

BEYOND BOLLYWOOD: ALTERNATIVE FEMALE SUBJECT POSITIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HINDI FILM RECEPTION IN TRINIDAD

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Hindi film and associated cultural forms used to be major identity markers of East Indians in Trinidad. The recent decline of their popularity indicates major changes taking place in the diasporic community. Gender roles, notions of the female body and sexuality are at the centre of the renegotiation of Indo-Trinidadian identity. Consequently, young women encounter potentially liberating discourses of femininity and a previously unknown freedom of choices, on the one hand. On the other hand, they are confronted with new forms of sexism and patriarchal repression. Thus, the renegotiation between local and global as well as national and ethnic discourses is crucial to current concepts of Indo-Trinidadian womanhood. Some of these become obvious in the analysis of Indian film reception.

The major focus of this paper lies on the structural similarities between Hindi film texts and symbolic womanhood, which can be seen as one central gender role associated with Indo-Trinidadian identity. In interviews with young women the significance of discursive strategies becomes clear, which heavily draw on established dichotomies of private/public and intimate/symbolic discourse. These are negotiated, challenged and resisted by interview partners. Thus, young women find ways to overcome essentialist notions of culture in their definition of a gendered 'Indian' identity beyond Bollywood as well as Western feminist thought. The paper is based on ethnographic data collected in Trinidad.

Introduction

The issues touched upon in this paper are related to major research questions of my Phd project, which focuses on the decoding practices of young Trinidadian women in the context of Hindi film reception. Generally, the perspective on media reception here is situated in negotiations between local and global imaginaries. The concept of 'mediascapes' by ArjunAppadurai is used as theoretical framework, which makes it possible to describe local and global media reference frames, but to still see the individual actor as "the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes" (Appadurai 1996: 33). Furthermore, Appadurai refers to imagination as social practice (*Ibid.*: 31), which negotiates between the wide range of identity choices, repertoires of meaning and sites of agency. In my reception study of Hindi film in Trinidad decoding processes are situated within this complex field. A special focus lies on female agency in practices of imagination. The preliminary results presented in this paper only refer to a subcategory of analysis and should be seen in the context of the overall research project.

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The paper refers to results of empirical field research conducted in the years 2010 and 2011. I will focus on interviews with three young women who are aged between 19 and 26 years (which is also the target group of the project, in general). They are all Indo-Trinidadian, of Hindu religion and from middle class background. Furthermore, they grew up and live in Central Trinidad and currently study at UWI (University of the West Indies) in St. Augustine. Each belongs to a certain group which I identified in the course of my field research and use for comparative analysis as suggested by Grounded Theory (Glaser / Strauss 1999: 104). As these groups show considerable differences in terms of their self-conception as well as discourses on ethnicity, gender roles and cultural identity, it was quite startling for me to find some crucial correlations which were the starting point for the main argument of this article. In many of the interviews I conducted during my field research, young Indo-Trinidadian women switched into a generalized discourse when asked about gender-specific issues. "You have to understand that Indian women..." or "East Indian girls do..." are typical markers of this discourse of femininity. Interview partners usually introduced themselves as representatives of the category. This can be understood in the context of symbolic womanhood proposed by Gabrielle Hosein, which can be described as a symbolic imagery Indo-Trinidadian women draw on to perform a feminine identity in certain public contexts, such as family gatherings, religious settings and cultural functions (Hosein 2004; 2011). In contrast, the three young women quoted in this paper related personal experiences in the interview concerning gender relations, sexism as well as female sexuality. In a discursive analysis based on the approach of Reconstructive Social Research, which seeks to follow the frame of relevance established by the subjects in the field (Bohnsack 2008), it becomes clear how significant speech pattern, phrasing and register in the three extracts are. In and by their performance in the interview (as every interview can be seen as performative space) they pointed at their postulation as well as their practice of a discourse juxtaposed to the that of symbolic womanhood.

To relate this negotiation of symbolic womanhood to Hindi film, the recent changes of modes of representation shall be focused on in this paper. In Trinidad, this development is debated in terms that can be related to the opposition of the mentioned discourses of symbolic womanhood and intimate experiences. For a long time, the scopic regime of Hindi cinema relied on a public sphere in the filmic context, which anticipated the representation of the private (Prasad, 1998, p.94ff). This convention solicited a public gaze that was controlling and sanctifying the actions displayed on screen. Of course, this scopic regime was adhering to patriarchal structures. Thus, the representation of a couple as autonomous union as well as eroticism in terms of intimacy was foreclosed, as both elude patriarchal control (*Ibid.*)

Intimacies such as kissing were alluded to by couples hiding or disappearing behind trees (suggesting kissing or other intimacies) and the erotic was codified in

an elaborate symbol language of love and desire (Dwyer, 2000, p. 113). Contemporary films mostly employ other modes of representation, also drawing on the realist mode associated with Hollywood. This goes along with other radical changes in the Bollywood industry. In Trinidad, a decline in popularity and a depreciatory attitude towards new Hindi films, which is mostly summarized in the comment “Skirts are too short and lovers kiss on screen”, are the consequences. Generally, this is seen as a westernization of Hindi cinema, thus a dichotomy which assigns ‘the private’ to Western and ‘the public’ to Indian values and cultural authenticity is established and reinforced.

Although the interview partners have not related to any films in this context, the correlation of symbolic/intimate and public/private might indicate a special relevance and role for meaning-making processes in the local reception context. Consequently, I would like to connect the analysis of the interviews with a certain film text, namely *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Karan Johar, 2006). As the film has triggered many debates not only in India but also in other places such as Trinidad, it is an interesting example of a renegotiation of different scopic regimes and corresponding modes of representation. Furthermore, the film includes crucial issues such as the representation of femininity, desire and sexuality. Bringing together film and interview extracts that are on first sight not related to each other shall open a perspective on underlying conjunctions of meaning which recipients to a greater or lesser extent draw on. This will offer insights into the role of Hindi film in Trinidad as well as the incorporation of media texts into sites of agency in the local context.

Symbolic Womanhood and Hindi Film

What I propose here is that symbolic womanhood and popular Hindi films display a structural similarity of which the public / private and symbolic/intimate dichotomy is only one feature. From its introduction in the 1930s Hindi film has served as a reservoir of symbols, codes and role models which have been represented and reproduced in symbolic womanhood (of course complex processes of incorporation, transformation and renegotiation in the course of the primary decoding process but also after, across time, generations, regional, religious and class differences have influenced them). Furthermore, both play a crucial role in identity formation processes as marker of difference and demarcation. They signify ‘Indianess’ in the wider context of Trinidadian society. Historically, the Indian woman, her body and the feminine ideal have been used to distinguish the community from others, which has deeply engraved the stereotype of a womanhood defined by dutifulness, obedience, modesty and sacrifice (cf. Mohammed 1999, p. 65). The representation of femininity in Hindi film has reinforced this, but has also been used to renegotiate the predominating ideals (Niranjana 2006, p. 173).

In present day Trinidad, the influence of Hindi film and the Bollywood culture industry is highly visible, especially in the domains where symbolic womanhood is most likely to be performed. Hindu weddings, for example, strongly remind of the filmi style established by Yash Chopra in his innumerable films (Dwyer/Patel 2002, p. 95). Reflecting on her experiences when participating in the MastanaBahar Indian Cultural Pageant, Gabrielle Hosein states: “It was performance staged to display the decorative femininity, Indian iconography and the ‘appropriate’ actions of high-caste Hindu culture, ironically re-centring the Bollywood world of fantasy within India’s diaspora” (2011, p. 148). To understand how symbolic womanhood and Hindi film texts function as markers of cultural authenticity and why they are contested in contemporary Indo-Trinidadian identity formation processes, let us take a closer look on both before entering the analysis.

As mentioned before, symbolic womanhood is a concept describing a specific feminine identity performed by many young Indo-Trinidadian women in the context of extended family gatherings, religious settings and cultural functions. It is important to note that Hosein in her use of the term situates it in a general concept of womanhood as performance “of ethnic, gender, class and other ideals” as well as their renegotiations (2011, p. 141). Drawing on Mohammed’s concept of ‘gender negotiations’, which describes the coping strategies of Indo-Trinidadian women confronted with different patriarchies and contradictions in Trinidadian society (Mohammed, 2002, p. 15), she argues that young women choose from a range of competing prescriptions in their performance of different feminine identities to navigate “the demands of community and belonging” (2011, p. 144). The concept of navigation emphasizes the agency of the subject. Moreover, she points out that symbolic womanhood can, thus, enable transgression in other spheres mainly located in the private (Hosein, 2004). The performed feminine identity is mainly constituted of the ideal outlined by Patricia Mohammed in the context of Indian womanhood in the post-Indentureship period, drawing on sources such as mythology, for example, presenting Sita as symbol for devotion, chastity and female sacrifice (1999, p. 65ff). These are negotiated and adapted to present day circumstances, but are still located in a discourse of cultural and sexual purity. Interestingly, this discourse endured the complex changes taking place in Trinidadian society as well as in the Indo-Trinidadian community, when women were highly involved in processes of creolization as well as modernization and became increasingly visible in the public sphere (Mohammed, 2001, p. 410f). Many elements of symbolic womanhood are still tightly linked to ethnic identity, as they are considered ‘Indian’ in opposition to ‘un-Indian’. As Hosein points out, the performance of symbolic womanhood is a crucial way of ‘belonging’ (2011, p. 141).

Similarly, Hindi film always served as a marker of ‘Indianess’ and difference, evoking a sense of belonging. In a time when the direct link to the homeland India had been cut off, the films offered an alternative point of reference for the diasporic

identity. Indo-Trinidadians “saw India in the landscape, in the clothing, the practices of religion which were transmitted on the screen, the fictional characters who lived out the morals which their priests preached they should replicate in their own lives” (Mohammed, 1999, p. 80). Especially in terms of the ideals of femininity and also masculinity the film texts legitimized as well as reinforced locally predominating stereotypes (*Ibid.*, p. 81). In the 90s, the romantic family film genre with blockbusters such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995) or *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998) strongly influenced contemporary gender ideals. As Niranjana points out, great popularity of the film is also due to the representation of the diaspora (including new and old) as a space where “a newly culturalized India is made available for global consumption” (2006, p. 181). Constructions of femininity played a crucial role in maintaining ‘Indianess’ in an otherwise culturally hybrid space in films. The female character, her body and sexuality, were sites of negotiation between tradition and modernity, marking her as the bearer of culture and tradition (Dudrah, 2006, p. 80f). As this was symbolized by the woman’s chastity and purity, it played along the lines, which established symbolic womanhood as marker of cultural as well as ethnic identity in Trinidad (cf. Mohammed, 2001, p. 405). When in recent years the genre of the romantic family film was displaced by increasingly globalized film texts, where illegitimate children, premarital sex or individualistic life styles disconnected from the family were common (which probably corresponds to the life realities of large parts of the Indian diaspora), Trinidadian audiences increasingly criticized the development and rejected Indian films.

Although there are many reasons for the decline of popularity, the disjuncture diasporic audiences in Trinidad experience is rooted partly in the fact that recent Hindi films have often failed to provide the crucial function of supplying symbolic womanhood as well as the discourse on gender ideals with an imagery as part of cultural and ethnic identity formations. The 90s films offered a wide range of symbols and a rich imagery for symbolic womanhood, as the negotiation of values and morals were at the centre of the films (Dudrah, 2006, p. 80). Actually, the film texts themselves moved on a symbolic level of performance to a certain degree, which the essentially public character of visual representation was part of, entering a hybrid space that offered alternatives and subversion. Most of today’s films adhere to the realist mode (which is generally seen as Western since it is the norm established in Hollywood. However, it is one among many when looking at global cinema). This caused a major disrupture in decoding practices and failed to supply for the imagery and imaginary of symbolic womanhood. The film sample of this paper lies at the intersection of these developments. *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (KANK from now on) partly moves in the moral universe established in the 90s family film and draws on established conventions (as, for example, it shows no kissing on screen), but at the same time employs the realist mode to a large extent.

Moreover, it breaks with the “totally uncompromising stance on the subject of female chastity” (Kasbekar, 2001, p. 293) as the story is about two married people finding love outside matrimony, betray their partners and still find a happy ending together (as usual, in marriage). Generally, the film has stirred much debate and provoked strong feelings of dislike as well as approval, also expressed by my interview partners. As all three young women referred to in this paper expressed a certain likening for it (from a general interest to fandom), I decided to use it in the context of the analysis. Let us now look at three issues raised by the interview partners and their connection to the dichotomies of public/private and symbolic/intimate.

Motherhood

There is a long-standing tradition in Hindi cinema to depict the mother as nurturer in many regards. As a devoted wife and mother she sacrifices everything for her family – husband and children. Also in terms of culture she is seen as conveying tradition and values to her offspring, which turns her into a bearer of meaning, a vessel, but never a maker of meaning. The all-time classic *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) took this to a symbolic level, establishing the notion of the mother of the nation (cf. Roy 2008). An identification of womanhood with motherhood is, therefore, predominating. This is referred to in a humorous scene of *KANK*, when the two main characters are shown meeting some years after their initial encounter. When the male protagonist Dev inquires if Maya does not have any children of her own (as she supposedly tried to kidnap his son), she responds that she cannot have any, but teaches those of other people and is a mother to all of them. In his rude and provocative manner he ironically calls her ‘Mother India’.

In *KANK* we find a female protagonist who does not comply with the predominating gender role, since she cannot have children. That this means ‘lack’ as defined by patriarchal discourse is made clear later in the dialogue, when Dev states: “Because your life is empty... incomplete... It shows in your eyes... just like in mine”. The male character, who is filled with bitterness, does not comply with the predominating male gender role either, as after a car accident he could not continue being a successful professional football player, whereas his wife Rhea is now a well-paid career woman and maintains the family. In the following, the love story between Dev and Maya develops, in which their unfulfilled desires play a crucial role. Female longing, especially, and also female sexual desire is represented in different ways. In the realist parts of the narrative she is shown as not feeling sexually attracted to her husband and feeling pressurized by his advances. In contrast, the song and dance sequences display her growing desire for Dev in modes of representation which are familiar from 90s romantic films. Finally, it all culminates in the lovers taking a hotel room and having sex, which is set in a song and dance sequence, but adheres to the realist mode (see in the subchapter ‘Intimacy’

for a more detailed description). Consequently, predominating notions of love, desire and sexuality are detached here from the concept of motherhood and reproduction.

Another negotiation of femininity, female fertility and the female body emerged in one of my interviews with a young woman in Trinidad. Generally, my interview partners incorporated these concepts in a discourse related to the principles of symbolic womanhood. It is clear that motherhood is a crucial marker of femininity many, as all without exception stated they would like to have children in the future. Some even pointed out that not finding a husband or a suitable boyfriend would not hinder them. Furthermore, the significance of motherhood becomes obvious in the glorification of their own mothers. Irrespective of the mother's occupation or life style, be it a housewife, a business woman, a divorced wife or single mom, many interview partners pointed out the hardships she went through and how much they respect her for it. This was also the case when abusive relationships of parents were hinted at. Consequently, in the discourse of the interview motherhood and womanhood were linked here to a female ideal characterized by the sublimation of a woman's own needs to those of the family. Although the interview partners often partly distanced themselves from identification with this gender role, they proposed it in this specific discursive space to portray Indo-Trinidadian femininity.

In contrast, the young woman in question at another element of the mother-daughter-relationship, which seemed to be a crucial concern to her in the representation of femininity to me in the interview. In a general discussion on motherhood and especially teenage pregnancy, she moved from general statements to a very personal account:

"Parents and children they don't be open, like... parents not hold it open with their children. When they go through puberty and things, they don't explain things to them. When I had my period the first time, I bathed like thirty times or something, I was so frightened to tell my mummy... I thought I was gonna die. I did not even know nothing about it, I did not know – something wrong with me... so I said: 'Mummy, can I tell you something?' and she said, like: 'Yeah, anything...' I said this and that, and then she showed me stuff. But I did not even know it would stop! Because she did not even explain nothing... I thought it would be like that forever and ever and ever (...). I think parents should be more open with their children, I see that in plenty Indian homes, that they don't want to, cause they feel if they tell them something, the worst will happen... But explain to them! Talk to them!" (UWI Hindu Society 1).

For me, the contrast between the established symbol of woman as nurturer and the inability to refer to actual physical processes connected to female fertility was startling. The difference between the symbolic discourse and the intimate, which refers here to an intimate, private discursive space in the mother-daughter-relationship, becomes obvious. Interestingly, the interview partner uses direct speech to depict the conversation between her and her mother, clearly indicating that this would be the adequate discursive space for the event. Generally, it seems that female

relatives and especially older women in the family are a crucial source of information Indo-Trinidadian girls (probably of most girls in various cultures in the world) to draw on issues of intimate nature (cf. Douglas *et al.*, 2009, p. 227). This does not mean that institutionally offered knowledge as given in schools is not significant, too, but it seems that the intimate discourse has more profound effects. What my interview partner openly criticizes in the quote above is that constraints on the intimate discourse severely limit the agency of young women, as a true sense of responsibility and autonomy cannot be developed. The main reason she points out, is the fear that the worst will happen, in this case a pregnancy. Similar critique can be found in other contexts as quoted by Douglas et al. in their focus group discussions for research study investigating HIV related gender issues. An Indo-Trinidadian girl states that she is “critical of parents who had not developed a way to help them transition from girlhood to womanhood” (*Ibid.*, p. 228).

With the statement “I see that in plenty Indian homes” my interview partner associates this with the ethnic and cultural identity formations in the Indo-Trinidadian community. Thus, the discourse she claims for young women is contrasted with predominating representations of ‘Indianess’, for example, the symbolic discourse other interview partners draw on. Quite explicitly she challenges the repression of intimate discursive practices by using an imperative – not directed to me, but to the parents of Indo-Trinidadian girls: “explain to them, talk to them!” The discursive space of the interview is thus used, on the one hand, to articulate the need for a counter discourse in the Indo-Trinidadian community, on the other hand, to perform an alternative ‘Indian’ femininity to me. Despite her criticism, it is important to note that she still sees the intimate discourse located in the family sphere, suggesting a strong appreciation of family values.

The film as well as the interview sample show a negotiation of femininity located in between discourses of symbolic womanhood and individualistic notions of the self. The interview partner calls for openness in the discourse of female sexuality and the body, a characteristic of KANK she possibly appreciates much. Furthermore, she demands a space inside the sphere of the ‘Indian family’ where the female body can be explored, without the disturbing influence of patriarchal claims as expressed in a symbolized performance of motherhood. Reproduction is, therefore, one valid element of the Indian woman’s body, but should not be exclusive – something that should be expressed in the public discourse, too. A female character like Maya, who explores her own desires but is still represented in conventional forms like song and dance, might appeal to recipients sharing these beliefs as it can be read within the paradigms of their local negotiation of femininity.

Agency

In mainstream Hindi film the feminine ideal characterized by chastity, devotion, submission and sacrifice was often contrasted with the westernized vamp associated

with promiscuity and very often marked as 'Other' in terms of ethnicity or religion (Kasbekar, 2001, p. 299). In the 90s, however, Western values and modernity were negotiated differently in the romantic family film, as mentioned above. The crucial role of femininity and the female body as sites of negotiation also lead to empowering aspects of the representation of women. For example, the concept of the 'arranged love marriage' was predominating and created a space for female choice and self-fulfilment (Sharpe, 2005, p. 67). The bridging of concepts which were seen before as binary oppositions (East/West, tradition/modernity...), one excluding the other, could be seen as a major aspect influencing the representation of gender roles at the time.

The film KANK displays a different deployment of these categories as it creates a binary opposition between the two female characters in the film. Maya is introduced clad in a red wedding sari and opulent jewellery, her hands displaying bridal mehendi when she is wiping clean a mirror that reveals her face. She is thus characterized by markers of cultural purity and 'traditional' womanhood. In contrast, the first shot of Rhea shows and she is walking down a corridor wearing a short skirt, high heels and a sexy top. Several medium close up shots of body parts such as her bottom follow. Consequently, with these markers of 'modernity' and Western culture the opposition is established from the beginning, even if in the following both characters mostly wear Western clothes and show corresponding lifestyles. The fact that it is Maya who is betraying her husband and Rhea is the faithful wife, plays on the dichotomies and makes a negotiation of Hindi cinema's uncompromising stance on chastity possible. Although the betrayal of the marriage partners is condemned in the moral universe the film establishes, the mistake is forgiven later by the divorced partners and also by the patriarchal authority represented by Amitabh Bachchan in the role of Maya's guardian as well as father of her husband. On his death bed he comments her infidelity with the following words:

"I am a father. I can't punish... I can only advise... Leave Rishi! You don't love him. By being with him like this you are keeping him away from his true love. And yourself too... These incomplete relationships will bring happiness to no one. [Maya: Dad!] It's not your fault, Maya. Love and death, both come uninvited. No one has any control over them."

In the discourse of symbolic womanhood I encountered female empowerment and agency mostly in relation to education. Undoubtedly, the entry of Indo-Trinidadian girls and young women into mainstream educational institutions as well as higher education, which was accompanied by a discourse of gender equality and a new role of East Indian women in Trinidadian society, marked a crucial change in gender roles (Mohammed, 2001, p. 408). Most interview partners associated education with a bridging between values represented in symbolic womanhood and modernity as well as between the female gender role of mother/daughter/wife and a career. Furthermore, many of the UWI students amongst them pointed at the agency that

education and a profession give to women. Interestingly, agency was mostly defined as a means of defence as they referred to situations such as future husbands betraying or abusing them. Hardly ever were transgressions or mistakes which are socially condemned on their behalf taken into consideration. This means they displayed the assumption in the discursive space of the interview that they would always comply with the norm and rules – clearly as part of the performance of symbolic womanhood.

Other sites where female agency especially for young Indo-Trinidadian women is very limited were, thus, almost excluded from these interviews. In contrast, interview partners who drew on intimate experiences mentioned issues such as domestic violence, sexual abuse or racist/discriminatory practices. They were fully aware how much this opposes the discourse of symbolic womanhood and sometimes expressed explicitly that they wanted me to “see the whole picture” or “know the truth” – basically, to introduce a counter discourse into the communicative space my research was set in. In the case of the following interview the young woman addressed directly the limited agency in case of a transgression concerning gender specific rules of conduct and the vulnerability of Indo-Trinidadian women in patriarchal society:

“The thing with my ex-boyfriend was, he got me drunk. It was not his fault only, I was drinking it. He took me into a public restroom and had his friend film us. And he sent it out and then broke up with me. I don’t know why he did that. And you see the thing is, he did not get any shit...He is a guy! I am a girl! I got expelled from my school, even though I told them what happened. We had a fight, but I don’t think that fight would justify him doing something like that. And me, because of that video, I got expelled from school. I had to pay a whole lot of money to do A-levels and all that. And he got nothing. Nobody told him anything! And up to this day people watch me and say ‘Look that is the girl, that’s the girl from the video’. It wasn’t even my fault!”(Rituals 2).

This is a personal account of something she refers to as a ‘mistake’ which girls are just not allowed to make. I would call this a severe case of sexist slander relying on the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Socially accepted sexism and gender inequality are clearly identified by the interview partner: “He is a guy! I am a girl!”. What the difference means she describes by drawing on the consequences of the incident. In the intimate and private discourse, which she establishes in the interview, her declaration can be articulated: “It wasn’t even my fault”. Furthermore, she makes clear (even more so later in the interview) that her family shares this perception. However, this is first contrasted with an impersonal ‘nobody’, and ‘them’ mainly referring to the institutional authority of the school. Second, the word ‘people’ indicates that, neighbours, (former) friends and the community as such maintain a public discourse which affects her strongly. In clear opposition to the interpretation of the event in the intimate and private discourse she also implements in the interview, the public discourse draws on elements of symbolic womanhood categorizing her as amoral, inappropriate and ‘un-Indian’. As she

pointed out to me she sees herself as 'Indian', which can be seen as a resistance to the discursive power and its repressive categorization. The counter-discourse which can represent her experience of repression and violation is, therefore, a crucial site of female agency.

Generally, a strong criticism of symbolic womanhood is clearly pronounced in the young woman's attitude in the interview. She points out that her experience of powerlessness and vulnerability is proof to her that a double standard is still dominating Trinidadian society. As the discourse of symbolic womanhood only allows a negative identification and no representation of her experience of injustice, it seems that for her it is primarily a means of repression, as it reinforces sexist social practices. Interestingly, she also feels a disinclination towards popular Hindi films. However, she vaguely remembered seeing *KANK* and mentioned in the interview that she could see some points of identification in similar films. Thus, the representation of 'Indianess' as well as femininity in *KANK*, which breaks with a crucial principle of purity, opens up the possibility of re-evaluation. In contrast to renegotiation, a disrupture like the one in the sample can offer an alternative female subject position clearly defined as 'Indian', which might appeal to young women in Trinidad who seek to break the silence on delicate issues in a public discourse which is to a large extent symbolic.

Intimacy

As already mentioned erotic intimacy is strongly codified in popular Hindi film. It stands in opposition to the display of the female body as object of desire mostly included in song and dance sequences, which is widely accepted. Kasbekar points out that although the female body is exploited as erotic spectacle there, various strategies legitimize this. For example, a diegetic audience often consisting of patriarchal authorities sanctions the erotic spectacle and as long as the narrative emphasizes the chastity of the female character (2001, p. 292ff). This allows a voyeuristic male gaze and erotic pleasure for cinema audiences as part of the spectacle. On the other hand, intimacy and eroticism are conventionally represented in the realist mode like in Hollywood films, but the illusion is created that the spectator gazes into a hermetically sealed world that is private. Thus, the gaze is voyeuristic and can evoke a feeling of shame (Prasad 1998, p. 103). The relation between representations of the erotic and the voyeuristic gaze are the subject of many debates in Western as well as Indian film studies.

A crucial song and dance sequence of *KANK* employs both forms of the gaze at the same time when depicting the climax of the love relationship – the love act of the two adulterers. In the conventionalized form of a staged performance including a frontal, direct address of the spectator, a diegetic audience and the display of the female body as spectacle, a realist scene in private space is embedded. Such an erotic scene embedded in the narrative would mostly go along with the

conventions we can find in Western films. However, as the erotic scenes take turns with the staged performance, the act of gazing is reflected upon and the spectator is reminded of his/her presence. This is especially due to the frequency of shots marked by frontality showing Rhea or Rishi, the betrayed partners. The erotic gazing happening in the hotel room setting is not easily available for identification to the spectator, because the voyeuristic perspective is disrupted constantly. The mixture of realist mode and spectacle results in a representation of erotic intimacy while the spectator is still made conscious of his gaze through the direct address. I argue that voyeurism is thus destabilized, as it is neither private nor public. However, many interview partners referred to the scene and pointed out that they felt uncomfortable when watching it. Their feeling of shame was mostly due to the fact that they went to the cinema with family members and did not expect erotic film scenes such as this one. Many of them stated that they could have accepted eroticism in Hollywood films far more easily. The public/private divide concerning the modes of representations in Hindi films becomes very clear looking at these audience expectations.

Many interview partners pointed out that in the renegotiation of Indo-Trinidadian identity and femininity, one of the crucial issues is premarital sex. As chastity can be seen as a central element of symbolic womanhood, interview partners drawing on the symbolic discourse emphasized virginity and did not refer to female sexual desire in any way. In contrast to this general attitude, one interview partner discussed the issue more widely without being asked directly about it:

“I talked to my mum about this, and I was asking what her honest opinion on this was. And she said she believed you can have premarital sex, as long as you marry the partner. When I was a teenager... that was, like, you don't know something, you ask your mummy. So that was, like, ‘Okay, mummy says...’. I know friends personally who at Form 5 in high school, just before we entered university, they had boyfriends, like, about three years straight. They would hold back with their virginity, and then sleep with the guy, and the guy turned out not to be the right one. Like, after a year or so they realized the relationship did not work out. So I told my friend ‘Listen to this... you are not going to stay with a guy and go through crap just because of something like virginity. You know what? Yes, we grew up thinking that premarital sex is wrong. But so you want to have it, because you think he is the one. And maybe you end up getting married. But you not gonna stay unhappy and take crap all of your life. You shouldn't be shunned upon! Or scorned or anything! So what when you meet a next guy, the chance you meet a guy who is not a virgin... so why should you feel ashamed” (Theatre 4).

Firstly, markers of an intimate discourse are conspicuous as the young woman refers to an open discussion with her mother. This is stressed by words such as ‘honest’, but also by the direct speech. Furthermore, an intimate relation with her friend is marked similarly. However, in the course of the statement she moves from a private and intimate discourse to a more general and public level. The words which were supposedly directed to her friend appear as a kind of speech about

women's rights and the injustices of patriarchal society. This is obvious in the phrasing of the advice for her friend not to stay with her partner for the sake of complying with a female ideal, also strongly proposed by symbolic womanhood: "You shouldn't be shunned upon! Or scorned or anything!" In the discursive space of the interview this young woman performs a kind of womanhood which is partly structured by public and symbolic discursive practices as well as the intimate discourse amongst female confidantes. Consequently, a private 'Indianness' is introduced into a public discourse and integrated into a performance of 'Indian' womanhood. Furthermore, this makes it possible to criticize the predominating double standard, which becomes clear in the final declaration that no similar expectations are directed at young men.

Although the interview partner never refers to her own experiences in this context, which indicates the public/symbolic nature of the discourse, intimacy and its renegotiation are a crucial component in her statement. By employing discursive practices associated with the performance of symbolic womanhood, issues such as female desire, sexuality and repression surface in a discourse deeply connected to Indo-Trinidadian identity formations. A declared fan of *KANK*, this young woman also strongly identifies with the character of Maya in the sample film. Moreover, she endorses the representations of intimacy and female sexual desire to a great extent, but also highlights the attractiveness of the film because of 'Indian' elements such as the beautiful saris or the song and dance sequences. It seems to be relevant in the local context of film reception that the representation of the private does not adhere to Western or to Hindi film conventions, but is a hybrid form. A decoding which negotiates symbolic womanhood and establishes an alternative 'Indian' discursive female position is thus enabled.

Conclusion and Outlook

The discursive practices analyzed in the sample of interviews, which also give insights into the reflection process following my field research, show the intense renegotiations as well as resistance against the hegemony of symbolic womanhood in female Indo-Trinidadian identity formations amongst young women in present-day Trinidad. It becomes clear that notions of the private and intimate are of crucial importance in this context. As decoding practices in the reception of Hindi films draw much on locally relevant issues, the negotiation of different modes of representations in film texts might be of particular interest and interpreted within this framework. Generally, a film like *KANK*, which is located at the intersection between these modes and, moreover, displays a special focus on notions of femininity, female desire and sexuality, can thus be related to crucial concerns expressed in the interviews. While other recent films fail to supply the imagery and imaginary of symbolic womanhood and are stigmatized as westernized, *KANK* offers diverse possibilities for alternative subject positions to emerge.

It should be noted, however, that the analysis of interviews only covers a branch of the investigation in the research process. Especially in the context of private and public discourses, the preliminary results presented here have to be related to current negotiations in the internet. Social networking sites such as Facebook heavily influence these concepts as their boundaries are increasingly blurred and further explored. New sites of agency as well as discursive practices arise in this context, which are taken into account in the dissertation project. Hopefully, the online ethnographic data focusing on participant observation and the analysis of visual forms of self-representations can soon be used to refine some of the ideas expressed in this paper.

In conclusion, the intimate discourse that the three interview partners postulate in different ways is a challenge to symbolic womanhood which dominates ethnically marked female identity formations. Very often this means entering a culturally hybrid space opposing notions of cultural purity and authenticity. The construction of 'Indianess' is, of course, hybrid as well, but as it is used to demarcate the Indo-Trinidadian community from other groups and especially from the Afro-Trinidadian population, it is not represented as such. Symbolic womanhood can thus easily turn into a discriminatory discourse as deviance is categorized as cultural 'Other'. Similarly, Hindi film, which has always been a hybrid cultural form is now seen as westernized and, therefore, neglected. However, it is to be hoped that the globalized Bollywood films will become a symbol of hybridization like Roxanne Kanhai describes in the case of the bindi: Bollywood might also escape cultural boundaries and cease to be a marker of otherness (2011: 4). Instead it could be a space of encounter and exploration, where new forms of selfhoods are imagined and negotiated. Indian visual culture could thus be one that all people in Trinidad draw on in their imageries and imaginaries.

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