



# cinema Images of Women in Hindi Cinema Post 1950's

by Shabana Azmi

BEGIN WITH A QUOTE FROM noted filmcritic Aruna Vasudev. "It is no coincidence that the first Indian film was a mythological. The moral education of all but the thinnest layer of affluent, westernised looking Indians is derived from the epics. These stories, despite liberal doses of miracles and fantasy, are no fairy tales easily told and forgotten. They still have a living reality and a dominant say in the conduct of daily life today."

Unfortunately for the women of India, the example of Sita as the perfect wife acquiescing unquestioningly to her husband's rejection of her has been held up as the ideal for any woman to follow. Taken in conjunction with Manu — the law giver, the average woman in India has had no opportunities to become anything more than the role to which she has been restricted as daughter, wife and mother. In chapter 9 verse 3 of the *Manu Smriti*, Manu is quoted as saying: "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman does not deserve freedom. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, sons. She must always be cheerful, clear in the management of her household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, economical in expenditure. Him, to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father's permission, she shall obey as long as he lives and when he is dead, she must not insult his memory." With these few lines women were condemned for 2000 years to a life of eternal subjection. Tradition required it, today the cinema enthusiastically upholds it. In film after film we see these values reiterated, underlined and reinforced.

To the weight of this tradition is added a middle class morality which makes a sharp distinction between woman as wife and mother, and woman as mistress and lover. Subscribing to the predominantly orthodox views of the large majority of audiences rather than acknowledge the reality of woman's growing influence and contribution to society, film makers generally prefer perceptions of the status of women which perpetuate male domination in society. As such, these portrayals reflect the society not so much as it is evolving as the way they may wish it to remain.

Popular cinema creates instant mythologies for uncritical consumption and not histories of credible people. The heroine is cast in two moulds: a) The all-forgiving, self-sacrificing wife/ The virtuous upholder of morality, the nurturing mother; b) The 'other' woman — vamp, titillating siren/ Courtesan with a heart of gold.

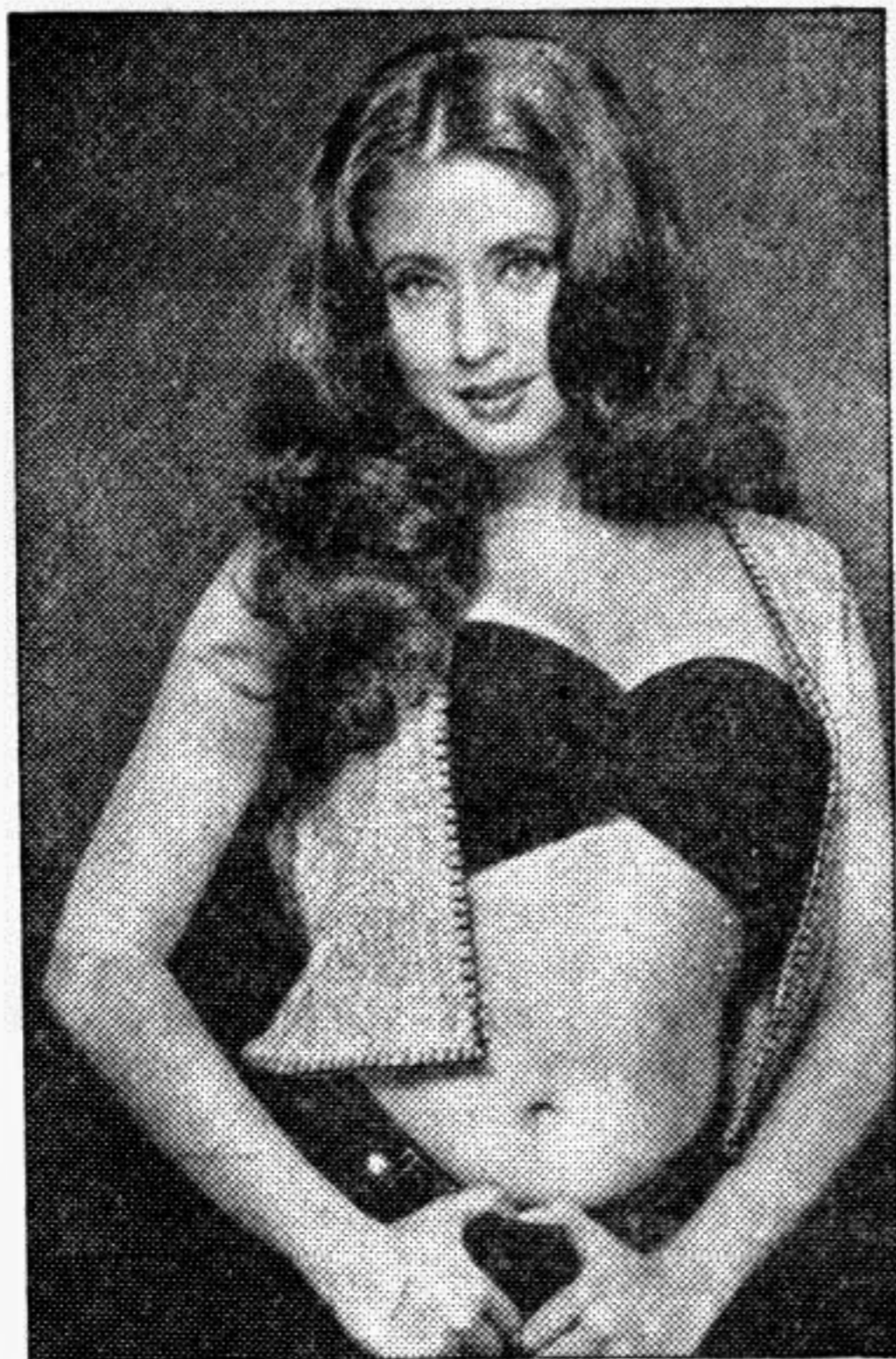
Hindi cinema in the 1980's and 1990's has not really progressed beyond these cardboard stereotypes. Like noted film critic Maithili Rao says, "The true archetypes of popular cinema are only two. First is the *Mother India's* matri-

arch who is the upholder of "dharma" and the true emotional centre of the hero's life. The second is *Pakeezah*, the romanticised apostrophe to woman as the pathetic impossible innocent 'other' to be rescued from the penumbra of social opprobrium. Every *Tawaif* and her cousin is descended from *Pakeezah* and is a man's reflection of pale, derived poetic pathos and every mother sternly casting out her son, is Mother India's daughter."

Radha, as portrayed by Nargis in *Mother India* is a truly iconic archetype in the sense that she is simple, strong and stern without the complexity that assails most modern individuals. Mother India's appeal is not only emotional and dramatic as the nurturing mother who stoically faces every adversity heaped on her. From tender bride to respected matriarch, her whole identity and purpose in life is nurturing her children. She is conceived as the enforcer of *Dharma*. The two sons are obviously derived from the two mythical heroes — Rama and Krishna. The younger Birju is the dark prankster with a penchant for dispensing rough and ready justice. And it is the passionate Birju that the mother loves most. But this conflict between duty and love is not allowed to cloud her judgement or impede the inevitability of her action. Mother India's path is sternly and immutably fixed.

Over the years it was easy to make this potent image with all its uncomplicated simplicity and apply it to an urban, contemporary setting as in *Dwaar*, *Agneepath* and *Khalnayak*. The mother figure has a prominent place in the cast of characters of most Hindi films, none of which ever speaks of a relationship between mother and daughter. Even with the sons, it is not so much a relationship that is explored or portrayed as the deification of the mother. Self-sacrificing, maligned and victimised by fate or the husband, she is shown as indestructible when it comes to protecting her sons. Since the heroine is strait-jacketed into a chaste wife whose suffering can only make her more virtuous, she can never assert her sexuality. No real relationship can develop with a wife who is a potential mother/goddess and must be a pure and sexless creature. With whom, then can a man have a satisfying relationship, physical and emotional? The courtesan has been a significant figure in classical Indian literature and until the 1970's, a staple diet of the Hindi films. Since she is forever excluded from the pale of domesticity, she can answer his physical needs, later to his fantasies (unlike the wife whose purpose is to procreate). Of course he may not fall in love with her, but inevitably her heart is lost to him. She provides solace, a haven when he recovers from his sorrows — he goes away or she conveniently swallows a diamond and dies.

The cultivated *Tawaif* is not merely a



pathetic victim of male lust. Around her is a cluster of myths and romantic yearning, of neatly labelling woman as the exciting 'other' and the wife as boring in her virtue. She is the melancholic music of romantic poetry, the graceful arbiter of courtly manners, the siren who lures with song and dance. She was different from the vamp of Indian cinema. The vamp from Hindi cinema, a popular figure from 1950's onwards becomes a staple diet in the film of the 1960's and early 1970's. The vamp was seen as an outsider, a home breaker who could display wanton sexuality on the screen. This display of sexuality was restricted to certain spaces of the Hindi screen, for example, the night clubs, the bar, the casino etc. These were moral spaces associated with the West, which through our own history of colonialism, were seen as evil. The association



of sexuality with the West had the effect of denying Indian women their own sexuality. The vamp was thus contrasted with the heroine of Hindi cinema, a woman who was virtuous, chaste, pure and spiritual. Helen played an extremely important role in the films of the 1960's as she was able to carry the Western image very easily.

In the cinema of the 90's, we see that vamp, who was crucial to the narrative of earlier cinema, has almost disappeared from the screen. This exit has been significant and is being seen with both fear and concern since the heroine of the 90's also carried within her the image of the vamp. New levels of permissiveness have obliterated the strictly enforced divide between the heroine and the vamp. The rigid dress code has disappeared. Today's heroine

dances with the seductive abandon of a *hour* as the camera routinely zooms in on one body part or the other. Her titillating purpose done, she usually dons a demure sari towards the end as she attains the "highly desirable" wife status.

The conflation of the heroine and the vamp of yesteryears into a single image of the heroine is disturbing many because the question of sexuality which was essentially seen as wantonness associated with the West and thus outside of Indian culture, is no longer being seen as something to be rejected. The heroine of today seems to be questioning the image of fixing the heroine into a slot where any display of desire was seen as negative and unlike the values of Indian women (with exception like *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* — Meena Kumari asserts her sexuality and demands that her husband stay back with her and takes to alcohol... ultimately dies tragically).

While the new image questions the moral codes that operated on the heroine of yesteryears, it would be wrong to celebrate this change uncritically. The business of films is to create the more potent its mythical seemingly indestructible life. The film image ostensibly celebrates the heroine's eroticism, while reducing her to a passive sex object. Much as one might wish to argue that Karishma Kapoor (in the clip shown) seems to be an active participant rather than a passive recipient of Govinda's lust — the fact cannot be denied that she is being subjected to the male gaze. The *Choli Ke Peeche* number, while ostensibly celebrating a woman's early sexuality is filmed in a way — where her body is fragmented into heaving bosom, swinging hip, bare midriff — commodifies her into an object for the overwhelming male gaze and robs her of all autonomy over her body.

The change that is taking place in the women of the Hindi cinema is a confused one — whereas the earlier films like *Main Chup Rahungi* (I will remain silent — being considered a virtue in itself) are giving way to a different female protagonist — the avenging angel *Zakhme Aurat*, *Sherni*, *Insaf Ki Devi* etc inevitably show a female vigilante sworn to vengeance after the trauma of rape. Do these films offer any insights into the complexities of what it means to be a woman? It is only a cosmetic change. First we had Rambos, now we have Rambolinas — men in drag wearing figure-hugging leather jeans, with a gun in one hand, purely imitating the cardboard one dimensional hero!

It was left to the parallel cinema to give women their due. The attempt of the *new wave* cinema was to situate women in real life conditions as social beings and not as either objects of display or servile, static creatures. The agenda of the *new wave* were directed against the main stream and thus a spate of films emerged with strong women characters. Films like *Ankur*, *Bhoomika*, *Nishant*, *Manthan* etc became well known for their strong women characters. While the women of these films were no doubt strong, they were limited in their agenda by the politics of realism that was a major influence on the *new wave* cinema. In attempting reality on the screen, the film makers were always restricted by the oppressive conditions that prevented women from attaining any kind of freedom in society. The *new wave* was, thus, marked by a series of compromises that the women always made and was justified in the name of "reality" (e.g. *Manthan*, *Bhoomika*). The women thus never ceased to be victims of society in the *new wave* barring exceptions like *Mirch Masala*, sections of *Mandi* etc. In urban situations, the dominant narrative became an exploration of the woman's self rather than situating women in their social context — this turning the quest for women's freedom into a struggle within the private sphere alone. The women, having an affair with a man other than her husband, being seen as an ultimate act of feminist revolt e.g. *Ek Pal*, *Paroma*, *Dristi* etc.

It is, however, becoming amply evident that society and cinema can no longer close their eyes to the changing Indian woman. Self-assured, confident women are starting to break out of the economic dependence that had for so long held them in thrall. In a society in transition, the rigidity of part norms cannot be maintained.

But who is this new woman? How much liberty can she be "granted" without threatening the very basis of a patriarchal order? What aspect of her personality should be highlighted? Even if a daring premise is taken, isn't it safer to stay with a resolution that is conformist?

A hero is the personification of contemporary morality and aspirations till such time as society can work out what this new woman is all about. The transformation of stereotypes with icons will continue to be confused.

In a situation where stereotypes play such an important role in defining the way we make sense of the world, it is clear that a pure space outside the stereotype is difficult to imagine. Thus the quest for women's representation on the screen should move beyond just a critique of stereotyping of a more complex dialogue and debate about the plurality of women's imagery — a plurality that needs to recognise that women's representation cannot be seen as only a 'positive' or negative image but as an arena of contesting voices and faces. It is finally up to us to recover the resistant voices/moments within this area.

About the writer: Shabana Azmi is a leading Indian film star and human rights activist. Shabana read this paper at the three-day Fifth South Asia Dialogue organized by Centre for Policy Dialogue held on 25-27 February, 1997 at Rajendrapur, Bangladesh.

## performing art Women in Indian Dance

by Sonal Mansingh

THE TRADITION OF PERFORMING arts in India has been dominated by women. As signers, dancers and actresses, women lent grace, beauty and rainbow dimensions to art and culture. Festivals, marriage, celebrations of every kind, varied events of everyday life were never complete without the presentations song and dance usually performed by women. More specifically, dance or *Nritya* which was an amalgam of music, poetic texts of great myths, legends and philosophical concepts sat on the apex of cultural values that informed and shaped successive civilisations across the Indian sub-continent.

The oldest known Indian text on the theatre, the *Bharata Nattya Shashtra* speaks of dance as a social grace of infinite value for the performer and viewer alike. Well-trained women danced for an assembly of connoisseurs called *Rasika-Sabha*. Their critical appreciation was sought more than favours from a king. This was the earliest known place of performance of dance. Then came the chieftains and kings who were entertained by court-dancers. A king being the mortal representative of God on earth, in turn offered dancers, dedicating them to the presiding deity of the temple. Thus, the three levels in later times came to be known as *Samaaya-Dasi*, *Raja-Dasi* and *Deva-Dasi*. They influenced the thinking, attitudes and mores of their times more than can be imagined today.

Whereas no auspicious or festive occasion was deemed complete without a proper performance of dance by women, with the changing social patterns and

patriarchal trends they began to be considered lowly or as fallen women. Dance itself being an art-form at once to physical and vivid when performed by comely young women had the undeniable power of capturing heads and hearts of Gods and men alike. The supple and smooth limbs wore magic tapestry of gestures and postures. That beckoned, cajoled or spurned the viewer's attention. But then even Shiva The Great God has the epithet *Nataraja* — King of Dancers, and Krishna is called *Nata-Nagara*, the Dancing Dandy. All the Gods and Goddesses, sages and seers, emperors and noblemen had to gain proficiency in the twin arts of dance and music. For it gave poise, power, grace, harmonious thoughts, balanced posture and a rootedness in themselves which were not to be got from any other activity. Indeed, dance and music came to be considered as the shortest path to enlightenment.

Earliest known model of a dancer is supposedly from excavations at Mohenjo-Dairo, about 6000 years ago, of a bronze figurine of a saucy young woman with high breasts, right arms akimbo on the hip and with one knee flexed in a posture known as *A-bhanga*. The second century BC rock-cut sculpture of a court-scene of King Kharavela of Orissa shows two buxom dancers flanked by musicians playing on percussion and wind instruments. Innumerable depictions in sculpture, frescoes, textiles, and old manuscripts show similar scenes of abandon in dance and music. Women dominate these scenes as do their beauty and shapely bodies. By virtue of their naturally voluptuous

physical endowments, female dancers at once became the most coveted, honoured yet feared creatures. Through dance they could wield power over natural phenomena, flora, fauna and humans. They could invoke the blessings and grace (*Kripa*) of Gods and add fertility to soil. They were always the honoured citizens of the Kingdom, rewarded and awarded best tracts of agricultural land, palatial mansions, jewellery and fine silks and a retinue of servants.

Increasing aggressions from alien tribes who brought alien set of values and a fractured vision of life found the sensuousness and beauty of the dances in India strangely overpowering and contrary to their own religious and moral beliefs. Therefore the dance, dancers, musicians and *Gurus* — all had to be discouraged and the performers scattered off to live anonymously in unknown villages. The suppression of dance and its philosophy in India is a depressing chapter of Indian history. Yet, with the advent of nationalist fervour preceding independence, many men and women took up re-establishment of dance-traditions as their cause. Famous among them include Smt Rukmini Devi Arundala who set up *Kalashetra*, Smt Menaka who revived *Kathak* dance, poet Rabindranath Tagore who pioneered a new style of dancing now known as Tagore School of dance greatly influenced by Manipuri style.

Today, learning to dance is considered a major accomplishment for young girls and women and dancing as a profession/vocation is back in vogue albeit to audiences who may be a mixed bag of

afficionados, connoisseurs, curious onlookers, tourists, diplomats and politicians.

Recurrent themes in Indian dance-texts and poetry paint the image of woman in prismatic images as: *Devi* (shining effulgent being), *Sati*, *Kanya*, *Kumari*.

At other levels she is the *Nayika*, the leader, the inspirer, a reward at the end of a long emotional journey. She is the creatrix and destroyer — giver and nourisher who reserves the right to punish as Mother. She is the focal point of creation and has the power to hold household, family, society and civilisations together. Indian dance has celebrated the multi-faceted, multi-layered, multi-dimensional persona of woman with depiction of archetypal characters like *Durga*, *Radha*, *Draupadi*, *Sita*, *Ahalya*, *Meera*, *Mahadenakka*, *Muktal*, *Rani Jhansi*, *Kasturba Gandhi* and thousands of others. Myth and history merge in India as nowhere else in the world. Because history speaks only of the past, whereas myth speaks at once of the past, present and future.

My own dance understanding has veered more and more towards women-oriented themes which become metaphors for our times. In an era of social and political insecurity where women attain to high positions, the majority remain at levels of suffering, unspeakable cruelty, torture — both physical and mental — and humiliations meted out by society in the name of religion, ethics, morality or convenience. Traditions are deliberately misinterpreted, facts twisted and natural order of things reversed. I personally agree



with many that much maligned author or *Manu-Smriti* who declared *Yatra Naryastu Pujyante Ramante Tatra Deva*. (Divine grace descends only where women are venerated, honoured and esteemed.)

My presentation of the solo dance-theatre *Draupadi* is one such example of a dancer's attempt to address the age-old problems confronting women and to point at relevant issues to checkout if

things have changed at all. *Mayaa hi sarvam jetyayam Aham na jeyo kenachit* (Everything is to be conquered by me, I by nobody and nothing).

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