

# **Revisiting the Sex-worker in Bombay Cinema: Space, Imaginaries, Performance**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
CINEMA STUDIES**

**NAINA MUKERJI**



**The School of Arts and Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi -110067**

**2011**



School of Arts & Aesthetics  
**JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY**  
New Delhi- 110 067, India

Telephone : 26742976, 26704177  
Telefax : 91-11-26742976  
E-mail : aesthete@mail.jnu.ac.in


**DECLARATION**

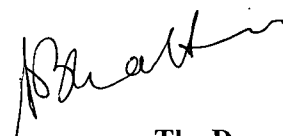
I declare that this dissertation titled **Revisiting the Sex-worker in Bombay Cinema: Space, Imaginaries, Performance** submitted by me at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution.

  
Naina Mukerji


**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation titled **Revisiting the Sex-worker in Bombay Cinema: Space, Imaginaries, Performance** submitted by Naina Mukerji at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies is her work, and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
Dr. Ira Bhaskar  
Supervisor

  
The Dean  
The School of Arts and Aesthetics

25 July, 2011

 Dean  
School of Arts & Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110067

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

I would like to introduce my project by quoting a couple of stanzas from Namdeo Dhasal's poetry. Offered as a putrid city, Bombay appears to be a place which offers itself up to everyone who is willing to partake of its myriad of realities, 'real' or imagined. I wish to forward the following poem as a token gesture through which one is allowed an insight into the figure of the sex worker as she gets inextricably likened to the city which not just houses her but also fuses its own identity with her. Ravished each night and day, both Bombay and the sex worker proceed to (re)define, shape and alter each other.

### Mumbai, My Beloved Whore

(Mumbai, Mumbai, Mazhya Priya rande)

*(Stanza 5, p. 59)*

Years, years after years  
They can't return to their place of origin.  
A great deal lost  
A good deal gained  
Time offers no solace  
Save for me just one moment of pain  
I won't go away from you  
Like a ragged beggar  
Mumbai  
My beloved whore  
I'll rob you and then go

*(Stanza 11, pp. 69-70)*

You be faithful to us  
You warm up our beds  
Play the flute of Eternity  
Play around with our dreams  
Breathe fire into our sperms  
O footloose hussy  
O churlish slut

O Khandoba's concubine  
O wanton coquette  
O whore with the heart of gold  
I won't go away from you like a ragged beggar  
I'll strip you to your bone  
Come, throw open the gates of heaven to the poor devils  
Mumbai, my beloved whore  
I'll take you for a ride  
I'll strike you dumb

Namdeo Dhasal

From *Khel* (Pras Prakashan, Bombay 1983)

Translated from the Marathi by Mangesh Kulkarni and Abhay Sardesai)<sup>1</sup>

## An Overview

This project owes its genesis to the impact of the post globalised moment on Bombay cinema such that the figure of the sex worker emerges as a complex confluence of different traditions contributing to her present persona. As a curious anomaly, she exists as an offspring of a quintessentially modern experience, even as her presence on-screen continues to take inspiration from earlier traditions like that of the courtesan, the vamp and the *devadasi*. In its most recent manifestations, after having undergone a series of mutations, the figure of the sex worker in Bombay cinema emerges as a highly fragmented identity, which allows for a hyper visibility of sex to proliferate on screen. Operating largely within the contours of the metropolis, the figure perhaps posits herself as a female counterpart to the urban male Flaneur who could engage with the city on levels that ranged from the optic to the haptic<sup>2</sup> (that is from the visual to the sensory) thereby allowing the metropolis to emerge as a text upon which impressions can be read

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<sup>1</sup> Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner *Bombay Mosaic of modern Culture*, Bombay Oxford University Press Delhi Calcutta Madras, 1996

<sup>2</sup> Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York 2002

and dispersed. As someone who has traditionally belonged to the realm of the public or the *bazaar*, the figure of the sex-worker is explored in this dissertation as one who confounds the divides that exist between the public and the private. Intrigued by the recent cinematic imaginaries of the sex worker where she not only undergoes semiotic mutations, but also sustains a blurring of identities that the city enables, I have attempted to track not just the architecture of the city space that she inhabits, but have also attempted to engage with the surfacing of schizophrenic tendencies both in the city and also in the figure under study. As a 'modern' figure by which I stress an understanding of modernity as a fragmented way of perception and analysis due to a barrage of fleeting impressions and sounds, the sex worker appears to carry within her characterization this very essence of evanescence and ephemerality.

Sandeep Pendse<sup>3</sup> refers to the unchronicled space of the urban metropolis where a multitude of unaccounted labourers and 'toilers' work to build a different city- which I, in this project, would like to refer to as the vertical city as opposed to the ever shifting horizontal sprawl. Throwing into complete disarray the post independence concern with maintaining the home and the world divide, the post globalised imaginary appears to mobilize not just images imported from all over the world but also allows a very specific and intense penetration, circulation and distribution of certain ideas and knowledge that manifest itself in ways that filmmakers choose to represent the figure of the sex worker. Re-defining the figure constantly by alluding to a range of shared memories of the sex worker, of which the tawaif is the most glaring example, the post globalized moment, is

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<sup>3</sup> Sandeep Pendse "Toil, Sweat & the City" in Sujata Patel & Alice Thorner ed. *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India* Bombay, Delhi ,Calcutta, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1996, 3-25



one which permits a kind of amorphousness to be associated with the figure. The mystery of her identity gets intensified in this moment and it is this fusion that I intend to further elaborate and understand. The city of Bombay (to a large extent) in this light presents itself as an imperative as it is in this space that different worlds and 'realities' collide. Offering herself as one of the crowd, the sex worker surfaces more than an illegitimate resident of the city's underbelly but rather a lens through which I wish to mount my argument on the discourse on sexuality, imaginaries and performance that she enables within the text of the city.

Unlike the specificity of the spatial location of the bar or the night club associated with the cabaret dancing vamp figure, the modern day sex worker operates from a number of sites, be it that of street, the red light district, hotels or even the home. The fact that she could be anyone, ranging from the housewife in *Aastha*, to a student in *Dev D* or even the insidious possibility of children turning into prostitutes in films like *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Salaam Bombay*, is something that has captured the imagination of filmmakers today. Anonymous and increasingly mobile<sup>4</sup>, the figure of the sex worker enables filmmakers to address a wide range of issues like sex and sexuality combined with other concerns like, pleasure, desire and the notion of the spectacular in tandem with the concerns expressed above.

Speed, mobility or motion, be it on foot or on wheels, with the appropriation of each medium, the figure charts a new way of looking at the city and the consequent

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<sup>4</sup> By this I intend to emphasize the contemporary sex worker's capacity to appropriate all kinds of space with a heightened emphasis on how she manages to navigate not just the streets but also the sphere of the domestic.

penetration of its spaces by allowing a dialogue to emerge between the legitimate and the so-called illegitimate. Charting a whole new way of looking and generating an understanding of the underbelly as well as the high-rises (a recent architectural interpolation into the city's landscape), the figure of the sex-worker emerges as someone who appears to personify and embody the notion of kinesthesia altering the course of sexuality and performance within the cinematic imaginary of the post globalised figure in the urban metropolis.

### **A brief history of the sex-worker's presence in recent scholarship**

Historically conceptualized as a source of threat in the city (Wilson 1991) due to her very presence, the female sex-worker intensifies this feeling of threat that the figure of the woman represents, even as the city demonstrates a skeptical stance towards the female explosion onto the streets post the industrial phase which remains a source of concern and anxiety. Unable to solve the riddle of her sexuality, the woman's presence (irrespective of her social identity) is seen as the signifier of the ultimate conundrum – likened to the Sphinx like quality where the question of her presence in the realm of the public is perceived as a threat. The west by and large has appropriated the sexual tension vested in the body of the female presence as a formidable and most importantly as an unknown element. Noir fiction characterized the female figure in ways that ostensibly polarized the 'bad' from the 'good' presence on screen; however, even with the blatant portrayal of a highly potent form of female sexuality this form was far from solving the puzzle of her sexuality and the threat it possessed.

In the Indian context, the figure of the public woman has been a source of concern throughout, even as filmmakers as early as the silent era have grappled with her on screen persona. In contemporary Bombay cinema, the bazaar, or by and large, the extension of the metaphor of the public arena, the red light district which traditionally segregated the topographical as well as the psychological presence of the street walker as pointed out by Arjun Appadurai, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sumanta Bannerjee, appears to undergo a transformation whereby the streets, a major part of an urban reality, enables the merging of various practices performed by all those who live on the streets thereby fusing the spatial divide of activities and by the same token, of a highly gendered notion of space. Appadurai along with Chakrabarty lays out the foundation for conceiving a different perspective on the exterior where various activities are performed out in the open thus merging the divide between the indoor and outdoor divides. Highlighting the immense validity of this observation, this dissertation aims to understand the moment in the recent filming of the sex worker figure as one who confounds conventional modes of understanding sexuality and its regulation. The red-light district gradually bleeds out of its ostensible invisibility and rapidly appropriates via the figure of the sex worker multiple ways in which not just topographies, imaginaries but also the iconography of the city undergoes a tremendous alteration.

The architecture of this project is spatially conceptualized along two axes, broadly speaking: the horizontal city, comprising of the city's vast and ever changing contours bearing in mind the chawls and its underbelly, and the vertical city which offers a sharp

contrast when juxtaposed with the amorphous horizontal city space. Not only do I wish to explore this clash but I also wish to foreground this as my framing tactic. The high-rises offer a completely different reality of urban space. Impeccable in its interior design, this space appears to exude its own dialectic of entry. Not everybody is allowed to trespass. Along with strict regulatory practices, the verticality of the city allows, in addition to its stark and most obvious contrast with the horizontal space – that of its extreme sanitization- a different kind of motion is seen to emerge. Elevators and surveillance technology pervade this new topography whereby individuals and action both become subject to a highly developed form of artificial intelligence. The omnipresent surveillance camera is used precisely to discourage the elements of the ‘other’ from invading this space; certain behavioral gestures gain center stage. It is in this context that my project will look at the popular codes of body language and how they feed into the making of an iconography. If the eponymous Chameli of Sudhir Mishra’s film belongs to the streets and is aware of her social inferiority when juxtaposed with Aman (played by Rahul Bose), the film’s representative of the vertical city, it is then interesting to view that awareness in the light of her gestural performance and language (both bodily as well as verbal). Performance and other factors like fashion will also play an important role in determining the mutations that the cinematic imaginary of the sex worker has brought to its audience of which the “escort” Natasha is a crucial illuminating factor in a 2007 film called *Laaga Chunri Mein Daag*.

Drawing from a vast corpus of debates that have congealed around the figure of the sex worker especially a certain reading of modernity that the figure enables in the

blurring of identities, this dissertation asks questions surrounding her configuration. Acting as an agent of the city's 'hyperstimulus'<sup>5</sup>, the sex worker allows a different dialectic of the reading of spaces to emerge.

Carving a niche for the sex worker within already existing debates, a scholar like Elizabeth Wilson articulates the tension that the figure poses and comments on the female presence in the city as a sphinx like conundrum wherein her very presence outdoors is questioned, challenged and feared. Guiliana Bruno concentrates on charting a different terrain of female sexuality using the figure of the prostitute to explore the landscape of the city. For her, architecture and space share an intimate connection with the body of the woman thereby allowing a tangible experience of sexuality to emerge. Others like Karen Gabriel focus on the imbrication of women and nationalist discourse. With Jasbir Jain's<sup>6</sup> model, the woman gets represented either as victim, rebel or transgressor. Delineating eroticism from romantic love Rachel Dwyer, represents a reading of eroticism as something which can be fulfilled (by way of fantasy) as opposed to a more complex reading of relationships which involves abstract patterns of thought which are always incomplete. A review of other writers and literature of the work which they have produced vis-à-vis feminine sexuality or the construct of femininity includes writers like Urvashi Butalia who focuses on femininity as a national construct extending very little critical analysis to the sex worker figure. Others like Shoma A. Chatterji focus on the axis upon which femininity gets articulated of which the "transgressive" sex worker is only

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<sup>5</sup> Ben singer" Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism" in Leo Charney & Vanessa R. Schwartz ed. *Cinema & the Invention of modern Life* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995, 72-99

<sup>6</sup> Jasbir Jain "Body as Text: Women Transgressors and Hindi cinema" *Films and feminism Essays in Indian Cinema* ed. By Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai , Rawat Publications Jaipur and New Delhi 2002

one part. Even in the realm of female eroticism, the sex worker merits minimal representation as eroticism gets subordinated to the larger and apparently more satisfying quest of finding greater fulfillment in relationships (which are more complex and abstract) as opposed to fantasies (which are mere shadows of reality)<sup>7</sup>. The closest that one comes to understanding the figure is through a critical investigation of her predecessor- the *tawaif* figure as discussed in some detail by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen(2009) along with the figure of the vamp as discussed by Ranjani Mazumdar (2007). Jerry Pinto's contribution in the same field is immensely useful as it combines the aesthetics of conceiving the vamp and more specifically Helen (the face of the dominant vamp in Bombay cinema) with the rise of an unconventional star (in his words *The Life an times of an H Bomb*).

### **Articulating my aim and intervention**

Given this vast corpus of critical examination that already exists, my intervention simply aspires to study the figure of the sex worker in the context of Bombay cinema as she gradually mutates over the ages. I wish to see this figure as an important part of the urban metropolis whereby her contribution to the mercantile economy extends her identification, among many others, as a part of the city's work force. An unabashed awareness of the sex worker's profession for me is an important area of concern as it sheds critical light on the prescribed prospect of professional choices given to women by a highly patriarchal society, and it is in this context that the New Wave posits itself as an interesting detour from the commercial mainstream aspects of Bombay cinema.

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<sup>7</sup> A view foregrounded by Rachel Dwyer in a book called *All you Want is love All you Need is money*

Drawing upon references from a long list of predecessors, my focus in this project will be to explore the ways in which the past continues to impinge upon the present. Be it in the form of Jenny choosing the iconic figure of the *tawaif* Chandramukhi as her namesake in a 2009 production called *Dev D* or that of Chameli cast in the mould of Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* which in turn takes inspiration from Gulzar's *Mausam*, the figure is seen in a constant state of flux and changes until she becomes the jet-setting figure of Natasha in *Laaga Chunri Mein Daag* who not only mirrors the vamp's penchant for mimicking the west, but also presents herself as someone who gains entry into the vertical space of the city's landscape. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, I present the logic behind my chapterization as one which opens with early Bombay cinema projecting its own version of the figuration of the sex worker while attempting to chronologically (a method that I have used with regard to the decades and not necessarily the films) chart its iconographic shifts and changes in the imaginaries generated by this figure.

## **Methodology**

The methodology that I have applied in the larger framework of my dissertation will incorporate Foucault's insights on sexuality in order to highlight a new "technology of sex" (a term used by him) and bring to the fore a local form of power as embodied by the streetwalker and observe the effects that emerge from this kind of an analysis. Representing a kind of a fusion of spaces and meanings that takes place through the

sojourns of the sex worker, a different order of experience comes to the fore - one that relies on a sensual understanding of the urban metropolis. Just as language creates an order of meaning not just through its physical act of inscription, but also through its omissions and repetitions, the act of walking itself is seen by many critics as a way of reading the spatial configuration of the city. Therefore my emphasis on the act of walking as a symbolic gesture deployed by the sex worker in order to engage with other proliferating discourses or meanings at different levels might prove to be a useful exercise. Highlighting that power comes from below and that resistance exists at every point, Foucault in refuting sexuality as a “natural and private matter”,<sup>8</sup> allows me to study the figure of the sex worker as practicing a constructed notion of sex and sexuality which exist in a multitude of simultaneous “regimes of truth” (another phrase borrowed by Foucault) in the public domain. I find this method useful as it allows me to observe other activities impacting the deployment of the figure as a product of other discourses influencing filmmaking, the most pressing concern being issues surrounding censorship and technology.

## **Chapter construction**

Focusing on these insights, my first chapter will aim to look at the figure of the streetwalker as a kind of an elaboration of the theme of mobility and how spaces interact with each other given the tactility of her movements. In this section, the streets, the night club and the home present itself as three very different spaces all coming into contact with each other via the figure of the mobile street walker who walks and wanders like the

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault cited and quoted by Shohini Chaudhuri from *Feminist Film Theorists* (2006)



urban male Flaneur. It will be a section dedicated to the horizontal 'reality' of the urban metropolis.

Chapter two, a vastly different exploration of the sex worker, will be an interrogation into the 'realist' frame of the filmmaker's imaginary. Neither set in the city nor exhibiting a glamorous approach, this section will articulate a brief yet powerful challenge to mainstream commercial cinema which aimed to create a different dialectic of the 'realities' and squalor that surround the sex worker. Set either in unnamed small towns or in the outskirts of the city, these films, from what is popularly known as the 'New Wave' movement, have been made by some well known film-makers of Bombay cinema. This chapter is an important investigation with regard to my project as it aims to bring together a very distinct and a highly politically aware representation of the figure's iconography.

My final chapter – the vertical city- will merit a thorough analysis of the post globalised moment wherein the blurring of identities and spaces fogs clear identifications. This chapter will study the forces that have allowed this tendency to emerge on screen as the figure of the sex worker now undergoes transformations that reference a global impact on the collective conscious of society. Emergence of intricate and dense networks not only in the realms of print and electronic cultures but also in appropriating a cyberspace upon which information, sounds, images all proliferate is seen to impact the imaginary of the post globalized sex worker.

## Chapter 1

### Streetwalking in Bombay cinema- the early years

“No two walks are ever the same.”

Michel de Certeau

The figure of the streetwalker acquires a special significance in the history of Bombay cinema as it slowly surfaces as a complex model of female sexuality. Emerging out of the on screen legacy of the tawaif, the vamp and the devdasi tradition, the streetwalker consciously positions herself as a self fashioned construct which has the urban metropolis at its center. In this chapter I wish to present the case of sex worker in Bombay cinema starting from the silent era coming all the way up to the 70s and in the process I am hoping to examine the various ways in which the figure has contributed to our cinematic understanding of the city, its attitudes and spaces. In order to arrive at an understanding of how the figure has mutated over the ages and how the city has contributed to this phenomenon, I will use the actual and metaphoric streetwalking of the sex-worker with its emphasis on the crucial presence of the street- the city's lowest common denominator of its architecture as a site for adventure. The focus on the street appears to be a relatively recent awareness about the city in the literature on the subject and it carries connotations which are undeniably modern. This chapter deliberately refers to the sex worker as a streetwalker as she is an important element of the city starting with the streets in order to generate an understanding of the many facets of the horizontal city.

Embedded in a dense network of meanings and signs, the figure of the sex worker reinvented as a streetwalker taps into and opens up spaces which have yet remained unexplored. Mobility vested in the body of the sex worker who takes to the streets itself becomes an interesting area of concern as it adds a new dimension to sex work whereby the red light district explodes onto the canvas of the metropolis, giving rise to undefined spaces and sites for exploring and interrogating sexuality, gender relationships and performance bearing in mind the shape-shifting tendencies of the figure and the horizontal metropolis.

The figure of the streetwalker is a somewhat different from the figure of the common prostitute whose presence was synonymous with the space of the public and the red light district. Magnifying the possibility of encountering the unknown on street-corners, the kinesthetic factor vested in the body of the streetwalker allows for a multiple range of possibilities to emerge. Slowly dispensing with notions of identifying illegitimate sexuality in a closed circuit through recognizable codes of body language and gestures, Bombay cinema takes up the fragmented figure of the sex worker again and again recasting her in ways which have become symptomatic of staging the city as a moment<sup>9</sup> with all its incongruities thereby allowing a different syntax of modernity mediated through the figure to surface.

Bombay cinema makes possible a different reading of not just its own history, i.e. the history that shaped the consciousness of its inhabitants but also allows for a different

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<sup>9</sup> By the staging of the city as a moment I mean the important recognition of its condition of incessant change and lack of fixity thereby enhancing its modernity. The streetwalker helps mirror these changes as her on screen persona appears to dialogue with the ever changing imaginaries of the metropolis.

kind of reading which emanates through a figure – a figure known not just for its ambiguity and ephemerality but also as someone who navigates the horizontal metropolis and engages with spaces traditionally known to be divided as per patriarchal rules of gender differentiation. For instance, the home, considered as being the realm of the mother figure or the prototype construction of female identity undergoes a blurring of sorts the moment the streetwalker enters or even dares to enter it. V. Shantaram's *Aadmi*, a 1939 social, focuses on the miserable plight of the sex worker, Kesar, who stages a dramatic walkout from the red light district and in search of an alternate "respectable" identity and a different work profile not only finds rejection but acquaints the audience with the popular notions of middle class respectability exposed as hollow and hypocritical which refuse to deviate from its strict codes of morality. Not only does the city question her motives, it also denies her a "respectable"/ "proper" source of income. In a sequence where the prostitute is desperate to eke out a living for herself on a different axis in the spectrum of work, her very presence is considered to be a kind of malignancy or threat giving rise to the popular notion of the "other" in the context of the city-space. Shunned from shops and homes, the prostitute finds it next to impossible to convince the gentry that she desires a reform. Having faced extreme denigration, her pathos further gets heightened as she waits for the man – Moti the constable, to come to her rescue. Distinguishing her from the "usual" or rather the usual crowd that one faces in the underbelly, the film posits the case of the streetwalker in a sympathetic light and examines the various attitudes and ambiguities that surround this figure.

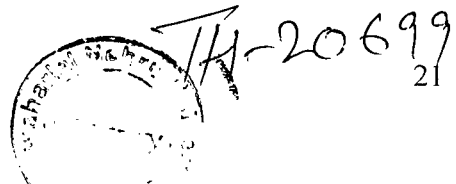
Preben Kaarsholm<sup>10</sup>, considers movies and cinemas to be an intrinsic part of the culture of Bombay and further invests these spaces and sensibilities as “central rallying points, symbols and institutions of modernization, and battlefields for the understanding of, for formulations and appropriation of, the conditions of the new life as against ‘what used to be’”. Given the example cited above, the case of the streetwalker then acts as a touchstone against which attitudes and popular notions are acted out and tested.

In charting out a different cartography of space in terms of understanding space as a sensory exchange that ~~is~~ allows bodies to understand their own movements in space, Giuliana Bruno points to the sensorial comprehension of spatial practices wherein the “haptic” or the sense of touch becomes the agent through which we enter into a reciprocal contact with our environment. The randomness associated with the walk of the streetwalker acquires its own vocabulary and meaning as space itself becomes subject to a kind of study which is fluid and tactile<sup>11</sup>. As a sensory practice, the haptic includes an understanding of kinesthesia which enables the self to realize its own presence in its environment. In other words bodies interact with space in a manner which not just validates their presence but also extends a sensorial dimension to space which otherwise remains constrained predominantly to the realm of the optic. This shift (from the optic to the haptic) marks a significant change in the way in which we come to perceive our lives in the metropolis. Mobilizing spaces that were considered to be hostile to strangers, the streetwalker is shown to constantly appropriate, confound and challenge norms which

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10 Preben Kaarsholm: “City Flicks City Flicks Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience” *Introduction Unreal city: Cinematic Representation, globalization and the Ambiguities of Metropolitan Life* ed by Preben Kaarsholm.

11 Giuliana Bruno: *Atlas Of Emotion: Journeys In Art, Architecture, And Film* Verso, New York 2002.



belonged to the realm of the legitimate. Gulabo's careful luring of Vijay, the poet persona in a song sequence in Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa*: '*jaane kya tune suni...*' through her bodily interaction with space appears to exude a kind of dynamic intensity as the dark alleys through which she leads him get infused with the language of her movements as a new awareness of space emerges - one that distinctly defines itself as highly erotic. This chapter opens with the deliberate staging of Bombay as the quintessential modern city as it offers not just a myriad of dreams, myths and realities but also showcases the city in a constant state of flux where ephemerality becomes one of the many factors that it has in common with the sex worker.

Articulating tendencies which seem largely social, films that aspire to examine this figure closely often appear to co-incide with the social genre. Films made on the sex worker in the years preceding the New Wave moment map out issues which bring to the fore questions that were otherwise considered resolved within the nationalist discourse (where the divide between the home and the world were sharply drawn). Sumanta Bannerjee<sup>12</sup> distinguishes space in terms of the world of the home and the '*bajar*' or the market. Elitist popular culture in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal sought to examine and reconcile the element of the 'other' given the context of the '*bajar*' and the threat of equating women with prostitution in this arena by extending a clear divide and code of conduct. The space for the 'bawdy' was clearly not the domain of the Bengali "*bhadralok*" (an equivalent of the western concept of the gentleman) nor did it belong to the space of the "*andarmahal*" or the palace interior. This divide was a western influence according to Bannerjee and the

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<sup>12</sup> Sumanta Bannerjee *The Parlour and the Streets Elite and Popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 1989

way in which these tensions and binaries got confounded was through the space of popular culture that abounded in the '*bajar*' and sought to diffuse the polarizations.

Roles that were earlier identified by a division of spaces underwent an intense series of alteration given the context of the sex worker in Bombay cinema. Gradually breaking out of its liminal space of the parlour (a term coined by Sumanta Bannerjee 1989), the sex worker reincarnates into a variety of avatars of which the streetwalker is one example. Jostling with the crowd the streetwalker posits the tangible prospect of female flanerie (a concept otherwise absent in the context of women) as her walk embodies not just the lack of a specific destination but also suggests an alternate gender role reversal with the dandy. As a public figure and as a participant of the multitude that fills the streets among other figures like “the news paper hawkers, vegetable peddlers, construction workers, mechanics, urchins, shoe-shine boys, petty thieves, pedestrians”<sup>13</sup>, the streetwalker qualifies her presence in the metropolis as one of the crowd. Ravi Vasudevan, in his examination of the popular describes how the notion of the popular owed its critical genesis to the cinema of the 1940s and the 1950s. According to his analysis of the social genre which was appropriated to examine the “issues of modern life”, the street presented itself as a space which added to the unstable elements of determining a clear notion of a social identity. It is in this context that the different elements of the urban crowd get heightened in foregrounding not just a proximity in terms of traversing the same space but also the motley of identities that constitute the landscape of the urban metropolis. In addition, it is not just the presence of these diverse

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<sup>13</sup> Ravi S. Vasudevan; Shifting codes, Dissolving identities: The Hindi social Film of the 1950's as Popular culture” in Ravi Vasudevan ed. *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* Oxford University Press: 2000, 99-121

identities that reshape and reconfigure social identities, it is also the presence of vehicles that have allowed perception to change, “cycles, trucks, cars, trolleys, buses and significant places (like the) – railway station, cafes, the red-light area, are also deployed in the semantics of the street and of movement.” (Vasudevan 2000, 99-121)

The figure of the Flaneur, “both defines and is defined” by his impressions of the outside world.<sup>14</sup> Predominantly a male figure, the flaneur acts as a synecdoche for the streets and by the same token for the city at large. Primarily theorized as a “sensory experience”<sup>15</sup> the enigma of the streets finds some sort of an articulation in the gaze of the flaneur by virtue of the symbiosis that takes place between the “shocks” of the exterior and the “fluid light space of the interior” or the arcades. Perhaps recognized as the final “hangout” of the flaneur, the Arcades ushered in a new sensibility wherein the exterior- interior binary ended and thus began a new dialectic of roaming and street-walking. Be it the archetypal stroller in Baudelaire’s poetry, or the dandy who used the crowd as a mask to hide and remain hidden thereby deflecting any conspicuous identification, the very act of walking freely assumed a kind of fluidity which at once became one of the most poignant signifiers of a different kind of ‘modernity’. It was by virtue of the idler’s aimless wanderings that the city acquired its multifaceted nature and also to some extent revealed its impenetrability. Is it actually possible to explore the city entirely, one may ask with regard to the flaneur and his schizophrenic tendencies? Or

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<sup>14</sup> Anke Gleber “Female Flanerie & the *Symphony of the City*” in Katharina Von Ankum ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender & Modernity in Weimar Culture* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997, 67-88

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Expose of 1939” chapter in the *Arcades Project*: Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 3-13



more importantly, is it only the prerogative of male subjectivity to register impressions and therefore give rise to a kind of kinesis which has the power to not just look but also transform? Is it possible to perhaps view the prostitute as a kind of a female flaneur or the flaneuse with regard to its initial German etymological roots whereby, the term itself rang synonymous with ambiguity and was considered to be contingent upon activities (such as hair-dressing and being a female massage worker) which could be (mis)understood as a euphemism for sex-work? These are just some of the instances of the figure of the public woman, raised by Gleber in order to posit the possibility of viewing the female subject as a Flaneuse. Can the sex worker be seen as a female counterpart of the male flaneur? Does she not construct and transform spaces by the fluidity encoded in her walk? Is she also not wandering (albeit not aimlessly but certainly without a specific destination in mind) the streets, controlling and in turn controlled?. As part of the city's underbelly (something that I would like to demonstrate is changing given the contemporary context of Bombay cinema) does she not also perform the similar task of absorbing sensory stimulations and shocks (with her contributing to it) that the city offers thereby creating a peculiar spectator position not just within herself but also within the audience? These are just some of the debates and questions that have congealed around the figure

With regard to the debates that have surrounded the conspicuous absence of female flanerie, Meaghan Morris, expresses the figure's belated inscription (if at all) into the canonical framework of the work that has congealed around this figure. This project in its task to bring out the streetwalker's iconography over the years as a marker of shifting codes of modernity will also pay heed to the possibility of positing the figure as

perhaps the only source of gaining access to different city spaces, partaking of different leisure activities and most importantly, being instrumental in creating an urban gaze which is not restricted to men alone.

A panoramic view of David Frisby's essay<sup>16</sup>, 'The Flaneur in social theory', reveals that the mystery of the city is something that the flaneur not only understands but also intensifies by transferring onto it some of his own mysteries/ambiguities. As a modern figure, the Flaneur emerges as a type of the vast multitude that constitutes the crowds and underscores the mutual inter-dependence that exists between the city and him. In the works of Benjamin, Simmel, Park and Kracauer, the Flaneur appears as someone who may be a wanderer, a stroller or a gaper, but even as he may be either one or all, he escapes any kind of attempt made to compartmentalize his function or place in the metropolis. Ostensibly unengaged, the Flaneur is someone in whose appearance the city finds a register. As an act, flanerie entails a reading of the city combined with a close observation of its various facets finally culminating with the production of texts which help to generate an understanding of the city given that it is like the figure himself in a constant state of flux. These so called texts, a metaphor for the gaze of the Flaneur, act as an entry point into what perhaps seems impenetrable given the context of the metropolis with its ever changing shape and structure. With the invasion of iron, steel and glass into its architecture, the city could no longer be understood in terms of its horizontal reality. However, this chapter will focus on the body-ground relationship and will try and explore the various texts created by the female Flaneur, i. e. the streetwalker, through which we

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<sup>16</sup> David Frisby "The Flaneur in Social Theory" in Keith Tester ed. *The Flaneur* London & New York: Routledge, 1994, 81-110

might gain an insight into a kind of modernity yet unexplored through the prism of the fractured self of the sex worker (ironically mirroring the fractured and fragmentariness of the modernization process itself).

Often romanticized as the modern lyric poet, the flaneur in Baudelaire's corpus of writing, the kaleidoscope that the metropolis appears to offer thus, offering an extra layering of the gendered aspect of his conceptualization and theorization. The female flaneur on the other hand enjoys no such privilege. Neither is she romanticized nor is she even recognized as a practitioner of female flanerie (unless of course she is incognito). Benjamin mobilizes the notion of the Flaneur as an observer who may also double as a detective by virtue of his vigilance and his ability to capture fleeting sensations. In a strange sort of way it is perhaps his little span of attention which allows him to slip in and out of roles (that is to say he may return to the figure of the gaper if his vision is allowed to stagnate). The female sex worker in this context may perhaps be a good example to forward as a Janus faced persona as she too performs the task of slipping in and out of roles. For instance, the fact that the streetwalker acquires a new name each night or goes by a different name, the one that she was not christened with, demonstrates how she too like the Flaneur is capable of not only capturing the momentaryness of impressions but contributes to it by being a part of it. Be it as a distraction or a fellow gaper, the streetwalker, allows herself to read the city just as the city proceeds to read her.

The crowd in addition to space bestows the privilege of anonymity on the Flaneur. The streetwalker, posits herself as an intrinsic part of the crowd by appropriating all kinds

of spaces. As a signifier of uncertainty and instability, Elizabeth Wilson<sup>17</sup> articulates the conundrum that the female subject poses given the site of the urban metropolis. Likened to a labyrinthine landscape, the city appears to regard female sexuality as an unsolvable riddle, “a symptom of disorder, and a problem: the Sphinx in the city” (1991: pp. 1-11). It will be my task to examine how this tension gets further intensified given the case of the streetwalker in Bombay cinema as an ambiguous figure and as a potential counterpart to the male Flaneur. In other words, it will be of importance to perhaps read flanerier as patenting a mood which is difficult to discern and equally difficult to dispense with given the context of the horizontal landscape of the metropolis.

Bombay cinema, as it would appear, perhaps demonstrates some of the tendencies of flanerier discussed above. As the arcades remain a western phenomenon, the bazaar on the other hand emerges as a space where fluidity of movement can be explored. It is perhaps in many ways India’s answer to the western concept of the space of the arcades. Commonly translated as market, the bazaar offers a kind of opportunity to explore the diffusion of the public and the private. As Wilson points out (1991: 7-9) the threat that women posed in the city, due to their very presence, gets intensified in the fluid cacophonous space of the *bazaar*<sup>18</sup> in the Indian context as highlighted by Sumanta Bannerjee.

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Wilson: *The Sphinx In the City ; Urban Life, the control of Disorder, and Women*, university of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford – 1991

<sup>18</sup> Sumanta Bannerjee: *The Parlour and the Streets Elite and Popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 1989. I use his notion of the public space or the ‘bajar’ i.e. the market, also a widely used synonym of the red-light district, in order to foreground the similarity of the plurality of possibilities that it has in common with the arcades.

This chapter attempts to examine the centrality of the urban context in sustaining an argument which aims to demonstrate a *movement*<sup>19</sup> fundamental in explicating a kind of modernity which we encounter through the figure under scrutiny. According to Bruno, “film moves us, with its ability to render affects and, in turn, to affect. It also moves to incorporate, and interface with other affective spaces.” Focusing on the role of movement in creating a modern space, streetwalking infused with the energy to infiltrate different kinds of spaces opens up the possibility to *feel* the city space in a more tangible way. Focusing on the gradual bleeding out of the red-light district, this chapter will take into account the various ways in which the streetwalker moves in and out of spaces, thereby re-defining not just its spatial contours by allowing a “sensory” notion of space to emerge, but also alters and challenges male dominated notions of sexuality and its regulatory practices.

## **Section a**

### **The streets**

#### **Mumbai**

It is people like me

Builders of your grand edifice

Who add to your glory

Day after day, O City

It is people like me

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<sup>19</sup>Also articulated by Giuliana Bruno in: *Atlas of Emotion: journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*. A sensory movement based on touch – referred to as the “haptic”

Builders of your grand edifice

Who add to your glory

Day after day, O city.

We live in hell-holes

And clean your streets;

Yet like stray hawkers

Cops drive us out.

We move on again,

Settle in another vacant lot;

And live out the legacy

Of this putrid culture.

We toil thus

So many of us

And exhausted

Like a burnt-out candle.

We wander in your streets,

Squares and bazaars;

Sometimes as citizens, householders

At times as loafers

These streets carry the festival of lights

into the heart of the night:

Balancing two separate worlds

With all their splendour

These crowds move ahead

But where?

A traveler amongst them

I too move, but where?

*(Stanzas 12-18, pp. 148-149)*

Narayan Surve

From *Maze Vidyapeeth* (Popular Prakashan Bombay 1975) Translated from the Marathi by Mangesh

Kulkarni, Jatin Wagle and Abhay Sardesai<sup>20</sup>

I open my discussion of the streets of Bombay by referencing Surve's perception of the city as ruthless and indifferent to the toilers who contribute to the making of the city's two very different 'realities'. In a curious way this poem maps the journey of a little boy who like his father grows up to be a toiler himself who helps build and "balance" the "splendour" of the city. In no way chronicled or named he constitutes the labour or work force. Amorphous and ever increasing, even though this particular poem is about the physical and psychic journey of boy to a man, the fabric of his everyday reality remains the same. Unaccounted and unnamed, he forms part of the cowed, the crowd that hold many such personalities of which the sex worker is also a part, ever changing and always in motion. Redefining an understanding of a fixed notion of space,

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<sup>20</sup> Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner *Bombay Mosaic of modern Culture*, Bombay Oxford University Press Delhi Calcutta Madras, 1996, pp., 148-149

it is by virtue of movement that one understands the impossibility of fully grasping the density of the map of the horizontal sprawl.

Since the silent era, the figure of the streetwalker has been part of the cinematic imaginary of Bombay and its film culture and *Gunsundari* can perhaps be deemed as one of its earliest renditions. Though the knowledge of the film is lost, one of its most prominent features as pointed out by a number of film scholars is the transformation of the wife into the persona of the public woman as she walks the streets in order to learn its language as she strives to rescue her marriage. Mobility and the appropriation of a public space, i.e. the streets becomes the center point of the film's methodology through which the audience is made to feel aware of its unique quality. The transformation, albeit brief, helps to highlight the ways in which the woman seizes the metropolis, as a public woman thereby releasing its latent tendencies. As scholarship around the film points suggests not only is she not a housewife in that brief sojourn, she is also someone who observes and imitates. She creates for herself a different position/role as she is the spectator within the ever-changing panorama of the city as she simultaneously helps to open up a space within the realm of spectatorship as the audience through her gaze vicariously proceeds to learn the diversity of the language of the street.

Blurring with the crowd, the housewife, not only gains anonymity which helps one to present the case of female flanerie as vested in the body of the public woman but also helps to bring to surface the different kinds of possibilities the tactile space of the



city enables. The outcome is as she desires. In this film, one can only contribute to its scholarship with the help of the work that already exists, however marking it as an opening moment in the discussion of the street is also crucial as it heralds a kind of transformative power vested in the act of streetwalking. However, even though the film is lost, the essence of its influence can be attributed to the particular sequence of the wife's sojourn into the public arena. Jumping much ahead in time and choosing anachronistically, in a much later film by Abrar Alvi, *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, we see a similar desire to rescue a marriage by appropriating the language of the public woman, and by language I mean not just the body language but also a certain meshing of certain spatial tendencies which traditionally deemed the binaries between the public and the private as a very different and highly gendered. In this film, *Choti Bahu*, a role essayed by Meena Kumari, shows how much the wife craves for her husband's attention. Adamant to win him over she proves to him that she too can satisfy by pleasing him in a manner which is considered to be unconventional as per the spatial and gender rules of the Zamindar's household. Once again a fusion of spatial practices which are separated by not just gender but also by certain social and cultural practices shows the ways in which the kotha bleeds into the realm of the domestic creating extraordinary transformations. The wife here brings the practice of a very specific tradition into the domain of the interior and performs the role of the public woman entertainer not as a streetwalker, instead as a courtesan by applying a very precise seduction technique which strongly references the tawaif tradition. While the act of streetwalking cannot be equated with the tawaif tradition, a certain technique which was seen as an intrinsic part of the

public woman makes its appearance as a borrowed medium through which the wife is able to express desire.

A little more than a decade after *Gunsundari*, in a 1939 film called *Aadmi*, V. Shantaram introduces Kesar as the sex worker who is not just part of the city's underbelly but is one who also uses her body as a commodity. For her, the body is a means to an end, a means of fulfilling not just the daily necessities of life but also a commodity for which there is a huge demand. Ushering a rhetoric of a mercantile, post industrialist lifestyle, Kesar's reality is that she is part of the urban crowd which carries "in (its) vast indifferent yawn"<sup>21</sup> a multitude of personalities and selves. One may also view her as a female Flaneur as her gaze is closely related to "consumption, as understood as, selling (ones's body), streetwalking and buying".<sup>22</sup> In a song sequence where Kesar performs to please her patrons, she brings entertainment in the colloquial idioms of pleasure to each of her clients in their own regional language and style. The film plays upon the Madonna-whore binary by fusing the two dispositions within the single characterization of the lead female protagonist. Definitely a whore by profession, Kesar is also referred to as a "devi" by the little tea boy who perhaps is the only semblance of family she has got in the red-light district and the city at large. The film uses religion as a means of bringing out the popular notion and understanding of the sex worker in the light of a moral discourse. Seen as impure by her own self, Kesar demonstrates extreme nervousness while entering the inner chamber of Moti's house, the sanctum sanctorum. Moti's mother's piety

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Wilson: *The Sphinx In the City ; Urban Life, the control of Disorder, and Women*, university of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford.

<sup>22</sup> Guiliana Bruno, *Streetwalking around Plato's Cave*, The MIT Press, October, Vol. 60 (Spring, 1992), pp. 110-129

functions as a way of harking back to the configuration of the east as a domain of spirituality with the home functioning as shorthand for the demarcation that exists within the public and the private spaces. Exhibiting fear, Kesar, feels impure as her identity as a sex worker gets further intensified in the realm of the private. Manifesting attitudinal differences between behaviors as generated by a specific spatial difference, that of the clash between the public and the private, religious discourse operates in a manner which articulates the contrast between the home and the world thereby accentuation the pathos of the sex worker signaling the concern of integrating her within the contours of the home (an issue that yet remains a poignant presence in the imaginary of filmmakers over the decades).

Although the film takes a sympathetic view of Kesar, her elimination in the end, as she gets sentenced to serve for life in one of the most formidable prisons of all time – “Kaalapani”, and her final departure while necessary (perhaps) in a deliberate compliance with the majority, seals the essence of the character as the Madonna figure pure at heart despite her associations with the squalor of the city’s underbelly. Her desire to reform and flee from the red-light district and her partial intrusion in the beloved’s home is left truncated. The overwhelming piety of the mother figure and her ideological machinery, while it serves the purpose of constructing two very different spaces and behaviors also emphasizes the paradox that while the red-light district and the home are two spaces which are essentially inhabited by women, a cross-over of sorts remains a problem. In other words, Kesar feels highly uncomfortable as she is presented before the female

deity, her lack of 'purity' (and more specifically sexual chastity) as magnified by the one room abode of Moti, is something that prevents her from viewing herself as a wife. As the film dedicates itself to the cause of the sex worker it uses and plays with institutionalized religion and its hollowness in the manner in which the other sex workers living in the red-light district constantly engage in petty skirmishes while they go about performing their own religious rituals. Kesar, again an anomaly in this sense is shown as embodying a kind of inner purity which aligns her not just sympathetically with the audience but also marks her actions as genuine thereby increasing her pathos. Different from the other prostitutes who appear to pay mere lip service to religion by indulging in a simultaneous bickering while going over the rituals of religious practice stands in sharp contrast with the mother's piety manifest in a deep engagement with her deity as well as Kesar who appears to project an inner purity as testified by the tea boy.

The street sometimes synonymous with the *bazaar* creates a fusion of a kind that helps to stage the larger frame of the metropolis as a moment by virtue of its fleeting impressions and plurality of possibilities not just visual but aural as well. The big city comes to the fore as a rather dystopic representation from its dwellers that mostly happen to comprise of its underbelly constantly shifting shapes and adding to the dense network of its horizontal reality. The protagonist usually a misfit himself or herself encounters the streets as a space which alternates between forces that are at times friendly but largely remain ominous and predominantly hostile for the pair in *Aadmi*. Sharing a close proximity with crime, sex work in this period gets articulated in an aesthetic practice which demystifies romance thereby accentuating a mercantile orientation of its members.

Even though romance in the years to follow becomes a major concern of filmmakers, its unfolding remains an interesting area of investigation. Even as some of the most iconic romantic scenes, that of Raj Kapoor and Nargis, have taken place on the street pavements in the famous song sequence, “*pyaar hua ikraar hua hai...*’ (Shree 420), it is important to bear in the mind that the street at that moment was endowed with characteristics which are not entirely true to the urban reality. The rain, perhaps cinema’s most potent signifier of desire and fertility, allows the pair to share a moment of seclusion and intimacy from the crowd as the street is entirely empty except for the brief sharing of the space by a trio of children unaccompanied by adults as they proceed to cross the street. Clearly fantasy, takes over ‘reality’ in this particular song sequence and it becomes a space where the couple confess their love for each other, metamorphosing it briefly as it gets shorn of its other more hostile qualities. In this moment, time appears to have frozen as the camera focuses only on the pair as the streets appear to have lost its polyphonous voice allowing only the couple to share a moment of seclusion and intimacy. In this moment the two are alone and the noise that always surrounds the streets gets subordinated to the melody of the song expressive of the pair’s love for each other. It is not a moment of hawkers, or peddlers or even pedestrians; paralyzed by the rain the city appears disabled in all its street activities allowing the pair to share a moment of togetherness.

*Pyasa*, a film made in the late fifties, showcases a motley of personalities that throng the city space. The film opens with a freeze frame of the idyllic pastoral (upon which the opening credits are shown) where the poet persona muses over the beauties of

nature. The film at its very onset sets up the dichotomy between the city and other spaces. The arrangement of the city is primarily carried out through a series of shots as per the poet's point of view. As ruthless and superficial, the urban space and more specifically the streets are staged as sites upon which marginal characters like the masseur, the prostitute, common peddlers, beggars, policemen and the homeless poet are depicted. It is also the space of crime, poverty and exploitation. Gulabo, the streetwalker in the film is introduced in a single frame capturing her silhouette as a mysterious woman humming the poet's lost composition, something that he not only cherishes but considers to be above the grasp of the common city dweller thus referencing the refined sensibility of the *tawaif* and its permeation into the figure of the streetwalker.

Reminiscent of the courtesan tradition where the practice and appreciation of poetry is considered to be a marker of finesse and accomplishment, the introductory scene of the sex worker in *Pyasa* references traces of this somewhat lost tradition. Coquettish in her manner of alluring a prospective client, Gulabo traverses dark city spaces unknown to the poet. The ease with which she leads is a case in point to demonstrate the movement which at once signposts the bleeding out of the red light district and establishes the potential of encountering the unknown. Easily masquerading as an "ordinary practitioner of the city"<sup>23</sup> the streetwalker in the song sequence, "*jaane kya tune suni jaane kya maine kahi...*" enables a reading of the streets as that which leads to a rupturing of the fabric of the mundane. Dealing with real issues but suspending the reality effect, the film showcases in another song sequence the hypocrisy that abounds in

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy Forgione "Everyday life in Motion: The Art of Walking in Late-Nineteenth Century Paris" *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (Dec., 2005), pp. 664-687, Published by *College Art Association*

the urban landscape. In this sequence, the poet delirious and disgusted implores the upholders of tradition to come and resuscitate life in the free democratic nation. Surrounded by an array of artistically choreographed episodes of exploitation and bestiality, the poet persona trudges down in the red light district in a drunken stupor seeing that which others fail to see. Based on a real composition by the poet Sahir, the song, “Jinhe naaz hai Hind par...” is set in a manner unconventional to the mainstream process of filmmaking. In keeping with the persona of the poet, the sequence, artistically strives to create ‘reality’ that is also a part of the metropolis. The red-light area, constructed as a place of crime, violation, exploitation and disease, is also a place which is visited by the so-called gentry and the poet mocks this blatant display of hypocrisy. As he tumbles down in his drunkenness, he also metaphorically exposes the debasement that the city is capable of unleashing on its homeless. Women as they pass the poet either laugh at him at seeing him drunk (this could just as well be a common sight for them adding a rather dark pun to the laughter – is it out of mirth or is it a covert expression of their alliance with his song?) or with the intention of acquiring him as a potential client. Unable to rationalize the lopsidedness of the exploitation of women in its worst possible manifestations, the poet, Vijay leaves with nothing ~~with~~ but a heightened feeling of emptiness and despair.

The space of the streets in this film is not the space of romance. In expressing desire, the sex worker Gulabo has no language of her own and above all due to societal pressures and taboo isn't allowed to express it. It is she (i.e. the sex worker) who carries the tension of ideological clashes between legitimacy and illegitimate desire. Romance

finds articulation either in the countryside or in a dream sequence with the poet's former partner Meena or through the words of the chaste *bhaktin* in the unusually shot song sequence, "aaj sajan mohe aang lagaa lo...", which is an example of how the *bhaktin* craves to merge with her lord in a highly erotic, explicit and unabashed recognition of her own desires. The body of the sex worker in this film and particularly in this song sequence is charged with a kind of intensity which only references an assumed and imposed superficiality and in doing so heightens the pathos of the socially ostracized sex worker. Creating a flowing over of associations between the Vaishnav *bhaktin* and Gulabo, once again we witness a diffusion of the Madonna-whore binary. Unable to come up with the language of articulating her own desire and more importantly unable to express it, Gulabo aligns herself with the cravings of the *bhaktin* through a highly suggestive gestural performance of her cravings through which the filmmaker is also able to emphasize her inner purity as opposed to an outward show of it. The song allows a critique of societal pressures on the socially ostracized figure of the sex worker to emerge wherein desire cannot be articulated by the socially oppressed. A world of crime and exploitation abounds in the horizontal underbelly of the city.

*Manoranjan*, a film made in the mid seventies (1974) also uses the myth of the great city but in a manner which is flippant and devoid of any moral judgment. Its light hearted tone throws in sharp contrast the actual tenor of the decade which was undergoing an internal political upheaval. The streets once again played host to a new moment in the history of the city as it staged a different crisis of homelessness,



unemployment and poverty. *Manoranjan* opens with the idea of an enigmatic street appropriately called 'Manoranjan Street'. Introduced in a series of hyperboles, Bombay surfaces as a dream like space or "phantasmagoria" which contains in one of its obscure pockets a city within a city which offers fun and fulfillment to those who wish to retire temporarily from the harsh realities of the 'real' city. Straddling the idea of utopia and dystopia (only shown in flashes), the film projects in its opening credit sequence 'Manoranjan street' as mimetic of a highly westernized square where mannequins and bodies embellish the display windows and pavements reminiscent of the Weimar sensibility of highlighting the shop windows and bringing to fore the analogy that exists between "film-viewing" and "window-shopping"<sup>24</sup>. Simulated in an environment which accentuates the surface level pleasures the film appears to undercut rather deliberately the seriousness that pervades the world outside the theatre. The filmic space in a sense positions itself as an alternate reality to the pressing socio-political concerns of the decade. The audience, in an extended metaphor of entering 'Manoranjan Street', is allowed to vicariously partake of its sensual pleasures. Criminality and illegality abound in this fictitious world of the post sacred. Pre-empting the nightclub in the seventies and its larger than-life décor, almost all the action unfolds on the generic street and the hotel allowing the space of the red-light district to unfold as a parody of the interior. In other words, inverting the exteriority of the red-light district, the film manages to invert the inside-outside binary by allowing its entire narrative to unfold on the street pavements making it appear as a predictable space akin to the comfort that the space of the interior extends. Not only are the residents shown to perform the necessary actions upon the

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<sup>24</sup> Guiliana Bruno, *Streetwalking around Plato's Cave*, The MIT Press, October, Vol. 60 (Spring, 1992), pp. 110-129

street, the only outsider figure – that of the constable- gets eventually integrated thereby erasing all polarities and generating an all pervasive concept of the street.

Influenced by the influx of global tendencies registered by the sixties, the seventies continued to incorporate western ideas within its filmic practices allowing modernity to explode in the Indian consciousness in a more obvious and conspicuous way. The figure of the streetwalker, a role played by Zeenat Aman, foregrounds a stark iconographic shift whereby the female body as a fetishised object of the male gaze gains center stage. Projected as liberated from the confines of domesticity, the sex worker demonstrates a business-like approach to the industry of the flesh trade. Laced with crass comedy, the streetwalker in this film walks the walk as a confident liberated westernized model of independence and security. Known to bring a very visible notion of modernity expressed through a heightened awareness of sexuality and its manifestation through a number of stock representations such as the exposed and seductive body of the sex worker along with the rather ambiguous presence of the hotel and the manager (a role played by Shammi Kapoor) which seems to merge the nightclub with a kind of domestic comfort as all the denizens of the underbelly come to this place not just for pleasure but also for retreat. The star persona of Zeenat Aman adds to the film's "modern" edge. The iconography of the star plays an important role in the setting up of the tone of the film itself. As an usherer of a new iconography of a modern westernized Indian woman, Zeenat Aman presents a contrasted form of female sexuality from that of Hema Malini's, another major successful star of the same era. Zeenat with her lean body pre-figures Parveen Babi's similar physical westernized appearance thus articulating a kind of

sensuality which clearly emanates from the west and gives impetus to filmmakers in the decades to follow<sup>25</sup>. Zeenat Aman articulates a different approach to performance in terms of deploying the body to move to the rhythms of the age, and hence also to the filming of the body of the sex worker.

*Manoranjan* opens with and continues to play with the idea of the display window and its implicit suggestion as a primary feminine space. The large picture windows which hold the mannequins behind are juxtaposed with the real mannequin like figures who stand in close proximity to the windows. Clearly generating nuances regarding the “hyper real”, the spectacle and the play of it, the film ceaselessly operates on a superficial level which allows no space for moral judgment to creep in. What seems to be modeled on the Weimar display window<sup>26</sup>, *Manoranjan* offers itself as a unique display of sexuality, spectacle and mirth creating a spectator position primarily for women where they can appear to enjoy a drama of harmless frivolity, indulgence and pleasure. Kracauer notes that it was predominantly the female gender that played the dominant role in not just partaking of the pleasures the window offered but also contributing to the sales. As “bearers of surface culture” (Kracauer), women and most significantly the sex workers in this film constitute the gaze of its spectators providing via the medium of the star figure Zeenat Aman a new notion of modernity, sexuality and consumerism.

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<sup>25</sup> especially in the post globalized era to pay close attention to the mushrooming of other important industries of which fashion is the most important and entertaining example fusing the distinction between the heroine and the vamp and later between identities itself

<sup>26</sup> Janet Ward “The Display Window, Designs and Desires of Weimar consumerism” chapter 4 in *Weimar surfaces: Urban visual culture in 1920's Germany* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001, 191-240

Truncating the crisis of masculinity by projecting the woman as the primary bread-winner, *Manoranjan* (especially) and *Pyasa* both offer a different view of city life as the streetwalker constitutes the centripetal forces of the navigable city space made tangible by the presence of the figure under study. As nocturnal beings they seem to offer a different reading of the relationship that conventionally exists between space, time and action. As the iconography shifts so does the mise-en-scene. Earlier the streetlights extended the much sought after essence of mystery and adventure but with advancements made in the field of science and technology, neon lights came to displace street lighting thereby setting the tone for a new filmic imaginary to evolve on screen. Daylight got simulated in a fashion which not just made it possible for the people to forge an extended relationship with time, but also helped filmmakers to play with the notion of lights and its various possibilities. The space of the interior underwent many transformations ranging from its display of variety to the other extreme end of the fantastic.

## **Section b**

### **The Nightclub**

Popularly associated with the star persona of Helen, the nightclub surfaces as a spatial blurring of the boundaries of dream and reality in which the extraordinary mise-en-scene contributes to the making of a fictitious space within the city where the clear cut agenda of the streetwalker also undergoes a blurring of sorts. As pointed out by Ranjani

Mazumdar<sup>27</sup>, the nightclub of the sixties and the seventies highlights the constructed nature of the décor thereby positing the superficiality that it represents in its excess of costumes, make-up and gestures. The nightclub as an imported concept from the west reconfigures the sex worker in a way which marks a shift in the cinematic imaginary as it moves from the streets to an imagined space of the interior. A lot like the theatre in many ways, the space of the nightclub stages exotic fantasies of repression and sexuality accompanied by Jazz, a form of music which was barely taken seriously as it asserted an individualist trait in its compositional style as opposed to earlier and more primitive notions of harmony and synchronicity.

As a variation on the topographic location of the red-light district, the nightclub offers itself as a much more ambiguous realm where female sexuality and modernity both undergo several mutations. Its association with the west along with a few actresses taking up the role of playing the same type of character again and again helped create a popular myth of the discotheque and its possible deviation from the prescribed code of conduct. As a space that exists somewhere between the imagined and the 'real', modernity and sexuality also acquire associations and overtones which are more conspicuous. The sets are now constructions that implicate a distention with the streets but the fluidity of the dances, the spectators and the fluidity with which the star entertainer crosses-over the traditional barrier between the stage and the audience brings to mind the fluidity that one finds in the streets or the bazaar. Mobility gets re-inscribed not into the walk but into the movement or dance of the entertainer. In synchronization with the fantastic element of

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<sup>27</sup> Mazumdar, Ranjani *Bombay cinema an Archive of the city*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

the nightclub, the dancer evokes situations which are highly erotically charged and the mise-en-scene often reflects its own ambiguity.

Helen, the undisputed star of the nightclub song sequences and the most widely recognized face of the vamp, charts out the course of a new and a very different kind of modernity to surface. Helen's "French-Burmese-British with a touch of Spanish somewhere"<sup>28</sup>, contributed to a startling persona of the vamp in the sixties and the seventies who was offered as a stark contrast to the mother figure or the myth of motherhood that "allowed no taint"..."(Pinto 2006 pp. 46). The world of the figure of the heroine was divided sharply into inside (safe), outside (fraught) and fantasy (romantic). To achieve pan-nationality, this idealized figure had to be Hindu, virginal, fair and long haired. This in turn meant that the vamp could not be a Hindu. She would have to be an outsider to the mainstream Hindu tradition" (Pinto 2006, pp 46). She also functioned within a framework of a preliminary condition - that being the question of her lineage which contributed to her iconography as not just the 'other' but also as someone who was predominantly associated with the in-between space of the nightclub which sanctioned activities that deviated from the activities of the home. Helen in this sense literally became the face of the 'other'. Gyrating to provocative songs, she allowed a sensual language to emerge in the form of dance movements. As Ranjani Mazumdar points out (2007: 119) "the westernized vamp" was largely seen operating within the contours of the nightclub and was "pitted against the female protagonist in many films". Allowing then for a channel to open which would allow an engagement with the heroine to emerge, the

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<sup>28</sup> Jerry Pinto: *The Life and Times of an H-Bomb*, Penguin books India 2006. pp.55

vamp enabled a plethora of other industries like fashion and various dance techniques to congeal around this figure.

The excesses of her costumes and cosmetics at one level though distanced from the barrage of stimuli from the world of the exterior, finds its way into the restlessness of the body of the dancing star in the realm of the simulated interior. Clearly not the space of the home or the world, the nightclub functions as shorthand for the superficial expression and display of the body, desire, performance and sexuality (predominantly female). The space of the nightclub given the special significance of Helen and her 'otherness' emerges as an interesting case in point as it is also the space where the body exudes a highly charged erotic appeal which then gets further explored in this realm.

The bar or hotel, which eventually metamorphosed into the 5 star hotels, a signifier of affluence and a different space within the city, in the current context of the vamp gets represented predominantly as a place where people come spend their leisure time. In an interesting observation, Pinto points to the presence of the hotels as a place for "transients" (Pinto 2006 pp., 55) casting shadow over what activities have passed there. The highly erotic *mise en scene* of the nightclub allows a curious exploration of sexuality to emerge existing in tandem with the underworld of the city. It is also the space where the hero "often takes his broken heart...(and) is reduced to taking solace in alcohol and the company of a woman who is no substitute for his lady love" (Pinto 2006 pp. 57)." As a space which gives language to lust instead of love, the star entertainer of the nightclub is also the face of the 'other' woman. Metaphorically the use of the red light is used in

ways to illuminate the dancing figure that suggests a covert association with the red-light district (Pinto 2006 pp. 55) casting her role as a sex worker in ambiguous terms a more elaborate architecture of the nightclub came to be located in the space of the 5 star hotels.

*Deewar*, a film made in 1975 mobilizes the space of the plush hotel and more specifically the bar to frame the sex worker as she gradually gains momentum and traverses not just a horizontal landscape but also begins to explore a vertical reality in terms of the city's sky scrapers. Articulating a different kind of modernity, the figure of the call girl posits the possibility to read a different moment in the history of the city – one which offers an alternate story of independence and affluence. Parveen Babi plays the role of the highly sophisticated sex worker. Clad in the style of a classic noir heroine, the sex worker in *Deewar* oozes confidence and panache. Having found a different space to trade her body, the sex worker feels at home in the well lit space of the affluent hotel – not a home but definitely a part of the metropolis creating the affect of the space of the domestic<sup>29</sup>. An important phenomenon of the globalised world which altered not just the optical range of its customers, but charted a different topographical reality of the city centered around a very unique and different appropriation of movement.

Presented as an expert conversationalist, the sex worker's visual iconography at this point reflected a stage in the imaginary of filmmakers wherein sex per se did not need to be presented in euphemisms. Intimacy gained a more direct visual mode of representation. Away from the streets and forging a parallel life of domesticity the two

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<sup>29</sup> Clearly not domesticated, the protagonists, Vijay and Anita appear to be living together and this is what I wish to foreground here in this section, the emergence of an alternate mode of integrating the figure of the sex worker in the space not of the home but of the hotel.



protagonists, Vijay and Anita appear to create a different sort of home, one that exists by the mutual consent of both parties. An equality between the two sexes appears to exist in this space also bringing to fore the concept of the 'nuclear family', where the conventional norms of gender behavior do not apply anymore. The couple is shown to indulge in not just sex but also in other more westernized modes of living. Anita, adept at preparing cocktails and smoking as heavily as her partner demonstrates that a new idiom of modernity and female sexuality is now being cast through the figure of the call girl. Moving toward what seems like a home, the sex worker unlike her earlier counterparts felt comfortable with the idea of marrying and materializing her and her mother's dream. The bridal saree hidden away in her closet marks the resolution theme that every film must deal with in reference to the figure of the sex worker. However her abrupt elimination once again raises the question of whether the audience was ready to accept the sex worker in the realm of the domestic without a metaphoric religious cleansing of the public woman's mind as in the case of the protagonist in *Sadhana*.

### **Section c**

#### **The Home**

After a tremendous blurring that has taken place in the iconography of the sex worker and the spaces she inhabits (thereby making her identification, surveillance and recognition more difficult) the streetwalker in films like *Aaina* (1977), *Sadhana* (1958) and *Tawaif* (1985) explores the heightened mobility and anonymity that the figure has gained in the space of the metropolis.

Starting chronologically in this cluster of films where the sex worker marks a complete cross-over to the realm of the home with *Aaina* as an exception where the home metaphorically opens onto the red-light district in the city, charts the inter-spatial negotiations that take place between the figure and the spaces she inhabits. *Sadhana*, the story of a tawaif 'Champa bai', starts with an invocation to Shudraka's play *Vasantasena* where one can see the impending parallel between the protagonists from the play and the protagonists in the film. In this film the *tawaif* is presented as a sex worker devoid of the ambiguities and glamour of her predecessors most poignant in the character of Sahib Jan in *Pakeezah*.

The film strategically makes the audience aware of where the hero's allegiance (played by Sunil Dutt) lies. Not only does he despise prostitutes (unlike Charu Dutt from Shudraka's play) like Champa bai who is aware of herself as a sex worker and has no qualms in even participating in a charade to embezzle funds, but considers their presence to be foul and a stain on the fabric of society. Once again the film erects the Madonna-whore binary that finds culmination of the critique of society that comes from none other than the *tawaif* herself who in her awakened sense of her 'real' desires undergoes a complete transformation. The film introduces the *tawaif* into the realm of the (sacred) domestic interior by forwarding her as an answer to an emergency. The matriarch, who desires nothing more than that her son get married soon, gets injured and in a peripatetic turn of events the son finds himself playing host to a charade with the *tawaif* playing the role of his wife. Punning on role-playing, the film underscores the saleability factor of the

female body as one of the fastest selling commodities enabling the sex worker to gain access into spheres unopened to them. Mobility and anonymity both help in this process as she quickly slips into the role of the ideal homemaker- Rajni. An ironic choice of name as it alludes to the darkness of the night just as it can equally hint at the darkness (or even fear perhaps) that lies at the heart of the greedy prostitute. Shown to be of a flippant carefree nature, Champa bai finds the task of playing the role of the wife tedious and the only factor that motivates her to return is her greed for the money and the gold. However, once successful in acquiring all this, Champa bai undergoes a crisis where the implication of the ornaments and the bridal package complete with the saree backfires in the mehfil. What had started as a variety in the usual *mujra* that she was to perform every evening, ends with her clients drooling over her new “look” as the ideal (but presented as a farce) homemaker or the “gunvanti”. A scathing critique of society gets articulated through the figure as she sees the error in her greed and in a rather surreal flash feels herself burning beneath it. This is the moment of the transformation and the beginning of the film’s resolution.

A later day resurrection of the same film can be noted in a 1985 film called *Tawaif*. Again with chance playing its hand at placing the tawaif in the slightly extended notion of the home as represented by the chawl, the male protagonist Dawood (played by Rishi Kapoor) finds himself obliged to keep the unwanted intruder under his care, else he faces the wrath of the much wanted criminal Rahim Sheikh (played by Kader Khan). Sultana, a role essayed by Rati Agnihotri, comes to the city as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. The age-old binary of the fallen woman and the Angel in the house, is

reworked in the two separate characterizations of Sultana the *tawaif* and Quainat the educated middle-class writer who has written a novel on *tawaifs*. At once placing the two women separately on a professional level but aligning them together through Quainat's intellectual understanding of women as the fastest selling and one of the most desirable commodities, the film enunciates through Quainat's intellectual journey its central thrust that in every woman lies a *tawaif* or a prostitute of some sort. Be it within marriage or within the brothel, every woman is subject to the threats and conditions of the post sacred, post industrial world.

*Tawaif*, as pointed out by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen<sup>30</sup>, "demonstrates the influence of the New Wave aesthetic on mainstream filmmaking, *Tawaif* is set partly on location in a chawl in gritty, modern, urban Bombay." Forced to pose as Dawood's fiancé, Sultana rapidly understands and adapts to the spatial behavioral requirements. Here the presence of the chawl plays an important part as it functions as a joint family unit thereby not just increasing the familial pressures manifold but also serves as smaller unit of the city. In its climax it is this community whose verdict is all that matters in accepting a fallen woman among themselves with the head employer of Dawood standing as the patriarch of this family. Sultana rising to the occasion starts playing the role with so much conviction that it is not long before she realizes that this is what she actually desires. Her transformation has a mimetic effect of the *mise-en-scene* of Dawood's bachelor pad as it registers a metamorphosis into a believable stage for the drama of the forced marriage to unfold. Sultana plays multiple roles, the most obvious one being the identity with which she introduces herself and the refugee that she has forced to become

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<sup>30</sup> Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, Tulika Books 2009

as her pimp is on the run from the police to being the martyr who sacrifices her love for the sake of the beloved and the woman who is worthy of his love and finally as the legally wedded wife of the man she loves. Even though the concept of rehabilitation plays runs poignantly through the film, it nevertheless re-works and re-shapes old idioms, attitudes and iconographies. The city presents itself as this force which is capable of bringing the unknown into close proximity with the known.

*Aaina* on the other hand presents a family of twelve living not in an urban but a rural setting. The film opens with the image of temple bells and chants thereby positing the highly religious tenor of its tale. The credit sequence opens onto a restless intercutting of scenes of fertility and despair. Village life alternates between images of prosperity and barrenness reflected not just in the lives of the people but also in the live-stock and foliage.

The protagonist, Shalini, played by Mumtaz is introduced first as a reference in a fight between the pundit and his wife as a metric pass who can contribute to the expenditures of the house by getting a job – an idea immediately rejected by the patriarch. Crushing poverty and despair becomes the emotional backdrop of the narrative and it is here that Shalini bursts onto the canvas with her childlike laughter initiating nothing short of nubile juvenile innocence. On an occasion the children, presided over by Shalini, find a way to distract themselves from other worries. As part of a “naatak”, Shalini comes dressed as the goddess figure or “devi maa” in front of whom the children one by one place their requests and confess their ambitions and dreams. What the film

initially used as part of its narrative was soon to become its technique through which it plays with the idiom of the binary and points to the constructed nature of rituals and idioms. Indeed Shalini does transform into the solution of all their woes and discomforts.

As a reaction to the mother's desperate "solution" to find a permanent end to the problem of hunger by poisoning her own children, which Shalini challenges, a major role-reversal takes place. From here on we witness her at every step providing for her family. As the demands increase, Shalini's will to satiate each of these also rises in equal measure. She even goes on a futile trip to Pune to seek a recommendation letter for her brother's admission into a medical college and falls into the trap of the female pimp whose voyeuristic tendencies compel her to eavesdrop on the conversation that Shalini has with the politician.

Hunger in this film operates on a dual scale, one that pertains to bodily hunger and the other which references the voracious libidinal hunger that Shalini compels herself to satiate on a daily basis. As she continues to live in a city that has taken away her laughter and identity, Shalini upon a chance encounter with Ashok (played by Rajesh Khanna) confesses how she no longer looks at a mirror as she afraid of the image it will reflect; instead she now only looks at an old picture of herself which according to her is still radiant and alive with memories of her past.

The film takes us slowly and carefully through the passage of her fall. The second time that Shalini faces the lasciviousness of men she remembers the three hundred rupees

that she must send home for her brother's college tuition fee. This time she herself strips and as she sheds one item of clothing the camera zooms in to capture her face breaking out in sweat as she hears the demands that her siblings had made during their "naatak". The proximity suggested between the "devi maa" and the naked sex worker is very important given the context of the home and the city as a willing recruit of helpless women who take to prostitution as a means to survive the onslaughts of the city

Even though the film offers marriage as a solution to the crisis where Shalini herself faces a situation where her self-worth gets deeply compromised, it does so with a sense of urgency as Shalini is clearly contemplating suicide upon being disowned by those very people for whom she had sacrificed herself.

This section demonstrates how the home becomes a place where sex workers not just enter but also change as they cross-over in terms of their social identity. Ceasing to be sex workers they become wives. This imaginary of the sex worker as a reformed wife presents itself as a recurring theme in many films indicating the tension that still remains unresolved.

The red-light district as we clearly can observe need not exist in a particular location but can and has the reach to invade spaces which do not have anything to do with it. Its presence or absence is what contributes to the enigma of the modern-day streetwalker as she constantly either loses herself or finds multiple selves within herself.

This chapter has been an attempt to see the horizontal space of the city as a site upon which the sex worker travels and reconfigures notions of sex, gender identities, performance and the ways in which cinema opens up a space for these debates to emerge. Charting shifts not just in terms of identity but also the ways in which the sex worker presents herself as a female flaneur, this chapter aimed to create a map of the street upon which the sex worker leaves her mark. This was an attempt at staging a moment where the city in terms of its impenetrable density allowed a kind of mobility extended to the sex worker in order to explore new avenues of the changing topographies of the city while keeping in mind the kind of gestural language it encourages.

While the horizontal suburban sprawl is important for the figure under study, a deviation from the city as its framing context would perhaps aid our understanding of the figure's complexities and the mutation which the era of the New Wave bestowed upon her. Taken out of the framework of popular commercial cinema, my next chapter will be an attempt to look at the figure as she exists not in the metropolis but in unnamed small towns and villages. This detour from my mainstream interrogation may prove to be crucial as it will allow me to study the sex worker in a different context of squalor and filth. It will be a study of the 'real' representations of the figure as she undergoes a drastic cinematic change in terms of her on-screen presence.



## Chapter 2

### Re-presenting the sex worker in the New Wave moment

Having traversed through the different city spaces which gives rise to a different understanding of the changing imaginary of the sex worker, the New Wave moment, posits itself as a range of different cinematic practices emerging at a time (in the late sixties), when the nation was rapidly moving toward a national crisis. “Remaining predominantly a cinema of social conscience...the new cinema rejects the smug self-satisfaction of an affluence that feeds the overwhelming majority on a diet of dreams, and leaves some 40 percent below the poverty line...It is a cinema that clearly loves to prick the affluent minority’s balloon of self-esteem and reveal the stark truth about India. At the same time, it has a sense of concern for the individual human being, and does not deal with him as an abstraction.<sup>31</sup>” Taking a detour from the mainstream concerns of portraying the sex-worker in Bombay cinema, I intend on observing a different approach to the figure under study.

This chapter aims to interrogate the figure of the sex worker as her on-screen persona in the seventies becomes highly de-glamorized and a series of other iconographic mutations mark her figuration as different from her earlier mainstream representations. For instance, the use of non stars to play the lead roles along with a clear emphasis on form, narrative and quality without unnecessary frills such as the song and dance

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<sup>31</sup> Chidananda Das Gupta “New Directions in Indian Cinema” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 32-42

sequence (often abrupt and extravagant) made the figure and the moment conspicuous in its aesthetic beliefs and practices.

This project dedicates one entire chapter to this moment in the oeuvre of the sex worker in Bombay cinema as the imaginary of the New Wave auteur underwent a marked change and along with it changed the conceptualization of the sex worker. In this section of the New Wave, the sex worker's iconography is highly distinct from the iconography of the other female leads in mainstream commercial cinema which points to the unabashed portrayal of the sex worker and the sex industry. She no longer appears in any ambiguous forms; instead her on-screen persona often essayed by non-stars forwards the aesthetic principles of the New Wave. Shorn of all the glamour the sex worker merits a kind of representation which is very different from a mainstream commercial enterprise. For instance, Kajli's iconography in Gulzar's *Mausam* (1975), although not an entirely New Wave film, prefigures a lot of the stylistic features one gets to view in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983). *Mausam* takes the position of 'Middle cinema' as it places itself between two very different aesthetic practices. It has a few of the elements of the masala pot-boiler as there are song sequences in the first half of the film and the second half, more candid in its representation of the sex worker and the sex industry, has a 'realistic' approach.

Mira Reym Binford (1987; pp 151- 152) notes how the mainstream commercial film had a way of depicting violence as a tool to add an element of the spectacular where the hero would engage in a rather elaborate fight sequence which had a superficial

rendition of violence wherein the requirement of the hero's triumph over the villain (often personified as caricatures of vice) would entail a series of routine choreographed scenes of physical brutalization. This reduction of violence to the level of bodily hurt and blood-loss by this segment of commercial cinema was viewed by the New Wave auteurs as unnecessary and meaningless. Violence which otherwise gets reduced to a fight between two people in mainstream cinema, under the observation of the filmmakers of 'Parallel cinema', underwent a deep transformation as the question of hurt and violence was addressed at a more social level. The auteurs of this new kind of cinema dealt with social injustice and were more aware of its 'realist' depiction. Politics and power, social evils, injustice, poverty even helplessness of the peasants or the lower classes, became the focal point and narratives were woven around real locations that is to say on-location shoots became somewhat of a shorthand for representing the 'real'. As an example I wish to offer the case of *Salaam Bombay* (1987) where the children of the streets played the key roles. It is a story about the dire conditions under which the children who belong to the streets of Bombay survive. It is also a tribute to their unfailing courage and survival strategies. Woven around Kamathipura, Bombay's red-light district, the film uses fifty two on location shoots to expose its underbelly and how hopelessly the homeless comprising mainly of children seem to fall prey to it. Here violence surfaces as a much deeper understanding of the various injustices that congeals around the poor and the homeless. The film can perhaps be understood as an assault not just on the body but also on the senses where the victims, i.e. the children, don't quite understand why it is that they are constantly at the receiving end each time. The film uses a background score instead of songs and an entirely non-star cast to play the different roles. In Mira Nair's

own words, “(the film) is not a fairy tale. The reality of the children who are denied a childhood but who survive on the streets with resilience, humour, flamboyance and dignity is a problem that exists not only in India” (Salaam Bombay! Mira Nair & Sooni Taraporevala, Penguin Books 1989). The film powerful in its representation of the gritty realities of street life has an auteuristic approach which defies the norms of the commercial success stories repeatedly told in theatres.

In the previous chapter, the emphasis on the city and its three distinct spaces identified as the streets, the nightclub and the home all bring into focus as to how mobility vested in the body of a sex worker, like Gulabo for example, allowed a different reading of the city, female sexuality and modernity to emerge. It allowed one to present the possibility of reading the sex worker as a female counterpart and an answer to the possible question of female flanerier. With the New Wave, a different set of concerns arise.

Binford (1982; 145) notes how commercial mainstream Indian cinema was ridiculed by the west and was ranked as one of the worst movie industries in the world (as reported by The New York Times) and yet it was also the place from where auteurs like Satyajit Ray created films which were not just ‘realist’ but were aesthetically far removed from the routine pot boilers or the ‘formula’ film that one encountered in almost every theatre. Inspired by the style of the Italian neo-realist films, Satyajit Ray’s style mirrored not just its aesthetic practice but also allowed a new sensibility and understanding of the ‘real’ to emerge. Binford comments on the post industrial films as a

“hybrid” form which absorbed a vast range of tendencies ranging from the “traditional” to the “modern” (1982; 146) and an “influx” which incorporated a little of everything i.e. catering to a little of something to everyone. The mainstream cinema primarily functioned as a “comforting fiction” (Binford; 1982) estranged from ‘reality’ and usually predictable.

At par with the narrative, technique itself often became the focal point of this kind of ‘New’ cinema. Doing justice to what is ‘real’ irrespective of the stark contrast it offered when juxtaposed with mainstream cinema, not to mention the risks and uncertainties in terms of reception and acceptance, this kind of a new cinematic imaginary opened up a niche for different kinds of representational modes and practices. The technique of telling a story became subject to a new order of aesthetic practices. Very often, the films made under this oeuvre differed from their mainstream counterparts in the ways they chose for themselves a self-reflexive gaze which not just added to the ‘serious’ nature (another synonym for this kind of cinema) but also gave a different and in many ways a more powerful validation of their social agenda which was predominantly the concern of this brand of filmmaking, which is not to say that mainstream cinema did not incorporate such themes but the thrust was to work with the formula as opposed to the artistic inclinations of the style of ‘New Wave’ auteurs. Filmmakers like Shyam Benegal, Basu Bhattacharya, Gulzar, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahni, T.S. Ranga became associated with this movement as they proceeded to create a new kind of cinema which defined itself in a rather tangential move away from the mainstream mixture of stars, formula, song and dance. Confounding almost every trick of

the 'masala' aesthetic<sup>32</sup>, these filmmakers proceeded to create their own typical brand of an artistic rendition of society and its intricate web of problems.

Emerging perhaps as another signifier of the 'New Wave' movement was its unique channel(s) of funding. Low budget films along with their artistic and aesthetic fidelity to the 'reality effect' became the new yardstick on which films were produced and received. This kind of a bifurcation from the mainstream had its own following and soon gained appreciation as 'art cinema'. Statistics reveal that a section of the population was interested in this kind of filmmaking which was not just different but aimed to evoke discomfiture in its audience; however the theatre owners were wary of the success rates of such films. Marked with an intensely high awareness of various socio-political issues, the New Wave films became the arena for exploring such narratives. Films created with this sensibility often acquired a voice of their own which was distinct from the voice of the masses. As an example, Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* can be classified as a social satire with the voice of the auteur overwhelming the voice of the masses (which is to reference the popular voice of the masses) and thus creating a unique spectator position which was perhaps being trained to appreciate a narrative which rested not just on plot but an entire scheme of techniques. Even in Basu Bhattacharya's *Aastha*, the use of a song playing in the background while Mansi (played by Rekha) tries to confess to her husband her role as a sex worker in its climax can also be forwarded as a nuanced understanding and

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<sup>32</sup> Mira Nair "Glorious Particularity" *Irish Pages*, vol. 3, No. 2 *The Home Place* (2006), pp. 103-108 expresses her views on the masala aesthetic of mainstream cinema as a literal mixture of spices which includes a little of everything for everybody. For her 'Bollywood' stands for a shorthand of enormous commercial success, replete with song and dance numbers and a platform where everything unfolds in an extravagant scale, boasts of lavish production values and is fed to the masses as a form of "escapist entertainment."

rendition of a closure (if at all it qualifies as one). We are never explicitly told what her husband feels about her confession, will he accept her as his wife and lover or is the deed too great to be dealt with and forgiven and does Mansi perhaps await punishment - one can only guess.

Refusing to turn pedagogic, the 'New Wave' auteurs are careful in their deployment of art and portray a struggle wherein the central concern of the film remains at the very helm of the director's filmmaking practice. The architecture of this chapter will be governed by the ways in which the New wave proceeded to articulate alternate filmmaking practices. I wish to start with a discussion of Gulzar's *Mausam* as a transitional film which occupies a very unique position in terms of its aesthetic value. After which *Mandi* and *Giddh* will be taken up as films critiquing the state and its powers. The third section will explore the underbelly of the city and the way in which the sex industry flourishes; here my film analysis will revolve around *Salaam Bombay!* and *Bazaar*. The final section will end with Basu Bhattacharya's *Aastha* as a signifier of how a consumerist outlook can be found embedded in the body of the woman and how the sex worker figure gets diffused and interpolated within an already existing identity, i.e. of the housewife. In all the six films the issue of prostitution as a social issue can be found occupying the center along with a delicate understanding of its intricacies reflected in its treatment.

## Section a

### Mausam

Made in 1975, Gulzar's *Mausam*, tells the story of Doctor Amarnath Gill and his trip down memory lane which leads him to a series of memories from what seems like a past life. Successful and rich, Doctor Amarnath returns to a small town in the hills as he desires not just fresh air and rest but also perhaps wants to solve the riddle of his past love with a woman called Chanda, the daughter of the local Ayurvedic healer; a concern that has clearly not left his mind. What started out as a mere inquisitive approach soon turns into a serious quest to unlock the mystery of his long lost love. He discovers that after he left the village never to return, Chanda was eventually married off to another man who died and left her a daughter. The story exhibits up until this moment its mainstream concerns however, in its second half where Kajli is introduced, marks its departure and establishes itself as a serious and a realistic enterprise which deals with the popular theme of love but also turns caustic towards society in the manner in which it recognizes the social evils and critiques it. Poverty, rape and prostitution form the trinity of the victimized female who has no other option left. The film in this regard offers a clear and a harsh treatment of the doctor's persona who is made to confront the horrors of uncovering the consequences of his act. He is offered no comfort from the time that he learns the truth about Chanda's death and Kajli's current state. The respect that he had garnered for himself in the city disintegrates before the sex worker's foul language and attitude emerging as a consequence of his own decisions.



Chanda's character reflected against the natural backdrop of the hills symbolizes beauty and innocence and it is here (in this segment of the film) that romance replete with songs and glamour – finds a register in the lead female actress Sharmila Tagore. Sanjeev Kumar who plays the role of the doctor is cast in the mould of the recognizable hero/lover who does everything he can to woo his beloved. Following modes that are the standard in the popular genre, *Mausam* alludes to a motley of popular aesthetic practices. However it is in the second half of the film that we witness a complete transformation. Once again seen as Kajli, Sharmila Tagore's glamour gives way to a realist representation of the sex worker wherein the body and language both become signifiers of the prostitute's denigrated surroundings. The male protagonist, Doctor Amaranth Gill, whose upward mobility is symbolically reflected in his etiquette, suit and affluence, puts in motion the realist agenda of the film which comes under a clearer focus in this section where the sex worker and the flesh trade industry come to occupy the central theme of the narrative. The film fuses the two aesthetic concerns and creates something rather unique – a blend of two cinematic imaginaries of the sex worker wherein the New Wave comes to represent a mode which had an impact on other filmmakers like Shyam Benegal who was very much a prominent part of this movement. Often cited as 'Middle cinema' *Mausam*, opens up the possibility of a transition that aids the realistic interrogation of society and its evils.

Kajli's on-screen introduction opens with the hurtling down of a client accompanied by a barrage of abuses. The Mercedes Benz which takes Dr. Amarnath Gill to Kajli's remote location acts an agent of the city through which her rehabilitation

programme is shown to begin. Nostalgia of an innocent past is associated with youth and the remote beauty of nature whereas guile, talent and wealth acquire associations with the city. The film works with the central theme of betrayal and rape through which the filmmaker explores the various ways in which victimization comes into play. Kajli, a rape victim, by default turns to prostitution as her only means of survival. By no means meek or subservient, she happens to understand the exchange that is central to her profession and displays tendencies which blunt the edges of her rough exterior (a throwback to the old idiom of the prostitute-with-a-heart-of-gold). Offered a great deal of interiority and complexity, Kajli's character reminds one of the stark contrast which exists between the upper classes and the poor. The film offers no euphemisms either about Kajli or her profession. It penetrates society in a way which makes the film 'new' in its approach. The transition that we see in Kajli is also a transition that is enabled through a directorial demand made of its female lead. It is also Sharmila Tagore's transition that we witness. The iconographic shifts visible in the mother figure as represented by the glamorous Sharmila undergoes a massive transformation as we proceed to witness her in her skimpy outfit meant to provide titillation. The film also deflates the theme of love and instead desires to explore the possibility of incest as Kajli begins to fall in love with the doctor. Unaware that it is after all Dr. Amarnath Gill who is responsible for the series of unfortunate events that have befallen her, the film dares to depart from the rhetoric of incest only used as a device of torture/threat in the mainstream commercial sex worker films. Articulating a kind of violence which has the force to hit without it requiring a fight sequence, the film controls the narrative's unfolding which is not left to chance. It is important that the film should do so as it reveals an understanding

of the forces that operate in society which create the sex worker and the flesh trade industry at large. Constituting a 'realist' approach to the themes, the film offers a mixture of positions through which one gets an insight into what the auteurs of the New Wave wanted to achieve.

*Mausam* represents a moment in the seventies which may perhaps be labeled as 'Middle cinema' as it was its curious positioning that led to its vast appeal and influence. Other filmmakers who shared the 'realist' vision reference *Mausam* with regard to its representational manner which has the sex worker at its center. Kajli's iconography which created a complete shift from what we had seen either in *Kesar* or in *Gulabo* gets reflected in Benegal's *Mandi* – another film that has no qualms in articulating the truth about the sex worker, her surrounding and her iconography. As daring as *Mausam*, *Mandi* explores the possibility of incest thus setting itself apart from the score of other courtesan films which merely use the possibility of incestuous love as a rhetorical device. Shorn of glamour, which is paramount in the mainstream mode, *Mandi* and *Mausam* both use well established actresses to play the lead roles thereby extending a kind of implicit metaphoric legitimacy to the films and its central themes of sex work, female sexuality, desire and poverty.

## Section b

### Critiques of the State, entrenched state and institutional power

*Mandi* opens in a realistic manner using low-key lighting in a medium-long shot where the camera holds the image of the kotha at a distance, marking a subtle change in time as the suburb awakens to another day. Located in the corner of a 'chowk', one can clearly see the dilapidation and the run down exterior as time has eroded not just its past glamour and popularity which also references the plight of its inmates. Unnamed and generic in its appeal, the film could be the story of any *kotha* established in any part of the country. The film carefully constructs a very different look for itself, one that is marked by a different texture and appeal. Set as a smaller counterpart to the overwhelming presence of Dharavi [?], the kotha in *Mandi* (1983), offers an alternate mode of survival and governance which challenges patriarchal structures and power networks.

*Mandi* is a story about a kotha popularly known as Rukmini bai's kotha and it is situated at the heart of a chowk. Its inmates all appear to live in harmony under the watchful eye of the madame, a role essayed by Shabana Azmi. Zeenat (played by Smita Patil) a highly prized vocalist and Basanti (played by Nina Gupta) a Kathak dancer appear to be the stars of this establishment and both seem to enjoy a superior position in the kotha. Moreover there is also a hierarchy which is in function as the other inmates notably Kamli's character (played by Ila Arun) is less glamorized. Completely in synchronization with the other forms of trade, this particular representation of the 'kotha'

is unique as the inmates constantly refer to themselves as 'kalakaars' or artistes as opposed to prostitutes. The narrative unfolds around this establishment and its constant tussle with the authorities. Seen as polluting agents adding to the filth of the neighborhood, the municipality vetoes any appeal made in favour of providing the uprooted with an alternative. Benegal's matter-of-fact treatment of the success of the kotha even in a space which shares no close resemblance to its earlier topography can be seen as a rather telling statement symbolic of its omnipresence, be it in the city or its fringes.

The film offers an understanding of the sex industry as part of a larger market economy where the female body becomes one of the many commodities that are bought and sold. The film portrays a 'realistic' understanding of the sex-industry and puts forward the gusto of the sex workers as not just an element of dark humour but also reveals an unbiased registration of the plight of the sex worker which is not condescending.

The film in its portrayal of the harangue and empty jargon of women's liberation uses a similar comic mode of representing the hollow rhetoric of the city-like jargon of fostering a clean and healthy environment by removing all its unwanted elements. Rebelling against being classified as beggars or pollutants adding to the squalor of the city, Rukmini bai in her direct confrontation with Shanti Devi – a representative of the state - vehemently defines herself as a worthy citizen who earns her livelihood through

her skills and devotion to the arts. Benegal, in his critique of the state via the sex worker puts forth a different conceptualization of the sex industry where the entire state machinery comes under sharp criticism. The state is critiqued as a hollow, image-conscious ideology which is blinded by its own hypocrisy and jargons. Power as emanating from within the lower rungs such as the kotha proves to be a fact which the film highlights in its unfolding.

*Giddh*, a 1984 production deals with the crisis of underage juvenile sexual oppression practiced in the villages. The film draws on the *devadasi* tradition in a manner which is not just critical of it but also foregrounds against a backdrop of poverty, superstition and illiteracy the 'real' pressing issue of young girls being sold into prostitution by their family members in order to avoid the wrath of the goddess. The credit sequence opens with a freeze frame of an act of intimacy where the expression on the girl's face is lifeless. Working with the real disturbing issue of juvenile sexual exploitation the film marks the remoteness of the rustics by the way in which they deal with their everyday reality. Pessimistic in its outcome, the film portrays the real plight of girls in the village who are compelled to enter into the service of the gods lest they invoke the wrath of the goddess. Laxmi, around whom the narrative unfolds, is one such victim who is eyed by all the village authorities. Sex work in the guise of service to the gods is the central theme of the film and T.S. Ranga's vision in the end is that try as they might, the weak and the poor will be forced to succumb to the larger forces which are at play. Over here institutional religion also plays an important role in bringing out the 'reality' of the village dwellers. Replete with rituals, the film carefully draws out the

sequences where the village pundit and the two opposing Zamindars vie for the virgin to become an official *devadasi*. The film is replete with irony as the Zamindar who otherwise is reluctant to assist the needy at once agrees to help fund the virgin's initiation ceremony.

Hanumi, a former *devadasi* who also suffers from syphilis along with the local pimp (who was once her lover, but got castrated by the village authorities) plot little Laxmi's escape by turning to the highway and the bus which transports people to Bombay. As it turns out, Laxmi's escape to a better reality gets sharply deflated as the other more industrious looking pimp who comes to the village to recruit girls finds her alone in the bus and alters her reality by initiating her into the other Bombay- the one where work force and talent of any kind gets immediately absorbed. The closing shot aesthetically puns on the tail light of the bus which by no-coincidence happens to be red and gradually fills the screen with its symbolic gravity. This particular mode of representing dystopia also performs the dual function by catering to the needs of both the city in terms of carrying work force and for the rustics in the way in which they fantasize of it as their vehicle of escape.

The film offers a scathing critique of state power as it functions through the figure of the Zamindars. The film has all the tenets of the New Wave movement as narrative occupies the dominant concern of the filmmaker. A strategic use of the aged *devadasi*'s song highlights the film's aesthetic mores and grounds it in the bitter 'reality' of the disturbing conditions of the villagers.

*Mandi* and *Giddh* offer two different modes of filmic practice united in their concern of portraying that which is 'real'. While *Mandi* often slips into a semi-jovial mode of narration, *Giddh* remains somber throughout. Both these films foreground the different ways in which the sex industry flourishes - be it in the amorphous shapelessness of Rukmini bai's kotha or the mask of an institutionalized religion; sex work in its highly de-glamorized form points to its all pervasive nature.



## Section c

### The Commerce of sex and the underbelly of the city

*Bazaar* a film made in 1982, opens with a rather pronounced reference to the courtesan culture of Hyderabad as Najma, the female lead adorns herself for her lover. Najma's story and position in the film at times slips into ambiguity as the film while not foregrounding her as a 'real' prostitute plays with the metaphor throughout. Najma's escape from her home was brought about by the pressures which she was facing from her mother who was trying to force her into prostitution. Now leading the life of a mistress, the film posits another highly nuanced notion of the body getting sold, in this case if not to a different man each night but certainly to a man who harbors no intentions of marrying her and has no qualms offering her as entertainment to a business client.

The credits open onto a sketch of Najma which changes its colour palette vividly in a manner which may perhaps suggest an element of surrealism in it as it is highly evocative in terms of its colours, thereby at once placing her as the center of our attention with a symbolic rendition of her character's complex nature. A similar technique is again used in the narrative when Shakir Bhai (the exploitative and callous entrepreneur from the middle-east) is shown in flashes of magenta and black as he proceeds to rape a girl. Referencing an old nawabi culture, the film in its initial sequences depicts the mother as an agent who attempts to compel her daughter into prostitution. Serving as a variation on the hackneyed iconography of the pimp, the mother offers not just a stark contrast in terms of a role-reversal but also in relational terms. At once the notion of the domestic as

a revered space, as a place of refuge from the big bad city outside gets ruptured. Succumbing to a need, the mother tries to convince her daughter into prostitution. Realist in its portrayal, the film references actual sociological cases where girls have been sold into the flesh-trade. Even though the film is predictable in its characterization of the poet as the critic of societal evils, he is also the one who is truly in love with Najma. The film concentrates on the psyche of Najma as she tries to legitimize her relationship with Akhtar, her lover by becoming the agent of another cycle of exploitation. Blinded by her ambition to get married, Najma agrees to indulge Shakir Bhai's lurid hopes of procuring a wife for himself, someone like Najma herself. In a rather poetic and yet heart-rending sequence, where the camera pans from one face to another the aural voice calls out the names in succession of girls who are of age. Scouting for 'Hyderabad's best', Najma sets up an alliance between Shakir Bhai and Shabnam, her brother's beloved. Marking a transformation of Najma from being the victim to being the victimizer, the narrative places the home under siege thereby adding to the city's insidious forces whereby identities are subject to the larger forces at work heightening the idea of multiple personalities existing within the self. The city, in this case Hyderabad, offers an insight into the complex nature of Najma as she proceeds to play the role of a pimp herself thereby fusing identities and foregrounding the notion of the 'other' existing within the self.

Uncanny in its approach which adds depth and complexity, *Najma* is faced with the dilemma of encountering the uncanny or rather the unknown with the topography of

the self. Making a cut from being a mistress to a pimp, Najma is shown to partake of the language of commerce that the flesh trade industry requires of its recruiters.

The underbelly of the city, a space which caters to all the illegitimate needs of the city dwellers finds an articulation in Mira Nair's '*Salaam Bombay!*' a film made in 1987 which actually tested the lengths to which one could go in order to obtain a 'reality effect'. Shot entirely on location, the film serves as a testimonial to the lives of the children living on the streets of Bombay. The city in this film presents itself as a harsh environment which erodes not just the cultural identities of its immigrants but also takes away their names. The children who add to the labour force are recognized either by their physical attributes (with names like Koyla, Solasaal and Keera) or by the kind of work they do (like Chaipau or Chillum). Solasaal enters Kamathipura as a prized virgin who has been sold into prostitution. Initially a reluctant outsider, she falls prey to Baba's slow seduction and finds herself quite comfortable in her surroundings. In the scene where she is supposed to receive her first customer, Chaipau after having managed to escape from the Chiller Room, finds Solasaal quite comfortably perched on her bed entertaining herself with a game of cards, fully dressed and ready to perform the requirements of her new identity. Nair herself alludes to the mystery of the city streets as she ponders over the essence of the film. "Is it chaipau's movie, or is it a movie about adults and children, or is it a movie about the pull of the city? Or is it all of this and is all this too much for one movie?" (1989; 14).

The film stages the city of Bombay as a set or a studio and the film proceeds to articulate it in all its squalor and grime. Revolving around the story of Chaipau mainly, the film also highlights the sex worker, Solasaal, in ways that receives a validation of its genuine quality from the real sex workers of Kamathipura. The film boasts of fifty two on location shoots and the iconography of the sex worker was based on real-life observation. “The brothels (according to Nair) themselves were tiny little rooms, painted in the inimitable peacock green-blue, lined with bright hand painted colour photographs of the girls (each one more startling than the next, plus always a picture of Indira Gandhi); the plastic cabinets which the girls sit on are a psychedelic magenta and black” (1989 pp; 9). As per this observation the claustrophobic interiors of the brothel actually represents the claustrophobia of the ‘real’ ones. Mirroring ‘reality’ in the closest possible manner, Nair develops a ‘new’ style of filmmaking which most certainly carries connotations of a documentary style as well. One can only guess at the range of possibilities behind these aesthetic choices however; what is certain is that the plot or rather the narrative posits itself as unique and different from other mainstream commercial enterprises which has aimed to capture the dark underbelly of the city.

Authenticity gains center-stage in this filmic rendition of the sex worker. Solasaal could be anyone of the recruits brought in everyday given the increasing number of north-eastern sex workers brought into the city. However, the sex industry does not remain confined to the contours of the city’s underbelly. It explodes onto other topographies as well.

## Section d

### Consumption, Sexuality, and the diffusion of prostitution

*Aastha*, made relatively late to come under the direct label of the moment certainly follows a similar trajectory of the movement where the housewife takes to prostitution in order to fulfill not the necessities but the luxuries of life. In this film, the city is vividly present in fragmented glimpses of its riches. The repeated references to Essel World by the child, Nike shoes, Hotels and its most poignant feature – the larger-than-life chandelier with its blinding luminosity all add to the lure of the big city. The recruiting eye in this film is that of the smooth talking lady who at once is able to peep into Mansi's inner-most fragmented self and desires. Not greedy but nevertheless falling prey to the lure of riches, Mansi confronts a conflicted self, one that is torn between playing the role of the dutiful house-wife and the other of the prostitute. The film situates the rhetoric of love and liberation in the character of the husband who by profession is a lecturer thereby allowing his audience to apply a skeptical gaze on his theorizations. One wonders whether his beliefs will remain confined to his classroom or will they actually yield progressive results. Mansi terrified at very the thought of her husband finding out about her secret source of income, finds herself at odds with her desires. Often expressing self-estrangement, while confessing to Anita (one of her husband's students), Mansi uses a highly stylized and a poetic version to explicate her metamorphosis from a dutiful wife to a much sought after call-girl.

Dispensing with the topographical presence of the red-light district, the flesh trade industry is shown to enter without warning into the most un-likely of spaces and integrating the most un-likely candidates thus resulting in a highly stylized diffusion and dispensation of the sex work in the film. Perhaps pre-empting the clash between the horizontal reality and the city's high rises, Mansi is shown to traverse spaces which at first appear alien but culminate in alienating her from her own zone of known experiences. The hotels and the semi-westernized iconography of the pimp also perhaps enables the sex worker to now traverse a very different landscape of the city. Consumerism vested not just in the body of the sex worker but also in the gaze of her clients and by extension, the audience, marks the sex worker as a commodity, a 'reality' that Basu Bhattacharya did not shy away from exploring.

Having entered the post-globalised era with Mansi, played by a de-glamorized Rekha, one observes the iconographic shifts and turns that the New Wave movement undertook. In the nineties however, one notices the emergence of the highly westernized look of the sex worker and it is indeed this moment which blurs the identity of the female persona on-screen making her progressively difficult to pin down. Allowing another conspicuous feature of the twentieth century to emerge – technology, films henceforth in the mainstream circuit follow the principle of glamour with fashion playing a very important role. The problematic of the diffusion of the sex worker gets further heightened as filmmakers and 'stars' both collaborate in staging the figure of the sex worker as a product of changing times. While this was an observation of the films that were made outside the realm of the city, the New Wave articulated a kind of appeal that remained

largely social dealing with 'real' tangible social issues. Falling outside the realm of the city debates, this moment in Bombay cinema articulates a certain kind of departure and disdain for the extravagance, which ironically was not just associated with the city but also with the mainstream form, a concern explored in the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

### The Sex worker in a post globalized world

Negotiating the traffic between tradition and modernity, this chapter continues to investigate the presence of the sex worker through the decades culminating in the moment of the 90s and the decade that followed. The acceleration of information via the explosion of cyber-space allowed a very radical transformation in the ways in which images and sounds came to be understood and appropriated. Trafficking of information from all over the world in the post globalized imaginary was conducted in a manner which heightened the presence of the internet and by the same token brought to the fore the impact of cyber-space. Not only was it possible for people to access information through this kind of technology gaining popularity in the 90s but this also enabled a very different mode of understanding and transmitting various kinds of videos, information, sounds et cetera. Re-defining the fabric of the everyday, the impact of cyber-space allowed for different industries to mushroom around it, the most obvious and popular example of it can be seen in the boom in the advertising industry. Appropriating not just electronic and print culture, the advertising industry expanded its hold over the masses through ways in which it designed notions and images of the popular. Like the metropolis in which this industry thrives, exhibitionist tendencies gained center-stage where its primary focus appeared to be fixed on *seducing*<sup>33</sup> the masses based on a popular construction of images and ideas. Penetrating and altering the course of the mundane, the post globalised impulse utilized cyber-space in a number of ways through which

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<sup>33</sup> My emphasis as I wish to foreground the intensity of affect that the industry displayed.



everyday activities like shopping underwent massive transformations. Consumer culture in this sense gained new dimensions. Somewhat subordinating the lure of the ‘display-window’<sup>34</sup> phenomenon, purchasing or simply browsing was literally a click away, placing technology at the very center of the post globalized imaginary. Enhancing mobility between the east and the west, various practices in film and television appeared to focus more on the influx of borrowed images and sounds altering perceptions and memory. Bombay cinema, in many ways responded to these changes and rapidly demonstrated its incorporation in many ways, of which the sex-worker emerged as a poignant presence. Inextricably linked to the metropolis in the realm of popular mainstream cinema, the figure under study in the two decades – starting from the 90s up to the present day- appears to transform conventional modes of representation by virtue of her highly westernized iconography and gestural language.

With the economy flourishing, a new kind of city also came to capture the filmmaker’s imaginary. The vertical city marked by its skyscrapers and sanitized environment allowed a rather interesting juxtaposition against the grimy underbelly explored in chapter 1 of this project. The possibility of carving a completely different image of the sex worker, impressions imported from the west came to dominate the figure’s current iconography. Rachel Dwyer (2000: 168) comments on the way in which magazines become one of cinema’s most potent ways of not just transmitting but also communicating with its readers an archive of notions and impressions thus, creating a “forum” within the world of print culture. According to her, “cinema reaches into almost

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<sup>34</sup> Janet Ward “The display Window: Designs and Desires of Weimar Consumerism” chapter 4 in *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920’s Germany* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001, 191-240

every area of modern Indian urban culture, across every aspect of the media, from satellite and cable television, to the video industry, the popular music business, and magazine publishing. These domains are mutually dependent and form dense networks of narratives and images which contribute to the viewing experience in the cinema hall.” As pointed out earlier, this kind of penetration possible only through an omnipresent and an all pervasive kind of technology is an interesting area of inquiry as it impacts not only perception but also generates the possibility of affect. The readers of film magazines like *Stardust*<sup>35</sup> and *Filmfare*<sup>36</sup> according to Dwyer helped create what Roger Chartier has called “a community of readers<sup>37</sup>” where the on and off-screen lives of the stars became the subject of critical, and more often than not, flippant analysis. This was also the space where images, notions and controversies surrounding the star were consumed and discussed. Scandal became a highly saleable factor giving rise to a confluence of ideas to emerge and interact given the space of the magazine’s like ‘*Stardust*’ ‘Q&A’ section more popularly known as ‘Neeta’s Natter’ (Dwyer: 2000 184). This section as suggested by Dwyer was also prominent for its use of “Hinglish” or “Bombay English”, “a mixture of non-standard varieties of English with the odd Hindi, Marathi or Gujrati word or phrase inserted” apart from openly discussing sex and sexuality. Also, as suggested, “Neeta’s Natter” was a space which journeyed through the glamorous world of Bombay cinema creating an impression of intimacy and a bond between “the fan to the magazine and the magazine to the stars.” Describing in detail the events that happened in the realm of the five star hotels, the Taj for instance, seemed to afford a vicarious experience of the

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<sup>35</sup> A part of Magna Publications, founded by Nari Hira in 1971, *Stardust* fashioned itself primarily as a gossip magazine.

<sup>36</sup> *Filmfare* was launched in 1952 by Bombay’s branch of *The Times of India*

<sup>37</sup> Roger Chartier “Community of Readers” from *The Order of books*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994, 1-23

same to its readers. This may also be viewed as an instance of the vertical city penetrating through popular culture into the mind of the readers thus creating and maintaining its aura of glamour and style.

Resuming the case of the sex-worker with regard to this kind of a spatial imaginary in opposition to the horizontal city takes into account the visual codes of body language and gestures for an entry into the realm of the vertical city. Reliance on the red light district for consumption, given the current context, if not obsolete, presents itself as only *one*<sup>38</sup> of the many ways in which the flesh trade industry is observed to operate. Relegated to the margins, the presence of the red-light district as a means of controlling the flesh trade industry becomes somewhat diffused. Its marginalization is crucial as it brings to fore issues surrounding technology and its various mediums which allows among other commodities, the body to emerge as one of the many saleable items on display and ready to be advertised and consumed.

Films made in the period under study prove to be highly insightful for my project as they allow me to investigate the steady rise of a cosmopolitan culture and its multifarious effects. With the arrival of what is popularly known as the 'jet age', the sixties had already ushered in a kind of global industry which had an impact on not just filmmaking practices but also heightened the effect of the 'hyperstimulus'<sup>39</sup>, on a more nuanced level. The 'modern city', now, in 2000 as in the 90s boasts of a variety of ways

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<sup>39</sup> Ben Singer "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism" in Leo Charney & Vanessa R. Schwartz ed. *Cinema & the Invention of Modern Life* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995, 72-99

through which it receives and emits images reshaping memory and its course. It appears to create a unique symbiosis between the masses and the films as it made possible with the help of the VCR and later the DVD the journey back to earlier configurations enabling just remakes to gain its own currency in the already existing notion and memory of the different traditions that went into sex-worker's on-screen making. Films like the eponymous *'Umrao Jan'* a remake of the earlier Muzzaffar Ali film and *'Laaga Chunri Mein Daag a remake of Aaina'* explore the ways in which the memory of the sex worker appears to be undergoing a process of mutation in the current context of the post globalized era. The vamp, a figure that ceased to exist after the 90s as the heroine increasingly became like her mimicking not just her appearance but also her performance helped to foreground an appropriation of the memory of the nightclub and the level of superficiality and extravagance that operated within the décor creating the notion of affect and spectacle.

Highly westernized, the figure of the sex worker in the post-globalized era appears to project a kind of mobility that now traverses a different cartography of the city bringing into conversation the forces that Edward Dimendberg defines as “centripetal” and “centrifugal”. Embedding his theory in the context of Berlin, Dimendberg goes on to demonstrate how the metropolis puts into effect two very distinct yet powerful forces of movement<sup>40</sup>. He formulates a theory of two kinds of movement labeled as the “centripetal” and “centrifugal” which adds to our understanding of modernity and strengthens the effects of the uncanny within the metropolis. The crisis of wanting to

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Dimendberg: 'From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang and Joseph Losey's *M*' *Wide Angle* Vol. 19:4, October, 1997, 62-93

know and yet the impossibility to fully see and understand gets emphasized in the context in which the figure articulates the tension between the 'real' and the imagined or even the superficial. How does one know who the sex worker is given her ability to now transform not just in terms of appearance but also through a carefully examined gestural language of the body? Appropriating the movement of the navigable city space as well as the world of speed, the sex worker brings into correspondence the two kinds of movements as mentioned above.

Centripetal space being that which responds to the decay of the city center and the debates and controversies which form a cluster around a kind of an urban "downtown renewal" sees itself as "a navigable metropolis" marked by the kinesis of pedestrians and automobiles where space can get reduced onto a map. On the other hand, centrifugal space, "is the dispersed realm", the world of "highways, movement and the replacement of metropolitan density and verticality by suburban sprawl". It is a space less defined by pedestrian movement making its navigability difficult to track and observe as it also appears to be "organized around speed". In other words, the former frames itself within the city's forgotten and decaying pockets by allowing a ground reality of walking to emerge as opposed to the latter where the speed of automobiles registers and replaces spaces, bodies and their interaction.

Bombay cinema, displaying some traits of these two forces of movement right at the on-set of the millennium in a 2003 film called *Chameli* sets up in its juxtaposition two highly mismatched individuals and mounts an investigation of a number of discourses

ranging from the clash between the horizontal city (as represented by Chameli the protagonist) and the vertical city (clearly indicated in the formal attire and body language of the lead male protagonist) to an exploration of the sex worker's iconography given the audience's understanding of the effects of a post-globalized economy. The represented space of the film is the imagined underbelly of Bombay, highly generic and yet recognizable as it could be any dark alley in the city. It's a space where the nocturnal life of Bombay gets explored through the figure of the sex worker. A transitional film in many ways, *Chameli* fuses the "centripetal space" of the streets with the post- globalised imaginary of the vertical city as it is carefully constructed through the eponymous protagonist's interaction with the highly sophisticated figure of the male lead, a kind of paradox wherein the city appears to be in a constant state of flux giving rise to a number of queries regarding the amorphousness that shrouds the city and its inhabitants.

Another compelling example of the increased kinesis as seen via the sex-worker in Bombay cinema and the vertical city space which she is now able to inhabit due to her transformation into a highly westernized and a glamorous figure can be found in a film called *Laaga Chunri Mein Daag* (2007). In this film, the sex worker or rather the "escort" fuses and challenges the spatial divide that had earlier not just made her distinctiveness easy to recognize but had also kept her at bay from the affluent city-space. Vanquishing her on-screen predecessors, the "escort" Natasha, a name chosen by the sex-worker herself points to the merging of identities and spatial practices. Behavior regulated by spatial configurations is exposed as mere construct and performance gains center stage. This particular film draws on a number of trends that were hitherto

considered alien to the portrayal of the sex worker in Bombay cinema. The sequence where the older sister called 'Badki' moves to Bombay in order to provide for the pressing concerns of her family in the relatively smaller town of Benaras, provides the film its entry point into exploring the gradual yet highly distinct changes that take place in the character's figuration. Referencing the real ways in which small town girls get lured into prostitution, the film acts as a 'modern' take on '*Aaina*' where a similar situation acts as the larger framework of the narrative. The changing of roles and the genesis of Natasha all happens at the level of the image and performance imported by enhancements in technology allowing a very different iconography of the sex worker to emerge on-screen. She not only occupies the horizontal space but also navigates the verticality of the high-rises in ways that make her identification an interesting area of inquiry.

Standing in sharp contrast to the sex workers in Shyam Benegal's '*Mandi*' where the inmates were clearly distinguished by the gentry or the elite through the physical codes of body language, gestures, and space itself, accentuating in its squalor the 'reality' of sex workers operating in the outskirts, Natasha in '*Laaga Chunri Mein Daag*', points to a different kind of 'reality', one which is multi-layered and has all the constitutive force of the globalization process. In this sense, fashion plays a very important role as it enables a diffusion of identities to take place. Even though Badki becomes Natasha, Natasha never looks the same, and is in fact somewhat of a contrast to Badki. Each night she looks different and each night her penetration into spaces forbidden to her due to social taboos gets fractured thus challenging the spatial divide not just between man and

woman or between the public and the private, but the divides generated by performance that also get enhanced and eventually made available for inquiry. Natasha's mentor, Michelle, though given brief screen-space has a major impact on the way in which the film guides its audience to read Natasha's gestural language and performance.

Among other factors, one of the most fascinating aspects of the post- globalized sex-worker happens to be her ability to understand and appropriate the workings of the market economy and by this I particularly wish to stress the role of advertising the body as a commodity using the media, print and other electronic cultures.

In this chapter it will be my attempt to (re) locate the figure of the post globalised sex worker in four different sections each playing a crucial role in bringing out the different degrees of variations that have been sustained over the ages. The first section attempts to place the stark juxtapositions of spaces and lives in the city of Bombay in a film called *Chameli* (2003) where the post globalised context and the underbelly of the metropolis both come together to form a new discourse on the imaginary of the sex worker. In the second section, the appropriation of the various mechanisms of the media industry by the sex worker aids in foregrounding the unabashed talk and display of sex. Censorship also becomes crucial as the board, particularly keeping in mind the degree of nudity that the film *Julie* (2004) foregrounds shows how the state desires to control the increase in sex images on the screen. Section three will address the issue of the vertical city and how the architecture of the affluent interior stands in sharp contrast to the squalor outside. It will explore the complex dynamics that emerge when the two distinct



images of the city engage with each other mediated through the figure of the post globalised sex worker. *Laaga Chunri Mein Daag* (2007) will be taken as a case study wherein the vertical city will be interrogated along with the emergence of the jet-setting call-girl Natasha, whose iconography indicates a complete blurring of the tendencies of the post globalised lead female actresses. It will also be an exploration of how the self gets fragmented and fissured given the context mentioned above allowing only a glimpse of the old 'other' (i.e. the pre-transformation self which has now become almost a memory) to emerge in a highly truncated manner. The final section will look at the third remake of a film called *Devdas* first made by P. C. Barua in 1935 then by Bimal Roy in 1955, then Sanjay Leela Bhansali in 2002, and finally by Anurag Kashyap in 2009. Kashyap's version of the novel and the earlier three filmic renditions bring into focus the changes that are not just radical deviations from the original novel and the three earlier films, but also a way of advertising a post sacred, post industrialist world where the protagonist need not fall from grace and thus accentuating its melodramatic potential by foregrounding pathos, but rather *Dev D* brings to our notice the web of complicated and tense relations that are fuelled by an increased awareness of sexuality. The figure of Chandramukhi, the tawaif with the heart of gold, pious and devoted finds a rather ironic and amusing reference in Chanda's decision to name herself after the monumental iconic figure and memory of Chandramukhi. Technique apart, Chandramukhi's cinematic legacy is undermined by the flippancy of the choice that Jenny makes.

## Section a

### The Nocturnal City and its Underbelly – the street and prostitution

A throwback to the figurations of the prostitute of the New Wave especially Kajli and the inmates in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi*, *Chameli*, can be seen as a transitional film which uses the tropes, anxieties and tensions of the imagined city and projects a 'reality effect' in its portrayal of the underbelly and the unabashed non euphemistic self expression of the sex worker.

Exploring the close nexus that exists between the street and prostitution, the film under discussion in this section is Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli* (2003). The film explores the two very different lives of two very different individuals. The time over which the narrative unfolds is one stormy night where the two individuals encounter each other. Chameli is a prostitute and Aman Kapoor, a wealthy investment banker. The film opens its credits as it intercuts with a song sequence, reminiscent of the nightclub where the interior is designed to stand in opposition to the streets or the exterior. It is a place where Aman finds himself disgusted to meet this own guests. Overcome by ennui and tiredness, Aman decides to leave his own party and go out. As the downpour nearly paralyses the city, Aman too falls victim to its effect and his car breaks down. His first encounter is with the streetwalker herself.

Nissim Ezekiel, in a poem titled 'On Bellias Road', highlights the presence of the sex-worker as a riot of colours first and then gradually sees her as a woman waiting for a

client. In this gritty rendition of the sex-worker's presence "poised against the faded red of a post-box" (Patel & Thorner, 1995: 135). A lot like the protagonist of the film under discussion, the sex worker like Chameli is presented in a 'realist' manner against the fading backdrop of the city.

A curious phenomenon, the street, presents itself as a melting pot of identities and culture. Pointed out by Ranjani Mazumdar (2007: 81), the street in the works of Arjun Appadurai and Dipesh Chakrabarty presents itself as a mixture of activities that blurs the distinction between the private and the public. Mazumdar quotes Chakrabarty, "People washed, changed, slept...out in the open" thus challenging the recent modern divide between the public and the private. Mazumdar herself goes on to emphasize the mention of women and their absence from these activities. According to her, "the Indian street as described by these writers is *ubiquitous* and peopled by all types engaged in different forms of activity in an almost genderless space" (Ibid). It is interesting as the street appears to be "genderless" in her observation as it indeed incorporates the multitude in the myriad of activities be it public or private in its rhythm of the everyday. In the film under discussion, it is also the space of desire. The women who walk the streets at night articulate a rather powerful and unexplored dialectic of occupying roles that are conventionally considered unwomanly. Smoking and advertising her body as a commodity on sale, the sex worker in *Chameli* offers a very different treatment of femininity and sexuality. Merging the public and the private, the post globalised cinematic imaginary of Bombay cinema appears to allude to these ambivalences in the figure of the streetwalker who not only has no qualms about admitting to the 'real' nature of her

profession, but also differentiates herself and by doing so carves a professional identity for herself, one that is distinct from that of the vagabond and the beggar.

*Chameli* is as much a story of the city as it is of the chance encounter of the two lead characters. The vertical city, i.e. the high-rises and wealth which forms one part of the city comes face to face to with its exact opposite. The squalor that the film personifies in the body of the sex worker and her language is something that one could also read as a constant running theme in the film. Like the prostitute, even the filth that accounts for the 'other' or the underbelly constantly shape-shifts. It is seen and felt at various levels ranging from the visceral to the psychological. The diseased body is constantly referenced as it forms the underlined threat that haunts Chameli in the form of the absent presence Naik – a powerful contractor and criminal who desires Chameli and is rumored to be infected with the deadly HIV virus. Scared for her personal safety, Chameli refuses to entertain Naik as one of her clients and in turn incurs the wrath of the underworld.

In many ways, the film though not ostensibly but certainly in terms of its mise-en-scene, alludes to the gangster genre as it almost obfuscates the interior and in contrast explores the dark dystopic city. The rain, a prominent feature of the gangster and noir genres finds an articulation in the story of the one night where the two vastly different cities, personified in the characters of the sex worker and banker, clash. As the story progresses, Aman, encounters the underbelly in a rather well choreographed manner. It is here that one also observes how performance plays an important role and contributes to the "genderlessness" of the city (Ranjani Mazumdar: 2007). Judith Butler, deeply

suspicious of the way in which identities get formed, raises issues that challenge the very basic formulation of the assumption that sex defines gender or that a gendered identity can be understood by the person's sex thereby leading one to presume a social display of a gendered identity. Wary of representational politics, Butler nevertheless recognizes it as a necessary practice and puts forth the imperative that one must recognize the historical conditions under which a critique of identity must take place that seeks to “engender, naturalize and immobilize”<sup>41</sup>. Placing gender as a cultural construct, Butler sees no logic behind assuming that a sexed body (if viewed as a fixed notion) must always automatically lead to a gendered body as the forces that determine gender are largely social and not biological. Gender in no way, for Butler, follows sex; rather gender should be studied as a concept independent of sex, only then will gender appear as a “free floating artifice”. It would appear that Butler is perhaps most comfortable with identities in flux thus giving rise to the notion that gender and identity are not to be aligned but to be questioned, allowing a very important discourse of performance politics to emerge<sup>42</sup>.

As Aman is exposed to the nocturnal professionals of the flesh trade, he is also acquainted with a homosexual couple, Raja and Haseena. While Raja openly declares his unsolicited love for Haseena, Haseena is portrayed as a transvestite who is out to earn a livelihood. In a fleeting moment of comedy where Haseena tries her luck at seducing Aman, what strikes as most important is the manner in which she plays the role of the sex worker. Ambiguity engulfing the brand of sexuality that this figure carries, performance at a deeper level aligned with Butler's arguments where a gendered identity need not

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” chapter from *Gender Trouble* Routledge 1990, 1-34

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler “ Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” chapter from *Gender Trouble* Routledge 1990, 1-34

follow a sexed identity is something that the film also works with. Love in this sense also gets liberated from a dominating heterosexual discourse. In Chameli's own words, no matter who or what the person is, love between two people should be all that matters.

Aman's exposure to the gangsters and his time spent at the police station all seems to be a little like an educational tour where the sophisticated male representative of the verticality and affluence of the city is given a nocturnal tour of the darkness that pervades the lanes of the city's underbelly. Not only is he exposed to these factors, he also chooses to penetrate it of his own will by helping Chameli to escape Nair and his band of goons. Exploitation of the female body finds articulation in the stories that Chameli narrates to Aman. Even though we don't know which story to believe, as each is declared to be a made-up narrative of exploitation, one is left asking for the truth as all seem perfectly plausible and could just as well be the truth. In this nuanced narration, commercial mainstream cinema stylistically appears to incorporate tropes from parallel cinema where representing the 'real' is paramount. This film, aware of these tendencies merges the two creating within the commercial bracket, a new articulation of middle cinema. In other words just as the film uses Kareena Kapoor in the role of the female lead, it also uses Rahul Bose to portray Aman, a clever technique as Bose's alliance with parallel cinema is widely known and while it uses the formula song and dance sequence, it is never extravagant or abrupt; rather the song functions as an aural articulation of the current situation. For instance, when Chameli seizes Aman's car playfully to fantasize a different 'reality', the song that she sings "*bhaage re man...*" only heightens her momentary pleasure as it proceeds to give her a moment of vicarious satisfaction and escape from the

'real' tangible threats that otherwise constantly shadow her. Also the popular song sung in 'Sweetie Bar', "*Man saat samundar dol gaya...*" points to the possibility of a romantic alliance between the two mismatched individuals. Its picturization is also apt as it references another nocturnal reality of Bombay where every night hundreds of girls dance to the tunes of racy popular Hindi film songs in order to earn their living. Later they also entertain their highest paying patron. Madhur Bhandarkar's *Chandni Bar*, a 'realist' mainstream portrayal of the flesh trade primarily through the stage of the dance bar is another case in point to highlight the impact of popular culture within the sex industry.

## **Section b**

### **Sex Foregrounded**

In this section, the main focus will be on a 2004 film called *Julie* (2004), where the role of the sex worker played by the former Miss India, Neha Dhupia, was widely used to promote the film. Subtitled as “beautiful mind...bold profession”, the film tried to ensure success at the box office, a factor that ultimately eluded the film, by advertising its “boldness” and ostensible seriousness by casting the former winner of The Miss India contest in scenes depicting repeated nudity. The plot, rather thin plays upon the arrival of a jilted nubile girl in the big bad city where her further exploitation by her social superiors leads her to become a high lever call-girl. This is Julie’s professional reality which she wants to abandon as marriage presents itself to her in the persona of Mihir, a wealthy bachelor played by Priyanshu Chatterjee. She desires to disclose her real identity as a call-girl not only to Mihir but to the entire nation. Herein lay the sex worker’s appropriation of electronic media. Very much like the sensationalism that exists in ‘reality’, the film also mirrors the furor that the preliminary advertisements caused in the arena of the public. Propelled by Mihir’s confession on television of his love for Julie, the film tries to evoke a different reconciliatory pattern within the cinematic imaginary of the sex worker theme by using the ‘reality’ factor of television and its impact on the masses.

This section reads this film as an unsuccessful intervention in mainstream cinema to portray a ‘realistic’ concern with the sex worker and nudity, also an unexplored factor in popular Bombay cinema. The highly westernized iconography of Julie and the



extensive use of mass media to explore the sex-industry, albeit superficially in this case, as Neha Dhupia's 'boldness' to project nudity on-screen often works against the seriousness of the tone that the film could have alternatively explored. Her repeated and elaborate sequences of love making appear to work as mere skin show and the critical concerns surrounding her transformation gets subordinated to a titillatory factor.

After her second episode of exploitation takes place, the first with her boyfriend who abandons her, and the second one, more powerful as it was right after this that Julie decides to become a sex worker, takes place with her boss, a very wealthy and resourceful man a role essayed by Sanjay Kapoor. As Julie walks the roads of Bombay aimlessly at night, she starts to view herself as a commodity and her body as a desirable item something that could fetch her a source of income. Having lost all, she appears to believe in her role as a professional call-girl and becomes a portrait of a highly sophisticated prostitute. What is interesting about this film is how the affluent city, personified by Mihir and to an extent Julie, is explored in terms of its plush interiors and unlike Aman from Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli*, Mihir not even for a moment enters the dark dystopic domains of the city's underbelly, and neither like Aman, does he speak the language of the streets, even spoken momentarily in jest. Mihir remains the representative of the sanitized city and obfuscates any real engagement with the sex-worker with who he is in love. Moreover, more often than not, what we see is Neha Dhupia the former title holder of the Miss India contest as opposed to the role that she is supposed to play. Julie never actually surfaces as a sex-worker due to a number of reasons of which the most prominent one is the repeated skin-show. While the knowledge of nudity is implicit in the

role of the sex worker's cinematic imaginary, one observes an opportunist trend in the film to appropriate the obvious as a means to draw the masses to the theatre. While the film fails to evoke appreciation in terms of the factors discussed above, it does manage to foreground sex in a non euphemistic way in mainstream Bombay cinema. Its use of the technique of 'reality' television is also commendable as it parodies quite successfully the sex hungry masses thronging towards the nearest T.V. set in order to get a glimpse of the self confessed prostitute. It also mimics the ways in which news channels appear to advertise sex and sell it to the masses in the greed of earning more TRP rates. An engagement of the media with the sex worker who desires to come out of her closet, superficial as it may be, is also quite compelling.

## Section c

### The Vertical City

Ornamented and embellished with the absolute latest in interior design and surveillance technology, the vertical city presents itself as a complete opposition to the horizontal and sometimes unnavigable city space comprising of a vastly different ground reality. The high-rises offer not just a respite from the constant chaos of the amorphous exterior, but also allow one to behold a systematic exploration of a vertical reality monitored and controlled by a set of people employed to correct every aberration in the city's plan. This is the 'other' reality of the metropolis. It is glamorous and allows a restricted traffic comprising only of the wealthy. Sandeep Pendse articulates how the topography of the city is impossible to determine as it is in a constant state of flux. Its inhabitants, mainly the 'toilers', who have no permanent residence account for a significant part of the city; widely recognized as the labour force, they accommodate all types of work force. The sex worker operating in the red-light district is also a part of this work-force. But how does one account for their existence given that they have practically no time for leisure and other activities apart from work. Work, a constant in this chapter in recognizing the post globalised sex worker, is important as it enables one to read prostitution as a profession and the availability and ubiquitous spread of its mechanisms.

In this section I wish to interrogate a 2007 film, *Laaga Chunri Mein Daag* a remake of an earlier film *Aaina* which explores the alarming poverty stricken family as

its larger backdrop and seeks to examine the transformation of the simple small town girl into a jet-setting high class “escort”. Under Michelle’s tutelage Badki gracefully transforms into Natasha. Described in no better way than Michelle herself, Natasha is to become “a top of the heap high-level escort, exclusive and very very expensive”. Michelle, not exactly portrayed as a pimp, but as an interesting ambiguous figure that can at best be described as Natasha’s mentor. The space that Michelle inhabits is also the space marked by wealth. This ‘panorama of the interior’ (Mazumdar, 2007: 153-156) as put on display by the film brings into sharp focus the various ways in which the interior is designed to keep the world outside as a separate world altogether. Disdaining any kind of traffic between the two, the sex-worker, now moulded as an “escort” shows the drastic mutations that the figure has sustained in the cinematic imaginary over the ages. The engaging sequence where Badki slowly starts becoming Natasha under Michelle’s guidance is insightful to my project as it highlights the performative aspect of the sex worker now expected to be proficient in not just speech and diction, but also one who must exude a kind of comfort, ease and sexuality which must not be at odds with the physical space of the plush interiors.

Harking back to the jet-setter leads of the sixties, Natasha is also presented as a globe-trotter. Traveling leading to an upward mobility allows Natasha to set foot in places which were not allowed to her on-screen predecessors. Answering the imperatives of a westernized glamourized “escort”, fashion appears to play its part in allowing Natasha’s presence and availability to circulate through a professional portfolio. Photographed against the standard white backdrop of bare walls and pillar central to

modeling and professional fashion photography, Natasha changes her outfit several times showcasing a new and a highly glamourized look each time.

Georg Simmel was perhaps the first to theorize fashion. According to him, individual and society inextricably linked must come together under the garb of uniformity wherein the individual expresses a twin need to belong to a larger organism, i.e. society while simultaneously maintaining a distance. Fashion is forwarded as one such way in which the individual adapts and merges with society while creating a space for the self. It is also the reason why the dandy often merging with the Flaneur appropriates fashion as a veneer through which he hides when he has to and passes judgment when he feels he must. Fashion, according to Simmel, provides an escape from any kind of responsibility and forwards a comfort zone from where he or she can be a part of something which is different from the rest. Focused on differentiation and dissimilarity, fashion also manifests itself in an incessant desire for change, in other words while it sets itself apart from the majority, it also vies for the masses' attention and the moment it becomes widespread that is also the moment when that particular look in vogue ceases to exist. Exercising mutability as its cardinal rule, fashion also appears to be led by the aesthetics of 'carpe diem' as it truly seizes the moment and makes the most of it. I believe the sequence under study here in which Natasha appears in an array of different kinds of looks also portrays similar sentiments to those briefly discussed above. Posing as a model, Natasha readies not just herself, but also her profile which will circulate among the A-listers.

Accentuating the divide between the home and the city, Natasha soon reaches a point of no return. Coming home is not an option for her anymore. Her 'work' keeps her busy and in a scene where she moves into her latest flat gifted to her by her client, she gazes out into the void: it is the indifferent gaze of the sex worker who looks down upon the city from the heights (could be read as metaphoric as well) into its depths. Her gaze once again foregrounds the vertical reality of a very different city where money is never scarce as well as a kind of merging of the two worlds as Badki who is familiar with the 'labyrinthine' city aligns her view with Natasha who has been tutored only to ascend.

As the film proceeds towards its redemptive pattern offered as a matrimonial alliance, air travel and transcendence from an old order where the sex worker was restricted to a certain red-light district to a new order where the presence of such a space seems obsolete takes place.

In 2001, Abbas Mastan's, *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke*, one gets acquainted with the possibility of the sex-worker who enters the space of the affluent interior, as one who ultimately solves the concern of the film's framing of the devoted couple's barrenness as the patriarch repeatedly hankers for an heir. While the legitimate woman of the house becomes incapable of conceiving after a miscarriage, the film posits the prostitute as an available option, on a highly visceral level, as one who rents out her fertility in exchange of money. As the film proceeds with its narrative, the sex-worker, now somewhat a part of the house fuses the possibility of a maternal instinct as opposed to her previous identity. The film traces a rather different entry of the sex-worker's entry into the

sanitized realm of the interior and more specifically, the home thereby allowing the possibility of identities to merge within the realm of the interior.

## Section d

### Chandramukhi Redux – in the post globalized world

Anurag Kashyap's 2009 remake of the literary and cinematic legend of *Devdas* undergoes a vast variety of drastic changes. The film introduces a number of concerns which add to its unique character. Dispensing with the grand fall, the film portrays the character of Devdas as highly flawed given to make frequent errors in judgment. Using the memory of the iconic tragic hero/lover, the film uses a 'realist' exploration of sexuality where sex is not a truncated rarity; instead there is a profusion of it to the point of numbing the hero's senses. Unconventional in the ways in which it falls under, but also differs from mainstream cinema is the way in which music contributes to exteriorizing the character's psychological landscape. The film uses the swish pan a lot while depicting scenes of drunkenness and very tight frames to heighten the protagonist's feelings of nausea. Indeed it is a post-globalised portrayal of the underbelly of Delhi where Dev meets Chanda the 'commercial sex worker'.

Jenny's transformation to Chanda or Chandramukhi starts with an exploration of female sexuality mingled with a childlike curiosity about sex. The film references a real event which created a sensation all over the country: the mass circulation of an MMS tape recording an act of intimacy between two teenagers. Rising immediately to the level of scandal, sex once again dispersed through technology came to the fore but in a way that was uncalled for. Kashyap's deliberate staging of this moment in his film marks the



turning point of the teenage girl's perception. Ostracized by her family and friends Jenny willingly becomes a part of the sex industry. In this portrayal, there is no luring of any sorts; rather a kind of freedom is extended whereby Jenny not only feels a sense of independence (rare to find in this circuit of films depicting the sex worker as independent since the presence of the pimp more often than not oppresses and further victimizes) but leads a dual life where she completes her education, and in her leisure time performs the role of the 'commercial sex worker'. Aware of this Janus faced tendency within herself, Jenny represents a kind of youth culture that desires freedom and sex unabashedly. Without any sense of entrapment, the film portrays the sex worker as highly performative, as each night she adorns a different persona and plays an elaborate game of sex.

The space that Jenny/Chanda inhabits is the space of the city's underbelly, and yet it is also the space where she feels at home. The interior stands in sharp contrast to the posh verticality of the high rises as a kind of hypersexuality is foregrounded and reflected in the interior. Replete with costumes and wigs, Chanda's quarter brings to mind the projection of a kind of 'hyperreality' wherein the repetition of images by the mannequins and mirrors all around evokes a kind of profusion of sex and sexuality<sup>43</sup>.

All the four sections discussed in this chapter reference technology as a powerful mediating force which allows sex to proliferate on screen and enable a kind of imaginary

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<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" chapter seven from Mark Poster ed. *Jean Baudrillard: selected writings* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988, 166-184

of the post globalized sex worker to merge with that of other women who occupy the same public space depicted in cinema. The impossibility of identifying the sex worker is, for sure, something that has been triggered by the enhancements made in fashion and technology. It is this moment of utter ambiguity in the presented persona of the sex-worker on screen, and flowing over of her appearance and its identification with other on screen female personas which has perhaps captured the attention of recent film makers. Mutations at par with the most sophisticated members of high society make the sex worker's amorphousness all the more interesting and a pressing area of concern. This chapter has been an attempt to read the impact of the post globalized imaginary upon the body the sex worker. While other industries like, fashion, cosmetics and advertising remain independent industries, the link that they seem to have formed over the past two decades remains truly fascinating.

## Conclusion

Having traversed through the different spaces of the city ranging from the physical to the psychological, this dissertation has been an attempt at understanding the various impulses that went into the making of the cinematic figure of the sex worker and how she has continued to survive in cinema till today. Registering mutations in terms of not just iconography but also retaining some of the traces of the traditions from which her figuration on-screen derived inspiration like the figure of the *tawaif*, the vamp and the *devadasi*, the most recent rendition of the post globalized sex worker in Bombay cinema exists perhaps as an important figure to track. I have attempted to understand her place in the two spatial divides that helped highlight the figure's importance in the city's landscape be it its horizontal or vertical reality, its amorphousness and a lack of a fixed identity that has proved to be an interesting enterprise in also generating a discourse on the body, performance and the various imaginaries that altered the course of certain star figures.

The horizontal space, ever shifting and like the figure constantly in a state of flux presented itself as an interesting observation which allowed me to accentuate the city's underbelly. Usually considered to be the city's impenetrable depths, the incessant criss-crossing of channels of survival, like for instance, the space of the city pavements, the chawls or any other empty space was seen as the 'reality' of the city's unacknowledged work force a kind of presence of certain inhabitants that Sandeep Pendse has labeled 'toilers' (1996: 3-25). Not just spaces but 'realities' also appeared to collide given the

filmmaker's choice of representing the figure at the time. Unlike the mainstream commercial enterprise of popular cinema, the 'New Wave' was staged as a different moment in the filmic practice referencing the gritty 'realities' of the sex workers. Completely de-glamourized, the figure in this section proved to be an interesting exploration of the ways in which certain aesthetic practices gained center-stage. Dispensing with the song and dance element, a staple of mainstream commercial cinema, the New Wave neither belonged to the vertical nor the horizontal space of the city; in fact it barely used the context of the city at all. Using this as a brief gap between my overarching concerns with the metropolis as mediated through the figure, allowed me to observe how the figure merits a very different treatment in a very different cinematic space which catered to a different class of audience.

Starting with the post-globalized moment in the nineties, the last section exploring the verticality of the city space was the moment which I intended to arrive at. The complete fusion of identities marked by a rapid appropriation of space and images via the intricate electronic networks available to the post globalized audience presented itself as a rich arena of exploring new ways in which the imaginary of the sex worker has undergone several mutations allowing a completely different iconography to emerge on screen. Presented as a blur and an amalgam of various other inputs like that of the fashion industry for instance, the figure at this moment enabled me to observe a new code of performance and movement which was central to the post globalized imagination.

In my concluding section I wish to illuminate certain areas that have been left out in this project. This includes the traditions from which the most recent rendition of the sex worker emerges. It might have been a better and a more challenging task to undertake a proper analysis of the figures that have enjoyed great box office success as well as a kind of posterity that continues to live not just as an obsolete cinematic tradition, but also as a tangible or tactile memory that manifests itself in the form of remakes and other recreations. The waning presence of the *kotha* for instance along with the complete erosion of the red light district which has given way to the independent rise of the highly sophisticated sex worker could have been enriched by a careful analysis of other materials like that of newspaper clippings, articles and images as well. A rich body of archival work that most certainly would have impacted my analysis to take the interrogation further could have been another interesting area of concern extending richness to my investigations. A structured analysis of the vast source of free floating materials like those available on the internet in the form of reviews, interviews and images surely would have aided a proper understanding of the mutations that has been one of my central concerns in this project.

However, placing the sex worker in the midst of the quintessential modern city - Bombay, allowed me to read a narrative of the city alongside the persistent recurrence of the sex worker figure replete with debates surrounding her on-screen persona and issues concerning the centrality of her body as a text upon which a discourse of sex and sexuality was mapped. This proved to be a challenging task for me to understand and highlight its importance. Given this, I would have like to have delved deeper into the vast

corpus of other debates from feminist discourses and gender studies that have also looked at this figure. Performance and affect present themselves as one of the many areas that can be taken and foregrounded as a separate enterprise altogether. It would be interesting to examine and probe deeper into the on-screen persistence of the figure under study as a source of gaining insight not just into a spatial understanding of her operations but also in terms of the way in which she presents herself as a rich source of reading other city debates that would take into account different historic moments like the pre and post independence moments to stage the figure's persistence in a more systematic way enabling a chronological reading of her transformations.

While the scope of this project restricts itself to a few select films that carry the essence of the debates discussed in the chapters, it would be beneficial to view a much larger number of films that have dealt with the figure of the sex worker and bring to the fore the fissures, overlaps and departures from the cinematic imaginary (something which I have attempted to undertake but perhaps not very successfully as I have only looked at a select few films).

I wish to conclude my humble intervention on the figure of the sex worker set against the city's multiple 'realities' - each one equally 'real' and imagined as the juxtapositions of the clashing worlds that have generated a vast number of alternate modes of existence and perception. In his poem titled, 'A morning Walk' Nissim Ezekiel describes the city dweller haunted by a "recurring dream", who in a state of semi-consciousness, finds his 'reality' equally disturbing as his dream (Patel and Thorner,

1996 :129-130). Though not about the sex worker, this poem expresses a deep sense of pessimism wherein the ‘many hands that sell cheap’ brings to mind the oppressed and marginalized imaginary of the sex worker permeating down to the millennium as Chameli who a lot like the narrator in this poem doesn’t quite understand as to when her day starts or ends. A dystopic tribute to the city that never sleeps, Ezekiel, brings to the fore the many factors that have contributed to its cosmopolitan label as the leading city of the nation. And yet, it is a city “barbaric” and infested with slums, and Ezekiel’s poem provides a bleak picture of the metropolis as it poses not just the challenge of understanding its contours and operations, but also poses the question of the anonymity of its inhabitants of which the sewer worker is also a part.

### **A Morning Walk**

Driven from his bed by troubled sleep  
In which he dreamt of being lost  
Upon a hill too high for him  
(A modest hill whose sides grew steep),  
He stood where several highways crossed  
And saw the city, cold and dim,  
Where only human hands sell cheap

*(Stanza 1)*

Barbaric city sick with slums,

Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many tongued,  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

(Stanza 3)

Nissim Ezekiel



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