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White Skin/Brown Masks: The Case of 'White' Actresses From Silent to Early Sound Period in Bombay

By Sarah Rahman Niazi

Abstract

My paper explores categories of gender, ethnicity, modernity and performance through the figure of the 'white' actress in the early years of Indian cinema (1920-1940). Film was a lucrative site of business for intrepidly ambitious individuals in search of reinvention in Bombay. For women from 'white' backgrounds, cinema became a means to recast their identity; helping them reclaim the public sphere in new and radical ways. The trace of 'white' actresses in the history of Indian cinema configures and transforms the status of performers and performance from the silent to the early sound period. The industry attracted a large number of Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish girls, who became the first group of women to join the industry uninhibited by the social opprobrium against film work. I use hagiographic records, film reviews and stills to map the roles women from the Anglo Indian and Jewish communities were dressed up to 'play' in the films. These roles helped perpetuate certain stereotypes about women from these communities as well as impinged on the ways that their identity was configured. Through the history of the Anglo Indian and Jewish women in the larger public sphere I lay out and highlight the field from where individuals and personalities emerged to participate in the cinematic process. I see the community as marking and inflecting a system of signs on the body of these women through which identity was constructed and their attempts at reinvention were engendered – a process of individuation, of 'being' and of being framed within a particular logic of the popular imaginary frames of representation.

Keywords: cinema, Bombay, reinvention, Anglo Indian, Jewish, actress, gender, race

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White Skin/ Brown Masks: The Case of 'White' Actresses From Silent to Early Sound Period in Bombay

This article explores the categories of gender, ethnicity, modernity and performance through the figure of the 'white' actress in the early years of Bombay cinema in India.[1] Film was a lucrative site of business for intrepidly ambitious individuals in search of reinvention. For women from 'white' i.e. Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish backgrounds, cinema became a means to recast their identity; helping them reclaim the public sphere in new and radical ways. The trace of 'white' actresses in the history of cinema in India configures and transforms the status of performers and performance from the silent to the early sound period. The Bombay film industry attracted a large number of Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish women, who became the first group to join the workforce uninhibited by the social opprobrium against film work most Indian women faced. In the period between the 1920s and 1940s many Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish women worked in the film industry: Sulochana (Ruby Meyers), Ermeline Cordozo, The Cooper sisters: Patience, Violet and Pearl, Madhuri (Beryl Claessen), Seeta Devi, Sabita Devi (Iris Gasper), Rose, Manorama (Winnie Stuart), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolite), Iris Crawford, Kumudini (Mary), Lalita Devi (Bonnie Bird), Mumtaz (Queenie), Nadia, Pramilla (Esther Victoria Abraham) and Romilla (Sophie Abraham) were some of the popular stars of the time.

Film practice in India from the 1920s to the 1940s underwent rapid transformations, from stray entrepreneurial efforts to interventions by businessmen with capital and foresight. Cinema is a melting pot of communities and cultures; and this diversity is reflected in the film practitioners in India. The early silent films by Dadasahab Phalke, Hiralal Sen, R. Nataraja Mudaliar, Fatma Begum, Jamshedji Framji Madan and sons among others, enabled the creation of a diverse cinematic public sphere in India (Shah 1950, Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 1963, Ramachandran & Rukmini 1985, Bhaumik 2001). 1930s was marked by the shifting terrain of technology and the emergence of studio system, specifically the introduction of sound to cinema led to the expansion of the film business as well as its form and aesthetic. While new studios and production houses cropped in different cities, old dominant studio like Madan Theatres closed down. Founded already in 1902, Madan Film enterprise was dominating the Indian film business, from production to exhibition and distribution, for several decades. However, the inability to successfully convert theatres to sound along with acute problems of profits being syphoned off and declining revenues led to its demise (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 1963: 61-62). Instead new giants emerged: Imperial Film Company, Bombay Talkies in Bombay, New Theatres in Calcutta and Prabhat Theatres in Pune. Other studios like Ranjit Talkies, Sagar Movietone, Wadia Movitetone,

Minerva Movietone in Bombay, East India Film Company and Aurora Film Corporation in Calcutta, Madras United Artistes Corporation ensured that cinema business was thriving and expanding (Bhaumik 2001, Mukherjee 2009, Gooptu 2011, Chatterjee 2011, Thomas 2013).

Any work on early cinematic practice and experience in India has to battle with the deficiencies of the archive, in this article I look at extant hagiographic records, the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report and Evidences, film reviews and advertisements to piece together the story of the Anglo Indian and Jewish presence in early cinema. The Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) was set up in 1927 in order to survey the organization of film business and investigate the adequacy of censorship in India. One of the central impetus of the committee was to assess and encourage the circulation of British empire films in the wake of threats from the American film companies (Chowdhry 2000, Jaikumar 2006). Though not without its limitations and errors, the report and evidences help understand the 'official' position held by the film practitioners, exhibitors and audiences on the 'white' actresses. The ICC remains as one of the most comprehensive study of the material conditions of early cinematic practice in India.

This article maps the roles women from the Anglo Indian and Jewish communities were dressed up to 'play' in the films from 1930s- 1940s. These roles helped perpetuate certain stereotypes about women from the Anglo Indian and Jewish communities as well as impinged on the ways that their identity was configured. The attempt is in no way to homogenise or coalesce in an (un)problematic way the history of these communities and the *bazaar* oriented nature of film culture, film production and filmic performance.[2] Through the history of the Anglo Indian and Jewish women in the larger public sphere I try to lay out and highlight the field from where individuals and personalities emerged to participate in the cinematic process. I see these communities as marking and inflecting a system of signs on the body of these women through which identity was constructed and their attempts at reinvention were engendered - a process of individuation, of 'being' and of being framed within a particular logic of the popular imaginary frames of representation.

The Public Sphere and the Modern Woman

> Chairman: You said a lot of Anglo-Indian girls and others have made inquiries from you about this, profession, Do you think it is really very difficult for an Anglo-Indian girl—I am not talking of the European for the time being—to adapt herself to Indian ways and interpret Indian ideas?

> Sulochana: It is not very difficult if she has got the knack of walking and behaving like an Indian—just as I do. (Indian Cinematograph Committee Evidence V: 4.)
>
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>
> Q. But is it not a little bit difficult to induce Indian ladies to come forward and take part in theatres?
>
> A. They are rather shy, but I think some of them are getting over it. (ibid.: 6.)

Sulochana's comments set up the contrast between the habituation of Anglo Indian and other Indian women. The familiarity with urban space was crucial to adapting to modern modes of employment and entertainment, where publicness and performativity were crucially tied together. Through a 'corporeal stylization of gender' (Butler 1990: 33), the codes of behaviour and gestures of the 'Indian woman' were performatively enacted and (de)/stabilized by the Anglo Indian actress as acts of reiteration and re-citation. Gender was performed not through any interior logic of coherence but through codes written on the body of the 'white' actress. The success of the 'white' actress lay in the polysemy of her image. Her polysemic image allowed for multiple, ambiguous and varied possibilities of meanings and associations. The 'white' actress could be cast in a variety of roles and appear to be 'Indian' in the absence of 'shy Indian' women. The suggestion by T. Rangachariar, Chairman of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, that 'Indian ladies' were difficult to persuade to work in cinema is rather misleading. While it took 'shy' 'educated' 'Indian' ladies under stringent norms of decorum and propriety almost two decades after the birth of cinema in India to appear on screen, women from performative traditions of stage like the folk operatic *nautanki* or the public parlours/ *kotha*[3] were already part of the constellation of stars. However, their presence was a source of discomfort for the film industry striving for social acceptability. Thus, cinema exploited the possibilities opened up by the greater degree of freedom of dress, action and respectability that the 'white' actresses allowed.

The excitement generated by the presence of women in the public sphere from the late 19th century was already activating a series of discourses in the 1920s and1930s. Cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore had become important spaces where public life acquired new cultural, social and technological dimensions. The metropolises were dotted with sites and sights of modernity like motorcars, trains, trams, telephones, industrial sites like mills, film studios, but

also the glamorous spectacle of fashion and modern lifestyles could be spotted on the city streets (Bhaumik 2001). Women were taking an active part in the processes of production, consumption and exchange. However access to the city and the use of urban spaces by women was not always easy. Their ways and movements in the street remained structurally organised and socially oriented along boundaries (invisible or otherwise), redirecting and restricting their forays through the metropolis.[4] Despite impressive reforms in the social sphere, *purdah* and an increasing seclusion of Hindu and Muslim women was perceived as a sign of respectability. The publicness and the professionalism of women was marked with moral distress (Forbes 1999).

Women from Anglo Indian and Jewish backgrounds grew up in homes unlike those of other Indian women. According to Alison Blunt, the Anglo-Indian home led an everyday life that was more similar to the British than to other Indian homes (Blunt 2002: 63). They were perceived and imagined themselves as 'different': more European than people of other Indian communities. They were groomed in particular ways of the modern. The Anglo-European ancestry of the Anglo Indians was inscribed by cultural markers such as language, dress, and a different domesticity (Blunt 2002). And these markers continued to shape a distinctive community identity that was bound to England and Europe as home. Jews, on the other hand, were known to tenaciously cling to their Jewish identity. Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel of Bombay and Calcutta lived for the most part socially segregated but in close proximity to other Jewish families, studying in Jewish schools and attending Jewish social functions.[5] The Jewish actresses Pramilla (Esther Victoria Abraham) and her sister Romilla (Sophie Abraham) studied in Christian institutions like the Calcutta Girls' High School and St. James's College. As an exceptional case, the Abraham family was sutured into the Indian social fabric. Their father's side of the family consisted of Hindus and Baghdadi Jews (though some biographical accounts suggest a Bene Israeli lineage). Jews drew impermeable borders between themselves and other Indian communities to prevent assimilation and a feared miscegenation. In contrast to other groups, the trace of inter-racial sex and illegitimacy continued to identify Anglo-Indian women as more licentious than other European and Indian women. In their lives within and beyond the home, Anglo Indian women were seen as admirably emancipated and yet dangerously transgressive. Their ability to mix socially with men and chose whom to marry was seen as another marker of their supposed autonomy and freedom.

Even if women's claim to the city were contrived; Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish women were visibly present in the public domain and entered the workforce in large numbers as early as the nineteenth century. Many of the women were trained and employed at first in the civil nursing service, established in the early 1870s.[6] At the turn of the century they formed a large majority of the staff

in government and civil hospitals as well as in the railways.[7] They were also hired as teachers in English medium schools. Pramilla was a teacher at the Talmund Torah Jewish Boy's School in the primary section in Calcutta before a visit to her cousin Rose in Bombay changed the course of her life. Rose had started as an actress with Madan's Corinthian Theatre in Calcutta in the 1930s. She also acted in a number of Madan films like *Fake Doctor/ Naqli Doctor* (d. Jeejeebhoy Jamshedji Madan, 1933) in which she appeared alongside Patience Cooper and *Poisonous Snake/ Zehree Saanp* (d. Jeejeebhoy Jamshedji Madan, 1933) with Jahanara Kajjan. Later she went to Bombay and joined the Imperial Film Co. In 1935, Rose was on contract to play the lead in *Return of Toofan Mail*. A nineteen year old Pramilla came to visit her on the sets. According to Pramilla's account, when director Rama Shankar Choudhury saw her, he told producer Ardeshir Irani that this was the girl he wanted for the film. A quick screen test and she was signed up. The film however never saw the light of the day and remained unfinished. Pramilla's first film was Kolhapur Cinetone's talkie *Bhikaran* (d. Premankur Atorthy, 1935) with Master Vinayak and Rattan Bai.

New avenues for employment for women emerged as modern systems of commerce were institutionalised. Many Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish girls were hired as shop assistants in European owned retail firms and employed in offices as typists, stenographers, secretaries and telephone operators in the major commercial centres of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. These spaces of employment habituated their senses and bodies to the kinesis of the urban experience. It immersed them in a sensuous world of consumption and exchange. However, there were recurrent complains about long hours, low wages and ill-treatment by customers. Actress Sulochana too had tried her hand at these before she joined the movie business (ICC Evidence V: 9). In fact her early films like *Telephone ni Taruni/ Telephone Girl* (d. Homi Master, 1926) through their staging of her former occupation as a telephone operator created an autobiographical citation which fed into her star persona, anchoring and reiterating her cosmopolitan image that the studio was building up.[8] *Telephone Girl* can be placed within the corpus of other Sulochana films like *Typist Girl aka Why I Became a Christian* (d. Chandulal Shah, 1926) or *The Secretary* (d. Chaturbhuj Doshi, 1938) that located the 'white' actress within stereotypical frames of reference identifying communities with specific patterns of employment.

The Indian Cinematograph Committee Report 1927-1928: 'Official' Narratives and 'Supplementary' Bodies

> Owing to the difficulty of obtaining suitable Indian actresses some Anglo-Indian girls have adopted the profession and several of them play Indian parts with considerable success and are among the most popular 'stars'. (ICC 66: 33- 34)

Throughout the ICC report and evidences, the moot point with regard to performers in cinema is the presence/absence of 'respectable' educated Indian women. In its emphasis on the lack of 'suitable Indian actresses', the statement almost appears as an apologia for the success of Anglo Indian actresses. It exposes the discomfort of the committee in acknowledging the sense of frisson that the Anglo Indian performers stirred through their various roles on screen. The statement reduces their work to circumstance and completely denies cinema's shrewd capitalisation of the publicness and enabling presence of the Anglo Indian and Jewish actresses. Another act of omission is the wilful negation of 'other' public women from the ambit of cinematic performance. The *tawaifs* courtesans[9] and the common prostitutes were liminal characters whose overt sexual and transactional nature threatened to cast aspersions on a nascent industry in the process of legitimacy. On the other hand, the Anglo Indian, Jewish actresses were figures who could in some measure be co-opted into a mould of 'respectable' appellations and could be groomed to 'play Indian parts' through a series of disavowals, ambivalences and masquerades.

Within the ICC narrative, the 'white' actress is a mere supplement, an adjunct replenishing a 'lack' and reinforcing the urgent need for the presence of 'suitable' performers. It would be quite constructive to view this notion of supplementarity through the Derridian concept of the 'dangerous supplement' (Derrida 1997: 141-164). The 'supplement', even though characterised as being an addition, functions as an extra surplus to the self-sufficient system of the 'natural' presence, even as it underlines the presence of a 'lack'. Derrida expounds the idea of the 'supplement as substitution':

> [b]ut the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness... (to) fill up/ accomplish by allowing to be filled through sign and proxy. (Derrida 1997: 145)

Thus, the supplement adds itself to enrich and accumulate the abundance and completeness of the presence so that the presence can be recognized and identified as the absolute and transcendental signified. The image of 'white' actresses can be seen as adding force and solidity to the trope of ideal Indian womanhood through representation. The *Telephone Girl*, according to Sulochana was "about an Anglo Indian girl who ultimately turns out to be an Indian girl." (ICC Evidences V: 3.) There was a constant play with meaning through processes of signification; meaning persistently oscillated between the effects of immediacy and deferral. Even though the 'white' actress appeared on screen with Hindu names and Effie Hippolite became Indira Devi or Winnie Stuart became Manorama and so on, their image created a visual discrepancy of ethnic difference . Their light skin and hair were clear indication of their difference but these were masked by the use of Indian style clothing and jewellery. These processes of disavowal re-invented their image on screen, but at the same time, the supplementarity of 'white' actresses broke out of its ancillary and affixed signage adding an element of exotica to the play of modern fantasy.

The Anglo Indian and Jewish actress was representative of the quintessential modern woman. Sulochana's 'exotic' features – dark eyes, light skin tone and hair –allowed technicians to experiment with different techniques of lighting and achieve the 'Hollywood look' (Ramamurthy 2006: 207). Sulochana's films *Cinema Queen* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1925), *Wildcat of Bombay* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1927) and *Indira B.A* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhary, 1929) helped in constructing her unique star appeal. Film journals and newspapers carried images of her dressed in the contemporary Western fashion, sporting the latest hair styles and make up. The 'Hollywood look' was aspirational but 'white' actresses were able to incorporate desi style elements like saree and bindi.

The ICC report's emphasis on the 'supplementarity' of the 'white' actresses was merely a function of the 'official' discourse seeking legitimacy for cinema. In reality, these actresses provided cinema with urbanely mobile bodies that could be recast and remodelled. The 'white' actresses' presence in the public sphere brought a cosmopolitan charge to their images on screen and added the seductive allure of modernity to a variety of entertainment forms on the stage and films.

Recasting Bodies: Early Theatre and Silent Cinema

The journey of the 'white' actress began on stage as they became prominent players in the theatre at the turn of the century. The modern commercial stage called the Parsi theatre (owing to the fact that many of the businesses were owned by individuals from the Parsi community), produced plays in a variety of languages (Gujarati, Urdu and Hindi) and popularised the proscenium style theatre in India

(Kapur 2003: 87-118). Many of the Parsi stage companies employed 'white' performers which added novelty to their production just as it did to early cinematic frames. Kathryn Hansen in her seminal work on Parsi theatre suggests that the presence of Anglo Indian actresses on the Parsi stage served as "expedient surrogates", circumventing the problem of respectability and enabling theatre managers to capitalize on the appeal of the actresses (Hansen 1991: 128). The Anglo Indian actress marked as racially 'other' and was thus exempt from social taboos on female performance, managed to provide "an acceptable alternative to those Indian actresses whose social position (or lack thereof) prevented their reception as suitable objects of spectatorial pleasure" and thus added "the spectacle of racial passing to the play of gender identities" on the Parsi stage (ibid.: 141). For Hansen, the presence of Anglo Indian women effected a transformation of colonial gender hierarchies. The Anglo Indian actress enabled a "fluidity of spectatorial positions" shifting, in the viewer's gaze "between the fantasized English memsahib, the material Anglo Indian actress, and the fictional Indian heroine" (ibid.: 146). And thus through his gaze, the male Indian viewer could "possess the English beauty and enact a reversal of power relations that prevailed in British dominated colonial society" (ibid.: 144). Citing, playwright Betab's comments in his autobiography: "[I]f the dramas of the time didn't have a fair mistress (*gori bibi*) and a black master (*kale miyan*), they were not plays at all", Hansen reads this as an illustration of how colonial "inversion was an integral part" of the narratives (ibid.: 144).

While it is difficult to map and assess the reactions of contemporary audiences, another possible reading of this desire/ fantasy can be traced to Indo-Islamic culture. Urdu popular culture is full of references to fair skinned women from central Asia or the exotic fair beauties from the royal harems or the *purdah nasheen gori bibi* (the veiled fair mistress) which were potent tropes in *masnavi* poetic form. Thus Betab's use of the Urdu word '*gori bibi*' could gesture to an earlier literary tradition. This reading becomes even more significant as often 'white' actresses were cast in oriental costume dramas. Actress Ermeline acted in an Imperial costume film called *Gulshan- e-Arab* directed by K.P Bhave with Gohar Jr. and Zilloo. Sulochana acted in the Arabian nights fantasy *Alibaba Chalis Chor (Alibaba and the Forty Thieves)* directed by Bhagwati Prasad Mishra in 1927 for Imperial Film Company. Patience Cooper acted in the film *Toorkey Hoor* (d. J.J Madan, 1924). While these films are lost, there is publicity material and advertisements which suggests that these costume dramas were located in an imaginary orientalised Islamicate land. For *Toorkey Hoor*, Patience Cooper appears dressed in an ornate oriental costume, the publicity images of the film reiterate a fascination with masquerade and transformation. The film was "banned in several Provinces on ground that it depicted a scantily clad European girl" (Chabria 2013: 171), although it is unclear which "European girl" in the film caused the furore as the cast

also included Miss Williams and Lilian Fox. It is clear that the body of the Anglo-Indian actress produced myriad emotions, anxieties and desires. A significant dimension of the performance emerged in the necessary discrepancy between the coded and direct enactment of a role and the specificity of Anglo Indian actress' indexically registered 'white' presence.

The desire for the 'white' actress was expressed not only in genres like the costume/ oriental fantasy film, but also circulated within the public domain through journalistic discourse that responded to the allure of the star-body in hyperbolic praise. Neepa Majumdar has analysed the role of film journalism in the production of stardom in India. The bulk of extra cinematic information that circulated in the magazines was limited to sketchy biographical details, filmography and a paragraph describing the actresses face. This 'profiling of the face', according to Majumdar, can be seen as "colloquial expressions of Indian aesthetics" (2009: 35). Reviewers wrote about the stars as emotional types borrowing from vernacular literary traditions of description of heroines like the poetic form *Roop Varnana*. Bijli Jampuri's *Filmi Titliyan* (Film Butterflies) published in 1945 is a fascinating compilation of description of contemporary actresses. Jampuri wrote the entire book in the *sarapa* form. Within Urdu poesis, the genre of *sarapa*- 'from head to toe' is devoted to the detailed praise of the body of the *mashuq*/beloved. Her/his physical charms and sartorial adornments are described in a frank playful manner allowing the readers to visualise the beloved through the gaze of the poet/ lover/ *ashiq*. Often in the poetic imagination the elusive, aloof *mashuq* is described as a fair *hoor* (nymph) from paradise. An example in praise of Madhuri (Beryl Claessen) is as below:

> Well-proportioned but extremely beautiful body, a moving statue of beauty, pure and translucent complexion like snow, black long tresses that smell of musk, forehead like the moon, eyebrows like the crescent, intoxicating eyes, apple like cheeks, red and soft lips like the bud of pomegranate, teeth that shine like pearls, bosom that creates unrest...restless like the butterfly. (Jampuri 1945: 119)

Jampuri description of Madhuri's body and his choice of metaphors are significant. The association of her 'white' body to snow (*barf*) and her complexion as pure (*saaf*) and translucent (*shaffaf*) plug into prevailing notions of the beloved within Urdu poetic conventions. Early theatrical stage drew heavily from the romantic *masnavi* tradition that had already popularized the imagination of the Central Asian beauty creating desires that fluidly identified the 'white' actress with the beauties of *masnavi* lore. The writers also borrowed liberally from Indic stories at hand and added Persian and Arabic flavour to give the tales a new spin. The

love stories imported were those of Laila and Majnun, Shirin and Farhad, and Yusuf and Zulaikha. Local Indian characters and stories like the story of Heer and Ranjha, Sohni and Mahival, Mirza Sahiban and Sassi Punno in Punjab were also among the *masnavi* poets' favourites (Orsini 2007). These offered standard ways of plotting the body of the *mashuq* (lover) which bred familiarity in the audience with characters, tropes and motifs that popular entertainment forms like the Parsi theatre eagerly drew upon and these idioms were carried into early cinema.

The pervasive influence of Parsi theatre on early silent cinema allowed many actresses to make the transition from stage to films. Patience Cooper began as a dancer in a Eurasian troupe, the Bandmann's Musical Comedy, before joining Jamshedji Framji Madan's Corinthian Stage Company as an actress. In the 1920s, song and dance item numbers by groups of young women had caught theatre goers' fancy in a big way. The Madan Corinthian Company had a group of 12 Anglo-Indian girls groomed by the company's dance teacher master Champalal; Cooper was one of them. She soon became a rage all across north India where the company presented its plays. J.F Madan of Madan Theatres ran the two businesses simultaneously, where performers were interchangeably used (ICC Evidence II: 829). Cooper became the leading Madan star after her success in the mythological *Nala Damayanti* (d. Eugenio de Liguoro, 1920). By the late 1920s, along with Sulochana, Patience Cooper was a sought after star and their stardom was crucially tied to the trajectories of the dominant studios they worked with; Kohinoor and then Imperial in the case of Sulochana and Madan in the case of Cooper. The circuits of production, distribution and exhibition were significant in harnessing their claims to stardom.

Stars like Sulochana, Patience Cooper and Ermeline acted in a variety of genres. The silent period was characterised by this creative engagement with genre and stars. Studios tried all kinds of new tactics to mobilise their stars' aura in the most effective way possible. Star bodies were not fixed to generic specificity yet. This becomes apparent from the variety of films that the actress performed in. Ermeline, for example, played a range of characters from the vamp to the damsel in distress. Her star persona oscillated between various signs of signification. The performances did not code her rigidly because of which her work during this period was characterised by a risqué charm and an unabashed sense of body and being. According to S. Ramamurthy, "[A]part from her qualities as a beautiful and talented actress, she was well versed in certain manly arts like horse riding" and was at her best in "strong cowboy roles and vampish parts" (Ramamurthy 1933: 9). In another contemporary article, Baburao Patel observed that "[D]uring the silent days she has done some excellent work...all the parts played by her so far have gone on well." (Patel 1935: 12). What is remarkable is that while her on-screen image in the silent period was multi-layered, in the sound period it gets fixed as a

vamp and was buttressed with stories of her off-screen brashness and tempestuous behaviour. The *Times of India* reported that Ermeline was fined Rs. 65/- for rash and negligent driving and for striking a police constable. "She admitted that she has quaffed a glass of toddy on the day of the occurrence and slapped a policeman" (*Filmland* 1932).

The affective regime of speed and physical action was best embodied within the generic corpus of urban films like the stunt (Vitali 2010). The urban stunt film visualised the human body in thrilling new coordinates where the actresses' body was cast in roles that enabled them to adopt gestures and perform movements that exceeded or significantly diverged from prevailing codes of gendered social behavior. The woman's body was embroiled in a heady fantasy of carnal voyeurism through a visual vocabulary that represented her in exciting new scenarios that exceeded the normative registers of decorum and modesty. For example kissing, smoking on screen, or action sequences. The pervasiveness and popularity of the stunt film extended beyond its silent days to the sound period, during which time it acquired a status of a new kind of spectacular attraction distinct in the Fearless Nadia films. Nadia (Mary Ann Evans) was of Australian origin and her roles as a masked adventurer became a signature of Wadia Movietone in the 30s and 40s (Thomas 2005, Wenner 2005). The poesis of the stunt film lies in the use of a new kind of feminine form – agile and modern – that was staged as an eroticized fetish and whose appeal was fully monetized and exploited by the studios. As their bodies were cast in 'new' radical ways through acts of performativity and performance, the experiences of women from Anglo Indian, Jewish and Eurasian backgrounds were radically reinvented. The coming of the sound technology in the 1930s affected another series of reinventions for cinema as well as for the 'white' actresses.

Transition to the Talkies

> When movies were silent, glamour was all important. [T]oday tastes are different. The mike discovered that beauty was only negative-deep... Inevitably, with the Talkies there came to the screen a wider variety of heroines, with more distinctive and many sided appeals. (Chetlur 1943: 25-27)

Film labour and culture at the threshold of a paradigmatic shift embarked upon new forms and idioms of performance and experience in the 1930s. The transition to sound catalysed the mushrooming of new studios and dispersed the field of cinematic experimentation into a new phase. This fervent escalation of film production created spaces to accommodate new genres and stars. Even though older traditions of visuality and pleasure were still in use, the new aurality made pos-

sible by the introduction of sound technology, transformed the landscape of silent cinema, infusing their spectre like forms with vernacular jargon and musicality. In an article titled "The Indian Talkies" B.L Bedam writes of the new conditions of work that 'talking pictures' demanded. The talkies were not merely "speaking silents" but were a new art (Bedam 1932:11). The multilingual and multicultural landscape of the Indian film circuit had ushered in the 'discord of tongues' (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 1963: 55). It was commonly believed that the rapid transition to the 'talkies' pronounced the imminent demise of the 'white' actress from the screen (Chetlur 1943: 26, Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 1963: 162). Stars of the silent era like Ermeline, Seeta Devi and Patience Cooper could not sustain their former status in the film industry. Failure at a 'sound test' was cited as one of the reasons many studios had to let go of their most valuable stars. Apart from the ability to speak fluently in the Indian vernacular, a practical knowledge of music and an appropriate modulation/ tone of voice were the most crucial requirement for the 'talkies'. The lack thereof accentuated the acute problem of finding suitable female performers for the screen. This spawned off a demand for *tawaifs* and singing stars, who in turn brought to the cinema a reoriented idiom of traditional performance.

Despite claims by later historians of India cinema, that 'white' actresses had 'dropped out' of the industry because of the sound boom, there was enough capital in the market to sustain the careers of glamour queens like Sulochana (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 1963: 162). 1n 1934, Sulochana acted in the Imperial costume drama *Piya Pyaare/ My Man* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhury), *Anaarkali* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhury) and the fantasy film *Magic Flute* (d. Homi Master, 1934). According to the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, *Magic Flute* was a remake of the 1929 silent film by the same name. The story was based on the work of Munshi 'Nashtar'. In 1935, Sulochana acted in the social *Do Ghadi ki Mauj* (d. Homi Master) which was exhibited at the Imperial Talkies. According to a review of the film, "Sulochana's work is not convincing...Good Box office attraction with Sulochana... Will run well in cities all over." (*Filmindia* 1935) This review highlights that even though Sulochana's performance was not appreciated by the critic, she was considered to be the main "Box office attraction". In the same year she also acted in the talkie remake of *Bambai ki Billi/ Wildcat of Bombay* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal) with Dinshaw Billimoria (known as the John Barrymore of Indian cinema) and *Pujarini/ Dancer of the Temple* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal). In 1936, she acted in the social *Shaan-e- Hind/ Pride of India* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhury) and costume drama *Jungle Queen/ Jungle ki Rani* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal). In the year 1937, she worked in three films: costume drama *Jagat Kesari* (d. Homi Master), *New Searchlight* (d. Homi Master) and *Vaahri Duniya* (d. Gunjal). It is unclear what she does in the year 1938, whether she performs at all. In 1939, she acts in a social *Prem Ki Jyoti/*

Do Dost (d. Gunjal).

The transition to sound did not hinder other starry eyed 'white' girls from across the country seeking employment in the industry. In her evidence to the committee, Sulochana mentioned how often she got letters from girls seeking advice on possibilities of work in the film industry during the silent era. She said, "I receive many letters from up-country asking to join…from their letters they must be a very good class. From Muhammadans mostly, and I have had one or two Anglo Indian girls who wanted to join." (ICC Evidence V: 2.). New 'white' stars emerged in this period like Sabita Devi, Madhuri and Nadia. Even though they faced stiff competition from singing stars like Jahanara Kajjan, Kanan Bala, Jaddan Bai and actresses like Devika Rani, Durga Khote, Shanta Apte, the 'white' actresses who remained were still the highest paid actresses until the late 1930s and worked well into the 1940s.[10]

Contemporary narratives of improvement and reform of the film industry, delineated the need for new personnel, both educated and skilled. N.N. Guha Chowdhury stressed in his article "Should Respectable Ladies Join the Films?" that the purity within the studio can only be made possible if the studio authorities show greater attention to details and keep a closer eye on the natural pitfalls of young actors falling in love or the presence of "female artistes from degraded class of society" (1933: 12). He further wrote, "Unless this be done we cannot expect intelligent women to come up to the studio for a profession" (ibid.: 13). The industry sought to align cinema with the social status of its labour in a bid for cultural prestige and legitimization within the framework of nationalism and reform (Bhaumik 2001, Majumdar 2009). However this demand for the reconfiguration of the existing constellation of stars coexisted with the expansion of the limits of participation which went beyond this very logic of cultural assemblage. Testament to this is the variety of backgrounds that men and women who worked in the film industry belonged to. Thus there was always a tension in the field between contesting desires for respectability and the presence of apparent elements of disrepute.

The 'white' actresses treaded the middle ground between being 'white' and not 'white' enough. In the silent period the polysemic nature of her image was mobilised by the studios to bypass the skirmishes of the repute/disrepute dyad. However the transition to the talkies brought with it a series of complications. Even though attempts were made in the silent period to flatten the processes of racial signification through make up and costume, in the 'talkies', sound threatened to shatter many of the ambiguities and disavowals. The masquerade needed to be embedded within a different set of codes. As suggested by Chetlur, sound had split the visual field between the face and the voice (1943: 25). One wonders if the creolized tongue of the 'white' actress was an impediment to the fantasies of ideal Indian womanhood that had been so painstakingly constructed. The editor of *Filmland*

in the June 1932 issue gives credit to Seeta Devi, Sulochana and Patience Cooper for having "taken great pains to learn Urdu and Hindi dialogues for appearing in the talkies." Seeta Devi, we are told, learnt Urdu songs with such perfection that she was able to earn the approbation of experts who saw her talking on the screen at Hyderabad at a private show. The editorial did however wish that "Madhuri in Bombay and Sabita Devi in Bengal would follow suit as quickly as possible." (*Filmland* 1932)

Many of Sulochana's silent films like *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), *Madhuri* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhury, 1928) and *Indira B.A* (d. Rama Shankar Choudhury, 1929) were remade in this period. *Indira M.A* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal, 1934) proved to be a huge success. However the image of Sulochana was realigned with dominant national and reform discourses in the talkie period, and she was recast as the ideal Indian woman, "marked by filial piety, sartorial modesty and contained sexuality" (Majumdar 2009: 98). According to Majumdar, Sulochana represented the high-brow spectrum of the star discourse in the 1930s. The cosmopolitan charge of her image identifiable through films like *Cinema Queen* and *Telephone Girl* was reworked through a "narrative of transformation" in *Indira M.A* (ibid.: 98). Majumdar argues that the way in which the "moral trajectory" of the film, from the "flapper" girl to her eventual return to "Indian roots and her recognition of her Indian suitor, Kishore" recast Sulochana in more ambiguous terms (ibid.: 98-100). While the "flapper" allowed for the vicarious display of modern fashion and glamour, the transformation aligned her to the new idea of womanhood promoted by the discourse of improvement and respectability in the film industry.

As indicated throughout film magazines in the 1930s-40s, the legitimizing call for respectability created an overarching impetus for reform and improvement. Studios were frenetically trying to reinvent their 'sullied' image and mobilised the image of their stars for the purpose (Chowdhury 1933: 11-14). While there was a demand for 'respectable' and educated women to join the film industry, the studios tried to fashion the image of their new 'white' stars through a series of ambivalences. Sabita Devi (Iris Gasper) persona is a classic example to illustrate the manner in which the film industry reconfigured the image of the 'white' actress in order to respond to the anxiety around 'respectability.' Sabita Devi made her debut in the British Dominion Films' historical *Kamanar Aagun/ Flames of Flesh* (d. Dinesh Kumar Bose, 1930). Her successful career in Calcutta and then at Sagar Movietone in Bombay established her status amongst the leading ladies of the time. At Sagar, Sabita Devi as the lead performer acted in three-four films per year. There was a lot of hype regarding her educated and respectable background. This was strengthened by the fact that she wrote articles urging other 'respectable' women to join the film industry and promoted the image of the studios as a professional space of work. In the article, "Why Shouldn't Respectable Ladies Join

the Films" (a response to the article "Should Respectable Ladies join the Films?" by 'A Lady Artiste'), published in *Filmland*, Sabita Devi clearly stated her position on the conundrum of film studio as viable spaces for work for women. The article gives a lucid sense of the manner in which the actress participated in and consolidated the drive towards establishing the studios as 'clean' working environments that was so important to the 1930s. Sabita Devi wrote,

> I have always been treated with the greatest respect and courtesy...and in contributing this article I am doing so not as propaganda, or with any ulterior motive, but for the purpose of defending myself and the good name of many fine gentlemen and friends I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with in the film world. (Devi 1931: 4-5)

The 'fine gentlemen' who she defends embodied "the aspirations of the West with those of the East" and held to "the traditions of the East in respect of their attitude to women" (ibid.: 4). By placing her emphasis on the "tradition of the east" as a site of superior values, Sabita Devi aligns herself to the nationalist discourse. Her image was carefully constructed by studios like Sagar where the charge of the 'modern' coalesced with figure of the ideal educated Indian woman. In another article titled "Garbo as 'Susan Lenox'", she claimed to write "not as a film struck Garbo 'fan' but merely as an appreciation of a humble sister artiste" (Devi 1932: 4). She aligned herself with the transnational order of stars, adding fuel to fire to the constant rumours that she was going away to Hollywood.[11] These speculations fuelled the notion of Sabita Devi as a star of 'international' stature and positioned the ethnic coordinates of the 'white' actress with Hollywood, which was seen as the greatest form of recognition and popularity.

Apart from Sagar in Bombay, another studio that emerged in this period with a dominant 'white' star was Wadia Movietone. The Wadias were most popular for their stunt films especially their Fearless Nadia films. While the stunt films had been a popular form since the 1920s, in the sound period, the Wadias "reinvented the genre by experimenting with formal and publicity mechanism...locating the change specifically in the type of stunts" through an element of "realism" and a wider acceptance and participation in the "discourse of physical culture" (Majumdar 2009: 104). In this period, Nadia was scandalously absent from most of the contemporary journals and was 'recovered' in the 1970s through a series of networks.[12] The work on Nadia has read her image variously as a "virangana"[13] (Thomas 2005: 23) and as a "radical feminist actress" (Wenner 2005: ix). It is her hybrid engagement with the kinesis of modernity and affective alignment with Indian cultural traditions that positioned her uniquely within cinematic imagination. Figures like Sabita Devi, Madhuri and Nadia were recast in the sound period in a variety of alignments and one crucial consistent referent was their polysemous modern self.

Conclusion

The response to the 'white' actresses was like the response to the experience of modernity: ambivalent, harsh and anxious. In 1938, Baburao Patel, editor of the popular English language film journal *filmindia*, lamented the 'degeneration' of Indian pictures and the onus lay with the Anglo Indian girls who worked in the films as 'extras'. He wrote:

> The number of these girls is hardly thirty... Goaded by the impulse of supplying sex appeal ...some of the producers departed on the disgusting practice of engaging these girls as 'extras' for community dances and as maids in scanty costumes...Perfectly hermaphrodite, they neither appeal to men nor women. For a tenner a day which they get, they come with rouge and lipstick, shake their hips and legs, pocket the money and go away... Some of these girls misbehave so badly in the Studio while working, that to kick them in the face would be a mercy... We have no objection to a few good girls from the Anglo Indian community seriously taking up screen as a career... there are already some really useful top liners from this community. But the material we have described above must not be admitted in our studios to suffer a stain of utter debasement in our pictures. (Patel 1938: 3–4)

Patel's offensive and vitriolic comments indicate a tension, where the 'white' actresses were both desirable and disreputable because of the nature of their freedom and publicness. By the 1940s, the 'white' actresses faced stiff competition from other actresses and began to be cast in secondary roles. Their gradual effacement from the top order of stardom in the film industry was related both to the "supplementarity" of their bodies and to the discourse of respectability that was at its pinnacle during this time. The publicness of 'white' women was central to their initiation into modern modes of employment and entertainment. Many 'white' women were already working professionals, but as the pay scale in cinema was higher compared to other jobs, it provided them with an alternative source of earning. Cinema opened up the possibilities of self-fashioning for women from 'white' backgrounds, through the performativity of gender and the stylization of bodies. In these processes of reinvention, cinema too was transformed by the presence of these beautiful women. Their urbanely mobile bodies were enabling and allowed cinema to use them in ambivalent modes of address. The charge of the 'white' actresses lay in their affiliations to modernity than in their ethnic difference. Masquerading variously as the ideal Indian women, the *gori bibis* or the hybrid *virangana* woman. Their entry into cinema in the 'official' discourses was based on an imagined sense of 'lack'; however, their 'supplementarity' added force to the

constructions and play of characters. Sulochana, Patience Cooper, Ermeline, Sabita Devi, Madhuri, Nadia among others transformed cinematic performance with their cosmopolitan verve, allowing cinema to capitalise on their seductive charms well into the early sound period.

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Notes

[1] Born out of the colonial encounter, the terms used in this paper- Anglo Indian and Eurasian refer to individuals of mixed parentage, in the case of Anglo India (British and Indian) and Eurasian (European and Indian). I use the term 'white' to denote ethnic configuration of actresses from varied backgrounds such as Anglo Indians, Eurasians, Jews and other mixed races in early Indian cinema. 'White' here works as a metaphor to denote typology of skin which is marked in comparison to 'brown' Indian skin and is a binding factor with respect to the categorization of Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish actresses within the film industry. Many accounts of the actresses interchangeably refer to them as Anglo Indian, Eurasian, or Jewish. The term 'white' here is not charged with the modern western discourse on race- oppositions with 'black'.

[2] The *bazaar* or the commercial marketplace was the physical and social location of cinema. According to Kaushik Bhaumik, "cinema grew as a disreputable bazaar institution…the industry in the mid-1930s had its antecedents in classes that resided in the bazaar which produced and consumed this disreputable cinema. Correspondingly, much of the industry and its audiences of the 1930s was a product of the process by which the bourgeoisie distanced itself from the *bazaar* and its performative modes." This was, however, also a period when a hybrid form emerged that mixed the style of bazaar and bourgeois cinema in India (Bhaumik 2001: 7).

[3] It is really difficult to translate this term. A *kotha* was a space of performance and entertainment. In colonial times, it gets a poor reputation, especially after the anti-nautch movement. Even then the *kotha* used to be quite different from the brothel. By the 1920s and 30s, it remained an ambiguous place somewhere between repute/disrepute. Many women from the *kotha* tradition moved to theatre and cinema as new opportunities came their way. (Oldenburg 1990)

[4] Anke Gleber has made these observations in the case of European women's spatial experience of the city. This comment, however, is equally applicable to women's experience in Indian cities, where women's mobility was part of a social debate and the restrictions were perhaps sharper and more incontrovertible (Gleber 1997).

[5] The Jews in India were divided broadly into three groups- the Baghdadis, the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews (Strizower 1971, Silliman 2001). It is beyond the purview of this article to discuss each group. For the sake of the argument, I will concentrate only on the Baghdadi and the Bene Israel as they were both largely concentrated in Bombay and Calcutta.

[6] Lionel Caplan, however, does not mention entertainment as a major site of employment of Anglo Indian women. Both the theatre and cinema were important areas of employment for young women from the community. (Caplan 2000).

[7] The British gave the smaller religious minorities a position of privilege, who found it easy to step into petty jobs in offices and workshops. The customs, railways, and posts and telegraph service were departments which were known to be the preserves of favoured minorities like the Anglo Indians and the Jews. (Bear 2007).

[8] According to Neepa Majumdar, it is after Sulochana is "reified as the most popular Indian star" in the 1930s that such a biographical connect worked in retrospect as a privileged offering into her private life. (Majumdar 2009: 98).

[9] The 'Tawaif' was a professional entertainer, a courtesan. During the time of the Mughals, the tawaifs were influential cultural elite before they were beleaguered and pushed to the margins of society in the late colonial period under the impact of social reform movements. Veena Oldenburg in her seminal work on the courtesan tradition has called their lifestyle "resistance" (Oldenburg 1990: 261-263). Film scholars locate the tawaif as a central figure within the Islamicate tradition of Bombay cinema (Kesavan 1994: 244-57, Bhaskar & Allen 2009).

[10] Sabita Devi was paid Rs. 2000 per month which was a princely amount for its time. *filmindia*, December 1938, 4: 8, 22. Citing the ICC Evidences, Barnouw & Krishnaswamy suggest that "A Bombay company was paying actors from Rs.30 to Rs. 1000 per month. The 30-rupee salary was for "a coolie, a super, an extra"; average actors got Rs. 200-250 per month. A normal star salary was Rs. 600- 800 but a few received more." (1963: 46)

[11] Sabita Devi's mother played an important role in managing her film career. Much like the *filmi* mummies of today, she shrewdly managed her daughter's career and was present at the studios to keep an eye on the happenings. According to a contemporary gossip column, Sabita Devi's mother was negotiating contracts with foreign studios. See, "Howlers of the Month" in *filmindia*, August 1938, 4: 4, 56

[12] According to Majumdar, Nadia represented the low-brow spectrum of stardom. Majumdar further argues that "in the hierarchies of star discourses, the popularity of actors associated with low-brow genres was registered almost exclusively in the unofficial star discourse that was marked by silence." (2009: 105).

[13] The *virangana* literally translates to the woman who manifests the virtues of heroism (*virya*). Within the large corpus of Indic literary paradigm, the *virangana* possess the qualities of wisdom, courage and power. (Hansen 1988, Thomas 2005)

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