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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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BOLLYWOOD BROADS: RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMME FATALE IN  
POPULAR INDIAN FILM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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To Vandhana and Jamie, Professors Dawson and Morse, Laurie and Aaron, and for my mother and John, as Elizabeth Wurtzell said, “without whom...”

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## Abstract

### BOLLYWOOD BROADS: RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMME FATALE IN POPULAR INDIAN FILM

By Erin Zimmerman Moss, M.F.A.

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Mumbai is currently one of the most prolific and lucrative film centers in the world. Its production of the “Bollywood” popular film has attracted billions in audience members outside the nation of India, many of whom do not belong to Indian culture in the Diaspora. The significance of this influence draws from the cross-cultural borrowings increasingly present in Bollywood cinema. The advent of Western investment in the production center has coincided with the diversification of the standard Bollywood film from “masala” musical to more genre specific action, horror and even romantic comedy musical. Within

this genre expansion, a nod to a classic—and specifically Western—cinema form has occurred. By borrowing the Femme Fatale from Film Noir and recreating her as the City Siren, Bollywood has achieved liberation for the heroine and from cultural emasculation in one. In this liberation, Bollywood has taken the Western implication of Eastern femininity and used a Western film form to turn that implication on its head. They have declared that the East may be masculine or feminine, easily utilizing either trait, as it is now fluent in both.

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## Preface

Bollywood produces over 900 films per year and maintains a daily domestic audience of 14 million viewers in a country of 1.2 billion people. These figures do not include the vast attention Bollywood films receive throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian diaspora. Due to the influence and exceptional returns of these films, Western investors have finally begun to pay attention in the past five years. Cross-culturally financed films between India and the West will grow rapidly in the coming years, meaning significant changes for both Hollywood and Bollywood. Not only will Bollywood stars become increasingly recognizable, but their wares will be more readily available causing an increased use of Bollywood actors in Hollywood films, and a platform for the reemergence of the musical, whose way is already paved by Western adaptations like Chicago and Mamma Mia. It is in adaptation that Bollywood may have its revenge against Western cultural infringement of the past. Having already taken so many of the plots of its top-grossing and most popular films from Hollywood, it is now time for Mumbai and the East to have its turn at changing the West. As seen with the effects of the import of East Asian directors like John Woo, Ang Lee and Wong Kar Wai in the early nineties, Southeast Asia is now ready to make its debut and its mark on Hollywood film and Western culture as a whole.

# Chapter 1

## The Sounding of the City Siren

*See the way she walks*

*Hear the way she talks*

*You're written in her book*

*You're number 37, have a look*

*She's going to smile just to make you frown, what a clown—Lou Reed*

The common claim that Bollywood is merely a copy of its Hollywood counterpart, both in structure and content, is a vast overstatement and one too often made, within and without Mumbai. Suggesting the presence of Western filmic construction in this Eastern form becomes especially dangerous as such an assertion may only contribute to flawed judgment. What must be remembered is that in any emulation there is always adaptation and redefinition and when the Femme Fatale presents herself on the Bollywood screen, we must not see her as that same dame immortalized by the likes of Barbara Stanwyck, Kathleen Turner and Glenn Close but as a new woman, specific to her culture and space: a “City Siren” (Das Gupta 29).

When Chidananda Das Gupta first used the phrase in a 1969 issue of Film Quarterly, he qualified it by indicating his belief in the Hindu mindset at the time: “sin belongs to the West; virtue to India” (29). The Siren is linked to the indulgent culture of

the West through her connection with the city whose cool electric lights burn so much brighter than the warmth of village fires. These associations have changed little in the four decades since Das Gupta's article was published. In fact, they have become all the more important, particularly as Western popular culture has continued to encroach upon Indian custom through various media, its center of influence now shifted from Britain to America. The prospect of Western commercialization of the already heavily commercialized Indian film, as with the import of the multiplex cinema, can seem imminent, especially in the most popular Hindi cinema. However, it is within the scope of what Homi Bhabha calls this "normalizing, hegemonic practice" that the possibility of revolt against both the encroaching sin of the West and the supposed virtue of Hindi tradition may be seen (Other Side; Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 58). The City Siren is the embodiment of that possibility. She is the hybridized agent of a new space, which she creates, confident of her position as both Western and Eastern, male and female. For it is in this articulation of difference that common ground is discovered and a post-colonial hybrid culture created through the process of reinscription (Bhabha, Location of Culture 38-9). This reinscription is an attempt on the part of the Eastern woman, now made masculine by her association with a dominant Western female figure, "to rechart and occupy the place imperial cultural forms reserved for [her] subordination" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 210). She fights "a consciousness that assumed [her] subordination [as that] of a designated inferior Other" (ibid). It is in this battle that she and her female audience may emerge as the other of itself (Bhabha, Location of Culture 39). The possibility of this created by her ability to reflect the values of a, now, cultural colonial power (the West via the Femme Fatale) while

utilizing them to subvert the identity of submission, previously inflicted from within and without her culture.

### **Shifting Cinema**

The evolution of the City Siren from marginal character to dynamic lead has largely been the result of the emergence of multiple genres in Indian film, which was, until recently, easily divided between the broad musicals referred to as “all-India” or masala films and the quiet realist pieces produced by directors like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak that formed “regional” art cinemas, particularly that of Bengal (Other Side; Das Gupta 32-3). The all-India film’s form is, sometimes begrudgingly, sometimes lovingly, known as Bollywood. This distinction between masala and art film is one few outside the country understand.

Bollywood is currently changing its production practice by producing films beyond the traditional form: a three-hour dramatic arc, broken only by extended song and dance sequences and comic scenes whose inclusion in the film is so irrelevant as to be almost entirely outside the diegesis. Genre-based films in horror (Fear, 2007; Darna Zaroori Hai, 2006) and romantic comedy (Deewane Huye Paagal, 2005; Pyaar Ke, 2006) are fast becoming the most popular, likely because of their close relation to the all-India formula in their titillation, romance and humor. This move toward the Hollywood formula angers many filmmakers in the country who view the influence, both direct and indirect, of Western, specifically American, style as detrimental to the construction of national cinema in India. These fears are heightened by the recent investment trend in Bollywood by

Western-run production companies, such as Sony Pictures Entertainment's 2007 release of Saawariya, directed by the popular Sanjay Leela Bhansali whose remake of Devdas (2002) was nominated for an Academy Award and won India its first British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award (Giridharadas 1). It is important to note that the majority of those against this type of involvement are independent filmmakers, many of whom will not benefit from Western investment as it is largely limited to the Bollywood system whose big budget films generate such high returns (Other Side).

### **Gender and Geography**

The City Siren film takes its place among the new genre-based entertainment, though not in the context of the dimly lit detective offices or smoky alleys the traditional Fatale populates, but in bright, well-appointed bungalows or technologically chic boardrooms. City Sirens penetrate the modern Indian male-dominated world from uptown to downtown, becoming his equal or even, occasionally, his superior. Her position challenges, not only the traditional role of the Hindu woman, but that of the feminized East—which affects both South Asian men and women—born out of decades of Orientalist exoticism under colonial rule and it is her very complexity in these roles that elevates Bollywood as it subverts it (Other Side). The Siren works throughout these films to gain control, often utilizing the West's gender structure to achieve her goals. Her success, as with her Hollywood counterparts, is significant to deconstructing the oppressed role of her gender, but takes on greater import in the broader power struggle between feminine East and masculine West that continues to occur in the post-colonial arena.

The tradition of Western presence in the East is, obviously, one of dominance. Within India, Western influence is largely defined by British imperial rule, one that began in the late seventeenth century and rapidly built toward its peak at the end of the eighteenth century. By that time, all regions of India had finally been made prostrate at the feet of Anglo hegemony and the humiliating legacy of feminization, left to so many colonized regions in Asia, was making its presence felt. Referring to an 1866 religious tract, Sikata Banerjee uses the phrase “Christian manliness” to describe the character prescribed for the masculine Englishman, so often contrasted with the supposedly soft Asian male. The English gentleman’s demeanor was one of: “faith, personal will to decide, resolve, fidelity, courage, energy, perseverance, strength, gentleness, self-mastery, and prudence” (23). It was the promotion of this type of character against the Indian male, constructed as “weak, irrational, nonmartial ‘other,’” that led to his cultural castration (22). The negotiation of the gendered was clearly based in religion as well, with Hinduism—so wildly misunderstood by the British—becoming emblematic of India’s weakness. The Sikhs, Marathas and Gurkhas who, in part, were able to escape this classification whether by brute strength or intellectual cunning did so only insofar as they remained non-threatening to their British superiors. Interestingly, by recreating the Indian male as feminine, the British inadvertently referenced the genderbent tradition of the devi (goddess) in Hinduism whose possession of masculine and feminine qualities highlights the sexual dichotomy of power between divinity and society in India.

## Chapter 2

### A Goddess in Heaven, An Angel in the House

The concept of power sharing between men and women is rare in Western culture as well, though while Christianity reaffirms this prejudice, Hinduism depicts a devotional structure in which the goddess features prominently, often in masculine, “martial” ways (28). For instance, Durga is perhaps the most famous warrior goddess (there are several) and certainly the most widely worshipped. She is a “cosmic battle queen” who “upholds the order of the dharma (virtue) by assuming a traditional male role and playing that role more effectively than any male deity” (Kinsley 131). Also, Kali not only possesses masculine traits, but is one of the most feared and revered of all the gods and goddesses. She is known to consume the blood of her victims and show no mercy in her attempts to enlighten those whose priorities have drifted away from the devotional. Depicted as having a wild and unkempt mane, she dresses in nothing more than a girdle displaying the limbs of her victims and wears jewelry of severed heads and infant corpses. Kali is the controller of the uncontrollable, symbolizing “disease; untimely, violent death; the wearing down of all things by time; the inevitable process of decay; and the capricious violence of natural forces such as flood, drought, and storm” (134). Both Durga and Kali represent a type of destructive force given only to the goddess—one hardly reminiscent of the nurturing mother figure—and are worshipped by both female and male devotees.

If the Siren is to be specifically cited among the goddesses, the Siren may be seen in the relationship of Lakshmi, goddess of luck and fertility, and Sarasvati, goddess of wisdom and knowledge. Their position as co-wives to Vishnu and respective cosmic specialties naturally places them at odds, yet the Siren is the incarnation of their bond as she possesses qualities of sexuality and of intellect, unifying the gifts of the two devis in her mortal role. It is from this power structure that the City Siren finds her roots within her own culture, assuming the traditional masculine role with artful femininity and playing it more cunningly than any male.

The dominant role for women throughout history is that of the matriarch, a character who, despite the often sexually inequitable system of Hinduism, subsists in Indian culture today. Centuries old Indian folktales of every language (there are currently 16 official languages of India, distilled descendents of a period when many more existed) that feature female characters usually involve her “saving, rescuing, or reviving a man” (Ramanujan xxv). In these stories, “men are wimps, ruled by mothers, mistresses, or wives” (ibid). Deities featured in the stories are usually female (Kali is a favorite) as well as the audience for which the tales are intended. Marriage is also not a means to an end in such stories but only the beginning and often an abused wife will get her revenge. These scenarios continue to be reflected socially in the eastern Indian state Meghalaya. There, the matriarchy continues its rule among the Khasi and Jaintia tribes. Despite increasing pressures from the men of Meghalaya, mostly due to outside influence from film and television, there is no indication that these tribes will change their practices anytime soon. As one Khasi woman said, ‘nothing happens in the family unless we want it’” (Bhaumik).



Perhaps, then, it is this awareness of the feminine power, which has laced Hinduism with misogynistic teachings for mortal women, such as those of Manu. While the devi is worshipped by a man, the woman must then worship that man. The Siren rejects this, suggesting a bridge between the divine and the mortal, one where she is no longer submissive, but supreme. Like the title character in “The Clever Daughter-in-Law,” she always has a plan and always comes out on top (Ramanujan 33-8). However, in order to gain this supremacy, she must lose her righteousness in the eyes of man and Manu. What the Siren, then also borrows from the Fatale is a tradition of Fallen womanhood. The stigmatization of the Fallen female in the West found its zenith at the height of British imperialism, in fact the majority of Victorian popular tales exploring the descent of the socially undesirable woman emanate from respected English writers like Gaskell, Elliot and Hardy. The main difference between the Fallen Woman and her twentieth century Fatale interpretation is intent. Gaskell’s Ruth, Elliot’s Hetty and Hardy’s Tess each violated the moral code of their society, also then tread upon its class structure in their sexual exploits with the gentry, however, in each case the female party was only marginally interested and mostly resistant to the episode, a victim of the supposed weakness of her sex rather than a proponent of its inherent strength. The Fatale is not only willing in her transgression of public mores, but remains unrepentant even when caught. Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity follows her cold-hearted agenda to the grave much like Glenn Close’s more unstable Alex Forrest in Fatal Attraction, while Kathleen Turner’s Matty Walker is unflappable in her pursuit of power in Body Heat. Despite the drastic societal changes that took place from Dietrichson’s demise

to Walker's emergence, a shared heritage keeps them unchanged, with Dietrichson born out of James M. Cain's creation in Cora Smith, Kasdan's Walker has now, twenty years later, bred Sonia (Bipasha Basu) in Jism. It is these three women—Dietrichson, Walker and Forrest—who form the core of what is translated filmicly between *Femme Fatale* and *City Siren*.

### **Tradition**

The life of the Hindu woman is essentially split into three major societal roles: wife, mother and widow. The first two roles are considered sacred, the third is rarely discussed. The stigma of the widow in Hindu culture is such that she is seldom acknowledged and often exploited. She inflicts a two-fold burden on her family as she is unable to provide income or to leave their roof because she may not be remarried; occasionally, she becomes a nun, by force or choice, to relieve her family (Pendakur 149). Many even commit suicide by self-immolation, throwing themselves onto the funeral pyre of their departed spouse as a final act of devotion, following the path of Sati, first wife of Shiva who took her own life by fire in grief for her husband (Kinsley 136-7). A widow's life is one without agency, aptly exposed in Deepa Mehta's Water (2005), and so usually, though not always, alien to the *City Siren*. The absence of a defined role for the daughter, essentially the single woman, only signifies how little she is valued in the culture. The unattached woman, like the widow, is not to be envied.

For the *Siren*, marriage is a business partnership meant to fulfill two desires: money and power. Once those needs are successfully met, the *Siren* loses interest and attempts to

dispose of the match, often at the expense of her husband's pride if not his life. In Aitraaz, Sonia rekindles her relationship with Raj for nothing more than her own sexual fulfillment, something the Siren does not require of her marriage. Sonia in Jism has a very similar marriage with a powerful and wealthy businessman, though she does not participate in his business only luxuriates in its excesses. The marriages of Kamini (Simi Garwal), Megha (Bipahasa Basu) in Chehrraa, Sanjana in Jurm and Anaita in Red are arrangements not only for the financial comforts of the Sirens, but necessary steps in their greater plan, whether it be for revenge or further financial gain. Nishi's feelings toward marriage in Corporate are those of disdain. She is divorced and, despite her love for Ritesh (Kay Kay Menon), she seems to have no wish for their marriage. She is very modern in her live-in relationship with him, particularly so as it is Ritesh who lives with Nishi, in her stylish high-rise apartment complete with a spectacular view of Mumbai, a monument to her success. In Raaz and Husn, there are no marriages for mistresses Malini (Malini Sharma) and Nisha (Parmita Katkar), only the threat between their lovers and their lovers' wives. For the Siren, sexual satisfaction always comes from outside the marriage and so the standards of society.

As mothers, Sirens violate what is considered Hindu's position of utmost respect and honor for a woman. Even if she does not have a child, the Siren possesses none of the maternal characteristics associated with Hindu motherhood, the nurturing sensibility completely alien to her nature. Aitraaz's Sonia aborts her baby with Raj in favor of keeping her sleek body. Her reasoning that she must keep her figure in order to retain her independence as a model is as unforgivable to Raj as the action itself. Ritesh's murder

effectively renders Nishi a widow within the film and single mother to an illegitimate child, making her seem hardly better than a careless prostitute. Corporate's final shot leaves us with a view of her body, now clothed in a loose white sari, absent make-up and in possession of a swaddled child. Strangely, she becomes the picture of Hindu maternity in that final image, unrecognizable as a Siren and seemingly reformed by devoting her life to the memory of her “husband” and the care of his offspring (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 42). While children rarely exist in the Siren realm—perhaps a comment in and of itself—Nisha's murder of Parry, Sanjay's favorite bird is certainly a violation of the calm and caring maternal figure, reminiscent of Alex's rabbit stew episode in Fatal Attraction. Also, Sonia has no issue with attempting to murder her niece when she stands in the way of the inheritance in Jism. There are few conventions the Siren does not transgress.

### **Taboo**

As defined by The Laws of Manu, the traditional Hindu woman is subject to her father, husband or sons at all stages of life (Manu 327-8). As defined by the City Siren, she is subject to no one, especially her husband. The breadth of freedom the Siren experiences is, comparatively, unsurpassed. She may be unchaste, taking and leaving sexual partners as she desires, as her male partner would. Interestingly, the kissing taboo, one in which any public displays of affection are strongly discouraged, is not present in any of the Siren films as each of their leading ladies engages in explicit embraces with her lover, showing passionate, though brief, love scenes between Sonia (Priyanka Chopra) and

Raj (Akshay Kumar) in Aitraaz and Anaita (Celina Jaitley) and Neil (Aftab Shivdasani) in Red (Banerji 17; Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 53).

The taboo came to Bollywood from the Parsi theatre of the nineteenth century and to the Parsi theatre from the teachings of Bharata in the fifth Veda, *Natyasastra*, written around the first century AD. His teachings indicate that even sleeping alone onstage ought to be prohibited lest the audience's "blush be shown," though: "If the context requires it and one has to sleep, either alone or with someone else, then kissing, embracing, any other private acts, biting the lips (of one another), marks of nails (on the woman's breasts), loosening the front knot, crushing the lips or breasts should not be shown on the stage" (Gerould 92). These ideas still inform censorship in India today through the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and have led to subversive filmic traditions such as the wet sari, where the beautiful young woman is shown bathing, often in the river, simultaneously performing a spiritual cleansing of self and physical arousal of her male companion as well as the audience. Both Sonia in Jism and Sonia in Aitraaz first appear to their future lovers, wet from the ocean, their already close-fitting garments transformed into a second skin by the pounding waves. This type of double reading is common in any culture whose public morality remains restrictive and it is something of which the Siren, in her quest for dual cultural authority, takes full advantage. It is interesting to note that, though this type of representation is scopophilic in tendency, the male body is just as often objectified as the female in Bollywood, particularly in Siren cinema as it is her control of her male victim sexually, and so physically, that gives her initial power. This is particularly true as each Siren chooses her victim. Watching him to be sure he is suitable for her plan, she is aware

of his existence long before he ever knows of her own. His discovery of this fact is as unnerving to him as it is to an audience unused to such a power shift on screen.

Interestingly, the absence of the cigarette from Bollywood, a standard prop for the Western Fatale, stems from the culture itself. Within India and much of the Middle East, smoking continues to be considered an act indicative of the lowest class for a woman. Even some prostitutes abstain from the act for fear of judgment (Brown 162). For men, it is generally allowed, though often discouraged in formal settings or in the high-class world of many Bollywood films, where its presence is rare and so especially significant upon its appearance. If one's character smokes, like Ritesh, he is immediately identified as being troubled, and often involved in something illicit or dangerous. To have a female character smoke is then particularly noteworthy as it indicates not only those traits ascribed to the male, but also a disdain for society and its rules that can be frightening as seen with Kamini (Simi Garewal) and Nisha (Parmita Katkar) who constantly light up.

## Chapter 3

### Bollywood Bodies and the Nautch Tradition

Siren sexuality puts an emphasis on the body, making it a matter of vital importance to her livelihood. Within the Fatale/Siren translation from Hollywood to Bollywood, however, there is an interesting variation in standards of beauty, one that is quickly falling away. There is the clear Hollywood type: incredibly thin, perfectly fit and undeniably beautiful, of which Jennifer Aniston, Gwyneth Paltrow and Charlize Theron are perfect examples. In Bollywood, only one of those qualities necessarily holds true. The presence of the voluptuous woman is prevalent in Bollywood cinema, perhaps because of the association of full figures with motherhood or slim ones with poverty, a much harsher and more readily apparent reality in India. It is impossible to distinguish an absolute reason, though its roots may lie in the tradition of the nautch girl whose influence can be seen in the dance present throughout Bollywood film, particularly those item numbers featuring Sirens.

The tradition of the nautch is intimately connected with both the patriarchal structure of India and its British colonizers. The word as it is known today is an English bastardization of the Urdu verb nachna meaning 'to dance' (Brown 35-6). The nautch girl was considered an artist for the upper classes, also a courtesan, the best were trained from birth and meant for the houses of India's various ruling princes. Her life under British rule

started brightly as she was initially adored by the white male settlers. Like Flaubert's Egyptian courtesan Huchuk Hanem, she became somewhat of a comely pet (Said, Orientalism 6). However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the racial purity movement in England and the influx of British women to the colonies, she had been demoted and come to be reviled as being little better than a prostitute (Neville 45-56). According to Louise Brown's The Dancing Girls of Lahore, the tradition of the nautch has only further declined, in many places her status not being far above that of Nisha in Hushn, performing a type of burlesque before being pimped out to one of the patrons (Bowers 97). Nisha's performance at The Rockstar club in the opening scene, in which men shower her with cash during the song's finale, is strongly suggestive of the nautch as this action represents the traditional method of reward for an appreciated performance. What made the nautch popular (and ultimately unpopular) with British colonizers is just what makes Basu, Chopra and their ilk so sought after today: the combination of beauty and talent, focused on the body and consumed by the spectator. While those spectators are still predominately male, their number has grown enormously with the accessibility of film making each big screen nautch girl available for private performances at any time, day or night. Though while the original nautch maintained power over such an intrusive gaze by retaining her ability to choose her partner at the end of the evening (if she chose one at all); the new nautch has freedom from even such a choice, the distance of the screen providing her with a sufficient barrier to the attentions of her patrons. The body on which those patrons focus forms the Bollywood aesthetic, drawn from the legacy of the nautch. It is a strange, lude and oddly convenient agreement



between spectator and performer, which ultimately leaves the new nautch, the Siren, on top.

Multiple paintings and sculptures of nautch girls, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depict “hour-glass” figures described at the time as being, “upright, supple and slender” with “well-rounded limbs” (On Orientalism; Nevile 45). The Sirens possess these traits as their curvaceous figures are manipulated by actress and camera to create Bollywood allure. The full-figured form is exalted as perfection, even an unflattering outfit showing a few unsightly love handle on Basu prior to the first of several sexually overt item numbers in Chehraa is excused as being part of her cute-tough look. Where the Femme Fatale is usually a smooth, high-gloss beauty as epitomized in Brian De Palma’s 2002 homage to the genre, the Siren is a saucy, supple sexpot whose glance alone holds more sway than any lipstick-stained cigarette.

A Fatale is not overtly sexual, as fear of her sexuality might scare off her prey. She is cool, unemotional and neutral in white, which is for her is a misunderstood symbol of purity, while the Siren’s presence in white is indicative of her association with the uncontrollable (think Kali), the color being symbolic of death in Hinduism. In India and Bollywood, white is, very literally, black. The Siren is all feeling and emotion, a mass of raw nerves receptive to the slightest touch, reactive to the least suggestion of strength. This characterization at first seems to commit her to a stereotype of femininity, but it is her awareness and acceptance of this element of her nature and her ability to manipulate it that grows her authority, extending her reach across masculine and feminine boundaries of

control. Whether at home or at work, she commands the space, often without the consent or even consciousness of those around her.

## Chapter 4

### The Domestic Goddess

Within the domestic space, the Siren is especially treacherous. She offers the comfort of hot sex and a warm bed to men unaware of their price. If the corporate world has been reserved for men, certainly, the home has belonged to women and it affords the Siren an advantage of which only she seems aware. The penetration of this space in the domestic genre is best depicted in Jism's seduction scene between Sonia and her ultimate victim Kabir (John Abraham). After bidding him goodnight, Sonia teases him from within the house, the all-glass doors of the lower floor providing a widescreen view of her ample body, just out of reach. The seduction itself is powerfully simple, reenacting the scene in Lawrence Kasdan's Body Heat when Matty achieves the same sexual hypnosis with Ned (William Hurt). Sonia locks Kabir in her gaze through a wall of glass doors and refuses to let go. Her attraction is so powerful it actually causes the doors to shudder in their casings. Kabir eventually enters the home in a symbolic gesture of their union, however, despite his initial impression, he only does so with Sonia's permission, ultimately coming and going at her will only to discover this manipulation when it is too late. The Siren's conscious ability to blind her lovers with desire is singular among Bollywood women and suggests the Western idea of the exotic, dark-skinned woman, made famous by the mystique of the nautch. The Siren plays to type even as she undermines it.

At home, Sirens are far from the domestic divas they may compete against. Maintaining the pristine look presented by Simi Garewal in Karz, Basu in Jism and Chehrraa, Lara Dutta in Jurm or Celina Jaitley in Red is no easy task. Sirens do not serve as cooks or maids or in any other capacity that might cause them to be mistaken for a subservient spouse. To her husband, she exists mainly for the satisfaction of his ego and libido and so is allowed to avoid those tasks traditionally assigned to her sex. While her abilities clearly go beyond the bedroom, her success in convincing her husband to believe the opposite only gives her more time to hatch her plan, one which often involves his demise. If the Siren of the domestic genre is married (and she usually is) she spends the majority of her time getting into and out of that marriage. The getting in: to attain riches and power and the getting out: to secure them. Achieving all this without the burden of a child is as much an indication of her total control of the marriage bed as of her inability to conform to the maternal type. If she is not married, she is attempting to become so and her focus often shifts from the elimination of a husband to that of a wife. Her mental state in this pursuit often becomes unbalanced. Driven insane by her inability to form a marriage and then denied the only man she desires, the Siren mistress revolts against the family structure, intent on destroying it if she cannot take part in it. These wife/mistress roles are found among the Fatale standards: Phyllis Dietrichson and Matty Walker are conniving wives, Alex Forrest, a mad mistress. What is most significant about the domestic Siren is her subversion of the social dharma, for it is that subversion which forms the core of the threat she poses.

This dharmic subversion may be seen along class lines as well. While India and Britain had little in common, they did share a similar social structure. And, though their origins and reasons for this system may have varied greatly, its effects were just as dramatic. The ingrained caste system in India suffered several blows under Ghandi and Ambedkar's influence, however, though caste may be derided now, it is still acknowledged and so the success of Kamini in Karz, Sonia in Jism and Megha in Chehraa, three young women of a servant class, is all the more striking (Erndl 137, Naipaul 3). Kamini is a seductress biding her time as a barmaid and while it is Sir Judah (Prem Nath) who initially plucks her out of her obscurity, Kamini is the one who executes her ascendance to the upper classes with, quick, cold and calculated thinking. By killing her husband Ravi (Raj Kiran) and banishing his mother and sister, she establishes herself as a regional queen for the next 25 years. Karz is based on the little known and widely panned 1975 American film The Reincarnation of Peter Proud, which depicts Margot Kidder as Marcia Curtis who murders her husband only to find years later that he has been reincarnated in the form of Peter Proud (Michael Sarrazin). Karz is an early City Siren vehicle, which establishes convention for the Siren while reaffirming the tradition of the Fatale (Jha 65).

In Jism, Sonia first appears to belong to the Brahmanic set, her beauty and intelligence indicative of an upper class upbringing, however, as Kabir discovers, she was once only a nurse in the home in which she now resides, aide to her husband's first wife before her death. In this revelation, Kabir comes to understand, not only Sonia's true origins, but the lengths to which she will go in order to sate her desires. The death of the wife exposes the breadth of Sonia's plot and her dual status as mistress and wife in the

Siren world. Her ability to become the wife has allowed her to escape that insanity usually reserved for the mistress.

Megha also escapes insanity in Chehrraa, though not from the legacy of the mistress, but from her mother. Maligned, beaten and even prostituted by her husband, Megha's mother suffers for her daughter on a daily basis until she must finally be defended by Megha if only to keep her husband from killing her. Megha kills her father and, after being abandoned—or so she believes—by her true love Akash, begins a new life in which she is beholden to no man, summed up in her first item number with the lines, “I don't shout for marriage. We have a new plan. Let me be me!” Megha, like Sonia, attempts to use another man to dispose of the husband she has only taken to supplement her income. What complicates Megha's situation is her need for revenge on Akash (Dino Morea), now a prominent psychiatrist whom she attempts to use against her husband.

After feigning a mental illness for three years, she finally succeeds in securing Akash's services. His reaction on seeing her is just as she had hoped. Akash is still in love with Megha, for in fact he had not abandoned her but, through a misunderstanding engineered by his prejudiced Brahmin father, believed she had left him. This knowledge, ultimately, cannot save Megha, but the misunderstanding marks a significant difference between her and the rest of her Siren sisters. Through her belief in her abandonment, Megha is given a reason, and to a degree an excuse, for her actions that no other woman in her society is afforded. Her actions become a crusade against the injustices she and her mother have suffered at the hands of men. Chehrraa is a revenge tale whose misdirected intentions ultimately result in its heroine's demise.

While Jurm's Sanjana (Lara Dutta) and Red's Anaita are not furnished with such elaborate backstories, their situation in luxury appears equally suspect. Sanjana's cavorting with the cutthroat Rohit places her in a dark underworld environment far from the elegant penthouses in which she resides, and Anaita's connections with the sleazy Ria and drug-addicted Rocky sully the high-polished marble and glass palace she inherits at her husband's death. Sanjana's entrapment of Avi (Bobby Deol) is depicted with the utmost patience so that her betrayal of him is as much a blow to the audience as it is to him. Such is the case with Anaita, whose vulnerability is as believable as Sonia and Megha's ruthlessness is apparent. Both Sanjana and Anaita's victims are at the core of their personal class war. If the Siren must belong to the underprivileged masses in the teeming cities, she uses smarts earned in those urban spaces to lure her fat suburbanite prey out of his home and into the streets where she always has the advantage. This type of social mobility is part of what allows the Siren her success. As with Anaita, she may spend the day as an ornament to her husband and the night as a hard-drinking drug-user in places her husband does not even know exist. It is into this world that she pulls her new lover, her puppet, giving her control not only over her own status but of his as well.

Nisha's transformation from murderous night club dancer and prostitute to maligned mistress is jarring to say the least. Achieving all this in a black leather jacket astride a motorcycle, her presence as the dominant female is difficult to negate and so her sudden entrenched attachment to a weak and effeminate man makes little sense. It is perhaps, then, his continued involvement with the beautiful and spoiled Trisha that takes Nisha over the edge. Being the woman that she is and yet still unable to lure Sanjay

(Yuvaraj Parashar) to her bed again after a passionate one-night-stand, Nisha is humiliated and determined to have Sanjay at any cost. Nisha's presence in Sanjay's life grows and becomes as menacing as Alex's in Fatal Attraction, even a family pet, this time a bird instead of a rabbit, sacrifices its life for their affair. Hush's climax also mirrors Fatal Attraction in Sanjay's total inability to remove Nisha from his life, requiring Trisha to excise her as Beth does with Alex.

Sanjana's (Bipasha Basu) destruction of Malini in Raaz is conducted in much the same the way. After her suicide, Aditya (Dino Morea) attempts to dispose of Malini's body but her spirit cannot rest. She returns to haunt Sanjana, attempting to kill her, so that she may have Aditya to herself even in the after life. Like Rebecca, another Fatale made famous in the 1940 film adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock, Malini is always present even when dead. She cannot be exorcised from Aditya's life except by Sanjana, whose love's purity makes her the only possible candidate. Prior to the exorcism, however, in a scene taken from Robert Zemeckis' What Lies Beneath (2000)—which was also compared to Hitchcock's work—Malini possesses Sanjana and attempts to seduce Aditya. The union of wife and mistress is one of the Siren and the Saint, made especially significant by the fact that Sanjana is played by Basu who portrays three of the most important Sirens of the genre in Jism, Chehrraa and Corporate. Though Raaz was released prior to those three films, it may now be read in this context making Basu as important as Sanjana and Malini as she possesses the characteristics of Siren and wife in one. Basu's portrayals imbue the domestic woman with power and the Siren with redemption. This relationship between



character and actress becomes particularly important in the corporate thriller as identification of the Siren is first negotiated through the actress' body.

## Chapter 5

### The Bedroom in the Boardroom

For the corporate thriller, the loss of the nautch body standard so constant in the domestic space seems to lie in the fact that the origins of the business practices depicted in these films are distinctly Western. From three-piece suits to coffee over teleconference, accommodation of Western business interests leads to conformity. Chopra and Basu both participate with their bodies, not just as characters but as actresses, Basu making the more striking transformation by appearing not only 15 pounds thinner than in Chehraa, but somehow, by lighting or make-up, less dark in tone and color—a trait for which the actress was criticized in her youth, in fact Bipasha means deep, dark beauty. Even her hair is parted on the side and straightened, rather than in the middle and left wavy as in Jism, that is until the final scene of her redemption where she appears in all her ethnic splendor (Mitra 22-3).

The Siren's intellectual ability couples with her sexuality to complete her well-crafted method of control. Its strength gives rise to one of Corporate's, somewhat clichéd though apt, taglines “beauty and brains is a dangerous combination.” Intelligence is of particular importance for the Siren in the corporate thriller as it is a place where her mind is finally of equal value to her body. That value system is, of course, determined by her male coworkers. Her skill in manipulating the system is her only revenge. The East/West

power struggle is negotiated through the Siren body whose fetishized flesh becomes emblematic of the East's subservient feminine role. It is this masculine system, however, where the Siren holds a singular ability to affect her desires, often at the expense of the very men who have determined her status. In this way, she achieves a dual gender victory, subjugating the men in her society while subverting the idea of Eastern feminization by imbuing it with power. Nishi's actions with Pervez (Sandeep Mehta) define this victory.

When Sehgal Group is at a loss to discover the new product rival Marwah Industries is releasing, it is only Nishi who can secure the secret through its guardian Pervez. Though enticing him in a tiny red dress—appealing to the color's Western interpretation rather than the Hindu, which associates it with brides and so purity—in a stylish hotel bar, she turns him down with characteristic coyness. Her temporary rejection, or at least invitation postponed, leads to Pervez's frustration and renders him vulnerable to the attentions of a particularly attractive and buxom young woman in black. Once in Pervez's room, the woman in black drugs Pervez and gives Nishi entry in order to copy sensitive documents from Pervez's now unguarded laptop. Pervez remains passed out in the background for the entire scene, a constant reminder of his impotence and Nishi's strength. The woman in black then collapses on the couch for a smoke break having revealed herself to be the lowest of women, likely a prostitute, and Nishi to be one of the craftiest of Sirens, capable even of outsourcing her near sacred power of sexuality and giving her control, by money or manipulation, over other women as well as men. Nishi pays the prostitute, making herself the patron. The absence of sexual exchange in Nishi's patronage only further reveals the frailty of the male, as represented by Pervez, and the

strength of the Siren who is seemingly invulnerable to such temptation as she comprehends its falseness, having been behind its mask.

Sonia's exploitation of beauty and brains as a spokesmodel spouting a girl power philosophy leads her to the top of the corporate world. Decrying tradition, she tells Raj that not only is "beauty [her] education and certificate," but that success is all a woman needs, "she can keep [it] as her husband, and can also play with it as a child." Her actions are consistently reminiscent of the Fatale and so the West, whether descending the stairs to meet Raj as Phyllis does to meet Walter (Fred MacMurray) in Double Indemnity or sitting cross-legged in a white dress, the camera's view just below the hemline so as to catch a very private glimpse at the slightest movement. Of course, being Bollywood, even a Siren film, no such glimpse, as provided by Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct, is given. Sonia's blocking in these scenes is indicative of a broader Siren trend, one in which she is constantly depicted in a position of dominance, especially during sex. Her placement on the board of directors, arranged by her chairman husband, allows her to promote Raj and induct him as a board member. She only does so with his understanding that she is responsible for the promotion and so maintains the upper hand to which he is now beholden. Raj is then in Sonia's grip, to be used or discarded at her whim. Ultimately, the only person capable of extracting him is a woman, his wife Priya.

## Chapter 6

### Protective Penelopes and Supportive Circes

There is almost always a virtuous counterpoint to the Siren. She often poses the only threat to her, as the men in their lives provide poor intellectual and physical matches. These are the broad terms of the Siren city, however, both Corporate and Red provide exceptions.

Aitraaz is a retelling of the 1994 film adaptation of Michael Crichton's Disclosure by Barry Levinson, which inverts the traditional supposed sexual dominance of the male/female relationship, particularly in the workplace. The odd construction of the film, which spends the entire first act creating the situational comedy that leads to Raj's marriage to the endearing Priya (Kareena Kapoor) seems almost totally separate from the second act, the majority of which functions in flashback to detail the previous relationship between Raj and Sonia, which is likely due to the traditional "masala" structure. Both women are kept apart until the high tension third act, by which point Sonia's attempted and rejected rape/seduction of Raj has led to her accusation of a rape attempt on his part. Priya comes to the aid of her husband, law training in-hand, exclaiming, "a woman will unveil a woman in a court full of men." Clearly, the Siren's only true match can be in the form of a wholly virtuous woman. Multiple contrasts exist between the two women so as to make them almost polar opposites. Their names for instance: in origin, Sonia is Greek

(Western); Priya is Sanskrit (Eastern). The popularity of Sonia as a Siren name only further supports its subversive usage. Priya is also very religious, praying to Lord Rama for strength just before entering the courtroom the final time while Sonia seems to hold no reverence for religion whatsoever. The body, again, serves as a signifier. Though both women dress in Western style clothes, Sonia is always groomed to the hilt, her hair straightened, her face made up. Priya, however, is all natural elegance and soft beauty, in no way the product of cosmetics or blow dryers. The most important variation in the women comes from the sacred space of motherhood. While Sonia has aborted Raj's first child, Priya is carrying his second, conducting her cross-examination comfortably wrapped in robes that insulate her precious package. Her vicious exposure of Sonia's past and motives in the courtroom may even be less a result of her love for Raj than her protective instinct for his child. Priya becomes the idol of Hindu womanhood in a country where, as the film states, "women are revered as goddesses." Though like Kali and Lailita, a partnership of darkness and light, condemnation and forgiveness, Priya's victory becomes one for Sonia as well, as from her Eastern origins to her intellectual strength and skill, both women work together to serve as a model for the possibility of female/Eastern dominance.

While Priya's victory was great, her task was fairly simple: she was to keep an innocent man from harm. Sanjana in Raaz and Trisha in Hush do not share that luxury. They must both defend a man who has, not only betrayed them but, now, cannot even protect them. The confrontation with the weakness of their husband and husband-to-be coupled with the realization of his unfaithfulness requires a certain patience and kindness of which the Siren is incapable. She cannot stand to share her lover, thus her need to

eliminate any distraction. The forgiving nature of Sanjana and Trisha makes them suitable for their role in the traditional space where they are wife and, ultimately, mother. The promise of the maternal role must be what drives her, for she defends her home and husband as a mother bear protecting her den and cub. It is not sex, but family which she defends.

For Reena and Sonia in Chehrraa and Jurm, this promise is not yet visible and so their passive stance in regard to the men they secretly desire. Reena even has an entire item number to herself in which she, amidst the powerful erotic symbolism of a poolside rainstorm, still cannot secure Akash. Sonia only seems to end up with Avi by the persistence of her presence, his interest in her only triggered when she is the last girl left. Reena and Sonia suffer, from the carnal allure of the bad girl. While Sanjana and Trisha may have briefly lost their men, eventually they win them back, even if that victory comes solely from a guilty conscience. Reena and Sonia are not just missing the drive of the maternal, but are simply boring. Their girl-next-door disposition has rendered them sexless, existing in the minds of their beloved, whom they hold in the highest esteem, as never more than a sister. It is ultimately emotional indifference and physical passion which wins the Siren her man while the sister, whose feelings are quite the opposite, is left out in the cold.

Corporate is significant in its lack of a female counterpart to Nishi, in fact, the only other feminized character throughout the film is Ritesh, her mousy and ill-fated lover who never seems to do anything right so that their relationship devolves into one more of mother and child than that of lovers. The other two women in the film are, of course, the

prostitute, whose one-dimensional status is determined by her singular sexual function, and the wife of Nishi's boss Chhaya Sehgal (Achint Kaur), also Ritesh's sister. When the Sehgal Group's illegal actions involving the cover-up of contaminants in one of their soft drink brands become public, it is only Chhaya who can convince Ritesh to encourage Nishi to take the fall, suggesting that the government will be easier on Nishi because she is a woman. Chhaya, like Nishi, takes the masculine arm and the maternal hand with her brother.

Like Chhaya, Ria (Amrita Arora) is almost as bad as the Siren in Red. Though she is not a killer, she is an adulteress, a drug user and, worst of all, a smoker. Ria uses Rocky for drugs and used Anaita's husband for sex, then his wife for friendship. Her eventual betrayal of Anaita is the obvious next step for her character. Finding herself in danger, she, like the Siren, protects herself at any cost. In another instance, perhaps during her affair with Anaita's husband, she would be the Siren, but instead, she is merely her minion, easily turned at the hint of betrayal. Ria, more than any other woman in Siren society, understands her position and the tenuous security it provides.



## **Chapter 7**

### **An Inevitable End**

The Siren's departure from the domestic and corporate world is one always enacted by force. Kamini is castigated by Kali, Malini is exorcised, Sonia is revealed to be a liar and a con and Megha loses both options of survival in the entrapment of anger. While Nishi becomes Sehgal's scapegoat, Nisha, Anaita and Jism's Sonia are murdered for their cause and, finally, Sanjana spends the rest of her life in prison, punished for the one crime she did not commit. However, the Siren's downfall, with the exception of Kamini and Anaita, is always instigated by her single weak point: the man she loves. When Malini shoots herself to supposedly be rid of Aditya, she finds only eternal unrest and Sonia's quest to relieve the humiliation of a lost lover, results in the loss of her position, her marriage and, finally, her life. Megha's attempts at revenge emanate from a well of pain and rejection while Nisha believes she has found true love if only he would understand. Nishi agrees to Ritesh's reluctant plea to ensure their relationship and his safety and Sanjana wants simply to please a man who, ultimately, sells her for his own freedom. Like Medea, another Eastern woman with strong sexual and intellectual ability, these Sirens perform dissolute acts for a single outlet of physical and emotional fulfillment. Their unwitting Jasons are, ultimately, undeserving of their attentions.

Each woman acts in such a way as to seem deserving of her fate, a fact of which she is entirely aware. The idea of remorse is then the ultimate difference between the Femme Fatale and City Siren. With women like Dietrichson, Walker and Forrest, regret is a trait not often seen. Nishi's transformation into a dutiful widow has been detailed as one of genuine penitence. Kamini begs forgiveness, throwing herself on the alter of Kali, the goddess being only witness to her quarter century old crime. In Jism, Sonia finds her conscience on her deathbed like Nisha and Malini who also seek freedom through redemption. With Sanjana left to rot in prison, she may now contemplate the mistakes she has made and the betrayal she herself has suffered. Sonia's end in Aitraaz is not only suggestive of regret, but of her devi status as well. Choosing to end her own life, she jumps from her apartment (also a Mumbai high-rise). Shown just before the act swathed in white, it is easy to imagine her descent as that of a literally fallen angel, especially when viewed in conjunction with Megha's suicide in Chehraa, where she jumps in a flowing sari after her foiled revenge plot is discovered. Her death becomes almost a martyrdom, purging her of sin. Only Anaita maintains her icy nature to the end. It is this complexity of character that gives the Siren a status usually reserved for the male characters of Bollywood, thereby raising her above the Fatale, men and the West (Pendakur 145).

### **Bollywood and Beyond**

There continues to be elements of the Siren growing in Bollywood and throughout Indian popular cinema. The 2005 remake of Heartbreakers (2001), Bachke Rehna Re Bahba, while not a true Siren film, certainly represents the spirit of the Siren genre with its

familial con team aptly played by Rekha and Mallika Sherawat. In their all-consuming concern for their own comfort and complete disdain for the men they swindle, they execute the cold actions of a Siren with ease. In one of the first item numbers, both women even sing, “It’s girls, it’s girls, it’s girls all the way,” while pushing attractive young male dancers out of their way to get to the foreground of the shot.

Outside of Bollywood, regional cinemas are carrying the trend beyond the masala musical. Satish Menon’s 2002 Kerala film Bhavum features a maligned widow Subadra (Mita Vasisht) who takes quiet revenge on her society by destroying the household of her unwitting pregnant sister. Menon pursues multiple taboo subjects in the film, from masturbation to adultery to homosexuality. These topics become all the more surprising as the project was partially funded by the State Film Corporation. Even the lead character’s name, Subadra suggests the turmoil she brings to her family in an English context (not an odd proposal as her sister teaches English). Vasisht executes her performance with a strange mix of rage and ambivalence calmly stating at an early point in the film, “I want what is mine, I will make them account for everything.” By which she means the husband who abandoned her and the father and brother who disenfranchised her upon widowhood. Apart from its non-Bollywood produced, non-musical form, Bhavum is significant as it takes place outside the city, in the domestic realm of Indian middle-class suburbia. The presence of Subadra in the house and the resulting stillborn birth of her sister’s child render even the village and its supposed virtue vulnerable to the sins of the city.

**“In Praise of Difficult Women”**

If “the bed...jewelry, lust, anger, crookedness, malicious nature, and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women,” then the Siren must be a “bitch as role model, as icon and idea...reveal[ing] [her]self to be about genuine anger, disturbance, fear” in order to survive within the society in which she is forced to live (quoted in Pendakur 147; Wurtzel 3). The first quotation is an excerpt from the Manusmriti (or The Laws of Manu), the second from a writer more famous for fatale-like antics in her personal life than for her work itself. The merging of these two ideologies—of fierce misogyny and militant feminism—a cult of which the Fatale is most assuredly a member, form the battleground from which the City Siren has risen a phoenix, poured into a smooth white sari, ready to deal her way to the top. She is born out of the West, but as with her upbringing under the gaze of her father, she has rejected dharmic determination and recreated herself under the guise of the City Siren, the only canopy that can shield and support her. While she may not, as yet, have learned how to outlive her outlaw existence, she has discovered the path to subversion, and she is trying, she is surely trying.

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### **Bollywood Films Mentioned in the Text**

#### Aitraaz, 2003

A remake of the 1994 adaptation of Michael Crichton's Disclosure, this film stars former Miss Universe Priyanka Chopra as Sonia Roy, the conniving wife of a wealthy cellular phone C.E.O. Upon her marriage Sonia is made head of the company's board and uses her position to promote her former lover Raj Malhotra, whom she has recently rediscovered amongst the company's employees. Sonia uses her position to attempt to win the now happily married Raj back. When Raj rebuffs her advances, she tells her husband that Raj attempted to rape her and has him fired. Only Raj's devoted wife Priya played by former number one Bollywood heroine Kareena Kapoor believes that he is innocent and successfully defends him in court. She not only wins his freedom and his job back, but also exposes Sonia to her husband and the public.

#### Bachke Rehna Re Baba, 2005

A remake of the 2001 film Heartbreakers, this take centers around the exploits of an aunt-niece con team Rukmini and Padmini played by Rekha and Mallika Sherawat. In the course of a standard con, Padmini loses her heart to her mark and Rukmini must remind her that it is just a game and he is just a man. Ultimately, Rukmini realizes that she cannot

deny her niece happiness and dissolves the team in order provide Padmini with the life she desires.

Bhavum, 2002

Lata's life with her husband Joy is not perfect. However, they find a way to make their marriage work and the promise of their first child gives each something to look forward to. But when Lata's estranged sister Subadra comes to visit, everything changes. After her husband's death, the cause of which remains unknown Subadra moves in with Lata and suddenly the small matters that once caused insignificant rifts between she and Joy have now exposed major character differences, many that seem insurmountable. Subadra seems to hate men, yet she consistently finds ways to tempt Joy. When Lata miscarries, he finally betrays her with Subadra, an act that carries its own incestual baggage. Ultimately, Subadra leaves, but nothing can ever be the same or even repaired in her vengeful wake.

Body (Jism), 2003

Based on Lawrence Kasden's Body Heat, which is based Billy Wilder's Double Indemnity, which in turn draws its own inspiration from The Postman Always Rings Twice, another tale by writer James M. Cain. Body, as with each previous tale, focuses on a beautiful, seemingly defenseless woman, trapped in a loveless and lucrative marriage. Bipasha Basu plays Sonia opposite her real-life lover John Abraham as Kabir. Kabir quickly falls for Sonia, easily believing that her husband is the abusive, controlling monster Sonia says he is, despite caution from his best friend, and father-figure and

policemen clearly drawn from Edward G. Robinson's portrayal in Double Indemnity. Kabir agrees to kill him, so that they may be together and only after the murder discovers that he was not only the opposite of what Sonia claimed he was, but that he himself has been played. Five years before Sonia was a nurse to her husband's first wife, whom she eventually killed. Sonia has also maintained another lover, now meant to remove Kabir from her life. Unlike Body Heat, however, Sonia finally suffers for her actions as Barbara Stanwyck does in Double Indemnity, though Kabir is made to suffer as well. After confessing to his best friend, he dies in his arms.

#### Chehrra, 2005

Bipasha Basu again plays a doomed Siren in this Bollywood hit, though this time she is less a cold-hearted, greedy killer, than a woman desperate for revenge against the men she believes have caused the madness of her mother as well as her own heartache. While a bright, spunky medical student, Megha meets Akash, an upper caste fellow student and they fall deeply in love despite his family's disapproval. During this time Megha is forced to kill her father in order to protect her long-abused mother during a particularly violent episode. When she calls Akash for help, his father answers and says that he has left town. Akash's father then tells the same to his son and the couple is separated for five years, when Megha reappears as one of Akash's wealthy mental patients. Now married to a cutthroat businessman, Diwan played by the talented Irfan Khan, Megha pretends she remembers nothing after her last night with Akash and their plans for marriage. Akash is racked with guilt and fears the power of Diwan. Megha repeatedly attempts to lure him to

her penthouse, telling him that Diwan is abusive and she believes he intends to kill her. Drawn in by guilt and his continued love and lust for her, he agrees to help her kill Diwan. It is only in the final confrontation between the three that Akash discovers Diwan has only tried to help Megha and that it is he she truly wants to punish. If he disposes of Diwan she will have the money and Akash will be sent to prison, shamming his Brahmin family. When her plot is discovered, Megha jumps from the balcony. However, the doomed couple find a small measure of forgiveness in one another when Akash catches her hand, and she asks him simply to let go. She falls to her death in a white sari, landing in a paint truck which then explodes with brilliant color.

#### Corporate, 2006

A moral tale about the corruption of industry, Bipasha Basu plays Nishi, a woman who believes she may live two lives as an unscrupulous businesswoman and caring partner to her weaker lover. Eventually the two paths cannot coexist and Nishi must make a choice between telling the truth about a product that could potentially harms millions of people and protecting her lover and lifestyle. In a surprisingly in-depth moral argument about third-world industry, the plot focuses on a new bottled soft drink, like water but with a kick. When the company that Nishi works for discovers that the water in the drink comes from a highly contaminated area, the corporate board and the film asks, what harm could be done to a country whose water supply is already so contaminated in general? Nishi's problem becomes a simple question of honesty, complicated only by her love life. If she tells the truth as her lover wishes, one or both of them will be killed. If she does not, she

could be responsible for dozens of deaths. The fact that she is pregnant brings her moral quandary to a head. Their decision to tell the truth results in her lover's death and the dissolution of her position and lifestyle as she knows, one she had built on numerous dealings of bad faith. She thoroughly transforms from unscrupulous Siren to upstanding "widow," the protection of her child and lover's legacy serving as her only guide.

Husn: Love and Betrayal, 2005

Nisha is a night club dancer, a prostitute, a thief and a murderess. But she needs love too. After a botched hit results her escape from her lover/partner with a large sum of his money, Nisha hides out in the countryside. During an attempted robbery and rape on a roadside, she meets with Sanjay who comes to her aide. They spend the night together and she is in love. He, however, is engaged. Her pursuit of Sanjay and his fiancé Trisha is clearly drawn from Fatal Attraction. There is even a murder of a family pet. While Sanjay desperately tries to keep the affair from Trisha, he is forced to confess after one of Nisha's murder attempts. Ultimately, Sanjay is totally incapable of protecting himself and Trisha from Nisha who is growing increasingly desperate with the knowledge that her ex-partner has discovered her whereabouts. It is Trisha who shoots Nisha, killing her and finally removing her from their lives. While they marry in the end, Trisha is clearly changed by the knowledge of not only Sanjay's betrayal, but of her sole ability to protect their family.

Jurm, 2005

From their first meeting Avi is transfixed by the beautiful Sanjana. Abandoning the only woman who truly loves him, the equally beautiful Sonia, Avi marries Sanjana quickly with the recommendation of his best friend and attorney Rohit, too quickly as he readily begins to suspect her unfaithfulness. He follows her on one of her many daytrips alone. They have an argument and Avi drinks himself unconscious only to awake to find their room destroyed and Sanjana missing. The police arrest Avi for Sanjana's murder and despite Rohit's valiant defense of Avi, a witness arises who claims to have seen Avi bury Sanjana. When a body is discovered, Avi is sentenced to death. Avi cannot believe he killed the woman he loved so desperately and he is able to escape during his transport to prison. What he discovers is worse than anything he could have imagined. Sanjana is alive and she is with Rohit and the man who claimed to see Avi kill bury her. Rohit has been Sanjana's lover the entire time, playing Avi in the hopes of taking over his business. Avi then enlists the help of the still-devoted Sonia in order to take his revenge. Together they fake his death, then use that to drive Sanjana mad. Avi attacks Rohit's business humiliating him before killing him. Finally, Avi is able to tape Sanjana's confession which he sends to the police. She is arrested and sent to prison for life, which Avi finally sees his true love in Sonia.

Karz, 1980

Kamini marries the region's wealthiest landowner Ravi Verma, then murders him to take his place as the region's ruler. She then banishes his mother and sister to a life of poverty.

Before leaving the palace Ravi's bereaved mother turns to an image of Kali and demands that She return the son She has taken from her.

Twenty-one years later, a famous singer named Monty follows his new love to her village and begins have horrific flashbacks. He recognizes the area, the palace and finally the queen. He has visions of being murdered by her and comes to realize he is the reincarnation of her dead husband. Monty searches for his (Ravi's) lost "mother" and "sister" and together they stalk Kamini, finally confronting her with intimate details of the murder. Kamini is ultimately consumed in flames and Monty/Ravi and his family are restored to the palace and Monty is free to marry his young love.

Raaz, 2002

Borrowing from What Lies Beneath, the film depicts the dissolution of Aditya and Sanjana's marriage. The couple escapes to their cabin, where love first flowered in hopes that it will rekindle some romance away from the city which they mistakenly blame for their issues. Sanjana, however, quickly becomes haunted by a presence. She discovers that Aditya had an affair and kept his lover in this cabin. Devastated she attempts to leave and is almost killed on the road. She begins to suspect her husband. He is increasingly distant and abusive. Through a series of events she discovers that his former mistress is dead and when she confronts him, he confesses that he encouraged her suicide in order to save their marriage. Sanjana, played by Bipasha Basu, taking an interesting turn as the sympathetic wife instead of the mistress—a role which won her a Filmfare nomination for Best Actress—believes she must now free the soul of Aditya's mistress. She executes the

exorcism by fire, as in Hitchcock's Rebecca. In doing so however, there is no indication that marriage may ever be salvaged completely, which is an surprisingly realistic approach from director Vikram Bhatt for the conclusion of a Bollywood film.

Red: The Dark Side, 2007

Anahita is the Siren in distress in the sexually charged film from Vikram Bhatt. Appearing to be a grieving widow, Anahita draws Neil into her life. Neil believes Anahita was abused by her dead husband, that he betrayed her with her best friend Ria and that now Ria and her drug addict boyfriend are trying to kill her for her money, that they even murdered her husband. In short, Neil accepts everything that Anahita tells him just as the audience does. Eventually, however, in trying to push Neil to dispose of Ria, Anahita goes too far. Neil attempts to kill Ria, but her acceptance of his actions and brutal honesty about her relationship with Anahita's husband gives him pause. He discovers that while Ria did have the affair, Anahita had one too and that Ria believes she used her lover to kill her husband. She even believes Anahita killed Rocky, whose murder she has just discovered. Ria and Neil become an unlikely team against Anahita, allowing Neil to mourn her death when Anahita finally disposes of her. Ria holds a strange place of equality in the world of men. In their final showdown, Neil does kill Anahita, but not before she exposes him for the cad he is saying, "you used me in bed, I used you out of it." The Siren's simple understanding of the world as seen even with Ria is what ultimately makes her so powerful. Able to live outside convention, she sees through it and the men who support so desperately try to support it.



## VITA

Erin Zimmerman Moss was born on March, 11 1984 in Easton, Maryland. She has an Associate's degree from Tidewater Community College in Chesapeake, Virginia and a Bachelor's degree from The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. She has taught introductory and upper level Speech at Virginia Commonwealth University for the past two years and received a Commonwealth Award Scholarship for her studies in 2007. She will be pursuing a Master's degree in the Humanities with a specialization in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago beginning in the fall of 2008. She currently resides with her husband and their beloved dog in Richmond, Virginia.