

Desiring (Wo)Men of India: Merchant-Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* and *Bombay Talkie*



Literature

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ABSTRACT

Creative treatment of both sex and sexuality marks a milestone in the history of Indian film industry. Merchant Ivory productions' Shakespeare Wallah and Bombay Talkie explore male-female relations beyond racial, regional and linguistic boundaries. This paper analyses the representation of (fe)male sexuality and sexual anxiety prevalent in India in the late 1960s in the selected movies. Infatuations of Indian men for foreign women, their body language and gestures and Anglophilia are critiqued. Here, the concept of white male colonization of the third world in terms of sexuality is subverted through miscegenation of Western women and Indian men. Thus, the selected movies complicate the issues of both colonization and decolonization in Independent India, as the plot ends with the deserted lovers.

Introduction

Desire, 'strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen', becomes the center of attraction of different genres of art. This paper deals with the sexual desire of the Indian protagonists towards their Indian and Western beloveds in Merchant Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) and *Bombay Talkie* (1970). Like the Indian films of the late 1960s, Merchant-Ivory productions (MIP) also brings to light sexuality, "a central aspect of being human throughout life, (which) encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction"¹, and the anxieties of the urban people on it. Since sex in Europe has been considered as a "force for colonizing the non-western world" (Walther)², this paper also illustrates how foreign women substantiates the Western efforts to master India, through conquering the indigenous males in terms of sexuality, for "where there is desire, the power relation is already present" (Foucault, 1978), in parallel.

Placing the traumas of the travelling Shakespearean troupe and the flourishing of Bollywood film industry in the post-independent India as framework, the selected films portray miscegenation of Indian men with Western women. While literature of these films concentrate on the Raj nostalgia and the "frictions at the hinges between East and West, and between high art and popular art"³ in Independent India, this paper discusses on the representation of Indian male sexuality, "expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships"⁴ and anxiety of the other sex in the selected films.

Sexuality, Hindi Cinema and MIP in the late 1960s:-

Fascinatingly, the commercial film industry in India of the 60s stands as the most influential channel to propagate the conservative "ideals it upholds and the values it projects" (Butalia, 1984). These films portray male body as the interface of multiple regional, class, and religious identities and texts. Another attraction of movies of the time is the encroachment of item dance, an explicit voyeuristic experience of "transgressive sexual relations" (Dwyer, 2000).

Shakespeare Wallah, "a fictionalised account of a true story" (Chatterjee, 2006) in an elegiac tone, is basically a movie of the problems of the travelling Shakespearean company in Independent India. The anglophilic protagonist Sanju roams around his lovers, an Indian actress Manjula and the other a Shakespearean actress Lizzie. Sanju's surveillance on the tents of the troupe and his description of hunting, facial expressions, gestures, rapid eye movements, and mimicking sounds with tone

modulation make him a romantic gallant. Through the romantic dealings of the main characters, we can realize the incessant attempts of the Indian hero towards his foreign lover, not because of her beauty but of the internal attempts to conquer the 'other' in terms of sexuality. Sanju tries to console Lizzie in her dressing room, an 'absolutely private' (Mrs. Buckingham). Sanju's efforts to enact and to appreciate Lizzie's performance of *Hamlet* and the following incidents reveal Manjula's desire to be loved by Sanju.

Shakespeare Wallah places the first kissing shot of the lovers in a misty nature, which mirrors the uncertainty of their relation. Manjula's sudden emotional response to her servant Didiji on hearing that kissing exemplifies her emotional temperament and the further encounter between the two lovers of Sanju is dramatically portrayed. In order to depict the confused sexual desire of the hero, Ivory provides a bedroom scene, where Sanju invites the 'stupid and vicious woman' Manjula to bed when she accepts his request to watch the performance of Lizzie, 'a real artist'. Manjula's arrival to the performance of *Othello* echoes the 'victory for the motion pictures over the theatre' (Mr. Buckingham), which was a deliberate attempt to degrade both Lizzie and her role in public.

Manjula becomes a representative of the changing Indians, who are uninterested in the killing of the heroine, and the 'moaning and groaning climax'. She finds fault with Lizzie, who 'wears a nightdress in front of everyone like all English girls', which is forbidden in Indian moral culture. It can be read in parallel with the struggles Sanju faces when hearing, 'it's mistake...the consciousness of our own innocence'. Reiteration of these words from the rehearsing troupe evoke moral conscience in Sanju regarding his kissing in public space, and justifies that, 'I'm not used to living in public'. Further sequences reveal Sanju's complex attitude towards Lizzie and his inability to move beyond the traditional concepts on a woman's behavior in public. Sanju even illustrates an anecdote of the 'great tradition' on women's 'izaaat' (dignity) and remains numb on accepting her love. Desperate Lizzie is set in the black and white shadows, symbolize her place between her dejected love and her ambition.

By avoiding Lizzie, Sanju becomes one with the teasing public, who fail to see the real artistic talent of her. Their active decisions intensify the satire on Indian male sexual perception and anxiety of the plebeian in the late 60s. Though she is ready leave everything for her lover, Sanju's moral anxiety on her public figure prevents him from accepting her, though he is a playboy. Thus, the discordant attitude of Sanju can be read as the power

of decolonizing the foreign powers, while Lizzie's behaviour symbolizes the efforts to conquer the nation.

In the words of Stephan Varble, *Bombay Talkie* is "the playing out of a final act of hysteria" (2012), placed in the illusory Bombay cinema world. The Nautch Queen Helen becomes an incarnation of both the Bollywood and of the liberated Lucia with respect to her explicit sexuality. While the description of the typewriter is in the background, we can see the intra-diegetic gaze of Vikram on Lucia. Compared to Vikram, Hari, the anti-hero exerts a control over his sexual longing to Lucia, though he promises her that he cannot see her suffering, which he keeps till the end of the story. Long compares Vikram and Lucia as the "romantic escapists" (97) of the East and the West, while Hari is "remotely self-aware" (2005). Though he tries to praise the beauty of Lucia to 'a tender jasmine flower', she seems attracted to Vikram "a purveyor of romance" (Long, 2005). The real intension behind Lucia's visit to India is as mysterious as Vikram's sexual dealings with her throughout the movie.

Presence of the maker of porn movies, Mr. Bevin Bose adds another chapter to the concept of sex, '(is) not bad, not crude... that's only the appeal of ignorant people'. But, Vikram's and Hari's rejection of such films showcase its explicit rejection based on the repression of explicit sexuality. Vikram's continuous rejection of his barren wife Mala and justification of their affair as an 'intellectual relationship' expresses his anxiety on an extramarital affair. As the Marabar Caves in *The Passage to India* (E. M. Forster) Indian caves are portrayed as symbols of the mysterious and exotic India in international films. The complex incidents in the cave scene harmonizes the theme of the paper as it complicates the incestual desires of the main characters and their real anxieties on their sexual halves.

MIP is also careful to document the sexual desire and anxiety of Indian women as the subplot, through the middle aged Bollywood actress Anjana. Her 'jealousy' on Vikram's girlfriends and her futile efforts to kiss him and Hari's mentioning of the number of girls waiting for Vikram elevates him to a desired male body, adored by many. Like Helen and Lucia, she also provides an erotic pleasure in the spectators. Vikram's return to his wife after the Birthday celebrations and Lucia's temptations on Hari replicate her incessant affinity towards her deserted lover. Long evaluates Lucia as a "Circe figure who turns men into swine... she manages to ruin two men" (2005). *Bombay Talkie*, like other films of the time imbibes male narcissism, self-contemplation, egoism and triangle love story to the plot. Western women are portrayed here to satisfy the erotic needs of the hero, and in vice versa, in both movies. Indian female characters of these movies experience "sexual sublimation", (Chakravarty, 1996) from the Western enchantress.

Conclusion

Since "sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality (Foucault, 1978), this paper critiques the protagonists as active representation of emerging fragile India, while the western heroines are symbolic of the moral discourse on "woman of the public" (Mazumdar, 2007) opposed to the *antharmahilas*. Amalgamation of 'Indian myths and Victorian ideology reintroduced Indian women's virtues and purity'⁵ stands as the prime reason for the heroes' rejection of western women, for the former belongs to the public space occupied and shared by many. Vikram's sexual zeal towards Lucia is a labyrinth when he suggests her to Hari as an 'unsolicited gift' after he has finished with her. In *Bombay Talkie*, Lucia becomes a vamp, signifying an unrestrained sexuality and license, given to vices unfamiliar to native women (Mazumdar, 2007). Lucia's oriental perception of India as a nation of spirituality and peacefulness is subverted in the movie as she experiences the

ashram as a place of 'unsexed people'.

In *Bombay Talkie*, the role of Helen is further developed through the "wanton sexuality" (Mazumdar, 2007) of the femme fatale Lucia. Public rejection of Shakespearean actress Lizzie and the unavailability of cabaret sequences in *Bombay Talkie* historicize urban anxiety of female sexuality, in a way an illustration of the explicit display of 'forbidden desire'. We can also relate the cadences of sexual pleasure and anxiety in these movies as the aftereffects of libidinal energy which results in the clash of Id and ego. Archetypal notions on male and female sexuality enforces the rejection of Western women. Thus, the Deification of India as *Deshmata* and the Empire as the strong male has been subverted in these movies.

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