

Cinema and Psychology

The 1st P.K. Nair Commemoration Lecture

Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata

22 March, 2024

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It is an honour to speak at an event in memory of P. K. Nair.

Psychology and cinema share a long relationship. It was as early as 1916, that the Harvard psychologist Hugo Munsterberg wrote *The Film: A Psychological Study*, in which he suggested that film transforms the external world into the mechanisms of the mind, including memory, imagination, attention and emotion.

But the psychological study of cinema, as we understand it today, really began in the 1950's with the publication of the book *Movies: A Psychological Study*, by Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites which convincingly demonstrated that psychological study of the cinema may be just as fruitful as Freud's applications of psychoanalytic thinking to the plays of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Sophocles. Psychoanalysis--and here I include Jung's analytical psychology-- was uniquely suited to the study of cinema because of their basic affinity: both focus on human **motivation** and both use **narrative** as their primary vehicle. This emphasis on motivation and narrative is lacking in other forms of psychology.

The field gradually evolved with the French periodical, Cahiers du Cinéma taking the lead. Cahiers used Italian semiotics as well as the ideas of the deconstructionist philosopher Derrida and the French psychoanalyst Lacan. Some of these ideas then began appearing in the British journal Screen as also other journals such as Camera Obscura and Discourse where psychoanalytically informed feminists also made their contributions.

Compared to most other countries, the psychological study of cinema in our country began quite early. I remember that it was in 1978 or 79 when the actor Roshan Seth and the film-maker Pradeep Krishan came to my house to discuss a special issue of the IIC Quarterly they were planning on Indian cinema. This was the issue titled Indian Popular Cinema: Myth,

Meaning and Metaphor. I had an essay in the Quarterly called The Ties that Bind, later published as a chapter Lovers in the Dark, in my book Intimate Relations. Wendy Doniger, a friend visiting from the University of Chicago had a mythological analysis of the film Karz in the same issue as did Veena Das and Ashish Nandy. Actually, I would place the beginning of psychoanalytical study of India cinema even earlier, to 1977, when the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson came to Delhi to lead a seminar on Identity and Adulthood. As a trained painter and thus exquisitely attuned to a visual medium such as cinema, he did an interesting analysis of the film Samskara, based on U. R. Ananthamurthy's novel and compared it to Ingmar Bergman's Wild Strawberries. But more of this later.

Psychoanalysis provides us with a number of ways of looking at narrative in general and films in particular as providing rich data for the study of the human mind and of our individual and shared values. I wish to caution you, though, that a psychoanalytical study of a film does not claim to be a definitive reading. It is sufficient if it can illuminate some aspects of what is happening on the screen, give new meaning to what had seemed familiar, and perhaps tell us how the audience experienced the film at a pre-conscious level. What we want from a good psychological study is not absolute truth but intelligibility, **coherence**, and **consistency**. I would add to this trinity a demand that the contribution be also readable but perhaps I will be in a minority on this among my psychoanalytically oriented colleagues who believe readability is a luxury that a scholar can easily dispense with.

There are five main approaches to the psychoanalytic study of cinema: 1. film as **narrative** 2. film as a reflection of the **film-maker's psyche** 3. Film as illustrative of a **developmental crisis** 4. Film as **cultural psychology** and 5. film as it is experienced by the **viewer**. These perspectives are not exclusive and a really good study tries to combine as many approaches as are possible.

I will speak very few words on each of these perspectives except the last one, the analysis of spectatorship, since I have to chair a session on that particular theme tomorrow.

1. **Film as narrative.**

This is the oldest psychoanalytic approach to the study of film which treats the story of the film as a case history. It concentrates on the analysis of the motivations of the film's **characters** as if they were real people. Different theories and concepts, from classical analysis to the theories of Kohut, Winnicott, Jung and others, can be used within this characters-as-patients model. This is still the most often used approach by clinicians writing on films,

though it is no longer favored by academic film critics who believe that since characters in film are not real and therefore the analysis is misguided and doomed to failure. If used with caution, with interpretations based on generalizable psychoanalytical postulates, universal and cultural symbolism, and on the analyst's own associations, this approach can still be useful in revealing what lies under the **surface** of a film's narrative.

- **Film as a reflection of the film-maker's psyche.** This approach is based on the assumption, often used in the analysis of literary texts or other artistic creations, that a deep knowledge of the **biography** of the film maker may shed light on the film. In other words, a creative person's work is inseparable from his biography, from the most important themes and conflicts of his or her life. For example, the hostility towards women documented in Alfred Hitchcock's biographies may help an audience understand the sado-masochistic overtones in male-female relationships in many of Hitchcock's films. As Bergman once remarked about the fragile conception of his **films**: "It is a mental state ... abounding in fertile associations and images ... a brightly colored thread sticking out of the dark sack of the unconscious.
- If we can accept Bergman's contentions that his films grow out of his dreams and traumatic memories and add that these films represent efforts at mastery (since he returns to certain themes and imagery obsessively), we can proceed to ask whether his films signal the recurring inner conflicts they depict.

This approach has limited use, especially in the Indian context where most films are a collective creation, involving the director, screenplay writer, cameraman, editor and also the leading actors rather than reflecting the vision of a single director/ author. It would, however, be interesting to see this way of looking applied to the films of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal or Adoor Gopalakrishnan, for instance, where the director/author is much more the creator of the film.

2. **Film as illustrative of developmental crisis.**

Often

the main theme or even the entire atmosphere of a film beautifully captures common developmental crises that are vicariously experienced by audience members. An example is Erik Erikson's analysis of Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara*. In terms of his eight stages of man theory of the life cycle, Erikson shows that the crisis faced by Praneshcharya, the hero of *Samskara*, is a premature old age crisis of integrity vs. despair. In Praneshcharya's case, as in case of Dr. Borg, the hero of Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries*, the

despair is involved with that part of his past in which the person lived a role chosen or foisted on him while leaving some essential aspects of himself un-lived. In other words, the **cut-off parts** of his life come back to haunt Praneshcharya as he ages, as the cut-off parts of **our** own lives will sometime or the other return during the course of the life to haunt all of us.

3. **Film as cultural psychology.**

I want

to say a few words about this approach, especially since this is perhaps the most rewarding perspective in the Indian context, or at least in the psychological study of Indian **popular** cinema. In India, cinema has become our most popular cultural artifact, our most collective and institutionalized form of entertainment. Films are our contemporary myths, the **Puranas** of our age. The involvement of many people in the creation of the contemporary myths we call films (and this includes TV soaps), and their complex financial arrangements involving producers, financiers, distributors, adds to their interactive, institutional, and collective nature. To survive, popular cinema must cater to our desires and help us narrow the gap between expectations and experience. Films, especially those that are successful at the box office, tap into the collective psychology of a mass audience. In pleasing the audience, they also articulate the cultural psychology of our era. These contemporary myths we call films provide clues to our shared conscious and unconscious wishes, conflicts, and fears that move us. Just as dreams function as wish-fulfillments (at least in many cases), so do films provide wish-fulfilling solutions to human dilemmas in a particular culture. (Conflict between love and arranged marriage, loyalty towards the family versus individual self fulfillment.) Their unconscious elements refer to shared rather than individual values, and to public conflicts rather than private ones. Like the stories from Indian mythology, some of whose elements are still present in contemporary films, popular cinema not only provides catharsis, but also unites audiences with their culture. To conclude, and as has been remarked by the psychoanalytic film scholar Glen Gabbard, audiences do not attend films merely to be entertained. They queue up at the local cinema hall or multiplex to encounter long forgotten but still powerful anxieties that stem from their common developmental experiences. By confronting them at a distance in a darkened cinema, they have the opportunity to master those anxieties vicariously and leave enriched and relieved. As with all forms of art, when we study film, we study ourselves.

The analysis of spectatorship

Film scholars writing from the perspectives of Lacan and Derrida have placed emphasis on the perspective of the 'spectator' or audience member. Lacan's most important student in the field of film theory has been Christian Metz who describes film viewing as a regressive, dreamlike state induced by the darkened house, the silence of the spectators, the inhibition of movement, the relative comfort of the padded chairs—all of which encourage suspension of disbelief. In this regressive state, the pleasure principle is enhanced and the earliest mental processes which psychoanalysis calls primary processes, are encouraged. Cinema restores the experiences of primary and secondary identifications from that time when the child first recognizes its own image in the mirror. By definition, the process involves voyeurism and fetishism. The Lacanian approach centres on how the perspective of the camera creates a 'gaze' on the events of the film's narrative. Thus, for instance, women are traditionally portrayed as little more than exhibitionistic objects of desire displayed for the voyeuristic gaze of the male audience. Bipasha Basu's dance in *Omkara* but also many other scenes from so many Indian popular films, old and new, come immediately to mind. It has been suggested, by the feminist semiotician Laura Mulvey's that the woman's body is fetishized in film because it produces anxiety in the male viewer, to whom the female body represents castration. The question would then arise: Is this especially true of our country where such scenes are essential ingredients of almost every film?

But let me also say that Lacanian analysis has generated considerable criticism in some quarters because the methodology is regarded as too top-heavy with abstract theoretical formulations and too focused on the processes through which film generates meaning rather than the specific content of a given film. Many psychoanalytic film scholars find the Lacanian approach too limiting. Nevertheless, Lacan continues to inspire some of the most important film theorists.

To come to the personal part of the talk, when I was growing up in the 1940s, going to the cinema, at least in the Punjab and at least among the middle and upper classes, was regarded as slightly dissolute, if not outright immoral, and the habit was considered especially dangerous to the growing sensibilities of young children. Of course, not all films were equally burdened with disapproval. Like everything else in India—from plants to human beings—there was (and still is) a strict hierarchical classification. In the movie caste system, stunt films, the Indian version of Kung Fu movies, were the low-caste *Shudras* at the lowest

rung of the ladder while the *Brahmin* ‘mythological’ and the *Kshatriya* ‘historical’ vied for supremacy at the top. The only time I was admitted to the owner’s box of Prabhat Talkies—the cinema owned by a grand-uncle in Lahore—was to see an eminently forgettable mythological called *Kadambari*. In childhood, stunt films were my favourite, although my taste was quite catholic, consisting as it did of indiscriminate adoration. With the complicity of a friendly doorman who doubled as an odd job man in my grand-uncle’s adjoining house, I was in the fortunate position of being able to indulge my secret passion for films whenever we visited Lahore. I use the word ‘passion’ literally and not as a metaphor, since my craving for movies was insatiable and my consumption equally remarkable; I saw *Ratan* sixteen times, *Shikari* fourteen times, and even *Kadambari* three times after that first viewing from the owner’s box.

I remember my movie-going with a nostalgia which cloaks childhood events, at least the good ones, in a unique glow of permanence and ephemerality. In the anonymity of a darkness pierced by the flickering light which gave birth to a magical, yet familiar, world on the screen, I was no longer a small boy but a part of the envied world of adulthood, although I sensed its rituals and mysteries but dimly. I always joined in the laughter that followed a risqué comment, even if its exact meaning escaped me. I, too, would hold my breath in the hushed silence that followed a particularly well-enacted love scene and surreptitiously try to whistle with the O of the thumb and the index finger under the tongue, in imitation of the wolf whistles that greeted the obligatory scene in which the heroine fell into the water or was otherwise drenched. When some years back, in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* Miss Zeenat Aman’s considerable charms were revealed through her wet and clinging saree at the receiving end of a waterfall, I remember feeling grateful to the world of Hindi movies for providing continuity in an unstable and changing world. When I was a child, the movies brought the vistas of a desirable adulthood tantalizingly close; as an adult, I found that they helped keep the road to childhood open.

I have described my engagement with the world of Hindi films at some length, not in order to claim any vast personal experience or specialized knowledge but to stress the fact of an enduring empathic connection with the world of Indian popular cinema. Today, this cinema, which draws upon images and symbols from the traditional regional cultures and combines them with more modern western themes, is the major shaper of an emerging, pan-Indian popular culture. Though its fixed repertoire of plots, with which the audience is presumably

thoroughly familiar, has striking parallels with traditional folk theatre, the popular culture represented by the cinema goes beyond both classical and folk elements even while it incorporates them.

The appeal of the film is directed to an audience so diverse that it transcends social and spatial categories. Watched by almost 15 million people every day, popular cinema's values and language have long since crossed urban boundaries to enter the folk culture of the rural-based population, where they have begun to influence Indian ideas of the good life and the ideology of social, family, and love relationships. The folk dance of a region or a particular musical form such as the devotional *bhajan*, after it has crossed the portals of a Bombay or Chennai studio, is transmuted into a film dance or a film *bhajan* by the addition of musical and dance motifs from other regions as perhaps also from the West, and is then relayed back in full technicolour and stereophonic sound to decisively alter the original. Similarly, film situations, dialogue, and decor have begun to colonize folk theatre. Even the traditional iconography of statues and pictures for religious worship is pay homage to film representations of gods and goddesses.¹

My own approach to spectatorship in popular cinema is to think of film as a collective fantasy, a group daydream. By 'collective' and 'group' I do not mean that Hindi film is an expression of a mythic collective unconscious or of some-thing called a group mind. Instead, I see the cinema as the primary vehicle for shared fantasies of a vast number of people living on the Indian sub-continent who are both culturally and psychologically linked. I do not use 'fantasy' in the ordinary sense of the word, with its popular connotations of whimsy, eccentricity, or triviality, but as another name for that world of imagination which is fuelled by desire and which provides us with an alter-native world where we can continue our longstanding quarrel with reality. Desire and fantasy are, of course, inexorably linked. Aristotle's dictum that there can be no desire without fantasy contains even more truth in reverse. Fantasy is the *mise-en-scène* of desire, its dramatization in a visual form.

The origins of fantasy lie in the unavoidable conflict between many of our desires, formulated as demands on the environment (especially on people), and the environment's inability or unwillingness to fulfil our desires, where it does not proscribe them altogether. The power of fantasy, then, comes to our rescue by extending or withdrawing the desires beyond what is possible or reasonable, by remarking the past and inventing a future. Fantasy, the 'stuff that dreams are made of,' is the bridge between desire and reality, spanning the

chasm between what is asked for and what is granted. It well deserves psychoanalyst Robert Stoller's paean as 'the vehicle of hope, healer of trauma, protector from reality, concealer of truth, fixer of identity, restorer of tranquillity, enemy of fear, and sadness, cleanser of the soul.'² Indian popular films, perhaps more than the cinema of many other countries, are fantasy in this special sense.

The sheer volume of unrelieved fantasy in one film after another is indeed overwhelming, and it is disquieting to reflect that this exclusive preoccupation with magical explanations and fairy tale solutions for life's problems could be an expression of a deep-seated need in large sections of Indian society. Some may even consider such a thoroughgoing denial of external reality in Indian popular cinema to be a sign of morbidity, especially since one cannot make the argument that fantasy in films fulfils the need for escapism of those suffering from grinding poverty. In the first place, it is not the poor who constitute the bulk of the Indian film clientele. In the second, one does not know the cinema of any other country which, even in the worst periods of economic deprivation and political uncertainty, dished out such uniformly fantastic fare. Neither German cinema during the economic crisis of the 1920s nor Japanese cinema in the aftermath of the Second World War elevated fantasy to such an overwhelming principle. And if one considers that neorealism even flourished in Italy during the economic chaos following the Allied victory, then one must acknowledge that economic conditions alone cannot explain the fantasia permeating Indian films.

The reason for the ubiquity of fantasy in the Hindi cinema, I suspect, lies in the realm of cultural psychology rather than in the domain of socioeconomic conditions. Now, as in other cultures, we, too, have our film addicts. These are the unfortunate people who are pressed in childhood to view reality in an adult way and now need the fantasy of the film world to fill up the void left by a premature deprivation of magic in early life. Leaving aside this group, no sane Indian believes that films depict the world realistically, although I must admit I often feel that our willingness to suspend disbelief is relatively greater than in many other cultures. This is not because the thought processes of Indians are fantasy-ridden. The propensity to state received opinion and belief as observation, to look for confirmation of belief rather than be open to disturbing new knowledge, to generally think in a loose, associative rather than a rigorous and sequential way, is neither Indian, American, Chinese, Japanese, or German, but common to most human beings. However, I would hypothesize, without passing any value judgement, that relatively speaking, in India the child's world of magic is not as far removed

from adult consciousness as it may be in some other cultures. Because of a specific thrust of culture and congruent child-rearing practices which I have described in detail elsewhere, the Indian ego is flexible enough to regress temporarily to childhood modes without feeling threatened or engulfed.³ Indian films seem to provide this regressive haven for a vast number of our people.

If, as I have indicated above, I regard the Indian cinema audience not only as the reader but also as the real author of the text of Hindi films, what is the role played by their ostensible creators—the producers, directors, scriptwriters, music directors, and so on? In my view, their functions are purely instrumental and akin to that of a publisher who chooses, edits, and publishes a particular text from a number of submitted manuscripts. The quest for the comforting sound of busy cash registers at the box office ensures that the filmmakers select and develop a daydream which is not idiosyncratic. They must intuitively appeal to those concerns of the audience which are shared; if they do not, the film's appeal is bound to be disastrously limited. As with pornography, the filmmakers have to create a work which is singular enough to fascinate and excite, and general enough to excite many. Moreover, in their search for the 'hit', the ten to fifteen films out of the roughly 700 produced every year which evoke the most enthusiastic response, the filmmakers repeat and vary the daydreams as they seek to develop them into more and more nourishing substitutes for reality. Under the general rubric of fantasy, which can range all the way from the most primal images in dreams to the rationalized misinterpretations of reality in everyday life, the Indian film is perhaps closest to the daydream. Indeed, the visual landscape of these films has a strong daydream quality in that it is not completely situated outside reality but is clearly linked to it. As Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge point out, while the landscape of the popular film contains places, social types, topological features, and situations which are reminiscent of ordinary experience, these elements are transformed or transposed so as to create a subtly fantastic milieu.⁴ Even film speech is reminiscent of real speech. Thus, the frequently heard admonition in 'Indinglish,' 'Don't *maro filmi dialogues, yaar* (Don't spout dialogues from films at me, friend)', is often addressed to someone expressing highly inflated sentiments of friendship, love, or hostility which typify exchanges between the characters of Indian cinema.

Like the adult daydream, the Hindi film emphasizes the central features of fantasy—the fulfilment of wishes, the humbling of competitors, and the destruction of enemies. The stereotyped twists and turns of the film plot ensure the repetition of the very message that

makes, for instance, the fairy tale so deeply satisfying to children—namely, that the struggle against difficulties in life is unavoidable, but if one faces life's hardships and its many, often unjust impositions with courage and steadfastness, one will eventually emerge victorious.⁵ At the conclusion of both films and fairy tales, parents are generally happy and proud, the princess is won, and either the villains are ruefully contrite or their battered bodies satisfactorily litter the landscape. Evil in film, too, follows the same course it does in fairy tales; it may be temporarily in ascendance or usurp the hero's legitimate rights, but its failure and defeat are inevitable. Like the temptations of badness for a child who is constantly forced to be good, evil in cinema is not quite without its attractions of sensual licence and narcissistic pleasure in the unheeding pursuit of the appetites. It is usually the unregenerate villain who gets to savour the pleasures of drinking wine and the companionship, willing or otherwise, of sexy and attractive women.

Another feature common to both films and fairy tales is the oversimplification of situations and the elimination of detail, unless the detail is absolutely essential. The characters of the film are always typical, never unique, and without the unnerving complexity of real people. The Hero and the Villain, the Heroine and Her Best Friend, the Loving Father and the Cruel Stepmother, are never ambivalent, never the mixed ticket we all are in real life. However, unlike in novels, the portrayal of characters in film is neither intended to enhance our understanding of the individual complexities of men and women nor to assist our contemplation of the human condition. Their intention is to appeal to the child within us, to arouse quick sympathies and antipathies, and thus encourage the identifications that help us to savour our fantasies more keenly.

When dogmatic rationalists dismiss popular films as unrealistic and complain that their plots strain credibility and their characters stretch the limits of the believable, this condescending judgement is usually based on a restricted vision of reality. To limit and reduce the real to that which can be demonstrated as factual is to exclude the domain of the psychologically real—all that is felt to be, enduringly, the actuality of one's inner life. Or, to adapt Bruno Bettelheim's observation on fairy-tales, films may be unreal in a rational sense but they are certainly not untrue. Their depiction of the external world may be flawed and their relevance to the external life of the viewer remote; yet, as we shall see, in their focus on the unconsciously perceived fantasy rather than the consciously perceived story, Indian film demonstrates a confident and sure-footed grasp of the topography of desire. The stories they

tell may be trite and limited in number, with simple, recognizable meanings which on the surface reinforce rather than challenge cultural convention, yet beneath the surface, the fantasies they purvey, though equally repetitious, are not so trite and add surprising twists to the conscious social understanding of various human relationships in the culture.

Having described the relationship between Indian cinema, culture, and psyche in some detail, let me now turn to the cinema audience's internal theatre of love as they watch the images flicker by on the screen. I shall focus on the lover-hero of the films, or rather the hero as lover though only glancingly at the heroine as lover, an important task which I would leave to others, perhaps some members of my audience here. I will also ignore other popular movie genre that have assumed prominence in recent years. For instance, the gay movies which signal changes in patriarchal structures, the threat of gender transgressions, and instabilities within masculine identities. Or the gang movies, such as *The Gangs of Wasseypur* or *Bambai Meri Jaan* which I recently watched on Netflix. Part of the draw of gang movies is that the gang is a representation of the underside of family life, with its inescapable conflicts between love and hate, and between trust and betrayal. Our own unending conflicts between such omnipotent desire and our sense of reality and conscience that are becoming more conscious suggest that gang movies will increasingly have a large and enthusiastic audience.

For the composite love story I seek to present here, is culled largely from a score of the biggest box-office hits I will take as my illustrative text only one film, Raj Kapoor's *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (*Rama, Your Ganga is Polluted*), the top box-office hit for the year 1986. I shall then use examples from other films to amplify and otherwise complete the prototypical love story of popular cinema.

Narendra, the hero of the film, is a student of a Calcutta college and the son of a rich, thoroughly corrupt businessman. His father is a close associate of Bhag Choudhary, a villainous politician, whose only daughter, Radha, is romantically interested in our young hero. Narendra, however, is unaware of Radha's feelings for him. He ignores her not-so-subtle advances and generally treats her in a friendly asexual fashion.

Narendra goes on a college trip to Gangotri, the source of the sacred river Ganges, in the Himalayan mountains. He has promised to bring his dotting grandmother pure Ganges water from the river's very source, since the water is polluted by the time it reaches the sea at Calcutta. He clammers down a mountainside to reach the stream, but the pitcher he has

brought with him slips from his hand and rolls down the slope. As Narendra seeks to retrieve the pitcher, he is saved from falling over a cliff by a shouted warning from the heroine of the movie, Ganga. Ganga is a pretty, young girl of the hills, unspoiled and innocent, and frankly expresses her liking for the city boy. Often enough, she takes the initiative in their budding relationship. She leads him by the hand on their excursions through the mountains, barefooted and impervious to the cold, while he both stumbles and shivers. During their courtship, they sing duets in meadows full of wild flowers and frolic through streams which, of course, make Ganga's thin white sari wet and cling revealingly to her well-formed breasts. Narendra saves Ganga from being raped by one of his college friends, which deepens the girl's feelings for the boy and increases their mutual attachment.

Although Ganga has been promised in marriage to one of her own people, she decides to break the engagement and marry Narendra. The marriage ceremony is preceded by a rousing (and arousing) folk dance and is succeeded by the wedding night. While inside the room, Narendra undresses Ganga with the gravity and devotion of a priest preparing the idol of the goddess for the morning worship, Ganga's brother and her enraged ex-fiancé are engaged outside in a murderous fight which will end in both their deaths.

Narendra goes back to Calcutta, promising to send for Ganga as soon as he has informed the family of his marriage. There he discovers that his grandmother has betrothed him in his absence to Radha, the politician's daughter, a match welcomed by both the families. After many emotional scenes involving the boy and his parents, in the course of which his grandmother suffers a heart attack and eventually dies, Narendra, defying his parent's wishes, sets out for the hills to fetch Ganga. By virtue of the political influence exercised by Choudhary, he is forcibly taken off the bus by the police before he can reach her village in the hills and is brought back to Calcutta.

In the meanwhile, a letter by Narendra's grandmother to her grand-son reaches Ganga, from which she learns of the family's plans for Narendra's betrothal; Ganga believes her husband now to be married to another woman. Their wedding night, however, has had consequences and Ganga gives birth to a child. Since in Hindu tradition children belong to the father, Ganga nobly decides to take the infant son to far off Calcutta and hand him over to Narendra. It is now that the perils of Ganga begin. Alighting from the bus at the foot of the hills and looking for the train station from where she can take the train to Calcutta, Ganga is instead guided to a cheap whorehouse. There she is sold to a customer who would rape her but Ganga manages

to escape with the baby clutched to her breast. She then approaches an old priest for directions to the railway station. He, too, turns out to be lecherous. Ganga is saved from his attentions by the timely arrival of the police. Finally put on the train to Calcutta by a kindly police officer—who for a change does not try to rape her—Ganga is kidnapped on the way by a pimp who brings her to a *kotha* in Benares, a brothel whose customers are first entertained by song and dance in the traditional style of the Indian courtesan. Ganga becomes a well-known dancing girl though all the while retaining her mysterious purity, that ‘purity of the Ganges which lies in a woman’s heart and which makes a man attracted to her, merge into her’.

Ganga is now sold by the owner of the *kotha* to Choudhary who has come to Benares to find a girl to keep him company in his declining years. Choudhary, her husband’s future father-in-law, installs the girl in a house in Calcutta and one day brings Narendra’s father along with him to show off the girl’s charms. He promises to share Ganga with him once the marriage of their children has been solemnized. On the day of the marriage, Ganga is called upon by Choudhary to entertain the wedding guests. As she sings and dances, Narendra recognizes her and without completing the marriage rites, rushes to her side. His father and especially Choudhary and his goons try to stop him but Narendra and Ganga are finally united. Together with their infant son, they go away from the corruption of a degraded older generation towards a hopeful new future.

Superficially, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* is a syrupy tale of the eternally pure woman whose devotion and innocence triumph over the worst efforts of lustful (mostly older) males to enslave and exploit her. As the third ear is deemed essential for listening in the psychoanalytic hour, similarly the analyst may need a third eye to break up the cloying surface of the film into less obvious patterns. Unlike Shiva’s third eye which destroys all reality, the Freudian one merely cracks reality’s stony surface to release its inner shape of fantasy. Like the dreamer who is not only the author, producer, and director of his dream but often plays all the important leads himself, the creator–audience of the film, too, is not limited to existing within the skin of the hero or the heroine but spreads out to cover other characters. The analyst may then reassign different values to the characters of the story than what has been the dreamer’s manifest intent. He will, for instance, be mindful that besides experiencing the overt pity aroused by the hapless Ganga, the audience may well be deriving secret pleasure in the sexual villainy as well as surreptitiously partaking of the masochistic

delight of her ordeals. Moreover, the third eye also destroys the very identities of the film's characters, replacing them with those of a child's internal family drama. Thus Ganga's screen image, with the infant clutched perpetually to her breast, becomes the fantasized persona of the mother from a particular stage of childhood. The faces of the various villains, on the other hand, coalesce into the visage of the 'bad' aggressive father, forcing the poor mother to submit to his unspeakable desire. It is then with the third eye that we look at Indian men and women as lovers and at some of the situations and spaces of love they project on the screen.

Bearing a strong resemblance to another girl from the hills, Reshma, played by Nargis in Raj Kapoor's first film *Barsaat* six decades ago, Ganga is the latest reincarnation of the heroine who is totally steadfast in her devotion to a hero who is passive, absent, or both. Independent and carefree before being struck by the love-god Kama's flowery arrows, all that love brings her is suffering and humiliation, particularly of the sexual kind. Indeed, her suffering, like that of such legendary heroines as Laila and Sohni, seems almost a punishment for breaking social convention in daring to love freely. Rape, actual or attempted, is of course the strongest expression, the darkest image of the degradation she must undergo for her transgression.

The question of why rape is a staple feature of Indian cinema where otherwise even the kiss was taboo, why the sexual humiliation of the woman plays such a significant role in the fantasy of love, is important. That this rape is invariably a fantasy rape, without the violence and trauma of its real life counterpart, is evident in the manner of its visual representation. Villains, moustachioed or stubble-chinned, roll their eyes and stalk their female prey around locked rooms. With deep-throated growls of gloating, lasciviously muttering a variant of 'Ha! You cannot escape now', they make sharp lunges to tear off the heroine's clothes and each time come away with one more piece of her apparel. The heroine, on the other hand, retreats in pretty terror, her arms folded across her breasts to protect her dishevelled modesty, pleading all the while to be spared from the fate worse than death. As in the folk theatre presentations of the scene from the Mahabharata where Dushasana is trying to undrape Draupadi, what is being enjoyed by the audience is the sadomasochistic fantasy incorporated in the defencelessness and pain of a fear-stricken woman.

Now masochism is usually defined as the seeking of pain for the sake of sexual pleasure, with the qualification that either the seeking or the pleasure, or both, are unconscious rather than conscious. The specific locus of the rape fantasy for men is the later period of childhood which I have elsewhere called the 'second birth', when the boy's earlier vision of the mother

as an overwhelming feminine presence is replaced by her image, and that of the woman generally, as a weak, castrated, suffering, and humiliated being. This is less a consequence of the boy's confrontation with female reality in the Indian family setting and more a projection of what would happen to him if he sexually submitted to the father and other elder males. As the boy grows up into a man, this fantasy needs to be repressed more and more, banished into farther and farther reaches of awareness. In the cavernous darkness of the cinema hall, the fantasy may at last surface gingerly and the associated masochistic pleasure be enjoyed vicariously in the pain and subjugation of the woman with whom one secretly identifies.

The effect of the rape scene on the female part of the audience, even if the movie rape is highly stylized and eschews any pretence to reality, is more complex. On the one hand, the sexual coercion touches some of her deepest fears as a woman. On the other hand, we must note the less conscious presence of a sexual fantasy due to the fact that the raping 'baddies' of Indian cinema are very often older men on whom the woman is dependent in some critical way: employers, zamindars (land- lords), and so on. The would-be rapists in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, apart from the anonymous brothel customer, are the priest and the powerful Choudhary, the future father-in-law of Ganga's husband. In many other movies, the face of the father behind the rapist's mask is more clearly visible. Thus in *Karz*, a box-office hit of 1979, the heroine's stepfather stages a mock rape of his stepdaughter to test the suitability of the hero as her future spouse. Wendy O'Flaherty has linked the power of this particular scene to the ancient myth in which the father-god (Brahma, Prajapati, or Daksha) attempts to rape his own daughter until she is rescued by the hero, Shiva.⁷ She points out that this well-known myth is tolerated and viewed positively in Hindu texts which tell of the birth of all animal life from the incestuous union of father and daughter. I would, on the other hand—a case of cultural psychology complementing mythology—trace the woman's allurements in the fantasy of rape by the villainous father figure to many an Indian woman's adolescence. This is perhaps the most painful period of a girl's life, in which many renunciations are expected of her and where her training as an imminent daughter-in-law who must bring credit to her natal family is painfully stepped up. Psychoanalysis regularly brings up the powerful wish from this period for an intimacy with the father in which the daughter is simultaneously indulged as a little girl and treated as a young woman whose emerging womanhood is both appreciatively recognized and appropriately reacted to. In part, this is a universal fantasy among women, arising from the fact that a father often tends to withdraw from his daughter at the onset of puberty, feeling that he should no longer exhibit physical closeness, doubtless

also because of the sexual feelings the daughter arouses in him. The daughter, however, learning to be at home in a woman's body and as yet insecure in her womanly role, may interpret the father's withdrawal as a proof of her feminine unattractiveness. The wish for father–daughter intimacy becomes a major fantasy in India because of the fact that in the Indian family, the father's withdrawal from his daughter is quite precipitate once she attains puberty. The daughter is completely given over to the woman's world which chooses precisely this period of inner turmoil to become increasingly harsh. The rape by the father is then the forbidden, sexual aspect of her more encompassing longing for intimacy. The fearful mask worn by the father is a projection of the daughter's own villainous desire which frees her from the guilt for entertaining it.

Narendra, the hero of the movie, is a passive, childlike character, easily daunted by his elders who put obstacles in the path of the lovers' union. He is a pale shadow of the more ubiquitous romantic hero who suffers the despair of separation or disappointment in love with a supra-human intensity (by which I mean less that of an inconstant god than of the faithful child lover). Such a hero used to be very popular in Indian films until about twenty years ago. Since in India nothing ever disappears, whether religious cults, political parties, or mythological motifs, the romantic lover too lives on, though at present he is perhaps in the trough rather than at the crest of the wave. For my generation, however, the images of this lover, as played for example by Dilip Kumar in *Devdas* or Guru Dutt in *Pyasa*, remain unforgettable.

The Majnun–lover, as I would like to label this type after the hero of the well-known Islamic romance, has his cultural origins in a confluence of Islamic and Hindu streams. His home is as much in the Indo-Persian *ghazal* (those elegies of unhappy love where the lover bemoans the loss, the inaccessibility, or the turning away of the beloved) as in the lover's laments of separation in Sanskrit and Tamil *viraha* poetry—of which Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* (*The Cloud Messenger*) is perhaps the best known example.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the psychological origins of the Majnun-lover as part of the imperious yet vulnerable erotic wishes of infancy.⁸ His is the wish for a total merger with the woman; his suffering, the wrenching wail of the infant who finds his budding self-disintegrating in the mother's absence. What he seeks to rediscover and reclaim in love is what is retrospectively felt to be paradise lost—the postpartum womb of life before 'psychological birth', before the separation from the mother's anima took place. These

wishes are of course part of every man's erotic being and it is only the phallic illusion of modern western man which has tended to deny them legitimacy and reality.

All soul, an inveterate coiner of poetic phrases on the sorrows and sublimity of love, the romantic lover must split off his corporeality and find it a home or, rather, an orphanage. The *kotha*, the traditional-style brothel, is Hindi cinema's favourite abode for the denied and discarded sexual impulses, a home for vile bodies. Sometimes replaced by the shady night club, a more directly licentious import from the West, the *kotha* provides the alcohol as well as the rhythmic music and dance associated with these degraded impulses. Enjoyed mostly by others, by the villain or the hero's friends, for the romantic lover the sexual pleasures of the *kotha* are generally cloaked in a pall of guilt, to be savoured morosely in an alcoholic haze and to the nagging beat of self-recrimination.

I will not discuss other types of lovers in Indian popular cinema, such as the Krishna-lover who is physically importunate, what Indian-English will perhaps call the 'eve-teasing' hero, whose initial contact with women verges on that of sexual harassment. From the Dev Anand movies of the 1950s to those (and especially) of Shammi Kapoor in the 1960s and of many Ranvir Singh movies today, the Krishna-lover is all over and all around the heroine who is initially annoyed, recalcitrant, and quite unaware of the impact the hero's phallic intrusiveness has on her.

It was Amitabh Bachchan who had the most impact in changing the image of the hero as lover. His phenomenally successful films spawned a brand new genre which, though strongly influenced by Hollywood action movies such as those of Clint Eastwood, were neither typically western nor traditionally Indian.

The Bachchan hero is the good-bad hero who lives on the margins of his society. His attachments are few but they are strong and silent. Prone to quick violence and to brooding periods of withdrawal, the good-bad hero is a natural law-breaker, yet will not deviate from a strict private code of his own. He is often a part of the underworld but shares neither its sadistic nor its sensual excesses. If cast in the role of a policeman, he often bypasses cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to take the law into his own hands, dealing with criminals by adopting their own ruth- less methods. His badness is not shown as intrinsic or immutable but as a reaction to a development deprivation of early childhood, often a mother's loss, absence, or ambivalence towards the hero.

The good–bad Bachchan hero is both a product of and a response to the pressures and forces of development and modernization that have been taking place in Indian society since the eighties. He thus reflects the psychological changes in a vast number of people who are located in a halfway house—in the transitional sector—which lies between a minuscule (yet economically and politically powerful) modern and the numerically preponderant traditional sectors of Indian society. Indeed, it is this transitional sector from which the Bachchan movies drew the bulk of their viewers.

The individual features of the good–bad hero which I have sketched above can be directly correlated with the major psychological difficulties experienced by the transitional sector during the course of modernization. Take, for instance, the effects of overcrowding and the high population density in urban conglomerations, especially in slum and shanty towns. Here, the lack of established cultural norms and the need to deal with relative strangers whose behavioural cues cannot be easily assessed compel the individual to be on constant guard and in a state of permanent psychic mobilization. A heightened nervous arousal, making for a reduced control over one's aggression, in order to ward off potential encroachments, is one consequence *and* a characteristic of the good–bad hero.

Then there is bureaucratic complexity with its dehumanization which seems to be an inevitable corollary of economic development. The cumulative effect of the daily blows to feelings of self-worth, received in a succession of cold and impersonal bureaucratic encounters, so far removed from the familiarity and predictability of relationships in the rural society, gives rise to fantasies of either complete withdrawal or of avenging slights and following the dictates of one's personal interests, even if this involves the taking of the law into one's own hands. These, too, form a part of our hero's persona.

Furthermore, the erosion of traditional roles and skills in the transitional sector can destroy the self-respect of those who are now suddenly confronted with a loss of earning power and social status. For the families of the affected, especially the children, there may be a collapse of confidence in the stability of the established world. Doubts surface whether hard work and careful planning can guarantee future rewards of security. The future itself begins to be discounted to the present.¹⁰ The Bachchan hero, neither a settled family man nor belonging to any recognized community of craftsmen, farmers, incorporates the transitional man's collective dream of success without hard work and of life lived primarily, and precariously, in the here-and-now.

The last feature of the portrait is the core sadness of the good–bad hero. On the macro level, this may be traced back to the effects of the population movements that take place during the process of economic development. The separation of families, the loss of familiar village neighbourhoods and ecological niches, can overwhelm many with feelings of bereavement. Sometimes concretized in the theme of separation from the mother, these feelings of loss and mourning are mirrored in the Bachchan hero and are a cause of his characteristic depressive detachment, in which the viewers, too, can recognize a part of themselves.

As a lover, the good–bad hero is predictably neither overly emotional like Majnun nor boyishly phallic like the Krishna lover. A man of controlled passion, somewhat withdrawn, he subscribes to the well-known lines of the Urdu poet Faiz that ‘Our world knows other torments than of love and other happinesses than a fond embrace.’

The new genre of films, coexisting with the older ones, has also given birth to a new kind of heroine, similar in some respects to what Wolfenstein and Leites described as the masculine–feminine girl of the American movies of the 1940s and 1950s.¹¹ Lacking the innocent androgyny of Krishna’s playmate, she does not have the sari-wrapped femininity (much of the time she is clad in jeans anyway!) of Majnun’s beloved either. Like the many interchangeable heroines of Bachchan movies, she is more a junior comrade to the hero than his romantic and erotic counterpart.

Casual and knowing, the dull wholesomeness of the sister spiced a little with the provocative coquetry of the vamp, she makes few demands on the hero and can blend into the background whenever he has more important matters to attend to. Yet, she is not completely unfeminine, not a mere mask for the homosexual temptation to which many men living in the crowded slums of big cities and away from their womenfolk, are undoubtedly subject.

Having viewed some lovers’ dreams in Indian popular cinema with the enthusiast’s happy eye but with the analyst’s sober perspective, let me reiterate in conclusion that *oneiros*—dream, fantasy—between the sexes and within the family, does not coincide with the cultural propositions on these relationships. In essence, *oneiros* consists of what seeps out of the crevices in the cultural floor. Given secret shape in narrative, *oneiros* conveys to us a

particular culture's versions of what Joyce McDougall calls the Impossible and the Forbidden,¹² the unlit stages of desire where so much of our inner theatre takes place.

Notes and References

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5 See Bettelheim, Bruno, 1976, *The Uses of Enchantment*, New York: Knopf.

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6 Some of these films are *Junglee*, *Bees Saal Baad*, *Sangam*, *Dosti*, *Upkaar*, *Pakeeza*, *Bobby*, *Aradhana*, *Johnny Mera Nam*, *Roti, Kapda aur Makan*, *Deewar*, *Zanjeer*, *Sholay*, *Karz*, *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*.

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