

STYLISH AND BOLD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TROPE OF THE MODERN GIRL IN INDIAN CINEMA IN THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD

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This chapter examines the distinct trope of the Modern Girl, which became apparent in Indian cinema in the early twentieth century, taking into account the discursive construction of feminine modernity from the interwar period to the end of colonial rule. The Modern Girl, who became a heuristic device and represented the desires and anxieties of an emergent modernity on screen, had transnational connections, thus opening an interesting area of research that unravels the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, and individual agency as evidenced by global trends and sartorial representations of the *sitaras* ("stars"). The chapter relies on films, documentaries, archival resources, and secondary material sources to explore the relevance of gender and modernity in the Indian context. It includes the discourse analysis of such representations to highlight a complex web of spatial, cultural, and temporal mediations.

Keywords: modernity, gender, film, India, colonial period

1. Introduction

The Indian film industry has experimented with thematic explorations and shooting locations over the years and can be historically examined in the context of its transnational connections (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998; Rajadhyaksha 2003; Sinha 2013). The "global reception and increasing visibility of Indian films in various countries are the result of a complex network of national and transnational" factors (Kankaria and Banerjee 2020, 236). The growth of the industry, due to technological advancements during its budding stage, had facilitated the movement of ideas beyond borders. While analyzing the transnational connections that became

apparent in Indian cinema in the early twentieth century, the distinct trope of the "Modern Girl" can be identified. Various cross-country collaborations propelled the emergence of the figure of the Modern Girl, who became the representative image of modernity, fashion, and femininity. The thematic discourse of films of the 1920s and 1930s contributed to shape the figure of the Modern Girl, who became a heuristic device and represented the desires and anxieties of an emergent modernity on screen.

The Indian Modern Girl had precedent in the image of the "Gibson Girl," created by Charles Dana Gibson (see Patterson 2010), who was a representation of the quintessential figure of the American woman at the turn of the twentieth century, epitomizing ephemeral beauty. The Modern Girl around the World Research Group (2008)¹ situates the iconography of the Modern Girl at the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, and individual agency as a result of her participation in global trends. The first appearance of the Modern Girl on Indian screen in the 1920s was geared by an appropriation of Western ideas of modernity. This trope was conceived not as a blind consumer of commodities, but as an active participant in the process of negotiating ideas of modernity, thereby producing newer meanings in connection with existing ones (Banerjee 2014).

The Modern Girl embodied a decisive struggle between contesting ideas of tradition rooted in the culture of the country and an imported modernity. Various forms of media created and publicized the look as well as the outlook of the Modern Girl. They were often seen in cinema and advertisements which associated such women with luxury, cosmetics, and travel. Their images reflected the changes taking place in society regarding the position of women which were brought about by extensive local-global intersections. The Modern Girl represented "an up-to-date and youthful femininity, provocative and unseemly in its intimacy with foreign aesthetic and commodity influences" (Weinbaum et al. 2008, 9). Transnational encounters helped reshape and re-define the prevalent gender norms and stereotypes while allowing for the exploration of various models of femininity. Although these changes were universal, the subtle differences made the trope of the Modern Girl distinct from one another. The emergence of the Modern Girl has long been negotiated in the Asian context. There are various studies which have focused on these icons across countries, including for instance, Japan (Silverberg 1992, 1998; Sato 2003; Frederick 2005), Malaysia (Lewis 2009), Burma (Ikeya 2008), Siam (Posrithong 2019), Indonesia (Kamphuis 2022), China (Stevens 2003), Korea (Suh 2013), and India (Ramamurthy 2006, 2008; Banerjee 2014).

¹ This research group comprised Tani E. Barlow, Madeleine Yue Dong, Uta G. Poiger, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, and studied the complexities of the Modern Girl.

This chapter is an attempt at situating the Indian Modern Girl and exploring the transnational modernity exemplified in the visual media during the 1920s and 1930s. Critically analyzing the emergence and evolution of the Modern Girl on Indian screens will contribute to unearthing the intersection of race and gender embedded in the visual and consumerist culture. It is worth noting that most of the Modern Girls who acted in silent films in India were of Jewish, Eurasian, and Anglo-Indian origin. This study employs discourse analysis and specifically focuses on the actresses of the time who were pioneers in breaking stereotypes. The chapter will focus on two particular actresses, Sulochana and Nadia, who were very popular during this era and were the leading ladies in many films. To explore the multi-layered nuances of their characters, the chapter relies on film excerpts, documentaries, and secondary material resources available online which include posters and stills from movies. The transformation in the representation of the Modern Girl in Indian films and its relegation to the margin in later decades have also been highlighted.

2. Theorizing glocality and modernity

The process of globalization promotes the creation of transnational social spaces (Roudometof 2005), which results in increased cross-border transactions. It is in such spaces that cultural exchanges are facilitated, and newer concepts are framed. The significance of global interconnectedness is an important component when undertaking analyses across disciplines employing specific theoretical lens (Castells 1996; Albrow 1997; Beck 1999, 2000). There have been varying opinions regarding the multifarious consequences of globalization, as several theorists have pointed out that the presence of a globally dominant culture poses a challenge to indigenous culture. This might prove to have a counteractive influence as the local and traditional culture do not have the capacity or the position to oppose the homogenization that globalization promotes (Thornton 2000). Globalization tends to propagate replication, and this has led to the formulation of newer concepts such as glocalization that aim to challenge the monolithic construction of cultural elements. The word “glocal” is constructed by fusing two terms—global and local. This idea has gained momentum among scholars in recent years as it encourages a cross-cultural perspective while exploring complex issues which involve global and local intersections. The notion of “glocality” embodies transnational processes and can be defined as the diffusion of the global and the local, which results in distinctive outcomes in different contexts. This highlights the global heterogeneity and the intermixing of cultures whereby selective appropriation of ideas are possible. The concept was introduced as an alternative to the traditional globalization framework as it provides a new arena for inquiry (Giddens 1990;

Sparks 2000), and this has been implemented in the field of media and film studies. Robertson (1995) emphasizes the understanding of the global-local nexus which aims to study the reconfiguration of global significations and their adaptations into the local contexts. The visual representation of these multi-layered negotiations is visible in myriad forms in the film and media industry as cross-cultural elements play a very important role in shaping the images.

Modernization has historically been understood as a "process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across the ever-expanding regions of the non-West" (Mitchell 2000, 1). The concept is fraught, however, with contradictions as it is a subjective position and a discursive ideological space created by local-global interactions. The concepts and discourses surrounding modernity are generally associated with a Eurocentric bias and carry an underlying patriarchal overtone. The emergence of the Modern Girl has been a result of the multi-layered Western influences and needs to be examined with respect to global media flow, modernity, and gender. According to Munshi (2001), the concept of femininity has been produced through various discourses "including those of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism." The colonies have had historical linkages with the "West" (Srivastava 2004) which has shaped and influenced their culture, yet this space cannot be homogeneously understood. This liminality and plurality of modernity were reflected not only in the literature of the times, but also in the visual representations, which recorded the changing concepts and attitudes of the producers as well as the consumers of visual culture. The transnational approach to the Modern Girl lays greater emphasis on the global facet of the appearance, hinting about the fact that "modern forms of femininity emerged through rapidly moving and multi-directional circuits of capital, ideology and imagery" (Barlow et al. 2005, 248). As a heuristic device, the Modern Girl exemplified the diverse aspects of feminine modernities through appearance, consumerism, the making and viewing of the body, popular culture, and contemporary representations (Nicholas 2015), with a view to negotiating with their image not only as modern objects but also of themselves as modern subjects. The Indian Modern Girl was a product of transnational connections, where the local was influenced by the global and vice versa.

Among various issues that can be studied at the intersection of global and local paradigms, modernity and its far-reaching impacts are important concepts that can be examined in relation to visual culture. The discourses of modernity have mostly originated from a Eurocentric perspective wherein ideas spread to different countries due to colonial influences. Non-Westerners engaged in complex interactions with these ideas, however, and adapted it based on their sociocultural context. These multi-layered negotiations have been theoretically conceptualized as "multiple modernities" and "alternative modernities" (Chatterjee 1997). In addition,

Bhabha (1991), Appadurai (1996), and Chakrabarty (1997) have also theorized about the development of the plural nature of modernity. This can be understood in terms of a heterogeneous concept which focuses on hybridity and intermingling of cultures leading to glocalization. Another important concept that needs to be mentioned in this context is the idea of colonial modernity, which lays emphasis on the colonial roots of the modernization process and how it integrated with the local cultures. The impact of colonial modernity was visible on the screen as well as in the representations in the print media as the Modern Girl navigated the multi-layered anxieties associated with the assimilation and appropriation of the global influences in a local context. In this sense, global modernity has been interpreted and adapted in various social and cultural contexts. Out of the diverse negotiations that on-screen modernity has undergone, the figure of the Modern Girl has been a persistent trope that has raised various debates about changing social and gender roles.

In the interwar period, the concept of modernity was shaped and disseminated "through the circulation of images, such as photographs in magazines, movies, and department windows" (Freedman et al. 2013, 4). This allowed the diffusion of the nuances of modernity in the public space into the private spheres. This influenced the local culture substantially and formed an integral part of the public culture. Appadurai and Brackenridge (1995, 5) define public culture as a "zone of cultural debate," which cannot be comprehended without understanding the conflicts and anxieties associated with "national sites and transnational cultural processes." This space problematizes the ideas of modernity and other cultural constructs, and at the same time allows for cultural encounters and interactions. The experience of modernity, in the case of films, considers not only the spectator but also closely involves the complexities of the performer's subjectivity and agency. Modernity shapes a new social identity which is built on the intersections of the consumption of culture as well as personal and national narratives (Lee and LiPuma 2002). The producers of visual media, such as advertisers and filmmakers, were conscious of women's changing roles and demands during the 1920s and 1930s, which consequently resulted in elaborate ideas of feminine subjectivities. This also encouraged increased consumption and, as scholars such as Weinbaum (2008) and Thomas (2008) have highlighted, it served as a means to participate in hegemonic racial identity and, sometimes, even to contest it. The consumerist culture is guided and molded by the audience's reception which is based on their own life experiences (Iser 1989). This highlights the nuanced engagements between cultural producers and the consumers.

Kellner and Durham (2001, 5) state that all cultural artifacts produced in a society are loaded with "meaning, values, biases, and messages" that need to be situated within the social contexts of their production as well as reception. The

various forms of entertainment contain representations which are situated at the intersection of gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories thereby making the idea of representation a complex and multilayered one, where culture produces meanings. As global media flows became part of the visual industry, consumerist tendencies began to be embedded in the local practices. The booming market of films in India was a result of the cultural consumption that started with the silent cinema of the past and continued to grow through newer mediums. The commercial film industry gave rise to a discourse based on images and narratives and which was further defined by the images of glamour, lifestyle, and fashion of the female actors, promoting cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, and thereby shaping the perceptions of people across classes and localities. Prompted by capitalism and material culture, the aspirations and performance of the Modern Girl in India shaped individual and collective identities influenced by advertising, bodily practices, and consumption. There was a marked shift of representation as an increasing emphasis on glamour, sexuality, and appearance highlighted the notion of the "modern self," which later manifested through beauty contests and pageants (Munshi 2004; Thapan 2004). As more consumer products, magazines, fashion trends, and accessories became available from other parts of the world, the consumerist practices of women underwent a change as they were no longer bound by the locally produced limited items but had access to global products advertised on screen. The discourses relating to beauty, clothing, body, and fashion led to the production as well as the performance of the newly defined female body.

Transnational modernity resulted in new depictions of the Modern Girl and her interpretation of the concept of modernity as well as negotiations with global ideas which were available across countries due to increased movement of people as well as commodities. The icon of the Modern Girl gained momentum as a media construct that symbolized Westernization and culture of consumption at a time when many of the countries were navigating the colonial influences and trying to negotiate with their cultural past. They symbolized the contradictions and ambivalence which were at the center of the debate surrounding modernity and its appropriation. The manifestation of various aspects of modernity was not restricted to their on-screen presence as the off-screen lives of the Modern Girl also reflected their engagement with variegated facets of modernity that captivated the public. They were able to challenge the restrictive norms of society through their sartorial experimentations and lifestyles, which generated interest through magazines and films (Ramamurthy 2006). The transnational influence in visual culture in India can be traced back to the early years of cinema, where the leading female stars were not essentially of Indian descent. The presence of women on the Indian silver screen was still considered a taboo and it was a generation of women from the Jewish and Anglo-Indian community who broke the stigma by entering

the public space, often adopting stage names to obscure their identity (Eisenberg 2020). The Indianized version of their names struck a chord with the audience, who imagined and reimagined their representation globally. While Jewish Indians were certainly the “other”—they practiced their own unique customs, were somewhat geographically isolated, and usually unable to speak Hindi—India was, and continues to be, one of the few places where Jews have integrated into society without facing antisemitism (Desai 2016). Modern Girls gained public acceptability and popularity by adopting Indian-sounding names although they stood apart due to their distinctive physical appearance on screen (Exbulletin 2021; Shrava 2021). The iconography of the Modern Girl became representative of the transformation that women’s appearance and presence on screen were undergoing amidst debates of modernity, female subjectivity, and cosmopolitanism:

In the early to mid-twentieth century, articles, discussions, and opinion pieces on women’s rights and the idea of the “modern woman” were common in English-language and vernacular newspapers and magazines. Discussions ranged from fashion to professions to ideas about what constituted the modern Indian woman. While Jewish women were rarely singled out in these conversations, actresses and the roles they played on screen and off screen were common topics of discussion. (Mukherjee 2023)

The global cultural flows and commodity market fashioned femininity, but the Modern Girl “indexed the racial formation of the nation or colony in which she resided” (Barlow et al. 2005, 247). The cosmopolitan Modern Girl made her initial public appearance through films where she was portrayed as the English educated college girl. Slowly, her flamboyance spread to other forms of visual culture, and generated a “social identity and a wildly popular icon in multiple media” (Ramamurthy 2006, 197). Although the *sitara*, or “starlet,” was an instant hit among the Indian audience, she was eclipsed over the years and has recently been re-discovered by scholars who have attempted to understand the complexities of her origin and fluidity of her performance. It is therefore important to formulate newer theoretical paradigms in order to understand the nuances of modernity and its appropriation by the Modern Girls in the context of India. These examples establish the more public roles that women during this period were adopting, thereby breaking away from the conventional set-up of society and asserting their independence. The growing portrayal of the Modern Girl as the quintessence of pleasure, desire, beauty, and autonomy highlighted a wider adoption of Western ideologies. The iconography of Modern Girls bears testimony to the divergent ways of individual appropriation of a global trend of the 1920s and 1930s, and demonstrates how these icons adopted and adapted their roles to serve local, national, and global purposes.

3. Analytical tools

According to Foucault (1978), discourses are not static as they endure constant struggles and transformations based on shifts in social structures. Discourse analysis focuses on identifying the underlying discussions that are embodied within any given text through a close analysis of the language, images, and subtext used. This approach also inquiries into the implicated broader social relations (Gavey 1989). Spatially and temporally, films embody "constantly varying configurations of sound, image, gesture, text and language" (O'Halloran 2004, 110). Interpretation of cinematic discourses and meaning making through reasoning helps in deciphering the semiotic message encrypted in the films.

Film discourse simultaneously refers to optical and auditory sign systems which is designed in a way to execute the filmmaker's creative intentions. The subjectivity of the audience adds, however, further complexities to the narration, which is compounded by various elements such as language, emotiveness of actors, intertextuality, etc. This helps in gaining insights into the filmic content and its contribution to broader cultural, political, and social discourses (Bateman 2018). Critical discourse analysis emphasizes the links between discourse and other social elements. It is an explanatory critique as it "does not simply describe existing and evaluate existing realities but seeks to explain them" (Fairclough 2023, 1). The chapter engages in normative critique, that is, the analysis does not simply describe the realities but evaluates the representations on the screen. The present research will therefore seek to identify the motif of the Modern Girl, uncovering their subject position and the subjectivities that are presented through cinematic texts.

The discursive themes and their treatment on screen can be multidimensional and might be interpreted in myriad ways depending on one's point of view. In this context, a comparative approach attempts to understand one film by relating it to another film based on any object, representation, or concept. A comparative perspective, when attempting to analyze cinematic discourse, helps in understanding the different nuances projected through various films. The subtle similarities and differences become more prominent while closely examining the contemporary films which helps in holistic discourse analysis. It helps in establishing and elaborating new connections based on similar theoretical paradigms.

The chapter seeks to unravel the multilayered icon of the Modern Girl during the formative years of Indian cinema. The chapter will rely on primary sources such as films, either whole or partial, posters of the films, and other visual materials. In addition to these, it will refer to secondary sources such as magazines from the same period to examine discourse surrounding the representation of the Modern Girl on screen and its reception by viewers.

4. Visual economies of the Modern Girl in an Indian context

The emergence of the Indian Modern Girl at the global-local interface presents interlocking views of acceptance and condescension about women's negotiations in the public sphere with respect to body and fashion. As a result, the codification of the "modern girl" as a canonical figure has been a challenging one, being variously interpreted and understood, in terms of diversification in the socio-cultural milieus. Around the 1920s, there were cultural and social changes taking place in India which sought to transform and define women's position and appearance in society. This was a complex space which problematized questions of race, gender, and power and constantly challenged the stereotypes. The appearance of discourse related to these issues and the arising debates could be attributed to the increasing reach and popularity of films. Dilemmas and questions of morality came to be associated with the visual industry which portrayed women in a "modern" manner. This period introduced evolving concepts of beauty, morality, class, sexuality, and desirability. These notions were derived from representations in the visual culture that encouraged ways of viewing the body as modern and feminine through the use of commodities and practices, which included skin care, make-up, and dress to propagate and sustain the discourses of beauty that were fundamental in fashioning the identity and image of the Indian Modern Girl (Ramamurthy 2008). She became the standard representation of modernity as well as femininity and this symbol was situated at the intersection of commercialism, culture, and the self. These ideas were shaped by the leading ladies of the silver screen and the discourses surrounding their lives off-screen. These developments made the appearance of the Modern Girl almost like a performance that was produced through a host of global commercial goods and home-grown cosmetics.

Although restricted to the urban setting, it was a development based on the visual presence of woman in the public sphere. As is evident from representations in the popular culture of the time, the film stars in the image of a Modern Girl epitomized glamour in the 1920s and a deviation from traditional constructs of femininity. The "familiarity with urban space was crucial to adapting to modern modes of employment and entertainment, where publicness and performativity were crucially tied together" (Niazi 2019, 335). The women actors generated excitement in the cities through their appearance and lifestyle during the 1920s–1930s, when society was being shaped by modernization in social, technological as well as cultural spheres. The spectacle of modernity was seen in urban spaces in the form of trains, motor-cars, film studios, and telephones while glamour and the flamboyance of lifestyles and fashion could be spotted on the streets (Bhaumik 2001). Access to this urban space was not, however, within the reach of the commoners, which added to the elusiveness of the film stars and helped in generating the popular discourses surrounding their lives on and off the screen (Madhukalya 2015).

Reneé Smith (Seeta Devi), Ruby Myers (Sulochana), Rachael Sofaer (Arati Devi), Susan Soloman (Firoza Begum), and Esther Victoria Abraham (Pramila) were among the first influential actresses who brought about a revolution on screen. It is to be noted that the actress-producer Pramila hailed from the same Baghdadi heritage as her sister, the actress Romila (Sophie Abraham), and her cousin, the starlet Rose (Rose Musleah). Seeta Devi's debut in *Prem Sanyas* (*The Light of Asia*) in 1925, an Indo-German production, made her an instant star in the budding film industry. This was followed by *Durgesh Nandini* (1927), *Shiraz* (1928), and *Prapancha Pash* (1929). Sulochana was working as a telephone operator before making her film debut in a film entitled *Cinema Queen* (1926) and had a long career thereafter. Some of her most popular films were *Typist Girl* (1926), *Balidan* (1927), *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), *Indira BA* (1929), *Sulochana* (1933), and *Gul Sanovar* (1934), among others. She was commemorated with the issue of an Indian stamp dedicated to her in 2013 (Robbins 2016). Arati Devi had the distinction of acting in the first Bihari film, entitled *Life Divine* (*Punarjanma*), but she did not have a long career as she gave up acting after her marriage. Pramila, the first Miss India and a popular screen personality, had an exceptionally versatile career, which included stunt films, such as *Return of the Toofan Mail* (1935) and *Ulti Ganga* (1942). She was one of the major woman film producers in Indian cinema with thirty-six acting credits to her name. Patience Cooper was another actress who popularized the Western, Hollywood-inspired look. She is also credited with playing the first double role in Indian films in *Patni Pratap* (1923) and *Kashmiri Sundari* (1924). Apart from these actresses, one of the most prominent stars was Mary Ann Evans, who came to be known as Fearless Nadia, a woman of Australian origin who became a successful actor as well as stuntwoman in the Indian cinema. Her first film, *Hunterwali* (*A Woman with a Whip*, 1935), where she played the titular character, became extremely popular and established her reputation as a stunts performer.

The graphical representation of styles, as seen in the films and film posters of this period, accentuates the stress on a modernized way of dressing that was gaining popularity. More often than not, the dress sported during the interwar years in India was mostly a variation of the traditional sari, but these variations signified fluidity as the style of wearing a sari culturally indicated the class or caste of a woman. Moreover, experimentations with draping styles did not associate them with any particular region, which added to the enigma and appeal of the stars or *sitara*. These modern draping of the sari broke stereotypes as is evident from the portraits of various actresses. New elements such as elaborate frills and designer blouses added to their glamour. In addition to this, the storylines of the films included a wide array of characters which experimented with their clothing and appearances. For instance, in *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), Sulochana played eight different characters including a policeman, a European blonde, a Hyderabad

gentleman, and a gardener. This demonstrates that cross-dressing was also adopted on the screen, which further emphasized the fluidity and ambiguity of the actresses.

There were various ways in which the Modern Girls were depicted on screen. In addition to the above discussed variations, the popular stunt films of the time shaped the figure of the avenging angel, who was generally masked and wore Western attires. In this context, mention must be made of Fearless Nadia, who wore tight clothes in sync with the characters she played on screen in action films such as *Hunterwali* (1935), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), and *Punjab Mail* (1939), ushering in a different trend and visual depiction of modernity. The experimentations regarding appearances helped the actresses in proclaiming their identity, thereby exercising their will and agency which gave expression to their negotiations with the ideas of modernity. The hair sometimes became shorter as the shift was to more radical and utilitarian cropped hair. An increased and loud use of make-up characterized the portraits and photographs of the leading film stars. Deeper shades of lipsticks, emphasizing the shape of the lips and eyes deeply lined with eyeliners and kohls, made their appearance very feminine and attractive. Ramamurthy (2006, 200) cites some of the tropes that stood out as symbols of the Modern Girl during this period: “sexy and provocative; long limbed or made to look so; she wore Western-style clothing and hats; she sported bobbed hair, lipstick, plucked eyebrows, mascara, and painted nails.”

The liberal lifestyle of Jewish and Anglo-Indian people made it easier for them to take on roles that other women of the time could not. Therefore, the Modern Girl also symbolized racial ambiguity and religious hybridity as they integrated themselves into the multicultural setting. Starting as early as the 1920s, their influence was predominant in the performing arts industry, as they enthusiastically incorporated dance numbers. The carefree demeanor alongside their lighter skin tones helped them flourish during the silent era and early talkies era. Women's visibility in the public during this time was characterized by experimentations of looks. It is further evident that they complicated their social position through their on-screen performance within a visual register by asserting their sexual agency and appearing in the public domain. The cinematic public space that this Modern Girl inhabited was a field of performance and enactment in the quest for self-fulfillment of the subject position of the Modern Girl. She encouraged the consumerist culture and indulged in consumption, an activity exemplified by a number of advertisements and posters from the early twentieth century (Thakurta 1991; Hussain 2021). The on-screen and off-screen lives of these women reflected their autonomy, agency, and modernity as they were challenging the established patriarchal norms. Their lives off-screen generated an interest, through magazines and newspapers, among audiences who closely followed their lifestyles, and this gave

rise to the codification of new body cultures—hairstyles, clothing, and activities. This in turn came to be followed by the masses who emulated the visual representations. The growing reach of industrially manufactured images to the masses shaped a new relationship between public visibility and femininity, which defined the identities of women in not only public but also private spaces.

The above-mentioned actresses, along with a few others, were trailblazers who ventured into a territory that was hitherto unexplored by women. The thematic issues portrayed in the films have been essentially mythological in the initial stages in order to cater to most Indian audiences. For instance, Patience Cooper, an Anglo-Indian actress, starred in films such as *Nala Damayanti* (1920), *Ramayan* (1922), and others which were inspired by Indian myths. Slowly, bold female characters were being written for the screen, such as in *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), *Hunterwali* (1935), *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), *Lutaru Lalna* (1938), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Jungle Princess* (1942), etc. In addition to this, the complex figure of the Modern Girl was explored in a middle-class setting, as female protagonists assumed the roles of new urban professions which were arising, such as typists, secretaries, telephone operators, teachers, doctors, and others. This is prominent in several of Sulochana's films, such as *Typist Girl* (1926), *Indira B.A.* (1929), and *Indira M.A.* (1934) (Dhawan 2007; Chowdhury 2020). This questioned gender roles and participation in public places, as these women were seen exercising individual autonomy in their personal as well as professional lives. In the film *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), Nadia thrilled the audience through her stunts while fighting off robbers atop a speeding train, while in films like *Hurricane Hansa* (1937) and *Punjab Mail* (1939) she played the role of an avenging angel who attempts to seek justice for the wrongs meted to her. Responding to the audience's craze for stunt films inspired by the West, the filmmakers exploited this genre with respect to the Indian context and referenced contemporary society so as to satisfy the demands of the audience (Bhaumik 2011), thereby, shaping a new generation of stuntwomen on screen.

Moral concerns were raised due to their sartorial representation and intimate scenes. Being Modern Girls, their sensual appeal lay in displaying their body aesthetics (Ramamurthy 2006). Images of physical intimacy in which the Modern Girl is seen passionately embracing or kissing her partner were also commonplace. The film industry therefore provided a space that blurred the boundaries of class, morality, gender, and sexuality. The Western outlook and freedom to work were some of the factors which influenced the women from the Jewish and Anglo-Indian community to opt for acting as a profession. The reason for their popularity was their ability to transform into the character and the flexibility to adopt and adapt to the Indian context. Their style did not adhere to the usual everyday wear as the Modern Girl transformed traditional dressing trends and suited it to their

needs. The lighter skin tone was a primary reason for the directors to encourage the Jewish or Eurasian actresses as it made it acceptable for them to be filmed on celluloid, as the technology was not sufficiently developed during the early years. Their altered persona created an enigma, and the switched identity added glamour to the film stars. The cultural othering also added to their appeal as they challenged the patriarchal construct of domesticity.

The question of visual modernity, that was portrayed on screen, was closely linked to the popularity and reach of the screen narratives and its related discourses to the audience. The discourse that surrounded the screen personalities lent them a popularity and an aura that awed the audience. The female stardom and popularity were a result of the magazine articles, photographs, publicity, and advertising. It is a construction based on film narratives along with the extra-filmic accounts which can be read within the social as well as the cultural contexts, and all this formed the cultural texts that were consumed by people.

Although there were several actresses who were quite popular during this time, unfortunately many records of their personal lives and the films have not survived. Although magazines reported on the lives of actresses, Majumdar (2009, 38) remarks how “no knowledge about the personal lives of actors and actresses coded as ‘private’ was circulated in the official private discourse until the 1940s.” Hence, it becomes crucial to uncover their contribution to the Indian cinema through a close analysis of available sources. The next section focuses on Sulochana and Nadia, among other actresses, as they created a lasting impact on the Indian screen.

5. Discourse analysis of the representations of Sulochana and Nadia

The presence of Sulochana and Nadia on screen distinguished them in terms of their sartorial appearance and cinematic appeal. The popularity of these stars and enthusiastic reception of their films cannot be overlooked. Ruby Myers, famously known by her stage name Sulochana, hailed from a Jewish family settled in India (Chowdhury 2020). She was pursuing a job as a telephone operator when she was spotted by Mohan Bhavnani of Kohinoor Film Company (Times of India 2015). Initially reluctant to join the film industry, as it was not considered an honorable profession, she eventually left an indelible mark through her performance in several films. As discussed earlier, in *Bambai Ki Billi* (*Wildcat of Bombay*, 1936), she played the role of a criminal called Billi or Wildcat as well as eight other roles which included the roles of a policeman, street urchin, gardener, fruit seller, Hyderabad gentleman, and a European blonde. She donned Western dresses almost in the Hollywood fashion, men’s clothing, and other experimental attires such as chiffon sari and a sleeveless blouse that set a new trend on screen. This was further

accentuated by increasingly hybrid representations. Mention should be made of some other films of hers such as *Cinema Queen* (1926), *Typist Girl* (1926), *Anarkali* (1928), *Indira BA* (1929), and *Sulochana* (1933). The titles of the films bring into focus the female lead, who is the eponymous character and the star of the narratives. Several of the films were semi-autobiographical and partially based on the life of Sulochana. For example, *Cinema Queen* (1925) was inspired by the life of Sulochana and presented an empathetic portrayal of the struggles of the actor. In addition to this, *Telephone Girl* (1926) was centered around her life when she worked as a telephone operator before joining the film industry. In this film, she plays the lead character, who works as a telephone operator to sustain her family until a kind lawyer falls in love with her. The film traces the hurdles and challenges that they face and how they overcome the odds. According to Majumdar (2009), such storylines of ordinary working women who have successful careers in films emphasized class mobility and empowerment.

Apart from such roles, Sulochana was also seen in romantic films such as *Madhuri* (1928), which gave her immense fame during the era of silent films. She did not shy away from kissing scenes and came to be known as "India's first sex symbol, and its archetypal modern girl" (Ireland 2007). It is of interest to note here that the 1930s were a time when the films were slowly transitioning into talkies, and this required the actresses to be fluent in the vernacular languages. Not all the Anglo-Indian or Jewish actresses were fluent in the local languages, proving it to be a challenge for them. This led to the obscurity of a few stars, but Sulochana took time off from filming to become proficient in Hindustani, a popular vernacular language which contained elements of Hindi and Urdu. This helped her in rejuvenating her career as she made a comeback with the talkie version of *Madhuri* in 1932. The success of this film inspired filmmakers to revisit silent films and produce new talkie versions of them. Sulochana became one of the highest-paid actresses in India (Mukherjee 2023). Her fame was so widespread that Gandhi used Sulochana's popularity to reach audiences while India's independence struggle was ongoing, as he used her image in his campaign poster (Jews of the Week 2018).

A close look at Sulochana's films demonstrates that she was the focal point in most of them, such as *Gul Sanovar*, whose poster featured a close-up of her face in which she sported elaborate jewelry and dark lips. Interestingly, the name of the actress featured almost as prominently as the title of the film. Her representation in posters and photographs focuses solely on her, often featuring a close-up image of her face, reflecting how the narrative of her personal as well as professional life surrounded her. The available archival resources highlight the angular postures and visual aesthetics that she wore on screen. In terms of clothing, she is seen wearing a wide variety of outfits ranging from Indian attires like sari to Western dresses in films such as *Indira M.A.* (1934), where she played the role of

an Oxford-educated woman who was trying to negotiate with modern and traditional beliefs. This fluidity in terms of appearance and her versatility represented her position in the Indian film industry as she was able to overcome the strict impositions placed on women from entering this profession.

Remembered for her masked, cloaked adventurer persona, Mary Ann Evans, also known as Nadia, was born in Australia to a British father and moved to India around the time of the First World War. This spectacular theater artist also worked in the circus where she performed various acrobatics and stunts. She was spotted by the renowned film maker J.B.H. Wadia who scripted films based on her performing skills which thrilled the audience. An interesting example that Rosie Thomas (2005) cites in her essay about Nadia is how she played the role of an avenging angel in *Hunterwali* (1935) and came to be known as Fearless Nadia due to the bold characters that she played on screen. Thomas (2005, 35–36) states that she played “a swash-buckling princess in disguise, she roamed the countryside on horseback sporting hot pants, big breasts and bare white thighs and, when she wasn’t swinging from the chandeliers, kicking or whipping men, she was righting wrongs with her bare fists and an impervious scowl.” She traded the Indian attire for androgynous clothes which was very well-received by the audience. A major concern for the makers of this film, the Wadia brothers, was that her appearance was too “European” for Indian audiences (Thomas 2005, 50) as they were concerned about the audience’s reaction to the behavior of a woman unlike any traditional Indian woman. Such doubts were dispelled, however, by the success of her first films. Nadia’s public figure symbolized urban modernity and sophistication. A close critical discourse analysis highlights the cosmopolitan and multicultural outlook that shaped the plural modernity that Nadia represented, and this fluidity was seen in posters as well as on screen (Wenner 2005). She wore Western outfits that accentuated the curves of her body, and the exotic appeal lay in the blonde curls and light skin tone, which bequeathed her with a Westernized image that was acceptable to Indian sensibilities. The technical advancements and skilled experimentation made it possible to incorporate elements that added to the thrill of the audience, such as racing cars and train sequences. Other celebrated films include *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *LutaruLalna* (1938), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Bambaiwali* (1941), *The Jungle Princess* (1942), *Muqabala* (1942), *Hunterwali ki Beti* (1943), *Mauj* (1943), *11 O’Clock* (1948), etc.

Unlike any other actress of her times, Nadia captured the male-dominated cinematic space in her role as a stuntwoman, horse-rider and roof-climber which became an enigma as she was seen performing gravity-defying tricks. Her performance in *Hunterwali* (1935) captivated the audience and this film can be said to have been ahead of its time for its portrayal of the female lead. Nadia’s representation of a blonde lead in *Hunterwali*, sporting tight outfits and using a whip

had modernist as well as feminist nuances. This persona is reflected in the poster which stated that the film featured Fearless Nadia along with her photo in a masked appearance and hot pants with a cape. The masked, mysterious identity became synonymous with her, and the audience associated her with fast, action-oriented sequences. The inherent dichotomy that she embodied is reflected in many of the films as she switched from Western attire to ethnic Indian wear to emphasize her "Indianness" and connect with the audience (Ayaz 2020).

In *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), the audience was exposed to scenes which featured hunting, racing fast cars along with fight scenes against men atop a train in motion. The posters of films like *Lutaru Lalna* (1938) and *Punjab Mail* (1939) displayed Nadia sporting a mask and riding a horse, sometimes holding a gun, and thereby emphasized the action, movement, and thrill that the film promised to the audience. Furthermore, these films featured scenes of Nadia riding a horse or a bicycle with moving trains. The train acted as a metaphor of modernity and hinted at the rapidly changing society. As is evident from the depictions of the posters and some of the names of the films, the train became a recurrent symbol of modernity that was commonly used by the filmmakers, the Wadia brothers (Vitali 2008). In films such as *Muqabala* (1942), revenge as the primary motive of a courageous woman brings out the essence of the dynamism and changing representation. Here, the Modern Girl plays a dominant role on screen as the plot revolves around twin sisters who were separated at birth. One of the sisters, named Madhuri, grew up in a luxurious household while the other sister, Rani, was brought up by a gangster and was forced to work as a dancer. Madhuri finds out the truth about how the gangster had killed their mother and imprisoned their father. They are consequently seen fighting for justice and finally freeing their father. Its relevance in contemporaneous film industry was the thematic reinforcement of justice prevailing, and how it highlighted the idea of freedom as society was also striving towards the independence of the nation. The films of Fearless Nadia met with amazement among the audience and her far-reaching impact and popularity has been explored in recent years through research engagements and films such as *Rangoon* (2017) which is based on the life of Fearless Nadia (Indiaglitz 2017). The film heavily draws on her persona as a stuntwoman and actress upon which the lead character named Julia is centered (Rathi 2017). The film, which shows her as an actress and the star performer of a dance troupe, depicts the attires and sensuous appeal of actresses in the 1940s.

The content of the films starring Nadia featured a storyline that generally spoke out against social evils and oppression. In such narratives, the leading lady emerged as a leader or a savior to free people from the clutches of the oppressor and became a beacon of justice. Hansen (1992, 28) has identified the *virangana* ("brave woman" or "heroine") motif in the women characters of this period, as they

dressed like men and displayed essentially masculine skills. In many of the films, the leading lady is seen engaging in battles and showcasing military skill, therefore she is someone who transgresses the boundary by taking on the avatar of a man. This transformation into a fearless heroine on screen is only possible when she indulges in cross-dressing and dons a mask for anonymity. The significance of the mask is twofold as it acts as a tool to hide her interracial identity for public acceptance and to reinforce her independence on and off screen. Fearless Nadia acted as the female version of Robin Hood and one of her films was even called *Lady Robinhood* (1946). As nationalist references could not be shown on screen explicitly during the colonial period, these characters were devised as icons who delivered people from subjugation and embodied liberty.

The portrayal of female warriors on screen is inspired by legends of brave women who took up the garb of men to uphold justice. Through the roles that Nadia enacted on the screen, the forte of men was now invaded by the woman figure thus re-defining traditional concepts of masculinity and reiterating the manifestation of modernity. The audience accepted this new public figure who challenged the patriarchal code, asserted her agency and “provided a counterpoint to the image of the *purdah*² woman of the empire films and visibilized their active role in the national movement” (Chowdhry 2000, 98). In this context, Thomas (2005, 44) mentions that the way Nadia’s otherness was negotiated and dealt with by the filmmakers made her popular among the audience of the time.

The Indian Cinematograph Committee was established in 1927. The primary function of the censorship was to ensure safety in theaters but later, it began to filter and screen the films being shown in order to promote a political agenda (Sinha 2013). By 1930s, “the focus of the board was on curbing the expression of sexuality on the screen as sensitive issues concerning physical intimacy and open display of affection on screen were severely criticized” (Kankaria and Banerjee 2020, 241). Since the films imported from America often exhibited sensual scenes involving white women, this became a major concern for the ICC as the white women would be seen in sexualized forms (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 43) which would lead to a moral crisis. Although the actresses belonging to the Jewish community took the center stage in the formative years of the Indian cinema, slowly they became side-lined in the mainstream cinema as there was a shift in the discourse of the films. This was marked by the transition of the *sitara* from the Westernized depiction to the Indianized version upholding a moral bastion. This slowly eclipsed the careers of actresses such as Nadia due to her distinct physical appearance. They were relegated to the margins where they played the

² Referring to the practice of seclusion, which was prevalent in certain sections of society, wherein the women used a veil or stayed behind a curtain to remain out of view of men and strangers.

roles of a vamp or seductress and were often portrayed as a foil to the virtuous lead character to encourage a comparison in which the righteous Indian woman is always rewarded. Moreover, the advent of talkies entailed stiff competition for the Jewish and Anglo-Indian actresses as women from the higher and middle strata of Indian society were entering the film industry.

6. Conclusion

The Modern Girl with her appearance, flamboyant style and independence signified a new development in the discourse of femininity, where she could simultaneously become a modern object and subject. The transnational figure of the Modern Girl embodied contradictions in the fantasies of the consumers as it was intimate and personal yet quite distant and public. A new kind of woman was taking the modern visual field by storm during the 1920s whose presence denoted a wave of change. The appearance of the Modern Girl revolutionized the film industry as women became a part of the public while they shaped fashion sensibilities through their "modern" outlook. The multicultural exchanges impacted the attires and sartorial representations (Strubel and Josiam 2016) as they were exposed to Western influences, but they appropriated it to their contexts.

Modern Girls played the lead characters in female-centric films that incorporated a wide array of issues. Initially, in the 1920s, the films featured the Westernized Modern Girl, but gradually there were simultaneous depictions of Western-inspired as well as "different yet modern" women on screen. Actresses of Jewish and other origin were instrumental in creating the aura of awe and stardom that paved the way for them in the entertainment industry. It was through the stylization and manifestation of their bodies and the performance of their gender in the visual media that created various possibilities of on-screen characters which were unprecedented. Stars such as Sulochana, Nadia, Patience Cooper, and others were successful in transforming the cinematic space with their electrifying presence and charms, which continued well into the early sound period. Their cultural hybridity initially added to their charm, but gradually they were side-lined into playing the roles of a vamp or seductress. This highlighted the tensions between culture and modernity. The representations of bodies, modernity, and femininity were configured and reconfigured through a variety of discursive practices, which makes the study of the Modern Girl an interesting one.

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