Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema

The framework of much of the discussion in this paper will be provided by concepts such as the nation state, the public sphere and theories investigating the dynamic between the global and the local. Nationhood or a coherent nation state is a concept that exists only in fiction. In these turbulent times the concept of a cultural identity or a form of personalised nationality has evolved as a more portable and useful term. The importance of the media, of film, of film and television images in fixing or directing these new identities and their implications on gender, both within and across borders, will be the focus of my paper.

With satellite television, proliferation of videotape and dubbing of American films - a flood of information, images and sounds have opened on the market. Yet this is in no way the ideal democratisation of the public sphere. There is increasing concentration of media ownership and a few elite gatekeepers control distribution and relay. The question that arises is - is it ever going to be possible to have mutually compatible public spheres and could these global media flows thereby feed a progressive political process? Academic debate should move from purely abstract analyses to a more active engagement with kinds of representation – modalities of image, forms of speech and address to viewers.

An imaginary national identity and sense of belonging emerges with modernity and with the capitalism that made possible increasing dissemination of newspapers and the novel form, in a common language linked to national identity. This is the question of how daily

* Research Fellow, Centre for Culture, Development and Environment, Asian and African Studies, University of Sussex.

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routine practices-homogenising cultural elements - so called Americanisation as in shopping malls, food chains like Macdonalds and entertainment such as American movies and television confront the deeper sense of belonging to a culture in which social and religious practices and family relations are central signs of specific kinds of cultural belonging.

I shall examine the process of gender representations in Indian cinema - and how larger ideological forces and market forces impact this process. I shall be looking chiefly at Hindi cinema but also at works of some women filmmakers of Asian origin working outside India.

I would argue that the process of globalisation is not altogether new or belonging entirely to the present. Particularly with Indian cinema - its history shows the continued influence of world cinema, in particular European and Hollywood cinema. In the 1920's an Indian film maker Himanshu Rai made Indo-German collaborative films. Starting with silent films and moving on to the talkies, Rai made a number of films based on Indian mythology, history and later on social issues. Like his predecessor Phalke who was more indigenous and worked within the Swadeshi project, Rai was also responding to the colonial experience by constructing self conscious Indian images and narratives, a sense of Indianness not only for the Indian audience but for the European market. The very nature of his collaborations (the early historicals - Shiraz, Prapanch Pash) unavoidable fell within the discourse of orientalism leading to a certain glamorisation of Indian history. Rai used a number of Eurasian actresses to play the female lead characters. These women were given Hindu names like Sita Devi - and were introduced to the public as "educated Hindu women". This anomaly of Eurasian actresses representing Indian historical/mythological characters sets up an interesting colonial moment and underlines the problematics of its representation. I would pin this as an early moment of global forces in operation - where an European technical team, a set of Eurasian actresses, an Indian scriptwriter and director - set about filming Indian narratives.

Devika Rani joined this unit as costume designer and upgraded as heroine and later as co-partner of Bombay Talkies - the production company Rai set up in Bombay. In Achyut Kanya Devika Rani introduced the village belle look (a curious blend of western sophistication and Indian costumes). This representation has had a lasting impact on how Indian rural women should look on screen, a construct from which later realist directors had to struggle to break away from.
In later decades of the history of cinema one can identify many such moments. The nationalist rhetoric of the pre-independence years produced films valorising the mother figure. Mehboob Khan’s *Aurat*, a modest film made in the early forties was remade in colour as *Mother India* in 1956. The making of the new nation, the projection of Indian culture to the world market, the first International Film Festival in Delhi - perhaps all these factors led to the tremendous reception of the film both at home and abroad. It was the immediate post independence moment that led to the phenomenal iconisation and identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. Nationalist discourse constitutes the female body as a privileged signifier and various struggles are waged over the meaning and ownership of that body. What does it mean for women to be explicitly evoked in theories of nation only when their specificity can serve a particular cause?

Viewing nation as narrative Bhabha puts emphasis on how the nation is articulated in language, signifiers, textuality, rhetoric. It emphasises the difference between the nation state as a set of regulations, policies, institutions, organisations and national identity - that is nation as culture. Looking at nation as text, as culture, questions the totalization of national culture and opens up the widely disseminated forms through which subjects construct the ‘field of meanings associated with national life’. Bhabha talks about the spaces in between through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated.

As the women’s movement gained strength in India and highlighted women’s oppression and a struggle for an egalitarian society - a series of women film makers brought women from the margins to the centre of their texts. An alternate view point and a female gaze brought a focus on female subjectivity. A number of films were made by Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjpye, Vijaya Mehta, Aruna Raje and Kalpana Lajmi - which were sensitive portrayals of women protagonists, in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific socio-historical contexts.

The advent of satellite television in the ‘80s suddenly changed the viewers world view. Foreign images, MTV culture - became part of everyday viewing experience. Narrative cinema was rather quickly replaced by the dominant image. I use here the theoretical argument that the post modern can be seen as the result of the commodification of the image itself. Fundamentally consumerism is set to objectify masculine ideals. Postmodern strategies of parody and pastiche simply
serve to maintain the male domination of representation. In Indian mainstream cinema we continue to see a patriarchal version of female sexuality. Masculinity is defined as the muscular body and physical aggression. The visual spectacle and collage have taken over as mandatory song and dance sequences through confusing international locales which disrupt the viewer's sense of time and space. Increasingly the pleasure element is gaining precedence over any concern with a narrative. In a recent release, yash Johar's *Duplicate* the fun and frivolity of the song and dance sequence even sanctions explicitly sexual gestures. In one situation where the duplicates have switched roles, the gangster tries to seduce the heroine and to the tune of a light hearted song, pulls her saree and gropes her. This form of retrogressive representation in a country where women are constantly battling against physical violation and sexual harassment, is seriously alarming as it trivialises real issues which affect women in their day to day lives. Here is instance of a global (read western) image used with a 'mis' reading or 'non' reading of a cultural context.

To continue with *Duplicate* the old and successful idea of the male double has been used for the plot. The female companion of the good and the bad hero are feminine polarities. The sophisticated, English speaking, no nonsense banquet manager loses her heart to the hotel chef amazingly quickly. Despite her apparent urban polish, she quickly turns into a dreamy eyed lovelorn girl, romping around foreign locales with her lover (as part of the imaginary romance dream sequences). The second actress plays the moll to the anti-hero gangster. Dancing in the night club she is objectified by the collective male gaze evoking familiar scenes from the sixties and seventies, while she tries to warn her lover through the coded language of her song. Many critics have observed the collapse of the romantic heroine and vamp in the persona of the heroine of the eighties and nineties. *Duplicate* is pastiche, it evokes key scenes from many films from the sixties and seventies and it polarises the feminine into the romantic lover and the sexual vamp who is on the other side of the law. The narrative uses the space of prime consumer culture - the international beach hotel, with its influx of tourists and foreign delegates. This is where the hero prepares sumptous banquets as he waltzes and sings in the kitchen. Though the narrative attempts to appear emancipated and contemporary, it presents a conservative ideology in valorising the male and objectifying the female.

The female avenger genre also raises similar problems. The contradiction with these films is that even though they denounce rape,
scene of female violation figures centrally in the narrative. The film *Dushman* by a woman producer and a woman director - perpetuates this rhetoric of violence. It is a disconcerting observation that a language of cinematic violence appropriates women film makers and disallows any alternate subjective vision to underpin the narrative. Every scene of male violence signals the consolidation of criminality and vigilantism with an increasing displacement of the state’s law and order role. Criminalising rape identifies with a progressive legal position but at the same time induces the voyeuristic pleasure prompted in the cinematic representations of rape. These films force us to reconsider the limits and possibilities of equating rape and revenge scenes and the masochistic underpinning of the rape scenes in this genre. These revenge films retain the rule of targetting modern urban women as victims - fashion models, college teachers, newlywed wives, policewomen. The metaphor of the city and the criminal/psychopath lurking in the streets doubly exposes the vulnerability and the threatened or real violation of these women.

Lalitha Gopalan in her essay on “Avenging Women in Indian Cinema” says visual representations of rape in Indian cinema also reminds us of the authority of censorship regulations and suggest the possibility of sado-masochistic pleasure structuring these rape scenes. Even while revenge narratives provide female stars with more dominant roles, women’s access to avenging power in these films is intimately predicated on rape. The avenging women genre can actually be said to be a giddy masculine concoction. The rape scene provides the narrative ruse for the revenge plan while providing the spectator with a range of scopophilic pleasures.

Gopalan writes the interlocking narratives of rape and revenge do not sufficiently dislodge or displace conventional representation of Indian cinema. the avenging genre opens the representational circuit for women on the Indian screen, but this unfettered power is undercut by finally reeling in the authority of the state and revealing the avenging women’s own overwhelming investment in the restoration of the social imaginary. Casting women as embodying and sustaining tradition recycles an old stereotype in Indian films.

Analysing complex interchanges between questions of nation/location and transnational cultural practices in specifying sexual politics, we need to incorporate a critical reading of global phenomena in our local, situational thinking about ideology and culture. My reading of Indian films as part of this transnational/local cultural debate looks at Indian films as part of a local industry as well as part
of an increasingly dynamic and influential cultural media around the
globe. Indian cinema is today enjoying a huge international market.
Films are exported to countries around the world and the audience
for it is growing too. The earlier generation of Indian migrants saw
these films for the sake of nostalgia. The present day generation view
Hindi films more in terms of an identity issue and has appropriated
Hindi film music and dance as a means of cultural assertion in order
to hold on to something of their own. Taking one instance, in the UK
now there is a vibrant Asian club culture, with underground Asian
music bands and it is a common sight on these club nights to see a
packed room of people swinging to the tunes of Hindi films remixes.
An addition to these has been the recent influx of club dancers -
young Asian girls, trained in Indian dance who perform a wild
rendition of hip hop, belly dance with snatches of Bharatnatyam
gestures and Kathak footwork.

Filmmakers like Yash Chopra and Subash Ghai are making films
with the NRI Indians in mind and images of consumer culture are
increasingly used to negotiate between modernity and tradition, such
negotiations take place over the women’s body. In Yash Chopra’s
latest musical Dil to Pagal Hai - a story of triangular love, the two
actresses Madhuri and Karishma are invested with distinctive set of
values. Karishma with her ‘body is my temple’ physique represents
the perfect body of the western dancer. She inhabits the space of the
gym, the dance studio and the stage. The realm of imagination and
romanticism belongs to the other heroine - Madhuri Dixit, who lives
with the naive belief that someday she will find her true love. She
inhabits the hero’s dreams in her translucent costumes, while Karishma
the professional dancer is part of his real life. Karishma is the modern
dancer, she runs through green woods in designer clothes and also
perform contemporary dance rather effortlessly. She practices classical
dance (kathak) and also works out in leotards. Her personal space is
an unreal bedroom set where she plays ghazals and cuddle soft toys.
Dil to Pagal Hai - offers some of the most contemporary, urbanised
images of a dance theatre company. Shiamak Davar’s choreography
invests a different visual rhetoric yet the two female personae do not
articulate a new subjectivity but remain limited as the filmmaker’s
imaginary feminine.

Who is watching? This film has been an instant hit with the Asian
audience abroad, and the audience in India has also identified with
it. But it has not done well in the interiors or in small towns as its
visual language is still alien to most Indian viewers. A more recent
market phenomenon in the UK is the featuring of Hindi films (*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*) in the top box-offices grossers, the distribution of these films in chain cinemas, redistributed with subtitles.

The print and electronic media surrounding the film industry continues to perpetrate the voyeuristic gaze of consumer culture. The Indian female star is continually objectified as photographs and inside stories continually establish her lack of control over her body and her life story. The glamour aspect of the actress is showcased in photo sessions, as she displays different clothes, hairstyles and jewellery - even varying colours of contact lenses. The sensational gossip stories override any concern with her professional career and competence. More and more the space in which she is interviewed gains significance, whether it is a certain star's makeup van or drawing room or the hospital room in which she is recuperating. The subjects of these stories are deprived of any agency as their voices are manipulated to fit in designed narratives. The magazines continue to sell by thousands not just in the country but abroad. Three such Bombay based magazines now have offices in the UK and in the Middle East. At least five such magazines are circulated in the UK, either to personal subscribers or sold off the stands. Hindi cinema in this country means good business. In London itself there are six cinema halls programming three to four Hindi films all week.

Other theatres have weekend programmes. The viewer is prepared to pay ten pounds for a film. Few months ago the Warner Brothers theatre decided to start regular programming of Hindi films having researched their economic viability. I mention these facts to raise the question of global and local in relation to the cinematic representation of gender and reception of it.

In India we have been talking and arguing about the impact of satellite television and global culture and national images. Living in the UK today, I find myself raising similar questions about Indian television channels in that country. Three Asian TV channels beam film based programmes throughout the day - full length features, countdowns, interviews, film functions and award events. A clearly identifiable pattern of glamourising the stars but also making their presence tangible through snippet interviews, close-ups, appear part of consumer culture where glamour is sold as a dream but is also within the consumer’s grasp. Viewership is not merely restricted to the Asian community, there exists a considerable native interest in filmi dance. Such images today are part of Michael Jackson’s videos as well as Madonna’s. Asian artists are featured on MTV, Indian film
seasons and festivals have enjoyed amazing popularity last year. Films are now being made with an international audience in mind but the ideological values invested in narrative and characterisation remain conservative. So, despite the fact that we cruise through a dozen different foreign locales in every song sequence, the idealizing of concepts like duty and tradition limit the possibilities for any emancipatory journey for the heroine.

At the end of the twentieth century, globalization has come to represent the interests of the free market not free from historical, cultural and economic domination or self determination for all the world’s people. As Ghosh and Bose write in the introduction to *Interventions* this paper addresses the “need for feminist engagement with global as well as local/situational ideological, economic and political processes, and the urgency of transnational, cross cultural feminist dialogue in building an ethical and egalitarian culture capable of withstanding the commodified, exploitative practices of global capital.”

Women do not inhabit a space of the state as home, women rather inhabit a space of their family as home, a space of much more local relations. Is cinema in any way able to link women’s local concerns with those of others globally? Chandra Mohanty (1991) recognised the lack of attention to Third World women and wrote about women in different national contexts and theorised western feminist neglect of women’s struggles globally. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s volume on Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices addresses specifically “the absence of gender issues in all world system theories”. They argue that just because modernity “has participated predominantly within discourses of the formation of nation states” nationalism needs to be examined in relation to feminist practice.

The use of nation as a family paradigm locates women in subordinate positions, confined to domestic, motherly roles, under the sway of husbands. Women filmmakers work through the position allocated to them in nationalist discourse, one relegated to the domestic paradigm, but use that position for resistance. The lack of any larger public sphere imagined community within which to locate themselves may explain why the question of identity is important to women in general and non-white women in particular. There is a reality of lived experience - outside white middleclass images manufactured by the postmodern news machine. This reality is the property of marginalised social groups such as ethnic minorities and women. This reality stands there waiting to be represented. Films by
women filmmaker like Pratibha Parmar and Deepa Mehta may be read as positive imaging of a reality that has previously been deemed unpresentable.

The new cinema movement of the 70's and 80's made attempts to explore women's subjectivity, her familial and civic role. Today we may well ask, where is the woman at work? Token attempts to characterise the heroine as a contemporary urban professional - a journalist, a teacher, an artist - are hardly ever developed. Recently Sai Paranjpye’s Saaz tried to explore female relationships (sibling relationships, mother-daughter relationships) as well as sibling rivalry. Over the last few years there has been a lull in the works of women filmmakers, in this context Saaz is significant in offering a narrative is only peripherally touched upon, the examination of the mother’s identity and the control of the State over this role is the central issue in Govind Nihalini’s Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa. Shyam Benegal continues his concern with marginalised female narratives – Mammo and Sardari Begum. The very concepts of gender socialising and gender categories have been questioned in Aml Palekar’s Daayera and Kalpana Lajmi’s Darmiyaan. In regional films Aparna Sen’s Yuganta explores a woman’s dilemma between her profession and her home; the break down of relationships in a background of increasing social violence. Santana Bordoloi portrays the experience of widowhood through three generations of women in Adyaja. 1997-98 marked the return of several women filmmakers and their gendered interventions to challenge popular rhetoric.

Any focus on cultural production begs the question of representation in its two senses: political (who speaks for whom) and aesthetic (what images, genres, and strategies are used). Cultural production is marked by class, race and gender positions. Some women filmmakers and actresses use their voice as representatives of a female collectivity on whose behalf they wage their feminist wars, others are less self reflexive about their position as speaking subject. As Mohanty has said the existence of Third World women narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood and located institutionally which is of paramount importance.

Given this proliferation of Bollywood films in countries outside India - which perpetrate the glamorisation and objectification of women - it is important to take a look at feminist interventions by filmmakers abroad. Pratibha Parmar was part of an exciting new moment when black artists were finally being given some recognition.
Khush takes its title from the Indian word happiness, and it addresses the dual form of colonialism as patriarchal and homophobic. Parmar explains in her essay “Khush... was about the discoveries of our histories within our cultural traditions of lesbian and gay representation.” Parmar refused to make a film that would pathologise lesbians, explain to audiences who did not know about the communities. She wanted to say “this is what we are and this is what we think.”

Khush mixes documentary interviews with scripted, fantasized and dramatized scenes. One scene that is repeated involves two Asian women in a sexual context, watching an old black and white film with an Indian dancer. Parmar explains in her own words, “Sometimes they have their back to the dancer and are just being with each other. That... was a strategy of subverting the gaze, of turning the gaze around and saying we are the spectators of our own images. We are the spectators we want to be.” The characters watch an old Indian film depicting a woman dancer possibly performing for an evil prince. Parmar “just edited out his gaze and left the two women enjoying it together. It was my filmic strategy about questions around the gaze and the spectators and around who is watching whom”. The women are filmed whole, not fragmented into body parts, as in most commercial films; this produces an effect of the woman’s bodily presence. She knows that the film was a deliberate celebration of the eroticism of the female body. She focuses on how the fetishization of the female body in mainstream advertising and film has denied woman this pleasure in women’s bodies. Khush is an attempt to take back this ground, to enter boldly into the terrain of filming the female body by doing it in her different way, with her different eye.

Could it be that the physical, cultural, linguistic difference of minority woman is something the white culture fears for a complex mixture of psychic and economic reasons, unless such difference is safely made exotic and thus controlled? This question can be raised about Mira Nair’s last film Kama Sutra based on the classical Indian text on love and sex. Nair’s film exoticises and essentializes female sexuality in India, more as consumer product from the western economy submitting to neo-colonial demands of the market.

The significance of women filmmakers working outside the constraints of Hollywood, cannot be over emphasised. Cultures urgently need films in which female spectators can identify with images and situations other than those stipulated by male hegemonic gaze.
and thus begin the slow intertwined process of changing consciousness and society. Deepa Mehta's Canadian production *Fire* addresses these needs squarely. *Fire* is about a north Indian family and it raises questions about the patriarchal controls in this household, and urgent issue of female identity and sexuality. The older sister in law is childless and her husband has lost sexual interest in her. The younger sister in law, a newly married wife is looked on as a baby-making machine by her husband who is emotionally involved with a Chinese woman. Finding it difficult to openly challenge the male dominated structure of the family, the two women are drawn close together both emotionally and physically. It is literally through an ordeal of fire that Radha leaves behind this family and walks out to join Sita whom she meets in the refuge of a mosque. Mehta's film explodes the uneasy alliance between family, state and market through an exploration of a lesbian relationship in an Indian context. *Fire* explores ways out of the male gaze as the act of surveillance limits truth to the exclusion of the other. Multiform and reflexive ways of gazing structure the film, certain key moments represent a female-female gaze which challenges the look of surveillance.

If on one hand global transactions are resulting in the manufacture of confused images with the conservative garbed in the new language of today, the strident nationalism of right wing ideology is also effectively stereotyping women and their roles. In the wake of nuclear tests and the huge search of national pride it has stimulated, the impact of this on women's lives needs to be reconsidered. It is no surprise that the most lauded film of the year has been a war film called *Border* which is set during the Indo-Pak war of the 70's. The film valorises war and the men who die fighting for their country against the pronounced enemy – Pakistan. The militant nationalism it uses effectively valorises the blind mother whose son must leave her to join the army. It romanticises the waiting lover and the wife of those soldiers who never return from the battle field. *Border* whips up the male rhetoric of war and harnesses the three classical female stereotypes – the mother, the wife and the sweetheart - all these subjectivities are sacrificed to the long drawn sequences of actual warfare where the heroes fight valiantly and die for their motherland. If anything the film is an indicator of the limits of possible representation in an increasingly militant state. A search for national identity exploits but precludes the real Indian women – much as we have seen in Mother India. *Border* remains a glaring instance of how nations are forced to privilege national culture and geographical
border when protecting themselves in the global arena but at the expense of collapsing culturally different groups within a specific nation.

In the course of this paper I have tried to examine the two pronged process of homogenisation in mainstream Indian cinema. Fundamentalist forces at home erase spaces of difference and possible interventions and construct a monolithic representation of gender and nation. The process of globalisation simplifies image making, isolating it from a historical or social context. The big boom of ‘Bollywood’ cinema threatens to obliterate alternate images and representations. But the effort to continually find spaces and intervene with a difference is a survival strategy which works - and the effort is ongoing.

REFERENCES