

THE STEREOTYPICAL PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN  
IN COMMERCIAL INDIAN CINEMA

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

According to Census of India (2001), India has 22 official languages included in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution. In addition to these there are 100 other languages which are not included in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution. Of these 122 existing languages feature films are made in 20 of them. Ganti (2004) writes, “Feature films are produced in approximately 20 languages in India” (p. 3). The term “Indian cinema” therefore could refer to films made in any of these 20 languages. On the basis of the percentage of films generated, “the four South Indian film industries (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada), that account for almost 60% of the films made since 1971 together represent the largest section of the Indian film industry” (Kindem, 2000, p. 37), followed by Hindi cinema or Bombay cinema, popularly termed “Bollywood” which produces “about 150 to 200 films of a total of 800-1000 films a year, 20% of the total number of films made in India” (Ganti, 2004, p. 3).

According to Ganti (2004), Hindi films, though comprising only 20% of the film product of the nation, are the ones that circulate nationally and internationally dominating discourses on Indian film. Hindi film represents Indian cinema internationally and is regarded as the standard archetype to follow or oppose (p. 3). This is because the principal official language of India is Hindi succeeded by English. Hindi is the national language of India, and in a country which has 22 official languages it is convenient to have one official Indian language, which is representative of India, and Hindi is that language. Therefore, Hindi feature films become representative of Indian films in any international forum. In the purely regional context of India itself, films made in Hindi are viewed across the nation owing to the commonality of this language. Therefore for the purpose of this paper, Indian cinema refers

to commercial films produced in Bollywood, in the national language of India, Hindi.

According to Butalia (1984), Indian cinema is the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and close to 12 million people are watching films every week in cinema houses and theaters (p. 108). Considering that the film industry entertains an enormously large population, what and who this film industry is made of becomes an important question.

According to Ganti (2004), Bombay film industry is a male-dominated industry. Women pursuing careers within the industry are primarily either actresses or playback singers. This trend has changed in recent years with women making their mark as choreographers, costume designers, editors and screenwriters but their numbers are still much smaller in comparison to their male counterparts. Very few women are lyricists or composers. While a handful of them have ventured into direction, they have not achieved the commercial success their male counterparts have (p. 94).

Women are thus very sparse in number behind the scenes of this film industry. In an industry with so few women working within it, it seems fair to assume that the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and may not necessarily explore women's world views, perceptions and subjective realities.

What roles women play onscreen is more often than not, the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what the director thinks viewers want to see. What viewers want to watch is something that conforms to their beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same social framework in which directors, live. There has to be a consistency in the beliefs, attitudes and values of all those

involved. This is Milton Rokeach's beliefs, attitudes and values theory from 1968, in action. Each member of the audience looks for entertainment that conforms to an existing system of beliefs, attitudes, and values which come from a socio-cultural context in society.

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), it is only when inconsistencies arise in this system of beliefs, attitudes and values, will there be dissatisfaction leading to change. As long as there is no inconsistency, a change in concept or perception is hard to arrive at (p. 80). This is exactly what happens to Indian film directors and to Indian cinema. It conforms to the existing structure because everyone seems happy with it, and it seems as though there is no dissatisfaction whatsoever in the way women are portrayed and so there is no need for the portrayal to change.

Figure 1 - The vicious cycle in Indian commercial Cinema



Figure 1 above illustrates the vicious cycle, and going further, the thesis will look at how one of the many contemporary women directors have interrupted this cycle and the consequent impact of two of her films. The Socio-cultural framework, and power structures in operation in society, including religion, the Hindu religious beliefs, and the influence of Hindu epics and myths on popular culture, govern the tastes and preferences of the audience. Both these factors determine the directors' preference. Directors and producers have to make films that address audience preference and also meet their profit margins. Audience is quite satisfied to see films that uphold their value system and conform to it, because they live in that social value system. This cycle is hard to end but some revolutionary directors have tried to do so. In this thesis, I will look only at one such director, Canadian-Indian film maker Deepa Mehta and two of her controversial films.

Her films *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, created a public outrage upon release, because the earlier film portrayed women in roles completely non-conforming to existing patriarchal social norms (as lesbians) and the latter film portrayed the ills of the Hindu religion and the atrocities committed on Hindu widows in the 1940s, making a politically incorrect point. Both films stirred the anger of religious groups and resulted in riots across North India.

*Fire* 1996 is the story of two women who by chance are daughters-in-law of the same household, in heterosexual marriages. However, their marriage equations with their spouses are unequal and a lack of the love, affection and space they look for in their marriages, drives them towards each other. They find the comfort and space they always lacked in their heterosexual marital relations, in the love relationship that ensues between them. The whole idea of women being portrayed as making this choice angered political parties, religious groups and religious fanatics, who went about threatening to kill the director, smashing and

destroying the theaters and cinema houses that dared to screen the film. The film was banned from screening in the city of Mumbai, the center of the Bollywood film industry, and the entire state of Maharashtra where Mumbai is located.

*Water* 2006, made by the same director, was thrown out of India even before it could be shot on location in <sup>1</sup>Varanasi, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Deepa Mehta's set was destroyed and the film's cast and crew were driven out of the shooting locations by state religious factions. *Water* is a period film set in the 1940's in the pre-independence era when Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was the biggest social phenomenon in British colonial India. During this period widow remarriage was not common. Widows were considered unlucky and a curse on society. They were sent from the homes of their in-laws and parents to special widow homes. The treatment of one such child widow who is sent to a widow house in the small town of Varanasi on the banks of the River Ganges is the essence of the story. This child widow learns the hardships of widowhood as she observes another widow in her early twenties who is also confined here. Using the "holy" aspects of religion like the town of Varanasi and the River Ganges, to bring out the negative aspects of the religion was unacceptable to society, especially to politically affiliated religious groups who were able to mobilize the masses against this film.

Riots broke out in protest against the screening of this film. Deepa Mehta, who was already a controversial figure in India after *Fire* in 1996, was given police protection when she came to India to film *Water*. Finally, she could not film there and had to go to Srilanka to make the film. Why did these two films wreak such havoc? Is it the in-built patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> Varanasi is the holy town of the Hindu religion and the River Ganges is its holy river. It is popularly believed that bathing in the River Ganga/Ganges can wash away all human sin and purify human beings to enter heaven.

propaganda that thrives in Indian society or is it religious and political propaganda? These questions will be addressed in detail later.

Also, given that this decade has seen many changes in Indian women's roles in society, it is interesting to explore how much has changed in a male dominated film industry. During a telephone interview student of Sociology in Chennai, India, Smriti Nandakumar, states,

I did my dissertation on women who pursue unconventional careers. In the process I interviewed women in the police department, women pilots, women lyricists, women assistant directors and many others who are in uncommon careers. I found it interesting and inspiring to note that a number of them actually had it hard on their way up and really had to challenge the pre-existing stereotypes inbuilt in society. It seemed to have been rough for them, but they still seem to have managed to reach the top and achieve their ambitions. They are all respected in their families and in society for what they have done.

(personal communication, Jan 8, 2011)

During the last decade, women in India have been fighting a bill for 33% seat reservation in parliament for women. Women in politics and other fields believe that this bill will enable more women to come to the forefront and represent the feminine population with greater empathy and sensibility, especially pertaining to women's issues. At a point and time with such political happenings, the representation of women in Indian cinema, is a significant issue.

At a time when women seem to have broken free from the Indian home and family set-up into the world, and are ready to challenge stereotypes, is this happening in the Indian film industry and the industry's portrayal of women in films? Are Indian films reflecting this changing social trend? These are questions worthy of exploring.

Since a large population watches Bollywood films, Bollywood cinema is a powerful mass medium of communication in India, and cinematic portrayals definitely are highly impressionistic, as this paper will later validate. What does this highly impressionistic medium communicate to the masses through the many stories that films tell? How does it portray women and what sort of messages does it send to the mass audience?

The phrase “portrayal of women” could refer to both women pursuing film careers off-screen and actresses onscreen. The study focuses only on the onscreen roles of lead actresses. A reference to off-screen roles has been made above only to mention the context in which the lead actresses are working in the industry.

## Chapter 2: Pilot Study – Quantitative Methodology

### Defining Stereotypes

Although this paper is primarily a qualitative analysis of the roles given to women in Indian cinema, a quantitative pilot study was undertaken to understand the operational definitions of the term and to check if the operational definitions conformed to the portrayal of women in commercial Indian cinema.

The research question of this quantitative pilot study is - Were lead actresses portrayed in stereotypical roles in highest grossing blockbuster Indian films from <sup>2</sup>1960-2009? The question that will follow it for the purpose of this thesis is: In the last 64 years how have female characters been treated onscreen and how much of the treatment has changed today?

### Method

Content analysis of the highest grossing all time blockbuster hit film of each decade, based on their box office earnings as recorded by [boxofficeindia.com](http://boxofficeindia.com). In this website films are classified as (i) All time Blockbuster Hit, (ii) Blockbuster Hit, (iii) Super Hit, (iv) Hit, (v) Above Average and (vi) Average. In this thesis only the first three categories are considered. Table 1 below shows the gross adjusted earnings, by decade for films in categories one and three. It shows the highest figures for category one, and the lowest figures for films in category three, indicating the range between the highest and the lowest possible earnings for a film to belong to the blockbuster league. The figures for category two films are understood to be anywhere in between this range. For the purpose of the quantitative pilot study, one film from category 1, all-time blockbuster hits was chosen for each decade. Two Indian

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<sup>2</sup> These years were chosen because India gained independence from British colonialism in 1947 until which time the freedom movement was the country's top social focus and priority. Choosing films from 1960 onwards helps to look at films made in independent India assuming that after a decade of independence, art and culture earned greater freedom of expression, availability of resources and greater breathing space in society, devoid of colonial tensions.

coders, one man and one woman, both 26 years of age viewed the entire film. They coded the film by observing the actresses - their traits, characteristics highlighted, costumes, interaction with other characters etc. scene by scene.

Table 1

*Gross Adjusted Earnings in \$, of All Time Blockbuster and Super Hit Films (Indian Rupees to Dollar Exchange Rate: Rupee 1=\$44.17as of Apr 10, 2011)*

<b>Decade</b>	<b>All-Time Blockbuster Hit</b>	<b>Super Hit</b>
1950-59	26,556,486	7,677,156
1960-69	30,040,751	7,840,163
1970-79	36,896,083 ( <i>Sholay</i> 1975)	8,397,102
1980-89	19,191,759	7,674,892
1990-99	70,015,847	4,620,783
2000-09	64,874,349	17,396,422
2010-2011	42,449,626	28,129,952

**Universe:** Highest grossing films (all-time blockbuster hits) as listed by boxofficeindia.com, based on the revenue earned by the films at the box office

**Sample size and inter-coder reliability:** The all-time highest grossing film of Indian cinema, *Sholay 1975* was chosen for the purpose of this pilot study. This study can be replicated and expanded quantitatively. Two coders coded the film *Sholay*, based on the operational definitions explained below. This film was chosen since it still stands as the highest grossing film in Bollywood ever, adjusted to inflation. The following were the operational definitions of stereotype that I coined for the purpose of the pilot study. I arrived

at these operational definitions based on my viewing of several Indian films over the years, and an extensive survey of literature on the subject of portrayal of women in Indian cinema.

### **Operational Definitions**

#### **Subordinate role function** (Lead actress role defined in relation to male lead)

Protagonist's Mother

Protagonist's Wife

Love interest of the male protagonist/girlfriend

Aids male protagonist to achieve his goal

Screen-time less than the male lead

#### **Alternative role function**

Vamp/courtesan dancer

Night club dancer/bar dancer/cabaret dancer

Prostitute/call girl

#### **Family ahead of self**

Compromises personal interests at least on one occasion for the sake of family

Willing to put spouse/male protagonist ahead of her own interests

Non-rebellious to established customs/social patterns

Sacrifices for the sake of family honor/ family's social status

#### **Career orientation**

Home maker: Takes care of children, Takes care of in-laws

Performs household chores

Lives in a joint family

No specific mention made of her career interests

### **Purity/chastity**

Never had a pre-marital affair/never has more than one lover in the movie

Portrayed as on following customs and rituals of her respective religion

Always conforms to set traditional values pertaining to marriage, prayer, religion, rituals

Pious/devoted

### **Very religious/God fearing**

Shown as performing religious rites/offering prayers in the “puja” (prayer) room/temple

### **Symbolism of virtue (Presence on screen)**

Does not smoke

Does not drink alcohol

Non-flirtatious

Not highly interactive with men (except her family or her love interest)

Does not make sexual advancements

Does not appear in an ‘item’ number (a cabaret dance, a night club dance)

Appears in traditional Indian costumes for majority of her role screen time

### **Objectification**

Tribal costume

Rain dance

Behind the bushes scene

Framed in sensuous ways: if she is wearing a low back blouse then framed in a way as to show that back or waist

Appears in revealing clothes: (exposing large part of thighs, back, waist, pelvic region)

**None of these - Appears in a completely “non-stereotypical” role**

Appears as a vamp or courtesan dancer

Breaks tradition, rebellious

Atheist and/or agnostic

Other roles in which woman does not conform to any of the above mentioned stereotypical categories

## **Results**

There were 2 main actresses in the film, each actress playing the female lead opposite the 2 male leads. All scenes in which either of them and/or both of them appeared were coded as per the categories by 2 coders. The two actresses were coded separately. The following tables are the individual coding sheets of the two coders followed by the consolidated coding sheet. Coder 1 data has been presented in table 1; coder 2 in table 2; and the consolidated coding sheets of both coders is table 3. The coders simply had to answer Y for yes and N for no, for every given characteristic trait. If they found that trait to be present in the character for a scene, they would have answered yes (Y) and if not, they would have answered no (N).

The following pages have the tables, which were the coding sheets of the two coders.

Table 2

Coder 1 – Stereotypical Traits Found in Characters Basanti and Jaya

Representation of Women in commercial Indian Cinema										
Name of film		Year of release	Amount Grossed	Genre	CBFC Rated					
Sholay		1975	Rs. 162.97 Crores	Action + Many other elements	A/U					
Coder #	1									
Name of Character	Basanti									
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of These
Answers tending to stereotype		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
1	13	Y	N	N/A	N	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
2	18	N	N	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
3	19	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	N/A	Y	Y	
4	23	Y	N	N	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	
5	24	Y	N	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
6	25	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
7	28	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	
8	29	Y	N	N/A	N	Y	Y	Y	N	
9	30	Y	N	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	
10	33	Y	N	N/A	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	
11	35	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	N	
12	42	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	N	
13	43	Y	Y	Y	N/A	Y	N	Y	Y	
14	44	Y	Y	Y	N/A	Y	N	Y	Y	
15	45	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
16	50	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N/A	Y	N	
Total # of Y's		14	2	5	3	8	4	14	6	0
Total # of N's		2	14	1	6	0	2	0	10	0
% of Stereotypical Portrayals		88%	88%	31%	19%	50%	25%	88%	38%	0%
Name of Character	Jaya									
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of these
Answers Tending to "Stereotype"		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
1	14	Y	N	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	N	
2	16	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
3	17	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
4	20	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
5	23	Y	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N	
6	25	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
7	27	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	N/A	Y	N	
8	37	Y	N	N/A	N	Y	N/A	Y	N	
9	38	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	
10	40	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
11	46	Y	N	N/A	N	Y	N	Y	N	
12	49	Y	N	N/A	N	Y	N/A	N/A	N	
Total # of Y's		12	0	3	7	11	7	11	0	0
Total # of N's		0	12	0	4	0	2	0	12	0
% of Stereotypical Portrayals		100%	100%	25%	58%	92%	58%	92%	0%	0%

Table 3

Coder 2 – Stereotypical Traits Found in Characters Basanti and Jaya

Representation of Women in commercial Indian Cinema										
Name of film	Year of release	Amount Grossed	Genre	CBFC Rated						
Sholay	1975	Rs. 162.97 Crores	Action + Many other elements	A/U						
<b>Coder #</b>	<b>2</b>									
<b>Name of Character</b>	<b>Basanti</b>									
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of These
<b>Answers tending to stereotype</b>		<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	
1	13	N	N	N/A	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
2	18	N	N	Y	N	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
3	19	Y	N	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	
4	23	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	
5	24	Y	N	N/A	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
6	25	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
7	28	Y	N	N/A	N	N/A	Y	Y	N	
8	29	Y	N	N/A	N	Y	Y	Y	N	
9	30	Y	N	N/A	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	
10	33	Y	N	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
11	35	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	N	
12	42	N	N	N	N	Y	N/A	Y	N	
13	43	Y	N	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
14	44	Y	N	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y		
15	45	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N	
16	50	Y	N	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
<b>Total # of Y's</b>		<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total # of N's</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>% of Stereotypical Portrayals</b>		<b>81%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Name of Character</b>	<b>Jaya</b>									
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of these
<b>Answers Tending to "Stereotype"</b>		<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	
1	14	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
2	16	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
3	17	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
4	20	Y	N	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
5	23	Y	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N	
6	25	Y	N	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N	
7	27	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
8	37	Y	N	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	N	
9	38	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
10	40	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
11	46	Y	N	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N	
12	49	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	
<b>Total # of Y's</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total # of N's</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>% of Stereotypical Portrayals</b>		<b>92%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>

Table 4

*Consolidated Coding Sheets – Stereotypical Traits Found in Characters Basanti and Jaya*

Representation of Women in commercial Indian Cinema										
Name of film		Year of release	Amount Grossed	Genre	CBFC Rated					
Sholay		1975	Rs. 162.97 Crores	Action + Many other elements	A/U					
Name of Character		Basanti								
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of These
Answers tending to stereotype		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
CODER #1	% of Stereotypical Portrayals	88%	88%	31%	19%	50%	25%	88%	38%	0%
CODER #2	% of Stereotypical Portrayals	81%	100%	25%	6%	25%	31%	56%	19%	0%
Name of Character		Jaya								
Serial #	Scene #	Subordinate Role Function	Alternative Role Function	Family Ahead of self	Career Orientation	Purity/Chastity	Pious	Symbolism of Virtue	Objectification	None of these
Answers Tending to "Stereotype"		Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
CODER #1	% of Stereotypical Portrayals	100%	100%	25%	58%	92%	58%	92%	0%	0%
CODER #2	% of Stereotypical Portrayals	92%	100%	58%	67%	83%	92%	100%	0%	0%

Firstly, both actresses together (individually and in unison) appear in 26 out of 50 scenes, which is about 52% of the entire film, much less than their male counterparts who appear in almost all of the 50 scenes.

Second, lead actress Basanti appears in 16 out of 50 scenes, which is 32% of the film and lead actress Jaya appears in 12 scenes, 24% of the film. The screen-time for the actresses seems low in comparison to their male counterparts who appear almost 100% of the film.

Both actresses have been portrayed in at least one or more stereotypical categories throughout the film barring a few occasions. The category that is the highest is the subordinate role function and the category that is the least is the alternative role function supporting my corollary that blockbuster Indian films will not portray the lead actresses in alternative (non-stereotypical) role functions.

The second highest category is the symbolism of virtue. The next two highest categories tending to the stereotype role are family ahead of self and purity/chastity -- though coders

agreed on these categories there seem to be greater differences between the coders in these two categories more than any of the others. While one lead actress seems to have been objectified, the other lead actress seems to have not been objectified at all and there is 100% coder agreement on that. Similarly, in the category of career orientation, one lead actress seems to have been portrayed in a completely stereotypical fashion while the other also tends to the stereotype but is not a complete stereotype. Both coders agree 100% that there was not a single scene that did not portray the lead actresses in at least one of these stereotypical categories. Overall, the numbers corresponding to each category by both the coders were balanced. If they had been on either extreme of the spectrum, then the hypothesis would not have been supported. But the coding results were balanced as shown in the tables above.

The overall result suggests that the lead actresses are frequently portrayed in stereotypical roles for the most part of the film. The hypothesis that the lead actresses are portrayed in stereotypical roles in blockbuster Indian films is supported for the highest grossing film in Indian film history, *Sholay* 1975.

This method could well be applied to other blockbuster films, which will help ascertain if the hypothesis will be supported for highest grossing blockbuster films over the last fifty years. This pilot study has been included in the qualitative analysis of the subject only to emphasize that even if a mathematical and quantitative approach is undertaken, it is more than likely, that the results will match the current study, ascertaining that women are more frequently portrayed in stereotypical roles in Indian commercial cinema.

A detailed look at a film such as *Sholay* 1975 supports the point of view that women do not have defining and empowering roles. Mulvey (1975), quoting Budd Boetticher writes,

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (p. 9)

While it is apparent that women have been portrayed in stereotypical roles including the role of the vamp, there are certain censorship norms that films had to conform to and these norms came into being in the 1930s, during the primary stages of Indian cinema. According to Shah (1950), the Censor Board prohibited films and/or scenes that explicitly represented passion and love, indelicate sexual situations, immorality, first night after marriage, brothels, prostitution, illicit sexual relationships, etc. While a number of rules may have been relaxed in recent years, the basis of these rules remain the same and to that extent influence the portrayal of women in popular Indian cinema, ensuring that roles conform to the existing socio-cultural framework.

This thesis explores how patriarchy imposes certain roles on women. Why are women's roles in films stereotyped; where these stereotypes come from and what they mean to Indian society and film? The subject of this thesis can be placed within the framework of a number of theories. The first of them would be Milton Rokeach's (1968) beliefs, attitudes and value theory, which has been explained in the introduction chapter of the thesis. Other psychological theories, including Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance and Laura Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytic theory which are at play in Indian society, have been elaborated, in context, in the course of the paper. Since cinema is a mass medium of communication, the idea of satisfying the masses by providing them with entertainment that caters to their needs is fundamental to this industry. Blumler & Katz's (1974) uses and

gratification theory which emphasizes on what people do to media is also at play in the Indian film industry and will be further explored in the following chapters.

The other dynamics in operation are the persuasion theory of alter-casting, the psychological dynamic of implicit stereotyping, and Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1930s), all of which have been in subliminal operation in society and culture leading to repetitive female stereotypes in Hindi cinema.

## Chapter 3: Methods and Research Questions

### Methods

This paper begins with a quantitative pilot study, specifically with a content analysis of an all time blockbuster Indian film, *Sholay* (1975); which after adjustments to inflation, in March 2011, still remains right on top of the box office hit list. This quantitative study helps operationalize definitions of “stereotype” which is then subject to further analysis in the qualitative study of the paper. The qualitative, narrative part of this paper has references to a number of books, journals, films, newspapers, magazines websites and other electronic resources.

The paper also draws, when pertinent, from the two greatest epics in Indian mythology, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, and a few other mythological stories and characters, all of which form a strong foundational structure for story- telling and story- writing in India. A number of character archetypes have evolved from these mythological stories. Their influence of present day character creation in stories will be elaborated on. The influence of the two great epics on popular culture in India is significant in order to understand epic archetypes, which have led to film stereotypes.

In addition to those resources, the paper will trace the role of women in Indian cinema using photographic images from various films mentioned, in order to argue the point of view of the camera and how this point of view is governed and dictated by the patriarchal framework of Indian society.

All the films featured in the paper, either in the form of discussions, writings, examples, or pictures, are films that have been chosen by decade (based on the context of the subject of discussion), from the website [www.boxofficeindia.com](http://www.boxofficeindia.com). These examples from the films will

explain the roles of lead actresses in these films and will point out that, while the stylizing of films has led to changed roles for women, the fundamental stereotypes continue to be in operation and do not show any significantly new ideological trends.

Finally, the paper will also have interviews of people working in film and other related media, - their opinions and points of view on the subject of women's roles in Indian cinema. Based on the above pilot study and the brief analysis of the films, *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, five research questions are identified.

### **Research Questions**

According to Butalia (1984), "As women become more and more visible on the screen, however, it becomes important to ask what this visibility consists of. What are the sorts of roles women play? How are they projected? Do women film stars serve as models for Indian women? How far do their films reflect social attitudes towards them? How far do they shape such attitudes?" (p. 109).

Drawing from Butalia (1984), from above, the research questions for the thesis are:

1. What kind of roles have women been playing in Indian cinema over the last 60 years?
2. What is the fundamental nature of these roles? What do these roles entail? (motherhood, role of wife, role of girlfriend, role of vamp, stripper, prostitute, comic role etc. as the case may be)
3. If these roles are the most common for women in Indian cinema, then why would that be? --  
The historical, social and cultural reasons for the commonality of these roles and why it must be important for screen writers to conform to the stereotypes existing in society?
4. When women have played other kinds of alternative roles (role of lesbians, role of the independent widow, etc.), what demarcates these roles from the regular ones and do these

films enter the mainstream? If not, why would that be? It is clear from the discussion of the films *Fire* 1996, and *Water* 2005, that non-stereotyped roles can lead to severe social repercussions.

This paper will explore the theoretical framework within which cultural stereotypes evolve and sustain themselves in Indian society, leading to repetitive female stereotypes in Hindi cinema. According to Acitelli, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Houston, stereotypes are drawn from existing prototypes in society and culture. Categorizing life experiences becomes so convenient for human beings, and the categories become so relevant that it becomes difficult to break out of this easiness (personal communication, Dec 2, 2010).

Drawing from Acitelli, in the case of Indian society, the patriarchal view of women has been so convenient over the years for division of labor and accountability of tasks that these categories became a way of life, so much so, that now, it is the foundational power structure of society and cannot be easily broken. The power structure reinforces the stereotypes and the stereotypes further strengthen the power structure.

The next question is where are these stereotypes coming from? What are the reasons for these stereotypes to have translated into the big screen of commercial cinema? The answer lies in the three factors explained in detail in the next three chapters – historical and socio-cultural factors, the influence of epics on popular culture and story-telling and finally the elements that make up the film viewing audience including the other media that they are exposed to.

## Chapter 4: Women in Indian Cinema

### History, Socio-Cultural Factors, and Women's Roles in Films

In the context of an evolution in the roles of women in Indian films, Laxmi (1991), writes, "From the passive wife of Dadasaheb Phalke's *"Raja Harishchandra"* to the long-suffering but heroic mother-figure of *"Mother India"* to the liberated single-parent of *"Mother '98,"* it has been a rather long and challenging journey for women in Hindi cinema". In a single sentence, Laxmi traces the history of Indian films, all the way back to the silent film, *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, moving on to *Mother India* 1957 and *Mother 98* 1999, during which time women's roles in Indian cinema have changed in many ways.

Since the 1960s, as more and more women's issues come to the forefront of the patriarchal Indian society, the more varied women's roles have become in Indian cinema. However, does variation necessarily eliminate typicality of roles? First, while many films have been made on social themes in the realm of women's issues including dowry, widowhood, rape, etc. it is not necessary that any of these films have been blockbusters; neither have they been popular viewed. Second, according to Butalia (1984), such films only take a superficial interest in women and their issues (p. 109). This means that although they deal with social issues pertaining to women, the films do not focus on the women's points of view but rather, on how the man plays the hero in these situations and fixes them.

The first women to act in Indian films in the 1920s were women of mixed British, European and Indian origins referred to as the "Anglo-Indians". Since they had hybrid origins, they were deemed separate from the women of pure Indian origin (Ganti, 2004, p. 13). There was a stigma associated with Indian women acting and in the context of this social stigma, when Indian women began to act, directors, in order to conform to social norms

might have been pressured to portray Indian women leads as characters who live within the confines of society even in the films. In Indian cinema, this is probably the beginning of the idea of having to necessarily cater to audience needs and conform to existing value systems.

Actresses in Indian films typically begin their careers when they are teenagers as opposed to male actors who start in their twenties. Even if the actress has completed only a decade in the industry and is just about 30 years old, though she may not have actually aged in terms of years, the industry considers the actress an “old face” and directors begin their hunt for “fresh faces”. On the contrary the male actor’s career period is much longer lasting unto his early fifties, sometimes. It is very common to see an aged actor in his fifties playing the male lead, opposite a female lead of 19. However, if slightly older female leads are cast opposite younger male actors, the actresses are criticized by the press, industry and audiences of having lost their “youthful charm” (Ganti, 2004, p. 114), because the audience likes to see young women in the lead, who is attractive to the male lead and performs sensuous song and dance sequences.

This indicates the male centralism and bias not only in the minds of those who make films but also the viewers who have been conditioned over years to view characters in films from this point of view. Patriarchal Indian society views young women as being sensuous and sexually appealing and older women as being less attractive. This is the male fantasy in operation which expects the female lead has to be young and in her prime, while the male lead can be in his early fifties and yet pass for a young hero/protagonist in his late twenties and early thirties. I have worked in the South Indian (Tamil) film industry and understand the way the casting process works. Many a time the casting hunt involves looking for a young

actress in her early twenties to act with the male lead who is probably in his early forties or even fifties.

This suggests the possibility of an inherent “male gaze” within and outside the industry. According to Mulvey (1975), “... the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him” (p. 6).

There exists a pre-conceived notion in society and within the industry about the kind of woman who should play the lead actress based on a fascination built by the film form and its pattern over the years. The highly male dominated audience perceives women in a certain way, the directors have their version of what people might want to see, and they build their stories for the people, and the stereotypes are further reinforced and the cycle continues.

Not only is there a certain established pattern associated with which the woman plays the lead actress, there is also a pattern associated with the portrayal of women who play the lead. Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2004), attribute historical and cultural reasons to the portrayal of women in “stereotypical” roles in Indian films.

In traditional Indian society, there were definite and consensual norms of behavior – that regulated the conduct of women...Sita<sup>3</sup>, immortalized in the Ramayana is the ideal woman, the ideal wife; she is steadfastly loyal to her husband and obeys his wishes unquestioningly... In traditional Indian society... women’s roles were essentially as daughter, wife and mother. According to <sup>4</sup>Manusmriti which had a profound effect on shaping the morals of Indian society, a female should be subject in childhood to her father, in youth to her husband, and

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<sup>3</sup> *Sita* – Lead lady character in an Indian epic story, *Ramayana*

<sup>4</sup> \**Manusmriti* – An ancient code of conduct governing social and familial lives of individuals in society

when her husband is dead, to her children...women were given no kind of independence...She is told to be cheerful, efficient in the management of household affairs, fastidious in cleaning utensils, careful with expenses... these norms governed the lives of women in traditional India and they find clear articulation in Indian cinema, especially in popular films (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004, p. 78).

While women were embodiments of purity, they could have romantic love affairs which are based on the “\*<sup>5</sup>*Radha-Krishna*” model of pure, all consummating, absolute love with no space for mistakes, errors or slips. Indian films represent the lead actress in the role of romantic woman based on this model. Women who are portrayed as per the norms of the traditional value system of society are shown as women who are rewarded while those characters in the story, who transgress the boundaries of traditionalism, are punished (Gokulsing and Dissaayake, 2004 p. 78).

In this context Ganti (2004) writes,

In the very early days of cinema when Phalke was beginning to make films, women were not willing to act due to the stigma attached to public performance. Acting, singing or dancing for an audience was associated with prostitutes and courtesans, and so were outside the boundaries of decent society. (p. 114)

It appears from the above that the socio-cultural context within which women started acting in films, conditioned the roles that were given to them in films; their film roles had to conform to the existing socio-cultural realities of women, and to the semiotics of their real life roles (upholder of family values, representing the status of family and community, etc.).

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<sup>5</sup> *Radha-Krishna*- Krishna is one of the many Hindu Gods. He is considered a re-incarnation of the god “Mahavishnu”. Radha is his lover. The love between Radha and Krishna is widely read and narrated and is considered a very pure, sensuous, erotic and romantic love.

Since women and their actions were considered epitomes of family honor and respectability in Indian society, Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2004), observe that in films, “Their need to preserve honor is expressed through elaborate codified behavior patterns that require the women to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband” (p. 79).

According to Davidson (1981),

Few directors have possessed sufficient moral neutrality to treat centrally the sexually dynamic female without resorting to caricature or to a kind of implicitly self-pitying sentimentality... the flat characterizations and mawkish moral slants make the central females seem like puppets, there to stir up sufficient melodrama to enable the filmmaker to make his moralistic points. (p. 31)

In trying to portray characters in these “stereotypical” socially acceptable roles, Richards (1995) observes, “The Hindi film upholds the traditional patriarchal views of society which, fearful of female sexuality, demands of the woman, a subjugation of her desires” (p. 3).

Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2004), point out that in conformity to social norms, women have been given two significant kinds of roles in commercial films; that of the mother (whose attributes are matched to that of the supreme form of feminine energy, the Goddess) and the wife (based on the mythological characters of Sita and <sup>6</sup>Sati Savitri; Sati – the characteristic of extreme devotion to the husband). They say,

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<sup>6</sup> Sati Savitri is a very pious and spiritual mythological character, whose husband dies when he is still very young. Savitri cannot accept this and she is so in love with him that she follows the God of death “Yama” who has taken her husband’s soul. As she travels the path of the dead, she convinces Yama to return her husband to her. Unable to refuse the demands of this persevering and sacred woman, Yama, miraculously returns her husband to life. Savitri’s love for her husband, Satyavan, is greatly revered in the Hindu religion.

The <sup>7</sup>Sati concept led to a considerable number of films in the 1920s and 1930s... and although it is no longer fashionable, its effect was to portray women ‘stereotypical’, uni-dimensional creatures with no personal ambitions of their own” (p. 79).

The theme of marriage, being married, performing the roles and functions of the typical Indian wife, conforming to the rules of family, being the perfect mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, etc. were all central to Indian film stories. Belonging to a patriarchal social structure and enacting the role of a woman in the confines of this structure and social order became the role of women in cinema as well.

Chakravarty (1989), commenting on realism in Indian films says, “A woman's social and individual identities are therefore both conferred by marriage... while part of this has a dramatic function...the overall traditional attitude to women remains in place...” (p. 46-47).

The socio-cultural context imposes roles on women and these roles are carried onto cinema. This is where the persuasion theory of altercasting enters this discussion. According to Terry & Hogg (2000), this theory suggests,

When a person accepts a certain social role, a number of social pressures are brought to bear to insure that the role is enacted. The social environment expects the person to behave in a manner that is consistent with the role; the role also provides the person with selective exposure to information consistent with the role. Alter-casting means that we ‘force’ an audience to accept a particular role that makes them behave in the way we want them to behave. (p. 201-226)

Women have somehow inherited specific social and cultural roles, which carry into the mainstream film industry and they end up always being cast in similar roles. A fine example

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<sup>7</sup> While Sati in India, refers to the act of the widow supposedly jumping, of her own free will,( but this act was forced on many widows) into the funeral pyre of her dead husband, to indicate that she has no life without him, it also is used to mean extreme devotion and love for the husband.

of this can be seen in the highest grossing film of the decade 1990-2000, “*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*” 1995. Dwyer (2005), comments on this film: when Nisha’s elder sister Pooja dies in an accident, their father suggests that the younger sister Nisha, marry Rajesh, the dead older sister’s husband. Nisha and her lover Prem (who is Rajesh’s younger brother), are willing to sacrifice their love...the younger generation is prepared to sacrifice love for the welfare of their loving and supportive families, who are the entire focus of the film...Film was popular for its depiction of family rituals (p. 113).

As opposed to the portrayal of women as ideal wives and mothers, the other popular portrayal is the exact opposite characterization, that of the vamp. “She flouts tradition, seeks to imitate Western women...drinks, smokes, visits nightclubs, is quick to fall out of love...portrayed as a morally degraded person...unacceptable for her behavior... punished for it” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004, p. 79). One of the most popular actresses to play vamp was an Anglo-Indian actress named <sup>8</sup>Helen Jairag Richardson. She played the sexy stripper, the vamp, the cabaret dancer at the bar, etc. Helen was always considered best suited for the vamp role and never played a heroine or main female lead ever. So this stigma attached to the vamp seems to have an impact on the careers of actresses in the industry. Once a vamp, always a vamp! However, it is not clear if directors specifically chose to avoid asking Helen to play heroine because of the “vamp” stigma or because there may not have been as many good actresses (who also should be good dancers) around to play vamp.

Another popular portrayal is the anti-stereotype character of the courtesan dancer. The courtesan dancer is considered the male lead’s respite and comfort in his moments of

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<sup>8</sup> Helen Jairag Richardson was an Anglo-Indian actress, with an Anglo-Indian father and a Burmese mother. She was born on Oct 21<sup>st</sup> 1939. She usually played vamp, cabaret dancer, etc. in popular Indian cinema. Having established her reputation as vamp Helen could never play a female lead in any popular blockbuster film. However she did play supporting actress in some films but they were not blockbuster hits. She did receive recognition from the Indian Film Fare Awards and was awarded best supporting actress a few times. The government of India conferred her with the Padma Shri title, the fourth highest civilian honor in the country, for her contribution to Indian cinema.

emotional trauma. Once he is relieved by life and fate of his many traumas, he will leave the women who gave him comfort when he most needed it and carry on with his life. In effect, courtesan dancers are women used by male leads. The man, in his disturbed phase of life finds comfort in this extra marital affair or fling or this fascination for another woman, but comes back to his family values eventually and this is justified. He is still a “good” and “moral” man with a few flaws which can be overlooked. However, the woman in the “fling” relationship is always “bad” and “immoral”.

This is very characteristic of Indian society. It is more common in Indian society for a man to be quite graciously accepted by his family, despite having an extra marital affair or a fling, than it is to see a woman being accepted by her family under the same circumstances. Courtesan dancers were these women of the “other world”, a world that the family woman would never want to see herself in. So even to women viewers, the idea of the courtesan dancer being the bad woman who the man eventually must leave for his wife and family, does not seem unfair. At this juncture it becomes important to give society’s family values more priority than the feelings and emotions of the courtesan dancer or the other woman.

According to Ganti (2004), courtesans were women who knew and performed songs and dances in the courts of kings, were well versed with poetry and literature and possessed tactful and engaging conversational skills; they were patronized by the ruling elite. Unlike prostitutes, they had a lot more control over their bodies and entered into monogamous physical relationships with their patrons. However, the British who were trying to displace this very ruling elite considered courtesans part of this elite and in an attempt to reduce their power and influence, started using them as prostitutes for British soldiers in India, stripping them off their socio-cultural status (p. 13-14).

It appears that what happened to courtesan dancers in reality (stripped of their status, riches and emotions), happens to them in popular films as well—they are simply characters used by the male leads, and they have no more additional value.

Dwyer (2005), in her analysis of popular Indian film comments on the highest grossing film of the decade (1960-69), *Mughal-E-Azam* 1960, in which Anarkali, a courtesan dancer in the court of Mughal emperor Akbar, and Salim, son of King Akbar, fall in love. For the crime of love, the two of them are sentenced to death by the emperor. Salim is killed and Anarkali is buried alive although Akbar lets her escape through a secret tunnel. (p. 167). She says, “Film brings out themes that are popular in Hindi Film...struggle between public duty and private desire...the self-sacrificing woman” (p. 168). The courtesan dancer is stripped off her status and emotions for having fallen in love with the prince who belongs to the ruling elite.

However, over the years women’s roles in films have evolved and many blockbuster films have featured women in important roles. These roles give women ample screen time and performance time. But the important question is what these roles imply and how that might have an effect on viewers. As Butalia (1984) says,

However a starting point may be that in spite of increased visibility, Indian women are not in general autonomous and self-defined in the films. This is not surprising given that 90 percent of the directors and producers are men. It is not an oversimplification to say that in popular Indian cinema women are seen very much in bad or good roles. The good ones are, more often than not (self-sacrificing) mothers, (dutiful) daughters, (loyal) sisters or (obedient and respectful) wives. They support, comfort and very seldom question their men. They are self-sacrificing and above all pure.... On the other side of the coin

modernity often seems to be equated with being bad. Bad women, other than being modern, are often single, sometimes widowed. They may be westernized (synonymous with being fast and 'loose'), independent (a male preserve), aggressive (a male quality) and they may even smoke and drink. Often they will wear western clothes but the moment they suffer a change and reform their ways, they will clad themselves in a sari and cover their heads. There are, of course, exceptions to the above stereotypes, but they remain exceptions. (p. 109)

While courtesan dancers are one end of the spectrum, the vamps are on the other end. As discussed earlier, these are the women who would be cabaret dancers in bars and pubs, the cigarette-smoking, sexily clad, sensuous women who are open about their sexuality and easily flirt with and entertain either the male protagonist or the male antagonist in the film. Some of the most popular actresses who have played these roles in films were Helen Jairag Richardson, Aruna Irani and Bindu Zaveri from the 70s and 80s. While they have played vamp, two actresses, Zeneth Aman and Parveen Babi have played the relatively more unconventional female leads – relatively more westernized in their outlook as characters, more daring wardrobe and sensuous dance sequences. According to Das (2007),

Parveen Babi (April 4, 1949 – January 20, 2005), was one of the most successful Bollywood actresses in the 1970s and was known for her portrayal of strong women who did not care about the conventional norms of society. She was the first Indian actress to have featured on TIME magazine's cover, in 1975.

Actresses who were cast in unconventional and more modern roles were recognized for having been different from the norm. Although the idea of the vamp being the immoral woman and the female lead being the moral and chaste woman was high, this did not

substantiate women's roles. It only led to demarcation between the vamp and the lead actress, with emphasis of certain character traits in these roles. The commonality between both the roles is that, they were both objectified anyway. On screen the only real difference between the vamp and the lead actress in terms of their objectification was purely contextual to the story.

Many a time, the difference between the vamp and the so called heroines was probably that the vamp characters are more open about their sexuality on screen. They already were "bad" and "immoral", pursuing cabaret dancing, wearing revealing and sensuous clothes, openly flirting with men, etc. all of which they did as a matter of choice. They were portrayed as characters who chose this way of living. The heroines, on the contrary, despite having some sensuous moments on screen, which included wearing revealing clothes and dancing some sensuous dances with hip shakes and breast thrusts were still pure. Why would that be? – Simply because their moves were portrayed as being the point of view of the hero. These acts done by the heroine were done with or in the presence of the male protagonist during his moments of passion and desire and it comes across as being his point of view of the woman he loves and desires which is much more legitimate in the minds of the audience than the open and unrestrained sexuality of the already immoral vamp. Although both heroines and vamps had many similarities in terms of what they wore and how they danced and how they were objectified on screen, the confines within which they exhibited their sexuality on screen, psychologically demarcated them in the minds of their audience as either being good or bad, moral or immoral. The differences between the heroine and the vamp indicate that the Madonna and the whore complex operates in Indian society. The girlfriend/wife/mother is a Madonna and therefore has to conform to those pure traits while

the vamp is a whore and can simply be immoral. The justification of her immorality is that she is a whore. The pictures below highlight the contrasting qualities of the Madonna and the whore.



*Sholay 1975 -Helen dancing to the song Mehbooba Mehbooba*



*Sholay 1975 – Hemamalini dancing to Jab Tak Hai Jaan*

In *Sholay 1975*, an all time blockbuster Hindi film, Helen makes only a special appearance as a gypsy dancer with a very sexy costume and dances as the male antagonist of the film watches her. One could compare that to the present day bar dancer, stripper, etc. only that it was done in the “gypsy” context at the time. The audience would look at Helen, her costumes and her moves as being justified by the theory that she is just a gypsy woman who is entertaining men out of her choice to do so. Many a time vamps become entertainers for the antagonist and at times even partner them and this further strengthens the idea of their being “bad” and “immoral”.

On the right is the heroine Hemamalini, sprawled out, with specific shots aimed at her hips during the entire sequence of the song, but this in the minds of the audience, is legitimised exposure because in the sequence she is dancing for the very desirous antagonist in order to be able to save the lives of the male heroes of the film. Although the shots used on Helen and Hemammalini, showing their hips and stomachs might seem to have similar

effects on the viewer, the perceptions of these shots are very different because the context in which the heroine is objectified and the gypsy woman/vamp is objectified vary greatly. Even in the film *Sholay*, there are two heroines with very opposing characteristics. One is the very talkative, boisterous but yet projected as homely and the hero's love interest, and the other is the widow, very quiet, introverted and portrayed as submissive and timid through the film. The role of the talkative woman is played by Hemamalini and the widow by Jaya Bhadhuri. Both the roles, though opposing in nature, clearly conform to the social norms of how a woman should behave and how a widow should behave. Dwyer (2005) comments on film *Sholay* 1975, the highest grossing film in Indian film history, "Hemamalini shines as the chatterbox <sup>9</sup>tonga-driver who is forced to dance for Gabbar's sadistic enjoyment, while Jaya is silent apart from the flashback to the family's <sup>10</sup>Holi party" (p. 218).



Helen in *Caravan* 1975



Helen in *Caravan* 1975

In film *Caravan* 1971 Helen performs the cabaret to the song *Monica oh my darling*. This is a fine example of the absolute stereotypical "vamp" woman portrayal in commercial Indian cinema. The heroine will never perform the cabaret in a bar. It will always be the vamp.

Although the heroine might be portrayed in sensuous ways by the camera, it will not be in a bar or a pub or any place or profession that is considered compromising in anyway. The

<sup>9</sup> A Hindi word for horse cart

<sup>10</sup> A Hindu festival of colors in which people throw color powders and color water over each other as a celebration of the triumph of the good and devout mythological character Prahlad, over the evil female demon, Holika who tried to kill him.

heroine's objectification will somehow be justified. But the vamp is the one who is objectified in the context of a pub, a bar or a cabaret performance. Below are some pictures of vamps/gypsy/tribal women, heroines and others from various films portrayed in erotic ways by the camera.



Aruna Irani in film *Caravan* 1971  
In the song *Chadthi Jawaani Meri*  
as the tribal, gypsy woman



Parveen Babi in film *Kranti* 1981, in the song  
*Mara Thumka* –in the role of supporting actress



Actor Sashi Kapoor      And      Actress Zeenath Aman in *Satyam Sivam Sundaram* 1978

In the above pictures, hero Shashi Kapoor, is looking at the heroine Zeenat Aman who is cleaning the temple opposite his home in the most erotic possible fashion. However, her sensuousness on screen is not as blasphemous as Helen's or Aruna Irani's cabaret in other films, because she is cleaning the temple as the hero watches her. What we see of Zeenat Aman is the point of view of the male protagonist and is therefore justified. A point to note here is that in the cinema of the 80s, 90s and the 2000s, the difference between the heroine and the vamp becomes hazy but in the 60s and 70s, there is a clear demarcation between

these roles and the traits that accompanny them. Any sort of sexuality that the heroine exhibits during the 60s and 70s period, is done within the confines of the male gaze upon her. While this is true to a great extent, of cinema in the later decades also, the interesting thing about the last couple of decades is that there seems to be a merging of the roles of the heroine and the vamp. Why?

As society becomes more modern and is exposed more to the Western world and globalization, it becomes necessary to conform to the modern male's idea and fantasy of what a woman should be. As <sup>11</sup>Sivasankaran says,

The only thing that has happened is a globalized objectification where the heroine and the vamp, all rolled into one cater to the globalized man's needs, desires and fantasies. How the Indian male with a Western and modern, globalized outlook wants his woman to be, is what is seen in the merger of roles of the heroine and the vamp. Nothing has changed in terms of substantiating the role of the female lead itself and this is really sad. (personal communication, March 26, 2011)

This is where Blumler & Katz's uses and gratification theory comes in. According to Haun (2010), the focus of the uses and gratification theory is on the consumer. The consumer is considered an active participant making conscious choices based on their individual needs (p. 94).

In the case of Indian cinema, this individual is the male audience who looks for gratification of his needs, desires and fantasies in commercial cinema. The audience is primarily male and the film industry itself is male dominated. So the gratification of this male audience is an important component.

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<sup>11</sup> Raju Sivasankaran is an up and coming South Indian regional language (Tamil) film director who completed his debut film *Varnam* in 2009, and is awaiting its release. The question and answer interview with Sivasankaran can be found in Appendix 1.

The Indian film industry caters to a wide range of audiences. While some unconventional ideas and films may have appealed greatly to the wide-ranged audience, such occurrences are rare. The industry is under constant pressure to deliver what viewers want to see, in order to make a profit. There has to be some commercial element (symbolic sex, song and dance, hot girlfriend and yet the most homely wife etc.) for the film to be satisfying to the largely male audience and as long as the audience is gratified by it, cinema with women in monotonous roles is going to continue.

Hence, having a 'modern' woman onscreen which mostly means wearing more revealing clothes, dancing sensuously, etc. caters to the male fantasy of the modern day Indian woman, who is both the librarian and the stripper. Unfortunately, the woman remains as just the love interest of the male protagonist and is rarely cast in a stronger and more independent role.

On the one hand the heroine is the good Madonna and on the other hand she is the sexy stripper and whore. How can this disparity be justified? This is a classic example of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. According to Moskowitz (2005), "The premise of the cognitive dissonance theory is that when people experience inconsistencies between two cognitions, this causes an aversive drive state that people are motivated to eliminate" (p. 317).

In the case of the cognition of women by Indian men, women are to be the Madonnas, epitomes of all that is moral. They must uphold the values of the Indian culture. This is the popular perception. But, they also need to be elements of fantasy for the Indian male with Western outlook and/or exposure. The Madonna now has to become the whore for male fantasy. But how can that happen? When both perceptions merge, they seem very contradictory and there is dissonance in cognition; there needs to be a way to appease the

value system and eliminate this dissonance. So, the Madonna, becomes the sexy woman of fantasy not by her own choice, but by the gaze of the male upon her and therefore, it is his point of view of her, which is justified. The dissonance in the contradictory cognitions is thus merged.

The issues of either wearing or not wearing revealing clothes, by themselves are not a matter of right or wrong. The point is that the role of the female lead in these films is nothing beyond the costumes and the hip shaking, boob thrusting dances. The role of the female lead ends up lacking substance and her character becomes sheer eye candy. As <sup>12</sup>Vinayachandran said in an interview, “Most roles for women involve glamorous skin show, a vivacious song and dance routine and in supporting the male hero to achieve his goals” (personal communication, March 30, 2011). The heroines, thus, become an interesting addition in the film and plainly support the role of the male protagonist. The audience which has repeatedly seen such roles, begin to perceive it as being eye candy and brand these roles as the only possible roles for women in Indian cinema.

A new stereotype is built around that eye candy, defeating the purpose of trying to break stereotypes. Films find ways to justify why the heroine is performing these song and dance sequences and more often than not, they will be a love sequence between the hero and the heroine or a sequence where the female lead is doing something for the sake of the male lead, either to save his life, or help him out of a situation. The fundamental idea of the male gaze, male fantasy and perspective is not lost yet. Merging the Madonna and the whore by suitably justifying the synchrony of roles is just a different way of catering to those fantasies, yet being within the parameters of what is or is not socially acceptable.

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<sup>12</sup> Vinitha has worked as an assistant director to a South Indian regional language (Tamil) film director, Gautam Menon. Currently she works in the Los Angeles, USA, branch of UTV, an Indian film production and distribution company, in the distribution department. The question and answer interview with Vinayachandran can be found in Appendix 3.



Madhuri Dixit in *Tezaab* 1988,  
Dancing to song *Ek Do Teen*



Madhuri Dixit in film *Khalnayak* 1993,  
dancing to song *Cholee Ke Peeche*

In the film *Tezaab* 1988, Madhuri Dixit is the heroine but her clothes are similar to the vamps of the 1970s. Such sensuous songs are usually referred to as “item numbers”, item referring sometimes in a derogatory fashion and sometimes in a sexy and sensual fashion to the woman who is dancing. In the 1970s, these item numbers are mostly the work of the vamps and bar dancers. In the 80s, this demarcation becomes hazy and the heroines perform these item numbers themselves, but in a manner that conveniently bridges the dissonance in the perceptions of the Madonna and the whore. For instance, in the film *Khalnayak* 1993, Madhuri Dixit, is the main female lead. She is a police officer, who goes undercover as a prostitute, in order to clear the reputation of her Police officer boyfriend, Ram. She is not a prostitute but a police officer, under-cover, (which is not the main point here), trying to save her boyfriend. Since she is trying to save the male protagonist and the audience knows her mission, anything that she does becomes acceptable under those circumstances.

Actress Shabana Azmi also mentions in an interview to Ganti (2004), that while there may have been a clear cut difference between the heroine and the vamp in earlier films, in recent times, specifically in the 80s and 90s, the images of heroine and the vamp seem to be blurring with the heroine being the sex symbol before her marriage and then the chaste wife after her marriage, making the portrayals even more stereotyped and one-dimensional (p.

190). Although the fundamental nature of the roles of heroine and vamp may have changed, what they represent, or what they signify in their roles has not changed significantly.

In the context of the merger of roles for the heroine and the vamp, Sivasankaran in a telephonic interview says,

Objectification of women always existed in Indian cinema and will continue to exist for many years to come. What has really changed today, by merging the roles of the heroine and the vamp, is not the roles of women, but simply the nature of the objectification.

Initially women wore Indian costumes and were objectified. Today they wear more Western costumes and reflect in their character, the so called Western, modern woman with the modern attitude and then they are objectified... I cannot say whether this is for better or worse, but I can definitely say, that the nature of the objectification may have changed, but ideas and perceptions about women, or the way women are projected in Indian cinema, remain fundamentally the same. (personal communication, March 26, 2011)

What women need to portray on screen, how their sexuality needs to come across, what sort of decisions these characters make are all determined by a certain value system in society which ensures that the patriarchal power structure is in place at all times, and that people's fantasies, primarily male fantasies, were being catered to no matter what. It did not necessarily have much to do with the genre of the film or the need of the story but more to do with satisfying different kinds of audiences, their fantasies and how their fantasies could possibly be addressed, given the confines of society. Cinema acts as an instrument of escapism, leading people into their fantasies, which are restrained by what is or is not acceptable socially.

In this process, women end up with very specifically stereotyped roles because directors and producers don't really perceive stories or scripts from the point of view of the woman. Even slightly evolved roles in recent years did not encompass a paradigm shift in ideology or the perception of women because their roles come from the socio-cultural context in which they live. When asked if the roles of women in Indian cinema come from the culture in which they live, Vinayachandran says, "As much as it is culture driven it is also market driven" (personal communication, March 30, 2011). So the audience is satisfied with what they see and no one is asking for it to be changed.

According to Littlejohn & Foss (2005), "The uses and gratifications approach uses members of the audience as actively utilizing media content rather than being passively acted upon" (p. 286). Thus commercial cinema and its representation of women in India acts upon the need of the actively engaged audience, fully aware of what they want and trying to match their needs.

The very modern, independent and hip girl before marriage suddenly blossoms into the most traditional and conservative girlfriend or wife to the male protagonist. In some sense her modernism and independence go through the very classic "Taming of the shrew" experience. The aim is to cater to audience escapism and fantasies, which is what ensures that the films earn their profits and whatever sells best is the blockbuster formula and is emulated and duplicated endlessly. In so many years of Indian cinema, having women characterized as stereotypes seems to have been selling very well with viewers. The most monetarily beneficial option is to continue to do the same.

Das Gupta (1969) writes,

The trouble with the Hindi cinema is not that it is commercial; all film industries in the world, including the state-owned ones, are commercial because they cannot go on throwing away money on films which people do not want to see. The trouble is that other film industries do two things that the Hindi cinema does not (for the simple reason that it is incapable): produce films at many levels ranging from pure art to pure commerce, and occasionally bowl over the art critic and the box office with the same film. Diligently, the Hindi cinema has perfected its one and only formula. It has had no John Ford turning out Westerns, no Milestone making memorable war films, no Hitchcock to hold us in thrall, no Minnelli, no Donen to make it by music alone. It has no genres. (p. 31)

Given this fixed blockbuster formula, and its parameter, the roles of women have to conform to the existing formula and no one is really even thinking about whether women can be given different kinds of roles. For instance, why can't a film have a central character who happens to be a 40 year old woman? Why does it always have to be the woman in her early twenties? This just shows an absolute lack of alternative thinking amongst script writers and directors. If the blockbuster formula works, they are more than happy to stick with that formula rather than try to change it. The issue of women and their roles, and the possibilities of having a 40-year-old woman as a central character to a film, or being innovative in the characterization of women in films are all lost in this maze of commercial cinema that has to appeal to the urban and rural masses in theaters.

In summary women are either absolutely pure wives or girlfriends, or self-sacrificing mothers and sisters, or they are immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers, strippers and vamps. These are very clear-cut categories in films. If for any reason, the pure woman showed

eroticism on screen it was for the sake of the good and pure hero and therefore it was alright. None of these women were self-defining, powerful characters who decided for themselves and chose for themselves. They were always deciding and choosing and doing as per the norms and values of family, culture and society. In this sense, a hero who smoked and went to a cabaret dance was still a pure man, but a heroine who by choice dressed in a sexually attractive fashion (wore revealing attire), or a vamp to whom the hero goes to satisfy his desires were all not as pure.

The point of this analysis is not to argue that women should not be objectified or that it is immoral for women in films to expose their bodies. These are personal choices made by actresses and directors. However, the way this exposure and exhibition of sexuality is portrayed on screen has an undercurrent, which carries messages to the audience, reinforcing further, the pre-existing stereotypes in society, adding strength to the vicious cycle – do films lead to socio-cultural stereotypes or do these stereotypes find their way into films? Where does the Madonna and the whore complex even come from?

It certainly has its base in religion and the factors that influence religion. The next chapter will explore one aspect that influences the Hindu religion greatly - the epics and mythological tales that are an important part of the foundation of the religion and their unmistakable presence in the realm of popular culture.

## **Chapter 5: The Great Indian Epics and Indian Pop Culture**

### **- Character Prototypes in Epics and their Influence on Story Telling in Indian Cinema**

The origins of the characterization of women for script and story purposes in Indian cinema has its roots in the epics of India. The two greatest and widely acclaimed Indian epics are the Ramayana, the story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita, and the Mahabharata, the story of a family feud between cousins for their kingdom.

In the Ramayana, the female protagonist Sita is the exemplified perfect woman, who stands by and supports her husband right through all his hardships. After Rama marries Sita, Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi, one of the Queens of the kingdom, who wants her own son Bharath to inherit the empire, manipulates her husband, King Dasaratha, into banishing the eldest son, Rama, from the empire. Rama, who has given word to his father that he will do anything to help his father, agrees to be in exile for 14 years. His wife Sita, accompanies him into the forests to spend her life in exile with her husband.

During this period Rama and Sita, accompanied by one of Rama's brothers Lakshmana, live in the forest and help the sages from the atrocities of the demons and devils in the forest. During this time, Sita is captured by a demon king, Ravana, who wants her to be his wife. Rama goes on to overthrow Ravana in order to win his wife Sita back. In trying to do this, Rama helps, befriends and builds relationships with various beings in the jungle to help him in the war against the demon king Ravana of Lanka. After Rama wins his wife back, in some versions of the epic, he is supposed to have asked his wife Sita, to walk through and bathe herself in fire as a proof of her purity. Sita acquiesces to this.

The idea behind this fire bath or fire walk is for Sita to prove to the world, that during her period of captivity, she remained untouched by Ravana and that she did not succumb to a

physical relationship or violation of any sort with Ravana; that she was neither raped nor willingly accepted Ravana. She is so pure, that the god of fire, Agni, can't much as even give her a small burn. This is popularly referred to as Sita's test of purity. According to Hindu religion, Rama is an incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, and his wife Sita, an incarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi, wife of Lord Vishnu. The purity of Sita has led to the Madonna complex in society, where the woman, bearer of children and the enhancer of lineage is supposed to be as pure as Sita in the Ramayana. This is a powerful concept in the minds of people in India. Films and film stories are many a time based on these epic prototypes and powerful impressions that epic characters make in the minds of people.<sup>13</sup>Pattanaik (2009) says, "We're looking at stories that have lasted the test of time, like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata... That's proof of their effectiveness."

This is because stories of the Gods, myths and epics are the stories people are told through their lives. They are stories children are raised with. Since it is so much a part of everyday life, people internalize the values in these stories for life. According to Pattanaik (2009), epics and stories that people hear all their lives, create subjective realities in their minds and these subjective realities are internalized, leading to the construction of their world views and perceptions. These world views then begin to dominate their ideas, attitudes, beliefs and approaches to life situations including management and business.

In the case of film stories, internalization of epics creates epic based ideas and fantasies in the minds of the people, which then enter the realm of popular culture, influencing character stereotypes in film.

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<sup>13</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik is a self-taught mythologist, and the author (and often illustrator) of several works on aspects of myth, including the primer *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* and his most recent book, *7 Secrets from Hindu Calendar Art*. He writes a column called "Management Mythos" for an Indian business newspaper, *Economic Times* that juxtaposes myth onto modern leadership challenges. His newest area of inquiry: How is traditional management, as expressed in old Indian cultural narratives, different from modern scientific management techniques?"

In the controversial film *Fire* 1996 directed by Canadian-Indian film maker, Deepa Mehta, one of the two female protagonists is named Sita. While the film itself was not a commercial blockbuster and aroused violent sentiment amongst religious fanatics and political parties, as discussed earlier, the idea of naming the character Sita comes from the epic Ramayana, and the director, in an interview on the DVD of the film says, “The point is to make somebody, women especially, go through continuous trials, to prove their purity, this seems to be a part of our ethos and that is why I called her Sita.” In the film the character named Sita has a situation in the story where her husband questions her because she breaks tradition and makes an independent choice overruling her husband. This is the moment the director is referring to in the interview and she says that this notion of the woman’s test of purity is an integral part of many Indian traditions and in some way permeates Indian society in so subconscious a manner that people hardly realize it.

In the second greatest Indian epic, The Mahabharatha, two sets of cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, fight over a kingdom. The first set, named the Pandavas, are five people with one wife named Draupadi. (We assume that polygamy and polyandry were perhaps common in society, the time at which this epic was written, because of a scarcity of land, resources and perhaps because the sex ratio was not evened out). The second set, are one hundred brothers, the sons of King Dirdashtra. The Kauravas call upon the five Pandavas to gamble. The Kauravas cheat and manipulate putting the Pandavas in a position of tremendous loss. The Kauravas are greedy for territory and want to possess not only their part of the kingdom but also the part of the kingdom that belongs to their cousins, the Pandavas.

The Pandavas gamble everything they have until finally, after losing all they have, their territory, property and wealth, they gamble their wife Draupadi. Draupadi is dragged into court by one of the Kaurava cousins, who insults her and starts to strip her off her saree. This is referred to as Draupadi's violation in court.

Draupadi, a great devotee of the Lord Krishna, prays to him and miraculously, her saree can never be pulled off of her; as the Kaurava cousin tries to strip her off it, more and more layers of cloth just keep making the saree longer and longer. Lord Krishna protects her by making sure her saree magically becomes longer and longer, so much so that the Kaurava prince tires of trying. The point to be noted in this story is the idea of treating a woman, one's wife, as property that can be gambled with. As in all societies, women are more vulnerable and any mishap leads for them to be raped or molested or violated in some form or the other. This vulnerability of women is used in Indian cinema very frequently. While rape may be a real social human rights issue in all countries, the problem with Indian cinema is that rape is a cinematic tool that leads to some empathy for the victim for sure, but it is mostly a cinematic moment that is used to exhibit the heroic nature of the male protagonist, who always ends up saving the damsel in distress. More often than not, the female lead will never get raped because it challenges the notion of feminine purity. The rape scene is only an attempt by the bad guys to rape the female and how the male lead saves her, showing off his brawling abilities, is the real story there. If at all a woman gets raped onscreen, it will be someone's maid, or the male protagonist's sister, and then the story is about revenge. It is never the main female lead who gets raped.

Why have these repetitive and monotonously predictable rape scenes then? Why can't the male character's greatness be demonstrated in something else? Why should a rape scene or a

dance sequence for the villain by the female lead be the cinematic tool through which the audience understands the male character? – This is because men see themselves as saviors of women in society and the male character’s actions are their fantasy.

It is possible that women have fantasies of being saved by the handsome prince or perhaps some other very different fantasy, but somehow, that is a point of view that is never really explored. Not a whole lot about female fantasy finds voice in Indian cinema, because it is not a subject openly discussed or explored, nor is it considered appropriate in a patriarchy governed family system to even try to express women’s sexuality or fantasies openly. Women are so used to this system and it is so internalized in them, that even women find other modern women (who are open about this subject), “not modest enough about femininity”, “immoral” or “wrong”. Women have come to believe that there is a certain patriarchy in the system that is legitimized and they must behave in accordance with this power structure. It has become an internalized value system which is further reinforced by the media and its portrayal of women.

In the case of the female lead dancing or sexually enticing the villain or antagonist - this again is a classic male fantasy, where they want to be the saviors of their women, but also want their women to do almost anything for them; be the chaste woman when needed and be the stripper when needed, satisfying the need for the Madonna and the whore. So it is all about the man’s gallantry and the woman’s vulnerability and these extreme character traits seem to have come from the epics. Smriti Nandakumar, in a telephonic interview says,

In a land where pagan worship is so intense, and the deities are Goddesses of power, rage and a certain wildness and empowerment to them, why does the average woman always have to be compared to the relatively softer epic prototypes? We worship Goddess

Durga<sup>14</sup>, and Goddess Kali<sup>15</sup>, who are symbols of absolute power, and empowerment but we want the women in society to be Sita or Draupadi. (personal communication, January 8, 2011)

Incidentally, in the mythological stories of the Goddesses, they always kill evil which is in the form of male demons. There has to be some sort of a feministic ideal associated with the portrayal of these Goddesses, which was perhaps women's way of associating with power, empowerment, opportunity and independence in a patriarchal, male dominated society. This portrayal somehow never made it to popular Indian cinema. This is because, in a patriarchal society, while men are willing to worship the powerful, empowered Goddess, they probably feel greatly threatened if the same traits of power come from the real woman, and incline towards suppressing women even more. So, they start to draw from the softer prototypes in epics and myths and try to impose those traits on women, thereby preventing the true empowerment of women.



*Goddess Durga*



*Goddess Kali*

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<sup>14</sup> Durga meaning the inaccessible in Sanskrit, the invincible in Bengali, is one who can redeem in situations of utmost distress. An embodiment of creative feminine force (*Shakti*), Durga exists in a state of *svātantrya* (independence from the universe and anything/anybody else, i.e., self-sufficiency) and fierce compassion. Durga manifests fearlessness and patience, and never loses her sense of humor, even during spiritual battles of epic proportion.

<sup>15</sup> Kali means the Black one. She signifies time, death, the Lord of death. She is a form of Durga, considered the wife of the black one (Shiva, the destroyer of all creation is the black one, "Kala" and his wife, is "Kali" the Goddess of death and destroyer of evil).

In fact, Goddess Kali, is usually portrayed as being topless, with a garland made of the heads of the demons that she killed to save mother earth from their atrocities. This image of power, independence and the sort of fear that this image instills, is worshipped by people, men and women alike, but somehow never translates into reality. The male fantasy is the vulnerable woman, not the powerful, empowered woman. So the male controlled society tends to impose and emphasize on women's vulnerability.

Women as symbols of purity, softness, obedience, chastity, virginity until wed, etc. are all concepts perhaps emerging from the prototypes in epics. The two epics are very important to Indian culture, religion, tradition and in many ways influence pop culture and therefore film, filmic situations, scenes, and values resonated in film and so on. As late as 2010, the film *Rajneeti* 2010, directed by Prakash Jha, is based on the story of the epic Mahabharata adapted to modern times.

In an interview to Sengupta (2010), Director of *Rajneeti*, Prakash Jha says,

Every kind of character, every kind of situation is embedded in the Mahabharata, he said.

It becomes the reference point for our psyche. One is never out of the Mahabharata...

There is no story that is not contained here.

This is the power of the epic and the many fascinating stories contained within it and it no doubt influences the story writer's psyche. Sengupta (2010), observes, that these epic stories do not get transmitted via books, but via the traditions and cultural framework within which one is born. She says of Director Prakash Jha,

For Mr. Jha, the filmmaker, the stories of the Mahabharata did not first come through books. He was born into a family of Brahmin priests. Children were told the stories of the

Mahabharata all the time. They were planted in his brain. To this day, he said, he sees it as the story of all stories.

Summarizing Director Shyam Benegal, who belongs to the regional Bengali film industry which is one of the many film industries in the country, Simons (2001) says,

Soon after, Bollywood moviemakers had come into their own, and by the early 1950s, they'd developed a distinctive style, based on the teachings of a 1,000-year-old Hindu text called Natya Shastra (Science of Theater). Under tenets set down in that book, entertainment must comprise the nine essences. These are love, hate, sorrow, disgust, joy, compassion, pity, pride and courage. In addition, there is supposed to be a lot of song and dance, as in popular staging of the epic Ramayana, which to this day entralls Indians.

The epics therefore form a great basis for story tellers to take morals from, to adapt stories from and in many ways might be acting as the foundation to building more and more stories, and a stepping stone to forming characters in these stories. According to Sengupta (2010), “The epics are so embedded that they penetrate everyday speech. A woman may be warned against following the path of \*Ahalya<sup>16</sup>, the adulteress of the Ramayana. A family feud might be likened to the battle of rival clans in the Mahabharata. There is even a school named after

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<sup>16</sup> Ahalya – In the epic Ramayana, Ahalya is the wife of a pious sage, whose piousness and simplicity has attracted the jealousy of the rain god, Indra, who, in order to avenge the sage, resorts to a lowly but yet the typical form of provocation. Indra, assumes the form of the sage himself, and violates Ahalya, the wife of the sage. Although Ahalya thinks for a moment that it might be Indra, she is confused for a moment and puts it beyond the capacity of the god of rain to resort to something so lowly and willingly gives herself thinking it is her husband. It turns out that it is not. However, Ahalya becomes the impure woman and is cursed and blessed in tandem by her husband, to be invisible to all eyes until the dust from Rama’s feet blows on to her. When this happens Ahalya would be re-united with her husband and be rid of the sorrow of Indra’s violation upon her. This is only a small story in the many chapters of the Ramayana.

Eklavya<sup>17</sup>, a gifted archer who chopped off his right thumb to prove his devotion to his archery teacher.”

Sengupta (2010) also says,

Neither the Mahabharata nor the Ramayana is considered to be the word of God. But they are powerful fables, and they represent for Hindus what the Bible and the Greek myths together may have historically represented in the West.

Pattanaik (2009), a writer who uses the Hindu epics in human resource management, describes them as ‘the template of Indian thought’.

Given that it is understandable as to how and why these epics subconsciously retain themselves in the realm of story-telling and story writing. Not only do epics form a basis for popular story writing and narrative patterns, but they have greatly influenced Indian classical culture and pop culture in various ways.

South Indian classical music popularly referred to as Carnatic music contains the works of a trinity of composers of whom Thyagaraja, who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is very popular. A number of compositions of Thyagaraja are extremely complicated and unprecedented and remain unsurpassed to this day in the realm of Indian Classical music. Thyagaraja’s compositions are taught to students of vocal and instrumental music at a highly developed and advanced level of learning the art. Thyagaraja’s songs and verses are all his interpretations of various situations in the epic, Ramayana. Classical dance in India is also

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<sup>17</sup> Eklavya – This is another small story in the Mahabharata of the warrior Eklavya, who was not of princely descent. However, he wanted to learn archery from the teacher of the princes Dronacharya. Dronacharya did not want to teach Eklavya since he knew Eklavya’s potential and did not want him to get ahead of the princes he was teaching archery to. In order to ensure Eklavya could not get ahead of the princes, Dronacharya asks him for the thumb of his right hand as gratitude and obedience that a student bestows his teacher for the art. Eklavya concedes and remains a very good archer but not one to beat those princely origins.

influenced by epics. Dance dramas portray stories of the Gods and Goddesses. The epics have influenced the basis of classical music and dance, and have been so much a part of classical culture that it is not surprising that they influence even modern day stories and popular culture.

Drawing from epic character prototypes to create new story characters seems the most natural and spontaneous thing to do while thinking of creating stories and characters.

Women in all these epics and other mythological stories have been portrayed as being obedient, subservient, complying, dutiful and enduring. Many a time they have been portrayed as being property to be gambled with or owned and these ideas tend to carry on in modern adapted ways into cinema creating a new set of stereotypes. This is how epic prototypes that conform to male fantasy, become character stereotypes of women in Indian cinema.

Once the epics and their prototypes enter the realm of popular culture, (it is not only film that the terrain of popular culture covers, but everything from lifestyle and social trends to society and family) then the focus shifts to this population which embraces the factors that govern popular culture – the mass audience. Who is this mass audience and what do they want to watch? What are the other factors that govern what they want to watch? The next chapter explores the composition of this audience itself.

## **Chapter 6: Elements that Encompass the Film Viewing Audience**

### **- The Film, Audience and Film, Film and Other Media**

#### **The Film**

The Film itself is one of the first elements that encompass the film viewing experience. What kind of film is a blockbuster film and what kind of film gets the mass approval? In this context, I interviewed, <sup>18</sup> Mudholkar, who has worked in the Indian media industry in Mumbai, and she says,

Before commenting on the nature of the roles given to women in blockbuster films it's important to define what makes a film a blockbuster hit. Knowing this is important because in my opinion this underlines the reason why women are given the kind of roles they are in "blockbuster" films- mostly stereotypical and conventional. A movie is declared a blockbuster hit only if it garners a profit for both- the producer as well as the distributors. For the film to make money for its distributors it has to be a smash hit not only in the metro and mini metros in India but it also has to be a big hit in the smaller towns and rural pockets of the country. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

#### **Audience and Film**

##### **Psyche of the audience**

Now that a blockbuster has been defined, it is important to understand the audience who watches films in theaters and decides whether the film is a hit or a flop. Who is this audience and what is their psyche? Mudholkar in her interview comments on the psyche of the audience. She says,

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<sup>18</sup> Priya Mudholkar has worked in the Indian media industry in Mumbai, in various capacities; primarily as production assistant in television production houses, writer for an Indian music Channel, and production person for film production and distribution companies. A detailed question and answer interview with Mudholkar can be found in Appendix 2.

People inhabiting these small towns and villages are generally traditional as well as conventional. The society in which they live has very set ideas about women and unless these ideas are replicated on screen, people, including the female audience can't relate to the heroines in films. For these people, a woman's world is restricted to her parents before marriage and after that it's her husband and her children, sometimes even her in-laws which rule her life. A woman's role in a man's life is romanticized and she's seen as faithful, god-fearing and utterly devoted to her family. There is no end to the sacrifices a woman will make for the sake of her husband and her children. This idea is so in-built and idolized by people that this is what a girl is conditioned to do while she's growing up. She's taught to think only about her home and anything beyond that is for the man to do. It is this population which is a majority in India and these people are the ones who make a film a hit film- not the urban population. Film makers therefore safely make a film to appeal to this kind of an audience. So it's always the hero or the main male protagonist who carries the entire film on his shoulder while the actresses are present only for a relief... (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Sivasankaran says,

The audience is male dominated. The demographic of the film viewing audience is such that young men, from adolescence to their forties, are the primary audience for films in theaters. It becomes important to cater to their needs and desires. Also, the industry itself is driven by the hero centrism, which means that the hero gets the central role because the industry's profit or loss is determined by the male protagonist. Who should be the hero is a big determining factor for the film's success. A male dominated audience and a hero

centric industry – no wonder that films are the way they are for women. (personal communication, March 26, 2011)

In this context Vinayachandran says, “The male protagonist tends to dominate the female protagonist in most blockbuster films. Hero worship is a common trend in Indian cinema as the primary movie going audience is still male between the age groups of 15-55. Very few women oriented films have made an impact at the box office, despite being critically acclaimed” (personal communication, March 30, 2011).

This is the audience and this is their psyche and directors try to cater to this psyche. The interview excerpts clearly help to understand the male dominated, hero centric, patriarchal, psyche of the audience.

### **The film viewing experience of the audience**

The whole gamut of the film viewing experience in India is very different from the West. Film viewing in India is not about going out on a date privately, or enjoying a few hours of solitude or losing oneself to the fantastic happenings on-screen. While it does have components of all those experiences, it is primarily a mass experience, a large group experience, a family experience, a very shared few hours as opposed to an isolated few hours. In those few hours, everybody in the family, ranging from the grandfather to the adolescent child need to be entertained, engaged and free of embarrassments because everyone attends the film together.

Pendakur (2003), terms film viewing a social act, and says that more often than not, families with almost three generations watch films together in the theatres. At times children and parents watch films together. A wide range of age groups watch films together in a theater. There are no specific age regulations like in the US, as to who can or cannot watch a

film. It is left entirely to parent discretion (p. 119-123). Although there is a rating system prescribed by the Censor Board for Films, the final decision is left to the parent. If an adolescent, 13 years of age, ends up in a film which is meant for adults, there is no one to really restrain that except the family, which in many cases will take the child with them to watch the film anyway.

Srinivas (2002) writes, “The popular Indian film may therefore be described as a pastiche, as it is constructed like a variety show, with something for everyone, rather than a seamless and linear narrative following a single theme” (p. 157).

According to the Censor Board for Film Certification in India, films are rated “A” which means adult viewing, A/U which means adult and unrestricted viewing based on parental guidance and “U” which is unrestricted viewing. The rating in American terms is explained:

U -- Unrestricted Public Exhibition: This rating is given to films suitable for 'family viewing'. A movie with 'U' rating contains no or mild violence and sensuality. This would be similar to the G rating of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

A/U -- Unrestricted Public Exhibition but with parental guidance for children below 12 years. This rating is similar to the PG-13 of the MPAA.

A -- Films are meant for Adult audience above 18 years only. This rating is similar to R of the MPAA.

While these are the ratings, it is not necessary that every film with small amounts of sensuality or vulgarity should be given the adult rating. It turns out that when directors want to make blockbuster films, they want younger people to be able to view them as well. Since an entire family, across three generations becomes the audience for popular film, it is perhaps

conditioned in the minds of directors and screenwriters to conform to all of their expectations, and conforming means portraying women as cultural stereotypes, acceptable to this wide ranged audience of varying age groups.

Such cultural stereotypes can have non-stereotype moments on screen, but these moments have to be justified eventually, as either being wrong or brash of the woman, or as being her fantasy, or as something she would do only because she does not yet have a man in her life. Once the man in her life arrives, many a time the woman goes back to being the very homely, socially acceptable wife, or mother or sister on screen.

In this context, Pendakur (2003), says, that the challenge for a popular film director therefore is to please adults and children in the audience, and ensure that the values portrayed in their films, through the language and semantics used, conform to conventions about structure and content of popular taste (p. 116).

One of the best ways to justify sexuality, sensuousness and sexual relationships is through song and dance sequences. That would be the time that the woman can be objectified and that objectification, perhaps justified in the minds of the audience. Since explicit portrayals of sex, progression in romantic relationships, etc. may cause a lot of discomfort amongst the audience, a musical sequence with outrageously provoking costumes for the female characters, satisfies the audience's need for this sort of sexual voyeurism, simultaneously holding the balance of conforming to culturally acceptable roles for women.

It is apparent this narrative pattern traces its origins to historic, cultural and social factors, and continues to thrive as the dominant pattern corresponding to the evolution of social institutions, like theatre, family, structures within these institutions, and cultural norms of Indian society which the Indian film has to conform and cater to.

### **The fantasy element for the audience**

Justified objectification of women is important because objectification itself is a male fantasy of the woman being both the Madonna and in a justified manner the stripper and the sexy girl as well. Since the film viewing audience and the film making audience are primarily male this fantasy must be catered to and yet be family and kid-friendly since a wide ranged age group is the audience for almost every film made in India.

The real man (who actually cannot fight away ten other men and still be unscathed), or the real woman (who is not always the young and sexually appealing character; real women are middle aged, elderly, not always objects of desire, not just ready to dance and sing at the first given chance, they are simply normal – neither the Madonna nor the whore), are not characters the real people want to see. They do not want to see themselves onscreen, however easy it may be to relate to those very real characters. They want to see unbelievable, unrealistic projections of themselves, fantastic heroes who conform to the real system of beliefs and values, but can achieve more than the real man, can be more than the ordinary man. This is the sense of fantasy cinema has to cater to so that it can consistently appeal to the mass audience, in rural and urban areas. It has to be extraordinary but it must conform to the ordinary value system.

In an interview to Simons (2001), Bhawna Somaya, editor of G Magazine (a magazine for movie buffs), said,

Poor India is not interested in pictures about poor Indians living in ramshackle huts. Rural India definitely is not interested in movies about rural India. And the affluent, educated in urban India, are looking away from Bombay and Calcutta to New York and London. People don't want to see problems on the screen.

The fantasy pattern is now so established that over the years, the audience has trained themselves to expect this fantasy narrative pattern subject to some social and cultural limitations, and the directors have become used to giving them what they want and the cycle continues. As Simons (2001) says,

...And the stuff it produces is always the same: boy meets, wins, loses and regains girl, during which time they run through vast wardrobes, turn up at locations all over the world, kiss (rarely) but in no other way indulge their passion, serenade each other with no fewer than six songs, and join chorus lines in half a dozen dance numbers. While all this is going on, family crises erupt and are settled, murders are committed and solved, cars are chased and destroyed. Oh, and the good guys win.

The audience loves this, wants this and then wants more of it. The fantasy element in Indian cinema is what keeps the audience going to the theaters in the first place. There is a sense of awe and admiration for these film characters who jump into all kinds of wardrobe and turn up for one part of the song in Darjeeling and the other part in Switzerland!

What the audience wants is based on the hardships and realities within which they live. They do not want to see these realities portrayed in their few hours of entertainment also. The directors have an idea of what the audience wants and projects to them, the unrealistic fantasy that the reel man lives out for them within the confines of society, which further reinforces their belief that all cinema must be fantastic and unreal and this is the vicious cycle which the film industry is struggling to break.

## **Film and other Media - The reinforcement of Social and Cultural Stereotypes**

Does the social context of film in India lead to representation of women in stereotypical fashions in Indian cinema, or is it that the media and media culture increasingly reinforce the stereotypes?

According to Srinivas (2002), the popular film addresses a habituated audience.

Habituees may be thought of as insiders to the culture of Indian cinema, audiences who have developed relationships with the films...Film makers attentive to the expectations of habituees, construct the film as a dialogue with such viewers. The expectations habituees have of movies and the movie-going experience, consequently shape the culture of movie going. (p. 157)

This habituated audience of film viewers is also constantly exposed to other kinds of media, which might probably reinforce their pre-existing notions of the kinds of roles they would like to see women in. For instance, Indian advertisements and Television serials portray women stereotypically as well. According to Roy (1998), "While most of the commercials in the category of domesticity portrayed an Indian woman in the traditional role of a housewife, a few commercials contained elements of an oppositional message. Embedded in these commercials were traces of tension between the forces of tradition on the one hand and modernity on the other" (p. 124).

This tension between portraying women as modern and yet traditional enough to conform to the social psyche is an interesting phenomenon that clearly exhibits itself in films as discussed in prior chapters of this paper. In his study of Indian commercials in 1998, Roy observes that the patriarchal ideology is still maintained. Even though, women are portrayed as independent, and their autonomy is incorporated into the story of the commercial, "this

incorporation does not call for any major adjustments in the sexist ideology.” (Roy 1998, p. 125) He also mentions, in this context that female viewers of these ads respond to them because they see themselves as subjects of the ideology (p. 124).

If this concept were extended to Indian film, when women are portrayed in specific roles that conform to socio-cultural norms, and a framework of which they are so much a part, perhaps it becomes difficult for them to separate themselves from that framework and view such representations any differently, or even think about such representations questioningly.

One other media, commonly viewed across the board that perhaps helps to perpetrate stereotypical notions on a day to day basis is television. Misra & Roychowdhary (1997) write,

Middle class ideologies of women's roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis for most programs. In a country where 36 percent of the agricultural workforce is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non-producers and as playing a limited role outside the home. Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as being marginal to national growth and development. Their primary place is seen as being within the home and this value is reflected in the content and setting of most television programs. The plural nature of Indian culture and the diverse roles that women play is neither acknowledged nor communicated. This results in a reinforcing of the stereotyped images and roles specifications of women in a uni-dimensional projection of their reality (p. 247).

Indian television also has the same issues with the representation of the modern, independent woman. As Misra & Roychowdhary (1997), observe in their paper, although women are given modern roles, the “new narratives and strategies of representation pose

instead an irreconcilable conflict between the full emancipation of women and indigenous social and cultural norms and practices (p. 247).

From the above discussion, I argue that while certain patterns exist within society and are represented in films, these patterns are also further reinforced by other media and then this cycle never really ends. Although a few changes occur in the representations of women, no change has been so dynamic as to have remarkably different roles for women in blockbuster Indian cinema. Patriarchy and the projection of male fantasy into film, is further discussed in the discussion section of this paper, under the heading, “The Objectification of Women in Indian Cinema”

## **Chapter 7: The Controversy over Films with an Alternate Storyline**

### **- Films *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, Directed by Deepa Mehta**

Two films made by a Canadian Indian film maker, Deepa Mehta had severely violent repercussions from the people and religious political parties. The films are *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005. In the special features section of the film's (*Fire* 1996) DVD, journalist Eleanor Hall in her voice over for the package says, "In a country where going to the movies is an obsession, in a country which churns out more celluloid fantasies than anywhere in the world, one film is sparking an extraordinary reaction."

*Fire* is the story of a family leading a middle class lifestyle. An old and ailing, widow and, handicapped mother, is taken care of by her son and the son's wife. The son's wife has not produced an offspring. Frustrated with life, the son renounces his marital life and gets on the spiritual path of celibacy. Although he does not separate from his wife, he refuses to engage in marital or physical relationship with her. He asks his wife to lie next to him only to test if he can refrain from being attracted to her. The wife's desires, and love and affection needs are trapped and she continues her existence out of no other choice. All that the wife is there for is to take care of household chores and to care for the ailing mother.

The younger son is having an affair with a foreign lady but is forced into a marriage arranged by the family. The younger brother marries her, but beyond that, he does not care for her and continues to have an affair with his foreign girlfriend. In a home where both women do not get any love and affection from their spouses, where the old and ailing mother-in-law is still the head of the family (despite being handicapped and losing speech), they resort to each other for love and affection. What starts off as a mutual friendship between the two daughters-in-law, ends up being a love affair.

When the two sons find out about this they are disgusted. The younger daughter-in-law slaps her husband and leaves the home. The elder daughter-in-law waits to explain to her husband and declares her unwillingness to stay with him any longer. As she plans to leave the home, her mother-in-law spits on her face for the disgraceful deed that the daughter-in-law has done, by sleeping with the other lady of the house. By accident, a fire starts in the kitchen. The husband lifts his mother and leaves his wife without rescuing her, almost as if she deserved to be burnt. Finally she escapes on her own. The film ends with both women finding each other as they had planned to.

In Indian cinema, this is one of the most revolutionary and unique roles played by women. It created a complete public outrage, fuelled by politics and religious fanatics. Cinema houses were broken down, the religious political party in the city of Mumbai, the Shiv Sena, appointed people (men and women), to protest and create damage to property. The director, Deepa Mehta, in an interview in the film's DVD, says, ““I think what I remember was the viciousness in the expression of the women who were tearing up the posters. And it felt like such a desecration.”

The two lead women characters were named Sita and Radha, who as explained before, are important mythological characters with certain traits and characteristics which were completely violated by the roles given to the lead women in the film. The fact that these names were used for two lesbian characters angered religious groups. They questioned why Hindu names which carried religious significance had to be used in the film to portray the very anti-Hindu sexual orientation of lesbianism!

Indian society especially religious fanatics were offended by the idea of lesbianism. Mehta was shocked by the violent repercussions and responded to them,

It is amazing that a film which explores choices, desires, and the psyche of people who are victims of people who are victims of tradition, would cause such uproar... It was not the lesbian relationship that so offended middle aged Indian men, (surprisingly younger and older men are ardent advocates of Fire), it was the fear that Fire might shift the status quo of husbands and women might just question their insignificant role in marital relationships that lean very heavily in favor of husbands.

The power structure of Indian society is completely inclined towards patriarchy. Anything that opposes that status quo is seen as a threat and when a film does not conform to the existing social power structure, it wreaks havoc. Actress Shabana Azmi in an interview in the film's DVD elucidates this point further.

What the women are doing is basically negotiating more space for themselves, what they are doing is trying to break out of a tradition, that places them only as wife, and mother, you know as the bearer of male children. And the fact that they are moving out of that and also claiming desire, my god, if women start claiming desire, can you imagine how dreadful it would be for our culture?

*Fire* 1996, with its different outlook and storyline, got sidelined as an art film and never made it to the commercial arena. Political and religious propaganda, inclining towards the patriarchal power structure, changed the course of this film's life span. It was banned, and wherever it was screened there was controversy surrounding it. The film was not sexually explicit, because had it been like that it would not have cleared the censor board norms and regulations. The only problem with it was that it was about two women who made their choice which happened to be lesbianism.

This is a classic example in India, of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. The hegemonic patriarchal ideology and societal framework is a reality in India. This reality possibly transfers itself on to screen and is reflected in the audience's reactions to a film made on a subject that questions the existing power structure or portrays the power structure in bad light. According to Gramsci (1998), the dominant or hegemonic ideology is so convenient for its perpetrators that it is enforced and upheld until it becomes the most popularly reigning common sense ideology of the day, followed, imbibed and internalized by all, even those that it does not really benefit. This common sense ideology is the prevailing and dominant ideology and is so internalized, that even those who do not benefit by it think nothing of it and conform to it instead of opposing it, thereby maintaining the status quo. This explains why many women opposed the films, *Fire* 1996, despite the fact that it portrayed women as independent and free to make a choice of their own.

The stereotyped, patriarchal projection and treatment of women characters has become the reigning narrative pattern of the day; it is so internalized that no one, not even the female actresses, realize that there seems to be a dominant narrative pattern in cinema. The female audience does not see this as an imposition of patriarchy but simply as an ideology that must be conformed to although it does not really benefit them.

The film *Water* 2005 is a period film set in pre-independent India of 1938. During this time child marriage had not yet been completely abolished in India. It was very common for child brides to be married off to much older men as a settlement of debt, as a riddance to the female child in the family, and as an effort to be done with the parental responsibility of marrying off a female child.

The child bride, now married continued to stay in the house of her parents, until puberty, after which she would be sent to the house of the older man she was married to. The older men used to end up dying of age, ailments and diseases. The child widow, lost her youth and her entire life. She cannot remarry because widow remarriage was uncommon in society and looked down upon. Widows themselves were looked upon as bad luck, a curse and a bad omen. So what happened to these widows? They were sent to widow homes, where they supposedly led lives of chastity and austerity devoting their lives to God.

*Water* explores the life of one such child widow, named Chuya, who is about 8 years old. Her older husband dies. Her parents give her away to the widow house. Here Chuya encounters another younger widow in her early twenties named Kalyani, and sees the life of widowhood through the life of Kalyani.

The widow house is headed by an elderly matriarch is an equivalent to a master pimp who sends away the relatively younger and more attractive widows to the Zamindars. In effect these younger widows are the Zamindars prostitutes. They are exploited but have nowhere better to go and stick within the confines of this widow dorm.

Kalyani, the younger widow in her early twenties has been forced into this prostitution and is the bread winner of the widow house. Despite that status, the other widows look down upon her since she is the compromised, widow-prostitute.

A young man, Narayan, who is a follower of Gandhi and the Satyagraha movement encounters the beautiful Kalyani and falls for her and asks her to marry him. However, as the story progresses, although Kalyani agrees to marry him, she realizes that she has been his father's prostitute. She commits suicide in shame. Kalyani's lover, Narayan, a follower of Gandhi is open to marrying her despite knowing of his father's relationship with her. He

abandons his father to marry her but by the time he comes back for her, she has already committed suicide. The eight year old widow Chuya witnesses all this.

The matriarch pimp sets her next in line to Kalyani and sends her to the Zamindar for child prostitution. One of the other middle aged widows, Shakuntala, the brighter and more humane of all the widows who has always been empathetic to Kalyani and the child Chuya, finds out about this. She confronts the matriarch and sets out to bring Chuya back. By now, the child Chuya, has already been violated and abused. However, Shakuntala finds her and decides to send her away from the misery of the widow house. She takes Chuya to a public gathering where Gandhi is addressing the masses. She wants to entrust the child to the care of Gandhi.

At this gathering, Shakuntala finds Kalyani's lover Narayan. She gives the child to him, screaming for her to be taken away from the cruelty of widowhood. She requests that he give the child to Gandhi where she can be a part of the Gandhian movement – filled with socially progressive and uplifting ideals.

Although in many ways, the roles of Kalyani (the widow who commits suicide), and the other widows (who conform to the rules), are social stereotypes of that period, the role of Shakuntala, who violates the rules and stands by her own ethical principles is the moment of truth and emotion in the film.

This film led to riots. Director Deepa Mehta's set was destroyed even before she could start the shooting of the film in the town of varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. In an interview package in the film's DVD, Deepa Mehta said, "What happened with Water infact is incredible. We were not allowed to shoot it even before our first shot and a lot of it has to do with internal politics... our shooting was shut down two days into the filming in a brutal

way... our sets were thrown into the Ganges in India... it was perceived that water was somehow detrimental to the health of Hindu culture.”

This was not because the roles of the women were questionable by social norms, as in the case of the film *Fire* 1996, but because a woman director dared to make a period film exposing the ills of the Hindu religion to the Western audience. The religious groups, which also have some political power, believed that this was an anti-Hindu- religion package that was being made for the West. There was political propaganda and agenda behind creating a menace before the film could even be shot. Religious factions did not want the ills of the Hindu religion, the holiness associated with the River Ganges and the town of Varanasi to be corrupted by the representation of the widows in the film. They asked why Deepa Mehta could find no other subject to make a film about and why she had to choose themes that were questionable and portrayed the Hindu religion in bad light. Why could she not make a film that was not controversial, was their question.

While films are the biggest form of entertainment in India, this particular film and its story were looked upon as objectionable because it projected the negative aspects of the Hindu religion. Political groups opposed this film and it never reached the masses entirely. Deepa Mehta moved to Sri Lanka, completed the shoot and released the film *Water* in 2005.

Even though some states allowed the screening of *Water* it could have never been a commercially successful film. It was never nominated for the Indian Film Fare awards although it won international accolades including a nomination for Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (making it Canada's first non-French Canadian film to receive a nomination in that category).

The two reasons this film could not have been a commercial success in India:

First, it created a religious uproar because the theme of the film was based on a sequence of events, which highlighted the negative aspects of the Hindu religion. Since this religion has a very strong power structure in India, it is unlikely that this film might have managed to reach the masses overruling the political and religious power structure.

Second, audiences in India, especially the masses who live in conditions of poverty and daily struggles, look to films for entertainment, and escapism. They do not exactly want to see reality cinema or period films made in artistic and aesthetic ways. They look for fantasy and escapism and cannot take the tragedy, melancholy and realistic story telling in this film. Even the educated middle class audience would say that the film and its theme were disturbing. So the film was conveniently classified as an art film downgrading Indian society and religion, made by a woman of Indian origin and Western exposure, who knew nothing of the indigenous ways of the Hindu religion.

These sources support the idea that Indian commercial cinema resorts to stereotyping women's roles and restrains the storyline within the confines of society for a variety of reasons, ranging from social, cultural, political and religious propaganda, to the economy of filmmaking, which leads to churning out blockbuster hits with a monotonous and repetitive formula. This formula unfortunately provides very few options for alternative and substantial roles for women in cinema. This chapter is followed by a discussion topic for the paper.

## Chapter 8: Answering Research Questions

1. What kind of roles have women been playing in Indian cinema over the last 60 years? Were their roles stereotypical in nature?

From the review of literature in this paper and the quantitative study above yes, their roles were stereotypical in nature. Women have been playing roles subservient to the male lead, very much stereotypical in nature, falling well within the operational definition of stereotype, as defined for the purpose of this paper.

2. What is the fundamental nature of these roles? What do these roles entail? (motherhood, role of wife, role of girlfriend, role of vamp, stripper, prostitute, comic role etc. as the case may be)

These roles usually have the elements of:

The subservient wife, mother or sister, the vamp and the prostitute, the very sensuous girlfriend who is very conforming, and overall, catering to the male fantasy of what women should be – both the Madonna and the whore in more modern cinema, (from 1980) and a clear distinction between the Madonna and the whore in cinema of earlier times 1960-1980). However, regardless of a distinction or a lack of it, between the Madonna and the whore, they both cannot decide for themselves anyway and the story is almost never about them.

3. If these roles are the most common for women in Indian cinema, then why would that be?
  - a. Socio-cultural and historical factors – the power structure in society, patriarchy and the dominance of male fantasy
  - b. Epic prototypes like Sita, Radha, Draupadi and Savitri, who cater to the patriarchal fantasy of what a woman should be like, overrule the feminist epic character traits of the Goddesses

Kali and Durga, translating that to popular culture in general and to main stream Indian cinema

- c. The Film viewing audience has certain beliefs, values and attitudes which they want cinema to conform to, directors have their own ideas of what the audience wants and present to them what they think the audience wants, and this further reinforces the existing power structure in a seemingly subconscious fashion. It is a process that simply happens and no one is really even thinking that it is happening because the dominant ideology prevails without society even realizing that it prevails. Also, other media, television and advertising, continue to have stereotypical models, which further strengthen the existing patterns allowing to sustain. Although newer patterns have emerged in recent times, they are just seemingly new but yet conforming to the confines of social stereotypes or they do not conform and remain exceptions to the norm, paying the price of being exceptions and get branded as “art”.
4. When women have played other kinds of alternative roles (role of lesbians, role of the independent widow etc.), what demarcates these roles from the regular ones and do these films enter the mainstream? If not, why would that be?

It is clear from the discussion of the films *Fire* 1996, and *Water* 2005, that non-stereotyped roles lead to severe social consequences and stories that package the ills of religion and culture are not encouraged in Indian society. The masses are not mature enough to challenge various notions in scholarly and academic fashions and choose to resort to mobilizing mass political propaganda and violence instead.

## Chapter 9: Discussion - Objectification of the Female Lead

Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2004), quoting Richards (1995), mention three categories of sexual objectification of women in Indian cinema, the tribal costume, the wet sari sequence and the behind the bush scene.

The tribal costume -- used for cabaret dances; exposure of vast expanses of the woman's body particularly the pelvic region; short skirts, brief blouses and veil-less upper torso all allow for maximum female exposure in Hindi films. The pictures below are a few examples of how these costumes could work to the advantage of the male sexual fantasy. The camera's point of view caters primarily to this male sexual fantasy.



*Sholay* 1975, an all-time blockbuster film; Hemamalini dancing to the song *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* as the camera gets a low angle shot of her swaying hip.



*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* 1995, released 2 decades after *Sholay* still used the same technique in costumes to cater to the male sexual fantasy.



*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* 1995; Song: *Didi Tera Devar Deewana*

According to Mulvey (1975), this sort of a portrayal that caters to the male fantasy is “Scopophilia”. She says, “What is seen of the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy” (p. 10). The “Behind the Bush” scenes as Richards refers to them give the audience the “scopophilic” pleasure in viewing that Mulvey’s (1975) article elucidates.

In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* 1995, a woman dressed as a man during a baby shower function which is a “women only” celebration, feels the actress up her back through the low cut blouse, indicating the scopophilic nature of the camera.

The wet sari -- This sequence is legitimized by “a sudden torrential downpour that soaks the woman’s flimsy sari and allows for a very provocative and sexually tantalizing exposure of the female body.”



*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* 1995; Actress Kajol enacting the modern version of the wet sari sequence, wearing not the sari but a more revealing white costume. In this film Kajol

comes from such a conservative family that she fears to tell her dad that she has fallen in love with someone. She goes to the point of sacrificing her life and marrying the man her father has chosen for her. Given that conservative context, it seems unlikely that such a character would be dancing this rain dance. But the rain dance is popular and loved by the audience. The director/story-writer, needs to place this sequence without making it look like there is a discrepancy in the portrayal of this character. So this rain dance becomes the dream sequence of this girl. It becomes the escapism of the character and in some sense of the audience also. This girl, from a very orthodox and conservative family, is the completely free, semi-clad, person in her dreams and fantasy. The objectification of the actress thereof, becomes a fantastic element in the minds of the audience also.

Lakshmi (1999), quoting an Indian feminist Brinda Karat in an article says, “In India, the sexuality of a woman is always linked to ‘marriage and morals’ ”. According to her, this “is in keeping with the global image of a woman, wherein besides being independent and expressive about her feelings, she is also bound by the ‘family values’ framework.” This is why the two women in the hits of the 1990s (*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*) play the roles of the “family woman”, self-sacrificing, independent to a certain extent, subject to the values and norms of the family, also catering to the male film viewing audience in specific song and dance sequences.

The other popular portrayal is the “behind the bush” act. The sexual act is considered too private and is prohibited from being explicitly shown, but a representation of the sexual act by means of creating a sense of voyeurism through song and dance sequences and “behind the bushes” moments conveys the act, yet protecting the privacy of the moment (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, p. 81).

All these various images from above, portraying women and their sexuality, portraying them as stereotyped mothers, sisters and wives are all images that are well thought of before being implemented. As Bazin (1960), says, images can leave behind impressions, can mean something and convey the message intended to be conveyed. For instance, a children's school book could have a picture of a lady cooking in the kitchen and it could read "Mummy is cooking in the kitchen". The same book could have another picture on the same page with a man sitting in front of a computer and that reads, "Daddy is working in the office." These images make an impression in the mind of the child. They carry a message about role playing. These pictures and their underlying theme become a part of the many stereotypical categories in the child's life over a course of many years.

This concept could be applied to film photography as well. Specific images are intended in order for them to convey certain messages. Bazin (1960), states, "No matter how skillful the painter is, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that the human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image" (p. 5).

In effect, these images of women on screen, the roles they get, be it heroines, vamps, sex symbols, etc. are intended and clearly send a message to the audience. Directors and writers are also products of the society that they make films about, and they are very much influenced by what the audience wants to see, and formulate their story, screenplay, character portrayal, etc. in specifically intended ways.

Having worked in the Tamil Film industry for two years, I would think that there is nothing wrong about women's sexuality being exhibited or viewed in a scopophilic fashion; if the women want to portray themselves as sex symbols, or erotic divas that is quite alright. However, as someone who has worked in the industry, what seems odd to me is that the very

same women whose sexuality is openly exhibited are not viewed by directors, writers and producers as independent women, capable enough of making decisions, or playing a character that is central to the story of the film. Films are rarely told from the point of view of this woman because such films do not sell. Under the premise of making women's sexuality less taboo a subject than before, a new dimension is being added to this freedom of sexuality and that dimension is – actresses are primarily eye candy!

Shabana Azmi, a popular Hindi actress in an interview to Ganti (2004), says, that under the pretext of sexually asserting herself, the woman is actually surrendering herself to the male gaze and rapidly losing control over how her body is used in films and what it is used to portray (p. 189-190).

Mulvey (1975), in her appropriation of the psychoanalytic theory says,  
...the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle... Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning... psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught... (p. 7)

Bingham (1999), says, “Women historically have not been encouraged to become such subjects, at least not of discourse that patriarchal society takes seriously. Women cannot be

consistently posed as the objects of male looks and language and also be the subjects of their own stories” (p. 3).

While women have always been objectified and given lead roles, none of these lead roles are the subject of the film. The female lead is mostly a supporting cast to the male hero’s lead in the film and the story is more often than not seen from the point of view of this male protagonist.

In an interview to Ganti (2004), actress Puja Bhatt says,

...I wanted to do something more than just the usual heroine role, because unfortunately I think women in Hindi films don’t get that much to do...I wanted to make heroine oriented films... where the hero and heroine are on par...they had equal roles...I want to produce some good movies where the women in my films are going to be women of today...I feel that women in Hindi films are very one-dimensional... (p. 191-192)

The all-time blockbuster of the 70s, the film *Sholay*, (as rated by [www.boxofficeindia.com](http://www.boxofficeindia.com)) had the lead actress Hemamalini objectified in the song “*Jab thak hai Jaan*” which she dances to for the villain in order to save the hero from being harmed. This not only represents the self-sacrificing woman but also the woman who is viewed through the scopophilic nature of the villain’s character.



In the 1990s two films were all time record breaking blockbusters. One was “*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*” and the other was “*Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*”. In both these films,

although the women did have substantially good roles, the roles were stereotypical; both the roles had women who had to decide within the frame work of the patriarchal social and familial system.

One of the main reasons for repetitive objectification and stereotyped roles for women in Indian cinema is the formulations and reinforcements of socio-cultural stereotypes in society. The process of stereotyping can and does happen almost implicitly. A society builds categories for itself and starts to view and perceive these categories in specific ways, so much so, that one is never aware when resorting to stereotyping - implicit stereotyping.

In the case of women in Indian cinema, women get socio-culturally conforming roles because these are the role types/categories that exist in society. When a writer thinks of the heroine, he is resorting to his own stereotype, (conditioned by the society in which he lives), of what it is to be someone's girlfriend/wife. These roles are given stereotypical characteristics like sexy girlfriend, pure wife, self-sacrificing woman, the family lady etc.

This is so implicit that no one actually pays attention to the fact that they might be stereotyping. Moskowitz (2005), states, "Because of the unintended nature of stereotype activation and use, stereotyping often proceeds without our awareness, biasing us in ways we would never suspect and may vehemently deny" (p. 442). Perhaps, this sort of implicit stereotyping is very common while writing a story for a film.

Dr. Acitelli, in an interview, pointed out an interesting aspect of stereotyping. She said that the more women are stereotyped, the more the opposite is stereotyped as well. In this case, the more men will end up being stereotyped as well. If one stereotype is the vulnerable woman, then the stereotype on the other end of the spectrum is the gallant male lead, who will then get to play no other character but that. Stereotyping the male will also increase and

alternative male traits like a “stay at home” dad, or a “husband who believes in equality of the marital equation in a patriarchal set-up”, or a “man who compromises for family” etc will never find voice in stories and cinema (personal communication, Dec 2, 2010).

While stories and roles may have changed, the fundamental nature of these characters played by women, the way in which women are viewed, does not seem to have changed very much and still conforms to the stereotype.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

This paper can be criticized on a few counts. Firstly, there could have been other approaches to studying this subject. This paper does not have a quantitative approach except for the pilot study, and is based in qualitative variables.

Secondly, there are many ways to pick and choose from Indian cinema in order to analyze the roles given to women in cinema. Using the terms commercial and blockbuster have led to the choosing of films from the box office lists alone. Perhaps categorizing films as films that have won film fare awards, or films directed by women directors, or alternate films directed by male directors, etc. might have led to different conclusions. This thesis looks only at commercial blockbuster Indian cinema and that might be a limitation.

Thirdly, the emphasis in this paper on the films *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, made by Canadian Indian film maker, Deepa Mehta, might raise the question as to why other films made on women centric subjects by Indian male and female film makers were not mentioned or analyzed. It is true that Indian film makers, including directors, Madhur Bhandarkar and Raj Kumar Santoshi have made films on women centric issues and subjects, giving their female leads the role of the protagonist. Some of the films including, Bhandrakar's *Chandi Bar* 2001, *Page 3* 2005, and Santoshi's *Damini* 1993, *Lajja* 2001, etc. feature women in unconventional roles addressing subjects pertaining to women and their emotions. In these films women have been lead characters and have played very substantial and defining roles. However, while these films were recognized at the national level and were awarded, none of these films were on the blockbuster list. But it would certainly help to take these films into consideration in the context of the subject of this thesis.

Fourthly, while Indian society, culture and religious influences have been touched upon, the politics of the country has not been detailed. Since India had a woman Prime Minister, Ms. Indira Gandhi, 1966-1975 (two terms), 1975-1977 (emergency rule), and 1980-1984, it might be interesting to look specifically at films made during that era to see if women's roles underwent change because a woman was leading the nation. In general, how politics influences the cinematic climate of India, particularly with reference to women in Indian cinema would be an interesting subject of discussion to pursue.

In conclusion, this thesis has found evidence in various forms, enough to say that women in Indian cinema have stereotyped roles. While studies can argue, and find support for statements and hypotheses, ultimately, change by itself has to come from every individual working for the film industry. Whether the industry really wants this change or not is definitely not territory that this paper is qualified to comment on. But, the fact that more cinema should focus on women in a variety of interesting and more challenging roles, apart from women being pure eye candy is a statement that cannot be disputed too much. There definitely has to be more in it for women than just acting as the hero's love interest with a few song and dance sequences.

With more women finding their way into the field of films as crew members, writers, technicians, etc. it is more than likely that approaches to story-telling might have women playing more substantial roles, independent of the male lead. Also, thinking of the audience as an intelligent mass might lead to better films, cultivating in the audience, the need for different storylines.

More often than not, even such papers are simply considered a feminist attempt to criticize the healthy film industry. Since the paper goes into details about the patriarchal

power structure in society and how this encourages the male fantasy and does not allow for a substantial female point of view, this will be greatly debated by many in the industry and many outside of it. The paper itself is an argument against this subconsciously prevailing dominant narrative pattern.

Many others would say, “But there has been this film and this other film which completely undermines the basis of this paper”. To all of them I would like to say that most undoubtedly, while certain changes have come about, these changes remain exceptions and they are not the norm. For the exceptions to become something more than just being exceptions, it is important for papers like this to consistently reiterate the existing norm and pattern and only such reiteration can lead to a refreshing change in this monotonous pattern that prevails.

If only directors and story writers could think of films from the point of view of women a little more frequently than they do right now, it might break the vicious cycle of stereotyping and monotony that Indian commercial cinema is mitted in. Over time this might condition masses to expect different story lines and encourage directors to conceive newer stories, improving the overall quality of story- telling. Cinema is a highly impressionistic medium and it is important for this medium to be an instrument that enables people to think differently and empathize with alternative perceptions of reality.

## Appendix 1

The following is a Q&A telephone interview with debut director, Raju Sivasankaran of the South Indian regional language (Tamil) film industry. Sivasankaran is awaiting the release of his first film, *Varnam*, which he completed in 2009.

**Q:** Can you comment on the roles of women in commercial Indian cinema?

**A:** In Indian movies portrayal woman is very poor. I would like to back it up saying, all kinds of perversions play up on it, not only in terms of exposing the body but also exploiting emotions... the mother, whose complex is huge – she is a Goddess in the story of the male protagonist for the most part, and then in his dream sequence, in order to cater to the male desires and fantasies, she becomes the whore. In fact roles of women in modern day films are worse than before.

In the 70s and 80s, although women may have been type cast, at least some roles, explored women's emotions and desires and addressed complexities related to women's issues and identities, but these days even that does not happen. Women are plain add-ons these days.

**Q:** In the 70s and 80s, the roles of the heroine and the vamp were clearly demarcated as being the moral and immoral. Today this has merged. Can you comment on the merger of the roles of the heroine and the vamp, Madonna and the whore?

**A:** "Objectification of women always existed in Indian cinema and will continue to exist for many years to come. What has really changed today, by merging the roles of the heroine and the vamp, is not the roles of women, but simply the nature of the objectification. Initially women wore Indian costumes and were objectified. Today they wear more Western costumes and reflect in their character, the so called Western woman with the modern attitude and then they are objectified. The only thing that has happened is a globalized objectification where the heroine and the vamp, all rolled into one cater to the globalized man's needs, desires and fantasies. How the male with a Western and modern outlook wants his woman to be, is what is seen in the merger of roles of the heroine and the vamp. Nothing has changed in terms of substantiating the role of the female lead itself and this is really sad. I cannot say whether this is for better or worse, but I can definitely say, that the nature of the objectification may have changed, but ideas and perceptions about women, or the way women are projected in Indian cinema, remain fundamentally the same.

What is going on in the larger social context affects films, and film is ultimately the reflection of what goes on in society. Since globalization and westernization are the social reality today, it has led to globalization of the woman's body and is simply transcending into films also."

**Q:** So you think skin and flesh exposure is not right?

**A:** It's not about right or wrong. But exposure for the sake of pure eye candy leads the character to be perceived as nothing but an add-on. We as film makers tend to talk about similar themes in our films, drawn from the social context in which we live. When it comes to women, how we talk about the subject we choose to talk about governs the way we perceive women and treat women's roles. But the economics of it comes down to pure consumption – gratify the consumer of the end film product. Who is this consumer – primarily male; women's bodies sell to this audience and as long as that holds true, women as eye candy characters in commercial cinema is not going to change very soon.

**Q:** So do you think making films that explore the woman's world view will help?

**A:** This depends on who makes the film and how they make it.

First, chick flicks can be made but will the male dominated audience watch it and how commercially viable will it be?

Second, when we talk about women centric films and the point of view of the woman, then we need to make sure we don't have the Vogue magazine syndrome or the Sex and the City syndrome, where the women we are talking about and the women we are addressing as an audience, are the upper middle class and the upper class women who are very few in number in the audience demographic in India. So how are we going to include the mass women audience in films and what stories we are going to tell from their point of view without creating the class divide is a very big challenge.

Which class of women must my woman centric, female protagonist oriented story represent? It's a tough question to answer given our audience demographic. Just making a film with women as important characters and not really thinking about substantiating their roles, will only lead to a small upper class audience for such films and I believe the ethos on which such chick flicks are based is silly, unless someone makes an effort to tell a good story with a substantial female character in the lead.

**Q:** Is there a difference, in your opinion, between the roles of women in South Indian regional language films and the Bollywood film industry?

**A:** Yes there definitely is. Women in the Bollywood film industry get better roles in my opinion. Typecasting is way higher down south. Also because, South India still does not have as cosmopolitan a culture as Bombay has. Bombay's cosmopolitan culture at least helps to conceive unconventional roles for women. Not to say that Bollywood super hits don't have women in stereotyped roles; it certainly is very stereotyped for the most part, but just that its probably a little better than the South Indian film industry.

**Q:** Do you think that stereotyped roles for women in commercial cinema are a direct result of patriarchy?

**A:** Patriarchy is only one of the reasons. The reason for stereotyped roles for women in commercial Indian cinema is more complex than just patriarchy. It is definitely one of the reasons, compounded by other factors, including, the demographic distribution of the audience, and the hero centric set up of the industry.

**Q:** How do you think that governs the psyche of the audience?

**A:** The audience is male dominated. The demographic of the film viewing audience is such that young men, from the adolescence to their forties, are the primary audience for films in theaters. It becomes important to cater to their needs and desires. Also, the industry itself is driven by the hero centricism, which means that the hero gets the central role because the industry's profit or loss is determined by the male protagonist.

## Appendix 2

The following is a question and answer interview with Priya Mudholkar, who has worked in the Indian media industry in Mumbai in various capacities, primarily as production assistant in television production houses, writer for an Indian music Channel, and production person for film production and distribution companies.

This interview was done via email on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2011. It will enable an understanding of who the audience is for Indian commercial cinema and why it becomes important for the film directors and producers to cater to this audience. It will also help establish to critics of this paper, that while exceptions have been made in Indian cinema, the exceptions do not cater to the mass audience.

**Q:** Can you comment on the nature of the roles for women in blockbuster Indian Films?

**A:** “Before commenting on the nature of the roles given to women in blockbuster films it's important to define what makes a film a blockbuster hit. Knowing this is important because in my opinion this underlines the reason why women are given the kind of roles they are in "blockbuster" films- mostly stereotypical and conventional. A movie is declared a blockbuster hit only if it garners a profit for both- the producer as well as the distributors. For the film to make money for its distributors it has to be a smash hit not only in the metro and mini metros in India but it also has to be a big hit in the smaller towns and rural pockets of the country”.

**Q:** What according to you is the psyche of this rural and urban mass audience?

**A:** People inhabiting these small towns and villages are generally traditional as well as conventional. The society in which they live has very set ideas about women and unless these ideas are replicated on screen, people, including the female audience can't relate to the heroines in films. For these people, a woman's world is restricted to her parents before marriage and after that it's her husband and her children, sometimes even her in-laws which rule her life. A woman's role in a man's life is romanticized and she's seen as faithful, god-fearing and utterly devoted to her family. There is no end to the sacrifices a woman will make for the sake of her husband and her children. This idea is so in-built and idolized by people that this is what a girl is conditioned to do while she's growing up. She's taught to think only about her home and anything beyond that is for the man to do. It is this population which is a majority in India and these people are the ones who make a film a hit film- not the urban population. Film makers therefore safely make a film to appeal to this kind of an

audience. So it's always the hero or the main male protagonist who carries the entire film on his shoulder while the actresses are present only for a relief...

**Q:** Having defined what a blockbuster is and who the audience is, what can you say about women's roles in commercial cinema

**A:** So it's always the hero or the main male protagonist who carries the entire film on his shoulder while the actresses are present only for a relief. Even if you find her doing anything substantial in the movie it will still be driven because of her supposed idealistic nature and it will mostly be in context of her husband, children or family (think of *Film Mother India* 1957). You'll never have an actress saving the world or even saving her city in the movie. No. That is the man's domain."

**Q:** What do you have to say about the unconventional roles women play in commercial film?

**A:** When you see an unconventional woman on screen- she could be smoking a cigarette, drinking alcohol, she maybe unabashed about her sexuality- when you see such a woman she almost always is the vamp- or the bad girl whom no boy will take to mamma. If at all this woman is shown to be the heroine, she will soon be mending her ways and realizing how 'immoral' and 'wrong' she was as the film progresses. This is done to appease the rural crowd so that the men and women in the audience can relate to this heroine. People get a vicarious pleasure in watching movies and in small town India every male sees himself as the hero- all the more reason for the heroine to be subdued and devoted! So what you get is a female character delineated with very broad strokes. She will be the love interest of the male protagonist and then his quiet support system while he takes on the world. This is mainly why actresses play run of the mill characters of the girlfriend, wife, devoted mother, daughter, the sidekick sister and so on. Interestingly, Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar, two of the most successful and sought after writers in the Indian film industry have shown their leading ladies to be strong independent women in a lot of their films but then again these characters have all been city girls and their screen time is not a lot (Hema Malini in *Trishul*, Parveen Babi in *Deewar*, Zeenat Aman in *Don*). When you see *Sholay* where you have a very popular Basanti with a decent screen time but she's a regular village belle. Having said this- no film can do without a heroine. After all, the hero (or a regular guy sitting in the theater imagining himself to be the hero on screen) has to romance a beautiful girl. He has to sing and dance with her; he has to be attracted to her and so comes the sex appeal factor which is provided by actresses. Men also typically like to see girls as vulnerable, helpless creatures waiting with bated breath for a strong guy (like themselves) to come and save them."

– This is where the patriarchal male fantasy is projected onto the realm of film from the societal power structure.

**Q:** Given that how is it that some Hollywood action films that portray women in extremely non-stereotypical roles in the Indian context are a super hit amongst the very same Indian masses?

**A:** While a *Lara Croft* and *Tomb Raider* might be watched in awe (if at all), the crackerjack action by a woman is digested only because she's a "foreigner", completely different from the typical Indian woman in every way.

**Q:** What in your opinion are the other kinds of films in which women have more substantial roles to play?

**A:** The other kinds of films where women drive the plot are mythological movies. These films if done well are sure shot blockbusters but the point to remember here is that the heroine will be playing a Goddess- admired and revered by every male.

**Q:** What is the impact of a rising middle class audience which goes to multiples theaters to watch films? Also, considering that this audience is a little more open to alternative storylines...

**A:** Since the rise of the multiplexes, Indian films have shown variety in terms of plot and characterizations. This doesn't mean that the quality of cinema has improved no- but the position of women in these films certainly has elevated from what it used to be. Predictably, these films do well only in big cities. People living in this part of India are well educated, well read, have seen the world and so naturally have wider perspectives in life. An emancipated woman on screen neither shocks them nor shakes their egos. Not so in rural sectors and as a result, some of these multiplex films are not even understood by the rural population. The cultures and thought processes in cities and villages of India is very different and so what works in the cities doesn't or may not work in small towns.

**Q:** What is your general comment on women's roles in Indian cinema as you see it today and how can film makers approach this situation?

**A:** It's hard to give an opinion in black and white on this question mainly because films always reflect the ever changing social, cultural and political scenarios. The cultural fabric is changing in urban areas and this complicates things. Not that the thought process among people in small town India is still the same. No. They're evolving too but this evolution has been slow and steady and it's even slower where women are concerned. When this is the situation at hand, films will naturally be reflecting the same and it's actually a tough job for film makers to find a middle path...we don't have a massive change in the scenario for women actresses. In my opinion, there has been a change with women playing major characters in Hindi films but then again such films have either done well only in urban areas or flopped all together. I think this also highlights a fact that maybe Indian film makers need to really understand and study how a female is to be portrayed in a film.

**Q:** Do you think the roles given to women come from the culture in which they live?

**A:** Absolutely. But it's not just the cultural but also the socio-political scene which influences Indian cinema. Globalization changed a lot of things in India towards the end of the 1990s. Foreign companies started investing in India creating a lot of jobs and people in general got some exposure into the western world thanks to media and marketing. This helped change the mental makeup and society saw a lot of women pursuing higher education and working-concepts which are reflected in today's films BUT this still is seen in the urban areas. Things remain the same in the northern and other deeper parts of India where female infanticide is rampant and there's still a hugely male dominated society, so like I said before, things in India are a bit more complex.

**Q:** Does the woman's perspective, life perception, and point of view really feature in films? And if a film entirely explores the woman's point of view, do you think it has ever been a super hit, or is this a relatively rare occurrence?

**A:** It's a rare occurrence. To have a truly meaningful role for a woman is rare. A film like *Mother India* will still be a huge hit but primarily because again the female protagonist sacrifices everything for the good of her children and then society- an absolutely idealistic take on a woman. Any other role which deals with a woman making an independent choice or a film dealing with her wanting to live life on her terms (*Astitva* 2000, in the past-*Arth* 1982 ) are rare. With the secondary status that women have in our society it's just the females in the audience who would empathize with a woman's perspective in a film or even enjoy watching it. If it's done well it will find a decently large audience among the urban males who are relatively more educated and therefore understanding and sympathetic but not anywhere else in the country. In a nutshell a woman just can't afford to make a mistake or a wrong choice/decision in her life. If she does she is expected to bear the pain and live with it at any cost. She is supposed to gracefully take in whatever comes her way. With this idea of a woman you really can't expect people in general to enjoy her take on anything.

### Appendix 3

The following is a Q&A interview via email, with Ms. Vinitha Vinayachandran who worked as an assistant director to a South Indian regional language (Tamil) film director, Gautam Menon. Currently she works in the Los Angeles, USA, branch of UTV, an Indian film production and distribution company, in the distribution department.

**Q:** Can you comment on the nature of roles given to women in blockbuster films?

**A:** The male protagonist tends to dominate the female protagonist in most blockbuster films. Hero worship is a common trend in Indian cinema as the primary movie going audience is still male between the age groups of 15-55. Very few women oriented films have made an impact at the box office, despite being critically acclaimed. Most roles for women involve glamorous skin show, a vivacious song and dance routine and in supporting the male hero to achieve his goals. (The only women-oriented film that has worked in the box office so far is "No One Killed Jessica").

**Q:** What do you think of these roles?

**A:** The woman is sidelined and marginalized and serves a purpose when required. There is potential for more but sadly filmmakers want to give the male hero a lot more screen time.

**Q:** Do you think the roles given to women come from the culture in which we live?

**A:** As much as it is culture driven it is also market driven.

**Q:** Does the woman's perspective, life perception, and point of view really feature in films? And if a film entirely explores the woman's point of view, do you think it has ever been a super hit, or is this a relatively rare occurrence?

**A:** Yes and no. We see some of her perspectives that make her an interesting character not just to us as an audience but to the male protagonist as well. This is a deliberate design to help us buy into the fact that this woman is worth being paired with the man in the story. We don't know her goals or dreams or what she wants for herself in life. But we are made aware of her desires, thoughts on love, and her feelings for the male lead. Her ability to submit to loving the male hero, and an admiration for his heroic qualities, feature most prominently in blockbusters.

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