Lyrical Nationalism: Gender, Friendship, and Excess in 1970s Hindi Cinema

he Bombay film industry (Bollywood) is usually considered, along with other state-sanctioned institutions, in its role as a force for cultural and political consolidation within the architecture of postindependence Indian identity.[1] The products of the industry and, indeed, the "filmic system" itself project a fantasy of a homogeneous culture that in fact masks the hierarchy of subject positions and belonging divided along the lines of gender, class, ethnicity, and caste.[2] In this essay I examine one particular feature of the films, the song-and-dance sequences, as they draw attention to the fractious nature of the postcolonial nation while simultaneously attempting to construct a space for the articulation of a consolidated national identity.

Songs in pop Indian film, as metanarratives, allow the spectator to create meaning within the larger, scattered, melodramatic filmic space. Consequently, they provide insight into an otherwise incoherent narrative. At the level of the "real world," the popularity of a song from a film often determines the failure or success of the film, since its economic success is largely indebted to the "catchiness" of the tune.[3] If the radio replay of the song is successful, the film audience will repeatedly (sometimes as often as daily for the entire run!) go back to see the movie. Another significant point is that the actors in the films do not perform the songs (although there have been exceptions); rather, voices attributed to the songs are of well-known playback singers. Neepa Majumdar's insightful work on the connections between stardom and song sequences is worth mentioning here. She argues for a connection between the star system in Bollywood and the "song picturizations" that take place on-screen.[4] According to Majumdar, the very definition of the term *song picturization* renders meaning to the image "in the terms set out by the song" (167). In song picturization, then, resided the aural and visual pleasure that gave Hindi cinema its unique nature. The split between the singing voice and the performing body on-screen became the desired norm by the 1950s.

Song-and-dance sequences, which had already been part of the formulaic device for Hindi cinema, became one of the key transmitters of Indian culture, since the music industry and the consumption of music on the radio relied heavily upon films to produce music as commodity. The "extra-textual" insertion of the playback singer adds to the "non-filmic investments that are integral to its [the film's] popularity and reception, the multiple positions from which its performance is conducted" (Vasudevan 44). Therefore, a "more complex knowledge is conveyed around the musical performance" (Vasudevan 44). Thus, cinema constitutes songs, along with other "para-narratives," as "narrational instances of its own authority" (Vasudevan 45).[5] At the same time, however, as Vijay Mishra states in his discussion on songs within the film, "the song sequences (often also dream sequences) do permit excesses of phantasy which are more problematic elsewhere in the film, for they allow the continuities of time and space to be disregarded" (127). Thus, Hindi film songs are viewed as working extradiegetically both within the filmic space and in the material world. The particular dialectic that exists between the two spaces anticipates a revisioning of the function of melodrama and its relationship to the film, the songs, and the spectator.

Using this as a springboard, this essay investigates the contentious relationship between women, the cinema, and the articulation of postcolonial nationalism through song spaces in Hindi films. In particular, it asks a series of key questions about the relationship between song spaces and the construction of the postcolonial viewing subject, especially as song spaces articulate a particular narrative of nationalism that is gendered in its composition. Is there a space for female spectators to occupy multiple positions, thus becoming active participants in anticolonial power struggles that unevenly position male and female subjects? How may female spectators resist the narrative that secures them as passive consumers of the film industry and, more broadly, of the nation itself? I am interested in engaging these questions in relation to some key films made at a specific historical moment, India in the early to mid-1970s, when a gendered image of cultural nationalism was asserted as a "true" Indian identity. To explore this particular instance of the contestation over nationalism and gender, I focus on two films, *Zanjeer* (Chains, 1973) and *Sholay* (Flames, 1975), both starring actor Amitabh Bachchan, whose rise to prominence as the "angry young man" of Hindi cinema during the 1970s responded to the national anxieties of this period of crisis. Intersections of filmic representation and Indian nationalism during this period cannot be adequately addressed without examining Bachchan's introduction of the working-class antihero to the Indian moviegoing audience in *Zanjeer* and its evolution in his later films. Bachchan's own "parallel text" as popular actor folds into the filmic space and the national space;[6] thus, his story is offered as India's story.

The modern institution of the film industry, a spectacular "carrier" of Indian culture, parallels the rise of nationalism and its discourses and is thus a significant medium through which sociocultural and political meanings are produced and disseminated. In postindependence India, the film industries are often seen as a key link between tradition and modernity, as the new nation-state settles geopolitically and as it attempts to remain true to both its past and its new nationhood.[7] Consequently, the historical development of the cinema can be read as a narrative of national transition. Specifically, I am interested in how the consumption of a particular mode of the Hindi cinema during the 1970s—the buddy film—actualizes a model of an ambiguous Indian nationalism. This nationalism is ambiguous because, read

in its historical and political specificities, it paradoxically reasserts colonialist perceptions of India as it reflects a prevailing populism that arose in reaction to the volatile political climate of the time.

While a return to an indigenous, precolonial cultural repertoire was part of the nationalist project, this return can be used for a recolonializing project. In the case of these films, the reiteration of a narrative template that appears "authentically Indian," insofar as it goes back to well-rehearsed cultural forms, in fact imposes a generalizing stereotype that works in relation to women in order to recolonize them, to rob them of a place, a voice. These films work to create national affiliations that are generated by a re-membering of a long-standing Indian myth of male-to-male friendship, *yaar, dostana*, or *dosti*, taken from the "Indian" image-repertoire.[8] The complex gendering of the nation takes a decidedly masculinist turn.

This turn is interesting, for in many ways these films were seen as rebellious insofar as they adopted a new narrative structure and took on key social issues. There are a number of ways to read these films (for example, by stressing the status of the central figure as an "angry young man" or by focusing upon the issue of homosociality) and make them appear radical. However, in relation to women, and particularly the female spectator, these movies pose problems. The reintensification of a mythic male friendship in these films positions and transforms the audience through the register of "masculine." In order to gain entry into the national form that the films project, the spectator must be masculinized. Consequently, the spectator, specifically, a female spectator, is led into a subject position that effaces gender difference in the national imaginary. We will see that a particular feature of these films—the introduction of songs into the narrative—both emphasizes this masculinization and offers the female spectator a position from which to resist. Although the *dostana* narrative did not suddenly sprout from the political crisis during the 1970s,[9] it underwent a structural transformation that was rooted in a particular awareness of class and ethnic consciousness at the time.

Madhava Prasad's recent book on Hindi film, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, provides clear-cut reading of the moment of crisis with which this essay is concerned. He chronicles a split India in which the political upheaval that wracked the nation had

long-lasting effects that left no segment of the population untouched. He asserts that

a period of intense political upheaval beginning in the mid-sixties brought into crisis the political form of the national consensus (represented by the dominant integrationist role of the Congress party). Since an authoritarian populist government contained the forces unleashed by this crisis, only a limited transformation of the political field occurred. Re-organized in a looser, somewhat disaggregated form, including a more visible though fragmented opposition, the political system was able to absorb or marginalize radical challenges through populist mobilization. (Prasad 117–18)

The prevailing atmosphere of India that Prasad signals is one where the Fascist-like response to the fracturing of the nation by Indira Gandhi's Congress Party resulted in a further fragmentation and repression of the country that could only be held together, however loosely, through populist mobilization. Prasad traces the populism to the changes in political and cultural thinking from the late sixties onward to the "need to transform the political form of the consensus" and the "fragmentation of the Congress, beginning with the various dissident formations that sprang up in the 1967 elections, at the state and regional level [that] culminated in what was popularly known as the 'Indicate-Syndicate' split in 1969" (119–20). This was due, in large part, to the failed process of decolonization in postindependence India that found itself succumbing to the "continued operation of the ideology of the despotic colonial state and the feudal order it had instituted" (Prasad 120). The disaggregation of the citizenry and the uneven processes through which citizenship was accorded led to anticolonial demands that further ripped the country apart and shattered the fragile points of national identification by its inhabitants. The resolution came about in Indira Gandhi's government "hijacking" the country and "channell[ing] into an authoritarian interregnum" (Prasad 120).

Both *Zanjeer* and *Sholay* are of cultural significance in the contemporary history of Hindi films. *Zanjeer*, released in 1973, introduced Amitabh Bachchan in the alter ego that would come to change the face of Hindi cinema—the "angry young man." The story is of a policeman named Vijay Khanna who metamorphizes from officer of the law to vigilante. After Khanna witnesses his parents' murder at the hands of a man wearing a horse charm bracelet, he is haunted by the image of the charm. Orphaned, Khanna is adopted by the policeman who finds him; Khanna eventually joins law enforcement in order to clean up the city. While still a cop he meets, fights, and befriends the *pathan*, Sher Khan, who ran gambling houses prior to his run-in with Khanna.[10] Khanna also becomes romantically involved with Mala, a knife sharpener, played by Bachchan's future wife, Jaya Bhaduri. Mala's inclusion in the plot is significant not only because she is the love interest for Khanna but also because her disenfranchisement in the film (because of her gender, class, and caste background) eventually aligns her with Khanna later in the film. In his efforts to eradicate crime, Khanna arouses the enmity of Teja, a crime boss. Teja frames Khanna for a crime, which leads to Khanna's disillusionment with the "system" and his birth as a vigilante. At the end of the film Khanna recognizes Teja as his parents' killer by the horse charm bracelet Teja sports and exacts his revenge.

The *dostana* song in Zanjeer is contextualized by Vijay Khanna's rejection of the justice system that sustained him and gave his life meaning and purpose. Mala, unable to help him, pleads with Sher Khan to help Khanna. On the pretext of having a birthday party, Khan induces Khanna to visit him. Khanna cannot refuse to attend, since it is his *yaar*'s birthday. However, I also see this as a birth or, rather, a rebirth of the narrative of *dostana* that takes place during the song-and-dance routine that follows. The mise-en-scène of the song belies the messages that dictate the power of the gaze and the positioning of the spectator during the performance. The splicing of the film from the narrative dialogue that takes place between the two friends before the performance to the song space draws attention to the extradiegetic purpose of the song space. When Khanna arrives, and the dialogue shifts into the song space, the jumpcuts of the camera disorient the spectator. The continuation of this technique, generally dismissed as the product of bad editing throughout the performance of the song, reflects the confusion and disorientation of Khanna as well. As Khan leads Vijay to his seat, the song begins with the following lyrics: "If God tells me, / 'My devotee, / Somebody shares my secret.'" The secret to which Khan refers, and that is only between him and God at this point, is the *dosti* (friendship) that will conjoin Khan and Khanna, essentially making them

Figure 1. Vijay Khanna (Amitabh Bachchan) looks at Sher Khan in *Zanjeer,* released in 1973.

psychically commit to one another. During the first few lines of the song, the scopophilic gaze of the spectator-voyeur is directed by the camera that chooses to focus solely on Khan. Slowly and reluctantly, the camera pans to the crowd of men that is gathered ostensibly to celebrate a birthday. We realize that the gaze of the camera is the gaze of Khanna. Thus, the spectator is nudged into identifying with Khanna, although the actual singing performance is by Khan. The song's lyrics emphasize the theme of sacrifice, integrity, and the role of God in strengthening this bond between the two friends. Male bonding thus belongs to another plane, where the two protagonists are "chosen" (passive) rather than "choosing" (active) to participate. It is plain that, at this point, the friendship that Khan wants with Khanna is only a wish or a prayer.

The dictates of the mythic understory that drive the narrative of the friendship demand a total devotion of one male to the other as Sher Khan proclaims, "My friend is my life. / What is there after him?" During the course of the song, Khan, his masculine desire held in check by the vigorous arm thrusting, "forceful outturned palms, one-legged pirouette, double leg jumps, and jerky, if rhythmic repetition of body slides" (Mishra 64), dances across the room to Vijay. Khanna's reaction to Khan's eyes and body movements as they make their way to him suggest a deference that overturns the hierarchical structure of the song narrative that choruses, "My friend is integrity. / My friend is my life."

The overturning of the hierarchy of the gaze is underscored by Khanna's inability to enjoin the spectator to participate in this space, since the spectator is already sympathetic to Khanna's position. This is done through his gaze, which, as the spectator follows it, is always leading us off the framing of the shot or completely off to the side. Two conclusions can be derived from Khanna's inability to meet the spectatorial gaze. The lack of dialogue between the on-screen events and off-screen viewer forecloses the possibility of any active engagement. In addition, Khanna's body language aligns him with the female spectator and also with Mala, as she too is unable to "look back." Just like Mala, Khanna is trapped—here, literally, in a suffocating room with no windows—in the identity initially foisted upon him. Both Mala and Khanna must also live up to the expectations of each of their positions: Khanna must give up everything for his *yaar,* and Mala must conform to the expectations of Indian society. In this sense, within the song space Vijay's body becomes a feminized space that, by the end of the song, he willingly gives up by joining in Sher Khan's dancing. By so doing, he demonstrates an understanding and acceptance of this premodern notion of friendship even while his attire of modern, "Western," white shirt and pants emphasizes the conflict between tradition and modernity. Vijay's body becomes the literal space where this conflict is resolved despite his awkward dance movements. This scene encapsulates national conflicts at the level of the nation and that of the gendered subject within this state. Indeed, this scene can be read as an allegory of this friendship: coded, hence secret; elevated, hence ubiquitous. The elevation is underscored by excluding women from the song space; thus, women are masculinized by their spectator position.

Unlike *Zanjeer,* in *Sholay* there is no seduction into the world of *dostana.* Released in 1975, *Sholay* reads ostensibly as a "curry western," haunted by buddy films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid;* it continues to be one of the biggest Hindi hit movies of all times. According to Ashish Radhyaksha, it is "patterned on Italian westerns with mixtures of romance, comedy, feudal costume drama and musicals" (788). Veeru (Dharmendra) and Jai (Amitabh Bachchan), two petty crooks, are hired by an ex-cop, Thakur Baldev Singh, to track down Gabbar Singh, a *dacoit* (bandit) who, years earlier, had decimated the *thakur's* family except for a

Figure 2. Veeru (Dharmendra) and Jail (Amitabh Bachchan) celebrating their friendship in *Sholay*, released in 1975.

daughter-in-law, Radha. In addition, he had also chopped off the *thakur*'s arms. Told in flashbacks, the plot recounts the *thakur*'s first encounter with Veeru and Jai and, second, the *thakur*'s family's decimation at the hands of Gabbar Singh and his men. The *thakur*, while acknowledging Veeru's and Jai's status as criminals, was nevertheless impressed by their honesty and humanity when he had arrested them a few years prior. The third and final episode brings Veeru and Jai together to track down and capture Gabbar Singh. In the process, Jai, who has fallen in love with the widowed Radha, is killed. Veeru brings Gabbar to the *thakur*, who proceeds to kick the bandit into submission. The conclusion of Radhyaksha's commentary on the film is particularly telling not only to this film but also to the film industry at large. He claims that the "kaleidoscopic approach to the plot structure allowed the filmmaker to anthologize the highlights of various genre narratives (e.g. *How the West Was Won*, 1962) and to combine them into a single film, a privilege usually reserved for crazy comedies but here held together by its intensely emotional current, sustained by the high energy shooting styles and savoury dialogues" (Radhyaksha 788).

Before the song begins, both Veeru and Jai have already been described and situated within the narrative as "first-class crooks" who nevertheless "also have their virtues." The description of them as petty criminals with hearts of gold contributes to the light-hearted and comedic venues through which "Yeh Dosti" (This

friendship) is performed. Both Veeru and Jai participate in a celebration of *dostana* as they overtake the rural landscape, the motherland, in a stolen motorcycle, celebrating their friendship. A homosocial space is constructed as it clashes with the tropes of modernity, here represented by the use of a motorcycle, which stands in as a reminder of a Western legacy. This ultimately gets refigured through the homoerotic as the sidecar of the motorcycle separates from the main body, and, suddenly, Veeru appears out of nowhere right behind Jai as they sing, "People see us as two, but we are only one." The affirmation of a singular, dyadic identity—two sides of the same coin—relegates modern history as fragmented, symbolized by the splitting of the motorcycle, while the postmodern, fragmented postcolonial subject is vindicated and made whole.

This idea also figures prominently later in the song when the two friends approach a coy village woman. They flip a coin to see which one of them "gets her," and the coin lands straight up, thus establishing their mutual equality. They shrug, get back on the motorcycle, and drive away as the woman makes a hasty retreat, an action shot in fast motion. This mininarrative within the song space alludes to the necessity of disallowing women to enter this space, since that will result in a world run amok by coins that land straight up and women who are endowed with super-speed. Hence, women are not validated within the song space, and, consequently, its verification as a unitary male-dominated sphere is complete. Thus, the song space confirms their solidarity, while, through the lyrics, each promises, as an act of love, to sacrifice himself for the other. A sampling of some of the lyrics of the song is of some relevance here:

> This friendship
> is one I will never break.
> Even if I break it, I will never leave your side.
> We eat and drink together,
> we die and live together,
> all of our lives.
> I will play with lives.
> For you I will become everyone's enemy.

The melodrama played out at the lyrical level exposes the depths of their emotional attachment to each other

and encodes them and their friendship within the excesses of "feminine."

As such, masculinity, the songs seem to suggest, is merely an act—it becomes, as Luce Irigaray suggests, a masquerade or a social mask (quoted in McClintock 62). While Irigaray discusses this concept as significant to the construction of femininity as "an ironic performance that is no less theatrical for being a strategy for survival" (McClintock 62), it nevertheless applies to the mimicry of masculinity as expressed through dance in these songs. The jerky movements of Sher Khan juxtaposed to the reluctance of Vijay to become part of the folk narrative of *dostana* underscores this point. Masculinity becomes something to be performed in order to draw attention to its construction even while the themes of the songs themselves reflect "an image they cannot fully assume" (McClintock 63) at the diegetic level. Each of the songs thematizes a psychosocial bond that none can destroy. *Dostana* is, as the songs declare, integrity, life that shines in its simplicity. Thus, masculinity becomes a slippery construct that is challenged and redefined through a homoerotic register that is conveyed through the men's spiritual friendship.

In spite of this, I contend that although these films seem to provide a popular mobilization, even a popular rebelliousness, through the figure of the angry young man, they nevertheless remove women from the populace, the nation. This is done through melodrama at the diegetic level of the films. These films are melodramatic in a double sense. First, they offer standard melodramatic plots in which we see a stereotypical struggle between good and evil. To this plot is wedded the formulaic device of the male friendship. In this formula, a tension arises between two friends when, for example, they fall in love with the same woman. As the plot develops, however, the tension is resolved by having one of the male friends sacrifice himself so that the other (generally the one the woman desires) can be united with her (Thomas 125). Despite all the films' surface rebellion, the ultimate goal is to assert a male bonding that promotes the restoration of the heterosexual family, with traditional family values offered as a safe haven in a world beset with turmoil. Second, these films are melodramatic in a literal sense; that is, they are music dramas, films that open into song spaces where, I contend, the real conflict in the movies is played out.

Song spaces provide an excess that opens up moments that cannot be uttered at the diegetic level. In other words, the highly stylized performance of the songs furthers the plot and gives voice to untold stories in the mise-en-scène. This can be articulated by indirection through the spectacle of the sudden and unexpected outburst of song and dance during the film. Consequently, songs provide moments in the genre, in this case, the "curry western" or action drama (both masculine in their own ways), in which the genre opens itself to the critical investigations of its contradictions, both in the film space and also in its connections with the Hindi film industry. This is significant to my argument in that, while at the diegetic level, the fixed triangulated construction of man-woman-man is accepted as part of the "formula" of the buddy film, the erasure of women within the excess that song space exposes is reminiscent of historian Partha Chatterjee's discussions of the "paradox of the woman's question."[11] In other words, it would appear that song spaces where this friendship is expressed contribute to a version of India and Indian nationalism in which women are effectively erased while the homosocial order is privileged and established.[12] With the insertion of the spectator in this narrative of the nation, a new triangulated construction is formed—that of the diegesis of the film, the song space of the film, and the (postcolonial) subject-spectator.[13] Any relief that the female spectator gets from the patriarchal order that the films organize is achieved through the malleability of this new triangulated construction, especially since the movement toward culturally adapted melodrama—rehearsed in different ways at the diegetic and song space levels—binds them together. This can happen because the new triangle is one that is constantly in flux, shifting and molding itself to the needs of the diegesis and of the audience. I argue that it is between the diegesis and the song space where a politicized melodramatic space opens itself for the active participation of the female spectator.[14]

Recent studies of the Bombay film industry have shown it to be an apparatus through which the function of performance is "dominated by heterogeneous form" (Prasad 43). Prasad deploys Marx's distinction between serial and heterogeneous manufacture, where the latter is "characterized by the separate production of the component parts of the product and their final assembly into one unit" to provide a framework that allows for a particular type of analysis of Hindi cinema. His comparison to Hollywood cinema here is particularly useful in

order to understand the Hindi cinema in its cultural specificity and also in order to perform the kind of cross-cultural analysis that is, in part, the goal of this essay:[15]

> If we consider the Hindi film is conceived . . . as an assemblage of pre-fabricated parts, we get a more accurate sense of the place of various elements, like the story, the dance, the song, the comedy scene, the fight, etc. in the film text as a whole. . . . What makes this method of functioning unsuitable for Hollywood is the fact that a material substratum—the story—is the point of departure of the production process and its transformation into a narrative film is the final goal of that process. (Prasad 43)

Prasad, in the above quote, gestures toward the recognition of the filmic system itself as the creator of cultural meaning espoused through the contents of the filmic space. The whole film cannot be understood without all the elements that Prasad catalogs. In this model, the diegesis of the film is often read as less significant to the reading of the entire film as the narrative structure merely follows the formulaic demands of the industry. But no popular Hindi film can be comprehended without the resort to the formulaic device used to create national cohesion. Because of a liberal "borrowing" from Hollywood, Bollywood films often reflect the growing need of India to convey its entry into metropolitan modernity after colonialism.[16] The Bollywood apparatus, as a highly charged institutional tool, joins past and future at threshold moments. In this sense, the interruption of the formula with genre draws attention to the artificiality and construction of history while allowing "difference" to be part of the formulaic narrative. This is where I think songs do a particular kind of historical work that cannot be translated purely as "musical" across national borders.[17]

Both these films create a convention of the *dostana* narrative that reacted in large part to the repressive political atmosphere of the times. The recalling of "simpler times" in these songs maintains a sociomythic narrative that can sustain India in its moment of crisis. As an underread theme in the popular Hindi film, *dostana* invites the spectator to enter a postmodern, utopic version of India through its spatialization in Hindi film songs. As such, the highly eroticized relationship between the nation and the construction of the postcolonial citizen becomes all the more apparent.[18] Read within this

framework, *dostana* provides an especially useful entry into the analysis of genre, formula, and Hindi cinema of the 1970s. A film such as *Sholay*, which recalls Hollywood buddy films, instills a particular sense of the "Indian" ethic when interpreted within the paradigm of "kaleidoscopic approach" that Radhyaksha invokes. Genre, in a large sense, enforces a ritualized view of the convention of *dostana*, which, in turn, reflects upon the social and the political as sites that inform the popular reactionary concept of being "Indian." Paradoxically, however, contemporary readings of the Bombay film industry overlook or mention cursorily this significant theme. For example, Rosie Thomas, in her article "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity," hastily dismisses *dostana* as one of the many "formulas" in Indian films. I have argued that *dostana* is not merely a formulaic device, since the friendship moves outside the diegetic space and into the world of song. It is not only a convention of plot; rather, through the use of the melodramatic mode, it offers an excess through the song space. In this sense, it digresses from the formulaic narrative and, in effect, enables a parallel reading to take place. Reading the song space in this manner relegates the creation of postcolonial realities to an extradiegetic level. The metanarrative function of *dostana* within the song space, then, offers an alternate discussion on formations of new national affiliations posited by the Bombay film industry and its use of melodrama.

Melodrama, in its original sense, derives from the Greek word *melos*, or song, plus the French word *drame*, or drama. In its contemporary popular sense, the mise-en-scène of melodrama is interpreted as "sentimental." As a result, it is also seen as "prominent in the construction of women" (Dissanayake 2), an idea I will return to later. It is the aesthetic site where realism and excesses of fantasy become points of contention and spectatorial in the filmic space. Melodrama, unlike its realist counterpart, visualizes a battle between absolute, Manichaean emotional excesses like "good" and "evil" and eventually releases moral truths to visually "speak" that which cannot be verbalized. As an epistemology, melodrama exposes or makes transparent through excessiveness that which has been repressed (Brooks 43). Thus, it becomes "a mode of expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience" (Brooks xiii). It is not a linear cause-effect pattern; rather, spectacle contributes to the emotional affect that melodrama produces

(Williams 200). Linda Williams states that melodrama is based upon the hyperbolic representation of the dialectic between pathos and action in the post-Enlightenment world. She writes, "[According to Christine Gledhill,] melodrama is grounded in the conflicts and troubles of everyday, contemporary reality. . . . All the afflictions and injustices of the modern, post-Enlightenment world are dramatized in melodrama" (Williams 53). The plot of *Zanjeer* certainly elaborates upon this by presenting a conflict during which the orphaned people of India turn to a system that ultimately betrays them. Left to fend for themselves, they have, the film suggests, no choice but to fight their own battles, even if it means stepping outside the parameters of what is legally acceptable. The film is very clear about denouncing this method even while deploying it at the same time; Vijay Khanna, a champion for people's rights, would not have resorted to vigilantism had the legal system not abandoned him.

The defining moment for contemporary melodrama is the aftermath of the French Revolution, during which "the classic examples of French melodrama were written for shopkeepers, through all sectors of the middle class, and even the embraced members of the aristocracy" (Brooks xii).[19] Although not modernist in its production, melodrama nevertheless reckons with the process of modernity at large. It is within the mode of production and reproduction that analysis of melodrama happens. Melodrama, within the cinematic space, functions at two distinct levels: it aesthetically represents the unconscious state of individual and cultural desire while it simultaneously, in a politicized mode, concerns itself with repressed social issues (Dissanayake 10). In Hindi films melodrama reveals a premodern fantasy that, through its basic moral conflicts, may problematize and redefine "experience," thus reconceptualizing modern history. As a result, it becomes emblematic of the "confluence of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western sensibilities, voices of past and present" (Dissanayake 5). The contextualization of melodrama in this space reveals the mode as a popular vernacular that exposes the divides between home and the world (inside/outside) and production and reproduction. Further, it is politicized through its mode of address as excess. In spectatorship theory excess begins at the point where motivation fails (Thompson 491). The light-hearted tone of the music in *Sholay* underscores this point because the happy-go-lucky behavior of the two heroes as they

make their way across the countryside while they sing a song of everlasting friendship is underwritten by a tone of cynicism. This cynicism is rooted in the narrative of *Sholay* that questions the agency of working-class people when the people in power (in this case, the feudal lord and policeman, Thakur Baldev Singh) is literally disarmed. The film seems to ask, Is there any motivation in fighting to maintain this system? Ultimately, the answer seems to be that there isn't, since Jai is killed, and Veeru leaves the estate with no particular destination in mind. Kristin Thompson argues that cinematic excess may direct the spectator to read films as oppositional cultural practices. For female spectators who are positioned as passive in the cinematic space, not as purveyors of the national culture but as symbolic representations to further the "nationalist" cause, this point is of particular urgency.

The ideological inscription of women as passive observers in the action taking place on-screen provides a critical point of departure from which to discuss the altering of the cinematic space, specifically within song spaces in Hindi films. Dissanayake invokes Clifford Geertz in order to discuss national culture and cinematic representation. He claims that "melodrama in the East is intimately linked to myth, ritual, religious practices, and ceremonies" (Dissanayake 2). This structuralist version of melodrama tends to privilege the experiences, emotions, and activities of women (Dissanayake 2). The fetishization of women not only on-screen but also as passive consumers of the melodrama signals a particular need of the postcolonial nation to reflect upon the forces that drive melodrama to be emblematic of nationalist articulation. The subjection of women in these frameworks reinscribes the melodramatic mode's social function. According to Paul Willeman, the "duty" of the melodrama is to "accommodate the survival of precapitalist relations within capitalism in order to legitimate and maintain capitalist social relations" (187). In other words, the agenda of melodrama, it appears, is to enact and establish a nostalgic resurrection of nationalism and national culture in its most conservative form.

This is where the excess of song space—as extradiegetic—does not reveal a simplistic return of the repressed through nostalgia but makes real the possibility of recognizing several layers of meanings when read as melodrama. Consequently, the films acknowledge a multiplicity of postcolonial positions in India. In other words, to go back to the melodramatic formula put forth by the

Hindi film industry, the Indian filmmaking aesthetics of basing Indian drama within the epic narratives of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* forms an historical genealogy of Indian film to the formation of an inclusive historical discourse. For example, in *Zanjeer*, the *dostana* is established within a broader narrative of Hindu-Muslim positions. It is the *pathan*, Sher Khan, who initiates a reluctant Vijay Khanna into the *dostana* by performing a song-and-dance routine that expresses Khan's devotion and admiration—even love—for Khanna. Thus melodrama used in this manner becomes a "sense-making system" (Brooks xiii). Further, as an interpretive mode, melodrama allows, through its excesses, a collapsing of time and space into, in Indian film, song. For a true postcolonial claim to history, this becomes significant, especially since it verifies Mishra's claim that an alternative possibility for a postcolonial interpretation of history gets rewritten through songs as it "disregards time and space" through an inscription of a circular narrative. A popular expression of quotidian existence haunts the historical commentary of the song. This narrative reinscribes meaning through what Frantz Fanon calls "a stereotyped reproduction of details" (224). For Third World cultural production, the reproduction of details underscores a point of departure from the "real." The separation of the real from the world of fantasy affirms the gesture toward melodrama as the past is used "with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (Fanon 232). The past becomes a space that opens up a world of postcolonial possibilities constructed through the register of "masculine" but one that rejects a triangulated construction of homosocial spaces as offered by Eve Sedgwick in her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. For Sedgwick, male homosocial desire is articulated and interrupted through the insertion of the figure of a woman. Thus, a heterosexual narrative replaces the thwarted expression of male desire. This is also true within the diegesis of the films I have chosen in which through death (symbolic death in the case of Sher Khan in *Zanjeer* or literal death through self-sacrifice in *Sholay*) a nationalist heterosexual symbolic order is put into place. However, the song space, as an extradiegetic metanarrative, underscores and privileges *dostana* as the significant site for understanding and articulating a differing if conflicting national historical space.

The song space, because of its existence outside a linear filmic and historical narrative, conjoins homo-erotic spatial discourse with the formation of a temporal national postcolonial history. However, the timing of the *dostana* songs and the broader theme itself are significant in that "nationalism ha[s] a special affinity for male society and together with the concept of respectability legitimize[s] the dominance of men over women" (Parker 6). The intention of respectability allows *dostana* to become part of the national rhetoric. The exclusion of women reiterates the notion that the motherland is merely a metaphor to be conquered by a motorcycle, for example. Nevertheless, the recuperation of the melodramatic mode as "feminine," the alternative triangle of the diegesis, the song space, and the spectator are always shifting and adapting themselves to the dictates of the spectacular vernacular of the cinema. In this sense, the erasure of women from the song space rather than the exclusion of women from the national imaginary instead reinscribes them even in their physical absence. In both *Zanjeer* and *Sholay*, the feminization of the song space attests to this fact. This is evoked through the reminder that melodrama, as part of the private sphere, the home, that women are seen to occupy, accompanies the circular narrative and claustrophobic environment of the song space. According to Susan Hayward,

> [i]n the melodrama, the male finds himself in the domestic sphere (home). So, he is in the site no longer of production but of reproduction. The home represents metonymically the site for the ideological confrontation between production and reproduction. The alienation of the labor process becomes displaced (the man brings the experience of alienation home with him) and the family—especially the woman and children—is supposed to fulfill what capitalist relations of production cannot. (203)

While Hayward's comments recount the male role in melodrama as one that reinforces the preservation of the heteropatriarchal society, she also allows for a subversive reading that delinks the conservative modes of being that melodrama espouses. In Hindi films reproduction is performed at the level of the song, while production is performed at the diegetic level. Song space is subversively rewritten as a domestic sphere (the home), one that the female spectator may unconsciously recognize and, thus, activate in the imaginary. She is thus able to identify the *dostana* narrative as something that may allow her entry into this space, which is ruptured by the

excess of the melodramatic mode in the song space. Her motivation is charged through the process of her involvement in realizing the contentious space between the lyrics and the images and also at the macrolevel, that is, between the diegesis and the song space.

As an apparatus, the Bollywood film industry has been seen by many contemporary film critics as one that projects a world of possibilities for the processes of decolonization and the formations of national collectivities. In order to successfully perform this function, the aesthetics of Indian films thematizes a world of precolonial fantasy and mythology that, through its modern diegetic and narrative strategies, defines the distinctive breaks between traditional structures as they come in contact with the modern world. This essay attempts to consolidate the many fractured modes through which the Hindi cinema constructs a wholistic notion of India. The melodramatic mode functions at the base level of Indian nationalism to represent particular postcolonial anxieties in postindependence India. Read within the paradigms of feminist film theories, I have tried to show that the song space, intrinsic to Hindi melodrama, may be deployed as a way of subverting its own agenda in order to create subject positions for Indian women in the national body politic at a moment when the patriarchal structure placed by the discourses of nationalism in India were threatened by the powerful and haunting image of a woman embodied in Indira Gandhi. The emasculation of the male Indian imaginary through her political agency in large part served to resurrect the "simple" and "pure" notion of male-to-male friendship vis-à-vis the Hindi cinema that projected a precolonial fantasy onto the articulation of a postcolonial future.

NOTES

1. According to Ravi Vasudevan, the production of Hindi feature films from the 1940s resulted in the Hindi feature becoming the main component in national production (29). The linguistic coding of the film industry "imagines" an India that is essentially "Hindu" in nature.

2. According to Stephen Heath, the filmic system is "the system of the film insofar as the film is the organization of homogeneity and the material outside inscribed in the operation of the organization as its contradiction" (quoted in Thompson 487).

3. Majumdar connects the music industry with the film industry in India. Song sequences have been part of the Hindi film industry since the introduction of sound in the first "talkie," *Alam Ara*, screened in 1931.

4. More commonly known as song sequences, "song picturizations" are "filmed with actors lip-synching to the prerecorded voice of the [playback] singer" (Majumdar 163).

5. While Vasudevan chooses to use the term "para-narratives" for the songs, I see them more as extradiegetic; that is, songs provide an opening to the narrative through the stories they tell.

6. For example, see Mishra, Jeffrey, and Shoesmith.

7. There is not one but many film industries in India. Bollywood, of course, is flagged as the dominant industry. However, there are thriving industries in the South (Madras, for example). There are also a lot of regional cinemas that reveal local issues through their celluloid medium.

8. This concept of primordial male-to-male friendship gestures toward a homosocial bond that supersedes the heteronormative order in Indian society. While many Hindi film critics acknowledge the thematization of *yaar* in Hindi films, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of this concept not only in film but also in other forms of cultural representations. See Prasad; Thomas; and Mishra.

9. Earlier films framed this narrative within middle-class consumerism. See Prasad 81–85 in particular.

10. The Pathans, tribals from Afghanistan, are known for their heroism and for their roles as "highway robbers." According to Charles Lindholm, "The ideal of manliness which accompanies this structure includes bravery, vengefulness and autonomy. Strong egoism, necessitated by the harsh struggle for survival, is characteristic of Pathans. These elements are balanced by a ritual of hospitality and a cultural fantasy of male friendship, where the emotions of attachment and affection find their expression. Friendship, however, can only be offered to an outsider, since one's people are, by definition, rivals" (5).

11. Chatterjee places the "paradox of the woman's question" (116) within the political milieu of the construction of the social order just prior to the prominence of the Indian nationalist struggles. The paradox he presents is one in which nineteenth-century debates about and mobilization for women's issues suddenly "disappear" toward the end of the century as discourses of nationalism become privileged. This "disappearance" is one that continues to haunt discussions on the status of Indian women and also that of Indian feminist movements.

12. Homosocial, according to Eve Sedgwick, "describes social bonds between persons of the same sex . . . it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may . . . be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (1).

13. Moreover, the dramatization of the actor as "parallel text" interrupts and extends the limits of the narrative of *dostana*, as we see in Amitabh Bachchan, a "one-man film industry." To summarize Bachchan's powerful and ubiquitous presence in contemporary Hindi film culture as well as in India, I offer a brief biography. Bachchan is the son of a prominent Hindi poet. Although he struggled as an actor for many years, it was his role as Vijay Khanna in *Zanjeer* that propelled him into stardom. The Bachchan "phenomenon" resulted in the "emergence of a new function for the star image. It was not just a question of exceptional physical features [as it had been in early Hindi cinema]. . . . [T]here is an integration of star-value with narrative that is unprecedented in the Hindi cinema" (Prasad 133). To borrow Prasad's words again, "[t]he star became a mobilizer, demonstrating superhuman qualities and assuming a power that transformed the others who occupied the same terrain into *spectators*. As the auratic power of the represented social order diminished, there was a compensating increase in the aura of the star as public persona" (134, emphasis in original). To give an example of this, in the 1980s Bachchan was injured during the shooting of the film *Coolie*. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was there by his bedside to lend her

support, and upon his recovery, posters proclaiming "Thank God Amit Is Back" were seen everywhere. He eventually went on to become a member of the Indian parliament during the 1980s, resigned under a scandal that marred his career as a politician, and came back to the movies in the early 1990s. He is currently the host of the Indian equivalent of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

14. Feminist film criticism that has dealt with the gendered spectator is implicated in the construction of the female spectator who belongs to a particular class and intellect. How the spectator engages with the role assigned to her is determined in large part to her awareness of and relationship to the cinema and cinematic theories. Thinking about the spectator as part of the process, I imagine, much like Mulvey in "Afterthoughts," a female spectator who identifies with the male protagonists "almost secretly, unconsciously, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides" (29).

15. I cannot emphasize enough that in the arguments that ensue in this essay I am fully aware of the challenges that lie in undertaking the cross-cultural analysis I aspire toward. In heeding Wimal Dissanayake's advice, I try to "undertake cross-cultural research in ways that avoid defamiliarizing the alien text, appropriating or 'managing' it, with the result of making it subordinate to the imaginary Western 'master' discourses; or, worse, still, 'domesticating' it into dominant Western critical paradigms" (9). Although many Indian and Hindi film critics do close readings of particular films and the film industry and their relationship to the spectator, there has yet to be an analysis of the social and private modes of the gendered spectator. For that reason, I find myself in a critical quandary where I must figure out ways in which to "adapt" Western feminist and cinematic theories.

16. For example, there are Indian versions of Hollywood dramas, action films, thrillers, and even horror movies. Of course, these films do succumb to the formulaic conventions of film. This is an area that needs to be explored in much more detail, especially in conjunction with the consumption of these films in the South Asian diaspora.

17. Musicals are theorized are "quintessentially American genres" (Hayward 235). The simplistic plot of musicals is a vehicle for song-and-dance performances that, unlike Hindi movies, do nothing for the narrative. The musical, according to Rick Altman, "fashions a myth out of the American courtship ritual" (quoted in Hayward 242).

18. See Parker et al. for in-depth discussions of this idea. In the introduction, both George Mosse's and Benedict Anderson's views on homosocial bonding and nationalism are remembered. For Anderson, "[t]he nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Parker et al. 6). Typically represented as a passionate brotherhood, the nation finds itself compelled to distinguish its "proper" homosociality from more explicitly sexualized male-male relations, a compulsion that requires the identification, isolation, and containment of male homosexuality (Parker et al. 6).

19. See also Altman; Williams. Within an international context, the melodramatic mode is also traced to the tensions that arise as the colonial state articulates itself as "modern." See also Dissanayake.

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