

## The Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Commercial Indian Cinema

Dr. HARI KRISHNA BEHERA

Guest Faculty

Dept. of Journalism & Mass Communication

Berhampur University, Odisha, India

INDIRA BEHERA

M.Phil Research Scholar

Dept. of Journalism & Mass Communication

Central University of Orissa, Odisha, India

### INTRODUCTION:

According to Census of India (2011), India has 22 official languages included in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution. In addition to these there are 100 other languages which are not included in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution. Of these 122 existing languages feature films are made in 20 of them. Ganti (2004) writes, "Feature films are produced in approximately 20 languages in India". The term "Indian cinema" therefore could refer to films made in any of these 20 languages. On the basis of the percentage of films generated, "the four South Indian film industries (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada), that account for almost 60% of the films made since 1971 together represent the largest section of the Indian film industry" (Kindem, 2000, p. 37), followed by Hindi cinema or Bombay cinema, popularly termed "Bollywood" which produces "about 150 to 200 films of a total of 800-1000 films a year, 20% of the total number of films made in

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

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

According to Ganti (2004), Bombay film industry is a male-dominated industry. Women pursuing careers within the industry are primarily either actresses or playback singers. This trend has changed in recent years with women making their mark as choreographers, costume designers, editors and

Screen writers but their numbers are still much smaller in comparison to their male counterparts. Very few women are lyricists or composers. While a handful of them have ventured into direction, they have not achieved the commercial success their male counterparts have.

Women are thus very sparse in number behind the scenes of this film industry. In an industry with so few women

working within it, it seems fair to assume that the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and may not necessarily explore women's world views, perceptions and subjective realities.

What roles women play onscreen is more often than not, the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what the director thinks viewers want to see. What viewers want to watch is something that conforms to their beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same social framework in which directors, live. There has to be a consistency in the beliefs, attitudes and values of all those involved. This is Milton Rokeach's beliefs, attitudes and values theory from 1968, in action. Each member of the audience looks for entertainment that conforms to an existing system of beliefs, attitudes, and values which come from a socio-cultural context in society.

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

One of the many contemporary women directors have interrupted this cycle and the consequent impact of two of her films. The Socio-cultural framework, and power structures in operation in society, including religion, the Hindu religious beliefs, and the influence of Hindu epics and myths on popular culture, govern the tastes and preferences of the audience. Both

these factors determine the directors' preference. Directors and producers have to make films that address audience preference and also meet their profit margins. Audience is quite satisfied to see films that uphold their value system and conform to it, because they live in that social value system. This cycle is hard to end but some revolutionary directors have tried to do so. In this thesis, I will look only at one such director, Canadian-Indian film maker Deepa Mehta and two of her controversial films. Her films *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, created a public outrage upon release, because the earlier film portrayed women in roles completely non-conforming to existing patriarchal social norms (as lesbians) and the latter film portrayed the ills of the Hindu religion and the atrocities committed on Hindu widows in the 1940s, making a politically incorrect point.

Both films stirred the anger of religious groups and resulted in riots across North India. *Fire* 1996 is the story of two women who by chance are daughters-in-law of the same household, in heterosexual marriages. However, their marriage equations with their spouses are unequal and a lack of the love, affection and space they look for in their marriages, drives them towards each other. They find the comfort and space they always lacked in their heterosexual marital relations, in the love relationship that ensues between them. The whole idea of women being portrayed as making this choice angered political parties, religious groups and religious fanatics, who went about threatening to kill the director, smashing and destroying the theaters and cinema houses that dared to screen the film. The film was banned from screening in the city of Mumbai, the center of the Bollywood film industry, and the entire state of Maharashtra where Mumbai is located.

*Water* 2006, made by the same director, was thrown out of India even before it could be shot on location in Varanasi, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Deepa Mehta's set was destroyed and the film's cast and crew were driven out of the shooting locations by state religious factions. *Water* is a

period film set in the 1940's in the pre-independence era when Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was the biggest social phenomenon in British colonial India.

During this period widow remarriage was not common. Widows were considered unlucky and a curse on society. They were sent from the homes of their in-laws and parents to special widow homes. The treatment of one such child widow who is sent to a widow house in the small town of Varanasi on the banks of the River Ganges is the essence of the story. This child widow learns the hardships of widowhood as she observes another widow in her early twenties who is also confined here. Using the "holy" aspects of religion like the town of Varanasi and the River Ganges, to bring out the negative aspects of the religion was unacceptable to society, especially to politically affiliated religious groups who were able to mobilize the masses against this film.

Riots broke out in protest against the screening of this film. Deepa Mehta, who was already a controversial figure in India after *Fire* in 1996, was given police protection when she came to India to film *Water*. Finally, she could not film there and had to go to Srilanka to make the film. Why did these two films wreak such havoc? Is it the in-built patriarchal propaganda that thrives in Indian society or is it religious and political propaganda. These questions will be addressed in detail later.

Also, given that this decade has seen many changes in Indian women's roles in society, it is interesting to explore how much has changed in a male dominated film industry. During a telephone interview student of Sociology in Chennai, India, Smriti Nandakumar, states, I did my dissertation on women who pursue unconventional careers. In the process I interviewed women in the police department, women pilots, women lyricists, women assistant directors and many others who are in uncommon careers. I found it interesting and inspiring to note that a number of them actually had it hard on

their way up and really had to challenge the pre- existing stereotypes inbuilt in society. It seemed to have been rough for them, but they still seem to have managed to reach the top and achieve their ambitions. They are all respected in their families and in society for what they have done. (personal communication, Jan 8, 2011)

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

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

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

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

## **WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA:**

In the context of an evolution in the roles of women in Indian films, Laxmi (1991), writes, "From the passive wife of DadasahebPhalke's "Raja Harishchandra" to the long-suffering but heroic mother-figure of "Mother India" to the liberated single-parent of "Mother '98," it has been a rather long and challenging journey for women in Hindi cinema". In a single sentence, Laxmi traces the history of Indian films, all the way back to the silent film, Raja Harishchandra in 1913, moving on to Mother India 1957 and Mother 98 1999, during which time women's roles in Indian cinema have changed in many ways. Since the 1960s, as more and more women's issues come to the forefront of the patriarchal Indian society, the more varied women's roles have become in Indian cinema.

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

The first women to act in Indian films in the 1920s were women of mixed British, European and Indian origins referred to as the "Anglo-Indians". Since they had hybrid origins, they were deemed separate from the women of pure Indian origin . There was a stigma associated with Indian women acting and in the context of this social stigma, when Indian women began to act, directors, in order to conform to social norms might have been pressured to portray Indian women leads as characters who live within the confines of society even in the films. In

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

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

This suggests the possibility of an inherent “male gaze” within and outside the industry. According to Mulvey (1975), “... the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns



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

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

In traditional Indian society, there were definite and consensual norms of behavior – that regulated the conduct of women...Sita<sup>3</sup>, immortalized in the Ramayana is the ideal woman, the ideal wife; she is steadfastly loyal to her husband and obeys his wishes unquestioningly... In traditional Indian society... women's roles were essentially as daughter, wife and mother.

According to Manusmriti which had a profound effect on shaping the morals of Indian society, a female should be subject in childhood to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead, to her children...women were given no kind of independence...She is told to be cheerful, efficient in the management of household affairs, fastidious in cleaning utensils, careful with expenses... these norms governed the lives of women in traditional India and they find clear articulation in Indian cinema, especially in popular films.

While women were embodiments of purity, they could have romantic love affairs which are based on the "Radha-Krishna" model of pure, all consummating, absolute love with

no space for mistakes, errors or slips. Indian films represent the lead actress in the role of romantic woman based on this model. Women who are portrayed as per the norms of the traditional value system of society are shown as women who are rewarded while those characters in the story, who transgress the boundaries of traditionalism, are punished (Gokulsing and Dissaayake, 2004).

In this context Ganti (2004) writes, In the very early days of cinema when Phalke was beginning to make films, women were not willing to act due to the stigma attached to public performance. Acting, singing or dancing for an audience was associated with prostitutes and courtesans, and so were outside the boundaries of decent society. It appears from the above that the socio-cultural context within which women started acting in films, conditioned the roles that were given to them in films; their film roles had to conform to the existing socio-cultural realities of women, and to the semiotics of their real life roles (upholder of family values, representing the status of family and community, etc.).

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

According to Davidson (1981) Few directors have possessed sufficient moral neutrality to treat centrally the sexually dynamic female without resorting to caricature or to a kind of implicitly self-pitying sentimentality... the flat characterizations and mawkish moral slants make the central females seem like puppets, there to stir up sufficient melodrama to enable the filmmaker to make his moralistic points. (p. 31) In trying to portray characters in these “stereotypical” socially acceptable roles, Richards (1995)

observes, “The Hindi film upholds the traditional patriarchal views of society which, fearful of female sexuality, demands of the woman, a subjugation of her desires” (p. 3). Gokulsing & Dissnayake (2004), point out that in conformity to social norms, women have been given two significant kinds of roles in commercial films; that of the mother (whose attributes are matched to that of the supreme form of feminine energy, the Goddess) and the wife (based on the mythological characters of Sita and Sati Savitri; Sati - the characteristic of extreme devotion to the husband). They say, The Sati concept led to a considerable number of films in the 1920s and 1930s... and although it is no longer fashionable, its effect was to portray women ‘stereotypical’, one-dimensional creatures with no personal ambitions of their own” (p. 79).

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

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

The socio-cultural context imposes roles on women and these roles are carried onto cinema. This is where the persuasion theory of alter casting enters this discussion. According to Terry & Hogg (2000), this theory suggests, When a person accepts a certain social role, a number of social pressures are brought to bear to insure that the role is enacted. The social environment expects the person to behave in a manner that is consistent with the role; the role also provides the person with selective exposure to information consistent

with the role. Alter-casting means that we 'force' an audience to accept a particular role that makes them behave in the way we want them to behave. (p. 201-226)

Women have somehow inherited specific social and cultural roles, which carry into the mainstream film industry and they end up always being cast in similar roles. A fine example of this can be seen in the highest grossing film of the decade 1990-2000, "Hum Aap ke Hain Kaun" 1995. Dwyer (2005), comments on this film: when Nisha's elder sister Pooja dies in an accident, their father suggests that the younger sister Nisha, marry Rajesh, the dead older sister's husband. Nisha and her lover Prem (who is Rajesh's younger brother), are willing to sacrifice their love...the younger generation is prepared to sacrifice love for the welfare of their loving and supportive families, who are the entire focus of the film...Film was popular for its depiction of family rituals (p. 113). As opposed to the portrayal of women as ideal wives and mothers, the other popular portrayal is the exact opposite characterization, that of the vamp. "She flouts tradition, seeks to imitate Western women...drinks, smokes, visits nightclubs, is quick to fall out of love...portrayed as a morally degraded person...unacceptable for her behavior...punished for it" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004, p. 79). One of the most popular actresses to play vamp was an Anglo-Indian actress named HelenJairag Richardson. She played the sexy tripper, the vamp, the cabaret dancer at the bar, etc. Helen was always considered best suited for the vamp role and never played a heroine or main female lead ever. So this stigma attached to the vamp seems to have an impact on the careers of actresses in the industry. Once a vamp, always a vamp! However, it is not clear if directors specifically chose to avoid asking Helen to play heroine because of the "vamp" stigma or because there may not have been as many good actresses (who also should be good dancers) around to play vamp.

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

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

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

British soldiers in India, stripping them off their socio-cultural status (p. 13-14).

It appears that what happened to courtesan dancers in reality (stripped of their status, riches and emotions), happens to them in popular films as well—they are simply characters used by the male leads, and they have no more additional value. Dwyer (2005), in her analysis of popular Indian film comments on the highest grossing film of the decade (1960-69), *Mughal-E-Azam* 1960, in which Anarkali, a courtesan dancer in the court of Mughal emperor Akbar, and Salim, son of King Akbar, fall in love. For the crime of love, the two of them are sentenced to death by the emperor. Salim is killed and Anarkali is buried alive although Akbar lets her escape through a secret tunnel. (p. 167). She says, “Film brings out themes that are popular in Hindi Film...struggle between public duty and private desire...the self-sacrificing woman” (p. 168). The courtesan dancer is stripped off her status and emotions for having fallen in love with the prince who belongs to the ruling elite.

However, over the years women’s roles in films have evolved and many blockbuster films have featured women in important roles. These roles give women ample screen time and performance time. But the important question is what these roles imply and how that might have an effect on viewers. As Butalia (1984) says, However a starting point may be that in spite of increased visibility, Indian women are not in general autonomous and self-defined in the films. This is not surprising given that 90 percent of the directors and producers are men. It is not an oversimplification to say that in popular Indian cinema women are seen very much in bad or good roles. The good ones are, more often than not (self-sacrificing) mothers, (dutiful) daughters, (loyal) sisters or (obedient and respectful) wives. They support, comfort and very seldom question their men. They are self-sacrificing and above all pure.... On the other side of the coin modernity often seems to be equated with

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

While courtesan dancers are one end of the spectrum, the vamps are on the other end. As discussed earlier, these are the women who would be cabaret dancers in bars and pubs, the cigarette-smoking, sexily clad, sensuous women who are open about their sexuality and easily flirt with and entertain either the male protagonist or the male antagonist in the film.

Some of the most popular actresses who have played these roles in films were Helen Jairag Richardson, ArunaIrani and BinduZaveri from the 70s and 80s. While they have played vamp, two actresses, ZenethAman and ParveenBabi have played the relatively more unconventional female leads - relatively more westernized in their outlook as characters, more daring wardrobe and sensuous dance sequences. According to Das (2007), ParveenBabi (April 4, 1949 - January 20, 2005), was one of the most successful Bollywood actresses in the 1970s and was known for her portrayal of strong women who did not care about the conventional norms of society. She was the first Indian actress to have featured on TIME magazine's cover, in 1975. Actresses who were cast in unconventional and more modern roles were recognized for having been different from the norm. Although the idea of the vamp being the immoral woman and the female lead being the moral and chaste woman was high, this did not substantiate women's roles. It only led to demarcation between the vamp and the lead actress, with emphasis of certain character traits in these roles. The commonality between both the roles is that, they were both

objectified anyway. On screen the only real difference between the vamp and the lead actress in terms of their objectification was purely contextual to the story.

Many a time, the difference between the vamp and the so called heroines was probably that the vamp characters are more open about their sexuality on screen. They already were “bad” and “immoral”, pursuing cabaret dancing, wearing revealing and sensuous clothes, openly flirting with men, etc. all of which they did as a matter of choice. They were portrayed as characters who chose this way of living. The heroines, on the contrary, despite having some sensuous moments on screen, which included wearing revealing clothes and dancing some sensuous dances with hip shakes and breast thrusts were still pure. Why would that be? - Simply because their moves were portrayed as being the point of view of the hero.

These acts done by the heroine were done with or in the presence of the male protagonist during his moments of passion and desire and it comes across as being his point of view of the woman he loves and desires which is much more legitimate in the minds of the audience than the open and unrestrained sexuality of the already immoral vamp. Although both heroines and vamps had many similarities in terms of what they wore and how they danced and how they were objectified on screen, the confines within which they exhibited their sexuality on screen, psychologically demarcated them in the minds of their audience as either being good or bad, moral or immoral. The differences between the heroine and the vamp indicate that the Madonna and the whore complex operates in Indian society. The girlfriend/wife/mother is a Madonna and therefore has to conform to those pure traits while the vamp is whore and can simply be immoral. The justification of her immorality is that she is a whore. The pictures below highlight the contrasting qualities of the Madonna and the whore.

In Sholay 1975, an all time blockbuster Hindi film, Helen makes only a special appearance as a gypsy dancer



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

On the right is the heroine Hemamalini, sprawled out, with specific shots aimed at her hips during the entire sequence of the song, but this in the minds of the audience, is legitimised exposure because in the sequence she is dancing for the very desirous antagonist in order to be able to save the lives of the male heroes of the film. Although the shots used on Helen and Hemammalini, showing their hips and stomachs might seem to have similar effects on the viewer, the perceptions of these shots are very different because the contexts in which the heroine is objectified and the gypsy woman/vamp is objectified vary greatly. Even in the film *Sholay*, there are two heroines with very opposing characteristics. One is the very talkative, boisterous but yet projected as homely and the hero’s love interest, and the other is the widow, very quiet, introverted and portrayed as submissive and timid through the film. The role of the talkative woman is played by Hemamalini and the widow by Jaya Bhadhuri. Both the roles, though opposing in nature, clearly conform to the social norms of how a woman should behave and how a widow should behave. Dwyer (2005) comments on film *Sholay* 1975, the highest grossing film in Indian film history, “Hemamalini shines as the chatterbox 9tonga-driver who is forced to dance for Gabbar’s sadistic enjoyment, while Jaya is silent apart from the flashback to the family’s 10Holi party”.

In film *Caravan* 1971 Helen performs the cabaret to the song *Monica oh my darling*. This is a fine example of the absolute stereotypical “vamp” woman portrayal in commercial Indian cinema. The heroine will never perform the cabaret in a bar. It will always be the vamp. Although the heroine might be portrayed in sensuous ways by the camera, it will not be in a bar or a pub or any place or profession that is considered compromising in anyway. The heroine’s objectification will somehow be justified. But the vamp is the one who is objectified in the context of a pub, a bar or a cabaret performance. Below are some pictures of vamps/gypsy/tribal women, heroines and others from various films portrayed in erotic ways by the camera.

Actor Sashi Kapoor and Actress Zeenath Aman in *Satyam Sivam Sundaram* 1978 In the above pictures, hero Shashi Kapoor, is looking at the heroine Zeenat Aman who is cleaning the temple opposite his home in the most erotic possible fashion. However, her sensuousness on screen is not as blasphemous as Helen’s or Aruna Irani’s cabaret in other films, because she is cleaning the temple as the hero watches her. What we see of Zeenat Aman is the point of view of the male protagonist and is therefore justified. A point to note here is that in the cinema of the 80s, 90s and the 2000s, the difference between the heroine and the vamp becomes hazy but in the 60s and 70s, there is a clear demarcation between these roles and the traits that accompany them. Any sort of sexuality that the heroine exhibits during the 60s and 70s period, is done within the confines of the male gaze upon her. While this is true to a great extent, of cinema in the later decades also, the interesting thing about the last couple of decades is that there seems to be a merging of the roles of the heroine and the vamp. Why? As society becomes more modern and is exposed more to the Western world and globalization, it becomes necessary to conform to the modern male’s idea and fantasy of what a woman should be. As Sivasankaran says, the only thing that

has happened is a globalized objectification where the heroine and the vamp, all rolled into one cater to the globalized man's needs, desires and fantasies. How the Indian male with a Western and modern, globalized outlook wants his woman to be, is what is seen in the merger of roles of the heroine and the vamp. Nothing has changed in terms of substantiating the role of the female lead itself and this is really sad. (personal communication, March 26, 2011) This is where Blumler & Katz's uses and gratification theory comes in. According to Haun (2010), the focus of the uses and gratification theory is on the consumer. The consumer is considered an active participant making conscious choices based on their individual needs. In the case of Indian cinema, this individual is the male audience who looks for gratification of his needs, desires and fantasies in commercial cinema. The audience is primarily male and the film industry itself is male dominated. So the gratification of this male audience is an important component.

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

Hence, having a 'modern' woman onscreen which mostly means wearing more revealing clothes, dancing sensuously, etc. caters to the male fantasy of the modern day Indian woman, who is both the librarian and the stripper. Unfortunately, the woman remains as just the love interest of the male protagonist and is rarely cast in a stronger and more independent role. On the one hand the heroine is the good Madonna and on the other hand she is the sexy stripper and whore. How can this disparity

be justified? This is a classic example of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. According to Moskowitz (2005), "The premise of the cognitive dissonance theory is that when people experience inconsistencies between two cognitions, this causes an aversive drive state that people are motivated to eliminate.

In the case of the cognition of women by Indian men, women are to be the Madonna's, epitomes of all that is moral. They must uphold the values of the Indian culture. This is the popular perception. But, they also need to be elements of fantasy for the Indian male with Western outlook and/or exposure. The Madonna now has to become the whore for male fantasy. But how can that happen? When both perceptions merge, they seem very contradictory and there is dissonance in cognition; there needs to be a way to appease the value system and eliminate this dissonance. So, the Madonna, becomes the sexy woman of fantasy not by her own choice, but by the gaze of the male upon her and therefore, it is his point of view of her, which is justified. The dissonance in the contradictory cognitions is thus merged.

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

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

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

Actress Shabana Azmi also mentions in an interview to Ganti (2004), that while there may have been a clear cut difference between the heroine and the vamp in earlier films, in recent times, specifically in the 80s and 90s, the images of heroine and the vamp seem to be blurring with the heroine

being the sex symbol before her marriage and then the chaste wife after her marriage, making the portrayals even more stereotyped and one-dimensional. Although the fundamental nature of the roles of heroine and vamp may have changed, what they represent, or what they signify in their roles has not changed significantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Das Gupta (1969) writes, The trouble with the Hindi cinema is not that it is commercial; all film industries in the world, including the state-owned ones, are commercial because they cannot go on throwing away money on films which people do not want to see. The trouble is that other film industries do

two things that the Hindi cinema does not (for the simple reason that it is incapable): produce films at many levels ranging from pure art to pure commerce, and occasionally bowl over the art critic and the box office with the same film. Diligently, the Hindi cinema has perfected its one and only formula. It has had no John Ford turning out Westerns, no Milestone making memorable war films, no Hitchcock to hold us in thrall, no Minnelli, no Donen to make it by music alone. It has no genres. Given this fixed blockbuster formula, and its parameter, the roles of women have to conform to the existing formula and no one is really even thinking about whether women can be given different kinds of roles. For instance, why can't a film have a central character who happens to be a 40 year old woman? Why does it always have to be the woman in her early twenties? This just shows an absolute lack of alternative thinking amongst script writers and directors. If the blockbuster formula works, they are more than happy to stick with that formula rather than try to change it. The issue of women and their roles, and the possibilities of having a 40-year-old woman as a central character to a film, or being innovative in the characterization of women in films are all lost in this maze of commercial cinema that has to appeal to the urban and rural masses in theaters. In summary women are either absolutely pure wives or girlfriends, or self-sacrificing mothers and sisters, or they are immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers, strippers and vamps.

These are very clear-cut categories in films. If for any reason, the pure woman showed eroticism on screen it was for the sake of the good and pure hero and therefore it was alright. None of these women were self-defining, powerful characters who decided for themselves and chose for themselves. They were always deciding and choosing and doing as per the norms and values of family, culture and society. In this sense, a hero who smoked and went to a cabaret dance was still a pure man, but a heroine who by choice dressed in a sexually attractive



fashion (wore revealing attire), or a vamp to whom the hero goes to satisfy his desires were all not as pure.

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

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

### **CHARACTER PROTOTYPES IN EPICS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON STORY TELLING IN INDIAN CINEMA:**

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

In the Ramayana, the female protagonist Sita is the exemplified perfect woman, who stands by and supports her husband right through all his hardships. After Rama marries Sita, Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi, one of the Queens of the kingdom, who wants her own son Bharath to inherit the empire, manipulates her husband, King Dasaratha, into

banishing the eldest son, Rama, from the empire. Rama, who has given word to his father that he will do anything to help his father, agrees to be in exile for 14 years. His wife Sita, accompanies him into the forests to spend her life in exile with her husband.

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

The idea behind this fire bath or fire walk is for Sita to prove to the world, that during her period of captivity, she remained untouched by Ravana and that she did not succumb to a physical relationship or violation of any sort with Ravana; that she was neither raped nor willingly accepted Ravana. She is so pure, that the god of fire, Agni, can't much as even give her a small burn. This is popularly referred to as Sita's test of purity. According to Hindu religion, Rama is an incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, and his wife Sita, an incarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi, wife of Lord Vishnu. The purity of Sita has led to the Madonna complex in society, where the woman, bearer of children and the enhancer of lineage is supposed to be as pure as Sita in the Ramayana. This is a powerful concept in the minds of people in India.

Films and film stories are many a time based on these epic prototypes and powerful impressions that epic characters make in the minds of people.<sup>13</sup>Pattanaik (2009) says, "We're looking at stories that have lasted the test of time, like the

Ramayana, the Mahabharata... That's proof of their effectiveness.”

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

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

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

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

Draupadi, a great devotee of the Lord Krishna, prays to him and miraculously, her saree can never be pulled off of her; as the Kaurava cousin tries to strip her off it, more and more layers of cloth just keep making the saree longer and longer. Lord Krishna protects her by making sure her saree magically becomes longer and longer, so much so that the Kaurava prince tires of trying. The point to be noted in this story is the idea of treating a woman, one's wife, as property that can be gambled with. As in all societies, women are more vulnerable and any mishap leads for them to be raped or molested or violated in some form or the other. This vulnerability of women is used in Indian cinema very frequently. While rape may be a real social human rights issue in all countries, the problem with Indian cinema is that rape is a cinematic tool that leads to some empathy for the victim for sure, but it is mostly a cinematic

moment that is used to exhibit the heroic nature of the male protagonist, who always ends up saving the damsel in distress. More often than not, the female lead will never get raped because it challenges the notion of feminine purity. The rape scene is only an attempt by the bad guys to rape the female and how the male lead saves her, showing off his brawling abilities, is the real story there. If at all a woman gets raped onscreen, it will be someone's maid, or the male protagonist's sister, and then the story is about revenge. It is never the main female lead who gets raped.

Why have these repetitive and monotonously predictable rape scenes then? Why can't the male character's greatness be demonstrated in something else? Why should a rape scene or a dance sequence for the villain by the female lead be the cinematic tool through which the audience understands the male character? - This is because men see themselves as saviors of women in society and the male character's actions are their fantasy.

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

In the case of the female lead dancing or sexually enticing the villain or antagonist - this again is a classic male fantasy, where they want to be the saviors of their women, but also their women to do almost anything for them; be the chaste woman when needed and be the stripper when needed, satisfying the need for the Madonna and the whore. So it is all about the man's gallantry and the woman's vulnerability and these extreme character traits seem to have come from the epics. Smriti Nandakumar, in a telephonic interview says, In a land where pagan worship is so intense, and the deities are Goddesses of power, rage and a certain wildness and empowerment to them, why does the average woman always have to be compared to the relatively softer epic prototypes? We worship Goddess Durga, and Goddess Kali, who are symbols of absolute power, and empowerment but we want the women in society to be Sita or Draupadi. (personal communication, January 8, 2011)

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

In fact, Goddess Kali, is usually portrayed as being topless, with a garland made of the heads of the demons that she killed to save mother earth from their atrocities. This image

of power, independence and the sort of fear that this image instills, is worshipped by people, men and women alike, but somehow never translates into reality. The male fantasy is the vulnerable woman, not the powerful, empowered woman. So the male controlled society tends to impose and emphasize on women's vulnerability.

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

In an interview to Sengupta (2010), Director of *Rajneeti*, Prakash Jha says, Every kind of character, every kind of situation is embedded in the Mahabharata, he said. It becomes the reference point for our psyche. One is never out of the Mahabharata... There is no story that is not contained here. This is the power of the epic and the many fascinating stories contained within it and it no doubt influences the story writer's psyche. Sengupta (2010), observes, that these epic stories do not get transmitted via books, but via the traditions and cultural framework within which one is born. She says of Director Prakash Jha, For Mr. Jha, the filmmaker, the stories of the Mahabharata did not first come through books. He was born into a family of Brahmin priests. Children were told the stories of the Mahabharata all the time. They were planted in his brain. To this day, he said, he sees it as the story of all stories.

Summarizing Director Shyam Benegal, who belongs to the regional Bengali film industry which is one of the many film industries in the country, Simons (2001) says, Soon after, Bollywood moviemakers had come into their own, and by the early 1950s, they'd developed a distinctive style, based on the teachings of a 1,000-year-old Hindu text called *Natya Shastra*

(Science of Theater). Under tenets set down in that book, entertainment must comprise the nine essences. These are love, hate, sorrow, disgust, joy, compassion, pity, pride and courage. In addition, there is supposed to be a lot of song and dance, as in popular staging of the epic Ramayana, which to this day enralls Indians. The epics therefore form a great basis for story tellers to take morals from, to adapt stories from and in many ways might be acting as the foundation to building more and more stories, and a stepping stone to forming characters in these stories. According to Sengupta (2010), "The epics are so embedded that they penetrate everyday speech. A woman may be warned against following the path of Ahalya, the adulteress of the Ramayana. A family feud might be likened to the battle of rival clans in the Mahabharata. There is even a school named after Eklavya, a gifted archer who chopped off his right thumb to prove his devotion to his archery teacher." Sengupta (2010) also says, Neither the Mahabharata nor the Ramayana is considered to be the word of God. But they are powerful fables, and they represent for Hindus what the Bible and the Greek myths together may have historically represented in the West. Pattanaik (2009), a writer who uses the Hindu epics in human resource management, describes them as 'the template of Indian thought'. Given that it is understandable as to how and why these epics subconsciously retain themselves in the realm of story-telling and story writing. Not only do epics form a basis for popular story writing and narrative patterns, but they have greatly influenced Indian classical culture and pop culture in various ways.

South Indian classical music popularly referred to as Carnatic music contains the works of a trinity of composers of whom Thyagaraja, who lived in the 18th century is very popular. A number of compositions of Thyagaraja are extremely complicated and unprecedented and remain unsurpassed to this day in the realm of Indian Classical music. Thyagaraja's compositions are taught to students of vocal and instrumental



music at a highly developed and advanced level of learning the art. Thyagaraja's songs and verses are all his interpretations of various situations in the epic, Ramayana. Classical dance in India is also influenced by epics. Dance dramas portray stories of the Gods and Goddesses. The epics have influenced the basis of classical music and dance, and have been so much a part of classical culture that it is not surprising that they influence even modern day stories and popular culture.

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

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

## **THE CONTROVERSY OVER FILMS WITH AN ALTERNATE STORYLINE**

Films *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005, Directed by Deepa Mehta Two films made by a Canadian Indian film maker, Deepa Mehta had severely violent repercussions from the people and religious

political parties. The films are *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005. In the special features section of the film's (*Fire* 1996) DVD, journalist Eleanor Hall in her voice over for the package says, "In a country where going to the movies is an obsession, in a country which churns out more celluloid fantasies than anywhere in the world, one film is sparking an extraordinary reaction."

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

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

When the two sons find out about this they are disgusted. The younger daughter-in-law slaps her husband and leaves the home. The elder daughter-in-law waits to explain to her husband and declares her unwillingness to stay with him any longer. As she plans to leave the home, her mother-in-law spits on her face for the disgraceful deed that the daughter-in-

law has done, by sleeping with the other lady of the house. By accident, a fire starts in the kitchen. The husband lifts his mother and leaves his wife without rescuing her, almost as if she deserved to be burnt. Finally she escapes on her own. The film ends with both women finding each other as they had planned to.

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

The two lead women characters were named Sita and Radha, who as explained before, are important mythological characters with certain traits and characteristics which were completely violated by the roles given to the lead women in the film. The fact that these names were used for two lesbian characters angered religious groups. They questioned why Hindu names which carried religious significance had to be used in the film to portray the very anti-Hindu sexual orientation of lesbianism! Indian society especially religious fanatics were offended by the idea of lesbianism. Mehta was shocked by the violent repercussions and responded to them, It is amazing that a film which explores choices, desires, and the psyche of people who are victims of people who are victims of tradition, would cause such uproar... It was not the lesbian relationship that so offended middle aged Indian men, (surprisingly younger and older men are ardent advocates of Fire), it was the fear that Fire might shift the status quo of husbands and women might just question their insignificant

role in marital relationships that lean very heavily in favor of husbands.

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

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

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

This is a classic example in India, of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. The hegemonic patriarchal ideology and societal framework is a reality in India. This reality possibly transfers itself on to screen and is reflected in the audience's reactions to a film made on a subject that questions the existing power structure or portrays the power structure in bad light. According to Gramsci (1998), the dominant or hegemonic ideology is so convenient for its perpetrators that it is enforced and upheld until it becomes the most popularly reigning common sense ideology of the day, followed, imbibed and

internalized by all, even those that it does not really benefit. This common sense ideology is the prevailing and dominant ideology and is so internalized, that even those who do not benefit by it think nothing of it and conform to it instead of opposing it, thereby maintaining the status quo. This explains why many women opposed the films, *Fire* 1996, despite the fact that it portrayed women as independent and free to make a choice of their own.

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

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

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

*Water* explores the life of one such child widow, named Chuya, who is about 8 years old. Her older husband dies. Her

parents give her away to the widow house. Here Chuya encounters another younger widow in her early twenties named Kalyani, and sees the life of widowhood through the life of Kalyani.

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

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

A young man, Narayan, who is a follower of Gandhi and the Satyagraha movement encounters the beautiful Kalyani and falls for her and asks her to marry him. However, as the story progresses, although Kalyani agrees to marry him, she realizes that she has been his father's prostitute. She commits suicide in shame. Kalyani's lover, Narayan, a follower of Gandhi is open to marrying her despite knowing of his father's relationship with her. He abandons his father to marry her but by the time he comes back for her, she has already committed suicide. The eight year old widow Chuya witnesses all this.

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

At this gathering, Shakuntala finds Kalyani's lover Narayan. She gives the child to him, screaming for her to be taken away from the cruelty of widowhood. She requests that he give the child to Gandhi where she can be a part of the Gandhian movement - filled with socially progressive and uplifting ideals. Although in many ways, the roles of Kalyani (the widow who commits suicide), and the other widows (who conform to the rules), are social stereotypes of that period, the role of Shakuntala, who violates the rules and stands by her own ethical principles is the moment of truth and emotion in the film.

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

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

religion in bad light. Why could she not make a film that was not controversial, was their question.

While films are the biggest form of entertainment in India, this particular film and its story were looked upon as objectionable because it projected the negative aspects of the Hindu religion. Political groups opposed this film and it never reached the masses entirely.

Deepa Mehta moved to Sri Lanka, completed the shoot and released the film *Water* in 2005. Even though some states allowed the screening of *Water* it could have never been a commercially successful film. It was never nominated for the Indian Filmfare awards although it won international accolades including a nomination for Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (making it Canada's first non-French Canadian film to receive a nomination in that category). The two reasons this film could not have been a commercial success in India: First, it created a religious uproar because the theme of the film was based on a sequence of events, which highlighted the negative aspects of the Hindu religion. Since this religion has a very strong power structure in India, it is unlikely that this film might have managed to reach the masses overruling the political and religious power structure.

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



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

### **DISCUSSION - OBJECTIFICATION OF THE FEMALE LEAD:**

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

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

According to Mulvey (1975), this sort of a portrayal that caters to the male fantasy is "Scopophilia". She says, "What is seen of the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy" (p. 10). The "Behind the Bush" scenes as Richards refers to them give the audience the "scopophilic" pleasure in viewing that Mulvey's (1975) article elucidates. In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* 1995, a woman dressed as a man during a baby shower function which is a "women

only” celebration, feels the actress up her back through the low cut blouse, indicating the scopophilic nature of the camera.

The wet sari -- This sequence is legitimized by “a sudden torrential downpour that soaks the woman’s flimsy sari and allows for a very provocative and sexually tantalizing exposure of the female body.” Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge 1995; Actress Kajol enacting the modern version of the wet sari sequence, wearing not the sari but a more revealing white costume. In this film Kajol comes from such a conservative family that she fears to tell her dad that she has fallen in love with someone. She goes to the point of sacrificing her life and marrying the man her father has chosen for her. Given that conservative context, it seems unlikely that such a character would be dancing this rain dance. But the rain dance is popular and loved by the audience.

The director/story-writer, needs to place this sequence without making it look like there is a discrepancy in the portrayal of this character. So this rain dance becomes the dream sequence of this girl. It becomes the escapism of the character and in some sense of the audience also. This girl, from a very orthodox and conservative family, is the completely free, semi-clad, person in her dreams and fantasy. The objectification of the actress thereof, becomes a fantastic element in the minds of the audience also.

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

catering to the male film viewing audience in specific song and dance sequences.

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

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

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

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

audience wants to see, and formulate their story, screenplay, character portrayal, etc. in specifically intended ways.

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

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

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

Mulvey (1975), in her appropriation of the psychoanalytic theory says, ...the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle... Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still

tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning... psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught... (p. 7) Bingham (1999), says, "Women historically have not been encouraged to become such subjects, at least not of discourse that patriarchal society takes seriously. Women cannot be consistently posed as the objects of male looks and language and also be the subjects of their own stories".

While women have always been objectified and given lead roles, none of these lead roles are the subject of the film. The female lead is mostly a supporting cast to the male hero's lead in the film and the story is more often than not seen from the point of view of this male protagonist. In an interview to Ganti (2004), actress Puja Bhatt says, ...I wanted to do something more than just the usual heroine role, because unfortunately I think women in Hindi films don't get that much to do...I wanted to make heroine oriented films... where the hero and heroine are on par...they had equal roles...I want to produce some good movies where the women in my films are going to be women of today...I feel that women in Hindi films are very one-dimensional... (p. 191-192) The all-time blockbuster of the 70s, the film *Sholay*, (as rated by [www.boxofficeindia.com](http://www.boxofficeindia.com)) had the lead actress Hemamalini objectified in the song "Jab thakhaiJaan" which she dances to for the villain in order to save the hero from being harmed. This not only represents the self-sacrificing woman but also the woman who is viewed through the scopophilic nature of the villain's character. In the 1990s two films were all time record breaking blockbusters. One was "Hum AapkeHainKaun" and the other was "DilwaleDulhaniya Le Jayenge". In both these films, although the women did have substantially good roles, the roles were stereotypical; both the roles had women who had to decide within the frame work of the patriarchal social and familial system.

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

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

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

Dr. Acitelli, in an interview, pointed out an interesting aspect of stereotyping. She said that the more women are stereotyped, the more the opposite is stereotyped as well. In this case, the more men will end up being stereotyped as well. If one stereotype is the vulnerable woman, then the stereotype on the other end of the spectrum is the gallant male lead, who will then get to play no other character but that. Stereotyping the male will also increase and alternative male traits like a "stay at home" dad, or a "husband who believes in equality of the marital equation in a patriarchal set-up", or a "man who compromises for family" etc will never find voice in stories and cinema (personal communication, Dec 2, 2010). While stories

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

### **Conclusion:**

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

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

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

of these films were on the blockbuster list. But it would certainly help to take these films into consideration in the context of the subject of this thesis.

Fourthly, while Indian society, culture and religious influences have been touched upon, the politics of the country has not been detailed. Since India had a woman Prime Minister, Ms. Indira Gandhi, 1966-1975 (two terms), 1975-1977 (emergency rule), and 1980-1984, it might be interesting to look specifically at films made during that era to see if women's roles underwent change because a woman was leading the nation. In general, how politics influences the cinematic climate of India, particularly with reference to women in Indian cinema would be an interesting subject of discussion to pursue. In conclusion, this thesis has found evidence in various forms, enough to say that women in Indian cinema have stereotyped roles. While studies can argue, and find support for statements and hypotheses, ultimately, change by itself has to come from every individual working for the film industry. Whether the industry really wants this change or not is definitely not territory that this paper is qualified to comment on. But, the fact that more cinema should focus on women in a variety of interesting and more challenging roles, apart from women being pure eye candy is a statement that cannot be disputed too much. There definitely has to be more in it for women than just acting as the hero's love interest with a few song and dance sequences.

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

More often than not, even such papers are simply considered a feminist attempt to criticize the healthy film



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

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

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