

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

**Beneath the Red *Dupatta*: an Exploration of the Mythopoeic  
Functions of the ‘Muslim’ Courtesan (*tawaif*) in Hindustani cinema**

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2015**

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Dedicated to  
My Late Father Sulliman  
For his unwavering faith in all my endeavours

It is customary to thank one's supervisor and sadly this has become such an automatic tradition that I am lost for words fit enough to thank Dr. Felicity Hand to whom I owe everything, from the inception of the project to constant timely support throughout the various difficulties I faced, and even at the delivery end of the project.

I also thank:

Bilall Jawdy, for help and kindness, and for everything else, and for keeping my middle-ageing grey cells on their toes.

My mother Fareedabee, always by my side – under all climes and seasons and for being my first and last inspiration working in Hindustani cinema.

My brother Shahnou, ever 'le p'tit dernier' showing so much promise.

My uncle Abdool Kader and Tia Dulce Maria Moosbally,

My uncle Goolhamid Khedoo, my Aunt Laura and their ever-so-congenial tribe,

Demetris Rafti, his mother and sister, for their friendship and support,

Dr. Savita Bailur, of the London School of Economics, for being a constant support and help,

Professor Vijay Mishra of the University of Murdoch for being my first inspiration for this topic.

Associate Professor Kumari Issur, light of the department of French Studies at the University of Mauritius for being a beacon at every point, and for educating me on Urdu civilization.

Associate Professor Amit Kumar Mishra, Director of the Centre for Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad, now at the University of Harvard, who gave me full access to his centre, offering generous and open help, especially for being just that sort of person.

Prof. Makarand Paranjape encouragement, his help, his bright-eyed friendship and guidance as a guru.

Prof. Brij Lall, for words of wisdom.

Dr. Sara Martin of the Autonomous University of Barcelona with her own knowledgeable, down-to-earth way of setting me straight on the right tracks,

Dr. Isabel Alonso of the University of Barcelona and her own knowledgeable, warm way of setting me straight on the right tracks

Prof. Eileen Williams-Wanquet of the Université de La Réunion for her unfailing support and friendship.

Prof. Tejaswini Niranjana, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Culture & Society, Bangalore, Visiting Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, Lichtstern Visiting Professor, Anthropology, University of Chicago, for helping me connect my ideas to musicology and for general inspiration.

Salvador, fellow-traveller his friendship and for loving his great city so much.

Chris Merrill and folks of the Iowa Writing Program for so much support and love.

Administrative and academic staff who provided help in one form or another at Libraries at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Cambridge University, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) London, London School of Economics, University of Hyderabad, University of Mauritius, University of Iowa, Library of Congress, D.C., University of Cape Town.

The nameless many who have helped me so selflessly along the difficult path of composing this Ph.D.

## 1. Introduction

The *tawaif* haunts Hindustani cinema almost continuously between the 1920s and the late 1990s. With its heyday in the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s, the courtesan as motif starts ebbing away in the new century, but keeps re-appearing, sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly. She resurfaces as postmodern revisiting (*Dedh Ishqiya*, Chaubey 2014) brief ‘cameo’ (such as with the immensely popular song sequences “Kajra ré”, “Billo Rani”, “Ram Chahe Leela”, “Ghagra”, respectively from *Bunty aur Babli* (Shaad Ali 2005), *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (Agnihotri 2007), *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (Bhansali 2013), and *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (Johar 2013); as nostalgic clin d’oeil in *Saawariya* (Bhansali 2007), *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008) and the film *Kajraare* (Pooja Bhatt, 2010) below) or as a remake of an older courtesan classic, replete with nostalgic dimensions: *Umrao Jaan* (J.P. Dutta, 2006), a remake of *Umrao Jaan* (Muzaffar Ali, 1981); *Devdas* (Bhansali, 2003), a remake of various earlier versions, notably of Bimal Roy in 1955; both *Umrao Jaan* and *Devdas* in turn adaptations from even earlier novels. Yet, although the manifestations might alter, the structures underlying the ‘world’ of the courtesan film persist, spectrally.<sup>1</sup>

The persistence of the myth of the courtesan follows over decades - from the 1920s but especially in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with a gradual disappearance as from the mid-1990s except as occasional nostalgic references. The courtesan’s presence/absence uncovers the dynamics of her performance by the Hindustani cinema text, her function in the filmic text and more generally in the social context. In fact, one can argue, the courtesan is present through representations of women and patriarchal structures in Hindustani cinema but more generally, in terms of relations of power. The historical *tawaif* pre-dates Hindustani cinema, but somehow the tradition of entertainment she carries informs the narrative structure of Hindustani cinema for instance in terms of the song-and-dance elements. Hindustani cinema’s ethico-ideological stances also show many mise-en-abyme correspondences with the world of the courtesan as entertainers in both cases.

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<sup>1</sup> See Derrida, 1994

In the second chapter I essentially carry out an overview of existing scholarship on the subjects of Hindustani cinema, feminist identity construction and film reception and film theory when concerned with spectatorship and identity-construction. Then follows an assessment of the various methodologies that have been used to analyse the subject at hand, with the delineation of the rationale behind the choice of Cultural Studies, as complemented by phenomenology, feminist film theory, and other critical theories. Chapter 3 proceeds to explore the *tawaif* in line with de Saussure (1959), and subsequently Derrida (1967) regarding how things are definable in terms of what they are not, and in line with Butler (1990) who proposes identities not as a *being* but as a *becoming*.

The courtesanness of the courtesan is explored in this chapter. One isn't born a courtesan but becomes one. As such, the courtesan is located as context and function. Contextually, she is located in terms of a politics of gazing. I proceed by exploring the life of the historical *tawaif* and the various ways she was received, especially by the British. I compare her existential with that of the *geisha*, in an attempt to nuance our understanding of each.

In chapter 4 I discuss how the space occupied by the courtesan in Hindustani cinema is approached phenomenologically as a locus of nostalgia, a temporal relationship of natality/morbidity. The courtesan inhabits a mythopoeic space of contradiction and uncertainty and a morally hybrid dimension, one that is both subversive and bourgeois.

The dynamics and function of the courtesan in the Hindustani cinema text are related to the scapegoat, the 'goat' offered to sacrifice for the good of the *polis*. These need to be repeated and ritualised so as to perform the myth (Butler's iterability, from Derrida) of the courtesan. The functions of real-life Lakhawi courtesans will be compared to the Hindustani film function.

The main focus will be on the figure of the courtesan and the temporal sources of her being in terms of her chronological existence (*Temporalität*) and the temporal relationship to the morbid, then to natality and to ecstasy (*Zeitlichkeit*). In opposition to the terrorist's hypermasculinity, the womb-like closedness of the courtesan's world makes her a hyperfeminine counterfoil; the world of the courtesan also represents a secular 'Islamic' space as a counterpoint to currently more assertive Islamic religious spaces.

Chapter 5 examines Hindustani cinema as a body as performance (as a doing, not a being). Above all, as with all bodies, Hindustani cinema is performed continuously (doing, not done) and therefore definable only differentially (becoming, not being). Thus, Hindustani cinema *herself* is a *mujra*, a performance, with “men” watching (gazing at?) a space of relative liberation, yet somehow limited by the strictures of its inscription into cultural contexts. Ethically, Hindustani cinema stands for a portmanteau of both Hindu and Muslim moral values. All along the *tawaif* had been the manifestation of a deeper structural dynamic at work in the Hindustani film text.

Thus, the final part of the argument considers Hindustani cinema ‘herself’ as a courtesan, as an entertainer that needs to please, which informs on the nature of its natality. It seeks to investigate the new avatars of the courtesan in Hindustani cinema.





## 2. Methodology & Literature Review

### 2.1 Methodology

...sexuality becomes a scene of cultural struggle, improvisation and innovation, a domain in which the intimate and the political converge, and a dramatic opportunity for expression, analysis and change (Butler 1989: 98).

The objective of this dissertation is not nostalgic of the profession of the *tawaif*. As well as dangers connected with physical violence and disease, prostitution divests a person of agency and is indicative of a gendered power relation that has been made normative. My aim is to consider myths constructed around the *tawaif* as cultural positionings. Engaging with these varied positionings allow for a phenomenology of the *tawaif* that disclose the successive worlds she is thrown in while teasing the hermetic nature of each of these worlds. In line with phenomenological practice and Butler's own phenomenology, there is no essence in identity to be discovered, but narratives that represent timely and shifting strategies. According to Carver and Chambers, Butler grounds her ethics in the *unknowability* of the self. Butler's politics is thus rooted in agonism, rather than in any position or predilection that is 'for or against' the law. Contradictions and correspondences that emerge for instance between myths surrounding the historical *tawaif* and the cinematic *tawaif* tell of differences among various clusters of narrative about her (e.g British colonials, Muslims, Hindus, feminists) or *zeitgeists* (e.g medieval India, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-independence India, the contemporary global world). Altogether, they reveal that all one can expect is *perspectives* of an identity and the only deconstruction is – in genealogical Foucauldian terms – the multiplication of perspectives and the constant revisiting of these perspectives again to undermine essentialism as far as possible. The *dupatta* is adopted here as a deliberately complex and elusive symbol, *inter alia* as deliberately ambiguous play with Islamic edicts of modesty about covering the female body, that acts as an analytical tool to expose notions of purity, so fundamental to the production of the *tawaif* as category, as unstable. More generally, it acts as a symbol of a game of concealing and revealing that is at once physical, metaphorical and epistemological allowing a phenomenological uncovering. In order to understand the Being-there (*Dasein*), Being needs to be grasped as Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), the way in which a Being encounters the world. Access to "truth" will be based on Habermas's "constructivist" model with the conjunction of the subjective (intuition, solipsism, and especially scepticism) and the objective (absolutes). The former is to help suspend the thesis

of the natural standpoint without actually falling into what Sextus Empiricus argues about scepticism in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: “Suspension of intellect is a standstill of the intellect, because of which we neither reject, nor accept anything” (quoted in Barnes, 1990: 9).

As well as aiming to follow Butler’s post-structuralist deconstruction of essence, while collecting data, I find myself in admiration of the historical *tawaif* in terms of her courage, dignity and humour when facing the difficulties of her life, arguably corresponding to a more political feminist/Queer theory commitment. Eschewing bourgeois notions of purity, whereby empathy is reserved only for the more or less passive victim, I find myself equally in admiration of the gritty realism, fine strategy, pragmatism, and constructive creativity with which they responded, adopting a variety of subversions, some more diplomatic and others less, generally based on necessary doubletalk. Lucidity about her condition and the world she inhabited came from the historical *tawaif*’s difficult life but also her intelligence in the face of it. This makes the 19<sup>th</sup> century *tawaif* a very modern female model, prefiguring in many ways (such as in terms of her sense of equality with men) although, significantly, most 20<sup>th</sup> century cinematic visions of the historical *tawaif* will recast her as pathologically envious of the status of the *begum* (wife), whereby her strategies of feigning love for a *nawab* will be portrayed as corresponding to her true inner self, fragile, emotive and melodramatic. Such overwriting fits the patriarchal hegemonic structure under a variety of guises by allaying anxieties (such as of women feigning affection or pleasure, a form of power) and creating narratives that re-centre the male (marriage) and restore the *status quo* (as a hierarchy that maintains dominant cultural discourses).

I proceed by adopting the phenomenological practice of *reductio* or *epoché*, a process involving the bracketing off of certain practices and subjecting them to analyses from unusual perspectives in order to assess their “essence”, after Judith Butler’s deconstructive phenomenology of performance in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) onwards, to also deconstruct the notion of essence as fixed. The final main disclosure (aletheia) here corresponds to what the manifest *tawaif* in Hindustani cinema had been concealing all along – that Hindustani cinema itself is a *tawaif*, in terms of the dynamics of its performance (like a *mujra*), its feigned respectability and conservatism, its subversion underneath, its commodification of the body as spectacle, its reception.

Phenomena like the *tawaif* call upon a mosaic of approaches ranging from film to sociology, from psychoanalysis to phenomenology. There is also no longer any reason in academia for the mass and high-culture dichotomy and Cultural Studies has provided freedom from attending feelings of superiority. Cultural Studies also provides the freedom of interdisciplinarity, thus I will use a mixed-methods research approach. The main approach is qualitative with, in the first stage, use of various data, including data from sources using quantitative approaches in a structuralist fashion as in uncovering underlying meanings and patterns to text of all natures. This first approach is intended to lead to better understanding of ideological structures of power and control and their manifestation in society. We triangulate classic content analysis with critical theory to investigate written and visual texts, moving from analysing the encoding to the decoding (Hall, 1973), and through this, we generate theories and hypotheses. Using critical theory as objective, I seek to uncover, through the description of cultural processes, structures of ideology at work. Adopting a post-structuralist opposition to binary oppositions that constitute those structures, the avowed aim is to increase awareness of such systems at work so as to increase awareness and vigilance about the transmission of ideology, while rejecting the idea of a text carrying a single purpose or a single meaning. Instead, I seek to offer multiple entry-points to the same entity or phenomenon to attempt as wide a phenomenological description as possible of essences and lived experiences.

What enables such a foray in the first instance is the political motor of 60s, 70s and 80s theory, which offset the inheritance of rationalist Enlightenment models of knowledge with attempts at less hierarchical structures. The politics – and therefore ethics – of this transformation of discourse lies mainly in the de-hierarchisation of “text” and therefore of world, since world is text. Text is text, and no text lies beyond the scope of analysis; all text becomes reducible to ideology. Also text becomes coterminous with historicity: if, as Derrida argues, “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”, text is context, text is metatext, text is paratext. For instance, Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage is reclaimed by Althusser’s post Marxism marking yet another collapse in categories of epistemology to capture the constitution of ideology (Althusser), Lacan’s mirror stage signalling above all that being can only exist through language: being is text.

In ontological terms, agency is one of the prisms through which we encounter the *tawaif* – both from the Lakhnawi past and from the Hindustani film text. In many ways assimilable to natality

(Heidegger, Arendt), agency corresponds to “...the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices” (Barker 2005: 448). Cultural Studies views cultures not as stable entities, but as having constantly renegotiated boundaries. While showing awareness of the cultural specificity of the *tawaif* as produced within specifically Indian and specifically Islamic contexts, I have chosen not to imprison her into those structures of knowledge alone, choosing instead to analyse her when compared to prostitutes of other cultures, most specifically, here, to the *geisha*. In fact, intercultural work discloses many of the universalising ambitions of patriarchal culture.

When the object of study cannot avail of the agency of language as in case of the “speechless” subaltern, the methodology that governs the study becomes mired in issues of articulation. Can the means of the study bring out an effective and holistic consensus free of an oppressive discourse, thus giving the voiceless the necessary space for articulation?

Reflexivity here refers at the same time (a) to the linguistic term as taking a subject and object with identical referents, as in the verb “to see” in “I see myself in the mirror”, (b) to the Lacanian psychoanalytic metaphor of to give back or show an image of, mirror, (c) to be aware of one’s being as in the phenomenological ontological question of being (*Seinsfrage*), which enables the *Dasein* (Being-There), and, (d) since the phenomenological method requires the matrix of attentiveness, to the inquirer himself, the author of this thesis. Thus this study makes many assertions which have no pretensions of pure objectivity but merely, contra rationalist illusions of completion of research, forays into certain truths. Bourdieu (1984) argues that the social scientist is inevitably laden with biases, and paradoxically, only by becoming reflexively aware of those biases can s/he free her/himself from them.

Many of the struggles I have had while researching for this Ph.D centre around my own personal identifications: first as a man working in feminism, as part of the Indian diaspora and as a Muslim. In each case, I had to negotiate with what was inscribed into my own body as an identity and whereas the body I use to encounter the world colours my judgement, it also helps to nuance my judgements that they do not necessarily correspond to emotive first-hand understandings. I also have at my disposal, empathy, rational thought which tends towards a transcendental subjectivity, and a certain academic practice (research, teaching) of deconstruction and self-reflexivity, all of which help me reach out beyond limits of bodily

identification. Starting from research on the illocutionary force, the backbone of Butler's performativity (see for instance Khoyratty, 1999), my work took a turn towards fieldwork on Bollywood reception in Mauritius (see for instance Khoyratty, 2010) and on critical theory approaches, compounded with phenomenological practice, to the Hindustani film courtesan (Khoyratty, 2011, 2013, 2014). I am currently working on a funded research project on representations of Mauritius in Hindustani cinema.

For Hindi and Urdu transliteration, I have been using the standard Devanagari transliteration system.

## **2.2 Towards Defining Hindustani Cinema and Bollywood.**

Hindustani cinema is my preferred term to refer to Bombay cinema in Hindi/Urdu (until the 1940s known as Tollywood, when it was produced in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta).

While some 'Hindustani films' are entirely in Urdu, and most Hindustani films contain some Urdu, Hindi tends to be the dominant language in the majority of films. It is impossible here to eschew the old and ongoing controversies concerning Hindi and Urdu as distinct languages since the historical world of the *tawaif* was itself centred around the Urdu language, and representations of the *tawaif* in Hindustani cinema include conspicuous use of Urdu.

To simplify a complex history, it has often been argued that Hindi and Urdu, which are mutually intelligible, correspond to more or less the same language with differences mostly of source of borrowing (especially Sanskrit and Persian respectively) and of script (Devanagari and Nasta'liq respectively) and that it is South Asian Hindu and Muslim nationalisms that have effectively performed the two as separate languages. Whether it was first a will or first a fact, Hindi and Urdu have since been used as indexes of cultural power and prestige, and have both reflected and influenced the complex history of South Asia. Two of the most official gestures within the eventful history occurred in 1948, when Urdu was declared the sole national language of Pakistan and in 1950, when Hindi was given official precedence over Urdu in the Republic of India.

Although both languages occur within the filmic texts, the space Hindi language occupies in Hindustani cinema is of the normative whereas Urdu is used within particular contexts, to indicate Muslim contexts, both religious and secular, or to add refinement to a romantic moment or to a romantic song with poetic thoughts and words. Thus, the term Hindustani cinema is preferred here since it is popularly used as normative. Hindustani<sup>2</sup> is a term which has historically (famously championed by Mahatma Gandhi) been used to hyphenate the two languages and which is used here as the least partisan term to describe the cinema at hand.

Phillip Lutgendorf's University of Iowa website,<sup>3</sup> (carrying the tongue-in-cheek title "philip's films - notes on Indian popular cinema") discusses the issue of calling the popular cinema of Mumbai Hindi or Urdu cinema and decides to adopt the term Hindi cinema, "political and religious differences of recent times notwithstanding, Hindi and Urdu are grammatically and practically a single language, and it seems foolish to categorize Mumbai-made "Hindi" films as being in "Urdu" whenever they happen to be about Muslims.", therefore without a strong conviction, Lutgendorf uses the term Hindi cinema.<sup>4</sup> My choice of nomenclature similarly proceeds out of practical convenience and carries no strong political convictions.

In fact, the term Hindustani cinema, although convenient, falls short of the complexity of the multilingual contexts that the films reflect (setting issues surrounding the historical Hindustani aside, with some or more Urdu and Sanskrit, Bhojpuri (and other North Indian languages), and, increasingly, a variety of Englishes – especially Indian) and its reach much beyond the issue of language since its use of Hindi belies its accessibility to spectators in India who speak either Sanskrit-based or mostly non-Sanskrit/Persian related languages (Sanskrit and Persian as bases for Hindi) such as Tamil, Telugu, Tulu, Kannada and Malayalam or to huge swathes of spectators in Africa and Asia, Latin America and beyond with little or no formal knowledge of

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<sup>2</sup> in some ways following from the common ancestor Khariboli, whereby Urdu is Persian-influenced Khariboli, and Hindi, Sanskrit-influenced Khariboli.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uiowa.edu/~incinema/Hindinote.html> [online], last accessed 09.01.13 at 15.12 Standard Mauritian Time.

<sup>4</sup> Further, he recommends the following books over the debate on Hindustani cinema: "Mukul Kesavan's "Urdu, Awadh and the *Tawaif*: the Islamicate Roots of Hindi cinema," in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, edited by Zoya Hasan. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994; pp. 244-257. Also recommended (on Hindi/Urdu): Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994. Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2001.

Hindi. With Hindustani cinema, the stretch will radically include centres of the New Indian Diaspora: (mostly Anglo-Saxon) metropolitan centres, such as London, New York, Melbourne and Los Angeles, and of various Gulf Emirates, and even beyond these. The term “Popular Indian cinema” is rejected here as a dissatisfactory label for only Hindustani cinema from Mumbai since as a term it ought to include other regional popular cinemas such as Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Punjabi and Marathi popular cinemas. Further, Hindustani cinema shares many actors with regional Indian cinemas and is known to share with, or “borrow” scripts from them. Perhaps it might be more acceptable universally to call Hindustani cinema Mumbai, or Bombay cinema<sup>5</sup> giving it less loaded new signifiers. So far however, these have not caught on as much as Hindustani cinema, Hindi cinema and, more recently, Bollywood. Besides, Mumbai is also the centre of Marathi cinema, which might lead to confusion.

Furthermore, I am using the term Hindustani cinema after Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s distinction between the more generic popular Indian cinema and Hindi cinema, which he argues in 1999, “has been around for only about a decade now” (2003: 28). Rajadhyaksha coined the term ‘Bollywoodization’ to refer to the global rebranding of Indian commercial cinema: ‘the cinema has been in existence as a national industry of sorts for the past fifty years.’ (ibid.) I am using this distinction with a further one: I am also referring to pre-1980s popular Indian cinema as Hindustani cinema.

Thus, Bollywood cinema refers to contemporary popular cinema produced in the city of Mumbai predominantly in Hindi with a global market in mind. But as with all definitions, the naming hides a number of games of categorisation that reflect a variety of ideological worlds. Although not a unanimously favoured term, Bollywood is by now pretty universally used, with an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. One of the limitations of the term “Bollywood” might imply that Bollywood is subordinate to Hollywood, of which it is a portmanteau contraction (Bombay + Hollywood): thus, the “Hollywood” cinema of Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay). In fact, in terms of audience size and number of films released, it can be argued that Bollywood cinema is the world’s largest film industry, or at least the world’s second (Jha, 2005: 1970). With an audience of 4 billions, it is likely it is second only to Hollywood in terms of the stretch of its

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<sup>5</sup> Bhaskar (2009) uses the term Bombay cinema, (and not Mumbai) perhaps in line with his book’s nostalgic flavour.



audience, although Bollywood cinema is by now making forays across the world beyond the Indian diaspora to audiences speaking languages that are not connected to the Hindi or Urdu-speaking *welts*.

According to Rajadhyaksha, Bollywood is disparate from India's generally low-budget art, or 'parallel', cinema, or the various regional-language cinemas. Instead, Bollywood is definable by what Salman Rushdie comically terms the "epico-mythico-tragico-comico-super-sexy-highmasala-art" (Rushdie, 1995).<sup>6</sup> It also corresponds to bourgeois morality and promotes a typically upper middle class approach to issues. Above all, and in line with Saussure's difference, perhaps Bollywood is easiest described in terms of what it isn't: parallel cinema, art film, Avant-Garde. Although there have been a number of crossovers into Art films in terms of actors (e.g. traditionally, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil; now, almost any actor), directors, and even scripts (parallel cinema with scripts seeking popular appeal and Bollywood movies with an edge or a couple of arty twists), Bollywood plots have remained more or less distinct from the arty or parallel cinemas. But even such definitions are becoming increasingly difficult, with semantic distinctions and therefore other connected certainties (such as over the cultural specificity of stardom, auteurship, genre, and consequently, culture *qua* culture) getting blurred.

Hindustani cinema is sometimes summarily defined as a "masala" served with a collection of "song-and-dance numbers" - for instance as kitsch in both the Western and the Indian media, commonly by urban Indian, NRI (literally non-resident Indian, but extensible for most cultural issues of reception to all South Asian diaspora) and non-Indian Western audiences, or even with metaironical humour, as in quite a few of Salman Rushdie's novels.<sup>7</sup> Hindustani cinema has after all been easily distinguishable by such narrative strategies, which is at the same time a generalisation. Typical Hindustani cinema narratives have included much melodrama, indulgence in sentimentality, with often rather stereotypical stock characters such as the valorous hero, the chaste heroine, the temptress vamp (of particular interest here), the evil uncle and the sacrificial mother. Situations have also tended to involve rich/poor Romeos and Juliets, lost twins, reincarnated reunited lovers, the heroine in distress (generally from a gang of extras or

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<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, Salman (1995), *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Random House India, pp. 148-149.

<sup>7</sup> For instance in *Midnight's Children* and in *The Satanic Verses*.

from a single main villain) saved in extremis by the hero, final scenes where quid pro quos are often resolved in a neutral wasteland. Although one genre sometimes predominates, Hindustani cinema plots almost inevitably imply a mixture of many genres (usually comedy, tragedy, detective, action, romance, revenge), part of a ‘something for everyone’ project (Kasbekar, 2001). As will be discussed later, Hindustani cinema itself is increasingly<sup>8</sup> breaking from its own mould, by the adoption of elements of art-film ‘realism’ or tongue-in-cheek self-derision, prompting a widening of its semantic reference. Hindustani cinema itself is particularly open to such games of (re)definition as slippage – it is part of its adaptive force and its renewed natality.

Bollywood cinema, the new commercial Indian cinema is culturally and industrially, and therefore narratively dependent on the Indian diaspora as increasingly the main market audience (Mishra, 2002). In a song sequence from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar, 2001), a Bollywood film largely set within a diasporic Indian context in the UK, as the camera pans across Central London, the old colonial power of most of India, the UK is overwritten and re-mapped, the music score is of “Vande Mataram”, the Indian National Song plays (see fig. 1 below).



Figure 1. “Vande Mataram” is played as the camera pans over Central London (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*)

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<sup>8</sup> One can argue, since about 2000.

Using the metaphor of the lost brother in London, initially vilified by the father, then sought by the younger brother from India, begging him to return home, it might symbolise reconciliation with the long-maligned diasporic Indian. In support (directly or indirectly) of the Republic of India's seduction of its moneyed diaspora (and collaterally, the rest of the diaspora), Hindustani cinema specifically supports the diasporic condition, arguing, much like Arjun Appadurai's formulation of ethnoscape, for 'modernity at large', modernity cleansed of the mechanics of geographical belonging by the diaspora and where the cyber-neighbourhood is acted out (Appadurai, 1997) and a virtual community is established. According to Mishra (2002), Bollywood cinema is a medium used by the Indian diaspora to alleviate feelings of isolation from their country of origin.

Hindustani cinema's adaptability and the variety of its audience can be identified by its consumption across many spaces, namely of region, class, the urban/rural, but also in terms of its maintaining a variety of audiences over time. Indeed, one can chart two recent shifts over the last decade or so in what exactly constitutes Hindustani cinema. The first is directly related to a shift in audience. The audience has already been steadily shifting from mainly the Indian, the villager or the urban working-class to the NRI, a more urbane recent diaspora, especially to major Western and Westernised metropolitan conurbations in the world such as New York, Melbourne and Bangkok. The experience of being NRI has been transposed onto existing Hindustani cinema fantasy structures of bourgeois success, representing an enhancement of the existing imaginaries of the South Asian in South Asia (the so-called *desi* market), of the NRI, and of others in the world involved in the same logic of imagining contemporary economic exilés as materialistically successful but nostalgic of loss of identity. The end result is a Hindustani cinema that is more glossy and in tune with new 'Late Capitalist' concerns of the rising middle classes in India and elsewhere in the global world. Gone are the Hindustani cinema socials and their angry young men and women carrying Marxist messages; but gone also are amateur scripts, poor editing, approximate camerawork; in comes more meticulous acting, a "soigné" finish, glossy photography, but often stereotyped attitudes to the Other of the central Hindustani cinema culture persist: 'easy' Western girls, ridiculous South Indians, terrorist Muslim men, terrorised women, musical ethnic Africans, picture-taking Japanese. More positively, however, side-by-side the new Hindustani cinema has ushered in much cultural nuancing, especially as regards alterities related to gender and ethnicity, as will be explored later.

Overall, Hindustani cinema can be described as clearly distinguishable from India's generally low-budget art, or 'parallel', cinema, or the various regional-language cinemas. It also tends to correspond to bourgeois morality and promotes a typically bourgeois approach to issues, notably to wealth. Despite the crossovers into Art films Hindi movie plots have remained more or less distinct from the arty or parallel cinemas but even such definitions are becoming increasingly difficult, with semantic distinctions and therefore other connected certainties (such as over the cultural specificity of stardom, auteurship, genre, and consequently, culture *qua* culture) getting blurred.

A shift in Hindustani cinema textuality is particularly traceable since 2000, where elements of the independent cinema have been progressively entering Hindustani cinema plots. *Dil Chahta Hai* (Farhan Akhtar, 2001) in particular was to lead to a new generation of increased 'artiness' in Hindustani cinema, leading to such substantial harbingers of a New Hindustani cinema as *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) and *Rang de Basanti* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006).

*Dil Chahta Hai*, *Lagaan* and *Rang de Basanti* each centrally star Aamir Khan, a popular Hindustani cinema star turned art film actor in the new century. Aamir Khan Productions was founded by him in 2001 in order to support the film *Lagaan*. The company was to prove particularly influential, churning out productions of a 'hybrid' nature of scripts almost to the rate of a film a year. Many of the films Aamir Khan is associated with were commercial box-office hits or very influential or both: *Fanaa* (2006), *Rang de Basanti* (2006), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008),<sup>9</sup> *Ghajini* (2008), *3 Idiots* (2009), *Peepli Live* (2010), *Dhobi Ghaat* (2011), *Delhi Belly* (2011), *Dhoom 3* (2013) and *PK* (2014). Each in its time, *3 Idiots* (2009), *Dhoom 3* (2013) and *PK* (2014) became the highest-grossing Hindustani film.<sup>10</sup> *PK* (2014) still holds the record for both the highest-grossing and fastest-grossing Hindustani film of all time.<sup>11</sup>

New Independent (Indie, or "Hindie" as popularly known in Mumbai film circuits) elements marry a commercially viable script and traditional elements of Hindustani cinema, often served

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<sup>9</sup> Note how *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008), although in many respects not a traditional Bollywood movie, launched the career of Imran Khan, who has become one of current Bollywood's most bankable stars. The fact that Imran Khan is Aamir Khan's nephew was used to commercially launch his career and the film.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-pk-highest-grosser-ever-aamir-khan-to-enter-rs-300-crore-club-2049501> [last accessed 01 April 2014].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

as a shared tongue-in-cheek kitschy text to the audience. *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2006) very skilfully parodies these facts about Hindustani cinema text. It is metafilmic and can be described as Hindustani cinema about Hindustani cinema, yet, more on the lines of postmodern irony than the Guru Dutt tradition,<sup>12</sup> it walks with petulant (and somehow camp) brio the tight rope between parodic kitsch and indulgence in what one is precisely laughing at (gently). In short it manages to be all at once a text eliciting second degree reaction and a text reinstating first-degree Hindustani cinema sentimentality and a strong sense of a Hindustani cinema community of actors/directors and audience that shares the same mores, the same jokes, the same stories (both within and outside the Hindustani cinema *récit*). The dynamic can be reminiscent of similar art/mainstream film hybrids in Hollywood as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) but there is an added hermetic cosiness at the heart of a Hindustani cinema audience's recognition of Hindustani cinema that can be likened to the relationship of cult films and their audiences. This is perhaps the result of a subtle awareness of sharing some marginal condition that is entirely absent from the more disparate and generally more self-engrossed Hollywood audience that is often quietly confident of its centrality among the world's cinemas.

*Dilwale Dulhaniya Lejayenge* ('Only the Daring get the Bride', henceforth known simply as *Dilwale*) is the story of two young first generation diasporic Indians living in London: Raj Malhotra and Simran Singh. Simran is the daughter of convenience store owner Chaudhry Baldev Singh, whose only dream is to return to his native Punjab. Baldev has arranged for his best friend's son in India, Kuljeet, to marry his daughter. Simran agrees out of respect for her father, but she begs him to first allow her to go on a trip across Europe with her female friends. During the trip, Simran meets Raj, and they fall in love with each other. When he finds out, Baldev is furious and gets the family to return to Punjab. Ahead of his marriage, Kuljeet boasts that he will engage in marital infidelity. Raj follows Simran to Punjab to marry her but only with Baldev's blessing. In fact, Baldev slaps him, and angrily tells him to leave. As Raj boards a train out of the village, Simran tries to follow, and is stopped by Baldev's hand. She begs him to let

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<sup>12</sup> Broody characters adopted by producer, director and actor Guru Dutt, such as of Vijay in *Pyasa* (1957). He played Suresh Sinha in *Kagaz ke Phool* (1959), which he also directed, the role of a depressed film-maker who is bitterly critical of the Bollywood film industry albeit even more of destiny. It is in many ways obvious that these characters and their views are the director's. Among other pointers, the first indication is perhaps that he plays them himself as actor and the second is the didactic tone that is adopted in them. It is definitely distinct from *Om Shanti Om*.

her go, and realising that no one will ever love his daughter as much as Raj does, he tells Simran to join Raj on the train.

As argued earlier, NRIs make up the largest portion of the Hindustani cinema market. Bollywood deals with multi-million franchise approaches to cinema both in terms of means and in terms of content. Hindustani cinema content tends to correspond to the Republic of India as it views itself now – not a land of poverty and defeatist kismet but one of the world’s economic superpowers. While the content of Hindustani cinema text is often daring, it is almost always unapologetically popular in scheme.

One of the biggest blockbusters in Hindustani cinema, *Dilwale* appears twelfth on the British Institute’s list of the top Indian films of all time. There was a quick follow-up to *Dilwale* with such major Hindustani cinema films as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Advani, 2003), *Salaam Namaste* (Anand, 2005) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (Akhtar, 2011), but also beyond Hindustani cinema, into an entirely new genre, diasporic Indian cinema in such films as *East is East* (O’Donnell, 1999) and *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001). In structuralist terms, the plot of the best-known international success of diasporic Indian cinema, *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) is in many ways narratologically identical to *Dilwale*. In turn, *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal!* (Agnihotri, 2007) follows the blueprint of *Bend It Like Beckham* rather closely.

*Dilwale* (Aditya Chopra, 1995) started the trend, followed by films as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, and *Salaam Namaste*, *Zindagi Milegi Dobara*, that are produced with the NRI market substantially in mind. Ganti (2004) argues that, since the 1990s, certain Hindi-language films have even enjoyed greater commercial success in Great Britain and the U.S. than in India itself, which had formerly enjoyed almost monopolistic sway over the economics of Hindustani cinema reception, and therefore of narrative construction of the text. This, according to Ganti, has led Hindustani cinema film-makers to consciously seek wider audiences outside India by opening distribution offices in New York, New Jersey, and London, creating websites to promote their films, dubbing films into English, Spanish, and French, and beyond expected languages corresponding to countries with significant South Asian diasporic populations like Arabic, Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia, subtitling them in Hebrew and Japanese.

Dasgupta (1996), in his analysis of the influence of films on the Indian nation, notes that the emerging of a global Indian society fuels the demand for collective symbols that represent continuity through the dislocation of immigrants from their homeland. According to Bagchi (1996), Hindi-language cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form had ever achieved (as cited in Ayob, 2008: 24). Hindustani films are a way for Indians all over the world to keep “in touch” with their homeland, what Mishra (2002) has termed feelings of isolation from their country of origin.

While it is in some ways a subversion of the older Hindustani film, the plot of *Dilwale* is typical of the older melodrama for instance in terms of the boy-meets-girl formula with Romeo-and-Juliet overtones, overall sentimentality, filial duty, and a ‘feelgood’ ending. Yet, it can be said to have initiated a new map of narrative and ethical postures. For, *Dilwale* does not merely create a variation within a world but a world within which variations occur. In *Dilwale* this power is made less repressive in the end although it is also sustained – thus, the solution to Hindustani cinema’s iterative dialectic of arranged/love marriage isn’t about eschewing the patriarch’s physical presence; it is here resolved by an introverted change in the patriarch’s worldview, a ‘change of heart’, but then it is also implied that Baldev Singh only caves in when he has clearly reached the limit of his natural authority. Baldev’s ‘change of heart’ uncovers patriarchy as a performance – Baldev wasn’t *in essentia* a patriarch. For, no one exists outside an environment. It isn’t that Baldev himself isn’t patriarchal, but as Judith Butler would argue when contrasting performance and performativity, it reveals that patriarchy – like any identification - never exists – it is only performed. Baldev’s continual anger and violence (he slaps Raj<sup>13</sup>) against the first-generation diasporic couple is in fact a sign of his powerlessness, of how, often, in diasporic circumstances, choice is mostly held by the patriarch in the domestic space, not in the outside world (for instance as convenience store owner in a mostly alien Britain). Nostalgia for community also implies nostalgia for power, when its cultural legitimation is perceived as in danger of cultural assimilation.

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<sup>13</sup> This can be compared to the Raicand patriarch slapping his younger son, Rohan in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, but also in the first segment of *Bombay Talkies* where the main character is slapped first by his father and then by a homophobic Dev.

The faultline has shifted subtly – away from an engagement with India-as-Indian to an engagement with the Indian-as-India. Existing post territory, Hindustani cinema's obsession is instead with family. The new context of the act of watching – DVD, satellite or cable designate the sitting-room instead of the cinema-hall. Between the 'private' and public space, Hindustani cinema chooses to bring back and bring out a compromise: the family, which, in privatist logic (Habermas) exists in-between. Hindustani cinema text, as noumena, reflects the phenomenal act of watching it by obsessively representing dramas about families, which can be rendered as: families phenomenally watching a noumenal family onscreen.

By the time *Zindagi na Milegi Dobara* was produced in 2011, there was no need to explain the expatriate Indian or her/his presence in Spain, a destination associated with neither the old nor the new Indian diasporas, indicating a Bollywood cinema open to the entire world. It is a conflation of the change in the role of the patriarch (the new 'absent' father is a 'feminised' patriarch who, as an artist, follows his calling and his dreams, and settles down in Spain) and the socio-economic context of the diasporic Indian. Typically for Bollywood, the Indian diaspora corresponds to the richer middle-classes, as distinguishable from the powerlessness of the old diaspora and of the bulk of South Asian migrants who are poor.

*Bombay Talkies* (Kashyap) is a Bollywood film that was released in 2013 as a homage to Hindustani cinema. For 2013 was the official year for celebrating the centenary of Indian cinema, a hundred years since D.J. Phalke directed *Harishchandra*, the story of Hindu gods fighting to influence an ethical king, a Homeric topic. Phalke's film is considered the first Indian film. Tollywood (coined in 1932) refers to the Bengali film industry based in Tollygunge, in the suburb of Kolkata (then Calcutta), a portmanteau word formed – like Hindustani cinema – by the addition of the town's initial letter to Hollywood. Tollywood was the first centre of the cinema of India. Popular Hindustani cinema would only truly come to Mumbai (then Bombay, hence *Bollywood cinema*) in the 1940s.

*Bombay Talkies* is an anthology of four narratively unrelated shorts from new generation directors Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee and Anurag Kashyap, who is also the general director. The explicit connection between the various shorts is in terms of homages paid to Indian cinema. Nostalgic clichés of old songs from Hindustani cinema, or cameos of old stars and a number of 'inside' jokes among other representations in the anthology support the idea of



the homage. The shorts are followed by a rather shoddy short clip, Doordarshan-style. In addition, however, it is significant that the homage made by all four directors should base their individual shorts, and more significantly covertly - around impressions of patriarchs. It seems to point to how, retrospectively, Hindustani has been about centrally resisting patriarchy and the limits of such resistance.

The first contribution is from Karan Johar, "*Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh*" (named after a very popular song from *Dil Apna Preet Parai* (1960)). It begins in Mumbai with a young gay man (Avinash) violently confronting his homophobic father. He is then shown to befriend a woman at work (Gayatri, at least 10 years older) who is neither shocked nor prejudiced by his sexual orientation. She invites him over to her house to dinner on his birthday and he is introduced to her husband, Dev. Dev is only made aware of Avinash's sexual orientation just before dinner and his reaction is homophobic and remains as such throughout dinner. However, Avinash and Dev find that they share a love for old Hindustani film and music and at some point as Dev and Avinash find themselves on their own in his music room, Dev reacts with a certain sexual ambiguity. With typical directness, Avinash informs Gayatri that her husband is a closeted gay man. This is eventually justified since when confronted by Avinash, Dev becomes aggressive and beats the younger man, which brings back memories of his father beating him up over his sexuality. Suddenly, Dev starts to kiss him. Avinash recoils, which triggers further violence from Dev. Avinash tells Gayatri that her husband tried to kiss him, but Gayatri doesn't wish to engage with this. When Dev reaches home and tries to kiss her, she rejects him, stating that, having blamed herself for the failure in their marriage, she now feels liberated.

The true central figure quickly becomes obvious – Dev is the patriarch, the male 'heterosexual' whose story becomes once again, the absent centre of narrative interest, like the clients of the *tawaif*. It remains, however, that this particular patriarchal figure does not benefit from the usual narratological impunity he might enjoy in older Hindustani cinema; nor is suffering reserved to women and to marginals. Instead, the hypocrisy of the patriarch is denounced, and the basis of his power is unsettled.

"Star", an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's short story "Patol Babu, Film Star", tells of a failed actor struggling to make a living following his father's death, suggesting he is trying to stand on his own feet (and become a patriarch on his own terms), a symbol of his idealism being the

decidedly non-indigenous emu bird he breeds. After he is given a fortuitous opportunity for a small cameo role in a film, he suddenly meets the spirit of his dead guru (a substitute ‘father figure’) with a pragmatic and proactive message to job-seeking. The final tableau is of him in the role of a new patriarch, neither distant, prescriptive, nor (as he did initially) shirking his responsibilities, but as storyteller. As the short closes, he is shown to animatedly act out his stories to his daughter. The connection between the guru’s advice and the final resolution is not made clear in the story itself except, I argue, through reference to models of patriarchy proffered.

“Sheila Ki Jawaani” tells of a fan, a 12 year old boy, who dreams of becoming just like Hindustani cinema star Katrina Kaif when he grows up, and dresses up like a character she plays in *Tees Maar Khan* (Farah Khan, 2010).<sup>14</sup> Whereas his sister shields his dream and to some extent his mother tolerates it, his father forces him to adopt football instead. One day he is caught dressing up as Kaif by his parents and he is told off severely. Meanwhile, whereas his sister requires 2000 rupees for a school trip, the father uses his money instead for the son’s football training, part once again, of a phallogocentric sense of priority. A double catharsis is reached when brother and sister come up with a paid event at an old garage to make money for the sister’s trip and the brother dances, with stars in his eyes.

“Murabba” (Fruit Preserve) is in many ways a homage to Hindi movie superstar Amitabh Bachchan and in fact sets Vijay as originating from his home-city, Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh). Vijay’s father, who seems to be ailing, informs him that only feeding him with homemade *murabba* half of which has been eaten by Amitabh Bachchan can bring back his health and guarantee longevity. Vijay struggles to fulfill his father’s wish in Mumbai and is even forced to take odd jobs to support his quest. Finally, Bachchan’s security guards are persuaded to allow him to meet the superstar, who, touched by Vijay’s determination, eats half of the pickle. On the way back to Allahabad by train however, a fellow passenger squishes the other half. He decides to replace the *murabba* and finds a new jar for it but the father detects the subterfuge, so he owns up and tells him the truth. The father reciprocates by telling his own story – his own father had made a similar request to him: for earlier superstar Dilip Kumar to dip his finger into a jar of honey which would guarantee him longevity. Vijay’s father also tried to honour his own father’s wish, but ants had found their way to the jar of honey and Dilip Kumar refused to help. Vijay’s

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<sup>14</sup> “Sheila Ki Jawaani” (young Sheila) is an immensely popular (25 million views on YouTube) somewhat raunchy item song.

grandfather unknowingly ate the honey and ended up leading a long life. The father wonders whether it was the protein of the ants in the honey that kept him alive for so long... The film ends with Vijay and a friend near a stable marvelling at the father's cryptic words of wisdom: "Never keep *murabba* in the wrong jar."

The film still retains a patriarchal hierarchy so as to deconstruct it. The difference between the old representation and the new is that the father and son relationship is more direct, based on complicity, a fair dose of humour and absurdity. It is implied the relationship from the previous generation lacked this informal connivence and more importantly, marked by a performed superiority of paternal wisdom. This nature of communication here can be generally assimilated, within a patriarchal structure, to a breach of hierarchy. In it is an acknowledgement of the patriarch's fallibility. The patriarch has lost the aura of the patriarch and falls instead into absurdity, the opposite of wisdom. This suspension of seriousness offers an insight into the performativity of the patriarch.

As far as Kashyap's *Bombay Talkies* is concerned, Bollywood cinema seems to centre on handling its ambiguous inheritance of the patriarchal from the earlier Hindustani cinema. This is what *Bombay Talkies* identifies as a main essence to Hindustani cinema. If the camera is a form of scopophilic/voyeuristic gaze, then watching Hindustani cinema in particular is to a certain extent culturally-specific, the term culture here to be understood in the widest sense as referring to constructed cultural decoding reflexes. I am arguing that the relationship Hindustani cinema (Bombay talkies) and the *mujra* (the *tawaif's* performance) is recursive and, after a 'Droste effect', the *mujra* pre-empts and replicates the act of spectatorship of the Hindustani cinema. Spectatorial expectations honed by the Hindustani cinema over the gaze as gendered are borne from many of the protocols of watching a *mujra*.

As with the father in "Star", Bollywood cinema is a storytelling father, but one that is in fact outperforming his patriarchy, but like the father in "Sheila Ki Jawaani", it can also prove to be a repressive spectator-patriarch who condemns the very art he has begotten, like those watching a *tawaif* perform. This ambiguity is reflected in "Murabba", where, again, the patriarch is a storyteller who, like Hindustani cinema, is full of surprises, twists and unexpected turns and – this is a clin d'oeil, doesn't always make sense. Dev in "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" shows the future hope for a new Indian cinema not only in terms of an encoding (as opposed to decoding)

process (expressible through the content and style) but in terms of a complete circle of encoding/decoding of textual production. It proceeds to 'out' the watching patriarch, to denounce him as inconsistent by two 'Others' that define his self-as-patriarch (through *difference*): a woman (Gayatri) and a gay man (Avinash), both neuter his violence, and therefore his phallic power.

## **2.3 Gender**

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Gender can be defined as differences used by society to culturally construct differences between male and female. It is a differentiation that is constantly and actively performed through practices in which individuals either participate or reject but in terms of which they define themselves and live.

The dominant cultural structure that regulates an understanding of gender as absolute difference is patriarchy. It is inadequate – and it is often done - to simply define patriarchy as a society where men dominate women. In fact it refers to a system which, while it tends to favour men, organises all of society into a full world that teleologically redefines everyone on its own terms (*inter alia* Mitchell, 1974: 409, Sanderson, 2001: 198). In other words, patriarchy is a system that overwrites an entire society's power-structure, exerting its grip most firmly on women (implying female inferiority), but also children, less powerful, or subversive men, but in fact, even by empowering certain men, it imprisons them within a set of roles and policing those strictures through a setup of rewards and punishment. Patriarchy almost always works in synchrony with other matrices of hierarchy such as age, social class, and ethnicity. In short, to use Butler, it is performative of sexual identity.

### **2.3.1 Feminism: the Three Waves**

Feminism has sought to oppose the established patriarchal norms of society, "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (bell hooks, 2000). It seeks to free women from the gender roles assigned to them within the patriarchal economy. The Western movement identified and self-identified as *the* formal feminism was mostly established and sustained over the twentieth century. Three related strategies of resistance to the patriarchal have been used to characterise this feminism: three waves (generally agreed to correspond to the pre-1960s; the

1960s; post-1980s). Although these distinctions remain at best indicative, they are useful distinctions in that they generally correspond to reasonably disparate, but complementary, feminist strategies and worldviews.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is generally thought to be the first clear feminist manifesto. It is an impressive modern document arguing for equity, but also theorising about equal rights for women beyond domestic roles and the private sphere, including women's suffrage.

Necessity was to prove crucial in reifying female equality since the two World Wars, as women contributed not only in the army and navy but also in areas of employment that patriarchal structure did not provide for them. Such participation led both men and women to a concrete sense of awareness of the basic ability of women, displacing established homosocial prejudices. This opened up expectations to women participating more generally in society, notably in terms of admission to spaces where women were only exceptionally allowed or in terms of an unfavourable hierarchy, such as within public space. Whereas the first Wave was prompted by World War I, the second was fuelled directly or indirectly by World War II, since the post-war economic growth was also a return to domesticity for women, in sharp contrast with the call for women to help with the war effort.

The first focus in the praxis of the contemporary Western feminist movement was the right to vote for women. Arguably, the 'Stonewall moments' for feminism are associated with the Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights in New York in 1848, which McKelvey (1948) describes as bringing together more than 300 men and women, and the Badasht Conference in Persia (today's Iran) a couple of weeks earlier in the same year. The main thrust was to reform the foundation of women's autonomy, identified as equality in "electoral, educational, and employment rights" (Caughie, 2010), but these were in the early twentieth-century almost doggedly Western (notably, the US, the UK, Canada and the Netherlands, with Persia a notable exception).

Such basic human rights for women acted as foundation from which to launch a full-scale investigation into the psychic and ideological social constructs that bring about the treatment of the female as inferior. Such struggles for gender equity provide an escape in particular from

spatial limitations of the female body to the sphere of the domestic, electoral equality itself directly signifying participation in the public space. It also implied that the woman was a citizen in her own right, and not only *in terms of* husband and children.

First wave feminism prepared the way for women's autonomy in their everydayness which then prepared the way for a second wave, which combined the continuation of a fight for equal living conditions such as equal conditions of employment with such issues related to the female body as sexual freedom and the right of reproduction, and the elaboration of complex feminist theories of identity to support and structure such political aims.

Whereas there was with first wave feminism a sense of emergency caused by the immediate realities of citizenship (denying women the vote and fighting for universal suffrage implied women were second-class citizens), this was less the case by the 1960s in most of the generic West (including Israel) and in many contexts elsewhere (such as Turkey). Once many basic rights were more or less established for women, feminism moved to analyzing in more detail the semantic construction of sexual difference itself. (Erens, 1990: xvi, xvii)

Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929) where she enunciates her views on women both as fictional characters and as writers is regarded as a defining text, particularly within literary feminism. Kaplan (1983: 27) identifies Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* as a primary work of second wave feminism. She describes the second wave as being mostly sociological in intent. Most feminist theories of identity centre on language and their respective bases were consolidated into full theoretical and textual structures during the so-called second wave. Interest in the socio-cultural construction of gender discrimination reading of language as the origin of gendered difference led to a focus on textual analysis for a search for discourses that mythologise such difference. Carried by the more general semiotics of the 1960s, second wave feminism was to similarly widen the ambit of its textual analysis to include visual text, most particularly film.

Second wave feminism's contribution to feminist film theory is mostly in terms of criticism of popular cinema's representation of women. Third Wave feminism was to find in it a source to reflect its own productive undecidability. To Kaplan (1983), semiology and psychoanalysis were the first two steps of second wave feminism. These two areas were inevitably connected since they helped explain how the unconscious was constructed into society, notably through artistic

representation. Marxism (especially through Althusser) became a third pillar. Kaplan (1983: 27) explains further that second wave feminists “argued that Oedipal processes were central to the production of works of art.” It investigates how meaning is produced in film, especially how patriarchal strictures construct the world instead of focusing on the film’s plotline.

Black liberation and Gay rights (eventually LGB, then LGBT among other identities and acronyms depending on various refinements in definition) movements of the 1960s and 1970s were particularly connected with the feminist movement, sharing similar premises on identity construction and many of their societal agendas. One such salient concept has proven to be useful to any number of such movements: the self/other binary. For De Beauvoir (1972: 17), “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought”. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Beauvoir prepares the way for Second Wave feminist politics and theory when she argues that women are ‘the radical other’, as man’s margin or other in the patriarchal structure. To oppose the patriarchal construction of otherness into gender, Beauvoir addresses a number of issues regarding female body and sexuality, championing egalitarian feminism. Later feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett would further finesse the debate on gendered otherness.

Rebecca Walker’s work (1992) *Becoming the Third Wave* formally heralds the beginning of the third wave of feminism. Already, within the feminist world, the notion of sexual difference was replacing the sexual division of labour as a major factor affecting femininity, especially when the work of Lacan became better-known in the mid-1970s. Meanwhile, Gillis and Munford (2003) find in the relationship between third wave politics and its two predecessors both continuity and discontinuity, which is typical of the dynamics of novel movements.

The third wave reflects the contemporary post-feminist global society. Third wave ideology rose beyond a ‘centred’ universal sisterhood identifiable with second wave, which was severely criticized by Kristeva and Irigaray for playing up to patriarchal essentialism. Instead, the third wave was aiming to focus on individuality and the divergent ways of being woman from society to society but also *within* specific societies and other contexts as well as the interstitial. Third Wave feminists have tended to find in second wave feminisms white- and hetero-centricism and have tried to broaden existing feminist discourses to become more inclusive. The complex web of narratives that it accounted for was inevitably woven in connecting threads of gender but also

ethnicity and race, class, nation-building. More saliently, the third wave gives new prominence to the variety of female subjectivities, eschewing generalizations and dos and don'ts while celebrating feminist agency as in essence subjective. For, initially named as a reaction to second wave feminism, the strategy, with the Third Wave, is to describe rather than to prescribe, preferring a *quasi* postmodern *petit récit* of constant retelling and of micropolitics (Freedman 2002, Gillis and Munford 2004).

It can be argued that the third wave simultaneously converges and diverges with the former waves and they can all be characterized in terms of their shared politics (Gillis and Munford, 2004). According to Crawford (2007), third wave feminism is notably distinct from second wave for celebrating femininity as well as more traditional feminist rights. Femininity was very specifically read by earlier feminists as a cultural function that enabled patriarchy's organization of society. The spirit in which manifestations of femininity such as makeup were understood reflected a new self-confidence about rights and agency that were deemed to be acquired by third wave ideology. Scott (1994) and Segal (1999) engage with the post-structuralist nature of contemporary feminism, and with the centrality of language usage to displacing hierarchical binaries, turning to Foucauldian discourse:

...post-structuralists insist that words and texts have no fixed or intrinsic meanings, that there is no transparent or self-evident relationship between them and either ideas or things, no basic or ultimate correspondence between language and the world... How do meanings change? How have some meanings emerged as normative and others have been eclipsed or disappeared? How do these processes reveal about how power is constituted and operates? (Scott, 1994: 284)

Building on rights acquired as a result of the earlier two waves, the new self-confident third wave feminism was now able to move its focus to a more post-structuralist genealogy of the female condition. The Third Wave was thus able to open up to new spaces through, among many others, cyberfeminism, ecofeminism, and transgender politics.

One of the criticisms of Third Wave feminism is that in its effort to be inclusive of all female experience it has lost its ability to truly signify and to effect concrete changes for women. Thus, whereas autonomous choices about self-expression can prove to be an empowering act of resistance, it might not be an enduring structure, yet within a world experienced as a marketplace of ideas and identities, such temporary choices are a more felicitous fit than more ambitious



models. While Third Wave feminism seems to maintain a binarised distinction between ‘victim feminism’ (the favouring of which is identified as one of the weaknesses of Second Wave) and ‘power feminism’, choosing the second over the first, this can be interpreted as a failure to take on board those who suffer under patriarchal strictures. Also, while broadening its interest to include, inter alia, non-western feminisms and non-white subjectivities within western feminisms and non-heterosexual identities, pornography and sex workers, the poststructuralist stance of the Third Wave is often perceived as corresponding to the state of women in much of the Western world which generally benefits from degrees of political and economic equality.

This brave new world of multiplicity of the Third Wave can account for a certain lack of a sense of cohesion that earlier waves carried in the notion of a movement. Opposed to the idea of disparate waves of feminism, Shira Tarrant identifies a lack of nuance to such a separation. Further, she denounces the implied Amerocentrism of the timeline of the three waves, which correspond generally to US, and more generally, Western history (Tarrant 2006: 222). Tarrant makes a valid point. For instance, the decidedly Foucault-sounding “The personal is political”, first popularised as the title of an essay by prominent US feminist Carol Hanisch in a 1969 essay, became a rallying cry for second wave feminism. In it is encapsulated the centrifugal dynamics of the second wave whereas third wave feminism is a more centripetal movement from the political towards the personal. It founds the premise of such a variety of theoretical works of Foucault, Cixous, Irigaray and Butler, the first and the last clearly overlapping figures of Second and Third Wave, and the two others possibly so.

However, contra Shira Tarrant, there are differences in worldview that correspond – though not always neatly – to the three waves of feminism as distinct. It is likely that second wave feminist stances on both *hijab* and the belly-shirt result in binary judgements, The *hijab* is then identified as a *de facto* patriarchal piece of clothing, whereas the belly-shirt, after a Eurocentric reading, is associated with the promotion of female autonomy. A Third Wave feminist reading would read both as “political agency and resistance to objectification” (Newman and White, 2012: 246). They are seen as effects of female agency, autonomous self-expression and resistance to patriarchal determination (ibid: 246-7). Accordingly, this included the dismissal of any restriction, whether deemed patriarchal or feminist, to define or control how women or girls can dress, act, or generally express themselves. Such a position is drastically different from second

wave movements, with radical anti-pornography and anti-prostitution postures. On the other hand, feminist third space ideology can be identified with neo-liberal ethics and in turn face criticism of the same order.

In “Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous (1976) attests that various women have a secret world which they have been “haunting since early childhood”. It is a “world of searching, the elaboration of knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions”. This concept corresponds to the Victorian English separation of the private and public realms, with female and male genders assigned to each respectively. A literary example would be of the eponymous heroine of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* who craved for independence. She had to suppress the desire to travel or go beyond domestic limits. As a result, she finds herself constantly at a window looking out, longing for escape: “I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer” (Chapter 10). Happiness for a woman was described as “finding a man”. Various movies include scenarios that are meant to teach women how to be submissive and beautiful in order to find a man to raise a family with (Benshoff & Griffin 2004: 220). Considering the many narratological connections between the Victorian novel and the general ethos of Hindustani cinema (Sutherland, 2005), the same structures are applicable to the *tawaif*. Indeed, according to Viridi (2003: 3), the idealised female figures in Hindustani cinema are epitomized as the “passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient”.

With implications that Third Wave feminism is so inclusive that it somehow eludes feminist principles of the first hour, the new trend is often conflated with post-feminism. It also includes in terms of theories of identity and subjectivity, both post-structuralist and postmodern, not always an easy accommodation with earlier trends towards categorisation and established practices. One such example is of ‘girl culture’, a varied movement. The Riot Grrrl (capital g?) movement, dating from the early 1990s, decidedly Third Wave in spirit, seeking to promote female power *inter alia* through artistic expression, proceeds by appropriating the grammar of their own names. By using one or two additional ‘r’s to ‘girl’ to displace gender-patronising signifieds associated with the word.

Although post-feminism refers to a number of viewpoints, generally, many definitions of third wave feminism correspond to definitions of post-feminism, and this is significant. In essence, both result from very similar disagreements with second wave feminism. However, the various post-feminist postures react more radically to what it sees as the failings of second wave feminism than the third wave. Post-feminism identifies second wave feminism as having failed altogether in opposing patriarchy (McRobbie 2004: 255). McRobbie (2004) analyses feminist media products like *The Diary of Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City*, which, while portending to liberate women through the portrayal of autonomous women, are instead portraying women who spend their lives searching for the right man. The skepticism such an understanding generates can be clearly termed post-feminist. Indeed, the post-feminist stance accuses feminism of having entrenched patriarchal structures even deeper, such as in terms of how many binary feminist struggles end up unintentionally contributing to the establishment of an essentialised, morbid connection between female identity and a victim status. There are many correspondences between the two movements in terms of their reaction to earlier feminism, the third wave itself being *de facto* committed to the notion of fluidity of gender and gender identity (such as of Butler's gender performativity). However, third wave reaction has been more of the order of broadening the ambit of struggle and multiplying entry-points to feminism itself instead of post-feminism's more radical postures. Laura Mulvey's own change of posture in 1981 signals one of the significant points of transit between the Second and Third Wave to which I will now turn.

## **2.4 Feminist Film Theory and Laura Mulvey**

Lacan's writing is a major inspiration for feminist film theory. While careful to avoid elitism when distinguishing art and popular film, Ellis (2000) argues that when watching a popular film the viewer identifies the camera itself as an extension of one's eyes. In the theories of both Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry (Metz, 1975 for instance), the film screen corresponds to the Lacanian mirror. Jacques Lacan's mirror stage refers to a constitutive pre-oedipal stage where the infant misrecognises her/his image in the mirror as the 'I', a primal phase of identification. During this phase, the human subject mistakes the image that the mirror throws back (Imago) as an authentic reflection of the self, and therefore the self as invested with fullness and integrity. This misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) lies at the heart of identity and its attraction to the human is that it acts as a psychic compensation for the anxiety of separation from the

mother's body, and the impossibility of plenitude by a future reintegration with her body. Further, this misrecognition satisfies a subconscious for the self to correspond to the Ideal-Ego. The subconscious (and often compulsive) attraction that the spectator finds towards film is a psychic externalization of the desire for wholeness and plenitude.

According to Laura Mulvey,

...the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist) combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. (1975: 48)

In relation to camerawork, it is said that there are three main kinds of shot-size: *long-shots*, *medium shots* and *close-ups*. The implication here is that everything onscreen is by definition looking that is mediated by a camera. In a number of ways the camerawork gives little or no choice to the audience about who is the object of the gaze and other aspects relating to exactly how to gaze, editing itself being a form of control and power. Further, looking itself happens within a world that already is and in terms that are already constructed. Working in reverse opens up a hindsight of such cultural constructions underlying the fact that social life allows the uncovering of dominant worldviews. Michel Foucault's notion of the panopticon,<sup>15</sup> connects looking to surveillance. He identifies surveillance in modern society as a "normalizing gaze", which "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them" (Foucault 1975: 25). In their influential analysis of *National Geographic*, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins observe that

mirror and camera are tools of self-reflection and surveillance. Each creates a double of the self, a second figure who can be examined more closely than the original - a double that can also be alienated from the self - taken away, as a photograph can be, to another place (Lutz & Collins 1991, 135).

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<sup>15</sup> based on Jeremy Bentham's model designed to allow only one watchman to surveil many inmates by creating in them the paranoid impression (as opposed to the fact) that they are being watched constantly.

Starting, like Metz, with the omnipotence and impunity that the darkness of the cinema auditorium confers upon spectators,<sup>16</sup> and again, like Metz, Mulvey connects it to Lacan's mirror stage:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence (Mulvey 1975: 13).

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that in society “*men act and women appear*” (Berger 1972, 45). Similarly, Mulvey describes scopophilia in terms of treating “other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1975: 8). Scopophilia splits the act of gazing into two distinct positionings, which Mulvey argues are rooted in sexual difference: the active male looks and the passive female is looked at. Being looked at places the passive female into one of two sexually oriented places: one akin to sadism and one akin to fetishism (Mulvey 1975). It can be argued that Mulvey, much like Lacan's phallogocentric psychoanalysis, is reflecting a social reality whereby in general terms culture offers divergent pathways for men and women to encounter both world and cinema screen.<sup>17</sup> Berger argues that women have been represented in European art from the Renaissance onwards as being aware of being gazed at by male spectators (Berger, 1972: 49). In fact, whereas a representation of such ‘knowledge’ might have, at face value, constituted a tactical advantage for the woman gazed at, it becomes assimilable instead to the man/woman - active/passive economy.

Further, the female character is depicted on classic screens as doubly gazed at, first by the characters within the film, and secondly, like a mirroring act, the spectator's own gaze:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium,... the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. (Mulvey 1981: 70)

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<sup>16</sup> Conditions that assist the act of voyeurism include the power and pleasure in the cinema auditorium of seeing without being seen. Baudry likens this sense of impunity in the auditorium to the psychic world of reverie, hypnosis and dreaming.

<sup>17</sup> “the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 1975: 58).

The position of the spectator in the act of gazing can be assimilated to that of a patriarch, as the site of power. Further, the position of the film spectator replicates the position of the male customer of a courtesan's *mujra* in Hindustani cinema - and the similarity is significant – both spectators have paid for the entertainment and exist within the patriarchal structure of the gazing that it implies. According to Metz (1986) the cinematic signifier is imaginary because, *inter alia*, cinema trades on the desire of the spectator. Within the filmic discourse, the camera knows no limit: it goes everywhere, sees everyone, exposes everything. The technological nature of the filmic medium (unlike, say, the novel) prevents a film from capturing absence. The camera inaugurates a regime of visibility from which nothing escapes, and this complete visibility allows spectators to believe themselves to be all-seeing (and thus all-powerful). What secures the illusory omnipotence of the spectator is precisely the spectator's own avoidance of being seen. The god-like spectator sees all and consequently feels all-powerful but remains constitutively unseen in the darkened auditorium.

Among the possibilities offered by the film medium, the Imago provides an illusory sense of power. The camera opens up a potentially limitless set of possibilities of setting and identification. Thus, Jean-Louis Baudry's notion of the Apparatus (*appareil*) implies that the impact of the technology of film on the spectator is twofold: the belief that films represent reality literally, and delusion that the spectator is in charge of the visual world s/he is privy to. This omnipotence and omniscience can be assimilated to the power of the patriarch, which is at the core of Mulvey's theory. Once the camera itself becomes an obvious presence rather than an invisible structuring absence (as often with Avant-Garde visual text for instance), the spectator loses the position of omnipotence along with the camera and becomes part of the cinematic event. When this happens, the spectator becomes aware that the film is a product and not simply a reality. To forestall this recognition, classical Hollywood editing works to create a reality effect, a sense that the events on the screen are really happening and not just the result of a filmic act of production.

Psychoanalysis has been generally responsible for establishing human agency and motivation as originating and conceivable more in terms of the subconscious than from the conscious. Lacan's own overall contribution challenges assumptions around biological determinism. For, to Lacan, the subject is causatively constituted by language during the mirror stage. It is thus language that

is gendered in the first place, and in this sense Lacan's arguments prepare the way for Third Wave Feminism and Butler for instance. Language itself is a symbolic medium and therefore can only be read as strings of symbolic relations and the source of misrecognition (mirror stage), the base for much of Lacanian theory. Lacan nuances Freud's uncomfortably biologicistic narration of sexuality by replacing need with desire and by adopting language as the origin of sexual difference. Since the Oedipal itself, as encountered through language is only ever experienced as something borrowed, the human subject starts by encountering the world through lack and division. This opens the way for Butler's performativity as the idea that all identity is based on lack. Lacan's confirmation of Freud's identification of the phallus as the centre for defining sexual difference<sup>18</sup> causes Irigaray to denounce what she reads as the entrenching of biologism under a different guise.

According to Lacan, the Symbolic, marked by the Law of the Father, consists of moral and legal prohibitions that constitute and limit subjectivity; in addition to language, individuals must take up all the positions of identification and subjectivity in order to signify socially. The Imaginary is the order of the unconscious and desire, marked by the mother's body instead. Film, according to Metz is of the same order of dreams and fantasy (Metz 1975); the act of watching a film is likened to the condition of half-sleep, of existing between reality and the dream world. It is in such a state that the spectator representations that would otherwise seem unreal become acceptable, given Metz's three exceptions (Metz 1986).

Mulvey bases her theories on Freud's reference to scopophilia (as pleasure in gazing at others), which is used by film theorists to justify the ontic pleasure of film spectatorship itself.<sup>19</sup> To Mulvey film is always structurally gendered and she differentiates viewing pleasure into "active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1975: 12), further constituted as a "controlling male gaze" (18) with 'woman as image' (16). In Mulvey's terms, "the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father". This reduces femaleness to a mere function in all cases *in terms of* the male gaze. Even the female spectator is offered only two options: either narcissistic identification

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<sup>18</sup> Freud argues that men read sexual difference in terms of women *lacking* a phallus.

<sup>19</sup> See also Neale, 1992, 283ff and Lapsley & Westlake, 1988, 77-9.

with the passive female on screen or masochistic identification with the active male. Film viewers, regardless of their gender, are treated by Mulvey in terms of masculine subjects. Firstly, the cinematic codes of popular films “are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego” (18). These neurotic needs can be subsumed under Mulvey’s new term, the male gaze. But further, it is not only the male spectator who gazes, nor only male characters, but also the female spectator and the camera. In turn it is only the female character who is gazed at. In subsequent articles, Mulvey will further refine the characteristics of this objectification, namely in terms of scopophilia, the act of seeing and voyeurism, the act of watching, each definable in terms of the nature of the gazer’s agency. Neither option allows for the depiction of the female as a subject in her own right. In both forms, the female signifies the threat of castration to male character/spectator. These refer to two attempts at resolution. Thus the female, the object of the gaze is made responsible for the character/spectator’s anxiety is either punished (sadistic) or is reduced to a fetish object – a spectacle.

Mulvey engages with voyeuristic and narcissistic tendencies in the spectator. The former refers to the objectification of female characters and the latter to identification with a cinematic ‘ideal ego’. Voyeuristic looking originates in sadism. It is a controlling gaze: “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt - asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey, 1992: 29). In parallel with the objectification of the female is the spectator’s narcissistic identification with male characters. Fetishistic looking leads to a play of substitution whereby a subliminal overvaluation in the representation of the female turns her into an image that is “reassuring rather than dangerous.” According to Mulvey it is to this structure of gazing that we owe the cult of the female (mostly classic) film star. The ‘classical’ Hollywood tradition not only typically focuses on a male protagonist in the narrative but also assumes a male spectator – and this is equally true of classic Hindustani cinema. Traditional films present men as active, controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire for men in both the story and in the audience, and do not allow women to be desiring sexual subjects in their own right:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (Mulvey, 1975: 28)



The camerawork participates actively in constructing that impression: the camera concentrates on the male as an active agent within the filmic space, focusing on what he does. Instead, the camera objectifies women, with close-up shots of those considered of perfect nubile age. The male is most often shown watching the female character, the I-camera perfectly espousing the male character's perception.

Reactions to classic Hollywood/Hindustani cinema, particularly as a public art/industry are more or less predictable, and inevitably collective. However, this is only true to a certain extent since even at the level of production, the classic filmic text is fraught with covert moments of sexual subversion, such as of female-to-female and male-to-male gazing (see Stacey, 1992, Neale, 1993, 2000 above). At the level of decoding, generalisations are even less likely to be accurate (see Ruby Rich, 1990). However, the ritualised repetition of a world through art wills that world to be, complete with identities that are ambiguous.

The issue of the gaze is closely related to that of identification. The viewer may subjectively identify with the camera's point of view, with that of a person which it depicts or with both (Burgin, 1982: 189). Whilst it is often observed that men tend to identify with men and women with women in film and television narratives, Ellis (2000) argues that this is an oversimplification. We may, for instance, experience shifting 'identifications' with different characters, and these may not necessarily be characters of the same sex (or sexual orientation) as ourselves. Indeed, we may 'identify' with feelings or experiences rather than characters as such. And such identifications may sometimes even be contradictory (see Clover, 1992).

If we agree with the premise that the idealised hero mirrors a satisfying ideal for the male spectator, leaving only a masochistic identity for the female spectator to identify with, then the passivity of the female cannot be understood except in terms of an inherently passive female agency. If, however, we read, like Clover *et al.*, the screen itself as the site of a certain degree zero of identity, of a mirror stage of pre-gendered identification, the theatricalisation of male and female becomes a pre-oedipal scenario. Entering a full living world (*Lebenswelt*), fraught with its own inner contradictions, narratologically readerly and closed, does offer options other than two extremes: to be pliant or to resist. Often resistance itself within the classic film does not involve critical structural reassessment or deconstructing, but resistance within text, often simply

a shift in ‘actors’ of the dominant/dominated paradigm instead of a radical (as in *radix*) questioning of the paradigm itself. Yet, compliance does not fully describe such spectatorship. After all, the constitution of an active subject does not eschew spectatorial transgression and a reproduction of the symbolic that escapes from the encoded pressure.

Ellis explains, in *Seeing Things* (2000) how Mulvey defends an oversimplified model of masculine identification, arguing for the ‘glance’ rather than the ‘gaze’. Others, such as Jackie Stacey (1992), have found female identification with the male gaze problematic. Among others, Stacey deplores the non-representation of “the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship” (Stacey, 1992: 48), providing (much as Neale for male-to-male gaze), examples from classic film of implicit female-to-female gaze that transgresses Mulvey’s initial model.

Gaylyn Studlar’s (*inter alia* 1989) views can act as a useful synthesis. She argues that, instead of a streamlining of passive/active roles (Mulvey *et al*), and again, instead of pointing to a stronger potential for radicality in the female (as advocated for instance by Kaplan), visual pleasure, regardless of gender, is derived from a passive and masochistic pleasure from the overwhelming cinematic image.

Discussing popular cinema of the 1940s and melodrama in particular, Mary Anne Doane (1987) argues that general passivity in female sexual fantasy is reinforced by the way women are positioned in film. The issue of agency (of the passivity) of women who are gazed at remains central to most of the challenges to Mulvey’s theories. Another major follow-up assumption upon which Mulvey’s theories are grounded is that the female spectator is largely passive, responding by mimicking the male gaze. Another related assumption is that responses to visual text are identical in everyone regardless of social factors beyond gender, regardless of individual ways of living and reading gender, and regardless of individuality (itself not stable) and various contingencies. Besides, masculinity itself is handled mostly as a stable, essentialist category, as tautologically evident, and this is particularly problematic since it reinscribes the category into an essentialism that has been convenient to the patriarchal superstructure.<sup>20</sup> For instance masculinity is assumed to be heterosexual and carries the further assumption that heterosexuality is a stable category.

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance Rodowick 1982, who accuses Mulvey of biological essentialism (8 *et al.*). See also Rodowick 1991, Williams 1990, Creed 1993.

All these assumptions do not invalidate Mulvey's 1975 arguments per se. They merely prompt vigilance about generalisations based entirely on Mulvey's theoretical premises and recommend that researchers factor in relevant context and minute and sensitive empirical observation to qualify an application of Mulvey. Mulvey's distinction thus remains both pertinent and potent. It allows, for instance, for a specific light to be shed on the drastic difference in the gaze on what is ultimately a similar female body: that of the mother/divine and of the prostitute. For our purposes here, this bourgeois gaze distinguishes the *randi* ('lower class' prostitute) from the *begum* (wife), with the filmic *tawaif* an intermediary of sorts between the two (the historical *tawaif* was closer to the *randi* than the filmic *tawaif*). It belongs to a distinction based on a reading of the body as sexually available and also a reading of sexuality as corruptive. The gaze is a reflection of the projection of sexuality onto the Other (here the woman as other to man) as a means of controlling it and ensuring it isn't returned. The gaze serves to subjugate the body that can potentially be desiring (and thus potentially powerful). The bourgeois gaze towards the female body is double, distinguishing *between* bodies but also applying the sort of doubleness to the one and same body that allows the gazer to gaze with impunity yet all at once not bear the potential consequences of the look (most notably the look being returned). This dissertation, based mostly on Hindustani cinema and its classic film structure, follows the overall match of the director's vision (as evidenced for instance by the visual narrative of her/his film) and the male gaze. It seeks to uncover the textual construction of the *tawaif*, whose semantic manifestation is in the first designed to elicit voyeuristic pleasure.

Mulvey's use of the word "man" or of male gendered pronouns to refer to the gazer throughout her article seems to point to the male gaze as corresponding to a male body. Yet, in reality, the realist film hinges on the female character, but as object, as a narrative function to prompt the main actant, the male, part of what Mulvey terms "the paradox of phallogentrism":

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation (Mulvey 1975: 809).

Mulvey also asserts that the dominance that men embody is only so because women exist, as without a woman for comparison, a man and his supremacy as the controller of visual pleasure

are insignificant. For Mulvey, it is the presence of the female that defines the patriarchal order of society as well as the male psychology of thought.

In many ways following from arguments by Kaja Silverman (1980), Kaplan (1983) argues for female reading as ambiguous and therefore potentially more subversive and less compliant than the male gaze. Referring to (in)famous classic film noir complete with femme fatale, *Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1946), Kaplan opposes the two gazes. On the one hand the male gaze matches the main male narrative voice: “The male spectator would find it difficult in this film to occupy any position other than that of identification with O’Hara” (Kaplan, 1983: 63).

Thus, Rita Hayworth, the cult actress, is afforded under a male gaze a typical ambiguity that only serves to increase desire, not to transcend it: “Hayworth is here idealized to the level of the Divine, her beauty evoking unremitting desire and longing while she yet remains inaccessible” (65). While it is true that for the female spectator “...given the male structuring around sadism, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism” (26), she is, in this example from *Lady from Shanghai* “not caught up in the same mechanism of desire for refusion with the Mother, the Hayworth figure appears ambiguous from the start.” (65).

Freed from the predictable psychic determinism of the male spectator, the female spectator is posited as better ontologically equipped for radical knowledge. This rejoins both earlier and later feminist contentions such as of Beauvoir or Cixous who suggest a certain ‘bisexual’ ability in women for multiple identification. The privileged position of the male implies, instead, a singular focus that espouses more tailored ranges of emotions, and therefore more definitely popular visual text. It follows therefore that although spectators can respond in unexpected ways there is an ontological predisposition for females to watch films with more distance. This is a departure from the picture of passive female spectatorship that Mulvey draws.

In this more compliant role, males are closer to a classic film director’s ideal spectator, more-or-less the spectator’s profile most in mind, capable of the most felicitous communication. In the end, most feminists (with a few exceptions like Studlar above) who disagree with Mulvey’s assertions as regards the female spectator also agree with her that *in essentia* classic film elicits the male gaze. The male gaze doesn’t require a male body – women can also adopt a male gaze

and, subsequently, males do not necessarily adopt a male gaze, and even when they do, do not do so consistently.

Finally turning directly to the question of female spectatorship, Mulvey responds to her detractors by giving a more Third Wave feminist sensibility to her existing theories in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’” (1981). She first concedes that “Visual Pleasure” (1975) was intended as a provocation or a manifesto, rather than a reasoned academic article that took all objections into account. Taking as example *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor, 1946), she argues instead in favour of a metaphoric transvestism in which the female viewer may choose between a male-coded or a female-coded analytic viewing position “as a point of disruption and contradiction”. It remains, however, that “masculinity as a ‘point of view’ is inscribed onto all spectatorial identification and pleasure in classical cinema (Mulvey, 1981: 69).

Through the groundbreaking research in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover uncovers that against the grain of general film theory, young male viewers of the ‘slasher’ film (a typically gory subgenre of the horror film genre particularly of the 1980s) were identifying at a surprising level with the ‘female’ victims instead of their ‘male’ aggressors. This is especially significant within the horror genre, and more so with the ‘slasher’ film, since films of the sort were thought to display markedly distinct gender roles. Clover further uses the example of the ‘Final Girl’ who is described by Clover as neither a passive victim nor a ‘damsel-in-distress’. The ‘Final Girl’ refers instead to the female who is the very final survivor of many ‘slasher’ films. This is the case with such major representative franchises of the subgenre as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, comprising 10 and 12 films respectively and novels, comic-books and other merchandise. Clover (1992) goes on to give examples of ‘Final Girls’ from other genres and most notably from the science fiction film. Here again, Clover is arguing that, *contra* established understanding, onscreen identification is not stable. Thus, in the final confrontation between the ‘male’ slasher and the ‘Final Girl’, Clover argues, the girl appropriates a weapon, typically a knife or a chainsaw, to use as a ‘phallus’ to ‘penetrate’ the male and render him ‘feminine’. This ‘adoption’ of the phallus by the female here refines the notion of ‘transvestism’ put forward by Mulvey in “Afterthoughts”. A reference to the Final Girl in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* Clover (1992) suggests that in these films, the viewer begins by sharing the perspective of the killer, but experiences a shift in identification to the final girl part

way through the film. Although these films seem to offer sadistic pleasure to their viewers, Clover argues that these films are designed to align spectators not with the male tormentor, but with the female victim—the “final girl”—who finally defeats her oppressor, suggesting that identification is ambiguous.

Identification (in the wider sense of Lacan’s captation, in terms of self and others) is central to the grammar of film reception, a major signified to the semantics of the text at hand. Clover’s point here is that if it can be established within such an obviously phallogocentric and sadistic-scopophilic *welt* as the ‘slasher’ film that gender identification is unstable, it follows that film identification itself must be in itself a site of undecidability. Clover is implying that the filmic medium ushers in the possibility of a degree zero of gender identity, situated in psychic terms to the time just prior to the mirror stage. This view can accommodate the direction of a number of contemporary theories of identity, from Lacanian psychoanalysis to Derrida’s deconstruction, from bell hooks’s ‘oppositional gaze’ to Butlerian performativity.

## 2.5 Queer Theory and Judith Butler

The term ‘queer theory’ emerges from Teresa de Lauretis who guest-edited the special gay and lesbian studies conference proceedings in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* with fundamental contributions from Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Eve Sedgwick and Diana Fuss. De Lauretis was to assess that the meaning initially ascribed to it has now largely slipped. At the base, queer theory, although based initially on gay and lesbian studies, analyses all identity, primarily marking identity as unstable<sup>21</sup> *contra* a variety of discourses that support sexual, and other, totalities, namely categorisations. From queer as pre-eminently a deconstruction of sexual identity categorisation as in Fuss (1996), I move to more general deconstructions of identity such as Green (2007). Already, Halperin (1997) paves the way for ‘queer’ to be defined in the wider sense:

‘Queer’ ...does not designate a class of already identified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited. (62)

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<sup>21</sup> The appropriation of the term ‘queer’ (as strange or bizarre) is comparable to the ‘Black is beautiful’ movement’s re-appropriation of the word ‘black’. Whereas ‘queer’ was used as a pejorative term for effeminate men, the implication, with queer theory, that everyone is ‘queer’ makes it relational and not fixed. Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* engages with the dynamics of the oppression of patriarchy.

It can be stated that the universality and analytical flexibility of queer theory is based on the radical premise that ultimately everyone is queer, starting with the original etymology of strange or bizarre. Thus Michael Warner, one of the founders of queer theory, identifies queer as “a resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, 1993: xxvi). The gesture is post-structuralist: the implication is that no one and no state of being can be described as ‘normal’:

By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal (Sedgwick, 1994: 9).

The play over normality seeks to destabilise the normative. The main new refinement in queer phenomenology (from Butler, 1990 onwards) is that of performativity, the suggestion that the subject does not exist prior to its performance whereas all identity is performed:

The disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interest of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain... That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality (Butler 1990:184-185).

Queer theory engages with how cultural practices *produce* minds and bodies (Foucault, 1975)<sup>22</sup> through the establishment of normative categories as natural, neutral and factual whereas category itself is arbitrary, thus Butler argues that nobody starts with gender: “... if desire could liberate itself, it would have nothing to do with the preliminary marking by sexes” (Wittig, 1979: 114). Cultural practices align to create a prediscursive

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1:

Western man [*sic*] has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation and modification of desire itself. Not only were the boundaries of what one could say about sex enlarged, and men compelled to hear it said; but more important, discourse was connected to sex by a complex organization with varying effects, by a deployment that cannot be adequately explained merely by referring it to a law of prohibition. A censorship of sex? There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy. (Foucault, 1978: 23)

“internal coherence of sex, gender and desire” (Butler, 1990: 10; 31), a coherence that is idealised (185) and masks the fragmentary reality from both criticism and everydayness.

Butler summarises the essence of de Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex* whereby one is not born a woman but becomes one (see above): a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a “natural sex” or a “real woman” or any number of prevalent social fictions (Butler, 1990: 191).

Structures of normativity are founded and sustained through notions such as “natural sex” and “real woman” which are maintained “within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler, 1990: 33). Such examples of “social fictions” construct the illusion of an ahistorical, categorisable, accountable identity. Thus Monique Wittig opposes the “polymorphously perverse” to binary structures of desire and as we find in the world of the *tawaif* as described by Oldenburg (1984).

A system of rewards and punishments, both physical and ‘symbolic’, as well as prohibitions and taboos and for living context, a *welt* of attitudes, constitutes the human subject. This entire system aims to perform the illusion of identity as stable and originary, and as a base for all cultural judgements, with as major component the exclusion or discreditation of structures that contradict it. Such structures that threaten the *status quo* of cultural dominance are met, especially at the boundaries (reference to Kristeva and abjection) with a ready arsenal of variously implicit societal exclusions often at the outset in terms of a taxonomic location as either Other or as non-existent:

The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness... the operation of repulsion can consolidate “identities” founded on the instituting of the Other or of a set of Others through exclusion and domination (Butler, 1990: 181-182).

To continue with the logic of Kristeva’s abjection, the over-refinement of both the historical and the filmic world of the *tawaif* reflects an attempt by the super-ego to overcompensate the feeling of abjection (a connection of the super-ego) towards the act of prostitution and the being of the prostitute that it sublimates. The *tawaif* as prostitute was a rite-of-passage for young sons of nawabs. To them the *tawaif* was to remain an encounter with the liminal, as the disorientation



that occurs in the middle of a ritual. An eventual rejection of the *tawaif* corresponds to the rejection of the mother-as-object which then allows for the individual's individuality. The body is thus willed out of presence in the narratives of the *tawaif* which, in line with the Freudian logic of denial, hides the fact that all along, the *tawaif* is exclusively about body (prostitution).

Butler refines this argument with this question, posed in response to de Beauvoir's argument (above) in *The Second Sex*:

Through what act of negation and disavowal does the masculine pose as a disembodied universality and the feminine get constructed as a disavowed corporeality? (Butler, 1990: 12).

Categories and social assignments such as 'universal mind/male' and 'gendered body/female' organise both the individual and society's cultural *existenziell* (ontic existential characteristics). Thus, although on the surface, the poetry and etiquette of the historical *and* the filmic *tawaif* seems to belie this dichotomy, their main function is that the sensuality of her performance sublimates her sexual performance as a prostitute, which makes her a discursive equivalent of the *begum* as reproductive body. Thus, both *tawaif* and *begum*, although presented as moral opposites, occupy the same category as 'gendered body/female', as opposed to the 'universal mind/male'. They correspond to two functions of the body female in society: sex and reproduction, which are here split into two distinct bodies - that of the *tawaif* and of the *begum*. The first binary hides a double false consciousness: first that one is not born *tawaif* or *begum* and more radically, that one is not born a man or woman. Butler proposes a radical and transposable strategy which in most ways corresponds to Derridean deconstruction: gender trouble.

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant... 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative (Halperin, 1997: 62).

Gender trouble refers to a strategic destabilisation of gender categories by a multiplication of gender postures in order to call into question categories of gender identity and totalising structures that support them such as heteronormativity<sup>23</sup> and to uncover their fraudulence, all social categories are denaturalised. Thus, for Butler (1990), "drag is a double inversion that says

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<sup>23</sup> Whereby heterosexuality is viewed as normal and any deviance from its totalities is identified as *abnormal*.

‘appearance is an illusion’”, since “the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (137).

The lack of a precise *modus operandi* for ‘gender trouble’ is part of its strength – it allows for the flexible inclusion of a wide array of gestures, from more straightforward First and Second Wave feminist, to more poststructuralist Third Wave, from feminism to – increasingly – all theories of identity. Thus, for instance in the influential *What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now*, Eng, Halberstam and Esteban Muñoz (2005) argue that the “queer epistemology” explicitly opposes lesbian and gay identity politics since its dynamics is to render all identity categories into discourse, moving beyond sexuality to deconstruct taxonomic structures such as of ethnicity.<sup>24</sup> This is a far cry from original appropriations of queer as an identity label by radical groups like ACT UP and OutRage!.

Butler’s performativity is more radical than Mulvey’s initial views, her critics’ counter-views (such as Clover) and her own final rejoinder in “Afterthoughts (1981) altogether” (above). Beyond perceived necessities of Second Wave solidarities, it questions the very fact of identity categorisation in the act of watching:

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within the discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued (Butler, 1990:1).

Butler’s assertion that there is no universal ‘woman’ argues that there can be no universal feminism. The historical *tawaif* offered gender trouble in many forms within the limits (and brilliance) of medieval Lakhawi patriarchy. Yet, the form that the resistance took clearly found resonance in Hindustani cinema but also more generally. The specifics of the gender trouble are more in line with Third Wave feminist than Second Wave approaches but there is a clear ‘universal’ appeal in the aesthetics of their mythopoeic construction.

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<sup>24</sup> “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990, 25).

## 2.6 Discursive Models for the *Tawaif*

The gaze itself is not image but perception of image, which is structured by society. An analysis of this structuring doesn't only uncover more immediate details about watching habits and visual culture, but also about early psychosexual development and extant psychopathologies. Thus, understanding the Madonna/whore complex, a particular nuancing to the gendered nature of the act of watching, is revealing of male/female relations in society. The Madonna/whore complex refers to a complex identified by Freud as the psychological state of men who can only develop a relationship with women in terms of two opposites: either as 'Madonnas' (with reference to the Virgin Mary) or as whores (prostitutes). According to Freud (1912), "Where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love." Posed thus, the Madonna/whore complex seems rather straightforward; yet it hides a number of absences. First, typically, Freud's enunciation of the dilemma is male-centred – females are represented as "loved" or "desired". In fact the Madonna–whore complex limits and fixes roles attributed to women – those women who are seen to enjoy sex are whores; the only way to not be a whore is to be virginal. The organising system corresponds to a full patriarchal economy where issues of the sexual are associated with notions of purity. 'Madonna' and 'whore', though referring to concepts that are 'opposite'<sup>25</sup> are both revealingly gender-specific. They are terms applied to women for which there are no male equivalents. The Madonna and the whore can in fact be said to exist within the same ethico-ideological world of sexual purity.<sup>26</sup> The former is a construction based on sexual chastity, and the latter, on specific indulgence, reveals an obsessive focus on female sexuality as definable only in terms of binary patriarchal functions. Female identity is constructed by patriarchy in terms of this exclusive binary thus outperforming full female agency.

The Madonna/whore model is universally common among various patriarchal societies, corresponding for instance to the *hetaerae/ pallakae* or *gynaekes* (in Ancient Greek culture), *geisha* (and *oikan*)/matron (Japanese culture) *begum/tawaif* (medieval Laknawi India/Hindustani cinema) binaries. Notably the second volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1984) engages with the *hetaerae*, the *pallakae* and the *gynaekes* of Ancient Greece. Evidently wives are not

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<sup>25</sup> one can make interesting analogies with Third Wave feminist perspectives of the hijab and the belly-shirt (see above).

<sup>26</sup> as Derrida (1974 *inter alia*) points out, ideas contain a viral (or spectral) presence of their opposites.

intended for virginity but are inscribed within the system where women exist *in terms of* a patriarchal sexual economy:<sup>27</sup>

We have hetaerae for pleasure, *pallakae* to care for our daily body's needs and *gynaekes* to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households. (from the speech, *Against Neaera* (ca. 340 BC), attributed to Demosthenes)<sup>28</sup>

Women are only invited in terms of the two set roles: the wife is treated as a Lacanian *la femme*, sacred and metaphorically virginal, a Madonna, in effect non-sexual. Typically, neither role allows agency to the female since the female as body-for-others only exists as functions in relation to the male, although feminists have tended to find more autonomy in the role of the 'whore'. The Madonna and whore complex eschews female agency but also a *relationship* with the female as a complete human.

Patriarchy does not only provide the frame for the Madonna and whore complex, but also sustains it, especially through bourgeois assumptions as well as the religious narratives and arts that support them covertly. The arts that support the complex tend to work, like its designation, in tandem, most notably romantic fiction and pornography. As a pair romantic fiction and pornography correspond to the Madonna and the whore in terms of the mind/body dislocation that founds the patriarchal taxonomy associated with women. It leads the heterosexual male to the dilemma of a choice between love and sex, and a belief that they are mutually exclusive in the one body. Pornography is no less the art of bourgeois society than romantic fiction: it is almost an exact fit with the function of the 'whore' in the Madonna and whore complex. Pornography covers what romantic fiction chooses not to represent – sex. However, sex in pornography is depicted as disembodied, and in the same register, romantic fiction depicts romance as a disembodiment, a lack of body. Thus, as a continuum, romantic fiction/pornography uncovers an economy of representation that further nourishes the existing Madonna and whore complex. Considering the studied absence of pornography in public bourgeois discourse and its (consequent) covert ubiquity in bourgeois society, its main obsessive thematic, sex, becomes further associated with concealment, denial, stress and guilt. The

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<sup>27</sup> At an *a priori* level, neither corresponds to virginity, but at the level of society, the matron-wife *begum* is 'virginal' in the sense that she is portrayed as neither desiring nor conspicuously desirable. In the end, both are part of the same regulatory regime.

<sup>28</sup> Oration 59:122.

vilifying of sex and the sexual act which is first performed essentially by religious narrative largely in terms of a body/mind binary is reinforced by romantic fiction/pornography.

One of the interests here with the *tawaif* film in Hindustani cinema is its constant hovering over the patriarchal split of the Madonna and whore complex, as exemplified by the *tawaif* in love, which tends to fall neatly into another established cultural cast: the ‘whore with a heart of gold’. The whore with a heart of gold implies, within bourgeois grammar, a moral contradiction: a woman in an immoral condition (a courtesan, concubine, prostitute) but with strong moral integrity, in fact generally stronger than other characters in the film as counterpoint. This is very much a universal trope, appearing under a variety of mythopoeic forms occurring notably both in older and newer Western and Indian literature and in cinemas associated with both sets of cultures. Within Hindustani cinema the *tawaif* film is an evident tradition where the ‘whore with a heart of gold’ has been a recurrent motif, especially in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s; yet other avatars persist, such as of 2007 Hindustani film *Saawariya* with Gulabji (Rani Mukherji) as a courtesan with a good heart and in the 2012 Hindustani film *Talaash: The Answer Lies Within* (Reema Kagti) where escort girl Rosie (Kareena Kapoor) is recognisably a ‘whore with a heart of gold’. Since the courtesan/prostitute is the image that most directly counters the purity model of Indian womanhood in cinema, the ‘whore with a heart of gold’ is an ambiguous answer to the question of purity. However, the ultimate handling of the courtesan in the *tawaif* film allows for little doubt. Within the micro-cosmology of mainstream cinema, ‘whores with a heart of gold’ are ‘punished’, particularly towards the end of the film, where the grain is separated from the chaff. There is a tendency for *tawaiifs* in particular to be denied their love for the main male protagonist, thus ensuring that the distinction *tawaif/begum* is performed without ambivalence. According to Bhaskar and Allen (2009: 7):

Not only is the heroine very beautiful, she is also an accomplished poet, singer and dancer, and the cynosure of all who visit her. Yet, while she occupies a prominent public space and position and is all-powerful in her command over male desire, she is at the same time portrayed in the genre as a tragic fallen woman, the antithesis of the woman in *pardah*.

The woman in *pardah* is the *begum*, the wife. For instance, *Pakeezah*’s narrative takes the figure of the courtesan and presents it as a figure of illicit desire and a threat to normative family values (Mishra, 2006). This economy of purported difference hides the fact that the bodies of both

*tawaif* and *begum* are regulated. Similarly, there is a deliberate absence of the male (as client) whose presence might have destructured implications that the courtesan's 'immorality' does not originate from society's own structuring, which while it hinges entirely on male desire, in the same breath, performs female sexuality as disposable. The absence of the male enables the concealment of the patriarchal origin of the courtesan's condition and enables scapegoating by displacing the real moral dilemma onto her. In the *tawaif* film, songs and dance, costumes and poetry tend to contribute to the false consciousness by refocusing audience attention even further by aligning the spectator's eye-perspective with that of the I-camera, which is most often also that of the watching male client's. The absence of the male (client) also signals the powerlessness and insignificance of the *begum* within the structure. Further, there is the absence of the female as a desiring body, since it might disrupt the phallogentric status quo of society.<sup>29</sup> As is typical of bourgeois absence, it hides the fact that the subconscious impulse for the *tawaif* genre is in fact angst over the desiring female. The entire narrative is consequently arranged to sublimate the fact, for instance by constructing the filmic fantasy of the passive courtesan, a far cry from what is known (see later) of real courtesans upon which they are based.

"Social fictions" (Butler, 1990: 191) construct identity in terms of a number of overt and covert strategies. One of those strategies Butler focuses on relates to Derrida's notion of iterability:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism... (Butler 1993:95).

The *tawaif*'s performance centres on the iterable in terms of a mise-en-abyme of repetition, the *mujra* itself constitutive of identity both as performance and as performativity. The first is as art, an act of aesthetic deliberateness, the second is when it is inscribed within a more 'mundane' set of everyday postures:

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<sup>29</sup> The social *status quo* is defined by Sunder Rajan (1999) as the place of the woman within the structures of family and community.

an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality* (Butler 1990: 190).

Understanding the construction of identity requires attention to these daily acts such as eye contact, fastidiousness, hand movements, performing which creates ‘courtesanness’. This can be extended to the construction of female/maleness and further to all identity. Following from this logic of Butler’s performative,<sup>30</sup> the difference between *tawaif* and *begum* is in terms of what they *do* and not what they *are*. This is brought out in the *tawaif*’s desire to become a *begum* in the narrative of the *tawaif* film, but in general this wish then shown to be impossible in the end (socially incompatible with the mythico-ethical world of the Hindustani film): either the male protagonist chooses a ‘purer’ option (‘virginal’, ‘untainted’) and/or the character is killed off. The repetitive desire to become a *begum* and its subsequent resolution as frustration acts as a ritual which sublimates and appropriates the *tawaif*’s sexual desire instead into a desire for social respectability and performs the identity of the *tawaif* through re-iteration. In a wider sense, this mythopoeic process inscribes the *tawaif* into the socio-mythical dynamic of the scapegoat of the *polis*. According to Freud, “drama originated out of sacrificial rites (cf. the goat and the scapegoat) in the cult of the gods” (1906: 306). Brought up within ubiquitous gendered structures underlying public and private manifestations (family, school, media among others) which are ritually performed, comforted by coded myths, females tend to evolve in complicity with their own marginalisation. While she is portrayed as seeking ‘normality’ and getting married, thus representing her salvation from society’s views of her as an individual, the *tawaif* is ineluctably written within an existing langue, re-iterated ritually.

Rebellion against societal *status quo* is shown, in Promethean fashion, to lead to the debacle of the rebel. Freud’s article “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” details the apparent paradox of an Aristotelian *catharsis* (emotional release) as a case of the projection of an inner conflict onto

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<sup>30</sup> In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler (2004: 1) defines gender as, “a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing...it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint”.

another context where it can be resolved beyond the possibility of personal harm to the spectator. According to Freud (1906), the precondition for ‘enjoying’ such an infliction of pain on stage is that the spectator should herself/himself be a neurotic since he argues that only a neurotic can feel within it the release of a repressed impulse instead “a simple aversion” (308-9). Further, neurosis requires a ritual revisiting and temporary resolution: for the neurotic “the repression is on the brink of failing; it is unstable and needs a constant renewal of expenditure” (Freud 1906: 309). Such a ‘ritual performance’ founds the base of the performativity of identity:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation (Butler 1990: 191).

In “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage”, *Hamlet* is described as a play whose psychic function is to resolve a conflict between the id and the superego. In the melodramatic structure of the *tawaif* film there are two struggles: one that is conscious and other, subconscious. The first is more manifest: a struggle between love and duty (to the *kotha*). In fact the more conscious struggle masks an inner struggle of identity between what is considered acceptable by society (the distinction *tawaif/begum*) and the individual desire (transcending the distinction) “Heroes are first and foremost rebels against God or against something divine; and pleasure is derived . . . from the affliction of a weaker being in the face of divine might” (1906: 306).

After the conflict, status quo is re-established and everything seems to be in its place, the “suppression of love by social culture, by human conventions,” (Freud 1906: 308). This cathartic moment could be said to be the opposite of the questioning and often major discomfort brought about by Avant-Garde *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>31</sup>

In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger argues that works of art are never passive representations, but active producers of a community’s shared existential understanding of the world. With typical gumption Heidegger reads art as a form of concealment, which is in the nature of art itself, since only concealment can then enable truth as unconcealment. Further, in the article, Heidegger distinguishes between artwork and the art object, the first of which is

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<sup>31</sup> As used by Bertolt Brecht, its inceptor, as opposed to Viktor Shklovsky’s more general use for literariness.



integrated into community life and the second when it becomes ready-to-hand, ‘made obvious’. Following from Heidegger’s (2008) premise that art is inevitably *about* something, and the Aristotelean idea of eliciting emotions, the main function of the *tawaif* film has been to perform the *tawaif* identity on its terms. It proceeds by concealing the ritual at hand and existentially impact upon the community.<sup>32</sup>

The function of the *tawaif* as social scapegoat is performed in a number of ways simultaneously, notably in terms of her representation on film. In terms of her many contemporary avatars, the subordinated *tawaif* can only be ‘heard’ by the world if she speaks the language of the oppressor and as we will see, for many reasons she cannot. Disparities between the nineteenth century Lucknow courtesan, its main inspiration and the Hindustani film courtesan are particularly telling. Many issues are raised by the new representations: for instance, the courtesan embodies angst over purity (as evidenced, among others, by the eponymous name “Pakeeza” in the film, the pure): is there a language outside the language of patriarchy once it establishes itself a self-evident? The *tawaif*’s body is used in films to ritually outperform the uncontrolled body (after Foucault), reflecting fear and therefore, following Kristeva’s theory of abjection, fascination. Above all, the ritual scapegoating serves to comfort status quo much as the Nietzschean Eternal Return provides a solace of temporal continuity. The many-layered status of the courtesan make of her an uncomfortable figure in an era of consensus and political correctness: too upper class, yet not upper-class enough; too feminist, yet not feminist enough. Thus, she continues to be marginalised for a variety of reasons. She is a spectral figure that reminds one how she fails to satisfy all politics. Thus, I argue, the *tawaif* is in many ways of those Spivak terms the *subaltern*, which is by no means a stable category.

Starting from Antonio Gramsci’s seminal *Prison Notebooks*, whereby the subaltern refers to groups that are excluded from dominant hegemonic power structures, Gayatri Spivak brings further nuance to the category, whereby in order to be heard and known, the oppressed subaltern is forced to adopt Western ways of *knowing*, of thought, reasoning, and language, in short onto-epistemological dimensions. Spivak’s Subaltern Studies straddles fields such as postcolonialism, history, anthropology, sociology and, inevitably, Cultural Studies. The Subaltern Studies Group

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<sup>32</sup> Increasingly, the term community relates to a virtual (in the sense of the extra-territorial) multimedia community. See below for a fuller discussion.

is a collection of South Asian historians who explore the political-actor role of men and women who form the mass population — rather than the political roles of the social and economic élites — in the history of South Asia. The specific nature of Spivak’s subaltern lies in that, swamped under dominant politico-cultural voices, the subaltern’s voice has no chance of ever being heard. In spite of this oft-repeated adamant note, in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak warns against essentialising the concept (she terms this ‘romanticiz(ing) the oppressed’) as helping the very system one seeks to undo. This opens up to contemporary identity theories that eschew the self as stable, referring most notably to Derrida and to Butler, and as eschewing accountability within given social structures, referring most notably to Bhabha.

Spivak’s wider project can be summarised very simply in her own terms as: ‘learning how to unlearn’. Unlearning is an internal process – it isn’t about identifying a specific category alone. It is in fact a set of matrices involving relationships between the object of analysis and the world but also, a form of exercise in self-reflexivity, relationships between the enquirer and in turn the world s/he inhabits, including the privileged status this implies. These sets of worlds, it follows, need to be uncovered as constructions and this is part of the transformation in lucidity that subalternity implies.

In an interview in 1992, Spivak expresses her concern about misuse of the term subaltern as she sees it:

. . . *subaltern* is not just a classy word for “oppressed”. . . In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference... The working-class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern. . . . Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don’t need the word ‘subaltern’ (De Kock 1992: 45).

In more recent interviews Spivak has disavowed the term subaltern altogether while keeping the concept, suggesting the misuse leads to the very essentialisation subalternity seeks to liberate from. In terms of discursive action, two options open up: either a more exclusive sense of subaltern, as Spivak seems to be recommending here, or a less exclusive formula, but one that is only *strategically* essentialist, given to changes. A term that is associated with Spivak, strategic essentialism, summarises the apparently paradoxical stance. Categorisation itself is problematic, corresponding to coming out of a closet merely to enter another (Butler, 2006 and above). While

identity categories can be bracketed off for intermediate purposes, such as academic investigation, one needs also be aware of their basic inaccurate, inadequate, volatile and arbitrary natures. Spivak's strategic essentialism can thus be assimilated to a Derridean *sous-rature*, play (after Heidegger's theory of erasure): "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since the word is necessary, it remains legible" (Derrida 1974).

Thus, *tawaiifs* are bound within the language of patriarchy, as the world into which they are 'thrown'. Even their subversion is recuperable within a logic of purity and in terms of such defining binaries as the "Madonna/whore" complex. Thus, although Anarkali is subversively, in the song sequence "Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya?" ("When in love why be afraid?") from *Mughal-e-Azam*, defying the Emperor of India, the formidable Akbar the Great himself, she is doing so for her love of Prince Saleem, and is thus immediately re-inscribed within a bourgeois family structure of marriage and motherhood as the only alternative enunciation to prostitution. The semantics of purity is crossed out/bracketed off but maintained for the intermediate purpose of allowing scrutiny into things-as-they-are.

Alterity is a relation and not a totality. Instead of merely critiquing the West as other for instance, Spivak proposes an understanding of the world you are thrown into as it is, as an uninterrupted continuum, much like Heidegger. Existentially, if *Dasein*, Heidegger's Being is 'the human Being' and existence is 'the world,' then *Dasein* and the world are one (Heidegger 1996). Further, in the being of every human, it is always already with others of its kind. According to Heidegger, we are inauthentic when we fail to recognize how much and in what ways how we think of ourselves and how we habitually behave is influenced by our social surroundings. Existence can only be authentic when we pay attention to that influence and decide for ourselves whether to go along with it or not (ibid.). Living entirely without such influence, however, is not an option. In fact, we are always given to the world in terms of a mood and that is inevitable. Thus, speaking in the name of someone else or in the name of a group is equally problematic, as Butler reminds us. As Butler also reminds us, speaking in our own names is no less problematic. Indeed, Spivak states: "a person's or group's identity is relational, a function of its place in a system of differences" (Spivak 1988).

Spivak (1988: 4) further states: “the colonised subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous.” This corresponds to Bhabha’s engagement with identity as Being-in-the-World as hybrid, as ambivalent and given to mimicry. Subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social group(s) who hold hegemonic power. Context is a complex and fragile relationship between Being, its world, the enquirer and her/his world. In an interview in 1993, Spivak states: “I have to really be on my feet learning new things all the time, and as I learn these new things, my positions change” (24).

The dancing courtesan of Hindustani cinema, the *tawaif*, although based on a figure of privilege, moneylender to nawabs and sometimes marrying Kings and becoming rulers can be considered of the subaltern. Further, even the original *tawaif*, although in so many ways privileged was also subaltern.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In *Pakeezah*, the Hindustani cinema *tawaif* is altered from her main historical inspiration, the courtesan from nineteenth-century Lucknow in Northern India and thus from representation to representation, the mythical figure is twice othered. In many ways, the courtesan has had to speak the language of patriarchy as a woman, then the language of heteronormativity, then the language of dominant colonial power, the British, although she has, after Bhabha, also used the poetic space to subvert the givens.

As a mythopoeic mainstay over the last four decades of the twentieth century and ever since persistent under various avatars, the Hindustani film courtesan is inevitably intentional, *about* something (in the philosophical sense) and therefore serving a psychic social function. Disparities between the living nineteenth century Lucknow courtesan, its main representation, and the Hindustani film courtesan are particularly telling. Many issues are raised by the new representations: for instance, the courtesan embodies angst over purity (as evidenced, among others, by the eponymous name “Pakeeza” in the film, the pure), used in films to ritually outperform the uncontrolled body (after Foucault), reflecting fear and therefore, following Kristeva’s theory of abjection, fascination. Above all, the ritual scapegoating (she will almost inevitably die) serves to comfort status quo much as the Nietzschean Eternal Return provides a

solace of temporal continuity. Yet, the courtesan also functions within that performance of purity, her identity being *performed* in terms of it.

The many-layered status of the courtesan makes her an uncomfortable figure in an era of consensus and political correctness: too upper class, yet not upper-class enough; too feminist, yet not feminist enough. The courtesan does not inhabit stable ontological categories. Thus, she continues to be marginalised for a variety of reasons. She is a spectral figure that fails to satisfy all politics, as such a persistent subaltern. Undecidability is, in fact, the heart of the theory of the subaltern and makes for a multi-layered ontology, both text and context, half-established, half-heuristic, engaging objects and their representations, engaging object, subject and reader/critic as existential continuum.

Phallogocentrism follows a Hegelian logic whereby both the master and his “other” are compelled to adopt opposite and complementary identities which in the end reinforce both categories and the line of difference that distinguish them. Similarly, in Western culture, male oppression of women, colonialist oppression of native peoples and human oppression of nature are justified on the same basis: the construction of the dominant human male as a self fundamentally defined by the property of reason. In *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power* (1992) Stuart Hall elaborates on the responsibility of discourse in reinforcing Western dominance. Initially, the notion of the subaltern is applicable to those who were excluded by the centralising discourses of colonial administration. Now it applies to a variety of contexts including pressures on countries to modernise in accordance with a Western model of modernity and development. Bhabha’s mimicry (as part of the Third Space), a model developed primarily along postcolonial lines is transferable, as dynamics, to the *tawaiif*’s condition. Thus, Bhabha (1995) is based on reading the often maligned colonised’s imitation of the culture of the coloniser (the ‘brown sahib’), instead as “recalcitrance”, as part of a strategy of resistance as a form of appropriation of the Other. Interestingly, mimicry is ‘ambivalent’: both an inscription of the coloniser as centre and a parodic cultural reappropriation. It serves for instance to disrupt notions that cultures are fixed totalities “authenticated by the originary past” and capable of more than partial truths, but more specifically in *The Location of Culture*, the Western culture. The world of the historical *tawaiif* mimics the world of the *begum* much as patriarchy acts as a form of colonialism. As a strategy of resistance, its dynamics was similarly ‘ambivalent’, working

both as part of an inescapable social bind that only allowed a power-behind-the-throne form, and a disruptive rewriting of the patriarchal system at work in the nineteenth century society of Lucknow. As a reversal of power structures, this gesture can be read as a gazing-back of the *tawaif*.



### **3. The Becoming of the *Tawaif***

#### **3.1 The Argument**

This chapter proceeds to explore the *tawaif* in line with de Saussure (1959), and subsequently Derrida (1967) regarding how things are definable in terms of what they are not, and in line with Butler (1990) who proposes identities not as a *being* but as a *becoming*.

The courtesanness of the courtesan is explored in this chapter. One isn't born a courtesan but becomes one. As such, the courtesan is located as context and function. Contextually, she is located in terms of a politics of gazing. I proceed by exploring the life of the historical *tawaif* and the various ways she was received, especially by the British. I compare her existential with that of the *geisha*, in an attempt to nuance our understanding of each.

#### **3.2 The Red *Dupatta***

*Pakeezah* tells the story of Sahibjaan, a courtesan who was renamed Pakeezah (the Pure of Heart) by her beloved Salim. Her father's (Shahabuddin) aristocratic family rejected her mother Nargis as a courtesan and she goes to live in a graveyard. Nargis dies during childbirth, and her sister, Nawabjaan, brings Sahibjaan up in turn as a courtesan in her mansion, where she becomes a sought-after dancer. Initially unaware that she was a courtesan, forest ranger Salim Ahmed Khan, falls in love with her when he sees her on a train and leaves a poem celebrating her feet. Rejecting the approaches of a prince (in contradiction with the implicit mores of courtesanship), Sahibjaan eventually elopes with Salim. But Sahibjaan realizes she cannot escape her fate: she is recognised by men wherever she goes in the company of Salim. So when Salim takes her to a priest to perform marriage rites, she runs back to the *kotha*. Salim eventually decides to marry another woman, and invites Sahibjaan to sing and dance at his wedding as a courtesan. Sahibjaan dances, but over broken glass from a shattered chandelier, until she falls unconscious. Shahabuddin is, serendipitously, Salim's uncle. Nawabjaan acidly points to the irony of a man watching his own daughter dance as a courtesan and ends up recognising Sahibjaan as his daughter. History won't repeat itself after all.

*Pakeezah* is, to many, the quintessential Hindustani cinema courtesan film. It is the life-story of Sahibjaan, who is given the name "Pure of Heart", "Pakeezah" in Urdu, and indeed, following



from conservative definitions of purity, throughout the film, her quest is to marry the man she loves and lead a ‘respectable’ life away from the *kotha*, the courtesan-house (or more accurately here, the courtesan’s mansion).

*Pakeezah* carries a number of the most memorable *mujras* of Hindi cinema. At an early point in the film, one of the best known cinematic *mujras* (lavish artistic performances associated with *tawaiifs*) takes place, during the song *Inhin logon ne*, during which there is a play over a red *dupatta*. Sahibjaan/Pakeezah (often given both names in this thesis since she is renamed Pakeezah the Pure towards the end of the film and it is possible she is troubled by the name) sings to the rich men who have come to watch her dance for the *mujra*, that unnamed men have stolen her *dupatta*:

*inhin logon ne inhin logon ne inhin logon ne*  
These people, these people, these people  
*inhin logon ne le linaa dupattaa meraa...*  
These people have taken away my scarf...<sup>33</sup>

The *dupatta* (or *odhni*) is a long and generally medium breadth scarf generally worn loose by women across South Asia as a sign of modesty and *izzat* (honour). Generally decorative, it is used mostly to cover the head and drape the contours of the upper torso as revealed by tighter clothes. The *dupatta* is often used solely as a fashion accessory, or – especially in diasporic contexts - as a marker of cultural identity. It is usually worn thin and transparent by the courtesan, is an ideal item to reflect, on the one hand, sexual modesty, on the other, sexual invitation as an apparent paradox. In fact, sexual invitation inevitably implies sexual restriction and this corresponds to classic Freudian *fort-da*.

In Pakeezah’s performance, the red *dupatta* is a ‘thinly-veiled’ reference to virginity or more generally to sexual honour. Polysemically, the colour red is meant to remind one of both virginal blood and the colour of the dress of most Hindu and Muslim Indian brides, with both possibly connected symbols. The story is here of a symbolic (or actual) rape, and of the loss of agency. There is thus a definite undercurrent of pain to the more flippant registers and this melancholic undertone even to a light song is typical of almost every song of the Hindustani film *tawaiif*.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.hindilyrics.net/translation-Paakeezah/Inhi-Logon-Ne.html> [accessed on 31 March 2009 at 00.12 Mauritius Standard Time]

Paradoxically, Pakeezah is lamenting to the very men who have paid to watch her with greedy eyes that someone stole her *dupatta*! But this is done deliberately, as a tease (see figs 2, 3 and 4 below). Within that more or less subtle game lies the gist of the courtesan's world – *nakhra* and *takalluf*. In Urdu culture, the notion of *nakhra* refers to coquetry, and *takalluf* refers to etiquette associated with sublimation, the art of sublimating what both addressee and addressor are aware is a substitution. Within the bounds of this etiquette lies the ethico-aesthetic world of the courtesan, on the one hand a repressive past world for the courtesan, on the other perhaps a comparatively liberating future for a real 19<sup>th</sup> century courtesan; on the one hand, the space for a most refined aesthetics, but on the other, one that hides many evils, from an encouragement to many men to abandon their household responsibilities to an entrenchment of gender and class prejudices. The central '*takalluf*' here is evidently of the sublimation of prostitution, first through the willed disappearance of the *tawaiif* as body, then the 'invisibility' of the *tawaiif*'s clients (see Chapter 4).



Fig 2 Pakeezah teases the watching men with her diaphanous red *dupatta*



Figure 3 One of the men pulls at her *dupatta*...



Figure 4.... Pakeezah stops, and wrests the *dupatta* from his hands, with playful, affected demureness.

The *dupatta* in a *mujra* (dance performance) as sensual play (see figs 2, 3 and 4) signifies the fetishistic absence/presence one can associate with the dynamics of strip-tease in terms of hiding

and revealing. It marks the perpetual postponement of the vagina, offering instead the oblique gaze (reference to Robert Doisneau's classic photograph – fig. 5 below) of the half-hidden face (see figs 6, 7 and 8 below).

Using Mulvey's distinction, whereby there are two distinct modes of the male gaze: "voyeuristic" (seeing women as 'whores') and "fetishistic" (seeing women as divinity) in classic Hollywood film (especially of the 1950s and the 1960s), classic perceptions of the Hindustani cinema courtesan (a close parallel to the 'fallen woman with a golden heart' can be categorised as both simultaneously). Mulvey's own classification is based on Freudian terms as responses to male "castration anxiety" caused by the female's lack of a penis. In the Hindustani cinema text, this corresponds to the performance of the courtesan, where the mirror is doubled – the cinematic performance, itself framed, in turn frames a *kotha* performance. Men experience castration anxiety particularly when the female, as icon, is displayed for the gaze and for the enjoyment of men:

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma, counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The first avenue, voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt, asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness (Mulvey 1995: 12-13).

Mulvey used some of these concepts to argue that the cinematic apparatus of classical Hollywood cinema inevitably put the spectator in a masculine subject position, with the figure of the woman on screen as the object of desire, thereby eliciting gazes that are both "voyeuristic" and "fetishistic".

The spectator's relationship to the onscreen dancing courtesan can be inscribed within such a double identification – voyeuristic and fetishistic. Her identification as dancing courtesan, itself a sublimation of her profession as prostitute (or more accurately the act of performing, performs her identity by soliciting an ambiguous gaze, both as something despicable (figuratively and literally, a 'slut', as opposed to a 'Madonna') and as something to be adulated (an inaccessibly

perfect goddess). In act, they are not contradictory viewpoints, merely two reactions to the same event and they even overlap: the woman represented both as an invitation and as aloof and inaccessible.

In *Pakeezah*, the main actor, forester Salim Ahmed Khan, leaves behind a note at the foot of Sahibjaan, at this stage, just a sleeping woman on a train: *Aap ke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai. Inhe zameen par mat utariyega -- maile ho jayenge* (“I saw your feet, they are very beautiful. Don’t place them on the ground, as they will get dirty”).<sup>34</sup> In fact the woman is a courtesan, whose feet dance for money, which according to a patriarchal structure of judgement, makes her ‘impure’.<sup>35</sup> In the end, however, both judgements are inscribed within the same fetishistic patriarchal episteme (a discussion of which appears in the next section below).

In many of these occasions of an ‘oblique gaze’ (reference to Doisneau’s photograph – fig. 5) by the *tawaif* is an indirect invitation to gaze at her with the impunity of knowing that the gaze cannot be returned, and her eyes do not return the gaze of a significant agent (see fig. 11 below). Even where there are signs of such an agent with some autonomy, (figs 6, 7, 8) the invitation, with lascivious kohl-lined eye movements and the various ambiguities of the *dupatta* encourage the ‘male’ gaze. While it can be argued that Mulvey’s polarised reading of the gaze is very useful, many feminists, especially since the advent of Third Wave feminism, have tried to either to nuance her views or oppose them. Richard Dyer (1992: 108) compares the gazing back of male and female models: “When the female pin-up returns the viewer’s gaze, it is usually some kind of smile, inviting. The male pin-up, even at his most benign, still stares at the viewer.”

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<sup>34</sup> translation mine.

<sup>35</sup> Compare to *Pakeezah*, the pure, which according to an episteme of purity, is intended to be paradoxical.





Figure 5: Robert Doisneau – *Un Regard Oblique* 1948. Note how, in *mise-en-abyme* fashion, neither the woman in the painting frame, nor the woman within the photographic frame disrupt the man's gaze by looking back at him. The gaze of the person watching the Doisneau photograph is invited to adopt the man's gaze, unable (perhaps uninterested in) what the woman is watching. The man's gaze thus occupies the entire visual space and in symbolic terms obviates the woman as subject within the visual economy. Gazing thus performs ontological inequality (see for instance Foucault (1975) for a discussion of Bentham's panopticon (see earlier footnote) as a metaphor for contemporary political docility as constructed by an "unequal gaze." Finally compare the lewd gaze of the man here with the gazes of the men at the *Inhin logon ne mujra* (fig. 2 above)



Figure 6: In the *Inhin logon ne mujra*, the *dupatta* serves to conceal/reveal Pakeeza's face, obliquely, as fetish



Figure 7. An earlier example from *Kohinoor* (1960), of the dancer-courtesan gazing seductively through the thin *dupatta*. Note how while the eyes speak of confidence here while still averted and, after a fashion, coy.



Figure 8 – A more contemporary example from *Devdas* (Bhansali 2003) – the song “Maar Dala” performed as a *mujra* by Chandramukhi the *tawaif*.

The being of the *tawaif* points to the fact that, following Butler’s performativity, underneath the *dupatta* there is nothing to ‘uncover’ except the performance of identity. Demonstratively, the *dupatta* is a prop that helps in the performance the myth of the feminine (through rituals of seduction played out as a hunter/hunted) through a complex power-play very much connected to gazing: while its handling by the rich man watching the performance says much about his sense of ownership of her as a woman, Sahibjaan/Pakeeza’s simultaneous appropriation of a residual “power-behind-the-throne” within the space of performance as play (in the episode, Sahibjaan/Pakeeza actually offers one man her *dupatta*, a deliberate metaphor, although questions both of agency, and the possibility of parody within the world of the courtesan are raised). It also bespeaks of a feudal class system and the power wielded by the upper classes over the lower. Thus the *dupatta* signals various other performances, but also, much like Butler’s drag, and more generally, her definition of ‘gender trouble’, that which uncovers the fact that all identity is fictive (or Butler’s “‘fictional’”).



Bhaskar & Allen (2002: 44) establish the centrality of the *mujra* performance to Hindustani cinema:

The space of the *mehfil* where the *mujra* takes place is central to genre of the Courtesan film. It is at once an architectural environment, a social space and a performance space in which the spectacle of song and dance and the cinematic rendition of that spectacle cohere, and in which the entertainment offered to the spectator within the film interacts in complex ways with the entertainment of the film.

*Mujra* itself is both the theatricalisation (and production) of a male/female heteronormative relationship, and its subversion. The repetitive *mujra* of the *tawaif* functioned as the performance of patriarchal hierarchy and all at once its transgressions and this served as a pharmacon to patriarchal anxieties and insecurities. Applying Butler, all identity is a performance and the performing *tawaif* evinces that all identity is performative.<sup>36</sup> Butler in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” (2006) gives the example of drag as a subversion of all gender, and ultimately of identity itself that is more radical than generally given. She refines the lack of an originary as “(a)n imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original. (314). Indeed, “if it were not for the notion of the homosexual *as* copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality *as* origin.” (313)

In this post-structuralist stance is the nutshell of Butler’s article. But its rhetoric is just as significantly post-structuralist. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” asks questions rather than providing answers to them since it is about playing (in the Derridean sense) with categories that are already firmly entrenched to denounce them as undecidable while trying to seem stable. This provocation is strategic, akin to Foucault’s avowed interested in writing a history of problems rather than a history of solutions, such that history “becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviour, habits, practices and institutions” (Foucault 2001:74).

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<sup>36</sup> “The “being” of the subject is no more self-identical than the “being” of any gender;” (Butler 2006: 314)

The *mujra* is the re-iterated performance of a heterosexual identity which, much like drag in Butler 2006<sup>37</sup>, a theatricalisation of the heterosexual hierarchies and games of power through the complex eye contacts and the exciting ambiguities of the *dupatta*, which is used as play with male gazing as centre. Thus, the *mujra* is a performance of patriarchal hierarchies that form part of the structural construction of gender identity itself and the creation of categories such as hetero-/non-hetero- sexualities. It is, as described by Oldenburg (1984) and (1990) above, of a world that escapes the patriarchal but is all at once re-inscribed into it as excitable<sup>38</sup> transgression:

acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions (Butler 2006: 315).

The *mujra*, through repetition, constructs heterosexual identity within the space of the *Kotha*. The naturalness of the heterosexual body is constructed by being repeatedly performed: “a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of a boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Butler, 1993: 8). Young aristocratic males were sent to *tawaiifs* to complete their education and this mimicry of motherhood acknowledges in a perverse manner, that males are merely ancillary to the matriarchal as the reproductive vehicle for humankind. The anxiety that this brings about is comforted by the illusion that it is the *tawaiif* herself who desires the sexual relationship, and her ‘maternal’ eyes bashfully look away while inviting a gaze unhindered by her looking back. There is in fact sado-masochistic pleasure in the ambiguities of power and domination.

Meanwhile, at the conscious level, the justification for the play is of *izzat* (roughly translatable as honour, as symbolized by the *dupatta*), and the mood is playful and jocular – but this is just play-acting. The *mujra* reassures patriarchy not only by not opposing it, but satisfying and serving it, both consciously and unconsciously. After all, in epistemic terms, a function or an institution cannot be enduring, especially in patriarchal societies unless it ultimately fits the patriarchal system.

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<sup>37</sup> The professionalization of gayness requires a certain performance, and production of a “self” which is the *constituted effect* of a discourse that nevertheless claims to “represent” that self as a prior truth (Butler, 2006: 310)

<sup>38</sup> used in the sense of Butler 1997 as “out of control” (15) in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*.

When Aretha Franklin sings, “you make me feel like a natural woman,” she seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural “position” of woman as object of heterosexual recognition... Aretha sings, you make me feel *like* a natural woman, suggesting this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of heterosexual drag” (Butler 2006: 317).

When looked at from a certain point-of-view, the most obviously docile performance may hide complex and indirect forms of resistance. According to Butler, common wisdom conceives drag as a mere replication of categories male/female but is in fact a subversion of these categories and their denunciation as mere performance:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation... there is no originary or primary gender that drag imitates but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original* (Butler 2006: 313).

According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975), power is strategic and not fixed. Further, Foucault is opposed to the commonly held belief that knowledge exists independently of power relations. The *mujra* itself, as can be seen from its classic example above, *Inhin logon ne* is parodic of the relationship between men and women, with the suggestion that the older men watching Sahibjaan/Pakeeza dance ought to be her protectors against the man who “took her *dupatta*”. There is, in the ambivalence between the jocular and the serious, in the *dupatta* that serves to both conceal and uncover, in the language that both invites and chides, something of the ontological undecidability of drag performance, and a denouncement of the *tawaif*'s condition.

Within the world of the *tawaif*, performance of the *tawaif* as identity is actually formalised in that the woman takes on a new name.<sup>39</sup> Sahibjaan is renamed Pakeezah in *Pakeezah* but by her lover, Salim Khan; Amiran, *Umrao*<sup>40</sup> in *Umtrao Jaan*; and Nadira is given the name (title)

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<sup>39</sup> See Chakravarty, 1993: 276.

<sup>40</sup> According to the novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* she earns her title *Jaan* after her name once she entertained her first client.

Anarkali (pomegranate blossom) by Emperor Akbar in *Mughal-e-Azaam*. Thus, what is particularly significant in the *tawaif*'s condition is that, unlike most constructions of female identity – or of any identity – consistently, there is evidence of an organic awareness of the performativity of being-*tawaif*. Thus, the ‘re-naming’ of the *tawaif* is, in strategic terms, similar to the *mujra*, a theatricalisation of sexual difference and – like drag for Butler – an ironical distanciation from its essentialising tendencies within the patriarchal structure. As we will explore, the everyday existentials of the *tawaif* is repetitively an appropriative and, often, subversive mimic of the courts where she danced, sang, and recited. The habit of changing names to indicate change in status was consistent in the Mughal courts, but was mostly reserved for kings and queens and aristocrats. At the other end of the social spectrum, lower prostitutes often change their names. What brings together kings and queens and prostitutes is, of course, the performance of a change in role and identity. There exist no original identities that are not performed – the only distinction regarding identity and the performative is in terms of whether the identity formation is open to its own performativity or conceals it with discourse. The *tawaif* identities – within societal limits - tend to belong to the first, for instance through mimicry of aristocracy and of patriarchy within a variety of registers, including that of the parodic.

Renaming an individual with a *tawaif* name helps uncover the effect of what Butler describes in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (2006) happens when she is identified as a lesbian: “One risk I take is to be recolonized by the sign under which I write.” (256). The risk a *tawaif* who is perceived as a *tawaif*, and not as a woman who is being a *tawaif* is the ontological reduction of the woman to a *tawaif*, much as Butler’s identity as lesbian reduces all she is to being a lesbian, which is impossible to define: she asks, is sexuality a phantasy structure, an act, an orifice, a gender, an anatomy? Butler thus argues that the act of ‘coming out of the closet’ (revealing a non-heterosexual identity to others) is an act of opening up another closet:

Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying-points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression (Butler 2006: 256).

“Coming out” as emerging from any identity category (lesbian, *tawaif*, short person) leads to an essentialisation of only one aspect of an agent’s full identity with the delusionary belief that that one aspect can be somehow rendered into a comprehensive, integrated and accountable set of practices. Renaming is a strategy that allows for the slippage of the *tawaif* into the category

tawaif to be made obvious and therefore questionable. However, as will be clear in the section below and elsewhere, regulatory regimes (whether in the shape of the Mughal, British colonial, general Indian independence movements, certain feminist movements, modern Muslim and Hindu purist motions, modern South Asian governments, or Hindustani cinema), by each responding to the identity category as a given, fail to engage with the undecidable complexity of identity construction itself and how the patriarchy that created the identity is rhizomatous and therefore the 'issue' of the *tawaif* cannot be isolated from a patriarchal dynamics that continuously reproduces similar discourses under different forms.

### **3.3 The Historical *Tawaif* – the Past's Present and the Present's Past**

Foucault's genealogical method is freely inspired by Nietzsche's own criticism of genealogists of his time in *On the Genealogy of Morals* as neglectful of a history of power relations, which he acknowledges in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (Foucault 1984). Foucault's own genealogical approaches seek to uncover the constitution of discourse while eschewing the drawing of metanarrative (*grand récit*) conclusions. His constant repositionings have provided novel, strategically unfinished histories that reveal all truths as unreliable: "he who listens to history finds that things have no pre-existing essence, or an essence fabricated piecemeal from alien forms." (78). The aim of the Foucauldian genealogy was to multiply entry-points to an object so as to escape from historiographical and metaphysical orientations towards an imagined origin:

... if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and the metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process. (86)

Every period operates according to a number of often contradictory *zeitgeists*, of networks of criss-crossing power structures that mark a world (*welt*). This concern to identify both what is specific to a period of time and what constitutes common denominators with other periods is characteristic of the oeuvre of Foucault.

Thus bodies, for instance, are inscribed into history and a history of how bodies are read during different moments of history uncovers existential fragments that can help enlighten investigators about the relationship between the collective and the individual, the 'public' and the 'private', the official and the officious and the use of the body of the *tawaiif* is particularly given to these complexities:

The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances (Foucault 1984: 87).

In our texts, more official history merges with more anecdotal approaches, tranguating with Hindustani cinema as mythical narrative, none of them privileged as carrying a clear metaphysical origin for a stable truth:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body (Foucault 1984: 83).

For Foucault (1970), episteme refers to unconscious grounds underlying the production of knowledge and its discourses in a given period in time. Several epistemes may co-exist and interact at the same time, as parts of various power-knowledge systems. Further, Foucault resists the idea of one principle or one foundational base to explain an event out. Instead, he favours an uncovering of the complex correlation of various elements. Among these is an understanding that while different periods in time compare with each other, they also show correspondences. However, no definitive conclusions remain possible, since there is nothing finite or definitive about how we define periods of time. The present is inevitable, since the past is mostly readable, even by well-advised investigators, as mediated by the present.

Whether during the Mughal period, the British colonial period, post-independence or currently in Indian history, a mind/body dichotomy stands as the foundation for judgements passed, one can therefore generalize by stating that although there are a number of further nuances, the differences when locating the *tawaiif* above all within a patriarchal structure of sexuality, resides more in degree than in nature. After all, the Being-*tawaiif* is in itself only definable in terms of a

patriarchal sexual relationship. The term *tawaif* itself as nomenclature pre-eminently describes the *tawaif*'s sexual relationship. The location of the woman as nothing more than a sexual being, identifiable for our purposes in cinema through the expression of centrality of male agency in the male gaze as the sole gaze of significance is of an economy that is heterosexual in construction<sup>41</sup>. Watching of every description is inevitably expressible in terms of the male gaze<sup>42</sup>. Similarly, discussing the *tawaif* is by its very definition, an exploration of sexuality. For instance, during the *mujra*, the overall *angarkha* dress that the *tawaif* wears is overly feminized with sequins, complete with a *dupatta*, inscribing it within a strict economy of sexual difference. Such an inscription is extended to the dance movements of the *kathak* form, which are executed with the gracefulness associated in the patriarchal construction with the feminine. *Mujra* is thus a performance of the everyday performativity of sexual difference.

Veena Talwar Oldenburg, arguably the best modern authority on contemporary Indian courtesans and their sense of the professional pedigree describes how the *tawaif* would often have sex with other women. This is supported by Saba Dewan's research.

Almost every one of the women with whom I had private conversations during these many visits claimed that their closest emotional relationships were among themselves, and eight of them reluctantly admitted that their most satisfying erotic involvements were with other women....

The frank discussions on the subject of their private sexuality left some of my informants uneasy. I had probed enough into their personal affairs, they insisted, and they were not going to satisfy my curiosity any further; they were uncomfortable with my insistence on stripping bare their strategic camouflage, by which they also preserved their emotional sanity. Their diffidence to talk about their lesbianism underscores their quiet but profound subversion of social values. It became clear that for many of them heterosexuality itself is the *lajawab nakhra*,

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<sup>41</sup> Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself... in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically c gendronsolidated phantasms of "man" and "woman", are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real. (Butler 2006: 313)

<sup>42</sup> see discussions in previous chapter, particularly Mulvey 1981. Further, according to Richard Dyer (1992), discussing differences in gazing back between male and female models:

Where the female model typically averts her eyes, expressing modesty, patience and a lack of interest in anything else, the male model looks either off or up. In the case of the former, his look suggests an interest in something else that the viewer cannot see - it certainly doesn't suggest any interest in the viewer. Indeed, it barely acknowledges the viewer, whereas the woman's averted eyes do just that - they are averted from the viewer. (104-105)

the ultimate artifice, credibly packaged with contrived passion and feigned orgasms. My ardour for precise statistics faded as the real meaning of their silences and their disguises began to sink in (Oldenburg 1990: Section 10).

It is telling of the pertinence of Butler's performativity to understanding identity that communities like the *tawaif* or drag artists develop, by virtue of their professional connections with the repeated performance of heterosexuality,<sup>43</sup> a strong sense of the playfulness of all sexual identity, since all sexual identities are, in Saussurean fashion (1959), produced by the patriarchal to define and refine heteronormativity. Such positionings emerge as a result of living existential adaptations and is not determined by academic theorising. Thus, since language precedes identity and produces it, the vocabulary and ontology to describe experience remains that of the world that the *tawaif* or drag artist is already thrown in. Any resistance to these inscriptions – in both cases, are *paroles* within the *langue* already established by patriarchy. Thus *tawaifs* can only be spoken of as *tawaifs*, a constructed ontological category, and the politics of resistance as *tawaif* can prove as precarious as Butler argues in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” regarding the act of ‘coming out of the closet’, which constitutes, she argues, entering a brand new closet, that of entrenching the definition of the self one seeks to free oneself from. Instead, the ‘only’ true alternative is to maintain a space of ambiguity, parody and mimicry.<sup>44</sup>

They [the *tawaifs*] referred to themselves as *chapat baz* or lesbians, and to *chapti*, or *chipti*, or *chapat bazi*, or lesbianism (after Shaikh Qalandar Bakhsh Jur'at, an Urdu poet from Lucknow, 1749-1809, wrote in rekhti, his now famous *Chapti Namah*). They seemed to attach little importance to labels, and made no verbal distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual relations. There was no other ‘serious’ or poetic term for lesbianism, so I settled for their colloquialisms. Their explanation for this was that emotions and acts of love are gender free. Normal words for love such as *mohabbat* (Urdu) or *prem* (Hindi), or love (English) are versatile and can be used to describe many kinds of love, such as the love of man or woman, the love for country, for siblings, parents of either sex. There was, in their view, no need to have a special term for love between two women, nor was there a need to flaunt this love in any way. There are words that suggest passionate love, like *ishq*; and are used by either gender. Although their

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<sup>43</sup> “The closer you are to a conjuror... the easier to spot the trick.” (Rushdie 1988: 363)

<sup>44</sup> The following is discussed in more detail later:

Male in-laws, particularly fathers and brothers-in-law, are caricatured in countless risqué episodes enacted regularly and privately among women. As things got more raucous I began to think that even their refined speech – *begamati zubaan* – seemed to be an affect. They ridiculed the aggression and brevity of sexual arousal in men, even as they amuse, educate, and edify the denizens of the *kotha*. These routines, embellished with their peculiarly rude brand of humour, irreverent jokes and obscene gestures, are performed like secret anti-rites, distilled and transmitted from generation to generation as their precious oral heritage (Oldenburg 1990: [7]).



bisexuality was a strictly private matter for them, the absence of a specialized vocabulary reduced it to a simple fact of their liberal lives, like heterosexuality, or the less denied male homosexuality. The lack of special vocabulary can be interpreted as the ultimate disguise for it; if something cannot be named it is easy to deny its existence. Urdu poetry, too, is often ambiguous about gender, and homosexual love often passes for heterosexual love. Many poems really express homosexual love, of the persona of the poem for a young boy, who is described in the idioms for feminine beauty (Oldenburg 1990: Section 10).

In a story characteristic of the general ambience of gender playfulness among *tawaiifs*, Navina Jafa (2003) details how even her investigation of *tawaiifs* of Delhi and Lucknow, whom she terms the liberated women of their time, took the form of drag. As she worked with real-life *tawaiifs* (Moti Jan, Chhoti Moti Bai, Zarina Jan and Mushtari Bai) who were going as far as denying even being *tawaiifs*, she found a rather subversive subterfuge to attend performances in Delhi, dressing up as a man. She states that the ruse worked so well, the women there considered her a very handsome man.

Oldenburg (1984: 138) explains in pecuniary terms, the *randi*, a courtesan of lower estimation than the *tawaiif*:

a *randi* . . . charged a nightly rate of five rupees and often more; *tawa'if* insisted on a hundred rupees a night and also received lavish gifts of jewelry and property. [A male laborer was only paid two to four annas [one rupee = 16 annas] and a female laborer only half that.)

The difference in income signals a difference in patronage in terms of art and general culture and therefore overall social status. The *tawaiif* had specific social and artistic roles (Feldman and Gordon 2006; Oldenberg 1984) in India, most notably in Lucknow: for instance the sons of the gentry were sent to the *Kothas* to learn etiquette and Urdu poetry and the art of lovemaking. Oldenberg 1984 describes the *tawaiif* as living in grand households (*kotha*) run by a chief courtesan (*choudharayan*), who had acquired wealth and fame through her beauty, music and dancing talents, which she used to set up her own house where she would recruit and train younger courtesans. The courtesan herself had to learn music, Persian and Urdu poetry, Arabic grammar, and to dance the *mujra*. The best houses kept skilled male musicians and such householders were important patrons of music. Other women living in the establishment,

including the regular prostitutes, but these were clearly distinct from the *tawaif*. This seems to be the case in much of Asia. Japanese courtesans, for instance, known as *Geisha*, were both artists and prostitutes, and were particularly respected, namely the *Oiran* class, and were distinguished from *yujo*, ordinary prostitutes. Swinton 1995 in particular details how the two highest levels of *Oiran*, the *tayu* and the *koshi* collapsed into *Oiran* by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this, as in many other respects, there are correspondences between the functions of the courtesan in the Japanese and Indian societies. Overall, there is more focus on art with higher courtesans like the *tawaif* and the *oiran* in comparison with European courtesans in general.

Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari (The Chess Players)* released in 1977, is based on Munshi Premchand's short-story of the same name. Around the time of *Recalcitrance – A Novel on the Events of 1857* aristocrats Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Raushan Ali are busy playing chess while Lucknow, under Wajid Ali Shah is being taken over by the British. Chess here can stand for a number of distractions, including, arguably those offered by courtesans, particularly since their immersion in the game makes the two chessplayers both irresponsible towards society (the collective) and towards their respective wives (family), who are given some prominence in the film and are played by two major Hindustani cinema stars, Shabana Azmi and Farida Jalal. Wajid Ali is also shown to be composing poetry and listening to music, although the film is less damning of him than of the two main protagonists. In the end, however, the film takes sides – late Laknawi nawab culture was mere decadence based on play. Although in the word *Shatranj Ke Khilari* it has lost the signified and merely refers to a chess-player, the word *khiladi* itself in Hindi/Urdu implies as trace, a jocular quality that is definable as the opposite of 'serious'. The asymmetry between the two male decadents and the female pragmatists, their wives, has cultural resonance in common cultural perceptions in modern culture about late Laknawi nawab culture based for instance on the life of formerly *tawaif* wife of the nawab Wajid Khan, Begum Hazrat Mahal, as mentioned earlier, who took over the administration of Oudh (Awadh) from her exiled husband, rallied others to the cause of opposing the British, recaptured Lucknow, named her son the new ruler, and was defiant to the end. This is in sharp opposition with the *nawab* who features according to many cultural perceptions as politically limp and as abandoning Lucknow too readily to walk into rather comfortable exile in Calcutta. A picture emerges of an all but matriarchal society where women carried a more pragmatic sense of business, while the men

indulged in merrymaking and poetry and this is epistemic (in Foucault's sense<sup>45</sup>) of the overall social worldview, iterable in both court and *kotha*, and presumably other arenas of everyday life in Oudh (Awadh). To understand how pragmatic leadership qualities were not exceptional in *tawaifs*, but directly ascribable to the tough school of life they had attended, is the case of Begum Samru, a *tawaif*, who headed a professionally trained mercenary army became a ruler of the principality of Sardhana in India in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She died one of the richest women ever.

The historical *tawaif*, whose profession in its complex form has all but disappeared from contemporary life except in Hindi cinema, has been read in many contradictory ways and an analysis of the use of her body over different periods provides a map to some of the worldviews associable to them. To summarise, while the profession existed there were genealogically specific ways of reading the *tawaif* that correspond to readings of the sexual of the time; during (British) colonial times, the profession was given the treatment of the Madonna/whore characteristic of the Victorian sexual mores; she is now subjected to the contemporary ambivalence around prostitution, the present context being the inheritor of the many past postures.

According to Bhaskar and Allen 2009, the 'Muslim' courtesan film in its historical form inevitably recreates the culture and habitus of nineteenth-century Lucknow, once capital of the princely Indian state of Oudh (Awadh). All geographical spaces are also cultural spaces in that cultural associations are inevitably made about them. The wealth of mnemonic cultural associations with the city of Lucknow, and its feeding of the imagination both in India and beyond, however, is quite unprecedented. It is surprising that whereas Oudh (Awadh) actually broke away from the Mughal Empire in the mid-eighteenth century, most of the cultural associations with Lucknow are concentrated on a very short period – the reign of Wajid Ali Shah (the fifth king and tenth Nawab of Oudh (Awadh)), just short of nine years, which ended in British annexation on 11 February 1847. The result of Wajid Ali Shah's own syncretic and subversive personality was the blurring of many distinctions in civil life such as Hindu/Muslim, religious/secular, courtesan/wife. Among the spaces such a world gave birth to was the mansion

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<sup>45</sup> See Foucault 1970.

of the higher courtesan, the *kotha*. The *tawaif*'s performance plays out – even in today's Hindustani cinema, the contradictions of that opposition of worlds. As well as associations of a lackadaisical culture, life in the *kotha* itself, the *tawaif*'s mansion, reflected the cultural openness.

Anurag Kumar's novel *Recalcitrance – A Novel on the Events of 1857* is set retrospectively in Lucknow at the time of the Mutiny and the British takeover. The narrator declares:

You will be quite amazed to know that under the liberal rule of the Nawabs, the Hindus and the Muslims got along very well with each other. Among the rich at least, it is said that their best friend is generally from the religion different from their own, that is, a Hindu's best friend would generally be a Muslim. Also, Lucknow is probably the only place where you would see that a Hindu has built an *Imambara* or a *mosque* and the Nawabs themselves frequently donated large sums for upkeep and even construction of Hindu temples (Kumar 2008: 9).

By moving from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to modern India, Kumar suspends definite judgement, introducing both an element of contemporary innocence and a contemporary comparative hindsight. The impression of Lucknow of the time is definitely of a liberal openness.

Underlying the openness that the artiness of Lucknow entails, suggestions of wanton idleness persist – an implicit criticism levied against the effect visits to the courtesan house has on men by many 'Muslim socials', both classic (pre-1960s) and New Wave (1970s and early 1980s) Hindustani cinema films (see below).

Oldenburg points out (in Oldenburg 1984, 2-3) how the *tawaif* were instrumental in helping the rebellion against the British. Indeed, she recalls her first 'encounter' with the Laknawi *tawaif* as revolutionary support:

When, in 1976, I was doing the research for a study on the social consequences of colonial urbanization in Lucknow, a city in northern India situated about a third of the way between Delhi and Calcutta, I came across its famous courtesans for the first time. They appeared, surprisingly, in the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 and in the related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation records' room. They were classed under the occupational category of "dancing and singing girls", and as if it was not surprise enough to find women in the tax

records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. The courtesans' names were also on lists of property (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. These women, though patently noncombatants, were penalized for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels (2-3).

The space created (and sustained) by the Lucknow elite courtesan was resistant and far from passive to the British imperialist. One of its most effective spaces of resistance was that of the *kotha*. The *tawaif* was in most terms part of the Laknawi elite, with not just a way of life to defend, but also wealth, and through it, material survival and dignity. The *kotha* mansion itself was built in an ideal "Orientalist"-style maze of rooms and corridors that offered privacy and space for conspiracy (moral secrecy, an assembly of males from the elite, architectural layout, often geographical location in designated areas, metaphorical and indirect rhetoric). The Laknawi *tawaif* herself had the money to support conspirators – however, such a power wasn't exceptional in both Muslim and Hindu kingdoms of South Asia.

Indeed, Oldenburg 1990 reads this power as resistance, to the British colonialism, and also to the patriarchal structure that dominated their being:

Characteristically they (the *tawaif* and presumably the *choudariyan*) responded by keeping two sets of books on their income, bribing the local *da'i*, or nurse, to avoid bodily inspections, bribing local policemen to avoid arrests for selling liquor to the soldiers, or publicly refusing to pay taxes even when threatened with imprisonment.

The tactics were new but the spirit behind them was veteran. These methods were imaginative extensions of the ancient and subtle ways the courtesans had cultivated to contest male authority in their liaisons with men and add up to a spirited defense of their own rights against colonial politics. Their loyalty to the king of Awadh's regime underscores the position and privileges that were the *sine qua non* of their existence (261).

The category *tawaif* itself is created out of an injustice (as exemplified in narrative terms by *Umrao Jaan* to name only one), the *tawaif* was ready to act within but also beyond what a pragmatic politics allowed, with a subversion that Oldenburg terms 'veteran' in spirit, inherited from generations of *tawaiifs* whose very survival depended on acting out. Such acting out might also be extended to the category feminine as constructed as normatively inferior within a

patriarchal structure and also based on 'acting' as Following from Bhabha and Butler, 'acting' can be read as a strategic mimicking that denounces *all* identity as acting. Indirectly acknowledging the same wider ontological motivation, Sharar offers a diametrically opposed tone in terms of conservative moral ethics when reading the *tawaif's* resistance and his (presumably) Indian Muslim denouncement rejoins the British denouncement of the 'nautch-girl' that we engage with next:

A cultivated man like Hakim Mahdi, who later became Vazir (prime minister), owed his initial success to a courtesan named Piyaro, who advanced her own money to enable him to make an offering to the ruler on his first appointment as Governor of the Province of Awadh (Sharar 1975: 192).

In fact, there are even a few instances of courtesans becoming queens, as is explored below. Sharar 1975 mentions the power of the courtesan in Lakhnawi society, he is referring to corruption of a moral nature (since the courtesan is after all, a prostitute) with only suggestions that it leads to political corruption. There is little sympathy there for the courtesan's own condition and its genealogy (in Foucault's sense), perhaps part of an older patriarchal and class strategy to blame the prostitute and not the *nawab*. This was and is still supported by a language that only limits discussions, for instance as to whether the *tawaif* had sex or not with her client, and is therefore condemnable, as opposed to the structure that allowed for the creation of the category *tawaif* in the first instance, a taxonomy within which all of society worked, lived, judged and died. There is a similar gesture to deny genealogy in the British colonial condemnation of the *tawaif*. Here again language itself is at the root of categorisation, and subsequently, definition and judgement.

The punishment by the British for the *tawaif's* involvement in the Mutiny reads like a list from Michel Foucault's oeuvre of a regime of rewards and punishment to maintain control over the body. Among others, in terms of the body diseased, literally, *tawaiifs* appeared in frequent official memoranda written in connection with venereal diseases that engulfed the military establishment in Lucknow, and the rest of British India, with one in every four European soldiers afflicted. Oldenburg 1984 points to the irony that it was the British soldiers who exposed these women to venereal infections, like syphilis, that were previously unknown in India and also how the British medical establishment of the British Raj never permitted a proper investigation into the cause of the venereal epidemic among European soldiers, such as homosexuality. An

omnibus law, enacted in 1864, made sure the profession was regulated and the women's bodies were regularly inspected and controlled, though not the bodies of their clients (which was the case in Victorian Britain as well). British propaganda against the reputation of the *tawaif* followed a code of contempt that was reserved for most Indians – the term 'nautch girl' was used as a Hobson-Jobson term, meaning dancing-girl but carrying strong undertones of moral and racial contempt. Oldenburg (1984: 265-266) further describes the sophisticated sense of history beyond a century old that even contemporary courtesans in very reduced circumstances had:

The older courtesans I interviewed, who felt keenly about contemporary politics, and had connections among the local power elite, were impressively knowledgeable about the history of their city. In their view it was official British policy to malign the courtesans and the culture of salons, in order to justify the British role as usurpers of the throne of Awadh in 1856... To consolidate their rule in the Province of Awadh, the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow, of which the *tawaif* were an integral part. Yet, when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon. It became official policy to select the healthy and beautiful "specimens" from among the *hotha*<sup>46</sup> women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers. This not only dehumanized the profession, stripping it of its cultural function, but it also made sex cheap and easy for the men and exposed the women to venereal infection from the soldiers.

As Gupta 2009 points out, after 1857, British Crown Law was brought into effect throughout India, *tawaifs* were criminalised alongside common prostitutes, with court judgements stating that singing and dancing were 'vestigial' activities while their real income came from prostitution. The forced exile of the king of Oudh (Awadh) and many of his courtiers abruptly put an end to royal patronage for the courtesans. The world of the courtesan further declined during the British period, and eventually independence, with the virtual abolition of *zamindars* (landowning aristocrats) by the Zamindari Abolition Acts, who had been the main patrons of courtesans:

Women, who had once consorted with kings and courtiers, enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends, were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British.  
(Oldenburg 1990:260)

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<sup>46</sup> Another spelling for *kotha*.

Further, Brown (2009) argues that the rising middle class, influenced by Victorian values and empowered by colonial law, increasingly dismissed the *tawaif* as immoral and decadent, and began various moves to ‘rescue’ Hindustani music from them. The campaign for a national music — cleansed of its associations with *tawaiifs* and Muslim musicians — aimed to make it appropriate for middle class women. Paradoxically, the very processes that enabled ‘respectable’ women to come out of purdah worked to make invisible the highly skilled, often highly educated, women who had been ‘in public’ all along: the *tawaif* (Gupta 2009).

Kenneth Ballhatchet concludes, in a very thorough book, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics 1973-1905*, “Rehabilitation (of *tawaiifs*) was precluded both by Indian realities and by British necessities” (Ballhatchet 1980: 20). The *tawaif* tradition was all but dislocated by the anti-nautch Movement initiated by the British in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, by and large an extension of the social purity movement in Britain, which found resonance in many existing traditions over purity among Muslims and Hindus and others at various points in the 19<sup>th</sup>, then 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The stated British drive to purify India also hid a desire both for revenge and forever disempower the *tawaif*, whose money and *kothas* had been so instrumental in harbouring and supporting anti-colonial rebellions (see captions to fig.s 9 & 10 below). When the courtesan tradition was revived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it acquired a mythical quality thanks to literature and eventually cinema, but lost much of it again by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century with the dismantling of India’s upper and upper middle classes. Most of what is left is two (some would argue opposite) heritage: a seedy skeletal form of prostitution with dancing and music (see *Chandni Bar* below) and a sublime contribution to classical Hindustani music and to Hindi cinema (as actresses and as theme).

One of the many novelties of Bhabha’s thinking is how it thinks not just in terms of power but also in terms of desire and pleasure<sup>47</sup>. British photography after the Mutiny, used at the service of colonial officialdom, is revealing of the ambivalent attitude<sup>48</sup> underlying the official political denigration of the *tawaif* and of the conscious and unconscious dynamics of such an attitude. There is little doubt that had cinema become a full industry, it would have supplanted British use of its ancestor, photography. The use of both arts, originaries to film and to the Hindustani film

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance Bhabha 1983: 156–61.

<sup>48</sup> Ambivalence is always implicit in the colonial discourse (Bhabha 1983; JanMohamed 1983, 1985; Spivak 1987).



industry are examples of how enduringly charming the colonial enterprise has been to the colonized and why its hegemony worked so effectively. Hindustani cinema, powerful as it is in the contemporary world, is an unplanned product of these arts. How the colonized could identify with the colonial enterprise despite their own obvious interests is very similar to how women identify with patriarchal interests in spite their own. A much neglected aspect of these hegemonies is seductive they are and have proved to be.

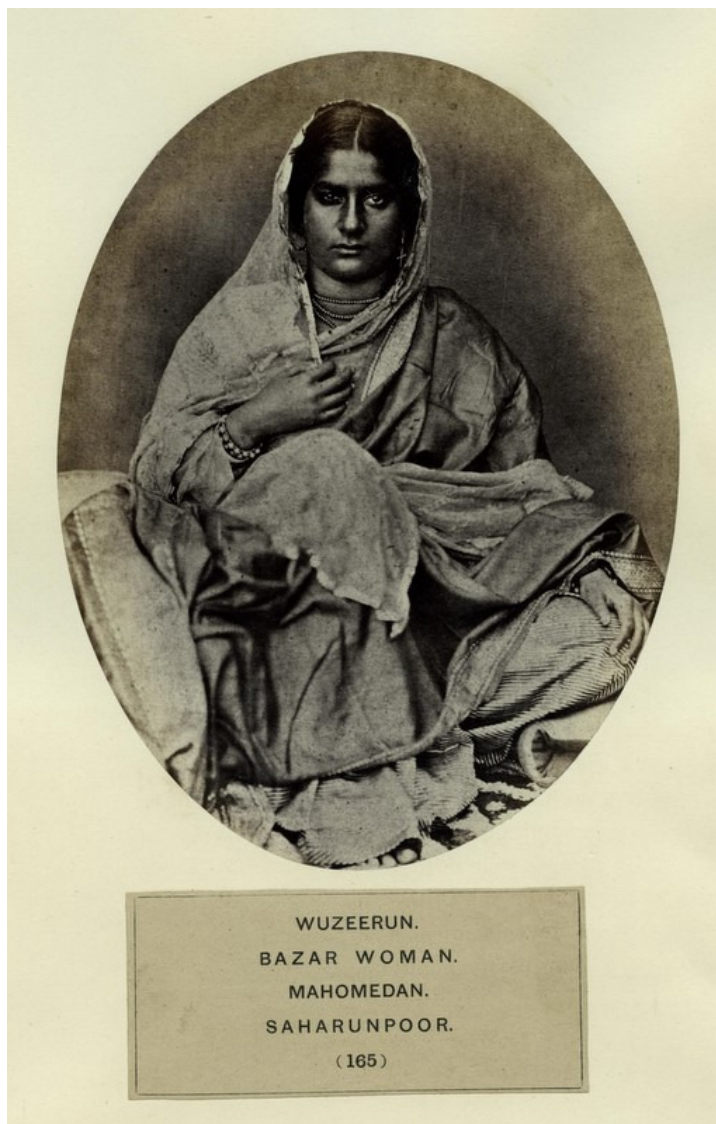


Figure 9. 1870s, from volume 3 of *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868.

Wuzeerun (fig. 9) is, most likely, a *tawaif* (see fig. 10 for a detailed description of her fine clothes and fig. 9 for a visual of the same). In fig. 9 above, although she is looking straight into the camera, there is ambiguity in the way she holds her *dupatta*: is she holding it together or opening it further? Perhaps the erotic potential lies within this very ambiguity: as with Pakeezah above, is this a playful invitation, or more excitingly, a touch of authentic innocence? In the generic term “bazar woman”, as with terms like “dancing girl”, or “nautch girl”, there is contempt – as so often with Hobson-Jobson English. The description that follows in fig. 10 below is attached in the book as a caption to the photograph of Wuzeerun above (fig. 9).

### WUZEERUN.—BAZAR WOMAN.

( 165 )

THIS photograph represents a Mahomedan bazar woman, or professional courtesan. Her dress is a yellow tunic, green silk trowsers, and red Cashmere shawl. There is little to be said for women of this class, who exist under many denominations all over India, and the nature of their profession debars description of them. Many are dancing women, Mahomedans as well as Hindoos. They can never contract real marriage, though some of them avail themselves of the form “Nika,” under the Mahomedan law, the offspring of which is legitimate, though in a secondary degree. In such cases those married and secluded become honourable women. Public courtezans are devoted by their families to the profession from their early youth; and, on attaining a fit age, they are married to a dagger, or a tree, with all the ceremonies of a real marriage. This custom obtains as well among Hindoos as Mahomedans. Many of the great Hindoo temples have bands of courtezans attached to them, who are maintained by the revenues of the establishment, and who follow their trade without public shame. It is a strange anomaly that, while a courtesan, born of, or adopted into, a courtesan family, is not held to pursue a shameless vocation, other women who have fallen from good repute are esteemed disgraceful. The practice of purchasing children to be instructed as courtezans was commonly practised some years ago, even in British territories, and is frequent at the present time in those of native Princes; but the stringent nature of the laws existent under the British rule against all practice of slavery, however it may be disguised, prevents any open violation of them, and the customs formerly existent can hardly now escape punishment.

Figure 10. From *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868<sup>49</sup>.

As well as revenge for the role of the *tawaif* against them in the Mutiny and their use as a scapegoat to explain the lust of British soldiers for Indian women and for each other, the British wanted to use the disparagement of the *tawaif* and of other prostitutes (terms used here without judgement against the women) to justify their rule during times (post 1857) when Indians, but also many among the British, were having doubts. The British were posing as liberators of India – especially in ethical terms - and using the proscription of the *tawaif* as an example of their moral superiority. Judgement against the *tawaif* is evident in: “There is little to be said for women of this class”. Judgement against the culture that promotes courtesanship is clear in: “Many of the great Hindoo temples have bands of courtezans attached to them, who are maintained by the revenues of the establishment, and who follow their trade without public shame,” in many ways a reminder of British postures regarding *sati*, or bride-sacrifice<sup>50</sup>. But then it becomes clear that *The People of India*, appearing so soon after the Mutiny, itself almost leading to British demise thanks to major financial and logistical contributions by the *tawaif*, while providing rebels with opportunities for concealment and ambush, those terms are part of a political propaganda to support British rule. Thus while there is no doubt about the necessity of discontinuing the horrors that accompany much of the *tawaif* condition, such as the kidnapping of young girls to train them into the profession, the intention of the British was not clear and certain aspects show their disingenuousness. For instance, frequentation of the *tawaif* did not discontinue – it merely became cheaper and more accessible. British condemnation for instance in the disapproving captions is also hard to reconcile with the gazing that is implied in the photographs (a bourgeois hypocrisy satisfying both *id* and *superego*) and anthropological curiosity that is at best suspicious, and following namely in gender and ethnic terms, the political hierarchy of the Gazer/Gazed at. In contrast with fig. 09, the *tawaif* in fig. 11 below takes a more assertive posture, but then she looks away from the I-camera allowing (inviting?) the gaze to

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<sup>49</sup> The book’s aim to catalogue various Indians – in the spirit of a Linnaeus classifying flora and fauna although with far less rigour – approaches the aim of one of its contemporaries, *The Indian Mussalman* (Hunter 2002). In its dedication on 23 June 1871, WW. Hunter states he intends to correct “The chronic peril which environs the British power in India is the gap between the Rulers and the Ruled.” (p. viii)

<sup>50</sup> You may wish to refer to Spivak 1988 for a similar debate on the issue of *sati*.

contemplate her body with impunity, thus submitting under only superficially different terms. Rather than conceal it, the *dupatta* draping the top of her body seems to outline it further.



Figure 11. Studio portrait entitled “Mohammedan dancing girl,” Jaipur, c.1890, from *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868.



Predictably, *kothas* were closed by the British after the mutiny. Given how one generation of tawaifs required the space of a kotha to train the next generation into their arts, by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many tawaifs had no professional options open to them other than the very common prostitution they had been re-categorised as belonging to, whereas some moved to the film and music industry. One of the most touching retrospectives of the centrality of *tawaifs* to the development of Hindustani Classical music is in a documentary by Saba Dewan (2009) as she searches for Rasoolan Bai who, in the 1950s used her own singing methods and changed the lyrics to create different versions of the *thumri* genre of classical Indian music. A critical point to the documentary is the exploration of the relationship between the *tawaif's* aesthetic expression and her sexual identity. Dewan elaborates by saying that until about the late 1960's the courtesans of Lucknow and Varanasi were respected community, applauded for their art forms. "It was a shame that a community that was looked upon for their dance and music was associated on the same lines of sex workers." The shame brought to the community resulted in the *tawaifs* performing their *thumris* at local radio stations and ultimately private performances at weddings. But that dies out soon, with the "family" members taking up 'regular' jobs and forgetting a history they once had.

At the same time the nationalist discourse was trying to purify itself of bad influences like the courtesan women. The nationalist movement found its early expressions in the form of social reform programmes, such as the anti-natch campaigns, through which the richly diverse and stratified group of courtesan women was reduced into a homogenous group which was a threat to the well being of the society. People like Rabindranath Tagore, Madame Menaka, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Pandit Vishnu Bhatkhande all played a major role in this project (Tula & Pande 2014, 76).

According to Chidananda Das Gupta (1981: 41):

As the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance progressed into the twentieth, it became more and more puritanical. Its leaders had been brought up on Victorian and pre-World War I English social and literary ideals and stuck to them even after England shook them off with the changing times. In true colonial style, India

became the last outpost of British Victorian morality and remains so in the period of Independence.

A common self-righteousness<sup>51</sup> made, within a variety of spatial and temporal contexts, strange bedfellows of the British, of Mahatma Gandhi,<sup>52</sup> of Nehru, of the Hindu extreme-right and the Muslim fundamentalist, of many feminists when it came to closing down the world of the *tawaif* and its dislocation into a body versus mind heritage. The action was the same but the motivations ranged widely: from political revenge and fear, to misogyny, to a defence of the rights of women to ideals of purity, from a desire to restrict women to a desire to free women, from shame to vilification of others. Nostalgics for the world of the courtesans have also tended to range from romantics of the exotic aesthetics to romantics of its sexual fantasy, from neo-Orientalists to defenders of a female space by default, from defenders of a metaphor of class resistance to those concerned by the postcolonial dimensions. The refusal of most cross periods to envisage sexuality and refinement, or to conjugate sexuality and purity, or to explore women as victims of a patriarchal structure whereas the men who benefit from it are excused, have made of the historical *tawaif* a subaltern despite her cavorting with royalty as will be explored later.

According to the post-*kehre* Heidegger, “There is no time in which there were no human beings, not because there are human beings from all eternity, but because time is not eternity, and time always temporalizes itself only at one time, as human, historical *Dasein*.” The world as constructed by the human being is the only world that is. According to Heidegger 1996 and many subsequent works of phenomenology, we are already thrown into a world at birth.

It can be argued that the world of Lucknow under Wajid Ali Shah, as reflected metonymically by the world of the courtesan was a reflection of the moral undecidability of a human world that played with the world rather than took it and its binaries seriously. The intrusion of the British

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<sup>51</sup> Note how, in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, pictures of “prostitutes of Calcutta” in his possession are used to support the case of rape against Aziz.

<sup>52</sup> According to Saba Dewan,

...the anticolonial movement led by Mohandas K Gandhi defined by a more inclusive politics, was also deeply influenced by his ascetic sexual morality. Gandhian nationalists castigated the practice of patronising *tawaif* musicians as ‘degenerate’ and, under their influence, large sections of the old aristocracy put an end to patronising *tawaif* performers. On the eve of Independence in 1946, Sardar Patel, the veteran Congress leader and minister of home and broadcasting in the interim government, banned women artistes whose ‘private lives were a public scandal’ from singing on All India Radio. This left AIR with almost no female Hindustani music singers, since most hailed from courtesan backgrounds (Dewan 2013).

had the effect, both in historical perception and in fiction, of the closing of the drapes to a nine-year play (play-on-worlds as play-on-words) and the return to a simpler ideologico-moral human wish on an already morally undecidable world. Yet, such judgements remain undecidable. For instance the creation of the term *tawaif* itself hides more than is revealed at first sight. First of all, it hides the sordid life and loss of agency of women who are forced into prostitution under the poetic and etiquette. Yet, it also hides the fact that in many ways marriage was for women often no less sordid and no less the mark of a loss of agency and that, in comparison, the *tawaif* led an independent life in terms of means (*nawabs* and kings would even borrow money from them), education, or even freedom to travel. Their skill as musicians, dancers, miniaturists, calligraphists, poets made of them the elite among women of the Mughal period in India, very few of whom could even read or write. It allowed them to often interact with men as equals, and even earned their respect and admiration beyond etiquette. Clearly, all these skills also served to ‘entice’ the male client sexually, but it is clear that the fact was not read then with the same degree of sexual prudishness and judgement as in more contemporary times<sup>53</sup>. Ultimately, the derivation of these issues lies within the system (as episteme) that organises discourses. Also, as pointed out by Ruth Vanita (2012: 191), the *tawaif* was the only class of woman who could move upward on the basis of her talent and beauty regardless of her birth. This changed with the fall of former patrons, colonial order and conservative freedom movements, the democratization of South Asian societies, as well as the rise of bourgeois ethos among various South Asian communities. Many ended up performing what they had been accused of, becoming regular sex workers while many also used their talents in the as yet nascent sound recording and film industries. In the last two cases, Oldenburg 1984 and 1990 and Dewan 2009 point out, *tawaifs* felt it best to disown their illustrious pasts because of judgements in the present. Begum Hazrat Mahal, who fought for Awadh and Lucknow, has been celebrated in the 1960s as a freedom fighter with a very sizeable monument, a park in Lucknow named after her and a stamp issued in her honour (see above), and yet in all the official articles to celebrate her there seems to be a strategic omission: her past life as *tawaif*, without which experience she might not have proved quite as capable to govern and conquer.

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<sup>53</sup> In *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* Vol. 1 (1978), Foucault argues that, contra received wisdom, in the West the 19<sup>th</sup> century was much more sexually repressive than the 17<sup>th</sup>. India, by and large under British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was subjected to a legal and cultural regime regulated by Victorian mores.

Late Professor Sukumari Bhattacharji is very much respected for much ground-breaking research on Ancient India, notably of its patriarchal structures. Predictably, for a Professor of the ancient past, her works hinge on the complexities of the relationship between past and present, often mixing the two while drawing on hypocrisies which, while consistent across time periods, can afford nuancing in accordance with specific zeitgeists:

Their bodies, accomplishments, gifts and charity were enjoyed by a community which otherwise treated them as untouchables and showered curses on the profession itself, as if prostitutes alone could make prostitution a viable profession (Bhattacharji 1987, 57).

As with debates around Mary Magdalene's role in Christianity – was she a prostitute, or was she the wife of Jesus, there is the implication that she would somehow be tainted if she were a prostitute, or that her marriage to Jesus somehow saves her reputation, part of the patriarchal bind is to divest the word 'prostitute' from a context that produces it and the make its victim blame-worthy. The history of omissions is very often more revealing than more formal histories.

### **3.4 *Geisha* and *Tawaif***

*Geisha* is a portmanteau word in Japanese combining 'gei' (art) and 'sha' (person).<sup>54</sup> The history of *geishas* goes back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century but the heyday of female *geisha* was not before at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas Hollywood appropriated the image of the Geisha very early, with the 1950s a definite heyday, perhaps as an acceptable projection of sexuality onto an exotic/erotic context when it could not be represented onscreen, the *tawaif* has largely been ignored by Western film.

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<sup>54</sup> Liza Dalby and Lesley Downer have proven my most useful references. Dalby has been nicknamed "the American *Geisha*" for her first-hand experience with the *geisha* community in Kyoto's red-light district. She was an adviser to Arthur Golden, who wrote *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and again to Rob Marshall for his 2005 film adaptation. Lesley Downer's *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha* (2002) bears much resemblance to Veena Oldenburg's work with the *kothewali* (residents of the *kotha*), centred on actual interviews with *geisha*.



In the face of Western stereotypes about *geisha*, Bardsley (2009: 312) observes that

it is crucial to observe that the *geisha* has had a remarkably more interesting history than her stereotypical fantasy images in the West or even today in Japan would suggest; for example, *geisha* cheered public speakers in the 1890s, launched patriotic activities during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), were maligned by the Japan Women’s Christian Temperance Union and supported by infamous New Women in the 1910s, and performed classical dance at the seashore in swimsuits in 1930.

Such political involvement, as evidenced by a number of contemporary academic research books as well as works of fiction, is mostly discordant with Western representations of the *geisha* as a sexual object, redolent of Oriental passivity.<sup>55</sup>



<sup>55</sup> Refer for instance to the Hollywood obsession with *geisha* as textual euphemism for sex, in the 1960s.

Figure 12. One of the posters of *Memoirs of a Geisha*: sequence of performing *geisha* (Zhang Ziyi as Sayuri Nitta) in the 2005 film that relaunched Western interest in the *geisha* that had known various fates since the heyday of the 1960s. The plot of the film shows striking resemblances with our array of *tawaif*-centred films, uncovering common mythical functions in society to both conditions.

There are a number of correspondences between the *geisha* and the *tawaif*. These correspondences point to a common dynamic of many patriarchal systems indifferently of geographical location. Thus, whereas the Japanese *yujo* (literally in Japanese, ‘play-woman’) generally corresponds to the Indian *randi*, the *tawaif* can be likened to the *geisha*. The Japanese also had an ‘intermediary’ between the *yujo* and *geisha*: the *oiran*, the highest of the *yujo* class, at once a Kabuki (theatre) actress and a prostitute.<sup>56</sup> Exploring the world of the *geisha* yields many insights into the corresponding world of the *tawaif*.

The latter are both assimilable to a more aristocratic form of prostitution, in terms of the clientele, and therefore of the nature of the entertainment that befits its expectations. The play of etiquette (*tehzeeb*) finds resonance in the play of the art of hosting and of entertainment. Like the *tawaif*, a *geisha* is trained to act and look respectable, to make abstraction of her lowly birth, and of the sexual nature of her activities.

The duties of a *geisha* include serving guests with *sake* while elegantly encouraging them to drink more by orgasing jocular challenges. There were also games of dice, where the women would often make sure they lost. The mood is playful, in many ways reminiscent of *Inhin logon ne* above. Like the *mujra* Japanese *geisha* performance include perfectly honed dancing and singing as part of the overall commitment to refinement. Similarly – and perhaps this is closer to an intimate existential swan song in terms of mood - *geisha* songs are full of melancholia, and often about sadness and loss in love. Again, this is comparable to the *tawaif* repertoire, particularly in the Hindi cinema *Umrao Jaans* (see below).

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<sup>56</sup> General foreign confusion between *geisha* and *oiran* comes from visual resemblances in their looks. Like *geisha*, *oiran* wear elaborated hairstyles and white makeup. Both wear ornate and elaborate kimonos. A simple way to distinguish between the two is that the *oiran* tie their *obi* belt in the front while the *geisha* tie theirs in the back. This is said to be because the *oiran* needs to tie and untie her *obi* several times to service her clients and this will be very difficult if the *obi* was tied in the back. Also, *geisha*, especially the mature ones have lighter makeup. (Dalby 1983)

The *geisha* is brought up in an *okiya* by a *Mama-san* or *oka-san* (literally, mother), in most ways identical to the *kotha* to which the *tawaif* belongs, as run by a *choudariyan*. At least from autobiographies, biographies, written and visual fiction (all perhaps dipped in Orientalist fantasy both at the level of encoding or decoding), the *geisha* and the *tawaif* endured difficult and complex competitive intrigues at the *okiya/kotha* respectively. The external political role of the *tawaif* corresponds to the life of a *geisha*, which is described as full of intrigue and secrets (Dalby 1983, Downer 2002). The Japanese have a term for the world of extreme beauty, subtlety and manners that the *geisha* inhabits, the “the flower and willow world” (*karyukai*)<sup>57</sup>. Such a term could easily be transferred to the world of the *tawaif* as described by Ruswa in *Umrao Jaan Ada* whereas the term *tehzeeb* only captures an aspect of her world.

There was a strict etiquette (*tehzeeb* in Urdu) surrounding the life and performance of the *tawaif*. *Tehzeeb* embodies the highest achievement of the *nawabi* culture of Lucknow, as *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006) demonstrates. For Bhaskar and Allen 2009, the performance of the *mujra* itself signals *tehzeeb* and *ada*, “the *tehzeeb* or manners of the courtesan and her patrons; ...*ada*, or grace and elegance of manner, articulated through gesture, movement, performance and expression of emotion.” (44) Bhaskar and Allen 2009 also list performance idioms such as the *mujra* and the *mushaira*; poetic and song forms associated with the Urdu language like the *ghazal* and the *qawwali* ... and the forms of social life which all these images and idioms serve to represent and cultivate. (ix) During the performance, there is an established agreement of manners that centre on distance, respect and gestures of greeting and approbation.<sup>58</sup> The *mehfil* is watched over by the *choudariyan* with much polite dignity, control and refinement of manners. This refinement and insistence on decorum is in sharp contrast with the physical intimacy of the sexual act that it sublimates for the benefit the super-ego and conceal to the world. The contrast is far less important in the case of the performance of ordinary prostitutes.

Like the *tawaif* were, genuine *geishas* are and have always been expensive as a result of their long and rigorous training, but also because the high price carries the guarantee of exclusiveness for the client/s. In *Pakeezah*, one of the most musically complex *mujras* in Banarasi *thumri* semi-classical form of Hindi cinema, *Thade Rahiyon*, is interrupted by the paradoxical reality of being

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<sup>57</sup> Find a number of gripping descriptions of that world in Feldman and Gordon 2006.

<sup>58</sup> You may refer to a discussion of the *tawaif*'s *adab* greeting later.

*tawaif* in the shape of the (fictional) Nawab of Panipat who, in jealousy of the fact that money is being offered by a lower attendee to Pakeezah during her performance, and to signify his own desire to own the *tawaif*<sup>59</sup>(see figs 13, 14, 15 below). Similarities with the Japanese *dana* is made evident by the *nawab*'s insistence, after presenting a red and gold silk rug (the colour and texture of the Indian bridal dress) on which Sahibjaan/Pakeezah will perform for him alone (the “Chalte Chalte” *mujra* – see later) wearing an *angarkha/dupatta* of similar hue. His invitation to a private barge on a river implies sexual intercourse, symbolical deflowering a virginal Pakeezah (which, it is hinted, took place after the *mujra* by the extinguished candelabra and the *nawab*'s lustful eyes, fig.s 31, 32, 33 below), the Pure, who is saved *in extremis* by a herd of angry elephants (her beloved Saleem Ahmed Khan is a forest officer).



Figure 13. The *nawab* of Panipat attending the *Thade Rahiyon mujra* offers a bag of money to Pakeezah who feigns surprise and embarrassment.

<sup>59</sup> The entire film narration moves along a chain of paradoxes contrasts. The main male character of *Pakeezah*, the forester, having only seen Pakeezah's feet, leaves behind a note at her very feet: *Aap ke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai. Inhe zameen par mat utariyega -- maile ho jayenge* (“I saw your feet, they are very beautiful. Don't place them on the ground, as they will get dirty”). These words are simultaneously ironic and emotive, as the very feet that the traveller refers to are the same feet that dance for hours in order to entertain men in a sexually evocative manner, wearing the ankle-bells (*payaal*) that have come to symbolise the *tawaif*.



Figure 14. As another noble dares to throw a bag of money to the *tawaif*, the *nawab* takes out his pistol, undoubtedly a phallic gesture, and shoots to stop him.



Figure 15. The *nawab* shoots at a second bag of money, which explodes in the man's hand. The man promptly nurses it, and quickly leaves, with the rest of the *mehfil* (gathering) following suit. Ownership of the *tawaif*'s body is established through a complex symbolic relationship of established laws and transgression.

The *tawaif* and the *geisha* institutions share a very specific system of male patronage. Affording *tawaif* and *geisha* required great wealth. Almost every *geisha*, like *tawaif*, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was supported by one particular man of means. For the *geisha* this patron was a *danna*, although by now the tradition has waned. Although the *danna* was usually married, he would cover the costs, for instance, of a *geisha*'s training including the enormous expense (about one year's savings for a *geisha*) towards acquiring a new *kimono*. The *geisha* and *danna* are united through a customary tea ceremony reserved for weddings (*san san kudo*), the mimic of the traditional Japanese wedding ceremony much as, we find out later, the world of the *tawaif* mimics and parodies the world of the *begum* (wife). According to Mineko & Brown 2003, the appeal of a high-ranking *geisha* to her typical male guest has historically been very different from that of his wife. Whereas the ideal *geishais* knowledgeable, skilful and carefree, the ideal wife was modest, somber and responsible. Such categorization is typical of patriarchal societies across the world (see Chapter 2 above).

According to Dalby 1983, a *geisha* and her *danna* may or may not be in love, and may choose to have sex or not, although it seems unlikely that no sexual favours are involved at all, in fact there are fixed traditions about how, often the *danna*, would take over the *geisha*'s virginity over seven days of *mizuage*, a rite of passage when the *maiko*, an apprentice *geisha*, gives up her virginity to a man after a *danna* outbids many other men (Seigle 1993: 179, Ditmore 2006: 184 and also *Memoirs of a Geisha*). This has been outlawed in Japan ever since but I said to still take place behind closed doors. Although it was less structured than the *mizuage*, bidding for the *tawaif*'s virginity was common. In *Tawaif*, a less elegant and sanitised film than the decorous *Anakali*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pakeezah*, Sultana the *tawaif* put up for the highest bidder as she confidently asserts through her song that every part of her is for sale and that the client must bid (much like *mizuage* as equivalent from the *geisha*'s world). Discretion about sexual matters remains paramount, however, in both traditions, where, perhaps ironically, the higher courtesan's reputation, 'purity' and dignity were important in the worlds of both *kotha* and *okiya*.

Some *geishas* were sold to the *Zaibatsu*, members of the economic elite of Japan, constituted of only four families, and a dozen more since the end of World War II. This gave them access to



power, cultural dominance and travelling. In general, *geisha* were by far the freest women in the culture, and certainly much freer than the Japanese matron. A similar judgement can be passed about the Indian *tawaif*, as will be explored later. As Lalita du Perron 2007 puts it, “the *baiji* [*tawaif*] may not have had the respectability of a wife, but she did have education, the freedom to move, to travel.” (73). In *Geisha, A Life* (Mineko & Brown (2003)), Mineko Iwasaki, herself a famous *geisha*, highlights the independence and economic self-sufficiency of *geisha*, calling them some of the most successful businesswomen in Japan. Within the matriarchal world of the *okiya*, run by the *oka-san*, men take on peripheral roles as spectators and, behind the scenes, as hair stylists, dressers and accountants, working under female supervision. For Mineko Iwasaki, although many who find in the *geishas* an exploitation of the female gender, there are many, too, who view this as a way for women to be liberated from the dictates of the traditional society, each view assimilable, we can argue, to second and third wave, feminism, respectively.

*Geishas* and *tawaifs* lead lives that are very strictly structured by tradition, arguably in the first to lend respectability to professions that fall short of it, eventually to keep up with the spirit of their world of euphemism and delicacy once established. *Geisha* may subtly flirt with their guests, encouraging them to spend, and hold at least a strong, meaningful friendship with the *danna*, they will be expected to remain in control of their emotions, while the struggle between true love and professional restraint remains a major *leitmotif* in *tawaif* films. As with the main line of narration in *Pakeezah*, *geisha* have been known to marry their clients but they then retire since *geishas* and *tawaifs* can never continue their profession when married. According to Dalby,<sup>60</sup> “They (*geisha*) do not marry, but they often have children by a patron, or a lover.” It remains that men – whether through marriage or as the courtesan’s patron and lover - were the only means for sustenance for both *geisha* and *tawaif*. The coat of identity is more or less cut according to the cloth of societal ambits.

One revealing contemporary public obsession (reflective of general bourgeois concern as *zeitgeist*) about both *geishas* and *tawaifs* is over whether or not they had sex with their clients. An answer would be that to think they did not (and do not in the case of the *geisha*) might be naïve and to imagine that sex is by itself the main attraction is reductive, and the general concern

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng\\_geisha\\_sex.html](http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng_geisha_sex.html) [last accessed on 14.04.2012 at 01.23 Mauritian Standard Time]

about this issue uncovers the inescapable obsession of society with sex, to start with, in terms of the construction of *geisha* and *tawaiif* as ontological category. Liza Dalby (see earlier footnote), known informally as the “American *Geisha*”, one of the most authentic non-Japanese academic voices, about the *geisha* culture, puts it in no straight-faced terms as: “Do they or don’t they?”<sup>61</sup> Mineko & Brown (2003) raise this issue with less humour, arguing that many *geisha* would be offended by the question and *defending* their honour against the calumny that they had sex with clients. Again this prudishness uncovers the intricate way in which identity is performative and how many forms of resistance take place within the laws of a given field rather than as a radical, fundamental revision of such laws. *Geisha* (like *tawaiif*) are not only policed, but actually produced, by the patriarchal, and resistance cannot take the form of a fully confrontational contestation, instead, a more indirect subversion, the sort that Veena Talwar Oldenburg identifies as “Lifestyle as Resistance” in her article about *tawaiifs*. Thus, the question of “Do they or don’t they?” can be rendered – not without humour despite the heavy implications as “Damned if they do and damned if they don’t.” The fact that this is an issue for, say, the *tawaiif*, is incumbent on an *a priori* reduction of *tawaiifness* by a variety of social actors to sexuality, much as Butler 2006 complains that ‘coming out’ as a lesbian reduces one to a limited and compulsively re-enacted category. The close-ubiquity of such judgement (including of the *tawaiif* herself does not betray any stronger authenticity, but instead the close-ubiquity of the patriarchal discourse. In other words, the obsession with the sexual this reveals is more telling of the patriarchal production of the *tawaiif* identity as exclusively sexual, as a by-product of woman as an exclusively sexualized entity.

At a time and within cultural contexts where men and women were in almost every sense unequal, the relationship between *tawaiifs* and *geishas* and their patrons was, in relative terms, very modern. The friendship that accompanied the *geisha-danna* relationship, with discussions of private and public matters, including business and politics was of the sort that would have been frowned upon between husband and wife. The lack of equality was, as we will explore, the result of a strict separation of duties according to gender and, consequently, a sharp difference in education. In many ways the lives of the higher courtesan were the closest we have of modern autonomous career women unhindered by limitations of family responsibilities as the imperative

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<sup>61</sup> [http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng\\_geisha\\_sex.html](http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng_geisha_sex.html) [last accessed on 14.04.2012 at 01.23 Mauritian Standard Time]



determinant of a fulfilled life. The body must be understood as a space where the geographical, institutional, the physical, the taxonomic merge.

The repetitive performance of being-*geisha* and being-*tawaif* helps establish heteronormativity, whereby gender hierarchies appear normal and natural and not historical, re-iterated and enforced by a system of symbolic rewards and punishments. Butler's own focus is mostly gender and she rejoins Foucault in denouncing the distinction between the personal and the political as part of the hegemony since personal acts are, in fact, "scripted" by the shared ideologies, and "rehearsed", much like the script for a play with actors. Making something seem normal or natural is part of the strategy for establishing and sustaining cultural hierarchies by a status quo, implying the support (at least through the lack of opposition to) of dominant discourses: "As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler 1990b, 279). Categories are purely fictive, although they become effective as people live and judge in terms of them, as well as a system of rewards and punishments for belonging to a favoured, or a disfavoured, category accordingly, and also for rejecting categorisation:

the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them (Butler 1990a: 179).

For Butler gender is not what one *is*, but something that one *does*, hence the term performance, corresponding to an *act*. In general, *performativity* is considered as describing the process of discursive production, whereas *performance* is a specific type of self-presentation. Bodies are already inscribed into language, which is inevitably social, parole being after all an individual utterance within an existing language. Bodies cannot be discussed in isolation, but in terms of other bodies, as a Being-with-Others. In many ways, the sometimes-equal body-and-mind relationship between the courtesan and the men who frequented her is, in many ways, an anticipation of modern couples. While the ultimate hierarchy, whereby the male maintains patriarchal hegemony is, under many guises, maintained, the *geisha* is in control of the relationship, making the body the site of a becoming and a continued negotiation.

In Liza Dalby's reflection on the changes to the world of the *geisha* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there are correspondences with the adaptation strategies of the *tawaif* as detailed in Dewan 2009:

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century *geisha* began to see that their profession had to change and adapt to new circumstances. The feudal regime under which they had come into being two hundred years earlier was gone. Individually, *geisha* could no longer count on the largesse of a single wealthy patron to finance their arts. So instead, they gradually went public in a conscious attempt to interest the larger society in their artistic activities. Eventually, the different *geisha* communities came to present lavish public performances of traditional music, dance, and theater several times a year. Like the ‘dynasties’ of contemporary Kabuki actors, *geisha* have come to be recognized in Japan as an expertly trained cadre devoted to the traditional performing arts. Their *gei* has been transformed into their professional salvation. Since the Japanese are extremely proud of their artistic heritage, *geisha* have found their niche as curators of highly esteemed genres of music and dance.<sup>62</sup>

The *tawaif* had to speak the language of patriarchy as a woman, then the language of the dominant colonial power. While both the *tawaif* and the *geisha* originate from patriarchal categories which reflect patriarchy’s hypocrisies, sexual expediency disguised as art, courtesans disguised as wives, clients disguised as artistic patrons, the subversion they have access to is along the line of Bhabha’s ‘sly civility’ (see for instance Bhabha 1985b: 78), strategies of resistance based not on a frontal opposition to the system but on subtle and adaptive approaches of subversion.

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<sup>62</sup> [http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng\\_geisha\\_sex.html](http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/ng_geisha_sex.html) [last accessed on 14.04.2012 at 01.23 Mauritian Standard Time]



## **4. The Courtesan in the Popular Hindustani cinema: Mapping the Ethico-Ideological and Mythopoeic Space She Occupies.**

### **4.1 The Argument**

The space occupied by the courtesan in Hindustani cinema is approached phenomenologically as a locus of nostalgia, a temporal relationship of natality/morbidity. The courtesan inhabits a mythopoeic space of contradiction and uncertainty and a morally hybrid dimension, one that is both subversive and bourgeois.

The dynamics and function of the courtesan in the Hindustani cinema text are related to the scapegoat, the 'goat' offered to sacrifice for the good of the *polis*. These need to be repeated and ritualised so as to perform the myth (Butler's iterability, from Derrida) of the courtesan. The functions of real-life Lakhawi courtesans will be compared to the Hindustani film function.

The main focus will be on the figure of the courtesan and the temporal sources of her being in terms of her chronological existence (*Temporalität*) and the temporal relationship to the morbid, then to natality and to ecstasy (*Zeitlichkeit*). In opposition to the terrorist's hypermasculinity, the womb-like closedness of the courtesan's world makes her a hyperfeminine counterfoil; the world of the courtesan also represents a secular 'Islamic' space as a counterpoint to currently more assertive Islamic religious spaces.

### **4.2 Mythopoeic Functions of the *Tawaif***

According to Csapo, "...neurotics provided a kind of royal road to human prehistory." (2005: 123). There are a number of ways of defining myth, but all of them centre on stories that aim to explain events, both natural and in the city. The world of the historical *tawaif* is mythopoeic in itself, distanced by not being of direct experience, was narrative through mythical means. *Tawaifs* were central urban figures until mid-19<sup>th</sup> century India with little of the historical material objective enough (refer to discussions of British and post-independence Indian attitudes reduction of *tawaif* life to bourgeois sexual categories in Chapter 3), with residual 20<sup>th</sup> century echoes that are mnemonic testimonies as recorded by such researchers as Oldenburg or Dewan.

Rememorating the *tawaif* is further deflected by its appropriation by fiction, first the written, then the visual, as discussed in previous chapters.

The mythopoeic (from Ancient Greek *muthos* (myth), and *poiein* (making)) here is not referring to the contemporary genre of fictional mythology of the kind composed by J.R.R. Tolkien, but to the more general communicative habit of myth-making that corresponds to Roland Barthes's modernised concept in *Mythologies* (1972). Mythology for Barthes is part of the construction of linguistic expression that appears self-evident, a sign without a history, or what he calls a 'natural' sign. For, as a myth, the sign, itself the result of a combination of signifier and signified, becomes, in the end, the site of a new meaning, a new signified. Barthes argues that while the first combination is arbitrary, the second isn't and is dictated instead by hegemony, modern myths being created to comfort dominant ideologies. In order to make sense of the origin of any sign one needs to understand the underlying myth. Myth, in the hands of Barthes, is no longer the 'other' of Enlightenment rationalism, or of Judeo-Christian belief-structures, but the universal 'other-side' of any meaning-construction. Thus, the *tawaif* is mythicized in the Barthesian sense, she pertains to the way meaning is constructed about her and her condition, the structure of which is not made obvious from the narrative. Here, I am mostly concerned by the filmic narrative of Hindustani cinema:

...myth is intimately connected, if not identified with, Art, and ... the investigation of intuitive channels of knowledge is inconceivable without resort to the concept of myth (Piettre 2006: 46).

Older definitions of myth were always associated with otherness – primitives, women, children, non-whites, older cultures, the irrational, anti-logos, lower-class, uneducated. Modern myth is more universal, and, beyond the ordinary sign covers the elements of perception in meaning-construction and secondly, myth inhabits the world of the subconscious and is therefore ready-to-hand and unobvious to users of the sign. Through this hegemony, modern mythopoeics wields a power not dissimilar to older mythology. Thus Piettre's assertion is applicable to both in terms of their psychic functioning:

Myth, being connatural with people in their earthly adventure, was and always will be their inseparable fellow-traveler and their refuge in their existential agony (Piettre 2006: 243).

The only main recognisable difference between the two definitions lies more in the universality of its application, the older definition obeying to Victorian divisions of the primitive being investigated by the civilised. According to the Barthesian sense I have adopted, all forms of communication are mythopoeic, and construct myth. Through this, it shows that, despite Benjamin's assertion (1968 *inter alia*) that the aura of ritual is lost in modern cinema because of the mechanical nature of its production, communication continues, all the more powerful precisely because of its ubiquity but also its false consciousness. The ritual aura of art, both as veneration and taboo, survives as trace in cinema to varying degrees: "As every myth, Art is chiefly a product of the imagination, fashioned through the cooperation of a number of other mental elements time, space, causality, albeit with rather loose templates" (Piettre 2006: 170). By normalising the context and common cultural competencies, modern mythopoesis are, however, able to control that decoding more or less follows the intention of the encoding. The concealment that is part of the construction of myth, according to Barthes, is a space of power, as part of a hierarchical structure that informs the one and not the other. Myth, both in terms of content and form, has always been related to power. In this respect, it is no coincidence that cinema, itself subliminal yet ubiquitous, power-driving and power-driven, has proven central to modern myth-construction.

Inevitably, Barthes's modern cultural myth contains extant elements of older definitions. Vassilis (2006: 6-7) is useful in providing more specific details and a consolidation of the various definitions of myth,

Narrowly defined, myth is:

- (a) A product of the imagination, for the creation of which the imagination blends in new combinations from the memory in order to respond to some internal need.
- (b) an oral or other tradition deeply rooted within a given social group.

Both definitions are useful to our context. The *tawaiif* is by now a figure received as mostly mediated by the imagination of historians with specific agendas, novelists and film-makers. The target reception for the myth is "deeply rooted" within the 'virtual community' of consumers of Hindustani cinema. Some of the corresponding "internal need" will be identified in this chapter.

Further, Vassilis (2006: 14-15) recommends a broadening of the term myth, according to which it:

- (a) Is not necessarily a product of the so-called “consciousness of the sacred” and, consequently, may refer both to the supernatural (not divine) beings or events, to superhuman acts, and as to objects belonging to the realm of social morality or aesthetics
- (b) Its content does not always refer to a conceptual, venerable, or marvelous domain (gods, superhuman heroes, or supernatural events); it may also aim at idealizing the world (Art).
- (c) Its extra-logical nature does not prevent its passing to the conceptual (not rational) field, and proceeding, in parallel and on equal terms, with conceptual thought.

Paradigm (a) in the list liberates the investigator from what has been a major concern of anthropologists of the mythopoeic: the sacred.<sup>63</sup> The association of mythology exclusively with the sacred, as opposed not only to the secular but to the rational/scientific/modern, corresponds to other associations based on binaries such as civilised/primitive, raw/cooked,<sup>64</sup> with the analytical gazing hierarchically poised. Thus, Barthes’s model is innovative in that it turns the Western metropolitan centre and its present tense of modernity into the object to be gazed at (in scientific terms), instead of the habitual position of the observer/gazer. Paradigm (b) similarly goes beyond the strict opposition of the superhuman and the supernatural (a conceptual, venerable, or marvelous domain) to the rational present. Instead Art is identified as privileged mythopoeic site. The form of art I refer to most here is Hindustani cinema, a vehicle for the mythology of the *tawaif* (as stated earlier). In line with paradigm (c), the interest here is not to oppose the conceptual with the non-conceptual but to instead investigate social and cultural functions of myths (specifically of the *tawaif*), as part of a politics of motivation to aesthetics.<sup>65</sup>

The myth ... allows for completion of the torturous gaps, while remaining beyond the range of confirmation by experience (in the myth everything is explainable,

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<sup>63</sup> See for instance James Frazer (1922) and Mircea Eliade (1963, 1967).

<sup>64</sup> A reference to Lévi-Strauss 1969, also in terms of how myths reflect patterns of pairs of opposites.

<sup>65</sup> “Le beau est social en soi.” (Thiry, 1967: 133).

everything is possible), thus offering relief from existential anxiety (Piettre, 2006: 20).

Earlier, Piettre (2006: 15) states that myth-construction responds to a deep-seated guilt that needs to be exorcised, which as I explore, is true of Hindustani cinema narrative on the *tawaif*.

(M)ythical consciousness, and the myth-generating faculty... is perhaps the most important, and the most multi-faceted, confirmation of the innate thirst of the human species for some redemption from indefinite yet significant (in the sense given the word by Heraclitus) existential guilt.

Understanding the workings of the art/mythology that is created by a community leads to a deeper understanding of its unconscious at work. For Devdutt Pattanaik (2001: 3), myths “capture the collective unconsciousness of a people.” Such an understanding is complementary to more official historiographies:

When we look at human history, we see only what happens on the surface, and even this is distorted in the faded mirror of tradition. But what has really been happening eludes the inquiring eye of the historian, for the true historical event lies deeply buried, experienced by all and observed by none. It is the most private and most subjective of psychic experiences (Jung, 1964: 148).

Campbell (1991: 520) states that a function of mythology is “to support the current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group”. Such views of mythology correspond to a cultural intervention in the process of Butler’s routinisation of gestures and practices through rituals of performance to coerce and invent identity (Butler, 1990: 134-141). “The mythic is even more deeply ‘present’ because the original event is once again ‘presently’ produced through repetition” (Dardel, 1984:69). Frazer (1922) in his very influential *The Golden Bough* argues that the origin of myth is ritual but whose initial motive has been diverted into a mythical narrative.

As explored above, according to Butler, identity is performed and established by being iterable, a Derridean terms referring to the repetitive, and in anthropological terms, the ritual. The ritual instills tranquillity by performing stability (which, in fact is illusory):

The recollection and the revival of the primordial event help ‘primitive’ man to distinguish and retain the actual. Thanks to its continuous repetition of a given



movement there appears a certain ‘something’ that is stable and unchanging within the universal flux.<sup>66</sup>

Repetition and therefore ritual bring about a trust in the ultimate stability of the world. Yet, paradoxically, as expressed elegantly in “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” (1906), once the immediate and timely source of anxiety is removed, there is a need to *repeat* the outperformance of such anxiety and that again and again to convince the human subject of stability in the midst of chaos. The drama of an outperformance starts with the staging of anxiety in the first instance. Such is in fact Freud’s explanation for human fascination with plays, and, for that matter with all narrative art.

Freud further relates repetition as a re-iterated antidote to morbidity. Deleuze (1994) finds that the greatest novelty in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is its connection of the death instinct (Thanatos) with repetition.<sup>67</sup> In it for instance, he famously describes his grandson in the “fort-da” game, the equivalent among speakers of German of peekaboo, or bo-peep. A “good little boy” who “never cried when his mother left him for a few hours”, Ernst had “an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner”. Freud noticed that the boy would utter an “o-o-o-o” sound of satisfaction notably when, by crouching down below a mirror, he made his image disappear. Freud interpreted this behavior as a way of obtaining satisfaction by causing things to be “gone.” This was “repeated untiringly” by the child (Freud, 2006: 14-15).

Deleuze (1994) identifies “the real problem” related to the contradiction between the compulsion to repeat and the pleasure principle in these terms: how is satisfaction to be derived from repeating actions that have been sources of unpleasurable feelings? Freud (2006: 16) explains how Ernst, the grandson he liked to observe

had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this

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<sup>66</sup> Eliade, M. *Aspects du Mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 115, transl. by Vassilis Vitsaxis, as quoted in Vitsaxis 2006: 105.

<sup>67</sup> See Freudm 2006. Eros produces creativity, harmony, sexual connection, reproduction, and self-preservation; and Thanatos brings destruction, repetition, aggression, compulsion, and self-destruction.

he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out ‘o-o-o-o’, accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction.

The great interest of this discussion of Freud’s is that it sums up and condenses his subsequent exploration of the principle of the repetition compulsion as powerful enough to overrule the pleasure-principle.<sup>68</sup>

The connection between the world of the courtesan and the *eros/thanatos* interplay in Freud’s compulsion repetition principle is multiple: the plot of most *tawaif*-centred films are obsessively first the performance of an identity category that is problematic to the *status quo* (the *tawaif*) then the category is outperformed, mainly by making the *tawaif* herself prone to romance and lured by the promise of the category *begum*. The true psychic motivation for the narrative all along would have been the ritualised replacement of angst-ridden unbridled bodies by the tranquillity of docile bodies. Further, the repetition compulsion principle is based on continued repetition (for instance of narrative) to assuage feelings of depression and morbidity. These exist both within the dynamic of a film and film qua film (reception by the spectator), often both intricately connected. The poetry of the *tawaif* (in *mujra* songs and in *mushaira* poetry competitions) often tends towards pessimism and melancholia, itself based on the morbid, and, after the more-or-less accountable world of fiction, is made to appear as inspired by her own existence marked by solitude, isolation, death, centrally from a dislocation between her profession and the psychic acceptance of an ethics of purity that is contrary to it. Whereas this aspect is given much attention by Hindustani cinema, notably in *Pakeezah*, *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Umrao Jaan* (see below), one of the reasons why an audience immediately identifies with the feeling is because of the morbidity it associates with sexuality, especially after sexual acts. There is a moment of projection of such morbidity onto the filmic *tawaif*, of corresponding resonance with the *post coitum omne animale triste est* nature in her clients.<sup>69</sup> Notoriously, in *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, Baruch Spinoza engages with the state of mind:

By sensual pleasure the mind is enthralled to the extent of quiescence, as if the supreme good were actually attained, so that it is quite incapable of thinking of any other object; when such pleasure has been gratified it is followed by extreme

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<sup>68</sup> See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 2006).

<sup>69</sup> The full expression “*post coitum omne animal triste est, sive gallus et mulier*” (after sexual intercourse all animals are sad except the cockrel and the woman) is attributed to Galen, the Greek physician of the second century A.D. is an expression of the well-documented feelings of melancholia of human males after sex.

melancholy, whereby the mind, though not enthralled, is disturbed and dulled (Spinoza 1955, "Notice to the Reader": 4)

Within the patriarchal economy which strips her of agency, the *tawaif* is represented not only as sexual, but as sex itself, and therefore she becomes psychically assimilable to, and indissociable from, the melancholic morbidity associated with it. Also, in the historical environment of the Laknawi aristocracy that led to the art associated with the *tawaif*, the zeitgeist was also one of a 'decadent'<sup>70</sup> blasé melancholia originating from a typically aristocratic ennui associated with excesses of ownership and possession, compounded with drunken and drugged melancholia, as related to a consequent sense of the impossibility of plenitude, in Lacan's sense. As well as plot, *Memoirs of a Geisha* shares the choice of ambiance (or mood) as that of morbidity associated with the world of the *tawaif*. Sayuri, the *geisha* narrates: "The heart dies a slow death. Shedding each hope like leaves, until one day there are none. No hopes. Nothing remains" (*Memoirs of a Geisha*).

The sense of loss and impending doom in the *tawaif* also originates in a variety of culturally-specific sources – a common psychic connection with the fall of Lucknow, the fall of the *tawaif*, the decadence of the Indian aristocracy, largely on its way out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, combined with more contemporary stamps of sexuality, a postmodern blasé culture of 'après l'orgie', to borrow from Baudrillard (1993). These feelings can be termed nostalgic.

Eliade (1963, 1967) argues that the mythopoeic gesture is a way for members of traditional societies within a mundane present to connect with a mythical past, a form of nostalgic connection. In *Talking about Films*, Chidananda Das Gupta argues that repetition is culturally specific to Hindustani film, echoing Vijay Mishra's (2002) views on the narratological origins of much Hindustani film on the medieval Indian Epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Thus, Das Gupta argues:

[Hindi movies] are not like short stories with beautifully chiselled form, complete with a beginning, a middle, an end. They are rather like the epics, which you can read from anywhere to anywhere, as long as you like... A Village woman in Bengal would enjoy a folk play no less because she arrives in the middle; she has seen the play before. The same attitude applies to all folk entertainment in India – whether it is singing, dancing, drama, opera (26-27).

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<sup>70</sup> Not only is decadence a subjective judgement; it is also a retroactive judgement, and thus 'scare quotes' are used here.

Earlier, he compares the legend of Radha and Krishna with Hindustani cinema:

...there is less of a search for mere novelty and sensation... Take the legend of Radha and Krishna. The story is fully known to the audience. Yet, for many centuries the same story has served as an enormous canvas which generations of artists have filled in and coloured with layers and layers of personal expression, building levels upon levels of meaning (22).

To Csapo (2005: 110) “(e)xtremes, be they philosophical, religious, social, or other, usually call the scapegoat factor into being with the goal of assuaging personal and/or collective feelings of impotence, inadequacy, and incompetence.” The Hindustani cinema *tawaif* is the ritual “scapegoat”, the “innocent” victim who is sacrificed for the ‘greater good’ of ‘society’, the necessary sacrifice for bourgeois values to thrive. Not only does the *tawaif* die for this ‘greater good’ but she is ritually brought into existence for the purpose of being sacrificed. She lives outside that society but instead of celebrating her freedom from norms as many real *tawaiifs* in India have done (see Oldenburg, 1984 & 1990 and Prabhu, 2011), she pines for the love (and patriarchal protection) of a man, for the normative. In the end she comforts the *status quo* but within the ritual of comfort a blood sacrifice is paramount. Thus the *tawaif* almost inevitably dies, sacrificing herself as a form of redemption. The ritual repetition of this redemption serves a mythical function, that of redeeming the guilt of the patriarchal structure itself with its commissions and its omissions, and in the same, the iterative construction of identity through its repetitive staging and comforting, as we will observe later.

As well as mainstream cinema anywhere in the world, as per Mishra and Das Gupta, the plots of Hindustani filmic text are culturally predisposed to repetition, and the *tawaif*-centered film as genre is based on a mythopoeic function that gives to repetition.

*Ghungroo* (1983) is one of dozens of *tawaif*-centered films of the 1980s and whereas most bore some resemblance with the main *tawaif* films, firmly sits astride the plots of *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Pakeezah*, and on a much tighter budget. In *Ghungroo*, the *mujra* sequence featured at fig. 16 below is in many ways reminiscent of the “*Teer-e-nazar*” *mujra* in *Pakeezah* (figs 18, 19 below). In each, the *tawaif* is invited to perform by her beloved on the occasion of his marriage or betrothal to another woman, and the *mujra* becomes a suicidal ritual. The later film’s *mujra* is less effective than the older *mujra*, which is much more haunting and better acted, but is one of

dozens of films to replay the same tropes, often with some of the best actors of Hindustani cinema (here Smita Patil and Shashi Kapoor). We find a striking example of plot ‘borrowal’ and repetition in accordance with genre (*tawaif*) between fig 16 and 18 below which fit Das Gupta’s comments:

Today’s Hindi cinema lacks no acting talent; but it is not meant to be used. What passes for acting is a game between the producer and the audience played with well-established types – the crying mother, the dotting father, the dancing, singing, dewy-eyed heroine ...situations are stock situations, with stock responses too ready-made to require any exploration of why or how something has happened; ... The films are long, as folk entertainment has always been; the opposition between good and evil is sharp, as it has always been in the epics and legends (7-8).



Figure 16. *Ghungroo*: Kesarbai the *tawaif* (Smita Patil) angrily confronts Senapati Vikram Singh (Shashi Kapoor), adopted heir of a local queen and her former lover, with the *ghungroo* (ankle-bells) that he presented to her, that symbolise her status as a *tawaif*.

According to Lacan (Lacan 1977, Mulvey 1975), the fear of castration from the absence of a mother’s penis is then disguised through fetishes such as kissing on the mouth, or elsewhere (as opposed to penetrative vaginal sex). Not only is this a rechanelling towards more culturally acceptable representations of what is seen as reprehensible and therefore ‘unrepresentable’, in fact, it manages to become, in many ways, the ‘thing itself’, such that, in turn the ‘real’ event can

only be conceived *in terms of* its fetish. Thus, for instance, a person with a foot fetish might be unable to envisage penetrative penile-vaginal sex without it. The Imaginary Order corresponds to the pre-oedipal stages, prior to Symbolic order, which provides a language to express difference between the self and the outside world. This language serves as substitute for the loss of plenitude. After Lacan (1977), to start with, the vagina itself is the site of loss, - psychically it represents, to the male gazer (the only gazer who signifies in the patriarchal economy) not only the fear of castration, but its actuality. Thus, the encounter with the vagina is a network of substitutions (fetishes) that divert from the vagina as a locus of the real. Cinema is instead of the Imaginary, of the indirect, but then the medium is marked by a nostalgia for the real of which it – like its ancestor, photography – is a reconstructed chemical imprint. It is also a site for idealising the real, as promising plenitude, The Imaginary being in fact, within the Symbolic, the closest state one can hope to enter to access plenitude. Any more direct approach than the ‘strip-teasing’ of its appearance/disappearance of the ‘vagina’ behind the dupatta in the *mujra* reveals a definite absence instead. This sublimation is generalised in Hindi cinema both as part of the filmic medium and within the narrative. It mostly takes the form of the romantic. A classic example is referred to earlier: in *Pakeezah*, Saleem Ahmed Khan, having only seen Pakeezah’s feet on a train, leaves behind a note at her very feet: *Aap ke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai. Inhe zameen par mat utariyega -- maile ho jayenge* (“I saw your feet, they are very beautiful. Don’t place them on the ground, as they will get dirty”) [refer to fig. 17 below]. Such fetishistic (psychically sublimated) reference to the feet is a *parole* within the established vocabulary of the *langue* of the Indian courtesan’s world (both historical and cinematic) of the foot as part of the *tehzeeb* (etiquette) and the *takalluf* (indirect reference to things as cultural practice) of a culture of the sublime and the sublimated.<sup>71</sup> Thus, beyond the face, itself given to a play of *fort-da* with the *dupatta*, the the only other part of the *tawaif*’s body that is revealed during the *mujra* performance is the foot. The foot itself is decorated with henna and *ghungroo*, the sensual anklets that give musical emphasis to the *tawaif*’s every leg movement, while completing the impression that the entire musical ensemble is generated by the dancing body. The bleeding foot becomes, in the “*Teer-e-nazar*” *mujra* in *Pakeezah* a metaphor for the sublimated menstrual blood.

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<sup>71</sup> Later in *Pakeezah*, as Pakeezah/Sahibjaan is invited by him to perform at his wedding, Saleem Ahmed Khan sighs to himself: “Tonight, I will see those feet you planted in my heart, performing in front of everyone. Will I be able to look?”. Feet are a poetic *leitmotif* in the film, acting as fetish and metonymy for the *tawaif* and her condition.



Figure 17. *Pakeezah*: The forester gazing at Sahibjaan's foot on the train, falls in love with her having seen nothing more of her. Her hennaed foot is reminiscent, in a film that is richly mythopoeic, of her bloodied feet (see fig.18 below)



Figure 18. *Pakeezah*: the *mujra* “*Teer-e-nazar*” ends with Sahibjaan/Pakeezah dancing over glass fragments from the floor candelabra she deliberately overturns. As she dances barefooted on the white dais (and loose haired), she bleeds over it, dancing until she faints.



Figure 19. Chopra’s film *Tawaif*: Sultana the *tawaif* (Rati Agnihotri) symbolically breaks her own glass *ghungroo*, dancing on the pieces until her feet bleed onto the white marble.

An almost identical scene to the ending of the *mujra* “*Teer-e-nazar*” in *Pakeezah* (1972) is reiterated down to almost every detail in Chopra’s 1985 film *Tawaif*. In it, Sultana the *tawaif* (Rati Agnihotri), like Pakeezah in 1972, ends the final *mujra* by dancing until her feet bleed. In *Tawaif*, the metaphor of the feet is extended to the *ghungroo*, whereby it is the glass anklets that, when broken against the floor, cut the dancing feet. The ‘borrowal’ of existing motifs, entire elements of plot or even script with minor alterations, are common in Hindustani cinema, but in *tawaif*-centred films, they are seen to correspond to a common existential reality. The sort of mythopoeic myth corresponds simultaneously to a rich foliage of various issues – as always with myth – it reinforces the foot fetish tendency in the *tawaif* world, it’s a sublimation, representing menstruation, and also the *tawaif*’s suicidal despair comforts the understanding that a woman is inevitably fragile and hysterical and in need of patriarchal control and protection;



through it the ‘moral’ superiority of family setups, especially as represented through the *begum* is performed. Finally all these strong but indulgent metaphors act as divergence since patriarchy is exonerated for constructing the *tawaif* as category in the first instance and myths being intentional (about something) and felicitously paradoxical, the *tawaif* was both a repository of art and a means to sublimate sexuality as a need within the patriarchal economy. Such a construction is re-iterated, sometimes more directly – as here with films separated by over one decade – sometimes – as we explore in the coming chapter – this is done more unconsciously as an underlying myth expressed through disparate manifestations. It is also interesting to note how Sultana is reflected in a ceiling mirror as she dances, an echo to *Mughal-e-Azam*’s *Sheesh Mahal* reflections in vortex mirrors (see fig. 26 below).

A temporal connection to the fetishistic is in postponement. The song that accompanies the “*Thade Rahiyo*” *mujra* (above) in *Pakeezah* is to do with the postponement of sex that is sublimated into a romantic play about a zealous lover at the door who is asked to be patient while the singer applies kohl to her eyes, or for a new reason in every stanza, part of an established tradition of coquetting in Hindustani cinema and more generally, in Urdu culture. “*Thade Rahiyo*” is translatable as both ‘keep waiting’ in the non-sexual sense, and ‘hold it’ with the sexual implication and as is often the case in Urdu culture, both signifieds are left to hover, vehicling remnant meanings of each. The postponement served pragmatic purposes – the studied demurring made *nawabs* (much like *danas* for the *geisha*) spend more and remain attached for longer periods. It also served the pragmatic function that was part of the sexual education of men that patience was an essence of lovemaking. But, here and otherwise, there is a mythical motivation in filigree marked by the patriarchal centering of male desire whereby desire is only definable as male and heterosexual. Male desire, which is desire for plenitude cannot be satisfied by the vagina, a site of castration, but by its ritual postponement, which is the closest, psychically, to maternal plenitude. Thus the Imaginary Order, from which the Real is inaccessible, provides substitutive signifieds of the order of the *objet petit a*, but cannot provide full plenitude; from the Symbolic Order plenitude is even more inaccessible.<sup>72</sup>

The inaccessibility of plenitude marks the dominant ambiance of the *tawaif* film – that of a sense of loss that can be described as nostalgia. Both *Umrao Jaan* and *Pakeezah* begin with sad past

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<sup>72</sup> See J. Rose, 1981 for instance.

narratives, and *Mughal-e-Azam* (Pride of the Mughals) in itself, implies that, at least during the reign of Emperor Akbar, there was a near-utopic reliability on imperial justice, especially on keeping one's word, a recurrent nostalgic motif even for current nationalistic postmodern tribal reminiscence. Metaphors of morbidity, such as of the bleeding feet of Sahibjaan/Pakeezah, the melancholy poetry of the *tawaif* (also reflective of a medley of cultures that celebrate poetics of nostalgia from Japan,<sup>73</sup> China, India through Persia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to Turkey; and perhaps Portugal and Galicia through *saudade*) in *mujras* and in *mushairas*, or the ontological image of the *tawaif* in the *kotha* as a 'living corpse' (*zinda lash*<sup>74</sup>) in a beautiful graveyard.

Myth is 'intentional', in the philosophical sense of 'aboutness': it only grows and flourishes within society only because it serves a particular purpose, has a number of functions and corresponds to unconscious collective and individual drives. Thus, the *tawaif*, built first as a myth, is itself an 'intentional' invention by patriarchy. It corresponds to the unattainable woman, Lacan's ~~la femme~~. The *tawaif* is the woman who is the opposite of the *begum*, like the beloved of the *ghazal*, and more generally, of Sufi sensibility, she is unattainable, remote and perfect, ~~la femme~~. According to Lacan ~~la femme~~ is crossed out since the Woman does not exist (*il n'y a pas la femme*):

Woman cannot be said (se dire). Nothing can be said of woman. Woman... is not-whole, since she can also have a relation with N... I designate N as the phallus insofar as I indicate that it is the signifier that has no signified... (Lacan, Seminar XX, 81)

From *nostos* (returning home), and *algia* (craving), nostalgia, she is representable as the promise of plenitude, a return to the mother's womb through the vagina. Already identifiable by gender before it is crossed out, ~~la femme~~ is a figure of nostalgia, a hoped-for entity that does not exist. Nostalgia, identified by Heidegger (1996 *inter alia*) as an effect of being human as part of *Dasein*, is a particular way of looking at the world with a yearning for meaning, representable by the mother's body in the psychic past, manifested in the conscious as a history of external events:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time - the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a

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<sup>73</sup> Sayuri as Narrator: "At the temple, there is a poem called 'Loss' carved into the stone. It has three words, but the poet has scratched them out. You cannot read Loss, only feel it." (*Memoirs of a Geisha*)

<sup>74</sup> From *Pakeezah*.

broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition (Boym 2001: Introduction XV).

Nostalgia refers more to a medley of angsts about the immediate world than to any specific object of desire.<sup>75</sup> It is more of a generalised mood about the immediate world and is reflected in morbidity and seeks compulsive repetition to being tranquillity.

The ritual repetition of the onscreen *tawaif* myth is a *signum rememorativum, demonstrativum and prognosticum*, a retrospective and prospective viewpoint that is set in an intense present:

The past and the future do not designate instants distinct from a supposed present instant, but rather the dimensions of the present itself in so far as it is a contraction of instants. The present does not have to go outside itself in order to pass from past to future. Rather, the living present goes from the past to the future which it constitutes in time... (Deleuze 1994: 71).

The contemporary postmodern world of the spectacle as defined by Guy Debord, but of main concern not only to Situationists but to the entire Frankfurt school (from Adorno and Horkheimer to Habermas) and beyond. Thus Debord (1967) contends:

When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency *to make one see the world* by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society... (Thesis 18).

Film provides a chance for overwriting the past by revisiting myths and re-adapting them to provide tranquillity (such revisiting is particularly typical of postmodern text) *in the present time*. Society as a spectacle points to 'real life' and the filmic *welt* as existential equivalents and mutual continua, with one 'text' indissociable from the other in the spectator's body in terms of experience. The implication is that the impact of rituals on film is as immediate and complete as other experiences ascribable to the real world. For Heidegger (1996), *Dasein* is not describable

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<sup>75</sup> Much like myth is described as "a means of surmounting, a completion without end..." (Vitsaxis 2006: 1)

as a being or entity that exists in time but as time; humans are constituted of nothing but the accumulation of their past experiences. A major part of the potency of the filmic text is in its posing as an existential extension of reality. In terms of its inscription directly onto the spectator's body as experience it becomes indiscriminately part of "the accumulation of their past experiences". This is not to imply that the cinematic experience is somehow inferior or less authentic than other experiences, which are also constructed. It remains, however, that there will be at least an equal lack of lucidity or vigilance about its constructiveness. The filmic text is present (both in space and time). The historical *tawaif* is inscribed through the Hindustani cinema in terms of a bodily presence and a present tense that is reified and maintained through repetition. Deleuze (1994) expresses this sense of the retrospective in terms of a scar: "A scar is the sign not of a past wound but of "the present fact of having been wounded" (77) Thus, the *tawaif* past becomes a mythical present. The past is after all, *sous-rature*<sup>76</sup> and can be rendered as ~~the past~~, only present as absence. The Hindustani cinema *tawaif* is a mythical confluence of ~~la femme~~ and ~~the past~~. In terms of clothes and setting, she belongs inevitably to the imagined Islamicate Indian past; one near-comical example is of *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, where shell-suit wearing Sikandar (Amitabh Bachchan) keeps intruding into the hermetic nostalgic *tawaif* world of Zohra Begum (Rekha) producing a sense of the anachronistic in the audience although it is set in 1978 and not in the past.<sup>77</sup> The *tawaif* also belongs to the nostalgic in terms of eliciting old-fashioned romance, such as of the hero falling in love by only seeing one of Sahibjaan's feet in *Pakeezah*.

Frankfort (1977) and Segal (2004) point to how mythopoeic thought finds seeming contradictions perfectly acceptable. The space of the mythopoeic does not favour the actual over the imagined – it shows awareness that the actual is no more acted upon by people than what is imagined. In fact, the actual is itself mediated perceptually first. Instead of seeking to unite different experiences under a universal law; they took each individual experience at face value. For example, the ancient Egyptians had three different creation myths. Hindustani cinema, like any other industry, needs to create desire for its product by promising 'tranquillity'. Hindustani cinema has shown an incredible ability to re-invent myths and adopt languages that fit the

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<sup>76</sup> "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since the word is necessary, it remains legible" (Derrida 1974).

<sup>77</sup> Also note that women are actually expected in conservative Indian society (regardless of community) to uphold tradition, often expressed in terms of clothes. Imperatives on men of that nature are more unusual.

zeitgeists of different audiences simultaneously. After all, myths do not seem to suffer from modern rationalist angsts to iron out contradictions from texts or to make characters entirely accountable or correspond to some narrative integrity. Instead they remain open to a variety of narratives, often ‘unnecessarily’ repetitive or even lacking in the modern (post-Enlightenment western) obsession with connective narrative or authorial coherence that is disconnected from the realities of the living body that produces.inspires it.<sup>78</sup>

### 4.3 The ‘Muslim’ Courtesan

A major proportion of the data we have about the *tawaif* comes from fictional sources. This is in fact not surprising. Representations of the *tawaif* reflect the construction of the *tawaif* itself, and, in metonymically widening circles, society’s complex relationship to prostitution which uncovers the dominant patriarchal male heterosexual sexual economy, and therefore, the relationship between society and sexuality. The *tawaif* is conceptually a moral and aesthetic game. Art is integral to the courtesan’s repertoire, especially in the form of song (Feldman, M & Gordon, B, 2006). While serving as a repository of art itself, the *tawaif*’s performance very often serves to sublimate the sexual act and to deflect questions of morality, both social and individual, and both conscious and unconscious. Given the moral stigma attached to the being of the *tawaif* and to visiting a courtesan, given the social class and position of most of her visitors, it is not surprising that most evidence of *tawaif* life does not come from factual government documents (and even then not directly). The artiness of the *tawaif* exists both in terms of the art she produces (as singer, but also in some cases as writer) and of representations made of her – in many instances, there is a blurring of the two, whereby the art of the *tawaif* is inspired by her condition itself. The initial artiness of the *tawaif* thus acts as an ideal bridge towards her representation in literature and in cinema. Her existential condition was already melodramatised by her art. The feminine beauty and grace allied with the tragedy of her condition constitute very attractive inspiration in art, and a photogenic inspiration in cinema. The hermetic nature of her world, brought about by the moral hypocrisies of society, and often maintained by the economic sense of maintaining an aura of mystery around her world makes for an alluring and exotic

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<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes’s narratological objections in “Death of the Author” might be of relevance here. (Barthes, 1977)

aesthetics and a narrative of suspense that bespeak the dynamics of entertainment in popular art. Hindustani cinema in particular, with its tradition of song-and-dance, and its melodramatic narrative line, found an ideal fit in representing the *tawaif*, made her a staple over many decades, was the mainstay of many of its classic masterpieces (*Anarkali*, *Umrao Jaan* –both Hindustani cinema versions, *Pakeezah*, *Mughal-e-Azam*) or figuring centrally in them (*Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki*, *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, *Devdas* –both Hindustani cinema versions) and helped carry a number of major female stars like Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Rekha, Aishwarya Rai, and Madhuri Dixit.

Hindustani cinema would have found a very early example of self-sacrificing courtesans in the history of Indian literature. *Mricchakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*) (Parab 1900) is a Sanskrit play written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, perhaps the earliest Indian play with a surviving manuscript. It was composed by Sudraka and dealt with humour and surprisingly modern twists and turns of the love of the generous but impoverished Brahmin Charudutta and the rich courtesan Vasantasena, most likely a fictional character. Courtesan-inspired Indian films started very early in Hindustani cinema. *Bilwamangal* (Rustomji Dhotiwallah, 1919) was the first Indian film to depict a courtesan: Chintamani, a legendary character. It was also the first film in Bengali. It was shown merely two years after *Raja Harishchandra* (Dada Sahib Phalke, 1917), the first ever Indian film.

*Bilwamangal* was released as a silent film in 1919, but was remade in 1932 into a sound film. It relates to a mythical poet and Sanskrit scholar, Bilwamangal who leaves his wife for Chintamani, a legendary courtesan. The eponymous hero Bilwamangal is credited with writing the Sanskrit anthology *Sri Krishna Karnamritam*, which describes devotion to the Hindu god Krishna, who is often associated with seduction, through excessive love. The courtesan character from Bilwamangal's writing, Chintamani, is also an ardent devotee of Krishna, and sings *bhajans* in praise of him all the time. The fictional Bilwamangal's attraction towards Chintamani eventually turns him to similar devotion to Krishna. This devotion marks much of the early history of courtesans in India, perhaps as a means to sublimate the earthliness of attraction to the courtesan into spirituality. Krishna will then remain continuously relevant to the myth of the courtesan throughout its hundred year history as part of Hindustani cinema text, from *Bilwamangal*

(Rustomji Dhotiwallah, 1919) to *Bunty Aur Babli* (Shaad Ali, 2005).<sup>79</sup> Thus, one of the episodes in one of the classic courtesan films, *Mughal-e-Azam* (K. Asif, 1960) includes a dance celebrating Janmashtami (the god Krishna's birthday) celebrated in *Mughal-e-Azam* by a dance of the quintessential courtesan, Anarkali.<sup>80</sup> This 'homage' connects the two courtesan traditions (the Hindu and the Muslim) very aptly, particularly in a film that celebrates respective Mughal/Rajput pride, mutual friendship and alliance, and through it contemporary Hindu/Muslim relations.



Figure 20. The *Mohe Panghat Pe mujra* celebrating the god Krishna's birthday -a golden statue of Krishna as a baby is rocked in a cot by Emperor Akbar and Empress Jodha during the dance in *Mughal-e-Azam*

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<sup>79</sup> Refer to the song "Kajra ré" from the film here, and in Chapter 5 below.

<sup>80</sup> The legendary courtesan Anarkali ('pomegranate blossom', a Mughal Court title), born Nadira *Begum* or Sharfun-Nissa, is so central to the plot of *Mughal-e-Azam* that it is directly based on a number of films in the 1950s from India, Bangladesh, and Pakiostan called *Anarkali*.



Figure 21. The *Mohe Panghat Pe mujra* celebrating the god Krishna's birthday- *Kathak* dance to a devotional-style *bhajan* in *Mughal-e-Azam* reflecting Islamicate cultural hybridity.

This connection with Krishna worship continues throughout in the courtesan tradition, albeit not always conspicuously, until as recently as “kajra re” from *Bunty aur Babli* in 2005 (see next chapter below), with the song's lyrics sung by the courtesan, addressed directly to the god Krishna (“kajra re”, meaning, the one with kohl-lined eyes, is a generally recognised symbolic reference to Krishna). “Kajra re” is a form of devotional worship, a search for the Godhead, based on a prayer that is especially common among the Gaudiya Vaishnava.<sup>81</sup> In terms of the search of the spiritual in the Beloved, the tradition finds resonance in Sufism and in mystical forms of Christianity, the sort of portmanteau cultural denominator that has mobilised Hindustani film directors and scriptwriters to appeal – and therefore sell - to the variety of target audiences. These films were selective of myths to represent and construct South Asian history. For instance, Emperors like Humayun, Shah Jehan, and especially Akbar, with his syncretic beliefs, are consistently represented in Hindustani cinema. Emperor Aurangzeb, identified as running a virulently anti-Hindu politics, is not. Overall, Muslim/Hindu friendship and syncretic cultural

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<sup>81</sup> More popularly known as Hare Krishna, Gaudiya Vaishnava is a Vishnu-worshipping movement primarily through Krishna, was founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is a form of devotional (*bhakti*) attachment to Krishna and Radha and their many forms.



discourses were made conspicuous within 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindustani cinema. This will prove less consistent by the 1980s. In fact, already after independence, Pakistani cinema was to favour Emperor Aurangzeb.

According to Bhaskar and Allen (2009), the Hindu courtesan tradition first drew upon the imaginary of court dancers in Hindu courts (*raja nartakis*) and Hindu ritual traditions, and the dances by *devdasis* within the precincts of the Hindu temple as well as the legendary myth of divine *apsaras*,<sup>82</sup> which remain strong references in Indian written and singing arts. Films like Kidar Sharma's *Chitrlekha* (1964) and Girish Karnad's *Utsav* (1984), both set in the fourth century, evoke these two traditions. The first film was based on the novel of the same name by Bhagwati Charan Verma, which appeared in 1934, and the second on the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Sanskrit play *Mricchakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*) as described above. The imagery and iconography associated with the figure of the dancer-courtesan in these films draw upon the distinctive role that sexuality and eroticism play within the traditions of Hindu religiosity (Bhaskar and Allen, 2009: 45). Courtesans of Buddhist tradition are assimilated by Hindustani cinema to the general pre-Islamic (Hindu) tradition - *Amrapali* is a one such example of a 1966 film based on the life of Amrapali, a Buddhist royal courtesan who lived around 500 BCE. Kidar Sharma's 1964 version of *Chitrlekha* was a remake of his own 1941 version of the same film, which had become a classic, and an influential film. The new version, which was far less successful, starred Meena Kumari, famous for playing the main courtesan role, Sahibjaan in *Pakeezah* in 1972 (filming for this had started in 1958, and therefore actually preceded *Chitrlekha*). Co-star and onscreen lover Ashok Kumar played Sahibjaan's biological father in *Pakeezah*.

In earlier films like *Bilwamangal*, or *Nartaki Tara* (1922) and in *Devdasi* (1925) that followed, the courtesan is not represented in the existential complexity and nuance as compared to the lush courtliness of the *mujra* setting and the full self-indulgence of Sufi pining for God or the

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<sup>82</sup> *Apsaras* are divine dancers mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*. They are divine dancers. According to the *Puranas* they are frequently sent to seduce people on earth who are trying to obtain power through rigorous penance. This formula of seduction will prove enduring with Hindu courtesans over decades, arguably merging into the more 'Islamic' tradition of later years.

theatricalisation of Krishna worship from pure *bhakti* to *natya*.<sup>83</sup> At its maturation, the courtesan tends to belong to South Asian Muslim tradition, based on the actual background of the *tawaif* or more generally the *kothewali*, the inheritor of Mughal courtly or urban opulence. Also, later representations of courtesan as ‘culturally Muslim’ (or ‘Islamicate’) brings out new ethical concerns related to the Judeo-Christiano-Islamic notion of the courtesan as living on the frontiers of a defined ethical model, which becomes narratively less melodramatic under Krishna worship. However, *Bilwamangal*’s gentle approach to Krishna worship does resonate in the later courtesan’s ethical inner conflict between love for the many (not without its irony) and love for one. In the end, the courtesan of the 1980s and 1990s inherited from both traditions – as often occurs in Indian culture, and the Hindustani film industry.

This dissertation mainly focuses on the Lucknow-style courtesan since the Hindustani cinema text of the 1980s and 1990s that centrally spotlights the courtesan is mostly of that inspiration. For even when not set during the period, or exactly in Lucknow (for instance, *Pakeezah* is set in Delhi and in the Princely state of Patiala in the Punjab in the early twentieth century), it followed the tradition of Lucknow, the capital of Oudh (Awadh), mostly as under the brief but illustrious reign of Nawab Ali Wajid Shah. Lucknow (and other princely capitals in historical Northern India) became north India’s major cultural centre after the decline of Delhi and was renowned for the quality of its Urdu language and literature. Its aristocracy was by and large Shia,<sup>84</sup> a minority within the Muslim minority in India, and even included many Iranians. There was strong Persian influence in language (Urdu as impacted by High Farsi<sup>85</sup>) and performance

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<sup>83</sup> *Bhakti* refers to the more ‘devotional’ approach to worshipping God in Hinduism (or more accurately *moksha*, Enlightenment). Notably, it includes a form of *darshan*, gazing upon the face of a physical manifestation of the God (statue or abstract representation - *murti*, stone – e.g. *lingam*, natural forms) and is inspired by mythological stories from the *Puranas*. *Bhakti* as a path is formally opposed to *jnana* (knowledge), *yoga* (meditation), or even *kama* (sexuality). In the praxis, and according to many readings, the paths actually intercross, in that, for instance, *bhakti* can be said to lead to a state of *yoga*.

*Natya* (dance) is one such path to *moksha*. Again, beyond the a priori opposition to other paths, it in fact merges with them. Thus, *nastya* can be merged with devotional worship of a particular god (Shiva for instance as Nataraj, the ‘Lord of Dance’ or, as here, Krishna, mostly approached in terms of the lover) as a form of *bhakti* leading to *yoga*, a state of meditation. *Natya Shastra*, a treatise composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE. This oldest surviving treatise of theatrics exposes an impressively wide range of issues around stagecraft, is still considered the main repository of sacred dancing traditions in India.

<sup>84</sup> See Cole 2005, especially pp.123 - 161

<sup>85</sup> The population then included many Iranian immigrants, among whom Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini’s paternal ancestors, such that when his grandfather returned to Iran, he was nicknamed ‘Hindi’ (a person from Hind, or India). (Trivedi 1996). Cole 2005 7-8 states that:

(kathak dance-form). The courtly culture in Lucknow was maintained until the independence of the Republic of India, yet it never achieved the sophistication as under Nawab Ali Wajid Shah. The Lucknow period covered only a couple of decades of history within a very limited, specific geographical area but remained a continued inspiration and has become generalised through Hindustani cinema into a timeless secular representation of Muslim Indian elites. The Hindustani cinema courtesan always was a nostalgic presence at different levels.

Vijay Mishra (2002 & 2006 and elsewhere) identifies the *tawaiifs* in the films I am mostly engaging with here, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* as ‘Muslim’ courtesans.<sup>86</sup> For Mishra (2006: 16), this figure of the “‘Muslim’ courtesan” remains pivotal to the Hindustani cinema conception of the heroine but also suggestively points to the once central and marginalised Muslim in Hindustani cinema.” Thus, the *tawaiif* figure also becomes a symbol of the ambivalence of Muslim presence in Hindustani cinema itself, and perhaps the hybridity that is Muslim Indian identity itself, part of how Muslims are seen and are invited to see themselves. Bhaskar & Allen (2002) adopt the term ‘Islamicate’ retrospectively, following from Marshall Hodgson (1974) and Mukul Kesavan (1994) to refer to “the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (Hodgson 1974: 59). Kesavan 1994 argues (246 *inter alia*) that the Islamicate Imaginary has permeated Hindustani cinema. Urdu, the language of choice to support Indian Islamicate culture, is identified not as much as a *lingua franca* for Muslim Indians as a general elitist Indian language of refinement:

[it]came to be associated with the literary cultures of the elite centred in the writing of poetry and performances of poetry at *mushairas*, where the assembled poets recited their compositions and appreciated each other's poetic skill. These literary and social gatherings in the public domain were predominantly male spaces, though women in *zenana* had their own version of the *mushaira* at similar all-women gatherings. While the literary genres of Urdu varied from poems (*nazms*) to panegyrics (*qasidas*) and the poetic rendering of legendary romances in the *masnavis*, central to this literary culture was the recitation of couplets (*shers*) and the *ghazal* (14).

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“Persian could be heard spoken by some common people in the capital, Lucknow in the late eighteenth century, as well as at court, and among literary figures. Enormous numbers of Persian words entered local speech, contributing to the further development of Urdu”

<sup>86</sup> “Courtesans in Hindustani cinema are almost always Muslim.” (Ghose 2006; 11).

The *ghazal* in particular has proven to be enduring in Hindustani cinema beyond the *tawaif*-centered film.

Starting with some of the first Hindustani, and well-established by the first sound film (of which it is an example) *Alam Ara* (Irani, 1931), much of early Islamicate representation in Hindustani cinema is shamelessly Orientalist in nature, adopting the Orientalist lack of nuance first between Indian and Middle Eastern cultures, then among the various cultures seen to belong to each:

The teens thus seem to have been governed by a majoritarian Hindu imagination. By the early 1920s, however, Muslim Historicals like *Nurjehan* (1923), *Razia Begum* (1924) and *Shahjahan* (1924), had begun to appear, and the pre-Sound period continued to see the emergence of others like *Mumtaz Mahal* (1926), *Shiraj-ud-Daula* (1927), *Shiraz* (1928), *Adale Jahangir* (1930) and *Chandbibi* (1931), clearly indicating that by the end of the Silent period the Muslim Historical film with its distinctive iconography was firmly in place. This iconography drew particularly from the architectural forms and the paintings of the Sultanate and Mughal periods, which the mise-en-scene of the films used to spectacular effect (Bhaskar & Allen, 2002: 4).

However, these ‘Orientalist’ films mature up by the 1940s to give birth to the so-called genre Muslim Historical, which was, instead, focused on constructing a strong sense of identity for Indians themselves:

...from the 1940s to the 60s, when there was a significant increase in the number of Muslim Historicals that were made, most of them focused on the Mughal period with Mughal Emperors such as Humayun ( *Humayun*, 1945), Akbar (*Shahenshah Akbar*, 1943; *Mughal-e-Azam*, 1960) Jahangir (*Anarkali*, 1953; *Mughal-e-Azam*, 1960; *Noorjehan*, 1967 ) Shahjahan (*Shahjahan*, 1946; *Taj Mahal*, 1963) and even Bahadur Shah Zafar (*Mirza Ghalib*, 1954) as protagonists or important characters (Bhaskar & Allen, 2002: 6).

Muslim Historicals, of which *Mughal-e-Azam* is a fine example, but also at the same time a ‘Muslim’ courtesan film, offer Islamicate grandeur, but largely for an Indian market audience with obvious post-independence and nation-building ambitions. Such an identificatory sense of self-esteem and self-worth is quite contrary to the effect sought by the orientalist film. Bhaskar & Allen 2002 list as evidence of the Islamicate “Islamic culture and the Urdu language, the Persian love stories of Laila-Majnun and Shirin-Farhad, poetic forms such as the ghazal and the masnavi, and song traditions such as nazms, ghazals and qawwalis.” (XIII), “design element for interiors... (c)olonnades and arcades of walkways with multifoil arched roofs, latticed and

filigreed balconies,...arched and pillared terraces with filigreed walls and latticed backgrounds, and the terraced and landscaped gardens” (11, 12). All these are traces of Orientalist presence as well, and feature inevitably in the *tawaif*-centred film, but beyond the 1930s, they will rarely again assume the adoption of a Western I-camera perspective again. Nair’s 1996 *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* can count as a rare exception, but although based on an Urdu short-story, does not depict a *tawaif*, but a non-Islamicate courtesan. In contrast, Gulabji (Rani Mukherjee), from *Saawariya* (Bhansali 2007) in an otherwise very Western-style story and setting and a short-story by Dostoevsky is unmistakably a filmic *tawaif*, inherently pure and self-sacrificial.

The Islamicate films draw upon Sufi philosophies of music and poetry. The *qawwali* in particular is a felicitous fit for the *tawaif*’s world since it aspires for the mystic’s union with the Divine through the worship of the Beloved (for an example see the *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*” as represented figs 28, 29, 30). In opposition to the terrorist’s hypermasculinity however, the womb-like closedness of her world makes her a hyperfeminine counterfoil of Muslim presence in Hindustani cinema. Similarly, Sufism contributes some of the most enduring images of Islam in Hindustani filmic text (for instance in representations of *dargas*, mausoleums where saints are worshipped through the *qawwali* mode), corresponding to the only alternative representations to the more phallic discourses of conservative or extreme Islam generated by the image of the terrorist. Like Sufism itself, the world of the *tawaif* is constituted as ideologically open, the ‘playful femininity’ of the *tawaif*’s space also opposes the contrapuntally patriarchal official discourse of Islam and offers a more *jouissif*, hybrid alternative, particularly as compared to many conservative or orthodox representations of Islamic space. Within the Hindustani cinema text itself, the myth of the *tawaif* uncovers an adaptive strategy based on hybridity that underlies an official homogeneity of orthodox Islamic discourses based on binaries. The *tawaif* inhabits a mythopoeic space of contradiction and uncertainty and a morally hybrid dimension, one that is both subversive and bourgeois. Mythically, the *tawaif* is an existential entity that exists within a Gnostic-like world (the creation of the imperfect demiurge) which persists as a Derridean ‘other’ within a Muslim receptive subtext. She represents a modern ‘human condition’ that cannot be acknowledged directly (and thus faced, and ‘defeated’) in the conscious world but can only be matched at the level of the unconscious as mythical metaphor. Thus, the *tawaif*’s world itself is “world” in Hannah Arendt’s sense of “world” (as distinct from the “earth”) as something built by

human work (May & Jerome 1997: 15). Anne O’Byrne refines Arendt’s phenomenology of natality in *Natality and Finitude as* “We arrive into a world but at the same time our arrival constitutes the world.” (34).

According to Husserl, a temporal object can only be understood in terms of anticipated futures and remembered pasts, inhabited by other events (Husserl 1964). Futurity, as a direction toward the future that always contains the past—the has-been—is a primary mode of *Dasein*’s temporality. For Oldenburg 1984, 267, in the *kotha* (*hotha* is an alternative spelling), the women “could be women first, and Hindus and Muslims in a more mutually tolerant way, because the culture of the *hotha* represented elements of both and was acknowledged as a truly synthetic tradition.” This tradition corresponds to Mukhul Kesavan’s Islamicate. Post-independence South Asia, however, was marked by violent politics of difference.<sup>87</sup> The hermetic nostalgic oldworld of the *tawaifs* was being confronted by the outside world. In *Sadhna*, the Islamicate tradition that defines the architecture and *tehzeeb* (etiquette) of the *kotha* is present in the colonnade of multifoiled arches that define the interior space, in the Kathak dance and costume of the *tawaif*, as well as in the gestures of greeting and approbation of her customers. The dominant imaginary of the *tawaif* film thus remains as Bhaskar and Allen (2009) call it, ‘Islamicate’. However, when Champabai/Rajani (Vijayanthimala) the *tawaif* heroine leaves the *kotha*, she ‘becomes’ Hindu again in the house of Professor Mohan (Sunil Dutt) and his mother where she is paid to pose as a daughter-in-law. At one point she unwittingly bids farewell to the Professor over the sick-bed of his mother using the traditional *aadab*, a Muslim form of greeting with the palm raised towards the inclined head, until she realizes that this standard greeting of the *kotha* (see fig. 22 below as an example) is out of place in this Hindu family. Indeed, since she is Hindu herself, it is actually a form of leave-taking that gives away her status as a *tawaif*, as part of an Islamicate world. She then quickly changes her gesture of farewell, pressing her palms together and bowing her head in a Hindu-associated *namasté*.

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<sup>87</sup> It is unlikely that it was a coincidence that Rasoolan Bai, one of Oldenburg’s (1990) most important informants, left her profession as *tawaif* and stopped dance and music in 1948, the year India and Pakistan became independent nations.



Figure 22. From *Umrao Jaan* (1981), the actress Rekha as Umrao at the start of a *mujra*, her right palm raised towards the inclined head in a classic Islamicate *adaab* of respect and modesty towards the audience (as part of etiquette *tehzeeb*). Also note the typical coy and downcast eyes from behind the *dupatta* to indicate modesty. Note, as discussed above, how the *tawaif*'s failure to return the gaze as a 'full' agent enables gazing at her with impunity.

In an article entitled "In Search of the Other Song" (2013), a kind of making-of of the documentary "The Other Song", Saba Dewan details her search for a bawdy version of a famous song as sung by *tawaifs* through Varanasi, Lucknow and Muzzafarpur in Northern India. In it she explains:

One of the issues taken up by Hindu-nationalist leaders of early 20th century was the demand that Hindi be declared the official language, as opposed to Urdu. During my research of Hindi pamphlets from the time, I came across a series of popular cartoons that presented the *tawaif* as 'Begum Urdu', the embodiment of the alien, exotic, untrustworthy, decadent, morally corrupt Muslim 'other' – in direct contrast to 'Mother Devanagari', the upper caste, respectable, honest and homespun mother of every true Hindu son. This attack was coupled with the anti-*nautch* movement of early 20th century, ... Locating Hindustani music in ancient *shastra*-based principles and mode of learning, early cultural nationalists (such as Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digamber Paluskar) focused their attacks on the corrupting influence of its present practitioners, 'dancing girls' and

‘ignorant and narrow minded’ Muslim *ustads*, both seen as interlopers to a sacred tradition.

While prostitution is rarely a recommended career for anyone, judgements about *tawaiifs* are mythopoeically rich. In the example above, as well as joining Muslim conservatives in building the *tawaiif* as responsible for her condition, and not the men who frequent her, nor even the patriarchal system that assigns roles, spaces and mindsets to both, Hindu nationalists have used judgement on the *tawaiif* is used to support the myth of the sexually corrupt Muslim, which carefully excluded discourses of prostitution associable with Hindu cultures, and often theorised by *Tantra*, such as of temple dancing prostitutes (*veshyas*), who are often referred to as ‘above’ common prostitutes. Within the Islamicate tradition, the heritage from ‘Islamic’ civilisations had been dominant (a *pax Islamica* of sorts) and much of post-independence Indian Hinduism has been in nation-building mode. Many Muslim Indians have also been dealing with fall of Empire loss and nostalgia. The Islamicate tradition was fast melting under post-independence politics with both Hindus and Muslims – in typical neotribalist fashion – sought to escape into nostalgic purism with the interest of both patriarchies to blame the *tawaiif* as scapegoat for their respective sexual hypocrisies. *Tawaiifs*, equipped by life with their pragmatic cynicism, showed lucidity about blaming games, being blamed themselves for patriarchy’s legitimation of the centering of male desire. Religious differences made no sense in their world: myths of the Islamicate associated with *tawaiifs* were nothing more than a pragmatic adaptation, a mimic, including cultural effects associated with Islam, though by no means uncritical of the dominant discourse. Thus, if we follow Oldenburg 1990’s narrative [Section 8], we may argue that use of *burqa*, the full-body ‘Islamic’ veil was somehow diverted to the *tawaiif*’s own purpose, at odds with her professional performances, to avoid the male gaze “when they went visiting or shopping since injunctions about female modesty did not apply to them, but also insisted that I should wear one as they led me to other kothas in the vicinity.”

Is the *tawaiif* Whore of Babylon or *apsara*? Is the *tawaiif* ancestor or prostitute? Cannot she be both? These categories are in fact judgements, mythical readings of the same event. As myths, they co-exist simultaneously, only inauthentic in as far as nothing is authentic. To continue in the *es gibt* logic, Bhaskar & Allen (2009: 46) connect ethics to aesthetics:



The distinctive feature of the historical Hindu-Courtesan film, - in contrast to the Islamicate Courtesan film, is precisely the pretext it affords to render eroticism in an ostensibly non-judgmental way. Yet when filmmakers try to capture the idea of the erotic in the Hindu tradition, as in *Chitrlekha* or *Utsav*, it inevitably loses its spiritual quality and becomes simply erotic in a soft-core way. Nor do these films escape the framework of moral judgment that defines the courtesan. In contradistinction to the Hindu Courtesan film, the Islamicate idioms of the 'Muslim' courtesan film locate the *tawaif* and her art forms in the historical imaginary of *nawabi Lakhnawi* culture, and conceive the figure of the *tawaif* as a repository of the social and cultural forms and values of this imagined world as they are expressed, and also transformed, in spaces other than and in times other than the nineteenth century.

The Muslim culture was to later feature more prominently within the general courtesan representation to produce the more recognisable *tawaif* tradition which would inspire the later Hindustani cinema text towards new 'existential' explorations of the beingness of the *tawaif*. The mapping of the ethical world of the Hindu and 'Muslim' courtesan traditions is more or less distinct, the latter leading to the most mythical landmark courtesan characters to the genre most spectacularly Anarkali, Pakeeza, and Umrao. Straddling 'abrahamic' and 'brahminic' worldviews, Islamicate Indian identity was not just hybrid, but hybridising, part of a growing becoming within which neither the 'abrahamic' mind against body dichotomy nor the 'brahminic' syncretism of both was able to occupy. Mythopoeic in the sense that it did not mind rationalistic contradictions, the Islamicate found a subversive space in the ancestral heritage of the *tawaif*, a prostitute whose sexuality was sublimated through dance and *tehzeeb*. In this bashful moment of sublimation, the thin *dupatta* that both conceals and reveals, the myth of the *tawaif* reveals the essence of being ethically Islamicate, a complex construction of guilt as condition *sine qua non* for the rich imaginative and delicately sado-masochistic world that it generates. Thus the *tawaif* provided and still provides, in mythical terms, an opportunity to psychically confront, overwrite and assimilate issues of sexuality, femininity, religious/ethnic identity all at once. Against paternalisms, purisms, it proposes a woman and a cynical prostitute as common ancestor, an 'agnostic' demiurgical world of imperfection, denouncing the patriarch and, indeed, *all* identities as tainted.

#### 4.4 Agency of the *Tawaif*

For Vitsaxis (2006: 1), “the history of myth coincides with the overall history of the human spirit.” According to Csapo (2005: 93), “(m)ths – and art generally – belong to the realm of collective fantasy mediating the two.” Analysing art, especially when intended for the collective, more so given that Hindustani filmic text is an industrially motivated cultural narrative, uncovers the mythical mindset of the consumers of that art: “Myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance.” (Csapo 2005: 9)

The unconscious, the seat of the language of mythology, is at the base chaotic and in the psychic history of the human subject. It is formed as a result of encounters with the alienating outside world and other beings, and certain narratives interact within the resulting psyche of anxieties (such as of the fear of castration), desires and libido in ways that result in a form of tranquillity. As with any manifestation of the unconscious, the mythological cannot be retrieved directly, but metaphorically, metonymically and retrospectively (in terms of psychic history, both collective and individual):<sup>88</sup>

Once a culture has forgotten its rapturous fascination with sunsets, sunsets can no longer explain why the myths are told (Csapo 2005: 162).

The *tawaif* is a particularly revealing example when it comes to understanding myths. The historical *tawaif* is already given to mythicisation during her time, and then the myth of the historical *tawaif* is succeeded by new myths constructed, maintained and transmitted by the Hindustani filmic text. Prabhu 2001 identifies the *tawaif* as one of recurrent myths of Indian women from commercial Hindustani cinema. It remains, however, that, as we have been exploring so far, the traditional *tawaif*, although first performed by patriarchy, offers a variety of indirect forms of resistance to patriarchal givens. While carrying over some of the older issues, the filmic *tawaif* poses fresh new challenges. The novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* poses itself as a veritable story and could easily have been one. It seems realistic in the sense that it is a story that could plausibly have taken place. Circumstantially, it seems that Ruswa most certainly had first-

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<sup>88</sup> Phenotype and genotype, with neither being truly exclusive of the other in the unconscious.

person experience of the courtesans of Lucknow. It shows very intimate knowledge of the world of the *tawaif* which, like the world of the *geisha*,<sup>89</sup> is arcane, or at least only accessible to the 'initiated'. The story of how the young Amiran is abducted and sold into the *kotha* is typical of how the *tawaif* was made, and her subsequent rejection by her entire family whereas she was hoping for solace, whereas she is adulated in her *kotha* fits within the ethico-ideological world she inhabited. *Umrao Jaan Ada* also makes references to direct and such authentic locations as the court of Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow where Umrao performs, and medieval Faizabad, where she originates, where such verifiable events as the fall of Lucknow, and – with it – the 'fall' of the *tawaif*. Veena Oldenberg (1990: 264), arguably one the best academic sources for the historical *tawaif* herself, identifies Ruswa's novel as "the single most important source of information on the courtesans of Lucknow."

Ruswa's Umrao is a strong, independent woman who seeks neither romance nor sex, nor yet male protection. The older Umrao, at least, is very unsentimental and very 'modern', neither naïve nor vulgar:

There is always an element of selfishness in love, whether it be a man's love for a woman or a woman's love for a man. Selfless love like that of Laila for Majnun or of Shireen for Farhad<sup>90</sup> is only found in tales and legends. I have come across cases of love which is not reciprocated, but I prefer to look on it as a sort of mental- disorder (Ruswa 1993: 39).

One of the ironies of the logic of performativity resides in that, since the identity *tawaif* itself is created by the patriarchal structure of the *nawabs*, the fate of the *tawaif* is felicitous while the system survives since she has her everydayness tied to it. When it fell, '*tawaifness*' became a double-victim, already one under the old regime, and performed under new regimes as different categories, including common prostitution where new judgements are not entirely new, or entirely subversive (revolving around notions of purity for instance). Thus Muzaffar Ali's 1981 film version of *Umrao Jaan*, although a thoughtful and mature version, falls short of the grim realism of the 1899 novel: as Gohar Mirza is about to have sex with Umrao (Umrao's first time) Umrao's teacher Maulvi Sahib, symbolically bearing a religious title and sporting a beard, a figure of moral rectitude, interrupts, causing the outcome to remain uncertain. Ali is cleverly playing out two possibilities – one conservative and another more subversive and manages to

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<sup>89</sup> See for instance, Feldman, M & Gordon, B, 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Fated lovers who are equivalents of Romeo and Juliet in Persianate cultures (of which common Indian cultural vocabulary).

satisfy two audiences at the same time. By 2006, there seems to be an accrued need to satisfy only one audience. In Dutta's version of *Umrao Jaan*, it is made very clear that she kept her virginity, despite its unlikeliness given her profession. After being rejected by the love of her life, Nawab Sultan, the audience is invited to identify with her loss. She is then *raped* by a lascivious Gohar Mirza, a contrast with the consensual sex in the original novel, ironically reflective of a modern relationship. The latest Hindustani film *Umrao* also refuses to have sex with Faiz Ali, the bandit. Only by proving her virginity, in body and in mind, can she be deserving of empathy within a bourgeois ethics of judgement and condemnation. The *tawaif*, despite her ontological origin in prostitution is thus re-inscribed within the existing repertoire of Hindustani cinema heroines, represented, as described by Prabhu (2001), as chaste, submissive, modest and self-sacrificing, virtuous all giving mothers, or long-suffering wives (*pativrata*).

Issues of purity are still (perhaps more than ever before) dictating how films are narrated, and therefore, how judgements are made. An 1899 novel, vehicling cold facts about the condition of the *tawaif* albeit behind the veil of *tehzeeb*, discussing sexuality in a relatively 'open' manner, sporting very 'modern' sexual relationships, will, by 2006, be transformed into a somewhat maudlin Bollywood 'retro' myth, extolling the virtues of a sexually 'pure' heroine. In the Hindustani film text, the historical *tawaif*, a confident 'feminist' figure, neither truly Madonna nor truly whore, is reinscribed within a bourgeois ethical economy of blame. In mythical terms, the 'laugh of the whore', assimilable to the feminist 'laugh of the Medusa'<sup>91</sup> is replaced by an invitation to gaze and to occupy. Instead of looking back at the gazer who is petrified into stone, the cinematic *tawaif* looks away, inviting a gazer's impunity.

This retrospective transformation contributes to throwing doubt on the veracity of the legendary Anarkali narrative as represented in *Mughal-e-Azam*<sup>92</sup>. The central issue of the story is how Emperor-to-be Jahangir (originally Prince Salim)'s father, Akbar, insists that a dancing courtesan can never become Queen of India. It is most likely a retrospective 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative fabrication or the conflation of the older myth with a different causative explanation, there is the notable case just over a century later of Baijiu Sahiba Nawab Qudsia Begum Sahiba Zamaniya Qibla-i-Alam, originally the *tawaif* Udham Bai, who actually became a third wife to Timurid

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<sup>91</sup> see Cixous 1976.

<sup>92</sup> A story discounted by many academics. An earlier cinematic version of the story, *Anarkali* (1952) carried a disclaimer that the story had no foundation in history.

Emperor of India Muhammad Shah Rangile (1719–1748). A century later, Wajid Ali Shah, the notorious last Nawab of Oudh (Awadh) took for first wife Begum Hazrat Mahal, originally a *tawaif* who became famous in her own right for taking over the affairs of the state when her husband was exiled to Calcutta, recapturing Lucknow, and rose against the British during the Indian Rebellion 1857 and has been variously honoured in contemporary times<sup>93</sup>. Beyond the *tawaif* who became royalty (significant as it is in terms of opening for a prostitute, as compared to the more conservative contemporary times), other *tawaifs* were also treated with much reverence. This is amply demonstrated in Ruswa’s novel *Umrao Jaan Ada*, but also from less fictional sources. “In the Asafjahi court, during the period of Nizam Ali khan, in 1730s, “a sum of rupees twelve thousand per month was spent towards salaries of *tawaifs*.”<sup>94</sup> Tula & Pande (2014: 74) state, referring to Oudh (Awadh) but also applicable to other contexts of (mostly medieval) Islamicate India:

It was compulsory for *tawaifs* to sing in the marriage functions, and after the *nikah* a group photo was taken for the sake of remembrance. The invited *tawaif* was also given place. *Tawaifs* were an integral part of various festivities—marriage celebrations, Bismillah ceremonies and *Urs* (death anniversaries of Sufi saints).

Such extreme acceptance of the *tawaif* and their firm inscription in society beyond the sexual might even buy scorn from contemporary conservative and/or extremist quarters, namely Muslim, Christian or Hindu. It is this spirit of Mughal tolerance and patronage of arts that led, in tandem with Wajid Ali Shah’s Lucknow, to the development of modern Khayal, the backbone of classical North Indian music, namely by Niyamat Khan and his nephew Firoz Khan, in the court of the same Timurid Emperor, Muhammad Shah. Again, this privileged treatment was only reserved for the highest of the *tawaif*, certainly not for *randi* or other prostitutes of lower esteem. We are not here opposing historical veracity with legendary and fictional invention – instead

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<sup>93</sup> On 15 August 1962, the Old Victoria Park in Lucknow was renamed *Begum Hazrat Mahal Park Lucknow* and was endowed with a marble memorial in her honour. (<http://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/travel/begum-hazrat-mahal-in-lucknow>) Accessed on 01 September 2013 at 17.00 Standard Mauritian Time.

On 10 May 1984, the Republic of India issued a commemorative stamp in her honour. (<http://www.indianpost.com/viewstamp.php/Currency/Paisa/Alpha/B/BEGUM%20HAZRAT%20MAHAL>). Accessed on 01 September 2013 at 14.45 Standard Mauritian Time.

Research I undertook has shown no comparable efforts of commemoration of any *tawaif* from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh or Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.

<sup>94</sup> Source: Tamkeen Kazmi, in *Hyderabad Aisa Bhi Tha*, p. 25 as quoted in Tula & Pande 2014, 74.

changes in narrative myth reveal general changes in *zeitgeist* and cultural function. Discussing the new *tawaif*-centered filmic myths, Bhaskar and Allen (2009: 46) argue:

In the Muslim Courtesan film the courtesan is presented as a woman who is essentially pure at heart, but one whose upbringing and lifestyle condemn her to a condition of permanent self-alienation.

The narrative of the *tawaif*-centered film has become melodramatic, *contra* the original deeper existential tragedy of *Umrao Jaan Ada*, yet the fates of almost all *tawaifs* is tragic. Lalita du Perron 2007 identifies this as the ‘tragedisation’ of the filmic *tawaif* with a specific function. It is important for the bourgeois world to believe that these women were tragic and doomed and could never enjoy a happy ending. Whereas *tawaifs* had access to freedom to travel, hold property and invest, it was, and is not in interest of the bourgeois world to promote that in any way, including by publicising such advantages in media. Hindustani cinema can thus be read as increasingly compliant with such interest.

The *tawaif* tradition has all but disappeared in India but lives on as myth through Hindustani cinema which has reappropriated the myth on its own terms. The power of women, giving the poetic reply to princes and nawabs was the linguistic antithesis to the subaltern, the voiceless woman. And yet, in the Hindustani cinema text, more often than not her power is truncated by her love for a man, which will mean the loss of her, but morally “buy her back” in the esteem of the Hindustani cinema audience, as I argue later. Language, once again, pace J.L.R Austin through to Derrida is performative.<sup>95</sup> It doesn’t just reflect the ontological; it *creates* it. The visual language of the *tawaif* film reifies the *tawaif* in society. Similarly, the language of freedom of the historical *tawaif*, based on the signifier, after Barthes’s notion of myth, is transformed into a desire for the social signified, marriage with a man, performed into an alteration in ontology. A subversive prostitute is turned into a delicate overfeminised Hindustani cinema myth that will often not dare look back into the I-camera.

From a bourgeois moral perspective, or under such guises as the medical (for the British), one main mythopoeic function of the *tawaif* in society (whether Indian or British) has been

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<sup>95</sup> To be more precise, the performative includes the contextual use of the periperformative, which Kristeva borrows from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick 2003 discusses the periperformative supports the performative, such as through mythological spaces and metaphors that allow it. It is collective and contextual contributions to the performative.

consistently as a scapegoat, the innocent goat to be sacrificed to save the city (reference to Freud 1906), although under a variety of avatars. Hindustani cinema's melodramatic construction of the courtesan as tragic (inherited from Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jaan Ada*) owes much of its consistency to that sense of the courtesan as scapegoat or at least as suffering for what she is not responsible for (to follow the option of an ethical logic that supports judgement and retribution): "Extremes, be they philosophical, religious, social, or other, usually call the scapegoat factor into being with the goal of assuaging personal and/or collective feelings of impotence, inadequacy, and incompetence." (Csapo 2005:110). Thus the various forms of collective guilt brought about by the historical *tawaif* are sublimated in the cinematic text into a re-enacted ritual of the scapegoat. The cinema *tawaif*'s story is one where the main heroine is rendered into a fragile melodramatic character infatuated with a man and obsessed by the prospect of getting married and becoming 'an honest woman.' By ascribing her condition solely to a heart-wrenching concurrence of events in her life, there is a diversion away from the deeper origins of her suffering in the more general cultural politics of gender difference. In mythical terms, the filmic story of the *tawaif* has a 'cleansing' social effect, blaming prostitution, symbolically demonstrating the pain it causes, and even bringing the courtesan to a fictional death. Marriage is the only redemption possible and this is rarely accorded – even in exceptional films like *Pakeezah* where the *tawaif* marries, the result is by no means unproblematic.

According to Bhaskar and Allen (2009: 47):

The heroine of *Pakeezah* is portrayed as if she were a pure spirit who is trapped within her own exquisite masquerade and the sublimely alluring yet ultimately tomb-like world of the *kotha*, like a bird in a gilded cage, to use a metaphor that echoes through the genre. Both the film adaptations of Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* are also organised around the idea of the courtesan's purity, and the excruciating pathos that arises from her inability to find fulfilment in love.

To reinforce the metaphor of caged bird is the torn kite hanging in the courtyard, and the whistle of the train, which operate as leitmotifs for the world of the *tawaif* as deceptively liberating. However poetic at first sight, the metaphor reflects an unambiguously partisan endorsement of bourgeois judgement. While it seems to be lamenting on the condition of the *tawaif*, a fully justifiable criticism, the film is in fact suggesting that the condition of the *begum* is so preferable as to be envied by the *tawaif* (the recurrent whistle of the train, which can be read like a desire

for freedom but also for modernity can be particularly misleading). Indeed, the implication is that, whereas the *tawaif*'s condition is an unfortunate and isolated effect of patriarchy, marriage is a *natural* endeavour for a woman. Although in the final scene, where Shahabuddin's family is forced to start the *baraat* (wedding procession) from the *kotha* in the red light district, a deeply ironical fantasy for a family with haute bourgeois morality, *Pakeezah* falls short of engaging – unlike a few later *tawaif* films – with the fact that both are effects of patriarchy and that the *begum* and *tawaif* owe their respective existences as part of a connected politics of difference as part of the economy of Madonna and the whore. Ultimately, the patriarchal system, which is denounced in the film as repressive to *tawaifs* only through the character of Shahabuddin and his father, ends up being re-instituted. The status of the *begum* is not truly engaged with: it is not shown to be somewhat similar to the condition of the *tawaif* and in many ways much more restrictive, and instead is always shown as a projection into the future, a promise of “happiness ever after.”

*Pakeezah* might seem like a notable exception to du Perron (2007)'s ‘tragedisation’: although it starts on tragedy and tragedy strikes again and again, it manages a *deus ex machina* happy ending, as serendipitous as *Pakeezah* is saved by elephants sinking the barge where the nawab was about to symbolically ‘steal her virginity’ (it is hinted she already has sex in the previous sequence with the “*Chalte Chalte*” *mujra* figs 19, 20, 21). In fact, the film itself finds a way to extend Sahibjaan/*Pakeezah*'s longing for marriage that dominates the film in the shape of a young *tawaif*-in-training, in one of the film's final sequences, as Sahibjaan/*Pakeezah*'s impressive *baraat* (wedding procession, complete with palanquin and a parade of servants) moves away into the distance (see fig. 23 below).





Figure 23. Younger *tawaif* looking wistfully at the departing *baraat*.

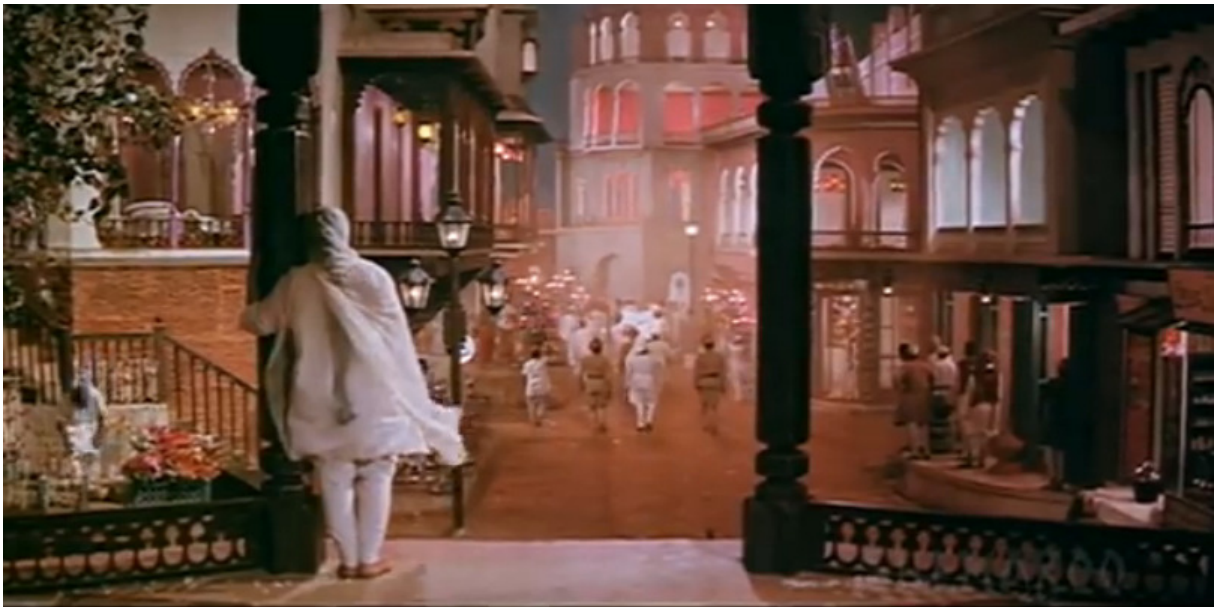


Figure 24. The final sequence of *Pakeezah*.

The final sequence of the film (fig. 24 above) shows the tail of Pakeezah's *baraat* leaving Lucknow's red light district, the same setting that properly introduces Pakeezah as a character during the *Inhin logon ne mujra* (above in Chapter 3). Nawabjaan, Pakeezah's aunt, guardian, and *choudariyan* to her *kotha*, watches them, a lonely figure, her white *dupatta* fluttering in the wind, as the film closes (fig. 24 above). It is implied that she is also being 'punished' for bringing Pakeezah to become a *tawaif*. In the end, individuals are 'punished'. As well as Nawabjaan, the *choudariyan*, Shahabuddin's father is forced to plead with a *choudariyan* for Pakeezah's hand and to allow the *baraat* to proceed from a *kotha*. The condemnation is in the film of the circumstances that led to Pakeezah/Sahibjaan becoming a *tawaif* leads to individuals rather than a system suggesting that what is required is a change of heart instead of more substantial engagement to structured social change and therefore that judgement can be reserved to a couple of individuals rather than awareness of the system.

Individuals acquire gender identities and become subjects by existing within a network of binary categories. Gender distinctions based will inevitably entail the woman occupying an inferior, subordinate position. One of de Beauvoir (1949)'s contentions is how the male identity is thus represented as universal and objective rather than particular and masculine whereas the female is characterized by self-doubt. Earlier in the film, Sahibjaan/Pakeezah decides not to marry Salim Khan since she gets to hear people bad-mouthing her for her profession, referring to her dismissively as a *tawaif*, rendered as "she's some whore!" (see fig. 25 below). The judgement of people around Pakeezah both bring empathy about her *tawaif* condition, but its also echoes the spectator's deeper, mythical, bourgeois judgements, since the solution proposed is marriage, another form of patriarchal culture where the female exists *in terms of* the male. Within the economy of purity, Pakeezah is established as a sentimental heroine, with melodramatic reactions. Instead, one would expect the historical *tawaif* to be seasoned to such judgements. Pakeezah's reaction is the moral equivalent of the gazed at lowering his/her eyes instead of returning it, confronting it and outstaring it 'like Medusa'. Instead, the lowered gaze legitimises impunity, bringing to the patriarchal gazer, 'tranquillity' in the face of "heterosexuality as an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own naturalized idealization" (Butler 2006:311). Sexuality is prescribed as heterosexuality, of which masculine heterosexuality is the norm and feminine heterosexuality is somehow the complement. Sexuality itself is heterosexuality as

norm, further with masculine heterosexuality established as norm and feminine heterosexuality as subordinate. Further, Beauvoir (1949:39) describes the female condition in terms of a lack of agency: “Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man...He is the subject, he is the absolute, She is the other.”



Figure 25. Pakeezah paying heed to comments by the crowd. By rendering the word ‘*tawaiif*’ as ‘whore’ (either following the tone of the men in the crowd or standard translation practice in Hindustani cinema), the subtitle seems to add insult to injury.

The novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1899), describes a powerful, if cynical, *tawaiif*, of whom increasingly less agency remains in the cinematic versions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as I discussed earlier until Dutta’s version in 2006, with a fragile-looking and -being Umrao (as played by

Aishwarya Rai), perhaps influenced by the highly influential *Pakeezah* transmutation of the myth:

I am but a courtesan in whose profession love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him. No one knows how to love more than we do: to heave deep sighs; to burst into tears at the slightest pretext; to go without food for days on end; to sit dangling our legs on the parapets of wells ready to jump into them; to threaten to take arsenic. All these are parts of our game of love. But I tell you truthfully, no man ever really loved me nor did I love any man. (Ruswa 2006: 101)

Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1990: section 7) uncovers parody as a strategy of resistance by *tawaifs* to their condition. Instead of adulating the condition of the *begum* (wife), Oldenburg's (and other) narratives show the *tawaif*'s gritty realism about it:

They had transmuted grim reality into parody. The thankless toil of an average housewife, including her obligation to sexually satisfy a sometimes faithless, or alcoholic, or violent husband, for the sake of a very meagre living came across vividly. 'Was not the situation of the housewife tantamount to that of a common prostitute, giving her body for money? It is we who are brought up to live in *sharafat* [genteel respectability] with control over our bodies and our money and they who suffer the degradation reserved for lowly [*neech*] women,' Saira added, lest I, poor naïve thing, had missed the whole point of their theatricals.<sup>96</sup>

One common form of parodic resistance to patriarchy was through a particular parodic theatrics and the use of language that subverted the polite refinement that characterises the female within the patriarchal libidinal economy:

Male in-laws, particularly fathers and brothers-in-law, are caricatured in countless risqué episodes enacted regularly and privately among women. As things got more raucous I began to think that even their refined speech – *begamati zubaan* – seemed to be an affect. They ridiculed the aggression and brevity of sexual arousal in men, even as they amuse, educate, and edify the denizens of the kotha.

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<sup>96</sup> In an earlier interview with the *tawaif* Gulbadan, Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1984)

VTO: Gulbadan, since you are a handsome woman, so well educated, with all this money and property and jewels, why didn't you marry a *sharif* [respectable] *nawab* [there are several descendants of noble families in Lucknow who use this honorific] and settle down to a life of respectability?

Gulbadan: Your use of the word "respectable" is thoughtless. Is marriage considered the only "respectable" alternative for women in America? Are married women not abused? Well let us show you what marriage is before you wish it on an old and *respectable* woman like myself, or any of us here. Let us dispel the darkness in your mind about the nature of marriage.

These routines, embellished with their peculiarly rude brand of humour, irreverent jokes and obscene gestures, are performed like secret anti-rites, distilled and transmitted from generation to generation as their precious oral heritage [*ibid.*].

In these narratives we find cynicism and even some melancholy, but no naiveté, no melodramatic self-pity and certainly no sign of pining romanticism. Saba Dewan's revealing documentary "The Other Song" charts her search for a bawdy version of a famous song sung by *tawaifs*. It constantly charts the double world of the *tawaif*: the world of extreme politeness marked by *tehzeeb*, and, in palimpsest, the world that parodies it. In the end, we conclude that the real *tawaif*'s world was far from austere or filled with desperate, suicidal women but was a space of playfulness and liberty only marred by the pragmatic realities of sexual relations for economic reasons, - but even there, it was never clear who was in control in the end. Oldenburg uses the Urdu term *nakhra*, a word which carries a certain playfulness, can refer to general coquetry but here specifically to the lineup of feigning tactics used by *tawaifs* to keep rich clients on their toes so they stay more and pay more.

These well-practiced ploys—the feigned headache that interrupts a dance or a song, feigned anger for having been neglected, a sprained ankle, tears, a jealous rage—have beguiled generations of men to lose thousands of extra rupees or gold coins to these women. The *tawaif*'s refusal, at a critical juncture, to complete a sexual interlude with a favorite patron is a particularly profitable device, because feigned coital injuries or painful menstrual cramps involve expensive and patient waiting on the part of the patron (Oldenburg 1984: 274- 275).

However, faking by women (whether of headaches or of sexual pleasure) is a patriarchal taboo – it is an admission and a demonstration not only that women controlled their own bodies but also that they wielded power over males. Thus the main *tawaif*-centred films of Hindustani cinema will at most incorporate *nakhra* on its terms, as a playfulness of rather immature nature. Thus, the first *mujra* in *Pakeezah*, *Inhi logon ne* (refer to figs 2, 3, 4 and to notes) can be described as playful *nakhra*: Sahibjaan/Pakeezah is here dancing and singing to the rich clients who have come to watch her dance for the *mujra*, that men have stolen her *dupatta* feigning to therefore find sympathy in the very men who have come to gaze at her lasciviously and hoping to have sex with her. This is in contradistinction with the older Sahibjaan/Pakeezah, who is shown to have no sense of *nakhra* but a desperate, melodramatic wish for marriage (refer to fig. 25 above with note). *Nakhra* is dismissed as immature. Instead, the source of *nakhra* is a cynicism that grows

out of knowledge and not lack of it. Certain truths about life and especially about patriarchal structures of desire and the place of the woman's body therein lead to *nakhra*, which is a strategy of survival, with some consolation with a nuance of revenge over the system (at least a relative transfer of power back to the *tawaif*). Such knowledge about existence is expressed in *Memoirs of a Geisha* by the main *geisha* protagonist Sayuri Nitta:

She paints her face to hide her face. Her eyes are deep water. It is not for *geisha* to want. It is not for *geisha* to feel. *Geisha* is an artist of the floating world. She dances, she sings. She entertains you, whatever you want. The rest is shadows, the rest is secret.<sup>97</sup>

Why is the older Sahibjaan/Pakeezah made to suffer submissively and masochistically in the film, instead of sporting the more brazen attitude to adversity one expects from the historical *tawaif* (and gets to glimpse in the earlier Sahibjaan)? The Hindustani film *tawaif* is matched with the *pretended* bashfulness of the historical *tawaif* to choose to portray not a cynical prostitute or one who enjoys her freedom and position but a character conveniently regretful. This fits within the sexual fantasy economy of the male client of the *kotha* transmuted into the spectator of the Hindustani text of there being no doubleness in the *tawaif*'s existence, that the *tawaif* is the ideal Madonna/whore in the 'right' dose – a submissive woman, always ready for sex and agreeable to becoming the object of any sexual fantasy (body) while remaining an equal intellectually and artistically (mind), and desirous of the condition of the *begum* (soul). The desire for normalcy is seen to come *from* her, in many ways the ultimate fantasy of Madonna/whore, of *begum/tawaif* all in one. This incongruous collage of fragments uncovers a male heterosexual identity as moulded by many of the ambiguities and contradictions of patriarchy, which performs categories that belie the fact that no identity is. which then explains to a similarly complex strategy of resistance by *tawaifs* akin to Bhabha's mimicry. Thus, Butler's thesis that an identity is reiterated equally by that which repeats it and that which subverts it. While there was undoubtedly much that was tragic about the *tawaif*'s condition, her handling of it was multiple. The choice of one myth over others is also an ideal cultural 'Darwinian' fit for the intended *zeitgeist* and the

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<sup>97</sup> Mameha, the Mama-san imparts a similarly sorry wisdom: "We do not become Geisha to pursue our own destinies. We become Geisha because we have no other choice." (*Memoirs of a Geisha*)

‘misfits’ are not even represented and the choice of one discourse over another is not coincidental. Some myths satisfy the audience more than others and it might seem that the current *zeitgeist* is one of bourgeoisie in subversive clothes, here a superficial feminism based on emotional identification with the inevitable despair (prison, tomb, fallen kite) of the female condition. Once such a model is established as successful it is re-iterated by mainstream cinema, with an additional sense of authenticity brought by its pre-existence. It becomes an increasingly felicitous fit and the myth is imprinted into everydayness as part of overall existence.

Lalita du Perron (2007: 72) writes:

A hundred years ago, these things weren’t available to married women, so being outside the bourgeois system had its own benefits, but it’s not in interest of the bourgeois world to promote that in any way.

The Bengali novella *Devdas* (Chattopadhyay, 1917) was the first recognisable source for this Indian version of the ‘whore with a heart of gold’. Films inspired by the novel (Mitra 1928, Barua 1935, Roy 1955, Bhansali 2002 for the Hindi medium alone) will relay the tragedy of Chandramukhi the *tawaif*, hopelessly in love with Devdas, the main protagonist, giving up her profession to save him. After *Pakeezah* in 1972, the myth of the ‘whore with a heart of gold’ will become a fixture in Hindustani cinema. In the Hindustani cinema text, more often than not her power is truncated by her love for a man, which will mean the loss of her, but morally “buy her back” in the esteem of the Hindustani cinema audience. In the end, however, in the cosmic world logic of mainstream movies, she ‘pays’ for being a *tawaif*, a continuous lining up of judgements as ethical gaze that condemn her, from the society within the film to the spectator.

In *Pakeezah*, *Mughal-e-Azam* and the *Umrao Jaan* films (especially Dutta’s), despite melodramatic moments such as of Anarkali being shown to defy the Emperor Akbar, the overall and final impressions are of fragile women seeking male approval and protection. According to Heidegger in *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, “One may turn away from a mood (*Stimmung*), but that is only to another mood; it is part of our facticity. Only with a mood are we permitted to encounter things in the world.” (1990: 45). There exists no neutral mood for encountering things in the world. The Hindustani cinema text of the dancing courtesan provides phenomenological ‘tranquillity’ (Heidegger 1996: 222 *et al.*) to much of the watching audience *in the present time* of watching. It confronts the audience with the myth and stages a transferred

confrontation of its own *id* and superego, after Freud's own explication for an audience's identification with the hero of a tragedy in "Psychopathic Characters on Stage" (Freud 1906).<sup>98</sup> The handling of the woman's sexuality is thus externalised onto the stage, and played out to the superego's satisfaction. This is why the courtesan in the Hindustani cinema text, far from spurning it, will, in fact, desire true love and marriage above all else, the situation where she will of her own volition wish to give up her freedom, her esteem by the highest men of society, her art, for the one man she loves. As with most myth-as-ritual, shedding innocent blood, the blood of the scapegoat (literally the goat as Freud reminds us) is essential to return society to the golden *status quo*.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The myth of the *tawaif* is revisited and reinscribed within existing tropes whether during the times of the historical *tawaif* or lately within Hindustani cinema – she is transformed into a hyperfeminine character, a *begum* in drag – she needs to 'prove' first that she is a woman (feminine, graceful, sensitive, fragile, hysterical), then that she is a 'pure' woman (preserving virginity or losing it inadvertently, depending on zeitgeists; lacking in knowledge of the world; an object instead of a subject of, desire). The myth of the *tawaif* thus serves to confront the societal anxieties about sexuality, rein it in, bring it back to the fold, reassuring the bourgeois values, then sacrificing a victim to cleanse the *polis*. According to Piettre (1968: 243), "Myth, being connatural with people in their earthly adventure, was and always will be their inseparable fellow-traveler and their refuge in their existential agony."

In the Hindustani cinema text, the *tawaif* provides a nexus for the entire ritual. As a prostitute, she exists within the patriarchal matrix of virgin or prostitute as an oversexual woman, complete with religious constructions of woman as sexual trap. As a skilful seductress, she is also a source of anxiety for 'wives'<sup>99</sup> (onscreen, or spectators) who would be worried about their husbands fornicating with the likes of her, or more alarmingly still, falling in love with one like her. Her love for the one man in the text, presented as 'pure', will serve as her redemption: she is brought

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<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 2 above. While it reflects genotypal resemblances with other *Hamlets* read or performed in terms of unconscious primal history, mythical readings of *Hamlet* remain affected – phenotypically – by *zeitgeist*.

<sup>99</sup> I have chosen, for the sake of clarity, to refer to stereotypes of the bourgeois family established by the patriarchal structure into self-evident, and mutually defining categories – husband and wife. The use here is bracketed/suspended/ironised.



back to the fold as one desiring bourgeois: “the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature” (Barthes 1972: 9). And meanwhile, ‘husbands’ can dream of fornicating with her while she looks with downcast eyes (refer to Umrao’s *adaab* gesture – fig. 22, and to Doisneau’s photograph above – fig. 5) while maintaining the appearance of ‘social decency’.

The film *Pakeezah* is myth-making. The mythical nature of the film itself and its production – length of time of filming, epic stories around the main protagonists, memorable *bons mots* from the director, but above all the cost of making the film, and the professional eccentricities over details (see fig. 26 below and caption). As most cult films, the making is as epic as the film itself. The content of cult films also find resonance with identifiable, mythical needs, functions and structures that tend to be universal. Thus, May & Jerome 1997’s identification of Hannah Arendt’s tragic vision echoes classical themes in seeing human beings as free indeed, but frail, pitted against overwhelming odds and liable to cause catastrophes when they use their freedom to act (28), a mythical vision of human fate that finds resonance with the epic themes of the *tawaif* film.



Figure 26. *Mughal-e-Azam* was one of the most extravagantly expensive Hindustani films: a studio replica was made of the Sheesh Mahal (literally, in Urdu, Crystal Palace but more commonly referred as Palace of Mirrors) which served as *harem* in extensive Lahore Fort. The use was anachronistic, since Sheesh Mahal was only constructed under Shah Jehan, Emperor

Akbar's grandson, but remains a major generic Islamicate reference. The original was, as seen in the still, decorated with *pietra dura* (inlay mosaics) surrounding mirror mosaics (*ayina kari*). In this still, Anarkali is seen reflected into an *ayina kari* of convex glass, in the 'swirling motile architecture' of the Mughal dance dress (*angarkha*) choreography. We can make an analogy to Lacan's mirror except that the Imago is fragmented into a repeated, re-iterated identity in a film that is full of visual imagery.



## 5. Hindustani cinema *Herself*: the Protean Body of Hindustani cinema

### 5.1 The Argument

This chapter examines Hindustani cinema as a body as performance (as a doing, not a being). Above all, as with all bodies, Hindustani cinema is performed continuously (doing, not done) and therefore definable only differentially (becoming, not being). Thus, Hindustani cinema *herself* is a *mujra*, a performance, with “men” watching (gazing at?), a space of relative liberation, yet somehow limited by the strictures of its inscription into cultural contexts. Ethically, Hindustani cinema stands for a portmanteau of both Hindu and Muslim moral values. All along the *tawaif* had been the manifestation of a deeper structural dynamic at work in the Hindustani film text.

Thus, the final part of the argument considers Hindustani cinema ‘herself’ as a courtesan, as an entertainer that needs to please, which informs on the nature of its natality. It seeks to investigate the new avatars of the courtesan in Hindustani cinema.

### 5.2 Binary Narratives

Myths change according to changes in context. The reader’s context acts as a signified to the text in that construction of meaning is only completed once the reader is taken into account. Thus the reading of a particular myth, - and therefore the myth itself – changes. Thus, there is no need for the courtesan as a pretext to show sexuality anymore. Contemporary Hindustani cinema is increasingly unembarrassed about sex and sexuality, with even homosexual relationships being portrayed by mainstream actors. The continued appearance of the courtesan in Hindustani cinema thus appears postmodern retrograde or anachronic. Residually, however, other mythical functions of the *tawaif* persist.

According to Levi-Strauss (1964 *inter alia*), mythologies are constructed in terms of opposites: in the *tawaif*-centered Hindustani film, Madonna/whore, *tawaif/begum* and vamp or item girl/pure heroine seem to represent the main binaries by which images are constructed. Susan Bordo (1987) engages with how the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection of the philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel, and Descartes has worked to fix perceptions about gender. Thus

women have been objectified – some female bodies are treated as objects (*tawaifs*) whereas others are protected (*begums*, mothers).

Connections are made subconsciously – mythically, between content and reception, between subject and object, with a culture shared between gazer and gazed at. There is a symmetrical movement of binaries within the narrative of cinema through images. An extended example of this happens within the *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*” in *Mughal-e-Azam*. Originally a Sufi devotional song, the style has been cleverly adapted to a more secular purpose here – namely, a versified battle of wits between two *tawaifs*: Bahar (Nigar Sultana) and Anarkali (Madhubala) about love, of which an extract below<sup>100</sup> uncovers the dialectical nature:

**Bahar:**

*Bahaarein aaj paighaam-e-muhabbat leke aayii hain*

Spring has brought a message of love.

*Badii muddat men ummiidon kii kaliyaan muskuraayii hain*

The flowerbuds of hope have smiled after such a long time.

*Gham-e-dil se zaraa daaman bachaakar ham bhii dekhenge*

It is best to protect yourself from heartache and wait and see.

*Ajii haan ham bhii dekhenge*

Let us wait and see

**Anarkali:**

*Agar dil gham se khaalii ho to jiine kaa mazaa kyaa hai?*

When the heart knows no pain, then how to cherish pleasure in life?

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<sup>100</sup> Translated by myself.

*Na ho khuun-e-jigar to ashq piine kaa maza kya hai?*

When the heart does not bleed, how can it know the pleasure in swallowing tears?

*Muhabbat en zaraa aansuu bahaakar ham bhii dekhenge*

We shall shed a few tears for love and wait and see.

*Ajii haan ham bhii dekhenge*

Let us wait and see.

(Lata Mangeshkar, Shamsad *Begum* and chorus)

In an aesthetics that vehicles an ethics around shame (as *sharam*, described by Salman Rushdie as “untranslatable”<sup>101</sup>) difference is performed between two ontological binaries: Bahar (Nigar Sultana) is luxurious looking (dress, make-up) (fig. 28), and Anarkali (Madhubala) is made to look more plain (and therefore more ‘pure’) (fig. 29). In addition, Anarkali is provided as an identity prop (reference to Butler, 1990) an orange and gold *dupatta* over the head, the playing with which indicates bashfulness. Bahar, obviously the ‘villainous’ *tawaif* is instead made to wear the Persian hat, bejeweled and plumed, fixed at a coquet angle.

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<sup>101</sup> ‘...shame fills up and drowns every letter of this novel. And not just ‘shame’, but the nearly untranslatable ultra-nuanced Urdu word ‘sharam’” (Rushdie 1995b: 1)



Figure 28. The *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*”: Bahar (Nigar Sultana) maintains a brazen visual relationship with the camera, and no *dupatta* as identity prop, with which to *be* bashful.



Figure 29. The *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*”: Anarkali (Madhubala) is bashful in contrast with Bahar, and in particular keeps toying with her *dupatta* (compare with fig. 9 above), with her eye downcast, refrains from looking directly into the camera, smiling with modesty, implying timidity and therefore ‘innocence’ and ‘purity’.

The two women are gazed at differently. After the competition where Bahar argues that love is about pleasure and Anarkali that pain is essential to love, the prince offers the rose flower to Bahar and its thorns to Anarkali. The film shows that although Bahar wins the debate, it is Anarkali who wins the heart of Prince Salim through patience and suffering. It is an unambiguous message about 'pure women' winning hearts and, within the micro-cosmos of the Hindustani film, the ethical message is reified into a concrete system of retribution implying cinematic survival or death. The proximity of the audio-visual cinematic medium with reality helping,<sup>102</sup> watching the film infects the reality of the spectator, informing her/his worldview, judgements about others, and therefore, oneself. In the film, the bourgeoisie of a contemporary *zeitgeist* of tabloids denouncing mistresses of politicians cannot admit to a *tawaif* as Empress of India (see Chapter 3 above) makes it self-evident that Anarkali will not marry Prince Salim. In the closed micro-cosmos of mainstream cinema, physical death is not an end (see for instance *Romeo and Juliet*). Within that logic, not only is Anarkali's life is saved in the end according to *deus ex machina* logic, but she wins morally, which means she wins ultimately and in the same breath, Bahar fails although she outlives Anarkali. The ultimate reward is, to use De Beauvoir's ideas about female agency, male approval, the signified without which the female remains a signifier. There is also, within this historical genre, the amaranthine implication that Anarkali as a legend will live forever whereas Bahar's name will be lost among the sands of time. This retrospective knowledge increases the sense of kismet that already inhabits the binary logic of the Hindustani film micro-cosmos.

The gazing Prince Salim (fig. 30) is the judge not only of the *qawwali* competition, but of the fates of the *tawaifs* in the moral sense. The position of the gazer is not just a physical or aesthetic posture, but a profoundly and intricately ethical one: it corresponds to a right to judge without being looked back at/judged in turn. His physical seated position as judge corresponds to his privileged position in the film narrative: he will, in the end, judge that Anarkali is marriageable and Bahar is not. Further, Prince Salim's position of immunity doubles as the one shared by the spectator, the gazer who is invited to constantly pass judgement. This lends self-evident

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<sup>102</sup> The medium of cinema (inheritor of photography) itself is existentially secondary, and therefore initiates de facto a fetishistic relationship with the world. Beyond upon this indexical (chemical) level of resemblance is built a series of complex iconic and symbolic (Pierce, 1934) representational structures which are directly connectable with cultural *epistémè*, as opposed to *technè*. See also McLuhan 1964 whose enduring statement that "the medium is the message" more or less founded Medium Theory, stating that the media became "an extension of our senses, and alter our social world" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:307).



normalcy to the hierarchy gazer/gazed at rendered as *tawaiifs*/prince. But it also fits, in *mise-en-abyme* fashion, the spectator's gaze, who is in turn granted the same immunity from being gazed at/judged.



Figure 30. The *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*”: Prince Salim (the future Shah Jahangir) sits through the *Qawwali* recital with a rose in his hand, an informal symbol of Mughal royalty. After the recital, a live versified moot debate about whether love is pleasure (as argued by Bahar) or pain (as defended by Anarkali), the prince wittily offers the rose flower to Bahar and its thorns to Anarkali. It continues the association of the *tawaiif* with morbidity.

Mulvey (1975) identifies three gazes that sexually objectify women onscreen. The first is the perspective of the male character on screen and how he perceives the female character. The second is the perspective of the spectator of the female character on screen. The third gaze joins the first two looks together: it is the male audience member's perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective allows the male member of the audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate himself, through looking, to the male character in the film. In the case of the *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*”, the camera eye Prince Salim and the ‘male’ spectator are aligned to objectify both *tawaiifs*. Whereas neither is judged worthy to survive in a film (in the entire history of Hindustani cinema few *tawaiifs*

have<sup>103</sup>), Bahar is made to appear deserving of a harsher punishment: pelvic death, in other words, she simply ceases to appear onscreen. Her mythical function of the *tawaif* onscreen is only *in terms of* the male.

The absence of the male client in most matrices of prostitution is significant in that stances about prostitution (such as, for our immediate purpose here, the anti-nautch movement) exonerates the male clients from the matrix altogether, and this is consistently true of the cinema *tawaif*. Whenever male clients are shown in *tawaif* film, they are not fleshed up characters shown within societal structures. The camera rarely gazes at them. Instead, the I-camera is invited, within *mujras*, to adopt their visual perspective. This turns the male character into a Gazer/God, watching with full powers, but unwatched back:

In the modern courtesan tale it is the male protagonist, rather than the courtesan, who has disappeared from the story. [...] It is worth considering what might be required to write new histories of the great women singers and dancers of the twentieth and twenty-first-century India who have continued the courtesans' legacy – histories that take into account these women's many successes and triumphs as well as their sorrows and failures (Schofield, 2012: 165).

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<sup>103</sup> *Tawaif* characters in films such as *Devdas*, *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, or *Mughal-e-Azam* face futures of loneliness at best.



Figure 31. *Pakeezah*: The *nawab*'s lascivious gaze as Sahibjaan performs the “*Chalte Chalte*” *mujra*.



Figure 32. The camera closes in on the watching *nawab*'s intentioned, liquid eyes...



Figure 33. Sahibjaan's bashful, and fearful eyes indicate she is not in control of the visual economy in this sequence, inviting objectification.

Whether assertive or not the woman is looked at and the I-camera assumes the role of the male gazer, neatly fitting with the perspective of the male character's gaze within the film. Within the economy, she is the *tawaif*, the receptacle (and invitation?) of the gaze, whether she is Bahar, Anarkali, Umrao, or, here, Pakeezah.

Eyes are central to many representations in Hindustani cinema. To provide only two examples of a wealth of references in Hindustani film. First, references to Krishna's eyes in "Kajra ré" (*Bunty aur Babli* – see Conclusion chapter below). In *Umrao Jaan*, Umrao sings:

*In aankhon ki masti ke*

*Mastane hazaron hai*

(The passion in these eyes of mine

Has impassioned a thousand admirers ...)<sup>104</sup>

This interest in eyes might have become a concern through the Islamicate genres, since it is shared with many other ‘Islamicate’ civilisations, particularly where only the woman’s eyes are seen by male strangers. This produced, in Hindustani cinema, a mutual game of gazes rather than a straightforward unidirectional yet this locking of eyes will most of the time not only display, but actually perform an unequal power relation, as indicated by the female bashfully unwilling (seemingly unable) to outstare the male (and this construction is presented as ‘natural’ and self-evident) – see for instance fig. 36 below).



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<sup>104</sup> translated by myself

Figure 34. “Bheegi Bheegi Raaton Mein” song [Kishore Kumar, Lata Mangeshkar] in *Ajnabee* (Samanta 1974) Rajesh Khanna and Zeenat Aman embrace...



Figure 35. “Bheegi Bheegi Raaton Mein” song in *Ajnabee* (Samanta, 1974) Rohit (Rajesh Khanna) and Rashmi (Zeenat Aman) kiss... In typical Hindustani film *habitus*, the kiss (see later) is deflected and no locking of lips shown.





Figure 36. *Bheegi Bheegi Raaton Mein*: Rashmi (Zeenat Aman) turns away from being kissed bashfully.

Further, the gendered camera is only interested in the woman in terms of her physique. This is far less true of the male. It becomes demonstrable with reference to the age of the camera's objects. Whereas the camera tends to be equally indifferent to men of various ages, in *Pakeezah*, the camera is interested in Sahibjaan visually but not at all in Pakeezah's aunt, guardian, and *chowdariyan* to her *kotha*. Women are objectified in accordance with a fixed brochette of criteria, mostly physical, one of which is youth (often compounded with facial features and body-shape). The camera does not gaze at men with the same intention or intensity. With the *tawaif*, again, the camera doubles up as an attendee of the *kotha*, ogling at the dancing woman, and neither at women considered less attractive nor men. The camera is, following Mulvey, obsessively male. The cinematic *tawaif* is sold as an exotic figure – exoticism by an Indian for an Indian (the main target audience). She is othered by time (nostalgic historical past) and space (luxurious palatial), but also gender (woman, vagina, mother), the ideal spectator being stereotypically male.

Males or females do not exist as bodies, as the later Mulvey contends (1981 & 1989) after Bergstrom (1979), Doane (1987, 1991 *inter alia*) and Clover (1992) using Sigmund Freud's ideas of bisexual responses, arguing that women are capable of identifying with male characters and men with women characters, either successively or simultaneously. Clover (1992) argues that young male viewers of the Horror Genre (young males being the primary demographic) are quite prepared to identify with the female-in-jeopardy, a key component of Horror narrative, and to identify on an unexpectedly profound level. Clover further argues that the "Final Girl" in the psychosexual sub-genre of Exploitation Horror invariably triumphs through her own resourcefulness, and is not by any means a passive, or inevitable, victim. Laura Mulvey, in response to these and other criticisms, revisited the topic in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" (1981). In addressing the heterosexual female spectator, she revised her stance to argue that women can take two possible roles in relation to film: a masochistic identification with the female object of desire that is ultimately self-defeating or a transsexual identification with men as the active viewers of the text.

Within the Hindustani text, various sublimations are used to conceal the objectification of women. For instance, according to Kasbekar (2001:7), heroines are represented as submissive and self sacrificial, hence a symbol of national honour. Pompous words like "symbols of national honour" hide ~~la femme~~, a denial of agency, forced marriages, honour killings, and of course, the condition of the *tawaiif*. In a definite turn towards the mythopoeic, Mulvey (1981: 13) states:

In the Proppian tale, an important aspect of narrative closure is 'marriage,' a function characterized by 'princess' or equivalent. This is the only function that is sex-specific, and thus essentially relates to the sex of the hero and his marriageability. This function is very commonly reproduced in the Western, where, once again "marriage" makes a crucial contribution to narrative closure.

According to her, discussing Hollywood film:

the function 'marriage' is as crucial as it is in the folk-tale. It plays the same part in creating narrative resolution, but it is even more important in that 'marriage' is an integral attribute of the upholder of the law (14).

Earlier, Mulvey (1975: 4), describing mainstream Hollywood cinema; expressing that in a patriarchal society "its formal preoccupations reflect the psychological obsessions of the society



which produced it". This is evidently applicable to Hindustani cinema as well. The mythical obsession with marriage is particularly applicable.

Marriage is about the hero and proving his heterosexuality – the woman is merely ancillary to this function. As with Hollywood, marriage marks the closure of film in Hindustani cinema, the illusory myth of 'happiness ever after'. Marriage also acts as the mythical marker of respectability and here the implicit power of this marker is culturally-specific. In fact, marriage obsession is identified as a consensus of various bourgeoisies across India's many cultures. Marriage (as *shadi*) is almost as untranslatable as *sharam* (shame – see earlier) – for instance terms like *shadi shuda* (already married) carry, within many South Asian cultures, a sense of pride, relief or self-importance which can only be charted phenomenologically as a lived-in existential experience.

*Tawaif*-centered films are similarly fixated on marriage. In *Pakeezah*, marriage is the main drive to the plot, the entire film tending to final resolution where Sahibjaan the *tawaif* becomes Pakeezah the *begum* as filmic micro-cosmic justice. The functions of the *tawaif* and the *begum* have been performed as moral opposites. According to Viridi (2003), idealized women were portrayed as: "passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient." Ram (2002) notes that images of purity are maintained by representing chaste characters, whose sexuality is confined within the bounds of heterosexual marriage. For Gokulsing, K. M. & Dissanayake, W. (1998),

In traditional Indian society, there were definite and consensual norms of behaviour - that regulated the conduct of women - all of them handed down from the past. For example, the concept of woman as *Sita* is prevalent in Indian society as well as Indian films. *Sita*, immortalised in the *Ramayana*, is the ideal wife; she is steadfastly loyal to her husband and obeys his wishes unquestioningly. The *Ramayana* says that a wife's god is her husband: he is her friend, her teacher. Her life is of less consequence than her husband's happiness. Over the years, Indian popular cinema had perpetuated this ideal of a wife's selfless devotion.

On the other hand, the *tawaif* exists outside the accepted moral realm of Indian womanhood. Her social function is connected to the sexual, therefore the shameful, in many ways reminiscent of untouchables whose job is connected with cleaning latrines

(“...at once celebrated and shunned, used and abused, praised and condemned” Chakavarty, 1993: 269). According to Mishra (2002), the character of mother is “idealised as bride, mother, and producer of sons; as long suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the status quo”. By reaction, it is perhaps not surprising that, in order to produce likeable heroines, Hindustani film directors constructed *tawaifs* with characteristics similar to the wife/mother: loving and self-sacrificial. In the many films with *tawaifs* from the 1960s to the 1990s, she will comfort a man who is unable to marry the girl he loves. She will inevitably fall in love with him; once he is recovered he leaves the *tawaif* to pine for him, a motif inspired by *Devdas* (the novel, and cinema versions). According to Mishra (2006) “Culture cannot endorse or celebrate the courtesan in social practice: no courtesan can become a mother or a wife; she can only be the desirable Other through whom love, often absent in arranged marriages, can be given felt expression”.

The passage in the hands of the *tawaif* as a rite of passage manifests an unconscious which used to be manifested by *nawabs* who would send their sons to be educated into sexuality by the *tawaif*. In the Hindustani film text, the hero sublimates society’s belief that while the *begum* must be a virgin when married, the husband is expected to be experienced, having the right to desire without being bound by an equivalent dichotomy to the Madonna and whore, virginity itself an issue of male patriarchal anxiety over the woman with carnal knowledge who can challenge masculine superiority within the libidinal economy. There is a “cultural cockiness” at work here, the assumption that it is natural that part of the population ought to be at the service of another – and be blamed for it. Enjoying sex or falling in love are beside the point – *tawaifs* become witnesses of the most cynical aspects of sexuality and romance. Instead the Hindustani cinema *tawaif* is almost invariably romanticized as romantic at the base. Only exceptional hints are provided of the opposite.

The nature of the complicity that is manufactured through the ‘carceral society’ that Foucault (1975) identifies with the modern society is such that the modern spectator has little lucidity about how modern myths are constructed and about how ideologies therein are communicated and transmitted. One of the subterfuges that manufacture consent and docility in bodies relates to taxonomic policing – thus, categories constructed by patriarchy are made to appear definite.

Thus the category *begum*, which modern Hindustani cinema vehicles as radically different from, and superior to, the condition of the *tawaif* such that every *tawaif* dreams of becoming a *begum* masks the many similarities between the two conditions in terms of patriarchal.

Differences between the *begum*'s and the *tawaif*'s conditions in many ways speak in favour of the *tawaif*'s life. The same men who might treat their wives with disdain and violence might find themselves at the mercy of the *tawaif*'s whimsical *nakhra*, of strict *tehzeeb* (etiquette) governing the *kotha*, of the *choudariyan*'s money and strong connections, as is evidenced in *Umrao Jaan* (Dutta 2006) where Khanum Jaan embarrasses the disinherited, penniless Nawab Sultan into leaving the *kotha*. The general independence of the *tawaif* would have made – and in fact did make – many *begums* jealous. The only defence *begums* had was to vilify the *tawaif* in terms of morality, scapegoating the *tawaif* while exonerating the husband:

'I know, I know,' continued Afsar Jan, impatiently, 'we are blamed for enabling men to maintain their double moral standards and destroying happy marriages. Must we betray our own interests for the dubious cause of women who suffer such men as husbands, fathers, and brothers? Today, things are grim; Lucknow's landed gentry lost their power after *zamindari* was abolished, and our profession is now illegal; there is hardly a handful of *kothas* in operation. Has this helped the cause of women or only made life harder for us? Are men treating their wives better? Beating them less? Only we have been silenced and we are now invisible in Lucknow society' (Oldenburg 1990: section 10).

Blurring the distinction between the *begum* and the *tawaif*, Oldenburg introduces the *khangī*, a married woman who rents rooms in a *kotha* to support their bourgeois lifestyle:

Their cooperation with some women outside the *kotha*, such as the *khangī*, or the married women to whom they rent space so that they too can earn (undisclosed) extra money, is also little known, and it would be no longer politic or possible if it were uncovered (Oldenburg 1990: section 13).

The *khangī* as interim can lead us to find it difficult to even define the *tawaif* as a *begum* who is paid more directly for her services by a man.

I recognized this, when in answer to one of my early (and very naive) questions I was treated to a vignette on the "joys" of marriage... Rasulan immediately took her *dupatta* (long scarf) and wound it around her head as a turban to play the husband. Elfin Hasina Jan took her cue as the wife, others became children and members of the extended family, while Gulbadan remained on her settee amid the

bolsters, taking occasional drags from the *hookah*, presiding, as a particularly obnoxious mother-in-law, on a scene of domestic disharmony. The wife/mother first surveys the multifarious demands on her energy and time: the children squall, ask for food, drink, and want to be picked up; the mother-in-law orders that her legs, which have wearied from sitting, be massaged; the husband demands food and attention; the father-in-law asks for his *hookah* to be refilled, and a sister-in-law announces that she cannot finish doing the laundry, nor knead the *chapati* dough because she is not feeling too well. Hasina is defeated, harried (Oldenburg 1984: 271 – 272).

Living so close to the basics of heterosexuality as constructed, such that “heterosexuality itself [becomes] the ultimate *nakhra* (Oldenburg, 1990: 277), *tawaifs* would very often perform a “drag imitation” of marriage. After all, the category *tawaif* was constructed as *différance* to the *begum*, who is defined solely in terms of marriage. Thus *tawaif*’s hands are painted with *henna*, which makes her look like an Indian bride, dressed up and ready to surrender herself to her bridegroom on her nuptial night.

In contrast to older *tawaif*-centred films, *Tawaif* (1985) [see fig. 18, caption and text for another debate] a remake by B.R. Chopra of his earlier Hindu Courtesan film *Sadhana* (1958) carries a much more sordid, worldly, Islamicate *tawaif*, beyond both the Hindu courtesan of early cinema and other Islamicate *tawaif* films. Both films emphasize the essential goodness of the courtesan, even as she is now unambiguously cast, in both films, as a prostitute, on lines both similar to, and distinct from the Hollywood prostitute with a heart of gold. Equally, both films criticize the double standards of a patriarchal culture in which, as the *tawaif* Champa Bai says in *Sadhana*, somewhat typically, the “lust of man is cast as the sin of woman”.

As described by Bhaskar and Allen (2009), in the film *Tawaif*, the dance-form is no longer classical *kathak* but a popularized form of filmy dancing that draws, among other traditions, from the bazaar form of the *nautanki*. Also the poetic evocation of emotion and the subtle arts of seduction that are displayed in films like *Umrao Jaan* or *Pakeezah* is absent. Sultana, dressed in a garish black-and-pink, silver-sequined *angarkha*, sings in a voice that wavers around the tone while, lying flat on the floor, she presses her stomach up and down and then writhes her body from left to right. Then she strides towards the camera, and hence towards the spectator, framed in low angle by two crystal glasses, kicking her legs and propelling her elbows forward and

backward with her hands on her swivelling hips. She then proceeds to sell herself to the highest bidder.

While the female is split between the dharmik codes (Mishra, 2002) - that is good sexuality [dharmik] and bad sexuality [desire] (Uberoi, 1997), the vamp is the symbol of desire who “flouts traditions, seeks to imitate Western women... drinks, smokes, visits nightclubs...” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004: 79). In the dance sequence of “Oulala” from Luthria’s *The Dirty Picture* (2011) for example, Silk defies the cultural norms of the Indian society where she operates as a highly sexualized figure, who engages in eroticism and passionate scenes while going to the disco and smokes. This image is of the vamp or an “item girl” and it is performed as contrary to the “ideal Indian woman.” As with *tawaif* movies in general, the hero is made to choose (see “*Teri Mehfil Mein Qawwali*” above, figs 28, 29, 30 and captions).

Film-makers in Hindustani cinema often characterize women characters as either heroines or vamps. According to Gangoli (2002 cited in Kaur and Sinha, 2005), the heroine presents traditional values, compliant to the wishes of the hero, while the vamp is characterised as “Westernised” and lustful. Gangoli (2002 cited in Kaur and Sinha, 2005) also provides a projection of women in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s and notes that films portrayed the ideal Indian/Hindu woman, represented by the heroine as the hero’s mother and/or sister, as typically Hindu and compliant with the wishes of the hero, embodying the male/patriarchal view. In contrast, the vamp is Anglo-Indian or “Westernised”, most often sexually promiscuous and “knowing”, as opposed to the sexually “innocent” heroine. Thus, the vamp is located as being the outsider to “Indian-ness” and to Indian norms and traditions (Ayob, 2008: 33).

*Teesri Manzil* (1966) is primarily about Sunita (Asha Parekh) and Ruby, the ‘vamp’ (Helen), a nightclub dancer who is Sunita’s nemesis. The ‘difference’ between Sunita and Ruby is that Sunita is the marriageable object of desire and Ruby is, instead killed off, like *tawaifs*. She is a sexualised subject with a desire of her own as she aggressively pursues the man she loves. Not altogether insignificant are the communal overtones of Helen’s off screen minority status as Christian. The vamp’s names, like her character are without much depth. They are very rarely Hindu but are associated with a decadent West or a corrupt Islam. For instance, Helen’s names in various movies were: Miss Suku, Dolly, Jenny, Sherry, Salma, Haseena, Ruksana, Laila, Champakali, Cham Cham (Ghose, 2006: 10).

The vamp (once a staple for any Hindustani cinema text) has all but disappeared in Hindustani cinema, perhaps mostly killed off by the feminism of nineties Hindustani cinema. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Karan Johar 2001), for instance, Naina Kapoor, the ‘other’ girl who is in love with the main actor isn’t a vamp anymore but a woman the spectator is invited to feel sorry for and is played by Rani Mukherji, a mainstream actress with whom the audience is familiar and so gets a sympathetic treatment in the plot.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps it is in the bourgeois but subversive-within-those-strictures context that the *tawaif* is to be located. For, the ethical difference (Saussure) between the *tawaif* and the vamp defines both female types and refines the definition of Hindustani cinema itself. Vamps are not morally recuperable as Krishna or as Sufi devotees and they sport a femme fatale quality that is largely absent from the *tawaif*. What the *tawaif* and the vamp share is the quality of seductress, almost always an unrequited love interest in the main male protagonist (thus rivalling the main female protagonist). Although both are involved in prostitution, the *tawaif* can also quite simply be othered from the vamp in terms of her status as part of an older tradition. The fetishistic associations of the *tawaif* are poetry, the Urdu language, the *kotha* mansion, a modest version of traditional dress (*angarkha*); fetishistic associations of the vamp are instead garishly rich underworld thugs, the English language, alcohol (*sharaab*, usually whisky), the nightclub. Superficially, they do not belong to the same ethico-ideological world. However, their treatment in the plot (usually death and no marriage possibilities).

The vamp is more directly a femme fatale, which is French for “dangerous (even fatal) woman” or as Doane (1991) suggests “deadly woman”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a vamp as “a woman who uses sexual attraction to exploit men”.<sup>106</sup> Its definition of “femme fatale” is virtually identical. The use of the word “vamp” dates back from the use of Kipling’s effectively implicit and ontologically uncertain poem “The Vampire” in the silent film, *A Fool There Was* (Frank Powell, 1915) where a coincidence of female vampire and seductress earned Theda Bara stardom and the nickname of “vamp”. The vamp would thenceforth mostly recur in Hollywood through the Film noir, one of few Hollywood genres to have hardly found its way into the Hindustani cinema multi-genre text. The Hindustani cinema vamp instead exists at the cusp of an uneasy East/West ethical relationship where she represents a sexually decadent West. The use of English is associated with colonialism, neo-colonialism, and Western decadence: one very

<sup>105</sup> Refer to *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag - Journey of A Woman* (Pradeep Sarkar, 2007) below.

<sup>106</sup> <http://oxforddictionaries.com/> [online], accessed on 20.08.11 at 03.40.

memorable Hindustani cinema vamp was called Monica in *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971), was red-haired with eye-lash extensions, lots of mascara and behaved “Western” in a club with a fake Big Ben (figs 37, 38). The 60s and 70s were marked by various Indian actors playing villains (male baddies or female vamps), whose coloured hair signified either that they were white or that they were Europeanised. The actor Pran spent much of those decades playing a red-haired villain. The hair colour accompanied all sorts of breaches of ethics associated in the Hindustani cinema text with Western moral decadence: sexual depravity, arrogance, perfidy, disloyalty.

Few films express the locus of the angst of being assimilated by the West as the 1970 film *Purab aur Paschim*, “East and West,” which featured mini-skirted, dyed-blonde Saira Banu as the locus of erotic interest and cultural anxiety about cultural assimilation (fig. 39 below). Such portrayals, reflecting a love-hate relationship with the West and with Indians who have settled there, underwent substantial modification by the 1990s, as Indians came to perceive their own culture as increasingly globalized, and their overseas kin—known in India, irrespective of citizenship or self-identification, as “NRIs,” (“Non-Resident Indians”)—as ongoing participants in it. Indeed, critics have observed that some of the spectacular hits associated with Hindustani cinema’s “romantic revival” in the ‘90s seemed aimed as much at NRIs as at the domestic middle-class audience, and also that NRI financial backing has helped to underwrite some productions. Recent hit films often include substantial footage shot in Europe, North America, or New Zealand, and sometimes feature NRIs as protagonists. Thus the hugely successful *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (“The Bravehearted Takes the Bride,” 1995), which opens with a dour Amrish Puri feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square and pining for the green fields of his native Punjab, quickly turns the tables on the old conventions: its motorcycle-riding, beer-drinking NRI hero rescues his sweetheart from an unwanted arranged marriage to a cousin back in the (not-so-ideal) Old Country.



Fig. 37. Monica in *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971): Red-haired, with eye-lash extensions, too much mascara to be a good girl, and a tumbler of whisky.



Fig. 38. *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971): the club with a fake Big Ben





Fig. 39. *Purab aur Paschim*: blonde coloured hair, chain-smoking (Saira Banu)

Conversely, the earlier Western vamp was symmetrically identified as Oriental either in person or in lifestyle: the Dutch courtesan and exotic dancer, Mata Hari (the nom de scène of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, 1876 - 1917) was one favourite inspiration. Sexuality was being identified as an exotic relation to the “other” across the “East/West divide” in fascinating symmetry. To develop a common axiom, repressed sexualities will predictably associate sex with the other. Such moves inevitably refer to beliefs borne of a desire for “purity” since they are about drawing (or entrenching) boundaries between cultures, essentialising them, and ultimately rejecting a type of hybridity. This is a ‘reverse Orientalism’, an “Occidentalism”, with the *tawaif* tradition itself a form of “re-Orientalism”, both its adoption and subsequent fading out point to one of the reasons for Hindustani cinema’s longevity is in its adaptability to various zeitgeists.

The vamp has been standard fare to the Hindustani cinema text until the 1980s, with actresses like Helen, Bindu and Aruna Irani specialising almost exclusively in playing such roles. The figure gradually phased out, no doubt overtaken by a new feminist awareness that was supported by feminist “Shakti-themed” films and a more general ambient feminism within society (see fig. 37 and caption below). One major exception of a return of the vamp is from *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (Farhan Akhtar), a 2006 remake of the 1978 cult film, *Don* (Chandra Barot), then the third highest grossing Hindustani cinema film. Kamini, the vamp in both films, is reduced to a mere cameo in the remake, during the famous song sequence “yeh mera dil”. In the remake however, the vamp in question doesn’t truly reappear since the viewer’s decoding context has been altered, and (given that a text isn’t complete until the nexus *director* → *text* → *spectator* is complete) therefore so has the ethical world s/he inhabits.

An excellent example of this alteration in the type of characterisation can be seen in the film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (2001, Karan Johar), in which the heroine returns to India after completing her studies abroad and joins the local college, where her father is the principal. Her dress is contemporary; she wears mini-skirts and the camera juxtaposes her body with the effect it has on the hero and other male characters in the film. Yet, when the heroine is challenged to sing a verse from the holy book, she does so with the humility and demeanour that would befit a traditional Indian woman. The male spectators as well as the hero in the narrative are simultaneously stunned and pleasantly surprised. It is after this scene that the hero begins to look at the heroine from a completely different perspective and considers her to be “marriage material”, in other words, he perceives her as still strongly grounded in Indian/Hindu cultural values despite the Western dress (Ayob, 2008: 34).

The vamp and the *tawaif* share a function of the female in the patriarchal structure: being gazed at, but within a framework that will fetishize the act by masking its sexuality. Both characters are often broken-hearted, nursing unrequited love from the main male protagonist. Although there is an overlap in terms of the exact danger they each pose to the patriarchal setup, the reaction of a vamp is less subtle and far less poetic than the *tawaif* or to put it differently, it is more radical. The Hindustani cinema vamp, true to her femme fatale reputation, will often seek, in addition to introverted, self-inflicted acts of pining which she shares with the *tawaif*, extroverted acts of revenge. Unlike the femme fatale in the Hollywood text (see Doane, 1991), the Hindustani

cinema vamp is portrayed as ultimately desirous – or even envious – of a bourgeois life. Thus the ontology of the vamp is itself very closely connected to an ethics, in respect of which there is an underlying structure in common with the cinematic *tawaif*. Again, there is a difference within the similarity: on a scale of ‘respectability’, which is a bourgeois judgement, the *tawaif* is ahead of the vamp, but both desire the next step in respectability: finding a man she can marry, marriage itself (as a “happy-ever-after”) being a guard in space and in time against the condition of the vamp. Death (as often occurs against the vamp in Hindustani cinema) is a more radical and definitive solution. In the prizewinning song sequence “piya tu ab to aja”, there is an ambiguous moment when Monica (Helen) in *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971) is seen to only empty her whisky after she has been stood up by her lover, and only then starts dancing like a vamp (fig. 40 below) , although he playfully joins in when he finally arrives. Monica’s fate is, typically, to be murdered which elicits pathos in the spectator, but from within the comfort of a bourgeois structure and an ending that promotes the political *status quo*. The affect of pathos elicited here is comparable to that of sexual desire, which is performed within a context that makes them acceptable. Examples of acts of fetishistic displacement on vamps, but also on main female protagonists occur in terms of context (clothes and location): Hindustani cinema makes it acceptable culturally to gaze at women who are either dressed in tribal dress or in wet saris, or behind the public garden bush, where there is circumstantial evidence they were kissed – for example, they might be seen wiping their mouths coyly (Dissanayake, 79). Whereas saris are viewed as part of an existing tradition of Indian modesty, tribal dress is a form of exoticism, relating to a “primitive other” in the other (tribal, uncivilised) that is a “primitive other” within (sexual, uncivilised). The bush in the public garden refers to a space that is both private and public. Thus it marks spatially what the wet sari, tribal dress and the bush all have in common: a game of spatial transgression. The ethical mapping on a difficult terrain of bourgeois idiosyncrasy which does not deny sexuality altogether (an impossible feat in psychical terms) but redirects it into fetish fantasy towards arbitrary boundaries that requires nuanced awareness of context.



Fig. 40. *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971): The song sequence “piya tu ab to aja” from *Caravan* includes suggestive deep breathing, suggestive sensual dance-moves.

During the same sequence, the camera breaks off to focus on good girl Sunita (Asha Parekh), wearing the traditional churidar, long plaited hair, the religious colour orange, feeling desperately out of place – a statement of sexual innocence (fig. 41 below).



Fig. 41. *Teesri Manzil* (Nasir Hussain, 1971): Sunita (Asha Parekh) the ‘good’ girl shocked by the vamp dancing.

In the film, she is offset by two vamps played by two specialist actresses of the type: Monica (Helen), and Nisha (Aruna Irani). The contrast is meant to work as a clear binary opposition. Yet, it can be argued that they in fact represent not two different types of women, but two different ways of representing women. As Asha Kasbekar (2002) states, ‘unofficial’ erotic pleasures had to be achieved by strategically circumscribing female eroticism within the socially acceptable domain of the song and dance sequence. These ‘performances’ when performed by the heroine are tolerated because they occur well within the realms of ‘make believe’ and therefore allow for transgressive voyeuristic enjoyment. Taking place as a ‘public’ exhibition in a theatre, nightclub or bar, the performance is coupled with an “approving audience” who serve to socially sanction the performance (Kasbekar, 2001:297). However when this spectacle is performed by the vamp, who is generally allowed more space for sexual promiscuity because of her nature as a ‘bad’ woman, she is “usually disposed off (by the convenient stray bullet) as a fitting punishment for her threatening sexuality” (Kasbekar, 2001:299).

While Hindustani cinema has been reflecting new trends in gender relations, the woman the main protagonist marries will generally fit the expectations of both traditional Islamic and Hindu norms of sexual ‘purity’. Conversely, women who go against these rules are punished.

She [the vamp] flouts tradition...drinks, smokes, visits nightclubs and is quick to fall in and out of love. She is portrayed as a morally degraded person (Gokulsing, K. M. & Dissanayake, W. 1998)

*Karz* (1980), the film that Bollywood film *Om Shanti Om* (2007) parodies, opens with Kamini (Simi Garewal) pretending to be a ‘good girl’ which is immediately offset by her smoking a cigarette lit for her by a man. This is reinforced later by her being termed “Angrezi”, and associated with Western music, standard English expressions, and even the chime of Big Ben. Usually the “vamp” is portrayed as a modern woman whose decadent behaviour is severely looked down upon (ibid). She engages in many sexual relationships, indulges in alcohol, smokes and goes to nightclubs. Her reputation is that of a morally degraded woman and her behaviour is associated with the perceived evils of the Western lifestyle. The “vamp” is usually punished.

The Hindustani cinema courtesan can be situated somewhere between the vamp and the ‘good girl’ of the Hindustani cinema text. The character of the vamp is usually contrasted with the character of mother and daughter. She is portrayed as a westernized woman disrupting the Hindu traditions and culture.

What is left of the vamp in today’s Bollywood is the “item girl”, a name which carries its own history of being gazed-at and objectified. She only appears during a song-and-dance item and it is clear she brings an erotic dimension to the piece. By the 1980s, the ‘*tawaif*’ is increasingly represented as a woman who has *become a tawaif*, and no longer as much *tawaif-qua-tawaif*. In *Khalnayak* (Subhash Ghai, 1993) the dance and song “Choli Ke Peeche” became an instant classic for its choreography and notoriety for its suggestive lyrics. Inevitably, the model became a mainstay of Bollywood cinema, with very popular examples in Munnii and Sheila from *Dabangg* (2010) and *Tees Maar Khan* (2010). It reflects many of the complex realities of Third Wave feminism that it is difficult to tell whether “item girls” are being exploited or - note the confident look of the dancers – whether they in fact hold agency over the men watching them. The song *Choli ke peeche kya hain* in *Khalnayak* (1993) is loaded with sexual innuendos:

“*Choli ke peeche kya hai?*

*Chunari Ke neeche kya hai?”*

What lies under your blouse?

What lies underneath your veil?<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> translated by myself



Fig. 43. *Khalnayak* (Ghai 1993) “Choli ke Peeche Kya Hai?” is a contemporary *mujra* in terms of dress, setting and function but also a reference to the vamp in terms of audience (of dacoit bandits instead of *nawabs*) and the lack of subtlety (*tehzeeb*) in the lyrics.

“Choli ke Peeche Kya Hai?” speaks of the adaptability of the Hindustani film text to various zeitgeists. In the Conclusion section we engage with a similarly hybrid inspiration in “kajra ré” (*Bunty aur Babli*). The millions of rupees that the “items” generate shows how Bollywood spectators miss their singing and dancing *tawaifs*.

The woman’s body has been identified and analyzed in different ways and from different perspectives by feminists. For instance, Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin have denied the prostitute any agency, whereas, Luce Irigaray and Gayle Rubin have granted the prostitute significant agency of her own. In her article “Agency, Resistance and Remapping Prostitute Identity: A Queer Diasporic Reading of Mira Nair’s *India Cabaret*”, Banerjee has analyzed the ‘woman’s body as the site for resistance to patriarchy, class oppression and heterosexuality’.<sup>108</sup> In *tawaif* films, the directors and the producers have used the women’s body as an object satisfying the men by giving them visual and sexual pleasures. Here, the women’s body functions as a mere object. However, according to Banerjee:

<sup>108</sup> [www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf)

The women's bodies thus function in two very different ways - as spectacularized objects during the dance scenes and as mediums of conveying homoerotic desire in the scenes depicting the women interacting with each other. While the former is strictly performative and an act, the latter is more meaningful and gives them a sense of community and belonging that is denied them in their daily lives due to the harsh ostracism faced by the women in society.<sup>109</sup>

Shannon Bell (1994) has argued that in the postmodern era, the performance of the prostitutes is a medium 'to reconstitute themselves as living artifacts of resistance' using their bodies as the main site of resistance "to reclaim and remap their own identities, to deconstruct the masculinist, feminist, and heterosexual inscriptions on their bodies, and as a consequence to destabilize the hegemonic discourse itself" (Bell, 1994). While giving her performance, the woman is the centre of attraction. She is the source of power, beauty and excellence. Males are only passive onlookers. It is the woman who decides with whom she wants to be. Here the woman is portrayed as powerful, rejecting patriarchy. The stage on which the woman performs is a platform for her to discover her own body and derive pleasure. According to Banerjee "these scenes could be read as scenes of autoeroticism where the women find pleasure in the exploration of their own bodies".<sup>110</sup> Further, according to Leslie Gotfrit, this is a means of resistance for the woman. She states that:

The dance floor is one location where desire and pleasure are courted and orchestrated, where body is central, and where sexuality, implicated in the production, limitation, and control of desire, is permitted expression. In the intersection of desire and sexuality and the body, dancing becomes a probable site for resistance.<sup>111</sup>

Another potent binary opposite that constructs the filmic *tawaif* is that of the mother. Woman's body seen as pre-eminently reproductive (Butler 1993) and women's categories are constructed and re-iterated in terms of reproduction. This might at first sight seem to push the *tawaif* out of the league not only of the respectable but also, of the divine, since the divine is worshipped as a mother (Shakti, Kali, Durga) in Hinduism, but, also, the earthly mother is worshipped as a goddess. According to Hinduism, god creates, maintains and destroys the universe but the power with which he performs these functions is *Shakti* (universal energy), a female form. The

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<sup>109</sup> [www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> [www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/transformations/.../s2/banerjee%20paper.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Gotfrit, Leslie. "Women Dancing Back: Disruption and the Politics of Pleasure" in *Postmodernism, Feminism and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux. State University of New York Press, Albany. 1991. P183



contradiction (as explored in *Lajja* (Santoshi 2001) and a number of other ‘feminist’ films) is that often the same Hindu society will mistreat women. Such contradictions run throughout Indian society. Thus, in *Anjaam*, in the final sequences, Shah Rukh Khan (Vijay) is attacked by Madhuri Dixit (Shivani) with a *trishul*, the Hindu symbol of divine trinity– using one tradition (Mother Shakti) to subvert another tradition (the passive damsel-in-distress transformed into an avenging woman). Hindustani cinema, and the new avatar, Bollywood, sit happily with contradictions. It is not surprising that the cinema has been so enduring, justifying so many different myths, focusing on entertainment and on the money (mostly translatable onscreen by sex and blood), which is, cynically, the only way to earn the means for any subversion of established traditional representations. This is a very *tawaif*-like logic.



Fig. 43. *Anjaam*: as Shivani attacks Vijay with a *trishul*, *mantras* to goddess Shakti can be heard in the background.

In *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Exchange* (2004: 79), Gokulsing & Dissanayake observe that in films, women’s “need to preserve honor is expressed through elaborate codified behavior patterns that require women to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband.” Mothers, having been represented exclusively as self-sacrificial and duty-bound with (like Empress Jodha in *Mughal-e-Azam*) anecdotal power,

were portrayed, especially as from *Dilwale* and the emergence of Bollywood, as “more trendy and fashionable”: “from ‘maa’, the Hindu mother became ‘mom’” (Enkayaar, 2008: 1). The more traditional mother persists, intuitive and suffering, for instance, Nandini (Jaya Bachchan) in *Khabhi Khushi Khabhi Gham* (Johar, 2001).

Mandira (Kajol), the main female character in *My Name is Khan* (Johar 2010) shows how a single mother can find happiness without a man. Ambar (Preity Zinta) in *Salaam Namaste* (Anand 2005) has sex outside marriage and does not feel pressured to marry the father of her child. In *Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota* (Shah, 2006), the modern mother is middle-aged, Tara (Ratna Patak) has sex with her former boyfriend in a very matter-of-fact break with tradition. In *Jab we Met* (Ali, 2007) Aditya’s mother decides to cohabit with her boyfriend, leaving husband and son in the process. In *Baabul* (Chopra, 2006), Balraj (Amitabh Bachchan) goes to great lengths to encourage his widowed daughter-in-law Millie (Rani Mukerji) to get married again. Side-by-side, although women are rarely subjected to the logic of the Madonna/whore, this dichotomous categorisation can be crossed, generally with the help of superficial symbols.

One aspect of constraining women under patriarchal ideology is the way they should wear traditional clothes such as saris. To subvert this order, the Indian woman of the 1990’s, overtly took on characteristics that were considered less traditional. In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), the heroine returns to India from overseas in a mini skirt. However, as mentioned above, she is forced to prove her “Indian-ness” to the hero who challenges her. She recites a verse from the holy book and she does so with the humility that would befit the traditional Indian woman. After this scene, the hero views her as ‘marriage material’ since she remains traditional despite her western style. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, Pooh (nickname) becomes Pooja (both Kareena Kapoor), and Rohan’s (Hritik Roshan) attention as marriage material only when she leaves her Western clothes for a traditional *churidar* and chants mantras to the house god (a *puja*, written also as *pooja* is a common Hindu prayer ritual).

The transforming attitude towards female sexuality, since the nineties, has attempted to redefine the limits of female desire. Sex is no longer dirty and actresses are more than willing to negotiate with the changing definitions of the body and the moral implications of what they may do with it (Chowdhury, 2011:68).

On the one hand, Hindustani cinema carries a common bourgeoisie where courtesans ultimately die or live alone. On the other, Hindustani cinema promotes love marriage over arranged marriage and has churned a long list of feminist films, including for instance the surprising *Nikaah*, where a Muslim woman from a conservative background rejects offers of marriage from both her reformed abusive husband and the man who comes to save her. Although the central (female) character of the film is not a *tawaif*<sup>112</sup> and, released in 1982, *Nikaah* could be located among a spate of ‘feminist-themed’ Hindustani cinema films, there is behind this gesture of defiance a reflection of various *tawaiifs* out to shame patriarchal society. It is clear however, that the Hindustani cinema *tawaif* is neither truly subversive nor truly conservative. Natalty is by itself a gesture that isn’t definable politically in a definitive manner.

For the *tawaif* represents both the non-judgemental space that enables Hindustani cinema to question conservatism (how else to identify with a *tawaif*’s plight, or for that matter a terrorist, a eunuch, an untouchable; how else to oppose the patriarchal father, the hypocritical politician, the lascivious priest?) and the space that supports the conservatism (*tawaiifs* willingly sacrifice themselves in favour of an ‘untainted’ heroine, and the film’s ending almost inevitably leads to a bourgeois family unit: the two healthiest, best-looking procreators marry, surrounded by perfect mothers/fathers/relatives/friends).

The feminine condition, as in essence a human condition of subjection and limited agency, is in many ways the human condition itself, *in essentia*. It only exists within a context, and can only act within it. Thus, the *tawaif*’s space is also a contradictory ethical space, a space that cannot will the patriarchal limitation away, but that still takes subversive positions. Such subversions aren’t unrealistic; perhaps their rarity in the Hindustani cinema text is. Thus, Nawabjaan’s remonstrations to Shahubuddin at the end of *Pakeezah* are part of an established tradition of a harsh wisdom delivered fearlessly by *tawaiifs* about the world, but more often by *choudariyan*.

Furthermore, Chandramukhi in *Devdas* plays an important role in voicing out against the caste system and dominance of the aristocrats. She openly criticizes the hypocrisy of the aristocrats

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<sup>112</sup> Salma Aga, the main actress, will go on to play the memorable role of a *tawaif* in *Pati, Patni Aur Tawaif* (Rajkumar Kohli, 1990)

who spend enjoyable moments in brothels at night while insulting the *tawaifs* in public places. In a scene, Chandramukhi slaps Kalibabu, accusing aristocrats of fathering illegitimate daughters in brothels, and eventually having sex with them.

Paro invites Chandramukhi, whom she has befriended, to a celebration of Durga Puja at her husband's home and introduces Chandramukhi to her in-laws without revealing her profession. However, Bhuvan's ill-natured son-in-law Kalibabu, a frequent visitor to Chandramukhi's brothel and who made inappropriate advances towards Paro, reveals Chandramukhi's background and humiliates her in front of Bhuvan and the guests.

In Calcutta, Devdas's carousing friend, Chunnilal, introduces him to the *tawaif* Chandramukhi.. Devdas takes to heavy drinking at Chandramukhi's place, but the *tawaif* falls in love with him, and looks after him. His health deteriorates because of a combination of excessive drinking and despair—a drawn-out form of suicide. Within him, he frequently compares Paro and Chandramukhi. Somehow he feels betrayed by Paro, never realising that she was the one who had loved him first, that she had said it out loud first. He does not realise this, but Chandramukhi does, and tells him so. In his non-drunk state he would hate Chandramukhi and loathe her presence. So he drank, so that he could forget his prejudices. Chandramukhi saw it all, felt it all and suffered silently, but she had seen that real man behind the fallen, aimless Devdas he now was and could not help but love him.

By objectifying woman on screen as a passive sexual object, man tries to gain control of her and overcome his fear of castration. At the same time the male gaze is a reflection of an unequal power relationship and a tool of domination. It reflects the patriarchal order, which has coded the erotic in a way that tends to maintain patriarchy. Today, Hindustani cinema films have become much more sexually explicit, openly exposing the female body in revealing clothes. Eroticism of Hindustani cinema movies can especially be seen in its musical sequences. The camera shots consist of frequent close-ups of female body parts. These are direct or indirectly inherited from the tradition of the *tawaif*, in particular to the *mujra*.

Central to the pleasures of heterosexual scopophilia, Metz (1975) argues, is the role of the woman, where she functions primarily to address the erotic gaze and constitutes an indispensable ingredient in look-soliciting strategies. According to Kasbekar (2001 cited in Dwyer and Pinney,

2001), Hindustani cinema films must persuade women (and men) to participate in their own exploitation as commodity. In other words, the film creators must accommodate sometimes incompatible desires within the same film and make them concordant with existing cultural and moral values of the society in which it circulates. This is done by resorting to a variety of strategies. Kasbekar (2001 cited in Dwyer and Pinney, 2001) argues that the most important strategy has been to create an idealised moral universe that upholds the official definition of femininity within the main plot, and then to provide unofficial erotic pleasures to its target audience through the song-and-dance sequences. Kasbekar (2001: 298, cited in Dwyer and Pinney, 2001) argues that having “devised the dance performance as a strategy to legitimise erotic voyeurism, film-makers must plot socially acceptable motivations within the narrative for such erotic exhibition”. This is achieved by bi-polarising women characters in the film. The “heroine” versus “vamp” is such a ploy that is sometimes used. In the films *Pakeezah* (1971, Kamal Amrohi) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981, Muzaffar Ali), the heroines are depicted as both victims and vamps simultaneously. While the audience acknowledges that these women characters are *tawaifs*, through the narrative structure, the audience learns of their unjust fate. According to Kasbekar (2001 cited in Dwyer and Pinney, 2001 ), film-makers are therefore subjected to commercial and ideological pressures to make a “spectacle” of the woman, but at the same time must deploy strategies and subterfuges in order to legitimise such erotic voyeurism without antagonising the state, civil society, or female members of the audience.

What has Hindustani Cinema done to the space of transgression that the *tawaif* opens up? Kept it or tamed it? Perhaps the answer can illuminate over the extraordinary capacity that Hindustani Cinema has to transform previously external narratives by subsuming them under its own driving power but also by adopting their own inner dynamics and dynamism. It may be argued this mirrors one of the essences of Indianness in general (as nationality but also as identity).

Hindustani Cinema’s adaptability and the variety of its audience cuts across many spaces, namely of region, class, the urban/rural, but also over time. Indeed, one can chart two recent shifts over the last decades in what exactly constitutes Hindustani Cinema. The first is directly related to a shift in audience. The audience has already been steadily shifting from mainly the Indian, of the villager or the urban working-class to the NRI (non-resident Indian), a more urbane recent diaspora, especially to major Western and Westernised metropolitan conurbations

in the world such as New York, Melbourne and Bangkok. The experience of being NRI has been transposed onto existing Hindustani Cinema fantasy structures of bourgeois success, representing an enhancement of the existing imaginaries of the South Asian in South Asia (the so-called *desi* market), of the NRI, and of others in the world involved in the same logic of imagining contemporary economic exilés as materialistically successful but nostalgic of loss of identity. The end result is a Hindustani Cinema cinema that is more glossy and in tune with new concerns of the rising middle classes in India and elsewhere in the global world. Gone are the Hindustani Cinema socials and their angry young men and women carrying Marxist messages; but gone also are amateur scripts, poor editing, approximate camerawork; in comes more meticulous acting, a “soigné” finish, glossy photography, but often in comes the persistence of a reflection of the Western attitude to the world as sexual, and its attitude to sex as soft porn, as well as attitudes to most that are other to the central Hindustani Cinema culture that lack nuance: ridiculous South Indians, terrorist Muslim men, terrorised Muslim women, musical Africans, picture-taking Japanese.

Showing a sense of the constant ambiguity of the ethico-ideological world of Hindustani cinema, Dasgupta (1996), in his analysis of the influence of films on the Indian nation, notes that the emerging of a global Indian society fuels the demand for collective symbols that represent continuity through immigrants dislocation from their homeland.

A subtle shift in Hindustani Cinema textuality is particularly traceable since 2000, where elements of the independent cinema have been progressively entering Hindustani Cinema plots. *Dil Chahta Hai* (Farhan Akhtar 2001) in particular was to lead to a new generation of increased ‘artiness’ in Hindustani Cinema cinema, leading to such substantial harbingers of a New Hindustani Cinema as *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) and *Rang de Basanti* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006). *Dil Chahta Hai*, *Lagaan* and *Rang de Basanti* each centrally starred Aamir Khan, a popular Hindustani Cinema star turned art film actor in the new century. Aamir Khan Productions was founded by him in 2001 in order to support the film *Lagaan*. The company was to prove particularly influential, churning out production of a ‘hybrid’ nature of scripts almost to the rate of a film a year (*Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008), both of which were critical and commercial successes). Then, after a year’s break in 2009, 3 films were produced over 2 years that many argue may change the face of Hindustani Cinema for good: *Peepli Live* (2010), *Dhobi Ghaat* (2011), and *Delhi Belly* (2011).

New Independent (Indie, or “Hindie” as popularly known in Mumbai circuits) elements marry a commercially viable script and traditional elements of Hindustani Cinema, often served as a shared tongue-in-cheek kitschy text to the audience. *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2006) very successfully parodies these facts about Hindustani Cinema text. It is metafilmic, Hindustani Cinema about Hindustani Cinema, yet, more on the lines of postmodern irony than the Guru Dutt tradition, it walks with petulant (and somehow camp?) brio the tight rope between parodic kitsch and indulgence in what one is precisely laughing at (gently). In short it manages to be all at once a text eliciting second degree reaction and a text reinstating first-degree Hindustani Cinema sentimentality and a strong sense of a Hindustani Cinema community of actors/directors and audience that shares the same mores, the same jokes, the same stories (both within and outside the Hindustani Cinema récit). The dynamic can be reminiscent of similar hybridities in Hollywood like *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) but there is a cosiness at the heart of a Hindustani Cinema audience, perhaps as a subtle awareness of sharing some marginal condition that is entirely absent from the more disparate and generally more self-engrossed Hollywood audience that is often quietly confident of its centrality among the world’s cinemas.

### 5.3 The Politics of Kissing in Hindustani cinema

Gopalan (2003: 4) argues that the camera withdraws just before a sexually explicit act and that is followed by shots of “waterfalls, flowers, thunder, lightning and tropical storms, metonyms for the missing act”. It can therefore be argued that sexuality was coded and hidden but it was nevertheless evoked. Songs, dance and masquerade hence become key components in displaying erotic pleasures since “they allow female protagonists a centrality that films narratives usually deny them” (Ghosh, 2002). Meanwhile, Bollywood has been gaining more confidence about representing the sexual directly, although slower in eroticising non-female bodies. Thus, Sonia (modern, Western-sounding names are common in Bollywood text) uses her sexuality without any *sharam* to get the man she loves do what she wants in *Jism* (2003). During the same period, *Kwahish* (2003) and *Murder* (2004) for example contain explicit lovemaking scenes, cleavage and passionate kissing. Following from the popularity of *Jism* (2003), *Jism 2* (Bhatt, 2012) contains even more explicit scenes.



Fig 44. An uninhibited kissing scene from *Murder* (Anurag Basu, 2004) – actors Mallika Sherawat and Emraan Hashmi were already infamous for their bedroom scenes in Bollywood.

Female sexuality is thus being portrayed powerfully, although again, it can also be read as female exploitation, particular by those who adopt a Second Wave feminist stance. Are these



liberated women not heirs to the *tawaifs*. Would some of them not have performed “Choli Ke Peeche” (see fig. 43 above) if they could and if they did not need to use *tehzeeb* as a protective screen against male vulgarity (and violence)?

In older Hindustani cinema, kissing (a fetish) is further ‘fetishized’. Kissing on the mouth (psychoanalytically, it can be argued, an equivalent of the vagina) is iconic to sex itself and is therefore all at once evoked *and* sublimated. There is definite play here. Prasad (1998) argues that the ban on kissing may have been related to a nationalist politics of culture. The most frequently offered justification of this informal prohibition has been that it corresponds to the need to “maintain Indian culture”. Bollywood (post 1990s) will progressively adopt another play on sexuality but the feeling of a need to ‘maintain Indian culture’ will persist and even increase in conservative contexts in the name of postmodern neotribalist ‘family values’.

First, it is to be noted that the history of kissing in Bollywood is in the image of Bollywood itself – complex. The earliest lip-to-lip kiss in Indian cinema took place in 1929, in *Prapancha Pash* in 1929, 12 years after *Raja Harishchandra* (Dada Sahib Phalke 1917), the first ever Indian film.



Fig. 45. The First Kiss in an Indian film – Seeta Devi, an Anglo-Indian, and Charu Roy in *Prapancha Pash*

The fact that the actress in question, Seeta Devi, was Anglo-Indian might have made her role here – and in most of her other dozen films - doubly acceptable. While her Western audience saw her as an exotic figure (see fig. 46 below), her Indian audience would have seen her as Westernised and therefore sexually more open, with less of a threat to Indian cultural purity. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, another Anglo-Indian (half Burmese), Helen Khan, would dominate the world of dancing in Bollywood scenes, especially as a vamp or a bar-frequenting girl (see figs 37, 40 above) appearing in more than 500 films. Helen Khan's in-between ethnicity would most likely have provided convenient suspensions of moral objection, as was the case with the earlier star, Seeta Devi.



Fig. 46. Actress Seeta Devi, seated in courtesan-like 'Orientalist splendour', 'gazing back' into the camera eye, in German director Franz Osten's *Prem Sanyas (Light of Asia)*, about the life of Gautama Buddha. She was only 13 years old and it was her first film.

In fact, the record for the longest kiss in Hindustani cinema so far dates from 1933, in the film *Karma* (see fig. 47 below), a kissing scene that was 4 minutes long although the fact that it involved actors who were real-life husband and wife probably helped it to be more culturally acceptable.



Fig. 47. Devika Rani (grand-niece of Rabindranath Tagore), and her real-life husband Himansu Rai in an infamous lip-to-lip kiss in *Karma* (1933)

A series of striking exceptions from older Bollywood came from the 1970s (arguably also because those were leading to the changes in the 1990s) where films like *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (Dev Anand, 1971) embraced a hippie ethos – an intriguing circle of Orientalist objectification whereby Indians were objectifying themselves by wearing hippie lenses. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* linked more indigeous bhakti Krishna worship with Western hippie drug and flower-power, as in the landmark song “Dum Maro Dum”. Bollywood (post 1990s), mostly a new play whereby sexuality (following from the *Purab aur Paschim* tradition) is more often othered to the Western body,<sup>113</sup> and by extension to an urbane and Westernised new generation. Similarly, the palette of women who indulge in onscreen sex (of soft-porn variety) tends to be limited to either Westernised (or ‘tribal innocence’ (Roopa [Zeenat Aman] in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*), or yet ‘low-class’ courtesan types. White women are consistently portrayed as

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<sup>113</sup> Kissing was described as a sign of “Western-ness” and was therefore considered alien to Indian culture. “It was not until the mid-eighties that films began to appear in which some awkward and perfunctory kissing.” (Prasad 1998: 29).

scantly dressed dancers, mad, drug addicts, deficient in some other manner, or even as prostitutes. The unfettered right to ogle at Western women (as opposed to Indian women) can still explain the rise of female stars who are partly or entirely white: Katrina Kaif and Helen Khan and Kalki Koechlin.

Thus, there is a subtle persistence of gender-specific and nationalist play centred on the Indian woman as embodiment of cultural purity for Indian culture (mostly centred around chastity, and connected with perceived Hindu, Muslim or Sikh ‘values’, among others) played out mostly in terms of difference. The filmic narrative itself remains part of a similar ethico-ideological world and therefore New Bollywood carries many of its contradictions. Faced with the world presented in a film, the spectator also clearly shares the same world as presented, but not the same worldview. Given the nature of popular film, the ideal spectator also predictably shares that worldview.

Hindustani cinema entertains more than half of the world and this proves that it is successful entertainment. However, beyond the clichés and the glitz and the kitsch, Hindustani cinema refers to a worldview that cannot simply be dismissed as reactionary. Even when Hindustani cinema has been reactionary, it has been so in more complex ways than is apparent from the first. Another fact will also be explored: not only is it merely escapist fare,<sup>114</sup> but also a subversive cultural force - although the extent to which it drives the trend or merely follows it when it has become a trail or is becoming one may be offset by the argument that in the latter case it is still reinforcing a subversive tendency. Hindustani cinema caught up with feminism in its own way in

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<sup>114</sup> The escapism itself supports a very “serious”, uniquely Bollywood structure, as evidenced by the first few pages of the aptly named *Bollywood Cinema – Temples of Desire* (Mishra 2002) which describes the “desire” for the “New image” as a religious temple offering (*pūja*), or one the main arguments in *Filming the Gods* (Dwyer 2006), that Bollywood originates in religious mythology, both invaluable books on Bollywood.

the 1980s.<sup>115</sup> Since 9/11 it has been far more enlightened about representing Muslims than Hollywood.<sup>116</sup> It isn't necessarily lagging too far behind representing non-heteronormative sexuality, albeit obtusely and sometimes patronisingly. In *Dostana*, sporting two mainstream actors pretending to be gay, and the slapstick *Tees Mar Khan*, with two policemen as minor gay characters or even much earlier, the ambiguous kiss in *Mughal-e-Azam* between Bahar the *tawaiif* (Nigar Sultana) and her maidservant (see fig. 48). Transgendered identities (usually rendered up as *hijra* (eunuch), although the signified for it has widened considerably) have more often than not been offered up for comic effect, sometimes tragic (in the same narratologically punitive logic as with vamps and *tawaiifs*) except for a few that held comparatively less insensitive portrayals. One significant film from 1991 is *Sadak*, which won actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar a much-coveted Filmfare Award, for Best Performance in a Negative Role, indeed the first ever such award. He plays an evil *hijra*, evil being at least a sign of some agency for a non-heterosexual role, whereas in major films like *Amar Akbar Anthony*, otherwise so syncretistic of various Indian identities (especially Hindu, Muslim and Christian), the *hijra*'s presence merely offers comic relief (as during the song "Pyaar ka Dushman"). By the film *Tamanna*, in 1997, Mahesh Bhatt, the same director as *Sadak*, achieves a more balanced portrayal of a *hijra* in Tikku. It remains however, that in general Bollywood supports what Butler (1990: x) calls "the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality." In the otherwise culturally open *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2003) which dares a sentimental ménage-à-trois, the predictably effeminate French interior decorator briefly appears as a comical interlude at the wedding eve of Rohit Patel (Saif Ali Khan) as an inoffensive rival for his feelings who is lightly brushed away by his mother. Furthermore, the spectator is invited to laugh along the comical trials and tribulations of the Gujurati maid Kantaben as she discovers Shah Rukh Khan embracing Saif Ali Khan which

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<sup>115</sup> So many that it established a full tradition (see for instance *Khoon Bhari Maang* (Rakesh Roshan, 1988) and *Phool Bane Angaray* (K.C. Bokadia, 1991) both starring mainstream legend actress Rekha). Interestingly, one of the origins of the perpetuation of Bollywood lie in its centripetal capacity for adopting and re-adapting existing discourses into its existing tradition: shakti, the divine female power embodied as a goddess. A number of 'feminist' films since the Eighties, walking the complex line between the "feminist" movie and the "female revenge" genre represented the revenge of the downtrodden woman in the shape of goddess Shakti rising to defeat the tormentor (see fig. 43 and text above), almost always the husband, thus going as far as to question to an extent some of the assumptions of the *sukhi parivar* (happy family) and the sati Savitri (a character from the *Mahabharata*, from a narration by Sage Markendeya, popularly known in India as the ideal of a wife for instance for her patience and courage to even confront death for her husband's sake but more popularly associated with the immolation of a widow on her husband's pyre).

<sup>116</sup> See for instance *My Name is Khan* and *New York* but compare with *Kurbaan*.

she believes everytime to be homosexual in nature. Both representations could read, simultaneously, as a positive visibility in a Bollywood where the heteronormative was always absent, or as a negative, or an inadequate visibility. Director Onir has built up a reputation on representing gay identities. He is particularly known for *My Brother...Nikhil* (2005).

The furore over diasporic Indian Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, one of the first mainstream films in India to explicitly show homosexual relations, suggests that there is some distance to accepting alternative sexualities, especially as indifferently part of established normalcy. After its 1998 release in India, many major incidents and riots took place, especially in Mumbai with Chief Minister Manohar Joshi encouraging the riots, exhorting: "The film's theme is alien to our culture." However, theatre screenings were resumed on 26 February 1999 and continued without incident. On the other hand, films like *Girlfriend* tend to render 'lesbian' sexuality mostly into male heterosexual masturbatory fantasy, all the while remaining very reticent to represent sex between women fully (see fig. 50) and caused no political scandals.



Fig.48. 'The woman-to-woman Kiss': the transgressive space of the *tawaif* in *Mughal-e-Azam*



Fig. 49. *Fire*: Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das), sisters-in-law kissing.





Fig 50. *Girlfriend*: the closest Tania (Isha Kopikkar) and Sapna (Amrita Arora) get to locking lips

In April 2007, Richard Gere and Shilpa Shetty were speaking at an HIV/AIDS awareness event in New Delhi when he playfully swept her into his arms, kissing her several times (see fig. 51). Arrest warrants were issued for both on grounds of obscenity and effigies of the actor were burnt in New Delhi, Mumbai and in Varanasi.



Fig 51. Hollywood actor Richard Gere alleged cultural *faux-pas*, taking in his arms and kissing Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty on the cheeks.

There are antecedents. In 1993, Shabana Azmi kissed South African leader Nelson Mandela on the cheek, and this created a huge uproar, particularly among Muslims in India. Earlier still, Padmini Kolhapure pecked Prince Charles' cheek during his visit to Mumbai in 1980 triggering a furore.

#### **5.4 Hindustani cinema, the *Tawaif* who seeks Respectability**

What other options were open to women: there was no other way to money for a woman but through a man, as sexual object, either through marriage or 'prostitution'? Hindustani cinema was a third option she took and where she left her own cultural imprint. The disappearance of the *tawaif* is a symptom of her ubiquity and persistence – as Hindustani cinema herself. In that sense her appearance was always also a site of her disappearance. At the level of the narrative, the *tawaif* has been transformed as representation of Woman (as *la femme*), and no longer just a woman. She thus performs her being as Being, and her womanhood as Woman. Hindustani cinema is a *tawaif*, a social and an economic relationship, hired to entertain. One of the relationships of Hindustani cinema to its spectatorship is one of mutual acknowledgement of the pragmatic and practical aspect of entertainment, and even the occasional *clin d'oeuil* to the audience in that spirit (the equivalent of the *tawaif* in *Pakeeza* accusing men of lifting her dupatta). According to Vijay Mishra the moral codes and narratives of Hindustani cinema are ideologically constructed through the similarity of the famous Hindu Epics: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In *Ideology of the Hindustani Cinemas*, Madhava Prasad (1998) locates the Hindustani cinema within the networks of economics, history and politics that are responsible to maintain its production and existence. There is also a more pragmatic and immediate influence: the *tawaif*. The mythical print she left was to prove more enduring than her timely performances.

The *tawaif* is a prostitute. She sells her body and her art to upper class men. Such a fact is by and large sublimated by Hindustani cinema. Yet, it does not vehicle the same reserve for a particular avatar, the vamp. It becomes clear that Hindustani cinema is the respectable daughter trying to hide her dubious pedigree. The result might seem like a series of unrelated conservatisms and

subversions. In fact, it reflects the dry reality that Hindustani cinema is an industry. As with all industries, its aesthetics is largely dependent on economics and in the first, dependent on it. It has no choice at the surface but to perpetuate ideologies while this perpetuation brings enough money for subversion within this, the world's first film industry. It is central to reading Hindustani cinema that it is understood first and foremost as an industry, with cultural aspects only relevant when they are pertinent to its financial ambitions. That is neither to say that the cinema is not influenced by things cultural nor that it does not drive culture. But then there is little doubt about which is the locomotive.

For Das Gupta in *Talking about Films* (1981: 6-7):

...it is the Hindi movie which holds forth: 'Look at the Twentieth Century, full of night clubs and drinking, smoking, bikini-clad women sinfully enjoying themselves in fast cars and mixed parties; ... in the end everyone must go back to the traditional patterns of devotion to God, to parents, to village-life, or be damned forever... The films thus give reassurance to the 'family audience' which is the mainstay of the film industry... Sin belongs to the West; virtue to India.

Hindustani cinema is a body as performance (as a doing, not a being). Above all, as with all bodies, Hindustani cinema is performed continuously (doing, not done) and therefore definable only differentially (becoming, not being). Thus, Hindustani cinema *herself* is a *mujra*, a performance, with "men" watching (gazing at?), a space of relative liberation, yet somehow limited by the strictures of its inscription into cultural contexts. Ethically, Hindustani cinema stands for a portmanteau of Hindu dharma and Muslim 'family values'. Hence its contradictions. A counter-everydayness is the only source of choice when an encounter remains ontic. Thus, overall, Hindustani cinema provides a morally undecidable space for subverting the more unitary language of much Islamic religious discourse as well as nationalistic Hindu discourses, all the while providing a conservative space whereby it remains largely inoffensive to a bourgeois Muslim worldview, symptomatically marked by hypocritical, circuitous (both prudish and glossy) representations of sexuality for instance, in line with a contemporary global bourgeois morality shared across communities. Hindustani cinema's aim is self-avowedly that of being commercially successful (Dasgupta, 1996; Ganti, 2004). Commercial success is based on a Darwinian sociology of being the fittest, a strategy of adaptation to environmental factors, pre-eminently desire. It has to speak a mixed language, both of tradition and of innovation.

In a conscious effort in the direction of Hindustani film, the director of *Moulin Rouge!* decides to capture an essence of Hindustani cinema, connecting through three recognizable tropes: narrative serendipity, the big spectacle, and the *tawaif* as main character. When asked about his inspiration for *Moulin Rouge!*, a musical with one rare crossover from Hindustani cinema, the Sufi song “Chaiya Chaiya” (*Dil Se*, Ratnam 1998, won A.R. Rahman Filmfare Award for Best Song and 9<sup>th</sup> of BBC Best Song in the World in 2002), Luhrmann explained his inspiration:

...a comic tragedy. This is an unusual form... it's not common in Western cinematic form. When I was in India researching *Midsummer Night's Dream*, we went to this huge, ice cream picture palace to see a Bollywood movie. Here we were, with 2,000 Indians watching a film in Hindi, and there was the lowest possible comedy and then incredible drama and tragedy and then break out in songs. And it was three-and-a-half hours! We thought we had suddenly learnt Hindi, because we understood everything! We thought it was incredible. How involved the audience were... ‘Could we ever do that in the West? Could we ever get past that cerebral cool and perceived cool.’ It required this idea of comic-tragedy. Could you make those switches? Fine in Shakespeare - low comedy and then you die in five minutes... that's the road we're walking down - stealing from culture all over the place to write a code so that very quickly the audience can swing from the lowest possible comedy moment to the highest possible tragedy with a bit of music in the middle.<sup>117</sup>

In the same newspaper interview, he informs that myth was central to his thinking about the *tawaif*: “In terms of the mechanics of story, myth is an intriguing one because we didn't make myth up, myth is an imprinture of the human condition. Romeo and Juliet was not written by William Shakespeare - it was an Italian novella, and probably goes back to Pyramus and Thisbe”

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<sup>117</sup> Andrew, Geoff. "Baz Luhrmann (I)". theguardian.com Film. Retrieved 2014-02-15.



Fig. 52. *Moulin Rouge!* (Luhrmann: 2001) Satine the courtesan (Nicole Kidman) and Christian (Ewan Mc Gregor) with most dancers in Orientalist Indian dress in front of a colourful kitsch setting with a replica of the Taj Mahal at the back.

From Nimmi to Nargis, many 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindustani cinema actresses had mothers who were *tawaifs* or singer performers. The crossover between the two performing spaces wasn't too difficult, aesthetically, but also ethically, since the world of cinema was almost as liberal as that of the *tawaif*. Jaddanbai, Nargis's mother was a famous *tawaif* who made a particularly successful transition to Hindustani cinema, being its first female music director, starting her own production company called Sangeet Films, where she introduced her daughter, with strict instructions that she was to be taught film-acting but no singing or dancing, staples of 'tawaiifhood', a world her mother wanted to protect her from. Nargis went on to star among many other major films, such as *Mother India*. Jaddanbai was reputed as a woman with a strong mind. She married three times, including to two Hindu men who converted to Islam to marry her.

Nargis was born Fatima Rashid and – much as *tawaifs* took a new name upon becoming a full-fledged professional, adopted the nom de scène (see Dwyer 2006 for a full discussion of name changes in Hindustani cinema). Pakeezah-style, after being saved from a fire by fellow actor

Sunil Dutt<sup>118</sup> on the set of *Mother India*, she left the acting profession for good in 1958 to marry him at the height of her career. She had always been praised for the purity of her mien and the naturalness of her acting.



Figure 53. Nargis in one of her defining roles with Raj Kapoor in *Chori Chori* (1956)

Acting itself occupies a liminal space, for instance, a space of sexual undecidabilities such as of cross-dressing. Within that space, actresses also need patronage to survive, in the form of money and also influence (including, like Hindustani cinema, underworld connections). Similarly, the

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<sup>118</sup> Dutt was playing her son, and Salman Rushdie made much wit of the fact in *The Satanic Verses*.

*tawaif's nakhra* is now turned into play-acting, a smooth transition aesthetically, but also an ethical transition, but one which now receives adulation and approval.

For Bose (2006: 362) “Hindustani cinema, we can be certain, will always be capable of reinventing itself. It remains the most wonderful example of Indian use of Western technology in a wholly Indian way.” The tragedy of the Hindustani cinema is the tragedy of the *tawaif*, condemned to please her crowd while possessing a deeper lucidity about life which accompanies such intelligent, talented performers and poets:

The underlying theme of courtesan films in Hindustani cinema is one of sadness and loss. The courtesan is hauntingly accomplished in dance and achingly beautiful, and this seems to keep her from any chance of happiness. Rekha, bejewelled and graceful, dances with self-restraint and expresses the poignant grief of the courtesan. Her body and gestures clearly articulate that she is needed by society and yet shunned by it. She lives in veiled corners of dark city streets, admired by men, hated by wives, mistreated by pimps, willing to sacrifice all for a love that will always remain unrequited (Nijhawan, 2009: 103).

Largely unnoticed to eyes that are unattuned, Hindustani cinema is subversive, gingerly inhabiting the transgressive space of the *tawaif* in *Mughal-e-Azam*. Thus, *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), which seems to be first about the intransigence of Emperor Akbar the patriarch, allows itself unexpected kernels of subversion. Thus, in the *mujra* “*Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya?*” (“Why be afraid when you are in love?”), Anarkali (Madhubala) is defiant to Emperor Akbar (Prithviraj Kapoor) directly (fig. 54).



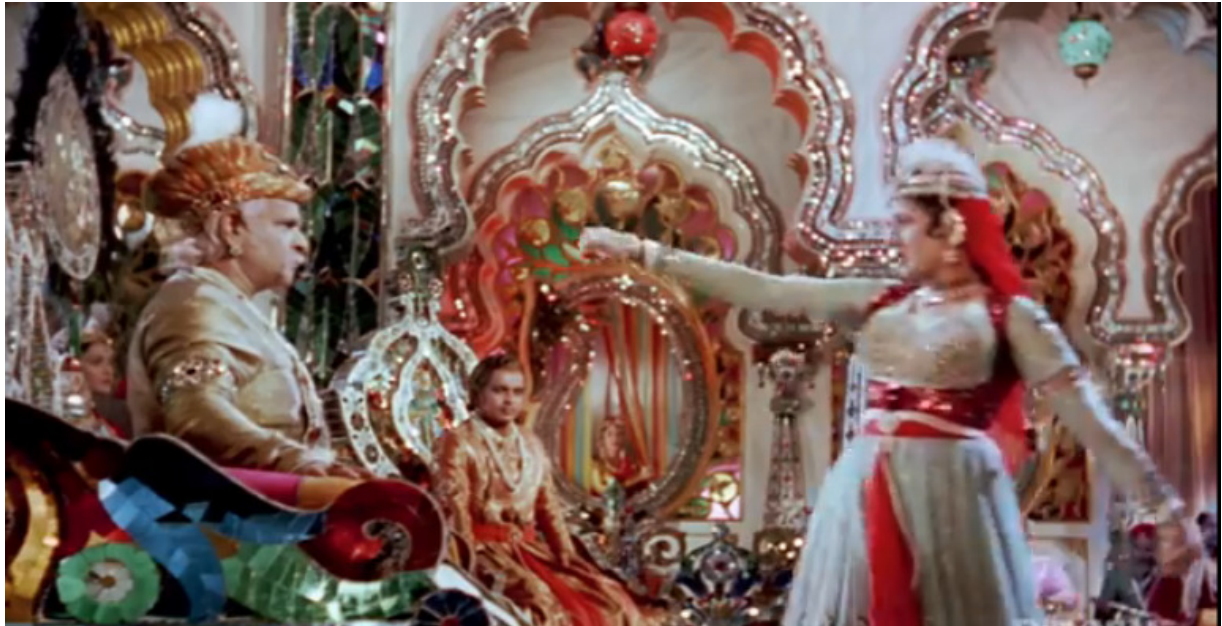


Figure 54. “*Pyaar kiya to darna kya?*” (why be afraid when you love?): Anarkali the *tawaif* challenges the grand patriarch Emperor Akbar himself.

The film also contains indirect references to non-heteronormative sexuality. At one point, as Bahar the *tawaif* is applying makeup to her face, her handmaid kisses her eyes with soft sensuality (fig, 48 above). During the “Jab Raat Hai Aisi Matwali” song a male dancer is made to appear as a counterfeit and shown to dance into a multi-reflecting mirrored standing chandelier which the male patriarch crashes as fake and illusory and ancillary to the true female *tawaif*, Anarkali whose dancing image was similarly refracted (see figure 26). The obsession with mirrors brings to mind how, according to Lacan, the mirror is constitutive of human identity and intuitive awareness of the mirror stage signals a regressive sense of identity as constructed and therefore representing a ‘degree zero of identity’.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Butler sees gender as an act that has been rehearsed, much like a script, and we, as the actors make the script a reality through repetition, thus coming to perform in the mode of belief. “For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies” (Felluga, 2006). Butler sees gender not as an expression of what one is, rather as something that one does. Furthermore, she sees it not as a social imposition on a gender neutral body, but rather as a mode of “self-making” through which subjects become socially intelligible. According to Butler’s theory, homosexuality and heterosexuality are not fixed categories. A person is merely in a condition of “doing straightness” or “doing queerness” (Lloyd, 1999).





Figure 55. As poison works on Prince Salim, a mujra is performed by a male dancer who – to use the culturally-specific term anachronistically – appears to be in drag. Although male dancers are traditionally part of the *Kathak* dance repertoire, with every other mujra in the world of the Hindustani cinema *tawaif* performance being female, one notices the unusual nature of this very brief appearance. Counterfeiting (Prince Salim is tricked by Anarkali so he is temporarily rendered unconscious) thus becomes ontological.



Figure 56. In the same Sheesh Mahal above, it is the turn of the male dancer to be reflected by the convex mosaic of mirrors (*ayina kari*) in the ‘swirling motile architecture’ of the Mughal dance dress choreography makes him look, in reference to Eurocentric modern standards, in drag (see fig. 26 above). Such reflection reminds one of Lacan’s mirror stage and regression to a ‘degree zero of identity’.

O’Byrne explains the mythical function of spectatorship according to Hannah Arendt in terms of:

Spectatorship is not for her a matter of titillation or idle distraction but is rather a vital part of what is required to keep the polis in existence as a place where action can happen. ‘Spectators make the space by watching.’ They are the audience in front of which we demonstrate who we are, and, while a group of gods looking down from the mountain might suffice, the best is a group of peers capable of passing on the story of who we are to new generations and of sustaining the political institutions that promise the continued existence of a space in this world where stories can be told and action performed (O’Byrne, 2010: 84).

According to Gallop (1982: 503), “it is only the law – and not the body – which constitutes him as patriarch. Paternity is corporeally uncertain, without evidence. But patriarchy compensates for that with the law which marks each child with the father’s name as his exclusive property.” The

history of paternalism is the history of patriarchal search for compensation and a frantic defence of laws and structures to maintain gendered hierarchy. Such hierarchy was disrupted by the historical *tawaif* and her world, which allowed for sexual ambiguities that were identified as anti-patriarchal. Dancing, which was instituted by the patriarchal production of the category *tawaif* in terms of erotic looked-at-ness (Mulvey) is instead subverted to express strong disapproval (fig. 16, 29), anger (fig. 17, 18) or even sexual ambiguity (figs 33, 34). These act contrapuntally to repressive regimes of ideology which support ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault), politically wresting ownership of the body, so central to prostitution from the pre-encoded Symbolic to reclaim the Mother’s body.

The *tawaif* musical tradition has all but disappeared in India but lives on as myth through Hindustani cinema. But Hindustani cinema has reappropriated the myth on its own terms. In traditional Indian society (mainly Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Jain), “respectable women” could never have been seen entertaining in public or even letting their voices be recorded, let alone dance for others. *Tawaifs* were accomplished artists who had trained for years, sometimes decades under the greatest *Ustads* or music professors. They performed for kings and other powerful men with a taste for the best. Ad libita versified debates such as accompanies the *Qawwali* song “*Teri Mehfil Mein*” in *Mughal-e-Azam* above (see figs 28, 29, 30) were traditionally performed with the nobles or the prince of the court, equal to equal as the height of intellectual witticism. The *tawaif*, as Lalita du Perron has pointed out (2007) has had an important impact on the development of Hindustani classical music. They were also responsible for bringing classical forms to everyday musical use as they had done for generations in the *kotha*:

The music of the Courtesan films also had an extremely significant impact on film music in general. Yatindra Mishra (2009; 46-47) points out that historically, the music of the *kothas* has had an intimate relationship with popular film music, which it radically constituted in the early Sound-era. The first decade of Sound-films especially used this music, with a number of the early stars being well-known courtesans of the day who performed their own music on the screen. Then, as the 1930s gave way to the 40s, the music in films began to change: it consolidated and drew upon several eclectic sources, privileged the melodic base without strictly upholding raga structures, and took the form that came to be recognized as the golden period of film music (Bhaskar & Allen: 55)

The fine choreography *tawaifs* introduced to Hindustani cinema still form an integral part of song-and-dance pieces which are integral to Hindustani film narrative. Bollywood has also shown a revisited interest in song sequences within lavish settings, heavy clothes, and perfect choreography. As Bruzzi (1993) has argued regarding clothing in Hollywood, clothing is an important component of film eroticism. This is foregrounded in the *tawaif* film, where the heroine's clothes heighten sexuality by their opulence and rich colours and textures, and their elaboration presents an exaggerated exhibition of gender difference. Such choreographies, a *tawaif's* dream, now include a further *tawaif* fantasy: dancing patriarchs and matriarchs in Hindustani cinema.

Beyond nostalgic attachments to an older Hindustani cinema “that was more profound”, the fact of Hindustani cinema being fantasy-driven itself hasn't changed – older historical mansions have been replaced by capitalist dreams more in tune with India as economic superpower – nouveau-riche dreams of chateaux, Eton education, soiree dresses in the Swiss Alps are no less improbable than dreams of nawabi grandeur to most of the Hindustani cinema audience. Instead the existential proximity that the medium of the audio-visual provides enables a brief (3 hours!) identification as solace from immediate conditions. Diasporic conditions themselves find an additional solace in the connection it offers to Indianness.

The appearance/disappearance of the *tawaif* in Hindustani cinema, as a symptom of its adaptability, uncovers the dynamics of the industry's pragmatic aesthetics and, through it, reveal watermark traces of its pragmatic politics (both reactionary and subversive, or to be more accurate, neither). The appearance of the *tawaif* marks the performance of femininity and, therefore the theatrical performance of woman herself. Hindustani cinema similarly performs itself, and, therefore, Indianness. As performance, Hindustani cinema is, by definition, subject to slippages in its self-definition. It is incredibly protean in its adaptation to all of the various phenomenal worlds that inform it, in terms of cultures that are seen as internal or external to (and therefore *differenced* from) Indianness, but also in terms of time. The resultant spacetime remains, as artefact, strikingly coherent with itself and all its other components. In this lies the enduring quality of Hindustani cinema – its various contradictions are smoothed over into a text that leaves the spectator with a strong sense of textual integrity.

This textual integrity of Hindustani cinema narrative has origin, or to be accurate a plethora of origins. It is based on a savant mixture of tradition and modernity, of imagined tradition and real tradition, of imagined modernity and real modernity, of various traditions and various modernities, of the established and the subversive. These transformations are paced and originate from negotiating a web of often competing and contradictory influences and in turn subversive turns that influence society. The apparent smoothness of the text stems from a habit of watching, constructed/established as a common cultural/literary competency among spectators.

Current new 'posthuman' technologies of communication (Rodowick, 2001) have re-mapped the world, for instance into more virtual, para-geographical transnational entities, such as into communities of Hollywood watchers and Hindustani cinema watchers although these identities are also dependent upon national and individual histories. A community of Hindustani cinema spectators is often maintained on discussion forums, social networks like Twitter and Facebook, and extends naturally to influence personal preferences, such as in romantic contexts, face-to-face, or on friendship and matrimonial websites. In contexts of geographical displacement, Hindustani cinema enables a virtual community, with dynamics reminiscent of 'Little India ethnic neighbourhoods' of 'new diaspora' metropolitan centres. The advantage of Hindustani cinema over such neighbourhoods is in fact its reach – Hindustani cinema requires nothing more than basic video/DVD technology to open its world – to view the same differently, Hindustani cinema isn't restricted by physical space. This commands a wide and ultimately uncomputable sphere of influence to the Hindustani cinema text. It also implies a complex game of public/private space, technological world itself the source of the existential ambiguity.

## Conclusion

*Bombay Talkies* (Kashyap, 2013) (see Introduction above) suggests that the main concern with Bollywood, and more generally, Hindustani cinema, is gender. We may suggest that the main reason is that the cinema form itself is a *tawaif*, constrained by the powers that be, but ready to subvert patriarchal structures, and to create a spectacle to entertain but also to educate in love.

*Bunty aur Babli* (2005) is an Indian retelling of the mythical criminal couple from US history, Bonnie and Clyde, although it is in fact a very much watered-down version of the Hollywood movie (Arthur Penn, 1967) with little violence and hardly any sexuality and none of the moral undecidability that underlines the original entertainment. All in all, *Bunty aur Babli* can provide, in line with Dyer (2002), entertainment, which is its first and foremost pretension – while carrying the bourgeois ethos of good, moral “wholesomeness”. Whereas the film was nominated for, but received no major awards (with its entertaining yet somewhat unambitious narrative), “*Kajra ré*”, the *mujra*, earned singer Alisha Chinai the 2005 Filmfare Best Female Playback Award and the 2005 Hindustani Cinema Movie Award – Best Playback Female Singer. It was also nominated by *The Times of India* as one of the 20 best songs in 2005.

In the movie *Bunty aur Bubli* (2005), Babli, the female half of the criminal duo, uses her sexuality to cheat people. Her disdain for the role of the housewife she is forced to play is comic: “If I have to make mango pickle one more time, I’ll die,” she tells the police officer who arrests the couple. This is intended to be taken with humour. The transformation of Hindustani cinema into Bollywood cinema together echoing the change brought by globalisation presents nowadays a more complex Indian culture within the filmic narrative.

The mythical is able to accommodate contradictions and to work beyond the binary traditional and subversive. The Hindustani text is thus able to simultaneously accommodate what might seem contrary discourses of conservative family values and more subversive discourses based on the radical primacy of love. The *tawaif* is thus the reification of a mythical relation, part of a mythopoeic dynamics that manifests itself narratively in the Hindustani filmic text.

When the Aishwarya Rai character appears in the nightclub in “*Kajra ré*” (*Bunty aur Babli*), she is clearly not a vamp although all the ingredients are present in the context for it to be a vamp’s song. First of all, Rakesh is a “good” villain in *Bunty aur Babli*, even more likeable than his Western counterpart, Clyde (*Bonnie and Clyde*) and although, as is typical in the Hindustani cinema text, the vamp would be dancing to the villain, and to a police officer, here ACP Dashrath Singh, so the clin d’oeil to the vamp is at best in keeping with the overall mood of the sequence: gentle parody. The unnamed dancing character isn’t localisable on an ethical map as a vamp. The seediness and decadence associated with the vamp is absent. Instead, she carries the (classier) melancholia of the *tawaif* with intertextual references. The piece is marked by ontological undecidability.

*Bunty aur Babli* (Shaad Ali, 2005) has proven an example of new formative winds that have been sweeping over the nascent Bollywood cinema. Thus the *tawaif* appears with unexpectedly modern turns in a parodic sequence in *Bunty aur Babli*, as a metafilmic touch: the song-and-dance number.

“*Kajra ré*”, the *tawaif*’s *mujra* occurs when ACP Dashrath Singh (Amitabh Bachchan) and the crook-with-a-good-heart he is chasing, Rakesh (Abhishek Bachchan), happen to arrive at a night club and an unnamed *tawaif*, played by Aishwarya Rai starts singing to them.





Figure 57. Three Bachchans: the father (left, Amitabh Bachchan), the son (right, Abhishek Bachchan), and the daughter-in-law (centre, Aishwarya Rai, now Bachchan) - *Bunty aur Babli*, “*Kajra ré*” sequence

From a strictly narratological perspective, the sequence is digressive to the nucleus of the main text of *Bunty aur Babli* (what Barthes, 1977 calls a catalyser). Its main function is many senses asynchronic: it isn't even related to moving the narrative forward and it functions as a parodic intertext. It turns the US story into an unmistakably Indian affair. “*Kajra ré*” is dance-performed and lip-synched (lip-synching being the norm in Hindustani cinema song sequences) at a nightclub by Aishwarya Rai. The greatest female star then in Hindustani cinema and the face of Hindustani cinema in the West since *Devdas*, *Bride and Prejudice* (Gurinder Chadha, 2004) and *Chokher Bali* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2003), she only appears as cameo during the one scene in the film (she is credited on the official script, and website as “Special Appearance”, which typically in Hindustani cinema will often refer to a crossover from the real to the fictional).



Figure 58. *Bunty aur Babli*, “*Kajra ré*” sequence, where Rai-Bachchan takes the seductive and assertive posture of the *tawaif* in a backless *choli* top with her *lehenga* folded under her, a dress associated with dance bars whereas the confidence of the posture is more reminiscent of the historical *tawaif*.

Feminism as a frame of mind instead of a material state can be understood in terms of this sitting posture. Sahibjaan trying too hard to prove she is pure, and deserving of the name Pakeezah, heeding bad-mouthing others. Here, in the posture is quiet self-confidence in the body.



In the scene, Aishwarya Rai is dressed in a more modern (and less ‘chaste’) version of the *tawaif* dress and performs the courtesan’s kathak-based *mujra*. The nightclub setting itself is decorated like a courtesan’s *kotha* with ‘Islamicate’ horseshoe (or Moorish) arches and columns although it includes a vamp’s modern bar at the centre. This links the *mujra* to a new bar culture that is specific to main cities of the Republic of India with more underground versions in Pakistan and Bangladesh: the “dance bar”. In dance bars women dance for money from male patrons, but unlike Western-style strip-bars, the women wear a mostly covered semi-traditional *ghagra* and backless *choli*. However, with a few very rare exceptions,<sup>120</sup> the performance of the women at “dance bars” is a far cry from the *mujras* of the old *kothewalis*. Instead, “dance bar” performers will move listlessly, with little or no art, as can be seen in *Chandni Bar* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2001) – see figure 59 below.

Rai-Bachchan’s assurance and the complex and coordinated choreography is a heritage from the harrowed and hallowed ancestor, the *tawaif*. Haunting images of bar dancers in *Chandni Bar* moving listlessly at the behest of her culturally insensitive patrons (although partly in control) act as graphic counter-images of Rai-Bachchan’s performance in “*Kajra ré*” and also of the *tawaiifs* of the past which, it might also be argued, signal the decadence of the old-world *tehzeeb*. Of the “dance bars” it has inherited the drinks bar, the informality, the unstructured playfulness, the *ghagra choli* – an A-line *lehenga*, backless *choli* (petticoat) with no *dupatta* (as opposed to the more demure *angarkha/churidaar/dupatta* combination of the *tawaif*); on the other hand, it has inherited the almost-kitsch luxury of the décor, the artistic assurance of the *tawaif*.

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<sup>120</sup> See for instance, Viju, B., “It’s time for *mujra re* for bar girls”, *The Times of India*, Nov. 1, 2005 (see [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2005-11-01/india/27855743\\_1\\_bar-girls-bar-dancers-mujra](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2005-11-01/india/27855743_1_bar-girls-bar-dancers-mujra), accessed on 10.07.11 at 01.10, Mauritian Standard Time).



Figure 59. Dancers huddled together wearing the *ghagra choli* (also known as *lehenga choli*) in *Chandni Bar* as they perform somewhat clumsily and out of synch with the music and with each other, in many ways anti- Hindustani cinema *tawaiifs*, who always dance with graceful precision and in harmonious symmetry with their backup dancers.

*Bunty aur Babli*'s release year is sandwiched between the years of Rai's two other appearances in contexts related to *tawaiifs* in two particularly opulent remakes of films: *Devdas* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002) and *Umrao Jaan* (J.P. Dutta 2006). The "*Kajra ré*" sequence acts as a gentle parody to the the 2002 *Devdas* film, in particular of the song-and-dance sequence of "dola re dola". The "dola re dola" *mujra* became famous among both Hindustani cinema spectators and beyond. Its much-celebrated choreography (by Saroj Khan) accounts mostly for its notoriety, and definitely the outstanding performances of the two renowned actresses/dancers Madhurit Dixit and Aishwarya Rai.

*Devdas* was India's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars in 2003. It won the BAFTA Award for Best Foreign Language Film, 2003. The film was also screened at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. *Devdas* was selected as one of the top ten best movies of 2003 among all the movies released around the world by *Time Magazine*.<sup>121</sup> One of the highlights to *Devdas* is the song in a *kotha*: "dola re dola". Whereas Paro (the main female protagonist Rai plays) herself isn't a *tawaiif* in the film; Chandramukhi, who dances in synch with her in the clip, is one. The

<sup>121</sup> Richard Corliss, Dec. 18 December, *Time Magazine*.

<http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2001842,00.html> [last accessed on 07.08.11 at 01.06 Standard Mauritian Time]

setting for “dola re dola” is the *kotha*, the *tawaif*’s lavish private storied mansion that houses the *tawaif*’s performance. In 2005, the year of *Bunty aur Babli*, the referent text “dola re dola” from *Devdas* would have been immediately accessible to the audience.

Later that year, Rai was chosen to play the part of the ‘proto-*tawaif*,’<sup>122</sup> Umrao, in the 2006 remake of the film *Umrao Jaan*. She starred, again, with Abhishek Bachchan. Abhishek Bachchan, who married her in 2007, was paired with her in the the “*Kajra ré*” sequence together with her future father-in-law, Amitabh Bachchan (a Hindustani cinema megastar beyond his heyday). Such constant crosses from the filmic to the real is particularly common in the Hindustani cinema text – over the last decade or so almost every “Special Appearance” has referred to actors appearing as themselves, often echoing Hindustani cinema gossip columns. Such a metafilmic collusion of cinematic agencies is rare in most Western cinemas.

Dashrath Singh, the name of the character played by Amitabh Bachchan might be a superficial nod in the direction of the mythical father figure of the *Ramayana*, Dasarata, father of the god Rama. Amitabh is Abhishek Bachchan’s real-life father. Rumours about Rai and the younger Bachchan being romantically involved were rife before, after, and during, the filming of *Bunty Aur Babli*, thus the hyperreal (Baudrillard) intrusion of Hindustani cinema gossip in a parodic manner into the text as a metaironical joke. All these references merge in Bollywood as a subtext and generates a strong sense of a cosy community within Bollywood that is very different from Hollywood generally. Besides, suggestions that Abhishek Bachchan is somehow less (as an actor – but with innuendoes of sexuality) capable than his father<sup>123</sup> and mother,<sup>124</sup> are based on similar assertions in Hindustani cinema trash press (known as the *Stardust* effect after the famous Hindustani film gossip magazine that is almost half a century old) whereas as the son of two of

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<sup>122</sup> Based on the novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* by Mirza Hadi Ruswa, first published in 1899. It is considered the first modern Urdu novel. It represents the life of a courtesan, significantly linking the courtesan with Urdu culture right from the start.

<sup>123</sup> Amitabh Bachchan, Abhishek’s real-life father, may be the best-known actor in Bollywood. He carries a playboy’s reputation even into films like *Cheeni Kum* (R. Balki, 2007) where he, very believably, has a love affair with a woman who is almost half his age. He is widely believed to have had an extramarital affair with actress Rekha (who played the courtesan in the first *Umrao Jaan* film version) when they were filming the earlier major film, *Muqaddar ka Sikandar* (Prakash Mehra, 1978) where she also played a courtesan.

<sup>124</sup> Jaya Bhaduri (now Bachchan), is a famous actress in her own right, although her most memorable roles have also involved members of her (actual/eventual) family. One of her earliest remarkable performances was in a film that launched the career of her husband as “the angry young man”, *Zanjeer* (1973). The two appeared again in a number of films: *Abhimaan* (1973), *Chupke Chupke* (1975), *Sholay* (1975), *Silsila* (1981). After an absence of almost 2 decades, she returned, appearing most memorably in blockbusters like *Fiza* (2000), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003), which won her various nominations and awards.

the most revered actors of Hindustani cinema, Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bachchan, there were high hopes about his acting. In the “*Kajra ré*” sequence the character he plays (as well as he himself?) is shown as generally inept, eliciting impatience from the character played by his real-life father, Amitabh Bachchan. At one point, he is shown drunk but unlike the Amitabh character, who holds his alcohol well (suggesting virility as mature self-control), he is shown to trip and fall in front of the dancing courtesan, metaironically suggesting various, simultaneous ‘impotencies’, perhaps to remind us that the *tawaif*’s ‘Medusa-like’ humour against men was as much of a defensive tactic as her feigned *tehzeeb* of extreme manners, used to keep men away from vulgar intimacy.

Intertextual reference is made in “*Kajra ré*” to the lamp that the main female protagonist of the 2002 *Devdas*, Paro (played by Rai herself) lit up for Devdas, the main male protagonist, with whom she has been in love all her life. She lit up a lamp for Devdas who left India to study and vowed to never blow it out, which is typical of the extreme romanticism that marks the entire text. During the “*Kajra ré*” sequence, the *tawaif* played by Rai appears with a lamp. The character played by Amitabh Bachchan blows out the lamp whereas the *tawaif* then comically playfully blows out Abhishek Bachchan’s own candle, a phallic symbol, thus implying some sort of emasculation. At the end of the scene, she simulates petulant interest in the character of Amitabh Bachchan and he follows her whereas Abhishek Bachchan is left pining at her feet. It refers to two different ways *tawaifs* would treat male clients.



Figure 60. *Bunty aur Babli*, “*Kajra ré*” sequence: the lamp as reminder of *Devdas*.

The new metacomic intrusion of stars’ real lives into the fictional Hindustani cinema does not point only to – as it might seem at first sight – a lax attitude to stars’ privacy in Hindustani cinema culture – there is a continuity in the act of spectatorship between the fictional and the real lives of actors – crossovers at various levels work in both directions. The tendency for a Hindustani cinema audience is to remain unmoved by the distinction. In recent Hindustani cinema films, the main effect of the crossover remains one of highlighting Hindustani cinema spectatorship as a *community*.



Figure 6. *Bunty aur Babli*, “*Kajra ré*” sequence: a parody of the lamp as reminder of *Devdas*



Figure 62. *Devdas*: the lamp that Paro keeps lit up to signify her undying love.

This is all done in the spirit of play and the ultimate feel is of a good-natured revenge by Hindustani cinema on Hindustani cinema, of stars over paparazzi, but as part of the same system (almost as a family performance). After all, Abhishek Bachchan’s openness to self-

deprecating humour is particularly impressive, and part of a new postmodern metaironical zeitgeist<sup>125</sup> in Hindustani cinema accompanying a less circumspect morality.

Also, to signal the confidence of the new zeitgeist, the cavorting of eventual father-in-law and daughter-in-law in the clip is of course risqué, but new Hindustani cinema caters for a more urbane audience than the older Hindustani cinema. Its ethical *Lebenswelt* is also more complex, half more modern, half postmodern nostalgic for an imagined society.

Intertextual references to *Devdas* would have been of marked recent memory to Hindustani cinema film watchers of 2005 as one of the greatest Hindustani cinema films ever (indeed they would still be recognisable to a contemporary Hindustani cinema audience. Together with *Asoka* (Santosh Sivan, 2001), *Devdas* was the harbinger of later glossy, opulent ‘historical/fictional’ films such as *Umrao Jaan* (J.P. Dutta, 2006) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008).

One cannot without the advantage of hindsight comprehend whether this is a new trend, and the question of whether to call it a new phase in Hindustani cinema, New Hindustani cinema or a new opportunity for Indie film with the Hindustani cinema audience. There is a definite subtle fusion in “*Kajra ré*” of Indian music (itself generally, and here particularly, a hybrid mix) with Western musical structures. There are a number of references to the traditional *tawaif*’s *mujra* repertoire as it appears in the extension to history that Hindustani cinema’s appropriation of *tawaif* history. But it remains the re-invention of an old tradition. As regards the innovation within the qawwali tradition that “*Kajra ré*” represents, Taneja 2009 has this exclamation:

maybe it is the reinvention of the qawwali by Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy and Gulzar, that helped the song pip *Om Kara’s Beedi* (2006) as the item number of the decade.

The qawwali form used for singing “*Kajra ré*” is far more jolly than the generally melancholy ghazal style that marks the two film versions of *Umrao Jaan* for instance. Yet, rather than oppose it, “*Kajra ré*” recaptures the essence of the *tawaif*’s *mujra*. The lyrics of *Kajra ré*, composed by one of the most reputed lyricists in Hindustani cinema, Gulzar, are definitely of the

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<sup>125</sup> Note, to mention but one of many examples, the various scenes in *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007), one of the most Bollywood-about-Bollywood films where a number of Bollywood actors play themselves and indulge in nudge-nudging with the audience about their (actual/imagined) foibles such as megalomania.

same nature as the usual repertoire for *mujras*; one of the recurring themes being playful reproach mixed with a pining with undercurrents of melancholia. As with the lyrics of “Inhin logon ne” from *Pakeezah*, for example, the awareness of gazing and being gazed at is very prominent. The main focus in the sequence is eyes, which is typical of an Indian tradition of sexual fetishism, referring here to the poeticising of a woman’s eyes<sup>126</sup> as substitution of the main focus of sexuality in the main sexual organs to other body parts, exacerbated by Islamic traditions of covering all but a woman’s eyes. Here the inspiration for the song “*Kajra ré*” is of Hindu god Krishna (“your dark, lotus-like eyes” refers at one level to him as sung by his divine consort Radha), the poetry of whom has also been a secular inspiration to non-Hindu Indians and non-Indians, but here it has been adapted to the *mujra* repertoire: the petulance mixed with a reproachful melancholia.

One of the most significant elements of “*Kajra ré*” however, remains its retention of the femininity of the *tawaif* as both empowered and disempowered. Despite lyrics that denote pining, there is an added symmetry here of male/female power that runs somewhat closer to the ‘real’ *tawaifs* than to the Hindustani cinema imagined version but, as in both cases, reveals. The symmetry of power can be represented as follows, hierarchically, from top to bottom, with the lower pining for the higher. Gestures of pining are, in true *mujra* style with the addition of Hindustani cinema melodramatic masala, exaggerated and very physical (including holding the beloved’s leg):

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<sup>126</sup> Or feet, as in the case of *Pakeezah* (see Chapter 3) which centres around a forester who falls in love with a courtesan on a train having only seen her feet and her destroying the same feet in one of the final sequences by dancing on broken chandeliers. Although psychoanalysts imply fetishism is universal, the conscious cultural understanding of such fetish in much of Urdu civilisation (and more generally in Indian civilisations) is of romance as opposed to sex. See Sudhir Kakkar and Ashis Nandy. (see Chapter 3)





Figure 63. *Kajra ré*: The freedom implied by the daughter-in-law/future wife, pretending to seduce both father-in-law and future husband implies the playfulness Veena Oldenburg found among the historical *tawaifs*, a strong sense that identity is performed, always play.

The *tawaif* is portrayed as empowered unless she decides to break one of the rules of courtesanship: exclusive love for one man.<sup>127</sup> Thus, “*Kajra ré*”, despite its brevity, and as is common with many parodies, reduces the original of the Hindustani cinema text on the *tawaif* to its essential dynamic – that the difference between being in charge or not is in love, love itself becoming a weakness. Thus the *tawaif* holds sway over all the men who pay for her artistic and sexual services but weak in what is perceived as a feminine essence – a call for romance, also readable as fetishistic exclusive heterosexual monogamy or as a desire for bourgeoisie. Were it not for her interest in Dashrath Singh, the *tawaif* would have maintained full power over males the way she does over Rakesh.

Of Sufi origin (a hybrid Arabic form largely readapted to an Indian Sufi worldview<sup>128</sup>), yet very much appropriated by other religious groups in India, as well as appropriative of non-Islamic intertext, the qawwali is often used in secular contexts as well. This is true of “*Kajra*

<sup>127</sup> See this issue under more detailed scrutiny for instance in the two *Umrao Jaan* films and in *Pakeezah*.

<sup>128</sup> One can refer for instance to the song “*Khwaja Mere Khwaja*” in *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) which is more deliberately Sufi. However, there is a marked presence of Sufi culture in many other songs, or other contexts in Bollywood cinema, for instance, in “*Chaiyya Chaiyya*”, from *Dil Se* (Mani Ratnam, voted by people from 155 countries through the BBC World Service as the top ninth among 7000 songs (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/us/features/topten/profiles/index.shtml>), is based on the Sufi folk song “*Thaiyya Thaiyya*”, as composed by Sufi poet Bulleh Shah.

*rē*”, except that it keeps religious context as trace. The lyrics and song style originate from the Braj Bhoomi folk tradition. The mystical dimension is also represented in “*Kajra rē*” much as it is in the tradition of Hindustani cinema *tawaiifs*. The black eyes in question are Krishna’s. In the lyrics to the song, the agony of separation from the beloved is part of both Sufi and the Krishna traditions (especially the Gaudiya Vaishnava Bhakti<sup>129</sup>), which share many commonalities regarding God as love but were also the favourite religious interests of the historical *tawaiif*. Thus the *tawaiif*’s condition, as reflected in particular in “*Kajra rē*”, is a spiritual condition, in marked contrast with the judgement of immorality attached to the *tawaiif* being a kind of prostitute, especially one that brings together Muslim and Hindu drawn by common denominators of lust and art, in other words beauty, but also power.

Suspiciously, there has been a dearth of happily independent *tawaiifs* in Hindustani cinema with agency that is regardless of men whereas, consistently, narratives of the historical *tawaiif* show a consistently powerful landowner, administrator, on behalf of the *choudariyan*, of the kotha, a businesswoman negotiating with or ordering a small army of men to supply goods and services to run the mansion, and to maintain regular *mushairas* and *mujras*, playing *nakhra* with kings and *nawabs* as (casual) revenge for their condition.

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<sup>129</sup> “aajaa re aajaa re aajaa re/ *Come to me, come to me, come!*” is a common mantra for Krishna within the movement.



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## Filmography

*Aan*, 1952. Directed by Mehboob Khan. India: Mehboob Productions.

*Ajnabee*, 1974. Directed by Shakti Samanta. India: Natraj Studios

*Amar Prem*, 1972 Directed by Shakti Samanta. India: Shakti Films, UniAjnabeeted Producers

*Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, 1979. Directed by Manmohan Desai. India: Hirawat Jain and Company, M.K.D. Films Combine, Manmohan Films.

*Amrapali*, 1966 Directed by Lekh Tandon. India: Eagle Films

*Anarkali*. 1953. Directed by Nandlal Jashwantlal. India: Filmistan Films

*Anjaam*. 1994. Directed by Rahul Rawail. India.

*Aurat*. 1940. Directed by Mehboob Khan. India: National Studios

*Baabul*, 2006 Directed by Ravi Chopra. India: B.R. Films

*Bahu Begum*, 1967. Directed by M. Sadiq. India: Sanamkada Films.

*Bilwamangal*, 1919. Directed by Rustomji Dhoteiwallah. India:

*Bin Phere Hum Tere*. 1977. Directed by Rajat Rakshit. India:

*Bombay Talkies*, 2013. Directed by Anurag Kashyap. India: Flying Unicorn Entertainment.

*Bunty Aur Babli*, 2005. Directed by Shaad Ali. India: Yash Raj Films.

*Camille*, 1936. Directed by George Cukor. USA: Metro-Golwyn-Mayer original, Warner Bros. current.

*Caravan*, 1971 Directed by Nasir Hussein, India.

*Chameli*, 2003. Directed by Sudhir Mishra. India: Pritish Nandy Communications PNC.

*Chandni Bar*, 2001. Directed by Madhur Bhandarkar. India: Shlok Films.

*Chetna*, 1970. Directed by B.R. Ishaara. India: Friends Video.

*Chokher Bali*, 2006. Directed by Rituparno Ghosh. India: Shree Venkatesh Films.

*Chori Chori*, 1956. [Film] Directed by Anant Thakur. India: AVM Productions.

*Chori Chori Chupke Chupke*, 2001. Directed by Abbas Mustan. India: Shlok Films.

*Daddy Cool*, 2009. Directed by K. Murli Mohan Rao. India: Maruti Pictures.

*Dedh Ishqiya*, 2014. Directed by Abhishek Chaubey. India: VB Pictures, Shemaroo Entertainment.

*Deedar-e-yaar*, 1982. Directed by H. S. Rawail. India: Prasan Kapoor Films.

*Dev D*, 2009. Directed by Anurag Kashyap. India: Maruti Pictures.

*Devdas*, 1928. Directed by Naresh Mitra. India: Eastern Films.

*Devdas*, 1935. Directed by Pramatesh Barua. India: New Theatres Limited.

*Devdas*, 1955. Directed by Bimal Roy. India: Bimal Roy Productions.

*Devdas*, 2002. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. India: Mega Bollywood.

*Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal*, 2007 Directed by Vivek Agnihotri. India: UTV Motion Pictures.

*Dil Apna Preet Parai*, 1960 Directed by Kishore Sahu. India: Mohan Pictures.

*Dil Chahta Hai* 2001. Directed by Farhan Akhtar. India: Excele Entertainment.

*Dilwale Dulhania LeJayenge*. 1995. Directed by: Aditya Chopra. India: Yash Raj Films.

*Dostana*, 2008. Directed by Tarun Mansukhani. India: Dharma Productions.

*Dunno Y...Na Jaane Kyon*, 2010. Directed by Sanjay Sharma. India: Movies Nasti Magic Studios, Shantketan Films.

*East is East*. 1999. Directed by: Damien O'Donell. UK: Channel Four Films.

*English Vinglish*, 2012. Directed by: Gauri Shinde. India: Curbside Films; Eros International; Hope Productions.

*Fanaa*, 2006. Directed by Kunal Kohli. India: Yash Raj Films.

*Fiza*, 2000. Directed by Khalid Mohammed. India: The Culture Company.

*Ghungroo*, 1983. Directed by Ram P. Sethi. India: Eros International.

*Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*, 2013. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. India: Eros International, SLB Films Pvt. Ltd.

*Hatimtai*, 1933. Directed by G R Sethi. India:

*Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* 2007. Directed by Reema Kagti. India: Excel Entertainment.

*Hum Aap ke Hai Koun*, 1994. Directed by Sooraj R Barjatya.

*Irma La Douce*, 1963. Directed by Billy Wilder. USA: Mirisch Corporation, The Phalanx Productions.

*Jab we Met*, 2007. Directed by Imtiaz Ali. India: Shree Ashtavinayak Cine Vision.

*Jism II*, 2012. Directed by Pooja Bhatt. India: Clockwork Films Private Limited, Vishesh Films.

*Jism*, 2003. Directed by Amit Saxena. India: Fish Eye Network Pvt. Ltd. Shreya Creations.

*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam*, 2001. Directed by: Karan Johar. India: Dharma Productions.

*Kajrare*, 2010. Directed by Pooja Bhatt. India: T-Series.

*Kal Ho Na Ho*, 2003. Directed by: Nikhil Advani. India: Dharma Productions.

*Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*, 1996. Directed by: Mira Nair. India: Trimark Pictures.

*Karma*, 1933. Directed by: John Hunt. India/UK: Indian and British Film Productions.

*Karz*, 1980. Directed by: Subhash Ghai India: Mukta Arts.

*Khoon Bhari Maang*, 1988. Directed by Rakesh Roshan. India: Film Kraft.



*Khuda Gawa*, 1988. Directed by Mukul S. Anand. India: Glamour Films.

*Khwahish*, 2004. Directed by Shahrukh Khan. India: Perry Pictures.

*Laaga Chunari Mein Daag - Journey of A Woman*, 2007. Directed by Pradeep Sarkar. India: Apocalypse Filmworks Productions, Yash Raj Films

*Laila Majnu*. 1976. Directed by Harnam Singh Rawail. India, East Germany, Soviet Union: Deluxe Films.

*Lajja*. 2001. Directed by Rajkumar Santoshi. India: Apocalypse Filmworks Productions, Yash Raj Films

*L'Apollonide: Souvenirs de la maison close 2011*. Directed by Bertrand Bonello. France: Les Films du Lendemain, My New Picture, Arte France Cinéma.

*Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki* directed by Raj Khosla, 1978.

*Maison Close* 2010/2013. [Serial] Directed by Mabrouk El Mechri, Jacques Ouaniche, Carlos de Fonseca Parsotam Season 1 , Mabrouk El Mechri, Jérôme Cornuau Season 2 . France: Noé Productions.

*Mandi*, 1983. Directed by Shyam Benegal. India: Blaze Film Enterprises.

*Manoranjan*, 1974. Directed by Shammi Kapoor.

*Memoirs of a Geisha*, 2005. Directed by Rob Marshall. United States: Columbia Pictures Corporation, DreamWorks SKG, Spyglass Entertainment, Amblin Entertainment, Red Wagon Entertainment.

*Mission Kashmir*, 2000. Directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra. India: Ramoji Film City Srinagar.

*Monsoon Wedding*. 2001. Directed by: Mira Nair. USA: Mirabai Films.

*Mother India*, 1957. Directed by Mehboob Khan. India: Mehboob Productions.

*Moulin Rouge!*, 2001. Directed by: Baz Luhrmann. USA, Australia: Twentieth Century Fox.

*Mr. India*, 1987. Directed by Shekhar Kapoor. India: Narsimha Productions.

*Mughal-e-Azam*. 1960. Directed by K Asif. India: Sterling Investment Corporation.

*Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*, 1978. Directed by Prakash Mehra. India: Prakash Mehra Productions

*Murder 2*, 2011. Directed by Mohit Suri. India: Vishesh Films.

*Murder 3*, 2013. Directed by Vishesh Bhatt. India: Vishesh Films, Fox Star Studios.

*Murder*, 2004. Directed by Anurag Basu. India: Rapid Eye Movies.

*Najma*, 1945. Directed by Mehboob Khan. India: Mehboob Productions.

*Nikaah*, 1982. Directed by B.R. Chopra. India: B.R. Films.

*Om Shanti Om*, 2006. Directed by Farah Khan. India: Red Chillies Entertainment.

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