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Private Lives and Public Spaces: The Precarious Pleasures of Gender Discourse in *Raja Hindustani*

Shakuntala Banaji

I: Setting the scene

What emerges from even a cursory reading of both popular commentary and critical scholarship about Indian commercial cinema is a foregrounding of discourses that are seen to pervade popular Hindi films: patriotism or terrorism, the abuse of wealth or its 'legitimate' pursuit, the fulfilment of personal desire or of filial duties. Amongst these are discourses that, in the last decade, frequently invoke a dichotomy between so-called 'tradition' and supposed 'modernity' only to subsume the latter within the former. These discourses on tradition work by depicting, for instance, heroes and especially heroines whose *life-styles* are westernised, consumerist and urban but whose *hearts*, rooted in traditional (read 'Indian') values, push them to sacrifice, for the sake of their families, their individual desires. In this context, theorists have focused on the ways in commercial Indian cinema appeals to the public imagination: firstly, by intermingling recognisable emotional concerns with diffuse anxieties concerning family values and public morality and secondly, by offering what appear to be *personal* solutions to broader social or national tensions (Dickey 1993: 134, 141; Nandy 1998:3-12; Chakravarthy 1998: 99-101; Uberoi 1999, 2001). Madhava Prasad (1998:4) believes that Hindi cinema has functioned as a site for the 'production and exploration of national identity and ideology' while Fareed Kazmi argues that in India where so many

people live below the poverty-line, Hindi cinema plays a crucial role in ideological 'image-building' (1999:16). If such claims are accurate, then an analysis of audience responses to specific aspects of Hindi film texts becomes crucial to an understanding of the culture at large.

Accordingly, I have spent fifteen months interviewing South Asian viewers in their late teens and early twenties about their feelings towards and understandings of Hindi films. While I have conducted over a hundred brief interviews in a public context outside cinema theatres in Bombay and London, or during film showings, the bulk of my data has been gathered in private one-on-one interviews with a sample drawn from diverse religious, class and caste backgrounds; these interviews included extended discussions about family and community as well as personal beliefs and attitudes regarding gender and sexuality.

Dharmesh Darshan's *Raja Hindustani*, which won a series of 'Filmfare' and 'Screen Videocon' awards and became a massive box-office success in 1996-7, has received barely any critical attention compared to giant 'family' romances like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*/ (*Lit.*) *The One with the Heart Takes the Bride (*Aditya Chopra, India, 1995) and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun …!/What am I to You …!* (Sooraj Barjatya, India, 1994).[1] This film, however, was one that was brought up repeatedly in interviews, by young people keen to express their views about issues as diverse as women's attire, community policing of adolescent sexuality and the 'censorship' of kissing in Indian commercial films. Here, I will be enquiring what narrative and visual

strategies on the part of the director can account for the pleasure provided by the film and exploring the ways in which discourses of gender and sexuality in the film might be understood by young viewers. Crucially, the apparently coherent textual readings offered in each of the following sections are not being provided as absolute or conclusive and only gain relevance when interrogated alongside the film's surrounding sociocultural context and the multitude of audience responses available.

II: Establishing oppositions: duality as a primary lens

In order to recognise the complexities of *Raja Hindustani*'s narrative it is important to map out the basics of the plot, which follows a time honoured structure of rich-girl meets poor-boy, rich-girl marries poor-boy, couple are parted, couple are reunited.

The wealthy Aarti Sehgal (Karishma Kapoor) and her father (Suresh Oberoi) are united by affection and a shared birthday; Aarti's stepmother, Shaalu Sehgal (Archana Puran Singh) is jealous of the bond between father and daughter; she plots with her brother to dispossess Aarti. While her father is on a foreign business trip, Aarti chooses to spend her vacation at an Indian hill-station called Palankhet. She is accompanied on her journey by a duo of minders, the 'macho' Kamal and her 'effeminate' brother Gulab. At the airport serving Palanketh, the orphan hero, Raja Hindustani (Aamir Khan), a rural taxi-driver, is introduced. Aarti agrees to stay with Raja's aunt (Farida Jalal) and uncle, who are, interestingly, not blood relatives. Romance blossoms between Raja and Aarti. When a thunderstorm sends them into an intimate embrace, the youngsters

acknowledge their passion. Soon after, Mr Sehgal arrives to convey Aarti back to Bombay. Distraught, Aarti publicly acknowledges her love for the penniless Raja and, marrying him against her father's will, she is outcast from her family but happy. When her father initiates reconciliation, Raja and Aarti are subjected to the malicious machinations of Aarti's stepfamily. Parted by Raja's suspicious pride and Aarti's naïve trust, the couple are only reunited by love for their baby, which has been born in the interim. After a violent fight, the villains are vanquished and the non-traditional 'Indian' family is once more whole.

Raja Hindustani opens on a close up of a birthday cake, childishly decorated and, although the camera swiftly cuts to a more traditional establishing shot of a spacious drawing-room in which clusters of elegant guests sip drinks or chat softly, the 'scene' has already been set and an attempt made to position the audience. This is done via the connotative significance of the birthday cake, which joins a whole ensemble of Hindi film confectionary to conjure up a chain of symbolic associations: in commercial films, birthdays – with their emphasis on an individual's uniqueness – tend to be celebrated by wealthy, urban, westernised families or couples (Saari 1985: 54 in Derné 2000: 93), whereas families presented as more 'traditionally Indian' might be depicted celebrating the birth of a child, a 'sagai' (engagement) or another religious festival. In this context, Mr Sehgal is introduced as a dignified man looking affectionately for his now grown-up daughter who descends the main staircase to a soundtrack of saxophone music and a lingering tracking shot which displays her bright colours, feminine curves and artless expression for the inspection of guests and viewers alike. Mrs Sehgal, in stark contrast,

is portrayed as a pretentious, affected woman, whose halter-top blouse and flimsy sari testify to her expensive tastes and lack of 'moral judgement', just as her westernised accent is suggestive of her ambiguous national identity. She is thus set up, from the outset, as an acceptable object of revulsion: her snobbery is un-Indian, her concern with appearance, immodest or unfeminine, and her stepmother status unnatural. Aarti, by comparison, is approved as not only a loving and faithful daughter but also, despite her western garments and her father's riches, a true-hearted Indian girl who values the rural simplicity of an Indian hill town like Palankhet over the 'glamour' of Switzerland.

If the oppositions birth-mother/step-mother and western/Indian have been established during the opening sequence, the contrast of sophistication and simplicity is firmly posited in the series of scenes leading up to and immediately succeeding the 'heroine meets hero' moment. On the journey to Palankhet, the audience's initial sympathy for Aarti is eroded by her portrayal as a spoilt rich kid. Her values – wishing to stay at the Taj Hotel, imperious directions to the bumbling minders, impatience at the non-appearance of her taxi – are linked to those of a whole host of other capricious film heroines[2]. Her independence is thus construed as a negative by-product of her wealthy upbringing and subtly undermined. In amusing contrast, the first shot of the hero, Raja (Aamir Khan), is a close-up of his boots, which are rough and unpolished but strong. Comedy – in the form of the mistaken gender identity of the 'butch' Kamal and her 'camp' brother Gulab – only serves to highlight the 'genuine' masculine attributes of the taxi-driver hero, Raja, and Aarti's unalloyed femininity, which is offered up to us, the spectators, via a series of disjointed and fragmented close-ups focused on parts of her

face and body as well as on Raja's face as he surveys her. His instant recognition of Aarti as an 'object of desire' is naturalised and purged of guilty connotations by the intervention of his side-kick, a little boy, whose droll remarks draw attention to the onset of romance by mildly ridiculing it.

The deep-seated belief that a young man and woman thrown together in any context will be unable to resist falling in love and/ or having sex with each other is, obviously, not just a construct of Hindi commercial cinema[3], although the notion of platonic cross-gender friendships is less common in Hindi films than in, say, Hollywood movies. The presence of a child, and of two sexually ambiguous 'others' in the scene that unites the hero and heroine for the first time is not accidental. The iconic display of a wedding group with a bride and groom during Raja's song 'Aye ho mere zindagi mein, tum bahar banke' (You've come into my life as the spring) – which is sung during an interlude in their car journey to Palankhet – connotes the as yet unacknowledged longing of the two protagonists to be united by a traditional bond. Furthermore, the displaying of the heroine/actress as an object of desire during this first song sequence deserves some comment in the light of long-running debates over the gendered nature of the filmic/spectatorial 'gaze'.

Much of what Laura Mulvey argues in her constantly discussed essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) is relevant for a study of Hindi films.[4] According to Mulvey,

> [i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact … woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle …. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. (Note, however, how in the musical song and dance numbers interrupt the flow of the diegesis). (1975)

Although clearly open to challenge at a variety of levels[5], Mulvey's argument offers insights when charted against scenes from commercial Hindi films. In this instance, as Raja sings – in obedience to a request from Aarti – the journey to Plankhet and hence the linear narrative is put on hold: instead, what we are offered is a series of striking pictorial clips in which aspects of Aarti's face and body are subjected to scrutiny. The camera cuts jerkily between Raja, singing or playing with his young companion, and Aarti, sitting under a tree, zooming in to capture her lips as they tentatively sip hot tea and her lips again, as she sucks on a piece of sugar cane, her innocent gestures all the more erotic for their seeming homeliness. While money – in the form of 'tips', payments and repayments[6] – mediates external relations between Aarti and Raja in the early scenes of their acquaintance and is critiqued for its corrupting potential, Raja's right to look at and consume Aarti with his eyes is never questioned. A number of Indian film theorists have written about the ways in which atypical Hindi film heroines are represented[7]. In contrast, invoking the notion of 'scopophilic pleasure' Fareed Kazmi writes that most typical Hindi films open with

> the women as objects of the combined gaze of the spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised [as in] … *Raja Hindustani*, … but as the narrative progresses, she falls in love with the main (male) protagonist and becomes his 'property', losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalised sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subject to the male star alone. (1999:188)

In line with these observations, initial shots of Aarti depict her stillness and passivity, as opposed to Raja's movement and vitality. This pattern is echoed a few scenes later when she is shown awaking from her first night in Palankhet, wearing a skimpy satin nightdress, and stretching sensuously to the stylised and crooning saxophone while Raja does vigorous physical exercises in the garden outside. Based on audience research with young female viewers, however, it is obvious that pleasure is achievable through contemplation of Raja's watching face and his active body: young women and girls I spoke to indicated that they found something satisfyingly suggestive and even *powerful* in the notion of watching the watcher without his knowledge and commenting on his physique to each other. There appears to be no necessary connection between such (voyeuristic) visual pleasure and the identification with the male, which Mulvey's essay posits as essential to our experience of the hero. By presenting my reading of two crucial sequences in this film, as well as of some youth responses to these sequences, I hope to illuminate, at least partially, both the allure and, if there is one, the agenda of Hindi films such as *Raja Hindustani*.

III: Policing attire: women's virtue; men's violence

The juxtaposition of imagery at the beginning of the film sets up a series of oppositions that imply a certain way of viewing the social world both on and off-screen. The loveless 'modernity' and (implicitly) un-Indian pomp of Aarti's family home is distinguished from the simple dignity of Raja's rural existence and his 'traditional' 'Indian' beliefs; her father's and step-mother's strained relationship is displayed more starkly by the mutual love and understanding of Raja's aunt and uncle. Raja's masculinity and Aarti's femininity are humorously foregrounded by Gulab's effeminate whining and Kamal's aggressive demeanour just as Raja's 'active' gaze, his subject-status, is enhanced by Aarti's 'passive' gratification at being gazed at. These supposed oppositions form no mere introductory schema that is eroded as the movie progresses but are intimately linked to the narrative, and function to structure what might otherwise seem random plot incidents or character 'types' into a seemingly coherent psychological universe. This hypothesis was confirmed during in-depth interviews with young spectators in Bombay and London who demonstrated and emphasised their knowledgeable stance vis-à-vis the roles, attitudes and actions of the characters.

In the 'red dress' sequence and its aftermath, we are presented by the director, Dharmesh Darshan, with what can be seen as either an elaborate set-piece of moralising or an invitation to take sides in a debate over a significant aspect of women's autonomy: their right to dress as they please. Aarti's minders – whose taste is as questionable as their gender status – persuade Aarti to purchase a skimpy dress that she sees in a shop

window in Palankhet town. A quick series of shot-reverse-shots depicting the minders' expressions, Raja's face, and Aarti's body in the dress, are a dramatic precursor to the scene's violent dénouement. Raja, at one and the same time a 'prude' with regards to western fashion and a protector of women's honour, is positioned through his disapproval of the dress in direct contrast to us, the admiring audience, and to the screen 'others' implied, but at first not shown, by the camera. The camera's extended journey, from Karishma/Aarti's shoes, up her smooth legs, to the risqué hem of the dress and then to the coy expression on her face, is again accompanied by a clichéd riff, the musical equivalent to a wolf whistle. Her assumption of a stereotypically 'sexy' voice and her deliberate parody of a model's catwalk journey are inserted as the basis for Raja's squirming discomfort. His confusion as he turns away from her is contrasted implicitly with our voyeuristic wish to see more of her; his frown of displeasure is both a warning to Aarti and to her audience; the naïve applause of the minders and the little boy's quizzical amusement are undercut repeatedly by Raja's fixed disapproval. In contrast to Aarti's amused but tolerant acceptance of his absurd efforts at 'dressing up' in the previous sequence, this scene displays the relative importance of men's opinions vis-à-vis those of women. When Aarti approaches Raja saying, 'it seems that Raja doesn't like my dress', his expression intimates his embarrassment and he comments that he will tell her the 'truth', the dress is 'not good', she should change at once: her own estimation of him in the previous sequence as a *'sachche dil wale'* (true-hearted man) returns here to haunt her, setting him up as the arbiter of her 'honour' and virtue.

If one is in any doubt over the relevance of popular-cultural contributions to debates over women's dress and conduct in contemporary India, one has only to pick up a newspaper and read about young people of differing castes murdered by their families for being seen together, women stripped and paraded naked through the streets for supposedly aiding illicit romance and others, beaten to death for allegedly giving birth outside of wedlock[8]. In *Raja Hindustani*, however, the bitter conflict between individual freedom and 'public' morality is construed not as one between Aarti's *right* to select her own apparel and Raja's *right* to legislate what she wears but as one of 'practical knowledge': his discourse, which invokes the dress's transgressive/come-hither connotations, is placed in opposition to that of the minders when they ask, 'What does he know about "fashion"?' Responding to such divergent discourses on women's clothing, Meeta, a seventeen year-old Bombay viewer from a lower middle-class family conflates comments she has overheard in cinemas with those she witnesses on the screen and asserts, 'wear sleeveless dresses, wear short skirts, but not the stuff that will make boys whistle on the streets like in *Raja Hindustani* when the girl wears the red dress, and the boys hanging around shout ‘higher, higher’[…] boys also get spoiled like that'. She thus places not only the invitation of harassment but also the corruption of 'boys' (both on and off screen) firmly on female shoulders.

Meeta is not alone in holding this view. Eight out of ten male viewers in their late teens and early twenties responded that dresses like the one in the scene under consideration could be 'dangerous' to young women and could make girls the target of 'eve-teasing' and hence should not be worn. One stressed that he would view the wearing of that red

dress as a clear 'invitation' to himself and those he termed 'road-side Romeos' to harass and 'tease' the wearer. The director, it would appear, represents aspects of this debate between alternative discourses on clothing: as Aarti approaches the camera laughing gaily and bantering with Gulab and Kamal at a roadside stall, the camera inter-cuts back and forth between a group of men drinking beer and staring at her, and Raja, hovering uncertainly at some distance and hiding his face in 'shame' at her – presumably 'shameful' – display.

Aarti bends and is shown from behind, with the skirt of her dress rising as the group of lounging men leer, drink and become the focal point of the camera's (and the viewer's) attention. In the next shot Aarti is peripheral; danger and threat – signified by a huge fore-grounded knee and a bottle of beer belonging to one of the louts who is flagrantly dressed in western designer jeans, base-ball cap and shades – takes centre stage as a male voice shouts: 'Hey sweetheart! *What a dress*! It's so small! If you weren't wearing it you'd look even better!'[9] I was told by interviewees that in the theatres at which they viewed *Raja Hindustani*, the dress sequence evoked enormous audience participation, men cat-calling and whistling, shouting 'Higher! Higher!' and 'Take it off!', young women yelling 'Oh no!' or shouting back at the men in their audience. Critiquing the modality of the scene, and also, implicitly, an imputed ideological stance, twenty-two year old Jasmine, a graduate in Bombay, commented that the red dress sequence highlighted the 'fear' in the eyes of the actress, Karishma, and made her seem like a 'useless, helpless object, waiting to be rescued', while Sonali, a college student there, was adamant that '[e]ven if you go around totally veiled from top to toe

the men will whistle and make comments. So why not show heroines in short clothes?' Such responses to the question 'How did you feel about the scene?' suggest the complex interweaving of text and context in the minds of many young female viewers.

The rest of this sequence is charged with menace by the emphatic drumbeat, repeated juddering pauses and fragmented shots of Aarti's face. The situation escalates, ironically, to the tune of a Hindi film song from the Akshay Kumar-Raveena Tandon hit *Mohra:* 'Tu *cheez* badi hai mast, mast' (what a gorgeous *thing* you are!)[10] Raja's subsequent violent intervention may be viewed at several levels: within the narrative it serves to bring him back into the frame of action again after a period of silence and passivity; symbolically, having been shown to be in thrall to the confident sensuality of Aarti in the preceding scenes – his authority as a man undermined by his burgeoning passion for her – he is placed firmly back in control as the violent defender of her 'izzat' (honour); in addition, the physicality of his violence serves as a reminder of the sexuality he has been suppressing. When he has taken on and vanquished the villainous louts – almost killing in the process – his transformation from tame youth to heroic man is complete: his disproportionate violence and anger are the markers of his righteousness as well as of his masculinity. Such a reading can be detected in the comments of viewers like Jasmine, who notes that such scenes 'show men reacting physically when their masculinity is challenged. Men are constantly forced, subconsciously, to take themselves too seriously – anything that challenges their image is supposed to be destroyed, most often with violence.' In rebuttal of Aarti's vexed question 'Why did you make such a scene for such a small thing?', Raja says, 'this is not

the city; daughters and daughters-in-law are treated with respect here; those who don't know how to respect them should be […] given a kicking', suggesting that his understanding of the ways of the village is intimately bound up with his 'image', his notion of himself and his view of masculinity.

The spectre of rape hovers at the margins of our consciousness, making Raja's vigilantism all the more acceptable and undermining Aarti's rejection of his violence and his advice when she shouts, 'How dare you! Who are you to tell me what to wear and what not to?' Her question is itself ambiguous, signalling as it does not her right to choose what to wear but merely her refusal of his claim on her – his claim to be a person who has the right to tell her what to wear and what not to wear – in India, a parent, uncle, brother or fiancé/husband. Rather than supporting Aarti's autonomy as a woman, the narrative further undermines her position by inspiring sympathy for Raja's working-class status when he replies despondently, 'Yes, who am I to tell you anything?' In the situations that follow, Aarti/Karishma is represented in traditional Indian costumes, salwar-kurtas that cover her entirely, and directed to use playful, childlike gestures (clutching her ears to imply contrition, smiling, sidling up to him) to distance her from the vampish connotations of the red dress, while Raja is presented as dignified and forgiving.

Eschewing continuity in favour of a non-diegetic song sequence (Kithna pyaara tumhe, Rabne banayaa/How lovely God has made you), the growing intimacy between Raja and Aarti is conveyed via lyrics, temporal shifts and fantasy images intercut with

picturesque views of scenery in 'Palankhet'[11]. It is interesting to note that the few lyrics which fall to Aarti praise all Raja's non-physical qualities while those awarded to him focus principally on her physical beauty: coincident with the perspective of the fantasy which follows – Raja sees images of his 'dream-girl'/'show-girl' Aarti in various classical dance outfits – this reinforces the male point of view within the narrative. With this aspect of the film in mind, I now turn to the second major sequence in *Raja Hindustani* to occasion controversy, the 'smooch' scene, which neatly ends the mock-innocent romanticism of the first hour. It is in and around this scene that powerful discourses about sexuality are invoked both by the director and by the audience.

IV: A kiss is never just *a kiss: various responses to on-screen passion*

Directly after the song in which Raja fantasises his beloved, in a use of the weather ridiculed as typically clichéd by several young viewers, rain sends the young people to shelter beneath a tree. All around them the verdant landscape is suffused by thunderous clouds. The camera cuts back and forth between their faces, framing them in medium close-up two-shots where we can see his bemused countenance but only her profile; thus her emotions are held away from us, less transparent than his, which allows the director to imply that she is still 'innocent' of sexual intentions right until the very act of kissing itself. Her laughter, the rain and the tinkling sound-track act as a foil to his confusion as he – presumably recognising his desire for what it is – moves away from her out of the frame. His turmoil and guilt are picked up in a subsequent close-up; the unrelenting rain and her friendly, 'thoughtless' physicality – she laughs repeatedly,

throws her head back, takes his hand – as she calls to him to take shelter beside her are artfully constructed by the director to enhance both her sex appeal and her aura of innocence. *As a 'good' woman* she is shown to be unaware of sexual impulses, equally unable to recognise the effect she has on him as she is to identify her own burgeoning desire. A perfect visual metonym for a temptress, Aarti's glistening and ornamented hand and wrist become the focal point for Raja's crumbling self-control: his move towards her is presented as not of his volition. It takes a thunderbolt and a flash of lightening to send her into his arms. Another bolt of thunder and drum roll on the sound track signal her sexual awakening.

The camera captures Raja and Aarti's first tentative and then passionate kiss – which lasts roughly forty seconds[12]– in a way that is unusual for contemporary Hindi commercial cinema, which normally censors lip to lip contact in favour of the kissing of female waists, hands, shoulders, necks and abdomens. While the director, speaking of *Raja Hindustani*, called it 'the perfect combination of body and soul, of the heart and the mind', based 'solely on [his] convictions and beliefs',[13] one generally positive reviewer writes, 'The kiss that Karishma Kapoor and Aamir Khan shared … was a bit too much for Bollywood'.[14] In line with this view, my interview data indicates that some young women felt threatened by the direct breaking of the 'no-kissing' code. For instance, Sunita (19) and Munni (19), both students, felt 'shown up' and 'embarrassed' in front of their families by the length of the kiss – 'we didn't know where to look', 'I didn't want father to see me watching that', 'it was a shock' – and Meeta was quick to condemn the scene:

> Meeta: *Raja Hindustani* when they are under the tree, that five minute scene of Karishma and Aamir Khan standing [pause] it's been made way too long and unnecessary because it didn't have to be longer than a minute and it has a really bad effect on girls and boys. […] I thought [the censors] shouldn't have shown that; I felt nothing was good in that scene[…] I liked the film as a whole but […] it has very bad, shameful effects.

In the world of the film too, moral condemnation is anticipated: the beginning of the heroine's 'punishment' is signalled when Raja, the man, breaks off the kiss. As she remains, face uptilted, lost in her sexual daze for some seconds longer, he mutters the word 'No!' indicating his greater *masculine* awareness of their transgression and his ability to 'control' himself where she is in the throes of a controlling passion. She remains smiling and touching her lips in sensual pleasure until she sees his expression, at which point her 'horror' surfaces and she flees the scene of her 'crime'. Her motivation for running is ambiguous, consistent with a wish for escape either from her own 'shameless' arousal or from Raja's condemnation. After the thunder of drums and choral music, which accompanies her run through the wet forests and fields, Aarti's father arrives to convey her back to the city. This could be viewed as a reminder of the familial control and ties which await young people who are so foolish as to fall in love; several of the young people I spoke with outside cinemas described it as such, either pejoratively – Nimesh (21), an Art student, thought that the director got cold feet ('woh dar gaya, yaar') – or approvingly – Hitesh (19),

whose father runs a shop, was pleased that 'the girl remembered her heritage and felt some shame'.

Meeta's vehement dislike of the kiss and her belief that it lasts 'five minutes' are revealing of the kinds of sentiments provoked by even a brief transgression of expectations in a Hindi film; the reasons she gives for her disapproval – 'if there were families there then they would have felt shame and if a boy and a girl had come together to the cinema to watch the film then it might give them ideas' – clearly reflect moral conservatism, amongst certain strata of youth, around issues relating to sexuality as well as a tendency to condemn Hindi films on the grounds of 'effects'. Interestingly, all three negative responses quoted show a keen awareness of how the screen kiss *or the watching of it* would be perceived by others, and do not rule out the pleasure provided by the sequence if viewed in privacy. Amina (21), a housewife, was eager to explain that she enjoyed the way the actress touched the actor's head during the kiss, 'just as I do when I get him [her husband] to myself; it made me remember him and I wanted to be beside him at that moment.'

Amina's more intimate associations with the kiss may well be linked to a sense that, as a married woman, an acknowledging of erotic desire for her husband would be considered legitimate. Her willingness to express enjoyment was echoed by Sunil (20), an electrician's apprentice whom I spoke to outside a film theatre, who said that he was 'asleep for most of the film' but 'woke up and stayed awake after that sexy kiss'. However, not all young viewers who felt comfortable with the kiss sequence's

lack of vulgarity[15], responded emotionally to it. Sonali insisted that it didn't move her at all because of its inability of portray a 'love' which she found realistic or believable: '[T]hey're outside getting wet in the rain […] God knows what happens to them but suddenly she comes close to him and they *smooch* [English] and they are all wet and it's all seen and the men in the theatre where I saw it were so happy they were whistling.' What this comment highlights, perhaps unwittingly, is the way in which *Raja Hindustani*'s efforts to remain within the Hindi film tradition of eroticism robs it of psychological coherence for some young female viewers. Nevertheless, argues Lalitha Gopalan, the state-imposed obscenity code governing sexual displays on screen has been a boon rather than a hindrance to the film industry through its ability to inflame desire and enhance spectatorial pleasure. She examines the ways in which the fragmentation of the female form via camera 'withdrawal' at crucial moments can be equated with the sexual practice of 'coitus interruptus' (1998:126). Viewed through such a lens, the kiss sequence tentatively transgresses several codes: first, by refusing a large section of the audience its *expectation* of perennial teasing anticipation (and providing some of them, like Sunil, with unexpected pleasure) and second, by showing the actress as an equal participant in an extended and unambiguous sexual event (thus causing more constrained and/or conservative youth to feel disturbed and embarrassed or morally judgmental, at least in retrospect, about vicarious participation in the kiss). Having exemplified some of the ways in which young viewers (choose to) answer questions about filmic representations of gender/sexuality alongside more 'ideological' analyses – which assume the director's intention to direct viewers towards a given

moral schema – the difficulty of asserting that any single reading of a Hindi film is the most 'valid' or likely to be shared by young viewers can be better understood.

V: The allure of suffering: emotional identification and audience pleasure

At no point in the film is *emotion* so clearly presented to the audience as a basis for identification as in the aftermath to the kiss sequence. When Raja sings his impassioned plea to his beloved asking her not to leave him, he has tears in his eyes and the rage of the drunken performing woman lends his pain mythic proportions. Thus the practical preposterousness of Aarti's presence in dark-glasses and leopard print outfit is masked and suppressed by the pathos of the events. Similarly, the absurdity of the motley collection of people at Raja and Aarti's wedding – cross dressing minders, slap-stick Sikh friend – is concealed by Aarti's grief at her father's absence and anger. Where little in the rich-girl meets poor-boy plot is original for an experienced Hindi film audience[16], and even less in his idyllic poverty and her pampered town life fits the conventions of naïve realism which would allow a majority of viewers to make sustained connections between their own modalities and those of the film, the sentiments of two young lovers being torn apart first by convention and later by the machinations of evil relatives appeal directly to the audience's experience in a manner similar to that of popular soap operas. Analysing the responses of a number of *Dallas* viewers to the programme, Ien Ang (1985: 44) uses the term 'emotional realism' to explain the connections forged by viewers between their relatively mundane existences and the glamorous ones of the characters on the programme. This type of realism, she

suggests, inheres not in the day-to-day circumstances of viewers and characters but rather in a more symbolic or connotative realm in which domestic arguments, betrayals, joy and sorrow form bridges between on and off-screen life.

Interviewing young Bombay viewers, I was told repeatedly of their undeclared or thwarted romances, secret liaisons and precarious flirtations: many invoked Hindi films as both the physical (the theatres provide space for being together) and the psychological (a particular moment in a film was transformatory) locations for turning points in their consciousness about relationships with families and lovers. Using Ang's paradigm of 'emotional realism', the subplot of treachery and familial deceit which gains significance in the latter half of *Raja Hindustani* could be said to hold pleasure for this section of the audience primarily through its evocation of the fraught psychological world in which a couple are not allowed to experience marital bliss without the interference and manipulation of their families. In the absence of Raja's family, Aarti's ties to her natal home are utilised as reasons for conflict. The scene during which Raja castigates Aarti for accepting a gift from her father is notable for its implicit acceptance of his controlling aggression and for its endorsement of her absolute capitulation. Young viewers interviewed were divided between those who ridiculed Aarti's abdication of subjectivity and those who praised it as a key attribute of a wife. Predictably, perhaps, younger unmarried women (17-19), from conservative families, did not or *did not feel able* to criticise Aarti's submissiveness, while married/working women aged over twenty, and men, were less anxious about the implications of the positions they took up, asserting confidently that 'she should go

back to her family if he treats her badly', and later, that 'divorce happens: that's modern life.'

In this context, Fareed Kazmi correctly argues that the disagreeable behaviour of natal family members or outsiders which 'traps' the heroines, 'reinforces their dependence on the heroes who are the only ones who have the potential of liberating them from their vulnerable and oppressed states.' He continues by pointing out that 'even the foreign-educated, extremely well to do Aarti … confesses her helplessness and total dependence on her non-literate, cab driver husband' (1999:189). Her statement, 'You are a man and can go wherever you want to, but where can I go, Rajaji? Ever since I entered your life, I have closed all other roads for myself. Never leave me and go' is both, as Kazmi suggests, a reminder of the film's ideological subtext about gender roles and, perhaps, a direct appeal to the feelings of Indian women who have chosen love over arranged marriages and feel rightly or wrongly that their individual identity is defined by the success or failure of their relationships with their husbands. Read in this way, Aarti's statement is not simply a pathetic confession of practical inability to live without her husband (she does, after-all, survive for several months without him after their angry break) but an appeal to the perceived 'emotional reality' that a section of the audience inhabits. There is little doubt, then, that audience members will have diverse interpretations and even contradictory responses to each scene, moving from identification to irony or critique depending on the emotional connection they feel with particular characters at particular times and the centrality of emotion within their experience of the film as a whole.

Raja Hindustani embeds normative discourses on gender and sexuality in spectacular visual set pieces, uniting these with 'emotional realism' to provide the audience with a pleasurable mixture that takes some unravelling. Thus, despite its benign invocation of (homo)sexuality through the stereotypically cross-dressed Gulab and Kamal, and its positing of 'bonds of the heart' as superior to or at least on par with those of 'blood', it is a typical commercial Hindi film. Aiming, perhaps, to capture the growing number of middle-class female students who frequent cinema theatres, several commercial Hindi 'romances' have, in the last decade, moved towards a more balanced eroticisation of hero and heroine, and *Raja Hindustani*, with its interest in issues of dress/role playing and social status is no exception. However, one of the most interesting aspects of the 'red dress' sequence is the fact that the apparently public space we are shown is bounded by men who make judgements about Aarti's status based only on what she wears; the space depicted thus becomes a 'male space' into which the heroine intrudes, both by the physical act of walking and by breaking a code which insists that women have to remain covered or else be considered to be sexually available and inviting. Her subsequent rescue by the hero and the punishment of the 'deviant' men can, in this context, be viewed as entirely consonant with the film's dominant ideological stance: *real*/Indian men protect women regardless of the folly displayed by the women; *real*/Indian women understand the error of their ways and alter their behaviour to suit accepted patriarchal dictates.

The build up to 'the smooch' sequence serves to remind the audience that sexuality is dangerous in ways beyond individual choice/moral control and that adolescents thrown together might not set out to do anything 'wrong' but that their (hetero)sexual desire is predestined and unavoidable. In the absence of a clear controlling patriarchal figure – Aarti's father, the only contender for this role, is deceived by his second wife and hence partially 'emasculated' – Raja, the hero, is identified as the locus of patriarchal and 'traditional' values through his dialogues on propriety, dignity and nationalism. It is he who polices his own sexuality at the beginning of the film[17] and ultimately expresses the director's belief in the popularity of patriarchal values when he says '[m]arriage in your [rich, urban, westernised] society might be a game dissolved by a signature on a piece of paper but marriage in my [poor, rural, Indian] society is a religious bond of the heart … and cannot be broken even if we do not see each other for the rest of our lives'. Here, authoritarian attitudes sit comfortably astride a retrograde and self-righteous moralism which passes, in various Hindi films, for 'tradition'. It would be fanciful to deny that such statements contribute to already potent conservative discourses on gender and sexuality within Indian society. While it is clear from urban youth responses that such film messages are neither cut and dried nor always passively accepted, it is vital to comprehend the profound impact of the wider cultural context on any interpretation of Hindi films.

Most of the young people I interviewed in Bombay inhabit a precarious world bounded by economic and social barriers of various types. Although in some ways youth and parental taste might appear to be increasingly at odds[18], many young film viewers from

both working and middle-class backgrounds live with the knowledge that their control over choices about work, domicile and sexual or life partners is highly limited. At the same time in the public sphere, along with the dominance in many states of rightwing Hindu 'fundamentalist' politicians and ideologies, spaces within which young men and women might explore their identities or interact with each other are being policed in increasingly hostile and violent ways[19]. Explorations of sex or sexual identity are at best taboo; at worst they are distorted, demonised and destroyed. The widespread vilification of those who are deemed to have flouted 'public morality' creates a climate of repression and anxiety so intense that, in some instances, being seen speaking in public to a member of the opposite sex is punishable in the most shocking ways[20]. In an environment such as the one currently in existence across vast areas of India, Hindi films may act to shore up dominant conservative morality, to warn of the dangers of non-conformity and to encourage compliance with accepted gender behaviour; however, in addition, they can offer not only legitimate physical spaces for interaction, contemplation or sexual exploration but also fantasy spaces for playful and/or serious engagement with sexuality and other aspects of identity. Finally, then, readings of Hindi films texts – such as the ones offered here – should not in any way be conceived as 'correct' or 'conclusive'. In fact, it is only by adequately exploring both the specific sociopolitical contexts and the multiple pleasures of Hindi commercial films that one can begin to make sense of meanings their messages may have for the gender and sexual choices, attitudes and behaviour of young viewers.

[1] See notably, Bharucha, 1995; Inden, 1999; Uberoi 1999 and 2001; Dwyer 2000.
[2] See Sara Dickey's discussion of the same phenomenon in Tamil cinema. (Dickey, 1993)
[3] Such a belief is expressed time and again both in 'classical' and popular fiction as well as media texts across the globe. Hollywood has a similar genre of teenage romances, some loosely based on Shakespeare and others supposedly 'original'!
[4] In her essay 'To Be a Woman' (1995) included in Aruna Vasudev's collection, *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, Maithili Rao takes Mulvey's theory as given.
[5] Mulvey has critiqued her initial work for its exclusion of the female spectator's perspective, notably in the essay, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun (1946)'; Mulvey, L. (1981) *Frameworks* 15-16-17, pp12-15.
[6] Raja's first anger is incited by Aarti's commodification of his services to her when he is falling in love and wishing to give his labour as a gift. It is only when he is able to pay her back the cash she gave him that he can begin to regain his dignity and his view of himself as her equal. He is also construed, through monetary relations, as honest and incorruptible; Raja's disinterest in cash and his stubborn insistence on earning his keep is only another indication of his masculine virtue.
[7] See Lalitha Gopalan, (1997); Jyotika Virdi (1999) and Nikhat Kazmi (1998).
[8] 'Listen to Your Heart and You Die' by Sakina Yusuf Khan, *The Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi, September 2nd, 2001; 'Panchayat nod for murder?' Lucknow. *The Hindu*, August 22nd, 2001.
[9] Such comments are mild versions of the ones that are in currency in most urban centres in India: my female interviewees spoke of constant references to their breasts and bottoms, often invoking their cow-like milk-giving properties; they explained that whatever they wore, they were subjected to such (or much worse physical) harassment which made them feel degraded and dirty. (Audience research, Bombay: 2000-2001)
[10] Emphasis mine – the word 'thing' appears to speak for itself in a debate about objectification! Whereas it was used in the original song as a bestowal of praise – you gorgeous *thing* – its sinister possibilities are myriad and Darmesh Darshan uses them, bizarrely enough, to point to the dangerous 'effects' that film lyrics supposedly have on the lumpen elements in society.
[11] Nadeem Shravan's sound-track was tremendously successful, emphasising the position of music in making a film popular, just as the visuals of nature scenes are common-places of romantic Hindi cinema.
[12] Derné too calls it the 'longest kiss in Hindi movie history' (2000: 131)
[13] Rediff On the NeT, Movies: *The Darmesh Darshan Interview*, 2000
[14] 11th Feb 2001, Internet Movie Database, user comments.
[15] In the 1989 Sooraj Barjatya romance *Maine Pyaar Kiya*, the heroine is never reveals her body to the camera and in only one scene is she supposedly revealed to her lover, Prem. Similarly, in the 1995 Aditya Chopra film *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, Kajol remains a whole night in the fields with her lover but we are never shown what happens; she remains covered throughout the film. However, many wet scenes in Hindi films eschew subtlety in favour of a buttock-wobbling, hip swinging dance routine that shows off the heroine's 'assets' from every available angle.
[16] This theme is amply explored by Hindi films, for instance in *Jab Jab Phool Khile (*1965)
[17] As does Shah Rukh Khan, Aditya Chopra's hero in the 1995 hit *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (*The One with the Heart Wins the Bride*), when he spends a night with the drunk heroine without molesting her.
[18] *MTV*, *Channel V* and several other satellite stations beam increasingly risqué scenes and topics into middle-class households.
[19] See 'Courting Death' by Vijaya Pushkarna September 9 2001, *The Week*: India Cover Story
[20] One 18 year-old interviewee told how she was beaten and put under 'house arrest' for a month by her parents for being seen speaking to a neighbour's son outside the local temple. See also, 'Listen to Your Heart and You Die' *Op Cit.*

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