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Loving with Irony: young Bombay viewers discuss sex, love and their encounters with media

Shakuntala Banaji

Abstract

The media landscape in urban India has changed so rapidly in the last ten years that it is not easy even to document the changes let alone to consider the ways in which these interact with people's lives and beliefs. Apocalyptic pronouncements about the ways in which MTV-style television, films and the internet are devaluing chastity and destroying 'genuine' Indian culture by promoting western sexual values abound in journalistic and political circles. But what are the realities of young people's encounters with media in a thriving Indian metropolis? How do they make sense of all the vastly different images of sexuality embodied in community/religious edicts and modern media? And how are their interpretations of all these supposed 'messages' played out in their everyday lives? Emerging from a three-year study of youth audiences, involving numerous in-depth personal interviews with young Hindi film viewers in London and Bombay, this article explores the ways in which these young people's sexual attitudes, values and behaviours are inflected by their interpretations of films, television and the internet. By focusing on understandings of and relationships to sex and love – both mediated and real – within the

context of statements about accepted community norms, formal and informal sex-education, and personal sexual practices, this article also engages with ideas and myths about representations of women that have dominated recent debates on sex, censorship and the media in India.

Introduction

The interpretations and discourses of dress and sexual harassment, gender and sexuality to be foregrounded in this article do not exist within a hermetically sealed space exclusive to viewers and the media texts they experience. Instead, they circulate within communities, and are inflected variously in many salient social practices. Comments made by young Bombay film-goers during interviews suggest strongly that female attire, ‘virginity’, sexual exploration and sexual violence remain issues of key significance both in life and films¹. In Bombay, the onus for remaining chaste is almost uniformly placed upon girls and women, while young men are known to engage, covertly, in a multitude of exploratory sexual practices and, sometimes, sexual violence without attracting much or any public censure. However, excitement and/or anxiety about sexual feelings and encounters appear to be shared features of young viewers’ talk. A number of academic studies in recent years have sought to map attitudes to aspects of community practice with regard to gender and sexual relationships amongst youth in India (Abraham, 1999, 2002; Sodhi and Verma, 2000). Leena Abraham’s work on the health implications of heterosexual peer networks and relationships amongst college students in Bombay offers some pertinent background for the heterosexual relationships and representations discussed here.

The disparity in sexual experience between young men and women in Bombay, Abraham argues, is linked in some way to the ‘normative heterosexuality’ prevalent in Hindi films. She then points to the *prescriptive nature* of the ‘true love’ relationship as portrayed in Hindi films ‘where it revolves around sexual desires, fantasies that are explicitly erotic at times, but stops short of transgressing the normative boundary of sexual intercourse’ (2002, p347). Sodhi and Verma, meanwhile, conclude their paper on ‘sexual coercion’ among unmarried adolescents in a Delhi slum with the finding that ‘[c]inema plays a role in perpetuating gender stereotypes, by encouraging girls to idealise the notion of “true love” and encouraging boys to seek sexual gratification’ (2000, p93). *So, is it the case that the depictions of romance and sexuality in Hindi films always contribute to conservative understandings of sex and sexuality within the viewing community? What other factors might contribute to the meanings young viewers make of film representations of sexual behaviour? And just how do film representations of masculinity and femininity become meaningful for young viewers in real contexts?* These are some of the questions with which this article aims to grapple.

Framing the study

The data explored here was gathered over a period of two and half years – September 2000 to March 2003 – and involved in-depth interviews with and extensive notes on the home lives, social environment and popular film experiences of 36 London South-Asian and

Bombay Hindi film viewers aged between 16 and 25. Additionally, I was a participant observer inside and outside over 80 Hindi film showings across both sprawling metropolises, conducting brief interviews with a hundred viewers, keeping a detailed field-diary and taking hundreds of photographs at cinema halls. Concurrently, I analysed Hindi films, articles about Hindi films and stars from popular film magazines, newspapers and the internet, and reviewed all the current literature on Hindi cinema, including much on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, clothing and film audiences. From the data collected I wove together a ‘narrative’ – of which this article forms one brief but significant segment – about the manner in which on and off-screen family, marriage, romance, dress, sex and sexuality are understood by a sample of young viewers and the manner in which gender, religion and notions of tradition come to shape responses to what may be termed films’ political discourses.

In selecting a sample, the knowledge that research subjects never speak from ‘ideal representative positions’ informed the explicit choice to include and acknowledge as many major variables as possible, notably, sexuality, gender, religion and class. I contacted respondents through students’ unions, teachers, friendship-groups, or family, via work colleagues or neighbours, by posting notices in local libraries, chemists, clinics and corner shops as well as on the internet-movie-database and other Hindi movie bulletin-boards, and via several youth outreach organisations. The sample of films proved trickier: interviewees rarely stuck to the ‘blockbusters’ I intended to use and sometimes referenced films I’d never heard of; overall, however, a number of ‘big’ films did emerge as central to Bombay viewers’ narratives on sexuality, romance and dress: the romantic hits *Dilwale Dulhaniya*

Le Jayenge (DDLJ, 1995, *The One with the Heart Takes the Bride*) and *Raja Hindustani* (1996, *Indian King*) were two of these. Symbolic and social discourses on ‘dress’ in ‘India’ are crucial to the courtship and marital relations in *Raja Hindustani*, while notions of an ‘authentic Indian’ sexuality for both male and female protagonists are delineated by various sequences in DDLJ, particularly one where the heroine wakes – with a hangover after an unexpectedly passionate excursion – to panic at the thought of having had sex with the hero.

During individual interviews, young people themselves volunteered all manner of detailed, fascinating and frank information about their lives and beliefs, behaviours and desires. In terms of the manner in which I conducted in-depth interviews, the notion of ‘active interviewing’ drawn from Holstein and Gubrium (1998) provided me with a measure of flexibility in terms of my ability to respond to, comment on or contest interviewees’ assumptions about a variety of sensitive topics from sexual harassment and rape to ethnic cleansing. They argue persuasively that:

Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing – the possible answers – that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. The active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher’s interest. (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998, p125)

Less controversially, the structure of interviews was loose enough to enable viewers to pursue ideas that concerned or interested them. Initial questions usually aimed to establish subjects' favourite films, genres or viewing companions, to 'break the ice', while later ones aimed to elaborate and unpick assertions about specific sequences or to pursue tricky assertions about gender, sex and ethnicity.

Show and sell: young viewers read clothing in Hindi films

Discourses around clothing were invoked by interviewees in conjunction with issues as diverse as sexual fantasy, financial status, religion, an apparent deterioration of moral values, and sexual harassment. One of the most common strands in discussions about dress and sexuality on screen was an appeal to 'direct effects' as grounds for censorship of film costumes. After commenting that an actress, Urmila Matondkar, 'must be hardly needing any material for her dresses', Gautham², an unmarried clerk living with his parents in a Bombay suburb, worries that after watching performances by this actress on screen young women and girls will feel *pressured* into wearing things that they neither enjoy nor feel comfortable in. Although implicitly he is averse to the wearing of 'revealing' clothes by girls and women, he poses the issue in terms of younger women falling prey to male predations:

I've seen the younger generation of girls in schools and colleges wearing these kinds of things, netted cloth stockings and mini skirts ... I feel that this is dangerous in the sense that the kids might be more of a target for eve-teasing and India might go the western

way with more child pregnancies; I feel that dress plays a part in this... They have no self-defence experience. [*English*³]

It is important to recognise that, despite his conflation of the ‘western way’, ‘child pregnancies’ and a need for ‘self-defence experience’, Gautham’s wording expresses concern about the safety of young women wearing ‘filmy’ or ‘western’ clothes and does not position him as offended by their choice of dress. Nevertheless, Gautham’s avowed concern could be seen as a displaced form of disapprobation and as an expression of the commonly emphasised opinion that sexual attacks and women’s clothing are directly linked to each other.

Lest this be taken as a feature only of male viewers’ talk, it must be noted that several female viewers in my sample held this view. Although she ‘loves’ to wear jeans and T-shirts, Neha, a married 23-year-old, too articulates her beliefs about on and off-screen dress via notions of ‘westernisation’ and endangerment stating firstly that ‘girls should avoid very less clothing kind of dress because it is spoiling the whole of what Indian culture is [which is] to cover yourself’ and secondly that men have ‘a tendency to get attracted and that is what is now leading to the crime what you see in foreign countries like because they are wearing all short skirts and that is what is leading to the rape cases’.

In contrast, in an almost dialogic rebuttal of Neha’s and Gautham’s assumption that a woman is endangered or may be protected by the type of clothing she wears because men’s thoughts are aroused or dampened by more or less revealing dress, working-class, 21-year-

old, Sonali maintains that ‘[e]ven if you go around totally veiled from top to toe the men will whistle and make comments.’ This leads her to assert angrily, ‘[s]o why not show heroines in short clothes? It’s female [pause] that’s all the men care about [pause]. I cover up totally and still get all kinds of things said’. Kavita, a student, too expresses her belief that ‘whatever you are wearing, even if you are fully covered, boys will pass comments and worse stuff’. Thus practical experiences of sexual harassment off-screen enable a number of viewers to challenge dominant discourses about clothing, ‘Indianness’, safety and chastity that may appear to be shared by Hindi film directors and some members of their audiences.

Sonali’s reiteration of the idea that self-censorship in dress achieves nothing in a milieu where being female is coded as being sexual prey leads her to make connections between Hindi film dress and gender ideology. In contrast to Gautham, who only mentions the more revealing aspects of actresses’ attire, Sonali is infuriated by the ways in which films show women *covering themselves up*.

Sonali: [I]n villages [pause] women are totally traditional, in sarees and veiled. They are abused if they don’t and given a warning about ‘shameless’ behaviour.

SB: In your view, are the films you watch against or for ...household veiling?

Sonali: Well, [angry voice] the really big blockbusters are totally in favour of veiling like that, wearing the saree over the head in front of elders and male relatives. Like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!*, *Hum Saath Saath Hain* [pause] these are really famous and influential. [*Hindi*]

Sonali's scorn is directed at big budget films that, to her, assert hegemonic or dominant patriarchal discourses about the ways in which 'Indian' women should conduct themselves when in the presence of elders or strangers and, as a corollary, any spectators.

Expected 'feminine' behaviours are, as usual, inscribed in clothing, which is itself an expression of cultural practice and may be an expression of cultural control (Thapan, 1997, p173). Challenging those who would maintain this control, Preeta, in Bombay, not only admitted that she enjoyed wearing 'western' clothing but said that she did so precisely because of what she saw as the transgressive, alluring, sexual and 'come hither' associations that they have acquired *via their use in Hindi films*. Her open enjoyment of male attention and her pride in her own body was, she asserted, better gratified by tight T-shirts, fitting jeans, and low-cut tops than by the salwar khameezes she routinely wore to the Gurudwara for prayers. 'It looks very sexy. That's why I'm wearing it right now' she told me, pointing to her frilly sleeveless top and tight stretch pants. Preeta's participation, without fear, in a discourse of desire, arousal, pursuit and sexuality – through an iconography of clothing in which films, unknown 'others' and her own body are actively engaged – cannot but complicate a view of 'western' attire on the Hindi film screen as functioning in a system of erotic meaning that is *entirely for the pleasure of male viewers*. In fact, I suggest, whatever may apparently be said in public contexts, and regardless of the film-makers' dubious motives for rendering such representations for public consumption, it is too simplistic to think of most female viewers as offended by or even always averse to stereotypically 'sexualised' depictions of women's bodies in Hindi films.

Jasmine, however, clearly linked sexual harassment in a film to the clothing worn by a heroine:

[S]he seems like a useless, helpless object, waiting to be rescued. So we see huge groups in long shots. We see close ups showing the fear in her eyes. Karishma in *Raja Hindustani* when she wears ‘that’ red dress. [*English*]

The sequence referred to by Jasmine in this extract, which depicts the negative response of a young villager when the educated and city-bred woman he loves appears in public in his small town wearing a sexy red dress instead of the obligatory salwar-kurta, is one about which I have written in greater detail elsewhere (Banaji, 2002).

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The fact that the heroine is then harassed by a group of local hooligans precipitates the gentle hero into an unexpected and shocking show of violence, purportedly in defence of her ‘honour’. Jasmine’s rendering of the scene has clothing being used as a triple pretext: firstly for men in the film to pick on the woman, secondly for the not so subtle warning to young women about what wearing such dresses might do to them and thirdly, for the hero to rescue the heroine. Several of the young male viewers I interviewed were keen to differentiate between clothing appropriate to a ‘good wife’ and that which might be worn at other times to excite the interest of men.

In one notable instance, a viewer maintained that the hero of *Raja Hindustani* was ‘old-fashioned’ not because he disapproved of the short dress worn by his sweetheart but because he made no distinction between the types of clothing permissible before and after marriage. Enthusiastic about every type of western/modern outfit found on a female character on screen, Azhar opened the subject by asserting that he ‘really’ enjoyed seeing everything, ‘Jeans, dresses, minis and micros’. When I indicated that he should elaborate, he told the ‘story’ of his wife’s altering costumes and his altered perception of her:

Azhar: [D]uring our college days, I dressed her in all those dresses, tight clothes, I told her I like it very much. In college I made her wear model dresses. While we were together. Whatever she wanted to wear. Even she felt uncomfortable wearing things sometimes and say she preferred salwar kameez and I’d tell her ‘please go on, when you look so horny in it, and it’s worn by actresses and models, go on’. To me I felt she should wear hipsters, sleeveless T-shirts. Even she began to like to wear those clothes.

SB: Does she still wear such clothes after marrying you?

Azhar: Of course not! How would she? She wears salwar khameez ... *Before* she was my girlfriend. *Now* she’s my wife. There’s a massive difference!

SB: Like in films–

Azhar: –See, in some films, like in *Raja Hindustani*, the guy doesn’t like such clothes on the heroine *even before marriage*. He’s old-fashioned. But I liked her to look like that and wear those things when she was my girlfriend. See, how I feel is, I wanted her to look ‘modern’ [*English*] when she was my girlfriend [...] Before I didn’t care if men said things about her. [laughs] But now if they say things about her then it is an insult to me. I

feel bad, you're getting my point? I don't want all that, I don't want to be insulted because of how she dresses...I don't want her to expose her body. She never wants it either. I convinced her it was necessary for her to give up all those sorts of clothes like jeans. [*Hindi*]

Azhar's multiple and casual sexist comments in this exchange – from 'I dressed her', 'I made her wear' to '[b]efore I didn't care if men said things about her' – would be almost comic, were they not so alarmingly similar to those I heard or heard of in numerous other interviews with both young male and female viewers.

Debates around dress in Hindi films have most frequently centred round themes of nudity and/or exposure. Arguments that are either anti-western in their gist or feminist in their intent have coincided in condemning the Indian media in general and Hindi cinema in particular for portrayals of women in tight-fitting, short, low-cut or transparent attire (Bagchi, 1996; Gahlot, 2003; Nair, 2002, p53). My intention here is not to deny the strength of negative feeling that on-screen female exposure calls forth within the Indian populace and the intelligentsia, nor, necessarily, to label all such feeling either mere prudishness or anti-western rhetoric. I simply wish to signal that in their own talk about clothing and nudity, 'exposure' and 'covering up' young people go beyond the parameters set up by most existing debates. Implicitly, by coding nudity and overt bodily exposure as 'sexual', fully clothed bodies may be relegated to an asexual realm that they, in truth, do not inhabit. Both campaigners against scantily dressed representations of women and, perhaps, some

filmmakers themselves, may well be missing crucial aspects of audiences' enjoyment of Hindi films and of human sexuality.

Might it not be the case that, in some instances, the bodies of women and girls displayed in latex and lycra, swimming costumes, rent blouses, mini-skirts and sheer fabrics *become or are*, to sections of the public, *less sexual* than images of women in flowing sarees and pure white salwar khameezes with high collars and full sleeves?

In relation to Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*, Stella Bruzzi argues that 'superficially restrictive clothes function as equivocal signifiers, acting both as barriers to sexual expression and as the very means of reaching sexual fulfilment' (Bruzzi, 1997, p38). Both Jasmine and Gautham demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which the highly choreographed censorship of female nudity – the tacit Hindi film industry requirement that women remain clothed, albeit scantily, at all times and that no 'explicit' sexual acts be displayed – could be used not to dampen but to increase the erotic potential of specific scenes and the lust of swathes of the anticipated audience. As Gautham explains:

Actually what Hindi films do is they entice you more than English films. Like, actually, you might find Madhuri Dixit much more sexual in the rain or a bathing scene than an English [Hollywood] actress like Jennifer [Lopez] who strips off completely. In English films they don't leave anything to the imagination, whereas in Hindi films the common man [including me] can go wild in his imagination... I like

Kajol mostly because her nature is lively like mine. I might fantasise with her [pause] with her body, so it's good they don't show the whole thing. [pause] *[English]*

Several issues arise from Gautham's assertions. Firstly, in the light of his claim that he prefers the covertly eroticised heroines in Hindi films to the overt nudity of heroines in Hollywood films, accounts of Hindi film and censorship, such as that given by Lalitha Gopalan (1998) in her essay 'Coitus Interruptus and Love Story in Indian Cinema' – where she argues that directors are not as unhappy as has sometimes been made out with the various dictates of the censor board precisely because the 'public' has learnt to gain a different kind of pleasure from suggestions and allusive sexual representations – become more plausible.

Secondly, to view Gautham's 'use' of Hindi films merely as pornographic and hence demeaning to the female characters in films – part of the construction of a men's culture of 'dirty talk' and 'dirty thoughts' about women that makes even urban India such a difficult place to live on terms of equality with men⁴ – is too simplistic. Although one point of such scenes may be precisely to provoke the sexual and potentially sexist and 'objectifying',⁵ response Gautham described – or a similar one – such interludes and representations, which invite viewers into a spectacle where clothing, suggested nudity and transferred kissing (the kissing of objects, hands, necks and abdomens instead of lips), provide much needed 'fantasy' space (Kakar, 1990, p27) for segments of the audience such as adolescents or young women. One young lesbian viewer, Abhi, from a working-class family, told me that she uses reactions during discussions about actresses' bodies (breasts, hips and thighs) to

gauge whether her friends might be open to hearing about her sexuality. Two young male viewers talked of their pleasure in *male* bodies on screen, their romantic identification with *heroines* and their crushes on leading actors.

Thirdly, it is also worth recollecting that even such fantasy spaces are not seen as wholesome or legitimate in a social setting that denies ‘common people’ the right to have sexual fantasies outside of marriage and that, in addition, refuses the time and the opportunity for such fantasies to many women, even if they are married (Thapan, 1997, p186). Such awareness may lead one to understand more clearly the reasons why, even when the audiences may not deny their pleasure in a film’s erotic moments, the directors cloud the issues of sex and sexuality by disavowing the sexual undercurrents in their films via the use of dance sequences, ultra-conservative dialogues and patriarchal/conformist alterations in character.

INSERT FIGURES 3 AND 4 HERE

Whose pleasure? The enjoyable objectification of bodies on screen

Commenting on what she sees as the chameleon ability of the commercial Hindi film to gratify desires that it appears to condemn, Asha Kasbekar argues that once it has ‘established its moral credentials’ and ‘sworn its allegiance to the official, idealised version of Indian womanhood, the Hindi film then dedicates itself to soliciting the prurient gaze by offering ... the woman as an erotic object in the song and dance sequences’ (2001, p294).

She later insists that, ‘by declaring it to be only make-believe, a pretence, the strategy of “performance”, allows the narrative to reconcile the woman’s idealized chaste Sita-image with her erotic invitations’ (2001, p298). Despite plausible analyses such as these, that offer explanations for the balancing act between exhibitionism and prudery in Hindi films, for me, there are several problematic aspects to the most widely held critical positions on spectatorship and Hindi cinema. These centre around the implicit suggestions that female viewers’ pleasures in Hindi films are a) monolithic, b) likely to be compromised by the eroticisation or sexualisation (which is viewed implicitly as a form of objectification)⁶ of female bodies on screen and c) can be safeguarded only via the stratagems of moralistic disavowal, spectacular materialism and the reassertion of authoritarian and patriarchal but non-sexual ‘roles’ for women within the narrative.

With regards to such objections, at one level, data from my sample suggests that at least outside the *immediate* and *public* viewing context of a cinema hall both male and female viewers hold a variety of psychological positions and understand images, dialogues and narratives in a range of different ways. Thus while not necessarily radical or ‘politically correct’, the meanings taken away from Hindi film representations of the body and the pleasures provoked by these representations are certainly not monolithic for either male or female viewers, although the publicly manifested responses may appear to be. At another level, some female viewers may well object to the depictions of female bodies on screen: I myself have done so on several occasions. However, surely the idea that a woman on screen is more ‘objectified’ when she wiggles her hips and has her cleavage zoomed in on by the camera than when she serves a man his food or covers her head chastely in front of

her in-laws is ludicrous. Nevertheless, the word ‘objectification’ does not crop up in critical commentaries nearly as frequently in connection to head-covering or cooking by women in films as it does in relation to wet scenes and scanty clothing.

Even Jasmine, who comes closest to a position typical of the Indian feminist movement in the nineteen-eighties and nineties⁷, moves from explicit condemnations of the vulgarity and sexism that she sees as inherent in screen portrayals of semi-clothed women – ‘It is very patriarchal and sexist’ – to a more light-hearted enthusiasm for the provocative, sexual allurements available to her and her female friends:

I can’t deny that the portrayal of a man’s body often turns me on, especially when accompanied by music. I am not shy about this attraction either. I wouldn’t use the word ‘turn-on’ in front of my parents but I have often ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’. I remember how Hrithik’s portrayal in the dance sequences absolutely floored me in *Kaho Na Pyar Hai*. After watching this, my friends were discussing how his biceps should be transplanted to his bum! [*English*]

At one level, Jasmine’s movement from condemnation of ‘objectification’ to empathy with such objectification is characteristic of a number of discussions of sexual issues by young Hindi film viewers and indicates both the shifts and reassessments taking place during an interview and the tendency of confident young viewers to condemn others for doing what they are proud of doing themselves. At another level, her assertion that she was ‘absolutely floored’ suggests a palpable and confident sexuality.

Rahul, a 21-year-old metal worker in Bombay, was open about his discontent with current social practice and rhetoric on sex and sexual depictions:

Rahul: I think somehow that Hindi films indirectly do want to show sex, they do, they go almost the whole way and then pull back for fear of public opinion or censors, like the kiss in *Raja Hindustani* and other scenes. But in real life, the public is miles ahead of the movies in terms of sex. They're doing everything that the films aren't showing yet, believe me! There is media where you can see it. Come on, there are so many sex channels that people can secretly or privately watch. There is the page three in mid-day, the 'mid-day mate'. Some people say in public, 'Dirt! What rubbish!' but alone they exclaim, 'Wah! Wah!' [Wow!] People never want to be seen thinking about sex. I do want to read proper sex books but they are hardly available. So we rely on gossip and on the advice of friends. My friends call me a coward because I haven't had it [sex] yet.

SB: How do *you* feel about a girl who has had sex before marriage?

Rahul: Look, I don't want her to feel that she has fallen in her own eyes. That's it.

SB: So you sympathise with Kajol in *DDLJ* during the hotel scene⁸ a sequence in which the hero pretends to have had sex with the heroine when she was under the influence of alcohol?

Rahul: She was lucky. Any other boy would not have let her go. Most probably. He'd think, come on, she's come into my hands. There might be boys who think she's drunk let's leave her alone. But I know many who would get her drunk and do anything for sex. ... In reality today amongst both men and women there are those who want to take

something from each other like a contract, a fulfilling of needs, which does not require marriage. I don't think there's anything wrong with that if it's equal. But is it, often? I have friends, girls, who have been having sex with their boyfriends, they've even had abortions, and I wonder why they're doing it, is it worth it? Other male friends of mine simply wait for young married women who are dissatisfied with their arranged marriages, with their husbands. Our society is simply so hypocritical. Nothing will ever come out in the open – on the surface it'll be white. Underneath it will be something else.

SB: So, how *do* the films you like fit into this society?

Rahul: See, these films separate out romance and sex. For sex there are the blue channels. For romance we have the Hindi films. We can't watch a blue scene with our sister-in-law and mother, can we? [sarcastic voice] Something would have to give, we'd have to get up and leave the room; otherwise they'd get the wrong impression about us. [sarcastic voice] [*Hindi*]

Rahul's interpretations, conjectures and observations about film viewing and sexual practices in Bombay, while possibly intended to impress me, and those to whom the research would be presented, are nonetheless confirmed or slightly amended, time and again, in public literature about the topics discussed and in other interviews with young viewers.

Most of the young viewers I interviewed were both aware of, and frequently participants in, a range of intimate non-platonic relationships where varying degrees of physical and sexual intimacy and, on occasion, violence or psychological coercion, were the norm. Nikhil was

open about the fact that before his arranged marriage he had had a sexual relationship with an older woman whom he ‘admired’. Several young female viewers, while understandably reluctant to discuss their sexual exploits on tape, were engaged in highly physical relationships with boyfriends. And, as if such accounts are not enough to confirm Rahul’s sense of the immensely intricate situation in real communities of viewers in Bombay, right at the end of her two hour interview, Preeta gave a slightly sheepish but candid description of her own encounters with pornographic material.

SB: So how have *you* found out about issues to do with sex and sexuality?

Preeta: Movies. Blue movies.

SB: What did you think of them?

Preeta: Wonderful. It was wonderful. It was the first time I saw it. And you’ve seen on the net? ...We go in Cyber cafes. It’s very productive out there. [laughs] I just go with one of my friends, the Muslim girl I told you about. We look at only sex sites. [**S:** Only those sites!] Yeah. I have got to know so many things about that [sex]. [long pause] Actually I never knew before about how to have sexual intercourse. But watching a [blue] movie I just came to know about all these things.

SB: Do your friends also use such films to learn about sexuality and sex?

Preeta: Yeah, maybe. Sometimes they laugh a lot and sometimes they feel shy too. I’m the leader of the group. We go at our friends’ places, we just [rent] the cassettes [...]

SB: What kinds of films?

Preeta: [laughing] I don't exactly remember it now but *Triple X* and things like that. At least eight of my friends have seen these movies with me. I would say....Some of the scenes make us laugh so much, you know. But at times we just be serious, and we watch it like that [sitting forward and showing me how they stare at the screen], we watch it to see what happens.

SB: I'm getting the impression that for some of you sex is completely separate and romance is completely separate.

Preeta: Ya, it is. In life it comes together. But in films – no. [*English & Hindi*]

In the viewing trajectory that Preeta describes, 'blue' movies and internet sex sites play an equally important role, apparently introducing not only Preeta – who is herself from a conservative lower-middle-class family – but also her Muslim best friend, and up to eight other female friends of theirs, to various images of sexual intercourse that they, according to Preeta, have not considered before and have not encountered in Hindi films.

Conclusion

Overall, an equal number of young men and women in my sample, springing equally from different religious and class contexts, dwelt at length and with sustained interest on the romantic narratives and the sexual undercurrents of a range of Hindi films. In this context, Preeta's description of watching her first commercial pornographic film as 'Wonderful – it

was wonderful’ must serve as a caution that generalisations, which categorise all male viewers of Hindi films as more focused on sex and the erotic than their female counterparts who, perhaps, are seen to await the moral subtexts or the romance in films, do little justice to the complexities of viewing communities or (South Asian male and female) relationships and desire. Clearly, then, while depictions of romance and sexuality in Hindi films may invite a limited range of *interpretations* they call forth a much wider range of *responses* and *engagements* from young viewers. Indeed, social circumstances (which include experiences of sex, pornography and/or romance) and political views *always* inflect meanings made from film representations of love and the body.

The notion that Indian women viewers, more than their male counterparts, require ‘treats’ in the form of emotional dialogues, fashionable clothing or moral retribution to *compensate* them for the sequences in which screen bodies are ‘sexualised’ and displayed supposedly for men’s pleasure⁹ does not sit comfortably with testimony by viewers in my sample. In at least half of my interviews more fierce and forceful objections were raised to the sequences in which women were represented as being foolish, servile, docile and obedient – all supposedly the moral window-dressing allowing women’s continued engagement with these films – than to those in which men and women danced suggestively or in which women’s bodies were glimpsed through their clothes. In fact, despite frequent comments suggesting a consensus that film-makers may cynically attempt to appeal to groups of male viewers by displaying actresses’ bodies in flimsy garments, in a number of cases, interviewees of both genders chose to dwell at length on their own enjoyment of dances, clothing and bodies on screen.

Defining ‘objectification’ in terms of female nudity/sexualised representation misses the point about how viewers choose to respond to the invitations of films. It also begs the question about which representations are not ‘objectifying’. Clearly, one must acknowledge, the criteria for labelling a representation chauvinist are not bound up solely with the perception of that representation by the represented group. However, calls for fewer and more sanitised depictions of the body on screen pre-empt learning and debate and reduce viewers’ fantasy space. It is worthwhile remembering that while the knowledge that in India ‘the common man’ is going ‘wild in his imagination’ thinking of curvaceous heroines under waterfalls may not necessarily fill some of us with a sense of ease and security, the possibility that ‘the common woman’ might also be doing the same thing about representations of either male or female bodies must surely give one pause for thought and signal the importance of avoiding simplistic calls for censorship in debates over ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ screen representations.

Notes

¹ This was indicated by detailed thematic mapping of 500 pages of transcript from the first 30 of 36 interviews. However, this is not an indication of how widespread these views are across youth in the population at large; and data in this article is not ‘representative’ of anything more than a partial snapshot of young Bombayites’ views on films and sexuality.

² Pseudonyms are used throughout to guarantee confidentiality and to reflect the regional and religious self-descriptions of interviewees.

³ In addition to being an indicator of class or class aspiration in Bombay, the parenthesized notations of language acknowledge translations or, within excerpts, sudden changes in language.

⁴ The view that depictions of women as ‘sex objects’ on screen and the responses these representations provoke in men is directly linked to the harassment of women on the streets is commonly held by lay people and critics alike in India.

⁵ The question which springs foremost to mind is whether all sexual desire is not to some extent inevitably 'objectifying' and, if it is, then what objectification actually means in each of its contexts of use. For instance, can any look be construed as 'sexual' and hence objectifying? Or, are certain types of look designated thus in order to pathologise the 'looking' done by 'others'?

⁶ Kathy Myers argues that 'There is a sense in which sight and perception necessarily entail objectification in order to conceptualise and give meaning to the object of our gaze' (1995, p267). Furthermore, she insists, 'we have to clarify whether it is the process of necessary objectification entailed in perception which we object to ... or the meaning it carries for women under specific patriarchal formations'

⁷ See Shohini Ghosh (1999) on censorship and the feminist movement; also Mary E. John (2001).

⁸ A sequence during which the Indian hero first pretends to have had sex with the heroine, when she was under the influence of alcohol, and then reassures her of her chastity.

⁹ Kasbekar 2001, p305

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