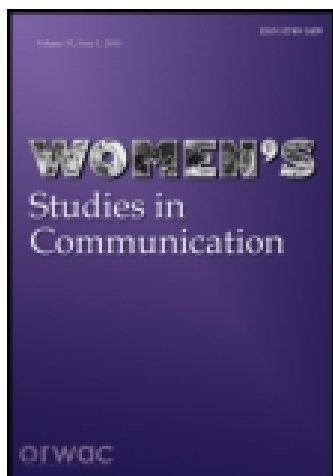


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Framing the Feminine: Diasporic Readings of Gender in Popular Indian Cinema

Anjali Ram

This essay focuses on the ways in which Indian immigrant women actively engage and interpret Indian cinema. Employing an ethnographic approach, the analysis moves between readers' readings and film texts in order to locate how Indian cinema mediates the constitution of gendered identities in the diaspora. Keeping alive the sense of agency, this study demonstrates that Indian women viewers/readers simultaneously comply with and resist the dominant patriarchal representations that saturate Indian cinema.

"There is something incendiary in me and it has to do with being female, here, now, in America . . . When they brush up against each other each of those markers—'female,' 'here,' 'now,' 'America'—I find that there is something quite unstable in the atmosphere they set up."

~ Meena Alexander (1996, p.10)

Recent approaches to migrancy emphasize the multiple linkages that are constituted as immigrants "forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1995, p. 48). Crucial to such alternating and shifting migrant positions is the role played by the electronic media and new communication technologies. The mobility and transnational flows of media texts and technologies contest geographically bounded notions of national culture. Specifically, the idea that media construct and reconstruct everyday discourse and are implicated in the making and re-making of the migrant self has been explored by writers such as Appadurai (1996), Chambers (1994), and Naficy (1993, 1999).

In this study, I explore one such instance of mediated identity by examining how commercial/popular Indian cinema is implicated in the reconstitution of gendered identities within the Indian diaspora.¹ Scholars

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have speculated in passing about the widespread prevalence of film viewing in the Indian diaspora. For instance, Chakravarty (1993) comments that Indian commercial cinema metonymically references "India" for immigrants and Dasgupta (1993, p. 56) writes that for Indian immigrants, Indian cinema plays an important role in maintaining a "continuity in their dislocation."

The ubiquity of this cultural practice is evident by the fact that almost every Indian grocery store carries a large selection of Indian film videos. Rows of hot pickles, packets of spices in all shades of brown, yellow and orange, baskets of mangoes, green gourds and okra, sheaves of curry leaves and cilantro, and bunches of small green chilies frame rows of videocassettes of popular Indian films. These videos are very often in turn interspersed with large posters of the latest movie releases and brightly colored announcements of local Indian film screenings. Inevitably, customers add a video or two to their regular purchases of cumin seeds, *garam masala* and *papad*. Some enterprising Indian grocery owners such as George Jacob in New York have extended their video rental business by signing leases on small movie theaters to show Indian films on the large screen (Berger, 1998). Besides watching films, the Indian immigrant community often plays host to visiting film stars who perform at gala events in major cities in the U.S. Frequently the guest of honor for the celebration of national holidays and social/religious events in the Indian immigrant community is a prominent Hindi film star. On such occasions, young women in the community typically dress according to the latest Bombay cinema fashions and dance to songs from Hindi movies (Dasgupta, 1993; Mukhi, 1998).

Given such a pervasive consumption of Indian cinema, my purpose in this study is to understand the ways in which Indian immigrant women interpret the gendered representations in Indian cinema and conversely how such interpretations help us understand the role of cinema in mediating gender in the diaspora. Further, in this paper I wish to extend the literature on gender and migrancy by taking the mediated experiences of Indian immigrant women as central and worthy of investigation. Hegde (1998) and others have pointed out that there has been a tendency in the research to treat the migrant experiences of men and women as similar. Inevitably, the specificities of immigrant women's lived realities are rendered invisible. In contrast, I draw attention to the experiences of a distinct group of immigrant women. By unpacking their talk about Indian

cinema, I hope to examine some of the ways by which Indian immigrant women negotiate cultural constructions of gender, community and nation.

Most research on Indian popular cinema has been concerned with texts rather than readers' readings (see for example Ahmed, 1992; Chakravarty, 1993; Mishra, Jeffery & Shoesmith, 1989; Thomas, 1989). In contrast, in this study I seek to articulate how audience interpretations of cinema assist us in understanding the mediated nature of identity. The ethnographic methods employed by the Birmingham school and Hall's encoding/decoding model generated viewer-centered approaches in media research. Often termed "reception studies," such research introduced the idea of the active audience where viewers were no longer captive to the text but employed a range of reading strategies to decode the media. While I situate my study within the paradigm of reception studies, I am very well aware of the charge that often the case of the active audience has been overstated (Carrage, 1990; Condit, 1989). Keeping in mind the polarizations of the text-reader debate, I attempt to understand how cinema mediates identity by counterposing texts and readers' readings in conjunction to history, social relations and political formations. In other words, I am interested in *both* how the text interpellates and recruits readers in an Althusserian sense *and* the culturally specific ways in which women viewers interpret and make meaning of these cinematic texts. Most importantly, neither media texts nor readers' readings forestall stable or closed circuits of meaning. While Indian cinema projects narratives of womanhood that are coded through discourses of patriarchy and nationalism, they sometimes open up spaces for subversion. Conversely, women viewers' negotiations with popular media texts simultaneously resist and submit to the preferred reading. Such re-editing and re-framing of the film texts by Indian women within the context of the diaspora is the focus of this study. The complex and contradictory intersections of textual meanings and viewer engagement allow me to articulate some of the ways in which popular Indian cinema is involved in the construction of gendered identity in the Indian diaspora.

To forecast briefly—I begin by commenting on the methodological underpinnings of this study. Additionally, in an attempt at critical self-reflexivity I comment on my own subject position as an Indian immigrant woman and its implications as I entered, lived in and interpreted the home/field. Then, as I attend to intertextual conjunctions among Indian cinematic texts, Indian immigrant women readers and the diasporic context, I develop three areas, which build upon each other. First, I take up the

question of gender as it emerges in relation to discourses of nationhood. Second, I explore how the women viewers reframe, re-edit and negotiate with the codes of gender presented in Indian films. Finally, I undertake a reading of the popular Indian film star, Rekha, both as heroine within film texts and as a movie star constructed through viewer interpretation, film narrative, and media gossip.

My interest in "reading" Rekha was prompted by the enthusiastic response from the women I interviewed, who unanimously declared her to be their favorite actress. The competing ideological codes that Rekha projected through both her film roles and her star image parallel the contested readings of gender that emerged across my interviews. Within the confines of the male-centered commercial Indian cinema, Rekha circulates as an ambiguous figure where both patriarchal and feminist discourses mesh to produce contradictory readings of Indian womanhood. The liminal space that she often occupies both in film texts and subtexts can be calibrated with some of the ambivalences that emerge in the discourse about cinema and gender by the immigrant women participants. Each section reveals some of the multiple, complex and contradictory ways in which gender is read by women viewers, giving us clues to how the "woman" question might be negotiated within the Indian diaspora.

Methodological Notes/"Homework"

This study derives from a larger project in which I focused on local practices and textual details to build a picture of how Indian women in the diaspora negotiate with nationalist and gendered representations inherent in popular Indian cinema.² Employing an ethnographic approach, I included in-depth interviewing, textual analysis, and participant observation as methods of data gathering and generation. To accomplish a dialogue with the women participants, I avoided a prepared questionnaire in favor of a topical protocol that included both questions and topics for discussion and attempted to develop a collaborative interaction as advocated by several feminist scholars (Brown, 1989; Langellier & Hall, 1989; Minister, 1991; Nelson, 1989). All of the fourteen Indian women I interviewed are part of the second wave of Indian immigration to the U.S. Living in Central Massachusetts, these women had immigrated as wives of Indian professionals and their ages ranged from 25 to 55.³

Since my intention was not to make generalizations in the positivistic sense, the number of participants was not a crucial issue. Following

Patton's (1990) recommendations, I used "purposeful-sampling" to get "information-rich cases" by approaching women who are regular viewers of Indian films and who are located at the cusp of the migrant experience (p.169). My emphasis was less on a specific number of "subjects" and more on the intensity and depth of the interviews. I deliberately chose women who have lived the reality of displacement and are in the process of negotiating their identity as Indian and as women in the interstitial spaces of non-white, immigrant America. I believe that their migrant experiences intensify the ways in which they interpret the gendered representations in Indian cinema. In other words, being immigrant is a crucial, if not central, aspect of their particular engagement with Indian cinema.

The interviews were audio taped and varied from one hour to two-and-a-half hours depending on the enthusiasm of the participant and the rapport that I did or did not manage to create. Although most of the interviews were conducted in English (except one which was entirely in Hindi), both the participants and I lapsed into Hindi often. In most cases, I followed up the interviews with additional phone conversations and meetings, which allowed me a more intimate, deeper understanding of the women's experiences and interpretations.

To supplement the interviews, I engaged in participant observation by attending local Indian film screenings, Indian social/community gatherings and festivals. Participant observation allowed me to fill in some of the inevitable gaps that I encountered while analyzing my interviews. Rather than relying exclusively on my analysis of the ellipses and disjunctures in an interview transcript, I used my direct and first hand experience to draw a more complete picture of the context of utterances. Recording observations in systematically assigned data logs enabled me to look at them as written texts in conjunction with the interview transcripts.

Each of the audio taped interviews was transcribed and since many of the interviews included Hindi, the process of transcription included translation. I started transcribing as I conducted my interviews. Such simultaneity allowed me constantly to reevaluate my topical protocol and my interviewing style. Listening to the tapes, I caught myself making several mistakes such as failing to follow up on particular thread, interrupting my participant, changing a topic too quickly and so on. Humbled by my many failures, I attempted to address them by being more vigilant and mindful in subsequent interviews.

The act of transcribing, however painstaking, provided an analytic prelude. Nelson (1989) states that, "it is *during* the labor of transcribing that the researcher performs the actual transformation from listening to speech to the writing of speech, of making visible the invisible" (p.229). My own experience with transcribing my interviews certainly confirmed her claim. The repetitious process of transcription enabled me to attend closely to the participants' voices until I started "hearing" patterns, themes, contradictions, and elisions emerging from the larger mass of conversation. Consequently, transcribing formed the first stage of making sense of the data analysis as I concomitantly recorded the themes and topics as they occurred.

My next step involved re-reading all the transcripts and my notes in order to identify the core themes that emerged in the interview texts. My research questions provided an initial guide as I sorted through the wealth of interview data. My study was guided by two main research questions: How do Indian immigrant women interpret the gendered and nationalist representations embodied in popular Indian cinema?; and How does Indian cinema contribute to the construction of mediated identities among women in the Asian Indian diaspora? The process of discovering significant themes involved accumulation and clustering of several related issues and subtopics. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) suggest that a theme that allows a researcher to make linkages to other issues noted in the data is particularly promising. Building a thematic narrative involved the organization of themes into a "coherent story about life and events in the setting studied"(p. 170). In other words, the analysis is not simply a description or cataloguing of patterns but an "interpretive leap" which, according to Patton (1990, p. 423) attaches significance, offers explanations, draws conclusions, makes inferences, builds linkages, attaches meanings and imposes order.⁴ Given the scope and focus of this paper, I have chosen to highlight the theme of gendered identity as it is articulated both through film texts and readers' readings.

I situate my analysis within the interpretative paradigm (Bohman, Hiley, & Shusterman, 1991) and emphasize cultural particularities, contradictions, and concurrences in the social construction of meaning. Like Fiske (1991, p. 451), I view texts and readers' readings as "instances of a system in practice." As Fiske explains, data in interpretative and critical traditions are not statistically and proportionately "representative." Instead, they are "systemic," whereby the text(s) analyzed provide insights

and clues into the larger social, cultural, political structures within which they are instituted.

My interest in Indian cinema and its relation to the lives of Indian immigrant women stems in part from my own confrontation with the politics of memory, place and identity. Displaced from the comfortable confines of Indian urban, upper-middle class, I have been repositioned as migrant, marginal and other in the United States, first as an international student and then as a green-card toting, immigrant woman/scholar. Like many immigrants, I found some comfort and delight in frequenting my local Indian grocery store and restaurants, participating in *Diwali* celebrations, socializing with other *desis*,⁵ and of course, watching Indian movies. However, as I observed the overt and aggressive displays of religious nationalism in public events organized by the local Indian immigrant community and the hyper-masculine, nationalist rhetoric that pervades Indian cinema, my feminist politics and sensibilities interrupted my pleasures of nostalgia and identification. Consequently, my concern with researching cinema, gender and identity in the diaspora emerges in relation to both my own uneasy, ambivalent consumption of Indian cinema and a conscious, reflective recognition of its centrality in constituting diasporic subjectivities in our community.

“Studying your own society” as Altorki and Solh (1988) put it, or “homework” as Visweswaran (1994) terms it, presents its own special dilemmas. If my membership within the community granted me a familiarity with and a relatively easy access to women I interviewed, it also presented me with contradictions and dilemmas. On one hand my own positionality as immigrant and racialized “other” both inside and outside academic arenas, and my own attempts to negotiate questions of home, diaspora and identity led me to identify with my participants. On the other hand my account of the readings and experiences of the women I interviewed is framed and situated by my stakes in Third World and transnational feminist politics and my academic location within specific critical, cultural and postcolonial discourses. Such simultaneous negotiations between positions of identification and critical distance reflect Lavie and Swedenberg’s (1996) observation that when the boundaries between home and field collapse and sites of research, writing, and representing become interchangeable, blurred and fragmented, ethnographic knowledge itself becomes increasingly destabilized.

Perhaps my biggest struggles in the home/field were with the issues of betrayal and accountability that emerged when I attempted to analyze and

thematize the women's voices (see Stacey, 1989).⁶ Much of what was disclosed by the participants was dependent upon their positioning of me as a "young wife" of the community and not as researcher. However, my representation of their voices emerges from my position as a member of an academic community and from my feminist/critical investments. Consequently, as I attempted to piece together my analysis I was constantly worried about misrepresenting the experiences of the women with whom I had talked. Upon listening to the taped interviews, I realized that my intellectual saturation in academic discourses was constraining my ability to appreciate the specific and different ways in which the women were framing talk about gender. Subsequently, in my analysis I attempted to draw upon a range of feminist scholarship, particularly postcolonial, and transnational feminism, to make sense of what I was "hearing" in my interviews. In fact my initial focus on gender broadened to a focus on understanding the *embeddedness* of gender within discourses of community, nationhood and cultural identity.

Most important, such a shift compelled me to consider my own situatedness while studying and relating with my own community. Being immersed in the Asian-Indian community and constantly talking with immigrant women about their experiences forced me to reflect on my own contrapuntal positions in relation to the institutions where I teach and study, to the larger American society, and to the Asian-Indian community. At one point during my interviewing, I almost lost sight of the issue of gender, as it remained so entangled with other discourses. Revisiting some of the feminist literature allowed me to recognize and locate gender, both in relation to my own positioning and my research, not as a separate issue but as more multi-vocal and multi-layered than I had initially assumed. For instance, the questions posed by feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1993) enabled me to reframe and rethink both my own experiences and the experiences of the diasporic women narrators. Mohanty asks: "What are the politics of being a part of a majority and the 'absent' elite in India, while being a minority and racialized 'other' in the U.S.? And does feminist politics, or advancing feminism, have the same meanings and urgencies in these different geographical and political contexts?" (p. 355). Such questions prompted me to resist applying a universal feminist framework. Instead I felt encouraged to adopt a more culturally-situated analysis of gender while being conscious about my own ambivalences, contradictions and varied intellectual, political and emotional responses in relation to my community.

While I do not believe that there is a facile methodological closure to such home/field dilemmas, I do think that we can endeavor to be continuously vigilant and reflective about our relationship with our participants, the community and the phenomenon being explored. Such vigilance can provide, as Ganguly (1992, p. 29) puts it, “the enabling moment for a more persistently politicized scholarly practice.”

Engendering the Nation

Ever since its inception, Indian cinema has contributed to the national dialogue on Indian nationhood (Ahmed, 1992; Chakravarty, 1993) and drawn deeply upon Hindu mythology for its thematic material. Consequently, Indian cinema’s narration of the nation usually collapses “Hindu” with “Indian” and naturalizes mythic-religious representations of the national identity. Entangled with such hegemonic configurations of the nation is the question of gender. Woven through many cinematic texts is the synecdochic relationship between the purity/sanctity of women and the purity/sanctity of the nation (see Thomas, 1989). Images of purity are maintained by representing chaste heroines, whose sexuality is confined within the bounds of heterosexual marriage. Moreover, the common narrative strategy in Indian cinema, where the villain threatens to violate the heroine and is foiled in his attempts by the hero, serves among other things to re-establish the moral order which includes preserving the chastity of the woman.

The Hindu goddess *Sita* represents one such embodiment of purity, chastity, and the careful control of sexuality, continuously circumscribed within the domain of heterosexual marriage, family and the nation. Prescribed as the feminine ideal by the classic Hindu text the *Manu-Smriti*, stories about *Sita* are used to promote strong patriarchal ideologies primarily through the notion of *pati-vrata* or complete devotion to the husband (Courtright, 1995). *Sita* imagery can be seen in several movies where, according to Saidullah (1992), “the martyred traditional wife who wins her man from the ‘bad’, modern, ambitious woman is celebrated” (p.38).⁷ Similarly, Vasudev (1983) refers to films such as *Thodisi Bewafaii* (A Brief Betrayal, 1980) and *Do Anjane* (Two Strangers, 1979) in commenting on how the woman who transgresses the role of the devoted, chaste wife is duly punished. Additionally, these themes of purity are underscored as being essential “Indian/Hindu” traits. Often *Sita* images are interchanged with images of the goddess *Ganga*, similarly coding the

feminine as the repository of purity.⁸ In contrast, adulterous women or stock characters such as the “vamp” or the gangster’s “moll” are often given Western or Christian names (e.g., Mona, Dolly, and/or Lily) symbolically locating their impurity alongside the paradigmatic axis that includes Western culture, modernity, materialism and so on.

The immigrant women I interviewed clearly noticed and responded to such gendered portrayals of controlled sexuality, monogamy, and purity in Indian cinema. Jayshree, a woman in her mid-forties who works part-time at a bank, professed identification and said, “I liked Mumtaz in *Aap ke kasam* because my style is old fashioned still, see I don’t call him [her husband] by his name, I am very typical that way . . . I just call him ‘Daddy’ like them [her children]. I like that about being Indian.”⁹ Revati, a young mother and housewife in her thirties, protested against some of the recent film heroines who in her opinion do not represent “Indian women.” But she explained, “other heroines do—like the very theme of *Ramayana* . . . where you basically adhere to a single, you know, monogamy and ours is not a society where women freak out with a lot of guys and have relationships before marriage and after.”

Similar interpretations of gender in relation to images of nationhood resonated across the interviews. For these narrators gender becomes an important site for cultural difference. Shame, patience, sexual loyalty and even deference are presented as signifying the “Indian-ness” of Indian women. Implicit in these accounts is that Indian women are different from Western/American/European/Caucasian women. This difference is marked primarily through the control of sexuality and the construction of the pure/chaste woman. Several women I talked with elaborated on this image of purity integral to Indian womanhood by expressing moral censure at some of the recent trends in Indian cinema. Urmilla, a social worker and mother of two teenage daughters declared that nowadays, the heroines “show too much of their body” and “in India we still have some respect with not too many clothes off.” Similarly, Shailaja, a store assistant in her mid-forties, bemoaned that “there seems to be a need nowadays to wear dresses as short as possible, or to use Western dresses.” One participant, Seema, a forty-five year old housewife, went to great lengths to recount a humorous anecdote that involved the lack of any bodily exposure in earlier films in contrast to contemporary films. Through her story she explained how she could not stand “English movies” because of the “bedroom scenes,” and that she gets very upset when some of the new Indian films exhibit a similar license.

In addition to the ideology of purity and compulsory heterosexuality, Indian cinema presents gender through images of sanctity symbolized by mother figures. Again, Hindu mythology provides the ground for such expressions. One of the most powerful symbols to resonate across religious, nationalist and popular discourses within Indian contexts is that of the Earth. In Hinduism, the Earth is revered as both *Prithvi*, or as natural/divine phenomena, and as *Bharat Ma*, Mother India, a more cultural/national entity. As Kakar (1989) observes, the maternal-feminine is more central in Indian myths and psyche than in their Western counterparts. Nationalist movements since colonialism have employed the iconography of *Bharat Ma* to stir up patriotic/anti-British sentiments. Contemporary Hindu nationalism, as Bacchetta (1993) notes, projects *Bharat Ma* as the ideal model of femininity and as representative of the territorial rights of the Hindu nation.

Within Indian cinematic history, the well-known '50s film *Mother India* functions as the unofficial ur-texte, for the celebration of the mother as nation and nation as mother. Thomas (1989) asserts that the female lead, Radha, is portrayed as “both venerator of men and venerated by them as *devi* (goddess) and *maa* (mother), and she is, in turn, in need of men’s protection and a protector and destroyer of men” (p. 16). Similar portrayals of Indian motherhood as both powerful and sacred permeate Indian cinema. Understandably, when I discussed the portrayal of gender in film with the women I interviewed, the figure of the mother emerged prominently. Revati remarked that Hindi film accurately portrays Indian mothers, for “that is how life is in India . . . mothers in India are very protective, taking care of their children is their main aim.” More emphatically, Shailaja referred to the film *Mother India* and commented,

take for instance Mother India; in every circumstance she takes full responsibility for her family and keeps it together . . . and when there are any necessities, she takes it upon her self and that is a speciality of Indian women . . . compared to Western culture.

Similarly, Urmilla observed that “no matter what other kinds of roles there are . . . the mothers’ roles are the same in Indian movies—they show them as sacrificing and caring—that is what the mothers’ instinct is like.” These interpretations confirm Vasudev’s (1983) point that although Indian cinema portrays women as self-sacrificing, they also figure as “indestructible when it comes to protecting” their children, particularly sons (p. 100).

Moreover, these readings, like the ones on the purity of Indian womanhood, are embedded within discourses of nationalism, where the maternal metaphorically signifies Indian culture, tradition, and the nation.

Taken together, the representations and readings of purity and sanctity suggest that Hindu mythology coupled with a Hindu/Indian nationalist ideology supply important interpretive frames to read Indian womanhood. The twin ideological discourses of purity and sanctity contain and constrain the construction of the feminine in Indian cinema, and most of the viewers I interviewed seem to acknowledge such representations as being appropriately "Indian." These readings are not surprising given the essentialized and nationalized discourses that pervade Indian diasporic communities (Bhattacharjee, 1992). Hegde (1998) notes that the "image of the Indian woman as inscribed in traditional patriarchal ideologies of Indian society is reinvented in the new world" and that questioning such traditions would be "a negation of Indianness" (p. 48).

These imbrications of gender and nationhood need to be understood within the larger political and historical context of the pre-independence, nationalist movements. According to Chatterjee (1993), discourses of nationalism in colonial India were articulated through a paradigm of structured oppositions such as East/West, Spiritual/Material, and Tradition/Modernity. But most powerful among these distinctions, according to Chatterjee, was the distinction between *ghar*, the home, the inner space, and *bahir*, the world, the outer space. This interiority/exteriority binary allowed Indian nationalism to use whatever was necessary to control and adapt in a modern, material world, while concurrently retaining a sense of spiritual distinctiveness by constructing the home as the domain for the true Indian self. The home then remained as the essence, "unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman . . . its representation" (p. 120). Such a series of correspondences between home, tradition, and gender provided an empowering, anti-colonial ideology for the construction of nationhood that has been consistently revived in Indian cinema. For diasporic women, then, such representations of gender, while repressive, rhetorically construct a distinct, differentiated sense of Indianness that can be recruited to develop a sense of national pride, identity and belongingness when faced with the ruptures of migration.

However, such engendered interpretations of nationhood were not the only ways in which the women I talked with constructed and represented gender. Contradictory interpretations of womanhood emerged across the interviews I conducted, depending on the context of the discussion. Often

these ambivalences were implicit and were not apparent immediately. Only after sifting through the interview transcripts several times was I able to appreciate some of the resistances, re-edits, and re-negotiations involved in how these women decoded gender as presented in the film texts.

Contested Readings: Formations of Pleasure and Sources for Empowerment

By tracing “pleasurable negotiations” and “resistant readings,” scholars such as Bobo (1988), Cooper (1999), Gledhill (1988), Mankekar (1999), and Radway (1991) have examined how historically- and socially-situated women readers engage with media in ways that contest the dominant ideology that suffuses a given text. Central to these studies is the exploration of the complex links between textual representations, readers’ interpretations and social situatedness. In this section, I explore some of the ways in which the women viewers I talked with generate pleasure and partially resist the patriarchal coding in Indian cinema.

Maternal/Sexual Images

As mentioned earlier, in Indian cinema, as in Hindu mythology, women are portrayed as both supplicants in a male-ordered universe *and* as powerful and deified mother figures. Such paradoxical positioning of the feminine provides one source for the ambivalences and contradictions that surround the representations and readings of Indian womanhood. Most of the women viewers I talked with expressed the importance of “showing respect” for “the women of the house.” For instance, Revati explained that she liked the way the women were represented in the movie *Dilwale*, because “they show a lot of respect to the ladies in the house, like her *bhabi* [sister-in-law].” Another participant, Nita, a twenty-eight year old who assisted in the family business, went into great detail in elaborating why she enjoyed the movie *Bhabi ki Chudiya* (The Bangles of My Sister-in-Law, 1962). As she recounted the story to me, it was clear that she took great pleasure in how the *bhabi* in the movie was respected and revered as a mother.

Here it is important to note the cultural ramifications of the *bhabi* figure. In most kinship systems in India, relationships are classified in a highly specific manner. For instance, the term “aunt” in English would be too general to designate a relationship within the Indian social context.

Instead very specific terms such as *maasi* would be used to denote a maternal aunt versus *bua* to denote a paternal aunt and *chachi* to denote a paternal uncle's wife and so on. *Bhabi*, therefore, solely denotes one's brother's wife and does not simply refer to a generic sister-in-law relationship. This cultural specificity is important, because the term *bhabi* connotatively indexes the maternal both in Indian society and in its cinema.¹⁰

Within the traditional, Indian, patriarchal, familial context, women have varying degrees of power depending on the relationship role in which they are positioned. As we have seen earlier, Indian women are revered and are accorded much power as mothers, in contrast to being wives where they are positioned as subordinate and subservient. Similarly, as the *bahu* (daughter-in-law), Indian women are positioned as powerless, yet within the same family network they can concurrently gain some measure of power as the *bhabi*, when interpreted and represented as a surrogate mother. Additionally, the *bhabi* often occupies a liminal location where she symbolizes both matriarchy and sexuality, impersonating mother and wife simultaneously. This sexual dynamic is often performed through the playful teasing permitted in the *bhabi-dewar* (husband's younger brother) relationship.

Such relative, contiguous, shifting registers of power and sexuality point towards some of the contradictions and ambiguities in constituting the feminine within the largely patriarchal ideology in most traditional Indian societies. Several prominent Indian films narrate this ambivalence, where the *bhabi* figures who initially play maternal roles are then transposed as real or imagined wives and/or as sexual partners.¹¹ When considered within this context, the formations of viewing pleasures expressed by these women in relation to the *bhabi* figures in Hindi cinema suggest a particular, gendered, cultural reading. In other words, as *Indian women* spectators they do gain some measure of pleasure and satisfaction in viewing possibilities for empowerment and female sexual expression, however partial and institutionalized these sites might be.

The Ideal Hero

Another source for re-editing some of the patriarchal ordering of the feminine in Indian cinema was revealed through the ways in which the women clearly distinguished those images of masculinity that were appealing from those they found distasteful. In fact, during my interviews with diasporic women viewers, I was particularly struck by the immediate

and lively responses they gave me when I asked them to discuss their favorite heroes. Not only were they able to come up with several specific actors and textual examples, but they were also able to elaborate what did and did not constitute the ideal male.

Additionally, not one woman narrator embedded her discussion on masculinity within the larger domains of community and the nation. Instead, the context within which they deliberated upon masculinity was intensely private and would sometimes occasion a digression into personal life history. For instance, Revati followed up her explanation of why she did not like a particular film portrayal of the male protagonist with a reflection on her own relationship with her husband. Similarly, two other participants alternated their discussion of the ideal hero with personal anecdotes and experiences. During my interview with Nita, she refused to allow me to continue recording as she turned from discussing film heroes to her own recent, painful divorce. The emotional energy that was displayed in the women viewers' comments about the ideal and the unworthy hero appear to resonate with the modes of reader identification described by Radway (1991). Radway proposes that 'ideal' romance novels provided both positive pleasures and "inadvertently activate unconscious fears and resentment about patriarchal arrangements" (p. 157) for the women readers she interviewed. Conversely, she observes that the 'failed' romance novel elicited discussions that focused not on "aesthetic qualities of bad stories nor on the uninspired . . . plots, but rather on the intense emotions that the process of reading a bad book evoked" (p.158–159).

Collectively, the Indian immigrant women's readings of the ideal male hero in Indian cinema have clear identifiable patterns. The ideal hero was defined as being "realistic about life," "practical," "sensible." He would respect the woman and be "adaptive" and "compromising." He would also be extremely devoted to the woman he loved, regardless of all obstacles, whether it be the family as shown in the movie *Dilwale* or grave illness as in *Prem Geet* (Song of Love, 1973). Older actors such as Rajesh Khanna were cited for their "gentleness." Newer actors such as Shah Rukh Khan were preferred, as he seemed like "the boy next door," "accessible" and "someone with whom I could talk." Coupled with such constructions of the ideal hero, most of the women insisted that they disliked "action-movies" and preferred instead romantic movies where women play an important role.

Most importantly, in the interviews I conducted, the ideal hero was interpreted as someone who would never display aggression towards the

woman. The participants made it a point to refer to some recent films, to give examples of negative images of masculinity. For instance, the hero portrayed in the recent film *Yashwant* (1996) upset several participants. As Revati declared:

Oh I certainly don't like Nana Patekar [in *Yashwant*, 1996] . . . Too aggressive, too aggressive . . . They [Indian women] should get up and slap him or something, like in this movie *Yashwant*, he does care for her, . . . he likes her but he always talks so bad, very rude and he slaps her for her own good [reason] or whatever, but it feels bad that he treats her that way.

Similar portrayals were pointed out by many of the women I talked with, as being very problematic. Nita suggested that, if a man mistreated a woman, she should "find a way to get rid of him," and that "in India a lot of women they need to learn that."

The women I talked with clearly rejected texts that portray violence towards women and insisted that the heroine empower herself and oppose the abuse. However, the interesting point here is that their criticism of violent, hyper-masculine portrayals in Indian cinema occurred side by side with references to the purity/sanctity model of Indian womanhood as being self-sacrificing, loyal, devoted, patient, and so on. Such variations in many of the viewers' negotiations with gender in Indian film indicate the multiple positions occupied by diasporic readers. On one hand, their (dis)location as diasporic women urges them to take pleasure in the nationalist discourses projected vigorously through Indian cinema, which promote idealized constructions of Indian womanhood as markers of difference from the West. On the other hand, nationalism is only one framework within which gendered identities are constituted. For as the narrators elaborate on the ideal hero, a different construction of the feminine emerges. In these accounts, women are not passive, sacrificing, and patient persons articulated primarily through their place in the family and their duties to their nation. Instead, they are constructed as individuals who deserve to be nurtured, loved and respected by the male. Any kind of abuse or aggression is not tolerated and it is perfectly acceptable to challenge male authority. Here talk about gender is not circumscribed by discourses of national identity. Instead, a more personalized, private, empowered discourse on womanhood emerges that allows cinema to provide images for vicarious sexual fantasy and pleasure.

These discontinuities imply that their responses favoring gendered representations that preserve notions of purity/sanctity and controlled sexuality may not simply indicate their uncritical acquiescence to patriarchy. Rather, their comments linking gender to reified and essentialized constructions of Indianness are more likely to be strategically employed to shore up a distinctive cultural identity made unstable by the fissures and uncertainties of migrant displacement. Such shifts, in relation to the constitution of gender, point to the contingent, contextual, conditional nature of subjectivity. As Hall (1991) explains we should think of identity as a “production” which is processual and never complete (p.21). In other words, our talk is always positioned, placed, enunciated in context and constituted within, not outside, representation. The contradictions in readers’ readings refuse a facile, unitary reading of the ways in which Indian immigrant women engage with the representation of gender in Indian cinema. Instead, these ambivalences invite us to consider identity construction as being inflected by both personal and collective histories simultaneously. Mankekar’s (1999) work on how women viewers engaged with Indian television both resist and comply with patriarchal representations and Abu-Lughod’s (1990) study of how Bedouin women both resist and support power structures in their readings of television similarly point out how resistance and compliance cannot be seen as mutually exclusive and monolithic categories. Rather, as Mankekar argues, “reconceptualization of resistance and compliance has implications not just for how we interpret the constitution of women’s subjectivities but also, more generally, for how we may conceptualize popular culture” (p.29). Further, these disparate readings affirm the importance of recognizing how mediated practices need to be understood in the light of the politics of location and the shifting of subject positionings.

In the following section, I provide a specific textual example from Indian cinema that invites ambiguous readings regarding gender. My choice to telescope my analysis to a particularly popular feminine icon of Indian cinema, Rekha, is not arbitrary. Rather, as I mentioned before, my attention was directed by the women viewers I interviewed. Their responses regarding their favorite film heroine forced me to recognize that despite the overarching patriarchy promoted by Indian cinema, there are spaces for transgressive readings. By tracking such sites of subversion, I seek to uncover an instance of the layered and laminated nature of both film texts and readers’ readings.

Transgressive Representations of Gender in Indian Cinema

Unlike the elaborate and emotional responses that were evoked when the women viewers contemplated their favorite film heroes, I was unable to draw similar, detailed discussions in relation to their favorite film heroines. Most of the participants would expound on the allegorical representations of femininity in Indian cinema as projected through the sacred mother figure and the pure, chaste, virginal heroine. However, when asked specifically to recall particular actresses and the film roles they played, the only specific response I was able to elicit related to the well known Hindi film actress and star, Rekha. Given the enthusiastic response from the women I interviewed, I explore why and how Rekha may stand as an appropriate feminine icon for Indian immigrant women. However, when asked to elaborate on why they preferred Rekha, these women were unable to do so, in sharp contrast to the enthusiasm they expended on male actors and heroes. Perhaps Indian cinema's notorious "male narrational authority," as Vasudevan (1989, p. 31) terms it, and its dominant male star-system are responsible for the paucity of lived/situated interpretations in relation to heroines and actresses. Nevertheless, within the largely patriarchal modes of address of Indian cinema, there are interstitial spaces that allow for expressions of female subjectivity and sexuality. Rekha, through some of her well-known film roles and her star image, represents one such slippage in the androcentric coding of Indian cinema. In order to understand why the women readers expressed a preference for Rekha, I examine both the network of gossip and selected film texts that have converged to produce her both as fictional/fantasy heroine and as real/public persona in the collective, popular Indian imaginary.

Commercial Indian cinema has clearly been a masculine domain which inevitably promoted women as star objects instead of star subjects. In other words, women were primarily seen as "stars" based on their ability to function as objects of male desire and fantasy. Male actors, on the other hand, achieved star status based on their ability to represent allegorically aspects of the self such as the "angry young man" image of the famous Amitabh Bachchan. One exception to this general principle was the actress Rekha, who managed to project herself simultaneously as a desired object, a desiring subject and the principle protagonist in several films.¹² Such contestations have been amplified by the syntagmatic chain of signification set into motion by a series of public discourses about Rekha.

The role of gossip magazines and fanzines in constructing public/star images of actors/actresses for popular consumption is an inevitable, pervasive, universal, and intertextual phenomenon. Not only is the film press in India almost as large as the film industry itself but writings about the star often supersede commentary on the films themselves (Mishra, Jeffrey and Shoesmith 1989; Vasudev and Lenglet 1983). For example, Thomas (1989) recounts the rumors and stories that surrounded the actress Nargis and star of *Mother India* to demonstrate how they influenced the Indian audience's reading of the film.

Mishra et al. (1989) demonstrate the construction of the actor as parallel text by deconstructing the multiple discursive frames that position Indian cinema's most well-known male star, Bachchan. They argue that stars are themselves "cultural interfaces" that embody historical, cultural, and economic meanings. Additionally, they assert that popular cinema in India, even more than in Hollywood, "became the cinema of the star rather than the cinema of the director, or the studio" (p. 53). Although they accomplish an exemplary analysis that contributes significantly to our understanding of the imbrications of Indian cinema with Indian culture, they refer exclusively to the construction of the hero. Even though I recognize the predominance of male stardom in Indian cinema, I believe that on occasion female stars such as Nargis and Rekha have functioned as parallel texts, thereby destabilizing, if not actually subverting, the phallogocentric address of the Indian cinematic world.

The story of Rekha as narrated through film gossip mills invokes the proverbial "ugly duckling" scenario. The daughter of a famous Tamil movie star, Gemini Ganeshan, Rekha entered the Bombay film scene with the 1969 film *Savon Badon* (Monsoon Clouds). We are told by her unofficial media biographers that she was considered too dark-skinned and too generously proportioned until she was expertly "made over" to become one of the most compelling female presences on the Indian silver screen. This metamorphic narrative of Rekha's physical appearance runs concurrently with Pygmalion-like stories about her initial inability to enunciate Hindi, the lingua franca of Bombay cinema, and her subsequent phonetic mastery over not only Hindi but Urdu, the elite literary discourse of Northern India.

Such stories of transformation mythologize how an ordinary woman can achieve the extraordinary, dazzling persona of a movie star. Rekha does not represent the unattainable, unrealistic beauty ideal. Instead she holds out the promise of accessibility and potentiality to the female

spectator similar to advertisements that use before/after images of transformation. Neither is she deglamourized as most of the actresses in Indian new/art cinema tend to be. Rather, in all images off and on screen, she is carefully coded with appropriate signs such as thick, lustrous, flowing black hair, full red lips, sultry eyes and rich adornments to signify her location within the fantasy world of popular cinema. Thus, gossip stories coupled with her screen images allow Rekha to be ambivalently constituted as both average and glamorous simultaneously.

By the early '80s, Rekha had achieved stardom and the gossip turned to her alleged liaison with the married mega-star Amitabh Bachchan. Thomas (1989) observes that although Bombay filmmakers assert that the Indian audience is conservative and easily shocked, the very same audience "appears very eager to be shocked in certain contexts, if one is to believe the evidence of the network of gossip that surrounds the scandals in the lives and loves of film stars [in India]" (p.22). Mishra et al.'s (1989) model draws attention to how "the screen biography and the star's actual life intersect, often generating industrial deals and occasional political placements" (p. 55). The Rekha-Amitabh affair was very soon committed to celluloid amid much publicity in the movie *Silsila* (1981), directed by Yash Chopra. The narrative mimetically documents how the hero Amit, played by Bachchan, resumes his relationship with his former true love Chandini, played by Rekha, while married to Shobha, played by actress Jaya Bhadhuri who is Bachchan's wife in real life. Such intertextual enmeshment of reel/real life further accentuated Rekha's liminality. In *Silsila* she is neither the pure/chaste heroine nor is she condemned as the "fallen" whore figure. Instead these dichotomies partially dissolve to disrupt traditional Indian cinematic framing of the feminine as pure and sanctified. Although the film ends by reinstating the sanctity of monogamous marriage, it opens up spaces for Rekha as Chandini to express degrees of female subjectivity/sexuality not often permitted in Indian popular cinema. Additional stories that accentuate Rekha as interrogating the traditional framing of the feminine in Indian popular culture chronicle her brief, failed marriages and her independent entrepreneurial spirit in starting one of the first women's health clubs in India. Karanjia (1983, p. 87) reports that Rekha is one of the few female stars of her era who publicly and assertively declared, "I want to get like a man and make a baby."

The image that most directly counters the purity/sanctity model of Indian womanhood in cinema is that of the courtesan. Chakravarty (1993)

comments that the courtesan, as historical character and cinematic spectacle, is one of the most enigmatic figures to haunt the margins of Indian cultural consciousness. Socially decentered, she is yet the object of respect and admiration because of her artistic training and musical accomplishments (pp. 269–270).

The courtesan is an ambiguous/romantic figure in multiple senses. She embodies both Hindu and Muslim social graces and represents what Chakravarty calls “female power-cum-vulnerability” (p. 270). Rekha’s most memorable roles have involved playing the courtesan directly or indirectly. In *Silsila* she plays the role of the “other woman,” which is echoed in variations in *Basera* (1985). In *Mukadaar ka Sikandar* she plays a bazaar entertainer in love with the tortured hero played by Bachchan, again blurring the boundaries between real/reel life, fiction/fantasy as film gossip and text intersect. In *Utsaav*, she plays Vasantsena, the legendary courtesan of ancient India, whose life is narrated in the classical Sanskrit play of the fourth century A.D. entitled *Mirchchakatika* (The Little Clay Cart). However, it is in *Umrao Jaan* (1981), which Chakravarty (1993) calls the quintessential courtesan film of Indian cinema, where she plays both desiring subject and desired object and reveals the contested nature of the feminine in the collective Indian imaginary.

In her splendid and thorough examination of the courtesan genre in Indian cinema, Chakravarty (1993) devotes considerable space to deconstructing the film *Umrao Jaan*. Rather than undertaking another textual reading, I draw partially upon her analysis to point out how this film further contributes to the syntagmatic, symbolic, biographical continuum that Mishra, Jeffrey, and Shoemsmith (1989) assert is essential to the construction of a star persona. Based on a popular novel of the same name, the film *Umrao Jaan* purports to be a quasi-historical account of a real-life courtesan at the turn of the century in India. Once again star and screen biographies edge into each other through the theme of metamorphosis. The film introduces the female protagonist Ameeran, played by Rekha, as a young girl from a middle class family who is kidnapped and sold to a brothel in Lucknow. There she is transformed from a tall, gangly, plain, adolescent to the beautiful, captivating Umrao, accomplished singer, dancer and poet.

The courtesan genre in Indian cinema interrogates the purity/sanctity model of Indian womanhood at several levels and considerably destabilizes received gendered representations. As Chakravarty (1993) points out, the genre presents a matriarchal, woman-centered universe where women

are wage earners. Moreover the primacy of the female image legitimizes feminine subjectivity and desire. However, the courtesan figure does not completely negate the patriarchal ideology that sutures most Indian films. Chakravarty observes that the opulent and garish mise-en-scène is a silent reproach to the courtesan's sinful way of life. Additionally, most courtesan-genre films finally stop short of celebrating woman-as-subject by presenting narratives of redemption through suffering or death. For instance, the film *Umrao Jaan* ends with Umrao facing her reflection in the mirror, socially rejected and utterly alone.

Similarly, within the domain of Indian popular culture Rekha as star/heroine is positioned through a syntagmatic accumulation of gossip stories and narrative roles as a contradictory figure, as neither completely outside nor inside the phallogocentric, patriarchal order. The contests and collusions represented by her screen/star biography might explain why the diasporic women I talked with find her the most appealing female heroine in Indian cinema. Reading Rekha at the interface of gossip, rumor, fiction and fantasy reveals unstable, shifting frames of femininity that simultaneously transgress and surrender to patriarchal codes. As women of the diaspora, they, like Rekha, continuously map out what it means to be an Indian woman across the alternating registers of nationalism, cultural identity, and the politics of representation and location.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the readings by socially-situated women spectators in relation to the textual representations in popular Indian cinema. First, I explored how women are implicated in discourses of nationhood and how these gendered nationalist scripts emerge across film texts and readers' narratives. Second, I attempted to unpack some of the contestations and contradictions inherent in the representations and readings of Indian womanhood in relation to the maternal-feminine, sexuality and the ideal-masculine. Finally, I engaged in an intertextual reading of the Indian film star, Rekha, in order to explain how popular Indian cinema holds out possibilities for transgression and subversion. By moving between texts and readers' readings, I wish to demonstrate that the immigrant women I talked with do not uncritically and passively accept the patriarchal ideology that underpins Indian cinema. Instead, there is an implicit recognition and rejection of some of the androcentric apparatus that propels Indian cinema and that occurs alongside the submission to the

mythic, national narratives of the self that privilege the masculine subject and present the feminine as object.

As my title states, this paper explores how the feminine is framed. I deploy the term framing to convey the multiple layers involved as readers, texts and contexts interact. For instance, “to frame” can mean to construct or to build, as in putting up the frame of a house or “framing a proposal.” Alternatively, “framing” can refer to enclosure, as in framing a painting or a photograph. Framing can also refer to pre-arrangements and adjustments as in taking care to “frame a question,” or more insidiously, framing someone. Additionally, the phrases “frame of mind” and “frame of reference” refer to disposition and context. My use of the term frame implies that women readers both actively construct interpretations and are themselves contained to some extent by the gendered representations offered to them by Indian cinema. Further, the women viewers’ negotiations with the film texts need to be understood within the context of their location (or dislocation) and their cultural positionings.¹³ In other words, when discussing media consumption, neither readers nor texts are reducible to deterministic or mechanistic formulations. Rather, the term frame allows us to apprehend what Shaun Moores (1993, p.16) refers to as “interdiscursive” play between readers, texts and contexts. After all, while frames may designate the boundaries of meaning, they do not necessarily determine meaning itself.

In my interviews, I spent considerable time and effort discussing with my interviewees their biographies, motivations and/or circumstances for migrating, their experiences as immigrant women in the United States, lifestyle changes, and ways in which they maintained contact with the homeland. These open-ended dialogues, rich with vivid details of life histories, have allowed me to consider their readings of Hindi film in relation to their other practices of consumption and everyday lives. For instance, they all participate in varying degrees in community activities, religious and cultural festivals; preserve links with relations and friends in India; develop strong social bonds with other Indian immigrants; subscribe to Indian magazines and news programs; decorate their homes with Indian handicrafts and artwork; wear Indian clothes on special occasions and at home; regularly cook Indian food; and so on. In other words, when situated in relation to their everyday lives, their consumption of Indian cinema becomes one more activity that heightens and intensifies what Smith (1994) terms their cultural bifocality, as they negotiate between past and present, home and diaspora, “here” and “there.” Consequently, the

practice of consuming film in the diaspora can be understood as a situated communicative practice. The displacements, uncertainties, and instabilities of migrant circumstances encourage the taking up of specific reading positions and the development of perspectives that preserve the natural, self-evidentiary, stable sense of cultural identity. Indian cinema with its aggressive valorization of cultural identity and gendered national discourses offers appealing sites of identification and stability for diasporic viewers faced constantly with the indeterminate drifts of migration. However, as these women actively re-edit and reframe the film texts that they view, notions of gender, home, and nation are reconstituted, reimagined and reinterpreted within transnational contexts.

Lata Mani (1990) points out that the "discourse of woman as victim has been invaluable to feminism in pointing out the systematic character of gender domination" (p. 37). However, she argues that it is important to employ this discourse with care and in conjunction with a dynamic conception of agency, for otherwise we are left with reductive representations of women. To counter such images of the "passive, acted upon," and "always, already victim," she insists that we understand women as agents even in moments of being "intimately, viciously oppressed" (p. 37). By highlighting both the resistances and recuperations that emerged in my conversations with Indian immigrant women, I have sought to keep alive questions of agency while concurrently critiquing the structures of patriarchal power and nationalist ideologies that are mediated by Indian cinema in the diaspora. Further, the shifting and strategic intersection of texts, active readings, and contexts affirm that popular culture is a crucial site for exploring how gendered diasporic identities are communicatively constituted.

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Notes

¹In this paper, I refer to the Hindi-language cinema produced by the Bombay film industry. Although there are strong regional language film industries in India, the Hindi films produced in Bombay or “Bollywood” forms the national cinema. In this paper, I use the terms Indian cinema, Bombay cinema and Hindi cinema interchangeably.

²This paper emerges out of my dissertation research where I examined how Indian women in the diaspora read the gendered and nationalist representations in popular Indian cinema. The dissertation concluded by drawing upon Bourdieu’s notions of “field” and “habitus” to develop the idea of the diaspora as habitus and to demonstrate the political, economic, and social contexts within which texts and readers’ readings circulate.

³The changes in U.S. immigration policy after 1965 allowed entry to non-European professionals and their families from the “Third World.” Initially most entering Indian immigrants were young males, but after 1970 they were joined by their Indian brides. According to Bhardwaj and Rao (1995, p. 199), “the reasons for Asian-Indian immigration of the post-1965 era have probably more to do with the American pull than with the Indian push factors.” Most Indian immigrants in the United States, therefore, tend to belong to the educated professional elite rather than the unskilled, working class. Although in the 1990s Indian immigration patterns were slowly changing, lending a more diverse complexion to the Indian diaspora in the U.S., the majority is still composed of middle-class professionals and their families. Given this predominance, I sought to interview women who belonged to such a socio-economic context, and who came to the U.S. as wives, in order to make meaningful connections among texts, readers and contexts.

⁴In the larger study I developed three core themes related to collective memory and the politics of remembering, nationalism and the construction of cultural difference, and gendered identities and resistance respectively.

⁵Literally translated from Hindi, *desi* means “native of a given country.” Within the Indian diaspora, *desi* refers to Indians and carries with it strong connotations (sometimes used ironically and even pejoratively) of affiliation and identification.

⁶In my larger study, I spend considerable space reflecting on the number of “home/field” dilemmas, mistakes and surprises. These reflections have forced me to both rethink feminist ethnographic practice and my own positionality as a feminist scholar of mass media.

⁷Examples of movies that have Sita imagery are *Pati Parmeshwar* (Husband/God, 1988); *Naseeb Apna Apna* (Different Destinies, 1986); and *Daasi* (Female Slave, 1981).

⁸Notable film examples using the iconography of *Ganga* are *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Beheti Hai* (The Land Where the Ganga Flows, 1960); *Ganga ke Saugand* (As Ganga is My Witness, 1976); *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Rama, Your Ganga is Polluted, 1986); and the more recent film *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997).

⁹The names of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. However, I have given some background details regarding each of the women narrators quoted in this paper.

¹⁰These are terms in Hindi and are specifically employed in parts of North India. In other parts of India, regional and linguistic terms differ in their designations of similar

kinship relationships. However, commercial, Bombay/Hindi cinema with its North Indian/Hindu hegemonic framework specifically uses North Indian/Hindi kinship terms and presents them as being pan-Indian.

¹¹Examples of such films are *Sahib Bibi Aur Gulam* (King, Queen and Knave, 1962), *Silsila* (Affair, 1981), *Ek Chaadar Maili Si* (A Soiled Quilt, 1982) and Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1969)

¹²Examples of such films are *Silsila* (Affair, 1981); *Utsav* (Festival, 1985); *Umrao Jaan* (1981); *Mukadaar ka Sikandar*, (Conqueror [like Alexander] of Destiny, 1978); *Khubsurat*, (Beautiful, 1980); *Joothi* (Liar, 1982); *Izzat* (Permission, 1995); and *Aastha* (Respect, 1997).

¹³I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting that my use of the term "framing" in the title could be unpacked.