Negotiating Gender: Women in Bollywood Cinema

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> To understand gender as a historical category…is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking.
>
> - Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

In the introduction to her influential book *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler discusses the desire that gender and its performance attempts to fulfil. It is the desire for recognition, to be constituted as socially viable beings by conforming to gendered identities, the constitutive terms of which are defined by and originate in a sociality that has no single author. If gender is conceptualised separately from one's individual personhood and performed without one's knowledge or will, does that make the act of performance automatic or mechanical? Butler counters the determinacy of socially constituted gender norms by describing the incessant performance of gender "as a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (1). One may not be the author of the gender one performs but the possibility to alter restrictive and exclusionary norms lies within one's agency.

In a postmodern world, the media industry plays a significant role as a producer of meaning, discourses, ideologies, and most importantly, gendered identities and subject positions. While media representations create myths about social and gender roles, they also constitute sites for their radical reimagining. This paper aims to examine Butler's concept of gender as performance and her ideas about the potential to reconfigure gender norms in the light of three Bollywood films — *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Astitva* (2000), and *Queen* (2014). Through a detailed plot analysis of these films, it attempts to trace the continual reconfiguration of the category of the feminine in Bollywood cinema and its movement towards more enabling and accommodating terms.

Recognition is "a site of power by which the human is differentially produced" (Butler 2). Consequently, refusal to be recognised or rendered intelligible within the limited and exclusionary norms may impair one's sense of social belonging, but that estrangement from society is preferable to a maimed recognition. Particularly in phallogocentric societies where gender is differentially and asymmetrically produced, social acceptability is predicated on highly restrictive parameters. Thus, only particular models of femininity are deemed permissible, while femininity itself continues to be considered less desirable than masculinity. In the Indian context, one only has to consider the premium

placed on chaste, docile, and virginal women at the same time that womanhood itself continues to be demeaned — highly vitriolic and sexist jokes at the expense of women and 'womanly' behaviour still dominate a large segment of the popular culture. Consequently, one's sense of identity remains in conflict with socially determined scripts for acceptable, normative behaviour.

Even as individuals attempt to fit themselves in the mould of socially desirable identities, their multifaceted desires continue to spill across boundaries. In a 1997 essay titled "Against Proper Objects," Butler suggested that despite the discursive production of gender, desire is never fully determined, and sexuality never entirely grasped by any social regulation. Hence, the conditions of symbolic representation, which attempt to establish themselves as normative, are vulnerable to transformative re-articulation. In other words, by maintaining a critical and transformative relation to the socially constructed norms of belonging, one may articulate alternative norms and ideals that would better facilitate a livable life. The task of feminism along with the new gender movements, according to Butler, is to be about "distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" ("Introduction" 8).

Women in Bollywood Cinema

In the Indian context, Bollywood cinema performs the crucial role as the site of reflection as well as construction and reification of normative gender roles. In general, the portrayal of female characters in Bollywood films is aimed at reinforcing rigid and patriarchally circumscribed notions of femininity. "One of the functions of narrative…is to 'seduce' women into femininity with or without their consent. The female subject is made to desire femininity" (qtd. in Burton 195). The meanings projected onto the empty signifier of femininity are historically contingent; it becomes necessary, in this context, to examine the historically changing prototypes of the feminine as represented in Bollywood cinema since its inception.

From its origin in D.G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), mainstream Bollywood cinema has traversed a long way from its initial function as a pan-Indian cultural artefact meant to create the imagined cohesive community that is India to its exclusivist focus in the new millennium, even as it often engages in critiques of the contemporary socio-political framework. While earlier the nation was allegorised through the genre of melodrama as an all-inclusive community or family demanding loyalty, such binding ties ostensibly seem to be waning in the films produced in the last two decades marked by globalisation and post-liberalisation which prioritise personal aspirations over community ties.

However, individuality remains a positive characteristic in male protagonists, while women continue to bear the burden of community values and are expected to lead neatly defined, socially scripted lives. However, some recent films like *Thappad* (2020) and *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2016), catering primarily to niche, liberal audiences, have sought to reclaim the idea of individual aspiration for their women protagonists.

The post-independence rigid, Brahmanical nationalism of the middle classes led to a Sanskritisation of Bollywood cinema that had earlier allowed some space for the expression of female sexuality. A new dichotomy emerged, and the figure of the woman was used to map out the conflicting pulls of tradition and modernity. The figure of the ideal woman—chaste and docile—stood representative of tradition, a repertoire of Indian, cultural and community values restricted to the domestic sphere. This women-as-nation artefact came to be in opposition to the "demonic" and sexualised figure of the Other, representative of the Islamic and worldly (and public) modernising impulses. "…the filmic coming into being of the feminine body has usually been a complex process of distilling visible signs, by which a form is abstracted gradually, by an acute calibration of *eros* and *jouissance*, between the world and the home, into a postulate of "traditional" patriarchy or of its intimate enemy, the modern" (Basu 140, italics in original).

Such seductive and threatening impulses are embodied in the "Helen assemblage" examined by Anustup Basu in relation with the genre of the feudal family romance that denied the possibility of female desire in the "patriarchal monopoly of sexual pleasure" (145). Posited in a rigid binary against the virtuous domesticated woman, Helen becomes the 'femme fatale' through her sexualised subjectivity whose power and existence in the public domain gets continually exorcised by her ultimate death or sudden disappearance in the films in which she figures. At the same time, the "epistemological forfeiture" (150) of sexual desire in the virtuous heroine accords her dignity as well as divinity as her love for the male protagonist transcends love to become devotion. On the other hand, Helen cannot be loved, for to do so would mean abandoning feudal patriarchy's absolute nomination of the husband as a despot in opposition to the Kantian notion of the modern institution of marriage as a free association of consenting individuals and a mutual interplay of desire.

In this context of the delimitation of femininity in accordance with the demands of national consolidation, Butler's remarks in an interview conducted in 2004 become enlightening. "If the task of 'nation-building' requires an effacement of the social forms in which sexuality lives, then the 'nation' will come to require the suppression of the actual ways in which sexuality is socially organized" ("Troubling Genders" 118). Through the filmic construction of

opposing models of femininity and the socially constituted difference between the virtuous woman of the home who exists as the repertoire of traditional Indian values and the sexually promiscuous femme fatale, the conditions of livability and social recognition of women are severely restricted. The arbitrary, mutually exclusive, delimitation of the roles and spheres embodied by the heroine and the vamp served, in effect, to restrict women's ways of being and living.

A possible rearticulation of these norms appears to be underway as one examines Bollywood cinema closer to the new millennium. As demands for feudal proprieties came into conflict with the practical need for survival in the atmosphere of tremendous political and economic upheaval post-1970s, the extremes of tradition/modernity, wife/whore, private/public, and virtue/vice—the heroine/vamp dichotomy, in other words—threatened to collapse in Bollywood cinema as women characters gained relatively greater access to the public sphere.

Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (1995)

Considered a universal epitome of romance, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995) has been a popular blockbuster for more than 20 years now. The characters Raj (Shahrukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol) have attained mythic significance and continue to be much appreciated by audiences. As the characters are introduced in the film, Simran is seen perpetually in the domestic space, looking out of the window longingly and dreaming and singing of her knight in shining armour. Raj, on the other hand, is a libertine who occupies the public space of thrill and adventure—playing football, swimming, driving race cars, racing with the aeroplane, and loitering with his friends at night. Similarly, Chaudhary Baldev Singh's (Amrish Puri) stroll through the London streets is in stark contrast with his domesticated wife and daughters, who hurriedly terminate their merry-making, adopting postures of feminine propriety as they sense his arrival.

Women confined to the domestic sphere are considered to be the repositories of Indian culture and *tehzeeb,* and Baldev Singh prides himself on having safeguarded this culture. As Simran's partner, Kuljeet (Paramjeet Sethi who is significantly shown hunting in the forest), is chosen by her father, the patriarchal monopoly over female sexuality becomes visible. Moreover, Simran, as a representative of Indian tradition, must ask her patriarchal custodian's permission to venture into the public sphere for a Europe tour while that permission is readily available to Raj.

As a form of subtle manipulation rather than open rebellion, women often assume conditional access to the public sphere, underscoring the fact of their respectability and performing the socially determined requirements of their gender

through sartorial gestures and a constant demonstration of a legitimate purpose. Thus, even while on the trip, Simran appears constrained and consistently exhibits a sense of purpose and respectability as evident in her distress on missing the train, mistakenly having her dress torn, when she asserts her disapproval of Raj drinking in front of a woman and her consternation at the thought of having spent the night with him. The most carefree she appears is in a state of intoxication. Transferred like a possession from one patriarch to another, as Raj too conforms to a similar constricting discourse of honour, respectability, and protection, Simran is co-opted into the very institutions that repress her and happily, she inhabits the space of a domestic, selfless, traditional, and stereotypical Indian woman faithfully observing Karvachauth.

The film, however, stages and entertains the possibility of Simran's desire symbolically through songs such as "*Mere khwabon mein*" and "*Zara sa jhoom lun main.*" Such moments of transgressive articulation remain submerged under the film's eventual affirmation of more conservative and socially scripted roles for women. Thus, the free-spirited Simran transforms from an agential, desiring to be a passive object of the larger-than-life hero's attempts to secure her hand in marriage. Such a trajectory remained a characteristic trope of most Bollywood films of the time, continuing into the present. Even as the figures of the ideal woman and the vamp began to merge in films produced after the 1970s increasingly, the hedonistic and pleasure-seeking impulses were invariably eclipsed under demands of social propriety. The reproduction of traditional gender roles on screen served to secure a renewed reification of women within these well-entrenched social scripts. Consequently, the popular Hindi film has been a mise-en-scène of male fantasies and scopophilia; the male protagonist commands plot development as his gaze, aligned with the gaze and phantasies of the patriarchal spectator, shapes the representation of the female figure. To quote Laura Mulvey, "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of [male] desire" (67).

Astitva **(2000)**

The re-articulation of these cinematic codes and possible reconfiguration of constitutive terms of femininity to make them more amenable to complex female subjectivity would occur five years later in Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astitva*. Aditi (Tabu) is introduced to us as a woman comfortably ensconced in the domestic sphere and married to a man called Shrikant Pandit (Sachin Khedekar) who appears to be completely dependent on his wife for the most trivial of things. He is aptly described by his friend's wife, Meghna (Smita Jaykar), as "self-centred and pompous, a male chauvinist pig" (*Astitva* 0:21:05). His behaviour upon discovering his wife's past infidelity and the truth about his son's, Aniket's (Sunil Barve), paternity establishes him as a model of repressive,

privileged, and fragile hypermasculinity. Throughout the film, he considers Aditi his property, unabashedly reads letters addressed to her, and subscribes to the patriarchal rhetoric of women's honour being threatened in the professional public space. Aditi's suggestion that she take up a job to overcome her loneliness during his long absences, and Malhar Kamat's (Mohnish Bahl) suggestion that Aditi makes a career out of music is met with an indignant response suggesting his belief in restrictive gender norms which require men to be the breadwinners, while women may indulge in activities merely for pleasure.

As opposed to Shrikant Pandit and his brand of toxic masculinity, the film indicates the possibility of liberated femininity through the characters of Meghna and Revati (Namrata Shirodkar). Meghna is depicted as an emancipated woman with well-formed opinions about companionate marriages. Having divorced her husband after discovering his infidelity and his nonchalant attitude towards it, she continues to insist upon equal responsibility towards children to be shouldered by the spouses. She appears to be the critical feminist consciousness of the film, questioning the hypocrisy of Aniket's supposed "modern outlook" (*Astitva* 1:26:44) and insisting to Aditi that "one must, at no cost, sacrifice one's self-respect, especially not at the altar of men" (*Astitva* 1:24:03).

The distinction between the traditional heroine and the modern, free-thinking vamp is no longer tenable—the filmic narrative of *Astitva* foregrounds a more holistic paradigm of womanhood in which the characteristics of both cohere. Thus, even though Aditi has been depicted as confined to the performance of stereotypical gender roles for most of her life, the film adequately represents her as a desiring, sexualised being, thereby paving the way for a re-articulation of the constitutive terms of femininity. Her sexual identity is evident in her responses to Kamat and the sensuous picturisation of their moments of intimacy. While the camera's gaze mostly focuses on her body, thereby catering to male voyeurism, the sexual overtones of women drenched in the rain are here transferred onto the male body as Aditi gazes longingly at the drenched Malhar and initiates their liaison.

Right before embarking upon an autonomous life, she delivers a monologue which questions the asymmetrical nature of gender roles and grasps the nerve of the matter—the fragility of male ego, which is threatened by female sexuality as only a woman can establish a child's paternity. Her confident questioning of gender stereotypes merits quoting at some length:

> A man however established a libertine he may be, expects complete faith from his wife...Are men's desires different from those of women?... Who gave you the privilege to sleep with other women?... Did you ever wonder what happened to them?... Is a woman not entitled to a fulfilling sexual life? (*Astitva* 1:38:07)

As Aditi marches on towards the hope of a better future, the two men, Shrikant and Aniket, are left speechless and immobile at the threshold that the woman has now crossed; significantly, on the wall behind them appears a portrait of Krishna's *rasleela*, a typical signifier of a culture that sacralises male libertinism while limiting female sexuality. Aditi's enraged questioning of normative gender codes is influenced by women like Meghna and Revati, who enable her to chart out a course towards financial and sexual autonomy, thereby establishing a paradigm of sisterhood crucially absent from the purview of Bollywood cinema so far. At the same time, the sacred domestic space is revealed to be a site of marital rape, repressed sexuality, and violence (both physical and psychological), thereby undoing the value-laden spatial segregation between the domestic and the public. Moreover, the redefinition of gender identities, it appears, occurs simultaneously with a reconfiguration of normative social relationships; unlike the eventual affirmation of heterosexual romance in *DDLJ, Astitva* prioritises alternative kinship models premised on an enabling acceptance of each other's multifaceted identity. The film, therefore, marks a shift from "the ideological fiction of marriage and the family as the normalised and privileged domain of sexuality" to a redefinition of kinship as a site of movement "beyond patrilineality, compulsory heterosexuality, and the symbolic overdetermination of biology" (Butler, "Against Proper Objects" 14).

Queen (2014)

The 2014 movie *Queen* catalogues the Bildungsroman of a conventionally shy and reticent Rani (Kangana Ranaut) into a confident, self-sufficient, and assertive woman, who claims pleasure and risk for herself on the streets of Paris and Amsterdam. Prior to her foray in the public world, her life is portrayed as contingent upon the male figures in her life—she requires her father's permission to venture out of the domestic sphere, faces innumerable restrictions from her fiancé in the name of protection and feminine propriety and is accompanied practically everywhere by her brother Chintu (Chinmay Chandraunshuh), who becomes the symbol of the invariably male patriarchal control, despite his young age. In a brief flashback, we witness a plethora of professional, behavioural, spatial, and temporal gender stereotypes wherein the characteristically shy and modest Rani (suggestively pursuing Home Science) shows indifference towards and shirks the unsolicited advances of the engineer Vijay (Rajkummar Rao) who engages in the traditionally male role of wooing. Rani, whose limited fantasies about travelling are circumscribed to her honeymoon, suffers an inevitable shock as Vijay calls off their wedding citing the reason, "For me, it's all about travel, business, meetings…*bohot tough ho jayega tumhare liye*" (*Queen* 0:08:51).

Even as she embarks alone on her honeymoon in Paris, neglecting the

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frowning eyebrows and the injunctions to take Chintu along, her initial forays into Parisian streets reflect emotional turmoil through the culturally conditioned need for a male guiding hand. Having braved physical threat posed by a mugger and being initiated into the world of risk-taking, Rani gains confidence. Being inadvertently drunk, she rebels against restrictive feminine propriety that restricts 'good girls' from burping, wearing certain clothes, and indulging in their desires.

Her carefree behaviour in a state of intoxication mirrors Simran's uninhibited dance to "*Zara sa jhoom lun main*" in *DDLJ*. However, unlike Simran's eventual embrace of conventional femininity, what follows in *Queen* is a series of subversions wherein Rani undercuts the restrictions that were earlier imposed on her—she becomes economically self-sufficient and exposes as baseless the culturally-induced inhibitions against ungendered spaces by sharing a room with three men. Male presence becomes more egalitarian as she assumes control by driving and making decisions, reading a map and simultaneously mapping the city spaces. A particularly powerful moment in the film captures Rani dancing wildly atop a bar counter; such dances, especially in Bollywood cinema of the 1960s and 70s, were associated with the figure of the cabaret dancer in the public space of the nightclub—a den of hedonism and unrestricted revelry. The hypersexualised figure of the cabaret dancer was invariably juxtaposed with the *sanskaari* woman of the house. Clear demarcations, however, were not always tenable; while the narrative discourse emphasised the need to maintain neat public-private distinctions, the lyrical sequences in these films unsettled such distinctions. Rachel Dwyer notes:

> film songs and their picturization provide greater opportunities for sexual display than dialogue and narrative sections of the films, with their specific images of clothes, body and body language, while the song lyrics are large to do with sexuality, ranging from romance to suggestive and overt lyrics.... (qtd. in Mankekar 419)

Rani's uninhibited and uncensored dance signals her initiation into an uninhibited subjectivity; it further marks the collapse of the socially constructed borders between masculine and feminine, active and passive, public and private, heroine and vamp. The film dramatises the desire for social acceptance of female subjectivity in all its complicated and multifaceted glory.

From the hotel-room window to the balcony to the streets of Paris, Rani's transition into a woman of the world (as was Aditi's in *Astitva*) is overseen by threatening Helen-figures. The blatant, confident, and bra-hating Vijaylaxmi (Lisa Hayden) and the unnervingly candid sex-worker Ruksar aka Roxette (Sabeeka Imam) represent the "disreputable" women of the world who enable Rani to transcend normative femininity, by offering her a glimpse of their

generous humanity and a new perspective that normalises shame. *Queen* offers a refreshing respite from the archetypal heterosexual romances by offering a striking vignette of female bonding under the Eiffel tower and a denouement that refuses to reinstate Rani's new-found freedom in the patriarchal institutions of heterosexual relationship or marriage.

Conclusion

What binds the women protagonists of these films is their struggle against restrictive social scripts. The outcome of that struggle is envisioned in widely differing ways — Simran replaces one patriarch with another, Aditi and Rani find refuge in unfettered individuality alongside supportive women allies. Notwithstanding its different outcomes, what is of significance is the struggle itself. During their finest moments, these films highlight the constructed, arbitrary nature of gender norms which fail to accommodate desire in its rich multiplicity. Intoxicated, the otherwise *sanskaari* Simran dances to the suggestive lyrics of "*Zara sa jhoom lun main*"; the usually shy Rani immerses herself in Parisian nightlife, all inhibitions forgotten; Aditi rages against the suppression of her desires under the circumscribing domain of wifehood.

In other words, these films dramatise the Butlerian idea that the constitutive terms of one's gender remain open to individual attempts at revisioning in a bid to secure a more liveable life. Adoption of a critical and transformative relation to social norms that restrict one's personhood is, according to Butler, the primary step towards the alteration of those norms. For far too long, control over the narrativisation of women's desires has rested with unsympathetic storytellers. The filmic space has remained the mise-en-scène of the desires of patriarchal directors and scriptwriters whose gazes project their own fantasies upon the empty signifier of femininity. As more women-centric films begin to involve the audiences, more women like Aditi and Rani begin to disavow repressive models of femininity in favour of more humane paradigms of womanhood. Not too long ago, Bollywood encountered its own MeToo movement even as female actors raised their voices against issues such as sexual harassment and equal pay. The need of the hour is, besides a greater representation of women in artistic as well as political circles, a sustained reconfiguration of women's representation in popular cinema and a continuous negotiation of gendered identities.

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