

# Power, Gender, and Consent: The Pedagogical Potential of Indian Films on College Campuses

A considerable body of research attests to the importance of film as a pedagogical tool in the college classroom.<sup>1</sup> Films are especially helpful in teaching cross-cultural issues and in challenging stereotypes students may have about people who live in other cultures. As C. Emory Burton points out with reference to using Hollywood films: “[the] viewer may learn something of what it feels like to stand in the shoes of a person of a different time, nationality, ethnic group or of some other situation vastly dissimilar to his or her own.”<sup>2</sup> This essay examines the potential benefits and problems of using mainstream Indian films in North American higher education, which are different than teaching with Hollywood movies. The specific themes will be the issues of gender, power, and consent, specifically examining the unique cinematic representations of South Asian characters negotiating these factors in various plots and settings. Rather than simply offering insight into South Asian cultures, Indian films present universal messages that transcend any single time or place—although one must be trained to recognize them. This essay, therefore, not only engages pedagogical theories concerning the use of films for instruction, but it also argues that Indian representations of gender, power, and consent may become an effective teaching aid in non-Indian classrooms.

First, a note concerning the term “Bollywood.” That term is contentious and seen by many, especially in India, as pejorative since it implies that Hindi cinema is derivative of Hollywood rather than an industry and a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, it has become a stand-in for Indian cinema in general, though it is a reference specifically to cinema that is created in Bombay (now Mumbai).<sup>3</sup> Bollywood is only one segment, albeit the largest one of films produced in India. Numerous regional film industries also produce a wide range of movies. “Bollywood,” however reductionist and pejorative, has gained international currency and is unavoidable even in South Asian literature. The term possesses an accessibility in American culture such that its use in a title of a course or a paper clearly targets



Image 1: The Regal Cinema in Colaba, Mumbai. Opened in 1933 the Regal thus spans India's late colonial to post-colonial eras. It is one of the last art deco theaters in the city. Its continued existence is in question due to mounting losses common in theaters globally. Its future is further imperiled, as is also the case in the United States and elsewhere, by the current pandemic limiting attendance. Photograph by Rangan Datta, 3 March 2020. Used under the provisions of Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4 at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Regal\\_Cinema\\_Mumbai.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Regal_Cinema_Mumbai.jpg)

the content. Yet it is probably better left to people of South Asian heritage to decide when and how to employ the term while here we refer to it as “Indian film.”

Indian films represent their own genre of storytelling, which were often misinterpreted by western film critics in the past. For instance, when Vincent Canby (1924–2000) reviewed the 1987 *Mirch Masala*, he wrote that it was: “a socially alert, cinematically primitive Indian melodrama about feminism.”<sup>4</sup> He then added, “The landscapes are exotic, and so is the soundtrack music, which threatens never to stop.” Since its release, *Mirch Masala* has developed a reputation as one of the most impressive films of modern Indian cinema. Canby’s inability to appreciate it might point to a key issue many instructors will encounter: that Indian films convey narratives uniquely.<sup>5</sup> For many westerners, one aspect of this unique quality will most certainly be apparent in the employment of song and dance.

Roger Ebert (1942–2013), in his generally positive review of *Lagaan* (2002), weaves numerous messages that treat the genre as humorous.<sup>6</sup> After acknowledging that he had only seen about six “Bollywood movies,” he goes on to state, “The most charming aspect of most Bollywood movies is their cheerful willingness to break into song and dance at the slightest pretext; the film I saw was about a romance between a rich boy and a poor girl,

whose poverty did not prevent her from producing back-up dancers whenever she needed them.” Ebert found *Lagaan*

an enormously entertaining movie, like nothing we’ve ever seen before, and yet completely familiar. Set in India in 1893, it combines sports with political intrigue, romance with evil scheming, musical numbers with low comedy and high drama, and is therefore soundly in the tradition of the entertainments produced by the Bombay film industry, ‘Bollywood,’ which is the world’s largest.

Of particular interest was the scene in *Lagaan* in which parched villagers suffering through a drought broke into song and dance when they spied storm clouds. Ebert mentions the dubbed voices, the “saris,”<sup>7</sup> and adds “Such dance sequences would be too contrived and illogical for sensible modern Hollywood, but we feel like we’re getting away with something as we enjoy them.” Both Canby and Ebert betray in their criticisms the assumption that Indian film in the aggregate was derivative of “real film,” i.e. Hollywood, and, thus, other.

The presumed frivolity of Bollywood, with its “illogical” and “unrealistic” musical numbers and melodrama, is often excluded from the category of “Third Cinema,” the title first used by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino and assigned to films by and about marginalized communities that stand in contrast to mainstream, i.e. North-American and European cinemas.<sup>8</sup> Heather Tyrrell contends that Bollywood shares with Third Cinema its anti-colonial, anti-imperial worldview, while at the same time being vested in commercial success. The musical numbers that are an essential part of most Bollywood movies speak to the unique language of Indian cinema that has its roots in traditional theatre and are used effectively in films to meet various goals such as to carry the story forward and to convey deeply felt emotions. “Modes of presentation termed escapist according to classical Hollywood mode, like the song-and-dance number, are, however, used to play on ‘deep tensions’—between wealth and poverty, old and new, hope and fear’ in Indian films.”<sup>9</sup> These songs have been popular in India for decades, and are seamlessly integrated into daily Indian life.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the use of dance in Indian cinema, it might be multi-referential, sometimes drawing from traditions of Indian folk culture, sometimes from traditions of temple ritual and dance, sometimes from other cultural traditions, and sometimes from the works of other choreographers. In short, the dances are highly complex and a vehicle for conveying the cinematic narrative.<sup>11</sup> In India, dancing is both a tribute to and an attribute of the divine. And, as already stated, one of the major foundations of modern Indian dance is classical Indian dance, of which there are multiple styles. Specific gestures, poses, and expressions constantly reference these traditions. South Asian audiences respond to them informed by a shared cultural tradition defined by the place of dance in Indian folk theatre and culture. Additionally, the association of a pantheon of Hindu goddesses in the development and fulfillment of Indian feminism also becomes an influence. Dance may be just one example

of how culturally complex Indian cinema is. When actors dance it is not always just fun and quirky.

There are practical issues involved with using Indian film as a pedagogical tool in North America. They take up a lot of class time. One could create a course on Indian film, but not everybody has the expertise for such an endeavor. A creative alternative that might prove intriguing is the formation of an evening film series drawing on the talent of professors from across the disciplines to help select films, make introductions, and lead discussions. Either of these options are preferable to showing film clips. The use of excerpts, even from a variety of movies, might help illustrate a wide range of experiences that Indian men and women have, but they are detached from their larger narrative framework and, therefore, divorced from the context of the film.

Other, more universal, problems exist with using movies in a course plan. Movies tend to focus on one or two main narratives at the expense of greater complexity. Romance is always a big attraction even when completely fictional, and it is not the responsibility of directors and actors to convey theory and historiography as they frame and recite lines once cited by historical personages. Thus, a college professor frequently spends much time preparing students for a film, and then revisiting the issue later to make certain the cinematic interpretation becomes a positive pedagogical experience. Despite these challenges, Indian films offer students as close an “immersion” experience into Indian culture, society, and history as possible without leaving an American classroom. As Sumita S. Chakravarty has observed, “The cinema is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation. It is the contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected.”<sup>12</sup>

The pedagogy of Indian film must grapple with a problem that plagues many who teach about other cultures: the exoticization or “othering” of people who reside elsewhere. Introducing students to films by, about, and especially *for* Indian audiences does encourage students to look beyond the exotica. These films are grounded in indigenous worldviews, and thereby “provide vicarious experience so we can see the world through another’s eyes.”<sup>13</sup> This is why contextualization is so necessary. Without proper context, the danger of exoticizing is a very real response both in and beyond the classroom. In-depth discussion after screenings to identify and critique stereotypes is essential.

Indian films may empower students to look beyond the common stereotype of “the oppressed Indian woman,” and to demonstrate to them the complexities of women’s relations and gender hierarchies in India—thus adding a global perspective to their own established or developing notions of gender prototypes. Neither in North America nor in South Asia is there a single notion of masculinity and femininity, nor are these notions fixed; rather gender relations are fluid, shaped by other identities, and always in flux.<sup>14</sup> Discussing gender divorced from the politics of American culture allows students an opportunity to see important issues in a new perspective.

Sarah Chinn has written that if instructors seek to bring our students to an empathetic and personal connection to the course material, then we must also remain cognizant that students experience a range of emotions.<sup>15</sup> Those emotions do have a powerful effect on learning, and film is a device for stirring the pot. Watching the films with the students allows the instructor to gauge visceral reactions.

Analysis of four potential movies, in reverse chronological order of their settings, will make-up the remainder of this essay. Indian film is not static, and while extravaganza and entertainment remain two dominant qualities over time, the exploration of crucial social and political issues have become more significant as the genre has developed.<sup>16</sup> There are numerous cinematic offerings from which to choose, but the four discussed allow for a reflection on the criteria that one might employ in selecting an interesting film that deals with gender, power and consent.<sup>17</sup> Feminism has a long and vibrant history in South Asia, and India's feminist debates have both universal and unique qualities. But the movies discussed here do not easily fit together; while we have selected a topic, we have neither homogenized a specific message or narrative, nor have we jettisoned a movie because it was difficult.<sup>18</sup> We selected movies with strong messages and performances, but not all equally powerful. They do provide good texts for critical analysis.

*Anaarkali of Aarah* (2017), a film by Avinash Das, is the fictional story of Anaarkali (Swara Bhasker), a popular singer and dancer in a folk ensemble that performs ribald shows in the town of Aarah (Bihar) in eastern India. The film has some references to a sixteenth-century story, most certainly fictional, of Anarkali, a courtesan at the court of Akbar the Great (1556–1605), who enters into a passionate love with the heir Prince Salim (later Emperor Jahangir).<sup>19</sup> Akbar demands an end to the relationship, but when it continues, he has Anarkali bricked into a wall. There have been other movies about this tragic love story, for instance *Anarkali* (1953) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). *Anaarkali of Aarah* is not a new version of that sixteenth-century story. It may be argued to be an imaginative re-interpretation, or perhaps it is simply evocative of the former, but it is difficult not to see a connection.

The twenty-first century Anaar has many admirers, including the influential Vice Chancellor of a local university (Sanjay Mishra). She is sexually assaulted on stage by the drunk Vice Chancellor, and she slaps him in response. The police confiscate and destroy all recordings of the incident, and everyone expects Anaar to apologize to a man of greater wealth and higher status. She refuses to do so, and instead demands an apology from him. Despite remaining largely isolated in her small home, the conflict escalates, and Anaar is compelled to escape from Aarah with one of her young orchestra members Anwar (Mayur More) to avoid the Vice Chancellor's goons. She lands in Delhi, where the efforts of an expat admirer Hiramman (Ishtiyak Khan) from Aarah provide her an opportunity to record an album that becomes popular among the Bihari migrants in Delhi, and eventually in Aarah as well. Two policemen from Bihar then show up at her door, to take Anaar back to face the consequences of *her* outrage and her subsequent refusal to back down. After first



avoiding the police, Anaar decides to confront the Vice Chancellor, and how she does so, and the consequence of that confrontation, form the climax of the film.

The central theme at the heart of the film is the issue of consent: women have a right to their bodies, and the right to say no, regardless of how they dress and behave, their sexual history, their occupation, and their relationship status. Anaarkali is not the ideal Indian woman popularized in Indian cinema in decades past, and more recently in the very popular and sometimes regressive Indian soap operas broadcast on Indian television since the 1990s and also shown throughout much of Asia. Anaarkali's situation is defined by more than her participation in bawdy songs and banter and risqué dances, which combine with her popularity in the minds of her mostly male following to collapse any sense of social distance. As is the case with many cultures, her public persona means that she has become defined by her audience as a public woman, a commodity, as opposed to a woman in an enclosed space. By the dominant tenets of her social context, she has moved beyond polite standards of proper society, and therefore has no right to complain about transgressions, harassment, and abuse. Here is a point of universality in the film. Anaar's experiences with harassment as she travels in the public sphere will be recognized by many women throughout the world.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Anaar demands respect for her decisions and choices, and she explains why she deserves respect. Anaar's determination to stand up for herself despite her own marginal economic resources and social connections; the collusion between the political authorities, the police, and the university administration; the absence of other significant female characters, etc., provide important issues to discuss with students. The real power of the film lies partly in the flaws and strengths of the main character: she is not perfect, but she is no victim. On this point, there is a contrast both with her sixteenth-century forerunner and with the next movie.

A different story appears in Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's film *Pink* (2016), which features three female protagonists. Minal (Taapsee Pannu), Falak (Kirti Kulhari), and Andrea (Andrea Tariang) are professionals and roommates who share an apartment in Delhi. At a party, Minal injures a man, Rajveer (Angad Bedi), who tried to assault her. Rajveer is badly hurt and so to punish the women, he and his friends harass and disrupt their lives. When Minal files a First Information Report (FIR), Rajveer presses charges against the women, for injury and for prostitution. A veteran lawyer, Deepak Sehgal (Amitabh Bachchan), decides to defend the women, and it is during the trial that the issue of consent is raised. The prosecution takes many innocent facts or images and turns them into ad hominem attacks against the women. Their willingness to accompany the men to their rooms in a resort and the consumption of alcohol is cited as evidence of their questionable moral character. This leads the defense lawyer to reference sarcastically a rulebook called "A Girl's Safety Manual" that includes strictures such as "No girl should go anywhere alone with any boy . . ."<sup>21</sup>

While both these films dealt with the issue of consent, *Pink* was a greater commercial success than *Anaarkali of Aarah*.<sup>22</sup> However, *Anaarkali of Aarah* is the stronger feminist message that conveys the true meaning of consent—that *all* women have control over their bodies. Moreover, Anaar lacks the socioeconomic and educational resources that the three middle class friends have, yet fights her own battle even in the face of opposition from the men in her life, including her uncle, Rangeela (Pankaj Tripathi), the leader of the orchestra, and the local police. In *Pink*, while the three women initially refuse to bow down, they are justifiably terrified by the harassment visited on them by Rajveer and his friends. As middle-class women, they have more to lose, vis-à-vis the charges of prostitution leveled against them in the presence of their family members, especially their parents. It is a man, their lawyer, Deepak Sehgal, who denounces the sexual double standard prevalent in society and makes the case for women's right to consent.

Oddly, much of *Pink* takes place in interior spaces: inside apartments, inside a police station, inside a hospital, inside a courtroom, and so on; the most dominant outdoor space is an enclosed park across from the two apartment houses where the lawyer and roommates live. This fact affords a weaker opportunity for students to explore cinematically the culture of India, but perhaps helps to convey this sense of the three women feeling boxed-in. When one of the women leaves the defined spaces and goes jogging, she is followed by a car and then abducted by the friends of Rajveer who later release her. Finally, the choice of Amitabh Bachchan as the lawyer/spokesperson for women's rights is a smart choice, as it amplifies the message, rendering it more visible and acceptable to a wider audience. Nevertheless, an older, good man has come to the rescue and even schools his defendants not to be irrationally emotional as he fights to save them in court.

In *Pink*, Rajveer and his friends are found guilty of assault. In reality, the case would probably have dragged on for years, and the men would likely have been released on bail and could have used their wealth and political influence to further hurt the women. In *Anaarkali of Aarah*, a more realistic Anaar would have faced significant retribution for standing up to the local authorities, especially given her lower standing in society. While optimistic in their endings, both films provide opportunities to discuss the complexities of women's lives in India, and how women make spaces for themselves and assert their identity and presence in a patriarchal context. The attempts by men and magistrates to push women into silence and confined space is apparent. *Anaarkali of Aarah* has similarities with an earlier film about sexual assault and consent, made about three decades earlier, and located in pre-independent India.

*Mirch Masala* (1987) is a "new wave" film, meaning that it presents social realism.<sup>23</sup> Yet many of its messages have transformed and become more accessible to American culture in the aftermath of the 2016 election. The setting is Gujarat in the 1930s. The film revolves around a poor, beautiful woman named Sonbai (Smita Patil) who is left alone in a small village after her husband goes to "the city"; it is not clear she will see him again. At the

same time, the *subedar*, or tax collector (Naseeruddin Shah), arrives.<sup>24</sup> As the avarice of the tax collector clashes with the virtue of Sonbai, *Mirch Masala* documents the development of Sonbai's character, enmeshed as she was in village society with its complex articulations of power hierarchies. In fact, the movie examines the lives of numerous other people and village society and culture are presented with complexity. The plot and setting are based on a short story by Chunilal Madia, but, since the storyline focuses on a vulnerable woman who becomes the target of a sexual predator it resonates with numerous other texts that depict predatory behavior.<sup>25</sup>

The *subedar* encounters Sonbai three times, the first he requests a drink, the second he spies on her while she is doing laundry, the third, he runs up behind her, spins her around and grabs her making a sexual proposition. She slaps him and flees, outrunning his bodyguards to find refuge in a factory where poor women grind peppers into powder; the factory is guarded by an elderly Muslim named Abu Miya (Om Puri). The merchant who owns the factory represents it as a charitable enterprise to create jobs for poor women, but his actions suggest that he has been exploiting their plight. This is the space in which Sonbai finds refuge, and she utters the line "I escaped" as she falls to the ground; Abu Miya shuts and locks the gates.

Ketan Mehta, the director, takes us into a setting where the main structures that might determine local identities were in flux: the local economy was in decay; the political system was in transformation; and the personalities of the men, who are barely maintaining the pretense of virtue, further erode the traditional patriarchal power structure.<sup>26</sup> This is the decadence of the dying colonial system. Furthermore, as professor Ranjani Mazumdar wrote, "*Mirch Masala* proves to be extremely interesting because of the multidimensional critique that it attempts." Since Sonbai's struggle becomes a crisis for the entire village, it targets "a whole value system and ideology which legitimizes the subordinate position of women."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, one is taken into the lives of a range of women with different levels of status and different jobs and different personalities. This means that the women have identities "other than their gender identities"<sup>28</sup> that intersect and shape their experience differently. The rebellion by the wife of the village head (or *mukhiya*; Deepti Naval and Suresh Oberoi respectively) involves stepping out of her home and walking from door to door, gathering and uniting the women to oppose the men, while Sonbai's rebellion involves confining and locking herself in the factory. The *mukhiya* drags his wife home and locks her into the house, while the men in the village seek to crush Sonbai's defiance by dragging her out of the confines of the factory and handing her to the *subedar*.

As stated, the cultural events of recent years transform scenes filmed in the mid-1980s, so they resonate with new significance, and that new meaning makes it less plausible for an audience to exoticize the characters. For example, the *subedar* grabs and propositions Sonbai, this scene has developed an aura of realism in the aftermath of the *Access Hollywood*



tape. The *subedar* relies on his wealth and possessions to overawe the poor villagers and, usually, he gets away with it.

The #MeToo movement has also transformed how students are prepared to see certain scenes.<sup>29</sup> College students are the generation of #MeToo; they have grown up with it. Their generation has listened to victims of sexual assault talk about their experiences and name the perpetrators. In one scene toward the end of *Mirch Masala*, an elderly woman trapped in the pepper factory begins to recount a childhood experience when soldiers came into the village and assaulted women, including her mother and sister. The other characters try to silence her.

Amba (Ratna Pathak Shah), another poor woman trapped in the pepper factory, who was selected to sleep with the *subedar* on his first night in town, commented that wealth and status are required for moral concerns; the poor must live differently. This is a statement that resonates with many previous scenes and asks the audience to decide the connections between cultural values and socio-economic status. Power is located in status and masculinity, and society presents strictly defined gender roles. The poorer men and all of the women are dependent upon those men who possess greater wealth and power. As Bubla Basu has written, “the men of the film are given status, the women are given identity.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, as the film approaches the final scene, while some of the village housewives had tried to make a gesture of help for Sonbai, the poor women desire what little they have and so they turn on her when they become engulfed in a larger moral struggle. The poor women are ill-prepared to deal with this moment. Some, the younger ones, will change at the end.

In the final analysis, *Mirch Masala*’s complex critique of culture has become even more powerful in the present. This unfortunate fact allows for conversations regarding topics such as *Access Hollywood*, the 2017 Women’s March, #MeToo, the Kavanaugh hearings—all American topics. This is the opposite of exoticizing.

Lastly, the movie *Padmaavat* (2018) fails to convey a feminist message in the same way as the other films described in this essay, despite director Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s effort to showcase the female protagonist, Padmavati in a feminist light, as a confident intelligent woman who is a skilled archer as well as a shrewd strategist. The movie is eponymously based on selections from the 1540 text by Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jāisī and tells the story of a probably fictional queen set in the late thirteenth century. Jāisī’s poem may have been influenced by the nine-century *Khumān Rayṣa* and also Persian models of patronage and poetry.<sup>31</sup> Jāisī wrote in Awadhi and dedicated his work to Sher Shah Suri (1486–1545), Sultan of Delhi.<sup>32</sup> The poet’s original fascination with the tale subtly promoted an allegorical interpretation in which the original idealized Padmavati, who, in first instance, represented the epitome of the traditional Hindu upper-caste woman, becomes in Jāisī’s *Padmāvat* a queen whose representation is influenced by the Northern Indian Sufi concepts of divine light and mystical love.<sup>33</sup> An English translation of *Padmavati* was published in 1944, but

is not easily accessible,<sup>34</sup> several abridged versions have also been published, as well as numerous scholarly studies.<sup>35</sup> Other sixteenth-century texts also mention the queen (who is also known as Padmini).<sup>36</sup> During the nationalist struggle, Rajput legends such as that of Padmini were presented as examples of resistance against oppression. In post-independence India, the tale of Padmini has continued to be romanticized through the widely popular Indian comic series for children, *Amar Chitra Katha*. Bhansali's film is not the first cinematic telling of the story. Dinesh Ranjan Das's 1930 Bangla film, *Kamonar Aagun* (The Flames of the Flesh) and Jashwant Jhaveri's *Maharani Padmini* (1964) preceded *Padmaavat*.<sup>37</sup>

In Bhansali's film, Padmavati (Deepika Padukone) was born in Singhal, but married Maharawal Ratan Singh (Shahid Kapoor), the King of Chittor, in southern Rajasthan. Her beauty becomes known in faraway places, and the Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji (Ranveer Singh), is told he will achieve all he desires if he has the love of Rani Padmini. Therefore, he attacks Chittor and abducts the king. Padmavati travels to Delhi to rescue him, which she does successfully with the assistance of the Sultan's wife, Mehrunissa (Aditi Rao Hydari). Alauddin returns to Chittor, dishonorably kills the king, defeats his army, breaches the city's walls, and faces a small rebellion by women who throw burning embers at the Khilji force, which gives time for Padmavati and the rest of the women of Chittor to commit *jauhar*.<sup>38</sup> The movie might have examined this aspect of the tale by analyzing the place of *jauhar* and *sati* in pre-colonial Rajput society.<sup>39</sup> Instead, it is presented as a venerated sacrifice. As an epic, the movie presents idealized, traditional, and gendered Rajput values and a celebration of Rajput virtues, but uncritically. Conversely, it also delivers an extremely negative representation of the Islamic ruler and his court: Alauddin Khilji is portrayed as a sociopath with no redeeming qualities, in sharp contrast to the morally upright Hindu Ratan Singh, who is virtuous to a fault.<sup>40</sup>

*Padmaavat* met with controversy even in production. Director Bhansali was assaulted during filming; leading actress "Deepika Padukone, had a bounty placed on her head."<sup>41</sup> Rumors that the movie would include a love scene between the Hindu queen and Muslim king brought outrage, but no such scene existed.<sup>42</sup> By the time the final movie premiered, over seventy scenes had been cut. *Padmaavat* is the opposite of social realism given its idealized forms, but it is lush with its settings, costumes, and special effects; it has its entertaining moments.

Many who rallied to defend the director during the threats and protests seemed to feel betrayed at viewing the final product. As Bilal Qureshi has written, "What started as a gorgeous period drama . . . became a cliché clash-of-civilizations war film between the honorable protagonists and their insatiable villains."<sup>43</sup> While Qureshi was critical of many aspects of the final product, she stated that the movie really crossed a line with the depiction of *jauhar*. Similarly, actress Swara Bhasker published an open letter to Sanjay Leela Bhansali "We are back to the basic question—of right to life." The point, according to Bhasker, was that one does not glorify horrific practices of the past. "Rajasthan in the 13th century with

its cruel practices is merely the *historical setting* of the ballad you have *adapted* into the film *Padmaavat*. The *Context* of your film is India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>44</sup> Bhasker then references the infamous attack, torture, and gang rape of Jyoti Singh on a Delhi bus in December 2012, pointing out that the victim did not kill herself, but fought back.

A feminist reading is complicated, but Bilal Qureshi and Swara Bhasker establish a paradigm. The themes of gender and power, virtue, and spirituality are prevalent, but they are defined by the traditions of the epic. The Queen lives isolated inside palace rooms and is often veiled, which expresses her virtue. When the Sultan of Delhi requests to see her, he is granted but a brief second to see her reflection in a mirror. And yet it is Padmavati who leads an army to Delhi to rescue her husband, traveling in a palanquin, one among thousands, both to maintain her seclusion from the world and to hide military commanders. The meeting between the Queen of Chittor and Empress of India is brief, but interesting, since both characters exercise a restricted and derivative power. Still, it is in Padmavati’s traditionally defined virtue that her strength really resided, but it seems an unrealistic depiction.

*Jauhar* is presented as an act of defiance and the weapon used by Chittor’s women to defeat Khilji and deny the prophecy. This act *might be* interpreted as an assertion of power by Padmavati and other women through the only means at their disposal in their historical era, namely their bodies. Yet even this act of defiance and pseudo-empowerment is almost rendered moot when Padmavati asks her husband for permission to do it. In the three films discussed earlier, women demand the right of consent and of control over their bodies. Padmavati on the other hand gives up these rights. This turns the notion of consent on its head. The longevity of the narrative, its constant re-interpretations, and the politicization of the epic in this age of nationalist populism makes the potential for classroom use obvious, as does the vast arena for discussing how *Padmaavat’s* representation leaves the character in another age. Her supposed virtue failed to protect her, the other women of Chittor, her kingdom, and thus appears not to offer an inspiring lesson on life.

Indian movies afford the college instructor an opportunity to provide students a window into what for many of them is a foreign culture while also focusing on a specific topic. Gender and power have been themes of exploration in Indian films for decades and a range of views have been produced while many breathtaking movies have offered powerful statements concerning women’s right to legal and political autonomy. As we have seen, many movies may take inspiration from past events or legends, but then become texts that are political statements for their times. Scholars have long been concerned with *anachronisms*, or the reading of modern ideas into events and stories from past centuries, but many successful movies offer appropriations of the past to comment on the present day, such as on the contested issue of women and sexuality. The complexity of Indian culture, society, history, and religion all combine to offer much for discussion. Indian movies possess great pedagogical potential for the American college classroom. Despite the problems of cultural

distance, the rich corpus of Indian film also offers numerous windows on emperors and villagers, merchants and warriors, men and women, and the power of justice, mercy, and love. All of these themes present vast canvases for exploration, but in the contemporary world consent should come first.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Afroza Anwary, "Teaching About South Asian Women Through Film," *Teaching Sociology* 31 (2003): 428–40; Paula Dressel, "Films that Put Social Problems in Global Context," *Teaching Sociology* 18 (1990): 226–30; James T. Hannon and Sam Marullo, "Education for Survival: Using Films to Teach War as a Social Problem," *Teaching Sociology* 16 (1988): 245–55; Christopher Prendergast, "Cinema Sociology: Cultivating the Sociological Imagination Through Popular Film," *Teaching Sociology* 14 (1986): 243–48.

<sup>2</sup> C. Emory Burton, "Sociology and the Feature Film," *Teaching Sociology* 16 (1988): 263–71, 264.

<sup>3</sup> Jigna Desai and Rajinder Dudrah, "The essential Bollywood" in *The Bollywood Reader*, eds. Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008): 1–17.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Canby, "Decency Battles Tyranny in 'Spices' from India," 6 September 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/06/movies/review-film-decency-battles-tyranny-in-spices-from-india.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Canby was criticized for his "inability to understand or appreciate films from foreign contexts." See, "The Power of *The Times* Critic; an Interview with Vincent Canby," Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas, *Cinéaste*, *New York* 10, no. 2 (1980): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Ebert, "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India," 7 June 2002, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/lagaan-once-upon-a-time-in-india-2002>.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the women were wearing traditional skirts called lehenga or ghagra in this song.

<sup>8</sup> Heather Tyrrell, "Bollywood vs, Hollywood: Battle of the Dream Factories," in *The Globalization Reader*, ed. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2004, 6th ed.): 397–404.

<sup>9</sup> Tyrrell, "Bollywood vs, Hollywood," 400.

<sup>10</sup> For more on music in Hindi cinema, see Heather Tyrrell and Rajinder Dudrah, *Hollywood Musical*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.jukolart.us/hollywood-musical/heather-tyrrell-and-rajinder-dudrah.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Sangita Shreesthova, "Swaying to an Indian Beat . . . Dola Goes My Diasporic Heart: Exploring Hindi Film Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (2004): 91–101, esp. 91 & 97. See also, "13 years of 'Om Shanti Om': 13 ways the film paid tribute to the 'Golden Era of Cinema,'" *Times of India*, 9 Nov 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/13-years-of-om-shanti-om-13-ways-the-film-paid-tribute-to-the-golden-era-of-cinema/articleshow/79119691.cms>; and, Souvik Chatterji, "Shahrukh Khan's projection of Bollywood history in Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi," *Station Hollywood*, 16 Jan 2009, <http://stationhollywood.blogspot.com/2009/01/shahrukh-khans-projection-of-bollywood.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Burton, "Sociology and the Feature Film," 263.

<sup>14</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, "Gender and Sexuality," in *The Cambridge World History, vol. 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1600 CE, part 1: Foundations*, ed. Jerry E. Bentley, Sanjay Subramanyam, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 133–56.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah E. Chinn, "Once More with Feeling: Pedagogy, Affect, Transformation," *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 22, no. 2 (2011–12): 15–20.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Inden, "What Happens in a Hindi Film?" *Asian Journal of Social Science*, special focus: "Rethinking Asian Media and Film" 41, no. 5 (2013): 492–503.



<sup>17</sup> Anwary, "Teaching About South Asian Women Through Film," 428.

<sup>18</sup> Waters cites the work of Spivak. Julia Waters, "'Ton continent est noir': Rethinking Feminist Metaphors in Ananda Devi's *Pagli*," *Dalhousie French Studies: Hybrid Voices, Hybrid Texts: Women's Writing at the Turn of the Millennium* 68 (2004): 45–55; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 154–84; and, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Wedge*, 7, no. 8 (1985): 120–30.

<sup>19</sup> The story receives first mention in the travel accounts of William Finch during his trip to Lahore (1608–11). Salim, later, as Emperor Jahangir, wrote about his life and yet never mentions Anarkali. *InpaperMagazine* (11 Feb 2012). See, "Legend: Anarkali: myth, mystery and History." <https://www.dawn.com/news/694833/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history>.

<sup>20</sup> One is reminded of the 2014 video "10 Hours of Walking Across NYC as a Woman," and similar videos posted on youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A>.

<sup>21</sup> In Mehrotra's 2017 course on Indian Cinema, most students picked *Pink* as their favorite of the dozen films screened in the course.

<sup>22</sup> *Pink* made Rs. 63.39 crores (about \$8.4 million) while *Anaarkali of Aarah* made Rs. .89 crores (about \$118,000) in India. Source: Bollywood Hungama: "Pink Box Office," 16 September 2016, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/movie/pink/box-office/> and "Anaarkali of Aarah Box Office," 24 March 2017, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/movie/anarkali-of-arah/box-office/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ranjani Mazumdar, "Dialect of Public and Private: Representation of Women in *Bhoomika* and *Mirch Masala*," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 43 (Oct 1991), WS-81.

<sup>24</sup> The post of *subedar* flourished under the British, and by his dress and possessions the character displays a taste for Anglicization. Beheroze F. Shroff, "Chili Peppers as Tools of Resistance: Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 249; Madhu Jain, "Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* is a tour de force in Indian cinema," 15 August 1986, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/19860815-ketan-mehta-mirch-masala-is-a-tour-de-force-in-indian-cinema-801117-1986-08-15>.

<sup>25</sup> Some examples include Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1524), Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), and Tartuffe's *Moliere* (1664), or more tangentially, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *El médico de su honra* (The Surgeon of his Honour) (1637), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), or Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de Piedra* (The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest) (1630).

<sup>26</sup> The paragraph draws heavily from Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Real and Imagined Women: Politics and/of Representation," *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 129–46, esp. 129–30.

<sup>27</sup> Mazumdar, "Dialect of Public and Private," WS-83.

<sup>28</sup> Mazumdar, "Dialect of Public and Private," WS-83.

<sup>29</sup> See, anonymous, "A Statement by Feminist Groups & Individuals on the Going #MeToo Wave in India," 13 Oct 2018, [https://feminisminindia.com/2018/10/13/metoo-india-feminists-statement/?fbclid=IwAR2dZQqS\\_jcr\\_6IENcNncy\\_xgNB6j3CX9YMseclCb9lCKJnE9uKVdTo6Ypc](https://feminisminindia.com/2018/10/13/metoo-india-feminists-statement/?fbclid=IwAR2dZQqS_jcr_6IENcNncy_xgNB6j3CX9YMseclCb9lCKJnE9uKVdTo6Ypc).

<sup>30</sup> Bubla Basu, "Film Flashback: 'Mirch Masala' had something to say about MeToo back in the 1980s," *Scroll.in*, 6 Nov 2018, <https://scroll.in/reel/901081/film-flashback-mirch-masala-had-something-to-say-about-metoo-back-in-the-1980s>.

<sup>31</sup> Aziz Ahmad, "Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83, no. 4 (1963): 470–76, 474; Thomas de Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust: Poetry and History in Padmāvāt by the South Asian Sufi Poet Muḥammad Jāyasī* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 23, 44, & chap. 4; and Purushottam Agrawal, "The Politics of Padmavati," *India Today*, 4 (December 2017), <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20171204-padmavati-karni-sena-malik-muhammad-jayasi-sanjay-bhansali-1092364-2017-11-24>.

<sup>32</sup> de Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust*, 11–13 & 45.

<sup>33</sup> de Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Padmavati*, trans. A.G. Shirreff (Kolkata: Royal Asiatic Society, 1944; Independently Published, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Besides de Bruijn, see Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India, c. 1500–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Hemratan, *Gora Badal Padmini Chaupai* (1589). British official Lt. Col. James Tod mentioned the legend in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829–32). See also, Shriram Iyengar, "Maharani Padmini (1964): Once upon a time before Bhansali's Padmavati," *Cinestaan.com*, 20 November 2017, <https://www.cinestaan.com/articles/2017/nov/20/9364>. A reprint of the poem is available online at: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.347867/mode/2up?view=theater>.

<sup>37</sup> Iyengar, "Maharani Padmini (1964)."

<sup>38</sup> *Jauhar* is the mass immolation of women, while *sati* is the practice of a widow immolation.

<sup>39</sup> For a brief introduction, see Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 214–16.

<sup>40</sup> Anna M. Vettichad, "Padmaavat movie review: Bhansali couches regressive, opportunistic messaging in exhausting visual splendour," *Firstpost*, 24 January 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/padmaavat-padmavati-padmavati-movie-review-bhansali-couches-regressive-opportunistic-messaging-in-exhausting-visual-splendour-4317153.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Bilal Qureshi, "The War for Nostalgia: Samjay Leela Bansali's *Padmaavat*," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2018): 45–51.

<sup>42</sup> "Padmavati: Violence after India Top court lifts ban on film," 22 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42771328>; Rachel Saltz, "'Padmavati' and all that Useless Beauty," 26 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/movies/padmaavat-review.html>; "Sanjay Leela Bhansali slapped, hair pulled by protesters on Padmavati sets," 27 January 2017, <https://www.rediff.com/news/report/sanjay-leela-bhansali-attacked-by-protesters-on-padmavati-sets/20170127.htm>; Brigit Katz, "Why This Film Based on a 16th-Century Poem Has Sparked Violent Protests in India," 29 January 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/film-based-16th-century-poem-sparks-violent-protests-india-180967955/#:~:text=Padmaavat%20is%20based%20on%20a,over%20the%20region%20of%20Chittor>; Siddhant Adlakha, "'Padmaavat,' an Indian Masterpiece Held Hostage, Sees the Light of Day," *The Village Voice*, 1 Feb 2018, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/02/01/padmaavat-an-indian-masterpiece-held-hostage-sees-the-light-of-day/>.

<sup>43</sup> Qureshi, "The War for Nostalgia," 48.

<sup>44</sup> Swara Bhaskar, "At the End of Your Magnum Opus . . . I Felt Reduced to a Vagina—Only," 27 January 2018, <https://thewire.in/women/end-magnum-opus-i-felt-reduced-vagina>.