

The Cinematic ImagiNation

*Indian Popular Films
as Social History*

JYOTIKA VIRDI



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WRITINGS ON THE PORTRAYAL of women in popular Hindi cinema have long been split between the figures of the Madonna and the vamp—remaining truncated and not extending beyond a content-analysis methodology. As necessary first steps in examining Hindi films' representations, these studies provide a rich and abundant characterization of its idealized women figures: passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient. What remains insufficiently explained, however, is why women have been fashioned so relentlessly in this manner in the period immediately following independence when in all other matters of development and national reconstruction, Hindi cinema was relatively forward-looking.

Rather than read popular screen characterizations of women as mythology's "timeless cultural resources," as some Indian critics do, searching history for continuities and shifts in the idealized representation of women offers clues to the way it structures our present culture and law. As Kumkum Sangari urges, we must comprehend "cultural processes which enable the symbolic empowerment or mythification of women."¹ Critics reconstructing an understanding of nineteenth-century Indian women are hard-pressed to find texts in which women represent themselves, speak in their own voice, and search for identity in the midst of cataclysmic changes that were underway. There is a notable absence of autonomous accounts by women in official archives, attesting to their invisibility in the nation's hegemonic discourses.

One option is to draw on a popular genre of memoirs (*smritika*), women's autobiographies and biographies that emerged in the nineteenth century and coincided with the beginning of women's education and the development of a new "individualism." These memoirs, inculcated by male guardians, were considered germane to women's needs: a technique used merely to record direct experiences of one's life. Women were not expected to express themselves or to develop their personalities so as to need more demanding writing abilities and stylistic embellishments. Yet what is striking about the autobiographies and their textual strategies "is the way . . . the very theme of disclosure of self remains suppressed under a narrative of changing times, changing manners and customs, and changing values." Women do not describe the self but the "times." Partha Chatterjee cautions us "to remember that sovereignty over language, a tricky business under the best of circumstances, is doubly vitiated for those subordinated to both colonialism and nationalist patriarchy."²

A century later, in today's texts of Hindi films, we are reminded of how women are still doubly vitiated and subordinated by a nationalist patriarchy and a sexist film industry. Women have no access to the means of film production and are still virtually unrepresented as directors, producers, or screenwriters. As actors they perform—directed by male fantasies and patriarchal values. Reading women's lives from the film texts alone would be flawed, particularly when the lives of actual women, especially in the film industry, are an apogee to their screen representation. Star texts—the lives of film stars occupying public space and knowledge—are useful counterpoints to constructions in film narratives. Changes in the film text and the extra-text are equally significant to note when mapping the trajectory of women's lives and the cultural space in which their lives change.

In another effort that attempts to hear women speak in their own voices, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha edited two anthologies of writings by women in India. Their project ambitiously spans the period from 600 B.C. to the present. Undaunted by the absence of women writers from official archives—which at times offer only a glimmer, a fleeting reference to their works—the editors resorted to oral histories and word of mouth, searching personal libraries and private collections in distant places far from the established centers of the academy and its affiliated institutions.

In doing so, they clarify their objective: it is not to retrieve women's writing as texts to be reinstated within established and venerated cultural institutions from which these women were accidentally dropped and forgotten. Nor is the purpose to monumentalize women's writings as an institution unto itself. Rather, their effort focuses on using these writings to reveal the stakes involved in the battles for self and agency within patriarchy's margins, "reconstituted by the emerging bourgeoisie of empire and nation."³ Translation, the editors acknowledge, involves a relation of power where two cultures collide. They therefore demand that readers "translate" past women's selves into specific sociocultural contexts, following the logic of these women's lives and the concerns of the world they inhabited. The writings they select reveal the response of women to history and the politics of everyday life.⁴

What purpose does this bear on a project that attempts to retrieve a history of filmic representation of women in Hindi cinema? Whether these popular texts are hauled onto the high ground of critical theory or whether theory is carried to a democratized, cosmopolitan world of cultural texts aided by free-flowing translation is a matter of judgment. As third-world cultural critics we are native informants, translating culture and texts—and also transposing the wherewithal of critical cultural armor upon them. These two worlds require traversing a slippery terrain.

In India there is a network of institutions that frame "womanhood" in law and the popular imagination. These institutions deploy discursive strategies that subordinate women and make them pawns in the rush for national identity. A useful focal point is the contest staged around the middle of the twentieth century, centering on reformulating women's legal rights within the private sphere. The sexist discourse in the Hindu Code Bill, and resistance to it in the form of the Uniform Civil Code, draws the State, religion, communities, and the nation into the fray.⁵

In the nineteenth century a model of "Indian womanhood" was created in the popular imagination in response to colonial rule, and jettisoning it has been difficult. Art, literature, drama, and poetry amalgamated to mold a popular vision of Indian womanhood, but the version of the "new" woman was actually the modernists' reinvention of the *traditional* Indian woman tempered by the mix of dominant Victorian

and upper-caste Brahminical values. The Indian woman in popular Hindi cinema is very much the product of this Victorian-Brahminic axis, especially during the first two decades of independent India.

The exemplary film *Purab aur Paschim* (East and West, 1970) brings this historicized construction of womanhood into sharper focus. The film explicitly manifests the ideology mythifying the "essence" of Indian womanhood. By zeroing in on the colonial encounter, which led to the first modernist enunciation of the women's question, we can see how the film is directly connected with the symbolic world of women's images in Hindi films today. Written, directed and produced by the self-proclaimed patriot and actor Manoj Kumar, *Purab aur Paschim* is the saga of several families traced along two generations, presented with an elaborate prologue set during the peak of the independence movement in 1942. Om, a freedom fighter fleeing from the British police, visits his home. Harnam, a family friend, informs the police, and Om is tracked down and shot.

About twenty years later, where the main narrative begins, Om's grown son, Bharat (Manoj Kumar), leaves for higher education in England, which to him symbolizes the spiritual lack of western civilization. He lives with the Sharmas, an Indian family that has become caught up in the alienated, hedonistic world of 1960s excess. Mr. Sharma's daughter, the leather-miniskirt-wearing, cigarette-smoking, bar-frequenting Preeti (Saira Banu), pursues a relationship with Bharat, and they are soon engaged to be married. When Preeti refuses to relocate in India, Bharat promises to live with her in England on the condition that she visit India once. On the visit they tour temples and attend carnivals. Preeti slowly becomes enamored of the country and transformed by the "spirit" and "essence" of the land, kicks her smoking and drinking habits, and chooses to live like a "traditional Indian woman." The family never returns to England.

There are a few moments of the film worth elaborating on before launching a search for its imaginative genealogy. When Bharat, the protagonist—an avowed nationalist—leaves for England, his grandfather points to an ironical reversal: in ancient times people came to India for higher education. Bharat explains that the nation needs to learn science and technology, the very purpose of his sojourn. Science and technology are the ground on which the west's superiority is conceded.



6. Preeti, a decadent “westerner.” *Purab aur Paschim* (East and West), Manoj Kumar, 1970.

But the west—specifically England, once the colonial master—is an emotional wasteland of derelicts without “family life”: alienated individuals seeking refuge in sex, alcohol, and promiscuity. The most glaring feature of the west in the film is its free-floating libidinal excess, signified by overexposed women’s bodies (such as the scantily clothed Preeti Sharma). Her journey to the east and its enthralling “essence” brings back her “lost origin.”

Preeti’s gradual transformation leads her to reflect on the East/West divide. She is struck by the devotion of the family servant’s wife, who waits forty years in her home village before her husband brings her to the city, and by Bharat’s female childhood friend who never confesses her love for him, constrained by an appropriate coyness. Preeti’s brother, a Hare Rama Hare Krishna cult member, expounds on *lajja* and *sharam* (coyness and shame), the “rare jewels” the Indian woman possesses. When Preeti’s mother, unable to cope with the lack of creature comforts on the tour, decides to curtail her visit and return to England, to her surprise she finds Preeti dressed in a bridal saree, worshipping at the temple. Gone are the leather skirts and boots. The errant girl finds her origin, embraces Indian womanhood—that defining essence of

Indianness—proving Bharat’s thesis about India: “*apne yahaan ki mitti kuch aise hai ajnabi ko bhi sanskaar sikha deti hai*” (the soil of our land is such that even a stranger learns its culture). The power of nation, tradition, and culture are invoked with unusual vigor in this film—and their reverberations can be felt in the entire corpus of popular Hindi films.

Fixing the Figure of the Woman

Historians puzzle over the surge of interest in women’s issues in the first part of the nineteenth century in India, and its disappearance by the end of the century when nationalist politics overtook the nation’s concerns. Partha Chatterjee argues that in India the women’s question receded from public discourse in the early twentieth century because the ideology of nationalism offered a resolution through the spiritual/material divide.⁶

Transposing the spiritual/material onto an inner/outer—*ghar/bahir*, home and world—social space is divided, playing a significant role in the everyday practice of life. Gender differences fit into this division: men occupy the material world outside while women preserve the home, its essence unaffected by the material world. “Modern” ideas recasting the “new woman” became acceptable—so long as women’s roles in the domestic sphere remained intact.

For example, nineteenth-century popular literature ridiculed Bengali women who mimicked the manners of European women; such literature expresses a common anxiety about Indian women. The message was that imitating the west was necessary in the material sphere, but, if it entered the home, it could threaten and destroy Indian identity. The new Indian woman was superior to her European counterpart precisely because she maintained her spiritual essence. The new woman also maintained her distinction from women of lower caste and class.⁷

Uma Chakravarti points to nineteenth-century discourse that was keen to emphasize the high-caste Hindu woman’s decline in status compared to ancient times. High-caste women became recast in the super-woman mold, “the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmi Bai.”⁸ Susie Tharu surmises that the emergent woman figure in the nationalist imagination

was “in keeping with the now naturalized Victorian ideals of domestic virtue, patient and long suffering and autonomous, conscious of her power and of the strength she could find in tradition: a gentle but stern custodian of the nation’s moral life. And this was the figure that was to dominate the literary imagination for several decades to come.”⁹ These two dominant strands are layered together: a tradition reinvented from the upper-caste Hindu notion of a “glorious past,” and a Victorian legacy of purity and sexual restraint. Both traditions mutually accommodate and reinforce each other.

Woman’s deification as mother was another dimension of womanhood occupying a powerful position in the national imaginary. By the end of the nineteenth century, in the early phase of nationalism, popular literature, song, drama, and painting—in fact the entire gamut of art and culture—was concerned with the problem of expressing “national identity,” and used the mother icon to personify the nation. Images of the mother as a victim—a figure inspiring a strong sense of duty, an intense, almost filial, relationship to the nation—abound in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Works that forcefully articulate the mother as a nation include Kiran Chandra Bandhopadhyay’s play *Bharat Mata* (Mother India, 1873), with its figurations of the nation as a “dispossessed woman, often a widow or a woman deranged by suffering”; the first anthology of patriotic songs, *Bharat Gan* (India songs, 1879); and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s 1882 novel *Anandamath*, where a mother is rescued by brave sons, the “agents of deliverance.”¹¹ Bankim fused the concepts of *shakti* (power), the mother goddess, and motherland in *Anandamath*, forging a powerful emblem with far-reaching consequences.¹²

We can only speculate about this excessive investment in the mother image. It may derive from nineteenth-century popular religious practices and imagery servicing nationalism.¹³ Or, the reiterated image may be linked to a general anxiety about the Bengali male’s “diminished capacity of physical courage” and used to elicit compensatory images of valor.¹⁴

The suffering woman—or rather the suffering mother, a metonym for the nation—became a powerful and inspiring image evoking a sense of duty among the sons: they are required to protect the mother, the primordial nurturing force. Such a history of cultural imagery is central to

understanding the construction of femininity and masculinity in Hindi cinema. In popular film the young male continues to be anointed the agent while the woman is powerless, an object to be acted upon.

The female figure as mother and nation also embodies sacrifice and forbearance. Fixing the figure of the woman in this context within the national unconscious occurred culturally along with the idea of reclaiming a reinvented “Indian” past. As nationalist politics unified around the struggle for political autonomy, independence from colonial rule took center stage. The fierce debates surrounding the “women’s question” became contained as *race*—and this became the anticolonial movement’s organizing principle. With brown set against white, nationalist ideology elided issues that could drive a wedge between diverse communities and classes or between men and women.

Woman, Community, Nation

If the above elaboration explains how women’s idealized mythification crystallized in the nineteenth century, it does not explain the need to sustain this image after independence. Though tensions between several interest groups were contained in pre-independence India, the eruption of Hindu-Muslim strife (played up by the British) culminated in the worst holocaust on the subcontinent—India’s Partition—that accompanied its independence in 1947. To stem the fissiparous tendencies and resolve contradictions between different communities the figure of the woman, already cast as a powerful trope for the nation, was once again deployed to shore up a sense of unity.

Yet such a formulation is problematic, especially if we turn to the debate on the passage of Personal Laws versus a Uniform Civil Code that raged for about fifteen years in the middle of the twentieth century. The furor surrounding rewriting the rule of law ends with the woman as a signifier of the home, the private, and the personal in the Sovereign Republic. It reinscribes iterations adapted under colonialism in laws dealing with marriage, family, and inheritance. Half a century after independence, the Uniform Civil Code remains a secular ideal to be achieved in the private sphere, which religious laws continue to regulate.¹⁵

In 1772, Lord Hastings designated Hindu texts as the source of Hindu law governing “personal” matters such as marriage, divorce,

inheritance, and adoption, authorizing Brahmin pundits to interpret Hindu texts and impose an upper-caste Brahminic code on the lower castes, who were traditionally governed by customary practices. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was the origin of the Anglo-Indian legal system. A judiciary was devised with laws facilitating market transactions and the accumulation of private property. Parallel to these public laws were the private laws—personal law functioning under the rubric of customary and religious norms and proscribing individual freedoms.¹⁶

Aspects of Muslim Personal Law (the *shariat*) were modified in 1935 by the Muslim elite (landowners and the middle class) and the *ulema* (the Muslim clergy). Enacting a central law applicable to the entire country's Muslim population, the *ulema* set themselves up as the *shariat*'s authoritative interpreters on matters of adoption, wills, inheritance, personal property maintenance, dower, guardianship, gifts, and *wakfs* (endowments held in trust for Muslims). The *shariat* gained unifying and symbolic significance for minority Muslims in the postpartition period. By consolidating Muslim identity around religion and the practice of religious laws, and placing themselves at the helm of this group, these Muslim leaders, with political ambitions of their own, were a force to contend with in independent India.

For Hindus the *dharmashastras* (moral code) governed conduct; the code's source lay in religious Hindu texts, the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*. Rules governing Hindu life were meant to maintain "the cosmic and moral order": marriage was considered sacred and indissoluble, succession of property was through male heirs, women had limited property rights, and polygamy was permitted. There were significant regional variations. For example, some women in parts of south India exercised political power and could dispose of property as they wished. Lower castes had less restrictive customs. In the patrilineal joint Hindu family, sons shared common property rights; their wives had a right to maintenance, but not inheritance.¹⁷

Between 1921 and 1936 the women's movement campaign to codify Hindu law, grant Hindu women property rights, and the right to divorce (led by the All India Women's Conference, AIWC) was obstructed by the Hindu orthodoxy. In 1944 the B.N. Rau Committee's draft of the Hindu Code focused on marriage and inheritance: a widow's

share was to be equal to her son's; a daughter was to get half a son's share; polygamy was prohibited; intercaste marriage was legalized; and grounds for the dissolution of marriage were established.

The Hindu Code left the elite deeply divided. Etched in this debate were notions about the ideal Hindu woman. Opponents drew the ideal woman's image from the *Manusmriti*, an orthodox Hindu guide: she needed protection, and "in this position of dependence she was worshipped as a goddess." The Hindu joint family was regarded as the appropriate property ownership unit, providing for women "in a manner superior to the individualistic basis of Western society." A member of the Constituent Assembly, Bajoria, argued that the notion of gender equality was British: "Hindus would be better protected by a nationalist government." With Pakistan awarded by the departing British to the Muslim League, a compensatory demand for a "'Hindu raj' (rule) in which Hindu values would be central" seemed legitimate.¹⁸

The putative pledge of Congress Party leaders to include social equality while drafting the Constitution failed to translate into support for the Hindu Code bill. Libertarian principles of gender equality, a fundamental right in the Constitution, precluded equal rights for women in marriage—in the private sphere. Implicit in a woman's right to divorce her husband or inherit property was the threat of her freedom from men's dominion.¹⁹

In 1945 a great deal of public interest was generated in the bill by the Rau Committee's tour around the country, the sale of translations of the Hindu Code into vernacular languages, and the appearance of 378 civilians at the Committee's hearings. Despite opposition, the Rau Committee's Hindu Code Bill was submitted to the Legislative Assembly in 1947 and debated in the Central Legislative Assembly and the Constituent Assembly between 1943 and 1944, and again between 1949 and 1951.

Publicity surrounding the bill grew because of the public hearings, while the controversy around it intensified because it was assigned to Dr. Ambedkar, the *dalit* Law Minister at the time. A *dalit* leader's support, combined with the bill's association with educated "westernized" women, provoked unmitigated hostility from the patriarchal Brahmin orthodoxy.²⁰ Notwithstanding the bill's publicity, the debate reached

only the educated urban community, barely 5 percent of the population, leading detractors to question women Assembly members' ability to represent women at large.²¹

The highest ranks of the Congress leadership were divided on the Hindu Code Bill. Ambedkar's announcement to secure the Bill's passage, his open criticism of Hinduism, and his resignation protesting Nehru's short-circuiting the legislative process by abandoning the Bill deeply offended orthodox Hindu politicians.²² Mahatma Gandhi opposed a legalistic approach while Nehru, in spite of his vacillation, favored legal reform and the Hindu Code Bill. All other senior leaders opposed Nehru—including the then-President, Rajendra Prasad, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. The President went so far as to threaten a constitutional crisis by refusing his assent to the bill even if the Parliament passed it.

Nehru treated his overwhelming victory in the 1951 general election as a mandate of support for the Hindu Code Bill, securing its passage in 1955. After a controversy that had raged for fifteen years, the Hindu Code Bill was divided into five separate acts and passed. These were: 1) the Special Marriage Act (1954); 2) the Hindu Marriage Act (1955); 3) the Hindu Succession Act (1955); 4) the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956); and 5) the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956).²³ The Indian Republic inaugurated secular principles in criminal and commercial laws and all aspects of property—except inheritance. Inviolable personal laws would govern the private sphere, varying according to each community's dictates. However, these laws, requiring contemporary interpretations of medieval and ancient scriptures, failed the test of delivering gender justice.

Though the AIWC demanded reform in Hindu law, they proposed the idea of a uniform civil code as early as 1940 to displace religious personal laws and bring the entire domain of the private/religious into the public/secular sphere. Minoos Masani, Hansa Mehta, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, leaders of the AIWC and members of Advisory Committees to the Constituent Assembly, voted in favor of establishing the Uniform Civil Code as a fundamental right, arguing that it would break down barriers between different communities.²⁴ Muslim leaders, however, made the community's identity contingent upon preserving the *shariat*, demanding Muslim personal laws be kept beyond the purview

of the Uniform Civil Code.²⁵ The Constituent Assembly debate posited preserving religious identity through personal laws versus consolidating national unity—equating the Uniform Civil Code with assimilating minority identity. This highly reductive nature of such religious/community identity was constructed in response to an Orientalist colonial and bureaucratic regime.²⁶ The discourse elides what lay at the heart of this debate—the control of women.

Protesting the failure to make the Uniform Civil Code enforceable, Hansa Mehta, in her speech in the Constituent Assembly, insisted that such a code was far more important to national unity than creating a national language.²⁷ Her words turned out to be prophetic in the light of what happened thirty years later, in the mid-1980s, when a tenuous national unity was severely strained by a sixty-five-year-old Muslim woman, Shah Bano. In 1985 Shah Bano's litigation, demanding a paltry alimony maintenance of 125 rupees (now \$3) a month, rocked the nation and threatened its fragile unity. When the Muslim orthodoxy threatened insurgency, the government capitulated.

The debacle began when Mohammad Ahmad Khan appealed to the Supreme Court, challenging the High Court's decree directing him to pay a small maintenance to Shah Bano, his divorced wife. Invoking Muslim Personal Law, he claimed he was not obliged to pay his divorced wife beyond the period of *iddat* (court proceeding). Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code of India enjoins the maintenance of divorced wives; under this clause Khan was obligated to pay. However, the Muslim Personal Law Board disputed the Supreme Court's right to interfere with Muslim personal law.

The Muslim fundamentalist leadership mobilized mass protest against the Supreme Court's ruling, demanding exemption for Muslims from section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code on the grounds that it contravened the *shariat*, offended Muslim sentiment, and even endangered their minority status. Initially the government stood behind the Supreme Court, but later it relented, reversed its position, and succumbed to conservative Muslim leaders, effectively buying electoral support at the cost of women's rights. The 1986 Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill was passed, ostensibly to preserve cultural diversity, the rights of minorities, and to protect their religious identity.²⁸ To maintain the ideal of multicultural, multilingual identities the

prospect of a uniform civil code, it was argued, had become anathema.²⁹ Here the figure of the woman, once deployed to consolidate national identity, is used analogously in the name of the Muslim community's identity in a way that diminishes Muslim women's rights and fragments Indian women's unity.

On another register, Hindi cinema also uses a specific construction of traditional Indian womanhood to connote a unified nation. Mastery over women plays a central role in such a signifying practice. Men equate women's legal equality with losing community identity. Postpartition tensions around Hindu-Muslim integration center around each community's right to retain control over "their" women. The *shariat* and the Hindu Marriage Act ossified patriarchal law. At stake for feminists now is disrupting a patriarchal discursive and social regime in which the woman remains a signifier of the religio-ethnic community.

Thus, the symbol of woman as home and nation turns out to be an unstable signifier. Varying political contingencies animate the woman as a sign: she is a stand-in for the nation at one historical moment, and for the religious community in another. Consequently, launching the woman as a symbol of the nation is at once progressive and regressive. It works as a symbol of unity, a Pan-Indian consciousness that Hindi cinema strives to project at a moment when political fragmentation is imminent. Yet such signification frequently fails, and women become sites of contest each time a community asserts its identity, threatening the fragile amity among religio-ethnic communities. Shah Bano's case, taken up by Muslims, and Roop Kanwar's immolation, a rallying point for some Hindus, are instances testifying to such lapses.³⁰

The symbolic image of the traditional Indian woman in Hindi film could well project a wishful desire to unite the nation around the figure of the woman, while repressing debates on identity and community which have propagated patriarchal laws signifying "difference" in the name of cultural diversity. To use woman to represent the entire nation blurs the boundaries contested by different communities. The double-bind, however, is that using woman as a stand-in for nation may work in favor of secular consciousness, but at the same time it continues to promote egregious gender injustice. Yet all communities and castes dally with this venerated image of womanhood, claiming it as

their badge of honor. It is clear, however, that women's interests have been sacrificed at the altar of national unity.

The "Social Butterfly"

Popular Hindi cinema in the postindependence years exercised monumental repression, denial, and disavowal of communal politics, presenting an idyllic oneness, unity among undifferentiated "Indians." Difference is acknowledged only in stereotypical representations of communities, through communal fraternizing typified by the Hindu protagonist's Muslim / Sikh "best friend," or the historical genre celebrating Hindu-Muslim amity.³¹ Yet boundaries between them remain firmly in place. For instance, film narratives assiduously avoid suggestions of intercommunity marriage that might effect genuine integration.

Yet Hindi films also use heterosexual romance and love as the "transcendent" power flouting strict endogamous codes that ensure social distance across class and caste boundaries. The divides between rich and poor, urban and rural, upper- and lower-caste are constantly surmounted by romantic love. This victory of romantic love is particularly intriguing in a society where a large number of ethnic religious groups (and multiple subjects within each) are all deeply conscious of their identity, and anxious to maintain their purity through the endogamous codes of an arranged marriage system. Love and romance culminating in marriage has enormous symbolic power and appealing triumph in its ability to bend social norms and push social boundaries. Yet in the history of Hindi cinema it has been impossible to enunciate or even suggest a Hindu-Muslim romantic union—at least not until Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), made in Tamil and dubbed in Telegu and Hindi, a trend as unusual as the film's aesthetics, a cross-pollination of popular and art film.³²

The protagonist, a Hindu journalist Shekhar (Arvind Swami) visits his home village and falls in love with a Muslim woman, Shaila (Monisha Koirala). Defying their families, Shaila runs away to marry and live with Shekhar in Bombay. Anonymity in the metropolitan city works well for them and their twin sons, until riots erupt in Bombay's streets disrupting their private tranquil.³³

With the passage of time their families relent and finally accept the grandsons as legitimate offspring of an “anomalous” union. However, the ire of that once-benign metropolis, Bombay, gives way to unimaginable ferocity in the form of Hindu and Muslim mobs, who identify and kill members of the other community. The twin boys, about age five, are lost in a riot. Disclosure of their hybrid origin intensifies their vulnerability, even threatens their survival. The irony is, of course, that they are both Hindu and Muslim yet neither purely Hindu nor Muslim, and hence unsafe from fanatics on both sides.

The Shah Bano controversy had barely subsided when the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party began claiming that the fifteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, the Babri Masjid, was the Hindu god Rama’s birthplace. The party sought to expand its base by calling to replace the mosque with a temple. The mosque’s desecration on December 6, 1992 set off month-long riots in several major Indian cities and towns—a conflagration on a scale the nation had not witnessed since the 1947 Partition. Ratnam, in keeping with his penchant for combining contemporary politics and film, strategically set the film in Bombay, a city that burned in December and January of 1992–1993, bewildering secularists who thought that its long industrial history and unique cosmopolitan culture had inoculated it from sectarian prejudice.³⁴

Critiques of the film insisting that a narrative constructing a romance between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman asserts Hindu cul-



7. Riots disrupt the private tranquil. *Bombay* (Mani Ratnam, 1995).

tural dominance liaise dangerously, and even buy into, a discourse in which the woman is a sign of her community.³⁵ Other critiques concede that demands to ban *Bombay* condone Muslim patriarchal sentiments, but still faults the film’s ploy of using romantic love. Yet romance in *Bombay* is almost reduced to a subplot, resolved in the first half of the film. A Muslim father and Hindu mother would not change the identity of the syncretically named hybrid twins (Kabeer Narayan and Kamal Basheer), whose fate becomes the focus in the film’s latter half. Furthermore, the charge that the film suggests that integration is accomplished in the private sphere is belied by the manner in which the eruption in the public sphere intrudes upon the supposedly safe haven of the family—here metonymic for a composite nation turning on itself.

Notwithstanding *Bombay*, a dominant trend for almost fifty years of Hindi cinema has been the omission of conflicts driven by community identity and a deliberate representation of communal fraternizing—*Amar, Akbar, Anthony*—style. Promoting a generic Pan-Indian identity, this tactic erases “difference,” especially between religious communities. What remains vital in this erasure, however, is maintaining “difference” of another kind—gender difference. Hindi cinema’s casting of “the traditional Indian woman” during the postindependence period is symbolic of a wishful desire to unite the nation around the figure of the woman and to repress the searing debates on identity and community.

If Hindi films routinely use romantic love to transcend all kinds of social schisms, in Guru Dutt’s film *Mr. and Mrs. 55* (1955), heterosexual love—or, more specifically, the modality regulating it—is thrown into crisis. The film raises the question of how female agency is expected to negotiate the private (love/marriage/family) and the public (legal/national/political) spheres. *Mr. and Mrs. 55* is unusual because Guru Dutt, canonized as a leading 1950s auteur for combining sharp social commentaries in his noir-like films, uses romantic comedy to depict a picaresque world of female anarchy and trouble.

The plot in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* deals with the infamous Hindu Code Bill, notoriously controversial in the public’s view because of a divorce clause granting women the right to annul a Hindu marriage, thereby transforming marriage from a sacrosanct, lifelong act to a legal, termi-

nable contract. As the film interrogates this bill it subjects it to merciless derision, employing romantic comedy as an effective cinematic genre to probe India's troubled gender politics. The film's narrative line manifests familiar symptoms of male anxiety about women repositioning themselves in society—symptoms that include publicly mocking women or trivializing and caricaturing their demands. Most insidious and effective of all, the film pits the misguided, “westernized,” “individualist” woman against the model, self-effacing, traditional woman, making the modernized woman finally learn the virtues of an “Indian” sensibility. An unlikely storyline is plotted in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* to indict women demanding legislative changes in the institution of marriage. Instead, the film affirms a deeply conservative version of marriage and man-woman relationships. In the process of this reaffirmation, the film mobilizes sentiments about both gender and class.

The women under siege in the film are at once upper-class, westernized, man-hating and money-minded. The film turns the Hindu Code Bill on its head, here referring to it as the “divorce bill”—a term assigned to it in popular parlance. Most interestingly, we get a glimpse of women never before seen in popular Hindi cinema: women getting organized, entering the public space, and bringing to it matters deemed personal and private. In the film *Anita* (Madhubala), the young heroine, is a rich young woman raised under the guardianship of her father's sister, Sita Devi (Lalita Pawaar). Sita Devi, an activist campaigning for the Hindu Code Bill, has become singularly devoted to the cause of women and their liberation. Her home provides a place for women's meetings; she is a public figure, organizes deputations to petition the government on behalf of women, and is recognized by members of the press. *Anita* finds herself impatient with her aunt and views the aunt as the demonized male-hating women's liberationist.

On her twentieth birthday *Anita* learns the terms of her father's will: She will inherit a sizable amount of property if she marries within a month. As the will explains, the father was aware of his sister's aversion to men, and he feared his daughter would be forced to remain single. Sita Devi decides to deal with the will's technicality through a legal counterstrategy. She finds a man, Pritam (played by the actor-director Guru Dutt himself), who is unemployed at the time, and arranges a reg-

istered marriage—that is, one that is to remain on paper alone. On the condition that the marriage remain a secret—that is, that Pritam does not seek to have intercourse with *Anita*—and that he be willing to divorce *Anita* on request, the aunt offers Pritam a monthly salary.

Pritam, already in love with *Anita* (although she is unaware of this), agrees to the marriage. To *Anita*, it appears he is in it for the money; initially she despises him for this. But Pritam refuses to cash his monthly check, attempting instead to win *Anita*'s love. When he fails, he responds with the malevolence of one spurned in love, letting *Anita* go by conjuring false evidence against himself so that Sita Devi can procure the divorce she desires in the court of law. The case proceeds under a floodlight of publicity, with the best lawyers and all the false evidence money can buy. Sita Devi expects to win the divorce case for her niece. *Anita* in turn wavers in her affection for Pritam, but when she finally learns the truth about her aunt's machinations to win the divorce case at all costs, she grows uncharacteristically defiant, challenges her aunt, and in the end successfully unites with Pritam, still rightfully her husband. The confrontation between the aunt and niece toward the film's end is unabashed in its misogynist raving, the dialogue rendering the film's conservative ideological underpinning transparent.

In a broad sense the film can be read as a clever, clairvoyant parable (recall the *Shah Bano* debacle) anticipating men's worst fears—that the new legislation permitting divorce and its incumbent system of alimony (“maintenance”) might open the floodgates to women's independence. Although the male protagonist receives “alimony,” he remains innocent; his complicity in a marriage of convenience remains uninterrogated because he refuses to accept financial support from his rich wife. In the first half of the film, Pritam also refuses to annul the marriage. For him, marriage means a lifelong contract. By refusing to cash the checks, the hero has the moral high ground. A significant aspect of this subtext is patriarchal culture's dreadful fear of alimony—having to pay up for institutions men could enter and exit with complete immunity. Herein lies the culture's lesson to all women, which the film states openly and unabashedly: a woman's place is to find happiness and love in marriage, circumstances notwithstanding.

The film skirts the chasm between Pritam's and real women's

circumstances in corresponding situations. While women's access to opportunities for employment and economic independence are acutely limited within Indian society, the film's narrative reshuffles these elements by making the male protagonist unemployed and therefore financially dependent. Pritam eventually finds employment as a newspaper subeditor. However, although his initial monetary lack gives way to financial power, there is a substantial class distance between him and Anita that continues even as financial developments avert his acute dependence on her.

By inverting traditional gender positions—setting up the woman as the one with means and the man in a state of penury, the converse of social reality—the film shifts attention onto a playful, imaginative scenario that although improbable is not altogether impossible. Such gender inversions in romantic comedy disrupt the “social hierarchy of male over female,” placing “the woman on top.”³⁶ The film's superb cast, entertaining gags, and comic interludes add to the general mood of irreverence generated against women of leisure. In a masterful oscillation between solemn conviction and lighthearted, disarming humor, we are asked to stretch our imagination, to envision alarming scenarios that any readjustment in the time-honored arrangement of Hindu marriage might provoke. And the film counterbalances this comedy with numerous moments when the air of frivolity is abandoned—moments when “serious” interventions are made to bring order into heterosexual relations supposedly thrown into turmoil by the anticipated effect of the new legislation and its reconfiguration of the man-woman relationship.

Now for a closer look at how the film depicts women getting organized. *Mr. and Mrs. 55* opens with a young newspaper boy's full-throated sales pitch: “*Assembly mein zordaar behas—‘talaq’ . . .*” (heated debate in the Assembly—divorce), which refers to the passing of the contentious 1955 Hindu Marriage Act. A crowd gathers, clamoring for the paper, and the camera follows a young bespectacled woman buying a copy. Soon after this opening scene, the camera pans to a meeting of a women's organization. In a few deft cuts, it singles out Sita Devi as she addresses a group of women, telling them of recent developments: in the past month the Women's Union sent a deputation to the government to lobby on behalf of the “divorce bill.” “You all know,” she de-

claims, “how important this bill is for women to gain self-respect in our patriarchal society where a woman's place is at her man's feet and she is expected to be happy as his slave.”

As she rails against women's oppression at the hands of men, the camera cuts to two women who sit inattentively and discuss various beauty treatments for the skin: orange peels versus milk cream. A third woman joins in after initially hushing them: “Try a mudpack,” she suggests. This satirical introduction to political issues is a quick summation and promise of what will follow in the film: the heavy-handed caricature of upper-class Indian women, their obsession with women's rights, and the specter of the “divorce bill.”

The film creates a scenario that mocks marriage as a contract—good today, void tomorrow; it valorizes eternal commitment and women's pleasure in subservience to men and marriage. Such issues were also phrased in this way in the political discourse of the time. In the widely publicized debates that occurred in the Legislative Assembly around the bill, Pandit L. K. Maitra from West Bengal contrasted his “humble wife married according to *shastric* rites . . . nurtured in the ideals



8. Women organizing in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* (Guru Dutt, 1955).

of our Hindu homes" with the women who supported the Hindu Code Bill. The latter he characterized as "the lavender lipstick and vanity bag variety."³⁷ Bajoria, another Assembly member, dismissed educated Hindu women as "butterflies with social affectations."³⁸ Even the then-President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, turned away a women's delegation lobbying for the bill on the grounds that he could not imagine his own wife supporting the divorce clause in the Hindu Code Bill.

The local media reacted against AIWC's "Indian Women's Charter of Rights," declaring it "represented the demands of a few overeducated women."³⁹ *Roshni*, the AIWC newsletter "complained bitterly" in June 1949 of being characterized as a "few educated women passing the same Hindu Code Bill resolution for thirteen years."⁴⁰ The strong hostility provoked by the "educated Indian woman" throughout this period is striking, suggesting a deeper sense of threat and fear. While the AIWC was faulted for being elitist and for failing to reach a wider base of lower-class women, the fact is that the men opposing the bill occupied the same elite strata; their locus standi—questionable on grounds of class and gender—strategically is never mentioned.

In *Mr. and Mrs. 55*, the young woman who buys a newspaper in the opening scene, Mona (the comic sidekick of the megalomaniac Sita Devi), informs the rustic, middle-aged house cleaner, "Nanny," that the "divorce bill" is going to pass. The house cleaner responds with sarcasm: "Well, go light up some oil lamps [and celebrate]. Night and day it's 'women's-liberation-and-the-crimes-of-men.' Is there anything beyond this that you women know?" Mona hushes her, reminding her of the imminent women's meeting. The maid responds in her brusque and nonchalant way: "The hell with your meetings! I am not afraid of anyone. God knows what's happened. Wherever one looks there's a meeting or a lecture. *Sab ke sab angrez ban gaye hain!* (Everyone's turned British!)." Nanny reiterates this every time she makes her brief appearance, leaving no doubt about her disdain for westernized, upper-class Indian women and their mimicry of the ex-colonizer. In doing so, she invokes a common insult, which oddly finds common usage among the already westernized.⁴¹ And such statements are often used to bludgeon the very idea of women autonomously organizing to fight politically for equal rights.

The press was divided on the issue of the Hindu Code Bill. The opposition staged demonstrations against the government each time it was debated during a parliamentary session.⁴² A smear campaign against the bill maintained that it promoted incest. Although female inheritance was the issue dealt with in the central clause, public attention and propaganda focused mainly on the issue of permitting divorce. This public furor does not appear in *Mr. and Mrs. 55*, but the film joins the bill's opponents in mocking any contractual or legalistic approach to marriage. In the plot, the series of events that build toward the initial climax clearly enunciate the film's perspective on the institutions of love, marriage, money, and class.

After the marriage is registered in court, Pritam defies the terms agreed to with Sita Devi. Disguised as the aunt's chauffeur, Pritam waylays Anita and takes her to his brother's house. Here they are greeted by his *bhabhi* (sister-in-law), a rustic village woman presented as the model woman and wife. She inquires if Anita is married yet. Pritam responds on Anita's behalf: "Not yet, and not for another twenty years. These are very wealthy people. They have a lot of money tucked away in their homes. . . . What do you know about these city girls? Unless there's a fat benefit involved, these women don't get caught in the hassles of marriage." Unwittingly the film script acknowledges the connection between marriage, money, and gender. Wealthy women don't really need to marry—not for financial security. The implicit threat that women with money pose is their lack of dependence on men; in a conservative way, the film subjects that threat to an open challenge. The film naturalizes the normative by postulating that the greatest pleasure for women lies in conjugal bliss. And in romantic comedy's inimitable style, heterosexual love in this film ultimately negotiates the difficult terrain of obstacles that are barriers to the couple's union. The woman's desire is the "principal object of comic transformation."⁴³

Anita's initial antagonism dissipates temporarily in the romantic interlude that follows when she responds to Pritam's overtures. In a convention that has become Hindi cinema's signature, the couple break into song. Anita's uncertainty, wavering affection, and dilemmas of the heart get settled, at least temporarily, when Sita Devi arrives. Infuriated by Pritam's impertinence, Sita Devi offers him ten thousand rupees

to release Anita. Pritam, still defiant, tears up the check and, assuming the role of Anita's protector, declares she will not leave against her wishes. But when Sita Devi pulls out a telegram Anita sent to summon her, a belittled and infuriated Pritam lashes out at her. He accuses Anita of conducting a charade. Then, filled with regret and sorrow, he berates himself for not knowing women like her better: "The likes of you butterflies cannot be trusted." Anita protests and storms out with her aunt. Thus begin the series of complications which the remaining narrative has to resolve.

The "butterfly" as a recurrent metaphor for "women of leisure" in popular discourse (recalling Assembly member Bajoria's dismissal of educated women as butterflies) distinguishes between normative and wanton womanhood. The butterfly metaphor evokes images of restless, flighty, colorful creatures who are difficult to pin down or control. Most important, the similitude admits compelling charm and captivating lure for the beholder. And herein lies the troubled relation Hindi cinema has with women, particularly the archetype of the westernized heroine. She entices with her alluring appearance but is hard to get. The challenge lies in conquering her, despite the hero's and the culture's disdain for her "inconstancy" and "capriciousness."

In *Mr. and Mrs. 55* this conquest occurs when the uptight woman is "brought to her senses." It happens in a last-minute reversal when multiple narrative complications and misunderstandings that separate Anita from Pritam dissolve. Anita realizes that her malevolent aunt's machinations have impeded her "true love" for Pritam. The initial oppositional desire of men and women in romantic comedy marks the woman as the narrative problem and tracks her progress toward "correct values . . . articulated and represented by the hero," and culminates in their union at the price of the woman's conversion.⁴⁴ This conservative aspect of the genre challenges assumptions about screwball comedy violating norms in the forwardness of its women and its non-sentimental, even combative courtships. If anything, the resolution in romantic comedy is remarkably conventional in that the ideology of love structures the woman's correct path. Heterosexual love, staunchly asserted as the "natural" channeling of female desire, is romantic comedy's *deus ex machina*, a "magic force" that defines rationality, like

fate in 1940s' noir.⁴⁵ Woman's rebellion in romantic comedy remains tolerated because it is short-lived and ultimately serves the hero's interests; the "unruly bride" is ultimately disciplined.⁴⁶ The "woman on top" in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* loses her grip and falls uncontrollably in love with the hero, who then, of course, takes firm charge of her.

No longer the irresolute young girl, Anita comes into her own and challenges her authoritarian aunt's ideology, politics, and personal style with uncharacteristic courage. The narrative pits these two women against each other and imposes its own well-defined ideology of class and gender. When Anita defiantly informs her aunt of her intention to meet Pritam on the eve of their divorce settlement, Sita Devi responds with alarm about its impact on the litigation.

SITA DEVI: The matter has reached the court, it has received publicity in the press. If you turn back now, it'll be very humiliating.

ANITA: Do preserve your sense of honor—even when someone's life is on the line! Whatever you do, you do for your own selfish interests. This leadership business is just about your ego. These illogical ideas you impose upon others are also for your own sense of honor.

SITA DEVI: My ideas are aimed at improving the lot of women. Everything I've learnt is based on experience.

ANITA: Then expand your experience! Instead of standing at the podium and turning your nose up at lower class women, go into their homes and see the pleasure an Indian woman derives from marital bliss.

SITA DEVI: Those illiterate women think of slavery as pleasure. What do they know about liberation? I will teach them about liberation and all I've learnt from women in America and Europe.

ANITA: A lot more can be learnt from them: to change one's husband four times like the change of seasons!

SITA DEVI: If an illiterate woman were saying this, I would understand. But an educated girl like you praising (women's) slavery is astounding.

ANITA: If finding pleasure in one's household chores, if keeping

one's family happy is called slavery, I'll praise such slavery a thousand times! The slavery in which a husband and wife love each other, respect one another, are concerned about each other's happiness, is better than your liberation, which has nothing more than hatred for men. . . . You always wanted my happiness. I have found my happiness. Why should it make you unhappy?

SITA DEVI: I warn you, one day, you'll return in misery.

ANITA: I'll never return to you!

The confrontation ends with Sita Devi locking Anita in her room to physically debar her from leaving.

Constructed as a dialogic encounter between the voice of the elite vanguard of the women's movement and the subaltern, "true" Indian woman, the exchange in fact takes place between two equally privileged women for whom the subaltern is a mere chip in the argument and on whose behalf both claim the right to speak. The most damning evidence, however, comes when Sita Devi admits to the Indian women's movement's relation to western imperial powers.

This is the weapon which indigenous patriarchy wields against women's assertion for rights and liberty—their complicity with the west. That argument against women's rights and autonomy conveniently represses the fact that the two preceding centuries of Indian history, struggle for national liberation, and assertion of a modern nation were predicated on ideas that were equally "western." Such an argument against women's rights brings us back full circle to the ideas of the nation, the Indian, and womanhood cast across the woman's body. In the years after national liberation, this argument prevailed legally not only because it positively defined the virtues of womanhood but also because it could clearly demarcate, distinguish, and mark the westernized Indian woman as horrific, malevolent, and capable of fomenting a fascist reign of terror—as in the caricatured representation of Sita Devi and her women's organization.

Kathleen Rowe invokes descriptions of comedy in terms of Northop Frye's "liberating a wilting world," Bakhtin's "carnavalesque," Victor Turner's "liminal" world, and C. L. Barber's "'green world' of festivity

and natural regeneration." But she also concedes that comedy expresses fears about what might happen if oppressed groups become liberated. Women in comedy can appear as "fearsome or silly, symbols of repression and obstacles to social transformation."⁴⁷ Sita Devi is the "eccentric woman" whose eccentricities relate to her high-class status.⁴⁸ In this she joins the ranks of a long list of spinsters, dowagers, prohibitionists, mothers-in-law, suffragettes, "battle-axes," career women, "women's libbers," and lesbians. In a way that is similar to Hollywood romantic comedy, Hindi films combine the figure of the rich woman with the educated westernized Indian woman, the "social butterfly," as the target of the misogynist hero's comedic aggression. Class and gender conflicts are rolled together as the struggle for women's rights itself becomes a fanciful pursuit for the leisured rich, a sign of female anarchy that the hero effectively contains.

Women's class status, visibility, and power that stem from material resources come under attack. The fact that they organize independently, free from male tutelage, becomes questionable, and with it comes the confounding question of "authenticity"—the impossibility for these women to represent or speak for all women. Such an interrogation of the Indian women's movement and its class domination points to a significant problem. Those who raise the question (in this case the celebrated filmmaker Guru Dutt), remain hidden in the margins, obscured within the text of their critique. The effectiveness of the film's narration lies precisely in the fact that the narrators using the filmic apparatus in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* can remain invisible, suppress their own class origins and their own stake in the viewpoint naturalized within a fictional narrative.

I have traced here the historical forces shaping archetypal Indian womanhood and reproduced endlessly in Hindi films. For more than a century now, the invention of the "new woman" has captured the Indian imagination, constantly reinvented according to the exigencies of the times. Although layers of meaning have accreted around the Indian woman figure over time, its foundation rests on establishing her difference from everything western. A sign for Indian tradition and culture, she is of course an interplay of Victorian and Brahminical ideas. The figure of the woman was first used as a symbol by nationalist

ideology to mobilize against imperialism, and later by majority and minority communities as a sign of community identity; ultimately it impinged on legal reform discourse, which sacrificed women's rights as equal subjects. Post-independence Hindi cinema denies communal differences by using the woman as a sign—a wishful desire for a utopian unified nation.

Chapter 3

Heroes and Villains

Narrating the Nation

IT IS ABUNDANTLY clear that Hindi cinema constantly narrows the gap between the public and the private by forcing connections between the nation and the family, bringing the former the same kind of affective relations of love that sustain the family. While Euro-American eruptions of melodrama during the interwar and postwar years are viewed as “dramatizing the retreat into the private sphere in the face of crisis within the public sphere,” in Hindi films these two spheres—family and “nation”—coalesce in the film hero's personal narrative.¹ The hero fights the nation's “enemies”—threats to the nation at the moment of the film's making. These enemies took the form of unprincipled profiteers in the 1950s, foreign aggressors in the 1960s, “smugglers” in the 1970s, separatist “terrorists” and politicians in the 1980s, and authoritarian patriarchs in the 1990s. While vanquishing enemies signifies the hero's passage to manhood, another battle, against the enemy within the family, marks his rite of passage.

Masculinity

Hindi cinema's narratives are unfailingly centered on a hero and heroine, who together constitute its fundamental templates in which masculinity is the flip side of femininity. Changes in masculinity in response