

## **Making a Woman From a Tawaif - Courtesans as Heroes in Hindi Cinema**

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### Introduction

In the Hindi film, *Kismat*<sup>1</sup>, the film's heroine (Muni) has been rescued by the film's hero (Moti) from the clutches of the villains and from their plans to force her into a life as a courtesan. Having been in their control, however, and having been forced to dance in public as a courtesan, Muni sees her situation as hopeless: 'The world can turn a woman into a courtesan, but a courtesan can never become a woman.' The Urdu word, *tawaif*, which I have translated as courtesan, is defined in at least one Urdu dictionary as "dancing girl, a prostitute; a female singer." Like Indian society of the past (and Indian films of the present), this definition conflates a woman's professional engagement as a performing artist and as a prostitute. The generic noun, woman, is used here to mean "respectable woman," one who, in the conventions of the Hindi cinema is sexually, socially and economically definable in terms of her relationship to one or more respectable males. In the eyes of "respectable" society (represented most clearly in this film by Moti's aunt, who rejects Muni because of her tawaif-identity), Moti's actions, however noble, are futile. Having been labelled tawaif, Muni can no longer hope for respectability; a happy ending—defined in the conventions of the Hindi cinema as the union of the heroine with the film's hero—is no longer possible.

Muni's distinction between women and tawaifs is actually a distinction between the female character who, in the dictates of convention, is a respectable heroine (and therefore marriageable) and one who is a tawaif (and therefore not). Since marriage (actual or implied) to the film's hero by the conclusion of the narrative is normally a given in the conventional cinema, the distinction and its characterisation as irreversible appears to remove Muni from the category of heroine or at best, to define her as a tragic heroine.

As has been made endlessly clear in films and film journalism (e.g., Somaaya, 2004), an Indian film heroine normally meets certain minimum standards. Among other things, she

must be sexually chaste, must honour the hero's parents, and must make at least occasional attempts at demur-ness. Film heroines may speak up for themselves quite assertively, may be adventurous or impetuous, and may even pursue the hero romantically; but their assertiveness is usually subdued once her romantic relationship with the film's hero is established. In speech and behaviour, heroines rarely challenge the conventional gender roles and images of the cinema, more rarely with success. They must not make direct references to sexual matters and must behave respectably in public and private.

The music and dance scenes that are omnipresent in the conventional Hindi cinema might seem to contradict my characterization of heroinely behaviour since they regularly employ revealing costumes, highly sexualised choreography, and suggestive lyrics in the erotic display of these allegedly respectable heroines; but these scenes are conventionally managed. Under most conditions, heroines only dance when the hero is present in the scene either as spectator or as participant. Heroines normally dance for others only under compulsion or in connection with some ruse that has a place in the narrative. The popular and infamous song and accompanying music scene, "*Choli ke peeche*" [What's underneath my blouse?] from the 1993 release, *Khal Nayak*, exemplifies the contradictions built into this system. The heroine's abbreviated costume and the song's provocative lyrics were the cause for national debate about the limits of acceptable erotic display in the cinema; but in narrative terms, the heroine's performance was framed as a lure to aid in the capture of the film's villain and was therefore entirely conventional.

In mainstream Hindi films, narrative conventions form a predictable and coherent code of behaviour and communication. The narrative and dramatic conventions of Hindi cinema routinely structure matters such as plot development, characterization, acting, story type, and so forth. Narrative conventions may also connect contemporary Hindi films to India's narrative and ideological past (see Booth 1995, or Mishra's discussion of "dharmik codes," 2002). The consistency of these narrative conventions was all but total for most of

the cinema's history; but there has been a perceptible weakening in their grip since the mid-1990s. My focus will therefore be primarily on the films of the 1950s through early 1990s<sup>2</sup>. Although the conventional cinema has by no means collapsed, my conclusions will be much more applicable to Indian films of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Hindi cinema is not realist (Prasad, 2000); but I argue, with Jameson that the consumer-producer relationship is interactive; popular media seek to produce images that will somehow control or lessen political anxieties and fantasies, which “must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text” (1992, 25) through ameliorative representation, in these instances, representations of women, their place in society and relationships to men. Jameson sees the consumer-producer relationship as more interactive than does Prabhu, who argues that society is the source of influence in the audience-cinema relationship: “If the image [of women in the cinema] is submissive or secondary, it is the society who is responsible for it...filmmakers, keeping in mind the commercial aspect of films, simply highlight what exists” (Prabhu 2001, 185).

While stories are often worked out quite carefully in the Hindi film industry, it would appear that complete screenplays, with specified dialogue and other details, were much less common. Prasad argues that there was no “‘mass production’ in the strict sense of the term” and that “the kind of narrative contexts that the given dialogue lyrics, dances and stock characters make possible *do not require* [emphasis in the original] a prepared script, simply because the variations in them are caused by innovation internal to the traditions...rather than the external pressure of the particularities of a narrative” (Prasad 2000, 39-45). A film may focus on the social problems created by prostitution, challenging the social notions of gender attached to the concept of the tawaif; but such a film also exploits the conventional image of the tawaif and must ultimately be seen as a collaborative and sometimes improvisatory process, especially in Hindi films of 1940-90 (Virmani 2004). In this way, and for the host of busy film professionals in Mumbai, narrative conventions served as “default” solutions to

some of the detailed needs of filmmaking, especially in areas of dialogue, plot, and character development. This makes Jameson more, rather than less, applicable: the spontaneous qualities of the filmmaking process could be argued to more closely reflect collective feeling and norms than otherwise. In this study I argue that the conventions that created tawaifs such as Chandramukhi, Sadhana, or Shahab-jaan, and the conventional narrative elements that dictated their fates do provide us with a valuable perspective on Indian notions of gender identity and relations.

In this study, I consider almost all of the films, in which tawaifs occupy principal or significant female roles, of which I am aware. Given the size of the repertoire, and the variable accessibility of films, there may well be some tawaif-centred films that are not considered here. Nevertheless, all the major films of this genre are considered. Tawaif-centred films do not, in fact, constitute a large proportion of the Hindi film repertoire; but both Jameson and Prabhu argue that the content of popular culture and media must be seen in the context of socio-cultural anxiety and responsibility. The relatively small size of the courtesan-film repertoire is offset, therefore, by the unique concerns it can address (gender identities and roles, control of women's bodies, and so forth). In this light, it is perhaps relevant to note that of the twenty-four tawaif films identified in this study, fifteen were released between 1970 and 1986, nearly a full generation after India achieved Independence and a time in which issues of women's identities being widely publicised on a global level. It is also tempting to point out that for thirteen of those seventeen years India was governed by one of the world's few female political leaders.

Regardless of how successful the Hindi cinema may be at ameliorating social tension, it nevertheless does have an enormous presence and influence in the direction of Indian popular culture. The images of tawaifs found in the Hindi cinema therefore take on a more substantial import than simply that of objects for display, scintillation, or interesting plot twists. Tawaif films are almost certainly not "about" the social transformation of actual

tawaifs—a non-existent tradition in modern India—or of actual prostitutes; but on a less explicit level, they are about gender, gender identities, and gender anxieties.

Cinematic tawaifs are female characters that often (and despite their situations) appear to possess more independence and often assertiveness (in cinematic terms) than most normal female roles. What is more, their sexual and personal pasts and futures are sources of narrative tension. Because her relations with specific respectable males are undefined or non-existent, a tawaif's personal and sexual history cannot be represented in terms male control. The chain of male custody so to speak (father, to brother, to husband, to son) which defines most respectable female character types is broken or non-existent. In this traditional (i.e., masculine) conceptualization of female identity (which is certainly less dominant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in many parts of India), women who positioned themselves so as to attract male attention and a sexualized male-gaze (and thus implied that their bodies might be beyond social control) were understood to be women of ill repute almost by definition. As one film hero (Devdas) explains it to one tawaif (Chandramukhi, in the 2002 version of *Devdas*), “a woman is a mother, a sister, a wife, or a friend; and when she is nothing, she is a tawaif.”

As they are represented in Hindi films, tawaifs do not exist in contemporary Indian society. Nevertheless, I suggest that the position of Appadurai, Korom and Mills with regard to Indian folklore, applies, if with different caveats and perhaps greater timeliness, to Hindi film:

“We had all better understand the ways complex civilizational traditions, like those of South Asia, have engaged the problems of fiction and fantasy, ... of the aesthetic prerogatives of men and women... within a complex set of performance traditions.”

(Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1991, 1)

The issues of gender, control, independence, sexuality, male-female relations, and so on that arise in these films do resonate with tensions in contemporary Indian culture. Despite its obvious adherence to a male-centred worldview, I argue that the material of tawaif films shows if not “cultural debate, on central matters of power, of status, of gender, of genre, and of reality itself” (Appadurai 1991, 471), at least cultural awareness of the inconsistencies and tensions in those relationships.

This is a study of representation within the commercial Hindi cinema, the dominant stylistic and linguistic component of the Indian film industry. As such it confronts the stereotyped images (based on gender, age, marital status, socio-economic status, regional identity, etc.) that are part of that cinema, but which do not correlate directly with the realities of Indian society. Scholarship in Hindi cinema has established the importance of stereotyped images and their role in the construction of gender in this cinematic repertoire (e.g., Booth, 1995; Mathur, 2002); this study is an attempt to move beyond the simple confrontation of those gendered stereotypes. I seek to shift the focus of discussion to a more productive view of the ways in which such stereotypes may be manipulated by cultural producers and the ways in which such manipulation may reflect subtle or changing understandings of gender (in this instance) within society.

In pursuit of these goals, I make two specific arguments in this research. First, based on some of the foundational theories of feminist and feminist film, critique, I argue that tawaifs are a distinct gender within the Indian narrative world and that the woman-tawaif transformation is not one way. The tawaif-woman transformation is also possible, as a number of films have demonstrated. Second, incorporating ideas from Indian folklore studies, I seek to demonstrate that, despite their superficially exploited images, tawaifs as protagonists are both heroic and masculine within the understandings of Indian folklore types. Throughout, I examine the narrative factors surrounding such gendered constructions and transformations and argue that these represent an unspoken form of social negotiation

between film producer and consumer, that not only establish the gender specifics of the character, but that also allow such apparently transgressive characters to be redeemed.

### Heroines, Tawaifs and Heroes

The tawaif is one of seven images of Indian women that Prabhu (2001) suggests inhabit the conventional world of commercial Hindi films. Tawaif films enact and, in at least some films, state explicitly, a clear distinction between the identities, tawaif and woman. In the conventional cinematic world, these identities are two distinct stylized codes of public and private acts, governing behaviour, economics, and relations with the male world. They are, in fact, two distinct gender identities.

The behaviour of heroines is conventionally under the control of fathers, mothers, elder brothers, sons, uncles, and so on in Hindi cinema. Heroines frequently rebel against the specific dictates of their elders; but these rebellions rarely extend to notions of sexual chastity or marriage *per se*. They routinely centre on the question of who the heroine will marry, not when or whether she will marry. Within conventional narrative structures, the control of a heroine's body is almost always transferred directly from her family to her husband, regardless of who chooses the husband.

The tawaif's body, on the other hand, is one that has been conventionally removed from the control of respectable society and family. Some tawaifs are represented as having a high degree of independence from any control; others are subject to the control in relationships that combine varying degrees of social or hereditary kinship, commodification, criminality, and sexual objectification. None of the normal strategies through which a hero might gain control of a heroine—the establishment of a romantic relationship, acceptance by the heroine's family, “proving himself” in some socially acceptable way (e.g., success in education, business, sport, etc.)—are available in tawaif films. Strategies for control over a tawaif involve economic exchange or criminality and violence, paths closed to most respectable heroes.

In their depictions of the distinctions between cinematic heroines and cinematic tawaifs (as well as between men and women), Hindi film-makers demonstrate a clear intuitive or experiential understanding of Butler's proposal that the concept of gender is based on "a tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 1990, 140). They also demonstrate a clear ability to balance and manipulate behaviour and speech in the production of sometimes quite subtle blends of these discrete identities.

### Women (Heroines) and Tawaifs

In her study of aspects of Hindi cinema, Sumita Chakravarty's assessment of the tawaifly condition echoes the unilateral understanding of possible gendered transformations that Muni's monologue expresses above:

A key element in [the courtesan genre of films] is the idea of woman's social and psychic transformation...a change that is primarily one of semantics and involves a process of renaming. In the case of the women of this genre, the change or crossover is irrevocable. As women who are renamed and thereby take on the identity of a radically social other, the move can only be in one direction.

(Chakravarty 1993, 276)

*Kismet's* dialogue and Chakravarty's assessment both assert that once the label, tawaif, has been inscribed upon and enacted by a female character in the Hindi cinema, not only her identity, but also her narrative fate, are sealed. While heroines can expect marriage to their heroes at film's end, the tawaif's conventional fate is heartbreak, abandonment, or death. Indeed, the tawaif characters in films such as *Devdas*, *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, or *Deedar-e-yaar* meet precisely these fates. In her identification of courtesan films as a genre, within the

repertoire of the commercial Hindi cinema, Chakravarty suggests, as will I, that courtesan films carry a particular form of ideological baggage (c.f., Viridi below, and Walser, 1993).

In this study, however, I argue that the understanding of genre (and hence ideology) is both more subtle and more flexible than Chakravarty suggests. In the context of Hindi cinema as a whole, however, these negative assessments expressed through Muni's character are too pessimistic: by the conclusion of *Kismet* and a number of other Hindi films (e.g., *Pakheezah*, *Suhag*, etc.), a series of narrative factors enable a tawaif's transformation into the respectable and demure soon-to-be wife of the film's hero.

A female character's identity is reflected in cinematic terms by (among other things) the renaming to which Chakravarty refers above. Tawaifs commonly and traditionally had the suffixes *jan* or *bai* attached to their names, as markers of professional tawaif status (e.g., Muni-bai, Malka-jan, etc.). Suffixes were also traditionally added to the names respectable women, either the formal suffix, *devi*—literally meaning goddess—or a variety of terms used for female relatives, such as *bahen* [sister], *bhabi* [brother's wife], *chachi* [auntie], etc., depending on age, social status, relationship, and so on. Respectable Indian women were thus exempted from the male sexualized gaze by being associated with either divinity or with one's own family. This social convention is much more negotiable (or even dispensable) in modern India than it was in the past; nevertheless, in the traditional context, it clearly defined the ways in which respectable women might be viewed and the kinds of gazes that were acceptable in polite society.

Because of the conventionally clear distinctions between characters that I will now call *devis* (conventionally respectable women characters) and tawaifs, these two cinematic images reinforce and exaggerate two culturally constructed polar identities, both of which are applicable to female characters, depending on their behaviours. Arora has argued that “despite their markedly different social standings”, the *devi* and *jan* heroines of the 1935 and 1955 Hindi versions of the *Devdas* story “function as mirror images of each other” (Arora

1997, 6). The behavioural contrasts between these identities are conventionally displayed in a range of ways, including naming and address, settings, cinematic introductions, costumes, speech and other behaviours.

While *devis* routinely interact with male characters, they do so within the social and familial relationships I have suggested. *Tawaifs*, on the other hand, are often shown relating comfortably to and engaging flirtatiously with criminals or other disreputable males. If they do not smoke or drink themselves, they are normally tolerant if not encouraging of men who do. They are prepared to be assertive, giving men orders and generally responding with disdain to behaviours or sexual advances that would shock and disgust the average *devi*. When the villains of *Amiri Gharibi* appear in Sona's *kotha* [salon/brothel] demanding her presence for a performance, she is simply disdainful: "No one gives me orders in my own house; behave properly or get out."

Laura Mulvey's (1989: 19) theoretical paradigm of a three-pronged quality of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is fundamental to the feminist critique of cinematic practice. It provides one useful way of distinguishing between the Hindi cinema's *tawaifs* and its heroines. Mulvey asserts that female images in the cinema can be analyzed as objects to be viewed in relation to three gazes: that of the camera, that of the film's spectators, and that of the male characters within the narrative frame. Naturally, *tawaifs* are routinely shown dancing for others in scenes in which the hero is not present, and in which a respectable hero should not be present. Worst of all, *tawaifs* frequently give every appearance of enjoying their situation. While all prominent female characters in a Hindi film possess the first two of Mulvey's (1989) three qualities of "to-be-looked-at-ness," (with regard to the camera and the members of the audience) only *tawaifs* possess it in relation to the generality of male characters within the narrative.

A unique representation of the *devi-tawaif* dichotomy is found early in *Mehboob ki Mehendi*, whose heroine (Shabana) is the daughter of a *tawaif*, but not a *tawaif* herself, having

been raised in respectable society by her grandmother. To some extent, the mother-daughter/tawaif-devi pairing heightens the contrast between these identities, emphasizing their constructed, rather than inherent or hereditary qualities; at the same time, it is her mother's profession that causes much of the film's narrative tension, since Shabana assumes that no respectable family will allow their son to marry her if they know of her antecedents.

When Shabana finally goes in search of her mother, she enters the kotha, confronting nothing more sinister than the musical instruments (tabla, sarangi, harmonium,) used to accompany a range of music and dance styles in northern India including, but not limited to, those performed by tawaifs. Even this veiled reference to her mother's profession, however, is horrifying to Shabana, before whose eyes the instruments themselves appear to swirl menacingly. Shabana subsequently discovers that her mother has committed suicide rather than confront her adult daughter in her degraded, tawaifly condition. The juxtaposition of polar devi-jan identities within a single family is also present in *Suhaag*. Here, the narrative presents two sisters as polar opposites, one a nursing-student devi (Anu) and the other a tawaif (Vasanti). Initial extreme contrasts in behaviour, dialogue, scene, costume, etc., construct diametrically opposed gendered images of the sisters that are subsequently ameliorated by a host of factors, as I will describe below.

One of the clearest distinguishers between devis and tawaifs is a female character's introduction. The title credits and introductory scene found in *Khilauna* offer a classic example of the practice that introduces tawaif characters in the performance context of the *mujra*, the traditional gathering that takes place in the kotha in which the tawaif dances and sings for her patrons, while they socialize amongst themselves, smoking, drinking, and admiring the performers. The tawaifs in these performative introductions (e.g., *Tawaif*, *Amiri Gharibi*, and *Ek Nazar*, and perhaps most famously, *Pakheezah*) are pictured as smiling flirtatious young women, apparently willing participants in the construction of their gender. Mujras are conventionally employed as a means of simultaneously introducing the tawaif,

establishing her identity, and imposing on her a general quality of to-be-looked-at-ness with regard to the collective male gazes of the men within the narrative frame

In a few films, we are first introduced to a young devi who is then kidnapped, or otherwise coerced into becoming a tawaif (e.g., *Ram Teri Ganga Maili Hogai*, *Adaalat*, *Kismet*, etc.). Often her former devi-identity is unknown to, or discounted by, other characters in the narrative. While such heroines encounter problems as a result of what is actually the temporary imposition of the tawaif identity (in society's eyes), the fact that the audience has viewed them initially as devis normally places their stories in a distinctive category from those female protagonists who are introduced as tawaifs, as I will show below. This circumstance normally also makes their subsequent re-transformation easier (the tragic *Adaalat* is the necessary exception). While such films are woman-centred, much of the tension is around male contestation for control of the heroine in which she remains a relatively passive object. Such female characters are not, properly speaking, tawaifs.

#### Masculinity in tawaif-centered films

The relatively active role played by tawaifs in their narratives, and sometimes by other, primarily older women (e.g., Shahaab-jan's aunt in *Pakeezah*, or Bhari-Ama in *Tawaif*), is complemented by a relative passivity in the behaviour of the male figures who would normally be considered the heroes of these films. Virdi (2003) shows us the important and distinctively complex nature of male heroism in the Hindi cinema and the role of mothers in that construction of gender. This is a topic that requires broader consideration than can be provided here. More specifically, Arora has attributed the "lovelorn, sexually impotent, politically disengaged, and ultimately tragic" features of the character of Devdas, to the interactions of class and colonialism with gender (1997: 1). Clearly such characterisations conflict with the normal, conventional expectations that heroes be the actors, the rescuers, and the fighters in the Hindi cinema, especially in their relations with their heroines. Arora's (1997) analysis of this historical story is too specific to apply to all male protagonists in

tawaif-centered films. Nevertheless, in many tawaif-centred films (e.g., *Pakheezah*, *Tawaif*, *Amiri Gharibi*, *Khilauna*, etc.), the male figures that would normally be considered heroes display remarkably few standard heroic traits.

Daud and Hira spend most of their narratives rejecting the advances of the tawaifs in these stories; Daud actually focuses most of his time on the romantic pursuit of a different (devi) love interest altogether. In *Pakheezah*, when Shahaab-jan leaves Salim, he feels betrayed by Shahaab-jan's flight; but he does not pursue her. He then agrees with his family's proposal that he marry a more suitable devi. Hira, who is the only fighter in this group of heroes, does not fight to control or possess Sona as such. Although he first meets Sona when he saves her from a group of ruffians, and although he describes his actions as "a question of a woman's honour," Hira subsequently refuses to have anything to do with Sona on the grounds of her tawaif identity. It is Sona who saves the respectability of Hira's family, just as it is Sultana who saves a neighbour's daughter from a kidnapper's clutches in *Tawaif* and who agrees to return to the villain, Rahim Sheikh, so as to save Daud from Rahim's anger. When Daud finally confronts Rahim and his men physically, he is completely ineffectual. In *Khilauna*, Vijay is helpless and insane; his cure towards the end of the film actually produces a shift in the film's story type at that point, and in the gender roles of the main characters. When Vijay suddenly appears as a standard heroic figure, Chand, pregnant and abandoned, is automatically transformed into a typically powerless heroine. Even the great Sikandar, of *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, who spends much of the film successfully fighting various villains, including Dilawar with whom he contests for Zohra, is (like Hira) helpless in the face of respectable society's rejection of Zohra as a tawaif. The primary conflict in these tawaif-films centres on a woman's quest for devi status and domesticity, not on a man's physical battle for control of her destiny. Sona and Sultana, and Chand to a lesser extent, are their film's actors and rescuers.

The devi-tawaif gender distinction also carries with it a range of implications for the gendered behaviours of male heroes in tawaif-centred films, as I have described above. The conventionally foredoomed and always questionable quality of tawaif-hero romances made tawaifs perfect female complements to the flawed and often tragic heroes that form part of the “*bechara complex*” (Mishra 2002, 37). Indian cinema’s prototypical bechara hero is Devdas, who Arora (1997) had earlier described in sado-masochistic terms. There have been at least three talking versions of this story in Hindi, under this title (1935, 1955, and 2002), in which Devdas, prevented from marrying his childhood sweetheart, attempts to drink himself to death. Before he succeeds, Devdas meets a tawaif, Chandramukhi, who falls in love with him and does her best to save him from himself and his sorrows.

Chandramukhi is “self-denying, devoted to healing the troubled hero whose last wish is to die in the arms of his Paro” (Somayya 2004, 58). Her love for Devdas causes Chandramukhi to renounce her professional tawaif behaviours; but Devdas leaves her, preferring to die of dissipation and heartbreak on Pavarti’s doorstep. Chandramukhi nevertheless displays nothing but loving, humble gratitude for Devdas’ attentions. In some versions of the story, the scenes of parting include cinematic devices, such as the growing prominence of ankle-bells (worn by tawaifs when dancing) in the background music (1955) or the increasingly wide-angle shot of the courtesan quarter (2002), that relegate Chandramukhi to the tawaifly domain. In more melodramatic fashion, the tawaif Zohra takes poison rather than break the vow she has given to have nothing more to do with the bechara hero of *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*. In her dying speech Zohra describes the fatal poison as simply the last of a life full of contamination caused by her tawaif identity.

#### Making a Woman from a Tawaif

Cinematic tawaifs are female characters possessed of ambiguous sexual and personal pasts. Within the stereotypes of the Hindi cinema, such ambiguity makes it difficult to predict a tawaif’s ultimate fate in the narrative structure since the tawaif’s body has been

conventionally removed from the control of respectable society and family. As long as a tawaif is content to remain a tawaif she remains an unproblematic source of decadent eroticism.

When a tawaif acquires the narrative potential or desire to become a partner for a film's hero, however, she suddenly acquires a desire-to-be-desired (Smelik, 1998). Two factors make her unsuitable for that role as I explain above. First are the conventional suspicions or assumptions about her sexual history, that is, that she is not chaste. Second is the extent to which control over her body and fate are associated with, and vulnerable to, criminal elements. Thus, even if she is assumed to be chaste at the beginning of the narrative, those who might control her cannot be expected to act according to the conventions of respectable society. In many films, both factors apply.

Filmmakers who manipulate the narrative conventions so as to produce a successful tawaif-devi transformation must see that circumstances in their narratives overcome or outweigh these negative factors. In doing so, they must confront, in some fashion or other, their own awareness that they are bending cultural norms and narrative conventions. They must also somehow convince their audience that their tawaif has actually become a devi; alternatively, they must oppose the polarity itself. Most tawaif films offer a combination of redemptive elements and at least token opposition to the concrete distinction between these two female genders.

Aspects of tawaif-films appear to offer resistance to the objectification and commodification of women; but a tawaif's redemption is carefully orchestrated both in terms of redemptive factors and her alternative fate. That their potential for resistance is extremely limited is demonstrated by the consistently offered (and desired) alternative to death and abandonment: a return to the confines of the "Laxman's line" (Virdi 2003) of male-defined respectability and proper female behaviour.

The irrevocability of the devi-tawaif transformation may be successfully opposed, but only in the context of the specific film heroine and usually only through the construction of suitably extenuating circumstances. In *Suhaag*, accounts of Vasanti's respectable birth, her attempts to help the hero (Amit) give up drinking, and a tragic flashback in which she recounts the economic adversity and attempted rape that forced her into the world of the tawaif, all act to mitigate her situation and justify her ultimate redemption. At least equally important, however, is the carefully worded assertion by the elder woman in Vasanti's kotha, who is represented as a combination of mother figure and manager (Vasanti addresses her as mother). When she rescues Vasanti from suicide and introduces her to her kotha, Vasanti recoils in horror. But as her new mother-figure explains to her, "it's true we sing and dance for men here, but we don't sell our honour." Although they may sell the right to view their bodies and may allow themselves to be put into positions no respectable heroine would consider in exchange for money, although society may believe they sell their bodies, and although that belief can be a source of narrative tension, a tawaif's simple assertion to the contrary can be the foundation of a tawaif's transformation (in this regard see also, *Khilauna*.)

These breaches in the hegemonic wall, the narrative inconsistencies in cinematic treatments of women, "elaborate and make visible the cracks in the supposedly air-tight case that is male-dominant imagery" in the Hollywood cinema (Walters 1995, 75). In most tawaif-centred films, the conventional polarization of gender identities based on "respectability" (if not chastity) is contested through image and/or text. One devi character in *Tawaif* goes so far as to argue that, "all women are merchandise for sale. Some are sold from their homes; others are sold in the bazaar. Some sell themselves; those we call tawaifs."

The examination of narrative inconsistencies and their manipulation in this strictly conventional cinema may do no more than reveal the structures of male-dominant imagery; but exploring these contestations does demonstrate the depth and inner workings of the hegemonic structures. The very fact that of the consistency with which tawaif-heroines seek

domestication, the complexly structured circumstances of respectable birth and the situations that appear to threaten sexual chastity; while carefully preserving it in fact all highlight the actual concerns of a highly traditional culture.

Each of the tawaif-centred films considered here establishes the explicitly tawaif-status of its central female character, by means of a mujra scene, usually highlighting the coming dilemma through dialogue rejecting tawaifs as respectable persons (the senior brother's behaviour and speech in *Pakheezah*, for example). These films' creators must then appear to contest that status and bring about that character's metamorphosis. In order to effectively transform these tawaifs into devis, these narratives rely on a combination of intentional behaviours on the part of the heroine, circumstances beyond the control of characters in the narrative, and transformative cathartic experiences. However aggressive and exciting they may behave or appear, however, these central characters retain a carefully noted sexual chasteness without which tragedy is the only possible outcome.

#### Renouncing *tawaif*-dom

When a tawaif is introduced as a tawaif and is the central figure in a Hindi film, she becomes, to borrow Annette Kuhn's characterisation of women at the centre of Hollywood films, "a structure governing the organization of story and plot" (Kuhn 1982, 32). Despite the obvious differences between Hollywood cinema and its Indian counterpart, the tensions that tawaif identity generates inevitably become the focus of tawaif narratives. The tension between the tawaif identity and the narrative's need to have her married to the hero is the central problem of a tawaif-centred film. How do narrative producers use image, dialogue, and plot to produce a successful tawaif-devi, so that the film is socially acceptable, popular, and, within its own conventions, consistent?

Shahaab-jan (*Pakheezah*), Sona (*Amiri Gharibi*), Chand (*Khilauna*) and Sultana (*Tawaif*) are tawaifs who, at certain points in their narratives, all acquire a desire-to-be-desired and who are successfully transformed by their narrative's conclusions. Among the

most crucial aspects to the transformative strategy is the shedding of any general narrative quality of to-be-looked-at-ness. The sexual excitement generated by the first image of a tawaif dancing in the mujra must be cooled down and replaced by respectable romantic or tragic conventions and images. Naturally, a tawaif who wishes to be a devi must avoid displaying herself (performing) in public, the principal behaviour that marks her as a tawaif.

Basinger has suggested that in the women's films produced by Hollywood from 1930 to 1960, "the major action ... [is] making a choice.... [the heroine] is not supposed to have two of anything. She can't have both a career and a home. She can't love two men. She shouldn't have two personalities" (Basinger 1994, 19). Here we see clear differences in the two cinematic repertoires. For cinematic tawaifs in India, the question is of a different nature: not "Which *will* she choose?" but "Which *can* she choose?" In *Tawaif*, it is only after she meets and gradually comes to care for Daud that Sultana even considers the possibility of a non-tawaifi identity. As she leaves his house to return to her criminal "owner," Rahim Sheikh, Sultana indulges in a soliloquy in which she considers how much she has learned about the desirability of the wifely state. Her problem is how to realize this potential alternative in the face of society's rejection of tawaifs. As Rahim says of Daud's respectable friends and neighbors, "those people are more vicious than I am!"

Roughly halfway through *Pakheezah*, Shahaab-jan enacts this dilemma when she is featured in a second mujra, reprising the song of her introductory dance. This time, however, instead of the vivacious and flirtatious dance of the first mujra scene, Shahaab-jan sits motionless, refusing to either sing or dance. Shahaab-jan is also making a choice between two identities; but in contrast to the American heroines that Basinger describes above, she does not agonize over whether to be a devi or a tawaif. In the hegemonic masculine view of the Hindi cinema, any woman would rather be respectably married to a man and dependent on him than be a tawaif.

Sona, who has also expressed her willingness to give up her tawaif behaviours, must nevertheless go on dancing because Hira refuses to return her love. For her second dance scene, however, the filmmakers produce a negotiated settlement that is wonderfully characteristic of this cinema. As Sona begins her performance, Rajesh, another leading male character, enters the room. Sona's desire for Hira allows her to mistake Rajesh for Hira, or to delude herself into believing that it is Hira who has come. The camera obligingly replaces Rajesh with Hira, who then dances with Sona. Thus, in her mind and in the audience's eyes, which is at least equally important, Sona adheres to the primary convention of her heroinely, devi behavior: she is dancing for and with her hero. The refrain of Sona's song suits her confused state of mind. "I'm lost in a maze from your glance. I've lost my way. How can I get home?"

### Becoming Devis

It is not usually enough for a tawaif to simply renounce her tawaif-behaviours. Other factors must contribute to her recuperation. Respectable parentage is one factor that is conveniently applied (*deus ex machina*) in many films. In the final scenes of *Pakheezah*, Shahaab-jan is revealed to the film's other characters as the daughter of Salim's paternal uncle, the result of his affair with a tawaif. Similarly, Chand is revealed to be the orphaned daughter of a friend of the family in *Khilauna*, raised by the tawaif she believes is her mother. In each film, heredity—together with specific other behaviours (Shahaab-jan's refusal to dance or Chand's care for her hero, Vijay) are enough to transform these two characters. The difference between the two, which will prove significant in the final portion of this study, is that the film's viewers know of Shahaab-jan's parentage from the beginning, whereas Chand's birth comes as a surprise.

Neither Sona (in *Amiri Gharibi*) nor Sultana (*Tawaif*) have pasts that are explicitly described. Their recuperations are more difficult, therefore, and require them to adopt a range of increasingly apparently sincere devi behaviours in their quest for transformation. Sultana is

forced by her situation to act in public as the wife of the film's protagonist, Daud. Her dress becomes that of a married woman, even to wearing a *burqa* (the usually black overdress, scarf, and veil commonly worn by orthodox Muslim women in northern India). Her demeanour is quiet and respectful to Daud and to those who believe them to be husband and wife. She even starts preparing his food for him. Since marriage is the only possible reason for her presence in Daud's apartment, Sultana has no choice but to act the part in public. Nevertheless, however much she might desire it, she never appears to consider seriously the possibility that her story will end happily. Sona, on the other hand, must go out of her way to create situations in which she can undertake *devi* behaviours; she does so privately but strategically, making specially effective use of religion. Generally, religion plays no significant role in *tawaif* films; this is especially the case since other cinematic conventions tend to segregate characters along religious lines (Hindu heroes require Hindu villains and heroines, and vice versa, see Booth, 2005). Indeed, Sona's resort to religion might be said to reflect the severity of the problem imposed by her undefined background. She makes the film's protagonist, Hira, the focus of her ritual *Karva Chauth* fast that married women traditionally perform for their husbands' continued well being on a weekly and yearly basis.

Although both these *tawaifs* become increasingly sincere in their adoption of *devi* behaviours, these films mobilize those behaviours, as well as the contrast between these and their *tawaif*-behaviours, as statements of semi-humorous resistance (however carefully controlled) to the social and narrative conventions that control a *tawaif's* fate. In *Tawaif*, Sultana, having a quiet smoke in Daud's rooms, is interrupted by her neighbors, who address her with respect as *bhabhi* (brother's wife), as is commonly done. In the conventions of the Hindi cinema, of course, one's *bhabhi* does not smoke cigarettes; in fact the *bhabhi* is often portrayed as the traditionalist lynchpin in the extended Indian family. Sultana rapidly transforms herself into a woman who has just finished her prayers. This not only gives her time to air out the room, it also gives her a *devi*-like excuse for her delay in opening the door.

Sultana's ruse juxtaposes tawaif and devi images in the same person and in rapid succession, so as to emphasize the suggestion that "because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes, ...and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler 1990, 140). This, of course, is in direct contradiction to the expressed nature of gender/tawaif identity both within and without the Hindi cinema. When Sultana's neighbours subsequently express their approbation of her religious zeal, this simply plays on society's inability to distinguish between what it nevertheless insists are two discrete identities.

In contrast to the semi-comic resistance offered in these two films, *Pakheezah* and *Khilauna* (both roughly ten years older than *Tawaif* and *Amiri Gharibi*) treat issues of gender as a serious source of nothing but tension. The only devis in *Pakheezah* are Salim's female relatives, who are peripheral figures; their anonymous, restricted domesticity provides a background of respectability against which the worldly tawaifs stand in stark contrast. Late in the film, Shahaab-jan speaks of tawaifs as "living corpses," an image reminiscent of Zohra's talk of a poisoned life in *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*; not only are tawaifs not devis, they hardly count as living creatures.

*Khilauna*'s narrative offers a more complex package of images. The film's male protagonist, Vijay (Sanjiv Kumar), is portrayed as insane for most of the film; the tawaif Chand, is hired, at a doctor's suggestion to pretend to be his wife in the vaguely stated hope that the attentions of a wife (which are carefully worded so as to exclude sex) will cure him. Chand is not being hired for sex, but because conventionally, only a tawaif would allow herself to be put in such a position. Vijay's mother and elder brother Kishore interpret a tawaif's presence in their home as a disgrace, although Kishore is shown to be criminally hypocritical. Kishore's wife, however, who is thus theoretically Chand's bhabi, is portrayed as sympathetic and welcoming. Like Sultana, Chand takes on the formal behaviors of a devi, bringing Vijay his food and generally caring for him as a wife would do, even defending him

against Kishore's abuse. Chand undertakes these duties in a context exactly opposite to those in which Sultana operates, however; everyone but the protagonist is aware of the ruse. That dynamic also leads to a remarkable and hegemonically male circumstance. Attracted by her beauty and believing her to be his wife, Vijay rapes Chand in the midst of his insanity. This act by a film's hero, unique to my knowledge in the Hindi cinema, is only possible in conventional terms because Vijay is, so to speak, not guilty by reason of insanity. I will examine both the nature of Vijay's role and the relation between tawaif films and the "rape-revenge" genre of the Hindi cinema later in this study.

### Finalizing the Transformation

As Shahaab-jan demonstrates, once a tawaif begins her transformative journey towards her devi identity, the avoidance of public performance and display becomes crucial. Any reversion to tawaif behaviours poses a serious threat to the heroine's ultimate recuperation. The tension produced by this dilemma is heightened in a number of tawaif films by the inclusion of a concluding music scene that negatively mirrors the introductory mujra scene, wrapping all the conflicting images and conceptual tensions of the film into a single aesthetic package. In returning to their recently discarded tawaif behaviours, tawaif's are motivated either by threats to their loved ones, as in *Kismet* and *Tawaif*, or by despair, as in *Pakheezah* (but also *Salma*). The images and texts of these concluding dances negatively mirror those of the introductory dances; they display the dark and unhappy side of the tawaif identity. What is more, Indian film directors have developed a specific convention that allows them to crank this sense of despair and tension to histrionic heights, producing the ultimately ironic situation.

Some tawaif narratives, including *Pakheezah*, have been structured so that the tawaif's final dance takes place at the celebration of her lover's imminent marriage to another, obviously more respectable woman. Since tawaif's did often dance in such circumstances historically, this situation has a resonance with cultural practice. In at least two tawaif films,

*Deedar-e-yaar* and *Salma*, the tawaif-heroines literally dance themselves to death, in a last gesture of despair, at their lovers' wedding celebrations. *Ram Teri Ganga Maili Hogai* concludes with the same kind of scene; but as I have suggested, this film's heroine is not properly a tawaif, nor is the story of the tawaif story-type. In other films, including *Tawaif* and *Kismat*, the heroines dance to save their heroes from death. As in *Deedar-e-yaar* and *Salma*, although with happier ultimate outcomes, these are scenes of sacrifice. These tawaifly swan songs, so to speak, confirm the internal tawaif-devi transformation by highlighting the new devi's anguish at having to perform in public. At the same time, they increase the tension between the internal transformation and external perception by reinforcing the notion that even though she has changed, the perceptions and rules of her society have not. Indeed, the act of dancing in public often appears as a sacrifice and renunciation of these tawaifs' hopes for devi status and a happy life.

The concluding dance sequences of *Pakheezah* and *Tawaif* have happier endings than some other films; they are also, however, trauma filled, cathartic experiences. In narrative terms, these moments of high tension and sacrifice provoke the final confrontations between the devi and tawaif identities, society's perception of those identities, and the location of these heroines within this socially constructed dichotomy. In *Pakheezah*, the flirtatious young girl who had given no thought to alternatives at the narrative's opening now dances out of despair at her apparent inability to grasp those alternatives. Her image is truly that of a mad woman. As her anguish reaches its height, Shahaab-jan knocks over the lamps illuminating her performance and continues to dance on the broken glass. Her bleeding feet leave a host of bloody footprints (Indian dance traditions are all barefoot). Her subsequent collapse leads to the film's denouement in which identities are revealed, sins expiated, and the tawaif is finally accepted as a devi. In the penultimate moments of *Tawaif*, Sultana also dances with bloody feet, in an obvious reference to the earlier film. In both films, these images of madness and

blood produce cathartic moments that legitimize the transformations at the heart of these films.

### Tawaifs and the Heroic Quest for Respectability

I have characterised the pursuit of respectability by tawaif heroines as a quest. Indeed, as I will describe below, tawaif heroines are sometimes quite active in their attempts to transform themselves. The notion of the quest, however, leads me into the world of Indian folklore studies, wherein scholars have suggested a range of possible conventional story types, based on (among other things) the importance of a quest within the narrative. Like the term genre, story-types convey specific ideological constructions along with their narratives and imply the use of specific narrative conventions. Indian folklorists have noted conventional distinctions between martial, sacrificial, and romantic story-types (Blackburn and Flueckiger, 1989), which have been shown to correspond to similar structures in the cinema (Booth, 1995). In the concluding section of this study, I argue that the application of understandings derived from studies of traditional narratives that examine connections between story-type, conventions, structure, and gender, the structure of tawaif films demonstrates a distinctive and distinctively heroic construction of tawaifs as gendered beings in the popular media.

Stories that focus on a central female character are quite common in both pre- and post-media Indian culture. Most stories whose narratives are activated by a woman-structure are labelled sacrificial epics by folklorists. In stories of this type the (usually) female protagonists sacrifice and suffer uncomplainingly to uphold family relationships and traditional values. “While a male adventurer-hero usually acts to assert family or caste rights, a heroine is more likely to play the role of protector and guardian of the status quo” (Beck 1989, 168). The famous sacrificial film, *Mother India*, is the most frequently quoted example from the Hindi cinema, which generally follows the same conventions.

Beginning from considerations of gender, A. K. Ramanujan has noted clear distinctions between narrative structures in male and female centered stories:

While tales that feature princes who go off on a quest for the golden bird in the emerald tree invariably end in wedding bells, tales with women at the center of action never do so. The women meet their husbands and are married formally or informally in the first part of the tale...and then the real story, usually nothing but trouble, begins.

(Ramanujan 1991, 2)

Ramanujan identifies action and the quest as male narrative elements; but defines female elements in terms of suffering to protect traditional values (marriage). Thus, the almost invariably unmerited suffering in sacrificial narratives, whether traditional drama or Hindi film, is performed most frequently by married, and often newly married women. *Ram Teri Ganga Maili Hogai* and *Adaalat*, in which the heroines are initially depicted as devis, and are informally and secretly (respectively) married to their heroes both fit precisely into this mold. The trouble begins once these heroines marry. Gendered behaviours and story type interact to locate these stories in the sacrificial/female category of Indian narrative. Despite superficial evidence to the contrary and the added titillation of minor tawaif elements (such as the mujra scene late in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili Hogai*), these heroines are not constructed as tawaifs, but instead fit into the normal pattern of female sacrificial heroines. Nor are these films, in fact, tawaif-films.

By implication, Viridi reinforces the importance of story-type in understanding Hindi cinema and the traditional ways in which a woman-figure activates the narrative, forcing it into the sacrificial story-type model. “When women are afforded centrality, they suffer: their sacrifice, restraint, forbearance, chastity, and stoicism strengthen and ennoble them in the face of hardship” (Viridi 2003, 122). This is, as I have noted, precisely the narrative structure of

scheme for most woman-centred Hindi films; but it is not the structure for tawaif-centred films.

When tawaifs are initially depicted *as* tawaifs and when the tawaif woman-structure activates the narrative, marriage, if it comes at all, comes at the end of the narrative. In contrast to the usual female-centred story of suffering and sacrifice, tawaif films are films of action, quest, and sometimes, even revenge. Tales of tawaif-devi transformations (successful or not) are, in most cases, structured like hero-centred stories rather than like most woman-centred narratives. With good reason, Ramanujan asserts that “the world of women is not the world of men” (Ramanujan 1991, 53). The world of respectable women, even the world of revenging women, is not precisely the world of tawaifs. Tawaif-centred narratives depict a social quest, undertaken by their central characters, to reach, so to speak, the world of women. But, it is more than story-type that establishes the distinctive gender-qualities of tawaif stories.

The desire-to-be-desired initiates the tawaif’s quest (it is this desire that distinguishes rape-revenge narratives from tawaif narratives); prior to that, tawaifs, like most Hindi film heroes, are depicted as content with their lot in life. Before a tawaif can be a heroine in the Hindi cinema, however, and in fact whether or not she ever becomes a heroine (as in the tragic fates of tawaifs in *Allah Rakha* and *Kala Pani*, for example), most tawaifs must act in a fashion specifically associated with men; to varying degrees they are in effect, the heroes of their films, engaging in precisely the kinds of behaviours that males undertake in other genres or story types. What is more, as I implied earlier, the male protagonists in these films have an equally reversed image. Like no other story type and like no other Hindi films, these tawaif-centred narratives show a female quest undertaken by female actors.

Tawaif heroes must act, even if their actions are no more than flight or rejection. Shahaab-jaan, by far the least active of the Hindi cinema’s successfully transformed tawaifs, manages at least this much. Like Zohra in *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, she chooses to save the

reputation of her lover's family at the cost of her own happiness. Unlike Zohra, however, Shahaab-jan has the redeeming feature of blood relations to save her from literal death (an unknown, but high-ranking heredity has been the salvation of many a Hindi film hero). A more significant distinction, however, is between these central female figures that make decisions, take action, and cause change on one hand, and those sacrificial heroines who struggle to maintain or reassert traditional social and family values through passivity and stoicism on the other.

Furthermore, tawaif-centred narratives (if not the tawaifs themselves) routinely ensure that the imposition/coercion of the tawaifly condition and/or the exploitation of a tawaif's condition are revenged upon the men responsible for that condition through death (e.g., *Pakeezah*, *Amiri Gharibi*) or imprisonment (e.g., *Suhaag*, *Tawaif*). *Khilauna* has no male in precisely this role, but the hypocritical elder brother, who abuses Chand, and Bihari, who attempts to seduce both Chand and Vijay's younger sister, are both discovered and punished for their wrongdoing. This is another gender-challenging aspect of tawaif-centred narratives: In traditional narratives and in the Hindi cinema generally, action and revenge are features of male centred films.

To be sure, the characters that Gopalan (2002) calls "revenging women" and that are at the centre of the rape-revenge films that she examines are also on a quest; they also take on masculine (and often quite violent) behaviours. Rape-revenge films constitute a distinct woman-centred genre of the Hindi cinema. Here, I briefly note that in such films, the quest for revenge (like their heroines at the beginning of their narratives) is precisely opposite to the quest undertaken by tawaif-heroines. Revenging women are almost inevitably forced beyond the bounds of respectable society by the acts that constitute their quest. They are, so to speak, going in the opposite direction, in comparison to tawaif-heroines who are seeking the very heart of respectability.

Here we see still more distinct refinements in Hindi cinema's application and modification of story type. The rape-revenge narratives of the 1980s, are martial epics (stories whose key ideologies focus on the restoration of social order and revenge upon those who have destroyed it) with gender roles reversed. Their heroines are the avengers using violence (a male tactic) and subterfuge to take vengeance on their or others' rapist. The villains in such films are evil individuals, whose deaths, as such, resolve the central issues of these narratives. Tawaif-centred films are not martial epics in these sentences since the villains therein, even criminals like Rahim Sheikh, are positioned as simply representatives of society. If they do die towards the narrative's conclusion, their deaths have little if anything to do with the resolution of the narrative's central tension.

### Conclusions

To a limited extent, tawaif-centred narratives offer the grounds from which to represent a limited form of opposition to conventional gender roles. "The genre of the courtesan film' [does] strain to domesticate the whore and fit her into a wifely role" (Virdi 2003, 132); but film-makers are routinely at pains to point out that their tawaif-heroes are not *really* whores. The irony is that these relatively aggressive female heroes are on a quest for domesticity, for a role that defines them in conventional masculine oriented terms. They seek to be "somebody" (as Devdas argues, above) as defined by their relation to a specific male, whose control they wish to submit.

Certainly, the ambiguity of the tawaif's sexuality and her externality to the world of respectable social control make her identity a problem to be resolved, at the more superficial levels of the conventional cinema. The actual strain, however, is not to domesticate, since that is the only conventionally desirable outcome. Instead, the strain in these films revolves around the question of how this domestication is to be accomplished given the fundamentally unacceptable nature of the tawaif gender? How to provide lip service in support of the notion

that, “she's a woman before she's a tawaif” as Hira argues in *Amiri Gharibi*, while still maintaining the cinema’s conventional notions of heroinely purity as the ideal.

The remarkably passive males of these narratives are as distinctly constructed as the females. Not only do their behaviours distinguish them from the average hero, they also distinguish them from the males in this cinema’s other category of aggressive-female films, the rape-revenge narrative). They are variations in the pattern “caused by innovation internal to the traditions of dialogue-writing...rather than the external pressure of the particularities of a narrative” (Prasad 2000, 45). Is there a further irony in the consistent production of such passivity? Is it only such males who become involved with these questionable women? Gender is here produced in not one but three dichotomies: two different sets of same-sex distinctions (conventional heroines and tawaifs, conventional heroes and the male “heroes” of tawaif stories) and the resulting conventionally gendered relationship between the tawaif heroes and their men.

Ramanujan's assertion that gender is genre takes on an expanded and highly illustrative position in this context. Male and female protagonists result in different types of dramas; but so too do devis and tawaifs require contrasting narrative structures, one based on sacrifice, the other based on action. What is more, each genre requires not one but two distinct genders in a conventionally defined pairing.

Like male heroes, the tawaif in the beginning of her story is normally portrayed as content with the role that society has allotted her. Once she meets her hero, she undergoes adventures and hardships, at the conclusion of which she either marries her hero or is sacrificed to the standard conventions. In this second case, the hero is often sacrificed as well, so that the two can be re-united in death (e.g., *Deedar-e-yaar* and *Salma*). Revenge (on those who have imposed or help maintain the tawaif-identity on our heroine) is sometimes accomplished, although it is rarely expressed by the tawaifs themselves and is never a consistent or structure-defining element.

Like a typical male hero, the tawaif embarks on a quest, although this is a slightly metaphoric quest for devi identity, rather than for “the golden bird in the emerald tree.” Whether the film ends tragically or happily, it is normally the tawaif who contributes the crucial actions that resolve the film's narrative tensions; it is her actions that produce results. Thus, in terms of traditional Indian narrative patterns, tawaifs act like heroes, and their stories are structured, as are those of male-, rather than female-centred, dramas. In *Pakheezah*, *Amiri Gharibi*, *Tawaif*, and *Khilauna* it is only after their quests for respectability are successful, at their narrative's conclusions, that these female protagonists, like male protagonists in their stories, “get the boy.” In terms of narrative sequence, tawaif films—in which girl-meets-boy is followed by conflict/struggle/quest and ultimately marriage—follow the heroic, male-centred pattern, even in a film like *Pakheezah*, where the heroine does very little but flee. The maintenance of social norms, which is the key ideology in sacrificial films, is replaced in these films by a combination of the quest for respectability and romantic love in a context that provides superficial opposition to the social norms. Their ideology, although certainly concerned with the domestication of sexually and socially ambiguous women, nevertheless has an undercurrent in which the woman-hero is the subject as well as the object.

The flexibility of story-type and the consistency with which these factors are applied is highlighted by two of the films I have considered. In *Suhaag*, Vasanti's recuperation is justified by her behaviour and heredity; but *Suhaag* remains a male-centered martial epic, in which two brothers contest physically with the villains who disrupted their idyllic family and caused (coincidentally) caused Vasanti's downfall. Vasanti's identity is a side issue in this narrative; but there is altogether less tension around Vasanti's gendered identity than in films that are expressly tawaif-centred (e.g., *Tawaif* or *Pakheezah*). In *Khilauna*, the fact of Vijay's insanity adds a complication to gender representation; it makes him a passive male in line with the male protagonists of other tawaif films and excuses his rape/assault on Chand. Once he has recovered, however, he has no excuse for not acting in a more typically male assertive

manner, thus producing a slight shift in the story structure and in characters' gendered behaviours. Similarly, in *Suhaag*, once Amit is reformed and dons his brother's police uniform, Vasanti becomes a female to be rescued rather than an actor who solves narrative problems on her own.

Tawaifs as characters have more or less disappeared from recent films (with the exception of Chandramukhi's resurrection in the 2002 version of *Devdas*). The 2004 release, *Chameli*, might be considered the most recent film in this genre, except that its heroine, Chameli, is a *rakhel*, a street-walking prostitute, with none of the cultural pretensions of a tawaif; her story is considerably more realistic, with settings and events much less splendid than the kothas of *Pakheezah* or *Tawaif*. But then, *Chameli* is not a conventional film. It is the narrative conventions that created cinematic tawaifs in the male-defined world of the 1930s-90s cinema. The narrative conventions both defined and managed representations of Indian society and its tensions. They also generated the specifically heroine-centred structure of the tawaif narrative to reflect and perhaps accommodate those tensions. They may appear exceptional in many ways, but they were the norm for this film-culture in this period, and I would suggest, are to some extent reflective (although not representative) of Indian culture as a whole in that period.

Tawaif films may be said to go "half-way" towards a legitimating of the "female subjectivity," that Chakravarty (1993) seeks. As their narratives are constructed, tawaifs are certainly more heroic than their respectable counterparts, and often more heroic than the heroes in their narratives as well. Even tragic tawaifs are often more active agents of narrative resolution than the typical film heroine. To this extent, tawaifs might well offer positive objects for a female subjectivity. The goal of a tawaif's heroic quest, however, is the achievement of or return to a male-centered domesticity. We are therefore left questioning the ultimate legitimacy of any female subjectivity generated by images of tawaifs. Especially

since, as I have argued, the desirability of domesticity appears to be one central ideological pillar of the tawaif genre.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to spell the names of Hindi films following, as consistently as possible, the spellings found on the commercial releases of these films. Many of the titles referred to in this study will be available under these spellings at the many Hindi film rental outlets to be found in most major cities.

<sup>2</sup> Because I am concerned only with the mainstream commercial Hindi cinema, I will not consider such semi-parallel films as *Umrao Tawaif* (1981), *Utsav* (1985), or the explicitly anti-conventional *Pyaasa* (1957), much less Shyam Benegal's fully parallel films on related subjects.