

**Portrayal of Women Prostitution in Hindi Cinema:
An Analytical Study**

Dr. Barnali Chetia, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Ms. Dharna Bhatt M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Research Scholar
Indian Institute of Information Technology, Vadodara



Mughal – e – Azam (1960 film by K. Asif)

Courtesy: <http://www.culturebowl.com/lesser-known-facts-of-mughal-e-azam-the-legendary-movie/>

Abstract

Vest, Nariyo, Gamaniyo, Ganika, Vannadasi, Kumbhadasi, Muhuttia, Janapadakalyani, Pumschali, Mahanagni, Atitvari, Atishkadvari...(Vinaya Pitaka III. 138) This generous profusion of synonyms is a gift from the Vedic literature to mankind, to understand prostitution better. Prostitution, still claimed to be world's oldest profession, has a long history. It has been witnessed in the narration of various epics that the Kings' forces were accompanied not only by craftsmen, singers, spies but also by courtesans for their entertainment. The term *Prostitute* is somewhat descriptive in nature, basically an adjective which often takes the form of a noun. Prostitution has

been a common feature in both ancient and modern India and is increasing in number with time. Prostitutes have been widely represented in cinematographic narrative since the early days of cinema. It is more of a reflection of the ever evolving human society. Generally, in Hindi cinema, prostitution centric stories deal with poverty in which the protagonist passes through many traumatic situations, and more often than not, the story ends with various kinds of unsolved questions. Hindi cinema has been successful in portraying women prostitutes under different shades of a society dominated by patriarchal idiosyncrasies. This paper is an attempt to portray the different aspects of women prostitution as reflected in the journey of Hindi cinema from 1950 to 2014 using seven cinemas, typical of the genres at their times of release, as case studies: *Pyasa* (1957), *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Mandi* (1983), *Aastha* (1997), *Chandni Bar* (2001), *Lakshmi* (2014). This is a qualitative research which follows the form of narrative method for analyzing the selected cinemas.

Key Words: Women, Prostitution, Patriarchy, Hindi Cinema

Introduction

The term *Prostitution* has been taken from the Latin word *prostitut* which means 'exposed publicly or offered for sale'. It refers to a sexual act which a woman or a man does in exchange of cash or kind. According to the *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (Sills, D. L., 1968:592), 'Prostitution is the granting of sexual access on a relatively indiscriminate basis for payment either in money or in goods depending on the complexity of the local economic system. Payment is acknowledged to be for a specific sexual performance.' The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act 1956 says that Prostitution is the act of a female offering her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire, whether in money or in kind.

The main reason behind this is basically poverty, social dogmas and different mental and physical domination on women. A survey conducted in India by Human Rights students in the year 2001 came up with data which shows that there are more than 20 million prostitutes in India from which 30% of women adopt prostitution before the age of sixteen and are sold to brothels by their parents or guardians for huge ransom of money. Even 99% of girl children of prostitutes follow the profession of their mother and most of them generally have a lot of resentments towards society. Even though prostitution is rejected and discarded by every section of society, it has always existed as an integral part of the society.

Moreover, prostitution is considered as the oldest profession of the world which is driven not only by the need of physical pleasure but also by the economic and psychological distresses which contribute majorly to the entry of prostitutes in this profession. It has been a common trait in both the ancient and modern times in India.

In Indian mythology there are Menaka, Rambha, Urvashi, and Thilothama who are referred as high class prostitutes in the form of Apsara. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the oldest cities of India have remnants of the statues of dancing girl which is considered another form of prostitutes. However, the early cities of India were known as Nagars which had the concept of Nagar Vadhus or City brides. They were basically prostitutes serving the common man's sexual need and desires while kings had their own personal harem.

Even during the Mughal and British ruling period, many women were captured and pushed into this profession for their entertainment. Basically women, in ancient times had no rights on themselves and were considered as the property of men. This proves that prostitution has been practiced by the people of India from ancient times. Even now it is a common phenomena as well as a central theme for many films.

Hindi Cinema and Portrayal of Prostitution

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture. In comparison to other art forms, it has been proved better in shaping and expressing the changing scenario of modern India. It also influenced the way in which people perceive various aspects of their own lives. The theme of prostitution has been used in Hindi cinema for long time and successfully portrayed the different shades of women prostitution. The narrations in the films that deal with the lives of prostitutes, usually tell the tragic stories of prostitutes who have passed many traumatic situations in their lives and the stories end with different kinds of unsolved problems. In a way, some of these films have been able to provide an insight to the plight of the prostitutes in our country. But the true face still lies hidden.

There are number of films in Hindi cinema which portrays the different aspects of women prostitution. Such as Devdas (1955), Pyaasa (1957), Sadhna (1958), Mughal-E-Azam (1960), Amrapali (1966), Chetna (1970), Pakeeza (1972), Call Girl (1974), Manzilein Aur Bhi Hain (1974), Mausam (1975), Aaina (1977), Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (1978), Mandi (1983), Sadak (1991), Aastha (1997), Chandni Bar (2001), Chori Chori Chupke Chupke (2001), Kali Salwar

(2002), Market (2003), Chameli (2004), Julie (2004), Born into Brothels (2004), Laaga Chunari Mein Daag (2007), Saawariya (2007), Pranali (2008), Dev D (2009), B.A. Pass (2012), Talaash (2012), D Day (2013), Lakshmi (2014) Mardaani (2014), P se PM Tak (2014), Rang Rasiya (2014), Black Home (2015), Yaara Silly Silly (2015), Begam Jaan (2017). Among all films based on prostitution Researcher has selected seven films Pyaasa (1957), Mughal-E-Azam (1960), Pakeezah (1972), Mandi (1983), Aastha (1997), Chandni Bar (2001), Lakshmi (2014), one from each decade to portray the different aspects of women prostitution.

Analysis

***Pyaasa* (1957 film directed by Guru Datt)**

Pyaasa is the pioneering Hindi film, which enters the world of the prostitutes with much sensitivity. It presents them as flesh and blood women, rather than as stereotypes of the fallen women with a golden heart or women with an unfortunate past. It tells the story of Gulabo (Waheeda Rehman), a self-sufficient prostitute who eventually helps Vijay (Guru Datt), a struggling poet to get his poems published. She is, in effect, the quintessential protagonist who fends for herself and also for another soul, whereas Meena (Mala Sinha), the original female protagonist seems to be a weak character who sells herself into a high-class marriage for a comfortable and secured life which is just another form of prostitution. Here it is seen that the women from the unacceptable strata of the society are hardworking and independent and on the contrary women belonging to acceptable society are mere parasites, totally dependent on their husbands, who would go to any length to fulfil their selfish desires.

At the end when Meena tried to convince Vijay that if he has complaints with a few people like his friends and relatives, then he should leave them or punish them but he should accept the fame and glory he deserves. To this Vijay made the most epoch making reply-

“Mujhe kisi insaan se koi shikayat nahi hai ... mujhe shikayat hai samaaj ke us dhanche se joh insaan se uski insaaniyat cheen leta hai ... matlab ke liye apne bhai ko beghana banata hai ... dost ko dushman banata hai ... mujhe shikayat hai us tehzeeb se, us sanskriti se jahan murdon ko puja jaata hai ... aur zinda insaan ko pairon tale raunda jaata hai ... jahan kisi ke dukh dard pe do aansoon bahana buzdili samjha jaata hai ... chupke milna ek kamzori samjha jaata hai ... aaise maahaul mein mujhe kabhi shanti nahi milegi, kabhi shanti nahi milegi”

(I don't have a complaint against anyone ... I have a complaint against that structure of the society which steals humanity from humans ... which makes your own brother as a stranger for personal

reasons ... which turns a friend as your enemy ... I have a complaint against those manners, those cultures where the dead are worshipped ... and the people living are crushed under the legs ... where crying in someone's pain is considered as cowardice ... where meeting secretly is considered as weakness ... in such an environment I'll never find peace, never).

With this iconic dialogue Vijay presents his displeasure on the ways of the world and proceeds on a journey of love and truth. He also gave a very beautiful message of life by saying “Zindagi ki asli khushi doosron ko khush rakh ke haasil ki jaati hai” (The real happiness of life is achieved by making others happy). Unlike many films on prostitutes, *Pyaasa* stands tall as it gives its due respect to Gulabo as she is asked by Vijay to accompany him at the end, and they together set for a new journey away from that materialistic world.

Mughal – e – Azam (1960 film by K. Asif)

Mughal-e- Azam is still called the greatest Bollywood film of all time. It enchanted audiences of every generation with themes of loyalty, honour, and love. It is the only film based on prostitution in the 60s which reflects that prostitutes don't have right to love and live a normal life. In the film the female protagonist Anarkali (Madhubala) had to suffer a lot only because she is a courtesan and dared to love Emperor's son Salim (Dilip Kumar). She has been portrayed as a delicate and weak character as her name translates to “pomegranate blossom.” But she still survives verbal and physical abuse, as well as cruel manipulation and public shaming. Between the Emperor Akbar (Prithviraj Kapoor) and Salim, she always seems to be disappointing someone. Akbar did not let her be with Salim, while Salim did not let her live peacefully without him. Both of these men use her as a pledge for their own advantage. Most surprisingly, she overcomes the crimes committed against her and tells her story to the world. Her words highlight the film's most important themes, and teach us about the power of love. The famous song “*Jab pyar kiya to darna kya...*” (*When you love there is nothing to fear*) reflects that she is no longer a victim, but rather a survivor who is unafraid to speak up for herself. Thus it is an incomplete love story of a prostitute which got crushed by patriarchal society and power.

Pakeezah (1972 film by Kamal Amrohi)

Even the title *Pakeezah* challenges the essence of its own meaning and throughout the film, the male protagonist Salim (Raaj Kumar) constantly refers to the woman protagonist as “pure” and “chaste”, it is opposed to the character of the courtesan who would otherwise be characterised as the “vamp”. Although the female protagonist is pure by heart the patriarchal system categorises the

existence of the courtesan as a helpless prey in the hands of powerful men. It is, however, the story of a society that refuses to accept its own faults and acknowledge the true love of protagonists.

Pakeezah is an Indian film which portrays two main facets of the woman character. First the character is analysed with relation to her work as a courtesan and secondly, the woman character's path towards self-actualisation. The female protagonist Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari) is restricted by outward shows of royal elegance whereas her inner desire is simple love. However, while she is the centre of attraction, she still remains powerless and submissive. She considers herself as an object to be used in male dominating society and accepts defeat without a fight. In one scene she broke down into tears and expressed her regret towards society in front of her friend Dibbin (also a prostitute) by saying, "Hamara yeh bazaar ek kabristan hai ... aaisi auraton ka jinki roohen mar jaati hai ... aur jism zinda rehte hai" (We are just living corpses; our souls are already dead, only our bodies are alive). She also compared herself to the broken kite that is caught in a tree as well as to the bird in the cage, trying to desperately fly and be free. While her mother Nargis (also Meena Kumari) chose to live in a graveyard after being spurned by her lover Shahabuddin's (Ashok Kumar) family, Sahibjaan refers to her extravagant brothel as a graveyard, where she awaits death.

Mandi (1983 film by Shyam Benegal)

Mandi is based on an Urdu short story called "Anandi" by Ghulam Abbas. It is presented as a black comedy about a group of prostitutes, led by Rukminibai (ShabanaAzmi), who struggled against the police forces and high class society people in the city who wanted them to be thrown out, and their brothel destroyed to make room for development. This theme is at the heart of the recurring song (Rukminibai hums it often, and also asks Zeenat (SmitaPatil) to sing it), "*Zabaane Badalte Hain Har Aan Khubaan.. Yeh Sab Kuch Hai Bigdi Zamaane Ki Baatein.*" (*Let us change every utterance. These are all things to be worn out*)

Other interesting facets of this film include the 'social worker', Shanti Devi (Gita Siddarth), who is concerned about the moral degradation of the city, and fights the merciless prostitutes to claim back lost honour. On the other hand, there was a powerful industrialist, Gupta (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), who buys their brothel with the intention of razing it down, but continues to mislead them. There is especially an emotionally frustrating scene where Shanti Devi speaks about how a woman should be respected and not sold, while addressing a crowd, and proclaims that she will persuade her 'sisters' to give up this lowly work. Some prostitutes respond with, "*Are to fir roti kaha se khayenge*" (*And where will we get our bread?*) Shanti Devi, compassionate womens-rights

espouser coldly says, "*Roti hi sab kuch nahi hoti jindgi mai*" (*Bread isn't everything in life*). One of the women casually replies with bursting frustration: "*Mufat ki milti hogi tereku*" (*You must be getting it for free*). Thus this film very well reflects that poverty is the basic reason for which women select prostitution as profession and once they are into it they accept it as their destiny.

Aastha (1997 film by Basu Bhattacharya)

"*Kyu aurat kisi chiz ki khavaish nahi kar sakti kya*" (*Why a women cannot wish for anything?*), with this critical dialogue Reena (Daisy Irani) challenges the stereotype in Indian society which is attached to women or wife in the film *Aastha* – In the prison of spring. She also marked women as 'thing' by replying to female protagonist Mansi (Rekha) that "*Aurat ho sirf aurat, ek bahut hi khub surat aurat, duniya me sabse jayada chahi jane wali chiz*" (*You are a Woman, just woman, a very beautiful woman, the most sought after thing in the world*). It reflects that woman has no identity of herself, but when she has life in her womb, her identity is recognised. And this was witnessed in a village courtroom (Panchayat) under a tree by the male protagonist: "*Aaj tu chulha badlne wali patili nahi, aaj tu Ma banne wali aurat hai, isiliye tera mat hai.*" (*Today you are not a utensil, changing fire places but you are an expecting mother, so you have your say*).

This film is more a tale of consumerism and urban marriage and less of love and companionship. The film also deals with the theme of self deceit and guilt of Mansi, the female protagonist. On one hand, Mansi was a typical middle-class housewife who unwillingly took up prostitution to fulfil her materialistic desires which were not fulfilled by her husband Amar (Om Puri). On the other hand, Amar is portrayed as a quintessential intellectual who believed in contentment, where money or materialistic pleasures had no role to play. Amar's allusions from Shakespeare's Othello mark him as a person with a broad perspective. He believed that Othello did not love Desdemona if he could kill her for her 'assumed' infidelity. If he truly loved her then he should have been able to forgive her no matter what she did. Thus this film brings into light, another aspect of urban marriage which is consumerism and unlike the people of a hypocrite society, Amar practices what he preaches that love is not about dying together but it is about living a life together.

Chandni Bar (2001 film by Madhur Bhandarkar)

Chandni Bar ("Moonlight Bar") is a hard-hitting realistic depiction of the life of a Mumbai "beer bar" dancer, whose disgraceful profession proves to be socially inescapable for her as well as her children. Through its explicit attempts at realism, the backdrop for the bar girls' rather lifeless dances before their unsavoury customers, the movie reveals the women who work in beer bars which

leads to prostitution due to livelihood problems. The film is thought-provoking and leaves one disturbed.

In this film Mumtaz (Tabu) came to Mumbai with her uncle with a dream of happy life but she was forced to dance in a beer bar to earn her livelihood. She was also raped by her uncle and after that she asked help from her bar friend Deepa (Ananya Khare) who warns the naive Mumtaz that “*Yeah mardo ka jamana hai, jaise hi pata chalega tu akeli hai, giddho ki tarah noach dalege tujhe*” (it’s a man’s world, and when men know you’re alone, they rip you apart like vultures).

After marriage she looked forward to a happy life but unfortunately she became a widow. Still she tried her best to educate her children. But fate played a crucial role in her life. Her son Abhay (Vishal Thakkar) is arrested in a fake case and in order to get her son out in bail, she tried to raise money in all possible ways. Her daughter Payal (Minakshi Sahani) also accompanied her to Chandni Bar. Life in jail changed Abhay and turned him like his father. Mumtaz's all efforts to give a respectable life to her children turned futile. Her dreams of better, educated lives for Abhay and Payal were tragically aborted. With this, in the humdrum of busy nook and carnies of the bars of Mumbai, another dream got killed.

Lakshmi (2014 film by Nagesh Kukunoor)

Lakshmi is basically a film about violation, deceit, hardships and exploitation. It is also a story of true grit reflecting the invincibility of human mind. The film portrays the real life story of Lakshmi (Monali Thakur), a 14-year-old girl who was kidnapped from her village in Andhra Pradesh, forced into the nightmare of prostitution and eventually testified in court against her traffickers. This film reflects the hellish existence of Lakshmi. She is forced and brutally injured many times. It also reflects traumatic condition and resentments towards society of prostitutes by one dialogue “*Ghar wale hame apnana nai chahte, Dost pahchanne se inkar karte hai, aur duniaka bas chale to kisi kone mein jaake dafan ho jaye.*” (Our home does not want us to adopt, our friends refuse to recognize, and if the world has a say we will have to bury ourselves in some corner of the world.)

Thus, the film deals with the harsh realities of human trafficking and Child Prostitution, which continues behind closed curtains in rural areas of India. It reminds us of the other India that crawls in the dark shadows of our towering skyscrapers. It is a world where survival comes before intangible ideas like honour and respectability. But it is also witnessed that there are inspiring

characters like Lakshmi who fought all odds and freed herself from the clutches of camouflaged human vultures.

Conclusion

Society is a collection of not only human beings but also human dreams, whims, fancies and ambitions in which all cannot ever be achieved or entirely ethical. Prostitution is also considered as unacceptable but inseparable part of Society. Hindi cinema plays very significant role in portraying the different aspects of society as well as the traumatic conditions of prostitutes which proved that society can turn a woman into a prostitute, but a prostitute can never become a woman. As in one of the Hindi film *Devdas*, the male protagonist said that: “a woman is a mother, a sister, a wife, or a friend; and when she is nothing, she is a tawaif.” It shows that the most evident form of exploitation committed against women is prostitution.

In India, prostitution is the oldest profession which has undoubtedly existed in different forms as long as society has attempted to regulate and control sexual relationship through the institutions of marriage and the family. However, poverty is one of the basic reasons which bring helpless women to the doors of prostitution. There are many women who are compelled to adopt prostitution to feed themselves and their dependents. Moreover, poverty is not the only reason behind prostitution, there are many other factors like girls ill treated or sold by parents, seduced by boyfriend, lack of education, immoral trafficking, unemployment, etc. Thus, the harsh reality of society is that women who have had sexual experience outside the arena of marriage are considered to be used goods or characterless entities often ending their life in dingy, filthy corners of some God forsaken brothel. While talking about a prostitute, a female character in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *Memories of my Melancholy Whores*, said “... She was beautiful, clean, and well mannered, but dying of fear because a friend of hers who ran away with Stevedore from Gayra had bled to death in two hours.” (Marquez, G.G. 2005:8)

References

1. Abraham, S. (2001). *Going Nowhere: Trafficking Of Women & Children in International Sex Trade*. Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors.
2. Agrawal, V. S. (1958). *Kadambari- Eka Sanskritic Adhayana* (Hindi), Varanasi: The chowkham bhavidya Bhawan Chowk.
3. Agrawal, V. S. (1953). *Harsha Charita –Ek Samskritika Adyanyan* (Hindi), Varanasi: The chowkham bhavidya Bhawan Chowk.

4. Altekar, A. S. (1995). *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers PVT. LTD. reprinted 2014.
5. Amrohi, K. & Amrohi, K. (1972). *Pakeezah*. India: KamalistanStudia.
6. Bhattacharya, B. & Bhattacharya, B. (1997). *Aastha: in the prison of spring*. India: Aarohi Film Makers.
7. Bhattacharyya, N.N. (2005). *Ancient India Rituals and their Social Contents*. Delhi: Mamnohar Publishers & Distributers.
8. Bijlani, L. M., Variava, F. & Benegal, S. (1983). *Mandi*. India: Red Chillies Entertainment.
9. Campbell, R. (2006). *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
10. Christine, O. (1992). What's wrong with it? Evaluating Sex Work, *Signs*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 17: 705-724.
11. Dutt, G. & Dutt, G. (1957). *Pyasa*. India: Guru Dutt Movies Pvt. Ltd.
12. Faren, P. (2006). The Labor of Pleasure: How Perceptions of Emotional Labor Impact Women's Enjoyment of Pornography. *Gender & Society* 20.5: 605- 631.
13. Kukunoor, N., Hiptoola, E., Kaushik, S. & Kukunoor, N. (2014). *Lakshmi*. India: Kukunoor movies production, SIC productions, UV news Media and communication.
14. Laura, M.(1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*. 16.3: 6-18.
15. Maequez, G.G. (2005). *Memories of my Melancholy Whores*. Colombia: Editorial Norma. 8.
16. Maggie, O. (2002). Feminism(s) and Prostitution. *Prostitution*. Aldershot: Burlington. 327-71.
17. Mohan, L. & Bhandarkar, M. (2001). *Chandni Bar*. India: Mukta Arts.
18. Pallonji, S. & Asif, K. (1960). *Mughal-e-Azam*. India: Sterling Investment Corportion.
19. Phil, H., Matthews, R. & Scoular, J. (2008). Regulating Sex Work in the EU: Prostitute Women and the New Spaces of Exclusion. *Gender, Place & Culture*. 15.2 137 – 152.
20. Roberts, N. (1992). *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society*. London: Harper Collins. 354.
21. Shah, B. & Bansali, S. L. (2002). *Devdas*. India: Red Chillies Entertainment.
22. Sills, D.L. (1968). *International Encyclopaedia of the social sciences*. New York: The Macmillan Company and the free press, 17: 592.
23. Spector, J. (2006). *Prostitution and Pornography*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
24. Spivak, G. (1987). A literary representation of the subaltern: A Woman's text from the third world. *In other worlds: Essays in cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen. 241-268.
25. Trautner, M. N. (2005). Doing Gender, Doing Class: The Performance of Sexuality in Exotic Dance Clubs. *Gender Society*. 19: 771-788.

Dr. Barnali Chetia, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
bchetia03@gmail.com

Ms. Dharna Bhatt, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.
Research Scholar
dharnapandya@gmail.com

Indian Institute of Information Technology, Vadodara
c/o Block No.9, Government Engineering College,
Sector-28, Gandhinagar 382028
Gujarat
India