

# The Cinematic ImagiNation

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*Indian Popular Films  
as Social History*

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economy and shifts in balance of power within it have been underway for the better part of the twentieth century in India and elsewhere. Film narratives have responded to that transformation. No longer under the umbrella of the aging patriarch, the new and smaller nuclear family unit finds itself under the power of sons who have asserted themselves as the new patriarchs, wresting control and power from their fathers.

It is this momentous transfer of power that replays itself over and over in the “family romance” projected in Hindi popular films. The narratives settle the issue unequivocally through the son’s victory over his father. As the competing and ultimately succeeding patriarch, the son asserts himself again and again by reclaiming his mother against the father, who either makes himself absent, disappears, or is dislodged by the son. The mother is the ground of contest and the site of resolution, with an outcome always already determined in favor of the son, the hero. She is the trophy, symbolizing masculine achievement. Popular representations—in film and elsewhere—repeatedly celebrate the moment of passage to manhood; the mother-son bond is germane to and anticipates this power shift. The narratives in Hindi cinema reinforce this shift, depicting patriarchy’s regeneration: the baton passed from father to son and the transfer of phallic power, staged through the contest over the same woman.

## Chapter 4

## Heroines, Romance, and Social History

AS ONE OF MANY discursive practices, Hindi cinema is exceptionally powerful in constructing gender with its knowledge/power dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Women, the prominently visible “heavenly bodies” with little material or directorial control in the industry, are the putative ventriloquists’ dummies reassuring men of their dominance.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on women as objects to be seen, and the lack of film narratives where women’s subjectivity is central, screens the inside, hidden, private female subject.

Instances of women’s resistance are diluted to collude with the dominant discourse. Thus, filmic representations of women resisting through self-punishing acts of valor and honor turn them into victims, martyred to aggrandize patriarchal values. Yet there are lapses in the solidity of such representations. In this chapter I pry open popular Hindi film’s reigning ideology to find moments of resistance and unintended leaks which subvert the text. Such critical reading against the grain destabilizes Hindi cinema’s hegemonic values.<sup>3</sup>

Women’s roles, assigned in relation to the hero—his lover, mother, or the “other” woman—maintain the male protagonist’s centrality. In film plots the heroine repeatedly appears as the girl the boy meets, the romantic lover, a figure in the margins—a dim outline with little or no substance. The range of women characters are limited to archetypal Madonna/whore, lover/“other” figures, while tales about male subjects abound in details about their struggles against society, quests for justice

and freedom, anxieties of loss and separation, or the satisfaction of avenging personal and societal losses. If a woman character in Hindi cinema is privileged with complex characterization, she is typically a pitiable victim in an elaborate saga of despair and tribulation. *Mother India's* suffering mother, Radha, is this quintessential figure. When women are afforded centrality, they suffer: their sacrifice, restraint, forbearance, chastity, and stoicism strengthen and ennoble them in the face of hardship.

Hindi films do not openly account for the sea change in women's lives since independence. A growing section of the female urban population—and, for a much longer time, low-income rural women—have been in the work force, impacting the public and private sphere. Disavowing these changes, the films at best refer obliquely to their struggles and the tenuous balance between public and private life. When films center-stage emancipated women, they are turned into objects of derision.

Reinvented traditions affected by the modernization process afflict women in specific ways: dowry deaths, acts of *sati*, and new technologically sophisticated forms of female infanticide all add to traditional forms of violence against women. These rarely appear in the virtual world of women in popular cinema. Repressing that reality is a sign of general male anxiety about social change and the desire to cathect this anxiety onto images of unchanging women—forever feminine, innocent, childlike, sexual, desirable, and devoted. As Teresa de Lauretis points out, the tension between “woman as representation” on the one hand and “women as historical beings, subjects of ‘real relations’” on the other, is sustained by a contradiction in culture: women are “at once within and without representation.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Reading Resistance*

A film historian plotting women's social history in postcolonial India through popular Hindi films confronts endless scenarios that sexualize, victimize, or marginalize women. Women characters may be ubiquitous in popular cinema, but they are inevitably denied depth or dimension. How then does one write a social history of women, based on their hypervisibility and metaphorical silence in the films? Feminist journals

and journalistic film reviews in India interminably lament the severely delimited “image of women” on the screen. A rather bleak scenario emerges in critical discourse that takes a dim view of Hindi cinema's gender politics. Steering through this pessimism, how do we write a history—how do we map a narrative of women through Hindi films that might still serve “affirmative” politics?

Given the lack of narratives *about* women and films made *by* women, the remaining choice is to examine women's roles in the margin: to recenter their position, look more closely at their silhouettes and find traces, however faint, from which to read more about what these women might actually represent. In other words, I view women's filmic presentations as inscriptions of and by dominant cultural discourse which clouds their concerns, sensibilities, and aspirations.

How does one extricate women's resistance from cultural representations?<sup>5</sup> Since resistance is always a response to domination, it is important to understand its extent, the nature of control, the points through which it is exerted, and the possibilities of intervention or protest. No power structure, however totalitarian, is monolithic. Even popular Hindi cinema condemned by feminists is not so successfully hegemonic in its patriarchal discourse. Portraying subordinates in a system as passive is a “woefully lopsided account of social reality.”<sup>6</sup> Power, constantly threatened by resistance, needs to be continually secured.

Commercial Hindi cinema, with its objective of gaining popularity and a narrative logic requiring situations exacerbating conflict in social relations, cannot but pit the voice of the subaltern against the elite, or present the woman figure straining against male control. True, this is an aspect of a carefully controlled representation that always reinstates hegemonic ideology. Yet leaks in the dominant discourse, especially in narratives that are dialogical, present women and men, both subaltern and elite, in encounters that force cognizance of the “real” situation. These moments of fracture open opportunities to read the text against the status quo ideology that the narrative imposes. The fault lines in the patriarchal order enable reading against the grain and reading resistance—a process Teresa de Lauretis calls “self-representation” in the “space-off” of the hegemonic discourse.<sup>7</sup>

Since women appear predominantly in the role of the girl who meets the boy, there are limits imposed in examining heterosexual

romance and tales of love, sexuality, and mismatched expectations. Of course, such limited analysis replicates the films. In applying this analysis the intent is not to rehearse the hierarchy set up by Hindi films between robust masculinity engaged in the public sphere and feminine susceptibility to sentimentality, obsession with the "private"—the concerns of love, home, and the hearth. Rather, the idea is to disclose the public and political nature and ramifications of the "private" that women are identified with in cultural representations such as Hindi cinema.

Close readings of films produced across several decades are examined here individually and intertextually. I read the film texts against the grain of normative culture, as well as against each other, to demonstrate that the films do not present a monolithic discourse. The film texts are also read in conjunction with "star texts," a salient aspect of film culture in India and a site where public and private narratives coalesce in revealing ways. Through this layered reading it is possible to piece together a history of the social text.

In the hermeneutic of women's representations popularized in Hindi films, reading against the grain would mean scrutinizing texts not explicitly about resistance—with, as Sunder Rajan says, an implicit "political agenda of feminist criticism . . . [to] read resistance."<sup>8</sup> Given the excessive use of the term "resistance" in literary criticism, it is necessary to add caveats so as to retain its critical edge. Through a series of negative assessments, I explore the political purpose and process of reading resistance. I assess a few different contexts in which resistance is read to clarify the diffuse meaning it assumes. While resistance is a matter of a particular reading, I eschew the methodology of feminists whose "political" acts of reading resistance in dubious actions (of death/suicide/*sati*) are rather strained. This deflects the discourse onto a metaphysical plane and reduces resistance to textual and semantic terms.<sup>9</sup> Such readings, far from being strategic interventions, can potentially offer alibis for a sinister right-wing agenda, which devalues human lives in general, and women's lives in particular.

Likewise, Sunder Rajan, reviewing *Women Writing in India*, makes important cautionary remarks. She points to (a) the conflation between the subversion inherent in women's writing and the act of writing, and (b) the critical reading of it. She notes problems inherent in both: in

the first case it is important to historicize conformism in women's writing where it exists, and, in the second, she points to the problem of generally inflating the critic's role to the point of speaking "for" the subaltern. To be sure, resistance in Hindi films can be read as a sign of "intention" and "agency" of the characters.<sup>10</sup> It is generally produced by a situational or institutional crisis within the diegesis, although this might only be temporary and the demands of narrative closure restore the status quo.

Another caveat is that just as dominance is not monolithic, resistance cannot be construed as entirely autonomous. In reconstructing a history of women's writing some critics have experienced the dilemma of finding it a process at once "violent" and "hegemonic." Violent, because it has to break with existing traditions, and hegemonic in terms of the hazard of setting future agendas.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, this is the nature of disciplinary practices that are constantly charting new frontiers.

To the paradigm of the dominant discourse and situating acts of resistance in its context, I wish to add another important constituent force: the subject, the "woman as subject" to be precise.<sup>12</sup> Addressing the problem of constituting women as subjects in the face of the contemporary onslaught of "Eurocentric postmodernism" and its declaration of the death of the subject, Nita Kumar points out that to announce the death of a subject one should first have had the right to speak as one, thus suggesting that subjecthood is a luxury not granted to all.<sup>13</sup> In defiance of current poststructuralist trends, Kumar insists on the construction of women as subjects as a way of speaking of autonomy, resistance, and protest. Although critical of poststructuralism, Kumar feels free to borrow from it, and suggests a modified Foucauldian approach to reconceptualize the subject as one who is constituted by discourse—a plurality of discourses, a recognition of subjection by these discourses as well as the possibility of resistance against it. We have to recognize that women are neither liberated nor repressed. What we have are discourses about "purity" and "honor" that have exerted power at different periods.<sup>14</sup>

The different forms of discourse through which women are constructed—language, speech, proverbs, songs, written texts, and even writings by women in autobiographies, letters or diaries—can be instrumental in revealing their confusions, aspirations, doubts and desires.<sup>15</sup> The

dominant discourse that women appear to accept passively is easy to read and deconstruct. But what is not easily accessible is that which is on the “inside, private, hidden and silenced, . . . mysterious and indistinguishable. Not only can we not interpret it right away, we cannot even locate it easily.”<sup>16</sup> Yet women constantly create new spaces from which they speak or act, based on their own notion of “autonomy” and “power,” very dissimilar from the masculine subject with his “operative will.”

### *Contesting the Laxman Rekha (Laxman's Line)*

B. R. Chopra's film *Gumrah* (Deception, 1963) is unusual for its time not only because the protagonist is a woman, but also because the film deals with the even now tabooed subject of a married woman's continuing relationship with her former lover. In the film's prologue Chopra is careful to insert an episode from the classic epic *Ramayana*: While in exile in the forest Sita asks Rama's brother, Laxman, how far she may stray from the home. Laxman responds by drawing the famous *laxman-rekha* (Laxman's line), encircling her. This is literally a line drawn around Sita—around all women, marking quite plainly the boundary every woman must stay within, placing limits on her moral and sexual “wandering.” This mythic line embedded in the patriarchal imaginary prescribes limits on the behavior expected of women and is carefully upheld by Hindi cinema.

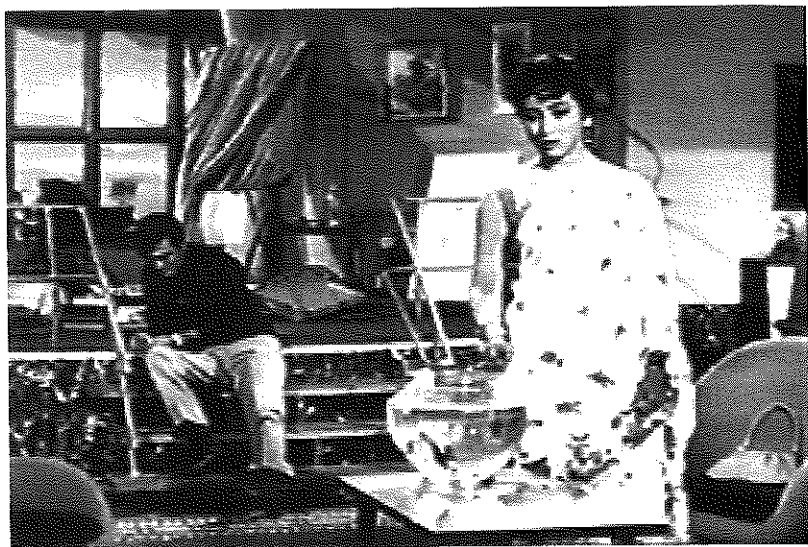
Over the last four decades there are moments in Hindi film when this encirclement of women—their incarceration in the prison house of exacting Brahminical-Victorian morality—is challenged, when the mythic line is contested, or its boundary stretched even minimally. These contestations can be linked with the social and historical moment to which they belong. Points of rupture, break, and destabilization can be traced within the dominant paradigm, and they sometimes—speaking optimistically—point to the possibility of change. Love and romance in Hindi cinema is a compelling locus to examine womanhood: how does romantic love constitute women? Does this reveal change over time? Discourses on love, romance, sexuality, and the family are sites where women's subjectivity is located, shaping how they are imagined.

Filmic representations of women in these scenarios are shot through with a common patriarchal ideology.

It is therefore no surprise that the time-honored love story formula, the benighted love triangle, always shows a woman torn between two men. Narratives of love foreground women caught in dramatic moments of conflict with their conscience: they wrestle with love, desire, and duty. Men do not face conflicts in love: their universe expands beyond love into lofty struggles against society, for social justice, and against evil forces. The male hero wins the woman he wants, while she struggles within her narrow moral universe to make the “right” choice—choosing the hero. Perhaps the only popular film that dealt with the idea of a man “falling in love” with a woman other than the heroine/wife was *Pati, Patni aur Woh* (Husband, Wife and the Other, B. R. Chopra, 1978). The film created a sensation because its audacious title named the unmentionable—the other woman. Significantly it chose comedy as the genre to present a not-so-serious extramarital affair parodying the seven-year itch—a temporary diversion from the boredom of marriage. The film explores a middle-aged man's roving eye that settles on the young office secretary. He eventually gets over her—without the fling posing a deep conflict.

As for women facing the dilemma of love there is an abundance of films addressing this; here I focus on few highly successful ones. *Gumrah* boasts the most unusual narrative, and I discuss it in relation to other films depicting similar dilemmas posed by the love triangle which traps the woman: *Sangam* (Confluence, Raj Kapoor, 1964), *Pyasa* (The Thirsty One, 1957), and *Guide* (1965)—all extremely popular in their time and now considered Hindi cinema classics.

In *Gumrah*, Meena (Mala Sinha) is a happily married young woman whose life is thrown into turmoil when her ex-lover, Rajinder (Sunil Dutt), re-enters. We learn that years ago Meena had abruptly terminated their relationship without any explanation. Rajinder now demands to know why she left, and Meena recounts events that interrupted their affair. After her sister's unexpected death, she married her brother-in-law, Ashok (Ashok Kumar), to take her sister's place and to mother his children. Although she is happy in her relationship with her husband, Rajinder's return re-ignites their unfinished affair, which



15. Meena meets her lover in his city apartment. *Gumrah* (Deception), B. R. Chopra, 1963.

becomes more impassioned under the circumstances of secrecy. She moves from a small town to a big city; despite this change their lives remain interconnected, and soon Meena finds herself drifting uncontrollably into a sexual relationship with her ex-lover. An elaborate but benign ruse set up by her husband forces Meena to struggle with her feelings of deceit, guilt, loyalty, desire, and duty. In the end, she confesses everything to her husband and chooses to stay with him, the man she is pledged to by the sanctity of their marriage vows. The *laxmanrekha* drawn in the prologue is successfully defended by her choice in the end.

Unlike the *Ramayana*, with its prototypes of good and bad men, the narrative in *Gumrah* has no villains. Each character has effective motivation. The first-person narrative in Meena's voiceover gives us not only her version of events but also access to her thoughts, conflicts, and struggles. It also lends credibility to the narrative. Ashok is kind, trusting, and gentlemanly in a paternal sort of way, removing any hint of tragic loss from Meena's choice in the end—an agreeable decision for the audience. The film is undoubtedly more candid than others about the extent to which Meena is drawn into the extramarital relationship,

despite the dangers it signals to her (*badnami nahin seh sakungi*, I cannot bear a bad reputation). Within the narrative economy, Meena's indiscretion is compensated for by the fact that she selflessly chooses to marry Ashok and mother her sister's children.

*Sangam* deals with a similar love triangle between Radha, Gopal, and Sunder. This time, however, the scenario shifts to Gopal "sacrificing" Radha, his childhood sweetheart, to allow his friend Sunder to court her. Sunder's narcissistic self-absorption prevents him from recognizing Radha and Gopal's relationship.<sup>17</sup> Neither can Radha tell Sunder about her commitment to Gopal, and under complicated circumstances she ends up marrying him. Sunder's adoration for Radha, his childlike ebullience, and their relocation in Europe, make it easier for Radha to reconcile with her situation. Gopal, however, keeps returning in their lives. Radha is clearly not over Gopal, and when Sunder discovers an old love letter to Radha his jealousy and suspicion turn into self-destructive rage. During the film's climax, the three face each other and Gopal, after confessing his longstanding love for Radha, kills himself.

The constant refrain is that heterosexual love demands "sacrifice"—conveying the need to obfuscate desire, to belie the intrinsically



16. The final confrontation in *Sangam* (Confluence), Raj Kapoor, 1964.

narcissistic logic of monogamy which lays claim to the desire to be exclusively desired. *Sangam* attempts to reclaim heterosexual love by mobilizing it in favor of a spirit of selflessness. Such a spirit calls for repressing the individual, obliterating the self in favor of some higher goal—nurturing motherless children as in *Gumrah*, or relinquishing one's self in the name of *dosti* (friendship), an exclusively male phenomenon in Hindi films.

Both *Gumrah* and *Sangam* have a highly charged denouement when the women speak out. In *Sangam* Radha interrupts Sunder and Gopal, who speak of her as a trophy they are both willing to forfeit for the other in the name of friendship. "Have either of you thought of what I go through," she interjects angrily. Then, rationalizing her experience, she says, "*Pyaar ho jata hai, par shaadi, shaadi dharam hai* (one falls in love, but marriage, marriage is a matter of duty)." Likewise Meena defends her loveless marriage in an impassioned speech: "*Shaadi farz hai*" (marriage is a duty). These moments of reconciliation indeed bare alarming implications: women (and the audience) accept marriage as an institution, a duty, a *dharma* (one of the four stages in the life cycle Hinduism traditionally enjoins) which can exist *without* love.<sup>18</sup> The films' narratives show us that love is possible outside marriage.

Obviously, the weight of duty serves as insufficient ballast to keep the marriage afloat. The reappearance of ex-lovers in both Radha's and Meena's lives seriously destabilizes marital equilibrium. However, the imaginary line of patriarchal authority—the *laxman rekha*—keeps it in place. Interestingly, in *Gumrah*, it is not the woman's conscience that functions as the mechanism of control; it is fear of chastisement and social disgrace in the event of discovery. Meena's desire is quite clearly kept in check by the social/patriarchal authority that places a premium on a woman's reputation. Not only does she represent the family name and honor, but the country and community as well. Ashok roundly declares this toward the end of the film. But if the woman is claimed a signifier of family honor, the film also suggests something else that contravenes, interrupts, and challenges marriage: the woman's own desire. The *laxman rekha*, although intact, is under severe strain.

This "overvaluation" of women's desire (rather than, say, dealing with their material condition, where much more is at stake) is dictated by the discursive cinematic practice which sexualizes women while si-

multaneously circumscribing their conduct within a strict code. In the films I have taken up here the women characters' "uncontainable desire" is a reactive move against that dominant tendency. An oppositional reading of film must seize upon transgressive moments that challenge the strict sexual/moral code imposed on women. Women internalize the code, simultaneously resisting and subverting its excessive demands—and this is what the film narratives inadvertently tell us. Or perhaps not so inadvertently, since the narratives point to social contradictions that elicit rebellion (only to have the rebellious women quickly returned to subordination and patriarchal control). Constant eruptions within the institution of monogamy betray its troubled, unstable nature. Yet as psychoanalysis would have us believe, within the schema of family pathology, we are always already inscribed within monogamy.

In *Pyaasa* the female figure locked in a loveless marriage—coincidentally another Meena (Mala Sinha)—again has an ex-lover, Vijay, who re-enters her life. Vijay is a recreation of the legendary, self-destructive Devdas figure introduced in Saratchandra Chatterjee's 1917 novel *Devdas*, and reformulated in the film as an iconoclast.<sup>19</sup> This male figure is powerfully imprinted in the popular imaginary through numerous filmic iterations, especially through the performances of certain leading stars of their time: K. L. Saigal in the 1935 film *Devdas*, directed by P. C. Barua, Dilip Kumar in the 1955 version by Bimal Roy, and Sharukh Khan in the extravagant 2002 remake by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Devdas suffers separation from and then loss of his childhood love, Parvati, and rejects the world because of it. In *Pyaasa*, Vijay spurns Meena along with the world. By choosing to marry a wealthy publisher instead of the poet-dreamer Vijay, with whom she once had a college romance, Meena comes to represent the shallowness and hypocrisy of the bourgeois world Vijay abjures. She has neither Parvati's austerity nor firmness in love, nor is her decision driven by sacrifice or circumstance.<sup>20</sup> Financial security drives her pragmatism. She lacks remorse and fears only that her domineering husband will discover her past. This justifies Vijay's misogynist aggression. Such male vindictiveness, presented as justifiable, is characteristic of so many films by Guru Dutt.

Meena stands in contrast to Gulabo, the prostitute in *Pyaasa*. A liminal figure, an outcast, she becomes the marginalized hero's partner.

In the last shot they walk away in a dim gray fog, entering a nowhere land, an unspecified space—an ending common to so many 1950s' Hindi films.<sup>21</sup> The film reclaims Gulabo as the hero's legitimate partner, a hooker with the proverbial golden heart. The first to recognize the worth of Vijay's iconoclastic poetry, she selflessly works on publishing it, and is unfailingly by his side throughout his travails.

In Hindi cinema the alluring courtesan figure and courtesan culture elicits an obsessive fascination.<sup>22</sup> These are women whose work depends on their being women, yet they are released from the cycle of monogamous love and romance. They are, as Sumita Chakravarty says, "at once economically dependent on and yet distinct from the world of men"; their autonomy depends on their sexual/moral conduct.<sup>23</sup> One would expect that the existence of this group of women would be explained by a nontraditional understanding of heterosexuality, love, sex, romance, and womanhood within patriarchy. But as Chakravarty argues, in the historical/legendary courtesan film genre, the woman, a victim of social conditions (or the victim who is also the apotheosis of maternal love) is transformed and refitted into the site of romantic love, where she longs for the "protection" of one man.

In an excellent discussion of the figure of the courtesan, Fareed Kazmi uses Julia Lesage's analytic framework to examine how the female subject becomes emotionally involved in narratives that victimize women. Kazmi examines eight films of the "Muslim social" genre and shows how in each case the protagonist, a subaltern Muslim woman living autonomously, ekes out an existence under extenuating circumstances and demonstrates outstanding courage by confronting or defying the dominant power. Yet in each case the dilemma of love—the longing for one man, romance, and glamour is an amazing elision of real-life circumstances, deflecting women's problems and concerns.<sup>24</sup>

While the genre of the "courtesan film" strains to domesticate the whore and fit her into a wifely role—to the point of projecting her as a trope for virginal purity—in one significant film it reverses this process and traces the movement from the opposite direction. In Abrar Alvi's Hindi film classic *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (The Lord, His Wife, and Slave, 1962), based on Bimal Mitra's novel, the domesticated upper-class wife adopts a courtesan's ways. An extraordinary film in several respects, this period piece, set in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Calcutta, provides an

outsider's view of the goings-on in the Chaudhari clan, a fast-declining, decadent feudal family that is overtaken by an enlightened bourgeoisie and outwitted by a modernized, managerial-technocratic class. It is a complex period film: the decaying feudal order is juxtaposed with the Subinay household. The latter is affiliated with the *Brahmo Samaj* movement, which works actively toward social regeneration in keeping with a late-nineteenth-century agenda of political action.

The story is told from the point of view of the household servant, Bhutnath, who oversees the work of demolishing the old *haveli* (mansion) that lies at the center of the narrative. The dismantling scene can be read as a literal dismantling of the old order, replacing it with the new. The entire film is a flashback, focusing on Bhutnath's memories of several decades earlier when he first arrived in the city as a servant in this *haveli*. Although there are several important characters and subplots, the main narrative deals with the youngest daughter-in-law, Chhoti Bahu (Meena Kumari), and her claustrophobic life within the *haveli's* walls.

Through Bhutnath's admiring eyes we first encounter Chhoti Bahu, who is astonishingly beautiful and hopelessly bored. Bhutnath is her only conduit to the world outside. Her husband, an alcoholic, spends his time entertained by courtesans patronized by the feudal households. His two older brothers are profligates who waste themselves in equally frivolous pastimes. Among the women the oldest sister-in-law, Badi Bahu, has lost her mind and wanders aimlessly through the *haveli*, a victim of the acutely lonely and oppressive *bhadramahila's* (upper-class Bengali woman) life. The middle sister-in-law, Manjali Bahu, keeps herself entertained by ordering fineries and jewelry.

Chhoti Bahu's ennui, her disenchantment, constitutes the central narrative. Determined to draw her husband into her life, she tries several strategies to win his attention. One evening she refuses to let him leave. Their not-very-subtle exchange is replete with references to sexual desire and sexual needs. The husband declares he is the "hot-blooded" scion of the Chaudhari lineage, and no *bahu* (daughter-in-law) of the family can fulfill his (sexual) needs. Chhoti Bahu insists on being given a chance. She attempts to seduce him. The young Chaudhari asks her if she can drink, dance, and sing licentious songs. Chhoti Bahu, horrified at first, takes up the challenge and initiates herself into what ends



up being a life of alcoholism. In one of Meena Kumari's most exquisite performances, we see her grapple with the angst of loneliness, lovelessness, a craving to be desired, and an unabashed desire for her inattentive husband.

Chhoti Bahu's actions reflect her refusal to conform to the norms of an upper-class wife. Not only does she make sexual demands on her husband, she also learns lovemaking as an art: the terrain of the professional courtesan. The film couches all this in the rhetoric of love and service to her husband, but the film's frame, in a moment of excess, betrays an altogether different meaning. The viewer cannot miss the sexual charge in the eroticized moments when Meena Kumari tosses her head back to strike a "kiss me" pose or when, on another occasion, she performs a dance number. A little high on alcohol, she dances and expresses her passion, her desire to be loved, to seduce and be seduced. This scene—in fact the entire plot involving Chhoti Bahu—is about the need to desire and be desired, a theme traditionally absent from filmic and cultural representations of women.

Meena Kumari's portrayal of Chhoti Bahu is a classic example of a



17. Chhoti Bahu strikes a kiss-me pose. *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam* (The Lord, His Wife and Slave), Abrar Alvi, 1962.

film star encouraging identification with a key protagonist. Pam Cook, referring to Richard Dyer's work on film stars, notes that "their charisma produced an excess of meaning which, by captivating the spectator's gaze, disrupted involvement with narrative progression. Even if the story made sure that a strong female character got her comeuppance, her dazzling image lingered in the spectator's mind, overriding the knowledge of her punitive destiny."<sup>25</sup> Get her comeuppance she does, for at the end of Chhoti Bahu's song (pleading with her lover not to leave) she tries physically to stop him. When she asks if she hasn't kept him "happy," Chaudhari evasively and wryly suggests that she spend her time like the other daughter-in-law of the household, collecting jewelry and counting gold coins. Incensed by his condescension, Chhoti Bahu flies into a rage. In a scene memorable for its dramatic tension, Chhoti Bahu remonstrates against the idea of being compared to other women of her class after she has undergone such a thorough sense of physical and spiritual violation. "No other *bahu* has ever consumed alcohol to please her husband . . . Call me a mother," she taunts him insolently, obviously rebuking him for his impotence. Chaudhari Babu, infuriated, slaps her, knocks her down, and castigates her for drinking and behaving like a madwoman.

The rest of the story traces Chhoti Bahu's life going downhill as she becomes an alcoholic. Bhutnath watches the years pass her by. She alternates between moments of delirium and lucidity, but is always weighed down by an overwhelming melancholy. Her husband contracts a terminal illness; in her last effort to do something for him, she prepares to see a shaman whom she hopes will cure her husband. She dies in the carriage on her way to meet the shaman, a death instigated by the family patriarch. In the film's terms, this is punishment for her transgressive behavior.<sup>26</sup>

If Hindi film offers mainly moments of "punitive destiny" meted out to the women characters, where do we look for transgressive behavior, for narratives that plot the changes that have overtaken real women's lives and histories? *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, in fact, shares certain biographical similarities with Meena Kumari's real life that became public after her death. She had a difficult relationship with her husband, and she was, in fact, melancholic, as were the characters she portrayed.

According to Dyer, the star persona, “across and between individual texts, can . . . work against the grain of negative stereotype,” and star performance can militate “against the smooth passage of ideology.”<sup>27</sup> Thus in *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, Meena Kumari’s drinking with her husband is projected as drinking for her husband. But the film reveals one of those moments of excess, as Pam Cook puts it, when the star’s personal life story intervenes to further charge the dramatic filmic moment. Meena Kumari, estranged from her husband for fifteen years, was known to be an alcoholic, living a lonely life similar to the one she enacts in *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*. Her private life was devoted to writing, poetry, and the search for a primal kind of love that she stumbles around to find in *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*.

What do we make of the star’s life?<sup>28</sup> Among the constituting elements of the Hindi film industry, the single most dominant group, the films stars, have a powerful grip on peoples’ imagination, and narratives about film stars’ lives occupy film magazines and film journalism—virtually an ancillary industry. These “star texts,” supposedly based on rumor and scurrilous reporting, are marked by fascination with and admiration for the lives of the rich and famous. Female stars’ lives are embedded in public discourses on love, romance, marriage, and sexuality—the traditional technologies of gender construction in Hindi cinema. But in this case the narratives’ origins are different, arising from a social text rather than a masculinized imagination; they deal with “real” women’s lives. The star text discourse and its narrativization style are strongly inflected by the historical moment of its publication.

Furthermore, other texts—the extra-text about the stars’ lives—are sometimes parallel to or at an angle from the film narratives. Film texts can reflect or refract star biographies. The play between the film and extra-text heightens tension and dramatic potential, expanding the possibilities of reading multiple meanings in the interchange between the two that the audience reads simultaneously. In this context Hindi film culture is a continuous film text, which includes not just the film’s narrative but also adjoining discourses by film critics, journalists, academics, and, most important, popular film and gossip magazines. Following the lives of the stars’ offscreen lives provides another opportunity for politically reading the interstice between the film and the social.

### *Film/Star Text: Reading Social Change*

We rely today on films to speak social history. But when the film texts are more or less formulaic, the sources and archival records must expand to include the social text beyond the film. Read against and parallel to films, star texts offer a wealth of information about cultural politics, particularly about a particular period—in this case, India’s postindependence years. This methodological innovation responds to the exigency of the situation—the emptiness of official archives—and draws upon the domain of the popular to read the popular.

The construction of female stars in popular discourse intersects many issues the films raise: femininity, romance, marriage, sexuality, love—and women as subjects. Rachel Dwyer’s description of Indian film magazines and close textual analysis of *Stardust*, the most popular one, points to their use by readers not as escapism or emulation, but as “ways of dealing with one’s everyday life,” a means to understanding the role of the individual, the family, the significance of the body, and the nature of consumer society.<sup>29</sup>

Print media purports to reveal the truth about the lives of the stars, and it is shaped by its own conventions and suffers particular constraints. By comparing the codes that operate in different discourses—in the films themselves and the genre of film reporting, which explores the topography of star lives—differences are revealed in their generic conventions. The parameters of the discursive practices in films and film magazines, what is included or excluded, and how the same themes are treated or inflected across discourses, change over time in response to other social and political influences. Thus, in the case of cinema, the women’s movement of the late 1970s indubitably affected the discourse of both film and film journalism, although it penetrated extant discourses in different ways.

Two immensely popular female stars of Hindi cinema are Meena Kumari (fl. 1947–1972) and Dimple Kapadia (fl. 1973–). Taken together, their careers span the fifty years since independence. In reconstructing the offscreen lives and careers of these two women who have excelled in performances portraying “women’s issues,” I analyze their films and their lives as depicted in newspapers and film magazines. Both women have struggled against a patriarchal system within and outside

the film industry—that is, in their public and personal lives—and public perception of them varies sharply. The point is not so much to compare their offscreen lives, but rather the narrative discourse shaping the life stories of two women working during the early and late periods following independence. By scrutinizing the language—what is and is not articulated—it is possible to discern the manner in which the discourse on “women” is ordered, framed, and focused for us. A notable change in this discourse enables plotting the history of social change in women’s lives.<sup>30</sup>

The euphonious obituaries for Meena Kumari compared the melancholic “tragedienne queen” she enacted in films to her own life. That life was characterized by extended bouts with depression, a sense of disenchantment that reverberated in the Urdu poetry (*nazm*) that she wrote, and her early death due to alcoholism and cirrhosis of the liver. It is worth noting how the public narrative about Meena Kumari’s life obfuscated these basic facts. Like many other actresses of her time, Meena Kumari’s origins were shrouded in secrecy with insinuations about her links with an old, disreputable courtesan culture—considered by some to be the repository of a tradition of song, dance, theater, poetry, and the arts and letters. Her mother, Iqbal Begum, a stage actress and dancer, had a fledgling career in the film industry and Meena Kumari (originally Mahazabeen) began her film career as the child-artist Baby Meena. Her husband Kamal Amrohi, the writer-director who directed and produced *Pakeezah* (Pure Heart, 1971), her last and enormously successful film, was only one of the men with whom she shared a very troubled relationship. Publicized as a film made over a period of twenty years (its production was interrupted by their estrangement), *Pakeezah* was released after Meena Kumari’s death. As many have speculated, that perhaps was part of the reason for its success.

The narratives about the last few years of Meena Kumari’s life and the circumstances under which the “tragedy queen” died are mixed with an unmistakable tinge of melodrama: she was alone and impecunious at the time of her death and her poems reflect her loss of will to live. She lacked worldly wisdom and was inept, even indifferent, to money matters. In her will she bequeathed her property to her siblings and to charitable institutions without certifying it through proper court pro-

cedures. As a result, her estranged husband inherited a sizable amount of her property, her manager seems to have siphoned much of it off for himself, and the state took almost half of her assets for tax arrears. For her labor in Kamal Amrohi’s *Pakeezah*, her grand finale, she had asked as payment one guinea—a token of her husband’s good will—which suggests the hopeless romantic that she was until the end. She bequeathed her diaries and poems to the writer-director Gulzaar, a trusted friend and perhaps once a lover.

Meena Kumari’s irrepressible charisma endeared her to audiences. As one journalist wrote, it was “her own personality that carried the impress of the culture and sophistication of Lucknow, the seat of the post-Mughal Muslim culture. Her studied reserve, cultivated smile, dignified mannerism, chaste diction, taste for poetry, polished and impeccable conversation and, finally, a golden voice that was a perfect combination of throatiness and nasalness.”<sup>31</sup> Her literary pursuits “and claims to intellectualism,” which the same journalist discounts, created an association between her and films based on literary works. Expectations that these films would benefit from her presence were never disappointed: Meena Kumari appeared to closely identify with the characters she played. This lent her portrayals an intensity that led the press to tirelessly draw parallels between her life and the roles she performed.

Meena Kumari became the site where fact and fiction ironically coalesced. The extra-textual accounts, as though observing an unwritten code, limit themselves carefully to elliptical allusion to her life, which seems to get more focused upon in her films. We never really read *about* her life—only about the impenetrable grief, turbulence, and pain she suffered. References to real events in her life appear unspeakable, unmentionable. What newspapers repeatedly discuss are the characters she played in her landmark films: *Daaera* (The Circle, 1953), *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (The Lord, His Wife and the Slave 1962), and *Pakeezah* (Pure Heart, 1971), in which she enacted women “belonging to three different settings at three different times. Yet, they are united in their ultimate response to life—the voluntary option to self-mortification, self-punishment and self-destruction, a characteristic of the masochism of the Indian female [emphasis mine].”<sup>32</sup> The tacit understanding between readers, journalists, the film industry, and film viewers is that Meena

Kumari was not "acting out" a role, but "living her life" on the silver screen. This suffused her films with an extra edge of "realism." Viewers had the pleasure of seeing her on screen, knowing how the film text spilled over into the extra-text, the star text.

A documentary film made ten years after her death, *Meena Kumari ki Amar Kahani* (The Unforgettable Story of Meena Kumari, 1979) by Sohrab Modi, was meant to chronicle, commemorate and celebrate her work: seventy-seven films over a period of twenty-five years, not including her performances as a child artist.<sup>33</sup> Yet the documentary had to grapple with an effort to keep her "scandalous" life out of her work. In a move that is reminiscent of the print media's simultaneous obsession with and obfuscation of her life, the documentary pastes together a collage of her films to ignore scandals and to sanitize that life, in an effort to monumentalize her contribution to the annals of Hindi cinema.

In fact the public narrative of "the tragedienne" was necessary to make the unmentionable, unspeakable "scandals" in Meena Kumari's life invisible to audiences and fans. That narrative provided a convenient spin of self-inflicted torment and sadness on the life story of a woman who was extraordinarily intelligent, independent, and unconventional for her times. This melodramatic narrative also refused to commend her for her own quiet assaults on a patriarchal order. It insisted on reading her life in terms of a suffering, tragic victim, full of the "self-destruction characteristic of the masochism of the Indian female," as the journalist quoted above wrote in her obituary. This may have been part of Meena Kumari's self-perception as well. Such a conflation of self with the tragic role indicates the power of discourse—the technology of gender—that shapes consciousness and knowledge about experience.

Dimple Kapadia arrived on the film scene in 1973, a year after Meena Kumari unexpectedly died at age forty. The timing creates an interesting divide between two film stars whose lives and careers in significant ways took very different turns. In these two time spans within the fifty years following independence, the technologies of gender were gradually bent, reshaped, and reconfigured in the domain of star text discourse. The two women—in a sense like mother and daughter—belong to different generations. The discourses surrounding their lives operate as a measure of the social change separating their life histories.

Dimple Kapadia's trajectory is not only different from Meena Kumari's; it is in fact different from that of any female Hindi film star. Introduced to the film world at age fifteen as a protégé of Raj Kapoor, the grand master of the industry, Kapadia's debut film *Bobby* (1973) was a runaway success at the box office. The young starlet's appearance in a teenage love story launched it as a cult-film classic. It spawned an entire line of products, from motorcycles to accessories like sunglasses, handbags, and hair clips, all bearing the film's name. At the time, this was an extraordinary phenomenon.

But Kapadia's success as a star was truncated by an early marriage to superstar Rajesh Khanna, a man twice her age who forbade her from working in the industry. Without understanding what her heady success really meant, the idea of being proposed to by the nation's foremost superstar, she later recalled, was an even headier experience. After a courtship that lasted a week, she married, quit working in films, and by the end of three years had two daughters. Rajesh Khanna's career declined rapidly and reports of trouble in this "dream marriage," and subsequent cover-ups, appeared in the press. Nine years later, in 1982, Dimple Khanna, as she was now known, walked out of the marriage and returned to her parents' home with her two daughters. Eleven years after her debut, she returned to make a comeback film as Dimple Kapadia, remembered now as the "Bobby girl."

The return was not easy, and as the print media reports it, Kapadia fought a hard struggle. She desired to be thought of not as a "glamour girl," but a serious actress. Here the contours of Kapadia's life narrative—in sharp contrast to Meena Kumari's heyday—reflect the social changes that made a new kind of public discourse possible. Kapadia spoke out against her years of "incarceration" within marriage, her complete lack of self-esteem, and her sense of the terrible loss of the best years of her life. She was frank about how she had children thoughtlessly when she was a child herself, how her traumatic marriage placed an emotional strain on her parents, and how hard it was to walk out with two children and no money of her own.

She, too, told a complete victim narrative, but with a difference: She was a victim with tremendous grit and staying power, the ability to fight and win. She went back to an industry she had left when she was too young to understand its ways. It was a place where her

ex-husband still had considerable clout, making prospective employers hesitant to hire her. She was emotionally vulnerable and faced constant comparison to her days as a starlet. She also contended with the "bad publicity" of being a mother of two trying to regain her stardom in an industry where such women are considered over the hill.

But Kapadia turned every disadvantage to her advantage. Speaking candidly to the press, she and the reporters plotted her life's narrative from the innocent teenager snared into an impossible marriage to the emergence of a mature "woman with experience." After the initial failure of a few films—*Zakhmee Sher* (The Wounded Lion, 1984) and *Jaanbaaz* (Gambling with Life, 1986)—Kapadia was back, fighting her way to the top, preferring to perform roles she described as serious and exacting rather than flippant and unchallenging. Film scripts began to be written around her, paralleling her life story. She and her directors openly publicized her roles as ones where she drew from the well of her own experience. *Aitbaar* (Faith, 1985), *Kaash* (If Only, 1987), and *Dhrishti* (Sight, 1990) brought her acclaim. Within five years, at age thirty, she received the Best Actress award for several of these performances.

In comparing the account of Meena Kumari to that of Dimple Kapadia, there is a discernable reversal in the style of journalistic reporting on women film stars. Kapadia's life was made the master text, the master narrative against which the films were read. In the earlier period, the press had merely alluded to Meena Kumari's life in relation to her film performances. In Kapadia's life, gone are the references to female masochism—even if the films Kapadia acted in repeat the narrative of the victim over and over again. In the clamor that arose from the press (although it should be noted that the regional, vernacular, and English press were not unanimous on this), Kapadia was hailed as the brave new, strong, seasoned, and "experienced" woman.

If there is a woman-as-victim aspect to Kapadia's narrative, she significantly undercut it by her own candid and consistent accounts of her life story that made it more than just a publicity gimmick or marketing strategy. The stories about her have no tragic undertones. Rather, they depict a woman with agency, making active choices and admitting faults and failings. She shows a readiness to learn, move on, and get ahead. She has no guilty secrets about the men in her life, past or present. She openly confesses having a relationship with a married man and work-

ing through the trauma it causes her children. She discusses a model of motherhood based on openness and "friendship" rather than hierarchy and authority. In the early 1990s, Kapadia even made public appearances as the ex-star Rajesh Khanna's wife during his election campaigns for Parliament. In short, in public discourse the victim searching for pity slipped away, replaced by a figure eliciting admiration. What intervened in the years between Meena Kumari and Dimple Kapadia was a new wave of the women's movement, a feminist consciousness with its own ideas about romantic love and agency. Though the reach of this new discourse was uneven, it entered crucial places in the public domain, especially the media—a site and agent for its dissemination. The "women's question" was reframed to interrogate patriarchal privilege and tyranny. Women's oppression was no longer a "characteristic of the masochism of the Indian female." Like Kapadia, women could choose to appropriate the discourse of feminism to represent themselves—a choice unavailable to Meena Kumari. She had to enclose her life in a shroud of secrecy and maintain the moral high ground, at the cost of terrible self-repression, turbulence, and grief.

Newspapers by no means construct entirely truthful accounts about stars. But it is not that veracity in question here; rather, it is how newspapers promote a discourse with sharp ideological underpinnings. Both film stars were highly successful in the industry, and singled out for screen performances portraying women's "reality." Screenplays and newspapers actively drew on their personal stories of an embattled life in patriarchal culture. The interpolation of a new star discourse, arising from the groundswell of the women's movement, indicates a slow but sure-footed change that is challenging, bending, and repositioning the old *laxman rekha*.

In her analysis of film magazines Dwyer rather pessimistically concludes that the discourse rejects feminism—despite the array of tabooed issues they air (divorce, the singles' sexual market, female star careers after marriage, homosexuality, and so forth).<sup>34</sup> I argue instead that the women's movement has a presence in the lives of "real" women, shaping "real" histories. When feminism creeps into the discursive texts narrating film stars' lives—apparent when we take a longer view—it reanimates the contested sexual/moral economy discourse in the public sphere.

What will happen to feminist cultural representation in popular discourse such as film and journalism is still uncertain, tentative, and very contentious. As screenwriter Javed Akhtar said, "Everyone in the film industry knows the image of the Indian woman is to change, but as to what the new image is going to be there is complete confusion."<sup>35</sup>

## Chapter 5

## *The Sexed Body*

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DURING THE 1970s, Hindi films featuring women as central protagonists began to show evidence of change. These changes, initially imperceptible and trivial, gradually become perceptible in following decades. Yet specific commercial films incorporating radical change nevertheless do so within an elaborate conservative scheme that clouds and contains that radical moment.

### *Filmic Love*

The introduction of Eastman Color in the early 1960s led to abandoning studios in favor of the open vistas of outdoor locations, especially for romantic sequences and their critical incumbent, "song picturization," as it is known in the film industry.<sup>1</sup> Films made under these circumstances typically track the movement of a young cosmopolitan man and woman traveling to an idyllic holiday resort where they meet by chance, fall in love, and, after a few complications and reversals, become a couple. These films flaunt signs of modernity overtaking the nation at the time: mobility, travel, and tourism worked to erase regional and ethnic boundaries by allowing young people to break away from traditional parochial bonds. Geographically bound regional communities began to dissolve into an expanded social space, the nation.<sup>2</sup> This