

**Gopal, Sangita. *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*. Pp. 240. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. US \$28.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780226304267.**

**Mehta, Monika. *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema*. Pp. 318. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. US \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780292747593.**

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Published online: August 2015

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Best known for its romantic melodramas and ubiquitous song-and-dance sequences, Bollywood is the largest of India's culture industries. This prolific Hindi-language commercial film industry based in Mumbai (Bombay) boasts an annual output of over 250 films and a daily audience of 100 million. Its films have always been tremendously popular not just with Indian viewers but also those in the Middle East, South East Asia, parts of Africa, and the former Soviet Union. In the past decade, this cinema has also attracted mainstream audiences in the West, first in the U.K. and increasingly in the U.S., in part due to the success of films like *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) that pay tribute to Bollywood's extravagant style. This cultural interest around Bollywood has invigorated South Asian cinema studies in the United States. The field is abuzz with an ever-expanding corpus of textual analyses, archival work, and ethnographic studies, not just of Bombay cinema but also of other regional cinemas in India. In this review, I consider two excellent additions to the scholarship on gender and nation in Bollywood: Monika Mehta's *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema* and Sangita Gopal's *Conjugations*.

*Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema* uses a Foucauldian framework to examine how diverse instances of "cutting, classifying, and certifying" shape representations of sex and sexuality in mainstream Hindi cinema, primarily between the 1970s and 1990s (Mehta 7). Writing against the prevailing conception of censorship as a top-down process in which government bureaucrats demand the deletion of parts of a film they deem offensive, Mehta urges us to conceptualize censorship not in terms of the "repressive hypothesis"—i.e., censorship as a something that limits creative expression and polices representations of sex in cinema—but in terms of Foucault's more fluid conception

of power. The implications of this theoretical reframing are laid out in the book's introduction (Chapter 1). The vigorous participation of lay audience members and various civil and political organizations in debates about cinematic representations of sexuality, Mehta argues, indicates that censorship is not simply a technology of the state. Rather, it constitutes a field of struggle where different actors jostle to make sense of cinematic texts and give shape to their desires. The move away from censorship as prohibition allows us to see more clearly the *productive* effects of censorship, both in terms of the audiences invited to view particular films and what Foucault called the "incitement to discourse" (Foucault 17).

That censorship generates important effects is amply clear when one considers how the categories and language used by India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) shape the reception of a film. As several of Mehta's chapters demonstrate, whether a film gets a U (unrestricted exhibition) or an A (exhibition restricted to adults) certificate is a crucial factor in determining who watches the film, when, and in what context. Certification helps produce the audience of the film. If the CBFC delimited the reach of Raj Kapoor's *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (Truth, God, Beauty, 1978) by restricting its exhibition to adults (Chapter 5), the same agency's enthusiastic stamp of approval for Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave-Hearted Will Take Away the Bride, 1995) as a "family love story" invited audiences to enjoy the latter film along with their family and friends (Chapter 8). These disparate cases make clear that certification and classification are important not simply because they can make or break a film at the box office, but because the labels they generate mark particular films and audiences as normative and others as undesirable. The implications for the construction of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity are stark. Gendered ideals and discourses about desire are produced not simply in moments of spectacular rupture—that is, in the debates that controversial films inspire—but also in and through the most banal, everyday operations of the state, namely certification and classification.

Students of Hindi film and film history will find Mehta's emphasis on the "micropractices" of censorship very instructive. Whereas previous studies of censorship in India and elsewhere have relied on legal documents and government reports almost exclusively, Mehta balances such archival information with ethnographic data and close readings of films. This methodological choice is significant as it allows her to narrate the history of censorship as an institution in India, from its British colonial origins to the changes proposed to the Cinematograph Act in 2010 (Chapter 2), and to link that story to the day-to-day operations of the CBFC (Chapter 3). The granular picture that Mehta paints through interviews with examining committee officials and observation of committee meetings is fascinating. One sees not just the structure and logics of the system at work—how committees are composed, at what levels particular decisions are made etc.—but also the arbitrariness and messiness of the process. Together these chapters provide a cogent critique of the postcolonial state and its patriarchal attitude vis-à-vis its citizens (thought to be in constant need of protection and education) even as they unravel the idea of a monolithic "big bad state" that imposes its decisions from above. Instead, censorship provides the means through which the state and its populace negotiate their relationship to each other.

Struggles over cinematic representations, particularly those involving female bodies and sexuality, are evident in several chapters. Take, for instance, Mehta's remarkable

discussion of *Gupt Gyan* (Secret Knowledge, 1974), “the first sex-education film,” in Chapter 4. The travails of this film lay in its medicalized depiction of sex and sexuality, and its apparent blurring of documentary and fictional genres. The film’s “realistic” representation of sex—replete with clinical depictions of the human body, venereal disease, and sexual intercourse—baffled officials who were used to demanding cuts of titillating close-ups and gyrating dance moves. After extensive review and debate involving not just the CBFC but also the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and intense back-channel lobbying by the filmmaker B. K. Adarsh, *Gupt Gyan* was released with some cuts and an A certificate. Still, the film’s success at the box-office and its subsequent de-certification in the context and aftermath of the political Emergency (1975-77) speak to the highly contingent nature of public debates about censorship, sex, and sexuality. The crucial importance of the political milieu is also apparent in the banning of *Pati Parmeshwar* (A Husband Is Like God, 1989) explored in Chapter 6. The CBFC deemed the film’s focus on the self-sacrificing wife demeaning, a clear indication that it was attuned to the widespread feminist activism and legal measures initiated during that period to end violence against women. Interestingly, other state entities to which the filmmakers appealed their case, including the Bombay High Court, disagreed with the CBFC’s assessment.

Whereas the aforementioned chapters deal with wrangling within the state, other case studies highlight the active role of audiences in shaping censorship debates (in particular, Chapters 5 and 7). Mehta’s close reading of the popular magazine *Filmfare*’s 1955 forum on censorship shows that readers’ deep investment in censorship lay not simply in their love of cinema, but in their understanding of how censorship was linked to concepts such as democracy, morality, tradition, and state authority (Mehta 42). These connections are also on display in the many letters to the editor that Mehta discusses in chapter 7 on the controversy surrounding the song “Choli ke Peechhe Kya Hain?” (What Is Behind the Blouse?) from Subhash Ghai’s *Khalnayak* (Villain, 1993). This chapter specifies just how the “liberalization” of the Indian economy in the early 1990s simultaneously enabled the circulation of the notorious song—the multiplication of its pleasures, one might say—and provoked anxieties about the female body as a bearer of national identity and cultural values. In conjunction with Mehta’s analysis of *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, a film about “an ugly girl with a beautiful voice” (114), the *Khalnayak* chapter explains how Bombay cinema configures the relationship between sound and image, and the place of the sexualized female body in that audiovisual compact. These chapters make for good reading in a course on Bollywood or film history or, even more generally, in a unit on Foucault’s notions of discourse and the play of power.

Towards the end of her book, Mehta makes one final move that undercuts the censorship-equals-prohibition formulation. In fact, she turns this idea on its head in Chapter 8 by linking the “cuts” of the censor to the creative decisions of filmmakers themselves. Focusing on the additions and deletions that director Aditya Chopra made to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, both before the film hit the screens and in a later official DVD release, Mehta argues that these choices are as critical as the CBFC’s process of certification in constructing *DDLJ* as a “family love story.” Equally important are the many paratexts associated with the film (DVD “extras” such as the made-for-television documentary “The Making of *DDLJ*” and deleted scenes) for they enable many alternate routes into a film that is quite conservative in terms of its representation of romance and familial hierarchies. Less well developed but equally intriguing is Mehta’s suggestion that scholarship itself

entails processes of selection, classification, and cutting, often due to length and time, the same considerations that motivate many filmmakers' editing choices.

Quite apart from the theoretical and historical contributions noted above, I am taken by the humility and the clarity of Mehta's voice in this book. What she offers is not just an excellent model of interdisciplinary scholarship, but also writing that is as kind to its readers as it is rigorous in its critique of power and knowledge.

Sangita Gopal's *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* takes off at the historical point at which Mehta ends her analysis, the post-liberalization period. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Indian government introduced a number of changes to its fiscal and economic policies in an effort to attract private and foreign investment. The impact on public culture was as rapid as it was dramatic. Along with changes to the financial operations and industrial organization of the Bombay film industry came transformations in the technological, aesthetic, and thematic concerns of this cinema. A fundamental contribution of Gopal's book is to delineate the complex of material, social, and institutional forces that give rise to a new kind of cinema in the post-liberalization period. She calls this novel cinematic order "New Bollywood Cinema."

So what is "new" about New Bollywood cinema? For one, it focuses squarely on the "post-nuptial" couple. Whereas Hindi films of the past spent most of their three-hour running time constituting the romantic couple and helping the lovers wend their way through social and familial obstructions, New Bollywood takes the heterosexual romantic unit as a given. So secure is this couple formation that these new films typically begin a few years *after* marriage—hence the title of the book, *Conjugations*. This is not to say that contemporary films do not reveal strains on romance or marriage: far from it. Gopal has a whole chapter discussing how the very structure of the "multiplot film," one of several new genres to emerge in the last decade, allows New Bollywood cinema to explore the diverse experiences and dynamics of couples across social strata (Chapter 4). Still, the fact remains that "unlike Hindi films of the past, these films assume the right of the couple to form a private union based on romantic love" (Gopal 147). This simple yet startling insight is Gopal's starting point and the lens through which she explores how cinematic form is linked to the social and material realms of the Mumbai film industry. By tracking transformations in Hindi cinema's couple formation—specifically, changes in the *formal* means of representing romance and couplehood—she shows us how Bombay cinema turned into New Bollywood, and how it re-imagines and reconstitutes citizenship, desire, and modernity in its new iteration.

Gopal's emphasis on form is one of the strongest features of this book. Not only does it yield very compelling close readings, it also trains our attention on the new technologies and organizational structures that enable particular cinematic representations. Consider an example from Gopal's excellent chapter on the "New Horror" genre (Chapter 3). The emergence of horror as an "up-market" genre is a recent development. Gopal proposes a link between the urban, middle-class audiences now addressed by New Horror and the increasing use of relatively new technologies such as Steadicam and Dolby sound in this genre. While most contemporary Hindi films evince a slicker style and more technological finesse than films of the past, what is significant here is the way these new technologies help secure the interiority of the characters and establish the couple's distance from the broader social realm. Extensive use of point-of-view shots and multi-layered sound evoke the psychological experience of horror; the terror is further heightened by the camera's

careful cataloguing of chic interior spaces and everyday technologies (cell phones, elevators, blenders, television sets) used by the upwardly mobile nuclear couple. For Gopal, these and other formal features of New Horror posit a new kind of subjectivity making it “the post-liberalization genre par excellence” (115).

In Chapter 2, attention to form and conjugality helps cast a familiar genre in new light. Here, Gopal discusses the NRI (non-resident Indian) film, as exemplified by the “KJo” brand, i.e. films directed by Karan Johar. The NRI film is the best known of New Bollywood’s genres for it is this kind of film that revitalized the film industry in the mid-1990s. KJo films contain all of the features U.S. audiences have come to expect of Bollywood: big budgets, spectacular production values, extravagant song-and-dance sequences, and family melodrama. Scholars agree that the affluent, transnational utopia these films project are indicative of a post-liberalization imaginary. As attractive and beloved as they are, it is easy to dismiss these films as regressive, given their exclusionary class dynamics and their idealization of patriarchal Hindu culture (which comes to stand in for “Indianness”). But Gopal gives us a different way of understanding these films’ “love affair with the family” (67). She first gives an impressively detailed description of the industrial changes that have professionalized and corporatized the industry’s longstanding family-enterprise model. Then, in what is perhaps the boldest move of the book, she proposes that KJo films enact a similar, thoroughgoing transformation of the family. In these new films, parents are no longer aligned with the “law”: they are instead “facilitators of desire” (80). In the process, representational strategies that were critical to the staging of romance in older Hindi films come to seem outmoded. Melodrama and song-and-dance sequences thus become “excessive” gestures, citations of the past that allow New Bollywood to stage a break from older versions of itself.

This self-conscious use and transformation of “old” cinematic elements is not limited to contemporary NRI films. In the very first chapter of *Conjugations*, Gopal offers a persuasive account of the work that song-and-dance sequences performed in the first decade of the “talkies” in India. She compares this narrative and ideological work to the functions of these sequences in New Bollywood cinema. Her analysis of romantic duets from three early sound films—*Chandidas* (1934), *Achhyut Kanya* (The Untouchable Girl, 1936), and *Admi* (Life Is for Living, 1939)—shows how the song sequence became a space for the articulation of desire (especially desire coded as transgressive in the narrative domain) as it related to modern, national identity. If the primary function of song in the 1930s was to constitute the couple as a legitimate, private entity, then that role becomes obsolete in the post-nuptial world of New Bollywood cinema. As the industry moves towards what Ian Garwood has called “the songless Bollywood film,” the song-and-dance sequence has fallen onto “couples that are out of joint—the poor, the old, the queer” (Gopal 58-9).

In her fifth and final chapter, Gopal pivots from New Bollywood to one of its putative others, the “regional” film industry of West Bengal. Focusing on the film *Chokher Bali* (Sand in the Eye, 2003) directed by the acclaimed filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh, she argues that New Bollywood serves as a “technology” that allows Bengali cinema to translate itself into a globally recognizable form. The film’s lush aesthetics, its revisionist stance towards history, and its focus on the desiring female body all signal a shift away from the tradition of “quality cinema” so dear to the middle-class cultural elite of Bengal. Despite Gopal’s impeccable cinematic analysis and historical acumen, this is the one chapter that feels

somewhat out of place to me. This is perhaps because it is hard to shake off the feeling that Bengali cinema becomes a derivative of New Bollywood cinema in this chapter. Still, this does not take away from the ambitious and sophisticated argument constructed in *Conjugations*. This is an important book for anyone interested in understanding the complexity of contemporary Bollywood cinema.

Reading Mehta's and Gopal's books alongside each other drives home the importance of feminist interdisciplinary approaches to cinema. While the methods, sources, and scope of these two monographs are quite different, both illuminate the operations of the Bombay film industry and link them to the form of the cinematic text. Brimming with historical insights and excellent close readings, both books succeed in challenging existing frameworks for interpreting representations of love, sex, and romance in Bombay cinema.

## Works Cited

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