

Size Zero Begums and *Dirty Pictures*: The Contemporary Female Star in Bollywood

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The privatization of the Indian economy in 1991 and the introduction of the multiplex to India in 1997 resulted in unprecedented changes in the structure and content of Bombay cinema in both its national imagination and its transnational travels (Ganti 2012, Mitra, 2012, Gopal 2011, Rai, 2009). Stars have occupied a crucial role in shaping this cinema from its inception, serving as markers of identity, anxiety, pleasure, and fantasy for audiences both at home and in the diaspora. However, studies on stardom in Bombay cinema¹ have suffered from a surprising paucity of analysis. The female star has especially been a subject of immense contention.

This paper analyzes contemporary female stardom in India through a close discursive analysis of the public personas of Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan, and the politics surrounding their bodies. The dialogue around the body of the female star and her place in the national (male) imagination has dominated notions of their persona. Female stars have also served as important lenses to gain insights into the discourses surrounding the 'ownership' of and 'accessibility' to their bodies in the public imagination. Placing these discourses within the altered fabric of the Indian media landscape after globalization, this paper studies how these changes have affected female stardom in India as articulated in the star studies of these two actresses. In what ways have they negotiated their respective star personas to align with the image of the 'modern Indian

¹ I use the term 'Bombay cinema' to denote the Hindi film industry located in Mumbai, India. India has several other film industries that operate out of other cities like Hyderabad, Chennai, and Calcutta.

woman’?² How far does this persona speak to that of the idealistic ‘moral’, ‘cultured’, ‘self-sacrificing’ ‘Indian woman’ who has dominated commercial Hindi filmic imagination since the 1950s? To what extent have Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan redefined or confused norms of female sexuality? What distinguishes their star texts from those of their predecessors? I argue for a new and reformed articulation of the Bollywood³ female star that effectively balances her media-constructed images of ‘private’ and ‘public’ selves with more autonomy than we have seen feasible so far.

Neepa Majumdar (2001) suggests that traditionally the Indian woman conceived as the repository of convention, home, and ‘authentic values’ of the pure nation was not welcome in the public domain of cinema, because “the actual enunciation of a discourse on female stardom was dictated by the needs of a nationalist conception of the moral space occupied by performing women” (2001: 57). She draws on Partha Chatterjee’s model of anticolonial nationalism placing the discourses around Indian female stardom in the context of a nationalist identity that maintained a distinction between moral and material domains of public culture. Historically any kind of female public performance, especially early theatre and singing, were associated with prostitution, primarily because the Western educated middle class disapproved of such styles (Banerjee, 153). Majumdar

² Sathya Saran, former editor of *Femina* (1979-2005), India’s foremost English language women’s magazine, describes this image of the ‘New Indian Woman’ as a woman who “wants to do everything. She wants to take holidays, she wants to be a mother, she wants to work, she wants great sex, she wants everything...(her) lifestyle is very aspirational...there is an upwardly mobile philosophy at work...and it’s not just economic or financial. It’s emotional” (Dewey 2008: 2011, in Mitra 2012: 170).

³ I use the term ‘Bollywood’ when referring to the global reach of the Mumbai film industry. In the last two decades it has managed to eclipse all the others as the forerunner of Indian national cinema, constituted under the all-inclusive global signifier ‘Bollywood’. This immensely popular form of cinema has been associated with spectacle, melodrama, excess, and an overwhelming emphasis on romantic and familial love and song and dance sequences. It is often seen as an eclectic commercial ‘masala’ genre; with elements of romance, tragedy, action, comedy and musicals—all rolled in to one package for unapologetically unrealistic entertainment. National allegories and stock characterizations of the male-female, families and social norms have defined this cinema. Ashish Rajadhyaksha says that there is a distinction between the film industry based in Bombay and the hype surrounding ‘Bollywood’, and traces its growth as simultaneous to global capitalism and diasporic nationalism. He calls it “at once a fad, taste, an Indian exotica, and a global phenomenon growing out of the cultural and political economy of a film industry based primarily in Mumbai” (2003: 3).

draws a link between such pre-existing forms of celebrity and the early discourses on female stardom—already arising from ‘tainted’ spaces strife with rumors, gossip and scandals—characterizing ‘low’ art forms. Therefore the discourse on early female stardom (1930s-50s) saw attempts to bridge this gap between private and public, with heightened emphasis on the “cultured” values of upper class Hindu actresses entering the cinematic domain. This was a significant way in which early Hindi cinema sought to rid itself of its reputation of being a degraded and immoral form of entertainment that did not fall in line with other ‘pure’ forms of Indian art like painting and novels.

Though successful in effecting a change in this outlook, the female star remained thoroughly encased within hegemonic notions of “ideal femininity”, which conformed to the nationalist conception of women as the guardians of “Indian morality” or the inner/spiritual domain where the colonial state should have little influence (Chatterjee, 1993). In other words, the entry of upper-class Hindu women in the cinema industry would lift it from its place of ‘degraded’ art and without such ‘improvements’ the nation was considered unworthy of independence (Majumdar, 2001). The image of the woman on screen and information about the private life of female stars were carefully structured to keep within such confines, as public circulation of gossip⁴ about their lives (like done in Hollywood tabloid magazines) was frowned upon. The Hindi film actress has therefore always occupied an ambiguous space, promising the fantasy of an inherently ‘Indian’—‘ideal womanhood’ to their male audience while walking the tightrope between the masculine/material domain of the outside world and the feminine/spiritual kernel of the private sphere (Majumdar 2001, Mitra 2012). This duality might also help explain the erstwhile automatic ‘retirement’ of an actress from playing the leading lady soon after marriage. Her entry into the marital sphere automatically signified that she now ‘belonged’ to another man, and therefore, her body was no longer considered ‘pure’/‘virginal’ enough to fuel male audience fantasies pointing to the unspoken discourses around the accessibility to the body of the female star.

⁴ Majumdar notes the role of gossip in early Indian stardom and writes about “its simultaneous presence and absence: because the very ‘being’ of film stars was one of ill repute, one did not need to read, though one may have heard, unsavory details about a specific star” (2001:78).

Attempts to completely translocate Hollywood models of star studies and discourses in the context of Bombay cinema have usually proved inadequate given the different cultural contexts of the differing nations. However there are several studies that do add considerable value to this reading of the contemporary female star in Bombay cinema, notably several helpful concepts from Richard Dyer's 1998 seminal study on stardom. Especially important is his concept of the star as 'structured polysemy', whereby the star not only encompasses a series of divergent meanings and values but also structures them such that certain inferences are upheld at the cost of the ones that are masked or displaced. His reading of stars across platforms—from the image on screen to publicity material, gossip, rumors, criticisms, commentaries and press discourse is the dominant framework of this study. Dyer also suggests that the predominant discourse around a star happens on the 'site of the audience'; the consumers of the text, rather than that of the media producers. Using this framework, primary material for this study has been drawn from several different areas: print and television interviews, films, press commentary, as well as tabloid media. A collective analysis of these will help delineate the dominant frameworks that surround the lives of female stars in India.

Jackie Stacey has worked on British women and their memories of film stars from the 1940s and 50s. She found that identification with stars developed across several different layers: worship, admiration, and aspiration, which she terms 'cinematic identificatory practices', where the star is imagined as the ideal other. My reading of the two contemporary female stars looks at how they have used their intra-filmic and inter-filmic narratives (or Dyer's notion of 'structured polysemy') to construct ideals of aspiration for the 'New Indian Woman'. For example, in the case of Kareena Kapoor, as detailed below, we find a significant aspect of her stardom dedicated to her size-zero figure and the subsequent positioning of this as a desirous goal for young females in the

country,⁵ while Balan seeks to subvert this by championing a more curvaceous body type; which is often positioned as “authentically Indian”.

Dyer acknowledges that reception studies has been conspicuously absent in his work and a crucial way forward for the future of star studies would be to understand the proliferation of star images among moviegoers. Given the unique god-like demeanor of film stars across the subcontinent, the site of the audience becomes particularly relevant in understanding the cultural context of stardom in India. Studies by scholars like M.S.S Pandian (1992), S.N Srinivas (2009) and M. Madhava Prasad (1999) have looked at the intersections between cinema and political culture of South India in understanding the appeal of several male stars among subaltern classes as spectators. In Bombay cinema, megastar Amitabh Bachchan has been a subject of analysis for scholars (Prasad 1998, Mishra 2001, Dasgupta 2007, Mazumdar 2007, Vitali 2008). Also notable in this regard is Steve Derne’s (2000) work on movie-going practices among lower middle class men in North India and their perceptions of the female actor, which again upholds the body as the central site of pleasure and fantasy. His study is also pertinent because traditionally in Bombay cinema the ‘masses’ that have constituted the audience have been imagined to be lower middle class males (Derne, 2000). These perceptions, however, have been changing over the last decade or so with the influx of the multiplexes that have managed to segment the audiences by economic class (Ganti, 2012). This makes the role of the audience as consumer and spectator a crucial point of entry in my study of female stardom in contemporary India as the two actors I study here appeal to both the ‘masses’ and the ‘classes’, that is to say, they have dabbled in both ‘commercial’ and ‘critically acclaimed’ cinema.

A considerable amount of scholarly work on the impact and influence of Bombay cinema have looked at the centrality of the nation (Chakravarty 1993, Mazumdar 2000) in cinema as central to identity formation and as a major site for the expression of national melodramas, desires and anxieties. The male star has traditionally embodied these

⁵ While Kapoor was a popular commercial star from the inception of her career in 2001, I argue that the direction this discourse took was determined by the changes that she made in her physical appearance.

perceptions, for example, Sumita Chakravarty describes an erasure of Western threat to the nation by contrasting “the deglamorized heroism of Raj Kapoor’s Indianized Chaplin to the more cosmopolitan rambunctious personality of the sixties hero” (1993: 205). Similarly Ranjani Mazumdar (2000) studies the shift from Amitabh Bachchan’s ‘Angry Young Man’ disgruntled with the corrupt state and system of the 1970s to Shahrukh Khan’s psychotic hero of the 1990s, signaling a change in national identity from collective to individual. The late nineties and new millennium saw the hero as upper class, sophisticated and urbane, often portrayed as an NRI (Non-Resident Indian) living in London or New York, speaking to the aspirations of a rapidly globalizing consumerist nation. The nation’s urban citizens with spending power shifted allegiance from single screens to multiplex theatres, and a trip to the movies became synonymous with visits to a mall, trips to coffee shops, and international fast food chains. As mentioned before, now divided along class lines, the movie going experience was rapidly redefined by cushioned sofa seats, plush surroundings, air conditioning, and sales of Cola-Cola and popcorn at five times their retail price.

The female star, on the other hand, as the ever-gentle guardian of the morality of the nation, embodying the ‘core of national identity’ (Majumdar 2009:53) has always remained an embattled space (Mitra 2012). Some scholars (Gandhy and Thomas 1991, Majumdar 2001 and Ramamurthy 2006) have written about the restoration of the female star within the moral universe of domesticity through marriage. Her reallocating as a wife and mother always centrally underlined her position as an ‘Indian woman’ and salvaged her from the taint of being an actress/body in the public sphere. In her study of Aishwarya Rai’s star text, Shreya Mitra (2012) argues for a reorientation of her public/private divide in the face of global India and states that the ‘New Indian woman’ emerges out of this discourse as a figure comfortably straddling the ‘realms of the (outer) world and the (inner) home, combining in her persona an unproblematic communion of the traditional with the modern’ (2012: 150). Mitra locates Rai’s stardom within the complex contradictions and tensions that arise out of negotiating this space, analyzing her early career as Miss World and a successful Bollywood actress, becoming India’s face on the world map, channeling several high profile endorsements, but never

straying from her identity as a 'Indian woman', dignified and cultured. She refused to star in A-list Hollywood projects with explicit sex scenes⁶ and was recently touted by her father-in-law Amitabh Bachchan as a "simple and domesticated" girl, a dutiful daughter-in-law.⁷ Interestingly, Rai drew immense negative press for her post-partum weight gain. Several commentators highlighted her role as an Indian ambassador (she is a regular at Cannes and other international film festivals), which underlines once again, the pressures on the 'performative body' of the female actor, which cannot stray from its 'ideal'. As I discuss below, this is a complex mix borrowed from Hollywood ideals of beauty meshed with ideas about Indian 'authenticity'.

Female Stardom in the 1990s: The Madhuri Phenomena

In order to better understand the star texts of Kapoor and Balan, I provide a brief detour into the stardom and filmic image of Madhuri Dixit, a prominent female superstar in the nineties. This is particularly relevant because her stardom rose just before the contemporary area under analysis here and will help us delineate the ways in which Kapoor and Balan conform to and deviate from their most recent predecessor.

The female star in Bombay cinema has been fixated within a few 'types': the most prominent among which are the default Hindu figure of the simple girl next door who eventually moves on to be a wife and mother, the Muslim courtesan,⁸ and the

⁶ The Frost Interview- Aishwarya Rai: The Return of the Queen?
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_brceGrUFk

⁷ "Aishwarya 'domesticated', says Big B" (<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/aishwarya-domesticated-says-big-b/32205-8.html>)

⁸ Meena Kumari (1932-1972), born Mahajabeen Bano, known as the 'Tragedy Queen', was famous for playing the role of the courtesan in *Pakeezah* (The Pure Heart) in the film of the same name (Kamal Amrohi, 1972). *Pakeezah* took 13 years to complete amid a troubled and tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce between the director Kamal Amrohi and Meena Kumari. It has since gone on to achieve both classic and cult status. Despite taking on a Hindu screen name, Meena Kumari as 'Pakeezah' embodied several traits of the courtesan figure in popular Indian cinema. Positioned as the 'other' of the ideal Hindu wife, the courtesan was an archaic, otherworldly symbol seeped in the dying embers of a decaying past. Her sexuality was constructed as a threat to the carefully controlled and disciplined sexuality of the Hindu wife and mother. The purpose of the Hindu woman's sexuality was procreation and not pleasure or eroticism like that of the Muslim courtesan. In many ways the Hindu wife/Muslim courtesan opposition spoke to the anxieties about women as actresses in the public/private spheres of 'national' life. Meena Kumari was able to destabilize this narrative by portraying both the

ambiguously ‘Western’ vamp.⁹ The actresses often portrayed singular ‘type’ across several films with occasional forays into a more ‘character-driven’ role. Rosie Thomas and Beheroze Gandhi (1991) were the first scholars to write about female stardom in India. They employed the concept of ‘potent femininity’ to understand the screen persona of three stars—Fearless Nadia, Nargis Dutt and Smita Patil, and argue for co-existing contradictory elements around these stars that diffuse the resistance to traditional notions of Indian femininity (in Mazumdar 2012). As pointed out earlier, most star texts of female actors in Bombay cinema articulate anxieties about ‘national culture’ and recall debates about the preservation of morality through its women as seen in Dixit’s example.

Madhuri Dixit emerged as a major female superstar in the 1990s and sparked debates about national culture, morality and anxiety (Ghosh, 1998). She is known and recognized by millions specifically for her dancing skills and faced legal charges for ‘vulgarity’ and ‘obscenity’ for her infamous song-and-dance sequence *Choli ke Peechey Kya Hai* (What’s behind your blouse?). Madhuri Dixit’s star persona was also defined by her appropriation of several roles in spaces traditionally reserved for the leading male actor. The film *Raja* (*King*, Indra Kumar, 1995) exemplified the extent of Dixit’s fandom in the country. As a pre-multiplex film without a significant male lead, it went on to become a blockbuster with several reviews claiming that the film should have been

traditional wife and the prostitute (as have other actresses like Nargis and Rekha) and ultimately structured a star text that interweaves Glehill’s (1991) ‘melodramatic mode’ both on and offscreen.

⁹ Helen (1938-) portrayed the quintessential vamp—a more vicious, sassy, and ‘western’ other of the ideal chaste Hindu heroine. She wore ‘westernized’ clothing, danced at cabaret bars and discotheques and often looked ‘foreign’ (had blonde hair, light eyes, wore short skirts). She smoked, drank alcohol, and usually concluded the narrative with a song sequence or a tragic death. Helen was the most famous vamp/dancing girl of the 60s and 70s. She was of Anglo-Burmese descent and her ‘un-Indian’ looks proved a huge hindrance for her becoming a leading lady. But her song-and-dance sequences were hugely popular and she has starred in over five hundred films. It is interesting to note that in recent years the ‘item girl’ has replaced the stereotypical vamp, with several leading actresses participating in a titillating, raunchy song-and-dance sequence, with little connection to the main plot or narrative of a film. These sequences often closely adhere to Laura Mulvey’s (1976) argument of the woman as spectacle and also Dyer’s description of the pin-up “as a social model, the pin-up promotes surface appearance and depersonalization, woman as sexual spectacle and sex-object” (50).

called 'Rani' (Queen) instead. A recent feature in *Prestige* magazine says about the actress,

Dixit is a fine example of the empowered Indian woman. She spent nearly two decades in Hindi films, rising through the ranks from supporting actress to queen of the marquee. She started out in largely forgettable flicks, but her prowess for song and dance—an essential ingredient in currying Indian cinematic flavour—ignited her career. Step by step, she caught the eye of directors and choreographers, who shone a spotlight on this remarkable danseuse. For the thousands who attended the 14th International Indian Film Academy Awards in Macau earlier this year, or the millions who saw the show telecast around the globe, Dixit's closing number brought the house down.

Madhuri Dixit's superstardom came at a time just before the privatization of Indian television, the granting of industry status to 'Bollywood' and the proliferation of Internet and mobile phones, which subsequently enabled the circulation of star images across several platforms in the country. She very much remained the queen of the single screens and a quiet and non-controversial public demeanour marked her adulation. She took a hiatus from the film world for an arranged marriage and domesticity and went into semi-retirement with her NRI husband in Denver, Colorado. There were often features about the idyllic and quiet 'home-life' of this erstwhile superstar and in several of these dialogues, Dixit, much like several other actresses, reiterated the joys of domesticity, she said in an interview to *Verve Magazine* in 2004,

I have carried my dance cassettes with me for practice, but otherwise, my day is filled with looking after the house, taking care of Arin (son) and waiting for Ram (husband) to get back...just as they show in the movies! I do all my house-work. There isn't too much dust, so you don't have to mop or swab every day. I manage fine with a household help who comes in once or twice a week. I do all the cooking; we don't go out all the time. My *dosas* turn out real perfect and I make them from scratch.

Her attempt at a comeback was with *Aja Nachle (Come on Dance, Anil Mehta, 2007)*, but it did not fare very well at the box office. It also lacked a male lead. She is now seen more prominently on both on the big and small screens as the judge of a reality television show modeled on the lines of *Dancing with the Stars* and is awaiting the release of two feature films, *Gulaab Gang* (Soumik Sen, forthcoming) and *Dedh Ishqiya*

(Abhishek Chaubey, 2014) which the actress feels are strong women-centric scripts with filmmakers who know what to do with a female actor above 40.¹⁰

Thus we see that Dixit's career trajectory followed the usual path outlined by Gandhi and Thomas (2001), a narrative that ultimately reinforces the return of the 'Indian woman' from the public domain of cinema to the private sphere of marriage, motherhood and housekeeping. Keeping the trajectories of their predecessors in mind, in my analysis of Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan, I suggest a possible realignment of several personas borne traditionally by the female star/star body in Bollywood, by situating them in the context of the multiplex cine-era in India. My study locates itself within the new spaces of production and consumption unleashed by globalization, in an atmosphere saturated by excessive media consumption across several old and new media technologies coupled with ideological changes regarding the position of women in Indian society. In the following two sections, I map the terrain of star persona construction for these two actors through a close analysis of their image/body circulation in the public discourse via interviews, criticisms, and commentaries in the English language press. The tensions that surround and dominate these discourses ultimately help us delineate that which constitutes the notion of the 'Indian' woman of the present times as she continues to reorient herself within grand narratives of the 'Indian nation', a concept that has been in constant flux in the face of globalization and neoliberalism.

Kareena Kapoor: 'My genre is bad films!'

Kareena Kapoor,¹¹ granddaughter of Hindi cinema's legendary thespian Raj Kapoor, comes from a family often heralded as the 'first family of Indian cinema'. From the

¹⁰ See <http://prestigehongkong.com/2013/09/certain-age>

¹¹ Her great grandfather Prithviraj Kapoor, grandfather Raj Kapoor, father Randhir Kapoor, uncles Rishi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, aunt Neetu Singh, mother Babita Kapoor, elder sister Karishma Kapoor were all successful actors ruling the roost in different decades of Hindi cinema, especially from the 40s to the 70s. Her cousin Ranbir Kapoor is one of the most

inception of her career, she stayed steadfastly in the public eye for her initial brashness and her Kapoor lineage, touted as the 'quintessential superstar',¹² synonymous with Hindi film royalty, glamour and arrogance. In the twelve years that she has spent in the industry, she established herself as the highest paid actress eventually creating widespread frenzy by displaying a size zero body (where she lost a significant amount of weight), which subsequently also led to her dietician Rujuta Diwekar becoming a minor celebrity. It also brought the term 'size zero' into the popular discourse in India.¹³ Kapoor often openly spoke of her relationships with fellow actors Shahid Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan,¹⁴ with her marriage to the latter in late 2012 being described by Wall Street Journal as the 'social event of the year' in India.¹⁵ After the wedding, she was known as a *Begum*,¹⁶ a term denoting royalty. After delivering a string of twelve flops, she called herself the only actress whose 'brand value increases with every flop' and told Bollywood A-List director Karan Johar on his talk show that her genre was bad films.¹⁷ Five years after this interview, Kareena Kapoor broke up with then boyfriend Shahid

successful young actors in the industry today, having garnered immense media attention both critically and commercially in only five years. Despite this long lineage, women in the Kapoor family were traditionally discouraged from being actresses, and both her mother and aunt quit the industry at very early stages of their careers after marriage to Kapoor brothers Randhir and Rishi (Chatterjee, Deenvi and Nihalani 2003). A failed marriage led their mother Babita Kapoor, to encourage her elder daughter Karishma Kapoor to act in films, followed by Kareena who debuted in 2000 starring with Amitabh Bachchan's son Abhishek Bachchan.

¹² "Koffee with Karan: Season 1 Kareena Kapoor and Rani Mukherjee," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZiL8h5nzco), video file, 45:22, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZiL8h5nzco>.

¹³ 'What's Eating Bollywood: The Size-Zero Trend' <http://bffc.ca/community/3031-what%E2%80%99s-eating-bollywood-the-size-zero-trend.html>, 'I Am Proud of Be India's Size Zero: Kareena Kapoor' <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/i-am-proud-to-be-indias-size-zero-kareena-kapoor/536676/>

¹⁴ Saif Ali Khan is popularly known in the industry as '*Chote Nawab*' (The Young King). He is the son of former Indian cricketer Mansoon Ali Khan Pataudi, also the last titular ruler of the Pataudi, in Haryana, India. His mother is Sharmila Tagore, grandniece of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and a popular 70s Hindi and Bengali film actress. Following the demise of his father, Saif Ali Khan was crowned 10th *Nawab of Pataudi*, as per the aspirations of the villagers, although the title holds no political significance from the Indian state (royal and princely titles were abolished in 1971). Saif therefore comes from a lineage of cricket, movies and royalty.

¹⁵ Rupa Subramanya, "Economics Journal: 'Saifeena' Wedding Follows a Trend," *India Realtime* (blog), entry posted October 17, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2012/10/17/economics-journal-saifeena-wedding-follows-an-indian-trend/>.

¹⁶ The Urdu word for the wife of a *Nawab*.

¹⁷ "Koffee with Karan: Season 1."

Kapoor after being paired opposite him in what has been called her career's best performance in the massively successful *Jab We Met* (*When We Met*, Imtiaz Ali, 2008). This coincided with the unveiling of her new size zero body in a bikini in *Taashan* (*Style*, Vijay Krishna Acharya, 2008). This was considered an especially 'bold' move for a Kapoor girl, as was her relationship with fellow actor Saif Ali Khan, ten years older, divorced and a father of two. Their very public live-in relationship attracted almost unprecedented media attention, primarily because this was the first instance of an actress publicly admitting to an otherwise taboo social norm in India. They have been called India's own Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and the couple has been popularly known by the moniker 'Saifeena'.

Since then, her body, her diet and exercise regimen, and her relationship have heavily defined Kareena's star persona. This was a significant departure from her early image, where she was mostly labeled an arrogant and brash star kid, repeatedly touting her lineage and taking digs at contemporary actresses (in an interview, her father, Randhir Kapoor, warned her not to talk like she was Shahrukh Khan).¹⁸ After her debut she had proclaimed that she wanted to be 'simple and Indian' in all of her films, but soon branched out into more glamorous diva roles and said, "I realize I can't be paid what I am for being draped from head to toe I've to be glamorous and seductive. That's what being a saleable heroine of today is all about".¹⁹ Her film roles often saw her starring in inconsequential bits with the Khans (Shahrukh, Salman, and Aamir), all three ringing the cash registers at the box office with their immense popularity among different fragments of the Indian audience. Despite this, a close analysis of Kareena Kapoor's several interviews over the decade reveals a persona caught between the paradoxes of being an actress and/or a star in a patriarchal industry. In the television talk show, *Koffee with Karan's* second season, filmed a couple of years after her famous comments about bad film genres being her forte, after three 'off-beat' films *Chameli* (Sudhir Mishra, 2003), *Dev* (Govind Nihalani, 2004) and *Omkara* (Vishal Bharadwaj, 2006) (playing a

¹⁸<http://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainmenttags/kareena-kapoor/kareena-kapoor-im-going-be-huge-staryou-wait-and-watch>

¹⁹ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news-interviews/The-importance-of-being-Kareena-Kapoor/articleshow/16277870.cms>

streetwalker, a Muslim riot victim, and Shakespeare's Desdemona in Othello's Hindi remake), that brought her critical acclaim as a performer, she said, "the easiest thing is to look pretty next to a big actor...that's not what I want to do".²⁰ In another interview, she proclaimed that she's "more interested in acting than being a star".²¹ However, in her conversation with Rajeev Masand, a film journalist with the news channel CNN-IBN, on being asked about her superfluous roles in several films she replied, "How many people are talking about an actresses' talent? I mean let's be honest"²². And finally to *Filmfare* magazine a few months before the release of her film *Heroine* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2012) (a self-claimed voyeuristic look inside the 'real' life of a fading Bollywood actress) she proclaimed

Let's face it. It's a male-dominated industry. Look at the *Ek Tha Tiger* (*Once there was a Tiger*, Kabir Khan, 2012) collections. We shouldn't try to compete with the actors and claim that actresses can carry a movie without them. Vidya Balan has done *Kahaani* and *The Dirty Picture*. Her films were a commercial success and they were good films. Hopefully, *Heroine* will be in the same league or maybe better. I've always maintained that box-office success is what counts. People don't care for your performance. If the men manage to get a larger number of people to see your film, I don't see why we should have a problem.²³

In all these interviews, Kapoor reveals the fundamental tensions surrounding the trajectory of the female star in India. While her film *Heroine* tried to portray the limited shelf life of an actress in a patriarchal industry, it ended up being a stereotypical caricature of Bollywood that met mostly with negative press and performed poorly at the

²⁰ "Koffee with Karan: Season 2- Kareena Kapoor and Shahid Kapoor," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-AZM8bByAE), video file, 44:51, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-AZM8bByAE>

²¹ "Kareena Kapoor on Koel's Couch," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRrq_R8cpPk), video file, posted by FilmiEntertainment, October 31, 2010, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRrq_R8cpPk.

²² "Rajeev Masand Interviews Kareena Kapoor on Turning 30 and Her New Priorities," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5AOpceuCog), video file, posted by Rajeev Masand, October 31, 2010, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5AOpceuCog>.

²³ Vivek Bhatia, "Kapoor: 'I've Given It My All,'" [Filmfare.com](http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/kareena-kapoor-ive-given-it-my-all-1273.html), last modified September 20, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/kareena-kapoor-ive-given-it-my-all-1273.html>.

box office.²⁴ While Kapoor has been able to garner acclaim for her beauty, her performances, and her dancing abilities, the overwhelming importance of the male star in commercial cinema remains paramount.

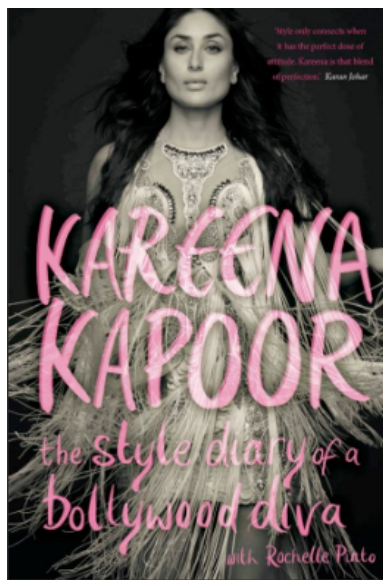


Kareena Kapoor, before and after her weight loss.
Photo courtesy- www.pinkvilla.com

Neepa Majumdar (2001) contends that when a star persona has been fixed in the public imagination, authenticated by specific screen roles, it becomes free of being anchored in specific film texts. “Stars then become public personae with little or no reference to cinema as an institution. In this way, a ‘star’ with only one successful film can remain in the public eye for years, even without any subsequent roles” (2001: 193). Christine Geraghty (2007) suggests that stars should be read both extratextually (across different platforms) and intertextually, (across different texts). Kareena Kapoor channeled what she calls the ‘national preoccupation’ with her figure and style in a book released in 2013, called *The Style Diary of a Bollywood Diva*. Here she exhibits herself as a fashion icon for young girls and women from ages fourteen to thirty five. The book is replete with photographs and revelations displaying her personal style when on vacation, photographs from her childhood and tips on how to eat well and stay thin. In her own words, it has “the right amount of information, a guide to every woman, whatever they

²⁴ <http://www.rediff.com/movies/review/review-heroine-is-unbelievably-trashy/20120921.htm>,
<http://www.firstpost.com/bollywood/movie-review-heroine-falls-flat-on-its-big-bad-bollywood-face-464635.html>

are looking out for, what they should wear to a movie, what to wear to a date, what to sleep in....”²⁵ In this book she also tackles the ‘size zero phenomena’ and says, “It’s not possible to have a model figure forever. At the end of the day, I’m an Indian Punjabi girl, I enjoy eating. I am happy being more curvaceous. I’m a happy girl”.²⁶ This new discourse on her stardom is reminiscent of the ways in which Linda Mizejewski (1999) discusses the impact of the Ziegfeld Girl in defining the ideal American womanhood, as a powerful symbol of sexuality, class, and consumerist desires. Kareena Kapoor’s book, heavily centered on her physical body, therefore addresses and advises this ‘New Indian Woman’ or the fantasy of functioning in an atmosphere of a post-liberalization global nation, where dates, movies, gowns, and a diet and exercise regimen is available to the ‘every girl’ who aspires to be like her.



Cover image of Kapoor’s book *The Style Dairy of a Bollywood Diva*

Mitra (2012) in her reading of the star texts of Aishwarya Rai and Shilpa Shetty²⁷ has pointed to the sacred space attributed to marriage, domesticity, and motherhood,

²⁵ "Kareena Kapoor at the Launch of 'The Style Diary of a Bollywood Diva,'" www.bollywoodhungama.com, video file, posted by Bollywood Hungama, February 7, 2013, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sd8gciefu1s>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Shilpa Shetty is a moderately successful Bollywood actress. She drew a lot of media attention after participating in *Celebrity Big Brother* in the UK, where her fellow housemates made racist remarks about her. Subsequently, she quit her film career and became an entrepreneur.

homologous with ideal 'Indianness' in both their public discourses. According to Majumdar (2001), Raj Kapoor's famous comments on his very public extramarital relationship with Muslim actress Nargis²⁸ in the 1930s-40s, sums up the dominant ideology (the public/private dichotomy) of female star discourses in Indian cinema since its inception. He said, his wife was not his actress and his actress was not his wife and that "one woman was the heroine of his films while the other was the mother of his children".²⁹ Kareena Kapoor's own live-in relationship and stand vis-à-vis motherhood reveals a rupture in this ideology. When asked about her rapport with her boyfriend Saif Ali Khan's children, she replied, 'They already have a mother. They don't need a mother. They need a friend'.³⁰ On the immense speculation of her impending wedding date, and whether she was already secretly married, her response was, "Rubbish! If I'm already married then has it affected my box-office status? Obviously not. I've given *Golmaal 3*, *3 Idiots*, *Bodyguard*, *RA.One*. I'm doing *Heroine* and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's next. It's been a dream run. Whether I'm married or not, how does it even matter? Marriage can wait".³¹ As several scholars (Majumdar 2001; Thomas 1991) have pointed out, the dominant strand in the discourse of a female star text is her personal life. Kapoor's

²⁸ Nargis, born Fatima Rashid, was a major star from 1948-1958, and is a fascinating example of the several dichotomies within which female stars have functioned in Bombay cinema. Nargis starred in seventeen romantic films with Raj Kapoor and spent several years in the public eye as the 'other woman' in Kapoor's life. Their affair was well known in popular discourse and their on-screen pair brought legendary success to RK Films, Kapoor's production house. In 1957, Nargis opted out of his company and starred in Mehmood Khan's epic *Mother India*. In this film she portrayed a staunchly moral, virtuous, self-sacrificing 'ideal woman' in different phases of a lifetime from marriage to motherhood and domesticity eventually culminating in her becoming the 'mother' figure for the village and killing her own delinquent son. Her star discourse after this film saw a nullification of her early persona and designated it entirely into a comfortable national narrative of a suffering, universal, passionate, sacrificing mother. Paroma Roy writes that *Mother India* 'fixes and monumentalizes a notoriously unstable star text' (1998:154), thereby making the figure of the national Hindu mother so literal that acting itself became impossible after this role. Her death in 1981 was mourned nationwide and it was indeed hard to tell that Nargis was indeed a Muslim woman not from a very 'respectable family' (her mother was a courtesan-dancer) and had conducted a very public affair with a much married man before she became Mother India/Mrs.

²⁹ Raj Kapoor made this statement to a journalist in 1973 (in Majumdar 2001).

³⁰ "Koffee with Karan: Season 3- Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIqNQ9iK9F0), video file, 40:19, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIqNQ9iK9F0>.

³¹ Vivek Bhatia, "Heroine Addiction," *Filmfare.com*, last modified April 23, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/heroine-addiction-366.html>.

comment therefore reveals a fairly radical departure from contemporaries Rai and Shetty, whose star texts read as attempts to constantly mold the 'global' and 'modern' Indian woman with several reaffirmations to matrimony and motherhood (Mitra 2012).

The current Bollywood star formula is a transmedia celebrity, a brand entity, and in essence encompasses tensions that spill far out of their cinematic image (Mitra 2012). Though Kareena Kapoor is absent on Twitter and other social networking sites, her book, several brand endorsements, and the launching of a clothing line with the global garment chain Globus, firmly situates her in Geharty's intertextual map. While her stardom still primarily draws from the cinematic idiom—more than being defined by entrepreneurial ventures like that of Shilpa Shetty's³²—it encompasses several changes in the discourse of female stardom. Factors like the overt display of the body, and being a 'showpiece' in several male dominated blockbusters, coupled with the little difference between her personas portrayed on and off screen, all conform to Laura Mulvey's (1975) contentions of the woman as a spectacle, pandering to the desires of the heterosexual male audience. In her extra-filmic ventures there is also the continuous celebration of hegemonic femininity for women, couched in rhetoric of empowerment, consumer citizenship, flexibility, and success with fashion and beauty being sanctified as the new authoritative regime, confirming to postfeminist ideas. Post-feminism is defined as this kind of female individualism that finds acceptance in mainstream society, replacing collective feminist politics, because it is non-threatening to a neoliberal economic system (McRobbie 2009). There is also an element of naturalization and authenticity given to this idealized femininity that erases or makes invisible the labour (like diet, exercise, makeup etc) involved in such performances (Weber 2009, Allen 2011, in Keller 2013). In Kareena's case however, there is emphasis on the labour of stardom and the maintenance of a perfect body. In fact, her book *The Style Diary...* details her yearlong process of diet, her exercise and skincare regime, and the number of specialists

³² Shilpa Shetty is a Bollywood actress who featured in a number of films from 1993-2007. She was not a major A-list actor, but her fame mostly came from her participation in UK's *Celebrity Big Brother*, where fellow participant Jane Goody made racist comments against her. She became very popular in the United Kingdom following her appearance on this reality show that she then went on to win. She partially owns a cricket team, Rajasthan Royals, that plays in the IPL (Indian Premier League) and she is married to entrepreneur Raj Kundra.

involved in her achieving a size zero body. She also states that despite the 'perfect body shape', she had to sit through several hours of make-up and other rigorous labour to do the now famous bikini scene where she unveiled her new body.



Kareena Kapoor in a print ad for Sony Viao 'size zero' laptops.

In the case of Kareena Kapoor, one sees her actively remaining within the contours of a hegemonic discourse, fuelled by hardcore commercialism, but retaining an independence in managing a public persona devoid of aspirations of motherhood, or any hints of a post nuptial ending of her career, unlike her predecessors. She asserted, "I don't think he [Saif Ali Khan] wants me to change, put on a heavy sari or something. Because that's not what he loves me for. I am known as an actor first, and then a *Begum*".³³ Her decision to make public her live-in relationship was also an incongruous decision for a leading female actor, and her unabashed proclaiming of herself as 'Heroine No.1',³⁴ feeling no threat from any of her contemporaries helps in confusing the discourse of the 'ideal feminine' propagated by the female star in Bollywood.

Vidya Balan: 'Let the Khans add Balan to their names'

³³ "Kareena Kapoor at the Launch."

³⁴ "Koffee with Karan: Season 3"

Vidya Balan, thirty-five, is widely considered to be an anomaly among her peers in Bollywood.³⁵ She has been variously labeled the 'leading lady with balls', 'female hero', and the 'fourth Khan' in Bollywood.³⁶ After debuting in a critically acclaimed period film *Parineeta* (Pradeep Sarkar, 2005), Balan struggled to find a foothold in an industry where she evidently did not conform to the stereotypical body type of the new millennium. After a string of unsuccessful films at the box office, she was heavily criticized in the press for her weight and clothing style, with screaming headlines, such as "Look! It Does Matter!", "The Worst Dressed Actor of 2007", and "What was Vidya Balan Thinking?"³⁷ From 2009 to 2012, her fortunes changed completely when she starred in five consecutive critically and commercially successful films, four of them without any significant male leads. Stars are often seen in similar roles and are thus often typecast for genre identification. While several stars have tried to resist the pitfalls associated with this, it is especially hard for the female stars to find a host of different roles to portray in predominantly male-driven narratives of commercial Hindi cinema. Vidya Balan's star persona presents an incongruity in this regard.

Balan won the industry's popular awards for best actress, the *Filmfare* and *Screen* awards, four times successively and the country's highest cinematic honour, the National Award for her performance in *The Dirty Picture* (Milan Luthria, 2011). She simultaneously transformed her public look and style by only appearing in designer saris, garnering praises for displaying the 'true persona of an Indian woman' making it to several best-dressed lists in fashion magazines.³⁸ In *The Dirty Picture*, she played an overweight sex siren from 80s B-grade South Indian films, Silk Smitha, a choice that was met with enormous positive press for her courage to accept such a role and for

³⁵ Aastha Banan, "The Leading Lady with Balls," *www.openthemagazine.com*, last modified August 18, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/art-culture/the-leading-lady-with-balls>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Aakash Wadhwa, "Look, It Does Matter!," *www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com*, last modified September 14, 2008, accessed April 9, 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-09-14/news-interviews/27891870_1_vidya-balan-parineeta-kismat-konnection. ; Rediff, "The Year That Was 2007: The Worst Dressed Actresses," *www.rediff.com*, last modified December 4, 2007, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://specials.rediff.com/yearend/2007/dec/04yractress1.htm>.

³⁸ Nona Walia, "Is Vidya Balan Trapped in a Sari?," *www.timesofindia.com*, last modified April 26, 2012.

displaying a body type that defied norms of conventional beauty. *Kahaani* (*Story*, Sujoy Ghosh, 2012), a crime thriller, followed this film where she played a heavily pregnant woman in search of her missing husband. The commercial success of these two films in particular brought laurels for her acting skills and willingness to take on 'women-centric' roles, and managed to steer Balan's star discourse in directions markedly different from those that have traditionally dominated the image of the female star in India.

Marian Keane (1993), in her criticism of Richard Dyer, argues that stars must be understood in relation to the wider set of beliefs about personal identity that exist for the culture in which the star image circulates. Therefore, her focus on cultural conditions as an important entry into star studies is significant, and is addressed by Dyer (1986) in his study of Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s. Dyer discusses the preeminent place of sexuality in American culture of that era, already circulating in public discourse through a number of channels, and sees Monroe as a star that both embodied and capitalized upon this dominant preoccupation by naturalizing sexuality. Similarly in his reading of Jane Fonda (1998) he argues that her stardom was defined by a radical femininity that overlapped with ordinary *Americanness*, and helped to simultaneously redefine norms of female sexuality and reaffirm heterosexuality. These dialogues between cultural star readings are helpful in understanding the popularity of a particular female star in a specific time period. Like Monroe's overt sexuality and childish demeanour often overlapped, I argue that in the case of Vidya Balan, her 'unconventional' on-screen persona coincides with her off-screen domesticity, thereby blurring lines between moral/immoral, public/domestic in a timeframe that is constantly grappling with redefinitions of such concepts. In some ways then, Balan's public image helps to manage the age-old anxiety that has plagued Indian modernity—of becoming 'too western' at the cost of tradition.

Most of this star discourse has centered on Balan representing what is 'real' and 'authentic' in Indian women and redefining the Hindi film heroine. In an article titled, "Why Vidya Balan Rules" that appeared late in 2011, two months after the release of the *The Dirty Picture*, journalist Vir Sanghvi wrote:

In an industry full of size zero figures, dancing bimbettes, and self-consciously trendy bejeaned muppets, Vidya comes off as a breath of fresh air. Basically, it's this simple: she is a real person. Everything about her is real: the curves, the little roll of fat that she makes no attempt to hide, the clothes that she chooses herself, the roles that she agonizes over before finally selecting one that suits her, the hard work she puts into each performance and then into the promotion, and most of all, the guts she demonstrates in finding her own path against the advice of nearly everybody in Bollywood.³⁹

The article then goes on to stress her middle class upbringing, her education, her long struggle to be an actress and her utmost dedication to her profession. "...We respect her risks. We admire her resilience".⁴⁰ In 2012, *Verve Magazine* named Balan one of India's most powerful young women and wrote, "In a reel world peopled by size zero-toned bodies and pretty-as-a-picture heroines, Balan comes across as completely real and natural—a woman who has followed her own instincts and dared to live her destiny by being her own person and not morphing herself to fit into any conventional slot".⁴¹

³⁹ Vir Sanghvi, "Why Vidya Balan Rules," *www.hindustantimes.com*, last modified December 17, 2011, accessed April 9, 2013. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/Why-Vidya-Balan-rules/Article1-783531.aspx>

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Shirin Mehta and Nasrin Modak, "Young Power Women," *www.verveonline.com*, last modified June 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.verveonline.com/109/people/power-women.shtml>.



Vidya Balan at Cannes 2013, in her signature 'Indian look'.
Photo courtesy- www.idiva.com

Balan's contemporaries and leading actresses Kareena Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra both have credited her with having changed the face of the Hindi film heroine. When asked in an interview how she feels about being given this mantle, Balan emphasized the changing social climate of the country. She said,

I think that's a huge compliment. But I will say that it is the times we are in. The time when Indian cinema, Hindi cinema began to veer towards bolder choices and the time when I decided to follow my heart and do exactly what I wanted to do, they coincided. There are lots of things happening, the woman, the Indian woman, is coming into her own more and more now. Even with what's been happening with all the rapes, the kind of outrage we are seeing now, we've never seen before. I think there is this goddess power rising. It's our time.⁴²

After the tremendous success of *The Dirty Picture*, the producer of the film Ekta Kapoor suggested in a press conference that Vidya Balan should change her name to Vidya Balan Khan, as only the three top male actors (Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir Khan) are

⁴² "Rajeev Masand Interviews Vidya Balan," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TJA_brL8Ms), video file, posted by Rajeev Masand, January 26, 2013, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TJA_brL8Ms.

able to garner such financial turnovers from their films. To this remark, Vidya replied, "Let the Khans add Balan to their names".⁴³



Promotional poster for Balan's film *The Dirty Picture*.

For female celebrities, the body becomes a crucial site for performing femininity. This is usually articulated through postfeminist hegemonic markers, characterized by a slim and hairless body, long hair, clear skin, dressed in fashionable, expensive, and trendy clothing (Mc.Robbie, 2009; Keller 2013). In Vidya Balan's star discourse, authenticity has mostly been articulated as inherently 'Indian' despite the seeming rupture between her on and off screen personas. This is also because her choice of roles has veered more towards characters that require her to present herself in ethnic Indian clothing as opposed to Kapoor. She has played a sexually manipulative woman on two occasions (*Ishqiya*, Abhishek Chaubey, 2010; *The Dirty Picture*), touted again as a first for a mainstream Hindi film heroine. "I cannot think of a single other heroine who would play a role in which her character to get ahead slept with a man!"⁴⁴ In fact, Balan herself stated:

⁴³ Aakansha Swarup and Surya Singh, "Vidya Suggests Khans Add Balan to Their Names," *www.indiatoday.in*, last modified December 8, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/vidya-suggests-khans-to-add-balan-to-their-names/1/163346.html>.

⁴⁴ Sanghvi, "Why Vidya Balan Rules," *www.hindustantimes.com*.

I think films are finally humanizing women. They are not being made into holier-than-thou images or being portrayed as Goddesses to be put on a pedestal. It's just that it's only now that filmmakers are showcasing the other shades of women and not labeling them vamps just because they are assertive of their desires or not afraid to flaunt their sexuality.⁴⁵

However, the predominant dialogue on her personal life sees a constant emphasis on her 'middle class roots', her 'humble beginnings', the fact she lived with her parents till her recent marriage, and her frequent public appearances in saris, replete with ethnic jewellery over dresses or gowns all collating to create an 'authentic Indian woman' persona. The actress says, "I discovered the sari again; I hadn't worn one for so long. I was born a woman who was trying to be a girl. I could only be a woman. And that changed things. Now heroines can be women. I am at a stage where I am free of any kind of pressure".⁴⁶ This speaks to Richard Dyer's contentions about the importance of stars in understanding social history and their role in the complex relationship between reality and representation. He writes, "[s]tardom is an image of the way stars live. For the most part, this generalized lifestyle is the assumed backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of her/his life. As it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary...love, marriage and sex are constants of the image" (35). Her 'authenticity' therefore is decisively eastern and 'Indian', associated with the 'real woman' as opposed to western Hollywood imports like anorexic bodies and Barbie doll faces. Thus the construction of Balan's 'private' public life presents a breach from the kind of roles she plays on screen.

⁴⁵ Akanksha Naval, "I'm Happy Being Called a Heroine: Vidya Balan," www.dnaindia.com, last modified December 9, 2011, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/1623410/report-im-happy-being-called-a-heroine-vidya-balan>.

⁴⁶ Banan, "The Leading Lady with Balls," www.openthemagazine.com; Walia, "Is Vidya Balan Trapped," www.timesofindia.com.



Vidya Balan and Siddharth Roy Kapur, soon after their wedding.
Photo Courtesy- www.ndtv.com

Therefore in Balan's case, we see the combination of a critically and commercially acclaimed female star in the sphere of performance, tied to an image of 'authentic Indianness', cemented by her recent 'traditional and simple' marriage to head of UTV Productions, Siddharth Roy Kapur. This stands in stark contrast to her recent choice of roles and decision to push the envelope for what is considered to be 'acceptable' for an Indian woman to do on screen (portray an overweight B-grade soft porn actress for instance, unafraid of flaunting her sexual appetite). What is also significant here is the covert distinction made between what is deemed acceptable for a typical 'authentic Indian body type' as opposed to a more 'global body' which someone like Aishwarya Rai is constantly expected to display. This duality in the discourses surrounding Balan's weight (celebrated as authentic) and Rai's post-partum weight gain (criticized as unwelcome for a global face) speaks directly to national anxieties being written on the bodies of female stars. In the case of Kareena Kapoor, we see the juxtaposition of inconsequential roles with a hyper visible personal life, in which several of her choices like a live-in relationship and openness about boyfriends seems 'un-Indian'.⁴⁷ As one of

⁴⁷ Traditionally female actors in India did not speak publicly about relationships or affairs. They also denied living-in with their partners outside of marriage, drinking alcohol or smoking.

the leading actresses in Hindi and Bengali films of the 1970s and her real-life mother-in-law Sharmila Tagore⁴⁸ said:

In my time, although there were a few progressive films, most were stereotypical. Acting wasn't considered a good profession for women. Also, women were considered to be homemakers and if married, couldn't find work. Today, an actress has much to do. Look at Vidya Balan in *Kahaani* or *The Dirty Picture* and Kareena (Kapoor) in *Jab We Met* and *Heroine*. Nobody can force them to do something against their will. Actresses smoke, drink, have live-in relationships and do not conform to societal norms. The scenario for them has become pleasantly democratic.⁴⁹

In one of her films, *We are Family* (Siddharth Malhotra, 2011) an official remake of Hollywood hit *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998) we see Kapoor stepping into Julia Robert's shoes, for a role that is similar to the constructions of her own star image and her relationship with Saif Ali Khan and his children. Yet, what defines Kapoor's star persona is this apparent 'honesty' (traditionally not seen in very many female actors before): willingness to talk to the press about her relationships, announcing herself as the best, and often even refusing films with A-list directors because she was dissatisfied with her salary.⁵⁰ What remains constant however, is the emphasis on her body. There have been speculations that Kapoor has surgically enhanced her jaw line and this,

⁴⁸ Interestingly, Sharmila Tagore was the first Indian actress to pose for a magazine cover in a bikini in 1966. Recalling the experience the actress said, "Oh! God, how conservative our society was back then! I've no idea why I did that shoot. It was just before I got married. I remember when I showed the two-piece bikini to photographer, Dhiraj Chawda, he asked me, "Are you sure about this?" In some of the shots, he even asked me to cover my body. He was more worried than I was but I had no qualms doing that shoot. Only when people started reacting strongly to the cover, was I taken aback. I was puzzled as to why they didn't like the picture. I thought I looked nice. Some called it a deliberate move to grab eyeballs; others termed me as 'astutely uncanny'. I hated that. Maybe, there was an exhibitionist in me, as I was young and excited to do something different. But people perceived me to be this awful person. I didn't want such a reputation. So I began to choose my films carefully. Within a few years, people began to take me seriously".

⁴⁹ <http://idiva.com/news-entertainment/sharmila-tagore-actresses-today-can-drink-smoke-and-live-in/20034>

⁵⁰ She famously refused Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2008) opposite Shahrukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan, because she claimed she was being paid 'peanuts'. The film went on to be a massive success both at home and among the diaspora, with Kapoor regretting her decision and apologizing to the director on his chat show for refusing the film.

coupled with the labour involved in maintaining a zero size body, makes her body denaturalized.

In conclusion, I suggest that such a visible personal biography that obsessively records the changes of a female star's physicality influences public perception and ownership regarding her 'body' in the audience imagination. Kapoor and Balan represent the two dichotomous faces of contemporary 'Indian modernity', a desire to hold on to purist traditions and celebrate 'realness' with Balan and at the same time be able to offer a more globally consistent/westernized image in the form of Kapoor. In different ways then, these actresses speak to and negotiate the several tensions in post-liberalized India. They encompass a multitude of ways in which visual excess and cultural anxiety about 'morality' and 'modernity' can be negotiated and articulated in contradictory discourses on female stardom.

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