

The Female Journalist in Bollywood

MIDDLE-CLASS CAREER

WOMAN OR PROBLEMATIC

NATIONAL HEROINE?

On the screen as in reality, female journalists in India have historically struggled to gain equality with their male peers. But a slew of recent Bollywood films depicting female reporters indicate that change may be afoot, as SUKHMANI KHORANA discusses.

Growing up during India's economic and communications 'revolution', my young mind revelled in the promise of a career in journalism that would serve both the aspirational self and the modernising nation. A role model emerged in Barkha Dutt, the independent yet feminine reporter at the still-credible New Delhi Television (NDTV). I recall her fearless stint in the trenches during India's war with Pakistan in the mountains of Kargil (in the militancy-affected territory of Kashmir). To my fifteen-year-old eyes, this was not the beginning of embedded journalism in India. Rather, it was a milestone for aspiring and working Indian female journalists with a serious interest in hard news. No longer were we to be confined to the pages of *Femina* (a women's magazine) or a Doordarshan (India's national broadcaster) news studio.

In the early 2000s, I moved to Australia to pursue a media degree at a sandstone university where journalism had only recently been deemed a subject worthy of academic study. One of our foremost guest lecturers was Dominique Schwartz, who was then newsreader at ABC TV's Adelaide studio, but who had also done formidable work as a foreign correspondent. Not only were we told that studying to be media workers and journalists at a university was a privilege, but also that it was a difficult career choice for women. Although I hadn't expected such



difficulty for career-minded women in the liberal West, subsequent internships at commercial stations confirmed Schwartz's views. Add to that the lack of visibility of 'women of colour' on Australian free-to-air television news (barring SBS) and my journalism dream was ready to shift gears and venture into more scholastic territory.

As a media studies tutor for several years, I frequently encountered starry-eyed young women in their first-ever university tutorial declaring that they were undertaking the degree with the sole aim of becoming television presenters or journalists. By this time, online news portals were already causing upheaval in traditional journalism in the West, with mass redundancies and very limited cadet positions. Meanwhile, on my trips back to India as well as via Facebook, I saw a litany of school friends begin work as producers or reporters for the umpteen television channels that had mushroomed there as the communications revolution took hold. While vague references to the long hours, low pay and poor job satisfaction

occasionally surface as updates on social media, there still appears to be a plethora of work opportunities in India, especially vis-a-vis the media of the developed world. Moreover, as Hinglish (a mix of Hindi and English) and vernacular language channels grow in number and importance, it is not just English-educated elite middle-class women being hired as newsreaders and correspondents. This shift is evident in the very attire worn by Indian female journalists, which has changed from the elegantly expensive silk sari of the Doordarshan days to the casual ethnic chic (often consisting of denim teamed with a kaftan and silver jewellery) of the present.

Indian film scholarship and the journalism genre

The shift in wardrobe is but one signifier of both the rising ascendancy of the female journalist in the Indian media sphere and the complexity of her role in a changing society. Similar to her Western counterpart, the contemporary Indian woman journalist

is frequently refracted through the medium of cinema. Rather than simply a representation of her role in the media, it is a refraction in that it gives us a sense of how society (and especially the assumed audience for such films) views and relates to her. It also helps us draw broader conclusions about the changing representation of women in mainstream Bollywood cinema, and the growing power of news television in that it is becoming a frequent backdrop for contemporary multiplex films.

Hindi-language feature films from 2000 to 2011 examined here include *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (Aziz Mirza, 2000), *Lakshya* (Farhan Akhtar, 2004), *Page 3* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2005), *A Wednesday!* (Neeraj Pandey, 2008), *Peepli (Live)* (Anusha Rizvi, 2010) and *No One Killed Jessica* (Raj Kumar Gupta, 2011). These films have been selected not only because they feature female journalists as protagonists or catalysts, but also because their narratives comment on the politics of the gendered nation-state. One of the most notable films that has been excluded is *Love, Sex aur Dhokha* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2010), which, although groundbreaking, does not explicitly link its female television boss to the (en)gendering of an exposé-obsessed society.

While there has been a marked increase in films featuring career-oriented women in general, and working journalists in particular, during the past decade, film scholarship in India is yet to undertake a detailed analysis of the 'journalism genre', let alone examine the on-screen female journalist. Blogger Saswat Pattanayak does a commendable job of summing up the above gaps in scholarship:

*although there have been dozens of well-made films on women as journalists, there has been almost no discussions on how they have worked as scribes, under what working conditions, the political-economy of situation and the probable systematic exploitation.*¹

In addition to the gaps Pattanayak identifies, it appears that the very characterisation of the female journalist, in a film industry with a history of casting women in subordinate roles, has been neglected. This article is an attempt to begin to address some of these absences. Beginning with a brief overview of the representation of journalism in Western cinema, I will then explore the Indian context in relation to the historical depiction of women in general, followed by the refraction of the female journalist in more recent Bollywood films. Following



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this analysis, I will endeavour to tie in the changing characterisation of the Indian woman journalist with the shifting audience demographic for certain kinds of film and television programming in India. This will help draw conclusions about the changing representation of career women in general (and journalists in particular) in contemporary Bollywood, and about the increasing sociopolitical importance of television journalism in Indian society.

Journalism in Hollywood

While journalism has been used as an ambient setting or the primary narrative in many a Hollywood film since the silent era, there has been renewed scholarly interest in the study of the journalism genre in the past decade. One such endeavour is Brian McNair's book *Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains*.² At the very beginning of his extensive examination of journalist characters in films, McNair acknowledges the long history of crossovers between media and film content.³ Significantly, it appears that cinema is regarded as a crucial lens through which societal shifts (including changes in both the journalism profession and public perception of the news media) can be viewed.

According to Matthew Ehrlich's research on the representation of journalism in Hollywood, the figure of the journalist has been refracted through a particularly complex cultural lens, being depicted as both 'a hero and a scoundrel', with the press itself being seen as both the 'defender of the common man and the corrupt instrument of power-hungry machines'.⁴ Despite these conflicting myths regarding the journalist as a person and as a public service professional, there appears to be no doubt regarding the mediating role of the news media or its position as the fourth estate. This is a crucial observation for the purpose of this article in that the Bollywood film industry, especially in its representation of journalism over the past decade, seems to have taken its cue from Hollywood. While the spectacle of television journalism and the celebrity-centred narrative of lifestyle journalism are critiqued in *Peepli (Live)* and *Page 3* respectively, the utopian potential of the news media to uncover the 'truth' remains unquestioned.

Hollywood representations of the female journalist also appear to be reflecting wider social concerns about the shifting role of women in the public sphere. In addition to being subject to the long-standing concern of balancing work and family, the female journalist has also conventionally been assigned 'soft' stories in both her real and Hollywood roles. But this may be shifting with films such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) and the *Sex and the City* franchise accruing greater cultural capital for style journalism, as well as giving post-feminist agency to the figure of the female journalist. McNair's research reinforces this view: 'It is nonetheless striking that in the cinema of the 1997–2008 period so many of the lead journalistic roles were occupied by women, and that these



NO ONE KILLED JESSICA

women were neither the “sob sisters” nor the “superbitches” of past celluloid convention.¹⁵ It now remains to be discussed how Bollywood has refracted the role of the modernising women in India’s transitioning society, and particularly what the function of the female journalist is in relation to the nation-state.

Indian women in Bollywood

Bollywood cinema, especially the strand known as masala films (named as such due to their amalgamation of comedy, action and melodrama, and their presumed appeal to the so-called ‘masses’), has been associated with clearly segregated gender roles and the absence of women in the professional world. While this may have been the consequence of both a patriarchal society and commercial cinematic conventions, it might be argued that such representations have undergone only marginal change in the wake of the women’s movement and India’s economic liberalisation. In his study of Bollywood’s historical treatment of the female figure, Chris Barker concludes that ‘It is not that popular Hindi films have not tried to represent more independent and assertive women, but rather, that such women are frequently depicted as coming to undesirable ends.’¹⁶ This has also been the case for career-minded women, especially journalists shown on the mainstream Hindi cinematic screen; desirable ends befall those who are willing to ‘reform’ or tone down their modern ways to the extent that it toes the line of the patriarchal nation-state and family.⁷

Films made in the 1990s depict a more modern version of the Indian woman to the extent that she embraces Western attire and is more willing to challenge the authority of parental figures. This is certainly the case in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), where London resident Simran (Kajol) is independent enough to travel across Europe with her friends and surreptitiously carry on a relationship with Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) in her family’s conservative India-based home where her wedding is being arranged. At the same time, Jenny Sharpe argues, ‘the message of *DDLJ* is that, although the hero and heroine wear Western clothing and embrace youth culture, they have maintained their Indian values, particularly around questions of sexual morality’.⁸ In addition, it appears that the modern Indian woman’s independence, however tempered by sexual mores, is confined to the personal realm and does not carry forth to a role in the public or professional sphere.

The above 1990s phenomenon begins to undergo a change at the turn of the century, although notions of ‘Indian femininity’ and chastity persist alongside emerging representations of the career-oriented woman. Leela Fernandes refers to this gendered blending of tradition and modernity as ‘the new Indian woman’ who, ‘as the publicity release for a contemporary women’s magazine puts it, “is the tough as nails career woman who finds it easy to indulge in the occasional superstition.

Her outlook is global, but her values would make her grandma proud.”⁹ As the following section explores in detail, this certainly appears to be the case in the journalism films from 2000 to 2005, with a virginal yet professional female journalist in the lead. Such a refraction of the modern Indian woman suggests the ideological continuation of the status quo in the traditional extended Indian family and the patriarchal nation-state.

Indian female journalists, real and refracted

In her comprehensive study of the everyday activities of contemporary Indian women working in the print media, Ammu Joseph observes that, as in the West, work-life balance and being assigned soft stories are ongoing concerns.¹⁰ In the Indian context this is compounded by the fact that female journalists were not allowed to work the night shift until the 1980s, which was ‘part of the larger battle to be recognized as full-fledged journalists’.¹¹ While there is yet to be a similarly wide-ranging and in-depth study of the growing number of female journalists working in India’s television news media, some key figures such as Barkha Dutt have come to symbolise the potential of both the medium and its opportunities for women. Dutt’s ascendancy may not be representative of the career trajectory of, or the stories assigned to, the average female television journalist, but it is significant because of her ability to enter and hold her own in the ‘masculine’ terrain of war and political reporting. As Uma Chakravarti puts it with regards to Dutt’s reporting during the Kargil war:

*Only one set of images of Kargil returned agency to women and this was the powerful statement made by the presence of Barkha Dutt on the war front ... While women are not yet ‘actively’ fighting for the nation they are providing the much needed consent for war as epitomised in the presence of Barkha on the battle field.*¹²

The real-life female journalist may have been allowed entry into the world of hard, patriarchal journalism, but this is reinforcing rather than undermining nationalist ideology. Is the refraction of this female journalist figure through the medium of mainstream cinema telling a similar tale?

The characters of Romi (Preity Zinta) in *Lakshya* and Meera (Rani Mukherji) in *No One Killed Jessica* cover the Kargil conflict within the film narrative, and are widely believed to be based on Dutt. However,

there are significant differences in the films' discourses on nationalism, and thereby in their treatment of the war-reporting female journalist. The nationalist narrative of a justifiable war that reforms the aimless urban male lead (Hrithik Roshan) by turning him into a brave frontier soldier lies at the heart of *Lakshya*. On the other hand, *No One Killed Jessica* is significant for the marked absence of male protagonists, and for spotlighting a tale of legal injustice (witnesses turning hostile in the real-life case of model Jessica Lall's murder) over a military conflict. Therefore, it appears that the former film positions the well-meaning female journalist as peripheral to the central concern of providing professional and personal direction to the young middle-class man. This man also incidentally stands in for the militaristic future of the nation-state. His girlfriend Romi was an activist in her college days and brings the same enthusiasm to her profession, but she is rebuked by a soldier for questioning the war when on duty in Kargil. Not only is this rebuke meant to bring the peace advocate-cum-journalist in line with the more important mission of the armed forces, but it also serves the purpose of undermining the career woman. In *No One Killed Jessica*, on the other hand, Meera actively challenges the status quo, interviewing a soldier on the necessity of war and later scolding a fellow (male) passenger on her flight back to Delhi when he compares coverage of the war zone to an action film. While her masculinisation is not entirely unproblematic in regards to the gendered nation-state, it is certainly a departure from previous Bollywood depictions of the modern yet demure female journalist.

The modern yet demure journalist is manifested in the characters of Ria (played by Juhi Chawla in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*), Romi (*Lakshya*) and Madhavi (played by Konkona Sen Sharma in *Page 3*), who are university-educated middle- or upper-middle-class women with serious journalistic ambitions. Their class roots are crucial to the performance of their personal and professional selves in that both are bound by virtue and in service of the nation's socio-political order. In the case of *Page 3*, although Madhavi aspires to be more than a lifestyle journalist, is in a relationship with a model and lives independently of her parents, she is nonetheless put on a higher moral pedestal than her less respectable and more sexualised female flatmates. According to Radhika Parameswaran,



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The film's seemingly positive fabrication of the female reporter's gender identity sets hers apart from the seamy world of soft journalism, but it also returns ideal Indian femininity to nationalism's constrained and essentialized models of virginal and pure womanhood.¹³

Similarly, Romi in *Lakshya* is the daughter of an academic mother and a journalist father, lives in her parents' tasteful Delhi home, and both her college activism and her professional journalism appear to be borne out of her liberal middle-class upbringing. Although her boyfriend visits the parental home, their relationship is never sexualised, and her chastity is implicit, and part of her overall virtue. Ria in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* does not start off as a virtuous journalist and fends off her mother's attempt to arrange her wedding. However, she does eventually come around to the journalistic (and the marital) mission under the leadership of the erstwhile rival male journalist. Again, it is Meera in *No One Killed Jessica* that proves the exception. Meera has a middle-class lifestyle yet lives on her own, uses foul language, and chastises her male bosses and lovers. She has both personal and professional agency, and does not appear to adhere to the mores of her gender, class or nation.

Despite Meera's apparent lack of feminine middle-class virtue, her professional actions perform and uphold an unquestioned civil morality. By bending journalistic ethics through the use of hidden cameras, and mobilising the urban proletariat to oust hostile witnesses in the Jessica Lall murder case, she ultimately serves the virtuous cause of middle-class justice (which masquerades as national justice in the film). Additionally, the film seems to paper over the increasing corporatisation of the television media in India since 1991, which would have lent greater prominence to a story about the alleged killing of an aspiring model by a politician's son at a Delhi socialite's party. The narratives of *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, *Page 3*, *A Wednesday!* and *Peepli (Live)* incorporate a more direct critique of commercialisation's impact on the assumed public service role of the media. At the same time, the nature of this critique is worth examining for its effect on the representation of the female journalist. It is indeed the soft and human interest journalism of all three films, itself a consequence of greater reliance on advertising revenue and television ratings, that is demarcated as the unquestioned domain of the female reporter.

As employees of commercial television networks, both Anu (Seema Malik) in *A Wednesday!* and Nandita (Malaika Shenoy) in *Peepli (Live)* are ruthless in their pursuit of a good story. The serious work of critiquing or bettering the nation-state is the domain of cops and middle-class men in the former film and a village-based male

print journalist in the latter. Similarly, in Page 3, it is the seasoned male crime reporter Vinayak (Atul Kulkarni) who 'stands in for journalism's vigorous and glorious past, for its historical legacy as an anti-establishment and anti-elite agent of progress, and for its role in birthing an India free and independent of British colonial rule'.¹⁴ Ajay (Shah Rukh Khan), the male lead in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, is initially chided by his freedom-fighter father for engaging in commercial, human-interest journalism. However, this turns to pride when the reformed journalist saves a wronged man from being executed at the end of the film. Serious journalism, according to the above film representations, is not only in line with the nationalist cause, but is also largely a patriarchal preserve. *No One Killed Jessica*'s Meera may be allowed to enter, and even to choose her own stories and methods, but she has to be in khaki on the battlefield, and she cannot question existing (and arguably aggressive) news values and newsroom cultures.

The audience for the female journalist film

It is possible that Meera's character, in addition to being modelled on Indian journalist Barkha Dutt, derives from the recent increase in Hollywood representations of women doing 'serious' journalism and generally being tougher and more resourceful (like the Pulitzer-prize winning Lois Lane in Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns*). McNair attributes this change to the post-feminist audience, arguing that 'Young women in the multiplex audience expect to see young women who embody their aspirations in the fictional newsrooms of Hollywood, and Hollywood has met that expectation.'¹⁵ I suspect that the rise of multiplexes in India, coupled with growing career aspirations and spending power among young Indian women, is leading to a similar demographic for Bollywood films featuring increasingly empowered female journalist characters.

The greater prominence of the multiplex cinema in urban India, as opposed to the old-style cinema halls that had become the preserve of working-class men, has led to the emergence of the 'multiplex film'. According to Adrian Mabbott Athique, 'this naturally has major implications for how Indian film producers perceive their audience, and thus underscores the pre-eminence of the contemporary "aspirational" mode of middle-class melodrama and the values that it espouses'.¹⁶ He adds that



the multiplexes thereby offer 'a venue for niche middle class oriented films in a range of styles not previously viable with the old mass public'.¹⁷ The post-2005 Bollywood films being examined in this paper (Page 3, *A Wednesday!*, *Peepli (Live)* and *No One Killed Jessica*) certainly fall under the multiplex category in terms of their content and presumed audience.

What are yet to be examined in detail, however, are the miscellaneous media consumption activities of this audience, especially with regards to Indian satellite television. In other words, I suspect that there is a direct link between the urban Indian youth's preference for the multiplex film experience and their preference for news television channels that feature seemingly influential female journalists such as Barkha Dutt. In terms of an analysis of female journalistic representations, this article has demonstrated that the greater cultural capital still accrued by hard news, in both real-life journalism and its cinematic refractions (especially in Bollywood), alludes to a continuation – and perhaps even a reinforcement – of a patriarchal news culture and a nationalist state. At the same time, the aspirations and responses of the audience that is assumed to watch such refractions, presumably based on their news-media consumption, needs further investigation. The middle-class career woman in journalistic guise may be a problematic national heroine in the multiplex Bollywood film at present, but this could change with the evolution of Indian television journalism in the future.

This article has been refereed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Saswat Pattanayak, 'Women Journalists in Hindi Films: Stereotyping the Stereotypes', *Saswat.com*, <http://www.saswat.com/blog/women_journalists_bollywood.html>, accessed 24 May 2011.
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- ⁴ Matthew Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago, 2004.
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- ⁶ Chris Barker, *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities*, Open University Press, Buckingham & Philadelphia, 1999.
- ⁷ See Robina Mohammed, 'Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani (Yet the heart remains Indian): Bollywood, the "Homeland" Nation-state, and the Diaspora', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 25, 2007, pp. 1015–40.
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- ¹² Uma Chakravarti, 'State, Market and Freedom of Expression: Women and Electronic Media', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no. 18, 2000, p. 16.
- ¹³ Radhika Parameswaran, 'Moral Dilemmas of an Immoral Nation: Gender, Sexuality and Journalism in Page 3', *IJPC Journal*, <<http://www.ijpc.org/journal/index.php/ijpcjournal/article/viewFile/10/12>>, accessed 18 May 2011.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ McNair, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- ¹⁶ Adrian Mabbott Athique, 'From Cinema Hall to Multiplex: A Public History', *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2011, p. 153.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*

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