Alessandro Monti

Love and Punishment. How Passion is Meted out in Bollywood.

Arranging Marriages

Both thwarted and unhappy love are a seminal feature in Indian films. The informing notion behind failure in love concerns authorization, this being a key concept, one that implies at least two agencies, constituted respectively by the family circle and by the dharmic norms, which are carried out by the family itself. Traditional Indian families, even in contemporary society with its globalising movements towards modernization, constitute a powerful instrument of control and imposed behaviour, particularly as far as women are concerned. Of course I would refer to stridharmic rules (*stri* being a Sanskrit term for a woman), whose importance in the urbanite middle class of today has been extensively stressed by Sudhir Kakar:

> The message from her parents, though, is mixed. Obedience and conformity, selflessness and self-denial are still the ideals of womanhood and a good woman does not "create waves" or "rock the boat". Middle class parents, however, also encourage and take pride in the academic success of their daughter. Their aspirations for an occupational career for her, though, more ambiguous than for a son, are not completely absent. The parents' cherished goal for the daughter, however, remains a "good" marriage. Her education should help the girl to find a well-educated, economically well-off man from a respectable family rather than pursuit of a career …. The preference for arranged marriage, where the modern Indian woman has a right of veto on prospective partners chosen by the family, is partly based on the young person's acceptance of a cultural definition of marriage as a family rather than individual affair, where harmony and shared values that come from a common background are more important than individual fascination. …. By marrying late, typically in her early twenties, the middle class woman no longer enters her husband's family as a submissive daughter-in-law, as is the case with her more traditional counterpart. Because of her education and maturity, she begins to play a significant role in her husband's family affairs from the very outset. The middle class woman's potential for individual self-assertion in her marriage and the new family has, however, clearly defined limits which come from her traditional "markings", etched deep into her mind during the process of growing up. She, too, believes that getting along in her husband's family and earning the good opinion of his family members, including the traditionally reviled and feared mother-in-law, are important obligations – even when these entail a measure of self-sacrifice and self-denial. [1]

[1] Sudhir Kakar, *DOST Critical Studies* 6 (Alessandria: Dall'Orso, in press).

Such – and sometimes even sterner – intimations against whatever inchoate, or even mildly wild, misruly behaviour on the part of potentially infringing women have been backed by the so-called and time-honoured

Laws of Manu, which are punitively misogynist: women are considered lecherous by nature, unreliable and weak in character, so that they must always live under the controlling shadow of a male, either a father, brother, or finally a husband. The *Ramayana*, a normative Hindu myth, has further stressed the subaltern role meted out to women in family life. Rama, the divine *pati* (a Sanskrit word meaning either master or husband) sets the tune for Sita, his *patni* (the feminine form of *pati*).

Sita evades the stridharmic norms at least twice: first when she follows Rama into exile, instead of taking care of her husband's parents, according to her primary feminine duty. A more serious rupture, laden with heavy consequences, takes place when Sita steps across the forbidding line drawn by Rama's brother: Laksman. To start with, Sita cannot keep her frivolous feminine nature in check – she has seen a golden deer in the forest and instantly covets after it. As a matter of fact, the deer is actually a demon in disguise, whose aim is to beguile her male guardians away from Sita.

After a while Sita insists that Laksman go to help his older brother. He does that, on one condition: that Sita will be safe so long as she remains on the right side of a protective line (the Laksman-*rekha*). She fails to obey and is consequently abducted by the demon Ravana. In the current interpretation this episode is seen as a warning against trespassing women, emphasizing the need to guard women, given female thoughtlessness, not to say worse. The normative relevance of the episode may aptly be summed up as follows:

> [T]he Laksmana-rekha could in fact be viewed as a form of constraint, a line which Sita, *as woman*, had no right to cross over. It was a boundary drawn by a male, who had been deputed by another male to guard Sita the female. When Sita failed to obey the male dictate and crossed the line, she saw why it was necessary to remain confined to where the male world wanted her to stay.[2]

[2] Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Woman* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1995), 110.

An implied Laksman-*rekha* similarly informs Mehboob Khan's 1954 film, *Amar*, in which a young lawyer falls in love with a teasing milkmaid, although he is officially engaged to another woman. The metaphorical *rekha* is represented in the film by a thorny hedge that separates the transgressing couple when they first meet. The woman crosses the line to help her future lover and by doing so she discards the stridharmic duties imposed on her behaviour. Both of them yield to unrestrained passion, a sort of *rati* which drives the man to the verge of death and makes a social outcaste of the woman, who is expelled by the village and finally charged with murder.

Two agencies rule out punishment against the adharmic and possibly miscegenating couple, one responding to the passionate myth of Krisna and Radha, the other stressing the self-sacrifying attitude we expect from

a dutiful Hindu woman. The milkmaid is surely an updated and rustic version of the *gopi* which shared the erotic play (*lila*) of the seductive god. Not by chance the young woman in the film addresses Krisna to ensure protection both for her lover and herself, since the *lila* staged by the god (the term stands both for divine creation and spectacle) deploys a constant frame of impending separation and loss of love. The feminine symbol of this myth is Radha, the forbidden woman, one who is married and therefore belongs to someone else.

On the other hand, the split male character is rescued by a painful choice (or rather by stinging shame and social repulse) made by his legitimate would-be wife, whose act of renouncing allows him to marry the woman he has violated. Here sexual intercourse may be seen as an inferior form of marriage, out of the eight possibilities traditionally made available to a Hindu couple.[3]

The self-effacing woman in the story embodies the role of an ideal wife. Albeit the intruding wedge driven by the sensual milkmaid breaks the link the legitimate betrothed has with the man she loves, the unselfish behaviour of the woman makes a *pativrata* of her, that is "someone who loses her identity and whose state of mind reflects that of her husband".[4] However, an added half-concealed agency of rehabilitation may be seen at work in the troubled happy ending of the film. Whereas the man is apparently doomed to an excruciating condition of emotional splitting, the jilted woman seems to act out of solidarity with her rival. By restoring the fallen honour of the milkmaid (a motherless orphan, whose daily life is made miserable by an ill-disposed stepmother, and who stands in a lower castal position, since she is presumably an *Ahir* by birth), the behaviour of the self-sacrificing woman suggests an intimation, albeit unexpressed, of sisterhood.

A later film about a heartrending story that involves an adulterous couple among the expatriate community in the States is more ambiguous in sorting out the new life of a 'sinful' pair (since it is devoted to a punishing frame of reference). This severe return to type, as expressed by the dharmic norms, is loaded by the very title of Karan Johar's *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006), which could be translated as *Sooner or Later Things Come to Light*. A man and woman whose respective marriages are slowly crumbling meet and fall in love with each other. Both of them nourish sadly failed or truncated dreams or hopes in life, but both are also loath to trespass on their conjugal duty. The invisible *rekha* that binds them to their unhappy marriages is finally broken by their respective partners, when they tell them the truth. They are exiled out of their homes and apparently doomed to live in remorseful solitude and loss of family status.

However the two lovers meet again after some time and decide to live together – a very sad ending though, given the bitter words spoken by the

[3] I refer quite loosely to the fifth type of marriage, *gandharva*, which could amount to no more than a liaison, which was often clandestine and took place with the consent of the two parties. It should be understood that in *Amar* the choice is between two kinds of relationships – consequently the issue deals with arranged authorization and self-authorization.

[4] Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, 43.

man as an introduction to their new life, "if you are willing to take what is left of me". This painful partition of being echoes back to the Hindu notion that the unity of the married couple (*jori*) is unbreakable and consequently an infringing husband (or wife) has no role within the dharmic frame. Differently from the two-pronged model evoked by the dual paradigm informing the myths of Rama-Sita and Krisna-Radha, here the conflict between duty and possibly unrestrained passion does not involve gender (the admonitory tale concerning Sita) or the very precarious balance between feminine obedience and the call for a free attitude (the play of Krisna with Radha).

Differently from what happens with *Amar*, in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* the audience is introduced to tensions which oppose 'dharma' to 'dollar': the film elaborates on the mundane side of the expatriate life (the pursuit of a successful career, which isolates the weaker member in the couple) and the maintaining of a superior *deshi* morality. This juxtaposition of values defines the thematic background of films which bring into focus such issues as arranged marriages and free choice. The seminal film concerning rebellious behaviour and a more or less spontaneous return to type is undoubtedly Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1996), variously translated as *The Hero* (or *The Young Man*) *Will Conquer the Girl*. The term *dilwale*, which may be split into *dil*, heart, and *wala*, a suffix that indicates someone's role or identity, could be smoothly equated to the different personae attributed to the male or female protagonists on the Sanskrit stage. Both a *nayaka* and a *nayika* are defined according to their different modes of characterization – for instance the hero of *Dilwale* meets the qualities of being noble in behaviour (*dira*) and fierce (*iudatta*), whereas his *nayika* is represented without experience in love (*mugdha*). This primary framework extends to a prologue, one that introduces the characters to the audience, a Swiss interlude, one relying heavily on filmic quotations, in which unauthorized love explodes, and the punishing imposition of an arranged marriage for the girl, who is forced to return to the rustic Punjab of her parents to be married.

Notwithstanding its seeming atmosphere of passional transgression the film still keeps on the safe side of the imagined *rekha*. Despite a drunken night spent in the Swiss ice-box, the reputation of the heroine cannot be blemished or stained – she is one over whom no unclean shadow or suspicion can be cast: "Hindustani women don't do that" is her forbidding statement in front of sex. On the other hand, the hero discards his *udatta* identity when he comes to the rescue of his faithful (*anukula*) heroine. Instead of acting overtly against the arranged marriage which is going to separate him once and for all from the woman he loves, the hero acts in the playful mode (*lalita*), yielding fully to comedy. He even refuses elopement, as suggested by the mother of the girl, who would like a better life for her daughter.

His words of refusal are correlative with the previous standing back pronounced by the girl, when the consummation of sex between them had been mischievously insinuated by the pretending man. On being offered a rupturing alternative the hero sternly says that only a father can marry off his daughter and that he will take her out of her father's hands. This sudden plea for conformity to tradition re-assesses the imposing role of the family circle, in a way that causes a dramatic standstill in the plot. However, by restoring the authorizing persona of the *pati* as the implied deus-ex-machina in the film the director does not follow a path leading to instructive change in the frame of mind of the father, but keeps to type, as expressed on Sanskrit stage, whenever a king allows a marriage which otherwise could not have taken place. As a matter of fact such endings do not imply a dramatic twist to the tale; but rather, they maintain dharmic order, including outsiders or rebels within its normative pale.

Passion and Compassion: *Rati* and *Karuna*

Two basic perceptions (*rasa*, literally "taste", suggesting how an audience is able to experience emotions or passions taken from real life) are deployed by the feeling of love (*sringara*) – which can either be love in separation (implying as a rule the final meeting of the two lovers) or love in union. However *sringara* always moves on the borderline of *karuna* (compassion), if one considers how love needs authorization and implies a suitability/unsuitability divide. Both perceptions highlight the social relevance of the dharmic framework, as far as daily life is concerned. As such they impose the agencies that control conformity to tradition, or keep alive social change and evolution notwithstanding.

Coming back for a while to the norms regulating dramatic development on the Sanskrit stage, I would mention *Mrcchakatika*, by Sudraka, a text I am considering and quoting from a recent French translation (*Le Petite Chariot de terre cuite*).[5] The events are about a poor Brahman, one well-known for his pious behaviour, and a rich courtesan – their mutual passion (even if the man is a husband and a father) should be understood in terms of *vipralambha* (separation which does not exclude a possible happy ending), whose dominant emotional mode is *rati*, that is love rather than sadness or compassion (*karuna*). If *Le Petite Chariot de terre cuite* introduces the audience to a situation of crossed love, the contrast does not concern at all a juxtaposition between conjugal (or dutiful) love and the yielding to untrammelled passion. A further agency of conflict operates through a typical villain, one whose jealous rivalry in love threatens a thematic transition from *rati* to *karuna*.

The love of a Brahman for a courtesan is beyond the institutional pale of marriage. To understand better how individual love (or the implied

[5] Sudraka, *Le Petit Chariot de terre cuite* in *Théâtre de l'Inde Ancienne,* Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). This is a comedy of manners, in which Sudraka deals with certain aspects of contemporary life in town.

right to sexual choice) and what I would term authorized marriage (such as takes place even nowadays in India, when the family circle chooses or authorizes the choice, through the practice of the so-called arranged marriage) are to be considered side by side, I would refer, perhaps unfashionably, to Engels. In *The Origin of the Family* (1884-1891), he deals with this specific issue in the section "The Family". Here he speaks of conjugal love as an objective duty (*dharma*, in our perspective), not as it were an individual disposition or preference. Of course he is referring to a pre-modern age; however, his views endorse how a substantially conservative society like India behaves in the matter.

A further issue, which is also connected to this question, leads us to the relationship between authorized love (or the monogamic relationship) and professional love. Although they are diametrically opposed to each other, these two instances of passionate behaviour should not necessarily be viewed in terms of uncompromising antithesis. They rather contribute to defuse progressively the strict surveillance regarding the behaviour of women – it is through the freedom granted to a courtesan that individual passion acquires acknowledgement within the social canon. *Le Petite Chariot de terre cuite* constitutes a valuable case in point. The courtesan is finally granted the honoured status of wife, since the king authorizes her to become a wife, that is to become a true woman following the notion of dharma.

This numinous upgrading of identity has been discarded by the Bollywood dramatic comedy of love. We could take as an example the latest cinematic version to date of the classic Bengali story, *Devdas*.[6] The male character Devdas, the son of a landed Brahmin, has been in love since childhood with Paro, or Parvati, the daughter of a poor Brahmin, one lower in the Hindu social and religious hierarchies. Devdas's family is against their marriage, and the male hero discards elopement as a possible solution, by deferring to social taboos which will appear again in *Dilwale*.

In this filmic version, which is quite different from the original narrative, no reasonable means of escape are made available to the couple. As a consequence, the story moves unpityingly from the *rasa* of passion (*rati*) to the tragical *rasa* of compassion (*karuna*, also implying sorrow, *saka*), a mode that evokes failure in love. *Rati* turned sour yields quite easily to the madness of love (*unmada*), one that leads Devdas to drink his life away and to punish himself with the half-rejected affection of a courtesan. Here no superior authority can act as an agency of authorization – the Hindu code of values refuses any form of social re-classification of the courtesan, who is de facto entrapped within her excluding role of non-wife and non-mother. She is a non-woman by all accounts, as Devdas remarks drily to the loving courtesan.

[6] I refer to the latest and somewhat extravagant version of the story, the 2002 remake by Sanjay Leela Bhansali.

Fig.1: Still from Mehboob Khan, *Mother India*, 1957, Mehboob Productions Private Ltd.

Imposing Stridharmic Norms

One should understand that a traditional Hindu marriage shifts the issue of the passion which is allowed within the family circle, as far as the women of the house are concerned, from the husband to the sons. It is shameful for a married couple to show marks of mutual affection, however innocent they might be. In Mehboob Khan's 1957 film, *Mother India*, the mother-in-law violently blames the happy newly-married couple when they yield to mutual fond

Fig. 2-3: Still from Deepa Mehta, *Fire*, 1996, Trial by Fire Films, courtesy of David Hamilton.

earnestness of behaviour. In Tagore's novel, *Choker Bali* (1903), a mother-in-law is seen prying with indignant eyes and commentary on a loving married couple caught in the privacy of their bedroom. If one moves to contemporary issues a similar powerful taboo stands behind the reactions of blind violence aroused by Deepa Metha's *Fire* (1996), a film that features a lesbian passion born out of solitude and neglect between two women. They are married to brothers and live in today's Delhi within the stifling pale of a rather traditional extended family.

The film claims an absolute refusal of stridharmic values: its title makes devastating fun of *agni-pariksa*, the proof of fire a woman has to submit to in order to show her innocence when she is suspected of betrayal. The notion behind *agni-pariksa* should be referred back to the *Ramayana*, after Rama has rescued Sita from Ravana. However, as Sita had lived in his

house, her honour might possibly be tainted (the obsession for family *izzat* again). In *Fire* female transgression takes place within, not outside, the domestic walls – two naked women make love to each other or exchange ambiguous marks of private affection in the presence of the family. To make things worse, *agni-pariksa* is equated to the domestic practice of the so-called 'kerosened wives': wives burning, or rather burnt, 'accidentally' to death, because of the synthetic fabric of their saris. The elder wife catches fire in the final discussion with her husband, who she is going to desert once and for all (she will eventually escape with a few burns).

The bare breast that appears for a short while in *Fire* marks the distance between this film and Rituparno Ghosh's *Antarmahal* (2005), in which the younger wife of a Bengali *zamindar* (a landlord) hangs herself out of shame after her unveiled face has been reproduced and exposed to the public in a statue. This transgressive range includes however a full view of shame as opposed to love and passion. Several films exclude *a priori* conjugal *rati* from their narrative frames. Such is the case of Sooraj R. Barjatya's *Vivah* (2006), whose title evokes the Sanskrit word *vivaha* (implying marriage). As a matter of fact, the original meaning of *vivaha* suggested that a girl was taken away for a specific purpose – a marrying procedure that might be transferred semantically to the hasty matrimonial expedition to Punjab in *Dilwale*. In *Vivah* the requirements of an ideal Hindu bride include a modified form of *agni-pariksa*, when a domestically-persecuted young woman orphan is severely burnt in a fire just before her marriage. The bride-to-be is thus deprived of her beauty in a radical way that makes sure that her feminine (and potentially dangerous) body should be purified of its agency of disturbing seduction.

Again, a true *patni* (the Hindu wife) must be somewhat tamed, or reduced to subaltern domestication. Indian matrimonials or the current discourse concerning the position and status of women make an extensive use of the expression 'domestically trained', to indicate a suitable prospective wife. This training to silent sacrifice and submissive duty may even happen during and not before marriage. In Ram Lam Hans's *Karwa Chouth* (1980), a younger wife within an extended family is sorely victimised by her jealous mother-in-law and elder sisters-in-law. Of course the very title of the film refers to the yearly day of fast kept by the women of the house on behalf of their husbands – here an implied equation (or a normative statement) to enforce the understanding that a marriage is not a festive or cheerful circumstance. In such a dreary perspective fasting assimilates feasting, and the *patni* merges into the *pativrata*, a wife inflicting punishing austerities on herself.

However, even the domestic and at least for the husband blissful festival of Karwa Chouth may give rise in Indian cinema to a clever metaphorical

bedtrick, an exchange in which one partner is substituted for another. According to Wendy Doniger, bedtrick stories "represent [a] tension between the urge to diverge and the urge to merge", suggesting also "the desire to masquerade, to assume the identity of another in addition to one's own".[7] In my opinion the unauthorized lovers in *Dilwale* and *Fire* invalidate ritual by assuming displaced identities: they think and behave like someone else. In *Dilwale* the intruding lover conforms to traditional Hindu type; whereas in *Fire* the two women act by substitution: their procedures of mimicry (such as the film-like ballet they stage at home) imply a free move above the strict boundaries laid out by gender. In both films the concealed lovers (and not the legitimate husband or betrothed as tradition would have it) give the woman the first glass of water at the end of the fast – a clever trick to amuse an Indian audience, but also a covert intimation of adultery or illicit love. The very act of bed-tricking hints at the dramatic divide between duty and passion, so as to deploy strategies of concealment and introduce comedy within the drama. This state of split consciousness regarding values and choices in life is probably shared in equal measure by the characters in the film and by an Indian audience – not as a transfer of moral standards from dharmic to adharmic, but as an act of self-authorization which awakens aesthetical pleasure.

[7] Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 7.

It would be possible to support this view by making reference to the *viparita* framework of *rati*, one in which an inversion of roles (both in sexual intercourse and in metaphor) takes place in the couple between man and woman.[8] Crucial to this discourse is the way appearance overrules substance, so as to engender confusion and finally the defeat of any conformity to dharmic type. This duality of behaviour on the part of the unauthorized lover goes beyond the act someone puts on deliberately to mislead – it rather suggests a move on the borderlines of received identities, in a way that dimly implies the possibility of a new self. However, such an inchoate metamorphosis of being concerns essentially women, given their presumed lack of balance. In everyday life this impermanence in correct behaviour leads to stern intimations of punishing control. A meek, silent response is what the Hindu conduct-book suggests to a woman, in particular if married. Family hierarchy and social etiquette impose everlasting obeisance and tame self-effacement on a bride, as shown in these current instructions:

[8] Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992/1990). I refer to the cosmic fight of the Devi against the demons, as featured in the *Devi-Bhagavata*. The Devi appears to her foes as a beautiful woman roaring in rage as a warrior, in a way that confounds them about her true identity.

> 1) "Consider the family you have entered as your own" 2) "Study the routine of the family" 3) "Never compare the new routine with life as it is in your house" 4) "Be organised and knowledgeable about running a house" 5) "Dim the light on your gourmet culinary skills unless called upon to do so" 6) "Always do a little more than what is expected of you" 7) "Make a friend of your sister-in-law" 8) "Never gang up with the other daughter-in-law" 9) "Never criticise the behaviour of any child in the family" 10) "Do not interfere" 11) "Be ready to

lend [your clothes and jewellery to someone in your immediate family]" 12) "Be ready to apologise".[9]

[9] "Joining the Family", *The Hindu* (11 January 2001).

Shilpa Shirodkar's *Ghar Ki Laksmi* (1990) illustrates the strict authoritarian point of view quite well. The title itself discloses the patriarchal ruse in attributing a double nature to the feminine self. One should actually translate it as *The Goddess in the House*, given the pun which associates Laksmi, the goddess of wealth and well-being, with the wife and the mother of the house. This may be viewed as another clever bedtrick, one which downgrades the potentially untamed energy of a woman to the subaltern role of domestic drudge, and self-effacing provider of food (but not of breadwinner) for the whole family, in particular for her children. Thus the pestering instances of domestic harassment shown in the film reassert a strategy which shifts the weight of women from heaven to kitchen, from the cosmic battlefield to petty domestic and trivial bickering.

The splitting of locations yields to a further division within the private world, whose intricate network includes both the family circle (known as *ghar*, the house – a concept reminiscent of the Greek *oikumene*) and the social framework at large (known as *bahir*, the world, seen as an outer extension of home). In Krishna Wamsi's *Shakti* (2003), the dramatic clash hitting married life revolves around the power of the extended family (and its emotional interconnecting links) set against an apparently modern nuclear family. Once again the intimate relationship between a mother and a son constitutes the motivating kernel within the film, not, however, as a metaphor of national identity and unity. A happy couple of second-generation expatriates to Canada returns to backward and violence-ridden rustic India, as soon as the husband learns that his family is dangerously involved in a local fight.

Their voyage back to the husband's ancestral *ghar* breaks up the initial blissful interlude, since the couple is dramatically caught in a crescendo of bloody internecine feuds whose tragical climax is the murder of the husband. Previously he had repeatedly postponed their return to Canada because of his reluctance to be separated again from his mother. After the man's death his widow and their orphaned son cannot leave India, since the domineering *pati* of the *ghar* needs an heir for his small empire (*bahir*) of illicit traffics. The woman fights desperately on behalf of her son and in the end will be able to leave the land, thanks to the sudden authorization of the *pati*, following a scheme I have already discussed apropos of *Dilwale*.

In *Shakti* the authority constituted by the *ghar* overflows into the wider range of the external world – an encroaching which erases from the patriotic agenda the eulogistic persona of the Mother seen as a symbol of unification. Even the all-powerful *shakti* is reduced to desperate acts of impotent resistance on the part of the mother, who has lost her numinous power

and her war-like inner qualities. By discarding myth despite its title, the film downgrades the crucial mother-son relationship to sheer mundane pathos and supposedly evocative quotation, so as to deconstruct semantically, if nothing else, the compensatory rebounds investing the current mythicized and imagined discourse against subaltern position and role in gender.

This pattern imposes *karuna* as the prevailing mode in Bollywood love dramas. The other possibility seems to be authorized marriage, following a scheme of postponed happiness which is strongly reminiscent of Greek romance, as analyzed by Bakhtin.[10] Time passes, but people are always the same, since what happens in the meantime between the beginning and the end is just a blank space to be filled in, one which does not modify reality. A good case in point appears to be Rimal Roy's 1958 film, *Madhumati*, in which the haunting presence of a woman seems to ensure stability notwithstanding social change.[11] However, the tribal Madhumati is finally replaced by Radha (her avatar), "the urban middle-class woman who quietly displaces the tribal woman to assume her place beside the male protagonist".[12]

Change acts behind and beyond fixity, but different reactions may be viewed against a possible modification of type. For instance, Vipul Amrutlal Shah's *Namastey London* (2000) re-writes with a vengeance the theme of the controversial return to *deshi* type, a feature one could smoothly equate with the synchronic grid suggested by Bakhtin. A bunch of second-generation Indian expatriates leads a free-floating life in London. A Muslim is ready to convert in order to please his fiancée's family, whereas a young woman is promised to a high-class Britisher. The heroine is lured into a voyage back to Punjab – there she is entrapped in an unwelcome (or rather enforced) marriage with an apparently rustic, rather beefy simpleton.

So far the tale seems suspiciously similar to *Dilwale*, although the libidinal (actually drinking) excess which is astutely suggested in the Swiss escapade becomes a glaring spree in postmodern London. To evade a perspective of caged life in Punjab, the heroine consents to a Hindu marriage, with the clause that the first nuptial night and the honeymoon will take place in London. Once there she abruptly discards her husband, since a Hindu marriage has no legal validity in England. As a matter of fact the simpleton turns out to be a convincing nationalist, one who induces the errant expatriates back to *deshi* values and one who will be able to conquer his reluctant bride. A turning point in the story should be recognized when the heroine refuses to have pre-conjugal sex with her English fiancé – her words (I am an Indian woman, and we don't do that) echo back to the anguished denial (I cannot possibly have done that) of sexual easiness expressed in *Dilwale*.

[10] Mikhail Mikhlailovich Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel", in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998/1981, originally 1975).

[11] For a full discussion concerning *Madhumati* see Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination. Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 47-55.

[12] Idem, 55.

Thus the filmic theme of love in temporary separation acquires a normative turn whose roots go well beyond *Dilwale* and reach back to Manoj Kumar's *Punjab our Pashim* (*East and West*) (1970), the story of a young westernized bride in London who travels back to India and to "her lost origin".[13] Both films (*Punjab* and *Namastey*) adjust to nothingness the colonial heritage[14] concerning the affirmation of womanhood – *Namastey* in particular re-invents the male, turning him from an innocuous maverick, whose independent behaviour is no better than a sequence of pranks, to a self-regulating resister against western ways of life. By doing so, the so-called "Funjabi" boy transfers the fight for a *swadeshi* rule (*swa* meaning self) from the *bahir* (or public sphere) to the private world of the *ghar* (the household), a cleansing move which reverberates imagined views of authority and self-authorization. This strategy is perhaps laid bare in the film by two rather crude episodes of racist intolerance and mocking attitudes against Indian culture, first in a party and subsequently in a rugby match between the English and the expatriates.

No doubt the Punjabi boy will save the day on both occasions, and will consequently be authorized "to conquer the girl". He features a true *dilwale*, whose acts of resistance go straight home, differently from the rather innocuous tricks staged by the presumptive hero of the eponymous film.

[13] Idem, 64.

[14] As far as stridharmic norms for feminine behaviour are concerned, one has to take into account that any step towards the gradual introduction of social changes cannot leave unnoticed the discourse of colonial hegemony.

Concluding Remarks

My hasty and necessarily incomplete overview tends to endorse at least two hypotheses, on the ground that the prevailing framework in Indian films is apparently split into two motifs, the first of which is the romantic (or passionate) side of love. A Sanskrit model for this kind of drama might be found in *Urvasi Conquise par la Vaillance* (*Vikramorvasi*) by Kalidasa, in which the figure of the male hero is on the forefront. The theme of temporary separation also informs the diegetic movements within the drama, before the external authorization to marriage finally takes place, so as to ensure *dharma* again.

If one switches to contemporary Indian society, one has to confront the everlasting dilemma caused by the excessive importance attributed to passion against social duty. Given the dharmic restraint still heavy on the individual arousing of passion, one would rather speak of imagined outbursts of unchecked love, rather than of intimations of a real conflict between duty and heart. Individualized passion does not constitute the ultimate aim of filmic representations of love – it rather suggests the *rasa* of *sringara*, or the use of a specific literary language, that reverberates meanings through a formulaic background.

On the other hand dharmic laws rule out authoritative individuality in social and even private life. They require homogeneity instead of freedom

in making choices and managing passion. Not at all casually the usual term in Indian matrimonials for a proposal of marriage is "alliance sought for". Groups rather than individuals are claimed here – passion must rage elsewhere. Consequently a traditional drama of love such as *Devdas* must etymologically refer to categories of truncated love, in implied opposition to deferred love, beyond any sociological reading of the sad events one might be induced to follow. The madness of love which hits *Devdas* should be understood as *unmada*, a state caused by definitive separation.

A different case is that of temporary separation (*Dilwale* or *Namastey*), one in which external or even individualized authorities restore dharmic values. This restoration is perhaps the founding pillar on which Indian cinema rests. It may take many and various shapes: in *Shakti* it gives a son back to his mother, whereas in *Mother India* a mother has to kill her son. However, acts of adharmic resistance may also be seen: in Rajesh Singh's *Ab…bas*! (2004) the rage of Kali explodes against a criminally persecuting husband. In this film (whose title could translated as *Enough is Enough*) the usual incipit constituted by sudden love and a potentially happy marriage turns all too soon into a hellish nightmare of betrayal and murderous violence.

At last the heroine discards the suffering identity of the *patni* and becomes the avenging Goddess. In this capacity she makes mincemeat of her husband, to the accompaniment of a voice that sings "You are Kali, you are the Power". This evolution of the feminine character might be associated with the different aspects assumed by Kali, here essentially in the puranic corpus of texts. She was initially a divine being verging on the demonic: afterwards she will be endowed with powers which as a rule equalize Kali to her divine male counterparts, in a measure that makes an untamed wife of the Goddess.

Similar intimations of reactive revolt against male violence have lately been transferred to the expatriate field. In Jag Mundhra's *Provoked* (2007), set in London, a domestically persecuted migrant wife kills her sadistic husband by scorching him to death with some chemical liquid used to clean the house. Domestic detergents are turned into weapons of cathartic revenge, or keys that open the door to a new life. This story, apparently taken from real life, updates the discourse concerning the married life of Indian migrant women, most of them hailing from rural areas and unable to cope with the new foreign setting. They are doomed to complete isolation (Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, 2003, may illustrate the point) and domestic harassment. Women lawyers have founded organizations in the States and in England, which take charge of the problem and offer legal assistance to these persecuted women: *Provoked* may be considered their manifesto, beyond the sheer rhetoric of the namesake featured in *Ab…bas!*. The dilemma is to find a way in-between the passive persona of the Laksmi within the house and the revengeful Kali.

The stereotype of the revengeful and murderous woman was probably first introduced in the literary field, before extending to the cinema, with Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). The novel represents a migrant woman who avenges rape by assuming the identity of Kali, naked and with a protruding and bleeding tongue, drinking spurting blood as a blissful fountain of life and dancing frenziedly on the prostrate body of Shiva. We are beyond passion, but this is another story:

> I extended my tongue, and I sliced it. Hot blood dripped immediately in the sink …. I began to shiver. The blade need not be long, only sharp, and my hand not strong, only quick. His eyes fluttered open even before I felt the metal touch his throat, and his smile and panic were nearly instantaneous. I wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out. I wanted him to open his mouth and start to reach, I wanted that extra hundredth of a second when the blade bit deeper than any insect, when I jumped back as he jerked forward, slapping at his neck while blood, ribbons of bright blood, rushed between his fingers.[15]

[15] Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 118.

Esterino Adami

Enduring Identities in Diasporic Cinema

Indian popular cinema and Bollywood productions have recently acquired great visibility as contemporary modes of storytelling and ways of representation of the complex cultural and social contexts of India. This also emerges in the research work of scholars who analyse the plots and narrative mechanisms of films, investigating the plethora of issues and features that characterise this cinematic typology. Equally important are the films produced and directed by diasporic or migrant film-makers, mainly British Asians or Indian-Americans, since "their work necessarily negotiates a dialogue between postcolonial identity, be it 'Indian' or 'diasporic', and the demands and preconceptions of Western audiences".[1] To a certain extent, the cultural contaminations of diaspora cinema emerge in eclectic Anglo-Indian productions such as *East is East* (1999) and *Just a Kiss* (2003), or even TV films like *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993).[2]

However, it may not be easy to apply such tight categories to a film like *Provoked* (2006),[3] directed by Jag Mundhra, in view of the fact that it seems to stand in transit between two contrasting viewpoints, with the Punjabi cultural code of reference for identity and behaviour alongside the troublesome burden of identity reconstruction for expatriates in the Western world, which turns out to be 'incomprehensible' for them. Adapting some critical tools primarily devoted to Hindi or Bollywood films, I shall discuss the peculiarities of this film and highlight the implications underlying the diasporic experience, seen as a metamorphosing dimension of being, when the migrant's frame of mind is split between eastern roots and western dislocation.

Provoked focuses on the story of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a Punjabi woman who settled and married in Southall towards the end of the 1980s. Subjugated and molested by her violent husband, she sets fire to him and is arrested and subsequently charged with murder because the man eventually dies. In spite of her rotten English, when she is in prison she manages to build up a close relationship with other inmates, thus creating a kind of alternative female community. Support and help are also provided by the social workers and lawyers of Southall Black Sisters, a charity dealing with cases of abused women. The film intermixes memories of the woman in India and England, and charts her precarious condition against the backdrop of the rigid structures of legal discourse in the West. Yet, the tense node of the film lies in the double condition of Kiran, torn between the traditional values of her own culture, which prescribes a regulated role for women, imagined either as wives or

[1] K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema. A Narrative of Cultural Change* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003), 96.

[2] See the essays "Bollywood Galore. Disarranged Marriages and the Impossible Return of the Native" and "Londoni Husbands and the Forgotten Wives", in Alessandro Monti, *Society, Culture, Diaspora. A Reading of Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2008). Concerning the extension of diasporic imagination within TV productions, see my *Essays in Diaspora. Rushdie, Kureishi, Syal* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2006).

[3] *Provoked. (A True Story).* Director: Jag Mundhra. Writers: Carl Austin, Rahila Gupta. Cast: Aishwarya Rai (Kiranjit Ahluwalia), Miranda Richardson (Veronica Scott), Naveen Andrews (Deepak Ahluwalia), Raji James (Anil Gupta). Country: UK/India, 2006. Language: English/ Punjabi. Filming location: London. Naveen Andrews is a very popular actor in British diasporic cinema, starring in films like *London Kills Me* (1991, written and directed by Hanif Kureishi) and TV series like *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993, based on the novel by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Roger Michell).