Dublin Institute of Technology
ARROW@DIT

Books/Book chapters School of Media

2007-01-01

Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

Rashmi Sawhney
Dublin Institute of Technology, rashmi.sawhney@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschmedbk

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Sawhney, R. (2007) 'Apotheosis or Apparition: Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema', Film Studies (special issue on 'Visualising the City' ed. Marcus, A.), Winter (11): 1-13.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Media at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License

FS_1101.fm Page 1 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

• Rashmi Sawhney

UNCORRECTED PROOF

In the text *City Flicks* (2004), Moinak Biswas suggests that contemporary Indian cinema puts an end to the representative tropes of east/west, city/country, police/criminal.[1] Ravi Vasudevan expresses a similar view, stating that the 'image of a depressed and dystopian urban subjectivity only conjures the most fleeting of residual utopian energies in its reference to a country idyll as an object of longing'.[2] The changing representation of village and city in Indian films over the last twenty years or so has roughly coincided with the state and corporate-led drive towards a 'globalised' and 'liberalised' India. In Indian films, the city and the village have 'performed' the narrative of national identity, particularly within a developmental or modernising role. This paper examines the representation of urban and rural India, and therefore of the Indian nation, in two films made by women at the turn of the decade marking liberalisation.[3] Aruna Raje's *Rihaee* (1988) and Sai Paranjpye's *Disha* (1990) are films which, by virtue of their thematic and formal treatment, to some extent, enable the conceptualisation of the aesthetics of women's cinema in India. The two films thematically bridge a moment of disjuncture in Indian socio-cultural history in the late 1980s and early 1990s, recreating an imaginary cinematic nation combining past and future visions of development. This paper argues that *Disha* and *Rihaee* portray a vision of modernity which is markedly feminised in the Indian context through their visualisation of city and village. By way of discussion of these two films, it raises questions about the theorising of Indian women's cinema and hopes to draw attention to the frequently overlooked perspectives of women filmmakers on the much studied issue of the modern Indian nation.[4]

Nation and Theories of Indian Cinema

Cinema and the nation exhibit a strange relationship in India. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to conceptualise an Indian national cinema, in the way it is conceptualised in many Western nations.[5] On the other hand, most Indian films, across the twenty odd languages of production, display a significant engagement with visualising the nation.[6] The nation as seen by Indian cinema is an entity which results from, as well as enacts and contains, the dialectic between modernising and traditionalising forces. Madhava Prasad uses Fredric Jameson's term 'ideologeme' to describe the pervasiveness of the tradition-modernity binary in Indian films.[7] Indeed, much of the scholarship of Indian cinema has emphasised the dominance of viewing cinema through the framework of the nation-state, and therefore, as an enactment of the process of modernisation.[8]

The viewing of Indian cinema as a contestation over the form of the nation-state is supported, either directly or tangentially, by, what could be identified as the three main schools of Indian film criticism: the experimentalists, the traditionalists, and the third, for want of a better word, the specificists. The first, represented by film-makers and critics like Chidananda Das Gupta, Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Kumar Shahni, aspires to an 'evolved' form of film-making that draws from the realist as well as the avant-garde traditions of Western films, along with influences from Indian folk traditions. Their concept of

FS_1101.fm Page 2 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

cinematic sophistication is influenced by a desire to be locally grounded, yet at the same time to fashion a cinema in line with the 'national' avant-gardes of Europe. The second group, spearheaded by political scientists and psychoanalysts like Ashis Nandy and Sudhir Kakar, see the Indian cinema as a 'slum's eye view' of Indian politics[9], or as the enactment of a collective democratic fantasy[10].

The third group, whose role in the last fifteen years or so, in pointing out the specificity of Indian cinema has been very significant, has instilled a new contemporariness to the study of Indian films, freeing it from the association between a 'pre-modern' form and a 'third world' aesthetic, as well as from the romanticising of tradition.[11] In the work emanating from this group, the cinema has been seen as a formal encoding of national identity using theories of modernity, and linking politics and history with aesthetics. While a number of scholars have been associated with this venture, the work presented by Madhava Prasad and Sumita Chakravarty is particularly significant for this essay. Prasad and Chakravarty both identify a site of struggle, unresolvedness, in the form of Indian films – Chakravarty describes this through the metaphor of the 'bahurupi' or the masquerade, a changing and fluid entity;[12] Prasad calls it the process of 'passive revolution' – a condition that generates (or tries to) an equilibrium through the opposition between the drive to modernisation and a simultaneous disavowal of modernity on an ideological plane.[13] Both authors emphasise the form of the nation-state as the form in question, which reveals (and is revealed through) the form of the Hindi film. The nation-state, therefore, is seen as a constituent of a number of forces that endow it with a fluidity, a transitoriness – however, one that withholds the process of real change, which has the potential to bring about a transformation in the form of the nation-state. However, it can be debated that the micro-processes which generate fluidity and impermanence, also generate new sites of meaning within the larger umbrella of national identity, which eventually lead to the evolution of newer political formations as well as newer forms of expression.

Migration, Modernity, and Transitions

One such process is the process of migration. Migration has been one of the central themes in the social history of India over the last century or so. When migrations acquire significant volume, they trigger off corresponding social transformations in a society, affecting the character of the nation-state, demography, civic society, politics, economy, culture, language and people. The act of migration in cinema, or the journey from the village to city, and from the city to the village, is a narrative device which performs the complex negotiations involved in arriving at a fictive understanding of national modernity and identity. The protagonist's journey is a crucial component of narrative cinema and has been pictured as traversing geographic barriers, boundaries of nationality, race, class, caste, or gender, metaphysical encounters with the self, or fantastical forays into outer-space and imaginary lands.[14] Journeys have played an especially critical role as mediators between familiar and unfamiliar territories, including those between tradition and modernity, self and other, real and imaginary. It is for this reason that the representation of the rural and the urban, as well as the representation of migration by women filmmakers becomes exciting in its potential to generate a women's notion of self and society.

The conventional idea of progress in cinema is of moving from village to city, and more recently, from India to the West, or to 'modern' East Asian locations like Singapore and Hong Kong. The village, as bearer of tradition, takes on a dual symbolism – first, as that which must be left behind to attain a modern state of being, and second, as the psychological fantasy of the innocent state of existence, the paradise lost. The city, on the other hand, symbolizes the attractions and threats inherent in discovery, isolation, uprooting, and the adventure of illicit romance. The upward mobility or *sanskritisation* that the move from the village to city promises is visualized through greater material possessions – accrued through the loss of innocence, through hard work, as well as physical and emotional exploitation. Within the city-village binary, the

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 3 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

matter of romance and sex takes on much significance. The men (and sometimes, women) who go out into the city are permitted, often expected, to engage in amorous or sexual relationships, while the village and its residents are imagined as naturally chaste, at least in the memory of those who once belonged to it.

For Hindi cinema, Bombay is *the* city of fantasy. The two hundred year history of modern Bombay, a relatively young city in the Indian context, from a cluster of fishing villages (reclaimed to form a single land mass in the first part of the nineteenth century) to a centre of colonial trading power, and later, as the commercial and entertainment capital of India has established Bombay as the ultimate urban location for Hindi cinema. Over the years Bombay has come to be seen as a multicultural city, having been influenced by the cultures of the Parsi, Christian, Muslim, Sindhi and Hindu communities, as well as by the Portuguese and the British, which gives rise to a synthesis that is uniquely 'Bambaiya'[15], and for the purpose of cinema, glamourised. Moreover, some of India's biggest working-class and trade union movements developed in the textile mills of Bombay and the large flux of migrants from villages all across India has further strengthened its working-class characteristic.

Both films under discussion here look at the social and ethical issues generated by economic migration; however, instead of evoking the conventional binaries between modern/traditional, hostile/nurturing, or masculine/feminine these films re-arrange such hierarchies to present an alternative vision of modern India. Significantly, in comparison with other urban-centric films made around the same period, and subsequently in the 1990s, *Disha* and *Rihaee* represent the city as the periphery of the Indian village, marking a shift in the location of development and modernity. The structural shift in the hierarchy of location, modernity, and therefore of power, suggested by these films enables migration to be seen as a fluid concept, a journey between old and new, loss and discovery, and the consequent transformations enacted thereof.

An emphasis on the *process* of transformation can open up the nation to readings which inhabit the spaces between new/old or loss/discovery inherent to migration. The journey itself contains multiple viewpoints which open up plural interpretation. Such spaces are what Homi Bhabha describes as 'liminal' or 'interstitial', occupying a space between contesting cultural traditions, historical periods, and critical methodologies[16]. Bhabha suggests that these liminal spaces are hybrid sites that witness the production of cultural meaning. Although his arguments are made in the context of essentialist readings of nationhood which attempt to define and naturalise 'third world' nations by means of homogenous, holistic, and historical traditions that define and ensure their subordinate status, they could also be useful to look at the nation as a microcosm of demographic power structures. Bhabha's argument can be appropriated in the Indian context to highlight the dynamic between city and village and the 'liminal' spaces between them as sites where identities are performed and contested. The journey between village and city assumes importance as a trajectory of 'performance' of change, as seen in the case of *Disha*.

Disha ('The Uprooted Ones')

Sai Paranjpye's film *Disha* (1990) is inspired by a real-life incident in Naigaom, a village in Maharashtra, where a man who spent sixteen years digging a well on an arid patch of land was declared mad by his fellow villagers. When at last he struck water and transformed the economic possibilities of the village, he was lauded as a hero. While Paranjpye identifies the source of her story-idea as a real incident in the village of Naigaom, the screen name chosen for the cinematic village is Bakuli[17]. *Disha* is a film about two migrant labourers from Bakuli who go to Bombay in search of work; one of them (Vasant/Nana Patekar) stays on in Bombay, while the other (Soma/Raghuveer Yadav) returns to Bakuli when his brother (Parshu/Om Puri) strikes water in his well (Figure 1). The film depicts the conflict between a longing for home and the compulsions of economic migration.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 4 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

• Fig. 1: 'Parshu's Well', *Disha* (1990).

The title of the film means 'direction' and it offers a critique of the industry-based model of socio-economic development adopted in the early years of independence by the Jawaharlal Nehru led Congress government. Any historical account of Indian cinema is testimony to the immense bearing of the Nehruvian era on Indian cinema.[18] New post-independence films began the project of visualising the nation in alignment with Nehru's developmental philosophy, and this trend in cinema was dominant until the student unrest and anti-corruption movements of the mid 1970s. In 1975, the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi imposed an emergency, which lasted for almost two years. By this time Indian cinema reflected the citizen's loss of faith in state machinery, and films where the protagonist took the law in his/her hands became popular.[19] The industrial sector was not functioning as promised and this resulted in a community of disillusioned workers. Further, industrialization had spurred rural migration to cities, generating new problems for civic governance. At the same time the success of the green revolution had renewed the hope of developing India as a strong agriculture-based economy. In the Punjab, the Green Revolution had created prosperous farming communities. Many of these communities then migrated to Canada, on the invitation of the Canadian government, which wanted to benefit from the knowledge of these farmers. Such social circumstances had in a way, compelled Rajiv Gandhi to re-examine Congress policies and public propaganda by the mid-1980s. As a result, the Congress government began to consider a more humanistic approach to development. The new vision of the Indian government can be captured through Rajiv Gandhi's foreword to the Seventh Planning Commission Report, published in November 1985:

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 5 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

> In the final analysis, development is not just about factories, dams and roads. Development is basically about people. The goal is the people's material, cultural and spiritual fulfilment. The human factor, the human context, is of supreme value. We must pay much greater attention to these questions in future.[20]

Disha develops this idea of a people-centric development, rather than an economic or industry-based model of development by positioning the village as the site of action.

Although the idea of village India being the 'real' India has been a feature of Indian discourse and policy for a long time, the socio-economic trend that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s had put this belief into question, and this perception also influenced films. According to film historian Firoze Rangoonwala, the period between 1981 and 1992 represents the 'age of violence' in Indian cinema[21]. The genre of the 'vigilante women films' of the 1980s subsequently gave way to other violent films like *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Tezaab* (1988), *Parinda* (1989), *Tridev* (1989), *Ghayal* (1990), *Agneepath* (1990), and *Satya* (1998) towards the end of the century, almost all of which emphasised urban anger. In this context of film production, as well as in the socio-economic context made imminent by globalisation, *Disha* can be seen as being representative of a feminised perspective on national modernity.

Balkuli is a symbol for the progress possible across village-India as imagined by the film-maker. The title shots of the film show a barren land breeding thorny bushes of the Bakuli plant; the yellow flowers of the Bakuli are beautiful but non-productive. The lack of markets for agricultural products and the diminishing sustainability of farming in Bakuli results in forced migration of the unemployed village youth to Bombay. Although Bakuli is a barren village, Parshu's well brings new hope and promise for sustaining a healthy agricultural economy. The symbol of the well, at first barren, and then filled with water, conveys the thought that real development lies in the revival of the agricultural sector in villages. Yet, the progress is not instantaneous; it needs to be toiled for. The film

• Fig. 2: 'Shoma and Vasant in Bombay Chawl'.

presents Parshu's obsessive interest in the well with an element of humour; he is generally accepted as a madman by other villagers as well as by his family. *Disha* suggests that villages can achieve sustainable development only through such obsessive passion.

Paranjpye's film belongs to the genre of realist sociological cinema which had rid itself of the 'excesses' of commercial Hindi films. The film demonstrates influence by Soviet realism, and especially by the concept of montage. The director attempts to represent the workers' lives by depicting mundane tasks such as bathing, getting ready for work, taking lunch breaks, working in the mills and such like (Figure 2). In a Kafkaesque reminder of the disease and degeneration in the city, Paranjpye shows us shots of cob-web covered machinery, symbolising the destruction and death to come through industrialization and migration. The influence of Soviet realism can be further glimpsed in scenes of drably-dressed workers doing mundane jobs in the textile mills of Dadar. One sequence in the film shows a non-functional mill through a montage of images, a result of the impasse in negotiations between mill-workers and the government, which crippled the textile industry in Bombay in the 1980s. There is no background sound to this montage and Soma comments on the morgue-like appearance of the mills; in the last frame of this sequence he exits the factory after exclaiming 'Ram Naam Satya Ho', a chant that is uttered during Hindu death rites.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 6 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

The only joy in the lives of the workers is shown to be the time that they share their lunch-boxes. Their nameless, faceless, existence in Bombay is depicted through a single shelf in the workers' house that has one peg for each man, where they can hang possessions – clothes, bags, calendars – suggesting that the only recognition of an individual in Bombay is through his material belongings. In another scene, as Vasant is being introduced to the men in the house – where each man has limited space and must sleep in shifts – the voiceover of the men's names is overlapped with images of cattle in a village shed through unsynchronized sound-image editing. By juxtaposing unrelated images and sounds, and using fades and wipes for editing, Paranjpye overlays the images with symbolism.

The village and the city of *Disha* are not fixed entities frozen in time. The film highlights the changes taking place in each location and the complexities of social and economic relationships. The act of migration involves the generation of memories of that which is left behind. Such memories are imaginary and subjective. In Vasant's case, the gulf between the Bakuli of his memory and the Bakuli he encounters on his return is vast. Vasant remembers Bakuli as a warm, nurturing place, evoking deep connections to the soil and its nostalgic connotations. On his return he finds that the maternal solace of the village is threatened by the discovery of his wife's (Phulvantibai/Rajshree Sawant) affair with the manager of the 'bidi' factory where she works. His difficulty results in a narrative turn; he reluctantly returns to the other life in Bombay.

Phulvantibai's new-found economic independence and her entry into the public sphere symbolize the changing face of the village that exists in simultaneity with the change brought about through Parshu's well. Paranjpye's depiction of Phulvantibai's affair stresses guilt rather than expressing women's economic and sexual freedom. Phulvantibai's embarrassment at the discovery of the affair by Vasant, her father-in-law's worried letter to Vasant, and the manager's licentious behaviour suggest that the affair is a result of economic compulsion more than anything else. In the scheme of the film's plot, Phulvantibai's affair serves as a narrative device to enable Vasant's return to Bombay. In an article on the realist turn in Hindi cinema, Madhava Prasad suggests, citing the example of Shyam Benegal's film *Nishant* (1975), that certain impasses in narrative are encountered because of the inability of cinematic realism to cope with the 'demand' for an explanation of the characters' conduct[22]. In Prasad's opinion, certain kinds of realist narrative cannot spin themselves out without a speechless core, and this inability is responsible for the narrative element of the silent subaltern. He suggests that the 'aesthetic of realism splits the melodramatic unit into its component parts: image and meaning, and assumes the burden of meaning, leaving the image in a raw state'.[23] Phulvantibai's affair represents one such impasse, allowing the realist narrative in *Disha* to develop to completion.

Paranjpye seems to suggest an alternative model of development which foregrounds rural development through the agricultural sector and small-scale industries. Even as Bombay retains its status as an 'expansionary force, devouring the other and reconstituting its own image'[24], the village undergoes a simultaneous change, bringing it closer to Paranjpye's ideal of development. Although the dominant perspective is clearly grounded in the village in *Disha*, the film also addresses the complexities generated by an economic situation that compels migration. It can be argued in the context of this film that the idiom of representation of the city-village trope is affected not only by changes in film technology (enabling more realistic images), or by socio-political discourse about the nation-state, but also by a gender-specific perspective. The urgency with which the image and memory of the village haunts the narrative is indicative firstly of the 'minor' tradition that women's films constitute, and secondly, of the place of memory and migration in a feminised world view.

The image of the nation in this film can be read as utopian or dystopian fiction; such a reading being enabled by the emphasis on spatial characteristics and geographies. The utopian

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 7 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

or dystopian view presented takes critical cognizance of the social context where the contradiction between social reality and the imaginary nation in *Disha* works to foreground social crisis; the film acquires a political viewpoint through its social critique. Alison Butler's idea of a 'minor cinema' is useful in elaborating this point[25]. The idea of minor cinema originally comes from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of minor literature[26]. As Butler explains, a minor literature is not a literary genre or period, nor is classification as minor an artistic evaluation, adding that Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, and Godard, who Deleuze and Guattari place in this category, are all canonical writers. The three defining features of a minor literature as listed by Deleuze and Guattari are displacement, dispossession, or deterritorialisation; a politicised experience; and a bias towards collective values.[27] They define a minor tradition in political terms, where the viewpoint of the deterritorialised group is foregrounded in its social context to generate a sense of collectivity, and this notion of collectivity is used in Aruna Raje's *Rihaee* to present an alternative view of development where the nation is in sympathy with women.

Rihaee ('Liberation')

In Indian society, national development has sidelined and distanced women's issues; the progress of women has frequently been seen as antithetical to national identity and development. This relationship is particularly foregrounded when nationalism becomes a significant concern and women are seen as symbols of national identity.[28] Film enables this distance to be addressed; it allows the imagining of a non-patriarchal nation, or of fictional national histories of equal opportunities. Jyotika Virdi states:

> The nation is constructed in Hindi cinema through a complex apparatus of metaphors, discourses, and modes of address. It is imagined through a stock set of tropes, symbols, characters, and narratives that are meant to first air, and then resolve, contemporary anxieties and difficulties. The films iron out tensions among various constituencies in the nation and play out utopian ideals – ideals embraced by audiences from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.[29]

What distinguishes the way the nation is imagined in *Rihaee* is the idiom of representation and the narrative strategies through which the two conflicting entities of 'woman' and 'nation' are either brought together as Virdi suggests, in a utopian ideal, or differentiated using political idioms from popular film culture. The act of migration and the depiction of village, city, and nation, operate as a means to create this fictional space where mutual interests and conflicts can be addressed. That is, issues of national development addressed in *Rihaee* include a vision of women's participation in this development. The conflict between nation and woman is negotiated in the film by re-interpreting the forces that place woman and nation as oppositional constructs, in particular the gender associations of the urban and the rural. Indeed, women become synonymous with the imagined nation in this fiction.

Many of Raje's films have dealt with the issue of women's bodies and sexuality. In *Rihaee*, she reveals the moral hypocrisy towards sexuality in a feudal set-up and uses the city-village binary to represent this conflict. Like *Disha*, *Rihaee* is a story about migrant labourers who work as carpenters in Bombay. The most significant aspect of the lives of the migrant men is the 'left behind' village and their women. Raje moves the narrative between the city and the village, showing parallel depictions of life. Life in both locations is made distinct by the moral, hierarchical, social, and cultural impositions forced upon men and women, as well as those that divide urban and rural people.

Raje presents an imaginary village and city through the use of codified settings. Geographical location in the film is symbolic and lacks localization. The city is named as 'Bombay' at one point in the film, but Raje chooses not to use any of the images commonly associated with Bombay in cinema. Bombay is introduced verbally to the viewer by the village postman, who comments that the migrant men have left behind a village full of women, children, the disabled

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 8 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

• Fig. 3: 'The Prostitutes and the Migrant Men'.

and the elderly. The introductory shot of the city captures men working as carpenters in an apartment. The customary images of the Gateway of India, the trains, the skyscrapers, or Marine drive are all absent in this introduction. The lives of these men are pictured without reference to any external indicator of life in Bombay. The depiction is restricted to the narrow lanes and alleyways that the men live and wander in. For the migrant men the city is constituted out of their immediate surroundings – their sense of adventure and discovery only extends as far as the prostitute's chambers (Figure 3).

Prasad points out that fictional stories can be located in real cities, but not in real villages. Prasad suggests that this is because unlike in the city, which is 'experienced as a space inhabited by a *population* . . . whose mutual relationships cannot be easily specified', a village with its clearly defined social networks has no 'dummy places, no empty seats, where fictional characters can be placed'; the fictional village has to be invented.[30] Vadner is a village that is marked by a large banyan tree ('Vad' means banyan). The banyan is the symbol of the village. But since the tree is a part of nature, Vadner's identity is shared by numerous other villages in India, most of which have large banyan trees as the centre-point of the village plan. The dress and language of the villagers suggests that it is situated in the state of Rajasthan. However, Vadner recreates fictional representations of the village from film and literature; stereotypical features become symbolic of 'Indian village'.

• Fig. 4: 'The Cinematic Village: Taku, Mansukh and Astrologer'.

The portrayal of village life incorporates women's tasks such as washing clothes, filling water from the well, or tilling farm land. The women's attire is traditional, yet colourfully ethnic. The allegorical village, recreated through the film sets, is iconic in its appeal (Figure 4).

To the binary of the village and city, Raje introduces a third symbolic entity – the foreign or 'abroad'. The presence of the foreign element draws the politics of the village-city into a larger framework, endowing the contours of the nation with more clarity in the process, and also subverting the power hierarchy of village and city. Mansukh/Naseeruddin Shah, who returns to Vadner after spending several years in Dubai, is the protagonist of this narrative ploy. Mansukh is the symbol of the foreign land, an imaginary place par modernity. His physical get-up and appearance reflect his modern positioning; he wears western-style clothes, smokes imported cigarettes, wears sunglasses, and possesses a cassette player. In other words, Mansukh imports the modern into Vadner; the conventional journey from village to city undertaken by Hindi cinema's protagonists is here reversed by Mansukh whose difference from the villagers, material belongings, and perception as a desirable young groom by the village women endows upon him a position of power. Ultimately, however, this power is exposed as

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 9 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

being superficial and greed-driven, when Mansukh chooses to marry the daughter of a rich landlord, a narrative act that reinstates the supreme position of the nation as defined by geographical boundaries. Raje establishes the hierarchy of the foreign-city-village triad within a structure that generates unconventional combinations of location-gender-modernity. This difference is visualized using theatrical modes through exaggerated and artificial symbols of representation. While the village remains the centre of narrative logic and action, the journeys between the village, city and the foreign land raise questions of relative values.

At the core of Raje's film is the focus on sexuality (and its moral associations) and women's rights to their own bodies. She uses the power-structure of the topographical triad to enact this drama. Mansukh's arrival in Vadner results in a series of intimate encounters between him and some of the village women. Popular discourse structures village-women-chastity in a paradigmatic relationship, each being substitutable among themselves, and operating as a binary with the paradigm of city-men-sexual liberty. The film attempts to break this structure by playing around with the linear equation (or syntagm) of the position of the subject in the transition towards modernity, the associated sexual freedom, and gender. A central part of the attempt to deconstruct this linear relationship is organized around the allegorical imagining of the village-city. In representing the village women as sexual individuals, and not as chaste wives-in-waiting, the so-called modernity of the city is transferred onto the village and hence its women.

The film breaches typical boundaries between private and public, and between the inner and outer worlds[31]. The female body, ordinarily a subject of secrecy and shame in middle-class India, is liberated by the village women in *Rihaee*. Raje uses the female body as the material object through which revolt is staged (Figure 5). Mansukh's sexual adventures result in two pregnancies in Vadner. One of these women, Taku/Hema Malini, insists on keeping her child based on the claim that destroying the foetus

• Fig. 5: 'At Work'.

would be a perversion of her own body and self. The film links moral hypocrisy and sexual oppression to the demands of a capital economy and the resulting migration and breaking up of community. Two of the oldest feminist organizations in India, the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) and the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD) have emphasized the connection between biology-based and labour-based oppression of women. These activists claim that while the root of women's oppression lies in the biological differences between men and women, it is only as the mode of production and reproduction changes historically that these biological differences became important enough to subjugate women.[32] An unpublished manifesto of the 'Stree Sangarsh' cited by Radha Kumar encapsulates this opinion: 'One of the first dualisms in human history was the sexual division of labour, which developed due to women's reproductive ability; the appropriation of control over women's bodies has been one of the most significant forms of oppression under

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 10 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

capitalism'[33]. The manifesto describes how this control is exercised by confining women to domesticated units which emphasize child-birth and rearing, and as societies industrialise, by privatising women's work around the duties of maternity and childcare.

The control of women's bodies by feudal agents whose powers are strengthened by a capitalist economy is visualized as a problem that is a combination of sexual hypocrisy and economic circumstances in the film. *Rihaee* depicts the confusion of a nation that is grappling with migration resulting from a capital-based developmental vision and the demands made by a social support system that is often of a feudal nature; a condition that results in the classic conflict between traditional and modern value systems. The village women's fight for sexual equality and a right to their own bodies is represented in the film through a mass protest against the village 'panchayat'[34]. Taku's refusal to abort her child draws the attention of the 'panchayat', which rules that she must leave the village if she desires to continue the pregnancy. Her protest is taken up by the other village women, particularly by the older village women. The scene of revolt stages the solidarity of the village women; to this extent the film makes its expectations and demands explicit.

Raje visualises a 'modernised' village, one where the conventions of oppression are resisted and countered. In order to represent this village, she creates an iconic village setting, constituting an allegorical component of the nation-state. Further, a literal injection of modernity is introduced through Mansukh's arrival in the village. Having thus transformed the village, a consciousness of women's bodies can be played out in the new setting. Bombay functions at a similar allegorical level as a constituent component of the national whole. Rather than situating the discourse of modernity in and through urban images, Bombay provides a narrative anchor to the modernising village. The dialogue between the urban and rural takes place through letters and physical journeys; these journeys bring about and highlight the process by which the new nation is evolved.

Towards an Understanding of Women's Cinema

The two films discussed here are marked by the visual, referential, and imaginary mobility they enable between the city and the village. In *Disha* and *Rihaee*, this movement takes the form of actual journeys. Paranjpye uses a classical approach bridging the journey between the village and city with a song in the folk style of the 'tamasha',[35] that pre-empts the adventures of the city before the visual transition of cinematic frames takes place. Subsequent journeys to and fro enable different viewpoints to be represented; a woman's perspective of Bombay through Phulvantibai's eyes, the changes in the village through both Vasant's and Soma's eyes. In *Rihaee*, Raje highlights the rupture between the migrant men and their wives through the exchange of letters, which are repetitive and predictable. These letters enable an imaginary link to be retained between the city and village. The most significant journey in *Rihaee* is the one undertaken by Mansukh, whereby the village becomes transformed through this bearer of a foreign-bred sophistication. The subsequent arrival of the migrant men in Vadner creates the ground for confrontation between a stagnant feudal patriarchy and a changed village. While the imagination of national progress in both *Disha* and *Rihaee* is based on other dominant discursive traditions in Indian political history, these films make a significant contribution to the understanding of nation and development from women's perspectives.

This essay has tried to emphasise that these two films challenged the dominant ideas of progress and modernity in the 1980s and 90s, and the linearity commonly associated with these, by reorganising the syntagm between nation-gender-modernity through narrative and form. The locus of modernity is shifted from its conventional place in the city to the Indian village, which assumes the location where 'progress' is performed. Even as these films generate a utopian vision of the nation which is in sympathy with women, they can be read as texts in the 'minor' tradition by virtue of the

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 11 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

combination of utopianism and social critique that they present. The blurring of boundaries of location as distinct encoders of modernity or tradition, and by extension, the blurring of the distinction between the modern and the traditional itself, represents the 'feminised' aesthetic in these films – an aesthetic which can be read as being 'feminised' in the context of Indian philosophies of perception.[36] These films express an alternative vision and language in the socio-political context of their thematic content and period of release, but the feminisation of this language through the subtle reorganisation of power-structures is seen to be a characteristic feature of women's filmmaking in India right across the thirty odd years of active film production in the Hindi and English languages. The observations about the aesthetics of *Disha* and *Rihaee* outlined in this essay, therefore, generate a more pressing need to explore Indian women filmmakers' treatment of binaries beyond those of city/village, to include perceptions of self/other, as well as masculine/feminine, which in turn, may generate new possibilities within Anglo-American film theory to conceptualise the association between gender and cinema outside the Western tradition.

Notes

1 M. Biswas, 'The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s', in P. Kaarsholm (ed.), *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience* (Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2004) pp. 40–59.

2 R. Vasudevan, 'The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, Narrative Form and Film Style in Contemporary Urban Action Films' in *City Flicks*, pp. 223–36.

3 It can be argued that India became attracted to the idea of liberalisation much before the 1990s, but for the purpose of this paper, the 1990s marked the moment when this idea began to occupy much prominence in public discourse and policy and became a visible influence on cultural production.

4 'Women's cinema' is a term that Indian filmmakers have persistently avoided and film theorists and critics have seen as being of marginal interest within the larger context of the study of Indian cinemas. However, since the 1980s, women have contributed in large measure to all aspects of film-making, and in spite of denial by women directors, it is possible to look at this body of work as a collective demonstrating specific aesthetic and thematic features. Both, film studies and postcolonial feminist studies, would potentially benefit from such an exercise.

5 Andrew Higson states that some of the factors which identify a national cinema include the inheritance and circulation of notions of national identity, negotiation of conflicts experienced by the imagined community, production of new representations of the nation, and the construction of a collective consciousness of nationhood through specialised cultural referents. See Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30:4 (1989), 36–46. For various historical, political and aesthetic reasons this definition becomes problematic in the Indian context, not least because of the multiple regional film industries that compete with Bollywood, some such as those in the South, generating a larger quantity of films than produced annually in Bombay. While Hollywood films have posed a lesser threat to Indian films, there has been a concerted effort on behalf of the Indian state and some filmmakers and critics to produce a 'subdued' and realist cinema, different from the excessive and fantastical films associated with Bollywood, generating a question as to the nature of what constitutes a national cinema.

6 The nation is being considered here more as an 'imagined' community in Benedict Anderson's words, rather than a socio-political formation. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1983).

7 Jameson defines ideologeme as the 'minimal unit' of organisation of class discourse – 'an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudo-idea – a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice – or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition'. Cited in M. Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi, OUP, 1998), p. 6. Prasad suggests that the binary tradition/modernity indicates one such 'conceptual belief system which regulates thinking about the modern Indian social formation', in addition to being a central theme and organising device in popular film narratives. *Ideology*, p. 7.

8 See theories of modernisation as outlined by Gyan Prakash, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Partha Chatterjee in this context, for example in, G. Prakash *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of a Modern India* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999); S. Kaviraj *Politics in India* (Oxford, OUP, 1997) and 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus*, 129:1 (2000) 137–62; P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi, OUP, 1994).

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 12 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

9 A. Nandy 'Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics', in A. Nandy (ed.), *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi, OUP, 1998), pp. 1–19.
10 S.Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990).
11 A large number of scholars in different parts of the world have contributed to recent developments in the theorising of Indian cinema, but it would be worthwhile to indicate that *Deep Focus* (1988–2005) and the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (1983–99) seemed to provide a launch-pad for these enquiries in the early years.
12 S. Chakravorty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1993).
13 Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, pp. 6–14.
14 Ashis Nandy, for example, suggests that 'certain core anxieties of the Indian civilisation have come to be reflected in the journey from the village to the city and the city to the village. Travel through space and time, the known and the unknown, and ultimately, the self and the not-self get subsumed through these two humble forms of journey'. A. Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: the Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination* (Delhi, OUP, 2001), pp. 7–8.
15 The term Bambaiya is affectionately used to describe the slang-ridden Hindi spoken in Bombay, and which has become a major feature of the Hindi language as used in cinema. The word Bom Bahia ('the good bay') was originally the name given to the islands by the Portuguese who sailed here in 1508. Later, in 1661, these islands were gifted to Charles II of England as part of Catherine of Braganza's wedding dowry.
16 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 2.
17 In the Marathi language, Bakuli is the name of a weed that has small yellow flowers and grows on arid land.
18 For a range of views on this subject see C. Das Gupta's, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema* (Delhi, Roli Books, 1991); E. Barnow and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York, OUP, 1980); A. Sircar, 'Framing the Nation: Languages of Modernity in India' (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of East Anglia, 1997).
19 Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar who worked as a team in writing many scripts for Hindi films in the 1970s and 1980s have often put to use the energies of unrest in Indian society during this time, and were instrumental in the creation of Amitabh Bachchan's star persona as the 'angry young man'.
20 Rajiv Gandhi, 'Foreword', *Seventh Five Year Plan Report*, Vol. I (Planning Commission, Government of India, 1985). Available online at http://planningcommission.nic.in.
21 F. Rangoonwalla, 'The Age of Violence', *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 4–10 September 1996, pp. 27–29.
22 M. Prasad, 'From Speech to Voice: a Note on a Realist Turn', *Deep Focus*, 7:3–4 (1997–98), pp. 51–54.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
24 Kaarsholm, *City Flicks*, p. 6.
25 A. Butler, *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen* (London, Wallflower, 2000), pp. 19–23.
26 Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20. Originally from G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
27 Deleuze and Guattari elaborate that 'in a minor literature, every individual issue matters: its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. Because a minor literature emerges from a deterritorialised group, its function is to conjure up collectivity, even in the absence of an active community'. Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20.
28 See P. Chatterjee 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1987) pp. 233–53; U. Chakravorty, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?' in *Recasting Women*, pp. 27–86; K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London, Zed, 1986).
29 J. Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 9.
30 M. Prasad, 'Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema', in *City Flicks*, p. 83.
31 The politics of the inner and outer worlds as used by Indian nationalists has been described by Partha Chatterjee in *Recasting Women*, pp. 233–53. The segregation into tradition bound inner domain, of which women became symbols in history, and the changing/Westernising outer domain inhabited by men may have been a useful defence mechanism during colonial times, however, its limitations from the perspective of gender have been extensively documented. *See also* U. Chakravorty in *Recasting Women*, pp. 27–86.
32 R. Kumar, *The History of Doing: an Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990* (London, Verso, 1993).
33 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
34 In villages in India the panchayat has been established as a medium of local governance and is comprised of village elders and influential persons who resolve local and domestic disputes through the method of negotiation and consensus.
35 A musical folk drama tradition developed in the early eighteenth-century in Maharashtra.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

FS_1101.fm Page 13 Friday, October 19, 2007 10:27 AM

36 In *Women's I/Eye*, I have argued that one of the defining characteristics of Indian women's cinema is the aesthetic of non-dualism. In this tradition, the 'other' is experienced as a projection of the self, and this outlook influences the manner in which points of identification are set up through the narrative and through filming and editing, which in turn influences spectatorship. The viewing relations set up by women's films in India are influenced by larger perceptions of bisexuality and gender transgression, as well as by the sub-culture of gender transgression evident in mainstream Indian society. Therefore, frequently, one finds that in women's films, conventional binaries are subverted or applied to a different grammar of cinema, inviting interpretations that are unconventionally feminist within the Anglo-American theoretical context. R. Sawhney, *Women's I/Eye: A Critical Study of Women's Cinema in India* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Limerick, 2006).

UNCORRECTED PROOF