Of Devis, Devdaasis and Daayins: The Image of Women in Postcolonial Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

This paper will attempt to analyse the different images of women in Indian (Hindi) cinema from a broadly feminist perspective - 'broadly feminist' as there is no real feminist cinema theory in India. Nor is there a Feminist cinema. There are a few stray women film makers but they do not necessarily make feminist or even women oriented films. So at the best what may be essayed is a feminist viewing method.

Introduction

1 Cinema in India is a very powerful medium and influences image formation in the minds of the viewers. Although films are made in many Indian languages, it is films made in Hindi that have, for reasons historical and commercial, appropriated the label of 'Indian' cinema.

2 Although there is some alternative or art cinema in Hindi and most other Indian languages, it is marginal and commercially unviable. Hence the majority of films produced in India are mainstream and belong to the *masala* ('spicy'/commercial) genre. These films therefore generally reflect conservative social views. This is also true in the case of the image of women. Indian cinema has usually misrepresented women and imaged them in stereotypical terms of binary oppositions - the *devis* and the *devdaasis*. Additionally there are also the *daayins*.

3 In the *devi* - the goddess - category are the revered mothers, the demure sisters, the romanticized girlfriends and the devoted wives. In the *Devdaasi* - the fallen woman - group are the sensuous vamps, the courtesans and the common prostitutes. *Daayin* literally means a witch. Labeling wise, powerful women witches is a trait the male dominated Indian society shares with other societies where such women are/were feared too. More generally such a term could also be applied to any transgressive woman who flouts male dictated societal norms and charts her own trajectories, both personal and public. Almost inevitably she has to suffer for this independence and is penalized by society.

4 Among these stereotypes and demonisations, the 'real' Indian woman is often lost or ignored. However, some Indian films have sought to present a more realistic view of the Indian woman. Some of these films have actually represented women in a radical mode and even explored the question of female sexuality and lesbianism.

5 This paper will attempt to analyse the different images of women in Indian (Hindi) cinema from a broadly feminist perspective - 'broadly feminist' as there is no real feminist cinema theory in India. Nor is there a Feminist cinema. There are a few stray women film makers but they do not necessarily make feminist or even women oriented films. So at the best what may be essayed is a feminist viewing method.

6 Indian cinema has a long history that goes back to the late Nineteenth Century and the first feature film made in India was ***Raja Harishchandra*** by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913. However, the focus of this paper is Postcolonial Indian cinema from the 1950s to the end of the 1990s. India became a free nation in the year 1947 and became a republic with the adoption of a constitution in 1950. The first general elections were held in 1952. Hence the 50's decade became the definitive years for the marking out of the parameters of Postcolonial Indian cinema. These were the years when the major film-makers of independent India first began to make films - Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt and Satyajit Ray.

7 These were also the years in which the newly independent nation was seeking to image itself in its own mould rather than in the Orientalist mode of the West. These were then also the years of the imaging of the nation. During the Nationalist period the nation had already been imaged as a mother-goddess - the benevolent Durga, as well as the militant Shakti. These are some of the manifestations of the Indian god of destruction, Shiva's spouse, Paravati.

I

8 The mythification of the nation was given an enduring iconic image in the 1957 film ***Mother India*** (*Producer and Director: Mehboob Khan*) . This film also confirmed the nation-mother pairing. Made in the aftermath of the bloody partitioning of colonial India into India and Pakistan along Hindu and Muslim lines - a binary opposition rejected by Indian nationalists - this film also reasserted the essentially secular nature of Indian cinema. The director and producer of this film Mehboob Khan was a Muslim, as were the script and dialogue writers. Even more importantly the titular heroine - Mother India - herself was a Muslim. Nargis was then at the end of her career as a romantic star and ***Mother India*** gave her the opportunity of proving herself as an actress. This film, however, not only enabled Nargis to prove her histrionic talents but also gave her a husband in the form of the debutant actor Sunil Dutt - a Hindu - who played her younger son in the film. This added an intriguing angle of 'incest' to the intense relationship between the on-screen mother and son. A fact that was not lost on the audience and provided a certain 'frisson' that added to the tremendous box-

office success of this film.

9 ***Mother India*** is the story of Radha, who is first presented to the audience as a very old woman and the entire film then folds back in a long flashback. This film had impressed the new-born Indian nation across the body of Radha. She is an intriguing metaphor for a Gandhian-Nehruvian India. Gandhi, the London trained barrister, had envisioned an India that lived in her villages and looked suspiciously upon modern technology. Nehru, who had a science degree from the University of Cambridge, on the other hand, nurtured dreams of a technologically advanced India. For Nehru the temples of Modern India were her new dams and hydro-electric projects that would irrigate the water parched Indian earth and feed her hungry millions.

10 ***Mother India*** opens with the titles superimposed against the background of tractors and dams. Nehru's dream of dams that took water to India's villages is about to come true and it is Radha who is persuaded by the villagers to pull the switch that turns the water on. The reluctant woman does this and then muses upon the long journey she and her village had undertaken to reach that state of technological advancement and imminent self-sufficience.

11 Radha had come to the village as a breathtakingly beautiful young bride. Her smitten husband had flouted conservative norms to openly woo his wife. Radha proved to be an ideal wife in the mould of the mythical goddess Sita, the wife of the Hindu god Rama. She had none of the coquettish qualities of the beloved Radha, of the other Hindu god Krishna - a later incarnation of Vishnu. Radha's stint as a young beloved ended very quickly as she gave birth in quick succession to two sons and a daughter. Famine stalked the village as the rains failed and Radha's husband who was already indebted to the usurious village money-lender gets deeper and deeper into debt. This rural indebtedness and the resultant bonded labour was portrayed by many Indian film makers of early postcolonial India, including Bimal Roy in his internationally acclaimed ***Do Bheega Zamin*** (*Two Acres of Land*, 1953). To pay off the moneylender, Radha and her husband take on the task of clearing a fallow piece of land that belonged to the family. It is from this point in the film that Radha properly begins to metamorphose into a Brechtian Mother Courage type of figure. In the Indian context she ceases to be the docile Sita - the spouse of Ram, a manifestation of the Hindu god Vishnu - and takes on the indomitable qualities of the Hindu god of destruction, Shiva's, spouse Durga.

12 Since the family's bullocks have already been impounded by the money-lender, She yokes herself to the plough with her husband as they try to break the rocky soil of the fallow field. The film maker, Mehboob Khan, has here deliberately created iconic images linking Radha to the soil, as an earth goddess. This image is then repeated at important points in the

film. The clearing of the field ends in tragedy and the husband loses both his arms when a huge boulder they were trying to shift, falls on him.

13 The woes of Radha are now increased and she has to look after a helpless husband and tend the fields. As she grows in strength and stature, though still beautiful, she is increasingly imaged in desexed mother terms. As Shoma Chatterji has put it, when a woman is at the center of the narrative she is generally desexed.[1] As a mother she has power but this is at the cost of her femininity. In fact, being a mother is not really a position of power in Indian society, it is instead used to debar a woman from responsibility in the public sphere. The ideology of motherhood justifies a woman's existence only in the context of her producing children and that too of the male gender.

14 As Radha tries to survive and feed her children, the money lender, now that her husband has disappeared, tries to lure her into his arms with promises of waiving her debts. Radha the still upright wife is enraged and in an almost melodramatic scene, covered with mud from the flooding river, upbraids the lecherous man. Here once more Radha is the earth goddess figure and also the avenging Kali, the more dangerous incarnation of Durga.

15 In scenes of epic endeavour Radha stops the villagers from leaving the flood-devastated village. She urges them not to abandon the mother earth, thereby herself becomes associated in their minds with it. Under her care the earth now flourishes and she raises her sons to manhood - the daughter having died in the floods. Now the narrative takes an interesting twist and Radha is called upon to make one more sacrifice for the greater good. Her elder son is an epitome of the new educated, Indian youth but the younger one is a rebel. Birju, rejects education and refuses to meld into the new India where the old injustices of rural indebtedness continued unabated. The money lender is still the serpent in the postcolonial Eden of India. Birju is also unabashedly cast in the mould of the god Krishna- yet another manifestation of Vishnu - who was the love object of thousands of *gopikas*, milkmaids. Birju is also fiercely protective of his mother and the off-screen romance of the mother-son pair added, as mentioned earlier, a further edge to their on-screen portrayal.

16 Notwithstanding her intense love for Birju, Radha, in her image as Mother of the village, cannot stand by and see her son kidnap and ravish a village girl. In a frenzied rage she shoots him down thereby once again displaying great courage and Kali-like qualities.

17 This iconic image of Mother India created by Mehboob Khan and brought to life by Nargis has continued to haunt the Devi-obsessed film makers of later decades and countless

[1] Shoma Chatterji. *Subject:Cinema, Object:Woman, The Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. Parumita Publications, Calcutta, 1998.

Indian actresses have essayed the roles of ideal, inspirational mothers. Such films have generally been lapped up by the patriarchal Indian society that salves its conscience on the count of gender injustice by deifying its mothers and sisters.

18 Two of the other more remarkable and successful larger-than-life Mother roles were played by the superstar of the 1970s Sharmila Tagore and the character artiste Nirupa Roy in the 1980s in ***Aradhana*** (*The Prayer*, 1970), and ***Deewar*** (*The Wall*, 1975) respectively. When ***Aradhana*** was made in 1970, Sharmila Tagore was already a star but her male lead, Rajesh Khanna, had still to become the Super star that he did after this film.

19 Tagore played the role of Vandana in ***Aradhana*** from the time she was the beautiful young sweetheart of an air force officer, to the time she became an old woman, the mother of a son who also becomes an air force pilot. Her saga is one of courage and sacrifice but she does not have the iconic, historical and political dimensions of a Radha. History is not written across her body. She is objectified and her iconisation in the later half of the film is at the level of the personal and not the political.

20 The mother in ***Deewar*** is a more political figure. This 1975 film starred the Superstar of the 1980s Amitabh Bachhan. But Nirupa Roy as the mother had a very powerful, pivotal role. This film was made when Mrs. Indira Gandhi the then Prime Minister of India had declared a state of internal Emergency and suspended the Indian Constitution and the Fundamental Rights of all Indian citizens. Mrs. Gandhi was at that time being imaged in iconic terms as Mother India and the all-powerful Goddess Durga, by the media and even artists and writers.

21 Nirupa Roy is the archetypal Mother, Sumitra Devi, in this film. Like Radha in Mother India, she is left alone by an absconding husband to raise her two sons. Like the sons in that earlier film, Ravi (played by Shashi Kapoor) and Vijay (played by Amitabh Bachhan) are two sides of the dark and light opposition. Sumitra loves Vijay more than she loves Ravi but in her social role as the upholder of values she gives up the beloved son. Vijay becomes an underworld don and Ravi a police officer. Like ***Mother India***, ***Deewar*** too is narrated in a flashback and is framed by the award-ceremony at which Ravi is decorated for bringing the criminal Vijay to justice. It was Sumitra who had encouraged Ravi to hunt down Vijay. Having done this, however, she had resumed the role of the loving mother and gone to keep her rendezvous with her erring son at a temple. It is there that a wounded Vijay finally died in his mother's lap. M.Madhava Prasad has observed that '***Deewar*** dramatizes the relations between the contractual, law-abiding society and its subterranean, criminal obverse, through a masochistic scenario in which the hero's movement towards death becomes a fantasy

resolution of the impossible desire for reunion with the mother's body'.[2]

22 While the mother figure predominates in the Devi stakes in the Indian cinema, other Devi-figures such as the demure sister and the dutiful wife also find ample representation. The Indian actresses most intimately associated with the sister figure were the actresses Nanda in the 1950s, Naaz and Farida Jalal in the 1960-70s. With the advent of action-packed films in the 1980s with anti-heroes, the sister figure has gone into an eclipse. But Nanda is still linked in the popular imagination with her titular role of ***Choti Bahen*** (*The Younger Sister*) a mid-fifties film in which she had played the sister who is doted upon by the brother. Though the films of the later decades did not iconise the sister a 'rakhi-song'[3] was almost de rigueur in most films of this period. If Nanda epitomized Indian sisters, the wives were most ably imaged by Meena Kumari and Nutan.

23 As the dutiful wife these women silently bore the injustices and infidelities of their husbands and emerged in patriarchal eyes as ideal wives. In ***Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*** (*Master, Mistress and Slave*) produced in 1962, Meena Kumari played the role of the *Choti Bahu*, the younger daughter-in-law, of a feudal family in Bengal. Her debauched husband ignores her and spends most of his time at the house of a prostitute. To win him back she employs the most extreme ploys and even agrees to drink alcohol with him - taboo to the traditional Hindu woman. Soon she becomes an alcoholic and her husband turns away from her in horror and disgust - a classic case of double standards. Ultimately she commits suicide.

24 Nutan was the other archetypal wife who suffered the most unimaginable horrors but did not utter a word against her husband - her lord. A versatile actor who had in the 1950s portrayed more realistic women, Nutan in the 1970s and 80s did a series of almost reactionary films such as ***Devi*** (1970) which were big hits with the audience. The men applauding the ideal wife and women empathizing with the suffering of the celluloid devi.

II

25 The power of cinema to create images that hold audiences in thralldom is even more evident in the case of the stereotype of the *devdaasi* - the woman dedicated to the service of the lord. In earlier times these women had a certain status in Indian society and were

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[2] M. Madhava Prasad. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

[3] A *rakhi* is a symbolic silken thread tied by sisters on the right wrists of their real or adopted brothers. Through this gesture the sister seeks the 'protection' of the brother, who by letting her tie the *rakhi* on his hand promises to protect her. This protection continues even after the sisters have been married and leave their parental homes. In a social system where a woman used to have no legal rights to the property of either her father or her husband, this was a good method of providing some degree of security to the woman.

dedicated to the temples where they performed dances in honour of the presiding deity. They thus became the custodians of the societal heritage of dance and music. Today however their position has degenerated and they are no more than glorified prostitutes who live shadowy lives in the courtyards of the big temples - at the beck and call of powerful head priests and secular patrons of the temple.

26 The Indian cinema has been fascinated by the figure of the *devdaasi* - used as an umbrella term for all kinds of courtesans and prostitutes - from its early years. This is possibly because as Maithili Rao has put it, the film maker has total control over the body of such a woman. He can even more easily eroticise her and reduce her to a passive sex object than he can the other categories: 'The space in which [such a woman] is filmed, the way her body is fractured and is commodified into an object for the overwhelmingly male gaze, all thrust her even more irrevocably into depths of involuntary thraldom'.[4]

27 Indian cinema's date with the *devdaasi* first took place in the year 1924, when Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer Indian film maker, made ***Kanya Vikray*** (*Selling of Girls*). There were several other silent films too on the subject of prostitution such as ***Devdasi*** (1925) and ***Midnight Girl*** (1929).

28 Postcolonial Indian cinema generally sympathized with the whore figure and there were a spate of films in the 1950s and 1960s that revolved around the central character of a prostitute. Prominent among them are Guru Dutt's ***Pyaasa*** (*The Thirsty One*, 1957) and Kamal Amrohi's ***Paakeeza*** (*The Pure One*, 1971). A more recent film in this genre is Muzzafar Ali's ***Umrao Jaan***, (1981), which was a splendidly mounted film in which the title role of the legendary courtesan of Nineteenth Century Lucknow, was played by the then reigning queen of the Hindi cinema, Rekha.

29 Guru Dutt's ***Pyaasa*** is a film that is critical of the exploitation of the prosititute. Waheeda Rehman, for whom Dutt nursed a grand passion in real life, played the role of the young prostitute Gulabo. The role of the hero Vijay was played by Dutt himself. Dutt had also cast his real-life wife, Geeta, an extremely talented play-back singer[5] in Hindi films, in a cameo role of a traveling street singer in this film. In a very intriguing and erotic scene in this film, Geeta Dutt, sings a song about the divine love of the Hindu God Krishna and his beloved Radha. The love of Radha and Krishna is an example of the metaphysical union of the temporal and the divine. As Gulabo listens to the song her face and body reveal her

[4] From 'To be a Woman', Mailthi Rao, in *Frames of Mind:Reflections on Indian Cinema*, edited by Aruna Vasudev, UBSPD, Delhi,1995.

[5] Most main-stream Indian films have at least 6-8 songs each. In the early days of Indian cinema these songs were sung by the actors themselves. However, by the 1940s, playback singers became the norm and the songs were recorded by these trained and talented singers and the actors merely lip-synced the numbers on screen.

intense desire for Vijay and the cinematic sub-text of the real-life romantic triangle of Waheeda-Guru-Geeta was not lost on the then audience. This sub-text is further intensified in the film where Vijay loves Meena a college girl who marries a rich publisher and Gulabo the street-prostitute loves Vijay.

30 Vijay's interest in Gulabo is more intellectual and social than physical and his sensitive soul rebels against the manner in which society treats prostitutes. In yet another famous scene from this film, Vijay and his friends visit another prostitute and as she dances her sick baby begins crying from an inside room. The dilemma of the woman as she listens to her baby's screams and its juxtaposition against the frenzied beat of the *tabla* to which she dances, becomes a comment on the hapless state of such women. However, neither Gulabo nor the other prostitutes have agency in this film. They are mere bodies over which the male dominant society writes its own narratives.

31 Umrao Jaan on the other hand is a woman who grew in stature and became a legend. Although equally shunned by a moralistic society she ultimately wrested control of her life from the pimps who controlled her earnings and wrote herself into history and culture. Her narrative is written against the backdrop of India's first war of independence - what British historians called The Indian Mutiny of 1857.

32 Lucknow was the seat of the Nawabs of Avadh and its rich syncretic culture - a blend of the Hindu and the Muslim - was typified by its last ruler Wajid Ali Shah. Shah was deposed by the British and during the battles of 1857, much of Lucknow was destroyed. Ali's film has traced the life of its eponymous heroine, Umrao Jaan, against this backdrop. The film is partly based on the novel, ***Memories of Umrao Jaan Ada***, by the Urdu novelist Mohammed Hadi Ruswa.

33 Umrao is kidnapped as a little girl and sold into prostitution. The woman who owns her, trains her as a dancer and singer. Gradually Umrao also begins composing poetry and soon becomes a famous courtesan. Her earnings and her life are however still not under her own control. Umrao makes several abortive to escape the *Kotha* - the House of Dancing Girls - with the help of different male admirers. Finally it is the chaotic conditions of the revolt against British rule that help Umrao get away from Lucknow. She goes back to her native village but it is too late to reclaim her old life. In a beautifully etched scene her mother watches her from a distance but is reluctant to claim her, fearing social ostracism. Umrao then decides to strike out on her own and on the strength of her reputation as a poet, she draws men to her *mehfils* - soirees. She is finally to some extent at least, an independent woman in control of her self and her money.

34 In spite of having a certain degree of agency, the depiction of Umrao Jaan is rooted in materiality rather than ideology. For the film maker whether he is a Guru Dutt or a Muzaffar Ali, a prostitute-oriented film is for the predominantly male Indian audience an opportunity for vicarious erotic satisfaction. This makes the box office registers tinkle all the louder.

III

35 As for the *Daayins*, the transgressive women, most Indian films are rather ambivalent about them. In a male-oriented world, the binary opposition of Madonna-whore is clear enough. You worship the one and exploit the other. But what do you do with the woman who refuses to play these roles? It is the *Daayins*, the independent minded, rebellious women with traditional and new knowledge, who threaten the social order where women have occupied certain men ordained positions and been re-presented and imaged through the prism of the male gaze.

36 Since a woman has been traditionally imaged in Indian cinema as a wife, the transgressive woman generally splits herself away from this image and is then in the main penalized for this act of rebellion. The earliest imaging of the transgressive woman was V. Shantaram's ***Duyniya Na Maane*** (*The World Does Not Approve*, 1937). Here the woman Nirmala is the wife-turned-rebel, but her transgressions against the image of the dutiful, husband right or wrong kind of woman, are framed within the male-approved schema of wifely duties and societal expectations. However, critics have also read Nirmala's willing participation in rituals for the well-being of her no-good husband as a double edged sword.[6] These rituals become empowering as they give women an opportunity to develop a sisterhood and provide the succor of woman-talk and advice to desperate women.

37 In more recent years, the Canada-based woman film-maker Deepa Mehta's film ***Fire*** (1996) has tackled the theme of lesbianism among dissatisfied urban Indian wives. This film won several international awards but caused a furor at screenings in India. The Hindu fundamentalist political parties organized demonstrations against the film and what they considered a blot on Indian culture and womanhood. The objections though were centred on how could the women in the film turn away from their husbands. The sub-text was also clearly focused on why should women neglected by their husbands look for sexual satisfaction. The male nurtured mythos of Indian womanhood has always elided female sexuality.

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[6] See Maithili Rao, 'The Woman as Rebel', Indian Film Scene, The Journal of Federation of Film Societies of India, May 1993, pp 19-20.

38 So the two women in the film Radha and Nita, according to the guardians of Indian culture, had no right to seek physical satisfaction with one another. These women were married to two brothers. Radha the elder woman's husband deprived his wife of sex on the pretext of being a spiritual person above such physical concerns. Nita's husband had a mistress and had no time for his wife. Gradually the women seek solace in one another's arms. The film sees the women's turning towards lesbianism as a natural corollary of male neglect. Being cloistered at home by a conservative society they had no other outlet for their sexual desires. This is also a deliberate turning away from men and seeking of autonomy in the world of women. At the end of the film the two women leave their home and attempt to make a life for themselves on their own. The woman film-maker leaves the ending wide open but there is a ray of hope for the women who just might succeed in their endeavour in the urban anonymity of Delhi, where the film is set.

39 Prakash Jha's ***Mrityudand*** (1997) is, however, set in the badlands of rural Bihar. The state of Bihar is in North India and is notoriously conservative in its treatment of women. In the last couple of decades it has also acquired a reputation for political and social lawlessness and caste wars. The transgressions of the two sisters-in-law in this film are thus played out against a very different and more threatening backdrop. The elder sister-in-law Chandravati (Shabana Azmi plays this role as she does the role of the elder sister-in-law Radha in Fire) is unjustly accused of being a barren woman, with all the stigma attached to such a state in rural India. In reality this is a mask to protect her impotent husband. The husband Abhay Singh to overcome the trauma and sorrow of his childless (read sonless) condition, becomes more and more involved in matters spiritual and finally becomes the head of the village temple and monastry. This naturally upsets Chandravati tremendously and she becomes seriously ill. The family sends her to the city for medical treatment. She is escorted there by the former lower caste family retainer, Rambharan, who is now a successful businessman in his own right. Rambharan has always nurtured a passion for Chandravati and in the more liberal atmosphere of the city, where nobody knows their antecedents, the couple become lovers and Chandravati conceives a child. She is overjoyed at proof that she is after all not a barren woman.

40 In a gesture of tremendous defiance she decides to keep the child and returns to the village. When asked by her younger sister-in-law, Ketaki (played by the superstar of the 1980s Madhuri Dixit) about whose child it was, the older woman simply says: mine. Chandravati's rebellion had initially been inspired by the brash courage of the young, educated Ketaki. But she soon overtakes her younger sister-in-law in the breaking of social taboos.

41 The rebellious women have to also deal with the criminalisation of Bihari society/politics and lose their husband and lover to criminal, political elements in the village. The end of the film finds both of them pregnant and alone but courageous and positive of the future.

42 At one level this seems to be a very bold film where transgressive women are allowed to survive but a closer viewing makes it apparent that Jha, in spite of his credentials as a revolutionary film maker, has slyly played up to the conservative sentiments of his audience. Mrityudand was a box-office success and this was due to the Madonna like image of the two women at the end of the film. By virtue of their impending motherhood their earlier transgressions are almost forgiven them and even their father-in-law gives them his blessings and approval.

Conclusion

43 This paper has attempted to give an overview of the principal stereotypical images of women that govern Indian cinema. It is not a complete survey as there are many other films in which the female protagonists fit into the categories of Devis, Devdaasis and Daayins, however the films focused upon in each category are fairly representative of their kind and should lead the reader into investigating further into the imaging and re-presenting of women in the Indian celluloid world.