

Demure Heroines Expressing Sexual Desire. Hints of traditional motifs in popular Hindi cinema

Sabrina Ciolfi

Università degli Studi di Milano

Abstract. In some of the most successful and representative popular Hindi films released between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the depiction of amorous feelings often takes traditional forms. The reference here is essentially to those films that come more or less within the broad category of classical family dramas: love stories that come up against all sorts of opposition, characterised by the celebration of the traditional Hindu values and the sacrality of the Indian joint-family institution. A particularly interesting aspect emerging here lies in the way in which the sexual desire of the heroine—typically a chaste and virtuous maiden—finds representation. On the strength of studied re-elaboration of traditional themes and motifs, these films achieve high levels of stylistic inventiveness and poetic refinement, albeit often limited to certain individual sequences. The apparent purpose of this aesthetic sophistication is to endow amorous feelings—always leading inexorably in the direction of marriage—with an aura of purity and authenticity. Indeed, it is a matter of sentiments so noble and intense as to win over the consent and blessing of the families by the end of the film. The paper proposes to identify and analyse the conscious use of these traditional motifs in some of the most representative films in this area.

This paper aims to analyse a selection of scenes of popular Hindi films¹ in which the depiction of amorous feelings seems to draw on some traditional themes and motifs of Indian classical literature.² The reference here is essentially to those particularly successful family-centred films, the most prevalent genre which emerged in the mid-1990s, coming more or less within the broad category of classical ‘family dramas’.³

¹ An important point to make here is that we are not referring to Indian cinema in general. Rather, by ‘popular Hindi cinema’, more commonly known as Bollywood, we mean the popular Indian film industry based in Mumbai. It is cinema made in Hindi or ‘Hinglish’, as the mixture between Hindi and English is journalistically termed, and it is essentially commercial—not ‘art’ cinema, that is—and so designed for distribution on a wide scale in India and abroad, especially throughout the South Asian diaspora.

² The marked continuity with the ancient Indian dramatic tradition has been underlined by Prof. M.C. Byrski, see Byrski 1980.

³ More precisely, following Rajadhyaksha (2003, 28), reference is to a reasonably specific narrative and mode of presentation that emerged in the early 1990s: a particular genre of glossy ‘feel-good-happy-ending’ romance, family-centred, packed with songs and dances. The film that pioneered this genre is *Hum Aapke Hai Koun..!* (Who Am I to You!, 1994). For the purpose of analysis I consider some of the most successful films belonging to the genre that came out between the 1990s

These films present the romantic stories of young lovers overcoming all sorts of opposition, to arrive at the happy end with celebration of the marriage and indeed with the celebration of the traditional Hindu values and the sacrality of the institution of the Indian joint-family.

In these films, as Rachel Dwyer observes, romance not only unifies, but also purifies, turning the vices of the emerging middle class (resident and non-resident) of the new powerful India—first of all consumerism, modernisation and eroticism—into virtue and aesthetic pleasure (Dwyer 2004, 66). The apparent purpose of this aesthetic sophistication is to endow amorous feelings—always leading inexorably in the direction of marriage—with an aura of purity. Indeed, it is a matter of sentiments so noble and intense as to win over the consent and blessing of the families by the end of the film.

On the strength of studied re-elaboration of traditional themes and motifs, these films achieve high levels of stylistic inventiveness and poetic refinement in certain sequences. A particularly interesting aspect emerging here lies in the way in which the sexual desire of the heroine—typically a chaste and virtuous maiden—finds representation.⁴ Here four typical situations can be distinguished: the girl blossoming into a woman, sexual excitement in women, the amorous skirmish and evocation of the act of love. The conscious use of these traditional motifs will be identified and analysed in some of the most representative films in this area.

The girl blossoming into a woman

The plots of the films we will be examining here always revolve around romantic stories developing between adolescents. If youth is universally recognised as the ideal season for love, classical Sanskrit literature, and most notably that of Kālidāsa, celebrates this aspect in particular. Then again, the tradition attributes great importance to the stage in life to be dedicated to *kāma*, i.e. love, a noteworthy example being the *Kāmasūtra*. A fundamental element both in cinema and in the literature is the essential innocence of the young girl, and in both cases it is usually pointed up with her first entrance on the scene in playful and even possibly childish attitudes. Thus the contrast is prepared for with the situation that is subsequently to develop, just before or just after the first meeting with the hero, which sees the girl coming into full blossom as a woman.

and the early 2000s. The names of the films, the titles of the songs, and the names of the characters are spelt as in the credits and advertisements for the film. All the translations from Hindi to English are ours.

⁴ Although all the movies considered in the paper display different kinds of influences, for the purpose of analysis we are here focusing only on the influence of Sanskrit love poetry and drama, which emerges in the depiction of heroine's sexual desire in certain sequences.

The protagonist's childish lightheartedness finds expression in the films through her exuberant and at times even unfeminine behaviour. Of the most representative examples we might mention the opening scenes of the film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (I've already given my heart away, my love, 1999) with the irrepressible vivacity of Nandini (Aishwarya Rai), in particular in the musical sequence 'Man Mohini' (Captivating), where the girl performs a spectacular dance-play in the middle of the desert, bringing out her innocence, beauty and vitality all at the same time.

Often at the beginning of the films the leading girl comes over as a real 'tomboy'. Exemplary here are the protagonists of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something is happening, 1998)⁵ and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham...* (Sometimes happiness, sometimes sadness, 2001), both named Anjali and played by Kajol, or the case of a character like Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) in *Hum Aapke Hai Koun..!* (Who am I to you!, 1994), who spins around the house on roller skates while gorging on chocolate. In all these cases the girls discover their femininity on falling in love, the event marking their transformation into women.

In various other films, however, this transition takes place just before the meeting with the hero, as if to underline the fact that the girl is ready for love. Such is the case, for example, in the films *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The brave heart will take the bride, 1995) and *Taal* (Rhythm, 1999). In these cases the young heroine expresses her desire by dancing more or less gently and charmingly in the privacy afforded by her own home or by nature—in any case when she finds herself alone. At the most, other women of the family particularly close to her (like her mother or sisters) may be involved.

In the celebrated musical sequence of the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* 'Mere Khwabon Mein Jo Aaye' (The one who entered in my dreams), for example, after having her bath Simran (Kajol) dances in her room wearing only a bath towel which she opens and closes following the rhythm of the music, in a mixture of virginal chastity and sexual allusiveness, titillating the audience with voyeuristic pleasure. As Patricia Uberoi (1998, 316) observes, the sequence marks the coming into maturity of the girl. Later in the sequence the girl is dancing in the rain in the courtyard, barefoot, wearing a short top and a mini-skirt, both white in colour. The prevalence of the colour white clearly expresses purity and chastity, but at the same time the sequence evokes an almost erotic image. Mention must also be made of the importance of the erotic force of the rain songs in Hindi films (Dwyer 2000), and in particular what is

⁵ In this case, however, Kajol is not the heroine, but is to take on that role only as the film develops. Here her exaggerated spontaneity serves only to underline the case of an immature adolescent and a hero that prefers a more mature and feminine sort of girl.

known as the ‘wet sari look’,⁶ a device that has found very liberal use in Indian cinema from the very outset.⁷ It is worth noting that in this song sequence, the director does not play on the effect produced by the transparency of the wet material, but the shots of the girl with her wet skin, hair and clothes evoke a highly sensual—if not erotic—image. The presence of the mother, who has hastened out into the courtyard to gather in the washing mitigates the erotic effect of the sequence to some extent, endowing the girl’s dreams and desires with an air of normality and legitimacy.

In the film *Taal*, on the other hand, during the celebrated song sequence ‘Taal Se Taal Mila’ (Match my rhythm to yours) the representation of the situation takes on a far more poetic style. It is the typical case of love at first sight: the young protagonist, Manav (Akshaye Khanna), an NRI travelling in India, falls in love with a lovely young girl, Mansi (Aishwarya Rai), secretly watching her in hiding while she plays and bathes in a pond with her sisters.⁸ This scene evokes a typical motif of the Indian literary tradition, frequently taken up and developed in a number of different variants. In particular, in India’s popular collective imaginings the motif is represented in the myth of Krishna and the *gopīs*, also thanks to the wide circulation it found in miniature paintings.

Traditionally the bathing motif celebrates, among other things, the maiden’s youthfulness and innocence. The device used to this end in the literature is to describe a typical landscape and the various elements composing it, employing wonderful metaphors that stress the beauty of the blooming maiden—the white lotus flowers, the water lilies, the pond itself and, more generally, water as a female element⁹ and, finally, the moon in virtue of the traditional comparison with the maiden’s radiant face and the magical light it sends out. The same sensation of extraordinary purity is rendered in the song sequence ‘Taal Se Taal Mila’ with a wealth of details: the propriety the girl shows in her attitude and appearance—the snow-white dress, extremely natural make-up, hair decorously plaited. Moreover, slow motion is used to bring out the gentleness of her movements; the atmosphere mists almost magically in the soft rain;

⁶ As explained by Yash Chopra, one of India’s top directors since the 1950s, and one of its most successful producers since the 1970s, as well as being the director’s father and producer of the film in question: ‘I think rain is a very sensuous thing. A woman in a sari or *churidars*, who has a good body looks very sensuous in the rain. There is a thin line between vulgarity and sensuousness in films’ (Dwyer 2002).

⁷ The film in question is *Raja Harischandra* (King Harischandra, dir. D.G. Phalke, 1913). Note that the scene was shot despite the fact that the female roles were played by men! (Dwyer 2000, 154).

⁸ Actually this is the first real meeting between the two young people although Manav had already seen Mansi, promptly falling in love with her, in a photo that showed her only as a silhouette against the light when, taking some photos of the landscape at sunset, he had unwittingly immortalised the girl practising *yoga* amidst nature.

⁹ For thought-provoking research on water and womanhood, see Feldhaus 1995.

the bright green of the meadows and trees of the forest contrasts with the water in the pond, while sweet music enhances the intense expressiveness of the scene.

Despite this aura of purity, the image that emerges in the literature and cinema is singularly sensual, if not indeed downright erotic. In part this is due to the voyeuristic situation that develops, and in part to the girl's unconstrained deportment, since she is convinced that she is quite alone. In the film the scene highlights the flowering of the girl into a woman, her quest for love and her growing desire, as the lyrics reveal. In fact, just before the water play, the sequence sees the girl rejoicing in the rain, first dancing and frolicking with her sisters, and then alone: lying face down in the soaked grass, then turning on her back, her body tense with desire, hands clutching at the grass, and finally abandoned on her side, almost as if acting out a series of amorous embraces. Here, too, there can be no getting away from the erotic suggestions evoked by the water in the lake and by the rain. Thus, the viewer is able to grasp all the intensity of the most intimate sensations experienced by the heroine (and by the hero, too) during the song sequence, thanks to the delicate and indeed poetic style with which the director represents the passion and increasing desire.

Sexual excitement in women

It is a tradition in India for women to take great care of their hair, which is usually braided in a plait. By contrast, an image of a woman with ruffled hair suggests a state of excitement and, in the specific context of Sanskrit love poetry; it evokes the end of a night of love. In films, too, the image is often used to represent amorous passion, both in the poetic lyrics of the songs and on the film set itself.

In the film *Dil To Pagal Hai* (The heart is crazy, 1997), and to be precise in the theatrical representation of an extremely modern and slyly allusive dance which formed part of the first musical sequence inserted into the plot, we find an example of the symbolic use of a woman's hair. In the words of the song 'Le Gayi Dil' (Stole my heart away), which describe the protagonist's sensations smitten by love at first sight, the girl tells us she wears her hair loose and walks as if drunk. Then we have the particularly explicit invitation by Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) to Megha (Aishwarya Rai) to unbind her hair in the text of the song 'Humko Humise Chura Lo' (Steal me away from myself), which accompanies the long sequence celebrating the reciprocity of sentiments in the film *Mohabbatein* (Love stories, 2000): the girl replies that this would turn day into night.

When the theme is acted out, however, it takes on less explicit tones. A significant example is to be seen in the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham...* when Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) invites Anjali (Kajol) to go with him to the Chandni Chowk fair, as a sort of first date. For the occasion the girl wears her hair loose—an unusual hairstyle for her—and

indeed the young man remarks on it complimenting her, saying how well it suits her. This detail is a sign of the growing interest that Anjali is taking in Rahul, and of a change in the girl, who is rapidly progressing from childish to more feminine ways. In the delicate transition from girl to woman brought about on falling in love, her loose hair serves as an outer sign: on the one hand it symbolises her desire while at the same time it represents a subtle attempt at seduction, as if to communicate that she is ready for love.

Another representation of sexual excitement in a woman is to be seen in the film *Taal*: at the end of the sequence we have been looking at, we see the first true meeting and physical contact between the couple, when Mansi, attempting to save Manav who has fallen from a cliff, appears with her long hair flowing over her shoulders to a particularly fluffy effect, with something almost wild about it. The sensuality of the scene is heightened when the two slip into a long embrace in the void—a situation allowing for a reversal of roles. The appearance of the young girl with her hair loose is in sharp contrast with her look in the previous images where a prim plait added a sense of purity to her gleaming white garments as she bathed in the pond—a contrast all the more striking in the sequence of scenes following one upon another as the plot develops.

Finally, another particularly suggestive image is to be seen in the film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, in the scene in which Sameer (Salman Khan) has just arrived in the palace and, with an uncertain grasp of palace etiquette but also with a touch of narcissism, shows off his fine physical form, taking the sun half naked in the courtyard. The girls of the house are gathered in a room combing their long hair, which is then to be braided in the traditional plait. When they see Sameer from the window they run out to get a better view, hiding and giggling playfully. Nandini, an older cousin, reproaches them in stern tones, but also looks on. In their hurry all but one wears their hair loose. The scene immediately calls to mind the motif of women looking on in admiration, very dear to the classical literature, as we find, for example, in a splendid image described almost cinematographically by the great poet Kālidāsa in the *Raghuvamśa* of the fourth-fifth century A.D.—the scene in which the princess and prince Raghu traverse the main street of the city. All the onlookers admire the couple showing great enthusiasm, but particularly the women, who abruptly abandon their personal care to run out and admire the royal couple, and above all the handsome prince, some with their hair loose, some even only half made up.

The amorous skirmish

The first meeting between a couple is clearly a matter of great importance both in classical poetry and in popular Hindi cinema. Here, body language plays a fundamental role, finding expression above all in a theme that enjoys great popularity in poetry, namely that of looks, of gazes. The interplay of glances often takes the form

of a loving skirmish, a body language with typically Indian connotations, which we find described in detail as early as the *Kāmasūtra*. Here, as in the poetry, it constitutes an element characteristic of *sambhoga śṛṅgāra*, love in union,¹⁰ while in films the skirmish generally develops right from the first meeting of the couple, with a fair dose of initial coyness and diffidence on the part of the girl.

We have a good example of this in the previously mentioned film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, in the memorable scene of the candelabrum. With an intense exchange of glances the first meeting between the hero and the heroine assumes the air of a challenge expressed with decidedly stereotyped attitudes: Nandini (Aishwarya Rai), sulking¹¹ because she has to give up her room for the guest, and Sameer (Salman Khan), the seducer come from afar, who applies a particular technique for the approach,¹² alternating boldness and sweetness. The camera lingering on a close-up of the girl and crisp dialogue playing on the definition of her gaze, which she herself describes as sharp, make the scene all the more pointed.

The *kāvya* captures and combines the various facets of the feelings expressed, creating metaphors and images of extraordinary beauty regarding above all the sidelong glances launched by the girls, *kaṭākṣa*. Traditionally, these glances reveal alternations of various emotions: they may be flirtatious and charming when used as means of seduction, coy or with eyes downcast on falling in love well and truly. Again in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, for example, during the long musical sequence 'Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyan' (The impertinence of the eyes) this seductive ballet of gazes is staged to masterly effect in the wedding scene where, amidst a great revelling crowd, Nandini encourages Sameer's bold advances with an exchange of looks.

Returning, now, to the love skirmish, it is to be noted that in films it usually takes a decidedly playful form. The innocent, almost childish play between the lovers constitutes a veritable language of courting and love. In a culture in which young couples hardly ever have the chance to be alone together in privacy, joking, making faces and teasing seem to constitute, in reality as on the film set, a way to establish initial contact and intimacy between the couple, and can be shown to the general public without any problems. This we can see in the film, during the same musical sequence itself when Nandini and Sameer tease each other against the background of a great throng of revellers, with hardly anyone noticing.

¹⁰ Reference here is to the representation of love in union, according to the well-known distinction made in Sanskrit poetry between love in union and love in separation.

¹¹ For women sulking has a particularly significant role to play in Indian love poetry. In general it is the response when the man's advances grow too insistent or when the girl is racked by doubts about the reciprocity of the relations, and is thus a prey to jealousy. Obviously, the situation puts a particular edge on the challenge for the man.

¹² See the *Kāmasūtra* on courtship, and in particular the sections on winning over young girls and the wives of others.

Evoking the act of love

In the films we examine here, love in union is never evoked with scenes of sex, which would obviously clash with the rules laid down by the censors,¹³ but even more, with the moral values that this genre of movies tends to celebrate. Actually, the situation of love in union generally occurs only temporarily in the plots of classical theatre and literature as well as films, as a starting point or point of arrival for the development of a series of dramatic events that will lead to the separation of the couple. In the films, moreover, it is not usually a matter of a truly erotic union, but rather of reciprocal sentiments that find expression in courtship and in the central musical sequence in the film which seals the love of the couple. The *kāvya*, on the other hand, reaches its highest point of poetic expression precisely in describing the night of love, and above all through the body language evoking the initial and final moments with the help of highly refined images.

The filmmakers take up these classical motifs and combine them in the staging or simply in the lyrics of the songs, offering actual quotations designed to evoke the act of love. Particularly representative in this respect is the second part of the previously mentioned musical sequence ‘Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyan’ in the film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. In a rare moment when Nandini and Sameer manage to get away from the crowd taking part in the celebration, just when their two faces come very close and one would expect a tender kiss, the girl, following the words of the song, applies to her lover’s lips a little of the *kājal* with which she has made up her eyes, echoing a typical scene which follows upon the amorous union in the *kāvya*, evidently indicating signs of passionate kissing. In the scene immediately after, when a kiss now seems inevitable, Nandini gently bends her head and softly blows out the oil lamp. Here, the themes seem to blend together: the first, highlighted by the lyrics of the song, sets off the beauty of the young girl’s face, which has to be hidden from the envious sun and moon; the second evokes the classical situation, with excitement mounting as a night of love lies ahead and, with desire and modesty competing in the woman’s feelings, so as not to be seen by her lover unveiled, she puts out the lantern tossing a handful of powdery perfume or petals over it. Here it is worth noting that the core of the film consists of a love story between the daughter and pupil of the *guru*—a relationship seen as incestuous in the ancient sacred Hindu texts, an ‘adharmic’ romance which is represented through highly poetic language and aesthetics.

In conclusion, let us take a look at another motif characteristic of Sanskrit love poetry, regarding the marks left on the woman’s body by her lover’s bites and scratches

¹³ On the ban on kissing in Indian films and on the ways of dealing with it, see Prasad 1998, 88–100.

at the climax of excitement. Proving extraordinarily evocative of the erotic union, the image recurs in the movie genre we are considering here in two particularly significant cases. The first example is in the film *Pardes* (Foreign country, 1997) when Ganga (Mahima Chaudhry), having been subjected to the harassment of her fiancé Rajiv (Apoorva Agnihotri) who had drunkenly tried to possess her in Las Vegas, shows the marks left by his kisses on her breast as evidence of the event. Another quite singular episode that takes up the motif occurs in the previously mentioned film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* when, on a journey through Switzerland, the protagonist Simran wakes up in the agony of doubt wondering whether she had had sex with Raj while she was drunk. The young man takes a mischievous delight in making her believe she had, showing her as irrefutable proof the marks of her kisses on his chest, and then, when she bursts into tears, confesses that he had drawn them with her lipstick for fun. The scene offers the hero a chance to show his sound moral values when, becoming serious again, he solemnly swears to his sweetheart that he is a true ‘hindustani’ and knows how valuable honour is for an Indian girl.

It is worth noting that both episodes take place during a holiday and that in both cases the person apparently responsible for the marks is drunk. But while, on the one hand, the abuse of alcohol puts the dissolute Rajiv in an even worse light, in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* the innocent Simran indulges only out of necessity, to withstand the harsh night temperature. In these films it seems almost as if the characters could abandon themselves to passion only in exceptional circumstances, on holiday or, indeed, under the effect of alcohol. Finally, the use of the traditional motif of the marks left by kisses as sole proof demonstrating that sexual intercourse has taken place is indeed a singular feature, above all in the case of *Pardes* where the girl could more tellingly have shown the marks left by the blows delivered by Rajiv as evidence of the violence endured.

Filmography

- Dil To Pagal Hai* (The heart is crazy), dir. Yash Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 1997.
Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (The braveheart will take the bride), dir. Aditya Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 1995.
Hum Aapke Hain Kaun..! (Who am I to you!), dir. Sooraj R. Barjatya, Rajshri Productions Pvt. Ltd., 1994.
Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (I've already given my heart away, my love), dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Bhansali Films Pvt. Ltd., 1999.
Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham... (Sometimes happiness, sometimes sadness), dir. Karan Johar, Dharma Productions Pvt. Ltd, 2001.
Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Something is happening), dir. Karan Johar, Dharma Productions Pvt. Ltd., 1998.

- Mohabbatein* (Love stories), dir. Aditya Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 2000.
Pardes (Foreign country), dir. Subash Ghai, Mukta Arts Ltd., 1997.
Taal (Rhythm), dir. Subhash Ghai, Mukta Arts Ltd., 1999.

References

- Byrski, Maria Christopher 1980. 'Bombay Philum—The Kaliyugi Avatara of Sanskrit Drama', *Pushpanjali* 4: 111–8.
- Dwyer, Rachel 2000. 'The Erotics of the Wet Sari in Hindi Films', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 23, 2:143–60.
- 2002. *Yash Chopra. Fifty years in Indian cinema*, New Delhi: Roli Books.
- 2004. 'Yeh shaadi nahin ho sakti! (This Wedding Cannot Happen!)', in *(Un)tying the Knot: Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage*, ed. Gavin Jones, Kamalini Ramdas, Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 59–90.
- Feldhaus, Anne 1995. *Water and Womanhood. Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prasad, M. Madhava 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish 2003. 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, 1: 25–39.
- Uberoi, Patricia 1998. 'The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in *DDLJ*', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, 2: 305–36.

SABRINA CIOLFI, Ph.D. (mail@sabrinaciolfi.com), lecturer at the Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

✉: Università degli Studi di Milano, Studi umanistici, Via Festa del Perdono, 7-20122 Milano, Italy