and "while one magazine even had the stars discuss the topic, *Cine Blitz* published an article on the homosexual relationship of two leading actors - no names [as usual] but people guessed" (Jain, 1991: 32)

Indian screen). The Indian society and its intolerance of open sexuality further endorses the hypocrisy and clumsiness of Indian films when it comes to sex. Finally, film-making as an economic enterprise depends on the salability of the product. Violence against women, as part of a general increase of violence in films, is used as a means to enhance the commercial value of a film.

Starlets, Stories, magazines

The question of where fantasies come from has partly been answered. One field, however, has not been discussed so far: the role of the actresses as role models of sexual liberation and their function as the bearers of male fantasy.

A look into any of the many so-called film magazines should suffice. The main purpose of these magazines is to relate gossip about the stars of Indian cinema to the nosy public. Consider the following example, quoted from the magazine *Star & Style* (July, 1991):

They are the gentlemen doyens of the industry, much admired and respected. One is a veteran villain, the other is a filmmaker with a cause. But both these men have a secret sexual hang-up. They lust for young virgin girls. While one spends his time ogling teenaged girls of a neighborhood school, the other has a producer friend (who makes heroine-oriented films mostly) to supply him sweet lil' things at a special hide-out. Here he is able to have the fun and games that is forbidden to him in the outside world because of his Mr. Clean reputation! (*Star & Style*, July 1991: 37)

The moral indignation of the journalist is just a mask. The real aim of the passage is not to voice public protest about the role of sex in the film industry, but to show that people in the film industry themselves lead the sexually liberated life of the characters in the movies they produce. Let us go back to the strip-tease of Pooja Bedi. Here we have an aspiring actress who, via the magazines, suggests that she might do "anything" for "everybody". Of course she doesn't, but in a society which is dominated by men, success depends on her willingness to satisfy the public demand.¹⁹ The public wants details about the "secret lives" of the stars,

19 In an interview following her strip-tease, she responds to remarks made by other actors and actresses. One remark by the actress Juhi ("I'm not going to be exploited.

especially the female stars, and it gets them. The example of Pooja Bedi is just one of many, in which female stars of the Indian cinema are presented as sexual icons in a sex-starved society.

Magazines and movies transform the actresses into something larger than life. For men, the female stars are the personification of their fantasies: they see a female actress in a movie, but just before they went to see the movie they read in one of the magazines, that:

She may be a pretty baby but she isn't as innocent as she looks. In fact, she's supposed to have been quite a *chaalu cheez* [clever, boyish in a psychological sense, rascal] running wild with the guys in her school and college days. Her passionate teenage affair with a college boyfriend had even got her pregnant ... (Star & Style, July 1991: 37)

In the film, this aspiring actress is probably raped, or she plays a sexually aggressive figure like the village belle. The spectator, knowing that the actress is sexually liberated and promiscuous (after all he just read it in the magazine), will accept the role of the actress on screen as reality. The real personality of the actress has disappeared, and is replaced by a construct of the media. This process can have dangerous consequences. The actress Meenakshi, for example, was attacked by a fan while shooting on location in Bombay-Juhu. The man obviously was not able to differentiate between the actress as a person in real life and the constructed image.²⁰ To which end these images are used is explained by one producer:

They [the Indian male] want their wives to be an angel in front of the family and a mistress in bed. She [the actress Sridevi] has that quality. (Chengappa, 1990: 250)

I'm not going to drop my top to reach the top.") triggers the following response: "You should drop your top only if what you have on top is worth showing." (Movie, 1991: 35) This of course is a statement the men in the industry are happy to hear. Moreover, Pooja Bedi has reached a questionable form of fame by being willing to do almost anything in a film. The effects are described by Prem (1987): "Good actresses are out of work. ... Today's demand is Farah, Mandakini and Sonam who can serve both purposes - sex and violence. Who are ready to be raped by three or more men, who are prepared to wet themselves and seduce the audience in film after film" (Prem: 20).

20 In the article *Fans or Fanatics* (Star & Style, July 1991: 16-18), other actresses reveal similar incidents. Farha, for example, was followed around by one male fan who wanted to marry her.

The second function of the images is to address the Indian female. The actresses are portrayed as being everything the Indian male wants. The Indian woman who is not an actress wants to be part of these images as well. Articles like *Sridevi's Fashion Special (Movie, January 1991)*, or *Revealed: The High Prize Madhuri had to pay for her success! (Stardust, January 1991)* address both sexes. Reading about "secrets" of the stars, their "daily problems", their "love affairs", has the effect of making the actresses role-models for the Indian woman, as well as idols for the Indian man. Would she (the Indian woman) not rather look like the actress Dimple, who conducts a seminar on make-up in one of the magazines, or dress like Sridevi, or deal with the unloving husband in the manner of Farha? The magazines provide the necessary information.²¹

The magazines are aided by the development in the socio-economic sphere. Women, especially in urban centers, are now an important part of the work-force. The number of educated women working in professional jobs has increased over the last years.²² This emerging female middle class forms an important segment among the readers of these magazines. This development, combined with the images of the actresses, has a strong influence on the psyche of the Indian male.

The actress, who symbolizes unrestricted sex, is in fact economically independent. The new emerging class of professional women is also economically independent. Both are threatening the male-dominated society, with its emphasis on female dependence and submission. The liberated image of the actresses, as a role model for the modern Indian professional woman, is a powerful argument for a redefinition of the role of women in Indian society. According to the magazines, in the world of Indian film male dominance is a thing of the past. Outside the film-world women are making inroads on the job-market. Taken together, these developments offer a new explanation for the rise of violence against women on the Indian screen.

21 Jain in his article *Changing Sexuality (India Today)*, 1989: 70-75) mentions the impact of these magazines on the changing sexual behaviour of Indian women: "The confessional school of writing - *Savvy*, *Society*, film magazines with their kiss-and-tell culture - also give the woman guts to think sex" (Jain: 71).

22 In the same article, Jain argues at length about the effects of the increasing female work force on sexual relationships within and outside Indian marriages. His conclusion is that "with women beginning to earn their own money, there has come a possibility of a whole new range of relationships that push through the frontiers of family: office colleagues, independent women friends and male companions" (Jain, 1989: 71).

Violence against women, public humiliation and rape can be seen as the male answer to a female argument for more liberation. As discussed above, the rape scenes offer a release for pent-up sexual frustrations. On a different level, these same scenes offer a release of psychological frustrations of male self-esteem. The movies, which still adhere to the values of a male-dominated society, show a world where professional women (characters and actresses) are constantly forced to admit their inferiority in view of male dominance. The spectator, who possesses the woman through identification with the male protagonist, can also take part in the re-generation of the male discourse. When, in the last reel, the hero finally takes revenge on the villain and gets his girl, the world is safe from women. While the female character (and the actress in the magazines) has initially formed a threat to the male position, in the last reel (and in the film-world outside the magazines) she is reduced to the "wife-status". Her independence is replaced by submission, her sexuality is replaced by servility.²³

Conclusion: The Poverty, the Rape, and the Dowry Death Trip

Up to now the subject of this paper has been the commercial film in India. The "other" Indian film, the art film has been left out. It is unique to India that the division between commercial and artistic cinema is so sharp and deep. The disadvantage is clear. A working relationship between the two is non-existent, and this is one reason why the Indian commercial film has consistently failed to create artistically valid works within the commercial cinema. The question that remains is whether the art film produces a different picture of women than the commercial film.

The answer is yes, but as the following discussion will show, the portrayal of women in art films shares certain characteristics with the commercial film.

23 Sarkar has advanced a similar argument in her 1975 study: "One begins to wonder if there is not an overt attempt by the Indian male to deny sexuality of the weaker sex, and the 'alien' argument is a rationalization [kissing on screen was banned by the censorboards with the reason that kissing itself was alien to Indian culture]. There is also the lingering doubt that if the sexual equality of women - status-wise - is openly acknowledged, the Indian male might be displaced from his self-created pedestal as has already happened in certain socio-economic circumstances" (Sarkar, 1975: 62).

As Lakshmi points out (Lakshmi,1986), even the art film is not free from the influences and pressures which have shaped the commercial film:

One director when asked what his next venture was going to be, said "oh dowry death, of course." He didn't have any specific reason for working on it except that it was a hot subject. (Lakshmi, 1986: 113)

One very good example of how the art film, and well-known directors, deal with the female character is provided in the same article. In the movie *Ghare-Bhairs* by the late Satyajit Ray, a woman has an extra-marital affair. Being married into a conservative household she is not able to deal with her new love interest in any other way than by feeling guilt. She expresses this emotion by feeling justly punished when she becomes a widow or imagines herself to be one. Lakshmi attacks this film and others of the same category by pointing out that:

These films seem to generally assume that every woman is just a few orgasms behind liberation. When the customary clandestine orgasms take place, lo and behold, her chains fall off; the world seems to be a different place and she is carried away on the wings of liberation. (Lakshmi, 1986: 114)

In art films, the form of dealing with the female character is more subtle than in the commercial film, and art films often take a critical stance towards Indian society and hence find themselves more often than not on the feminist side of the discourse; yet female sexuality is still not portrayed as a natural basic human need (as male sexuality is). Lakshmi argues accordingly that the exploitation of the Indian woman in film is akin to "good trips - poverty trip, rape trip, dowry death trip" (Lakshmi: 113). The use of the plight of the Indian women for commercial, or aesthetic reasons thus forms the ultimate abuse of reality for the sake of economics.

In Indian cinema, both the art and the commercial film use the female body as image, and the man as the bearer of the gaze. Both categories of film satisfy their audience's demand. Both categories are male-dominated industries, where the occasional female director is a token woman. Both categories have seen an increase in the portrayal of violence against women. This development should be seen in connection with a general rise in violence on and off screen. It should also be seen in connection with the socio-economic pressures on the film industry, and

as part of a discourse on the changing role of women in a rapidly changing society. Films, in this phase of cultural re-definition, adhere to conservative values emphasizing the economic dependence on and social submission of woman to man. These values are reflected on a textual level (the level of plot), and on the level of semantic and picture analysis.

The images of actresses on and off screen serve as: 1) a sexual safety-valve in a society which is still large by sexually repressive; 2) a role model for the emerging class of female professionals in the urban centers; and 3) as a way to ensure commercial success for the film industry which faces the competition of video. The humiliation of women, and the punishment of female sexuality, on both levels of film (plot and picture) satisfies the demand of the audience: It re-establishes the image of male dominance in a society where this dominance is more and more open to question, and it deconstructs the female body according to the sexual fantasies of man. These processes are closely interrelated. The young male, who is sexually frustrated, who faces competition for jobs from educated women, is able to release his frustrations by identifying with the male actors. Moreover, the actresses in the films, who are part of the larger female threat, are presented to him in a manner connoting submission and servility. The display of open female sexuality which signifies promiscuity on one level, and boldness (for example on the job market) on another level is punished. Thus, the Indian film re-constructs male supremacy and re-defines women's roles in society.

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