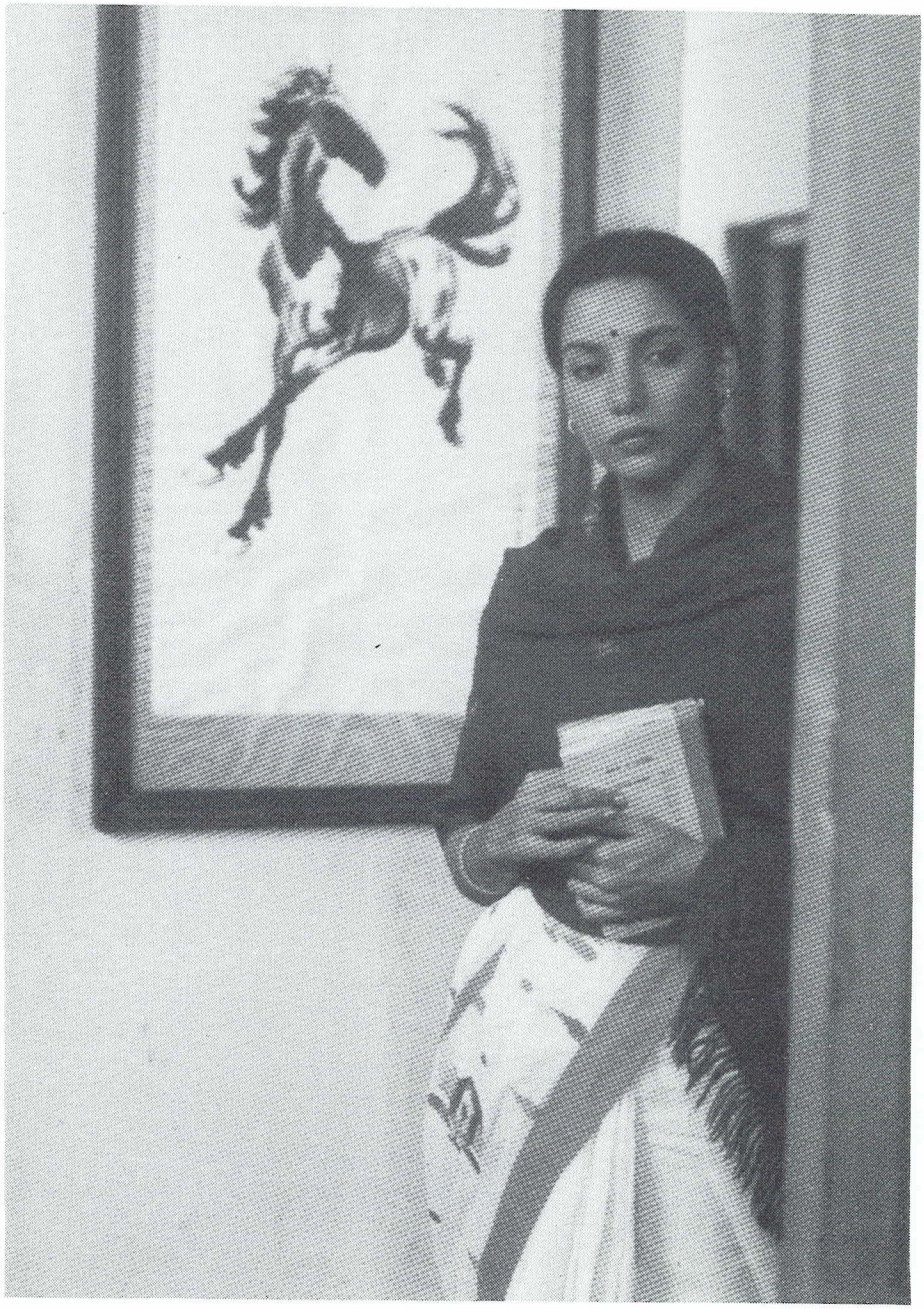
The Exotic, the Erotic

South Asian Women

By Yasmin Jiwani

L'article examine les origines historiques des images contemporaines des femmes de l'Asie du Sud projetées dans les films populaires américains et britanniques. L'article situe ces images dans la pensée littéraire et dans l'imaginaire des pays colonisateurs au tournant du siècle. L'article démontre comment ces images ont servi à justifier la domination coloniale et comment elles transforment les inégalités de pouvoir en oppositions symboliques.



Shabana Azmi in *Madame Sousatzka* (1988)

and the Dangerous

in Popular Film

The debate concerning issues of representation in films, literature and other cultural productions has assumed considerable force over the last several decades. The importance of examining such representations lies in their 'prescriptive' and 'descriptive' values, namely, in how they are used to communicate a given group's "place" in the larger society, to describe it, and 'socialize' it into behaving in ways that conform to the dictates of the larger society (Bannerji; Parmar). The critical concerns remain those of identifying the historical roots of such representations, as well as their value as currency in the creation and perpetuation of "ways of seeing the world." (Dahlgren and Chakrapani; Said)

Images of South Asians in Western popular thought

Unlike other Asian groups, South Asians have not figured dominantly in popular American thought. In fact, compared to the British folklore surrounding India and Indians, there is a marked paucity of South Asian characters in early turn-of-the-century American literature and collective knowledge. (Isaacs) This paucity may in part be attributable to the fact that between 1902 and 1906, the population of South Asians in the United States totalled only 800, with most of these immigrants concentrated in California. (Gonzales)

Nevertheless, in the images that did exist, India was defined in the American imperialist imagination as a land of squalor, disease, over-crowding, rampant sexuality and excessive mysticism. These images, borrowed from British colonial literature, were further fuelled by reports of American missionaries who first went to India in 1813 in an effort to salvage souls ostensibly lost to paganism. One such missionary report written in 1852 stressed, "the deplorable ignorance and stubborn prejudices of the Hindus, together with their caste system, their entire absence of correct principles, and finally their moral degradation." Yet another, typified the Hindus as "lifetime liars and worshippers of a stupendous system of carnal idolatry." (Isaacs 262)

In 1893, Swami Vivekenanda attended the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. His visit catalyzed the growth of yet another predominant strand in the American collective imagination: that of the Indian as a false and opportunistic guru who saw America as a land of unsuspecting and naive public, primarily composed of gullible white women. (Isaacs 257)[1]

Two dominant themes surface in these early accounts, and both coalesce around the notion of women. The first deals with the American fear and perception of Indians as over-sexed men who were obsessed with the desire for sexual intercourse with white women;[2] and second, that this obsession with sexuality was an inherent part of Indian culture as evidenced in the ample and lurid descriptions of temple prostitutes and Indian religions that proliferated in the literature of the period. This imagery of excess—whether it be sexual, violent, disorderly, backward or mystical—is the common denominator underlying images of people of colour in mainstream American cinema, and it also appears to underpin these images in Canada and Britain. (Wilson and Gutierrez; Parmar; Shaheen; Stam and Spence; Winks; Jiwani; Engelhardt)[3] Images of South Asian women were significantly absent from these early accounts, except in the missionary reports which allude to the debilitating effects of temple prostitution on women in India. This invisibility may have been compounded by the fact that South Asian migration to the West was largely a male phenomenon. (Buchignani and Indra; Visram; Parmar; Gonzales)

South Asians in British literary thought

In British imperialist fiction concerning India, Kipling's works become a defining strand, condensing popular images of South Asian peoples. For Kipling, as for other writers of this period, the Indian woman represented doubly dangerous terrain. First, she was dangerous by virtue of her abundant fertility which, if excited by the British male, could result in the creation of a mixed race. This represented a major threat to British rule. Secondly, the Indian woman was perceived as being highly distracting; she had the power to lure Indian men away from the "work" of the empire. And finally, the Indian woman was the quintessential "other"—a woman, as well as an Indian. (McBratney; Greenberger; Burney)

From print to celluloid

Similar sentiments are echoed in the works of Sir H. Rider Haggard, a British colonial officer, whose works, *King Solomon's Mines*, *She*, *Ayesha* and others, depict the Indian or African woman as being excessively sexual, fertile and dangerous. (Stott; Hammond and Jablow) In all these descriptions, the attribution of female characteristics was extended to include the entire colonized nation. Hence, India became the female body on which the discourse of violence via rape, and subjugation via colonization were inscribed.

It is not surprising then, that like imperialist fiction, American and British films have continually valorized the rule of the Raj. For the Raj was, in essence, the subjugation of the female terrain by the male colonizing powers. In keeping with this tradition of domination, Indian men, who were perceived as allies in the domination of the colonized country, were depicted as fierce fighters and faithful Gunga Din types. These characters became fodder for such films as *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Paramount, 1936), *The Black Watch* (Fox, 1929), *Gunga Din* (RKO, 1939), *Son of India* (MGM, 1919), *The Rains of Ranchipur* (MGM, 1955), and so on. (Isaacs) More recently, this glorification of the Raj can be seen in such British films as *The Far Pavilions A Passage to India* (1984), *Jewel in the Crown*, and *Heat and Dust* (1982), where, "implicit cultural discriminations are presented as 'truths.' Colonial atrocities by the British are then presented as deeds of extreme personalities...." (Dhillon-Kashyap 122)

This imagery of excess—sexual, violent, disorderly, backward or mystical—is the common denominator underlying all images of people of colour in mainstream cinema.

Women only figure prominently in these films if the central plots deal with miscegenation. The inter-racial love affair usually suffers a tragic end, as per the tales in Kipling's poems. Other than that, women remain in the background, gracing the scene at times, and at other times, babbling incoherently at some generic bazaar.

As with other writers of the period, Haggard's literary works were subsequently transformed into feature films and, in contemporary times, are reflected in the celluloid adventures of Indiana Jones. (Stott) In *She* (1935, 1965), for instance, the woman of colour who appears to be undeniably 'Asiatic' lives in a city underground. 'She Who Must be Obeyed' has the power of immortality. The white hero/explorer, Allan Quartermaine, in his search for that secret of immortality, falls in love with her. She dies as she tries to revitalize herself in the fire of immortality. Meanwhile, Allan, watches her change from a beautiful woman to a horrific hag. The moral of this story is that those who dare to cross the boundaries of race are bound to face the most hideous form of death.

In more recent films, as for example, *The Deceivers* (1988), Indian women are once again confined to the realm of the 'exotic' and the dangerous. The white colonial officer, played by Pierce Brosnan, first tries to save a young Indian woman from committing *Sati*. He pretends to be her husband and ensures that she catches a fleeting glimpse of him, so that in knowing that he is alive, she cannot commit herself to death. The second time that an Indian woman is featured in this epic, which takes place in India, is when Brosnan, pretending to be a *Thuggee*,[4] partakes of the sexual pleasures offered to him by an Indian prostitute. In this film, Kali, the goddess of destruction and also the principal deity of the *Thuggees*, is depicted in the classic Kiplingesque sense—as evil incarnate, excessively sexual and fecund, bloodthirsty, and all powerful. However, not as powerful as the Christian god as evidenced by the dedicated, martyr-like manner in which Brosnan seeks to expose the *Thuggees*. Once again, we see the colonized through the eyes of their masters. 'They' remain savage-like and brutal. 'We' on the other hand, identify with the colonizers who embody 'truth and justice', values of a 'true civilization.'

The ghettoization of South Asian women into the role of sexually alluring entertainers appears in various other films. As early as 1938, in Raymond Massey's *Drums*, South Asian women are only shown as dancers/prostitutes. One can see this pattern repeat itself in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), where the entrance of the dancing women is accompanied by a verbal text that argues in favour of the colonial occupation of India. In this collective form, as in their appearance as nameless hordes (*Octopussy*, 1983), their individuality is suppressed, their difference is levelled. (Minh-ha) They become the background against which the main story, usually involving the exploits of a white male, gets told. We see the Indian world through the eyes of this white male.

If South Asian women do play a prominent role in a film, their depiction is usually contained within the parameters of imperialist thought, as for example, the role of the domineering mother played by Shabana Azmi in *Madame Sousatzka* (1988). As a mother, she is shown to be obsessed with her son's success. As a woman, she comes across as unkempt, dirty (witness the scene in which she is reprimanded for having 'allowed' a strand of hair to fall into the samosas that she makes for a local London outlet), tradition-bound and basically 'backward.'

If not framed in this manner, South Asian women tend to be used as signs to signify other characteristics that are seen as resonating with their colonially inscribed features. For instance, in one *Star Trek* film featuring Perseus Kambatta, the South Asian woman has cut off her long hair to depict the kinds of 'advances' that have taken place in the space age. However, her sexuality remains at the forefront as she is described as belonging to a culture that has knowledge of the esoteric arts of sexuality (the apparent connection here being knowledge of the *Kama Sutra*). Moreover, her empathic qualities make her a natural vessel for the lost soul of the Voyager satellite. In other words, her personality, her being or 'soul' are irrelevant; they can be disposed of, and the fact that this can be done with such ease points to her quintessential weakness—as the "other" in that she is unlike other 'normal' human beings. She is merely another piece of 'exotica.' Her union with a white male cannot be allowed to continue because of who she is. She becomes the object of the white, male gaze—mechanized by the appropriation of her body. Thus appropriated, she can be recast in a mould that fits the categorical schema of her observers.

Contemporary stereotypes

With the increased migration of Indian peoples to Western hemispheres, as part of the cultural diaspora, there has been an influx of other stereotypes that resonate with those embedded in the colonial tradition. These contemporary stereotypes define the South Asian woman as being highly traditional and submissive; a victim of patriarchal structures, such as arranged marriages, domestic violence and cultural conflict; a refugee; and, as an exotic/erotic creature (Dhillon-Kashyap; Parmar; Thobani, 1991 &1992).

These same stereotypes, widely prevalent in the news media, are also articulated in more recent films, as for example, in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992), where the character of the heroine's mother is, once again, depicted as being submissive and tradition-bound. This acts as a foil for the heroine's own break with her cultural background, a culture which in turn is defined as being "backward," racist, and patriarchal.[5] And although the heroine is portrayed as being a strong and independent character, her strength comes primarily from disassociating herself from her culture. Dislocated from it, she acquires a fullness of character that is denied to her within the larger Indian tradition. She becomes assimilated—more like 'us.' This once again reaffirms the stereotypical notion that there is only "one" South Asian culture, and that that culture is highly repressive in its orientation to women.

The South Asian men featured in both this and other films of the South Asian immigrant experience, for example *Masala* (1991), *Lonely in America* (1990), and *Sam and Me* (1991), are depicted in highly effeminate and opportunistic terms. They are emasculated and rendered powerless, unless they happen to have assimilated the dominant society's norms. For example, Krishna in *Masala* is the only 'macho' character in the entire film. He clearly rejects his Indian cultural background.

Oppositions, hierarchies and ambivalences

The circulation of images of South Asian women as tradition-bound, submissive, weak, and victimized affirms the image of the West as an advanced and progressive entity. At the same time, they underlie a paternalistic variant of colonial relations. Such sentiments have historically been used to legitimize British intervention in Indian affairs, particularly as it concerns the status of women. (Mani) The emphasis on the rampant sexuality and fecundity of Indian women is once again placed in opposition to the supposed puritan self-control of the West and its containment of female sexuality. In this manner, the Third World is locked in a system of representation that defines it as female, other, chaotic, primitive and emotional. (Wilson and Gutierrez) These oppositions mask the historical factors that have led to the economic under-development of the Third World, the destruction of indigenous economies, and the imposition of exploitative relations of domination on the cultural fabric of these nations. What one sees then is only part of the picture—bits and pieces of the contemporary reality of the Third World—which are then dislocated from their historical context and shifted around to fit patterns of perception that are rooted in imperialist thought and a colonial mentality. Thus, hierarchical relations of power are levelled to simple binary oppositions: first world/third world, strong/weak, ordered/disordered, and so forth.

At the same time, the contrary values embedded in the stereotypes themselves are used to legitimize certain perspectives: against the hordes, we have the individualization of particular women, but these individualizations carry the weight of specific, historical connotations associated with South Asian women in general. Hence, the character of the domineering mother becomes the force by which the woman's identity is singularized against the backdrop of the nameless hordes. The woman is appropriated as a sign and as a sign infused with meanings that have their roots in the historical relationship of inequality and otherness.

The symbolic value of the South Asian woman as a 'sign' in the system of visual signs that forms the language of the cinema lies in its ability to evoke this chain of association. The chain of associations has become entrenched over time and now forms the taken-for-granted stock of knowledge of contemporary Western societies.

This knowledge gains its legitimacy from playing on the ambivalent characteristics embedded within the sign itself: the South Asian woman is both 'exotic' and 'dangerous,' both attractive and repulsive. She is a woman like her white female counterparts, and yet not a woman because of her race. Her difference is what makes her exploitable as a spectacle.[6] And it is her difference that remains 'fixed'—in her race and gender—as one of the subject peoples. (Bhabha)

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The rampant sexuality and fecundity of Indian women is placed in opposition to the puritan self-control of the West and its containment of female sexuality.

[1]This stereotype still pervades popular American films, as for example, *All of Me* (1984) in which an Indian guru attempts to mediate the transmigration of a wealthy heiress' soul. It is also interesting to note that one of the first American films dealing with India was Edison's documentary entitled *Hindoo Fakir* (1902) which relied on Indian mysticism and its perceived

charlatan character to portray South Asians. (Isaacs)

[2]This fear is evoked in *A Passage to India* (1984) which deals with the possible rape of the central white female character by her Indian host in the Malabar Caves.

[3]In Canada, the image of the hyper-sexual Indian male was also widespread. An example of the extreme fear of miscegenation it prompted can be seen in the following extract, written in 1914: "What is feared is the effect of that union on the lewd Hindu, the effect on the safety of the average white woman or white girl; and there is no one on the Coast, who had lived next to Asiatics, who does not know what that means in terms of fact that cannot be set down here." (Buchignani and Indra 46)

[4] An Indian cult of Kali worshippers which has been represented in a number of ways in Western cinema.

[5]It is interesting to note that in virtually all of these 'immigrant' films, whether they are directed by South Asian filmmakers or white filmmakers, the South Asian male characters are either foolhardy terrorists, inept at social graces, or crude 'money-grabbers.' This portrayal is in keeping with the British colonial stereotype of the lascivious, greedy merchant. See for instance, Greenberger's analysis.

[6]See for instance, Schneider's analysis of the use of exhibitions of Third World peoples as spectacles.

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