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Woman Becomes Goddess in Bollywood: Justice, Violence, and the Feminine in Popular Hindi Film

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Woman Becomes Goddess in Bollywood: Justice, Violence, and the Feminine in Popular Hindi Film

Abstract

What happens “when a woman becomes Chandika?” This essay contributes to an on-going discussion of the theme of “avenging women” in popular Indian cinema, with particular focus on the transformation of a woman into a fierce Goddess who avenges oppression and re-establishes justice. Analysis of the story line and selected song sequences from the Hindi language film *Anjaam* (“Outcome,” 1994) in light of themes from the Hindu Sanskrit text, the *Devi-Mahatmya* (“Greatness of the Goddess,” 5thc. C.E.) shows how traditional religious images and values are adapted and transformed in a modern context.

Keywords

Goddess, Bollywood, Indian cinema, Devi-Mahatmya, Hinduism, Madhuri Dixit, Shahrukh Khan

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Author Notes

Kathleen M. Erndl is Associate Professor of Religion at the Florida State University, where she teaches in the field of South Asian religions. Her research interests include Hindu Goddess worship, women's religious practices in Hinduism, Hindu-Muslim interactions, and Indian cinema. Her favorite Bollywood stars are Madhuri Dixit and Shahrukh Khan.

Introduction

Bollywood, the popular Hindi-language cinema of India, produced in Bombay (now Mumbai)¹, is a rich source for exploring religious values, images, and tensions in Indian popular culture. Scholars such as Vjay Mishra go so far as to argue that Bollywood cinema as a whole is a massive meta-narrative that reflects and transforms the two ancient Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.² What both of these texts have in common is a concern with *dharma*, a multivalent concept encompassing duty, morality, cosmic harmony, virtue, justice, and so on. While I agree in substance with Mishra, I would expand his purview to include other texts, especially those from the Puranas, such as the *Devi-Mahatmya*, as well as folk and oral traditions that are concerned with *dharma*, as sources for Bollywood film. In this essay, I am particularly interested in exploring how notions of *dharma* and especially *adharma*, the violation of *dharma*, are connected with the construction of femaleness, both in the divine and the mundane realm. I am here only secondarily interested in the widely studied themes of normative female virtues such as chastity, loyalty towards the husband, and nurturing of children that abound in both religious texts and popular films. My primary interest is in story lines where a woman is the *victim* of violent injustice and what she does about it. This essay analyzes the film *Anjaam*

(“Outcome,” 1994), directed by Rahul Rawail and starring Madhuri Dixit and Shahrukh Khan. Focus on a single film allows me, through “thick description” of selected song scenes, to bring together threads that may seem unrelated at first glance. The appeal of this film lies in its deep resonance with the story of the Goddess killing the Buffalo Demon as found in the *Devi-Mahatmya*, one of the most popular mythic and ritual texts in the Hindu tradition, and also the ways in which the narrative, dialog, and song-dance sequences open up discourse about female sexuality, women’s power, and the corruption of the modern State versus the sacrality of “Mother India.” These two themes come together in *Anjaam* through the ritual invocation of the goddess Chandika or Durga herself in the film and her identification with the female human protagonist, Shivani, who is a victim of violence, perpetrated by the male character Vijay, as well as by the legal institutions that purport to uphold justice. As such, *Anjaam* displays the “woman as powerful goddess” image so prevalent in Indian culture, while at the same time presenting a powerful critique of the ways in which that image often fails to translate into women’s everyday lives. The tension inherent in this disjunction between mythic ideal and social reality is mediated in the film by repeated interrogation of the “male gaze,” through song and comic sequences, culminating in the eventual transformation of a woman into a Goddess who redresses injustice.

The *Devi-Mahatmya*

In the Hindu sacred text *Devi-Mahatmya* (“Greatness of the Goddess”), in times of crisis when the cosmic moral order (*dharma*) has been usurped by demons, the Goddess Durga appears in order to destroy evil or disorder (*adharma*) and re-establish justice or harmony (*dharma*).³ The text consists of three stories relating the exploits of Durga, interspersed with hymns that extol her powers and qualities. Throughout the text, she is called by various epithets, the most common being Ambika (Mother) and Chandika (Fierce One). The most well known in iconography and oral tradition is the second story, that of the Goddess Durga killing Mahisa, the Buffalo Demon. Mahisa has usurped the power of the gods, so that they are no longer able to receive their proper shares of the offerings of sacrifice, thus throwing the whole cosmos into disorder. As the gods are unable to defeat Mahisa themselves, they concentrate their powerful energies, which fuse together as a heap of brilliance that becomes a beautiful woman who rides on a lion. Each god gives her a weapon or quality, whereupon she proceeds to demolish Mahisa’s army, while her lion devours the dead bodies. Finally, facing Mahisa himself, battling his various shape-shifting forms, she places her foot on the buffalo demon’s neck and pierces it with her trident. As the demon in “humanoid” form tries to emerge from the buffalo’s mouth, she cuts off his head with a flourish. After gods praise her with hymns, she promises to return whenever they call on her again. In folk versions of this story, Mahisa tries to

capture and marry Durga against her will. This theme is found in the Sanskrit *Devi-Mahatmya* in the third episode, where the demon brothers Sumbha and Nisumbha try to force her to marry one of them.

While the theme of attempted rape or forced marriage is certainly relevant to women's experience in the human realm, the text itself says little about actual women. The action of the three episodes is all in the divine realm. In the frame story of the text, a male sage narrates the three episodes to two human males, a deposed king and an ousted merchant, both of whom worship the Goddess after hearing her stories and, as a result, receive boons from her. Nevertheless, adaptations of the text in oral tradition frequently identify human women with the Goddess in one or more of her many forms. In folk and regional traditions throughout India, an ordinary woman subjected to oppression, takes on the power of her divine counterpart, transforming into a fierce Goddess to avenge the injustice done to her or her community. While the goddess of the Sanskrit text *Devi-Mahatmya* is a transcendent mythic figure, the vernacular and folk traditions abound with divine figures that had prior lives as human women and after suffering a devastating injustice, are transformed and worshipped as goddesses. This theme of feminine (divine/human) retribution, repackaged in modern political and social contexts, has emerged in popular Indian cinema over the last several decades, presenting an image of women that complicates that of the docile, obedient daughter or wife, as well as that of sex object.

Fierce Goddesses and the Male Gaze in Indian Film

The *locus classicus* in modern Indian film for woman as fierce goddess is the iconic *Mother India* (1957, directed by Mehboob Khan), in which the character Radha, overcoming the adversity of flood, poverty, abandonment by her injured husband, and constant financial and attempted sexual exploitation by the village moneylender, symbolizes India as an emerging nation. The film opens with her being honored as the “mother of the village” and asked to bless the new irrigation system. Her life story unfolds as a flashback, culminating in her killing of her favorite son Birju, as he is about to dishonor the moneylender’s daughter. This sacrifice, terrible as it is, is necessary to uphold *dharma* and requires Radha to assume the form of the goddess Durga.

In the 1980s, a spate of films, most notably *Pratighaat* (“Retribution”, 1987, directed by N. Chandra), centered on themes of rape and revenge, largely in response to growing feminist activism in India in the 1970s centering around high profile rape cases and resulting in on-going changes to rape laws.⁴ In *Pratighaat*, the female protagonist, Lakshmi, files a criminal suit against a corrupt politician, whose name ironically is Kali, the name of a fierce Hindu goddess. Kali had committed numerous violent crimes, including the gang rape of Lakshmi’s friend Durga and the fatal torture of Durga’s husband. He retaliates against Lakshmi by publically disrobing her, a scene reminiscent of Draupadi’s attempted disrobing

by the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*. In the climax of the film, Lakshmi garlands and anoints Kali publically on the stage of a political rally, then kills him by striking him with an axe, the symbol of his political party. Lalitha Gopalan critiques an earlier argument advanced by Maithili Rao that films such as *Pratighaat* are “hostile to female sexuality” and pass themselves off as being nothing more than “victimization masquerading as female power.” Gopalan points to a study done by M. Rahman in which he interviewed N. Chandra, director of *Pratighaat* and also prominent actresses like Hema Malini, Dimple Kapadia, and Rekha, who have all played avenging women. While Chandra suggested that these films are made to satisfy a viewing audience that wants a change from the male “action” movie, the actresses argued that playing powerful and dominant women is a welcome break from stereotypical roles as submissive wives and mothers. Gopalan, noting the immense box-office popularity of this type of film, remarks that these contradictory readings “are provocative enough to warrant another look...”⁵

Laura Mulvey, in her classic essay, has posited the “male gaze” as the defining element of all cinema that objectifies female bodies and manipulates all viewers, male and female, into the role of the male gazer.⁶ Her work is a feminist take on that of Christian Metz who theorized the production of desire in cinema, what he calls voyeurism or scopophilia. While I do not deny that Bollywood filmmakers are masters at manipulation and that most, if not all, Bollywood films

could function as textbook examples of the “male gaze” and “scopophilia”, many films are complex enough to inspire multiple interpretations and audience responses. In my analysis of *Anjaam*, I will have occasion to point out not only examples of the male gaze, but also places where it is disrupted, subverted, and interrogated. I argue that the transformation of an “ordinary” woman into a fierce Goddess is key to this subversion of the male gaze.

***Anjaam* and Actors as Parallel Text**

The plot of *Anjaam* centers around the character Shivani Chopra, an air hostess turned social worker, played by Madhuri Dixit, whose idyllic life as a devoted wife, mother, and sister disintegrates through the sociopathic interference of Vijay Agnihotri, an egomaniacal business magnate, played by Shahrukh Khan. Audience reception of the film is largely tied to the personae of these two megastars, a phenomenon that Vijay Mishra has called “the actor as parallel text.”⁷ That is, the audience reads meaning into the film based on the whole corpus of the actor’s work and life, both on and off screen. When *Anjaam* was released in 1994, Madhuri Dixit was the leading Bollywood actress at the peak of her career, while Shahrukh Khan was a relative newcomer, as evidenced by Madhuri’s top billing in the film’s opening credits, a position rarely given to female actors in Bollywood’s male-dominated industry. Madhuri Dixit’s appeal

lies largely in what audiences perceive to be an ideal balance of sexiness and wholesomeness, as well as her versatility and skill in dance. Even today in semi-retirement, she is still the model for aspiring actresses. In 1993, the year prior to *Anjaam*'s release, she starred, with Sanjay Dutt, in *Khalnayak* ("Anti-Hero"), in which she played a police officer working undercover as a cabaret dancer performing to the song "What's Behind the Blouse? (*Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai?*)" that sparked controversy and (ultimately unsuccessful) outcries for censorship. In 1994, the same year as *Anjaam*, she starred, with Salman Khan, in an unmitigatedly wholesome (yet undeniably sexy) role in the record-breaking romantic and family comedy *Hum Aap Ke Hain Koun!* ("Who Am I to You!" 1994). She was nominated for the Filmfare award for Best Actress for both *Anjaam* and *Hum Aap Ke Hain Koun!*, winning the award for the latter. Fan responses to Madhuri, as even a casual look at YouTube comments on her film dance clips reveal, border on adoration. Celebrated (and controversial) Indian painter M.F. Hussain seemed to echo this public adulation when he declared Madhuri to be the epitome of Indian womanhood and did a series of paintings with her in the guise of various Hindu goddesses. Not only is he said to have seen her film *Hum Aap Ke Hain Koun!* 85 times, he also made a film *Gaja Gamini* (2000), in which she, as the feminine force, appears as various women throughout history all over the world.⁸

Shahrukh Khan, now known as King Khan or Badshah of Bollywood, was at the time of *Anjaam*'s release still a relative newcomer and was primarily known for his negative "villain" roles in *Darr* ("Fear," 1993, for which he was nominated for the Filmfare Best Villain award and *Baazigar* ("Gambler," 1993), for which he won the Filmfare Best Actor award that year. For *Anjaam*, he won that year's Filmfare award for Best Villain. He was yet to play his breakout role in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ("The Brave Hearted Will Take the Bride," 1995) that catapulted him into mega stardom and inaugurated the Raj/Rahul type of character for which he became famous, the strong but sensitive male hero who cries, knows how to talk to women, and is able to walk into any situation and make everyone's life better.

Anjaam begins with an establishing portrait of Madhuri's character Shivani, whose name is that of a Hindu goddess who can be identified with either the gentle wife of Shiva, Parvati, or with one of her fierce alter-egos, Durga, Chandika, or Kali. Shivani is a modern, independent woman with traditional values. Employed as a flight attendant for Air India, based in Bombay, she supports her ailing sister and greedy gambling-addicted brother-in-law. She is engaged to marry Ashok, a pilot. In the first scene, she wears her airhostess uniform, the sari that with its elegant drape, epitomizes Indian womanhood. Later, however, we see her in a nightclub wearing stylish Western clothing, dancing at a friend's birthday celebration. It is there that she first attracts the

unwanted attention of Vijay, whose name somewhat ironically means “victory,” who attempts to crash the friend’s party and sticks his fingers in the birthday cake. Shivani responds by smashing the entire cake in Vijay’s face. Later, on the way home, Shivani and her friends see Vijay on the road with his Mercedes stalled. They sing him a taunting ditty and drive away, whereupon he peevishly sets fire to his own car and walks away. Later, over the ineffectual protests of his doting widowed mother, he bribes a police inspector to pay off owners of shops that were damaged by the fire and to keep quiet. Vijay’s tortured facial expressions reveal his character to be pathological, to be far more dangerous than the typical spoiled rich boy with a sense of entitlement who buys his way out of trouble. Looking over videos of prospective models for his company, Vijay sees Shivani in an advertisement for Air India, and goes to her house to recruit her, whereupon she rebuffs him again. These initial encounters are a subversion of the type of initial encounters found in romantic comedies, in India as much as in America, where after several false starts, the couple gets together in the end.

Song Sequences

My analysis of the film, from this point on, focuses on three song sequences appearing at key narrative points, encapsulating the tensions and themes of the film. Popular Hindi cinema relies on the convention of songs, sung by playback

singers and “picturized” on the actors in a film, in order to advance the narrative, convey emotion in ways that cannot be done by dialog alone, to comment on themes in the film and, of course, to entertain the audience.⁹ *Anjaam* is typical of Bollywood films in its use of song and dance sequences, in this case, showcasing the dance skills of Madhuri Dixit and the physical stunts of Shahrukh Khan.

“I’m in Big Trouble; I’ve Lost My Heart” (*Badi Mushkil Hai; Khoya Mera Dil Hai*)

After the unsuccessful encounters with Shivani, Vijay sees her at the Bombay airport about to board a flight to Dubai. He jettisons his own plan to fly to London on business and gets onto her flight, returning with her on the same flight. He tries constantly to get her attention, even injuring himself, so that she has to bandage his wound. Upon landing, he begins to sing, “I’m in big trouble; I’ve lost my heart,” while Shivani looks on in disgust, even walking over his body that he has flung to the ground at one point. The tune is lively, bouncy, and light-hearted; the lyrics are romantically comic:

I'm in big trouble; I've lost my heart.
Someone please track it down and bring to me!
I'm in big trouble; I've lost my heart;
Someone please track it down and bring it to me!
Won't someone tell me where I should file a report?
Should I cry, or laugh? What should I do?
I'm in big trouble; I've lost my heart;
Someone please track it down and bring it to me!

Someone tell me, where should I file a report?
Should I cry, or laugh? What should I do?
The one who comes into my dreams, when will she come into my arms?
Until then, she'll torture me so!
The one who comes into my dreams, when will she come into my arms?
How long will she torture me like this?
Wherever I turn to look, I find only the sight of her.
My road, my journey; she is my destination.
It's a crazy time; desires stir;
Should I cry, or laugh? What should I do?
I'll surpass the limits of insanity.
How shall I show her how she looks to me?
I'll surpass the limits of insanity.
How shall I show her how she looks to me?
She's the most beautiful woman in the world; no one else is like her.
My God, she's a killer!
I don't know what intoxication I've succumbed to.
Should I cry, or laugh? What should I do?
I'm in big trouble; I've lost my heart;
Someone please track it down and bring it to me!
Someone tell me, where should I file a report?
Should I cry, or laugh? What should I do?

Vijay continues singing this song in the taxi as it navigates the streets of Bombay, climbing onto the roof as he sings, and even emerging once from the trunk of the taxi. Along the route to his home, Shivani “appears” wearing male clothing in the guise of first a betel nut seller (*pan-wallah*) and then a barber who shaves Vijay. Vijay arrives at home, surprising his mother, who expected him to be in London on a business trip, performs a cartwheel, dances with his mother, and jumps into the swimming pool, singing all the while. He confesses his love for Shivani to his mother, who agrees to visit Shivani on the next auspicious date to propose marriage to her.

Many observations could be made about this song sequence, but I confine myself to three here. First, with its upbeat melody and Vijay's comic antics in the picturization, this song is a light-hearted take on the "male gaze," almost a parody. Vijay sings his heart out, while Shivani literally walks all over him. Vijay sees Shivani "everywhere", even in the unlikely faces of the betel nut seller and barber. This leads to the second point, that of gender bending. Why does Vijay see Shivani in male clothing? The cross-dressing and masquerade in this fantasy sequence provide ample scope for queer interpretations. The gender-bending theme is later echoed in a comic sub-plot featuring a *hijra* named Champa Chemeli, played by comic actor Johnny Lever, who alternately flirts with and insults various characters as she is shuttled back and forth between the men's and women's prisons. *Hijras*, India's traditional third gender (comprised mostly of male-to-female transgender people) figure prominently in popular Hindi films, usually in comic and song and dance sequences. Their role here is to provide a discursive space in which criticism of gender roles can be carried out in a playful and (to an Indian audience) non-threatening way. Third, there is a sinister sub-text in this song. After the destroyed cake, burned-up car, and self-inflicted injury, the audience knows that Vijay is not a typical nice guy, and that not only is he *in* trouble, he *is* trouble. Lines like "I'll pass the limits of insanity," conventional enough in romantic poetry, here seem literally plausible, and "she'll torture me" and "she's a killer" a prediction of things to come.

“In the Chickpea Field” (*Chane Ke Khet Mein*)

When Vijay and his mother go to Shivani’s house to propose marriage, they arrive to find her wedding to Ashok in progress. Heartbroken, Vijay tries but fails to commit suicide by slashing his wrist, then leads a profligate life drinking and hunting, resisting his mother’s repeated attempts to get him married. Meanwhile, Shivani and her husband Ashok have moved to New York, where they have a daughter, Pinky. Four years after his suicide attempt, Vijay attends the engagement party for the daughter of a business associate. There he sees Ashok, who tells him that he and Shivani are again living in Bombay. All of a sudden, Shivani appears, as the entertainment of the party, in full traditional Indian dance costume. Dancing and spinning in the popular semi-classical film style, with expressive hand and eye gestures, she sings the following song:

I was a naïve girl of eighteen
I went out with my lovely face hidden in a veil.
I was a naïve girl of eighteen
I went out with my lovely face hidden in a veil.
The beauty got caught
The beauty got caught in the chickpea field.
In the field of chickpeas, a theft occurred.
First the rascal caught my wrist,
 then he quietly pressed down a finger.
First the rascal caught my wrist,
 then he quietly pressed down a finger.
By force
By force, in the field of chickpeas, there was a theft.
All around me, hunters' traps;
 seated there, the plunderers of girlhood.

I was defeated, I was defeated as I cried out,
glancing wildly around.
Draping a veil over my beauty, I went
Adorning my hands with bangles, I went.
The bracelets broke.
The bracelets broke in the chickpea field.
By force, in the field of chickpeas.
Alas, I won't be able to meet anyone's eyes.
How can I tell such a story to everyone?
Alas, I won't be able to meet anyone's eyes;
How can I tell the story to everyone
of what all happened to me?
No one came to help me!
I went, tying a knot in my skirt...
Putting a flower garland in my hair, I went
My earring fell off
My earring fell off in the chickpea field.
By force, in the field of chickpeas.
I was a naïve girl of eighteen
I went around with my lovely face hidden in a veil.
The beauty got caught
The beauty got caught in the field of chickpeas.
In the field of chickpeas, a theft occurred.
First the rascal caught my wrist, then he quietly pressed down a finger.
By force
By force, in the field of chickpeas, there was a theft.

This song and dance evokes multiple interpretations. On the face of it, the song appears to suggest a rape or seduction scene, in which a young innocent girl frantically tries to avoid the advances of a “rascal.” However, Shivani’s intricate, exuberant dance steps and smiling, flirtatious gestures contradict this reading. When the lyrics refer to covering herself with a veil, in the dance she simultaneously removes the veil in a rhythmic motion, exposing her bodice. At one point, she playfully draws her husband into the dance, whereupon he picks up

a drum and approvingly beats the rhythm to her dance. This type of song, with naughty lyrics full of double entendres, features prominently in traditional Hindu women's nuptial celebrations. In this case, the theft in the chickpea field may be a not-so-veiled reference to the wedding night of a virginal young bride, like the young woman whose engagement is being celebrated. But Shivani herself is not an innocent village girl of eighteen trapped in a chickpea field or anywhere else. She is a modern professional urban woman, who has chosen her own husband and is not afraid to express her sexuality and flirt openly with her husband, albeit in a culturally acceptable song and dance performance context. Another scene subsequently reveals that Shivani is now a mother and has been happily married for several years. She has left her job as an airhostess and is now a social worker caring for disabled patients in a hospital. She is the perfect woman, an educated, devoted wife and mother, a domestic goddess with a social conscience. But she is clearly no prude. Narratively, this song-and-dance scene is the catalyst for Vijay's renewed stalking of Shivani, the lyrics clearly auguring his subsequent moves. At the same time, especially for female audiences, it establishes Shivani as a mature woman, secure in her own sexuality. Monika Mehta's comments on Madhuri Dixit's famous dance scene, "What's Behind the Blouse?" in *Khalnayak*, apply equally to "In the Chickpea Field":

...Dixit was known for her stunning and sexy dance performances. It is not difficult to see why many middle class women in urban India would enjoy these performances. These women are often given gender training by families and society at large on how to dress and how to speak. For the most part, they are warned that any public expression of sexuality on their part will lead to sexual violation. Whether women pay heed to these precautionary measures or not does not seem to matter since they are generally subjected to sexual harassment in any case. In an atmosphere where the consequences of sexual expression are sexual violation or harassment, many of Dixit's middle-class female fans find her performances pleasurable because they associate sexual agency with these performances.¹⁰

Of course, Vijay has been watching Shivani with eerie fascination throughout the dance. If Vijay is creepy in this scene, it gets worse in subsequent scenes. Shivani and her husband go to Mauritius on a business trip that becomes a second honeymoon for them. While they dance, sing and cavort on the seashore and hilltops, Vijay lurks in the bushes spying on them. He continues to intrude in their lives in many ways, starting his own airline company and hiring Ashok, against Shivani's wishes, at an exorbitant salary. He attempts to get Shivani to divorce her husband and marry him. Later, he kills Ashok, and when Shivani refuses his marriage proposal, citing the sanctity of Hindu widowhood, he beats her up, charges her with attacking him, and attempts to pin Ashok's murder on Shivani. By this time, she is pregnant with a son. The police do not believe her accusation of Vijay, although she was an eyewitness. Instead, Vijay bribes Inspector Arjun Singh to provide him an alibi and concocts a story that Shivani

had been having an affair with him, killed her husband, and attempted to kill Vijay when he refused to marry her. While he is not able to prove that she murdered her husband, the court, unaccountably, believes the rest and sentences a pregnant Shivani to prison for three years, leaving her daughter, Pinky, to live with Shivani's invalid sister and greedy brother-in-law.

“When a Woman Becomes Chandika” (*Nari Bane Jab Chandika*)

Shivani has been victimized not just by a psychopathic male, but also by the State, which is all too willing to condemn a woman for even the suspicion of sexual infidelity. In prison, Shivani bonds with fellow inmate Nisha, convicted for the death of her mother-in-law, who had attempted to murder her over the wedding dowry. Shivani suffers the wrath of the shorthaired cigarette-smoking liquor-drinking (all Bollywood film code for immoral) female warden who uses the inmates to provide sexual services to government officials. Thus the police, judicial system, prison administrators and government officials, all are shown to be corrupt, to be the agents of *adharma*, rather than the protectors of *dharma* that upholds Mother India. Shivani escapes being pimped out to a politician, because of her pregnancy, but her friend Nisha is sent instead. Soon, Shivani finds out

that her daughter and sister have been killed, after the brother-in-law has thrown them out of the house, by a car Vijay was driving. Shivani has only her unborn child to live for, but then the warden severely beats her in retaliation for reporting to the authorities the warden's pimping activities, causing her to miscarry. When her friend Nisha tries to comfort her, she says:

Don't cry Nisha.... You won't see a single tear in my eyes. Like dried-up blood, every tear in my eyes has dried up. Wipe these tears that weaken a woman. Do you know why a woman is terrorized? Because she endures it. A woman's endurance is like the earth. She bears everything, but at the limit of her endurance, a volcano erupts, and she annihilates everything. The world has seen a woman as a mother, a sister, and a daughter, but it has not seen a woman in the form of Chandi!"

Chandi or Chandika is the fierce demon-slaying Goddess, who now has finally made an explicit appearance in the film and remains until the end.

The next scene shows the warden explaining to the prison guards that the women have requested to hold a *jagrata*,¹¹ an all-night songfest honoring the Goddess, and that these sinful women now want to atone for their sins. She tells the guards that permission must be granted, since the ceremony is a matter of religion, but that the guards should watch the women carefully. For non-Hindi speaking viewers, the reference to the *jagrata* could be easily missed, for it is not translated in the DVD's English subtitles.¹² The *mise-en-scene* highlights the irony of the dialogue: Behind the warden is a map of India, reminding viewers

that nationalist images and discourse are always the backdrop of Indian cinema. Mother India is pure and sacred, while the warden as a representative of the State is a victimizer of Mother India, who is here represented by Shivani.

As the women begin their prayers in front of a garlanded portrait of the lion-riding Goddess Durga, a guard summons Shivani to the warden's office to meet some "special guests." At that moment, Nisha, with the portrait of the Goddess behind her, wipes her own forehead with blood-red vermillion, turns and looking straight at Shivani, intones the following chant:

O Goddess Riding a Lion, your eternal victory!

O Flame Goddess, your eternal victory!

O Fiery Goddess, your eternal victory!

The other inmates join Nisha in this chant, as Shivani enters the warden office. Shivani declares that the warden has brought on her own death by killing Shivani's unborn child and says, "You flesh trader! This uniform of law doesn't become a woman like you." The camera cuts back and forth between shots of the women prisoners blowing a conch, playing musical instruments, and chanting praises of the Goddess, on one hand, and Shivani beating and executing the warden on the other. As Shivani chases the warden down a passageway to the gallows, her friend Nisha chants these words:

The fire of revenge has ignited
Now that she is poised for vengeance
The fire of revenge rages
Now that she is poised for vengeance
Now that she slays her foes, she vanquishes evil
When a woman becomes Chandika
Justice will prevail
There will be no sin
Sinners will not be spared
This vow she will not break
Law and Justice have done enough atrocity
She's no longer afraid of the outcome (*anjaam*),
Now that she slays her foes,
She vanquishes evil
When a woman becomes Chandika

“When a woman becomes Chandika” is the most important phrase not only in the song, but also in the film as a whole, as it signals Shivani’s transformation from a virtuous woman who simply plays by the rules to one who reaches deep into herself to pull out that *shakti*, that divine feminine power, to destroy the force of evil.

This chant, sung along with instrumentation, the blowing of a conch shell, and the beating of drums repeats nondiagetically throughout the remainder of the film, every time Shivani kills one of her oppressors. After her release from prison, Shivani first extracts revenge on her brother-in-law, who was responsible for the deaths of her sister and daughter. Ironically, the brother-in-law has finally picked a winning horse and won the jackpot. Shivani, dressed in black like the Goddess Kali, attacks him, bites a chunk of flesh from his arm, and with blood

streaming from her mouth, kills him by stuffing the rupee notes down his throat. Next is the police inspector Arjun Singh who, bribed by Vijay, was responsible for her incarceration and who also informed the prison warden about Shivani's report, leading to the murder of Shivani's unborn child. Arjun Singh confronts Shivani at her daughter's grave,¹³ knowing that she would go there and that she must have been the one responsible for the brother-in-law's murder. He had already figured out that she killed the warden, but was not able to prove it, since the women all swore that she was at the *jagrata*. Shooting at Shivani, and cornering her in a nearby barn, Arjun Singh plans to rape her, but after he removes his pants, she pulls out a sword from under her shawl and kills him, leaving him to burn in the barn. Finally, Shivani extracts revenge on Vijay himself, but not immediately, as the filmmakers decide to develop one more arc before the *anjaam*, the conclusion of the story.

The Anjaam of *Anjaam*

Learning that Vijay and his mother left their home, Shivani contacts the doctor who once supervised her in the hospital, asking for some kind of work outside of Bombay. The doctor sends Shivani to a sanatorium in the countryside. When she arrives there, she learns that the sanatorium is funded by Mrs. Padma Agnihotri, Vijay's mother, who often travels on business, and that Vijay lives on the

grounds. Grabbing a sickle from the garden, she sets off to kill him, but then stops when she sees Vijay in a wheelchair, where he has been in a catatonic state for the past two years since his car accident, the one that killed her sister and daughter. Shivani asks to be assigned to Vijay's case and nurses him back to health, renewing his interest in life by helping him do *puja*, worship of the gods, taking him for walks, and even dancing and singing for him. Here again, the male gaze is reversed. When Vijay's mother sees who is caring for her son, she calls Shivani a whore and a murderer, but then changes her mind when she sees how much Vijay has improved.

When Vijay is finally cured, his mother sends him to thank Shivani, who has gone to worship at the nearby Goddess Durga temple. Vijay enters the temple to see Shivani, wearing widow's white, seated in front of the Durga image. Once again, Vijay asks Shivani to marry him, saying that since she did him the favor of giving him a new life, he should do the same for her, as no woman should live alone. He asks her, "Just say once that you love me." She reaches out to embrace him, and as they embrace, she pulls out a knife and stabs him in the chest. As she steps back, her white garment slips off, revealing her black Kali outfit underneath. She says that she gave his life in order to take it back again, that "a woman can be a mother who gives life, and she can also be Chandi who takes it away." Grabbing Durga's trident weapon from the image, she attacks Vijay with it again and again, as the "When a Woman Becomes Chandika" chant plays in the

background. He runs outside and asks her why she didn't kill him when he was helpless, to which she replies, "It's a sin to kill a helpless person, but it's virtuous to kill a demon like you." He drags her to a cliff, and she hangs on while he dangles over the edge. He tells her that if he dies, she will too. She replies that his death is more important than her life, let's go; and they both fall to their deaths.

While the film's end may not be satisfying from a feminist point of view, the writers have left themselves no alternative, since they have already killed off everyone in Shivani's life. For a devout Hindu widow, however modern she may be, remarriage is out of the question. Her children and all other relatives are also gone. The writers wrote her onto the edge of a cliff and had no choice but to let her fall. Once she achieved her goal of revenge, the story has played itself out, and there is no more reason for her to live. Furthermore, from a Hindu perspective, Shivani has died a heroic death, which would be rewarded by a better rebirth or even apotheosis as a deity. Precedents for such transformation include the celebrated wife-turned-goddess Kannagi, who in the Tamil epic *Shilappaiyam*, rips off her breasts and sets the city of Madurai ablaze in retaliation for the king's unjust execution of her husband.¹⁴ Also, Shivani's death could be seen as a kind of *visarjan*, or ritual disposal of the physical image. During the annual Nine Nights festival, the spirit of the Goddess Durga is ritually invoked into a temporary image that is worshipped for those nine nights. On the

tenth day, the Goddess departs from the image and it is submerged into a river. Shivani, who was transformed into the fierce Goddess Chandika during the *jagrata* at the prison, has no more reason to continue in that form after achieving her end.

Conclusion

Anjaam is a commercial film of the type referred to as *masala*, a term meaning mixture of spices or flavors, which is a mega-genre encompassing comedy, drama, action, and song-and-dances sequences, often in exotic locales. Since *masala* films are intended to entertain and appeal to all audiences, the social or political message may be diffuse or ambiguous. Thus, *Anjaam* is not strictly speaking a feminist film, though it is certainly open to feminist readings. The theme of women becoming fierce goddesses to redress injustice is more explicitly linked to feminist analysis of patriarchy in “independent” films of the so-called parallel cinema. Examples of these include *Mrityudand* (“Death Sentence,” 1997), directed by Prakash Jha, known for his socio-political themes, and *Daman* (“Oppression,” 2001) and *Chingaari* (“Spark,” 2006), both directed by Kalpana Lajmi, known for her feminist woman-centered themes. *Daman*, subtitled *A Victim of Marital Violence*, was distributed by the Government of India in order to raise awareness of domestic abuse and promote women’s education and

independence. In these three films, incidentally, the female protagonist does not die at the end after slaying her oppressor.

Commercial films like *Anjaam* cannot be viewed as unambiguous manifestos for women's rights or as coherent ideological critiques of patriarchy, nor can they be faulted for failing to be such. Like religious texts, such as the *Devi-Mahatmya*, they are mythic and multivalent, open to multiple interpretations. One might argue that *Anjaam* upholds conventional roles for women, but in my reading, the film also opens up a space for questioning prevailing standards of sexual morality, especially for women, and the hypocrisy of the double standard. To the extent that the film has a feminist message, it is one that draws on traditional Hindu understandings of the Goddess, and by extension a woman, as the upholder of justice (*dharma*) and the redresser of injustice (*adharma*). In *Anjaam*, there is the exploitation of the male gaze, but at the same time a countering of that gaze in the audience's identification with Shivani as she redresses the injustices done to her and her family, as well as to society at large. *Anjaam* may be a cautionary tale for male viewers (or evil-doers in general) or a vindication for female viewers (or their allies), but it in any case opens up a way of imagining what may happen "when a woman becomes Chandika."

¹ Mumbai, a traditional place name, officially replaced the colonial name Bombay in November, 1995. *Anjaam*, the film under discussion here, like many popular Hindi films, is set mostly in that city. As the time period is prior to 1995, I refer to the city as Bombay in my discussion of the film's narrative. The term Bollywood, a portmanteau of Bombay and Hollywood, was probably originally used facetiously or pejoratively. Now the term seems to have stuck in both popular and scholarly usage to describe a unique but fluid mode of cinematic production with its own aesthetic and cultural contexts. See Jigna Desai and Rajinder Dudrah, "The Essential Bollywood," in *The Bollywood Reader*, edited by Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (New York: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 1-17.

² Vijay Mishra, "Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema," in *The Bollywood Reader*, edited by Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (New York: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 32-44.

³ The most accessible English translation of the Sanskrit text is Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1991). The *Devi-Mahatmya*, dated 5th c. C.E., is part of a much larger work, the *Markandeya Purana*, though it is typically published as a self-contained book in inexpensive bazaar editions, with auxiliary hymns and translation, commentary and ritual instructions, in one of the vernacular languages such as Hindi or Bengali. The stories of the *Devi-Mahatmya*, with many regional variants, are found in other Sanskrit texts, vernacular texts, and oral traditions all over India.

⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of India Cinema*, new revised edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 446.

⁵ Lalitha Gopalan, "Avenging Women in Indian Cinema," *Screen*, 38.1, 1997, pp. 42-59, reprinted in *The Bollywood Reader*, edited by Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (New York: Open University Press, 2008), pp.97-108. The articles she cites are M. Rahman, "Women Strike Back," *India Today*, 15 July 1988, pp. 80-82 and Maithili Rao, "Victims in Vigilante Clothing," *Cinema in India*, Oct.-Dec. 1988, pp 24-26.

⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, 1975, pp. 6-18.

⁷ Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 125-156.

⁸ Patricia Oberoi, "The Bliss of Madhuri: Husain and His Muse," in *Barefoot Across the Nation: Maqbool Fida Husain and the Idea of India*, edited by Sumathi Ramaswamy (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 213-234.

⁹ While Indian intellectuals have snobbishly derided song and dance sequences as "dancing around trees," audiences demand them, and film scholars are increasingly recognizing their aesthetic and thematic importance in films. See, for example, Corey K. Creekmur, "Popular Hindi Cinema and the Film Song," in *Traditions in World Cinema*, edited by Linda Badley, R. Barton

Palmer and Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), pp. 193-202 and Sangita Gopal and Biswarup Sen, "Inside and Out: Song and Dance in Bollywood Cinema," in *The Bollywood Reader*, edited by Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (New York: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 147-157.

¹⁰ Monika Mehta, "What is Behind Film Censorship? The *Khalnayak* Debates," in *The Bollywood Reader*, edited by Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (New York: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 131-132.

¹¹ The *jagrata* is a ritual performance for the Goddess popular in the northern state of Panjab and among Panjabi speaking people elsewhere in India. Shivani's surname, Chopra, indicates that she and her husband are Panjabi. For more on the *jagrata*, see Kathleen M. Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 84-104.

¹² The name Chandi in the previous scene is also mistranslated in the DVD English subtitles as "demon." Furthermore, the refrain of the song "When a Woman Becomes Chandika," is missing from the subtitles. The inconsistent quality of subtitles in Indian films is an obstacle to their appreciation by non-Indian audiences, particularly when it comes to cultural and religious references.

¹³ According to Hindu custom, adults are cremated, but children below a certain age are often buried.

¹⁴ Prince Ilango Adigal, *Shilappadikaram (The Ankle Bracelet)*, trans. Alain Danielou. (New York: New Directions, 2009).

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Film Credits

Anjaam. Directed by Rahul Rawail. 1994. Bloomfield, NJ: Video Sound, 2001. DVD.

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