FRAMING MARRIAGE: CONSUMPTION, MORALITY AND SEXUALITY IN *HUM AAPKE HAIN KAUN*

by

MONISHA K. SRINIVAS
B.A. (Art History), Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1996
M.A. (Art History), Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1998

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 2002

© Monisha K. Srinivas, 2002

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Fine Arts
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

September 10, 2002

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that the 1994 Bollywood film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Who am I to You?), is framed by an apparent middle-class desire to reinscribe caste and class purity. I argue that the ritual of marriage enshrines the commodity and gives it a larger visual appeal that needs to be understood in the context of India's economic liberalization of the nineties. The narrative reflects the normative role cinema can play in shaping ideas about religion, politics and economics in contemporary India. In order to interrogate the Bollywood film's tendency to homogenize Indian cultural experience, the thesis also investigates resistant films such as Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). Also, I demonstrate how national print media and women's magazines in particular reinforce stereotypes about marriage in the globalized economy. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun's* opulent visual spectacle functioned as a marker of class and became a symbol of self-representation of that class as well. This thesis engages with debates about the construction of nation, family and women. The thesis presents specific examples from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and the resonance it has within public debates about morality and sexuality including the work of artist M.F. Hussain. It also argues that the film is a visual endorsement of the fundamentalist and exclusive ideas *Hindutva* (militant Hindu nationalism) was trying to perpetuate in the highly visible public spheres of the Nation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT		ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS		iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS		iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		vi
INTRODUCTION		1
CHAPTER 1	Political Genealogies of Class and Consumption	11
	1.1 Rituals of Consumption	14
CHAPTER 2	Narrative Frameworks of Marriage: Caste, Family, and Nation	26
	2.1 The Realm of the Pure Versus the Impure	34
CHAPTER 3	The Women's Question	41
	3.1 The Choli Controversy	47
CONCLUSION		56
ILLUSTRATIONS		58
BIBLIOGRAPHY		76

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1	"The Great Indian Wedding," *India Today* December 10, 2001.	58
Figure 2	*Small Store in Aurangabad displaying film posters*, 2000. Photograph.	59
Figure 3	Film Still: Engagement Scene. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	60
Figure 4	Film Still: Shagun. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	61
Figure 5	*Laxmi*, popular print, circa 2000.	62
Figure 6	Film Still: Exchange of Shoes. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	63
Figure 7	"Wedding of Jayalalitha's Foster Son," *Manorama*, 1996.	64
Figure 8	Raja Ravi Varma, *Hamsa Damayanti*, 1899. Oil on Canvas. Collection, Maharaja Fatesingh Museum Trust, Vadodara.	65
Figure 9	Film Still: Family Reunion. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* 1994.	66
Figure 10	Film Still: Kitchen Scene. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aakpe Hain Kaun*, 1994.	67
Figure 11	Film Still: Bestowing the Ramayana. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	68
Figure 12	Film Still: Rita disrobing Nisha. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	69
Figure 13	Poster Print: Madhuri's backless Choli. Sooraj Barjatya, Director *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* 1994.	70
Figure 14	Film Still: Choli ke Peechay kya hai? Subhash Ghai, Director *Khalnayak*, 1993.	71
Figure 15	Postcard: Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) and Prem (Salman Khan) seated by the pool. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.	72

Figure 16:	M.F. Hussain, *Menaka Seducing Vishwamitra*, circa 1995. Acrylic on Canvas.	73
Figure 17:	Poster Print: On a Leading Painter's fascination. *Amul Butter,* circa 1998.	74
Figure 18	Film Poster: Madhuri's mutiple roles. M.F. Hussain, Director. *Gajagamini*, 1998.	75

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my readers Dr. Katherine Hacker and Dr. John O'Brian for their encouragement, unfaltering support and valuable recommendations made during the length of this project. I am indebted to them for keeping their doors always open; for their minds always critical; and their pens always poised. I would like to thank my colleague and friend Kathleen Wyma whose keen eyes and insights helped me during this endeavor. I would like to thank my family for their enthusiasm and emotional support especially, my parents for believing in me. Aditi, my younger sister deserves special mention for her technical expertise and invaluable help during the crucial last days in Vancouver. Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband Arjun Vadapalli for being there for me when I needed it the most. His companionship and emotional sustenance played a great role in the completion of my project.

Introduction

> The venue is a chiffon-draped, picture-perfect universe strung together with 3,000 orchid stems imported from Bangkok for Rs. 1 lakh. As the Dom Perignon flows endlessly into fluted Solitaire, over 1,000 guests help themselves to a plural cuisine spread over 15 anthurium-crowned buffet counters. . . . The invite and logo that went into the personalized linens. . . . were designed by M. F. Hussain. Straight lifts from a Bollywood blockbuster? Song 'n' dance plagiarisms from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*? Hardly. These are the flamboyant weddings of our times. Theatrical, dream-like, spectacular, mind-boggling. An unabashed declaration of social mobility and familial gait, a ticket to the social hoopla where the bride and groom assume secondary status to the swishy dos.[1]

As the year 2001 drew to a close, *India Today*, a weekly news magazine published and distributed widely in many Indian cities, drew attention amidst the crowded sidewalks, railway, and bus terminals. The central story in its first weekly edition for the month of December was titled "The Great Indian Wedding" (Figure 1). The bride and groom, as we later learned, were not Bollywood stars who commonly grace the magazine covers. Instead, they were Puja and Agnivesh Aggarwal, a young couple who were recently married in an ostentatious ceremony at a private beach resort. Swathed in expensive jewel-studded garments, they stood against large chairs wrapped in orchids against an iridescent image of Lord Ganapati shimmering in the background. As we read on, the magazine profiled weddings held in the large cosmopolitan cities in India, drawing attention to the pomp and extravagance that was part of weddings in many large and small cities across the country. The detailed description of the opulence at such weddings, the gastronomic cuisine served, the ostentatiousness, and the hedonism instantly recalled the 1994 blockbuster Bollywood film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, a larger-than-life acknowledgment and cinematic representation of a Hindu wedding.

---

[1]The article researches the way in which the rituals of a Hindu wedding have undergone a sea change in the era of post liberalization in India in the nineties. It also makes reference to the opulence and array of wealth that is showcased in many Hindu weddings. Renuka Methil, "The Great Indian Wedding," *India Today* (December 10, 2001): 48.

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, released in India in August 1994 by Rajshri Productions, became one of the most popular Hindi language films in Indian cinematic history.[2] By July 20, 1995, the film completed its fiftieth week in fifty cinemas in India, at the Bellevue Cinema in London and the Albion Cinema in Toronto. The film, reviewed in sixteen national newspapers and magazines, went on to win most of the popular film awards during the year 1994-1995. [3] The film's mass appeal united rickshawwallahs, cooks, and businessmen, as well as the urban elite in the dark cinema hall, and it enabled the effacement of traditional caste and class hierarchies, if only for four hours. Indeed, this film was so well received that a special screening was held at Rashtrapati Bhavan (the President's office) in New Delhi. The four-hour song and dance bonanza, based on the ritual of an arranged marriage, united the nation in applause and praise, and replaced the 1975 Bollywood blockbuster *Sholay* as the most successful commercial film in the country.[4]

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun (Who am I to You), is based on the ritual of an arranged marriage between two families. The film revels in a newfound banality that threatened and upturned the existing genre of the Bollywood action film. It replaced the action-packed Bollywood thrillers of the eighties with the celebration of a Hindu marriage narrativized through fourteen song and

---

[2]Rajshri Productions is India's largest and only all-India film distribution organization. Established in 1947 in Independent India, the company has produced 47 films to date, and it is India's biggest entertainment conglomerate. These statistics point to the wide distribution that also contributed to the success of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* For more details, see http://www.rajshri.com/index.html.

[3]*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* won more than three major awards including the *Filmfare* awards, the *National* award for film, and the *Screen* award for outstanding achievement.

[4]In the history of the commercial film, *Sholay*, a Bollywood blockbuster, created records for its groundbreaking approach to the narrative of the Hindi film. *Sholay* was released in 1974, and it ran for eighty weeks. It also marked a transition into a new genre of film that replaced the existing genres, where violence became the main tool for social protest against the prevailing injustices in society. For a detailed discussion regarding the hero Amitabh Bacchan and the cult status he gained, see Sumita Chakravarty, "The National-Heroic Image: Masculinity and Masquerade," in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema*: *1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 228-234.

dance sequences. The theme of marriage brackets the film, and the filmmaker devotes most of the film to the various rituals and festivities that are an integral part of Hindu weddings. The questions that prompted an inquiry into this issue were numerous.

1. Why did a Bollywood film on a Hindu wedding solicit such applause and praise from the entire nation, including the President's office?
2. Why do films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* have so much resonance in the public culture of India?
3. What was the relevance of such a film in the liberalized era of the nineties in India?

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun revolves around the life of two North Indian families who are brought together by an arranged marriage. The film's central characters are two orphaned brothers, Rajesh (Monish Bahl) and Prem (Salman Khan), brought up by their uncle (Alok Nath). The uncle's childhood friend, Professor Siddharth Choudhary (Anupam Kher), and his wife, (Rima Nath), whom he knew from school, offer their eldest daughter Pooja in marriage to Rajesh, and the alliance receives immediate approval from the two families. From this point on, more than half of the film's narrative is devoted to the celebration of an elaborate Hindu wedding, which is followed by the birth of a child. The sudden and accidental death of Pooja (Renuka Shahne) casts a gloom on the family, and almost immediately the patriarchal heads of the family decided that Professor Choudhary's younger daughter Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) would have to step into her sister's shoes and marry her brother-in-law to care for the baby. But the families are unaware of the love between the two younger children Prem and Nisha, who sacrifice their love for the sake of the newborn baby. Rajesh discovers their secret and the young couple is reunited in the end.

Before I delve into the above questions, I will portray how the visual narratives of the cinema are entangled in the social and political spaces of the Indian nation. The Hindi film has

always had a pervasive influence on the social fabric of India since its first film was released in 1913.[5] The nationalistic ideology of *swadeshi* was an important subtext or an undercurrent to the films, which would make it impossible to disassociate the medium and its appropriate technology from the spheres of religion and politics in colonial India. Madhava Prasad also theorises that film technology did not arrive in a vacuum and therefore is not a medium that is neutral. Furthermore, he writes:

> There was a cultural, political, social field from within which some people encountering a new technology of representation devised ways of putting it to uses that accorded with the field. The technology did not bring with it, ready-made, a set of cultural possibilities, which would be automatically realized, through the mere act of employing it. [6]

Since its inception in the early twentieth century, cinema has enjoyed an unprecedented popularity in India and it has become an integral part of the social and political landscape in contemporary urban and rural India. Millions of people flock to cinema halls to see the newest Bollywood releases. Cinema has been the biggest source of entertainment for the majority of India's population. Songs can be heard blaring from street corners, film hoardings tower above sidewalks, and a genealogy of past blockbusters can be traced by looking at the *paan*-stained

---

[5]The touring agents of the Lumiere Brothers introduced the cinematograph to Bombay on June 7, 1896. The new device was advertised in the *Times of India* as the "marvel of the century." The medium was well received by an Indian audience. In 1911, Dadasaheb Phalke, a middle-class Hindu who trained at the J. J. School of Art and later at the Kalabhavan in Baroda, saw the film *Life of Christ* in England that year. It immediately brought to his mind the immense possibilities offered by the medium and the ability to make an Indian [synonymous with Hindu in his context] film with mythological figures, gods, and goddesses. This conviction also coincided with his Nationalist ideology of Swadeshi to use the medium to convey an essentially Hindu way of life amidst colonial rule. *Raja Harishchandra*, which was screened in 1913, was based on the life of a virtuous king who embodied *dharma* or duty and the moral and ethical codes of an ideal king. The film appealed to the sentiments of the middle-class audience, and the medium of film was used to create nationalistic feelings against colonial rule. The links between religion and technology were already in place in a country like India with more devotional films like *Krishna* and *Sant Tukaram*, which were also released in the next couple of years. For details, see Firoze Rangoonwala, *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema* (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd.), 1979.

[6]Madhava Prasad, "Introduction," in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

walls in any city. Posters of blockbuster films like *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1998), *Taal* (1997), and *Earth 1947* (1999) line the shutters of doors in the small city of Aurangabad (Figure 2). The images visually testify to the currency of the medium.

Despite the deep penetration of the Hindi film as a visual and technological medium, it has found its harshest critics among some of the urban elite in India. In 1976, Khuswant Singh, novelist and columnist of a leading English newspaper, stated, "India's movie industry makes the worst films in the world . . . and the Indians love them."[7] His upper class sensibilities blind him to the social impact popular films have in India and how these films are often overlooked in favor of parallel cinema and other forms of artistic production and evaluation. More recently, due to a larger theoretical engagement with the project of modernity, many scholars have shifted their focus to analyzing the vast, complicated, and sometimes fragmented terrain of visual culture "that saturates public arenas and is accessed by a vast cross-section of society."[8] The parameters and exclusive categories of art have been challenged to incorporate a larger vista of visual culture that includes mass media like film, television, poster art, and prints that had remained at the periphery of artistic production and evaluation.

In the context of Indian commercial cinema, scholars like Sumita Chakravarty have identified the major genres and movement within Hindi Cinema since Independence and use the commercial film to enter cultural debates about the Nehruvian project of nation building. When compared to the state controlled television and radio, cinema was singularly the most popular medium of entertainment for the majority of Indians in post independent India. This was

---

[7] Khushwant Singh, "We Sell Them Dreams," *New York Times Magazine* (October 30, 1976): 42.

[8] Preminda Jacob elaborates on the discourse of modernity by drawing attention to the work of scholars like Charles Baudelaire, Stuart Hall and Arjun Appadurai who have theorized about the terrain of modernity in the context of its global scope and have furthered the debate about the project of decentering modernism as an exclusive category of the west. For more see Preminda S. Jacob, "Between Modernism and Modernization: Locating Modernity in South Asian Art," *Art Journal* Vol. 59 (Fall 1999): 54.

because television as a medium was introduced only much later when compared to cinema. This continued to be true until the decade of the eighties when television became a popular medium of entertainment. Television as a mass medium of communication was aggressively marketed after the popular telecast of the Asian Games in 1982.

The screening of television serials and epics captivated middle class audiences. I am referring here to Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* that was screened on state-controlled television in 1987. Even though Doordarshan did not necessarily intend to perpetuate communal differences or exclusions amongst castes, the telecast was instrumental in reinforcing the aura and ideology of *Hindutva.* The televised epics lent greater credibility and were visually appropriated by Hindu nationalist leaders like L.K. Advani and other members of the Sangh Parivar. As Farmer notes, "The Doordarshan epics are examples of an array of programs that arose from the triadic nexus of a growing middle-class, increasing commercial advertising, and the use of television as an election strategy."[9]

Nowhere is the more potent use of the technological medium of film and television demonstrated than in the project of *Hindutva* or militant Hindu nationalism. The Hindu Right, through the rather spectacular deployment of the print and electronic media, have demonstrated how the interests of fundamentalism can be given visual form by the strategic use of imagery in the market economy of the nineties. *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism, has been brought to the forefront by a group of political organizations called the *Sangh Parivar* (Sangh Family), consisting of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Dal* (National Volunteers Association), the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People's Party), and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council).

---

[9] Victoria Farmer, "Mass Media: Images, Mobilization, and Communalism" in *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* ed., David Ludden (Oxford University Press, 1996), 106.

Hindutva, with its fundamentalist and utopian construction of *Ramrajya*, sought to reassert a quintessential Hindu identity by reclaiming the imaginary birthplace of Ram at Ayodhya, and in the process, destroying the Babri mosque there on December 6, 1992. It also sought to resurrect and reinvent Hindu traditions and rituals (to give social legitimacy) to create the illusion of a hegemonic Hindu nation. The ritual as Dirks reminds us, "encompasses politics and emerges as a site for power and struggle."[10] Rituals become a useful weapon for political propaganda and religious manipulation in colonial and postcolonial India.

In this attempt at recuperation of fundamentalist ideas, Hindu rituals had to be made visible in the politicized public sphere to reinscribe the geopolitical boundaries of the Hindu imaginary. The *Rath Yatra* undertaken by Lal Krishna Advani in 1991, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, was invented to lend greater visibility and credence to the project of nation building for the proponents of *Hindutva*. Thus, the ritual and its highly publicized performative aspects ensured that the Hindu Right were well entrenched in the public imagination. The project of economic liberalization initiated in July 1991 by the Finance Minister Manmohan Singh of the Congress I government created a burgeoning middle class, who played a significant role in shaping the market, the media, and religious politics. With access to more wealth than ever before, these classes were at the helm of this culture of consumption.

Sooraj Barjatya's film on the theme of an arranged marriage, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* is a representation that needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the above-mentioned events. Cultural theorists like Rustom Bharucha have attempted to theorize fascism, and recognize its manifestations and undercurrents in the visual media. Bharucha recognizes the difficulty of

---

[10]I am drawing on Dirk's idea of ritual as a site for struggle and conflict as elaborated in his studies on the Aiyanar festival in Southern India. Nicholas Dirks, "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* ed. N. B. Dirks, G. Eley, E. B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 482-503. I wish to bring attention to how the Hindu Right was using ritual to establish the illusion of *Ram Rajya* in India. The *Rath Yatras* led

alluding to fascism without naming it, but suggests that it surfaces constantly in the nation building efforts of the Sangh Parivar and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as well as in mass media. He further traces how nationalist films like *Roja* (1995) 'manufacture consent' and coincide with the intolerant political views of the Hindu right.[11] Drawing on the theoretical premises of such scholars, my project attempts to understand how certain commercial Bollywood films, with their ability to percolate deeply at all levels, could be implicit with the larger project of *Hindutva* and impart greater authenticity to the claims of the upper castes and therefore fortify its militant ideology.

Instead of focusing on commercial films which attempt to portray overt political and patriotic themes, I choose to engage with the visual representation of marriage in film and how it embodies the policing of caste boundaries and attempts to create a cultural hegemony. In the process of contrasting *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* to other films like *Fire* and *Monsoon Wedding*, I will be able to demonstrate how the above tendency to homogenize the cultural experience is being resisted and poignantly countered in the cinematic medium itself. The hegemonic construction of Indian/Hindu culture and tradition that Barjatya sought to put forth was heavily critiqued in films like *Fire* (1996) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001).

In order to illustrate this process, I have divided this thesis into three chapters. In the first chapter, I argue that marriage becomes a site of consumption for the middle classes and, in turn, signals the upward mobility of the aspiring middle classes. With select stills from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, I examine specific rituals and how they reveal deeper and complex attitudes toward consumption of food and commodities and betray the middle-class anxiety over social ills,

---

by Advani and the *Mahaartis* organized by the Shiv Sena in the aftermath of the Bombay riots attest to the political manipulation of ritual.

[11] Rustom Bharucha, "On the Border of Fascism: The Manufacture of Consent in *Roja*," in *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 114-139.

particularly dowry deaths. The film on many occasions also reveals deeply embedded beliefs about wealth and religion, which are closely tied to the social status of the dominant classes.

Throughout Chapter 2, I portray how writers, artists and reformers of the colonial period tried to perpetuate a Hindu identity based on caste purity which could be maintained within the domain of marriage. In this chapter, my analysis centers on the ideal Hindu family-based values the film promoted. I argue that the film helped foster a very particular idea of family, nation, and community. In addition, the *Ramayana*, as a text, has importance here. It serves as a model for relationships among family members and also affirms the concept of *dharma* or divine duty. *Dharma*, a key tenet of Hinduism, is the underlying philosophical cornerstone of the *Ramayana*. Understood in the simplest of terms, it places great emphasis on the personal duty of a person toward family and society. For example, the central character Rama fulfills his *dharma* on many occasions in the text when he unhesitatingly accepts from his father the harsh exile for fourteen years, or when he renounced Sita due to public pressure from his subjects. Yet feminists have critiqued the concept as it upholds the duty of the Hindu patriarch, often at the cost of the female characters. Furthermore, I engage in debates of censorship and morality to illustrate how the Hindu Right, in trying to set codes for the media, was trying to destroy opposing voices and opinions on the subject of representation.

In Chapter 3, I work with issues entrenched in debates about the politics of the body and about gender stereotyping that Barjatya's film promotes on many occasions. Also, I demonstrate how the national print media and women's magazines in particular reinforced this polemic about marriage in the globalized economy. The opulent visual spectacle functioned as a marker of class and became a symbol of self-representation of that class as well.

I argue that *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* represents the urban imaginings of the elite, the middle class, and those aspiring toward this middle-classness. The female bodies of Nisha

(Madhuri Dixit) and Pooja (Renuka Shahne) are emblematic of the complex discourse about how tradition, modernity, and myth are negotiated. This analysis is critical to further debates about the sexual politics of marriage and morality in the medium of the Hindi film. Furthermore, positioning of this Bollywood film in relation to parallel cinema by women directors like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta in *Monsoon Wedding* and *Fire* respectively prove how commercial films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* resist and often overlook depiction of the trials and tribulations of contemporary, urban Hindu families and their complex negotiation with the process of globalization.

Chapter 1- Political Genealogies of Class and Consumption

I chose to foreground the ideology of the rising middle class and how it inaugurates an era of consumptive politics in India, in response to the economic liberalization of the 1990s. But the idea of what constitutes the middle class in India cannot be assumed, and instead the various problems in its definition need to be laid out at the very beginning. Considering the diverse caste structure and the divisions within this structure, the socioeconomic positions of these groups will have to be taken into account.

By 1993, the finance minister of the Congress I coalition government had already propelled the country into the second phase of economic reforms. The Hindu Right Wing, the largest opposition party in the country, indicated its commitment to the privatization of a state-controlled economy as well, which had impaired the emergence of a diversified middle class in the past. The middle classes, who were largely concentrated in the urban centers, found they were the focus of studies by various market research organizations. Surveys conducted by the proponents of the New Economic Policy (NEP) indicated, "Urban India itself was the world's third largest country."[12] The National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) provided statistics that the very rich comprised about six million households. Below them the middle class was divided into three segments.

1. The consuming class, who rested comfortably at the apex of this, was made up of 150 million people.
2. The climbers, or the upwardly mobile, numbered about 275 million.
3. The aspirants, who aspired toward this middle-classness, numbered 275 million.

---

[12] Jairam Ramesh, in *The Hindustan Times* (March 14, 1996): 10a.

The economic stratification of the middle class enabled the various financial institutions to understand the complex consumption patterns in one of the world's most populated countries. The research thus enabled multinational companies to target their advertising toward the consumers in each of these classes. The buyers of all kinds of consumer objects like cars, washing machines, videocassette recorders, and television sets belonged to the consuming class. For example, the advertising for much of soap and dishwashing liquids was targeted to rural audiences, while more expensive commodities like cars, washing machines, and chocolates were directed to a cosmopolitan urban population. These figures constituted two-thirds of the population of India and signaled that the middle class, further divided by religious ideologies, had become a dominant economic and political segment with which to contend. These projected estimates from 1994 coincided with the release of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* The burgeoning middle class, even at the most conservative estimates, had disposable incomes to economically support new forms of cultural consumption like domestic tourism, sports like cricket, food, and restaurant industries.[13]

But while the euphoria over the liberalizing of the economy sought to project the classes chiefly for their ability to consume, they conveniently sought to gloss over the fact that many still lived in abject poverty. Guruswamy, an analyst in the *Pioneer,* reported the contents of a study by the non-governmental international organization Oxfam. According to the survey, urban poverty alone increased from 32.43 percent to 33.87 percent towards the end of 1995.[14]

---

[13] In a terse analysis of modernity in India, Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge scrutinized the society of consumption in the early nineties in India and the various forms of cultural production like films, television, and media that increased in the era of the globalizing of the economy. An attempt was made to understand the complex interaction between the middle classes coming from towns, cities, and villages, due to the advent of electronic media. They discuss this society of consumption under the rubric of public culture, a concept that politicizes this zone for a debate to emerge. Carol Breckenridge, ed. "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1-20.

[14] Mohan Guruswamy in *The Pioneer* (November 8, 1996): 12.

This is well illustrated in the numerous slum colonies that dot the urban landscape in many large cities. The aspirants who numbered at 275 million were people who were workers and often lived in slums in the large cities.

There were other realities that made it impossible to neatly compartmentalize the so-called middle class. While it was possible to talk of this class in terms of economic stratification, the violent *castesization* of politics which the country had already witnessed with the implementation of the Mandal commission in 1989, by then Prime Minister V. P. Singh, had further ensured a division along caste lines. The urban English-educated Hindu youth were vehemently opposed to a reservation policy that allowed for thirty-five percent of the jobs to be reserved for the so called Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and other minorities. The violent demonstrations and protests that occurred were restricted to the urban centers in the northern and western states of the country. The above reactions were an articulation of a certain political consciousness of one's upper-caste Hindu descent, and the threat of disruption of the status quo.[15] While the Mandal commission was an affirmative action policy, intended for backward and disadvantaged castes and tribal people, in reality the protests signaled that the upper-castes were not willing to relinquish economic power to the backward castes.

On December 6, 1992, a large crowd mobilized by Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, setting off a wave of riots in the country. The *Shiv Sena* and other communal organizations had the support of upper caste Hindus who were economically entrenched or aspiring toward this middle class. The violent communal riots that ensued in

---

[15] In his book, Kancha, a member of the *Dalit* (oppressed) castes, raises important questions about the project of *Hindutva* from the perspective of *Dalits*. He contends that the lower castes have been denied any rights since brahmanical times in a highly exclusive caste system. This idea has been used to justify the centuries of dominance against the *Dalits*. For further discussions see Illaya Kancha, *Why Am I Not a Hindu?* (Calcutta: Samya Trust Publications, 1996), 35-40.

urban cosmopolitan and rural centers alike further created a rift among religious communities of India. This communalization of politics radically redefined the religious identity of the upper classes in this era of economic liberalization. While it unleashed a wave of caste consciousness, the real aim of eradicating poverty and illiteracy was never addressed.

1.1 Rituals of Consumption

Hindutva and its philosophy of liberalization find representation in the visual narrative of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* The idea of a patriarchal state which values consumption is what the film conveyed on more than one occasion. The following section will illustrate how by representing the tradition of an arranged marriage between two upper-caste, middle-class Hindu families, the film preserves the potential for depicting the appeal of conspicuous consumption in the global economy. The filmmaker Barjatya was honored by the government and proclaimed unanimously as the custodian of past culture and tradition. But in analyzing the "tradition" of an arranged marriage onscreen, it would be important to remember historian Romila Thapar who suggests that traditions are not "self created" but are "consciously chosen" to "suit our present needs."[16] Therefore, by appealing to the tradition of an arranged marriage signifies how the values of chastity and family honor, central to the identity of the upper caste Hindus, are being recuperated; values of a Hindu family overlapped with the ideology of Hindutva on many occasions. Rituals then become the tools for performance and preservation of such traditions, mechanisms through which regional identity is shaped.

The often-elaborate and time-consuming marriage ceremonies in India are comprised of rituals that differ from region to region and caste to caste. The filmmaker Sooraj Barjatya

---

[16] Romila Thapar, "Tradition", in *Between Tradition and Modernity*: *India's search for identity: A twentieth century anthology.* ed. Fred Dalymar, G.N. Devy, (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press) 266-268.

restricts himself to the depiction of the wedding between two North Indian families. The rituals of *sagaii* (engagement ceremony), *shagun* (fixing of the auspicious time), *shaadi* (actual marriage), and *bidaii* (bridal send-off) are focal points for the narrative of the film itself. Later in the film, the *sangeet* (musical get-together by the ladies of the families) to commemorate Pooja's baby shower and the birth of the baby itself are the other major events of the film.

Amidst a religious pilgrimage to Ram Tekri, an idyllic place of worship of the god *Rama*, the two friends Professor Choudhary and Kailashnath, fix the matrimonial alliance between the two families. The engagement is at once solemnized by the temple priest who blesses the couple in the presence of Rama. The popular song *Wah Wah ! Ramji, Jodi Kya Baniyee, Bhaiya aur Bhabhi ko Badhai ho Badhai,* (Salutations to Lord Rama who has matched the couple so well and congratulations to our brother and sister-in-law), portrays the groom's brother Prem and the bride's sister Nisha dancing in the temple complex and as witnesses to the happy occasion. The light banter takes place amidst the chants of Tulsidas's *Ramayana.* Dressed in a striking green and yellow sari with her head covered, Pooja stretches her hand forward and Rajesh slips the engagement ring on her finger (Figure 3). The ceremony is immediately followed by the ritual of *shagun* which takes place when the families consult with the astrologer to fix an auspicious time and date for the wedding. Typically a private affair between families, the filmmaker turns it into a huge, public event for all to celebrate as well as to witness. The focus of this ritual becomes a time for gifts, where expensive clothes and jewelry are exchanged between the two families in the presence of a large audience. Nisha stands behind her future brother-in law holding a tray full of gifts her parents had bought for him. The mother, in the symbolic action of putting the *tilak*, or dot, on Rajesh's forehead, announces to the witnesses that the bride had been accepted into the family, and that the date for the wedding has been set (Figure 4). In this particular ceremony, the bride is not present as a mark of respect towards her future in-laws.

Sooraj Barjatya turns this small ritual into a mega event, and uses this occasion in the film to echo the sentiments of exchange not only of gifts, but also of the handing over of the professor's daughter, Pooja.

In a song and dance sequence following the ceremony, Pooja's mother humbly offers her daughter in marriage to Rajesh's family. She sings, "*raaz ki baat battaen, yeh puja jeevan ki, shobha aaj se hai ye aapke aangen ki*" (My daughter, who is a shadow of myself, one who is pure and chaste, is coming into your home. Our lifelong earning and wealth and honor [her daughter, Pooja] are now offered with due respect to your family). Pooja is symbolic of not only fertility, but also of abundance and wealth, or *dhan*. She is the symbolic goddess of wealth, Laksmi, who will bring abundance into her new in-laws' family home. The Goddess Laksmi, presents a Hindu example of a ideal spouse before the world who sits at the feet of Lord Vishnu. The blessings of the goddess are invoked to bring in wealth and prosperity before the autumn festival Diwali. Standing on a lotus floating on the water, a reference to her divine birth, she is represented with gold coins flowing out of her palm collecting in heaped plates at the bottom (Figure 5). Her symbolic presence is often conferred upon married Hindu women, and it is common practice in many households to symbolically refer to the new bride as Laksmi. The commercial Hindi film on numerous occasions confers brides the auspicious title of Laksmi.

"*Dulhe ki Saaliyon, O Hare Dupatte Waaliyo, Joote Lelo, Paise De do.*" This refrain from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* translates as, "Sisters-in-law of the groom, wearing green scarves, give us the money in exchange for the shoes." The song sets the stage for the opulent wedding and elaborate festivities that follow. Filmed against the heavy chandeliers, scarlet carpets, and towering stairwell, the song compliments a lighter moment in the narrative when the megastar Madhuri Dixit, cast as *Nisha*, and the uncle of the groom exchange a large bundle of money in lieu of the shoes (Figure 6). The uncle invokes the upper-class Hindu patriarch clad in an

expensive silk suit, turban, and pearl necklace. The light banter between Nisha and the groom's uncle corresponds to a widely prevalent ritual in the northern and western provinces of India and attests to the commonplace exchange of commodities in a marital alliance. On receiving the bundle of money, Nisha, being the younger sister of the bride, with great humility dutifully dusts the shoes before slipping them on her brother-in-law's feet. This ritual symbolically announces the end of the wedding ceremony, marking the rite of passage for the bride from her natal to her marital home.[17]

The song and dance sequence at the wedding or the *shaadi* reinforces the film's central theme of consumption as the camera zooms in to capture the rich foods, the gloss of shining silks and scintillating jewelry. The thrust of the theme song at the *shaadi* is on abundance. Marriage thus becomes a site for the public display of commodities that the professor can afford to shower on his guests. In addition, the materiality of this image was visibly heightened by garlands of twinkling lights framing the cinematic screen in the dark theaters. This ploy by the filmmaker further intensified the two-dimensional frame of Barjatya's spectacle and had great visual impact on spectators in the cinema halls.

In a scathing attack on the film, Rustom Bharucha comments,

> Among the objects fetishized in the film, it is food that is alluringly foregrounded and texturalized with a power not witnessed in any form of advertising. Indeed Barjatya's film is gastronomically lavish and loaded with signs . . . in short food becomes the most literal yet resonant thing in Barjatya's world of wealth and health, family and tradition . . . Barjatya naturalizes the iconicity of food items which [in reality] could scarcely be afforded by the millions of people watching his films. And yet one is given the illusion that these commodities are eminently available, such is their abundance.[18]

---

[17]As the custom goes, the sister-in-law of the groom has the privilege of hiding his shoes. When the groom gives up the search, the sister-in-law gives him the shoes and gets a handsome reward from the groom's family. It is also a sign that the wedding must come to an end and the bride leaves her parent's home.

[18]Rustom Bharucha, "Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 15, 1995): 803.

A variety of food is seen throughout the film. The food at the wedding was gastronomically lavish, but even the everyday consumption of food is elevated to new levels. Chocolates, coca-cola, savories, and sweets, along with plenty of tea, are served each time the family got together. Food not only becomes a conversation piece, but also "a lot of humor in the film is specifically food centered."[19]

With the liberalized markets, food became an important marker of class, and the early nineties witnessed an explosion in the restaurant industry, with more Indians being able to eat out frequently. Coca-Cola became available again in India and the American restaurant chains like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken made their appearance in the nineties and became symbols of one's urban cosmopolitanism and upward mobility. These restaurants soon became the target of the Hindu nationalists who saw how food could influence the tastes and attitudes of the coming generations. As Appadurai writes, "Food in India is closely tied to the moral and social status of individuals and groups. Food taboos and prescriptions divide men from women, gods from humans, upper from lower castes, one sect from another."[20] While Appadurai reveals how cookbooks influenced the tastes of upper class and upper-caste Indians, new technology also contributed to this interest in experimenting with not only new foods but also the desire to reinstate regional cuisines. As a testimony to Appadurai's observations which successfully brings up the issue about food taboos, as recent as March 2002 McDonald's the fast food chain agreed to pay ten million dollars to a class action suit filed by Harish Bharti, a Hindu immigrant from Seattle, Washington. Bharti said he was humiliated when he took a visiting Swami, a holy

---

[19]Rustom Bharucha, "Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 15, 1995): 803.

[20] Arjun Appadurai, "How to make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 30 (January 1988): 10.

man visiting from India, to McDonald's for some French fries. He later learned that the so-called vegetarian fries were coated with beef-fat. Hindus consider the cow a sacred animal and do not eat beef products. Feeling cheated and tricked he filed the lawsuit and was given an apology by the fast food company.[21] The satellite and cable channels like Star TV and Zee TV devoted hour-long broadcasts to cooking shows, which confirmed celebrity status to cooks who were now national heroes.

Without a doubt, we are dealing not only with the spectacle of the commodity, but also more importantly, with the ritual of marriage which brackets the film and emerges as the archetypal event in the narrative. While the commodity is arguably consumed, its timely and strategic insertion within the ritual of marriage gives it a social sanction and a larger visual appeal. Thus, the film naturalizes the role of the commodity within ritual on many occasions.

The film in this representation of ostentation and opulence also frames middle-class anxiety over the practice of dowry, which increased immensely after the opening up of the markets. Dowry, as a social practice, is a reality that has again been on the rise in urban India and has increased in the recent era of high capitalism. The pressure on the family of brides to arrange lavish weddings, to serve elaborate courses of imported food, and to the exchange expensive gifts is even greater than before. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* reflects the normative cultural role the middle-class ritual of marriage has assumed in the heady hedonism unleashed by the liberalization process.

According to a 1996 report at the venue for the International Women's conference in Beijing prepared by Mrinal Pande, a feminist who had elaborately researched bride burning in India, "There are so many consumer goods available, and there is a possibility that if you torture

---

[21] Paul Shukovsky, "McDonald's settles beef dispute with Hindus, vegetarians," in *Seattle Post,* (*March* 8, 2002): 1.

the bride . . . then her father or brother will try and meet your demands."[22] According to the news piece, an estimated five thousand women in India were murdered each year for being unable to bring the desired amount of gifts to the in-law's family.

The filmmaker also makes many references to the practice of dowry in the narrative of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* At the beginning, Rajesh's aunt in the presence of the family states that she has found a bride for Rajesh who would bring with her immense wealth as part of the dowry. Even though her suggestion is turned down, the issue of dowry cannot be ignored in the film. In another instance, when the new bride Pooja crosses the threshold into her in-laws' house, a conversation between the Mamiji (aunt), the Mamaji (uncle), and the servant, Lallu, takes place. The aunt pulls her husband aside and asks him the following:

Aunty: "How much dowry did her father give us?"

Uncle: "I do not know."

Lallu: "Her father gave us an imported car, a diamond necklace, and a new bungalow."

Aunty: "Oh my goodness; that is wonderful news."

Lallu: "But I forgot to add, we did not accept these gifts, as we prefer our *bhauji* (Pooja) to all the material wealth in the world."

The aunt is at once disappointed and disgusted. She walks away angrily. Though the film sends a social message that the practice of dowry should be banned, it fails to justify how a college professor could host such an extravagant wedding. By inserting this scene, the filmmaker conveys how the film reveals the anxiety and discomfort over the issue of dowry and how it cannot be ignored in an Indian marriage.

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun interestingly projects the self-image of a nation opening its doors to the world of new media and capital. Another scene in the film shows toys strewn around the

[22] Gayle Young, "Bride Burning Alive and Well in India," *CNN World Report*, September 12,

house, bought in anticipation of the impending birth of a child. The toys are another symbol of the liberalized market; foreign manufactured and imported objects are now readily available in abundance in the liberalized markets. The coke cans, chocolates, and expensive imported foods consumed are symbols that can be substituted for other commodities like washing machines, refrigerators, and expensive cars that are visible in the house. The aspect of globalization looms in the background with the constant allusion to multinational capital. Rajesh, for instance, always discusses the car unit he is in the process of building for his brother, leaving his pregnant wife behind to finalize a deal on a car factory in a foreign country.

Swadeshi, or economic nationalism, the manifesto of the Hindu Right Wing which reflected the aspiration of the middle classes gained currency after the Congress I government opened the doors on the liberalization policy. The document, a part of the manifesto of the Hindu Right, condemns the Congress party of India for succumbing to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It accuses the previous governments of siding with the multinational companies at the risk of destroying local businesses. The economic manifesto outlines its promise that the economy would be monitored more strictly and that the government would encourage the local companies to compete in the global markets.[23] In spite of these electoral promises which served to protect the interests of small businesses, the BJP and its allies have embarked on a project of multinational capitalism, one which is more liberal than the one proposed by the earlier governments.

The analysis of the film would be incomplete if one does not mention the intrinsic relationship of money to the visual narrative. *Dhan*, or wealth, is presented in a new light in the

---

1995: 6

[23] The Hindu Right has redeployed the concept of Swadeshi in recent times. Originally a Gandhian concept, it signaled self-reliance of the people by encouraging cottage industry and emerged as a significant tool in the resistance against the British in India. For more information, see BJP Election Manifesto–Our Swadeshi Approach at http://www.bjp.org/manifes/appeal.htm.

film. An exchange of wealth in the form of currency is a cornerstone of the film. As previously discussed, Nisha exchanges shoes for money (see Figure 4) and references to money are made in the lyrics of the song when Pooja's mother hands her daughter over to the in-laws as wealth or property. Pooja thus becomes the metaphor for wealth. Symbolically, she is *Laxmi*, the goddess of wealth. As soon as Pooja enters her new home, her uncle hands her the keys to the cupboard where the money and jewelry are locked. This gesture indicates that as the new *Laxmi*, Pooja will now assume responsibility for the finances in her new home. Biologically, she is a symbol of fertility; a goddess who will ensure the dynastic lineage.

In cinema of post-independent India, wealth came to assume several connotations due to the strong influence of Gandhian ideals. The excess of wealth was tainted, and in contrast, poverty was upheld to be sublime.[24] Through the portrayal of morally upright characters, the accumulation of excess wealth is often seen as vulgar. And the camera often takes up the perspective of the poor. Gandhian values often identified with this image of poverty. In post-independent and more importantly Nehruvian India, films like *Mother India* (1957) take up the perspective of the exploited peasant and condemn the greedy moneylender. Moreover, in the films of the seventies the figure of the anti-hero emerged very strongly. Through the subaltern characters of the coolie, the dockyard worker, or a miner, actor Amitabh Bacchan fights this obsession of money that makes people corrupt and greedy. But significantly in the decade of the nineties films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Dil Wale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1998) completely invert the model to applaud the rich and exclude the poor. In 1993, a parallel film titled *Dharavi*, based on the largest urban slum in metropolitan Bombay (also where Bollywood is based), focuses on the reality of one million people living in subhuman

[24] Sumita Chakravarty, "The National-Heroic Image: Masculinity and Masquerade,"in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 228-234.

conditions. According to Kalpana Sharma, *Dharavi* the actual slum lies like an expansive underbelly to the city's planners and state government.[25] The lives of the protagonists unfurl in the slum, a place bereft of social conscience, where they are seen as cheap labor. The illegality of the slum itself is testament to the schizophrenic space it occupies in the city. The film reveals the aspirations of the protagonists, and the harsh reality of unfulfilled dreams in an alienated capitalistic city like Bombay. The film is a visual testament to the underside of the euphoric project of delineating the middle classes. The slum itself is in opposition not only to the elite economic analysts of India, but also to the fantastic array of wealth showcased in films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun. Dharavi* is built on the aspirations of the protagonists who are unable to afford the life of beauty, fantasy and abundance they actually experience in the celluloid word of Bollywood films.

The filmmaker Barjatya excludes the poor from the canvas of his film and wealth has new connotations, and the guilt associated with wealth is abandoned. In fact, the ideal representation of the generosity of the rich and the upper castes over the poor dominates the narrative. Lallu, the loyal servant, is given a large sum of money to pay for his mother's hospitalization. Pooja hands him a bundle of money in the presence of Gods in the family temple, thereby placing her trust in him. The wealth coalesces with religious piousness and assumes an aura that had never been witnessed before in the history of Indian cinema. The wealth portrayed is to be respected and revered as the goddess of wealth, *Laxmi*. Religion became the moderating factor for this excess. The upper caste Hindu ideologies of caste segregation, elitism, and economic power were what the film naturalizes.

---

[25] Kalpana Sharma, *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slums* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), 22-24.

While the filmic spectacle was reinforcing conspicuous consumption through the ritual of marriage on the cinema screen, the chief minister Jayalalitha of the southern state of Tamilnadu made headlines across the world for organizing the largest wedding in postcolonial India.[26] In 1995, with elections in a few months, Jayalalitha, herself a former film star in Tamil films, opportunistically announced that she would sponsor the wedding of her foster son. The ritual of marriage was willfully appropriated to facilitate her political career. It was the first time in the liberalized economy that such a spectacle was sanctioned by the state and the ritual of marriage was used as a political platform. John Burns, the author of an article in the *New York Times*, reported, "For Indian politician, an opulent wedding means political bliss. Half a century after India's maharajahs began fading into history along with their pink marble palaces and gold-plated Rolls Royces, one of the country's most controversial politicians stages a wedding for her foster son here this week that was a show of maharajah-like opulence, as well as of political defiance."[27] The *Dutch Press* reported, "On September 7, over 100,000 invitees watched with awe . . . as the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, Jayalalitha, married her foster son."[28] The *South China Morning Post* reported, "A wedding costing more than thirty million dollars has drawn flak."[29] In an image reproduced in *Manorama,* a Hindi language magazine, Jayalalitha, at the extreme right, stands with another Chief Minister in front of the young couple (Figure 7). Interestingly the guest is none other than Lallo Prasad Yadav, the chief minister of Bihar who

---

[26] Jayalalitha, chief minister from 1991- 1996, rose to become one of the most corrupt woman politicians in the history of India. In the liberalized economy, she was implicated in a number of scams and was arrested for possession of disproportionate assets.

[27] Burns reported that the chief minister turned parts of the city into a private theme park, and she had cutouts of herself lining the streets of Madras. John Burns, "For An Indian Politician An Opulent Wedding Means Political Bliss," *New York Times* (September 10, 1995): 13.

[28] Mary Van Danielle, "Indian Reception,"*Deutsche Presse Agenteur* (September 7, 1995): 19.

[29] Lin Xiang "The Madras Reception," *South China Morning Post* (September, 20, 1995): 11

has been a target of harsh criticism for his state sanctioning of corruption; Jayalalitha herself has been prosecuted for corruption. The garlanded bride and groom are dressed in garments made of pure gold thread, and bedecked with jewels certainly set a high standard for Pooja and Agnivesh Aggarwal who graced the 2001 cover page of *India Today*. The wedding clearly demonstrated the way in which a corrupt state used the government machinery. In order to gain more visibility, the chief minister manipulated the broadcasting media and satellite television to telecast this event for all the citizens of Tamilnadu to view.

The austerity of the past decades was certainly defied by Jayalalitha's move. In the liberalized economy, the ritual of marriage, indeed, was used not only to make a claim for the Dravidian state as in the case of Jayalalitha, but was also an important marker of class. The ritual worked as a profound basis for group identity onscreen and offscreen. Thus, the ritual of marriage sat at the nexus of the economic, political, and aesthetic domains. The ritual thus emerged as a powerful tool to homogenize the experience of marriage in the hands of the filmmaker and as a medium of propaganda when appropriated by the chief minister.

It is also necessary to mention here that *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* was released all over India; it had a large fan following, even in the four southern states of the country. The Bollywood film is generally viewed in the northern and western provinces where Hindi is a common language. In the eastern states and the southern regions of India, there has been a resistance to the Hindi film as the regional cinema is more strongly rooted. For instance, in Jayalalitha's Tamilnadu, films are made in the regional language of Tamil with its numerous local dialects. While Tamil Cinema generically resembles a Bollywood film, it possesses its own sensibility and style that incorporate its own local variants; also, the resistance to the national language of Hindi was greater in the south. But *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* transcended this resistance, and the theme of marriage proved universally popular in its appeal.

Chapter 2- Narrative Frameworks of Marriage: Caste, Family, and Nation

The theme of an arranged marriage brackets the narrative of the film and becomes the ideological basis for the maintenance of caste and class purity. The commercial success of the film proved, beyond doubt that the visual affirmation of the elaborate performance of an arranged marriage on screen appealed to a large number of people from a large cross-section of society. The film reaffirms the need to marry within one's caste to maintain the Hindu *dharma.*

But the very concept of marriage has had resonance in the politics of colonial India as well as in the debates of nationalism. Nationalists and Colonialists alike debated the women's question in the middle of the nineteenth century in Bengal, which centered primarily on the tradition of marriage, including widow remarriage and the appropriate age of the bride, and the abolition of Sati. Politicians, poets, painters and revolutionary leaders also presented the various ideas of marriage, promoting a patriarchal point of view. Writers like Peary Chand, in a series of articles between 1860 and 1880, wrote about the mythical women and goddesses who are unparalleled in their devotion to their husbands. He promotes an ideological and religious point of view by including mythological feminine figures like Damayanti, Savitri, Sati, and Sita, women who subsume themselves in their husbands and gain spiritual fulfillment.[30] Court painters such as Raja Ravi Varma also drew on the past literature to popularize images of mythological goddesses. The large-scale circulation of images of these women as ideal spouses disseminated in the medium of oleographs and prints gave a visual frame of reference to prevailing beliefs of the middle classes in the early twentieth century. As example, the popular and well-circulated image of *Hamsa Damayanti*, originally painted by Raja Ravi Varma visually

[30] Somnath Zutshi, "Women, Nation and Outsider in Hindi Cinema" in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* ed. Ashis Nandy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83-142.

reinforces the separation and longing she feels in exile away from her partner. The loss and longing, as well as the strong commitment to her husband, are what the painting emphasize (Figure 8). Damayanti wistfully stares into the garden and is kept company by the talking swan *hamsa,* who speaks of the hero Nala and his exploits in battle.

The so-called Bengal Renaissance was very much a Hindu upper caste urban phenomenon. And many of the social reforms that organizations like the Brahmo-Samaj advocated pertained to the practices and problems of the Hindu upper- castes. Widow remarriage and the abolition of Sati were key issues that had engaged the reform movement of the early and mid-nineteenth century.[31] In addition, the binary opposition of the home and the outer world was created in the nationalist discourse to reconstitute patriarchy where the women were part of the inner world and their bodies became bearers of tradition and honor. [32] But in these reform movements, women themselves were the passive objects of reform devoid of agency. As Tharu writes, "The sculpting of the new respectability was one of the major tasks taken on by the social reform movement, which set out to transform a traditional society into a modern one."[33] In spite of the reform movement, "the respectability of women from the emerging middle classes was being defined in counterpoint to the crude and licentious behavior of lower-class women."[34] Thus middle class notions about femininity were being established.

---

[31] Established in 1866, the Brahmo Samaj was founded in Calcutta as an institution that advocated social and religious reform. Abolition of *sati* and widow remarriage, were social issues that the Brahmo Samaj was deeply involved in. In addition, by making selective use of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagvad Gita*, the institution gave Hinduism a liberal appearance and reconciled it with middle class ideas and ideals introduced by the West.

[32] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Women," in *Nation and its Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117.

[33] Susie Tharu, "Introduction," in *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present,* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), 11-12

[34] Ibid.

Colonial women writers like Saradasundari Debi, and Prasannimayi, however, challenged the established canon about Hindu marriage presented in the novels and literature of nineteenth-century Bengal. The above women often wrote about the pressures of society around marriage and Sati. They offered a very different viewpoint of their marriages, the demands modern life made on them and the hypocrisy of patriarchy. Through their personal encounters and experiences as homemakers and child widows, they were able contest the romanticized and patriarchal construction of marriage in their autobiographies.[35]

The Hindu nationalists were also framing the debate about the institution of marriage. Historian V. D. Sarvarkar, the first exponent of *Hindutva,* was also instrumental in the formation of the communal *Hindu Mahasabha*, which laid the foundations for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Dal. Giving up the struggle against the British colonial ruler, he transformed himself into a staunch proponent of *Hindutva.* With the publication of *As a Hindu,* first published at Nagpur in 1923, he came to be regarded as the father of Hindutva. Summing up the ideology briefly, Hindutva aims to reconstruct and mobilize Indian Hindus through a process of exclusionist and prejudiced identity building chiefly against the Muslim other and other lower caste minorities. The text first became a manifesto of sorts for the more militant wing of the Hindu nationalists, the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Dal*, popularly called the RSS, and the *Shiv Sena*, a regional party with its base in Mumbai under the leadership of Bal Thackeray. These groups have, on many occasions, based the ideological premises of their political party on this foundational text.

Sarvarkar states three preconditions that make a person qualify as a Hindu: (1) *Pitrabhoo*, (2) *Jati*, and (3) *Sanskriti.*[36] Roughly translated, the first implied birth in

---

[35] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Women," in *Nation and its Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117.

[36] V.D. Sarvarkar quoted in Satish Deshpande, "Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India," *Public Culture* 102 (October 1988): 251.

Hindustan (ancestral homeland of the Hindus). Significantly, Sarvarkar refers to India as *Hindustan*, as opposed to Bharat. The second term, *Jati*, or "caste," meant that a person's dynastic lineage was preserved through the caste system. Any attempts to undo the caste hierarchy would mean that the caste purity would be tainted. Therefore, the institution of an arranged marriage would, in many cases, maintain the *jati* of a family. The third concept of *sanskriti* implied the shared cultural knowledge of participating in the performative aspects of the rituals in religious ceremonies. But Sarvarkar's idea of Hinduism was also more violent. He writes:

> If the population of the Hindus dwindles and the strength of the other faith outnumbers them, then there would be serious threat to the building of peace and prosperity, nay to the idea of Hindustan . . .. This suicidal policy, which allowed Hindu girls to be converted to other religions, must change. Non-Hindu girls should be converted and married and assimilated. This dynamic Hinduism must be adopted.[37]

The institution of an arranged marriage thus not only protected the religious beliefs and sexuality of Hindu women, but as Zutshi notes, "Hindu and non-Hindu alike had to be brought under male Hindu control."[38] The theme of an arranged marriage also lent support to the institution of a joint family, but placed a great deal of emphasis on honor, chastity, and virginity of women in the family. According to Sarvarkar, marriage within the caste also reinscribed the ideas about caste purity.

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun is promoted as a modern epic, paralleling the virtues found in the *Ramayana*. For two thousand years, the *Ramayana* continues to influence the politics, religion,

---

[37] Somnath Zutshi, "Women, Nation and the Outsider in Contemporary Hindi Cinema," in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*. Eds. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, Vivek Dhareshwar (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1995), 90.

[38] Ibid.

and art of modern India. The epic endorses the exemplar rule by the Hindu King Ram, and reinforces the caste divisions in Hindu society. The *Ramayana* is also important in the expression of normative gender roles and in the construction of relationships between husband and wife with Ram and Sita as role models. It upholds the idea of duty or *dharma* by the patriarch at the cost of the feminine characters. In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* versions of the *Ramayana* are frequently recalled in the conversations between the family members, and the character of Sita is evoked to indoctrinate the young bride, for instance. The text becomes the focal point for the construction of relationships between the family members. The hierarchy of the older patriarchs like Pooja's father-in-law, her father, and her uncle, are always maintained. They became the decision-makers for the family, and their often harsh decisions are never countered or criticized. The married women always appeared respectfully with their heads covered, and they never addressed their spouses by their first name, in an act of deference.

The relationship between the younger brothers, Rajesh and Prem, was evocative of the relationship between Rama and Laksman, the main protagonists of the *Ramayana.* As is known, Laksman followed his elder brother in the forest after the exile of Rama was announced. Laksman gave up his life as a married man and left his wife at the kingdom of Ayodhya to serve his brother. Laksman is symbolic of devotion, service, and self-sacrifice to his elder brother. Similarly Prem sacrifices his love for Nisha when the family members decide that she should marry Prem's older brother Rajesh after her sister's death. In order for the young infant to have a loving mother, Prem justifies this action. Nisha, on the other hand, accepts the alliance mistakenly, when she assumes that she would be married to Prem. Upon discovery that she was instead chosen to marry her brother-in-law, she tearfully but dutifully accepts this decision. In an instant, the young lovers reconcile to their fate, accept it as their duty toward their family, and decide to bury their love for each other.

The ancient practice of marrying one's brother-in-law was resurrected in the filmic space. No longer prevalent in contemporary times, this rule was invoked only on rare occasions. If a young woman was widowed, she was married to her husband's brother to keep the property within the family and to protect her children's rights. This was also allowed if a man lost his young wife. If the woman had a younger sibling, she was married to her brother-in-law to raise his children and to fill the void his wife left behind. The filmmaker selectively draws upon the past and conveniently redeploys a tradition to endorse his imaginary construction of a Hindu joint family.

Kailashnath, the uncle of Rajesh and Prem, put aside his decision to marry so that he could bring up the orphaned brothers and fulfill his dream to be a successful businessman. This sacrifice is the reason for their material success and, thus, the economic importance of the joint family is stressed on many occasions as well. The setting up of an industrial unit for his younger brother became Rajesh's dream. The dharma, or divine duty, of each of the family members was stressed, to maintain the delicate balance of relationships. After the birth of Pooja's child, at the family reunion the large family of elders who are addressed as *kakaji* (paternal uncle), *mamaji* (maternal uncle), *mamiji* (aunt), break into another song (Figure 9). Each of these forms of address identifies their relationship within the Hindu joint family. The aspect of *sanskriti* (shared culture) as enumerated by Sarvarkar is evident in the familial settings of weddings, *antakshiris* (popular song-games) and rituals about gift giving. Familiar cultural experiences are constantly evoked in this film to stress regional peculiarities. The film thus inculcates the values of an ideal joint family; the hierarchy of the patriarchal heads that imparts wisdom and guidance to the younger generations is strictly maintained. The film promotes nostalgia and longing for the now almost nonexistent, large, upper-caste feudal families. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* in its construction of a joint family also portrays how economic safety is anchored in large families.

Rustom Bharucha also draws attention to the concept of love within the family. Wealth and riches are also synonymous with keeping the family together. But this politics of including many relatives, also serves ultimately to keep those without money and those belonging to the lower castes out.[39] The construction of a joint family also reinforces orthodox religious values. Furthermore, caste hierarchy and dynastic lineage are proudly showcased in the narrative.

The home-centered narrative becomes the focus of the film. In the process of adapting this theme, it upset the earlier Bollywood genre of action, sex, and violence; instead, the camera turns to the interior spaces of a home for the structure of its narrative. The kitchen with its displays of gadgets became a space for cooking, banter, and even love between Nisha and Prem. During Pooja's pregnancy when Nisha visits her sister, she is asked to cook food for Prem. After proving her talents in cooking, she visibly impresses Prem. As Nisha is busy preparing food for the next day, Prem breaks into a song. The checkerboard kitchen tiles, the leafy vegetables and shining utensils form the backdrop for the song (Figure 10). He woos Nisha and confesses his undying love for her. The song *Pehla Pehla Pyar hai* (our first love) marks the beginning of desire and passion between the younger couple. They dance to the tune of lilting music with the kitchen as the backdrop. The dining table also becomes the site of consumption and for many events and rituals, as it is always stacked with plates of fruit and home-cooked food.

Decisions from matrimonial alliances to business deals are all made in the confines of the house. The bedroom, the luxurious courtyard with the swimming pool, and the sprawling estate is where the family lives as each day of their lives unfolds. The inner spaces of the home which, in India, were constantly invaded by Western media and satellite television with American soaps like *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, became the spaces that needed to be

---

[39]Rustom Bharucha, "Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 15, 1995): 804.

protected and sanitized from the effects of globalization. The issues of adultery, incest, and sex portrayed through satellite television are countered and resisted in the filmic narrative of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* The filmic space thus insulates itself, society, and the nation from the cultural onslaught of the media and the cultural effects of globalization. The complexities and realities of the pressure faced by the middle-class institutions of religion, caste, and marriage were effaced to offer neat solutions to the destablization that the market economy was bringing.

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun also established a genre that filmmakers capitalized on in an attempt to lure the middle classes back to the cinema halls. The technology of the videocassette, the popularity of television serials aired on Doordarshan, and the violent movies targeted to the working class audience led to the abandonment of the cinema halls by the affluent classes.[40] After films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, cinema once again regained its former status as the premiere mode of recreation and leisure for the middle classes. Every major blockbuster in the nineties incorporated extravagant wedding scenes and improvised on them. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1998), and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1999), to name only a few, made the emotional melodrama of marriage as the main narrative of the film. This decade witnesses the resurrection of home-centered narratives where celebration and the preservation of this institution became the preoccupation of the middle class. The outdoor world of corruption, violence, and the harsh reality of the subaltern, a subject matter that was the focal point of cinema of the eighties, were rejected in exchange for the depiction of the affluent, urban, middle-class family. The cinema in the seventies and the eighties was a space where the social realties of the disenfranchised, minorities, and women could be negotiated; but

---

[40] Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 10-11.

the blockbusters like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* efface this dialogue, where the sole preoccupation of the filmmaker is in the portrayal of the class which gained considerable ground both economically and politically.

2.1 The Realm of the Pure Versus the Impure

The filmmaker was applauded on many occasions for directing a clean film. *The Limca Book of Records* conferred the People of the Year award for 1996 on Barjatya for "his freshness of approach in providing clean wholesome entertainment."[41] The preoccupation with clean cinema had deeper connotations. This idea not only had its affiliations with the theme of an arranged marriage which allowed for the preservation of a pure and legitimate dynastic lineage, but it also alludes to the moral content which was then entangled with issues of censorship in the context of Bollywood cinema. The debate of pure versus impure and the clean versus unclean interestingly alluded to the sexual content of the film. By "clean, wholesome entertainment," the critics meant that there were no sexual overtones or any allusions to sex in the film. Through this preoccupation with being "clean cinema," the film positions itself in the ongoing debates about nudity and sexuality in the highly fraught public spaces in India, including cinema.

Popular film has debated issues of morality since the early fifties. As the Bollywood film evolved from its early religious mythological genre to musicals, issues about censorship and the moral code of cinema were vehemently debated. As Chakravarty notes, "In 1954, 13,000 women of Delhi signed a petition for the prime minister, asking him to curb the evil influence of cinema as it made their children play truant from school, acquire precocious sex habits, indulge

---

[41] "People of the Year award, Sooraj Barjatya." in *Limca Book of Records* (New Delhi: New Delhi Publishers, 1996), 81.

in misdemeanors, and the like."[42] Taking this as a cue, the zone of censorship was an embattled one in the liberalized economy of the nineties. At the core of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun's* acceptance and popularity in official circles lay the debate about clean and pure cinema. With the liberalized markets, the puritanical ideology of the Right was trying to set a moral code for media; if this discourse was ignored, one could fail to grasp the implications of Barjatya's film and the moral code it was setting. For example, the Shivsena, an arm of the Hindu Right, came into power in Mumbai after winning all local elections. Immediately labeled the moral police by filmmakers and the popular press, the Shiv Sena scrutinized the media and targeted advertisement campaigns that advocated free sex and nudity in an effort to protect children, society, and the Indian/Hindu family from vulgarity in the public sphere. Nandagonkar, appointed by the state government as the president of the Stage Performances Scrutiny Board of Maharashtra, writes, "Literature, drama and films are the base for our cultural values. We should make sure that these are clean. We are not after anyone but these are the best ways to clean society. We should give people good values."[43] In a short-term appointment as Information Minister in 1996, Sushma Swaraj made headlines with her remarks that women news readers on Doordarshan "expose more than they should."[44] Swaraj's remarks were immediately followed by a blanket ban on advertisements for the AIDS campaign. She stated, "For the AIDS campaign I have said that we should change it around to advocate sex only with your life partner instead of stressing only on safe sex."[45] In an effort to enforce puritanical thinking on society,

---

[42] Sumita Chakravarty, "The Film Industry and the State, The Dynamics of Cultural Legitimation," in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 72-73.

[43] Maria Abraham, "Cleansing Culture," *The Week* (May 17, 1998): 5-6.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

the members of the Right Wing targeted advertisement campaigns and placed nearly 3,500 serials being aired on satellite television under scrutiny.[46] In particular, popular American soap operas such as *Baywatch* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* were singled out for corrupting morals of children.[47]

In May 1994, a meeting was convened by the Minister for Information and Broadcasting with the Censorboard, members of the National Commission for Women, cable television operators, and members of the film industry. The Hindu Right, under the leadership of Uma Bharati, demanded that the criminal law of obscenity, the civil law of indecent representation of women, and the regulations and guidelines of the Film Censor board be more strictly enforced.[48] The Indian censor board came down heavily on Mira Nair's *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* (1995) and the *Bandit Queen* (1995), a film directed by Shekhar Kapoor. As Ratna Kapur argues, "The Hindu Right regarded obscenity as a violation of the woman's traditional identity in roles as wives and mothers. Respect for tradition and family values constitute the basis of the Right's position."[49] In a press release, the filmmaker of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* claimed to emancipate the viewer, particularly the female audiences, from the macabre sexual violence of the films of the eighties. For example, a film like *Zakhmi Aurat* (The Wounded Woman), released in 1988, chronicles the trials and tribulations of a woman police officer who was raped; her only recourse to justice was to murder her assailants after the courts denied her justice. Violence against

---

[46] Ratna Kapur, "The Profanity of Prudery: The Moral Face of Obscenity Law in India," *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol. 8. No. 3 (1997): 3-4.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ratna Kapur argued that such a position of protest "ultimately ends up endorsing the censorship of sexually explicit representations. Rather than challenging the idea of sex and sexuality as evil and corrupting, it ends up reinforcing this idea. And it is also an argument that has created an uncomfortable alliance between feminists, the state and the Hindu Right." See Ratna Kapur, "The Profanity of Prudery: The Moral Face of Obscenity Law in India," *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol. 8. No. 3 (1997): 1-19.

[49] Ibid.

women either within the home or within the public sphere is a standard trope of mainstream Bollywood film. To be sure, although there are many problems in Hindi films such as *Zakhmi Aurat*, they offer a space of dialogue for social issues like rape and domestic violence that are looming large in Indian society.

In its bid to position itself as a clean film, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* suppresses sexual politics and upholds the Hindu patriarchal norms of control that force women and the lower castes to assume a subservient status, not by violence, but by constant ideological indoctrination. The film, as a representation, also runs into the danger of being co-opted into the ideology of the Hindu Right. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, thus hailed as the prototype for cinema in the nineties, is "seductive and soothing, reversing the effects of the global invasion of culture, implicitly asserting the permanence and stability of all the institutions under pressure: joint family, patriarchy, religion and the nation."[50]

It is important to mention that the monolithic model of an ideal Hindu marriage presented in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* was being questioned, resisted, and even counteracted in film and popular fiction, and its relation to the above-mentioned institutions like the joint family, patriarchy, religion, and nation were being questioned and debated in the political economy of the nineties. In the realm of literature in the English language, Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee's anthology of short stories titled *An Arranged Marriage* effectively brings to the fore the economic and social realities of Hindu women negotiating within the institution of an arranged marriage in the global economy. The stories, on more than one occasion, reveals the social stigma attached to divorce. It resists stereotyping of women and brings a new dimension to the

---

[50] Priyadarshini Garg, "Movie Review: Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," in *The Times of India*, (September 5, 1995) 7c.

understanding of the politics of ritual as well as the institution amidst the global realities of migration and culture flows.[51]

In the cinematic medium, two art house films, *Fire* (1996), directed by Deepa Mehta, and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) by Mira Nair, seek to question the institution of Hindu marriage by directly engaging with women's agency, an issue completely evacuated from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. *Fire* met with protest from the Hindu Right in major cinema halls located across metropolitan cities in India. In comparison to *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, Fire* first and foremost debunks the ideal imagery of a Hindu household that *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* set out to construct and preserve. Interestingly, *Fire* also advances the narrative through two women in a joint family. The painful marriages of the two sisters-in-law in *Fire* rendered dysfunctional by their spouses, and the subsequent exploration of their lesbian identities, is in stark contrast to the moral and pious family of Barjatya's film. The two sisters-in-law Radha (Shabana Aazmi) and recently married Sita (Nandita Das) are sexually dissatisfied in their respective marriages. Radha's husband Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) is on a spiritual journey, and is practicing celibacy. He has not had sexual contact with her for many years.

The filmmaker makes references to the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi who espoused similar views about practicing sexual restraint in marriage. Gandhi writes, "The very purpose of marriage is restraint and sublimation of the sexual appetite."[52] Gandhi, as is well known, struggled with the issue of sexual pleasure in marriage and the filmmaker uses Gandhi as a spiritual exemplar for Ashok's character.

---

[51] Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee, *Arranged Marriage: An Anthology of Short Stories,*(New York: Anchor Publications, 1995): 1-320.

[52] Quoted in Sudir Kakkar, *Intimate relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 95.

Ashok's younger brother Jatin (Javeed Jafri) has an extramarital affair and sells pornography on the sly in the video store he owns. The sexual overtones of the film are quite in contrast to the narrative in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.* The film *Fire* is equally about excess and restraint in the character of the two brothers. It portrays the opposing personalities of the two brothers one who exemplifies sexual restraint and the other who is sexually licentitiousness. Instead of the religious piety and invocation of the textual *Ramayana* we witness the servant Mundu (Ranjit Choudhary) masturbating in front of the televised *Ramayana.* It would also be necessary to point out that *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* presents itself as a film of the upper class and caste, while *Fire* is based on the life of people who are less fortunate. While the protagonists of *Fire* live in a congested urban space in the city of Lucknow, Barjatya's film is set in a small, unspecified town in northern India in a large palatial home. It is very interesting that the two films, parallel one another in the narrative by basing the story on the lives of two married couples within the joint family along with a male servant who is an integral part of both families. Laloo the servant in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* reveres Pooja, and is conscious of his lower-caste birth; he always bows his head in respect when he speaks with her. Mundu on the other hand has sexual fantasies about Radha and is angered when she snaps at him. The two brothers in Barjatya's film are English educated, and their business is international, while the men in *Fire* run a small, home-based business. This, in turn, determines the different expectations and pressures the women are subjected to.

Mira Nair's film *Monsoon Wedding*, released in 2001, represents an upper, middle-class family in the capital city of New Delhi, who are in the midst of planning a grand wedding. The central theme of the film is an arranged marriage between an increasingly global diasporic set of families. The wedding becomes the site for exploring the sexual identities of many of the characters in the film. The agency that women possess and their negotiation with the institution

of an arranged marriage are indeed complicated. Lalit Varma (Naseeruddin Shah) and Pimmi (Lillette Dubey) are the parents of Aditi, the young bride, who have had their share of ups and downs in their own traditional arranged marriage. Their families come together from around the globe to participate in the wedding. The frustrations involved in planning the wedding, the economic reality of the events, and the often-difficult process of communication between the two families, all of which are totally effaced in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, are the highlights of the film. The film is successful in bringing to the front the vexed relationship between women and the globalized consumer society in India. Nair also uses the medium to comment on incest and rape of a minor, which poses a moral conundrum for the family. *Monsoon Wedding* also presents the viewer with the striking contrasts that exist in the capital city of New Delhi. The expensive stores and sprawling homes with their blend of high fashion and sophistication are diametrically opposed to the small and crowded home of P.K. Dubey, the event manager, for instance. The filmmaker makes a comment on the economic class structures that exist in the city. Instead of presenting the wedding as a simple event, *Monsoon Wedding* accepts the global modernity and the complexity of a cosmopolitan lifestyle that the middle classes have adapted to in the past decade after the policy of liberalization. The reality of dysfunctional marriages, pre-martial affairs and incest figure in the space of the narrative. The very existence of the institution of an arranged marriage, its elasticity and contradictions are portrayed very successfully.

Both *Fire* and *Monsoon Wedding* raise important issues about the stereotypical representations of the chaste modern Hindu family, which the commercial cinema perpetuates. The eroticized and sexually fraught spaces of this institution in these films often challenge and even resist the narrative of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* with its asexualized and stereotypical representation of the institution of an arranged marriage.

Chapter 3- The Women's Question

Framing the discourse about gender and the commercial Hindi film is contentious, multifaceted, and fragmentary. The Bollywood film has often been accused of perpetuating a "gaze" that is essentially male where the body of the woman becomes the site for the creation of morals, codes and myths. An analysis of gender reveals the traditional roles women are assigned: homemakers, mothers, and dutiful daughters, lovers and seductresses, and especially the courtesan. But caution has to be exercised as Chakravarty argues:

> We are indebted to (the first phase of) feminist film theory for our awareness of woman in cinema as "object of the male gaze," the commodified image as fetish, and the independent woman who is not so independent after all. The cinemas are culture-specific and nation-specific, so that distinctive Indian modes of critique have to evolve that directly address different systems of meaning and signification. A feminist reading of patriarchy that would view all versions of woman as signifiers as one and the same is in danger of producing its own brand of essentialism and universalism.[53]

Chakravarty also rightly points out how the entire repertoire of the different roles of women in Indian cinema has not been explored in a systematic way, though the more obvious ones have been singled out. Keeping the above argument in mind, I would like to clarify here that my analysis deals with the subjectivity of the upper caste Hindu woman. While the Hindi film has portrayed and dealt with issues of and about women from many socioeconomic backgrounds and castes, the cinema of the nineties has largely sought to engage with the identity of the upper-caste Hindu woman. It is a construction that "not only seeks to reconcile in her subjectivity of the conflicts between tradition and modernity in Indian society, but works also to deny the actual conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives."[54] *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* weaves its narrative around the two sisters Pooja and Nisha who belong to

---

[53] Sumita Chakravarty, "Woman and the Burden of Postcoloniality: The Courtesan Film Genre," in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 273.

[54] Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, "Real and Imagined Women, Politics and/of Representation," in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 129.

upper-caste Hindu families. The politics of marriage indeed emerges as a contentious zone entangled in nationalist politics in colonial India and in the fundamentalist politics of *Hindutva*, and can be further located within the discourses of globalization and the media.

To further illustrate the above point, the institution of an arranged marriage has always posed a dilemma to the emergent middle classes and is perceived differently in the various economic classes and castes. Since the 1960s and continuing today the Sunday edition of the *Times of India*, the nation's largest circulating daily, has devoted numerous pages to the matrimonial column, featuring advertisements for eligible grooms and brides. The sections of the column divide the criteria into two distinct parts. One of the sections, entitled *Cosmopolitan*, carries advertisements for single people interested in marrying outside of their caste. This means that the eligible groom and bride are not restricted to marrying within their traditional castes, are more open to accepting partners from other religions, are willing to transgress boundaries of regions (which implies different attitudes about language as well), and are also not particular about matching their astrological charts. Beginning in the early eighties, it also signaled that the potential partners were open to moving overseas. In another section titled *Traditional*, this column features men and women interested in marrying within the *varna* system. The subsequent pages carry advertisements listed under each caste and regional state. These potential brides and grooms believe in maintaining and protecting religious affinities and the more orthodox beliefs of consulting the astrological charts for an auspicious match. Within a decade of globalizing of the economy, eligible partners from both sections were willing to start lives abroad, but the division still remains. It is also important to point out that these advertisements were only supported by middle-class families and the upwardly mobile, and were accessed by the people of certain economic classes. The two sections of the Sunday newspaper reveal the

currency, and seriousness of the institution, but also the anxiety, the elasticity and the divisive ideas and beliefs about the system. Generally speaking, this trend signals how some groups of individuals in the middle classes in India perceive themselves as part of a more global, cosmopolitan community, while others still want to maintain, preserve, and abide by the more traditional boundaries of caste, religion, and regionalism.

The characters of Pooja and Nisha and Radha and Sita are emblematic of the shifting, varied, and reconstituted positions of the upper-caste woman in the decade of the nineties. Pooja represents the woman who was poised, more in control of her emotions, and also fits the description of the ideal daughter-in-law for her husband's family. At one point in the film, when the bride was about to cross the threshold of her in-laws' home, a discussion between her in-laws alludes to the phenomenal amount of dowry, the cars, and diamond necklaces that Pooja brings to her new family. While the mother-in-law asks the value of the goods, her husband reminds her that it was unimportant as they had in their possession a true Sita, visually affirming the importance of *dharma* or duty in the new home. The father-in-law bestows Pooja with a hefty volume of the *Ramayana* (Figure 11).

In an essay published in 1989 entitled "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics," Sally Sutherland brings up an interesting issue. Sita and Draupadi are the central female characters in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*, respectively. Sita, as is well known, maintained throughout her ordeal of separation and kidnap a submissive nature to her husband's duty or *dharma*. However, Draupadi is often aggressive and outspoken and challenges her trauma with anger on many occasions. Sutherland argues that in a survey in Northern India, from a list of twenty-four goddesses an overwhelming percentage of young men and women chose Sita for their ideal female role model. This trait of an ideal wife

stills resonates in many parts of India.[55] The film drew analogies between Sita and Pooja, keeping Sita in the public imagination. The film invokes the fundamentalist idea of *RamRajya* or the "ideal imaginary kingdom of Ram," ruled by the just Hindu patriarch Ram, and seeks to preserve the pure and legitimate dynastic lineage. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and Bollywood cinema in general draw upon the epics like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* to construct a complex array of characters. Numerous feminine characters like the pious Sita, the destructive Kali, and devoted Shakuntala provided inspiration and complexity to the female characters portrayed in popular cinema. Pooja, in her role as the elder sister, is a devout Hindu wife and daughter-in-law. She always wears the traditional sari, with her head covered, as a sign of respect to her in-laws' family; the red vermilion or *sindoor* on her forehead, as well as the *bindi* or dot; and the *mangalsutra,* or auspicious thread, symbolic of her status as a married, upper-caste Hindu woman. She is demure and participates seriously in all the family religious rituals. In her controlled desire and sexuality as well as her chastity, she is favorably compared to Sita.

In a section of the film when it is revealed to the family that she is pregnant, her *devar* (brother-in-law) Prem breaks into a song. He sings, *Pehli kiran jabse uge, bhabhi meri tabse jage* (Sister-in-law, you are a treasure trove of happiness. The moment the first sunbeam appears my sister-in-law awakes. She gives her attention to everyone; she works until the evening ends). Pooja is thus defined in the song as hard working and conscientious, and her sincerity in her duties as a daughter-in-law is praised. For instance, in a tense and emotional moment in the film, Pooja asks her husband to go ahead with his plans for a business trip to set up the factory for his younger brother, even though she has to forgo his support during the crucial last days of her pregnancy.

---

[55] Sally J. Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 1 (January-March 1989): 63-81.

Nisha, on the other hand, has a more distinct personality and is the rebellious and outspoken one of the two sisters. She uses her sexuality and charm to articulate her desire and attract her boyfriend Prem who also happens to be her elder sister's brother-in-law. Before Nisha visits her sister, she is advised to observe and emulate her sister in order to become a devout homemaker later. This sets Nisha thinking as she sings, "*Chocolate, lime juice, ice cream, toffiyan, abtak yeh thi meri sahelian. Par mujhe lagta hai ab yeh sab atkhelian,* (Chocolate, lime juice, ice cream, that was before, where do my years be now. Dolls, toys, and my friends: they all seem to me now like things of the past). From a stubborn and sometimes impolite young woman, she is domesticated and reformed to earn the love, praise, and admiration of Prem. Nisha's character is slowly transformed in the light of her sister's traumatic death. As Sunder Rajan notes,

> The polarization, in any case, subtly deconstructs itself into continuity: the young woman's freedom, (here Nisha's), because it precedes marriage and domesticity and will therefore be "naturally" tamed by them in due course, makes her youth a sanctioned space for a last fling of rebellion. The "new woman" does not, in either case, jeopardize the notion of a tradition, which is preserved intact in the idealized conjugal and domestic sphere.[56]

The attitudes toward femininity and marriage were also the center of debates in women's magazines targeted to middle women in urban centers. According to the National Readership Survey (NRS) in 2001, the reader base in urban India has grown by fifty two percent from 63 million to 96 million. *Griha Shobha* (Beautiful Home), a Hindi language magazine, was the most widely circulated magazine in urban India. English language magazines like *Woman's Era* and *Femina* are the most popular in the urban regions of the country. While it is difficult to ascertain how regional women's magazines circulated and were received, it would be a fruitful

---

[56] Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, "Real and Imagined Women, Politics and/of Representation," *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 135.

exercise to see how the English language magazines naturalize marriage as part of a good Indian tradition and construct it as the basis of a middle class woman's existence.

Woman's Era and *Femina* embody varying attitudes towards marriage, home and women. It is through advising women about the various aspects of the institution of marriage that *Woman's Era* consolidates its position. Heera Nawaz, a reporter researching the politics of marriage for an article in the magazine, writes "Marriage may be termed old fashioned by feminists, but it is the basis of a stable social life... Some people influenced by the western ideology would claim that marriage is absolutely not essential. ...These relationships flourish in Western countries, but in India, such an attitude would only be looked upon as very loose living with no values and meaning."[57] The magazine has a distinctly conservative attitude towards marriage and conveniently construes feminism as aberrant and anti marriage. In other columns titled *Are you a divorcee?* and *How I saved my Marriage* the editor apparently only solicits divorce stories that express regret. The stories warn that the stigma of a divorce is often borne by the woman and she is ultimately held responsible for the loss of honor and has to bear untold economic hardship. The sole responsibility of saving the marriage often is placed on the woman and her courage and sacrifice to put up patiently with her spouse or in-laws are lauded.[58]

Femina, on the other hand, constructs the modern woman secure in her cosmopolitan modernity, one who negotiates her roles as a modern professional and as a traditional homemaker with playful and confident ease. It also projects the global marketplace where high fashion, and the cosmopolitan chic of the western marketplace are successfully blended with an Indian touch. *Femina* is also linked to the fashion pageants and is responsible for the success

---

[57] K. Srilata, "The Story of the Up- Market' Reader: *Femina's* 'New Woman' and the Normative Feminist Subject in *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 32-33 (January- March, 2000): 34-37.

[58] Ibid.

India has had with the Miss India and the Miss Universe Contests.[59] While both magazines encompass different ideological positions and have staked a visibly different identity in the political economy of the nineties, it is important to point out that they essentially exist in a depoliticised space completely disassociated from the realities of women of the lower castes. While *Woman's Era* takes on a more conservative role in advocating marriage, *Femina* embodies the ideas of women who are situated comfortably in global capitalism.

3.1 The Choli Controversy

The chartbuster *Didi tera devar dewaana* was one of the most popular songs between the years 1994-1996. In this song Nisha matures into a woman who is very much in control of her sexuality. The song commemorates her sister's baby shower. Yet it marks a moment of rupture in the film. The song symbolizes sexual desire in an overt manner in a narrative where any reference to sexuality is completely omitted. Performed by Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) at the venue for the baby shower, the song recreates the culture of the *zenana* or the space designated only for women to come together for the celebration of fertility rites, baby showers and premarital festivities. Denoted in contemporary India as a 'ladies function' it becomes a socially sanctioned and accepted space where women can articulate desire.

In this space Nisha is allowed to transgress the boundaries of sexual control and morals. With the stage set for the elaborate festivities, the chartbuster begins with Nisha hooking her choli (short blouse) and quite so without a brassiere. Nisha pretends to be a pregnant woman and Prem's cousin Rita (Sahila Chhadha) impersonates him. Together Nisha and Rita as wife and husband, but also mimicking Prem, narrate through the device of humor the ordeal of a pregnant

[59] K. Srilata, "The Story of the Up- Market' Reader: *Femina's* 'New Woman' and the Normative Feminist Subject" *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 32-33, (January-March 2000): 43-44.

woman. The wife asks for foods pregnant women crave such as lemons but only to be given the opposite by the careless husband. For example, the *khattai* (sour foods) are substituted by *mithai* (sweet foods). In the very beginning of the song Nisha also complains about his roving eye. *Didi tera devar deewnana hai ram kudiyon ko dale daana, dhandha hai yeh uska puraana hai ram kudiyon ko dale daana.* (Oh sister! exclaims Nisha, your brother-in-law / Prem has a roving eye and is always attracting the opposite sex. In fact he is so careless that when I ask him to get me foods he being so forgetful in watching other women gets me exactly the opposite of what I crave.) The song has a scene where Nisha and Rita/Prem pretend to have sex with Nisha complaining he has got her pregnant and that is why she is at unease (Figure 12). The song portrays Rita/Prem disrobing her, and Nisha trying to push him away. But soon after she sings *Mushkil hai yu mujhko fasaana hai ram kudiyon ko dale daana* (it is difficult to trick me), Nisha pulls out a huge pillow to reveal that his attempts to seduce her and get her pregnant have failed. The women at the function in turn receive this final plot with loud applause.

Superstar Madhuri Dixit, cast as Nisha in the film, wears a sexy and revealing *choli* which was very popular with young brides and fashion magazines (Figure 13). Infact, her provocative dress was marketed aggressively in the various stills of the film. The *choli* instantly makes visual references to the larger debates in the visual culture of the nineties, with actress Madhuri Dixit at the center of the controversy. It is her costume the controversial *choli* that brings back the vexed question of censorship.

In 1993, the song *Choli ke pechee kya hai* (What is behind the blouse?) featured in the Bollywood film *Khalnayak* with Madhuri Dixit in the lead role plunged the nation into a debate about morality.[60] A chartbuster, the song portrays Madhuri Dixit as Radha seducing a suspected

[60] Monika Mehta, "What is Behind Film Censorship: The *Khalnayak* Debates," *Jouvert* 5, 3 (October 2001): 2.

terrorist. Based on a folk song, the raunchy number in the thriller *Khalnayak* references the breasts of women. Radha /Madhuri Dixit in a backless and very short *choli,* Madhuri gyrates rather suggestively to the song (Figure 14). With her outstretched hand pointing in the direction of the Khalnayak (Sunjay Dutt), immersed in her dance, Radha/Madhuri tells the audience in the film and outside of it that she has a heart brimming with love (covered by the short choli), intended solely for her lover. The sequined red dress combined with the accessories made of ivory and the rhythm of the song are modeled on the Gujarati and Kutchi, tribal and pastoral communities and their associated culture. The sexually explicit lyrics of the song ignited a controversy where urban audiences, the censor board and the Hindu Right were all involved. Several public interest petitions filed by women's groups, the Bharatiya Janata Party and others claimed that the song was "not only obscene but derogatory to women."[61] The nation was embroiled in a huge debate about the corrupting morals of cinema. Some called for stringent action, while others claimed that a certain degree of sexual licentiousness was permissible in contemporary liberalized India. In her analysis of the controversy Monika Mathur brings two interesting issues to the fore. Closely scrutinizing both the lyrics, and the camera angles, she concludes that:

> The song was disruptive because the visual and verbal representation combined to produce female sexual desire. It was the articulation of this desire that was the problem –it posited that women were not only sexual objects but subjects as well. In this controversy, what needs to be problematized is both the repression of female sexuality and the commodification of female sexuality in the name of Indian tradition-and what needs to be explored further is the possibility of women's sexual agency.[62]

---

[61] Monika Mehta, "What is Behind Film Censorship: The *Khalnayak* Debates," *Jouvert* 5, 3 (October 2001): 4

[62] Ibid.

In her research Mathur also points to the fact that these performances are pleasurable to women in middle class homes, where the expression of sexuality is contained and controlled.[63] But the actual controversy and debates could be very well over the space that cinema allows. Madhuri/Radha in *Khalnayak* had after all transgressed the controlling private space to perform her sensual dance in front of a terrorist in the public sphere. Viewing Madhuri's (Nisha's) performance of *didi tera dewar diwana* (Oh sister! exclaims Nisha, your brother-in-law / Prem has a roving eye and is always attracting the opposite sex), *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* recontains this sexuality in the appropriate space. It can be said that the permissiveness in the 'ladies function' becomes a site for women to talk about sexuality and desire. It becomes a stage where by impersonating the male characters in the family, they are able to articulate sexual desire and to overturn puritanical moral codes imposed upon them by patriarchy through devices like humor, role-playing and bawdy language. The song within the private space of the 'ladies function' becomes a space for Nisha to speak about her love and her lover, and to articulate her desire for a flirtatious sexual liaison.

While the controversy over the references to the *choli* were very much part of national debates about sexuality, it was still part of the public imaginary in the posters and post-cards circulated by the filmmakers of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. The two-piece ensemble of *choli* and *sari* had a life beyond the film becoming one of the popular dresses in weddings that season. Madhuri Dixit (Nisha) and Prem (Salman Khan) seated together by the pool, share a quiet moment after her foot tapping number at the baby shower (Figure15). Salman Khan's body faces the audience while Madhuri offers her back revealing a backless purple choli. Dramatically draped in a purple sari, which is heavily embroidered, and barefoot, she is quite a

[63] Monika Mehta, "What is Behind Film Censorship: The *Khalnayak* Debates", *Jouvert* 5, 3 (October 2001): 7.

contrast to Prem dressed in suspenders and cowboy boots. While the purple two-piece ensemble consisting of the *choli* and the *sari* became the most popular dresses in traditional weddings, Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) wearing a sari is fetishized. Her latent sexuality is addressed by the *choli* she wears.

As a visibly impressed member of the film audience, artist and octogenarian M.F. Hussain who saw this film 70 times, proclaimed Madhuri as being emblematic of the icon of "Indian culture." This voluble fascination with the young and talented actress culminated in an exhibition featuring six images by Hussain that cast Madhuri in various mythological constructs of Radha, and the seductive celestial beauty Menaka who seduced the sage Vishwamitra (Figure16). Along with his exhibition catalogue Hussain accompanied each work with a note explaining the painting. Hussain admits that the image is inspired by a large oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma, where the ascetic Vishwamitra raised his hand in a denial to the plea of the celestial Menaka.[64] Hussain claims he tried to "interpret" the mood the former painting evoked, with Madhuri as his muse. [65] In the mythological story that was eventually transformed into a play by Kalidasa, Vishwamitra gives into temptation and breaks his vow of celibacy. Menaka, sent by the Gods, eventually conceives a beautiful daughter, Shakuntala, the main protagonist for Kalidasa's acclaimed fifth-century play *Shakuntala.* Raja Ravi Varma captured this heart-rending story in a series of works commissioned by the royal family of Indore in the nineteenth century.

In Hussain's painting we witness the nymph Menaka in a classic dance pose. In the right hand raised above, a small infant rests. It could symbolize the child who is born to both Menaka and Vishwamitra, who is none other than Shakuntala. The other outstretched hand is pointed in

[64] Maqbool Fida Hussain, *Rare Paintings Signed Fida.* exh.cat. (New Delhi: Art Today, 1995).

[65] Ibid.

the direction of Vishwamitra who covers his face in horror and shame when he realizes he has given into temptation. The skin of a tiger hangs on his naked body.

During the course of the exhibit Hussain proclaimed his desire for a future film project titled *Gajagamini* with Madhuri in the lead role. This fascination with the young actress made headlines in various tabloids, because Hussain is himself a very large personality and prominent in the media. Furthermore, advertisements for the sale of Amul Butter, a leading brand of butter titled "On a leading painter's fascination" made its appearance on billboards in many cities in India in the winter of 1996 (Figure17). Beside the artist with his muse Madhuri is the bold typeset "Heroine Addiction" followed by the logo Amul Butter. "Fida on you", a pun meaning crazy about you, is a witty description as the word Fida also occurs in Hussain's own name "Maqbool Fida Hussain". Drawing extensively on this collaboration with Madhuri, the image portrays the young actress with her backless *choli* and hips in full view, with the artist painting her, this time as the naked lady *Godiva*. The image here recaptures many moments. The dress and posture are reminiscent of Madhuri as Nisha in the song *didi tera dewar deewana* from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. But also we witness Hussain facing an easel with a painting featured in his exhibit. Interestingly, on the back of his shirt we witness the logo of the Congress I government. The symbol signifies Hussain's political affiliations to the right wing government which was led for a long time by the three generations of the Nehru dynasty. Hussain as is well known has depicted various images of Indira Gandhi and discreetly supported the emergency in 1977, which was opposed by many scholars and artists. The emphasis on Madhuri's hips in the painting and the reference to the film titled *Gajagamini* is very obvious (Figure 18).

Gajagamini, a Sanskrit compound word, means woman with the elegant gait of an elephant or woman with swinging hips. The concept finds mention not only in the canons of art and *kavya* (poetry), but also in many plays of Kalidasa, the sixth century dramatist, to describe the

idealized proportions of women, and is an ideal of beauty to be followed in the visual and literary arts. Madhuri's body is marked as the sexual body on all three occasions.

Justifying the exhibit, artist M.F. Hussain said that he was only hoping to bring more people into the gallery, those belonging to working and the middle classes, who had been alienated from the practice and spectatorship of fine art in contemporary India. While on the one hand it was a sarcastic comment on the divide between fine art and mass media, it could also be argued that Hussain was inserting yet another commodity into the art market -Madhuri's body- that would circulate in the capitalist gallery system. The thought of Hussain doing so should hardly come as a surprise, as his early affiliations to the Bombay film industry is well known.[66]

Towards the end of the film, Nisha's sexuality and body are not under her control any more. Instead in an anti-climatic ending on the event of her sister's death, she is chosen to marry her brother-in-law in order to become a surrogate mother to her infant nephew. Her sexuality and desire are contained by the sacrifice she makes. Nisha sacrifices her desire for the honor of her family and reestablishes the idea of dharma, one of the cornerstones of the *Ramayana*. The commercial film not only upholds the identity of women who take on more conservative roles in the liberalized economy, but also represents the "contemporary liberated female figures, elite, westernized professional" (as is evident in the construction of women like Nisha and the intended audience for magazines like *Femina*) who "effortlessly and simultaneously hold on to the traditional values of husband-worship, family nurturance, self-sacrifice and sexual chastity."[67]

---

[66] On numerous occasions in Hussain's biography, mention is made of his early days when he was struggling as a painter. After his migration to Bombay in 1937, he was apprenticed to a painter of cinema billboards. Richard Bartholomew, "Maqbool Fida Hussain", in The *Art of Maqbool Fida Hussain*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975), 32.

[67] Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, "Real and Imagined Women, Politics and/of representation," *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge), 1999, 135.

But films like *Monsoon Wedding* have indeed challenged the commercial Bollywood film where "women (and religion) are made to serve as harmonious symbols of historical continuity rather than as conflictual subjects and sites of conflict." [68] During the entire narrative of the film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, it is constantly stressed that women should be virgins; any attempt to have a relationship outside of marriage is rebuked and condemned.

Sita is held up as the role model to be imitated for the chastity and restraint practiced by her during the period of exile. Aditi, the bride to be in *Monsoon Wedding* has a different dilemma. She is at a crossroad, in her relationship with a married man and her impending marriage. The reslution of this dilemma and her honest discussion of her past with her fiancée is a struggle for her. Her mother Pimmi (Lilette Dubey), who smokes cigarettes in the confines of her bathroom, has marital problems with Aditi's father, Lalit Varma (Naseeruddin Shah) who is under tremendous stress in attempting to balance the finances and expenses related to the wedding. Aditi's father and mother are in conflict as they each have independent ideas about the event. The stress, the harsh reality of the economic hardship of mounting a wedding in India is completely erased in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. The cosmopolitan identity of the urban women in *Monsoon Wedding*, constructed within the institution of an arranged marriage is often strained. But the filmmaker also seeks to point us towards the desire of lower class women like Alice, the maid. Naming her Alice enables Nair to introduce class and religious diversity into her film. Alice's desire to look beautiful and her attraction to P.K. Dubey, the event manager, is yet another focal point of the film. The filmmaker seeks to construct the relationships of people belonging to the lower castes and their differing negotiations with the capitalism in the city. The parameters of the institution and ritual emerge as very fragile and often fragmented in Nair's film. By contrasting the two films one realizes how *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* neatly packages the

[68] Ibid.

tradition of marriage and effaces the shifting realities of the ritual in the political economy of the nineties. The women protagonists in *Monsoon Wedding* have more agency, but are also urban women who are in the process of constructing their identities in the fast paced cosmopolitan lifestyle in New Delhi. The construction of gender stereotypes, which in a film like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* is central to the narrative, is also being shaped continuously in the media and the popular press. But films like *Monsoon Wedding* critique these conservative positions and reshape the thinking about not only upper caste woman's identity but also the negotiation of desire in a lower class woman like Alice.

Conclusion:

Retracing my steps back to the questions I raised about the resonance of this film, I would like to sift through the trajectories my project has taken. The visual imagery examined in the course of my project has functioned as a frame of reference to articulate the currency of debates about arranged marriages in the media. The image from *India Today* of the young couple Pooja and Agnivesh Aggarwal at a private wedding, in 2001 was the starting point for my argument about the politics of consumption showcased in a Hindu wedding. Furthermore, actress-turned-politician Jayalalitha's staging of a grand wedding to maneuver public opinion in the forthcoming elections functions as an example of how the ritual of marriage can be propagandistic and manipulative in contemporary politics. Nationalist politics too have discussed the institution of marriage, which has prefigured as a major debate in the construction of nation and of women. This in turn signals how the "women's question" is entangled in the sites of nationalist and fundamentalist politics. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Susie Tharu have advanced the discourses about how patriarchy imparts its own ideology to women and imposes a code of conduct at appropriate times in the nation's history. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and its depiction of a North Indian Hindu wedding are deeply embedded in the debates of home and nation. My analysis of gender has revealed how the two women Pooja and Nisha are the sites of construction of contemporary ideas about femininity. The visual rhetoric of the film frequently frames the sexual politics of marriage and femininity in a conservative manner, only to be critiqued and challenged in more recent, alternative films like *Monsoon Wedding* and Fire. The contrast has proved to be fruitful to view other films based on the theme of an arranged marriage and how they can provide a critical counterpoint to the visual representation of a Hindu wedding.

The very conservative and orthodox portrayal of a Hindu wedding in Barjatya's film also reinscribes and endorses the geopolitical boundaries *Hindutva* was trying to demarcate and perpetuate. This is evinced in the stereotypical representations of the myth of the joint family, of the role of women, and moreover in the relationships among family members. The desire to maintain and advocate the boundaries of caste and class hierarchies and to propagate dynastic lineage is showcased in the film.

In my work I have also pointed to the numerous debates about censorship and sexuality that were ongoing when the film was released. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* also positions itself in these debates about moral codes for cinema. The conservative view that the Hindu right was trying to enforce in the media coalesces with the vision of the filmmaker. The insertion of actress Madhuri Dixit as Nisha further complicates the debates about censorship and sexuality in this vexed terrain of mass media. The site of the film is further entangled in debates of cinema, art and the other visual media like advertisements. Thus in my project I have focused on the theme of arranged marriage in film to interrogate the many layers of complexities, and to place it within current cultural and political debates.

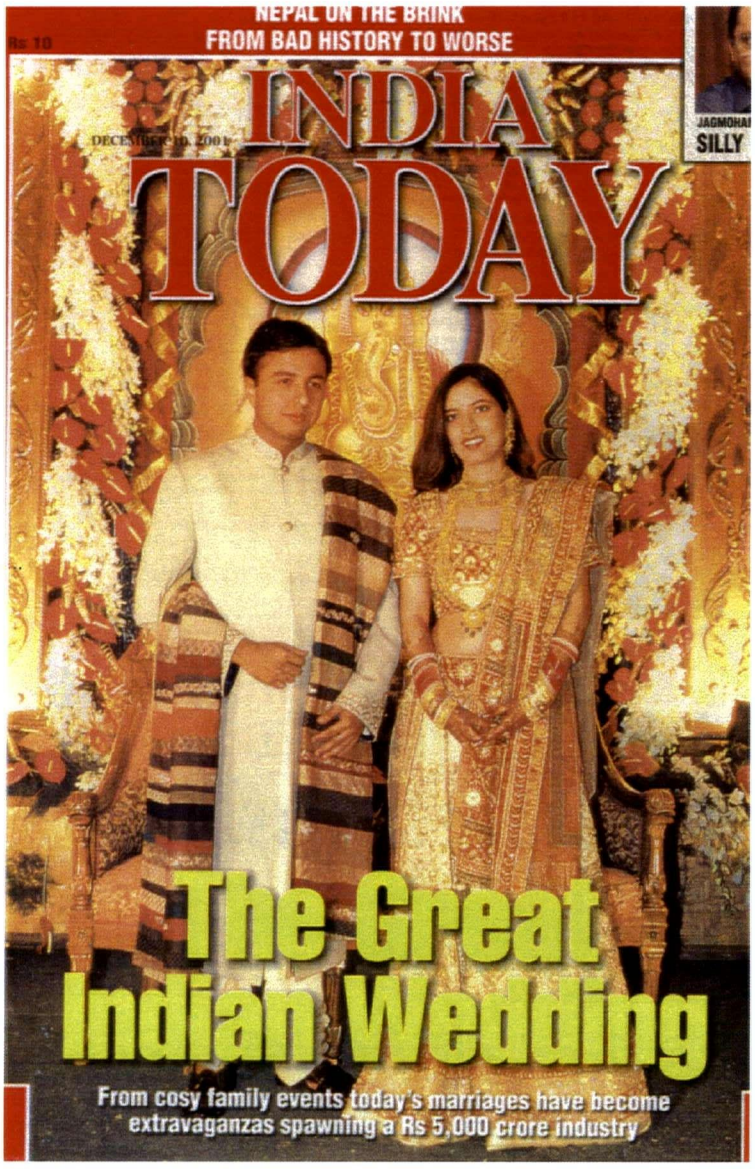

Figure 1
"The Great Indian Wedding", *India Today* December 10, 2001.

Figure 2
Photograph: *Small Store in Aurangabad displaying film posters*, circa 2000.

Figure 3:
Film Still: Engagement Ceremony. Sooraj Barjatya, Director.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, 1994.

Figure 4
Film Still: Shagun. Sooraj Barjatya, Director.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, 1994.

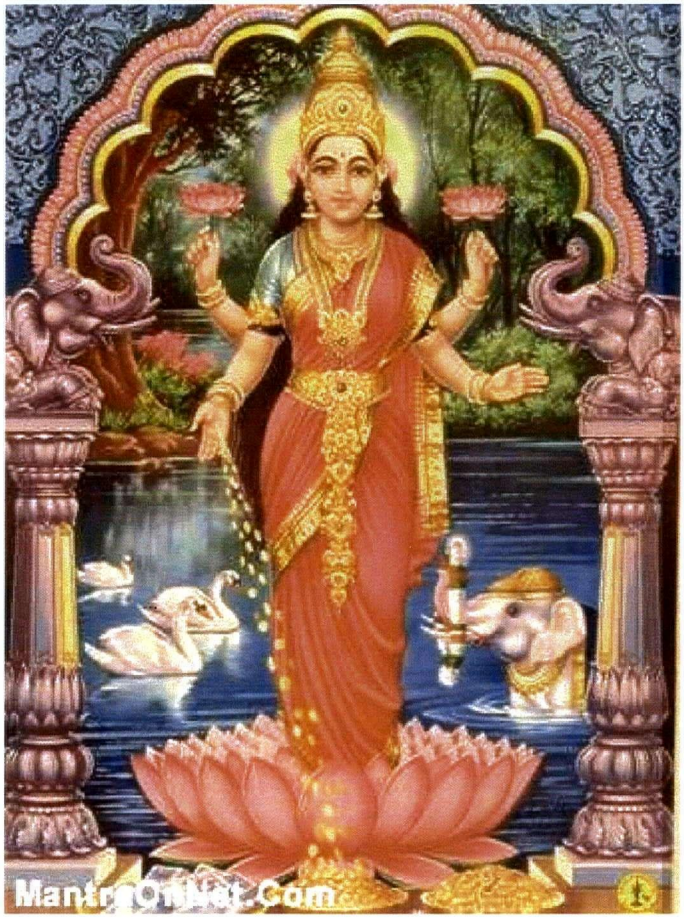

Figure 5
Popular print: *Laksmi,* circa 2000.

Figure 6
Film Still: Exchange of Shoes. Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.

Figure 7
"Wedding of Jayalalitha's Foster Son", *Manorama* 1996.

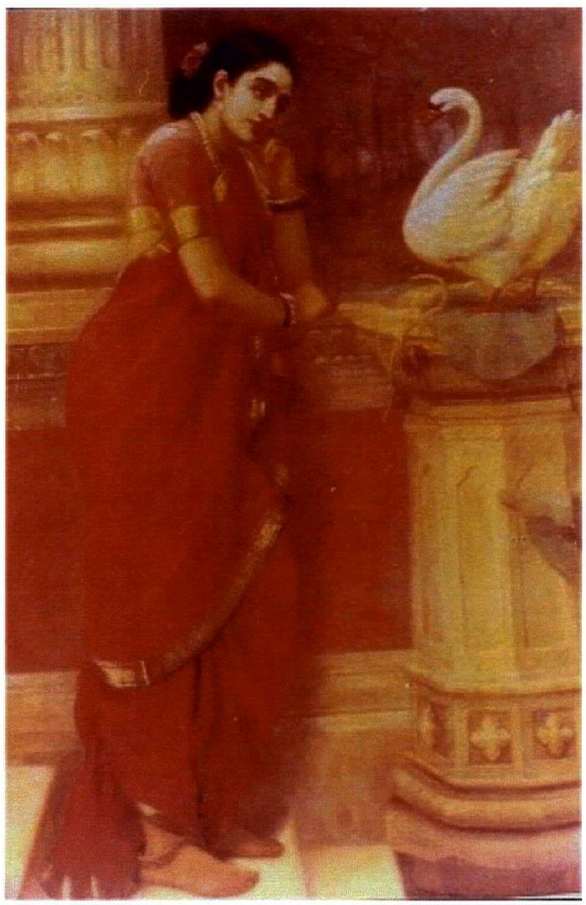

Figure 8
Raja Ravi Varma, *Hamsa Damayanti*, 1899. Oil on Canvas.

Figure 9
Film Still: Family Reunion. Sooraj Barjatya, Director.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, 1994.

Figure 10
Film Still: Kitchen Scene. Sooraj Barjatya, Director.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, 1994.

Figure 11
Film Still. "Bestowing the Ramayana". Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.

Figure 12
Film Still: Rita disrobing Nisha. Sooraj Barjatya, Director.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, 1994.

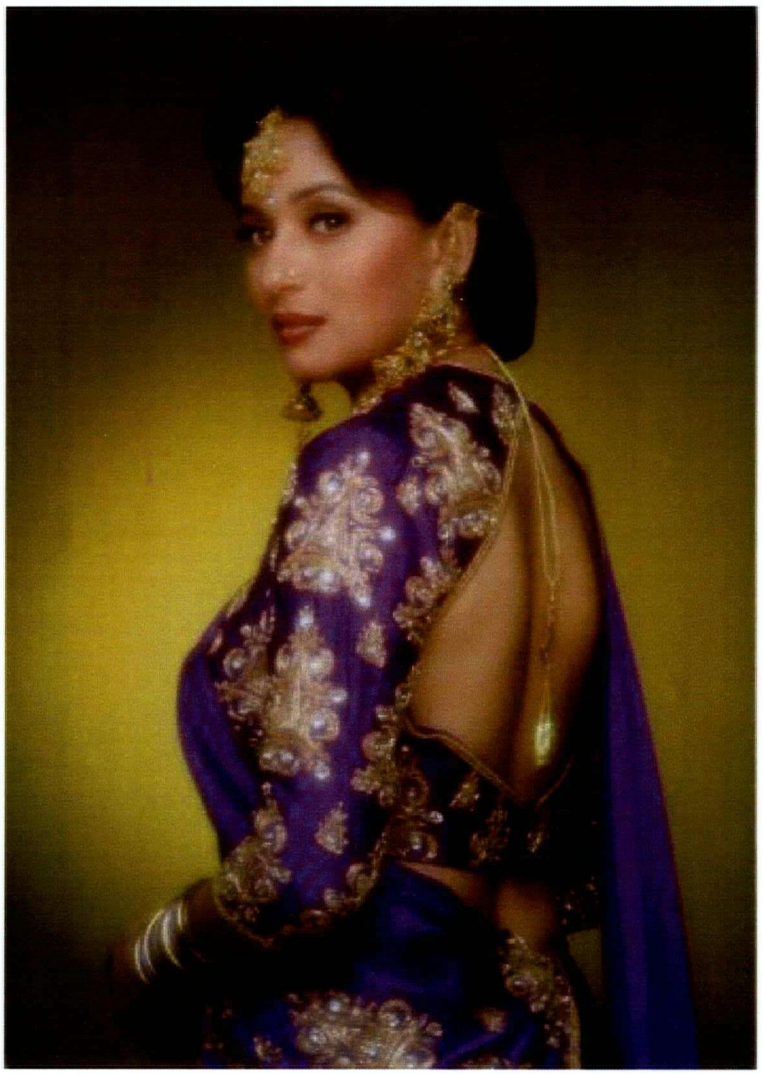

Figure 13
Poster Print. "Madhuri's backless Choli", circa 1995.

Figure 14
Film Still: Choli ke Peechay. Subash Ghai, Director.
Khalnayak, 1993.

Figure 15:
Postcard: Nisha(Madhuri Dixit) and Prem(Salman Khan) seated by the pool". Sooraj Barjatya, Director. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994.

Figure 16:
M.F. Hussain, Menaka *Seducing Vishwamitra*, circa 1995.
Acrylic on Canvas.

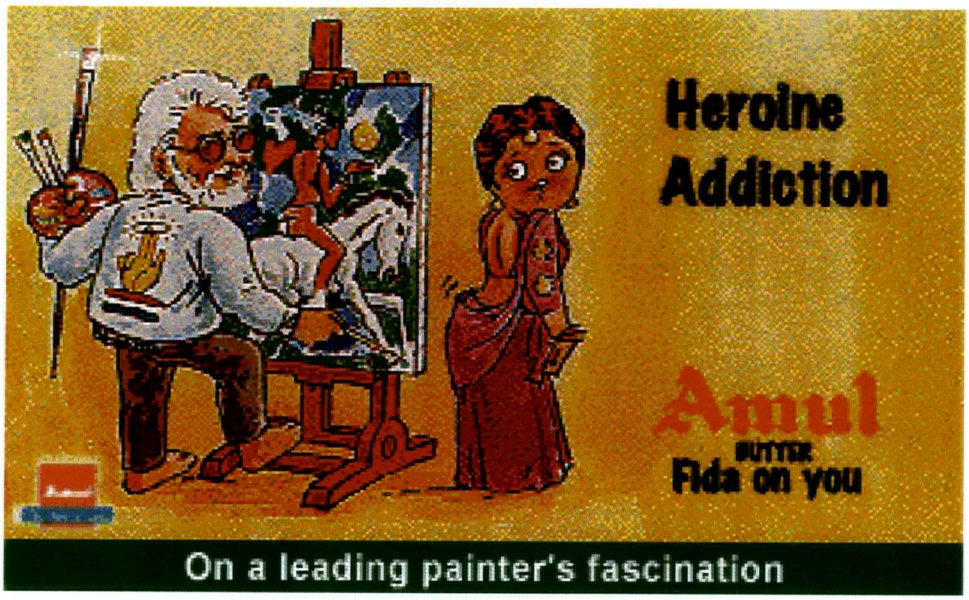

Figure 17:
Poster Print: On a Leading Painter's fascination. Amul Butter
Circa, 1998.

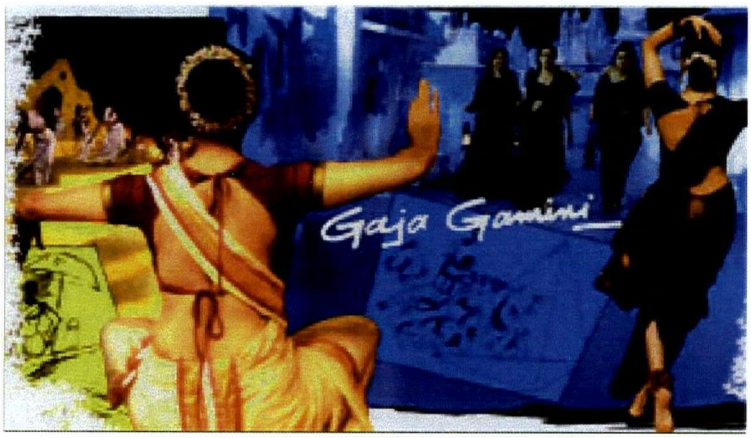

Figure 18
Film Poster: Madhuri Posing. M.F. Hussain, Director.
Gajagamini, 1998.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abraham, Maria. "Cleansing Culture," *The Week* (May 17, 1998).

Appadurai, Arjun. "How to make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 30 (January 1988).

Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol A. Breckenridge. *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Bannerjee, Chitra Divakaruni. *Arranged Marriage: An Anthology of Short* Stories. New York: Anchor Publications, 1995.

Bartholomew, Richard. *Art of Maqbool Fida Hussain*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Bharatiya Janata Party, *BJP Election Manifesto–Our Swadeshi Approach,* 17 August 2002 <http://www.bjp.org/manifes/appeal.htm> 3 June 2002.

Bharucha, Rustom. "Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 1995).

Burns, John. "For An Indian Politician An Opulent Wedding Means Political Bliss," *New York Times* (10 September 1995).

Chakravarty, Sumita. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and its Fragments.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Deshpande, Satish. "Hegemonic spatial strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India." *Public Culture* 10 (1998).

Dirks, Nicholas. "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," In *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner. Princeton: University Press, 1994.

Farmer, Victoria. "Mass Media: Images, Mobilization, and Communalism" In *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India,* ed. David Ludden. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Garg, Priyadarshini. "Movie Review: Hum Aapke Hain Kaun," *The Times of India* (September 5, 1995).

Kakkar, Sudir. *Intimate relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Kapur, Ratna. "The Profanity of Prudery: The Moral Face of Obscenity Law in India," *Women: A Cultural Review* 8, no. 3 (1997).

Kancha, Illaya. *Why Am I Not a Hindu?* Calcutta: Samya, 1962.

Xiang, Lin. "The Madras Reception," *South China Morning Post* (September 20, 1995).

Mary Van Danielle. "Indian Reception,"*Deutsche Presse Agenteur* (September 7, 1995).

Maqbool Fida Hussain. *Hussain's Rare Paintings Signed Fida.* exh.cat. Delhi: Art Today, 1995.

Methil, Renuka. "The Great Indian Wedding," *India Today* (December 10, 2001).

Mehta, Monika. "What is Behind Film Censorship: The *Khalnayak* Debates", *Jouvert* 5, Issue 3 (October, 2001).

Guruswamy, Mohan. *The Pioneer* (8 November 1996).

Prasad, Madhava. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Rajshri Productions Limited, 1947 <http://www.rajshri.com/index.html> 9 June 2002.

Ramesh, Jairam. *The Hindustan Times* (March 14, 1996).

Rangoonwalla, Firoze. *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema.* London: Hamlyn, 1979.

Sharma, Kalpana. *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slums.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000.

Shukovsky, Paul. "Mc Donald's settles beef dispute with Hindus, vegetarians," *Seattle Post, (March* 8, 2002).

Singh, Khushwant. "We Sell Them Dreams," *New York Times Magazine* (October 30, 1976).

K. Srilata. "The Story of the Up-Market' Reader: Femina's 'New Woman' and the Normative Feminist Subject," *Journal of Arts and Ideas Numbers* 32-33 (January-March, 2000).

Sunder Rajan, Rajeshwari. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism.* London: Routledge, 1999.

Sutherland, Sally J. "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (January-March, 1989).

Thapar, Romila. " Tradition", *Between Tradition and Modernity: India's search for identity: A Twentieth Century Anthology.* ed. Fred Dalmayr, G.N. Devy. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998.

Tharu, Susie. *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present.* New York: The Feminist Press, 1993.

Young, Gayle. "Bride Burning Alive and Well in India," *CNN World News* (September 12, 1995).

Zutshi, Somnath. "Women Nation and the Outsider in Hindi Cinema" ed. Ashis Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.