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Slippery subjects

Gender, meaning, and the Bollywood audience

Shakuntala Banaji

Debating gender and film spectatorship

Critical studies of gender representation in Hindi, most notably “Bollywood,” films are not uncommon, quite often focusing on male viewers of the genre, who are thought to predominantly identify with a limited number of sexist and heterosexist discursive positions mapped out for them by the films. These discursive positions, defined here not simply as units of communication but also as structures of feeling and thinking expressed through visual and other language which order experience and inflect behavior, are assumed to be fairly homogenous across individual films and even across entire genres. In order to understand how and why this movement between assumptions about textual meaning-producing strategies and audience meaning making takes place in relation to Hindi films, it is important to understand the history and background of studies of cinematic gender representation. Foremost, a concern about the direct effects of media on behavior has motivated a good many of the theorists writing in this area. Empirical studies of gender representation imply strongly that media images serve as “models” for readers and viewers; for instance, Kaul argues that

The popularity of films, newspapers and television in India prompts speculation on the social consequences of such media portrayal: it is potentially very damaging. Not only is a patriarchal world order reinforced in the press, on the screen and in television serials, but the existing dichotomy of sex roles is perpetuated ... The relentlessly negative representation of women in India’s media has had the effect of validating women’s inferiority as real and natural. The end result can only be a progressive debilitation of women’s self-image.
(Kaul 1996: 261–2)

The triangular move from potentially “damaging” images of women in the media to the reinforcing of social discrimination and then on to a negative transformation of women’s “self-image” takes place rather seamlessly. It appears not only logical but simply common sense. The facts of existence for a majority of India’s women, mostly rural and poor or urban and poor, as well as the evidence garnered via

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research into media representation and used in Kaul's paper, make such a linkage seem all the more justified. Other researchers doing textual analysis of Hindi films (Chatterji 1998; Kazmi 1998; Mathur 2002; Nair 2002; Vishwanath 2002) have argued that the films support unjust, patriarchal regimes. These studies also imply that audiences, only rarely approached in person and that too in the most superficial ways (Derné 2000), participate in these social imaginaries. For instance, expressing the frustration of many feminists with the representation of women in commercial Indian films, Maithili Rao's essay "To Be a Woman" (1995) appears to speak both about films and for female spectators. In her words, "women's response to popular cinema is a ceaseless love-hate thralldom because the film image ostensibly celebrates her eroticism while reducing her to a passive sex-object" (1995: 241).

In this context, increased sexual "permissiveness" on the screen is seen as simply one more complicating factor in the chain of iconography which binds and degrades women. In this view, it fuses the traditional Hindi film dichotomies of "vamp/prostitute/dancing girl" and "chaste wife" within individual heroines and makes the idea of "woman" merely more appealing to certain men. Meanwhile, heroines become less psychologically coherent. Male viewers would, apparently, previously have had to cheer for dancing girls and then to fall silent in respect for the loyal piety of the heroine. Now, according to Rao, these men are given license to imagine, beneath the demure sari, the sexual delights which the heroine displayed and *promised* when, as an unmarried youngster, she cavorted in "itsy bitsy fluff" or "disported in diaphanous saris under waterfalls" (1995: 243). It is thus the way in which Hindi commercial cinema appears to reinforce certain oppressive patterns of thought and self-image for women that comes across in Rao's essay as most deeply disturbing. She writes of the film *Aaina* (*Mirror*, Deepak Sareen, 1993) that "the condoning of psychic violence done to women [goes] largely unnoticed. Meekness and patience are rewarded whereas the ambitious woman's attempt to exploit her sexuality for personal fame [is] condemned as morally reprehensible" (1995: 253-4). In a similar vein, feminist film theorist Shoma A. Chatterji argues that contrary to performing an "idealising" function, "myth" in Indian popular culture perpetuates images of women which are "beautiful" but in which their "inner strength"—if they have any—"mainly derives from a man, dead or alive—father, brother, husband or son" (1998: 49).

Most of these textual analyses endorse two theoretical premises of major relevance to our discussion in this chapter. The first premise, following Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on narrative cinema, suggests that all textual pleasure is predicated on the passive display of female bodies, fetishism, voyeurism, and the successful subordination of the female to the male gaze. The second insists that gender identities are formed and maintained within a simple binary of masculine and feminine sex roles. Problematically, however, all these studies fail to analyze, in more than vague and generalized terms, the mechanisms whereby such supposedly psychologically constitutive activity takes place. There is also an implicit acceptance that gender identities are more significant than other aspects of identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of media texts. Crudely put, when you watch and understand a Hindi film or other media text, you respond to it and interpret it first as a man or woman. Other aspects of your identity are thus either subsidiary or irrelevant to how you interpret films. However, put so bluntly, this seems a highly suspect and somewhat

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limiting conclusion. So, where else can we look for a framework which might shed light on the connections between Hindi film viewing, meaning, and gender identity?

Feminist social psychologist Lynne Segal takes issue with what she deems to be theoretical weaknesses in social psychological sex-role constructions of gender identity such as the ones we have just looked at. She suggests (Segal 1999) that there is no necessary “rational” movement from disenchantment with or even anger against the “oppressive” or obsolete structures of “patriarchal” life to social change and alteration of the gender order. In effect, when we know something is bad for us, this does not always spur us to reject it immediately; nor, just because we do not reject something and stop doing it, does this mean we are not aware that it might have negative consequences for us or for the world. Perhaps, then, what is required from a theory of gender that hopes to explain men’s and women’s relationship to media representation is a conception of subjectivity which does not assume a *consistent relationship* between action and emotion or between aspects of an individual’s psychic identity. Some strands of poststructuralist feminism appear to present just such an account. The research presented in the following sections draws on such arguments for its conceptual framework in answering the seemingly straightforward questions: How do viewers of Hindi films interpret and respond to representations of masculinity and femininity in the movies they watch, and in what ways do their gender identities seem to be inflected by these interpretations?

Audiences and meanings

While a range of audience studies of films has been carried out in the past decade (Austin 2002; Barker and Brooks 1998; Cherry 2002), those that deal significantly or exclusively with themes of masculinity, femininity, and gender are not so numerous. In line with the more dialectical view of gender identity and representation arrived at in the previous section, Kimberley Chabot Davis discusses how her audience ethnographies are informed by “anti-essentialist theories of subjectivity” and explains that she investigates “how multiple axes of identity can complicate a viewer or reader’s positioning” (2003: 5). Chabot Davis finds from her audience study of responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (the novel, film, and musical versions), the story of two men who meet in prison, that only half of the gay men interviewed identified with the effeminate gay character Molina; “many in fact identified with Valentin, the macho political prisoner who could be read as either straight or bisexual” (2003: 5). This finding complicates immediately the notion that audiences or individual spectators watch film sequences and unreflexively begin to copy particular gender roles. People do not automatically identify with characters who share their maleness or femaleness. Gender is conceptualized here as a series of discourses—structures of feeling and thinking about the self and the world which are expressed either verbally or visually—and material practices encompassing behaviors and actions towards fellow humans as well as the making of visual and verbal representations.

From her interview-based study of audience responses to the film *The Piano*, Chabot Davis concludes that “identification is an ideological process, rather than one that simply devolves from the female body or psyche.” Indeed, “[f]eminist

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viewers of *The Piano* recognized that their identification and/or disidentification with the protagonist Ada was influenced by their own adherence to particular feminist ideologies” (Chabot Davis 2003: 6). The fact that these women self-identify as feminists might tempt researchers in a quantitative tradition to dismiss their discussions of viewing and identification as so far from the “norm” as to be meaningless in providing an explanatory framework for how spectatorship and identity are connected. I suggest, however, that their explicit acknowledgment of ideological world-views simply makes it easier to understand their interpretation of films than it would be in the case of viewers who do not have the vocabulary to describe the ideological stances they hold and the discourses in which they nonetheless participate.

Iglesias-Prieto (2004) examines the Mexican film *Danzon* and the relationship of diverse groups of viewers to its depictions of class, gender, and sexuality. Her focus group discussions with young heterosexual men, gay men, lesbians, and heterosexual women from different class backgrounds reveal several common “reading patterns.” These center on aspects of identity that are not simply to do with gender, although they do intersect with gender at various points. For instance: “the group composed of younger gay men spoke of the story of *Danzon* in a manner similar to that registered in women’s groups. ... The possibility of change in a female character composes a subversive element that upsets the distribution of power in gender relations. For this group, Julia becomes a model in that she is congruent with what the younger gay men seem to admire” (2004: 183–4). Thus, both Chabot Davis’s and Iglesias-Prieto’s studies suggest that, in contrast to the emphasis on embedded or inherent meaning which comes from textual analysis, the same moments in a film, watched by different audience cohorts, can hold divergent meanings and symbolic references. They also suggest that identification is a conscious ideological choice for some viewers. So, how do these findings play out in the very different context of Hindi popular film viewing?

Gender, sexuality, and Hindi film audiences

Over more than a decade now, I have conducted extended in-depth interviews with more than 100 young people and two dozen adults in India and the UK about their media use and Hindi film viewing, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Interviews, which generally lasted between one and four hours and were conducted one on one or in pairs, have been analyzed thematically in the light of forms of discourse analysis stemming from social psychology (Henriques *et al.* 1984; Potter and Wetherell 1987). Thus, although aspects of viewer identity such as class, gender, and religion are seen as significant in inflecting experiences of life and film, interviewees’ accounts of Hindi film viewing and use are presented here as part of a moment in cultural time and space that has absorbed and thus reflects key meanings, values, and discourses from its surrounding sites of culture. This chapter draws particularly on a small number of the extensive responses to questions about representation, gender, pleasure, and morality in a series of films in the late 1990s and through the 2000s. Following Miller and Glassner (1997: 101), the language of interviewing is not seen here as a straightforward reflection of an unproblematic reality experienced by the interviewees. Instead, interviews are seen as providing

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accounts of media experience, which are also constructions of self that can and do change at different points in time or in different viewing contexts.

Turning to the question of how discourses and representation of gender in Hindi films are actually interpreted and received, a series of clear themes and patterns emerge from my data. In line with the theoretical framework outlined, and going further than other work in this tradition, the opinions, beliefs, and actions of viewers, as described by them during interviews, seemed frequently *at odds* with their purported judgments about courtship, sex, and marriage or masculinity, femininity, and sexuality in Hindi films. For instance, several unmarried female viewers, in both Asian and Western cities, who expressed deep enjoyment of film narratives about the importance of chastity and the sacrifice of daughters' personal desires in the face of parental authority or out of love/respect for fathers, were themselves engaged in clandestine sexual relationships and desirous of acceptance of these relationships by their parents (Banaji 2012 [2006]). While some of these interviewees even used the interview situations as therapeutic moments to analyze the differences between their avowed beliefs and pleasures in film narrative and their actual beliefs and actions, others remained unreflexive throughout. For instance, several young male viewers who claimed heterosexuality, having championed the rights of film heroines and real-life women to self-determination, described complacently how they acquiesced in the subordination of their own girlfriends'/wives' autonomy to their wishes or their families' supposed "traditions" and values. Thus, regardless of viewers' gender, age, religion, or location, they deployed *available discourses* for talking about gender, both on and off screen. While some of these were stereotypical (assuming the fixed and essential nature of gender identity) and some were quite clearly counter-stereotypical (assuming that men and women can become and be different from how they behave or appear at particular times), they frequently coexisted in accounts of viewing.

When I asked interviewees to discuss films about religion, politics, and romance, religion and nationalism intersected with gender and sexuality in their interpretations in interesting ways. Several male viewers who described themselves as gay were emphatic in insisting that, given the lack of plausible and coherent gay male characters, they identified comfortably with the experiences and choices of heroines on screen. One of these viewers maintained that he could not accept his own sexual attraction to men as "a permanent thing" and claimed he watched Hindi films in the hope that he would discover the way to be "a proper man, a proper Indian husband." At a later point in the interview, however, he criticized the overwhelming heteronormativity of Hindi films. Following a discussion of young people sacrificing their romantic love to make their families happy in the film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, he stated:

MANISH: ... I don't think they should do that. It's all about the strength of your love, I think. If you give up then you'll be upset later that you never tried. Like with my ex. It really upset me when that ended. If you sacrifice then you never know how much that person means to you until they've gone. ... the minute we met, we knew we were meant to be together. His feelings complimented mine. But now he's under pressure to get married. I mean, I think Hindi films put a kind of pressure, maybe like on the older generation, reminding them that they have to get their children married. ... Like it tells them they *have to* have a daughter-in-law. I think it does have an effect.

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Another feature of talk about masculinity and sexuality was the tendency for some viewers to suggest that religious, national, or class groups to which they did not belong were the perpetrators of sexual violence and regressive practice. So, “only Pakistanis” or “only Westerners” or “only Muslims” or only “lower class men” molest women or can be homosexual, while “only white girls” and “only Hindu girls” would wear short skirts or act in pornographic movies. During interviews, several of these viewers became aware of and then embarrassed by their own normative claims. Others recounted how these were beliefs that they or their families had held previously but that they themselves no longer held having experienced “real life.” When asked how they could take pleasure in such prejudiced depictions and discourses on the Hindi film screen, they suggested that textual pleasures and ideological beliefs off screen are not coterminous. The complexities of these thoughts ARE seen in the following discussion with a 21-year-old British-Nepali Hindu, Padma, about a sequence in the film *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* when the hero first encounters the heroine on an intercontinental train:

PADMA: When they first meet each other on the train, it’s so cute [pause, laughing]. It’s only because he’s Shah Rukh Khan that I say that. He probably *is* harassing her, like it’s too much when he puts his head in her lap! Any other Indian guy and I’d be going “*Excuse me!* What’re you doing? That’s harassment here!” Call the guard, get him kicked off the train! He is harassing her and you only accept it because it is a Hindi film. You know, “Oh it’s a film!” I mean if that happened in real life, you’d be like, “Oh my God, No!” But that’s the thing, isn’t it, it takes you away from real life. [pause]

INTERVIEWER: Does it?

PADMA: I reckon that in some places that could encourage guys to try it on, you know what I’m saying, some countries [smiling] ... I reckon that in places like Nepal, India, people go and see that in the cinema and they go “Hey, I’d like to be a bit of a hero.”

This excerpt highlights a tendency amongst film audiences to position their own responses to film themes and representations in relation to existing discourses on gender, class, or sexuality which are prevalent in their family or national and community media environment. It is therefore interesting to get a sense of *who* viewers are while elaborating their interpretations. Smriti (14) and Champa (15) are best friends. Smriti is lower middle class, Champa middle middle class. The girls met at school. Several conversations with parents and children reveal that Smriti’s mother thinks Champa’s family is “snobbish” and “a bad influence”; Champa’s mother casts Smriti’s mother as “narrow-minded” and “old-fashioned”:

SMRITI: [I like Hindi films because] they show love affairs, teenage problems and foreign locations. I am interested in that and I’m not ashamed. Who else will tell us about that? I want to travel and get away from my life here. But my mamma says I have to study, study, study. What for? To end up in just such a place with some useless guy whom I hate and who tells me what to do?

INTERVIEWER: That sounds sad. So you watch films to see how you can change what you think your future holds? (Silence). Have you seen anything that you were excited by recently?

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CHAMPA AND SMRITI: All *Twilight* series! (they both groan)

SMRITI: *Love Aaj Kal, Saathiyaa, Three Idiots, Fire.*

INTERVIEWER: You watched *Fire*?

CHAMPA: My mom lets us watch her DVDs. It's a good film. Some people say it's not showing Indian values, because the two women, you know ... But I think it's very Indian. More than most of the Hindi movies set in big houses in Sidney and New York and London.

SMRITI: And it was funny how the film showed the two-faced (hypocritical) men in the family. The servant. On one side they expect you to behave in such a way, modest, good daughter-in-law. On the other side they are wanting to have sex or watch pornos (both girls laughing loudly).

CHAMPA: I don't like the films set in the villages. They are so slow and there is nothing to see.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean visually they don't please you?

CHAMPA: No. I really feel uncomfortable. A girl like me would not fit in there.

SMRITI: I love those films. She doesn't like the villages, but I do. I go every vacation to my native place.

This excerpt from the beginning of our interview shows both girls positioning themselves in relation to their parents' worldviews and those supposedly conveyed in films. They pick out themes of travel, place and modernity, sexuality and hypocrisy, class, and gender for comment. Participating in a world opened up to them partly by Champa's mother and her cosmopolitan attitude to adolescence, both girls can comment on sexuality, pornography, and other aspects of media culture. Smriti, while yearning for a lifting of the cultural constraints placed on her by her family's class, by their gender values and their communal identity, claims she is still able to enjoy fiction films set in villages. Champa and Smriti's discussion tightens the complicated knots between sexuality, gender, communal identity, and class that have emerged in previous studies (Banaji 2008; Rao 2007). This suggests both the insistent intersectionality of film viewers' identity and the problematic nature of a research question which try to detach one set of social discourses in films entirely from all others.

Other salient themes about identification and meaning making emerge from actual interviews with audience members. Of these, a significant one relates to the way in which the same sequence watched by different people or with different companions can provoke divergent emotions and interpretations from viewers of the same gender. For example, Kaveri (11) and Nimmi (12) are cousins. Kaveri's parents work as shop assistants; Nimmi's parents belong to the aspiring middle classes.

INTERVIEWER: You were telling me about that film *Fashion* [dir. Madhur Bhandarkar]. I'm surprised you were allowed to watch that.

NIMMI: I like to see films because then I know all the latest designs. I ask my mamma to get them for me; she does. I think it's nice to look good. And models (in English) look good.

KAVERI: (smiling) I think my mamma took us to that picture because she wanted us to think about how you can spoil your life running after material things, running after more. But (shyly) Nimmi was very excited to see all the costumes.

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NIMMI (CONFIDENT): Why was everything so beautiful and shown again and again by the camera if we weren't supposed to like it? It was like an advert. [Pause] I would have a balance in my life, not like those models who take cigarettes all the time and drink Pepsi for breakfast. But I want to look good (whispers), sexy. Some costumes are so beautiful—girls should be able to choose how they dress.

KAVERI: Yes, I agree with her that on one side the films make bad and dirty things very beautiful to watch and then on the other side we are told don't do this, this is not good. So it is hard to know which one to believe. But that is why we have to follow our own upbringing. I know what is right, what is wrong. Designer clothes and high grades in class and lots of money do not make someone a good human being ...

Interconnected discourses drawn from strands of humanist, feminist, and post-feminist thought surface during this exchange. Although both girls are under 13 and from the same extended family, their thinking is very distinct: Kaveri accepts her parents divergent worldview and sees it as a moral imperative to be her own person, to reject global youth culture as well as Hindi film representations of perfection or social success. Nimmi, whose parents would be disturbed at the notion of her wanting to appear “sexy” and yet who gratify her every request when it comes to clothing and make-up, finds the visual pleasures of looking at clothing and girls on screen too strong for any moral subtexts of condemnation to taint her enjoyment. Further, she uses Hindi films' displays of fashion consumption as a way of inspiring new outfits and styles for herself. Her cousin points out that brands are inscribed with problematic versions of femininity. This is something Nimmi is aware of but chooses to reinterpret as supporting her choice to clothe herself fashionably (“girls should be able to choose how they dress”). Both girls put a premium on imagination and freedom, but read Hindi film depictions of femininity, class, and fashion from apparently opposing consumerist and civic viewpoints. This leads one of them to express her freedom as freedom of choice as a young female citizen-consumer, and the other to see freedom as free will, leading to critique of a society dominated by capitalist representations of success. Neither of the girls commented on the various incidents of sexual manipulation, violence, and female self-harm in the film, which could arguably be seen as the film's most consistent representation of working life for female models. Let us set these young women's readings of the film *Fashion* beside Linda Williams's argument that in narrative cinema “[t]he woman's gaze is punished ... by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy” (2002: 61). This juxtaposition allows us to see that theorizations of ideological discourses and subtexts in films may well be useful tools for understanding power relations within the texts but are less stable and useful when it comes to understanding audience meaning making and subsequent behavior.

Destigmatizing the audience

A significant strand of broadly feminist writing is theoretically wedded to the belief that the media purvey stereotypical sex roles which implicitly become part of

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viewers' own gender identities. In such accounts, the *effects* of media stereotypes on human identity are often immediate, monolithic, and almost unbounded. To a large extent, this chapter has rejected the premises of fixed, rational, and essential identities in favor of more nuanced explications of gender identity and media. While mindful of the importance of fantasy and the unconscious in shaping human identity, I move away from the notion of "roles" and the "unconscious" adoption of them. We thus reach a notion of subjectivity that allows greater agency (however problematic) and flexibility (albeit limited by specific experiences and material contexts) in viewers' interactions with the media. In tandem, I argue that the pleasures of Hindi film viewing are not convincingly linked by audience research to theorizations which suggest an unconscious absorption of retrograde messages. Indeed, detailed work with film audiences has shown that films are far more than the sites of cultural struggle, although they are always also implicated in social tensions and conflicts.

However much textual elaborations of gender representation might push us to this conclusion, film viewing is not an activity that occurs in a vacuum or an ideologically homogenous goldfish bowl. This is not to say that media producers do not follow culturally limited parameters of predominant notions of gender difference; nor is it to suggest that there is a precise and scientific process whereby one can chart and describe events which occur when representations of gender in texts and readers meet. What studies of spectatorship should take on board, I suggest, is the more or less limited range of interpretive choices available to most viewers and the ways in which these choices may be constrained by structural and psychic intersections of class, ethnicity, and gender or other aspects of human identity. Although frequently equally worrying or retrograde, contextual and sociocultural identities and experiences *in addition to gender*—from race and ethnicity through geography to sexuality and class—play a crucial role in complicating and inflecting audiences' responses to, pleasures in, and uses of gender representation in Bollywood Hindi films.

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