Cinema as Gendered Medium

Pakistani films, like those from cinemas across the world, reinforce patriarchy and its values by emphasising pre-existing patterns of female objectification via the gaze. According to Mulvey, these patterns are “already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him ... Film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretations of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle ... the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form”. The male viewer is fascinated with “the image of his like set in illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis”¹. In the cinematic order, as in the overarching social
order which it reflects, men have various orders of power (on screen as well as in the auditorium), whilst women are to a degree powerless and objectified.

In the early days of Pakistani cinema, the attitude to films was somewhat puritanical. The early films promoted the norms of the civilised, Urdu-speaking elites of Delhi and Lucknow through social narratives which have been eclipsed by the vulgar comedy, ‘dirty’ dancing, and charismatic Punjabi villainy of the last three decades. These changes reflect an increasing dependence on cheap consumerism.² The early Pakistani films promoted the legendary chhooi-mooi girl who surrendered herself to the desires of the male viewer.

The chhooi-mooi girl has been replaced by the fragmented exhibitionism of the contemporary ‘rain dancer’. These bold and beautiful women have superseded the stereotypical symbols. They fulfill the needs of logos (father) and tokos (son) in subservience of the deep rooted norms of a culture.³ Their creators claim that their films meet the needs of the common man: “those judging and criticizing Lollywood have no right to take away the happiness or pleasure of a man on the street whose only avenue for entertainment and thrills is to watch a film in the cinema”⁴.

The Evolution of Pakistani Cinema

Pakistani films are often romantic musicals that embrace crime and action as necessary ingredients of plots. The finest of the earlier films, such as Kardar’s Jago Hua Swera (The Day Shall Dawn, 1959), failed at the box office because of a lack of good songs, while music and choreography have made blockbusters out of shoddy yarns. The original formula
constructed plots of *hijr* and *visaal* - meaning separation and unification of male and female protagonists - aiming for a happy ending. It juxtaposed serene images of dancers with spiritual pieces of master musicians. Serenity was achieved through powerful *mise-en-scène* and the play of light and dark on soft faces and fragmented bodies of women wrapped in religiously respectful costumes which yet accentuated the feminine physique. Consumerism was reflected in highly fashionable and trendy wardrobes that were designed to appeal to both the female and male audience.

In Islam the male audience is denied the right to such appeal, gaze, desire, and consumerism. These wardrobes were thus reflective of Islamic values and culture only because they provided ‘cover’. The dancers were often shown practising Islam in their personal lives. As Islam does not support dance, music, and the gaze, the disparities and dichotomies of personal conduct and professional choices were justified through the depiction of hardships and social realities. The audience, caught between Islam and entertainment, was lost in serene but in fact complex images of human interaction. The complex treatment of the life of a dancer reinforced everything concerning patriarchy, gaze, religion, and culture in one’s private space. The dancer had an audience inside the story space as well as in the cinema.

Both serenity and Muslim costumes have disappeared behind bold and beautiful images of free women, often referred to bluntly as ‘dirty dancers’. These women return and command the gaze, but are no longer recognised for the quality of their performances. The *élite* disown this dance trend, yet these images remain provocatively popular; as Kazi says, "These films are a public acknowledgement of private desires.... [and
play an important role] in diffusing some of the frustrations in a society with feudal, legal and religious restrictions". She is hinting at typical social, economic, and political problems that were always present in Pakistani society, but mounted when everything concerning entertainment was banned in Pakistan in the 1970s.

Pakistan: the 1970s

The 1970s military régime used Islam to terrorise the nation and maintain and prolong its sovereign control. The trio of dirty dancer, vulgar comedian, and ruthless Punjabi villain were partly born in reaction to General Zia-ul-Haq’s state terrorism. The fake hero of Urdu cinema disappeared along with the chhoi-mooi girl, but the song and dance formula evolved to fit the needs of the exhibitionist dirty dancer, vulgar comedian, and bucolic villain who fought the establishment. These stories were boldly set against the social and religious agendas of a regime that exploited the emotional sensitivities of ordinary people by using religion to gain control of the populace.

The exploitation of the public strengthened patriarchy by intermixing education, entertainment, and religion. According to Kazi, General Zia imported “a rigid interpretation” of Islam and Islamic values “from the Middle East and post-revolutionary Iran which attempted to replace the more porous South Asian style of Islam. More and more women started wearing the irani/Middle Eastern style of hijab [veil] rather than the south Asian ‘dupatta’ or head covering and ‘burqa’. More men have beards and kifafa or Arab head covering, creating a boring homogeneity in a richly diverse cultural context”. The diversity was evident in urban and rural settings that were inequitably affected by Zia’s
brand of Islam, in which religion became a political weapon. These strategies in turn affected Pakistani media.

The society was susceptible to earlier cinematic fashions because the chhooi-mooi girl covered up her body, unlike the exhibitionist women of the latter period. The earlier female icon allowed objectification, while the latter bears has greater apparent power but is in fact a still more enticing subject for the male gaze. She may appear to be a powerful subject in her own right, but her filmic representation involves a still higher degree of objectification than in the case of her predecessor. This wronged woman is subservient to a patriarchal system which uses culture and religion to justify the construction and consumption of these images.

Gender Representation since the 1970s

The post-Zia female icons signify resistance to oppression in cinema and popular art. These women, as Kazi comments, are proud of their bodies, sexually active and open with their emotions. The disparity between reality and representation can be understood in terms of film as a medium that gives a kind of breathing space to both artists and audience. As Kazi suggests, “The stories, although presented in a heightened reality, are in fact reflective of real problems and desires ... The stylistic device of lifting these stories to an above-reality level allows the privacy to acknowledge they exist without feeling publicly challenged”.

The darkness inside the theatre gives the viewers subjective control of their lives, decreasing the sense of powerlessness against the culture around them. In the wider society women are used to denying their real feelings in subservience to the symbolic order. The departure of films from reality sorts out
their emotional crises by releasing tension. In Kazi’s opinion, women look to cinema in order to identify with the representations of free women who “ride horses and motorbikes, dance in public, reveal themselves as lovers, prostitutes, seductresses; express their love, run off with lovers, drink, smoke, show a lot of their bodies, take bloody revenge on their rapists, know martial arts, use guns, and talk back!”. In other words, they return the gaze, exercising their subjectivity and denying the objectification of a chooi-mooi girl.

Families and social codes in general appear inferior to their personal happiness. They are caught up in stories of wronged and desirable women who marry men of their choice against the will of their families. According to Kazi, Pakistani filmmakers “have great compassion for problems faced by women, by the underdogs of society – the poor and powerless. They are not morally judged. The prostitute is seen as a misunderstood woman; the bad girl who smokes and dances in clubs is shown often as a woman driven by an unjust society”. Thus, unlike society at large, cinema does not judge them morally, but instead owns their weaknesses and justifies their actions, values, and conducts as human and noble.

Nonetheless, it is men who define these roles for women. In the end, role-reversal attempts like Rangeela’s Aurat Raj (1979) are rare; the stereotype predominates. Male protagonists are involved in action around female characters. Women are at the heart of the films, yet without real agency. Men as true bearers of subjectivity guard them as objects. Plots follow male agendas and lines of action. Rhythm and tempo develop to depict male pursuits of riches and females. Physically stronger, they run the show and protect their
women from perceived evils, while women remain constrained to the display of their softer side.

If sexual expression is the domain of hookers, national and regional cinemas reflect inconsistency in their treatment of female protagonists and prostitutes. Urdu cinema uses courtesans; Punjabi cinema relies on ‘dirty dancers’; Sindhi women appear liberal; women in Pashto films fully command their agency. These images do not conform to the social reality of the North West Frontier, where women on the streets are disapproved of - along with the entertainment values of modernity - by conservative Muslims.

Men and women are still struggling for new roles as modernity creeps in. The dancing heroes of yore have disappeared, while females have to a certain extent transformed into free women. The bonding between couples reflects manlier, romantic men and sexually expressive women. The changing decades reflect the departure of chhooi-mooi girls and the arrival of bold and beautiful women as protagonists who only played the roles of antagonists in earlier films. Confusingly, these bold images of sensuous, seductive women offer a contrast to real women, who, increasingly, dress conservatively.

Notes and References


5 I am indebted to Durriya Kazi’s unpublished manuscript ‘Portrayal of Women in Pakistani Cinema’, University of Karachi, 2006, which is the source for the remainder of my quotations from this author.