

# **I'm a Drama Queen...But I'm the Star you Love to See!**

## **Soap Operas, Melodrama and the Televisual Construction of Female Stardom**

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### **Abstract**

The relationship between the silver screen and stardom has been the focus of academic work for several decades. Despite the post-globalization expansion in the Indian mediascape, a rapid increase in the number of television channels, an exponential increase in television programming, and a never-ending production of television stars, small-screen stardom, however, has still not received the same kind of academic attention. With the arrival of Ekta Kapoor's Balaji telefilms in the early 2000s, the soap-opera genre on Indian Television introduced the audiences to melodramatic tales in the form of *saas-bahu* sagas. Kapoor's soaps gave birth to iconic characters like Tulsi, Parvati, Perna and Jassi whom an average Indian woman adored, identified with and often held on a pedestal higher than that of film stars. Thus, the phenomenon of stardom, once associated with film actors, slowly found its manifestation in television actors.

This paper aims to understand the discourse of the star-text that emerges in relation to the small- screen through the 'leading ladies' of the soap opera genre. The paper will explore

how ‘female stardom’ is constructed on the small-screen through the melodramatic form and televisual techniques adopted in the soap opera genre. Establishing an association between television melodrama and television stardom, I will analyze how the two complement each other and prioritize the female protagonist through narrative, music, costumes and other televisual techniques, thus conferring to her a ‘star-status’. Through a semiotic analysis of a few leading soap operas - *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Bade Achche Lagte Hain*, *Balika Vadhu*, the paper will analyze the associations that the star-text and the melodramatic-text bring together in the soap-opera genre.

Keywords: Indian Television, Stardom, Female, Soap-opera, Melodrama, Small-screen.

## Introduction

The year 2014 can be considered a milestone in the journey of Indian television. With 168 million TV households and 149 million cable TV subscribers, it has become the second largest television market in the world after China<sup>1</sup>. This massive expansion of the Indian television industry can be traced back to the post-liberalization era in the early 1990s that introduced Indian audiences to satellite television. From one state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan in the early 90s, Indian audiences now have an offering of 798 national and regional satellite television channels to choose from<sup>2</sup>. With an exposure to foreign programmes like *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Baywatch* in the initial years of liberalization, the entertainment genre wasn’t too far behind in producing indigenous content that was served with a flavour of Indian culture and values. The immediate years of post-globalization offered acclaimed soap operas like *Banegi Apni Baat* (1993-97), *Tara* (1993-97), *Hasratein*

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<sup>1</sup> Data accessed from the annual FICCI-KPMG Indian Media and Entertainment Industry Report 2015 available at [https://www.kpmg.com/IN/en/IssuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/Documents/FICCI-KPMG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.kpmg.com/IN/en/IssuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/Documents/FICCI-KPMG_2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Data accessed from <http://telecomtalk.info/total-number-of-tv-channels-in-india-as-of-july798/120527/> on September 10, 2014.

(1996-99) and *Saaya* (1998-99) that represented everyday middle-class anxieties related to marriage, relationships, family and career with protagonists who were stuck at the cross-roads of life. But it was with the entry of Ekta Kapoor's Balaji Telefilms that the soap opera format on Indian Television witnessed a rapid transformation. With the broadcast of two of its most successful soap operas *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahanii Ghar Ghar Ki* in the year 2000, Kapoor's new formula of the *saas-bahu* sagas<sup>3</sup>(often known as the K-series) became an instant hit among the audiences and the Hindi entertainment genre conferred a new definition to the soap opera format. Few other television producers followed Kapoor's formula and redefined the soap-opera genre with women-centric narratives that gave birth to iconic fictional characters like Tulsi, Parvati, Jassi and Anandi. A brief overview of the expansion of Balaji telefilms in the early years of the new millennium can be helpful in gauging the reach and popularity of its soaps and their stars. In the early 2000s, Balaji's serials accounted for 85-90 percent of the total advertising revenue for its host channels. The production house increased its programming from 616.5 hours in 1999-2000 to 1584.5 hours in 2001-02, and the company's programming revenues increased from Rs. 48.88 crore (2000-01) to 110.30 crore (2001-02), a 125.63 percent jump within a year<sup>4</sup>. These figures clearly indicate the burgeoning effect that the *saas-bahu* serials had on their audiences and the popularity they provided for their female leads. It is within these co-ordinates that the phenomenon of female stardom on television can be identified and analysed. This is not to say that the female protagonists from the soap operas of the 90s were not popular. Their reach and popularity, however, was only restricted to a relatively smaller audiences until the late 90s as the cable television industry was still in

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<sup>3</sup> The tales of mothers-in-law and daughters-in law are referred to as *saas-bahu* sagas on Indian television.

<sup>4</sup> Data accessed from The Annual Report – Balaji Telefilms 2002, available at [http://www.balajitelefilms.com/pdf/annualreports/balajiannualreports/annualreport\\_2002.pdf](http://www.balajitelefilms.com/pdf/annualreports/balajiannualreports/annualreport_2002.pdf)

its infancy in India<sup>5</sup>. Female stardom on the small-screen, then, must also be understood within the intersections of technology that allowed the rapid expansion of cable television in Indian households and the economic growth which provided social upward mobility to the audiences so that they could own a television set. This, however, will be an expansive study beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper will explore the construction of the star-text on the small screen through an analysis of the melodramatic form and the televisual techniques adopted in the soap opera genre and will argue that both melodrama and the televisual apparatus centralize the female protagonist and are thus critical in the formation of the small-screen star. The soap-opera or the *telenovela* is a women's fiction form that finds its roots in melodrama. Deriving similarities between soap operas and melodrama, Jane Feuer argues that Peter Brook's conceptualization of melodramatic characteristics like "strong emotionalism, moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of beings, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue..." are in perfect synchronization with the contemporary genre of soap-operas (Feuer, 1984:4). Furthermore, scholars like Lynne Joyrich, Ien Ang and Jeremy Butler have also drawn strong associations between the melodramatic form and the soap opera format, thus, linking the two closely together (Joyrich, 1991-92; Butler, 1986; Ang, 1985). The melodramatic form, therefore, becomes central to the understanding of the soap opera genre. Feuer observes the "excess" that characterizes the melodramatic idiom in the aesthetic as well as the ideological form of soap operas and argues that this "excess" is evident not only in the narrative and *mise-en-scene* but also in "acting, editing, musical underscoring, shot-reverse-shot gazes and the use of zoom lens frequently" (1984: 10). The "star-text" that I propose to extricate in this paper, will also be unraveled through an analysis of this "excess". Through detailed

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<sup>5</sup> The number of cable households in India rose from 4 million (1992) to 30 million (2001). The number of satellite channels increased from 8 in 1992 to 90 in 2001. Increasing buying capacity of the population and fall in price of the TV sets can also be cited as important reasons.

textual analyses of a few popular prime-time Indian TV soaps— *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* (Star Plus, 2000-08), *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*<sup>6</sup> (Sony, 2003-06), *Balika Vadhu* (Colors, 2008- till date) and *Bade Achche Lagte Hain* (Sony, 2011- 14), I will analyze how various televisual techniques foreground the female protagonist in the production of the melodramatic text and how melodrama as a form itself privileges the ‘star’.

Ellis’s

argument about the lack of the “photo effect”<sup>7</sup> on television gives me an entry point into understanding the discourse on television stardom through the framework of film stardom. Television, Ellis argues, pretends to ‘actuality’ and ‘immediacy’ as opposed to film’s presence-absence or the “photo effect”. Therefore, TV produces not “stars” but “TV personalities” who “have a fairly constant presence on the medium during the time their TV series is being broadcast” (Ellis 1991:38). Unlike film actors, who metamorphose from one character to the other in every new film, the daily fictional presence of television actors typecasts them in one character. The off-screen circulation of the actor’s image is also such that it supports his/her on-screen persona. Working within this framework, my analysis of the ‘star-text’ that emerges in these soaps will remain confined to the fictional space of the soap operas. With an analysis of the narrative, characterization, music, costumes and make-up and the support of the televisual apparatus, I will attempt to offer an understanding of the star-text that the soap operas produce on the small-screen.

### **Narrative, Characterization and the Soap Opera Star**

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<sup>6</sup> *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* is the Indian adaptation of the Columbian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*. The American television series *Ugly Betty* is also inspired by the same.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of the “photo-effect” is borrowed from Roland Barthes. He talks of the photograph as always already recorded that makes present something that is absent and brings back the absent/past through the illusion of the reality of the image.

From the Ewings in *Dallas* and the Carringtons in *Dyansty*, to the Viranis in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Babu Thi* and the Aggarwals in *Kahaanii Ghar Ghar Ki*, they all demonstrate a key characteristic of the melodramatic form: the usage of the family as the locus to dramatize various socio-political issues. The ‘nuclear family’ of the 1950s American Film Melodrama is, however, replaced by a ‘joint family’ in the contemporary Indian soap operas. Where, on an ideological level, a joint family as a social institution constructs the idea of a national-self<sup>8</sup>, at a narrative level, I observe that it provides the writers with ample opportunities to establish multiple characters, introduce various sub-plots and provide for celebratory occasions like a daughter’s marriage, a mother-in-law’s funeral, the birth of a new baby and so on. The concept of a joint family is further extended in the Indian soap operas by weaving in the narrative of a family lineage of almost four generations<sup>9</sup>. John Cawelti notes that melodrama is complicated in plot and character, which

Instead of identifying with a single protagonist through his line of action...typically makes us intersect imaginatively with many lives. Subplots multiply, and the point of view continually shifts in order to involve us in a complex of destinies. Through this complex of characters and plots we see not so much the working of individual fates but the underlying moral process of the world (Cawelti, cited in Modleski, 2008: 267).

As we discuss the contemporary genre of Indian soap operas, I will argue that although melodrama in soap operas still gives emphasis to “the underlying moral process of the world,” in terms of the

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<sup>8</sup> Maitrayee Chaudhri discusses the idea of seeing the Indian joint family as the construction of the national-self which “uniquely expresses and represents the valued aspects of Indian culture and tradition” (373). See Chaudhri, M. (2010). “The Family and its Representation: From Indology to Market Research”, in *Social Sciences- Communication, Anthropology and Sociology*, Ed. Yogendra Singh. Vol XIV Part 2, 363-390.

<sup>9</sup> *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahut thi*, *Kasautii Zindagi Kay*, *Kahani Ghar Ghar ki* and *Pavitra Rishta* are a few shows which had a narrative weaving in four generations in the story. A new generation in a family is often introduced through a generation leap of over several years. This is a narrative technique usually implied when the story with current characters starts getting exhausted.

narrative pattern, the genre has evolved from the shifting point of view of multiple characters to a dominant point of view of the protagonist(s). While the narrative still intersects with multiple lives, the female protagonist, I argue, becomes the fulcrum upon whom the entire plot revolves. The narrative foregrounds the point-of-view of the protagonist(s) and we witness the multiple sub-plots and various characters through her. Within the framework of the family, the protagonist (in most cases a female) becomes the binding factor for the family and the narrative of the soap. In all the soaps that I undertake to study, I observe the presence of a female protagonist as central to the resolution of everyday familial conflicts. The dutiful daughter-in-law Parvati (Sakshi Tanwar) in *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (hereafter KGGK), the ugly-geeky secretary Jassi (Mona Singh) in *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* (hereafter JJKN), the affectionate mother and wife Priya (Sakshi Tanwar) in *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain* (hereafter BALH) and the respectful and enduring Anandi (Avika Gor/Pratyusha Banerjee/Toral Rasputra) in *Balika Vadhu* are all strong idealized female characters who hold the family together and fight against all social odds to maintain the moral rightness of the social world order. The single-protagonist narrative technique in the contemporary Indian soap is what I observe as one of the primary reasons that has led to the emergence of television stardom in India.

Television writer and academic, Vijay Ranganath observes that with the rise of the satellite television channel, Star Plus, in the 1990s<sup>10</sup>, a different narrative strategy was being carved out in the daily soaps. “What Star did was to connect the audiences to one face rather than multiple characters. All shows started showcasing one woman on a big hoarding. One face, one woman would invite the

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<sup>10</sup> In 1991, under the Congress government led by Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the Indian economy discarded the socialist policies and went through a process of liberalization. The new neo-liberal policies opened doors for international trade and investment, deregulation, privatization and tax reforms. As a result, the Indian broadcasting industry also witnessed an explosion of Cable Television with the entry of many foreign players who set up new satellite channels, for example Rupert Murdoch’s Star TV Network.

audiences to watch the show.<sup>11</sup>” Marking the difference between earlier soaps and now, Ranganath observes, “*Pehle ek mudda hota tha aur uspe kahani banti thi, ab ek ladki hoti hai aur uski kahani hoti hai.*” (Earlier the story would be about an issue, now the story is about a girl). Taking the example of a famous soap of the early 1990s - *Swabhimaan*, he notes that it was a story about “*jaayaaz and najaayaaz*” (legitimate and illegitimate) whereas now, we have stories about a child-bride Anandi in *Balika Vadhu* or a middle-aged newly-wed Priya in BALH. Unlike the earlier soaps (*Buniyad* and *Humlog*), which had several storylines and multiple protagonists, today’s soaps run on a single protagonist and one major storyline that is narrated through the point-of-view of the protagonist. Therefore, the screenplay and the script of the soaps over-emphasize the role and function of the protagonist. This results in portraying the other actors as merely subsidiary, and the protagonist as the ‘face’ of the soap and often also of the broadcasting channel. Talking about *Balika Vadhu*, writer Gajra Kottary discusses that the initial few episodes set up the narrative and “that is the reason we emphasize on the protagonist. Once the protagonist is liked by the audiences, we move on to other sub-plots.” She further adds that, “telling a story from the point-of-view of the protagonist is simpler and the audiences have a direct connect with one character that they look up to and therefore other people’s stories are also told through the point-of-view of the protagonist.”

A quick reading of the synopsis of the soap JJKN on its host channel’s website<sup>12</sup> will support the point I make and illustrate how the story of the soap is essentially the story of its female protagonist Jassi. It illustrates how the story of the soap opera unfolds as Jassi traverses her journey through various phases of life.

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<sup>11</sup> All interviews (except the ones for which links have been shared or sources mentioned) are taken as a part of my field work for my MPhil dissertation during July-Aug 2013.

<sup>12</sup> The synopsis of the soap *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* was accessed from [www.setindia.com](http://www.setindia.com) on November 10, 2013.



Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin is a story of the loveable ugly duckling Jassi's journey to becoming a beautiful swan and finding her prince charming. It is the story of Jasmeet Walia – Jassi – who is an unattractive, bespectacled girl with braces and an odd style of dressing. She is naive but intelligent. Jassi faces a lot of criticism from prettier colleagues – both men and women. The show chronicles her at her workplace where she wins the hearts of her colleagues and her boss due to her warm nature...

Furthermore, I observe that the soap operas not only privilege the female protagonist in the narrative by giving her maximum screen-time and considering her point-of-view as primary, but they also project her as 'an ordinary woman with an extraordinary persona'. Shoma Munshi, in her study of Indian Prime Time soaps notes that "lead actresses in soaps – whether positive or negative – are always strong women. Heroines of soap operas in India are also almost always an embodiment of *Shakti* (power)" (2010:188). Richard Dyer, in his seminal work *Stars* (1979), observes the phenomenon of stardom as an amalgamation of the "spectacular with the everyday and the special with the ordinary" and the stars as "ordinary yet extraordinary modern individuals" (35). For me, it is this incorporation of the 'ordinary with the extraordinary' that puts the soap opera heroines in the category of stars where they are 'identifiable' and 'aspirational' simultaneously. Rajan Shahi, the producer of successful shows like *Bidaai* and *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, in an interview points out that the prime factor in casting a female lead in a soap opera is the 'relatability' factor. "There has to be a *kachchapān* (rawness) that the audiences relate to. I like to cast innocent and vulnerable faces so that people think that this is my sister or my daughter or my wife's story. She can't be picture-perfect. Else she would be in films."

Jassi, a less-than-ordinary looking office secretary who gets nervous at the very sight of her boss; Priya in *BALH*, a 33 year old unmarried working woman who doesn't succumb to societal pressures of getting married at the right age, the child-bride Anandi in *Balika Vadhu* who continues with her

education even after marriage and KGGK'S Parvati, the eldest daughter-in-law of the Aggarwal family who transforms from a domesticated housewife to a modern and confident entrepreneur to win back the lost family fortune— are all reincarnations of a middle-class Indian woman. They are all characters who embody in themselves melodramatic characteristics that build not just the narrative of the show but also their own star-images. But while they represent the ordinary woman, they have an extraordinary persona with which they solve every day familial conflicts and disseminate messages of women's emancipation. Shailja Kejriwal, an ex-Creative Director at Star Plus, mentions, "women-wives, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law – find their strength and their heroes in Tulsi and Parvati, just as they found their heroes in Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man persona...Tulsi and Parvati are the Amitabh Bachchans of the small screen" (Kejriwal, cited in Munshi, 2010:191). Thus, it is evident that the ordinary looking house-wives- Anandi and Parvati- are not just fictional characters we see every day, but personalities that embody "ethical forces"<sup>13</sup> and emanate such characteristics that put them in the category of stars.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* bring to us symbols of Indian womanhood through the figures of Sita<sup>14</sup> and Draupadi<sup>15</sup> respectively. In her study of the K Soaps, Munshi observes a direct relation between Indian soaps and epics in terms of the narrative patterns both follow. She notes that Ekta Kapoor's inspiration for KGGK comes from the religious Hindu epic *Ramayana* and therefore, KGGK for her is the modern day *Ramayana*. The narrative unfolds the story of the Aggarwal family,

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<sup>13</sup> Term borrowed from Gledhill, Christine. "Signs of Melodrama" In *Stardom: Industry Of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, Pg. 213, 210-211, London: Routledge, 1991. For Gledhill, the moral/ethical forces entailed in the melodramatic good vs. evil dichotomy are externalized in a character's physical being, personality, gestures, dress, voice and above all actions.

<sup>14</sup> Sita is a Hindu Goddess, an avatar of Lakshmi and the wife of Hindu Deity Lord Rama in the epic *Ramayana*.

<sup>15</sup> Draupadi is described as one of the 'Panch Kanya' (Five Virgins) in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. She is said to have been an extraordinarily beautiful woman who was married to the five brothers known as the Pandavas.

an affluent joint family consisting of four brothers (like the four brothers in the *Ramayana*<sup>16</sup>) and their everyday familial conflicts. Parvati<sup>17</sup> as the eldest *bahu* (daughter-in-law) of the family is the one who shoulders the responsibility of keeping the family united in tough times. The first episode of KGGK, while introducing us to the main protagonist Parvati, parallels her role to that of Sita. The episode opens with Parvati, clad in a red *saree*, ornamented with gold jewelry, sitting on the floor and making a *rangoli*, almost reincarnating the figure of Sita. The house is decorated with lights and *diyas* (lamps) which gives the audiences an idea that the festive occasion for which Parvati prepares is *Diwali*<sup>18</sup>. In a long shot, the camera pans slowly and establishes a temple in the background while Parvati makes a *rangoli* in the foreground. Next, we are introduced to Parvati through a series of close-up shots as she is engrossed in making the *rangoli* with the background score playing “*mangal bhavan amangal hari*”<sup>19</sup>. Then, we see Parvati moving around the house as she puts *diyas* in the house and through her, we are introduced to other members of the family. In the first fifteen minutes of the episode, the audiences are made to believe that Parvati is not only a dutiful and responsible daughter-in-law, but also a loving wife and a concerned sister-in-law. The episode ends with Parvati protecting the *diya* flame with her hands to prevent it from going off while her husband, Om joins her (this frame also becomes the logo of the show) saying “*tumhare hote iss ghar mein andhera kabhi nahi ho sakta...main jaanta hoon tum duniya ka har dukh seh logi par iss ghar ki sukh shanti par kabhi aanch nahi aane dogi*” (This house will never be dark in your presence...I know that you will sacrifice everything

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<sup>16</sup> *Ramayana* is a Hindu epic that narrates the story of good vs evil through four brothers Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan.

<sup>17</sup> The character name Parvati is also derived from Hindu mythology where Parvati is a dedicated wife to Lord Shiva.

<sup>18</sup> The festival of Diwali is celebrated amongst the Hindus as celebration of the homecoming of Lord Rama after a fourteen years exile in the forest. This story is mentioned in *Ramayana*.

<sup>19</sup> These verses are taken from *Ramcharitmanas* – a religious book that has compilations of stories from the life of Lord Rama.

for the peace and happiness of this house). Just like Sita sacrificed all the palatial comforts for the well-being and reputation of her husband and family, Parvati is also equated to her and expected to do the same.

While Munshi refers to KGGK as a modern day *Ramayana* and parallels the character of Parvati to *Sita*, writer Kottary in her interview with me mentioned that although there are no direct parallels between soap heroines and the image of *Sita*, “but a good woman is always *Sita*. We as social human beings have set images that come from scriptures.” Therefore, in all the other soaps that I study, I do not find any direct relation to the mythical characters but all the protagonists to some extent inherently bear the characteristics of *Sita*. In fact, what I observe in the modern Indian woman that the soaps depict, is an embodiment of the characteristics of *Sita* with a balance of rationality, a profusion of modernity with traditions. Therefore, while a woman is dutiful, virtuous, self-sacrificing, an ideal daughter, wife and mother; she is also educated, independent, rational, ambitious and progressive. When Anandi in *Balika Vadhu* sees that her husband has fallen in love with another woman and in spite of all her efforts doesn’t want to return, she, too, finds her life-partner in another man, Shiv. This modern day Sita in the form of Anandi does not live in exile after her husband abandons her for another woman; instead, she finds a safe haven elsewhere<sup>20</sup>. Although her in-laws object to her receiving education post-marriage, she fights for her rights and goes to school and returns as the village *sarpanch*. Although she is cultured and respects her elders, she is not easily suppressed by her in-laws; instead, she stands up for her rights. It is also interesting to note that a soap which was labeled as “regressive” by audiences and critics stands out as very “progressive” when Anandi’s *Dadisa* (grandmother-in-law) herself allows Anandi to get married to Shiv and start a

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<sup>20</sup>According to the *Ramayana*, Sita was abandoned by her husband Ram once she returned from Lanka where she was abducted by Ravana. Questioning the morality of Sita, Ram abandoned her and sent her for a lifetime exile in the forests.

new life. Moving away from the general constructs of patriarchy, the leading ladies of the soap operas are what Munshi calls the “*televisual viranganas*” (televisual women warriors) who are “virtuous and strong, powerful and prudent...and (move) beyond the roles for women prescribed by patriarchal society” (2010:193). While on the one hand, the narrative supports melodramatic excess through “chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute-rescues and revelations, *deux ex-machina* ending” (Neale 1986:6), the characters themselves exteriorize melodramatic attributes through extreme facial gestures, heavy costumes, excessive jewelry and garish makeup. The next section of the paper will discuss how elements other than the narrative aid the melodramatic form and the star-image in a soap-opera.

### **Costumes, Make-Up and the Make-Over**

Tracing links between melodrama and stardom, Gledhill finds similarity between the two as both use the mode of “exteriorization” of emotions and gestures:

Melodramatic characterization is performed through a process of personification whereby actors—and fictional characters conceived as actors in their diegetic world—*embody* ethical forces...Here moral forces are expressions of personality, externalised in a character’s physical being, in gesture, dress and above all in action...Star personae are constructed in very similar ways. Stars reach their audiences primarily through their bodies (Gledhill, 1991: 214).

Focusing on the ‘excess’ that is created through the appearance of the characters, I will discuss how the process of “exteriorization” fosters the melodramatic attributes of the protagonist and also helps in the creation of the “star-image” within the fictional space.

Melodrama, Gledhill argues, works on “visual rather than verbal effects” and star personae too offer pictorial pleasure “with appropriate settings, dress and accoutrements” (1991:214). Indian soap operas invest an exorbitant amount of money and time into glamorizing the characters through dress and make-up. Indian soaps have earned immense criticism for they enforce their women to wear heavy *sarees*, jewelry and make-up even when their women go to bed. The soap actresses defy the logic of age as they never have to worry about wrinkled skin or grey hair. One can observe that the “excess” that melodrama creates as a form, is prevalent in the soaps not only in the narrative, music, dialogues but also in the make-up, costumes and sets. Mitu Kumar, the Creative Director of KGGK informs me in an interview that, “heavy sarees, jewelry and make-up makes the female characters look larger than life and adds an aspirational quality to them. That is why the audiences want to look like them or dress up like them.” Yvonne Tasker argues that “the star functions as commodity, as signifying system, as fetish object and, to some extent, as the space of a narcissistic identification on the part of the audiences” (1998:180). Therefore, at one level where the fetishized female body of the protagonist adds to the spectacle of the mise-en-scene, at another level the fictionalized feminine subject becomes “the object of identification rather than eroticism” for the female spectators (Stacey, 1994:129).

Where on the one hand the narrative in the soaps has references to *Sita*, the same is exteriorized through costumes and make-up as well. While the soap opera heroines bear modern ideologies and drive major decisions in the family, they are always represented as the ideal, self-sacrificing and *pativrata* wives (all the attributes that we also associate with Sita). Be it the more traditional housewives like Parvati and Anandi or the modern Priya, they all wear *sindoor* and *mangalsutra* as the potent signifiers of a married Hindu womanhood. These symbols, however, are not seen by these women as symbols of oppression but that of “romance, lyricism, beauty, enchantment and fulfillment” (Singh, 2007:36). In all the soaps that I studied, I observed a married woman (protagonist) *always*

wears the signifiers of married Hindu womanhood. It is only after the death of Om that *Parvati* in KGGK is shown removing her *mangalsutra* and wiping off her *sindoor* and *bindi* in deep remorse. Therefore, the use of *bindi*, *mangalsutra* and *saree* is not just an accessory to enhance the protagonist's beauty but also an essential part of the identity of a married Hindu woman.

Munshi points out that Balaji Telefilms spends a minimum of Rs.15,000 on a *saree* and has its own cupboards filled with *sarees* which are rarely repeated. She adds, "Balaji actors and actresses are dressed and made up like film stars in an expensive Bollywood production" (2010:93). Ritu Deora, a leading costumes designer, mentions in an interview<sup>21</sup> that in the early 1990s Television had no concept of costume designing, and fashion came from films. "However, now TV producers have realized that the personality of a show depends much on the look of the characters." She further adds that costume designing for TV is much more challenging than films as "films can do with very plain costumes, because in most cases they are juxtaposed against scenic backdrops for effect. On the other hand, a TV serial relies only on frontal views in most cases. So whatever gloss or effect we want to create has to be on the front."

Another theme that I want to focus on is that of the image make-over. I will analyze the make-over in the soap operas within the framework of Gledhill's observation that "The star vehicle frequently places its star in a role which initially withholds the full persona" (1991:215). My observation of the two makeovers that I analyze also supports the fact that the star-persona of the characters that I read is 'maximized' over a period of time as the narrative is taken forward. Since the soap-operas run for several years and the actors are supposed to maintain a specific look that their character requires, it often becomes monotonous for both the audiences and the actors. Therefore, a change in the

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<sup>21</sup> Interview published on the site : <http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k3/actor/ritu.htm>

narrative or a generation leap often helps the producers to experiment with the look of the actors. Sakshi Tanwar's makeover from Parvati to Janki Devi is a case in point. After a six-year telecast, the soap took a generation leap of 18 years in November 2006. Parvati, after spending several years in prison, on charges of murdering her husband Om and nephew Krishna and then spending a few more years in Benaras, returns to Mumbai and plans to seek revenge "against her own to win back her own" (Apno ke liye, apno ke khilaf). The metamorphoses of the *gharelu* (domesticated) and timid Sita-like *bahu* Parvati to a modern, confident and glamorous Janki Devi was a much-awaited one for everyone. Balaji roped in the makeover king of Bollywood Manish Malhotra to execute the same. With designer *sarees*, strappy blouses, pearl and diamond jewelry, shoulder length highlighted hair and modish make-up, Parvati transformed into Janki Devi. However, a change in the look did not result in a change in the personality of Parvati. Malhotra in an interview mentions, "Her personality is not going to change, I will make her look elegant, not sexy. She will continue to be the inspiration for millions of *bahus*"<sup>22</sup>. Although there is a complete alteration in the physical appearance of Parvati, she still remains the ideal *bahu* who dons a new avatar only to bring back balance in the family. The audience identification still lies with her personality (of Parvati) while her looks only confer visual pleasure to them.

Whereas in KGGK, the make-over is peripheral to the narrative, in JJKN the make-over becomes central to the narrative of the show. When a less-than-ordinary looking *Jassi* with thick glasses, a shabby wig, braced teeth and full-sleeved *shalwar-kurta* is all set for a makeover, the audiences are in for a jaw-dropping moment. Abhijit Roy contextualizes Jassi's makeover with the phenomenon of the makeover as a wider category in global consumerist culture:

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<sup>22</sup> Interview published on The Hindu on November 17, 2006 <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/behind-the-beauties/article3231384.ece>



It was indeed interesting to note how the serial triggered a context of reception in which the central thematic of the bodily makeover resonated with a broader thematic of societal and representational changes (2011:19).

Roy notes that the makeover of Jassi brought along with it the makeover of the post-globalized Indian society and also of the changing television programming. Discussing the politics of makeover, Roy argues that although there is a change in the image “but never a paradigmatic shift in ideology... sustenance of a certain order of ‘tradition’ appears to be a key condition in discourses of makeover” (21). While there is a dimension of change in the made-over-body, there is a dimension of a non-change in tradition.

Therefore, the bodily makeover helps the character to shed her existing image which has been appreciated by the audiences and instead acquire a new image in order to do what her character is otherwise not meant to do (seek revenge). Also, the make-over is almost always from a timid, traditional woman to a confident and glamorous one (and not in the reverse order). Therefore, the once identifiable character of Parvati or Jassi, later acquires an aspirational value for the audiences. If Parvati would have been the glamorous Janki Devi from the first episode, the relatability with her would have been much less. Once Parvati acquires a “star-image” through KGGK, her transformation to a glamorous Janki Devi becomes acceptable to audiences because although her physical being has changed, she still remains Parvati Bhabhi for them. While the exteriorization of the mise-en-scene comes through appropriately with the costumes and make-up of the characters, the exteriorization of emotions is often conferred via dialogues and music in melodrama. “Sound”, Thomas Elseasser says, “whether musical or verbal, acts first of all to give the illusion of depth to the moving image and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the mise-en-scene” (1991:75). With an

emphasis on music, I will now explore how the ‘melos’ in melodrama caters to the aural pleasures of the spectators and acts as a critical third dimension in building the ‘star image’.

### **Melos, Melodrama and the Star Image**

Both stardom and melodrama, Christine Gledhill argues, give “centrality to the systems of the ‘person’” (1991: 211). This emphasis on the personality is further enhanced through the usage of music and particularly the title track of the soaps. But before I link the usage of music in soap operas to stardom I want to briefly explain how music enhances the emotional effect that melodrama aspires for. In terms of film melodrama, Ira Bhaskar identifies the use of music and songs as a unique characteristic of Indian melodrama, which serves not only as a vehicle for emotional amplification, but is also “the language of the ineffable” (2012:163). In the context of television melodrama, music not only expresses the ‘ineffable’, but also due to its ‘hyperbolic’ nature, works towards producing an ‘underlining’ or over-emphasizing effect. The emotional and mental turmoil of the characters, which cannot be expressed through the dialogues, is fore-grounded for the audiences through the use of music. In an interview with television writer Ved Raj, I was told that since the narratives of soap-operas run at a snail’s pace, the music makes the audiences believe that “a lot is happening” although there isn’t much that has happened in taking the story forward. The music in television, therefore, also works as a tool to ‘delay’ the narrative. Since the daily soaps are shot and edited at crunching deadlines, music helps in elongating the programming time for the soaps thereby keeping a slow narrative pace.

This observation becomes significant with reference to the soap opera genre where in, functioning within the melodramatic mode, the “melos” most often becomes more important than the “drama”.

The heavy and continuous background score in almost all the soap-operas under discussion is a witness to the fact that music becomes as important as the narrative in the soaps.

Dorothy Hobson observes the primary function of a title track in a soap opera as that of a “siren call to view” for the audiences (Hobson cited in Munshi, 2010:97). Most of the title tracks that I undertake to study are sung by a female artist. The lyrics of the track weave into the main plot and introduce us to the protagonist of the soap. Furthermore, the feminine voice in the track, engages the viewer directly with the protagonist of the show. This further supports what I have argued earlier - that the female protagonist’s point-of-view remains central to the narrative. *Balika Vadhu*’s title track for instance summarizes the agony of the child bride, Anandi, who is married at a tender age of eight years. The female voice in the track represents Anandi’s voice who complains to her father for marrying her off at a young age. To give the soap a more authentic appeal, the title track uses Rajasthani dialect instead of Hindi.

<i>Chhoti si umar parnai re babosa,</i>	Father, you got me married at such a young age
<i>kiyo tharo kai main kasoore</i>	What wrong had I done to you?
<i>Itra dina toh mahane laad lagaya,</i>	You have loved me for so many years
<i>ab kyun karo mahane hinde se dur</i>	Now, why are you sending me away from you ?

Unlike *Balika Vadhu*, which has a first person account in the track, KGGK is a third person account that describes how an ideal family lives, but the female voice re-enforces the idea that the song is being sung by Parvati. This is also supported by the visual where the video starts with a close up of Parvati and then we are introduced to different family members through her gaze. The point-of-view of the camera becomes the point-of-view of Parvati.

It is important to throw some light on the title track of BALH at this juncture. The track is originally drawn from the famous Bollywood song *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain* (*Balika Vadhu*, 1976). With minor variations in the lyrics, the song is played in the background in almost all the episodes. Playback

singer, Shreya Ghoshal lends her melodious voice to the protagonist Priya (Sakshi Tanwar) through the title track at various instances. Ghoshal's voice which is widely used in Hindi film songs for almost all the famous Bollywood actresses gains an aural quality specific to the small-screen. Her filmic 'aural stardom'<sup>23</sup> is conferred on to Priya's small-screen stardom in a way that puts Priya at the same pedestal as a film actress whose 'invisible voice' Ghoshal becomes on the silver-screen. Also noteworthy is the fact that there is a male version of the song sung by Trijay Dey but it is Shreya/Sakshi's version that is used more frequently in the soap.

The usage of films songs in television soaps has also seen a rapid increase in the last decade. TV soaps often borrow their titles from old Bollywood songs since they have a better recall value. At a time when soaps come out of an assembly line system, the soap titles need to be catchy to grab the viewers' attention. Titles like *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain*, *Sasural Genda Phool*, *Kya Hua Tera Vaada* and *Na Bole Tum na Maine Kuch Kaha* are often more appealing than titles like *Parichay*, *Saans* or *Sanskar*. The usage of film songs, however, finds a more important function in the diegesis of the TV soap where at critical climactic moments the film song not only 'underlines' the already depicted emotions but also 'delays' the plot. An additional function that I observe of the film song in the soap opera narrative is that of the manifestation of film stardom in television actors. With reference to Hindi film songs, Neepa Majumdar considers songs to be an important vehicle of star construction since "they epitomize the most spectacular aspects of star performance" (2009:175). Although there is an endless list of film songs that feature in almost all daily soaps, I will explore the very controversial consummation scene of Ram and Priya in BALH which I observe as a replication of the consummation scene between Jodha and Akbar in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodhaa Akbar*. The song "*In Lambon ke Daaman mein*" plays in the background while Ram confesses his love to Priya, similar

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<sup>23</sup> Neepa Majumdar (2009) uses the term "aural stardom" in *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only* to discuss the popularity and fame of one of the leading Indian female playback singers of Bollywood Lata Mangeshkar.

to Akbar expressing his love to Jodhaa. Ram and Priya's bedroom is the site of the performance and objects like mirror and candles become important elements in the *mise-en-scene* in both the sequences. While the camera in *Jodhaa Akbar* keeps itself at a distance and attempts to capture the palatial grandeur along with the characters' performance, the camera in BALH tightly frames the characters with slow pans between the bodily movements of Ram and Priya within the backdrop of the bedroom. The close-ups thus become vital not only in setting forth the emotion but also in the identification of the characters with the audiences. Although the act of consummation is performed almost similarly in both the sequences, the well-choreographed movements in *Jodhaa Akbar* are replaced by candid gestures between Ram and Priya in BALH. The title track "Bade Achche" is interspersed twice in-between "In Lamhon ke Daman mein" to emphasize on the fact that though it is a televisual manifestation of *Jodhaa-Akbar*, the characters here are not Jodhaa and Akbar but Ram and Priya. Ram and Priya at any point do not remind us of Hrithik Roshan or Aishwarya Rai but of the characters they played in *Jodhaa Akbar*. It is Rai's manifestation of Jodhaa that Sakshi Tanwar borrows from in playing the role of Priya, thus imbibing in her performance, the skills displayed by Rai on celluloid. While the "melos" in melodrama allows for emotional heightening through the usage of songs, the televisual apparatus further supports this heightening through the use of various camera and editing techniques. The final section of the paper will explore the role of the camera and the editing pattern in making meaning of the televisual text.

### **The Televisual Apparatus and the Small-Screen Star**

Peter Brooks considers melodrama as a rhetorical mode that is based not only "on verbal signs that provide a full enunciation of how and what one is, there is also a realm of physical signs that make one legible to others" (1976:44). These physical signs are depicted not only through the *mise-en-scene*

but also through the actor's facial expressions and body language. Jane Feuer argues that the "excess" that melodrama creates as a form is often most prominently visible in the actor's acting style in the soap-opera format which is far more "excessive in comparison to the more naturalistic mode currently employed in other forms of television and in cinema" (Feuer, 1984:10). While melodrama allows for hyperbolic and exaggerated acting for emotional heightening, the television apparatus further supports this heightening of emotions through the use of close-ups, fast zooms, swish-pan shots, tableau construction and fast paced shot-reverse-shot editing pattern. "The small television screen records perfectly even the most minutely nuanced gestures" (Thorburn 1976:598). Therefore, it is in the light of the televisual apparatus that I will analyze the actor's role in the creation of melodrama and furthermore his/her own 'star image' in the soap opera format.

Talking about television melodrama, David Thorburn notes that "far more decisively than a movie actor, a television actor creates and controls the meaning of what we see on screen" as television's "reduced visual scale grants him a primacy unavailable in the theatres or in the movies, where amplitude of things or spaces offers competition for the eyes' attention" (1976:598). Contrary to this, television producer and writer Zama Habib observes that in the contemporary context, the actor's role is undermined with the emergence of latest technologies used in the televisual apparatus. Discussing the technological and industrial changes that took place with the coming of daily soap operas in the late 1990s, Habib mentions:

All good writers, directors, actors left because they knew that they will not be able to churn out episodes every day. So then, the mediocre lot took over. Actors were non-actors who were taken for face-value. So, to prop them up the directors had to play with the camera, editing and background score. Since the actor doesn't act, it is the camera that has to act...a good actor underlines things with silence and pauses...an

average actor cannot do that...so to underline, you put music, twist the camera and use the bang sound effect on dialogues.

It is with this premise that I argue that the contribution of the televisual apparatus cannot be undermined in making meaning of the televisual text, and the actor's role in the soap opera genre. The actor's role is further enhanced by various camera and editing techniques that I will discuss to bring home the point that the apparatus plays a crucial role in making meaning in melodrama and also building the 'star text'.

The televisual apparatus, in the soap-opera format privileges the star in various ways. The first episode of JJKN is an interesting case in point to discuss the same. The first shot of the episode begins with the point-of-view shot of a girl who enters Gulmohar Fashion House for an interview. The hand-held camera takes the audiences inside the office building leading to the reception, the elevator, various office cabins and finally to an interview room. Supporting the visuals is the audio of a girl who is asking people directions to the interview room. Shocked reactions of the employees looking towards the camera work as a build-up for the revelation that the audiences are just going to witness. When finally the name Jasmeet Walia is called out, the shot cuts into a fast zoom-in of Jassi followed by a close-up shot of her face. Therefore, the camera acts as the point-of-view of Jassi initially, and while she is introduced to the interview board of Gulmohar, she is simultaneously also introduced to the audiences. The camera's prioritization of Jassi's point-of-view over that of other characters, especially that of Pari Kapadia, her archrival on the show (who is also introduced to the audience through Jassi's point of view) foregrounds the primacy of Jassi's point-of-view which will drive the narrative forward. Earlier, in the paper, I have also illustrated how in the title track of KGGK the camera prioritizes Parvati and acts as her point-of-view.

The close-up shot is the dominantly used shot in the medium of television and more so in the soap-opera format as it provides a "window to the soul" of the characters. The close-up shot has the

“effect of bringing the viewer closer and closer to the hidden emotional secrets” of the characters (Hayward 1997:156). With a dual function, “both to emphasize details and to exclude surrounding actions”, the close-up trains the spectator “in being sensitive to the unspoken feelings of the characters” (Butler 2009:183; Modleski 2008:92). Romance, pathos, anger, revenge and regret are all emotions projected by the actors that find further intensification through the use of the close-up. Anandi’s love-confession to her new found love Shiv, Priya’s consummation with her husband Ram, and Jassi’s make-over from Jasmeet Walia to Jessica are all important sequences that use the close-up and at times even extreme close-ups to bring across the emotion of the characters to the audiences. The soap-opera episodes are filled with close-up shots of various characters but “especially the protagonist” (Munshi 2010:118). In an analysis of KGGK and Kyunki., Munshi observes that “the end of each day’s episode, nine times out of ten, also freezes the picture directly on the faces of Parvati and Tulsii” (Munshi 2010:12). In relation to the close-up, Christine Gledhill notes that “stars reach their audiences primarily through their bodies” (1991:214). Where on the one hand the close-up shot functions as a lucrative tool for emotional heightening in the soap operas, it also “offers audiences a gaze at the bodies of stars closer and more sustained than the majority of real-life encounters” (Gledhill, 1991:214).

The swish-pan, swish-zoom and tableau shots are some frequently used techniques that occur at critical points in the narrative of the Indian soap operas. Whereas a swish pan refers to an extremely fast pan movement of the camera from one side to the other and vice-versa, a swish zoom is an extreme zoom in and zoom out movement, both resulting in producing blurring effects. Both swish pans and swish zooms are often accompanied by a heavy soundtrack and colored filters that enhance the emotional and visual appeal of the narrative. The dynamic camera movement of the swish-pan or the swish-zoom, the use of heightened music and often green, red or yellow colour-filtered visuals make the star’s body look like an audio-visual spectacle. However, creative director



Mitu Kumar says that although earlier Balaji shows used these techniques more frequently, “the loudness has toned down to a great extent in the contemporary soaps”. Whereas a swish pan functions to accelerate action and emotional reaction, a tableau shot freezes the action to hold onto a particular emotion. “It gives the spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs” (Brooks, 1976:62). The tableau construction in the soap operas also works at a similar level as it freezes the frame and most of the times transforms coloured visuals into black-and-white with a bang sound. In terms of the star figure, it enhances the function of the close-up shot by providing a closer and more continuous look at the star’s body.

Jennifer Hayward observes the paradoxical nature of televisual technique, where on one level it creates intimacy with the characters as “the camera literally pulls us into each scene, positions us at eye level with the actors”, while on another level, it maintains distance between the viewer and the text with the shot-reverse-shot editing pattern that “leaves a large gap of absent space in which we as viewers are positioned” (Hayward, 1997:157,158). Similarly, stardom as an institution also thrives on contradictions. While star appeal depends on connection and identification, it also relies on distance and mystery. “The star must maintain a distance or absence in order to achieve mystique, but also must be perceived as omnipresent, on-the-scene, in the moment” (Mizejewski 2001:166). Thus, the intimacy/distance dialectic that the televisual apparatus operates with unknowingly generates the star-text while catering to the melodramatic form of the soap opera.

While the televisual text foregrounds the ‘leading ladies’ of the small-screen through various aesthetic and technical procedures, one cannot undermine various other factors that constitute the formation of a small-screen star. My endeavour in this paper has been to map the construction of small-screen stardom in the fictional terrain of the soap opera homes. Television stardom, however, is a multi-layered phenomenon that cannot be understood solely within the limits of fictional spaces. The expansion of Cable TV, the decreasing costs of television sets and the increasing income

capacity of its buyers, the corporatized structures of television channels that build these star-images and an ever expanding culture of media convergence can be considered as nodal connections that lead to unraveling the star-text and further problematizing the phenomenon of small-screen stardom. However, this is material for a different study. Meanwhile, I hope that this paper has demonstrated how the melodramatic mode is deeply imbricated in the televisual construction of small screen stardom.

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## The 'Screen' of Khandeshi Cinema

Shiva Thorat

### Abstract

The screen can be understood as the metaphorical plane that in turn generates the physical plane through the 'will' of a subaltern collective. Onto the physical plane are projected the desires and differences of the collective. This can be argued in the case of Khandeshi cinema whose subaltern character lies in its struggle to constitute a 'screen'. This struggle stretches from the political economy of its location, the status of the language it uses, to the history of its form. What began as a series of music videos in the Ahirani/Khandeshi has now attained self-awareness of its function as cinema. It can boast of the constitution of 'Deewane' interested in this cinema in spite of the perception that the cinema in question is unconventional. In spite of a territorial character, this phenomenon gathered enough attention in a decade that it has attracted the attention of the entertainment industry forcing it to respond to such an emergence. This paper based on textual analysis of prominent films and interviews of the people involved in this cinema, seeks to understand the process of the production of the 'screen' through the perceptions of its producers as well as its patrons while examining therein the equations of gender, class and caste.

Keywords: Cinema, Region, Khandesh, Maharashtra, Caste, Power Equation.

## Introduction

Study of cinema traditionally concerns itself with 'high' cinema. This is similar to the obsession with culture as 'high' culture. In this era where most cinemas across the world have reached their high points in terms of extent, scale and reach; the newer and the emerging cinemas risk being ignored or at best seen as being 'low' in comparison to the 'high' cinema. This risk has also other facets. It is missing the opportunity for producing an understanding of the contexts of the emergence of this new cinema. Narendra Koli, a Khandeshi film maker and actor notes that “a cinema's survival is ensured when it is in touch with the social realities and culture of a region or its people.”

Khandesh is a region that is not easily defined by the geographic and administrative borders. The borders here are more at the level of culture in the form of the day to day experiences of the people. Khandeshi Cinema is produced within this region which is part of Maharashtra. References to this region are common in popular electronic and print media. Nandurbar, Dhule, Jalgaon and North Nashik with the prominent town of Malegaon and Burhanpur District of Madhya Pradesh constitute what is known as Khandesh. Among them Jalgaon, Dhule and Malegaon are the major places which produce films shot on video in Ahirani, Marathi and Hindi languages. The making of these films is also contributing to the production of the region.



(<http://doctormyfriend.com/images/Khandesh.jpg>)

There is also the use of the term 'Mollywood' or even 'Mallywood' referring to Malegaon which has shot into prominence. The video production in the form of music videos in the region emerged in the beginning of 1995. These music albums were about the day to day lives of people of Khandesh, reflecting on society and drawn from the oral history and the folk music of the region. This enterprise of music albums runs to date. It is not an exaggeration to say that because of this practice the people of this region experimented with producing content rather than merely consuming it. Enthused by the success of the music albums, this practice led to film-making. Among the themes addressed by these films are social issues such as superstition, honor killing and dowry system. The phenomenal growth of this cinema is attracting the mainstream production companies like Venus, T-series, Wings, and Ultra and TV channel.

### **Producing a 'Screen'**

Khandeshi cinema addresses a particular region. The very first audio album of Khandeshi Cinema became famous and popular because of its connection with a public address.



*(Source: Snapshot of one of the video song in 'Dehati Lokgeete')*

The name of the audio album was *Dehati Lokgeete* (Rustic Folksongs). This album was produced and directed by the Bapurav Mahajan. In his creation he tries to explain common Khandeshi

peoples' problems. The album appeals to a spectator's experience about her/his day to day life. One of the songs of the '*Dehati Lokgeete*' called '*Dheere dheere gadi chalni...*' (Slowly the wagon goes...) talks of the livelihood stress in the region and the consequent migration. The singer addresses the village girl asking her if she would go to Bardoli<sup>1</sup>. The album was popular across the Khandesh region because the content was addressing the audience of that region. Pankaj More, a local, whom I interviewed, says that "It's in Ahirani (language). That is the one and only quality I look for. Other thing is the faces of the actors that look like us".<sup>2</sup> The subjective experience of the audience is important here. The immediate appeal of the album was in its proximity to its audience.

Bapurav Mahajan said "As we had become popular due to *Dehati Lokgeete* we decided to make the videos. As we knew nothing about the video making, we made it with the help of a wedding videographer"<sup>3</sup>. In this album he tried to show the social economic situation of the society because of illiteracy, poverty and migration. Another producer, Ashok Mahajan, a school teacher based in Dondaicha which is a town in North Maharashtra, made movies which talk about the social problems in a comic way. The superstitions in society, the political parties with their failed promises, and problems of the disabled are the themes in his movies. He says that,

If we just tell people not to be superstitious, they may not listen to you. They do not want to listen to anyone speaking against divinity. That is their mentality. But in my experience through the movies people can be made to think. It is very effective.

A landmark moment in the history of this cinema was the release of '*Kanbai na Navana Changbhala*' a reference to Kaanbai the deity for all of Khandesh in 2005. For the release of this film, a screen was 'acquired' quite literally by forcing the existing Hindi film to vacate. The early

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1 Bardoli in Gujarat is famous for the 1928 disobedience movement which produced 'Sardar' Vallabhbhai Patel'. It is also a centre of industrialization, and draws a large number of people from the Khadesh region.

2 Pankaj More an audience and upcoming music composer in Khandesh gave an interview to me on 18th April 2013 in Thalner near Shirpur.

3 As told to me by Aaba Chaudhary, a filmmaker in an interview.



days of this cinema with its idealism has moved from music albums and 'socially relevant' cinema towards what appears to be an imitation of the Marathi and Bollywood movies. Each of these shifts is an attempt to constitute the screen. The first stage is fully dominated by the music album. Its success can be attributed to the urge of the people of Khandesh to see their own language and their culture on screen. The filmmakers' focus on this aspect led to the constitution of the screen in the first place. Whoever decided to make the movie, wrote the dialogues of the movie and many times acted as the lead and other side roles. The need to see themselves and their culture on the screen and the fact that they are denied representation in the mainstream led to their attempts to overcome its dominance. With control over most facets of filmmaking they attempted a representation of the culture of the Khandeshi people.

In one newspaper interview, Nasir Sheikh the very well-known as film maker of '*Malegaon Ka Superman*' says,<sup>4</sup>

What's wrong if the *Superman* theme or *Sholay*, *Shaan* were copied by us? The issue we are showing in our film is related to our region only. In the big budget movies they talk about one particular family. But in our movies we talk about the North Maharashtra and also it's very important to show our life because audience is only our people. No one else.

The International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in 2009 featured two films *Yeh Hain Malegaon ka Superman* and *Gabbarbhai MBBS* from this region, which got a lot of attention. The film *Yeh Hain Malegaon ka Superman* was a documentary on the phenomenon of filmmaking in Khadesh directed by filmmaker Faiza Ahmad Khan<sup>5</sup>. This film has led to a perception that the films are made only in Malegaon and the subsequent coverage by the very sympathetic media led to the coinage of terms like cinema from Malegaon or Mollywood. The Khandesh cinema screen might

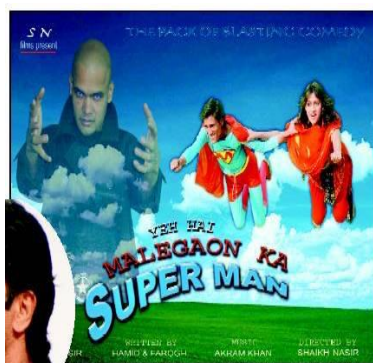
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4 Malegaon Ka Superman, Maharashtra Times, Aug 19, 2011, translation by the author.

5 The film *Supermen of Malegaon* was released as late as 2012.

be inspirational for outsiders but it is made for those who want to see themselves on screen. Even Nasir Sheikh, the director of many remake movies of Malegaon, says that, “the movie which I produce and direct is about Malegaon. It might be similar to the characters of Ghazni, Gabbar and Superman but the issues show are local. The Malegaon people want to see themselves and the issues around them only.”<sup>6</sup>

I would like to problematize the 'Supermen of Malegaon' and read the multi-layered structure of Khandeshi Cinema culture which includes the intersections of caste, class and gender strata's 'intercourses and representations'. As Gayatri Spivak's in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has powerfully confronted the representation concept of Gilles Deleuze. She was said, “Deleuze declares that there is no more representation, there is nothing but action”. Khandeshi Cinema is a production of collective mass who suffered their own day to day routines and found a way to consume their own 'leisure'<sup>7</sup>. Producing the 'Khandeshi Screen' with suffering and leisure itself is an action.



(Source: <http://rakeshsabbarwal.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/graphic1.jpg> )

The importance of understanding the cultural economy of Khandeshi people is not merely confined to financial transactions and profit making of culture industry but is closely tied to

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6 Malegaon Ka Superman, Editorial, Maharashtra Times, Aug 19, 2011.

7 'Leisure' is concept used by the culture theorist Theodore Adorno to explain 'Free Time'.

political articulations that emerge from this ‘underground’ economy. Khandeshi Cinema has no long history, but from the first album ‘*Dehati Lokgeete*’ they struggled for a ‘screen’. They are happy with the VCD-DVD’s, Video Corners and Memory Card distributions. The song ‘*Mumbai Gayi Mi Dilli Gayi*’ is one of the finest examples for saying that Khandeshi Cinema has reached every house of Khandesh. This song is a sort of an anthem of Khandesh. It catapulted Pushpa Thakur to the status of a matinee idol.



*(Source: Poster of songs catapulted girl of Khandeshi Cinema, Pushpa Thakur)*

While there are no actors who have achieved the status of stars, there are known faces. Due to the regular production there is a competition. This may be the reason why there are no stars. There is however an aspiration. Aaba Chaudhari says that, ‘language is motivation for making movies and albums’. Shubhangi Shinde looks up to Madhuri Dixit. The editor and film-maker Sukhdeo Mali says making money and showing his talent in front of people is the motivation to do this business. B Kumar Patil claims that, ‘cinema is finest resource to make change’ and for Bharat Saindane ‘acting and dance is life in his occupation.’ The challenges they felt in ordinary life is forgotten after someone reminds them that they are a star in Khandeshi Cinema. Kuldeep Bagul says that,

“I went to so many places to show my talent including Mumbai, Pune and Gujarat but no one recognized me, but with one negative role here, people think I am a real life

villain. The great actor Nilu Phule had a similar experience. Children run on seeing me screaming 'Paya wa may deepya una' (Lady run! Deepya is coming)''.<sup>8</sup>



*(Movie poster of 'Vishwasghat', sent by the actor Kuldeep Bagul by email)*

Priyanka said that, 'cinema is not only about the acting it is also about living life and feeling good about life.' The success of Khandeshi cinema has attracted capital from other giants. The big budget movie from Khandesh 'O Tunī Maay' by Vinod Chavhan was funded by T-Series Company and was released in 2013. As with other films it was not screened in any theatre. Other than the stars, it had all the highlights in Khandeshi cinema until then. It failed to capture the audience although it has to be seen if it will get any of their interest.



*(Source: Movie poster of 'O Tunī Maay', resource – Google Image)*

In movies like 'Dubrya No. 1', 'Dubrya Bhai MBBS', 'Lagey Raho Dubrya Bhai', 'Gadbadan Lagin', 'Man Dola Re Taal war', 'Natrangi Nar' etc the themes and content are somehow drawn from the

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<sup>8</sup> Kuldeep Bagul, gives interview to the researcher in Surat on 6th April 2013.

Hindi and Marathi movies but it's relation with topic and characterization is only about Khandesh.



*(Source: a snapshot from movie 'Dhudyabhai MBBS')*

For example '*Lagey Raho Dubrya Bhai*' of the '*Dubrya Series*' is about a dwarf and his struggle, but the structure of the story is drawn from '*Lagey Raho Munnabhai*'. In the Hindi film Sanjay Dutt, hero of the movie helps others to bring their happiness. In '*Lagey Raho Dubrya Bhai*' the lead person who is a dwarf tries to solve problems which are local. Mainstream movies like '*Munnabhai MBBS*' and '*Lagey Raho Munnabhai*' might be an inspiration for Khandeshi Cinema but the issues and the content of the movies are about the people of Khandesh. The '*Dubrya*' series, a collection of movies by Ashok Mahajan, tries to show the unlikely love story between one poor disabled person and the daughter of the feudal landlord from the village.

### **The Screen struggles**

The film industry grew in proportion due to the working class patronage. This patronage is based on a demand for what has often been called entertainment or is based on a claim that the working class needs an outlet and that somehow entertainment makes them forget their exertion. Bhai Bhagat (2001) writes:

Human beings are always after knowledge and entertainment. They endeavour to attain knowledge. Entertainment is not different. They want entertainment to rejuvenate

themselves. Singing, playing equipments and dancing are the major things for entertainment.

Apart from occupying the screen by force, films made in this region struggle to make it to theatre screens. They are however successful in selling the videos on CDs, DVDs, on local cable TV and now distributed as mobile phone videos which are loaded for a fee. To suggest that the people involved in making these films are making a profit is not the complete picture of this enterprise. That there is the earning of livelihood around it is the significant observation. But the practices of production are anything but mainstream. One of the major and prominent director-producer of 'Khandeshi Cinema' Aaba Chaudhari says that,

...Our resources are very limited and we work on a low budget. We cannot afford audition expenses. We select our actors randomly and start with the film making process since the story and the theme are already fixed... Our camera-men are very talented and have good understanding of the movie and shooting techniques. There are choreographers and music directors who are familiar with our culture. My job is to manage all these units and bring them together.

The almost tacky form of this does not distract the audience or patrons who appreciate this cinema because it is in their language and of their culture. The look and feel of this cinema has also been changing because of factors like competition and newer technology. But a significant theme I came across in my interviews is that the audience as patrons is given more importance than the 'stars' and prominent filmmakers.

Another insight obtained through these films is that there are several equations of power within this industry. According to Ashok Mahajan, a filmmaker, this cinema is only working for the marginalized people who never had other options of entertainment. But Bharat Saidane, a popular choreographer, actor of Khandeshi Cinema and winner of state level dance competition, maintains that:

Inside, the cinema is divided. Every industry is biased against the female worker. There are so many issues. Among them class and caste are prominent. Who the hell is going to stop these things? You are targeted if you speak up against these. So, no one takes up leadership to voice the concerns.

An interesting aspect is that a different sort of discrimination is practiced vis-a-vis gender. Most men who appear in non-prominent roles are not paid. The women are always paid. This points to a different interpretation of male camaraderie. Most men I spoke to claim that they worked for others out of 'friendship', never for money. Caste is also a prominent theme here. Most albums made in the name of Goddesses in Khandesh valorise the feudal upper castes. One of the actors, Bharat More says that,

It started from one of the early albums of Ahirani. 'Amana Gaav Na Patil' was an album made by an upper caste Patil and he only shows how Patil Community is prominent in every village. He gave chances to his relatives.

But it should also be noted that a good number of videos made depict Khandesh through the folk-songs which start as audio then video. These are liberal, address everyone and highlight problems and the issue of migration from Khandesh and are made by lower castes, especially from the Bhil and Scheduled Caste community.

The Malegaon reference was frozen when yesteryear actress Deepti Bhatnagar produced for one Indian television channel SAB TV a series called '*Malegaon Ka Chintu*' which is about Chintu an innocent man who lives in a village of Khandesh.





(Source: Reality show in Television called *Malegaon Ka Chintu*)

The series is described in the following manner on the Youtube channel:

“... [the film] captures the eventful life of Chintu... a lively young man who lives in Malegaon and loves only three things in life; his coat, bicycle and Pinky, the most beautiful girl in town. He is full of life with a heart of gold. He is very emotional and cannot see anyone in trouble. The show takes the viewers through different situations in Chintu’s life that make for a laughter riot.”

The series is shot on location, in Malegaon. The actors Al Amin and Ashwini Khairnar are widely acclaimed to be from Malegaon. A claim is also made on the status of the Malegaon cinema and director Nasir Shaikh's national and international fame.

In a certain sense this is to be seen as yet another constitution of the screen. Recently the team of '*Malegaon Ka Chintu*' finished their second series called '*Chintu Ban Gaya Gentleman*' which is a sort of a sequel to '*Malegaon Ka Chintu*'. In this Chintu is married and touring with his wife Pinky in India and abroad. The site claims that Chintu, “(b)eing a small town fellow, has reactions while exploring different countries/cities and culture. [These] are extraordinary and create lot of comical situations.” In a sense the channel has married the genre of destination TV content, popular on TV and a specialty of the producer Deepthi Bhatnagar to the supposedly immutable personality of Chintu - a small man from Malegaon. While the makers played on the newfound fame of Malegaon ka Superman, they make no effort to either utilize the idea of region or its language and instead draw merely on the name of Malegaon and produce humour through a



series of gags. In more ways than one this is an act of silencing of the screen that emerged through the enterprise of the people of Khandesh. While the foray into mainstream television was through an act of silencing, the music video and feature films continue to flourish. There is now a sense among those associated with the cinema of this region that the time is ripe to increase the scale and extent of this cinema. One of the actors of Khandeshi Cinema Kuldeep Bagul said,

There is need to compete the mainstream cinema. They made audience addicted to a staple diet of love, drama and a scattered story which doesn't have connection with the goings on in the society. And the continuation of these trope themes is unabated.

It also seems that the films that attempted to bend rules and stray away from tried and tested formula, have been doing well. Ravi Nikam, who is preparing for the UPSC and temporarily working in school as a teacher, says that:

We need to appreciate our language. The mainstream looks to us and appreciates our work. So we have to encourage our Khandeshi filmmakers. Who else will sustain this?

Indeed the audience is the most important part of this phenomenon which ensures growth and sustainability. The enterprise is increasing in complexity and range. What were devotional and folk songs albums are now videos on all social issues. The case of Khandeshi cinema brings back the question of patronage practices.

The entry of giant production houses is another prominent event which is making an 'industry' out of this enterprise. Companies like T-Series, Ultra, Wings, Krunal and Shemaroo have entered in Khandesh to make money. Recently a film made by T-Series *Malegaon mein Gadbad Ghotala* was a success through distribution of CDs/DVDs of the film. The biggest budget so far for a film was more than 20 lakhs for *O Tuni Maay* which was produced by T-series. This points to a possibility for this form of production to become a norm since it seems to be setting a standard; but this claim can threaten the existing media ecosystem. It is a threat for the characters of the

screen constituted by the Khandesh films and is very different from the silver and golden screens of Film and Television respectively.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I maintain that the approach to any culture as high or low is counterproductive. Creative processes and in this case social processes are to be seen as processes of resistance whose forms are dynamic. New production methodologies are possible because of technological developments and more interestingly how these are used in unexpected ways. What is assumed to be the default production mode is a hierarchical notion and needs to be more subjective. The conventional rule is to see movies on the screen in the theatre, but Khandesh Cinema has broken that condition and has challenged the notion of the screen. With the equations of caste, class and gender, the film-makers of Khandeshi Cinema come out with a good number of films and albums made with the help of their 'friends' and 'celebrities' and 'patrons'.

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# **Fantasizing Desire and Emulating Desirability**

## **Queer Spectatorship and Popular Hindi Cinema**

Aditi Maddali

### **Abstract**

When it comes to love in India, popular Hindi cinema is the hero of the story. Whatever the genre of the movie, popular Hindi cinema almost always has an underlying love story. The form of the cinematic text with elaborate stories, songs, drama, action and comedy elements, allows for multiple subversive readings. While it appears to be innocently portraying heteronormative content, it has its pockets of transgression.

This paper is however not the story of queering the text, but of identifying and exploring the queer eye. The seemingly heterosexual text is not just catering to the assumed 'normal' spectator but also to a section that lies on the other side of 'normal'. Through various conversations on love, desire, gender, sexuality and popular Hindi cinema, the paper looks at the representation and reception of ideas around gender from popular Hindi cinema. It explores the practices and adaptation of gender identities from cinema to understand how emulation can also act as a correction of non-normative gender practices to align them along the 'normal'. Furthermore, it traces how these rigid notions of 'normal' are constantly subverted by the queer spectator and identifies their individual preferences of representation. The conversation moves on to the fantasy of the desired

and how the phantasmic nature of cinema allows for a subversive reading for the queer spectator.

Keywords: Queer audiences, Emulation, Fantasy, Popular Hindi Cinema.

## Introduction

It had to be Amitabh Bachchan because it was the 80s and I had seen *Sholay* at that time. And I became obsessed with *Sholay*. I'd seen that movie 30 times. I think I got a little irritated of the romances because they (her friends) would take me and they would start crying and then I would be the only one not crying. And then everyone would be leaning on me and I would get irritated. I remember even imitating Amitabh. I wanted to smoke because Amitabh was smoking in *Sholay*. And I did. I loved Madhuri too but I never wanted to be her, I always wanted to be the other and I could never think of emulating her.

- Rish, 34, Animal trainer

Rish describes her love for the heroes and heroines of popular Hindi cinema. She is clear that she liked Amitabh Bachchan and loved Madhuri Dixit among other contemporaries but she only emulated Bachchan. Social and economic norms have decided that women like romance and men prefer action cinema, but that is for a binary world. Rish, on the other hand, grew up being the biggest fan of Kung Fu films till she discovered Bachchan's angry-young-man genre of films. Taking a look at the genre of films, Raj Rao in his essay *Memories Pierce the Heart*, talks about how Bachchan's angry-young-man themed films were revered among men and hence theatres became homosocial spaces for audiences to not only connect with the hero on the screen, but also with one another in the dark spaces of the room, away from the eyes of society (Rao 2008). However, one may argue that at a time that the angry-young-man themed films were popular, women's access to public spaces was minimal and was validated by work. It would have been difficult for women like Rish to watch Bachchan's movies in the theatre.

This paper delves into the representation and reception of the ideas around gender and the imagination of romance from popular Hindi cinema. The seemingly heterosexual cinematic text is not just catering to the assumed 'normal' spectator but also to a section that lies on the other side of 'normal'. The paper attempts to steer away from queering the text, and move towards identifying and exploring the queer<sup>1</sup> eye through various conversations on love, desire, gender, sexuality and popular Hindi cinema. For understanding the relationship of the spectator and the screen, the much nuanced method of media ethnography was used. In this, I went about by primarily focusing on conducting unstructured interviews. The interviews were themed around the cinema watching practices of the interviewees, directly related to the screen; the cinema cultures that they carry outside of the screen; their imagination of the idea of desire or love and factors that are directly associated with it like gender and sexuality and negotiation with the content of popular Hindi cinema. While I did not get to do any participatory observation, i.e., actually physically watch films with any of my interviewees, the in-depth interviews were personalized and involved much memory building in order to recall their anecdotes, experiences, fantasies and practices that they had indulged in from their childhood. This also gives a clearer picture of the social and ideological setting of their upbringing vis-à-vis their current location. This exercise also made it feasible to contextualize their responses with the changes in technology and the socio-political and economic conditions of the country. I interviewed ten people, five of whom identified themselves as lesbian women and five who identify as gay men, at that time. I approached them in Mumbai between March 2013 and December 2014. I chose Mumbai for reasons apart from access. It is one of the more queer friendly cities in the country. Moreover, with the popular Hindi cinema industry residing here, escaping it is not possible.

The age of the interviewees falls under the range of 23 years to 40 years. All of them come from middle to upper middle class households and were residing in Mumbai at the time of the

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<sup>1</sup> I derive the idea of queer from Narrain and Bhan (2005) who point out how the term is not only inclusive of the identities of the communities that identify themselves as gender and sexual minorities but also aims to deconstruct the larger notions of heteropatriarchy, institutions like marriage and family that function around it and its intrinsic relationship with societal forces such as caste, class and religion.

interview. Most of the respondents have migrated to Mumbai for educational or work purposes. All of them have at least a Masters' Degree, except Zal who has done Engineering. All of them, except for Arya, actively participate in the queer movement. Zal is Sikh and the others are born into Hindu families. Minal, Rishi, Diyan, and Parul insist on not affiliating themselves to any religious thought and tradition. Kabir was born Hindu but now follows the Buddhist faith. Similarly, all of them belong to privileged<sup>2</sup> castes or admit to not being adversely affected by their caste status because of their class status.

### **Beyond the Binary**

Our everyday lives are filled with agents of gendering that define the accepted notions of gender, reinforce them and correct gender-deviant behavior. Judith Butler, in her canonical work *Gender Trouble*, explains the preservation of heteronormativity as a simultaneous preservation of gender hierarchy. She says, "it is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations" (Butler 1999: xii). Therefore, the most effective ways of safeguarding heteronormativity is by 'policing gender' (Ibid. xii). Valocchi, in his paper, *Not Yet Queer Enough* talks about the creation of categorical identities which are reinforced by the modes of institutions that reinforce them (media, other forms of socializing), in order to maintain the hegemony of gender. He adds that as an addition to social and cultural histories, people acquire fixed notions of identities and perform them "with a fairly predictable relationship between the subjective awareness of one's identity, the behaviors that correspond to or enact the identity, and the social institutions that enforce this identity" (Valocchi 2005: 754). These institutions work towards the maintenance of heteronormativity because it maintains the society's power structure of gender hierarchy. Therefore, as Valocchi

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the lack of access, I wasn't able to transgress class and caste lines. While I depended on social networking to approach the respondents, it also reflects the nature of the movement and its reach, to some extent. Hence, the respondents are all English speaking, urban, middle-class (onwards), physically able, educated film buffs, who are a part of the struggle for love.

points out, social institutions are constantly at work to maintain predetermined notions of identity based on social norms. These in turn distance us from the idea that gender, an essential part of identity formation, is not natural and rigid. One such premier social institution that is responsible for the maintenance of the gender binary is cinema. It repeatedly reproduces codes of heteropatriarchal norms and positively reinforces them through the cinematic text, hence maintaining heteronormativity and preserving gender hierarchy. While cinema barely represents non-normative characters out of the fear of breaking the binary, whenever it has attempted to do so, it usually ends up portraying homosexual characters as the breakers of normativity. The homosexuality that is being represented in popular Hindi cinema today is informed by economic power relations and the politics of hegemony where homosexuality is defined around the terms of heteronormativity. On one hand the queer community is depicted as secondary, villainous or comical, or as deviants with derogatory connotations, while on the other hand the ‘image’ that is constantly being made visible of the community is of a particular kind— the effeminate gay and, if represented at all, the butch lesbian.<sup>3</sup> These new identities constructed for representation also derive themselves from heteronormativity.

### **Gender in Cinema**

The main characters in popular Hindi cinema are usually represented as hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine and these notions are reinforced through continuous reward and punishment. When gender hierarchy and heteronormativity are seen to be under threat, gender policing begins to operate. Commonly, the hero, who shows no deviance from the prescribed masculine behavior, falls in love with the heroine, who also performs conventionally acceptable feminine behavior. As long as they comply with these levels of gender conformity, they are rewarded with love, marriage and family. On the other hand, deviance from such behavior often results in

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<sup>3</sup> Lesbians are rarely portrayed in popular Hindi cinema. Butch women are usually portrayed as desexualized or undesirable women.



unrequited love, undesirability, desexualized secondary characterization or is represented in comical or villainous ways in the film. Hence, cinema constantly gives out strong messages of gender conformism and sexual normativity.

For me *Main Hoon Na* was all about Sushmita Sen, I totally have the hots<sup>4</sup> for her. But I couldn't help notice that there is a shift in Amrita's character. This happens in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* also. I remember liking Kajol until she was feminized. The other movie I can't help bring here is that one with the irritating ending—*Dil Bole Hadippa* with Rani Mukherjee. She's in drag, playing cricket as a boy in the movie.

- Rish, 34, Animal Trainer

Rish talks about how she felt that if she was Anjali (Kajol), from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), who was a tomboy, she may not find love. In the movie, Anjali's desired one Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) fell for a more feminine girl, Tina (Rani Mukherjee). Moreover, in the second half of the film, Anjali undergoes complete transformation from being a tomboy to blossoming into a saree-clad damsel with long hair. It is after the feminization that her desired lover Rahul begins to notice her and fall in love with her. Similarly, in *Main Hoon Na* (2004), Sanjana (Amrita Rao) consciously undergoes a 'make-over' from being an undesirable 'tomboy' into a hyper-feminine back-less blouse and saree-clad woman, only to knock her desired one, Lucky, (Zayed Khan) off his feet. He automatically notices her and begins to fall in love with her after the transformation while he considered her his best friend before that. In *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009), Veera (Rani Mukherjee) is a dancer who is passionate about cricket. She is denied membership to the cricket team that was to play against Pakistan for the 'Aman Cup' because she is not a man. She auditions for the team dressed as a man, Veer, and gets in. During the course of the movie, the coach (Shahid Kapoor) discovers that Veera is a woman in drag and accuses her of deception. During the final match, when the team is on the verge of losing, Veera goes onto the field as Veer to win the match after which she unveils her drag and talks about women's exclusion from sports in India. Zal talks

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<sup>4</sup> Sexually attracted.

about the dissemination of strong messages of having to follow gender norms to be socially accepted.

In Bollywood, the thing is, people just stereotype very badly. I still remember how there is no clear way to tell someone that you are gay. The first image that comes to their mind is Bobby Darling. Because in films *wahi dikhaya gaya* (that is only what is shown) and Bobby Darling is not even gay! That is what happened when I came out to my parents also.

- Zal, 25, Management Consultant

With no reference to give to his parents and the lack of an alternative language, Zal tells his mother he is gay and her first reaction is that he doesn't look or dress like Bobby Darling.<sup>5</sup> The queer community is seldom represented in popular Hindi cinema and more often than not, they occupy the roles of the scorned deviants- the villains or the comic characters. They are used to add to the element of 'entertainment' of the film and are usually depicted as overtly effeminate. The only representation of deviancy from the gender binary is that of the effeminate 'gay', the third gender and the butch woman, who is either desexualized or is the undesirable one because of her gender. It is also necessary to note here that due to the lack of familiarity, there exists an ambiguity in distinguishing between non-normative gender and sexual deviance. In the story about homosexuality in *Bombay Talkies* (2013), the father calls his son a *chakka* (a term used for transgenders) when he learns that he is gay.

Gender and sexuality have a strange relationship with each other. While on one hand, heterosexuality is one of the reasons for the maintenance of the conventions of gender binaries, sexuality and gender do not have a causal relationship with one another. In fact, as Judith Butler puts it, "gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix. Whereas it is important to emphasize that forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is

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<sup>5</sup> Bobby Darling is a trans woman who has been one of the very few characters who has been playing queer roles in cinema. Most of her roles have been to invoke comedy through homophobia.

nevertheless crucial to maintain” (Butler 1993: 27). Therefore, as discussed earlier, the intricate relationship between gender and sexuality often leads to misidentification where they are mixed with one another. Hence, it is taken for granted that gay men are effeminate or effeminate men are gay. This leaves a compulsion among heterosexual men to perform their masculinity in order to prove their heterosexuality—a phenomenon often reinforced through cinema. Here, I am reminded of Zal’s only disappointing moment in his latest favorite movie *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania* (2013). He has watched the movie over twenty times for his favorite actor Varun Dhawan. He tells me that he is so engrossed watching Varun that there are times when he is not paying attention to Alia Bhatt, the female lead actor, in the movie. But the one thing that troubles him about the movie is the depiction of a homosexual character in the film. He says, “The guy is shown very macho and all that and then they tell *kei* (that) find out one flaw in him and then they say the flaw is that he is gay. That is so wrong! Especially coming from a person (Karan Johar) who is talked about to be one from the community.”

From the 2000s, there has been a shift in the depiction of masculinity. Popular films like *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), and *Kai Po Che!* (2013) stand testimony to the increasing metrosexuality in popular Hindi cinema. Singh, in his article *Visibly Queer Bollywood* says, “While queer in its own way, *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) gave us male characters who wore their emotional masculinity (still heterosexual) on their sleeves while being in touch with their feminine side” (Singh 2011). While *Dil Chahta Hai* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* demonstrate a high degree of Western influence, *Kai Po Che!* does not distance itself culturally. Characters with an emotional side, also often played by actors like Ranbir Kapoor tend to question the erstwhile ideas of masculinity. However, even though the way masculinity is represented is undergoing some change, it is nonetheless not to question it. By the end of the film, masculinity, at the level of heteropatriarchal structures, continues to be maintained. Can these films of homosocial bonding be called the new-age buddy films? Do these films also, hence, have subversive

potential? Moreover, the male body has also undergone transformation with respect to how it is presented - it is now increasingly on display for consumption for the spectator.

## **Emulation**

Minal talks about how she had always been a tomboy and the fact that it was easy to be one when she was young. The problem began once she started growing up. Unlike many young girls she grew up with, she didn't have *that* actress, from the films, whom she wanted to be like. For her, emulating film stars, especially women, was out of question. If she ever would emulate a film star, it would be a male one. However, looking up to film stars was beyond young Minal because her family values didn't allow her to take Bollywood seriously. She says, "I never aspired to look like or be like those heroes. I was a tomboy in my own way." Even when it came to participating in "girls' dances", as she puts it, she always preferred being the boy in the scene. However, she always had to balance it out by playing a few female roles, to keep her parents happy.

Emulation is one of the primary forms of learning. People emulate their idols all the time. Fan cultures thrive on emulating favorite characters and recreating stories. Emulation comes from the desire to aspire to be what one sees. Since the representations of characters usually typify the normative social codes, this often becomes a way to learn normativity or unlearn subversion.

Being gay I'm sure it was primarily the looks that they had at that point in time. Even with Varun and Shahid, it was their looks. That's the first thing to catch my eye. I remember wearing denim jackets like Shahid used to when *Ishq Vishq* had come out. I may not go forward and buy clothes like Varun's, like I did with Shahid but I am sure his dressing style influences mine.

- Zal, 25, Management Consultant

The thing Aamir did *Aati Kya Khandala*, I did that a lot. The thing with the match stick really appealed to me. The only other thing was imitating the actors smoking and because

Amitabh was smoking in *Sholay*, I also wanted to smoke. I did smoke and imitate all these things.

- Rish, 34, Animal Trainer

Zal talks about how his fashion sense may be derived from his favorite actor Varun Dhawan and Shahid Kapoor, when he was younger. Similarly, Diyan had Kajol's haircut from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* because she admired her "cheerful and active presence" on the screen, which was unlike most of her contemporaries who Diyan thought were porcelain dolls. Diyan, like Rish, disappointedly mentions,

"By the second half of Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, she became all conforming, as if once you fall in love you become all conforming, which I erase. Even today, I watch the first half and skip the second half"

-Diyan, 40, Pursuing M.Phil. in Women's Studies.

Diyan expresses her love for the smaller, secondary roles that tomboys play in films. These are women who go unnoticed. She also talks about her phase in life when she used to wear pants which had 'Aflatoon' written on them, like Akshay Kumar used to wear and net ganjis (vests) in bright colors, like Hrithik Roshan did in the early 90s. While some copied fashion and style, some others like Rish, adopted habits from actors. Rish admired Amitabh Bachchan from his angry-young-man phase so much that she incorporated similar characters in the plays she used to write for her friends. She also learned how to smoke, like he did in *Sholay*. She even tried the trick with the match stick that Amir Khan does in his popular song *Aati kya Khandala*<sup>6</sup> from the movie *Ghulam* (1998).

Emulation can range from copying physical appearances to adapting behavior. The song and dance sequences are the most consciously mimicked parts of films. Celebrations during festivals and social events, in several parts of the country, often include dance sequences which are

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<sup>6</sup> *Aati Kya Khandala*, translated to 'Will you come to *Khandala*?' is a song that is famous for a particular sequence where Aamir Khan sets off a matchstick using his tongue, to impress the heroine.

choreographed like the ones in the film. The latest fashion trends in the market also resonate styles from popular Hindi cinema.

I always emulated Sridevi. I didn't merely emulate her, I celebrated her!. I used to dress up as Nagin<sup>7</sup> and when there was no one at home, I used to do this nagin, *nagina* kind of a step<sup>8</sup>, play the beam *waala* music (snake charmer's flute) and the moment the *dhhol* (percussion instrument) would make the *tadadadhin* sound, I would get up and go running to my mother, wherever she was- bedroom, bathroom, I would go to her and do one *dhasne* (bite) ka scene. I was in awe of Sridevi, so much that I know all the dialogues of *Chaalbaaz* (1989) and *Chaandni* (1989) by heart.

- Harish, 35 years, Director Event Partnerships of an NGO in Mumbai

Children are often encouraged to imitate the fashion of actors of their assigned gender. However, once they start copying actors from genders other than their assigned gender, society operates corrective measures to realign this 'disorder'. Additionally, it is considered to be less of a taboo for young girls to be 'tomboys' since it is passed off as a 'phase' that they will eventually grow out of, to become more feminine. Young boys, on the other hand, are discouraged to show signs deviating from masculinity. They not only must look like men and dress like men but also behave like men. Kabir also recounts how his father used to constantly correct his walking style and was worried about Kabir's fascination with pink lips. He kept reminding him that he was a boy and "boys don't have pink lips".

### **Sexuality and Gender**

Though she is butch and confesses to play the role of the 'man' in her romantic relationships, Minal never emulated a hero nor felt like a man. Even though there may be a slight shift in Bollywood's notion of gender, there continues to be a clear distinction of what constitutes 'man'

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to Sridevi's character in the film *Nagina* (1986) where she is a polymorphous snake.

<sup>8</sup> Snake dance inspired from the movie.

and ‘woman’. According to her, this creation of binary and polarity spills over into the idea of love where the man is the pursuer, who initiates love and the woman reluctantly falls in love. She believes that she probably acquired her notions of love and gender roles from these representations of love she has been watching in films. She says:

I definitely knew I was never the heroine. I felt like I was more the hero type. I still feel that. But I didn’t want to become like the heroes. I prefer to say not-feminine rather than masculine but at no point do I move from the gender I feel. I was assigned gender female at birth and that’s how I feel. It never ever crossed my mind that I could be a man. Even when I was extremely homophobic and was in denial about liking women I knew that didn’t make me a man. It didn’t occur to me. I’m still a woman only.

Deriving from Gayle Rubin’s *Thinking Sex* (1984) and Sedgwick’s (1993) notions of the relationship between gender and sexuality, Butler asserts, “If to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man; and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever it is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an imaginary logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability” (Butler 1993: 28). This also implies, she adds, that it is not necessary “if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender” (Ibid. 28). Thus, gender and sexuality are not structurally bound, i.e., there is no determining hierarchical relationship between the two, which in turn implies that fluidity in sexuality is associated with the destabilization of the rigidity of binaries in gender.

While Minal talks about how she likes to be the pursuer in her relationships, she extends her thoughts saying that hasn’t always been the case. She says, “I also am pursued and made to feel special. Nothing is fixed, it happens both ways. I think once we break out of this heterosexual man, woman, marriage, child, love should be like this, desire should be like this, sex should be like this, these are the man’s roles and woman’s roles, then it’s really very colorful and the more you open up your mind, the more you’ll see.” She introspects about her affinity for hyper feminine women and supposes that it’s probably because she is allowing herself to be a certain

way. She always thought this dream-like hyper feminine woman in a chiffon saree<sup>9</sup> is only in the movies and doesn't exist for real. She realizes her reservation and feels she must be more open. She says, "I've been with women who are more masculine than I am, I've also been with women who are quite androgynous and my gender has also moved from long hair, nail polish and all that to being more butch. In the last ten years I have seen a wider spectrum and that has made me question not just Bollywood but also heteronormativity overall."

Rish, on the other hand, recounts how she found feminism when she was fifteen years old. After a lot of reading, she began to believe she was born in the wrong body. She says that reading Judith Butler made her realize that gender was a social construct and hence decided to reconstruct herself to her assigned gender. She says, "I thought I must socially construct myself as a woman and that's what I started doing. I started to grow my hair. If I show you a picture right now, of how I looked, you'll be really surprised because I was a complete tomboy! It took me a long time to try and construct myself as a woman." "If you were reading Butler, why did you think you had to follow the construction?" I asked. She replied:

At that time, the second and third wave of feminism was all like you want to be male because you want male privilege. That's something that I definitely didn't want! By then I had also seen a lot of instances of violence against women. Especially where I lived, men would beat up their wives. I had seen enough to be upset with patriarchy even for my own self. I remember I used to cry with anger because my grandparents' friends used to ask my brother, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and they used to tell me, "Don't grow so tall, or you won't find a man to marry you." That used to really upset me. Then I started second guessing myself and saying that I want to be a man because I want to have all this. That's what made me try and become a woman. I tried it for a long time, from fifteen to nineteen I just struggled with my gender.

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<sup>9</sup> In popular Hindi cinema, the feminine heroine is often shown wearing a flowing chiffon saree and this is intended to add to her sexual allure.



## **Fantasies, Love and Popular Hindi Cinema**

*Not all men are gazing erotically at women, some women are gazing erotically at women, some women who are gazed upon look like women, some men gazed upon by men look like women.*

- Sue-Ellen Case, 1995

Cinema is neither a mirror nor a window, neither purely reflective nor perfectly translucent [...] it mixes opacity with a certain semi-transparency and mirror-like diffraction of the world outside. It captures images and sounds from the material world, but reassembles them into new configurations to produce new or different meanings (Ivakhiv 2011: 203).

Cinema is a space that traverses through space and time to provide an experience of phantasm through the projection of 'real' spaces that undergo cinematic treatment. Foucault, in his canonical work *Of Other Spaces* demonstrates how the cinematic experience is heterotopic where on a two-dimensional screen, there is a projection of three-dimensional worlds. According to him, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1967). Ivakhiv (2011) in his essay, *Cinema of the Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise of Film as Heterotopia* illustrates how these spaces of phantasms are created through visual images that allow spectators to experience these spaces without actually physically being there or enable the re-imagination of these spaces through the mix of experience and memory. "Visual images can move us in this way not because they harbor a mysterious power over us, but because, through carrying and condensing meanings in forms that involve us emotionally, they mobilize a power that is already ours" (Ivakhiv 2011: 191). Hence these heterotopias permeate through multiple dimensions of space and time enabling the spectator to experience, at one level, fantasy, but also a rupture from reality.

Songs on the other hand, within the diegetic space of the film text, are spectacles of further escape from time-space continuum of the cinematic text. They are extraordinary para-narratives that accessorize and enhance the affect value of the larger cinematic experience. Their farther escape from 'real' time and space enables them to be pockets of rupture from the limitations of reality. This makes them optimal spaces which allow for the expression of pleasure, desire and fantasy. This characteristic feature of songs permits them to be the quintessential spaces of desire and fantasy, subverting reality, even when the song is removed from its diegetic space.

Audiences desire to take the place of characters on the screen, emulate them in their everyday lives and also fantasize romancing them. Lead characters in popular Hindi cinema are often so extravagantly depicted in 'normal' life situations that they become the space to imagine the possibility to desire them, acquire them, and fantasize about them.

Kabir tells me that he has sexual fantasies for a lot of Hindi film heroes. His sexual fantasies are usually of muscular men of the film industry- Salman Khan, Saqib Saleem and John Abraham. Though he is a friend of his favorite actor John Abraham, he can't stop fantasizing about 'John's perfect body'. According to him, actors possess such perfect bodies and also display them so that people fantasize about them and "that's why they look hot and better than most of the *janta* (common people). That's something which you want- a perfect body and that perfect lover." John Abraham is a popular icon among the queer community, especially among gay men. His fan following got upgraded after he played one of the lead characters in *Dostana* where he pretended to be gay and in love with Abhishek Bachchan's character in order to share a home in Miami. John has however never endorsed the community in public. Harish is also an admirer of John and considers him to be his '*tan badan ka swami*' (god of sexual desire). He says, "For me it's not between your legs but between the arms, the heart matters to me the most. And I think John has a beautiful heart, I know him personally also."

“When *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* came out, I remember, everyone loved the film for Shahrukh and I loved the film for Kajol. I remember at that time I was fascinated with the way her lips moved, the way she would play with her hair, her dialogue delivery. I used to day dream about her all the time, of being an assistant to her”, says Minal. According to her, the fantasies were barely sexual. They were more to do with watching Kajol and wanting to be with her. She went on to watch *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* four times in the theatre, something her parents had never let her do before. I asked her why she dreamt of being their assistant and not their lover, to which Minal says:

That was the thing! I didn’t want to be the hero ever and I of course definitely didn’t want to be the heroine. In *Darr*, Juhi Chawla did quite a few flesh showing scenes. I remember in some scene, it starts raining and she gets wet and she removes some blouse or something and I was like woowww! Without recognizing it! But I have had those memories from that day and I have words for them now, feeling sexual arousal. I was like ‘Oh my god! Look at that woman’. I’ve dreamt of being an assistant or her friend or flat-mate, where I can just help them with their day and just be around them.

She recalls that she was around fifteen years old when she spent endless hours day-dreaming about her two favorite actors. She never realized they were sexual fantasies, as she puts it “This lust that you just want to be close”, until she reminisced about it much later. In a conversation with her parents, who have accepted her sexuality, Minal tells them about her adoration for Kajol and Juhi to which her mother exclaims, “Like ‘Heroine *ke saath*?! (with a heroine?!)” Minal laughs and says, “that reaction is not because of the sexuality part but because it (the fantasy) is with a Bollywood heroine!”

Like Minal, Rish also imagined meeting and talking with her favorite heroine Hema Malini. She says she began liking Hema more because she starred in *Sholay* with Amitabh and then was

fascinated by Basanti<sup>10</sup> “because she was very spunky, with the horse—which really appealed to me.” Both of them realize that they have a pattern in the kind of women they like to emulate and it is usually the ones with greater agency in the cinematic text. This takes us to Senthoran Raj's essay, *Igniting Desires: Politicizing Queer Female Subjectivities in Fire* (2012) where he draws on Judith Butler to elicit queer desire by breaking gender norms. He says that gender norms are ‘troubled’ when a man is dressed as a woman (or vice versa); the ‘performativity of gender’ is reiterated leading to the ‘denaturalizing of sex’. Thereby, “the fantasy or gender play, is more than a psychoanalytic attempt to recuperate heterosexuality, it is a space for articulating queer pleasures and gender masquerades through atypical Bollywood 'drag' performances” (Raj 2012).

### **Beyond the Male Gaze**

At this point it would be necessary to invoke Laura Mulvey's acclaimed work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey talks about ‘scopophilia’ where one derives pleasure from ‘seeing’. She draws her argument from Freud’s understanding of ‘scopophilia’, who says that in the case of children there is pleasure in wanting to see what is ‘forbidden and private’. Mulvey takes this forward by saying that “Although the instinct is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (Mulvey 1975: 381).

Though she elucidates that the woman is ‘represented as a spectacle’ for the male gaze, it will be necessary to complicate Mulvey’s argument in this context where the relationship between the spectator and the character on screen is breaking the gender binary of man and woman. Moreover, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that the queer pleasure desired from popular Hindi cinema doesn’t completely rely on the audience. While the cinematic text has the ability to bear

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<sup>10</sup> Basanti is a feisty female character in *Sholay* played by Hema Malini. In the movie, she makes a living by driving horse-carts.

multiple meanings, they may not always have to be ‘seen’ differently. Gayatri Gopinath in her essay talks about subversive readings in the subgenres of cinema and points out that to ‘see’ same-sex desire there may not necessarily be a need to have a transgressive text. Using popular cinema like *Hum Aapke hain Kaun* (1994), *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Utsav* (1984), etc, she discovers that the text leaves out ‘pockets’ for subversive readings. These pockets are usually found in subgenres of films in themes around homo-social spaces, where “these spaces allow numerous possibilities for intense female friendship to slip into queer desire” (Gopinath 2008: 285). She says, “these representations are useful for queer purposes in that they hint at other possibilities of gender and sexualities that fall outside the confines of traditional heterosexuality” (Ibid. 292). While, these representations of queer desire are not overtly intended to show any transgression from the heterosexual norms, she also notes that these representations may not be positive, hence they “also tend to shut down these (subversive readings) almost as quickly as they raise them” (Ibid. 292).

Kabir and Harish’s fantasies are more to do with the physical appearance of the hero, their ‘sex appeal’ as Kabir puts it. While the gaze of the audience is in question, it is also necessary to understand that there has been a shift in the representation of gender, especially for the heroes of Hindi cinema. Charu Gupta (2007), using the two popular Hindi cinema texts *Saawariya* (2007) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007) talks about how the objects of desire on display are the heroes and not the heroines. The films are centered on the consumption of their bodies and the men are not depicted as hyper masculine. This reliance on the male hero for commercial success “directly addresses this fascination and takes care to present the star as both an object of sexual desire and a figure of identification” (Muraleedharan 2005: 77). According to him, the “act of seeing and deriving pleasure needs to be seen as a dialectic with an ever-slipping trajectory of signification. The viewing subject, constituted as *he* is at the conjuncture of a variety of discursive formations,

also functions as a text in his own right, sliding the signification and pleasure of cinema on to the ambiguous realms of inter-textuality” (Ibid. 76-77).

## Conclusion

The pervasiveness of popular Hindi cinema and its narrow and stereotypical depiction of gender and sexual identities have repercussions greater than those explored. This paper isn’t suggesting that these responses serve as prototypes for the queer community, the enquiry is merely an initiation into identifying and acknowledging differences in perception of gender identification, emulation and fantasizing, which is directly linked to representation. While on one hand, most of the people interviewed for this study express distress and anger towards the representation of the queer community, like Zal in the above comment, it would be interesting to interject this with Harish’s response:

The pansy gay man is also a part of my community. So every time a pansy gay man is shown, are we going to get up and start screaming that, “*Ye stereotyping hai!* (This is stereotyping)” *Tob uska representation kab hoga?* (Then when will he get represented?) Normalizing *humare dimaag main kab hoga?* (When will be normalize it in our heads?) People cannot always make a PSA. Gay people are normal people and gay people also like to have fun. Every joke on a Sardar is a straight joke. Do you think they are trivializing heterosexuality by making straight-sex jokes? Do we call them straight jokes? Why can’t we laugh at ourselves sometimes? Why is it considered stereotyping- sometimes it’s done in a caricature-ish way, but there are times when it’s okay.

This response is a reminder that there is not just one way of seeing cinema. However, Harish talks about how even this minimal representation, of whatever form is good for visibility. While his opinion might differ radically from those of the others in the study, it is necessary at this

juncture to realize that being critical of popular Hindi cinema is not to diminish its ability to entertain but to be critical of what is considered entertainment.

Queer visibility may have increased in popular Hindi cinema. By doing it in formulaic methods, it restricts the imagination of the audience, denying acknowledgement of the existence of any representation. Since the representation of sexual minorities in the public sphere is minimal, agents like cinema play a major role in determining perceptions about the community. Hence, the problem doesn't merely lie in how the effeminate gay man is represented but also lies in the fact that, more often than not, only the effeminate gay man gets represented.

Note: This paper is a part of my MA dissertation titled, 'New Ways of Seeing- *Same-sex desire and popular Hindi Cinema*'; from the school of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS, Mumbai (2015).

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## Looking into the Progressive: *Yakshi's* Undoing

Sudha.K.F

### Abstract

The archive for this paper is early Malayalam “progressive” cinema and the experiences of modernity it constitutes. This paper will attempt and locate “progressive” Malayalam cinema of the 50s and 70s as an archive; as a historical method, that helps us write histories of the disaggregate experience of modernity that gets constituted in the Kerala public sphere, through different socio-cultural formations. One key site of analysis is the melodramatic form of this cinema which is in tension with the ideological programme of rationality, which is privileged in the narratives. This paper as a preliminary attempt to tease out these points using one movie which best captures these two trajectories of enquiry, called ‘Yakshi’. Hence this paper attempts to extract the variable and contradictory meanings of the filmic text which emerges from the elements in the screen itself.

Keywords: Malayalam “Progressive” Cinema, *Yakshi*, Melodrama, Disaggregate Modernity.

### Cinema as Historical Method: “Progressive” Malayalam Cinema

In writing about popular culture in Kerala, the superior/”progressive” nature of cinema of the region has always been a cornerstone for judging the merits of Malayalam cinema. This kind of

writing/scholarship discursively produced the category of “progressive cinema” as the ideal in the history of Malayalam cinema, with an investment in “realism” and a “progressive” modernity, even while the narrative is largely governed by melodramatic conventions. It is a category which was first used by critics, scholars and writers to talk about a certain kind of Malayalam cinema from the 50s to 70s, when a lot of “progressive literature” was made into films, and writers, directors, screenplay writers, lyricists, music directors either belonged to the Communist Party or had affiliations with its cultural movements like the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC).<sup>1</sup> These films have been analysed by various critics to beckon towards the progressive nature of the films by talking about the narrativisation of class/caste inequalities, like in *Neelakuyil*<sup>2</sup> and other such films of that particular period.

The archive for this paper is early Malayalam “progressive” cinema and the experiences of modernity it constitutes. This paper will try and locate “progressive” Malayalam cinema of the 50s and 70s as an archive; as a historical method, that helps us write histories of the disaggregate experience of modernity that gets constituted in the Kerala public sphere, through different socio-cultural formations. One key site of analysis is the melodramatic form of this cinema which is in tension with the ideological programme of rationality, which is privileged in the narratives. This paper due to space constraints would refer to one film titled *Yakshi*, which best captures these two trajectories of enquiry. The film came out in 1968 and was directed by K S Sethumadhavan. The

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<sup>1</sup> Kerala People’s Arts Club established in 1950 is the oldest theater organization in Kerala with the objectives of promoting social awareness to envisage a fair and just society in a burgeoning environment of cultural humanism. Also Ratheesh Radhakrishnan has argued that the history of Malayalam cinema has been written through this category of “progressive cinema”, “middlebrow cinema”, and has pointed towards the exclusions of excesses, both in writings of the cinematic narratives and processes of viewing cinema in Kerala.

<sup>2</sup> C S Venkiteswaran has written about the almost radical potential of *Neelakuyil*. *Neelakuyil* is seen to be a harbinger of “progressive cinema” that came later on, established as superior in terms of thematic content with its investment in social commitment, and superior in form too, infusing elements of realism with the standard social melodrama, in writings on Malayalam cinema.

script and dialogues are written by Thoppil Bhasi, an important Left activist/cultural figure in Kerala then.

Marcia Landy (1990), in her introduction to the book she edited on melodrama *Imitations of Life-A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, foregrounds melodrama as multilayered text and its study yielding several meanings. She writes that melodramatic content is marked by a constant struggle for gratification and equally consistent blockages. Its crises are articulated through familial ties, separation and loss, misrecognition of one's place, person and propriety. Jealousy, murder, suicide, incurable illnesses are all commonplace problems in the melodramatic mode and victims are usually females threatening the normative discourse of sexuality, property and identity. Illness and criminality are all constituted as the protagonist's transgressions against social expectations. On the other pole, are physicians, psychiatrists and representatives of Law.

Landy challenges the Marxist critical notion as all mass culture or the melodramatic mode itself as escapist. Instead she argues that it is important to see commercialized mass culture not as a monolithic unitary entity; rather it is rife with seamless contradictions. She draws from Gramsci's notions which do not see cultural products as monolithic. She writes that it is necessary to identify the nature of the mass culture, to understand the complex operations of ideology. She writes: "Cultural artefacts contain the marks of dominance and subordination, in their strategies of containment, but they also provide clues to opposition." (Landy, 1990: 18)

Thus melodrama is produced as a multilayered text and not unitary or coherent in nature. She writes that it "violates the language of empiricism and rationality", thus calling attention to the text's struggle with itself.

Hence this paper tries to extract the variable and contradictory meanings of the filmic text which emerges from the elements in the screen itself. When "progressive" cinema has always been

correlated with the project of rationalism, in this paper, through *Yakshi*, I hope to demonstrate the text as not an exponent of a monolithic modern project but as throwing up different calibrations of experiences of modernity itself.

## **Yakshi**

*Yakshi* is the story of a college professor named Prof. Sreeni (played by Sathyan) who is a Chemistry professor, but is shown to be intensely intrigued by the figure of the *yakshi*, who in Malayalam folklore is the figure of the supernatural seductress who seduces men and kills them. Sreeni has a romantic relationship with his colleague. But he meets with a fatal accident in the laboratory while doing research on the *yakshi* and his face is burnt leaving him disfigured and ugly. His lover leaves him and he takes refuge in a house far away from the city and the college, with a helper for company. There he encounters a beautiful woman named Ragini, (played by Sharada) who comes to his house one night. The house is infamous for ghosts/*yakshis*. Ragini is shown to be passionately in love with Sreeni, who cannot believe that any human can even look at his face anymore. They get married, and during their honeymoon it is shown that Sreeni is impotent. He starts being suspicious of Ragini and doubts her to be a *yakshi*. In the end Ragini is found missing and Sreeni is shown to have gone mad. His friends take him to a psychiatrist who hypnotizes Sreeni and reveals to the friends and the spectator that Sreeni has murdered Ragini out of his doubts and anxieties and has fallen from reason, leading to his arrest.

The movie begins with a meeting in college where Prof Sreeni and his colleagues are present. One of his friends is questioning Sreeni about his interest in the supernatural or an irrational element like the *yakshi*. Sreeni, played by Sathyan, is seen to give a lecture on the importance of rationalism as a desired ideal, but justifies his interest in the figure of the *yakshi*, saying that he does not believe in it.

They are shown to continue the conversation in the next shot, outside the staff room, with the large college building in the background. Sathyan is shown attired in a three piece suit. He uses a fair amount of English words in between and fits into the urban modern space of the college. His female colleague, who is his lover, played by Ushakumari, is shown to be in admiration of his intellect. There is a certain confidence Sathyan portrays through gestures like hands in the pockets and a smirk at the corner of his mouth; it brings in a certainty to the frame, one that a modern man who believes that anything can be studied or measured with Reason. In a subsequent shot at the college corridor, he smirks at one of his students who is romantically interested in him and says that there is no time to waste for such trivial things. Thus, with the female subjects who are either romantically involved with him or is attracted to him, Sreeni played by Sathyan, is shown to be a man of restraint. There is no overt romantic gesture that Sathyan brings to screen.

After the accident at the laboratory, Sreeni/Sathyan is taken to the hospital and his lover who visits him, seeing his burnt face, leaves abruptly without informing him. This event is followed by a song sequence when Sreeni/Sathyan goes to the college. It is a romantic song, whose lines are part of a poem his lover had once recited to him in an earlier shot. The song starts and one is shown a medium close-up shot of Sathyan's shoe clad legs. This shot cuts to again a medium close-up shot of Sathyan's hands folded at the back, with a watch on it. This again cuts to a long shot, from the back, where Sathyan is shown walking. So throughout the sequence, when the romantic lines are playing, which is the male voice wishing that he was a dream of his beloved, there is no shot of the face. The face that carried the certainty of the modern man is disfigured and "fallen". It is only the shoe clad legs and the watch bearing hands that are left as markers of his modern self. Then Sathyan is shown sitting sideways, in a midshot, again the burnt part of his face is not visible. Then the camera follows his gaze, when he is looking at a couple, holding hands and merrily walking around. It cuts back to Sathyan's face as a mid shot-sideways. Then he moves again and camera follows him from behind,

again with shots of his feet with shoes and a fully formed shadow. He stops walking and the camera is positioned behind Sathyan and we look along with Sathyan at the statue of a woman in the park. Immediately in his imagination, near the statue appears his lover. Then the female voice starts singing, through the lover, and the lines are reciprocating his love. Now for the first time in the song, there is a close up shot of Sathyan and his lover romancing. They are shown to hold hands and rhythmically move in the park. Then the song ends with an extreme close up of Sathyan's face, where he is shown singing and is about to kiss the statue, thinking of it as his lover. So on-screen we can see a man of vulnerability, who now performs overt romantic gestures, otherwise absent from Sathyan's screen persona.

In the next part of the movie Sathyan shifts to the "ghost-house" in the village, along with a servant, who is played by the renowned comedian Bahadur, after being rejected by his lover and others' reactions to his disfigured face. Again the space of the new house is mapped through an acoustic landscape and lighting that is characteristic of any horror movie of the times. Sathyan enters the bare house and the background music invokes anxiety and fear. The house is mapped through the play of light and shadow, made by railings in the house, chiaroscuro being a key feature in the horror genre. Sathyan is shown walking through the house with slight uncertainty. The servant Bahadur is petrified by the eeriness of the space of the house. But in the sequences with Bahadur, Sathyan assumes a similar assured, rational self, dismissing fears as almost pre-modern and laughing it off.

Prof Sreeni/Sathyan is shown to be getting depressed during the stay in the house. The story progresses to him meeting Ragini, played by Sharada, one night, who is almost an impossible presence, in that space. She starts living with him and claims to be an orphan and homeless. The exposure to the disfiguration of Sreeni/Sathyan's face is made in sequences which come after he starts suspecting Ragini, who he has married, to be a *yakshi*. Here, he is shown to be under-confident

and hesitant. There is a song sequence in which Ragini tries to seduce Sreeni. Here unlike the previous romantic song discussed earlier, there are close up shots of his disfigured face, which does not stop Ragini from trying to seduce him with passion. Sathyan is shown to be not returning her embrace and appears very unsure of himself. He tries to walk away and subtly rejects her advances. The song is shown to be sung by Ragini with lyrics talking about female passion and the desire to be touched.

## **Conclusion**

In this narrative of the “empty” homogenous time of modernity and progress, the fallen modern man that Sathyan acts out (following the accident) and the presence of Ragini function as elements of “shock” or in Benjaminian terms produces an effect of “traumatic value”<sup>3</sup>. These elements become configurations of the contingencies of modernity, rendering its very experience as disaggregate.

The seduction song sequence of Ragini and the overtly sexualized mise-en-scene involving Ragini in general destabilizes the overall narrative which is otherwise invested in a rational and scientific modernity. It is this desiring female that produces fear and anxieties in the otherwise rational and “progressive” Malayalee male figure of Sreeni. Pleasure in this text is intricately tied to the sexualized mise-en-scene involving Ragini. The presence of Ragini for the spectator is consistently produced as a figure of pleasure, but simultaneously also a figure of anxiety through the tropes of a horror genre. These tropes are abandoned after Ragini’s death, for a linear and pedagogic rational narrative,

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin has written about the “traumatic value or the shock value that cinematic montage carries as opposed to the “auratic”.



culminating in the unraveling of the “Truth” by the pedantic modern figure of the psychiatrist in the climax. Ragini becomes that desiring woman whose passions are not within the purview of this desired ideal modern Malayalee woman, but is again constituted through a complex calibration of modernity itself.<sup>4</sup>

Melodrama is always mapped with its stylistic excesses and sentimentalities, often identified as a feminized aesthetic, whereas realism with its claims of being able to appropriately representing anything and everything is seen as a different epistemological project. The film in the first half deploys melodramatic excessive elements of the ghost/horror genre invoking a fear in the audience, springing primarily from the presence of a “modern” woman Ragini. Her passion/love for Sreeni coupled with her own playful and intelligent ways are things that make her existence impossible or either supernatural- in other words an aberration. A woman expressing her sexual desires to a “fallen” man and her singular presence without accompaniment of any elements of a traditional order in films- family, women friends- are the real source of anxiety. At the same time, the film also produces a liking for her straightforward and passionate manners. The anxieties are proven to be completely wrong, and this utter disbelief in this woman who acts out her passions and love turns out to be the real problem. That this woman had spotted Sreeni as a professor while she was a student at the college can exist only as a supernatural fantasy and that she arrives in the night ascertains these doubts for the spectator. Because can the good woman/heroine be mobile in the night? But the movie plays with these expectations generated by other melodrama socials and exposes Sreeni’s as well as the spectator’s paranoia and anxiety by the end of the film.

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<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars like J Devika, Praveena Kodoth etc have theorized the formation of notions of the “Ideal Malayalee woman” in the Kerala public sphere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, founded on upper caste notions of femininity, interacting with ideas drawn from the experience of colonial modernity. The new ideal “Malayalee woman” is produced with the primary role of being educated and to work, only to contribute to the constitution and sustenance of the nuclear patriarchal family. She gets constituted significantly differently from the earlier Nair woman who was part of matriarchy and was not involved in marriage at all.

The movie begins with a debate on reason and rationality, and ends validating it. But the film itself turns out to be one that mobilizes pleasures from various ‘unreal’ and ‘irrational’ sources like the possibility of the presence of a supernatural seductress, derived from popular and folk myths-the yakshi, which is validated by the chiaroscuro cinematography and settings of the house and the sexualized mise-en-scene of Ragini and her passions. Though the psychiatrist arrives at the end with an explanation that explains Sreeni’s illness in relation to his impotence and paranoia caused by the scars of the fatal accident, it is like an epilogue. This is because Ragini has already been murdered by Sreeni and there is nothing to be saved with this rational explanation at the end. What the spectator has already experienced and the rhythms of perception that have been mobilized in the films have been melodramatic excessive elements. Thus, through these contradictory channels of perception offered by the film to the spectator, a monolithic and unitary assumption of modernity itself is displaced. It offers many and disaggregate modernity, thus displacing the fixing of the rationalist project as the centre of the text.

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# **‘Beep’- the Sound of Erasure:**

## **The Censored Text as an Aesthetic Device**

Ishani Dey

### **Abstract**

This paper is invested in exploring the sensory affect that is created through censorship. It is invested in unravelling the complex interaction between the films of Anurag Kashyap and the institution of censorship, the sensibilities of which are capitalized and appropriated into the aesthetic effect of the film. It also looks at how such a deployment constructs the cult of a transgressive auteur. I argue that the deafening ‘beep’ that screams of the otherwise silencing practices of censorship is what guides the way to unraveling the subversion of censorship in the filmic text. Taking cue from Žižek’s *Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006) which looks at cinema as the ultimate pervert art, telling us how to desire, this paper asserts that censorship doesn’t erase the profane, instead it points to its very utterance. I argue how Kashyap’s films’ profilmic text becomes the site of censorship standing out as material evidence to its very censoring. The ‘beeped’ or censored word becomes a provocation focusing attention onto itself by mobilizing its unspeakability through marketing the product as “controversial”. I posit that Anurag Kashyap capitalizes on this recognition. I look at the force of publicity that is created by censorship in Kashyap’s public discourse on censorship,

in his negotiations with the CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification) from before the planned commercial release of his first directorial venture *Paanch* to his ongoing battle with the CBFC over refusing to use the court mandated no smoking warning in ‘*Ughy*’ (2014)<sup>1</sup>.

Keywords: Kashyap, Auteur, Censorship, Affect, Cult, CBFC.

## Introduction

There were a great many censor problems that the film encountered. Thus, the maker had to go through the entire process of ‘beeping’ the film where certain words weren’t even allowed to be voiced. (*Paanch Goes Beep*, 2004)

The above excerpt from a newspaper clipping is part of a statement released by Tejaswani Kolapure the lead actress of *Paanch*, Anurag Kashyap’s directorial debut that never saw the light of theatre projectors. Having generated heavy online traffic in discussions over the botched release, the reason for its non-release is drowned in the cacophony surrounding its three year long negotiations with the censors. The process of ‘beeping’ that Kolapure refers to is of intrigue. The deafening beep that screams of the otherwise silencing practices of censorship is what guides the way to unraveling the subversion of censorship in the filmic text.

Slavoj Žižek in the *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006) claims that, “Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn’t give you what you desire - it tells you how to desire”, my assertion here is that censorship doesn’t erase the profane, instead it points to its very utterance. The profilmic text as a site of censorship also stands as material evidence to its very censoring. For the ‘beeped’ or censored

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<sup>1</sup> Yet to be commercially released but has already made its way to Cannes in Directors Fortnight in 2013 and is set to open the New York Indian Film Festival in May 2014.

word becomes a provocation, focusing attention onto itself. In this paper I look at censorship as the auteur's interaction with the text and as evidence of the auteur's understanding of the sensibilities of the censors. This very knowledge as well as the auteur's understanding of the effect of the censored text is used to incite sensorial affect through its aesthetic deployment, which through the ensuing argument we will find is critical to forming his particular Camp.

I argue that the profane is consciously woven into the text to be censored so as to make obvious its very presence. Later I will also look at the purpose that such a deployment fulfills in sowing the seeds of the cult of a transgressive auteur.

Following Kashyap's journey<sup>2</sup> in the Hindi film industry is much like tracing the quintessential heroes' journey—an outsider making his way through the “bullies” (Juneja, 2007) of the industry, only to firmly plant himself within their midst in two short decades to emerge as not just an auteur, but an entrepreneur fostering young directors under his two production houses and numerous joint ventures. This paper has been divided into sections bringing to the fore moments that have been critical to the construction of the auteur's transgressive aura.

The first section is dedicated to his first public encounters with the censor board where I attempt to draw out the charm of the censored beep in its appropriation by the auteur. The next section delves into the significance of Kashyap's Camp identity. In the *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* Lalitha Gopalan points to the mobilizing of a fan following of auteuristic

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<sup>2</sup> An undergraduate awkward teenager who never spoke to girls, Kashyap was introduced to the world of performance through the theatre group *Jana Natya Manch* and ended up watching 55 films in ten days at the International Film Festival of India (in '93) only to find himself in Bombay within five months nursing starry eyed dreams of making movies. Working on the essential heroes' journey, he is faced with one obstacle after another—his first film (*Paanch* 2003) falls into trouble with the censors and then finds itself without a producer destined to lurch in pirate circles, his next venture (*Black Friday* 2007) too is stopped short of its release only to struggle against the censors for another ten years, his next film is shelved as the lead backs out six days before shooting (*Gulaal* 2009), his next release finds critical acclaim but bombs at the box office, the film after this fails to leave a mark amongst the critics or the box office (*Return of Hanuman* 2007) and finally a tryst with substance abuse and one broken marriage later, he finds success in his fifth release (*Dev D* 2009) and he never looks back.

filmmakers like Ketan Mehta and Ram Gopal Verma who not unlike independent filmmakers gain currency by controlling their productions to create a distinctive style. She sees their films as being able to read the spectators' desires as much as their ability to read into their creations by keeping in mind the cinephiliac tendency to scrutinize and deploy a system of signs beyond the narrative. She sees this as creating a potential space for Camp and cult followings which can also tell us how the Kashyap Camp is created and mobilized. The section after this is dedicated to his dialogue with censorship, at first through the affective potency of the censored beep in *Paanch* (unreleased) and later by reading *No Smoking* (2007) as reactive to the agency of censorship. In a brief textual reading of sequences from both films I notice a shift in Kashyap's engagement with the censors where in the latter I witness a more textured engagement than the former, as he steps onto the mantle of the censors. This layering is reflected in *Gangs of Wasseyapur* (2012) where again I witness a thematic continuum of the same. From here I move onto reading his author function as it moves beyond his filmic text and furthers his performance of the transgressive auteur in public discourse. The last section examines the figure of the bootlegging auteur and the potential of this figure in forming cult fandom.

### **The charm of the 'beep'**

I begin this inquiry by studying the inception of the auteur's discourse with the censor board that begins with the awaited release of his directorial debut *Paanch*. This, as we will see, has implications on not just his particular body of work but also textures our understanding of the state's relationship with its citizenry, for



Examining Hindi filmmakers' discourses about censorship complicates our understanding of the institution of state censorship and reveals how its concerns move beyond the restriction of expression or the regulation of content and become centrally involved with the production of citizenship, class identity, and subjectivity in a postcolonial setting. (Ganti, 2009:90)

In her ethnographic study of the Hindi film industry, Tejaswini Ganti argues that there is an internal self-censoring amongst the Bombay film fraternity that can be traced back to a developmentalist ideology, which informs state policy and molds subjectivities in postcolonial India. Characterizing such a condition she contends that there is an internalized sense of backwardness or underdevelopment when compared to the west that is evident in the industry's self-representation as well as representations of its audience. Filmmakers view the masses as passive, easily influenced consumers of media, attributing a hypodermic effect to media and thus sanction censorship as a necessity in order to reign in the all-powerful forces of media.

Their engagement with censorship is further complicated in the Bombay film fraternity's strive towards self-censoring. Since the 1930s in an attempt to sanitize their image and distance themselves from the industry's historic links with nefarious elements of society there has been a drive among filmmakers to create an image of legitimacy for the industry which reflects "the Bombay film industry's desire for respectability and acceptance within Indian middle-class and elite social spheres". As a result, there emerged themes, that in keeping with the strive for propriety, the Hindi cinema did not want to talk about. Ganti elaborates how from the mid-1990s the self-representations of the film industry have been marked by a narrative of increasing respectability accruing to the profession. In this narrative, filmmakers assert that the Bombay film industry is becoming respectable because of the middle- to upper-class backgrounds of new entrants;

filmmakers also make distinctions between legitimate, committed filmmakers who make films for the sake of storytelling and entertainment and those who make films for reasons that are morally suspect (2009: 89).

The morality that is being questioned here can be contested itself, however, in this drive to create a sanitized image of itself, Kashyap stands out like a sore thumb. If the developmentalist mode that Ganti argues is evidence of the Indian state's nationalist project and fuels the modernist project in India, Kashyap's provocation of the same points to a moment of the contemporary that is finally detached from its modernist predecessor. Kashyap's cinema reeks of squalid neo-noiresque decay, the implications of which are far reaching in creating contemporary subjects that stand in defiance of their modern censored counterparts. Kashyap describing his motive behind writing:

Mainstream Indian cinema is about happy endings, it's about making people happy. I always wanted my films to be real, based on life situations people don't like talking about. That's where the basic idea for most of my films...comes from. (Rana, 2013)

Kashyap's particular brand of "real" can be best described through a highly stylized reemergence of noir through his body of work. He emerges with a distinctive neo noir aesthetic<sup>3</sup> while exercising the auteuristic stylistic privileges that such a sensibility allows for. His own auteur style is doubtlessly evident through his expressionistic rhetoric as well as his themes. The disillusionment or incoherence that is characteristic of noir<sup>4</sup> is evidenced in his form as well as narratives. Kashyap

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<sup>3</sup> Mark T. Conrad emphasizes how unlike the classical noir films where the term "noir" was only added in retrospect, neo noir filmmakers chose to consciously work within the noir framework and are aware of the implicit meaning that 'noir' encapsulates (2007).

<sup>4</sup> In his essay 'Notes on Film Noir' Schrader points out how *Film Noir* cannot be defined as a genre for it is not dictated by conventions of setting and conflict, but consistent in inducing a particular tonality and mood. He discusses the various thematic elements that he attributes to *Film Noir* while drawing out its stylistic elements that invested in simulating reoccurring themes emphasizing loss, nostalgia, insecurity, feelings of alienation, paranoia and pessimism in an environment of crime and violence, resulting in disorienting the spectator (1972).

marks the arrival of a thematic shift in Hindi cinema that positions itself as the grotesque underbelly of its predecessor. Noting this shift in modality in her work on the cinematic rendition of the cityscape of the metropolis of Bombay, Ranjani Mazumdar notes how:

'This is a cinema that exists on the periphery of Bombay's cinematic excess where the "blindness" generated by habitual cultures of seeing is rearranged to make the spectator see what has not been seen before. The ordinary and extraordinary worlds of the films forge an aesthetic in sharp contrast to that of melodrama...This is a cinema that embodies the crisis of the human and produces the family as an unstable category, defying the moral universe of melodrama. While melodrama as a form has had a rich history in India, giving shape to several critical narratives, the current crisis clearly needs a different kind of engagement. (2010: 154,180)

The kind of engagement that Kashyap's cinema was to command, that he himself was to enter, has led to the realization of certain novelties in the function of censorship in public discourse. William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur (2009) undertake an ethnographic reading of censorship in public culture, drawing out the multiple modes of control exercised by "semi-clandestine" censors. They also point to "the drama of legal process, in which the forbidden word must be spoken again and again precisely to establish its un-speakability." (2009: 6) They recognize how this un-speakability is mobilized in marketing to make a product more desirable by marking it as "controversial". I posit that Kashyap capitalizes on the recognition of this attribute of censorship.

Kashyap attempts to release his directorial debut in a climate of compliance and support for censorship. Instead of debates over free speech and creative freedom, the debates over the function of the censors have been formulated around their redundant approach to censorship or their

pedantic readings of the filmic text. Where a certain degree of self-effacing is internalized by other film makers, Kashyap plays on the wanting vacuum left behind in the debates over censorship and takes a position of vehement opposition to censorship. When his contemporaries argue over the ineffective methods of censoring, Kashyap lobbied for free speech from the very beginning. He exploits the industry's lack of foresight in recognizing the force of censorship as a tool of publicity and also exhibits a marked understanding of the lucrative potential that lies in public negotiations with censors.

A large part of Kashyap's image as a filmmaker as it stands today is drawn from his constant public conflict with the CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification), his dialogue through published articles, his blog ([anuragkashyap.tumblr.com](http://anuragkashyap.tumblr.com)) and his now defunct Twitter account ([#UglyAnurag](https://twitter.com/UglyAnurag))<sup>5</sup> as well as the coverage that he receives in the media that is then multiplied through social media in the form of re-tweets, reposts or trending articles. All this material thus forms an intrinsic entry point to understanding how Kashyap's stardom is created. His public performance can be traced back to his first encounter with the CBFC, where newspapers in the country were flooded with headlines detailing the negotiations that ensued over censoring his first film. After three years of negotiations with the censor board, Titu Sharma the producer of *Paanch*, in unwittingly setting him up as the poster boy parading the cause against censorship, proudly claimed:

My writer-director, Anurag Kashyap, was determined not to succumb to any pressure for a censor certificate. No matter how long it took or what effort it entailed, we were determined not to change a single frame. And eventually, with a

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<sup>5</sup> He deleted it after lashing out at the selection committee when *The Lunchbox* (2013) failed to make it as India's official entry to the Oscars. (Firstpost.com, 23 Sep 2013)

more reasonable board, the battle was won. It will release without a single cut.

(Bhattacharya, 2010)

My provocation here is to read the publicity that is generated around the censoring of a film much like one would read the rumors that are consciously generated by the producers of Lotte Hoek's Bangladeshi films. Hoek traces the exhibition and reception of the 'obscene' through the phenomenon of the cut piece by reading Bangladeshi cinema's B circuit. She sheds light on the novel conditions of exhibition and reception of the obscene mainly by following the trajectory of *Mintu the Murderer* (2005), taking it as indicative of a particular breed of films. These films feature suggestive posters which are indicative of the high dose of sexually explicit cut-pieces that help generate larger audiences (Hoek, 2010: 55). She remarks how,

To boost their returns, theatres relied on the association of "obscenity" that movies such as *Mintu the Murderer* evoked. The posters and photosets for the film ensured such associations and guarantee an audience for the film. (2001: 63-64)

The "obscenity" referred to here are pornographic cut-pieces spliced onto rolling film during its projection. While there is an implication to the cut-pieces in the posters and photosets, the media coverage gathered by censorship, specifically *Paanch's* censorship, explicitly details the alleged profanity and gore that had been scrutinized by the censors. Much like the jump cut that cues the possibility of a cut-piece insertion, the failing of which leads to the audience booing the projectionist, the beep too becomes a bitter reminder of the object denied. I argue that the lure of the forbidden content is incepted only after it has been deemed inappropriate by the censors. For if it was not for the beeps, the colloquial "profanities" would presumably cease to generate shock after the first few utterances. The beep is a visceral reminder of the obscene. Much like the cut-piece in Hoek's narrative that is inserted hurriedly in the brief window of opportunity that her exit from the

hall provides, the audience of a censored film too addresses the cut piece created and denied by the beep.

### **Making the censored text scream**

The extra filmic space, the tools of promotion of a film (trailer, press conferences, appearance by the director, producer, stars etc.) as well as exhibition spaces, all add to the cinematic experience. Cinema becomes a dynamic space only when they all come together. It is these elements that distinguish it from videos on satellite, the internet, rented home videos etc. Cinema's effects on its audience have been a field of much introspection since its advent. The CBFC website too takes note of such extra diegetic elements when it claims that:

Film censorship becomes necessary because a film motivates thought and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as compared to the printed word. The combination of act and speech, sight and sound in semi darkness of the theatre with elimination of all distracting ideas will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and can affect emotions... (Background, CBFC website)

When the question of censorship is then looked at with the knowledge that the Censors themselves take note of the sensory aspect of cinema I wonder whether they overlook the affect generated by their own censoring. The decision whether to beep or cut out censored texts lies with the filmmakers. This brings me to question if the very act of allowing for such novelty, in either beeping or muting the obscene, is a conscious decision on the part of the censors to leave the censored text as a proof of their functioning as gatekeepers of morality in the society?

The censors' engagement with the text becomes imperative for our understanding of cinema's affect. In the introduction to his book, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) talks about the "aesthetic specificity" of VHS viewing practices drawn from the most paused moments where tapes had been worn and the noise, the fuzziness of the video, what he calls its "charm" was evidence of its veneration. The glitches in the medium are evidence of its interactions with its audience, smudges of its encounters. In addressing the relationship of films with the State, Lawrence Liang explores the affective and libidinal dimensions of what happens when censors watch an erotic film. According to him, that is where the desires of the law reside (2000: 403). He lays bare the legal skin that encounters the bodily engagement that film demands- that of excitement, horror and shock- "media forms produce a theory of law which opens out the world of law to the world of the sense." (Liang, 2013: 66) Through an aesthetic reading he brings to light the sensuous relationship between the law and media.

My argument here is that much like Hilderbrand's VHS glitches, the censored text, when it is 'beeped', is proof of its sensuous encounter with the law. I go a step further in marking the beep not just proof of its provocation, but as a preemptive measure in having been placed with the intent to be censored. Its charm is drawn from Kashyap's understanding of the mode of functioning of the Censors<sup>6</sup> as well as the power that censorship unwittingly gathers in its publicity.

In order to decode the 'sensation' that is created through censorship, a distinction needs to be drawn regarding the way that different modes of censorship affect a viewer. Unlike the 'no smoking' warning that distracts the audience from the narrative of the film, the 'beep' only calls attention to itself by accentuating certain words- which though jarring, doesn't draw attention away from the narrative. It instead creates a cinephiliac intrigue similar to "a cinephiliac mourning over lost

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<sup>6</sup> See Ganti 2009.

footage” (Gopalan, 2002: 21). Sensation as a term is being used here to recognize the sensory affect that one experiences while watching a censored film as well as the effect that the public discourse on censorship has on a viewing audience. The role of the audience as we will see becomes inextricable in matters where the reception of the film and more importantly, its camp<sup>7</sup> status are concerned.

The moment after “the small dark room” in the large dark cinema hall is of intrigue. The law as the guardian of morality claims to know how images work and presume their influence. It judges the appropriateness of images and those that it deems censored are replaced by a legal text. It is the effect of this text that I explore. Instead of reading censorship as a force acting from the outside, taking a page out of Gopalan’s articulation of a certain internalized negotiations I too come from a position where:

Instead of seeing censorship as *post facto* interference from the state, I suggest that film-makers spend considerable energy in incorporating censorship regulations during film-making, in an attempt to pre-empt sweeping cuts that would drastically affect the flow of the narrative. (2002: 20)

But I ask what happens when this very same understanding is turned on its head? In Kashyap’s deployment of the same, Gopalan’s “interruptions” are inverted, where by an attempt to pre-empt censorship, more “explicit” material is woven into the body of the narrative, intentionally to be beeped out knowing the jarring effect this would have. The *coitus interruptus* still exists, but within the diegesis- where the camera no longer withdraws or cuts to shots of ‘waterfalls, flowers, thunder, lightning, and tropical storms.’ Instead, the presence of censorship is hyperbolized in the beep that ensues- creating a hyper awareness of the profane. As Gopalan observes:

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<sup>7</sup> Camp as defined by Susan Sontag is an unmistakably modern sensibility that bases itself on a “love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not.” The term is being used here to indicate a postmodern interpretation of the same which in contemporary times has seen a revival garnering cult followings.



The relationship between the state and the film industry reveals a spectrum of negotiations- from an obedient nationalism to a flagrant flouting of regulations- that fuels the production of images on the screen. (20)

I begin from a position of recognizing Kashyap's engagement with the censor board as playing a part in a conscious attempt to gain popularity as a transgressive auteur, furthering his Camp status. In order to maintain his relevance as a gritty filmmaker, his public dialogue with the censors becomes pertinent in the notion that, where his style is kitschy, his dialogue with the state steps in as part of his performance— his Camp. What becomes censored is all the more relevant. This is most obvious when in *Paanch* the first beep is simultaneous with a police officer telling Pondy, “*ae gali mat de*” (hey don't swear). This very self-reflexive trope of the agents of the state carrying out the function of the censors (herein police officers) returns again in another sequence where the band is performing a song about going up against oppressive regimes and Luke, the front man of the band is curtailed by cops. The song carries over to a sequence where they find themselves singing to a live cheering audience but where again they are denied the fruits of their labor. We also return to the same police officer from the former instance where he reprimands Pondy again, beeping him and then removing him from the scene following onto the next sequence where he is escorted by a uniformed policeman where the sequence is silenced entirely. The beeping of censored words have been deployed very cautiously where the initial beeps are only in sections where they are enforced by state representatives, bringing sharp focus onto the working of the law within the diegesis, reminding us of the state's disciplining.

Kashyap recognizes the potency of the censored object to generate a sensory affect which he then exploits by creating a debate by intentionally weaving in over the top randy content in his text.

Where there can be no denying of the restrictive and often silencing tendencies of censors, he makes the censored text scream.

This becomes more than evident while staring at a copy of the script submitted to the censor board. The evidence of censoring screams as loud on paper as it does on screen. With the number of omissions marked (in the characteristic circling of the word that still allows for one to decipher the omission) it becomes clear that Kashyap consciously integrates material in his text that would raise the hackles of the censor board. When words like *Choot*<sup>8</sup> and *Raand*<sup>9</sup> are written in the script, one could argue that they are written with the intent to be censored— an exaggeration in line with his Camp sensibilities. It becomes important here to note how *Choot* and its derivatives appear fifteen times in the *Paanch* (unreleased) screenplay submitted to the CBFC for certification.

His affinity for *Choot* and its many derivatives including and not limited to *Chootia* generously garnish the dialogues of all his films. For example the opening sequence of *Black Friday*(2004), (his second directorial venture and first release) is that of a police interrogation where the man being interrogated is also being assaulted by policemen in uniform and when he finally gives in and volunteers information about planned attacks on the Mantralaya (the administrative headquarters of the state government of Maharashtra), the Stock Exchange and the Shiv Sena Bhawan (the building which houses the central office of the Shiv Sena<sup>10</sup> in Mumbai), the policeman slaps him and refers to him and his fellow conspirators as “*Chutioon*”<sup>11</sup>. This, including many sequences of graphic police violence as well as colored dialogues, has escaped uncensored. In fact the first beeped *Chootia* only

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<sup>8</sup> Hindi slang for Vagina.

<sup>9</sup> Hindi slang for prostitute.

<sup>10</sup> The Hindu nationalist political organisation founded by Bal Thackeray that originally emerged from a movement in Mumbai advocating a pro-Marathi ideology demanding preferential treatment for Maharashtrians over migrants to the city. It has since tied up with the larger Hindu nationalist agenda aligning itself with the Bharatiya Janata Party and has been linked to multiple instances of communal violence including the 1992-1993 Bombay riots.

<sup>11</sup> *Chootiya* in the plural.

appears in the second half of the film when a character reacts to his hired labor's complaints. Similarly, in *Gulaal* (2009) the only word (presumably the same) that is beeped is when it is directed towards a reference to Gandhi.

Kashyap's play with censorship has become distinctive of his auteurial voice, echoing through each film. As Mazumdar notes:

Anurag Kashyap's early years of struggle when he first arrived in Bombay made him see the world from a very different perspective. The film industry's inability to experiment with new ideas and his battles with the censor board and the courts over his earlier films (*Paanch* [2003] and *Black Friday* [2004]) shaped the psychological landscape of *No Smoking*. (2010: 153)

In *No Smoking*, the censorship of the text takes place at multiple levels and its site shifts from the erotic to the sordid. The only sex scene is indicated through a close up of Ayesha Takia's hand clutching the cover while the audio leads us to believe that she gives in to her husband's hankering, only to be interrupted by a fit of coughing that leads him to want to smoke. Gopalan's *coitus interruptus*<sup>12</sup> comes into play in a classical close-up of her hand, where the camera shies away from more explicit details. Unlike the films that Gopalan's observation stems from, instead of cutting away to scenic landscapes, here the audio plays on, lending the audience an extra moment of being privy to what has otherwise been denied traditionally through such self-censoring, only to pull it away very consciously through a spat of coughing. The body takes center stage, where the auteur through the trope of smoking draws the spectators' attention to the very wanting that such censoring creates.

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<sup>12</sup> She uses the term to signify the censoring of the female body in Hindi cinema where the camera shies away from the erotic to cutaways of waterfalls or flowers instead of lingering on the body itself. She sees this as characteristic of Hindi cinema's own self censoring.

Kashyap's play with censorship becomes more intriguing in *Gangs of Wasseypur*. In the sequence where Faizal confesses his sins to Mohsina and she in turn whispers hers in his ears, we are not privy to that information. A hierarchy of knowledge is created where the characters of the pro-filmic world do not trust its audience with its secrets. In a similar refrain the background music blares loud when Direct tells Faizal the plans of his assassination. If one were inclined to read his filmic text through a lens of censorship such deployments can be read as the auteur's mistrust of the institution of the censors as well as the function of cinema itself. In the films there is a sequence depicting self-flagellation which immediately precedes the only sex scene that hints at a woman's pleasure. We can read this as the auteur's intervention as an ironic apology before being self-censorship. This is perhaps why every sex scene in the film happens behind closed doors. Such an auteurial deployment ties in with Ganti's earlier argument regarding filmmaker's self-censoring and find Kashyap parodying the same.

### **The Transgressive Author's Functions Beyond his Films**

Kashyap's discourse on censorship moves beyond his body of films. His use of the word *Choot* becomes even more intriguing in the light of an article, '*All Atwitter*' in the Indian Express, (4<sup>th</sup> January 2013) where in a climate of uproar against Yo Yo Honey Singh's lyrics, Kashyap takes on the moral policing outrage that has erupted on social media. In his ponderings his understanding of the affect incited by the word *Choot* becomes clear.

Where does the song "C\*\*\*t" come from? It comes from repression. It's the lament of a boy who has been rejected by a girl and is expressing his feelings musically. It might be a crass song but crass also has the right to exist. (10)

His understanding of the pulse of the audience is clearly articulated when he goes on to explain how,

As a country, repression is one of our biggest problems. You can't tackle repression with suppression...I made *Gangs of Wasseyapur* and people were laughing at all the wrong places. Mostly at the *gaalis*. Where did that laughter come from? While watching a horror film, people laugh out of fear but in this case they were laughing out of repression. Saying the unspeakable got them laughing.

In an almost empathic tone with Honey Singh's moral exile, he goes back to his struggle with *Paanch* and draws from his image (while no doubt reviving the reader's memory of the same) as a 'victim' of censorship stating that:

I've gone through this grind for 20 years. I made *Paanch* and people said the same things about me that they are saying about Honey Singh. I've also been banned but I still make the films I want to. I have suffered it.

Thus it becomes clear from the above that Kashyap has an astute understanding of *gaalis* and the functions they play, but what is relevant is the effect that the knowledge these censored *gaalis* have on the audience. He thus stands in stark contrast to Ganti's subjects where she notes how "much of the discourse about censorship presented in this section is centrally concerned with the subjectivities, sensibilities, and conduct of filmmakers rather than audiences" (110). Kashyap's entire formulation seems to have come into play keeping the audience precisely in mind.

In an article issued after reports of scenes having been cut on the demand of the censors, Titu Sharma claimed that– “the new board chief, Vijay Anand, agreed with our view. So, not a single scene has been cut. Only a word has been beeped out.” (Gupta, 2003) This word is presumably one that occurs fifteen times and instead of being cut is beeped. The experience of watching the film that emerges from such negotiations is a distinctive engagement marked by the staccato of the censors’ beep. Owing to its circulation amongst the circuit of digital pirates, the spectators of the film are scattered in time and geographic location, but their space as a collective audience remains. It is in this space where we see the formation of cult belongings in the digital realm. The action of this audience is witnessed in their active role in the circulation of the film.

### **The Bootlegging Auteur**

The notion of paid use and access have been articulated in their polarity by Hilderbrand who draws a sharp distinction between bootlegging and piracy in that the latter intends to reap profits while the former draws from an instinct of access. He explores bootlegging as a “set of practices and textual relationships that open up alternative conceptions of access, aesthetics and affect” (2009: 6, 365). However, what is lost in such a myopic articulation of profit is the phenomenon of the cult.

Various streams on the internet have alluded to the likelihood of the film having been released onto the pirate networks by Kashyap himself. Kashyap claims to have been aware and having given consent to the film’s release online.<sup>13</sup> Thus here the auteur is the bootlegger and there is a creation of access as well as profit. The intangible profit, though incomprehensible in monetary terms initially, is

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<sup>13</sup> In conversation with Anurag Kashyap, November 2014.

reaped from the creation of an online pirate fan following. This league of enthusiasts consists of loyalists that then create and propel online momentum regarding Kashyap's each and every move.

Such a formation itself stands to debunk Hilderbrand's assumptions of VHS being an inherently more democratic medium when compared to the digital. As he argues, the home video emerged amidst debates on its conspicuous legality and has "always been out of control". In the shift to the digital he draws our attention to technological locks, licenses and copyright laws that render illegal some uses of media that were common in the analog age. He problematizes the notion of access that is attached to digital media and draws attention to the restricted access of new media consumers. Discussing agency, he points to how digital media, in being dependent on multiple layers of encoding, restricts users in purely legal premises. He finds that the notion of fair use copyright exemptions are endangered by what technology now allows for. What falls through the cracks in such an argument is the space of the auteur-bootlegger. The notion of legality (though defunct in pirate circles) is complicated when such a figure appears and legal locks have far from restricted access. In this case in particular, the auteur has commanded complete control over his text (perhaps even more so than a commercial release would have warranted) and what must instead be questioned then, is why when he (if he) chose to release the film, he chose to release the censored copy?

Coming back to the phenomenon of the Cult, one of the effects such a formation has is that any coverage of Kashyap, his ventures or even his own statements, blogs, article or tweets are multiplied and reposted across the internet in various websites, social networking sites, film club blogs, personal blogs and twitter handles, amongst others. This creates an archive of material tracing Kashyap's each and every move, his progression through the years, in an unending stream of hyperlinks allowing even for information posted by him in his now defunct film blog,

passionforcinema to survive in multiple tribute blogs. Besides providing data for studies such as this, these blogs also function as constant reminders of Kashyap's public discourses.

Public announcements about negotiations with the censor board become a form of promotion and creates public interest in the film before it hits the theatres. In the occasion of the failure of the film's release in commercial theatres, it is this awareness that gives the film its momentum in pirate circles. This becomes clear when *Paanch* (2003), which never saw the light of a commercial release, enjoys a devoted cult following of cinephiles the world over.

Carrying the traces of its encounter with the law in the only available version of the film online, it demands a hyper awareness regarding the profane. This brings us back to Kashyap's use of Camp and his motives behind a deliberate presence of censorship. This is in line with the creation of a cult following, explained in the following quote:

The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves. (Sontag, 1966: 181)

This very "stink" plays center stage in Kashyap's cinema. In an interview with Steve Rose, his conscious fracture from the 'development discourse' becomes obvious and his understanding of the same explicit when he argues how "Indian films have this obsession with hygienic clean spaces, even though the country's not so clean". Rose points out how in contrast to the popular wave of Hindi cinema, *Gangs of Wasseyapur* (2012) is a gruesome, unhygienic, multi-generational crime epic – and is leading India's new cinematic wave. In the interview, Kashyap goes on to describe how in an



attempt to show an India not filmed earlier he chose to shoot on busy streets and industrial wasteland. Taking the “stink” quite literally, he describes how in sequences involving the butchery “the smell was so bad. While we were shooting, 60 buffaloes and a camel got slaughtered before our eyes.”

Such details surrounding his process of filmmaking, his motivations, become even more significant granted their Camp implications, for as Sontag points out, “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.” His stylization is what makes him distinctive. His own subjectivities as an auteur become glaringly evident through this very style. In *Gulaal* he encapsulates the aura of the film in the sequence where Dilip brings Anuja over to his house for the first time. They enter an open doorway framing a neon lit 69 and as they walk in Anuja swaps places with Dillip, now in the left of frame, asserting his dominance in this space. Bottles named Liberty, Constitution, Colonialism and Capitalism are stacked and the camera pans over as it comes to rest on a close up of Dillip’s eyes only to cut to Anuja rolling a joint. The gaze shifts from our perspective to his. The stage is set and all intoxicants are in place— substances and the woman, all consumables much the same. As she lights up prayer bells start ringing. Religion too is brought into the fold as the sequence cuts to a *hawan* setting with a priest chanting accompanied by the chaos of temple bells. Far from a realist filmmaker, Kashyap’s astute understanding of his target audience is reflected in his cinema which is characterized by its pastiche of influences. Despite noting how Kashyap has used the censored beep as an aesthetic device, I do not mean to imply that Kashyap has in any way escaped the insidious repression of censorship. Kashyap’s own cynicism regarding the space for cinema, his trust of the medium is brought to the fore through his work. As a text *Gangs of Wasseyapur* can be read as Kashyap’s tribute to Hindi cinema where the film itself provides a

chronology of Hindi cinema. The characters are constructed as tributes to the stars of yesteryears and even their dialogues reference movie dialogues.

Moving beyond the beep, which has quite fruitfully been deployed by the auteur time and again it is essential to keep in mind how his crusade against censorship does not rest there alone. Uniformly opposing all exercises of censorship over his text, Kashyap took issue with the mandatory no smoking warning in his film *Ughy*. He appealed to the Bombay High Court when the CBFC declined to grant him a censor certificate.

Kashyap had moved court after the CBFC refused to grant certification for his film *Ughy* as he refused to adhere to the Act. The filmmaker claimed that the imposition of the rules is in violation of his fundamental rights under Article 19 (right to speech and expression) and Article 21 (right to life) of the Constitution. (Manve, 2014)

It would be callous here to assume the relationship between the state and the auteur to be restricted to a film's affect alone. Its implications cannot be covered within the scope of this paper. However, keeping the concerns of this inquiry in mind, in order to contextualize a broader perception that modes of auteur image function under, Surendra Bhatia's observations of the state-auteur relationship become pertinent:

The trick for the film industry is to challenge the government at every step. If certain service tax provisions are leading to double taxation, challenge them; if certain rules related to exhibition are inimical to good business, don't take them lying down just because the government has issued a GR to make them seem legal; challenge them and let the government know that it can't get away by harassing the industry. (2013, 15)

Kashyap deploys this very same sentiment when he asserts that

I don't want to release *Ugly* with those (anti-smoking) notifications. I have to fight till the end. I have my right to expression. I make my films and in this country, being a democracy I think I am going to pitch my fight till the end to see that what comes out of it because somewhere somebody has to stand up and fight against it. (IANS, 2013)

## Conclusion

The above arguments illustrate how Kashyap manages to read into the desires of the censor board as well as an audience functioning under the oppressive regimes of censorship. In exemplifying the potential of cinema to be the ultimate pervert art we witness Kashyap's astute understanding of the sensibilities of the censors and the potential affect of the censored objects. He deploys the censored 'beep', appropriating its sensory effect in *Paanch* while strategically drawing to its function of silencing in *No Smoking*.

Such strategic engagements with his form prove as effective subversions of censorship practices. His more public discourses that have come to light most recently with *Ugly* however, are indicative of a much larger struggle with the institution of censorship inscribing its presence over the profilmic. While he has appropriated the Beep as an artistic deployment of the censor's urge to leave a reminder of their presence on the filmic text, he has used his public struggles with the 'No Smoking' disclaimer as a platform for his heralding for free speech and expression. His subversion of state censorship in the above are indicative of a larger strategic evolution in his form that propagates his

status as a contemporary auteur, the various shades of which then go on to have implications on his Camp, his cult and thus, inevitably his strategies as filmmaker.

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## Performance and Subversion in Kathak

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### Abstract

Kathak is considered a dance of the Northern region in India. Kathak started as a dance for upper caste Brahman men belonging to the caste called 'Brahman Kathak' which is also where the dance gets its name from. It draws from Hindu mythology and scripture and is said to explore the very complex ideology of spirituality. Kathak believes in the philosophy of *advaita* which means 'oneness' or whole. In the context of Kathak this implied that male Kathak dancers performed both the male and female acts of the dance. It is this argument which has enabled scholars to claim Kathak as an androgynous space. This kind of claims on performance and dance directs us towards unexplored aspects of sexuality and gender which Kathak as a dance tries to evade. Making these concerns the premise, I am exploring and examining the space that Kathak provides to women on and off stage. It is dealing with sexuality of the characters and performances where the woman is able to express male sexuality without any boundaries but while performing a female act she is constrained and remains a man's fantasy. The essay in the end discusses various possibilities of subversion to challenge and explore new spaces for the voices of women dancers.

Keywords: Kathak, Sexuality, Gender, Performance studies, Dance Theory, Subversion.

## Introduction

Everyone has heard that performing is simple but it is performing in front of an audience that causes your heart to beat faster, even when darkness submerges the audience into nothingness. The nervousness and anxiousness on stage is not simply to perform but to perform perfectly. A perfect performance requires the complete embodiment of characters because dance forms narrate stories. Each story has many characters, many versions but what remains common in them is the perception, construction and performance of gender (Butler, 1999). As a woman who learnt Kathak<sup>1</sup>, an Indian classical dance form, for a decade, I have imbibed gender not only from the social order of things but from the arrangement of societal values in the narrative of Kathak. This mutual contribution between Kathak and social structures has happened over hundreds of years and hence one can claim that they co-produce as well as anchor each other.

Kathak emerged in a postcolonial India that was trying to shape itself as a ‘modern nation state.’ This ‘modern nation state’ was providing patronage to various dance forms in India which were branded under the overarching institution of ‘Indian Classical Dances’. The state successfully promulgated official histories of all the dance forms including Kathak to the nation as a dance that was “pure” and “sacred” (Chakravorty, 2008). Kathak as a dance form is not only associated with movement, *bols*<sup>2</sup>, *taals*<sup>3</sup>, and tempo but has embedded itself in depicting social realities at multiple levels. It does this through the dancer’s body which it writes upon (Allegranti, 2011). This writing is not in terms of only techniques, like stated earlier, but uses a socio-cultural context. In this context Carter states, “the relationship between dance and its socio-historical context is complex, for dance does not simply ‘reflect’ the value systems, customs, and habits of

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<sup>1</sup> Kathak is a North Indian classical dance that traces its history to Ancient period. It belongs to the brand of other Indian classical dances which are defined by *Natyashastra*.

<sup>2</sup> *Bols* are syllables like: dha dha, dhin dha, dha dha, dhin dha (these bol belongs to a sequence called teen taal).

<sup>3</sup> *Taal* is a sequence which constitutes of *bols* put together in a rhythm -- which dancer uses while dancing on that particular series.

a society but actively constructs them. It produces as well as reproduces; speaks about society, and to it (Carter, 1990).” This pushes a complex relationship between the dancer’s body and society which puts the performer in an ‘in-between space’. The notion of in-between spaces is used to problematize binary oppositions so that the body can exist in ambivalence rather than occupying one position or the other (Briginshaw, 2001), which makes subversion possible. Here, the dancer is told to move beyond societal obligations by transcending the materiality of everyday life. At the same time she<sup>4</sup> is asked to follow and embody social realities to connect to the audience and her inner self to achieve transcendence, as Kathak believes in the ideology of *ananda*<sup>5</sup>. This culminates in the performer embodying the everyday reality and experiences as a mode of community. This socio-cultural writing on a dancer’s body produces many aspects of what lies within and beyond the society, and one of them is gender.

Kathak as a dance form produces gender, gender hierarchies and makes gender operational in multiple ways. One of the ways it has done this is through its association with a sacred text called *Natya Shastra*<sup>6</sup> which elucidates norms on performance by a male author who defines the role and function of women vis-a-vis men. Secondly, it does so by confining the dissemination and learning of Kathak in the tradition of *guru-shishya parampara*<sup>7</sup> which provided space for *gharanas*<sup>8</sup> to evolve. Gharana system has restricted women to occupy positions as authors and *gurus*, which in turn has devoid them of position that defines the narrative of Kathak and has left them at the

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<sup>4</sup> The paper uses the pronoun as she because the semiological order is always around the father which is signified as a he/him. To inverse this order, the paper is using she/her.

<sup>5</sup> *Ananda* is an ideology that believes in reaching in a level in your mind where you transcend material life and move towards a spiritual life.

<sup>6</sup> *Natya Shashtra* is considered a Hindu sacred text which elucidates the norms of every ‘Indian Classical Dance’ and how it needs to be performed. Thus, it guides the dance in various aspects of the dance by describing each component in detail.

<sup>7</sup> *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is an old tradition where a student unquestioningly surrenders her/himself – mentally, physically and socially, conditionally to the teacher to learn the art form perfectly.

<sup>8</sup> *Gharanas* are various thought schools within Kathak which mark different styles of performing. These schools are named after the city where they evolved, like Lucknow, Jaipur, Banaras and Raigarh.

bottom of the power hierarchy. This is because *gurus* are the owner and creator of the dance whereas women are just merely looked upon as a medium to perform their authorship – this position provides women with no power and control over entering the institutionalized space of Kathak. Thirdly, the historiography and content of Kathak has been derived from Hindu mythology (a work of men that has oppressed women for centuries) (Chakravorty, 2008) which has resulted in making the performance and learning space of Kathak extremely gendered since the embodiment of characters are ‘modeled’ after so-called righteous men of Hindu society. This goes on to suppress women, making their visibility a mere existence instead of an agential subject. While these are the different ways I have theoretically and experientially elaborated on the patriarchal nature of Kathak, as a dancer the closest experience of having felt gender play out in Kathak has been through stories. This is not to say that the pure dance sequences like *Tirana* are not gendered but they surface the hierarchy in a more subtle manner. As Desmond states, “Movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class and national identities. It can also be read as a signal of sexual identity, age.... (Desmond, 1998).” However, I focus on the episodes performed through Kathak. This is because it is here that most dancers perform gender and it is the same location where many scholars make their claims for this dance form to be having liberating power.

These episodes are composed of the *abhinaya*<sup>9</sup> aspect of the dance which is drawn from the Hindu mythological narratives. They provide the dancer an opportunity to play the roles of both<sup>10</sup> male as well as female characters, even though Kathak is popularly known for being performed as a solo form. But the primary question that surfaces here is: does this mean that we transcend gender because the body gets to perform ‘both’ the genders? This raises another

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<sup>9</sup> *Abhinaya* means expression. *Abhinaya* sequence in Kathak is part of sequence which engages in performing expression with the dance movement. The most popular form of *abhinaya* is *thumri*.

<sup>10</sup> This is because the patriarchal order of the society functions in binaries and has recognized only two genders.

pertinent question regarding other genders. Does the space of performance become gender neutral because both the binaries of gender are performed by one performer? Purnima Shah, a dance scholar, argues that Kathak's ability to let the dancer transform gender roles through a performance makes the space androgynous and in turn is able to transcend gender (Shah, 1998). Her claim to the phenomenon of transcending gender is premised on the idea of 'oneness' or non-dualism, also known as *advaita*, which is performed through the *abhinaya* aspect of the dance. According to her this provides an opportunity for belonging to a gender neutral experience because Kathak provides dancers with the space to use cultural symbolisms to achieve 'oneness' or *advaita* of her mind and body (Shah, 1998). In this argument, Shah fails to overlook the space of Kathak in its entirety and its performers' subjectivities and therefore claims it as an androgynous space. Studying spatiality in dance and performance through subjectivities, Valerie Briginshaw states that,

Space then, like subjectivity, is a construct, a human or social construct, and so it cannot be explored without reference to human subjects. Possibly the most immediate relationship of subjects to space is through their bodies since 'it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived – and produced (Briginshaw, 2001).

Furthering Briginshaw's argument that space is a 'human social construct' it becomes apparent that so is a dancer's body. This is because the body exists in a society which provides it with meanings and social values which are represented through everyday activities. Hence when a gendered body performs in a space which is also produced by similar structures, performances invariably reflect the socio-cultural context which is inevitably patriarchal. Therefore, Shah's argument (as stated earlier) which is based on the performative aspect of the character and the dance form fails to look at the complex relationship between dancer's body, stage and the socio-

cultural 'realities'. She furthers her argument by explaining that as a dancer one has to change the behaviour and performative aspect to connote a different gender. She states,

Gender difference is expressed through the manipulation of body movements, expressions and gestures. For instance, broad shoulders and chest, uplifted face, straight spine, and a direct look in the eyes are some of the male physical characteristics; the female may be depicted with relaxed shoulders, slightly drawn inwards, thighs closed together, eyes lowered with a slightly bent head, and so on, as the case may be. Masculine and feminine qualities of movements may alternate according to the nature of the characters that is, refined, heroic and virtuous, or demonic (Shah, 1998).

Shah elucidates that gender distinction needs to be embodied while performing, she reinstates that the embodiment of both the genders makes the space androgynous and therefore transcends gender (Shah, 1998). The major flaw in this argument is that she completely disengages and negates the relationship between performance and culture. She assumes that a dancer's body is easily able to embody characters and as easily able to disembody it. She does not examine the culture in which the characters are embedded and re-embedded. In her argument, she pushes aside the fact that the dancer herself is rooted in culture which makes her experiences and engagements pre-embodied. This is to contend that when a performer performs, her body is not devoid of her multiple identities, experiences and values but these are embodied by her through everyday existence. Therefore, while one does get to perform both genders, one has to examine a dancer's experience of gender in terms of the socio-political culture she is situated in, her relationship with the texts she is performing and her experience of embodying characters. Does she experience a conflict while embodying genders or is she able to engage with them with as much ease and perfection as Shah claims?

I argue against the generalisations made by Shah by analysing the experience of Kathak dancers, including myself, who perform *abhinaya* episodes in Kathak. One of the most popular aspects of *abhinaya* is *Thumri*. I am engaging with *Thumri* as a specific genre because the dancers (whom I interviewed<sup>11</sup>) preferred performing *thumris* as they found it to be the essence of Kathak. This is because *thumri* demands *abhinaya* or expressions which require an outward flow of emotions like no other genre in Kathak does (Chakravorty, 2008). *Thumri* is a genre practiced by both Hindustani musicians and dancers. In the following section, I will discuss the context in which *Thumri* emerged, the components that form *Thumri* as a genre, its relevance in today's time and why women have formed certain associations and attachments with *Thumri*.

*Thumri* as a genre can be understood in two phases; one that was performed in Mughal<sup>12</sup> and colonial<sup>13</sup> times and the other that came to be performed in post independent India. The differences in both kinds of *thumris* emerged in regard to the content and was through the lyrics and music. This change and censorship has been beautifully captured in the documentary 'The Other Song' by Saba Dewan (Dewan, The Other Song 2009). The pre-independence genre of *thumris* were sexually explicit and placed woman as a speaking subject – with agency – whereas the post-independence *thumri* has been desexualised and sanskratized<sup>14</sup>. This process took place when nationalists took on the project to make dances and music in India classical. I am going to

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<sup>11</sup> I interviewed women Kathak dancers who have been trained in Kathak on authorial and performance aspects of Kathak. Most of these women have learnt Kathak as students, performers or teachers of the dance form, for at least five or more than five years with either female or male gurus.

<sup>12</sup> Mughal period was a phase in India's history following the sultanate period. The phase lasted from 15<sup>th</sup> century till early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was ruled by emperors who followed Islam and spoke Persian and Urdu.

<sup>13</sup> Colonial period was a phase following Mughal period. It lasted from early 18<sup>th</sup> century till mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. British ruled in this phase and brought in the Western systems to India. There was complete submission of Indians to British rulers. The language that the British spoke were English.

<sup>14</sup> Sanskratization is a process, and a phenomenon formulated by M.N. Srinivasan, where the lower caste groups emulate the upper caste people through rituals and customs for an upward mobility as well disassociation with stigma associated with belonging to the lower caste.



explore- through an ethnography- the sanskratized *Thumri* because it is practiced in classical Kathak and has been performed by the dancers I interviewed.

### **Sanskartized *Thumri***

*Thumri*'s birth is associated with liberation. It was born out of the Bhakti cult as an erotic subject matter based on devotion (Bose, 1976). Mandrika Bose states, "the inspiration behind the evolution of *Thumri* was the cult of Vaishnavism particularly that of Krishna which portrayed divine love. In later years, the philosophies of Vaishnavism and Sufism were the guiding force in the evolution of both *Thumri* and Kathak (Bose, 1976)." *Thumri* as a genre emerged after *khayal*-a genre in music. *Khayal* is a rigorous musical genre that demands constant practice and guidance by the *Ustads* (professionally trained singers) without any space for improvisation (Banerjee, 1986). According to Projesh Banerjee, musicians started performing *thumri* to provide themselves with "breathing-space" and to get out of the 'shackling laws of *Khayal*' (Banerjee, 1986). Elaborating on the birth of *thumri*, Banerjee explains that "they [artists] craved for poetic sensuousness, and hence birth of *thumri*, a music in which lyrical expressions come into play, not confining the song to any one particular *Raga*<sup>15</sup> only. Then, in order to introduce added beauty to it, several *Ragas* were mixed in one tune (Banerjee, 1986)." Therefore, the cornerstone of *thumri* is expression or what Kathak calls *abhinaya*. *Thumri* was popularized in Lucknow *durbars* (Bose, 1976), the most popular one being that of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's court in 1847-1856 (Manuel, 1986).

Banerjee elucidating about the content of *thumri* explains that this genre usually uses *Shringara Rasa*<sup>16</sup> to surface the sensuousness it is associated with but at times uses *Karuna Rasa*<sup>17</sup> as well. The

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<sup>15</sup> A raga uses a series of five or more [musical notes](#) upon which a [melody](#) is constructed.

<sup>16</sup> A Vaishnavite sect developed new *rasas* based on earthy emotions and reduced the primary eight emotions to five which surfaced the erotic love between Radha and Krishna (Massey, 1999). These five emotions were called *shringara rasa* and were characterized to be earthly, sensuous and transcendental (Chakravorty, 2008).

beauty of *thumri* lies in its, “ability to convey musically as many shades of meaning as the words can bear (Banerjee, 1986).” *Thumri* is also considered as an ‘effeminate type of music’ and provides a link between classical and light music (Perron, 2002). This is why *thumri* has been ostracised by Classicists because it deviates from rigid masculinity that the Hindustani music embeds itself in and women get associated with it because of the kind of frivolousness it is imagined with (Bose, 1976). Therefore, it has been recognised as a ‘semi classical’ genre and not classical (Manuel, 1986). Lalita Du Perron states, “the gendering of a genre is likely to reflect societal preconceptions and prejudices as to what constitutes masculinity and femininity, incorporating a hierarchical perspective (Perron, 2002).” Banerjee adding to the defense of *thumri* and criticizing classicists states that,

From the classical point of view it is decadence and regression, but if we look more closely into the verbal texture, it is an enrichment of music by fresh content which in terms of the common emotions of daily life may sometimes be described as ‘literary’, non-musical and impure, but which in the light of its apt musical garment still possess sufficient musical appeal for the unsophisticated many (Banerjee, 1986).”

*Thumri*’s essence lies in *Sringara Rasa* which speaks of love and romance located in Brij/Braj, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where the saints composed these verses to describe the amours of Radha and Krishna and pranks of Krishna (Banerjee, 1986). This is the reason why most of the *thumris* are in *Brajbhasha*. *Thumris*, being an effeminate genre as claimed by Banerjee, uses all eight *Nayikas*<sup>18</sup> in its compositions. The emotions embedded in different *Nayikas* are expected to be

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<sup>17</sup> *Karuna rasa* describes the emotion of pity.

<sup>18</sup> Ashta *Nayikas* are 8 heroines whose situations are dependent on the lover. These are: Swadhinpatika (having her beloved in her grip), Vasaksajja (the maiden in a state of readiness to receive her beloved), Virahotkanthita (the maiden excited by separation), Khandita (the jealous and aggrieved maiden), Kalahantarita (the maiden who quarrels with her beloved and is then besieged by remorse), Vipralabdha (the disappointed maiden whose beloved fails to appear at the time of the tryst), Proshitipatika (the pensive maiden separated from her beloved)

played out by the dancer. *Nayikas* are not independent characters but beings that come into existence in accordance with their beloved. The most important aspect of *thumri*, while performing Radha and Krishna or a *Nayika* is its embodiment of the *bhav* or emotions which defines the core of *thumri*. The main motive of *thumri* singers and dancers is to provide grace, elegance and sensuousness to the performance. *Thumri* thus speaks of divine love expressed by the Kathak dancer through spectacular movements, gestures and rhythmic footwork (Bose, 1976). One of the major themes is that of Radha-Krishna. As mentioned earlier, though it engages with romance, it is devoid of crude eroticism and therefore, to appreciate a *thumri* one requires a “cultured” mind (Banerjee, 1986) (Chakravorty, 2008). Perron expresses discomfort with this kind of play between Radha-Krishna. While she agrees that there is no crude eroticism in these *thumris*, she views them as portraying sexual harassment because when Radha tries to refute Krishna he forcefully clutches her, takes her clothes away and watches her bathe when she doesn’t want him to. The ambiguity that people discuss in Radha’s emotions towards Krishna is rejected by her and says that *thumris* are gendered and justify violence and harassment against women (Perron, 2002).

The ‘cultured’ mind who is trying to engage with the *thumri* doesn’t need to only know the words that are being sung but needs to understand expressions through gestures of the dancers, like when she walks like a peacock, or plays the river through her eyes and her walk. Thus gestures are not universal but are pertaining to the parochial upper caste cultural construction from which Kathak borrows. The gestures or *mudras* are expressed through *bhava* by using hands, fingers, eyelids, eyebrows, and the head. Two of the most popular *thumris* that the past few generations associate are from two popular Bombay Hindi cinema blockbusters: *More Panghat pe Nandlal Ched Gayo re-* Krishna teased me lovingly when I had gone to the ghats<sup>19</sup> to fetch water, from the film

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and Abhisarika (the young maiden, blinded by love, goes in quest of the beloved or sends messages to him) (Narayan, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> The term ghat refers to a series of steps leading down to a body of water.

‘*Mughal-e-Azam*’ (Mughal-e-Azam, 1960) and the other one being *Kabe Ched Ched mohe* where Radha is asking Krishna why he keeps teasing her, from the film ‘*Devdas*’ (Devdas, 2002). These films are important not because one can see the stylization of *thumri* outside the classical paradigm but because it has universalised it by taking it to the masses who view popular Hindi cinema (Bose, 1976).

*Thumri* can be performed both sitting as well as standing but the dancer sings the verses again to provide multiple meanings to the same lines. In the classicist paradigm, *thumri* is performed by making every gesture very sharp and clear by wielding one’s body accordingly. There is a constant attempt at training dancers in *thumri* so they don’t become vulgar or represent a phase that Kathak idealists are ashamed of. I remember my guruji telling me, “*bhav lao beta, bhav se dhayan aakarshit karo, sirf shareer ka upyog karne se yeh Kathak nahi ban jayega, par kuch aur hi kaha jayega*”- (Bring expressions in your dance my dear, attract your audience through it. If you will only use your body, then it is not Kathak but something else). Here the connotation was to desexualise the dance but to maintain the gracefulness of the genre. This is important because as Banerjee states, “As the grace in women is an outward sign of the inward harmony of the soul, dance is nothing but an outward expression of inward human feeling (Banerjee, 1986).” Using this grace and harmony the dancer is supposed to perform each gesture with such measurement that the audience is not distracted but excited to a point that they crave to see the dance again. While it is supposed to keep the audience in her control, the dancer is expected to become oblivious to her own identity and is expected to embody the performance. The act of making oneself enter oblivion is also perceived as experiencing the divine or achieving *ananda* or ecstasy. As a student and performer of Kathak, where I performed *thumri* for more than 6 years, I used to feel elated while performing Radha more than Krishna. But I haven’t experienced the divine or achieved *ananda*. This might be because my training wasn’t long enough or my guru and I lacked the kind of *guru-shishya* relationship that is required. The divinity that is meant to be achieved is not universal as many dancers have claimed that moving towards attaining *ananda* requires one to

be so perfect in techniques and embodiment that it becomes much more difficult. While some practice Kathak to get in touch with their inner self which helps in experiencing the divinity, others perform it for recreational purposes. In the coming section I will analyse how Kathak dancers, including myself, have experienced *thumri* and other story-telling aspects of Kathak-gat *bhava*. This foregrounds how gender can be experienced in such genres.

### ***Abhinaya, Thumri and Us***

*Thumris* are performed by most Kathak dancers who have learnt Kathak for at least four years in professional capacity. Before I draw upon the experiences of other Kathak dancers, I would like to engage and elucidate on my own experience of performing *thumri*. I started performing *thumri* in my sixth year of learning Kathak. I was around sixteen years old at the time. Before that I used to perform short pieces on Radha and Krishna's story on ghats and forests, which was more about technique rather than expressions. A classical *thumri* demanded expressions and bodily sensuousness which wasn't easy to bring about and it took long hours of practice to coordinate the expressions and emotions to reflect them in my eyes to my smile, to my breathing and to my gestures. The *thumri* I performed the most is;

*Kabe rokat dagar pyaare, Nandlal mero, Kabe rokat*

*Nith hi karat jaghda mose panghat nahi jane daet*

*Dekhe bhai naari more bhaiyaan kabe gahe re*

*Benati karun mein naahi woh maanat sunat naahi bhai*

*Cheen liyo gale ko haar, pangath nahi daet re*

*Binda dekh dheet langar barbas mori laj laet*

*Dungi Dunahi ab hi jayi Nand ke dwaar.*

*Kabe rokat....*

Why do you stop me from going to the river, my dear Nanda?

For no justifiable reason you fight to stop me from going to the river.

Don't you see the prying eyes of other women?

Why are you clutching my hand in front of them?

O He is deaf to my entreaties.

Snatches my necklace and will not return at request

Binda look at Him he is embarrassing me

If you don't stop teasing me I will go to your house and complain about you

Why do you stop me (Banerjee, 1986)

The essence of this *thumri*, rather most *thumris*, lies in the conversation between Radha and Krishna. Here Radha is requesting Krishna to stop teasing her in front of other women, with whom she is going to fetch water from the river. When I was being taught this *thumri* I was told that her request to Krishna is to stop teasing her in public. Rather, Radha wants Krishna's entire attention to be on her, while she goes about doing her daily chores. I was also told that Radha, in most of the *thumris*, asks Krishna to behave while he teases her, while she actually wants to be teased because she desires him. To draw this understanding in modern terms would be equivalent of the notion that 'when a girl says no she means yes', which has resulted in crimes against women. Therefore, I was asked perform anger with a smile, because Radha's anger is sign of her love for Krishna. This is why every time Radha addresses Krishna, it is followed by a term of endearment. Love surfaces when Radha 'requests' Krishna not to tease her. It is never an order.

The reason I enjoyed performing this *thumri* was mostly because of Radha. The *thumri* used to start with a *matka gat* or gait which portrays a woman carrying a clay pot on her head. I used to do the walk around the stage and then look around as if searching for Krishna. This was followed by a swift *palta* which transformed me into Krishna who again does a *gat* while playing his flute looking around. After taking a round of the stage, he stops and smiles, keeps the flute aside and walks towards Radha. Once a *palta* has defined both the characters one doesn't have to

perform *palia* every time. Now Radha smiles and Krishna clutches her wrist when the lyrics of the *thumri* begin. She struggles and makes him let go of her and performs the *thumri* where she continues to smile at Krishna as he continues to be naughty and flirtatious.

A stark gendered behavior is portrayed between Radha and Krishna, where Krishna is shown as a carefree, fun and passionate man who has no inhibitions of society or the world whereas Radha is shown to be a shy, nervous girl who is cautious of judgments that others would make if they saw her with Krishna. As a woman, I always related, associated and familiarized myself with Radha. This was because I was always told to maintain ‘boundaries’, not to discuss my sexuality with others and was always asked to look and emulate women figures in stories, cinema and music. While watching cinema or theatre I often heard people around me say, “what an ideal daughter, you should always aspire to be like so and so,” or “what an altruistic wife, one always wants a wife like this.” I have grown up hearing the dedication, commitment, love and perseverance of characters like Sita, Radha, Draupadi, Gandhari and others in mythology and have always been asked “to be like them.”

Therefore, performing Radha seemed an easier task than Krishna whose naughtiness I had observed in men but never experienced as a woman. While one is taught to smile coyly and tease, it was never easy to perform Krishna. It never felt like I was transcending gender. Rather, I became even more conscious of my gender identity as I found a contradiction in my actual behavior: of a bounded woman and of a free soul. I found myself struggling to get my wrist free of a man’s clutch easier than trying to be flirtatious on stage. The characters were too starkly gendered for me to experience the embodiment of both characters without any hiccups. This is even more surprising because Krishna is considered an “effeminate” God compared to others, like Shiva and Bramha.

Another reason for this fissure in embodiment of characters might be because the speaking subject here is a male. In this scenario it is Krishna who is made the center of the episode as well as the narrative. Radha is only indispensable if Krishna exists otherwise her existence becomes

pointless. This is to show that Radha is the 'other' of Krishna. The 'other' can always be replaced and manipulated but the primary subject can't be – a construction that patriarchy has been operating with from times immemorial. No performance act helped in either perfect embodiment of the characters or the transcendence of gender to achieve the claimed "*ananda*". But this continuing performance did make me realise that gender in performance is embedded in everyday reality of performing our socially constructed and biologically assigned gender. Hence, when one performs Kathak one realizes that language of Kathak is entrapped in gendered notions. The question is how will one be able to escape gender? Clearly for me, Kathak is not about escaping gender and why should one aim at escaping gender? One will always be entrenched in their genders because society internalises the performance of gender at a biological, social, economic and cultural level to the extent that performing oppositional characters is to just strengthen the already existing hierarchy (Butler, 1999).

This is precisely the reason why it has become important to understand how the dancers have understood gender and sexuality in Kathak. Some of them have found performing the same gender as 'natural' like my own experience of performing Radha, whereas some have found performing the opposite gender easier because of the experiences they have had in their lives. But what is interesting is that no one argued that it was easy to perform both and transcend genders. Some did stress that if one is focusing on the spirituality aspect of Kathak then the emphasis on gender and its conscious performance is not as ostensible. To understand this phenomenon more elaborately, I will engage with the experience of the Kathak dancers I interviewed as part of this study, using ethnography. The following discussion is a dialogue between the current practitioners of Kathak and me who once performed Kathak and is now engaging with it at an academic level.



Payal Das<sup>20</sup>, one of my interviewees and a Kathak dancer, believes that women as a category were subsumed at a later stage in Kathak's history. This was because their need was perceived at a much later stage. She explained that the codification of Kathak in its present avatar has been developed by contributions of many phases of which some are memorialized and some erased. Out of these phases the one that has given women space is that of *thumri* which emerged with the idea of sensitivity and sensibility, because in a Mughal court dancing for or performing Hindu deities wasn't an option. When *thumris* were initially performed, they were taken up by men and male gurus to perform Krishna, who wasn't considered as masculine as Shiva. On the other hand, Radha was a feminine character and hence transformation wasn't at extremes. This is why fluidity at the time of transformation between characters of different genders seemed smooth. My explanation to this smooth transitioning of gender is that men were performing both the genders and already had access to expressing themselves without the boundaries that a woman experienced. Also, they were much more comfortable in occupying public spaces than a woman could ever be.

Das refuted my point by stating that,

When women started to perform Kathak they were also able to experience the fluidity and attain a certain masculinity which otherwise was completely denied to women. This made Kathak a fluid dance form. The popularity of *thumri* is because both the characters don't assume extreme masculinity; this helps women associate with *thumris* and claim to transcend gender.

Das noted that the importance of gender fluidity in Kathak and its perception differs from individual to individual. She started by stating that, "to experience and realise gender fluidity in Kathak is a long and difficult journey which is not easily attainable outside the dance space." She explains that the performance of Kathak on stage is a magical moment where every movement is

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<sup>20</sup> The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identity and maintain anonymity.

an art as well as a transformation. But this transformation becomes fluid, is unnoticeable and is an intrinsic part of the dance form. This is because Kathak, that follows the Vaishnavite tradition, works with aspects like *thumris* which are not conventionally masculine and are rather effeminate. For instance, Krishna has feminine traits which makes the transformation between Krishna to Radha to Gopis and back to Krishna fluid. Shivalini Agrawal, an interviewee and a Kathak dancer, claims a completely different gender experience. She didn't perceive Kathak as a fluid dance form. Rather she learnt feminine attributes from it which helped her in day to day activities and dismissed the masculine traits that were being taught. She explains that while society influences the dance, dance also contributes to the larger society by altering the dancer's life. Hence, according to Agrawal the dance isn't as gender fluid but is a space where resonance can be found with acts you perform in everyday life or characters you want to reflect in your personality like grace. Therefore, for her gender exists both inside and outside the dance form, the only difference being in Kathak you perform gender much more consciously than in actual life where its assumed to be 'natural.'

Yamini Patel, interviewee and a Kathak dancer, agrees that if you consciously think of your gender you will realise it is easier to perform one's own gender. But the dance form is not about thinking about gender but forgetting it. She states:

See I do this *abhinaya* piece where I show Krishna is pining for Radha rather *Braji*.

He has come to Dwarka. I used to do it earlier and wanted to perform it again. I never found it difficult to perform but now that you mention it, maybe it is simpler to get into the skin of Radha and have more occasions to do it.

Contrary to Patel, Agrawal's explanation can be understood in the terms that dance constructs gender in accordance with society and hence has to be performed carefully enough to give an illusion of fluidity without disturbing the order or challenging patriarchy on which it is based. Zunaili Khan attributes another reason as to why it is important to perform different genders so fluidly. She explains that classical Kathak's ultimate aim is more than *ananda*, it is to attract and

sustain the audience through entertainment. When entertainment becomes paramount the entire art gets trapped into the category of bourgeois consumption. Here the appealing stereotypes are played out, like performing female and male characters in certain ways as described by Purnima Shah (Shah, 1998), so that the audience relates and can approve of the existence of Kathak which then demands its patronage from the State.

Another argument made by Das is that gender is a construction and when you realise that, you figure that your body can coexist and become fluid because the construction of gender makes it possible to embody both the genders. Agrawal observes this phenomenon to be completely dependent on the performer. She explains that, “great performers and guru’s like Birju Maharaj ji are extremely skilled and professional and because of their stature you don’t care to notice the gender they are performing. But when it comes to personal experience I any day would prefer being a Radha than a Krishna.”

Ratnika Manjarekar, drawing from both Das’s experience as well as Agrawal’s, states that there is a difference between the gender fluidity you perceive on stage when professionals dance and when it comes to performing it yourself. She, like Das, perceives the Radha and Krishna transition to be effeminate and states that,

I think when Krishna is portrayed there is a certain femininity to him, he is portrayed with this very attractive elegance as well as charm. But most importantly he possesses male elegance whereas Radha is mainly (I never got to play Radha), what I have observed, is played with innocence and femininity. The playfulness of both the characters is what is noticed by most people.

Manjarekar explains that while Radha and Krishna are placed on the same platform as protagonists, characters- such as the Gopis<sup>21</sup>- that provide Krishna with grandeur, are totally

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<sup>21</sup> Gopis are women of Vrindvan who Krishna is said to flirt and have sexual relationships with.

marginalized. The Gopi as a performer has got to perform only as a Gopi and the power relationship between Radha and Gopis are also gendered. In this context, Ratnika states,

Gopis are generally choreographed to be in awe of Krishna, in a very literal sense of worshipping. They are not given any sense of identity. Their identity is with Radha and Krishna. They are made into a homogenized group, at least that's the feeling I got. Playing a Gopi you never get noticed as an individual.

Manjarekar notes a new politics of representation where gender hierarchy is not just clear cut between men and women but exists between women. Here, Radha is an upper caste and class woman whose illicit sexual relationship with Krishna is justified, but Gopis are always seen as fragments of the story, instruments that Krishna uses to excite Radha. She explains that her experience of performing characters remained gendered because she got to perform mostly one gender; but she felt comfortable performing it.

I feel when you're performing a story you need to adapt most of the behaviour patterns, as narrated in the story. When I was Krishna and told I was supposed to relate in a certain way to Gopis – I realized I needed to embody that behaviour. But when you play the role of the Gopi you seem to get dissolved with the background. I have always felt that. This is because Radha and Krishna are the center of attention whereas Gopis become as invisible or visible as the background. Krishna has this elevated sense of pride. He is desired and worshipped. You feel noticed and visible. That's why when you play a Gopi it is a step down the ladder. Not to say Krishna is superior in any sense but you feel you are being blended with the background and as a performer you don't feel as important.

She furthers her argument by explaining that Kathak is predominantly occupied by women. Das and Manjarekar are embedded in different positions as women. While Das thinks that one can go

beyond gender because it is just a construction, Manjarekar is uncomfortable with the idea that gender can be molded so easily. She believes that the narrative of Kathak is so patriarchal – as it uses gendered mythologies and stories– that to transcend the gender hierarchy becomes difficult.

Changing the perspective of the argument, Das states that while a woman dancing is seen as a natural phenomenon, men have been stigmatised because they are assumed to be ‘gay.’ Ila Banerjee, an interviewee and a Kathak dancer, agrees with this and explains that the audience usually has a bias against seeing men perform unless they are figures like Birju Maharaj. Furthering her argument, she states that,

It is tougher for a man to portray the feminine side than for a woman to portray masculine side. I still feel that men have to go through a lot more social rigidity when they have to portray women roles. There are people who feel squeamish about watching men perform, they don’t enjoy it.

This is a problematic understanding of sexuality and gender which most dance forms haven’t been able to resolve. Patel agrees with Banerjee and questions ‘is the true aim of Kathak to be analysing gender transformation? The aim of a serious dancer is not to dance out of context and maintain the integrity of the dance. The question that one needs to ask here is what is the ‘true aim’? Who defines it and why is there one? The answers are hidden in the narratives and historiography of Kathak.

The important question that remains to be discussed and given a proper platform is whose subjectivity we are looking at while this transformation is occurring. Is it a male’s attitude that the dancers attain or is it a woman’s understanding of society that is depicted through the performance? This is a question that according to Das depends on many factors. For her what is important to be discussed in Kathak as a performance art is the philosophy of *advaita* – oneness, including that of gender which makes the stage androgynous. She gives the example of *qawwali*. She explains that *qawwali* is usually assumed to be performed by men in what is considered to be

a very feminine act of expressing love and passion for God. When the *qawwali* is performed by women it stitches the gender gap and blurs the gender difference for God who is then marked as a non-gendered entity being desired by a devotee and not a specific gender. Therefore, when one is engaging with any kind of performance, gender becomes superficial, a state of being and a given form, according to Das.

Zunaili Khan is in disagreement with Das, because she explains that spirituality is more of a belief than an experience and hence she doesn't believe that any ideology can lead to the achievement of divinity. For her every action is a performance and is about performativity. She states

Surely dance is uplifting at times but mostly it makes one really contemplative. It is the translated script of the heightened human emotional expression but still I don't know how to comment about the spiritual aspect of it. It is a huge word for me. I would rather say that performance is an imperative for me. I see the world in terms of performativity: every ritual, every action is performance and the world is performing a choreography. Nietzsche says, and I am paraphrasing, that God has to be a Dancer.

Agrawal, shifting a bit away from what Khan is claiming states that for her spirituality is something that one understands as one matures with the dance. While she was growing up, Agarwal perceived Kathak as simply a dance form. It was only later in life that she experienced it as something that could be used to escape the humdrumness of life. Yamini Patel claims that Kathak didn't emerge as a randomly performing movement but the idea was to reach the divine through spirituality. According to her, when one is performing on stage a moment arrives where everything is forgotten and you dance without consciousness of the surrounding. At this stage, one experiences joy and the presence of the body in an unworldly way. This is the attainment of *ananda* for Patel. She notes that this moment occurs at some point in the performance and the

experience doesn't stay throughout the performance. She adds that all classical dances have the spirituality aspect intrinsic to them but only the best of performers can achieve it.

Ila Banerjee discussing spirituality states that it depends which end of the spectrum one is standing; those who are not religious view it simply in terms of an art form and think of Kathak as a medium to escape everyday mundane life whereas those who believe in a higher power or religion tend to lean towards spirituality, like her.

Banerjee's goes on to claim that it is the dancer's choice to relate to the dance in terms of an art form or a medium to attain divinity. This then suggests that spirituality is not intrinsic to the performance of Kathak and not every dancer can or wants to attain that divinity. Therefore, claims made by dancers and scholars of Kathak that go beyond gender by the attainment of *ananda* through spirituality (Shah, 1998) are challenged. In this sense, Kathak for women who don't engage with spirituality, like Khan and me, is a dance form that derives itself from the patriarchal text of *Natya Shastra* which uses brahmanical stories which demand women and men to conduct themselves in a prescribed manner. These prescriptions mark the conduct and boundaries of women and men in everyday life and hence Kathak is about depicting these everyday stories through mythology which is rooted in patriarchy.

Therefore, the dancers speaking here are the ones who have experienced Kathak as performers as well as women who view performing as a gendered experience. They all agree that Kathak is rooted in patriarchy which produces gender and its performance. While some challenge the stereotypical performance of gender and question certain associations with the characters, others argue that Kathak isn't about gender performance but about trying to remain true to its aim: that of attaining *ananda*. As a dancer I agree with those who argued earlier that spirituality is a construct that not every dancer believes in. Hence the claim that Kathak can be used to transcend gender fails at multiple levels.

While it has been established that Kathak is a gendered form, what also emerged was that classical Kathak provides a space where one can change the embodiment within the same gender

role or look at Kathak's past and draw aspects of it which are not as patriarchal. In other words, Kathak provides a space for subversion where women can become a speaking subject.

### **Subverting History and Embodiment**

Kathak, as an art form, provides various possibilities of subversion. Subversion is a necessity because women in Kathak have never been made the speaking subject. The attempt is at visibilizing the embodiment of women or other characters. This helps in providing them with voice and agency that has been denied to them. The idea of subversion becomes particularly important because the idea of escaping gender in Kathak is unimaginable. There is a need to change the narrative of Kathak and make prominent women's voices. This attempt will then enable a change in authorship of Kathak and its texts.

Subversion can only happen when women will perform what they write which includes their experiences and beliefs. The space for performance of women is marked by patriarchy both in everyday life and on stage. Susan Melrose, discusses that the space provided to women in performing arts is very complicated because, "we are damned if we do act like women, damned if we don't. But how do we act like women if acting is indeed one aspect of patriarchal institution" (Melrose 1998). The agency to write, read, and view the performance has been controlled. Julia Kristeva, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, suggests that to break this practice we need to invert the semiotic order so that the woman becomes the semiotic which will then place her at the center of every understanding (Fort 1998). She claims that history has solidified women in the area of performance to the extent that every representation by women perpetuates the dominant ideology. Therefore, she argues that one needs to place emphasis on women as a site of subversion through language which should be the tool of subversion so that a woman can become the speaking subject.

Cixous and Irigaray, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, agree with Kristeva and Adshead-Lansdale's analysis of Lacan's theory that we acquire patriarchal values through language, but assert that it is



therefore possible to dismantle the patriarchy through language, specifically by encouraging and exploring women's language, a language rooted in the female body and female sexuality (Fort 1998).

Women performing Kathak are limited by dominant social order about how to perform. The boundaries are laid down before one even starts to perform. Moreover, drawing from the Hindu scriptures which have been authored by men has placed limits on every aspect of performativity which continues to exist as heteronormative values in the underbelly of Kathak. This can be seen in the case of a *thumri* where Krishna can express himself and his desires clearly but Radha's sexual desires are repressed and her conduct is defined and placed in social order.

The way to subvert this patriarchal order is to perform pieces that were performed by *tawaifs* and *baijis*<sup>22</sup>. We need to perform versions of the *thumri* that are sexually explicit and reflect woman as having agency. By doing this we are reclaiming "fallen" women within classical Kathak which then blurs the line between "petty nautch"<sup>23</sup> and golden "classical dance." We also need to give voices to those women characters who have been neglected in patriarchal authorship like Kali, Durga and Surpnakha. These women are not always characterized as good or bad and this is why one should perform women like them who have reflected power and agency. I will take this discussion further by discussing it with other dancers and how they view subversion in Kathak as character embodiment.

## Embodying Subversion

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<sup>22</sup> Dancers who belonged to lower rung of the society and performed Kathak were known as *tawaifs* who entertained men at the *kothas* (a space where *tawaifs* dance and sing) and then engaged in a sexual relationship with them (Chakravorty, 2008). The head of the kotha who managed the tawaifs were called *baijis*. *Baijis* are very accomplished in the art of dance and music.

<sup>23</sup> Nautch was a term coined by British in the colonial times. Nautch signified dance of lowly women which was a precursor to soliciting sex.

Talking to different women I realised that there is a need to perform characters that are silent yet strong; strong enough to speak of gender discrimination, violence and patriarchy and at the same time be graceful, powerful and elegant because as stated by Yamini Patel, “we as women are required to be elegant and sophisticated in our performances.”

The definition of grace and elegance I will work with doesn't fit within the mainstream understanding of women and behavior, but it would fit with characters like Surpanakha, who has been called ugly and unwomanly because she was a demon. Figures like Kali and Durga when performed seem drastic because Kathak narratives perform 'docile' and 'domesticated' women like Parvati, Draupadi, Yashoda, Radha and others. While I am not negating the power and contribution of these women, I am attempting to surface those characters that have been ostracised and silenced completely. Giving them voice and subjectivity is inverting the semiotics or symbolic order. Julia Kristeva, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, suggests that to break this practice of producing Symbolic order, one needs to invert the semiotics in place so that the woman becomes the semiotic and everything then places her at the centre of understanding (Fort 1998).

I am working with the character of Surpanakha (Ramayana<sup>24</sup>) who represents women in the system, who are also considered the 'Lack'. Making her a speaking subject would not just be inverting the semiotics, but going beyond it. Surpanakha the demon who initially tries to seduce Rama (the *dharmic*<sup>25</sup> man) and Laxmana (the unconditional devotee of Rama) has been called many names including lusty, a sexually driven 'fallen woman', ogress, foul mouthed, hoarse voiced, one with coppery hair, amply endowed on the upper deck and capable of changing forms at will (Maddy, 2011). The stance taken on Surpanakha is rooted in the image of women either as a demonic man destroying woman or as a devotee of the *dharmic* man. In either case her construction is based on men and their perception of her (Dance, 2010). My subversion wants to

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<sup>24</sup> Ramayana is a Hindu text to remind upper caste women and men of their *dharmic*—duties.

<sup>25</sup> A man who is committed and devoted to his duties as prescribed by sacred Hindu texts.

change this perception. My Kathak wants to show Surpanakha as a woman, who engages with pleasure in her beauty (without transforming into a conventional woman) and like every other woman, has the best and worst of men getting attracted to her. Being a demon, she possesses enough power to destroy or mutilate. This roots Surpanakha in womanhood and also it doesn't take away her identity as a demon. The multiple identities are to make her more powerful and influential rather than culminating in the double oppression of being a woman demon.

I would perform Surpanakha, in a similar way to how one imagines Radha. Radha is performed in a luxurious manner; where she is aware of her beauty, her behaviour which attracts Krishna and her impact on him. In a similar way I would perform a *gat* with long and wide steps after which I would show Surpanakha enjoying the wilderness by smelling flowers, bathing in the river and playing with other demons and creatures of the forest.

After that I will perform with a *palta*, Rama walking in the forest with fear in his eyes and looking around for any signal of threat. At this point he reaches the river and bends over to drink water. In the river he watches Surapanakha bathe. Her hair is long and lustrous, her big eyes are gleaming in the sun, her long fingers are soaping her body in elegant swipes, her breasts are heaving and her voluptuous body is wet and glimmering. Rama is instantly attracted by her and continues to stare at her. Surpanakha catches Rama's eye, smiles at him and invites him in the river. Rama is tempted but is worried that Laxmana might see him with Surpanakha. In frustration of not being able to act on his desires he calls her a lusty and 'fallen woman' for seducing a married man. Because he is in love with Surpanakha and is worried about being caught for cheating, he sends Laxmana to mutilate her. The idea behind Rama's decision is that if he can't have her nobody should find her as grand and beautiful.

Laxmana arrives at her hut and demands her to come out. Surpanakha inhibited, comes out and at this point they both fall in love with each other. Laxmana like Rama is not able to resist her beauty which is grand like no other woman he has met. Surpanakha invites Laxmana inside the

house and undresses herself. Laxmana despite being a loyal devotee of Rama succumbs to the desires of Surpanakha and his. The sexual relationship with Surpanakha makes Laxmana weak because he believes that Rama would kill him for disobeying whereas Surpanakha doesn't care either about Rama's *dharmic* principles or Laxmana's devotedness. But when Laxmana collapses out of fear and cries for Surpanakha to mutilate any part of her body so that he can go back to Rama and Sita, she fulfils Laxmana's request because she doesn't want him to get killed for providing her and himself pleasure. She cuts her nose and gives it to Laxmana and demands that neither he nor Rama should ever visit her again.

Therefore, in my Kathak, Surpanakha is not mutilated for being a demon woman but she gives her nose as a gift to a man who begs for his life. She fulfills her feminism by accepting her particularistic character of sensitivity (associated with femininity) while at the same time being strong enough to be inhibited in front of a God and his brother (not usually associated with femininity). Therefore, in this narrative Surpanakha lives on her terms. She is powerful and self-integrated to the extent that she does grant them life, even though she is a demon. She is given agency, power and humbleness that demons are expected to be devoid of. While Surpanakha's character is remolded to present subversion in Kathak that challenges the gendered performance and authorship of it, there are characters in Hindu mythology which are very powerful and that's why they are not discussed and performed.

In Kathak, the performance of Radha, Draupadi and Yashoda becomes a day to day affair. Their stories are performed thousand times over but most of the stories depict them as vulnerable, threatened and dependent on their husbands or Gods like Rama for safety and security. Otherwise, women are depicted in feminine domesticated roles as mothers, wives, and sisters. But Kali is a change from all these characters. She is usually not associated with docile feminine roles but with darkness, death, and destruction (Smith, 2003). However, unlike Surpanakha, she is not born a demon. This is because her femininity is supposedly chaste and virtuous and

therefore she kills creatures who offend her femininity. Kali's character has schisms that lead to the exploration of her character that go beyond her being a virtuous feminine character. This is because she epitomizes feminine power which is fearsome and awesome.

She is fearsome because she can swallow the world into darkness, like her name which means darkness. Her power of reducing everything into nothingness creates fear in others but peace in her followers (Smith, 2003). It is this complex role Kali plays in mythology that inspires me to perform her. In Kathak, we perform Shiva's *tandav*<sup>26</sup> over and over again to show his anger which can destroy the world and this is precisely why we should perform the counterpart of Shiva to suggest that the world is not revolving because a man is holding it but also because a woman who is as powerful is not destroying it. While Kali is a feminine power that needs to be represented in Kathak, I will not call her a feminist symbol though she has been reclaimed by feminists.

The two examples stated above describe how Kathak can be performed differently and how it can challenge the gendered performance by not escaping but changing the authorship and giving voices to characters that have been ostracised or not performed because they threaten the patriarchal authorship. These are the only two examples I have explored here but there are many characters in mythology and scriptures who can be used to create alternative narratives and stories or can be given a voice to change the subjectivity and which more often than not overlaps. My attempt at providing subversion is personal and political whereas the dancers who engaged with me have agreed that it is important to explore spaces in Kathak if not necessarily in terms of subversion.

Payal Das who has performed Kali and Durga explains that subversion is intrinsically associated with subjectivity. For her to subvert is to change subjectivity but she doesn't see it to be

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<sup>26</sup> A form of dance within Kathak paradigm, Tandava expresses Shiva's anger and grandiosity.

important enough in Kathak because she feels that in Kathak you are able to embody all the characters. She doesn't link embodiment with subjectivity and explains that dancers can be graceful and bold, like transforming from playing Parvati to Shiva. While subversion is just not about techniques, she added that subversion needs to be understood in terms of how the audience perceives the subversion in performance. She explains that what is subversion for her might mean nothing to others. This was the reason that subversion is more often than not personal but political. People might refuse to recognize my subversion, but for me I negate the gendered space of Kathak through subversions. Ratnika Manjarekar on the contrary explains that because the scriptures, mythology and Kathak as a text itself is a creation of man, the space for subversion becomes limited, though the attempt at subversion does challenge the shackles of patriarchy. She states that,

The way scriptures can be interpreted and choreographed are limited. There is a bit of scope in exploring new space in Kathak but most of the times dancers are bound by terms and framework that has already been established through structure of narrative. Therefore, there is some space of subversion but not entirely as you don't have control over the preset tradition that besieges a dancer. You end up abiding by these structures which makes it the dance form it is. Otherwise what is Kathak?

She suggested that another way of subversion is displacing the importance we give to the *gurus* of Kathak.

First of all, women have to be seen as a more significant contributor to the tradition of Kathak. The audience understands Kathak through the performers' body and explanation of it... Thus performers should be given more importance. If you think of performer as a subject of study and give her a voice, then dance embodies her perspective and the authority of men as gurus and authors is negated. Hence, performer

interprets the tradition and gives it the perception. Therefore, there would be no Kathak without the performer.

Ila Banerjee is skeptical of subversion if performed in a drastic manner. She believes this because according to her if the entire story and characters are changed, the audience won't be able to relate to Kathak. Therefore, according to her one should use classical Kathak narratives within it in a subtle manner to appeal to the audience. She claims that Kathak does need subversion but it should not overthrow the classical value that Kathak has imbibed over the years. Yamini Patel, adding to the discussion states that she performs subversive characters in Kathak more for exploration and experimentation than subversion. But she explains that whatever the intention behind performing a certain character maybe, what is important is to design characters and give them a voice so that they speak a new language. She also explains that in Kathak experimentation depends on the embodiment factor. This is important because if a woman is playing a negative character but the embodiment isn't full, the power of the character will have no impact. Therefore, for Yamini Patel subversion needs to have full embodiment with a new language that speaks to the newer generation entering the space of Kathak.

While discussing experimentation in Kathak she claims that Radha can be experimented in so many ways. She can be shy, coy, angry, passionate, and lovable. She explains that when she performs Radha, she is a subversion to societal value because even after being married to someone else she meets Krishna and has an illicit sexual relationship with him. While I agree that depicting Radha as a sexualised woman is a subversion in the classical tradition, its performance is justified because Krishna is a God and goes beyond all the boundaries that is set for women. It is the same case with Meera bai who can be dancing naked for Krishna and won't be called a 'fallen woman' but if it was for anyone else she would have been ostracized and maybe killed because she would have dishonoured her family.

Agreeing with the idea that silent women characters in scriptures need to be given voices, Patel explains that everyone needs to be heard. In this context she gives the example of Mandodari-Ravana's wife and Urmila-Laxmana's wife. Mandodari is a powerful woman who has to live with a husband who is in love with Sita and might leave her or might lose him to Rama, who will provide him with Moksha. In either case, she loses her husband therefore depicting and giving her voice is a very powerful idea. In the case of Urmila, she is in a sense abandoned by Laxmana who wants to be a dutiful brother. Once he leaves for the forest with Rama, Urmila is left behind to spend 14 years of her life waiting for him. Therefore, making Urmila speak would be providing subjectivity to a character who is invisible and hence would challenge the larger semiotic order.

Semiotic order according to me can be challenged if Gopis are shown to be busy amongst themselves, playing, dancing, flirting and engaging in sexual relationships and hence discounting the presence of Krishna. It makes a statement suggesting that Krishna isn't inevitable. This homosexual description of an age old narrative also challenges the heteronormative patriarchal culture that Kathak is imbibed in. Shivalini Agarwal, while suggesting that this might be difficult to perform, agreed that these kinds of contrasting and challenging pieces need to be performed. Zunaili Khan, adding to the argument states that,

For me if I perform Radha or Krishna, although I mostly try to avoid it, then it is a matter of how much I am able to relate the conjugal love to my own life experience which may or may not be there in the first place, that is why I feel *abhinaya* does not come very easily to me. *Raas leela*<sup>27</sup> is the celebration of love and if I do a new rendition of it I would represent the Gopis to be from the LGBT community.

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<sup>27</sup> Love and erotic sequence between Krishna and Radha



Kathak dancers, while differing on the notion of subversion did provide ways in which alternative spaces and characters for performance can be explored and performed. This suggests that every Kathak dancer experiences certain boundaries and hegemony which they either consciously or subconsciously want to break by providing space and voices to characters that either fall beyond the boundary or do not exist in the system. Therefore, every Kathak dancer has a classical space to show skills and every Kathak dancer needs a space to feel liberated and to go beyond the prescribed text which comes with exploration, experimentation and above all subversion.

This subversion is not only performed by dancers because they are controlled by institutions, *gharanas*<sup>28</sup>, gurus, historiography of Kathak and notion of good and evil. To elicit that the everyday performance of Kathak is gendered at different levels rather than succumbing to it, we, as women, need to wield alternative spaces, voices, characters and narratives to represent our bodies, experiences, and individuality which will make us speaking subjects representing our agency. This in the long will present the aim of politicizing a space that has escaped critiques in guise of transcending gender and being androgynous.

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<sup>28</sup> Different schools of thought within Kathak which are depended on locations in which they were born like Jaipur, Lucknow, Banaras and Raigarh.

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## **Finger on your Lips:**

### **Indian Sanitary Napkin Advertisements and the Culture of Silence**

Tarishi Verma

#### **Abstract**

Menstruation, a biological process of every woman's body, is a gross taboo in all cultures. Studies suggest that not only do the taboos have a discriminatory effect but they also affect the sanitation habits of women. These taboos reflect in the ads of sanitary napkins which cannot escape talking about menstruation and yet they do. Indian sanitary napkin advertisements, while using slogans like 'choice' and 'freedom', reinforce a narrative of layered control over women's bodies. The use of 'choice' and 'freedom' is in fact the most interesting aspect of these ads because while they talk about empowerment, they end up making menstruation, an intrinsic part of a woman's body and a natural biological process, a bane and a hindrance in their life which shouldn't be talked about. In this paper, I have studied how the sanitary napkin advertisements reinforce the culture of silence around menstruation.

Keywords: Sanitary Napkin Advertisements, Menstrual Cycle, Menstrual Taboos, Female Body, Gender in Media, Media Representations of Women.

#### **Introduction**

*Two women are sitting on a bench, holding files in their hands. One girl is very excited while the other seems tense. Suddenly, the girl who is tensed gets up at the pretext of looking at something on the notice board, looks over her shoulder, signals something worriedly to the other girl who then quietly gives her the thumbs up signaling 'all is okay'. The girl heaves a sigh of relief, smiles and comes back to the bench. The other girl then whispers in her ear, "Kapda use karogi toh daag ka dar toh rahega na. Fir interview pe concentrate kaise karogi/If you use a cloth, you will always be wary of staining. Then how will you concentrate on the interview." She then looks around and passes a bag to her saying, "Yahi soch toh badalni hai/This is what we have to change." The girl opens the bag to find a packet of Stayfree secure and her face lights up. The other girl continues, "Stayfree secure. Better suraksha deta hai/Gives better protection." A background song starts simultaneously with that, "Chalti hun yeh jahaan badalne ke liye, dil men yeh umange leke, ke bhaage man hawa ke sang, khwabon ko liye/ I walk to change this world, with hope in my heart, I run with wind with dreams in my heart" The girls then get up and receive their interview letters. They rejoice and climb down the stairs saying "Ab waqt hai, badalne ka/now is the time to change".*

While at first glance, the scenario comes across as a narration of two progressive women looking out for themselves, this advertisement of a sanitary napkin is in fact, steeped deep in layers of regression – of shame, oppression and silence around the female body and its natural process, menstruation.

The problem that I have tried to discuss and demonstrate in this paper is that Indian sanitary napkin advertisements, while using slogans like 'choice' and 'freedom', reinforce a narrative of layered control over women's bodies. I have used textual analysis to analyze Indian sanitary napkin advertisements and have studied the narrative around menstruation in these advertisements, how they reinforce the culture of silence around menstruation and how they construct layered control over women's lives.

## **An Impure Ritual: Menstruation and its Taboos**

Menstruation is a process that occurs in the female body, triggered during puberty when every child's reproductive organs are developing. The reproductive period of the human being continues from about the age of 13 years to 45-50 years. In girls, this period is marked by a characteristic event repeated almost every month in the form of menstrual flow. It may be temporarily stopped only by pregnancy. The process of menstruation is when the egg, that was supposed to be fertilized with a sperm, does not get fertilized due to the absence of sperm and is discharged through the vagina as menstrual discharge every 28 days. This discharge lasts for 3-5 days. As the uterus prepares itself for fertilization every month, it builds a uterine lining as well, which also sheds during menstruation causing blood vessels to rupture. The process can start any time after puberty, when it is called menarche, lasting for about 30-35 years and ends at the age of 45-50 which is called menopause. The generation of the egg essentially means that a woman is capable of bearing a child subject to the presence of the male sperm and signifies a healthy body.

However, menstruation has always had many taboos associated with it. In India, a part of the taboo is brought out by the restrictions surrounding the days when a woman is going through her menstrual cycle. They are often not being allowed to enter the kitchen or cook. Touching holy books or offering prayers is not permitted. In some cases, women are forbidden from looking at themselves in the mirror during this cycle and there are also certain food restrictions. (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011)

While physical restrictions are at play, the cycle itself is never talked about. The menstrual cycle, while being representative of a healthy body and of fertility, is commonly talked about in hushed terms and almost never in front of a male member. The 'culture of silence', as I have called it, exists around menstruation for every girl where she is taught to stay quiet and be secretive about the phenomenon.



Paulo Freire first used the phrase ‘culture of silence’ in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) in context of the poor third world countries and their education. Freire formulated that the culture of silence is perpetuated by those in power in order to keep others under their subordination.

Feminist discourses have adopted the term to denote how this culture of silence works towards the subordination of women. Feminists see the culture of silence in women who are victims of violence of any kind. In her essay ‘A Swirling Power Quadruple Interplay: Misogyny, Violence, Silence and Voice’ on violence against women in Kenya, Kerubo Abuya (2014) talks about ‘silence’s role in sustaining the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that are embedded in the myriad visible violent behaviors and cultural artifacts along with the invisible values, assumptions and beliefs that are embodied in our cultures.’

The silence around the violation of one’s body, sexually or in assault, arises from the notion that women’s bodies carry the honour of the family upon themselves and a violation of the body damages the honour. As Kanchan Mathur (2008) writes in her paper *Body as Space, Body as Site: Bodily Integrity and Women’s Empowerment in India*, “virginity and chastity are virtues...the typical image of a “good woman” is still one who upholds the honour of the family, maintains the “culture of silence” prevailing in the private domain...” (Mathur, 2008, p. 55)

Thus, the woman is not allowed to talk freely about sexuality, sexual desires and anything pertaining to the body, which includes menstruation. While being representative of fertility, menstruation also signifies sexual development of the female body – after all, the egg is being fertilized in anticipation of the sperm which would be provided by the male body through intercourse. The sexuality needs to be protected until formal ties, like marriage, are established for intercourse. The inclusion of intercourse in the discourse around menstruation partly leads to the formation of taboos around menstruation. This culture of silence leads to practical problems:

for instance women don't understand their bodies because they are never allowed to talk about it.

Kerstin Jurlander, in her study "*Wash your hair and keep a lemon – the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in South India*" talks about the lack of menstrual knowledge among girls and even the lack of basic knowledge about their bodies. While in Tamil Nadu, girls were wary of talking about their bodies and did not know where their reproductive organs were, in an urban slum in Delhi, the girls are unprepared for menstruation and had 'very little knowledge about what happened in their bodies.' In Rajasthan, the girls were only told about the restrictions that they had to face during menstruation and no other information was provided. (Jurlander, 2012)

The other discourse around women's bodies has always been sensitive. The bodies need to be perfect according to dominant social norms. They are subject to regimes that force them to maintain 'perfect' bodies, which are ideally thin, fair, hairless, and exist without any bodily fluids like sweat, spit or menstruation. Shame is not only then associated with not talking about the female body. A perfect body's association with menstruation can only be that of shame because it blemishes the body and thus, shame or a necessity to hide menstruation becomes an imperative to market a sanitary napkin.

The necessity to hide is followed by a validation for it by bringing the idea of 'empowerment'. The empowerment narrative may be well explained through ideology and its ways of working. While the products come with a promise of empowerment, they have certain stereotypically regressive ideas about representation of genders. Louis Althusser notes that,

"Ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life...[it] is the way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order: a social order that is marked by enormous inequalities of wealth, status and power... they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of

the social order, but that, ultimately, they return us to our places in the social order, refreshed and ready to tolerate our exploitation and oppression until the next official break comes along.” (Storey, 2008, pp. 4-5)

The ideology of protection and shame, thus, reigns supreme by providing a seemingly different outlet of empowerment.

Using these themes and ideas formatively, I have employed textual analysis to examine Indian sanitary napkin advertisements. I have tried to analyse the various layers of text and sound that contribute to building the discourse of shame. Textual analysis may be defined as a method employed to “obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them.” (McKee 2003:1)

Roland Barthes propounded the theory of the denotations and connotations, following from Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signifier and signified. According to Saussure, the ‘signifier’ dog ‘signifies’ a four-legged canine creature. Barthes added a new layer of meaning, arguing that ‘this indicates only primary signification’. In the secondary level of meaning ‘dog’ can also refer to an ‘unpleasant human being.’ (Storey 2008)

“[Barthes] claims that it is at the level of secondary signification or connotation that myth is produced for consumption. By myth he means ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices, which by actively promoting the values and interests of dominant groups in society defend the prevailing structures of power.” (Storey 2008:119)

It is at these secondary levels that the ideologies of these advertisements can be deciphered. The elements to be looked at for a textual analysis are:

- Form: The shape of the text and the way it appears before us. Some of the components of the form are:

- Frame: Size of the image, placing of the elements in the image, if anything has been removed from the image – all these determine whether the image is dominant or isolated.
- Distance: Whether the shot is an extreme long shot or extreme close up, whether it is a mid-long shot – this distance from the camera helps to determine the closeness to the characters in the narrative determined by how comfortable the filmmaker wants the audience to be with a particular scene.
- Content: The content is what is actually inside the frame: the subject of the text and how that subject is presented to us. The content is made up of:
  - The subject(s).
  - The focus of the shot the setting: Tilts, tracks and zoom in-zoom outs are used to give more contexts to the narrative of the film.
  - Extra-diegetic sound: This is the sound that comes from outside the film and is usually the background song which is used to reflect the mood of the film.

(Bainbridge, Goc, Tynan 2011)

Being audio-visual in nature, television advertisements have all the above elements that may be analysed for a second level meaning. An advertisement – or a moving image – has form and content in addition to camera work. All of these work at the level of connotation, working not only to denote movement but also to denote power hierarchies and dominant ideologies.

“Advertising is one of the oldest forms of media it informs much of the media we consume, as advertising provides the main source of income for media owners advertising orientates the range of entertainment and information produced by the media toward those audiences advertisers want to reach.” (Bainbridge, Goc, Tynan 2011:230)

Textual analysis takes into consideration all the elements of a text and analyses them for connotations and how they work in the interest of certain people and against the interests of certain people.

**“Unless you tell someone, it’s your secret.”<sup>1</sup>**

Based on the methodology, I have created categories and picked up elements from advertisements that suit these categories. The ‘image’ is the picture that is seen on television and the image constructed of the people in the ad, the voiceover or background song that is usually in tandem with the ‘mood’ of the advertisement, the text or explanatory words that appear on screen and the spoken ‘dialogue’. All these categories lead into each other, forming a layer over the other to form meaning that is explained through secondary texts and interpretations.

Each category has listed some examples that examine how menstruation is being talked about in that category, thus examining how the silence around menstruation is created in advertisements.

### ***1. Dialogue***

*A girl is getting ready to join the army. She is packing her bags for her training when her mother asks her, “Lekin un dino men kya karogi/ What will you do during those days?”*

In this scene from Stayfree ‘army’ advertisement, the conversation is happening inside a room between two women and they refrain from using the word ‘periods’ or ‘menstruation’. Out of the 10 ads I looked at, 9 don’t use the word menstruation or ‘periods’. Out of these 9 ads, 6

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<sup>1</sup> Houppert 1999:82. Houppert, Karen. *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

don't refer to it at all and 3 use veiled terms to refer to it, either in Hindi or in English. Some more examples are:

'Those five days': A Kotex advertisement for its sanitary napkin uses the phrase 'those five days' throughout the ad as their jingle. The ad begins with a song with the words, "Do you hate being a girl, on those five days?" where the words 'on those five days' are repeated thrice. The chorus says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." The girls in the ads also flash their palms to show five days. In the final segment of the ad, the voiceover says "celebrate being a girl" and the song continues the sentence "even in those five days".

Silence: In the Whisper Choice 'Dance' ad, when the girl feels worried about performing in the dance show, she gives a troubled expression and runs inside the bedroom. The mother follows her to know what happened. The girl, her face still sad, says, 'I can win but...' and she doesn't complete her statement but the mother has already understood it as she smiles an assuring smile that says she has a solution.

This absence of a direct reference or a reference to menstruation without actually using the term seems to be the hallmark of all sanitary napkin ads. Not only do the ads not refer to the term in conversation, even when there is a product demonstration there is no mention of why the product is used. The other 6 ads have narratives where the conversation between the people in the ad or the conversation between the viewer and the producer in the ad is carried on the basis of a mutual agreement that both the parties understand what is being talked about. Even though there is product demonstration and conversations about the 'pad', 'napkin' and 'stains', there are no references to menstruation.

In the Don't Worry 'hockey' ad, the girls talk about the 'pad' but neither of the girls needs to be told that this is about menstruation and there is no mention of the term. The girls even hush up their voices when they are talking about the pad.

In the Don't Worry 'waterfall' ad and Kotex 'gym' ad, there is only product demonstration and no conversation between protagonists about the pad.

In the Sofy '*shakti*' ad, the girl doesn't mention menstruation in conversation but mentions her 'napkin'.

In the Stayfree 'job interview' ad and Whisper 'college' ad, the girls talk about stains, '*upari geelapan*' and general discomfort but don't mention the source or the cause of this.

These ads incumbently play upon the notion of silence and the awkwardness around menstruation that girls have harbored from a young age. When Karen Houppert, author of *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*, conducted a focus group discussion for her book and spoke to young girls aged 10 years to 11 years about menstruation, the girls were not just shy in talking about menstruation but also knew there was something wrong about saying the word 'period' out loud. (Houppert, 1999, pp. 51-52)

The omission of the word is followed by enforcing the idea of shame by not letting the 'secret' spill out in public by way of hiding stains or smell.

## **2. Voiceover**

A voiceover in an ad is the voice of the creator and delivers the most important message of the ad. They convey to us the function that the product will perform that might benefit us. According to the ad, the essential function of a sanitary napkin is to prevent staining. However, it is not seen as something that is technically dirty but is masked in the idea of protection. This is articulated by using certain terminologies. 6 out of 10 ads use words that indicate that sanitary napkins protect you from staining.

- In the Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the voiceover describes the product as it is demonstrated, “Sofy bodyfit slim, with three way leakage control. Double absorbent core fits the body, multi-leak control lines for leakage control and shape maintenance system keeps the pad in shape – *taaki aap protected rahen lambe samay tak/so that you remain protected for a long time.*”
- In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the protagonist explains that girls fear that their image will get stained and because of Sofy, they don’t need to worry about staining. The product is demonstrated as the voiceover explains, “Sofy side walls. *Iske unique flexible sidewalls side leakage na hone de aur lambe samay tak sokhen/It’s unique flexible sidewalls prevent side leakage and absorb for a long period of time.*”
- In the Stayfree ‘army’ ad, the girl is protected from stains as the product demonstration tells the viewers that, “*Iska suraksha centre pad ke beech men zyada sokhe aur de daag se behtar do guni behtar suraksha/Its protection centre absorbs more in the centre and gives two times better protection from staining.*”
- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, the girl says that the pad gives better protection from stains. The voiceover demonstration of the product says, “*Stayfree secure wings men hai super absorb centre aur leak protect design, jiske saath yeh sokhe paanch guna zyada/Stayfree secure wings has super absorb centre and leak protect design because of which it absorbs five times better.*”
- In the Whisper ‘dance’ ad, the mother shows her daughter the product and explains its qualities, “*Wagt aa gaya whisper choice wings apnane ka, jo kapde ki tarah mudta ya sarakta nabin, bana rehta hai aur deta hai daag se behtar suraksha/It’s time to start using whisper choice wings which doesn’t shift from its position unlike cloth and gives you better protection from stains.*”



- In the Whisper ‘college’ ad, the girl complains of wetness (one can presume she is talking about the pad) which makes it difficult for her to walk quickly like her friends. The voiceover demonstration says, “*Iske naye top sheet mein hain 50% larger holes, jo sokhe zyada ek hi second mein/it has a new top sheet with 50% larger holes that absorb a lot within one second.*”

The words that are used to tell the viewer about the benefits of the sanitary napkin are chosen in a way that makes menstruation something one needs to be ‘protected’ against, enforcing the shame. The product description is in the form of words like ‘protection center’, ‘secure’ wings, keep you ‘protected’ all day and ‘fear’ of stain. Menstrual blood shouldn’t ‘leak out’ in the literal sense as well as in the sense that no one should get to know about it. The brands themselves are named Whisper, Stayfree and Don’t Worry, all pointing towards a protection from it, ultimately harping the same narrative – it will be shameful if anyone else finds out about it.

The shame associated with staining is limited only to sanitary napkin advertisements. Surf Excel’s advertising campaign ‘*Daag Achhe Hain/Stains are good*<sup>2</sup>’ is not only saying that stains are not a problem for anyone, they also go ahead and show them. These, however, are limited to mud, food, shoe polish, paint and other regular stains. Menstrual stains are omitted from these ads.

The idea of menstruation being ‘shameful’ comes from the polluting nature of menstruation that all women believe in, evident in the restrictions imposed on them during and the taboos associated with menstruation. Kerstin Jurlander, in her study “*Wash your hair and keep a lemon – the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in South India*”, posits that “the notions of menstruation and the rules about uncleanness are deeply rooted in the Hindu mind, even though the everyday practice changes over time.” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 25) She talks about middle-aged women in Banaras who have conceded to the fact that they are unclean and therefore do not

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hul.co.in/brands-in-action/detail/Why-we-think-Daag-Achhe-Hain/306334/>

participate in rituals and religious ceremonies. “For some, the restrictions were connected with the feelings of loneliness and shame.” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 25)

Houppert (1999) gives the example of Tambrands, an American tampon brand, in her book where the brand answers a common query that girls have: ‘will anyone ever get to know about the fact that I am menstruating?’ “Tambrands answers: no, “unless you tell someone, it’s your secret.” And, by the way, in order to keep it that way here’s some advice. Use tampons, not pads, “so you don’t have to worry about odor.” Use biodegradable tampons and applicators, since flushing them down the toilet is “a good way to help keep your period private.” (Houppert 1999:82) Even though Indian ads don’t say it out loud – keep your period private – they do so in a number of implicit ways. It’s spilling out or leaking out is prevented by not only not speaking about it and by protection from stains but also by talking about it in a private space.

### ***3. Image***

The advertisers carefully choose the spaces in which menstruation is talked about. The characters in these ads are always shown to be in what can be described as private spaces within the architecture of the advertisements. These private spaces could be a bedroom, as distinct from the living room, a secluded corner in a public space or even inside a toilet. The ads emphasize the need to treat menstruation as a private affair not to be spoken about with everyone and anywhere. “Nice girls may talk about bleeding in the *privacy* of their...bedrooms, but nice girls never talk about it elsewhere.” (Emphasis mine. Houppert, 1999, p. 71)

Five out of ten ads show a shift in the space from public to private or show a private space for talking about menstruation.

- Shifting from public to private:

- In the Whisper Choice ‘Dance’ advertisement, the girl runs inside the bedroom from the living room. The conversation between the mother and the daughter happens in a long shot with the audience placed at the door, looking into their private life. The audience is made privy to what goes on inside the bedroom, thus confining the discussion of menstruation to a closed space.
- In the Don’t Worry ‘Hockey’ ad, the captain of the team rushes inside the dressing room and her friend follows her through. Inside, they talk about the benefits of a gel based sanitary napkin over cotton pads as the camera zooms in to their faces when they talk about it, again indicating a closed space.
- Remaining in the private space:
  - In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the girl mentions the word ‘periods’ once and describes the problems girls seem to face about it inside her home. It is only when she has solved the problem of staining does she steps out of her home.
  - In the Kotex ad where girls are meditating to soft music and boys are working out to rock music, the space between the two is clearly demarcated by a glass wall between their areas of working out and meditation.
  - In the Stayfree sanitary napkin ad, the two girls are already sitting away from the rest of the public and they are talking about the product in hushed tones.

The ads also emphasize that not only is menstruation to be spoken about in ‘secret’ but even the product itself has to be kept insulated from the public gaze. The relationship between the product and the consumer is almost exalted to the level of an intensely private and exclusive relationship. In the advertisements under study this insulation of the product from public recognition is done in various ways:

- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, one girl hands the sanitary napkin packet to the other girl through her bag and the packet never comes out. The camera has to ‘peep in’ her bag in order to see what’s being exchanged.
- In the Whisper ‘college’ advertisement, the girls take their friend inside the washroom and there they are able to take out the packet to show her its benefit. There is no ‘peeping-in’ in this ad.
- In Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the camera has to peep in the bag which is kept in a fairly public space.
- In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the sanitary napkin packet is kept out in the open but in the washroom of the home of the protagonist.

The only time the sanitary napkin comes out is in the private space. Placement of packet reinforces the ‘private’ domain of the sanitary napkin. The girl in the Sofy ad talks about the issues girls face because of the fear of stain. She could also have talked about these same problems outside the house especially since her words refer to public spaces (“*periods mein office nahi jaogi, party nahi karogi*”). But the idea is to not let menstruation spill into the public space.

Jurlander’s study mentions that for the girls in an urban slum in Delhi, “menstruation was a subject that was rarely discussed either in public or within the families....” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 20) Her study also talks about the girls in Rajasthan who used washable cloth during menstruation and “[t]he cloths were usually washed with soap, but then unfortunately often stored in unhygienic places, not to risk others to see it stored their sanitary napkins.” (Houppert, 1999, p. 21)

Once they have successfully restricted menstruation to the private space and made sure it is not ‘spilled out’ in the public, they go on to ideas of choice in women’s lives and empowerment of women. The ads talk about the impact of menstruation in women’s lives and how hiding it facilitates success in their lives.

#### ***4. Background Song and Tagline***

The background song or extra-diegetic sound sets the mood for any ad film (Bainbridge, et al., 2011). After confining menstruation to the private space, the ads culminate their message in the emancipation of women. The advertisements emphasize on the use of these sanitary napkins for growth and success in life. All these ads show success and confidence in women's lives. They not only show successful women, the tagline of their ad and their background songs reinforce notions of success.

- Professional Success
  - In the Don't Worry 'hockey' ad, when the captain takes care of the problem of menstruation by wearing the sanitary napkin, she goes on to win the match. The background song says, "Now you don't need to stop."
  - In the Stayfree 'job interview' ad, out of the two women, one doesn't use Stayfree and she is worried and tensed. But once she is introduced to Stayfree, she not only becomes more confident, she goes on to get the interview call letter. Again, the background song 'I walk to change the world with hope in my heart, now my mind runs free like the wind and I walk with all my dreams with me' alludes to success.
  - In the Stayfree 'army' ad, the girl keeps her 'morale boosted' by the use of the sanitary napkin. Again, the background song is 'I walk to change the world with hope in my heart, now my mind runs free like the wind and I walk with all my dreams with me'.
  - In the Whisper 'Dance' ad, the girl is protected by the sanitary napkin that she is wearing and she goes on to win the dance competition and the background song says 'now when we move, we won't be stopped'.

- Choice to have fun:
  - In the Sofy 'side walls' ad, the girl mentions all the fun things that girls miss out on due to the fear of staining. Girls don't work, don't party, don't wear fancy clothes because of periods but with the sanitary napkin, they have the choice to do all these things and be stain free.
  - In Don't Worry 'Waterfall' advertisement shows three girls having fun in the water while one is sitting aloof, reading a book. When the other girls start troubling her, she uses sanitary napkin as her weapon to absorb all the water that was 'staining' her book. With a sly smile on her face, she manages to tackle the people who were troubling her. She takes care of the problem of menstruation by using Don't Worry sanitary napkin and does this with a smile on her face.
  - In the Kotex 'gym' ad, the girls decide to have some fun and tease the boys and do it in the presence of the yoga teacher. The girls know how to have fun even during menstruation because they are protected by the sanitary napkin.
- Confidence:
  - In the Kotex 'those five days' ad, the girls who are not using the sanitary napkin have to pretend to be men during those five days. But the girl who has the sanitary napkin is able to discard the manly clothes and wear the dress that she likes, strut confidently and be around men. She is celebrating 'being a girl'.
  - In the Sofy '*shakti*' ad, the girl has the confidence to tackle troublemakers, an eve teaser in this advertisement.
  - In the Whisper 'college' advertisement, the girl defeats a boy in the race to a seat in class.

Success is also alluded to in the taglines of these advertisements.

- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, the girls are shown to have become successful while the tagline says ‘*ab waqt hai badalne ka/now is the time to change*’.
- In the Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the girl is shown to have the power to tackle the world while the tagline of the ad is ‘*hum aagey aagey, duniya peeche peeche/we lead while the rest of the world follows*’.
- In the Whisper ‘college’ ad, when the girl is shown to have defeated the boy, the tagline says ‘*kadam badhaye jaa/keep moving forward in life*’.

Menstruation is posited as a barrier to women’s lives by these ads and keeping it away from the public domain and effectively hiding is shown to being success in women’s lives. Tambrands, the American tampon brand also posited menstruation as an ‘omnipresent threat’. Houppert notes that “To keep the stakes high, the company implies that “your little secret” is safe...with it. Worry, they tell girls, because evidence of your bleeding is an omnipresent threat.” (Houppert, 1999, p. 84)

The ads are giving a solution to this ‘omnipresent threat’ of the evidence of bleeding which will then facilitate their success. That they should have the ability to transcend their bodies like men is a requisite for them to be as successful as men.

Empowerment also, then, becomes a commodity to market along with the sanitary napkin. It makes the napkin saleable because then the napkin enables the women to achieve what they would otherwise be unable to. The ads present a very simplistic and myopic view of empowerment. The power dynamics aren’t necessarily changed through the purchase of the napkin. In fact, as Jia Tolentino writes for the *New York Times*, “This version of empowerment can be actively disempowering: It’s a series of objects and experiences you can purchase while the conditions determining who can access and accumulate power stay the same.” (Tolentino, 2016)

Also, commoditizing empowerment problematizes access to empowerment. Only a certain class of people is able to access the empowerment because only they can afford it. This is evident in the higher prices of these sanitary napkins – they are virtually inaccessible for lower classes, especially for the rural masses.

More so, the advertisements stick to overarching gender roles that stand in complete opposition to the empowered figure of the woman that they are trying to project.

### **Gender Roles**

Menstruation, being tabooed and hidden, also enables a systemic oppression of women by classifying them as entities carrying shameful functions. While it becomes important when the questions of child bearing come in, it still lurks quietly inside rooms, mostly being discussed among women. Menstruation also becomes important in assigning gender roles. The bleeding woman becomes inherently weaker and menstruation has often been cited as a professional hindrance – which seems to be a primary reason why advertisements play on the empowerment trope.

The sanitary napkin advertisement promises to erase this difference of ‘weakness’ and brings the narrative of empowerment through the erasure of this difference. This continuous endeavor to erase the difference works toward making the bodies of the two genders equal. Menstruation is an essential function of the female body that marks it healthy. By portraying a necessity to hide it, the advertisements fail to acknowledge the importance of it in the female body. Incidentally, while the bodies are projected at par, the societal roles continue to remain stereotypical.

The ads construct the image of the male figure as someone who is completely away from the whole idea of menstruation and is present only to fulfil some prescribed roles. As Houppert noted in her book, children, even from a young age are taught about the body in separate



classrooms. The boys grow up knowing nothing about menstruation because it is presented as an issue private to the girls. (Houppert, 1999)

While some of these ads don't have the presence of the male figure, in the ones that do, the men are clearly demarcated from the space in which the women talk about menstruation. They are not even in the same room as the women and do not take part in the discussion.

The male figure's image in these ads is that of authority in some way or the other and they are away from the area where menstruation is talked about.

- In the Kotex 'gym' ad where girls are meditating to soft music and boys are working out to rock music, the space between the two is clearly demarcated by a glass wall between their areas of working out and meditation.
- In the Stayfree 'army' ad, the father rebukes the daughter for joining the army but also eventually changes his thinking and accepts his daughter. She goes inside for packing her bags to leave for training and her mother accompanies her but her father is not seen. But when it comes to accepting her success, her father is the first one to be there.
- In the Whisper 'dance' ad, the father is the one who gives the daughter permission to participate in the dance competition. But while she runs inside the room, the father remains sitting in the drawing room. Even though he is aware that there is some problem, he doesn't go ahead and address it.
- In the Don't Worry 'hockey' ad, the coach is the one who is giving instructions to the women players. He is puzzled by the captain's decision to not play but he remains outside while the girl runs inside followed by another girl.

This image of the male seems to be a natural one and no one questions the absence of the male in these ads or his absence from these discussions. The male is there to take the decisions and the woman is empowered only by his validation.

Even though women are being given the choice to hide menstruation and move on in life, the real decision lies with a male in a position of authority. While the women appear as each other's comrades and sympathetic partners, the male figure stays out of the realm of sympathy and stays in the public space, indicating his aloofness from the idea of menstruation.

The female too, is an ideal one. The ads not only tell women how and where to talk about menstruation, they also tell us how a woman should behave during menstruation. The advertisements also omit the fact that women have to go through a certain amount of pain during menstruation. The women in these ads are completely devoid of any cramps or stomach pain. The complete silence on the subject of pain further enforces maintaining a silence on the subject, encouraging women to keep quiet about cramps, which can turn out to be a serious medical issue, within the culture of silence.

These images maintain that hierarchy of power between the masculine and feminine even while talking about a feminine product that is supposed to emancipate the woman.

## **Conclusion**

Sanitary napkin advertisements seem to have a fairly simple message to deliver to the audience. Their product will help collecting the blood while women are menstruating and dispose it properly. The subtext used for marketing the product is telling women that these napkins will help them lead a better and successful life.

The narrative of empowerment, however, is punctured with needles of oppressive ideas that seek to reinforce the same notions that bring the need for empowerment in the first place. The choice that a woman is given to be successful in life is only available to her once she has hidden a trait of her that asserts the fact that she is a woman. Hiding menstruation is hiding an important part of her 'gendered identity.' (Woods, 2013) In her study of advertising campaigns for oral

contraceptives that reduce the number of menstrual periods to three or four cycles in a year or completely obliterate them from a woman's life, Carly S. Woods says that these advertisements promise to correct the way in which a woman's life is interrupted due to menstruation. (Woods, 2013) Similarly, Indian sanitary napkin advertisements also show how menstruation interrupts women's lives. While they don't promise complete elimination of menstruation, they do promise to effectively hide it so that the women can achieve their goals in life. The woman can achieve success in life but only after she has stuck to certain choices given to her by the society.

In all these ads, the constant theme is that of becoming successful in life, especially in areas where men excel. Not just success, women also learn to be confident – but all of this is possible when women are able to transcend their bodies like men do; which basically translates to being able to tackle menstruation. Any presence or mention of menstruation renders them incapable of tackling other problems. Woods says that these ads, claiming to help women succeed, show that it's only menstruation and not gender discrimination that bars women from success and having a good life in general. (Woods, 2013) No bodily function should be a hindrance – just like men.

The idea is also to eliminate menstruation because it is 'dirty' and hence leads to all the taboos. Mary Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger*, writes how eliminating dirt is not a part of a hygienic process but rather a process of cleansing that leads to an environment that conforms to our idea of perfection (Douglas, 1966). A perfect environment then would be one where menstrual blood is not present or is at least not leaking out in the environment. "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created." (Douglas, 1966, p. 4) The advertisements indulge in this exaggeration by actively trying to normalize the absence of this difference.

To sum up, the covert claim of the advertisements is that being saved from menstruation – in the sense that no one gets to know about it and you remain un-shamed – women can lead

successful lives. The success in their professional and personal lives hinges on the complete erasure of menstruation from the public discourse.

Women continue to face discrimination in various spheres of life, as described by Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth*. At the workplace specifically – since that is the arena highlighted by most advertisements – menstruation would feature as one of the many bullet points that enumerate the biases against women. It's erasure and the silence around it gives a false sense of empowerment and makes women unable to accept this part of their bodies as normal since it is constantly being marketed as shameful. At a time when their bodies are generally being told off for being imperfect, telling them to hide a healthy function can lead them further into the abyss of dysfunctionality, leading to more body image issues. The idea of these advertisements should be to normalize menstrual bleeding and its appearance on clothes and market the product as providing comfort without necessarily hiding the process.

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