The Westernized Vamp and the Modernised Nightclub of Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract / Introduction

Bollywood is famous throughout the world for its unique choreography of music, melodrama, fantasy, dance and spectacle. In the popular dance numbers of the 80s and 90s, the vampire has always been used as the visible intrusion of the west into the cinematic space of Indian films. While the heroine of Bombay cinema was the site of virtue and ‘Indianness’, the vamp’s body has suggested excess, out-of-control desire, and vices induced by western license.¹

This paper examines the concept of the vamp portrayed as an outsider much westernised in its depiction, distinct from the ideal woman of the nation, the popular icon in the Bollywood cinema. The researchers try to explore various reasons through instances where the vampires have been used as an object to focus on the theme of escapism through fantasy.

Understanding the way in which the representation of the purity/spirituality of the nation was negotiated through the image of the heroine, and the woman’s body became the site of conflicting value systems propagated through the modernised concept of sexism and nationalism², the paper also looks at the genre of the social- through which the cinema attempted to deal with issues of modern life-premised on a strategy of excess and containment.

India’s Stage Culture and the Melodramatic effect on Cinema

The influence of India’s rich ethnicity of popular folk culture and theatrical performances on the popular Bollywood films is quite blatant. This can be easily observed in the stage-like quality of acting, stereotypical characterization in the mechanised plot, and the use of conventional tools of sentimentality like songs and dance sequences with a dash of extensive melodrama. This melodrama, since its inception has served to magnify the moral oppositions between good and evil, the righteous and the fallen.³

This staging of the melodrama conventionally entails a Hero (the Good) - inevitably a good-looking young man wearing the best of costumes and modelling the latest hairstyles, the one who is moral and righteous; a Villain (the Evil) who contrasts the hero in every possible thing, in being immoral and feeling no guilt about it; the Heroine (the supporter of the Good) an ally of the hero, the female counterpart in every manner; and, of course, the exact opposite of the Heroine, the Vamp (the supporter of the Evil), and the ally of the villain.

¹ Majumdar Ranjanai, Bombay Cinema: An archive of a city (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)
² The Politics of Identity; 2013, Ed Harris Michelle, Nakata Martin, Carlson Bronwyn
³ http://vasundharaprakash.blogspot.in/2010/06/bad-girls-of-hindi-popular-cinema.html
The two women, Heroine and Vamp were products of patriarchy- both modelled to serve the men4. The dominant forms of patriarchal ideology can be seen in how women are seen subjugated- as the nurturing mother, the chaste wife, or the promiscuous vamp5. The representation of the two women was diametrically opposite and the exaggerated qualities of one in one extreme portrayal would bring out the qualities/negativities of the other.

**The (in)famous Vamp and the righteous heroine**

The vamp, Hindi cinema's designated bad girl has always done things on screen that were considered social taboos and upright Indian girls from decent families weren't supposed to even think of doing - drink, smoke and have sex - and she was usually seen on the villain's arm in brassy dens or smoke-filled bars, wearing revealing outfits and sometimes even bikinis. Sexy cabaret numbers, nautch girls, sky-high heels, extremely loud makeup and exaggerated Western hairstyles, there was a time when the fraternity of vamps and item girls were either seen dancing in pompous ‘item songs’ (used widely in film’s promotion) and in certain situations in nightclubs or at pool parties.

Vamps played a pivotal role in the success of a film6. Since these item songs were used widely in the film’s promotion and trailers, the viewers almost had a love-hate relationship with these vamps who smoked, danced erotically and drank and did everything that our ideal ‘Susheel Bhartiya Naaris’7, would not even dare to think. According to the earlier researches, these sultry women grabbed more eyeballs and money than the leading ladies of those films owing to their ‘oomph’ factor and sizzling performances. They were a perfect package to portray the extreme negativity and adding the requisite entertainment and spice to the bollywood films.

Unlike the heroine who was denied the expression of ‘desire’ the vamp was exploding of it8. Exploring her sexuality and exposing through costumes, makeup and dialogues, she comfortably intruded in the well-defined space of the leading lady. But the vamps were not only present in the films as a cosmetic entity and they did serve a purpose no matter how frivolous. In some films, they formed a part of the plot as an accomplice to the villain. And in others, the vamps played arm candy to the villain. It also happened that a few films saw it an excuse to have them featured to squeeze in a sassy cabaret number. The item song was the defining moment for the vamp because it gave her the much needed setting of a nightclub or a gambling den, the opportunity to flaunt the Western attire, the outlandish hair-do and her obvious dance of seduction, all of which mad her morally degraded ‘other’ woman of the film. All the identifiers were part of the whole package and worked either way. As Vasundhra Prakash points out in her essay, ‘Bad Girls of Hindi Popular cinema’- “whoever smoked or drank or danced sensuously was usually a vamp, a vamp usually smoked, danced and drank”9.

The ancestry of dancing girls in Bollywood can be traced back to Kuldeep Kaur and a dancer, Azoori. Azoori influenced an Anglo-Indian girl Cuckoo who featured in 49 films within five years after her debut in 1945. She made her appearance in Pehli Nazar and Mujrim. Cuckoo captivated the audiences for almost 20 years. Though in most of her films she only appeared for a song or more, distributors considered her no less than the heroine embarking a lot of the film’s success.

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4 https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~ravi22s/classweb/sexismbollywood/virginvamp.html
5 MacDonald Alison; Real and Imagined Women: a Feminist reading of Rituparno Ghosh’s films, Department of Anthropology, University College London 2007
6 http://pandolin.com/an-ode-to-the-vanishing-vamps/
8 http://vasundharaprakash.blogspot.in/2010/06/bad-girls-of-hindi-popular-cinema.html
9 ibid.
Nadira Baghdadi Jew, famously known as Farhat Nadira, was another popular Bollywood bad girl who is in-famous for being the first Indian actress who smoked on screen. In Raj Kapoor’s ‘Shree 420’, Raju, the hero is caught between two worlds and two women -- Vidya (meaning knowledge), the heroine, and Maya (meaning illusion), the vamp. The unforgettable song from the film picturised on Nadira ‘Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh’ has Maya dancing in her typical ‘Ek haath mein jaam, doosre haath mein dhooaan’. The mise-en-scene of the club, an indoor space with lighting that played with shadows creating a dark and murky mood in a deceit and dishonest city life was accentuated by the contrast in the openness of the setting of Vidya’s school under a tree, a setting that shared the aesthetics of the propaganda films of Films Division, Government of India.10

Next in line is the great Lalita Pawar, often regarded as the Vamp Prodigy of Indian Cinema. She reined the arena of badness and irreverence for nearly three decades. Particularly famous for playing the wicked mother-in-law in almost all family melodrama films, she is remembered for her conniving characters from films like Mr & Mrs 55, Sujata and Shree 420. She also played the legendary role of Manthra in Ramanand Sagar’s television series ‘Ramayana’.

Some of the other famous bad girls of Bombay Cinema include Shashi kala, the Padma Shri award winning actress who played the vivacious carefree or completely negative characters with equal charm and ease. Apart from her, the famous sex symbol of seventies who dazzled on her sizzling cabaret ‘Mera naam hai shabnam’ from Kati Patang and who iconically portrayed Villain’s moll as ‘Mona Darling’ in Zanjeer, Bindu is applauded for her mesmerizing performances in films like Intihaan and Hawas where she enacted the role of seductress and nymphomaniac respectively. The one name that defines the iconic role of the fraudulent stepmother is that of Aruna Irani who outshined in the Bollywood cinema as the popular vamp, excelling not only in acting but also dancing.

This list will be incomplete without the undisputed Cabaret Queen of India in the 1970s and 80s, Helen. Helen’s golden period began in her 30s with the emergence of RD Burman as the music director. The Asha-RD combination brought a new wave of Western music and help position Helen in the bollywood, who was inherently seen as an outsider because of her looks despite being in the industry for so long.11 She is still unmatchable because of her iconic performances like Piya tu ab to aaja from ‘Caravan’, Aa Jaane jaan from ‘Inteqam’, Mehbooba Mehbooba from ‘Sholay’ and Yeh mera dil from ‘Don’.

The Westernised concept and the conflict between nationalism and colonialism

The bad girls of the Bollywood cinema could be placed so well in the films’ plots as they were reflecting largely on the experiences of modern life- wealth, crime, fashion, style, sexuality, status and identity. This character gap between the modernised outlook and role play of the vamp, and the conventional culturally rich character of the heroine gave a stark contrast in developing the narrative of the film through these two. Helen’s anglicized looks proved useful in emphasizing this characterisation of the vamp. She was therefore also popular for playing some westernised, free spirited roles in her films. This was supported by her bold choice of clothes and sensual dance moves. ‘Iss duniya mein jeena ho to, sun lo meri baat’ from ‘Gumnaam’ might not qualify strictly as a cabaret, but it’s certainly worth mentioning because it is one of those songs where a vamp portrays the individual choices,


freedom and the westernised concept of modernity thus distinguishing it from the leading ladies and their behaviour.

Film scholar Ranjani Mazumdar has compared the vamps in popular Hindi films with the femme fatale of the noir films who were characterized by revealing clothes, stilettos, blonde hair and invariably dark and mysterious character. The figure of the vamp permitted the Hindi films to explore a different mise-en-scène where desire, wealth, sexuality and urban modernity could be explored.

The concept of the West as the cultural other being ugly and corrupt that was cashed upon through the westernised vamps emerged largely from India’s colonial past. This sharp divide between what is Indian and what is not was portrayed by the two women- the heroine and the other (vamp). This depiction of the bad/evil as the westernised and modern, and that of good as the traditional and Indian made the vamps to survive in the film industry for long. This conflict between the good and the evil was clubbed with the conflict between nationalism and colonialism.

Modernity and Domestication

Indian cinema has invented more narratives in service of the nation, which are no less than the narratives of defeat and domestication. Both the Indian and colonial values are represented through women in the starkly opposing roles of the virgin (the heroine) and the vamp (the other). The heroine’s virtue never triumphs over the vamp’s immorality (Creekmur and Sidel 54), and even if it does, it is when the hero ‘domesticates’ her by making her understand/accept the fault of her ways.

This relationship between the concept of femininity and the values of domesticity was intensified during the post- independence nationalist movement. In the film Purab aur Paschim (East and West, 1970), The heroine Preeti, who lives in England falls in love with Bharat (Hindi name for India) and they eventually get married. The power and superiority of Indian tradition against the modern western culture is established at the end through the transformation of the westernized protagonist into a domesticated, traditional and culturally driven woman. Preeti who is portrayed as a hedonistic, miniskirt-wearing, cigarette-smoking, bar-frequenting woman in the first half transforms completely into the righteous Bharatiya Naari towards the climax. Rather than the hero’s charisma alone, the nation’s greatness here itself lead to the domestication of the vamp. She morally transforms by adorning a saree in place of a mini skirt. The sari-clad traditional woman can become a good wife, forgiving lady, a sacrificing mother and a dutiful daughter. The heroines were therefore representing the bold identifiers like the big red round bindi, long black well plated hair, usually seen offering the Goddess Aarti with a pooja ki thaali in the temple.

Sexuality, Spectatorship, Visual Desire and Fantasy

Another important theme of popular cinema that differentiates between the heroine and the vamp is the split between ‘good’ sexuality (dharma) and ‘bad’ sexuality (desire) (Uoberi 1997). The heroine is the embodiment of ‘good’ sexuality as opposed to the ‘vamp’ with overt sexual displays of lust. The erotic spectacle of women is notably one of the central pleasures of commercial cinema viewing. The power and superiority of Indian tradition against the modern western culture is established at the end through the transformation of the westernized protagonist into a domesticated, traditional and culturally driven woman. Preeti who is portrayed as a hedonistic, miniskirt-wearing, cigarette-smoking, bar-frequenting woman in the first half transforms completely into the righteous Bharatiya Naari towards the climax. Rather than the hero’s charisma alone, the nation’s greatness here itself lead to the domestication of the vamp. She morally transforms by adorning a saree in place of a mini skirt. The sari-clad traditional woman can become a good wife, forgiving lady, a sacrificing mother and a dutiful daughter. The heroines were therefore representing the bold identifiers like the big red round bindi, long black well plated hair, usually seen offering the Goddess Aarti with a pooja ki thaali in the temple.

12 Mazumdar Ranjani: Bombay Cinema, an archive of the city (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)
13 Srivastava Neelam; Bollywood as national(ist) cinema; Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, Third Text, Vol. 23, Issue 6, November, 2009, 703–716
14 https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~ravi22s/classweb/sexismbollywood/virginvvamp.html
15 Corey K. Creekmur and Mark Sidell, Cinema, Law and the state in India; 2007
for transgressive voyeuristic enjoyment. Taking place as a ‘public’ exhibition in a theatre, nightclub or bar, the performance is coupled with an ‘approving audience’ who serve to socially sanction the performance (Kasbekar 2002:297). This is so because sex in the subcontinent culture is regarded as a forbidden ‘fantasy’, which if indulged in results in social disapproval. However the ‘bad’ woman or the vamp is generally allowed more space for sexual promiscuity and therefore can easily indulge in the same.

Laura Mulvey (1975) among many others has critiqued cinema for objectifying the female body, claiming it becomes a passive reciprocal of the pleased active male voyeuristic gaze and this argument is readily applied here. Furthermore by only acknowledging women in terms of their sex, female identity is imagined to be clustered around two polar extremes of sexuality - dharma and desire that the heroine and vamp used to portray.

**Individual freedom, Choices and the Metamorphosis**

The vamp almost vanished by the end of the film. Going by the tradition, perhaps because of the sins they had done by being an ally to the villain. Over the years, Globalization and liberalisation twisted the neat moral divisions of good and bad. ‘The heroine’, says Gyan Prakash, the Director of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, “now dressed by a fashion designer and placed in a consumerist mise-en-scène, was liberated.” She could appear in a club and wear revealing clothes without being coded.” It is due to the redefinition of the image of the heroine by herself because of the individual freedom and the choices made by the leading ladies, that has led to the extinction of the vamps.

With the coming up of ‘modern’, ‘stylish’, ‘open’ and ‘westernized’ female protagonists like Parveen Babi (in the film Deewar) and Zeenat Aman (in Hare Rama Hare Krishna), doing everything that was considered ‘immoral’ for the heroine, the existence of the quintessential bad girls aka vamps was questioned. The 1980s also marked the disco age therefore the need to insert disco dance numbers centered around the leads including the hero and the heroine. Now one character had the ability to accommodate both. As the bollywood dynamics changed further, the act of ferocious vamps completely vanished. Actresses like Kajol and Priyanka Chopra came out of their comfort zones and experimented with negative roles in films like Gupt and Aitraaz respectively. Late 80s and 90s exploded with leading ladies dancing sensuously in songs that have become the icons of Bombay music industry, like Sridevi in ‘Kaatey nahi kate yeh din yeh raat, in the film Mr. India and Madhuri Dixit in ‘Choli ke peeche kya hai’ in the film Khalnayak.

The heroines became the full package of entertainment that was self-sufficient in itself leaving no room for the vamp in the film’s plot. This transformation from the purity of the character to a bit grey also liberated the heroine from being judged/scrutinised by the public eye. She was no longer expected to be the social yardstick for the perfect “Bhartiya Nari”. And if the Bollywood’s vamps’ main value was seen as only the desire, glamour, titillation, sexuality factor, it is no surprise that the modernised leading ladies like Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi drove them out of the Bollywood films.

**The last word/ Conclusion**

Heroines and Vamps were metaphors of stark reality in white and black representing the extreme positions as envisaged by the society. But gradually the society and therefore the films began to question both these patterns of the existential clash between the ‘pure good’ and ‘pure evil’. With the coming up of ‘The Angry Young Man’, the Bollywood hero also had the shades of grey. Hero’s wrongdoings or little deceits were now justified according to the circumstances he was put through.

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These circumstances ranged from the torture by an evil father to an influence of a bad company. It is this clash between pure good and pure evil and the somewhat convenient shift in morals that led to the dissolving of one into another. As film scholar Rashmi Doraiswamy says that, “Now the heroes, heroines, villains, vamps display the ability to contain within themselves more than one- if not many stereotyped selves”\textsuperscript{22}.

In the following decades, with the success of the films like ‘Murder’, Mallika Sherawat and likes have become stars by successfully projecting themselves as heroines with sexuality. A flood of films like ‘Girlfriend’, ‘Julie’, ‘Zeher’ has followed with remarkably similarly positioned heroines in Amrita Arora, Isha Koppikar, Neha Dhupia and Udita Goswami. Change in the iconography of Indian women in cinema is invariably connected to advertising and economics apart from the obvious socio political representational shift. Today, the look of the Indian heroine comes from the modelling universe. It is not just the Western influence of their dress designers; it is their presentation as characters.

Today, all barriers of costume, setting, hair-do and make-up are crossed by the heroine and she has leaped into the so called world of the vamps. The vamp thus has indeed faded away! Or as the creator of Mona Darling, Javed Akhtar says, “She got swallowed up by the heroine”\textsuperscript{23}.

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\textsuperscript{23} http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/fr/2002/07/19/stories/2002071900170100.htm
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