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EVERYTHING I TOUCH TURNS PINK

I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else. --James Baldwin, Autobiographical Notes

We would watch old Hindi film programs on rainy Saturday mornings. I was convinced that if only my parents had raised me in India my life would have been fine, better than fine--spectacular--eventful, full of dancing and coquetry; dancing and coquetry on roller skates at snazzy Bombay rooftop parties, dancing and song and coquetry in the snowy Himalayan foothills.

When Papa and Mama first decided to settle in Chicago they disentangled their future offspring from our history. When I married a black and Jewish Californian and moved to the West Coast, I drifted further, now removed from my parents, sole purveyors of Indian culture in my life. Papa and Mama, though, were “modern” among their generation: an artist and a musician who fell in love, moved to America simply for adventure, and chanced to become a teacher and an accountant. They had a variety of interests--they were global citizens who spoke many languages fluently, good-lifers who entertained a variety of friends and occasionally prepared Indian meals for them. We spent weekends in Chinatown or eating breaded steak by the lake and our only religious traditions were those of the international brotherhood of Jehovah’s Witnesses. We smiled at Indians when we saw them at the grocery store but there ended our conversation with the diaspora.
I would eat alone at Indian restaurants. Bollywood lovers would leap across the flat-screen in the bar and I would revel in their reveries, hum along to lyrics I could not translate but understood from my depths. I would go to Indian restaurants alone because I didn’t feel like explaining tandoori to friends. Or hearing my Californian explain tandoori to friends and neighboring tables, resident expert as one married to an Indian (-American from the Midwest). I would order rice and dhal and scoop it up with papadum (A bizarre method of eating Indian food, inauthentic and not to be imitated). The dhal would sink in a comforting lump, warming my belly and soul, and then I would gulp scalding chai and write feverishly on my napkin to keep from crying.

So why would I start to cry while sitting at Khanna Peena or Vik’s or that place on College Avenue, watching gentle parents kissing their little babies, feeding them little rice balls? The Bollywood lovers would make me particularly wistful; the scent of cardamom and warm milky tea and my place among a throng of brown people unleashed some crush of emotion like grief inside me. Why did I have to go to an Indian restaurant for something more than dhal, why did I hope so intently that the soft Goan waiter would make conversation with me, ask me questions, offer solace, say something to settle my despair?

I have always lived in American cities and while I travel extensively I have visited India only several times. I can find no excuse for such a complicated, compulsive attachment to India. My upbringing has left me without real grasp of Indian languages and as John Stuart Mill wrote, “Without knowing the language of a people, we never really know their thoughts, their feelings, and their type of character.” Perhaps my affections are misplaced. Yet they persist. I even took the Californian to India and realized that since he didn’t love India, there were many parts of me
that he could not love. This defining realization was bound up in many realizations that finally urged me to leave him. I have no more reason to essay India than I have to write on Chicago or the experience of being female, or the sensitivities of the artist. But India and Indian-ness remain my constant source material. India by turns hounds me or plagues me or enthralls me. I write in, on, and around India. I am preoccupied by India. In fact, everything I touch turns pink. “Pink,” said Diana Vreeland, “is the navy blue of India.”

Only several times! On what authority do I write about India?! Perhaps by the authority conferred upon me by those strangers who demand of me authentic recipes, shopping recommendations, and exotic tall tales of my presumed past. My Chicago-based enunciation with the mild inflections of my British-educated Indian parents will be admired as a lovely foreign accent, my surprising command of the English language commended. When confronted with a full-lipped, dark-skinned appearance like mine these curious Americans consistently draw from two media-based expectations: In her essay “Race, Ethnicity and Film,” Robyn Wiegman says, “For non-white females, the stereotype oscillates between a nurturing, de-sexualized, loyal figure and a woman of exotic, loose, and dangerous sexuality: from O-Lan in The Good Earth to Hue Fei in Shanghai Express or from Mammy in Gone With the Wind to Epiphany Proudfoot in Angel Heart.” Do I regard my situation with bitterness? Tremendous. Bitterness. I often succumb to these artificial personae, enduring an eating-me-alive bitterness difficult to relieve and suffering for much of my life with symptoms of neurotic disturbance as anxiety and melancholy. Yet, to their credit, the East that Americans seek in me may be something rooted in the Jungian psychic inheritance, the collective unconscious, the source of which I have been detached.
In *Psyche and Symbol*, Carl Jung describes the collective unconscious as a mental record of the ancestors’ experiences, explaining, “The mind is not born as a tabula rasa. Like the body, it has its pre-established individual definiteness; namely, forms of behavior. They become manifest in the ever-recurring patterns of psychic functioning.” I function with a consciousness inherited from a place I have never lived. I use my Eastern inheritance to slay Western dragons, the notion of dignity my greatest, most silent weapon.

My position as a young hyphenated American appearing to society with a visage cultivated by 6,000 years of Indian history and a consciousness/unconsciousness just as deep has influenced my personal sense of individuation. The process of individuation includes a psychological discovery of those elements that make one unique from other members of society. While the standard American fat kid, sporty kid, and pretty kid all take their cues from the community’s appreciation of their personal areas of emphasis, distinct aspects of my personality--music enthusiast, artist, kind-hearted softy--are eclipsed. My prevailing named quality remains my designation as an Indian: “So what are you? Where are you from? Tell me about the Kama Sutra.”

Over 25 years, such a consistent interest in what I am rather than who I am has induced me to take on India as my mode of individuation in a blackwhitelatino America. India, of those summer vacations, India where my parents led unconventional lives. I am more INDIA than my parents ever were because as a marginal American, defined by my marginality during crucial stages of psychological development, my very identity has been tied up in my Indian appellation. I gather India factoids, prepare to answer questions about population and per capita income and malaria and palaces. I defend India to the death because India c’est moi. Unhealthy as it sounds,
India inhabits my unconscious, my subconscious; wide-eyed India features in my countenance.

To apply Jung’s terms generally, India dominates my animus--my center of ambition and creativity, my shadow--source of my rage, my persona--my social personality, and, sadly, my method of individuation. India! That’s my banner but I do not feel sufficiently informed. So I read books and watch movies and concoct authoritative answers.

Dhal does sing to my soul, though, calling forth a Proustian flood of memory. In his overture to *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust writes, “The smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.” The neuroses I suffer relate to the amplified sensitivities of the artist. In his book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung observes that artists have the “primordial vision,” a special sensitivity to archetypal patterns and a talent for speaking in universal images to make their inner worlds intelligible through art. Host to such a vibrant inner world, the artist will “resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression.” A desire to communicate guides the artist, as “the primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed, and therefore requires mythological imagery to give it form.” Art creates meaning where none previously existed and the identification of archetypes and concrete imagery helps to organize the pool of concepts artists seek to define.

I have the task of defining unfathomable emotions. An archetypal approach helps bring shape and structure to the human experience, fashioning orderly units, a Platonic ordering of chaos. With a systematic archetypal study of film, literature, and family lore, I aim to look to the past--to describe and encapsulate my inheritance, my progenitors and their values, my history--so
I may face the future without bleary eyes full of inexplicable tears. As Baz Luhrman described his motivation to create the personal ode to his homeland, *Australia*, “Once a story is told, it is--and then you can move on.”

I must move on. But first I must reign in some persistent questions. For one, do I prefer a properly airy, crisp biscotti to all other cookies because my mother enjoys rusk, and does she enjoy rusk because wealthy Indians appreciated the things the British cherished, and did the British eat rusk in India because the 16th century Portuguese...From where are my artistic choices born? Everything I touch turns pink...
Film, after all, is more than mere celluloid. It is socially constructed within a three-cornered association between filmmakers, film spectators, and the film texts themselves, and at every point in that nexus of relationships we encounter negotiation and interaction involving active social beings and institutionalized social practices.--Andrew Tudor, “Sociology and Film”

As a bit of tea-soaked madeleine summoned Marcel’s memories of holidays in Combray, the aroma of sandalwood soap, simply cooked lentils, and hot sweet milk with a cream skin call up the general sensation of one period I spent in India. Sparing my kind father from her hormonal vicissitudes, my pregnant and homesick mother left Chicago for the duration of her pregnancy and took me along to her maternal house. There she was properly pampered and I was entertained by a merry cast of characters from a world to which I belonged, all of us in giddy anticipation of my sister’s birth. Like those “sonorous, fragrant, limpid hours” Proust’s protagonist spent in the country, the time I spent as an only child suddenly plunged into a warm extended family continues to affect and color my life. I cling to the sense of security,
contentment, and connection I sensed in what was, for six months, my world instead of the one I so lightly inhabit. So shocked I was by our return to America that when I saw my own sweet father I blinked at him frankly and said, “I’m shy of you.” The people of that faraway land were very different from the quiet wintry Chicago to which we returned, and if I was borne of that world then I was forever very different too.

My understanding of humankind derives from a plurality of sources: The Benneton metropolitan America of my youth, discriminatory suburbia of the following years, literature and popular media of my generation, and the expressions and values of my parents. This last fount remains invisible to me while the others are a result of physical, extended, first-hand experience. The India I visit today is over thirty years removed from my parents’ last days there. Just as postcolonial Indians maintain certain archaisms of the departed British Raj that are now defunct in UK society, the specific heritage I received remains buried beneath thirty layers of anthropological evolution. I recognize the sweeping Bombay boulevards of my mother’s youth and the brand of particularly suave angry young men my uncles were only in the movies.

Postcolonial theorist Rey Chow recommends film study as a method for identifying societal character saying, “The iconoclastic, portable imprints of filmic images and the metropolitan, migratory constitution of their audiences mean that film is always a rich means of...
exploring cultural crisis--of exploring culture itself as a crisis.”
I see my grandfather’s progressivism in Raj Kapoor of the Hindi classics, a quality absent from the reactionary patriarchs of current cinema. I realize the rebel my father was (pursuing rock music, skipping continents, mortifying his family by changing his religion for love) when comparing his choices to the relatively diplomatic ones made by the film heroes of his time. Cinema reveals that era of my parents and grandparents, serving as a gauge and mirror to their style, values, and choices. In his essay, “Issues in World Cinema,” Wimal Dissayanake writes, “Film is not an isolated art form, it inhabits a common expressive culture fed by tradition, cultural memory, and indigenous modes of symbolic representation.” Cinema reveals a history I feel and sorely wish to see, a story I could not linearly continue having grown up so far away from its millennial setting.

Contemporary Indian cinema allows me to see the aesthetic of what would have been my generation had my parents stayed, as it dramatizes the prevailing fads, desires, anxieties. Delhi 6 most recently reflects my specific context as it follows Roshan, a naive New Yorker, on a coming-of-age experience that moves him to settle in India, a brave step I often contemplate. In my earliest saddest movie moment, I recall a Malayali girl’s doll being thrown into the sea--she dives after it, never to be seen again. I was five and looked like the little girl and continue to identify with that sort of romantic fatalism, but I am not here interested in what might have been mine. I am interested in examining and seizing the obscured legacy that throbs in me.
Facets of my South Indian ancestry are exemplified in the archetypal characters of classic Hindi and Malayalam cinema. The archetypes, universal templates, exhibit patterns of behavior I comprehend as a fellow human, yet their unique manifestation in the Indian environment reveal the origin, mind, and character of a people—projections of their expectations, aspirations, fears, and values—what Oxford’s *Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* describes as a racial memory or “predispositions to respond in similar ways to certain stimuli.” Archetypal interpretation uncovers the way in which a people make sense of their particular circumstances and organize their shared experience. While psychoanalytical film writer Barbara Creed states that Jung’s theory of archetypes has never been widely used in cinema because “it applies the universal to the subjective,” film criticism stands to gain from it since such universalization of the specific remains the ultimate appeal of great art; the goal of writers, artists, and auteurs.

The films analyzed here are not of the art house variety; as Graeme Turner observes, “for cultural studies, it was the popularity of popular cinema itself that was so interesting.” Social anthropologist Rosie Thomas describes dominant mainstream Hindi cinema as actually “opposed” by the art films of international acclaim. For my purposes, I prefer mainstream Hindi cinema to the grim avant-garde as I have always associated the escapist musical spectacle with the India of my parents’ comfortable experience. My mother attended Bombay Scottish parochial school with the children of film stars and in the casual, easy existences of Bollywood families I find my gaudy history, my family, and early on I determined to love the bombast because it was mine.

When studying film as portrait of a culture’s core, Indians’ own representations of themselves must be examined—not the depiction of Indian characters as they appear in Western
media. Robyn Weigman identifies the “homogenized figure of the Asian-American” in Hollywood and a portrayal of non-whites as static, one-dimensional, and cliched. They are expected to put on broad gestural performances, represent polarities of good or bad, and impart the essence of a foreign people in relation to the dominant American culture. Homi Bhaba has described the impact of such casting upon even an informed public, saying, “Knowledge of the inaccuracy of the stereotype does not forestall the political effect of the stereotype.” These characterizations feed a sort of internalized racism in minorities--as one who has engaged primarily with American media, through the years the characters for whom I feel responsible and to whom I am most related physically are Seinfeld's Babu, Apu of The Simpson's quickie-mart, and, more recently, evil terrorists. Of the recent inclusion of American Idol Sanjaya Malakar and Kal Penn in Harold and Kumar go to White Castle, Pitzer sociology professor Dipa Basu says, “There’s still not that complete kind of acceptance and inclusion because there is that notion of hilarity, spectacle.”

Growing up, I was without an image of myself, left with no cultural force to organize the experience of life. I pursued art, constantly trying to define for myself the unique position between cultures, attempting to refine potentially negative, destructive qualities into artistic attributes and poetic sensibility. I sought out the
work of non-curricular hyphenated writers Amy Tan, Richard Rodriguez, and Sandra Cisneros, convincing myself that all this hurt, this constant, restless quiver, was of advantage, giving one perspective. Within the past few years, Jhumpa Lahiri has begun articulating the realities of the space where I live. Her writing becomes a catharsis--her characters’ inner struggles and mine finally visible and so grab-able and possible to resolve. A theme emerges in her work: No matter how extraordinarily perplexing it may be, acceptance of what came before leads to acceptance and understanding of oneself now.

Faux Bollywood Slumdog Millionaire, directed by Danny Boyle, won the Oscar for Best Picture of 2008, while authentically Indian film remains marginal in an American context. In Asian countries, however, which make up over a third of the world population, it has been consistently demanded over indigenous, Hollywood, or domestic political cinema. India dominates global film production, according to Rosie Thomas in her essay “Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity,” and remains “resistant to the cultural imperialism of Hollywood [. . .] thematically and structurally distinctive despite its influence,” addressing the different needs and expectations of an Eastern audience. She describes the Indian film’s emphasis on emotion rather than tight narrative and warns critics not to compare Hollywood to the universe of Indian films--where elements of high melodrama, blatant fantasy, and stylization are accepted while transgressions in moral code are not. Song sequences augment each story and reveal yearnings of characters bound by a society full of code and censure. A variety of elements--influence of Parsi plays and folk tradition, the Indian’s desire to identify with the opulence of pre-colonial existence, the mainstream audience’s appetite for escape from daily struggle--result in a body of lush
production between opera and circus where scenes are orchestrated to ensure “clapworthiness” and repeat viewings. My father, a Bombay cinema non-fan admits to visiting the theater seven times for the 1973 film Bobby, a hit that inspired others to enthusiastically return 40 to 50 times. A key to understanding the structure of a typical Indian film includes an observation of audience interaction with characters. Otherwise mild-mannered families visit the theater together and noisily whistle, cheer, and admonish the actors onscreen. In his essay, “Make Mine Movies,” Bombay poet Adil Jussawalla remembers, “Once the film got going my father would get involved in the action perhaps more than anyone else, punctuating the goings-on on screen with whoops and cries. Suddenly, on occasion, he would rise from his seat in an attempt to ward off a sword [. . .]” Rey Chow uses the term “suture” to describe audience identification with filmic characters, a relationship clearly manifest in the reciprocations of a typical Indian audience. I make deliberate attempts at suture as I study the popular films of my parents’ India.

Wimal Dissayanake underscores the issue of civic identity at the core of film, saying, “How a nation tells its unifying and legitimizing story about itself to its citizens is crucial in the understanding of nationhood.” During 1945-1975, a period described by Aijaz Ahmad as one of “high decolonization,” a particularly Indian realism served as an important tool of nation-building. While archetypal characters played out eternal human stories of love or vengeance, a
distinct cultural consciousness was used politically to strengthen the sense of confidence and solidarity in newly independent Indians emerging from centuries of British oppression. Asks media scholar Lutz Koepnick, “How does the archetypal angry young man manifest himself in the Indian context? The universal archetypes must take on peculiar inflections of history and local specificity to create a sense of ‘we’ in a people.” The archetypal sage takes the unlikely form of John the bootlegger in *Boot Polish*. He rouses a band of beggar children saying, “In you lies my new life. Achieve something with these hands of yours.” He feeds the children’s dreams, continuing to impart courage so that they shout, “In my fist is my destiny, our eyes see hope of joyful times.” John and the children take on the task of nation-building with the élan of Mary Poppins, singing, “We won’t accept even a diamond given to us in alms; it’s fun to overcome obstacles!” In the 1975 film *Sholay*, a leader similarly incites villagers, orating, “This has been a country of farmers for ages. But whenever someone evil has shown aggressive designs, by God, it was farmers who melted their plows into swords! It’s not the blood of cowards that flows in our veins, no!” Speeches full of emotional appeal and didactic instruction appeared routinely for as Gyanendra Pandey says, “Realism, or rather, various national realisms were important in writing up the biography of the emerging nation-state and creating the authoritative self-image of the nation.”
While each state in India has a unique culture and language, the post-Independence nationalist intention led to a nationwide audience for the advanced cinema of Bombay, in the Hindi-speaking state of Maharashtra. As a result of such exposure, Bombay itself became the archetypal fabled City of Gold. In Don, Amitabh Bachchan sings, “This is Bombay made of gold and silver. In this magic city fortunes swing. From afar they all come to try their luck, leave their villages and their kin to come here and make their destiny[. . .]Like opiate in the seas, I’m dumbstruck by what this city does to me.”

Though Bombay films engaged in extensive self-reflection, in his essay, “Indian Cinema,” Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes how an all-India aesthetic formed and a need to speak to a diversity of interests led to “masala films,” literally “spice mix films,” developed with a variety of regional crowd-pleasing ingredients and featuring actors who moved to Maharashtra from other places. In an effort to promote specific ideologies, government entered film production and commissioned auteurs like the legendary Satyajit Ray. During the 1960’s, the government-funded New Cinema Movement provided facilities for “films of good standard” and helped to build local industries from Bengal to Kerala, my grandparents’ original home, named by economist Amartya Sen as India’s most socially advanced state. According to the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA), intellectuals of Kerala had long participated in film societies featuring European films and so when the New Cinema filmmakers began their work they ignored Bombay and adopted Godard’s formula: “We must begin with what we know.” Critical reviews abounded in film magazines and journalists like the Malayali “Cynic” took on the responsibility of educating viewers in the ways of neo-realism. As Wimal Dissayanake notes, “In a large country like India with its numerous languages and religions, films produced in
regional languages such as Bengali or Malayalam tend to valorize, directly or obliquely, the regional at the expense of the national, thereby revealing certain fissures and fault lines in the national discourse.”

As youths, my parents disregarded local Malayalam cinema as un-glamorous, yet the plump mustachioed heroes of Kerala—a fertile region that hosts an active Communist party partly responsible for its egalitarian social system and 100% literacy—make up in wit what they lack in style, using intelligent dialogue to examine human ideals, family dynamics, and the nuances of everyday life. While Indira Gandhi’s 1975 Emergency led to subversive alternatives to patriotic realism in Hindi film, naturalism continues to reign in peaceful Kerala.

I do not seek to compartmentalize the various Indian cinema here described as even certain international classics feature in my distinctly Indian history: My grandfather, a self-made businessman, emulated The Godfather in his public persona; aunties styled their hair like Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday and later on wore it long and natural like Ali MacGraw in Love Story. In his memoir, Satyajit Ray writes:

I became a film fan while still at school. I avidly read Picturegoer and Photoplay, neglected my studies and gorged myself on Hollywood gossip purveyed by Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. Deanna Durbin became a favorite not only because of her looks and her obvious gifts as an actress, but because of her lovely soprano voice. Also firm favorites were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, all of whose films I saw several times just to learn the Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern tunes by heart.
While Ray’s *Pather Panchali* naturalistically presents the concerns of a rural Bengali community, the structure of his specifically Indian breakthrough film was inspired by Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*.

As Rey Chow says, “It is worth remembering that film has always been, since its inception, a transcultural phenomenon, having as it does the capacity to transcend ‘culture’—to create modes of fascination which are readily accessible and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities.” Raj Kapoor’s enthusiasm for *Archie* comics inspired a slew of teen romance movies. Adaptations of Western films have yielded huge success for Indian producers: *Sholay*, inspired by *Once Upon a Time in the West*, was the highest grossing Indian film in history, showing in theaters for five straight years. Chow describes a phenomenon that I use ultimately in my argument for archetypal analysis: “The world-wide appeal of many such films has something to do with their not being bound by well-defined identities, so that it is their specifically filmic, indeed phantasmagoric, significations of masculinism, moral righteousness, love, loyalty, family, and horror that speak to audiences around the globe, regardless of their own languages and cultures.” The ubiquity of foreign media images in India led to Bombay cinema’s integration of settings reminiscent of *The Sound of Music*’s Swiss Alps. Even today, film heroes of surprising mobility continue to serenade heroines through Sydney, Paris, and New York City.
In 1907 Rabindranath Tagore wrote to a relative studying in America:

To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education. To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one’s identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room.

I live forewarned yet acknowledge my critical approach to an Eastern cinema as definitely Western. Amartya Sen cautions against a “sympathetic” comparing of the rational West and unreasoning India, explaining, “In this pre-selected ‘East-West’ contrast, meetings are organized, as it were, between Aristotle and Euclid on the one hand, and the wise and contented Indian peasants on the other,” an exercise no more productive to social understanding than an imagined meeting of “Aryabhata (the mathematician) and Kautilya (the political economist) on the one hand, and happily determined Visigoths on the other”! Carl Jung’s model, therefore, remains only that--a framework from which I begin. In my study of Indian cinema, I seek to elaborate on Jung’s archetypes, tailor them for an Indian context, and identify new characters. Where the West sees only Apu the silly Indian (named, ironically, after a creation of esoteric Satyajit Ray), perhaps I can reveal the goddess, the playmate, the nosy neighbor of his homeland. As feminists built upon Jung’s work, I build upon the work of Western scholars. My references are overwhelmingly Western: I have been educated in the American tradition but draw heavily from postcolonial world scholarship, assuming the style of those educated in the West who make the East their business. Consider Bombay native Homi Bhaba, a postcolonial theorist and Harvard professor who cites influences Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault alongside Edward Said. With thanks to my personal influences, everyone from Homi Bhaba to Jung, from Marcel Proust to Amartya Sen to my Nani, I present the archetypes of Indian cinema by dominant genre.
Voltaire catalogued the important things to come to Europe from India: “Our numbers, our backgammon, our chess, our first principles of geometry, and the fables which have become our own.” He acknowledged more than an archetypal connection between world stories, pointing to an anthropological movement of ideas, the East-West spreading globalization of a past millennium. The origins of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet can be traced to Italian dramatic characters and further still to the Persian lovers Laila and Majnu, hero and heroine of the template Hindi Romance. Barry Langford traces the Romantic film format to native musical traditions and Wimal Dissanayake notes the legacy of classical art forms saying, “In India, film melodramas bear the cultural inscriptions of folk theatre as well as the Parsee theatre of the 19th century.” While Indian films are famously multi-genre productions, those dominated by Romance thrive on physical adventure and present the heroic quest. Good (or Baddie with a golden soul) triumphs over evil and the dragons of class-based oppression, repressive tradition, and bad politics are slain. Romance paints the world in Technicolor, by any variety of means: Don, the quintessential 1970’s Bombay underworld film, features exotic mafia dens, achingly charismatic Amitabh Bachchan in big aviator sunglasses, sensual disco fusion numbers, spangled dancing girls, imported whiskey, cocktails, and Cadillacs. Following another vein of bombast in the 1954 film Boot Polish, John Chacha plays percussion on the bald pates of his friends and the multitude of tones produced assist him in an invocation of the monsoon rain believed to restore their hair. Characters of Romance, from Don’s mysterious hero to John’s bootlegging wizard,
enjoy rapport with nature and the cosmos supports them in their attempts to restore simplicity, establish peace, or create meaning from India’s particularly heterodox chaos.

Characters of Romance

-A genre Romance revolves around heroic or romantic duos. Like the poor poet Majnu who lost Laila because of repressive notions of status in 7th century Arabian society, the romantic duo faces an array of obstacles to their happiness. Plot twists are accentuated by strains of Western melodramatic violins and the microtones of Eastern raga scales. The keepers of traditional society in *Prem Rog* prevent Dev from marrying Manorama because despite his intelligence and city education one of his caste does not belong with a lord’s daughter. Meanwhile, in the cosmopolitan Bombay of *Bobby* where issues of caste and religion are irrelevant, Raja’s family would rather maintain their status by marrying him off to a wealthy mentally challenged girl instead of allowing him to pursue sweet Bobby, the daughter of a middle-class fisherman. In the *Laila and Majnu* archetype, I identify my parents who overcame religious and geographical obstacles before they married: My father was an apathetic Catholic and a languid rock ‘n’ roller who went to college in Kerala. He immediately fell in love with the new girl, Nirmala, freshly arrived from Bombay. He asked her to marry him after two weeks of making casual conversation. “No!” she cried, “First of all, I’ve known you only two weeks, second of all my father will kill me, and third, I’m one of Jehovah’s Witnesses and I won’t marry outside my
faith!” My father uncharacteristically relished the challenge, leaving her with the words, “Two weeks will become two months and two months will become two years!” His mother sent him to finish school in America, where he began to study the Bible and accepted his new religion despite opposition from the priests and nuns in his family. He contacted my mother by letter, telegram, and difficult long-distance phone calls. Two years later they married.

The Majnus of the Romantic Hindi film use their charming looks and quick wits to overcome all odds and get the girls. Dev suffers violent attacks but holds to his principles and eventually vindicates the widowed Manorama. After the four of them are bonded by a near-fatal police chase and whitewater plunge, Bobby, Raja, and their parents link arms and skip off into the countryside.

-Majnu the lover first appears as The Modern Hero. Like the prince in Prem Rog, his distinction may rest in his wealth, position, and audacious behavior, but such superficial heroes are often undercut and the prince is killed by his own reckless driving. More importantly, the Modern Hero has youthful, liberal values, the ability to shape his own world and the charisma to persuade his community to his point of view whether right or wrong. As exemplified by lanky, laconic Amitabh Bachchan in Sholay, his physical dominance makes him likely to invite conflict and
fight for his own. These talents give him the power to take up unpopular causes--sometimes only for the sake of novelty or stimulation--and he may not be a man of long-standing convictions. Bachchan was often cast as The Angry Young Man, a protagonist who reflected the real movements of working classes against the exceptionally corrupt politicians of the 1970’s. Cast as Jai the vigilante, he remains cool and quiet at rest yet incited to action often, performing excellently where he judiciously applies his efforts.

*Muqqadar Ka Sikandar* showcases the Modern Hero as The Self-Made Success. Sikandar rises from poverty using knowledge gained from unsavory contacts only to outshine and turn against them. While clearly courageous and determined, this hero consciously uses his personality to preside over others and carefully manages his public image. Sikandar charms both policemen and smugglers, yet to no evil ends, using his cleverness only to amuse himself, to achieve his goals, and confound the undeserving. When my great-grandfather died, my grandfather Daniel ran away from home to make a living in Bombay. He took any work he could, cooking for soldiers in the army, apprenticing with a tailor, and working at an auto garage where he realized the potential profit in tire repair. He worked this way until he opened several tire dealerships and was able to provide for his family in a manner
so fine that they lived on Malabar Hill, the choicest Bombay neighborhood, enjoyed luxe international holidays, and attended the city’s most prestigious schools.

-In the absence of a heroine, the Modern Hero finds his complement in The Buddy.

Like my easily swayed Uncle Ike, this ever cheerful sidekick respects his friend’s every view and broadcasts his causes to the public. He has a comical aspect, chasing bandits in white sneakers and denim, falling in love often, irritating his hero and entertaining audiences with excessive chatter. Chores are delegated to this hardworking wingman: Veeru in Sholay acts as a diplomat for the heroic duo and kills off extras who clutter the screen, leaving the most awful villain for his partner. The Buddy exists to support his friends and his friends love him for it: When my very reticent grandmother died, most of the hundreds who attended her service came with the sole purpose of consoling their teary-eyed cardiologist, Ike. Jai eventually dies for Veeru, saying, “I have no regrets, I lived with my friend and I am dying with him.”

-The Man of Principal can be differentiated from the Modern Hero in that he makes decisions based on a constant internal moral compass. This group includes The Good Cop, The Innocent, The Progressive, and The Good Die Young. My grandfather Kurian died when my father was only months old but his mildness and goodness were inherited by his sons. He died in
his 30’s, suffering a heart attack while he was on a retreat with his students. In film too, the good die under such tragic circumstances. They are likely to choose non-violence and to make braver decisions than the Modern Heros because they are deliberate, not impulsive, taking action only when absolutely necessary. Dev of Prem Rog defies tradition and feeds Manorama after sundown, saying “I can’t bear to see anyone die under the burden of false customs.” Even though Dev received schooling at the expense of the town pundit, he refuses his archaic value system because it stands against his sense of justice. Boot Polish’s Bhola, a boy of principal who vows never to beg again accidentally receives alms and has a panic attack, reacting very differently from other hungry boys. The Man of Principal has less provincial thinking than his peers because of some unique life circumstance. Dev, an orphan, returns from study elsewhere and proceeds to reform his hometown. Because he grew up without a structured family, my father made choices that suited his conscience alone.

The personal choice to change one’s religion becomes an epic task when placed in the ritual-entrenched Indian context. Those who convert are either 1) Rice Christians, so disenfranchised that they have nowhere to go but up 2) So well placed that they are above comment 3) So bold and determined that they do exactly as they wish, or 4) So self-aware that their spirituality takes priority over public opinion. Over the past four generations, only three men in my family have
changed their religion. K.C. Chacko, my great-grandfather, was a well placed landowner who quit his Jacobite theological studies and became one of Jehovah’s Witnesses simply because he was impressed by the Biblical reasoning in a talk given by traveling minister J.F. Rutherford. He decided to reject Kerala Christianity which was, by the 1930’s, influenced by the self-serving, tradition-bound Catholicism of the Portuguese and the tailor-made Protestantism of the British, instead aligning himself with first century Christian teachings—incidentally introduced to Kerala by the Apostle Thomas in 52 AD. Daniel, my willful grandfather, and Jacob, my progressive father similarly left behind blind faith for a value-system based on logic.

-In his mind, every hero carries an image of The Maharani or The Goddess. All women are goddesses at first interaction. Raja and Hindi film audiences were captivated when Dimple Kapadia made her debut as Bobby. Driven by her iconic beauty, Raja no longer sees anyone at his glamorous birthday bash and makes her his life’s obsession. Sikandar’s love too singularly fuels his will to succeed. While a heroine’s character develops throughout a story, she continues to appear as a queenly figure throughout the film’s fantasy sequences.

-The Princess exists as the paradigm of beauty and virtue in her community. This essential combination of qualities, equally esteemed in cinema and society, sets the Princess apart from other women. Achamma, my great-grandmother, had just such a reputation, remembered by family
first as a belle of the Quilon coast, a petite woman with a big bust and “curly-curly” hair and, oh yes, also a good, gentle, loving, nature. The long, winding plot of a Hindi movie will test the mettle of a Princess’s character as an entity separate from her beauty, revealing her true nobility. There are, of course, as many princesses in India as there are chiefs in Africa, yet “curly-curly” hair, a feature my grandfather and I inherited, still can be considered a trait unusual among Indians. It renders me so racially ambiguous that my sororal smile will most often be returned with blankness. In India it made Achamma exotic. In America it simply makes me Ethiopian. In film, the good woman of exotic beauty, renowned among women for her extraordinary eyes (Rekha), her dancing ability (Hema Malini), or maybe her chin (Dimple Kapadia) presents herself as a reward to the hero who has proven himself more worthy of her grace than other men.

-The heroine reveals her inner thoughts to **The Confidante**, a sister or female friend who may remain throughout the movie as **The Advocate** like Radha in *Prem Rog*, or evolve into **The Back-Stabber**. Neema in *Bobby* acts as a mediator between the teenagers and their parents, telling the adults, “Modern kids want to see with open eyes.” She meanwhile encourages Raja to run, singing to a group but urging him with her glances, “Trapped! Better that the bird flies away!”

-Clever Neema was, in her prime, **The Spicy Doll**, the spunky, mouthy, bold and funny heroine. She flirts consciously, like Manorama in *Prem Rog* who beguiles Dev into eating overspiced samosas then bites him when he refuses her apologies. This classically Indian tomboy possesses not only assertive spark but hips and arresting
allure. Dev fantasizes about her emerging half clothed from a lotus, dancing with fire, and as a courtesan in a harem but beneath the Spicy Doll’s sizzle hides an innocent. For all her eyelash batting and noisy banter with male friends, my stiletto-heeled sister, Cherie, whose name itself means darling, sits aloof and tongue-tied in the presence of any prospect she finds truly appealing. When Manorama asks Radha about married life, viewers realize she knows nothing about sex. Upset by what she misinterpreted from Radha’s innuendo, Manorama becomes frightened on her wedding night and refuses to consummate her marriage. The Spicy Doll, more than any other heroine, proves herself more than just a trophy, smartly retorting to her hero’s every jab. In *Sholay*, Basanti the sassy buggy driver defends her work saying, “City girls drive cars and no one says anything to them!” She later becomes a real helpmate to Veeru and Jai, riding them to points of advantage, delivering reloaded guns, and attacking bandits with her colorful horse whip.

-In Hindi film, **The Patriarch** manifests himself as either **The Oppressive Father** or **The Proud Papa**. The Oppressive Father uses his family members to promote his own interests and propagates outdated agendas. After conniving with priests to produce fraudulent horoscopes, Manorama’s father says “Oh what luck! My wish was always that she would marry into a higher family!” On the other hand, Jack Braganza, a jolly Goan fisherman, answers Bobby’s requests with a tender, “Yes love.” When Raja arrives at his house to take Bobby on a date, Mr. Braganza says, “You’ll go Dutch. I’ve collected enough money for my daughter’s happiness. Share the cost, here’s the money, have a damn good time!”

- **The Matriarch** appears either as **The Dictator**, **The Nurturer** or **The Butterfly**. My grandmother Sosamma, the Butterfly, would have been well cast as Raja’s beautiful, vain mother.
Her concern with appearances usually amuses her family but ultimately drives them to despair or ruin. Raja’s father disciplines him with excessive sternness only to make up for his mother’s leniency. The Dictator, exemplified by Sosamma’s own mother Pennama, takes the opposite position. Aubrey Menen describes the Dictator in “My Grandmother and the Dirty English: “My grandmother, like Michelangelo, had *terribilità*. She had a driving will; she would not be baulked and whatever she did was designed to strike the spectator with awe.” Pennama was a beautiful widow who lured my great-grandfather by passing his house each morning after her bath with long, streaming wet hair. Over decades she developed into a powerful, almost masculine, capable woman who managed her family to her own advantage, much like the Oppressive Father. She fought my grandparents and other relatives in court. She openly practiced favoritism and spoiled the children of her first husband. She tricked the most eligible local bachelor into marrying her mentally-ill daughter, Mariamma. To her credit, she took from the rich and gave to the poor, delivering luxuries gleaned from her city-bred grandchildren to their cousins, Mariamma’s children, whom she cared for as her own.
My mother, The Nurturer, the most balanced and virtuous of the Matriarchs, uses her intellect to guide the ones she loves. The Nurturer introduces her children to art, music, literature, and dance and continues to support their ambitions and calm their fears through thickening plots and through life.

-The Nurturer may be equipped to provide such care because she began her life as The Luck Child, herself protected by parental love. She may be the oldest or the only child, and the security she feels as a child in the idyllic first years of her parents’ marriage gives her confidence to deal with outsiders. Bobby dismisses Raja’s physical advances instead of giggling or giving in, saying, “I’m I girl of the 21st century and I can defend myself!” The Luck Child may be oblivious to the false motives of others because she has none of her own. Her home life provides her with a real feeling of worth in her role as the good girl and the big sister, appreciated by her parents and siblings. As she lounges by the pool in India’s first film bikini, Bobby puts on no false pretenses: Bobby with her dimple and her Proud Papa and her mane of effortless hair knows for certain that she is the center of the universe. As the Luck Child, my mother made her father most proud as she resisted the admiration of his business enemy’s handsome son, David, and finally, dramatically refused to elope with him. Her only
private concession to this episode lives on in my sister’s middle name, Davina (Cherie Davina! I still don’t think my father has caught on!).

-While she may fall for a bad boy, the Luck Child knows that she can most likely maintain her identity with The Good Son. Like my cousin James, the PR man for his socially insular family, this fellow takes pleasure in making his parents proud and maintaining a good image. When Raja arrives at an empty home after years away at boarding school he dutifully kisses pictures of his parents in their unforgivable absence. The Good Son’s dedication to duty makes him vulnerable to breakdown as his personal desires conflict with his community’s. In Hindi film, though, the community always comes around and the Good Son finds himself reinstated.

-The Hardscrabble Kid enjoys none of the Good Son’s material advantages and must rely on pluck and courage. Like Sikandar and beggar Bhola in Boot Polish, he always finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, yet with perseverance he may become the Self-Made Success.

-The life of the Hardscrabble Kid becomes tolerable with The Protective Sister by his side. In The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy describes this warm filial relationship: “In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us.” Bhola lives for his seven-year-old sister Belu who wipes his tears, strokes his hair and convinces him that even if he did accidentally polish canvas shoes and receive a beating, all is not lost! The Sentimental Brother has real parallels among Indian men. While there are extreme aspects of bravado in Indian culture, one of the liberties men enjoy includes freedom of expression! Heroes cry, uncles cry--my father does not
cry, but then again he was raised by tough Catholic women. When my father’s family gathered recently for a funeral, we three girl cousins stood in shock while the six boys eulogized and wept. These young men are no weaklings, each of them actively pursing and achieving in the fields of law, writing, medicine, business, music, film. Spending a weekend with my cousins after so much time apart from them I realized that the men of my recent proximity have neither the accomplishment nor the disposition to suit my background. There indeed exist quiet, gentle men who need consoling.

-American movies present Indians as gurus and mystics, yet the mentor figure has been most often depicted in Hindi film as **The Unlikely Sage**. The Unlikely Sage generally participates in a minority religion that provides him with an alternative worldview. In *Sholay*, Jai and Veeru look to the blind Muslim imam for guidance and Bholu (*Boot Polish*) finds leadership in John the Bootlegger. The Christian or the Muslim hopes for future rejuvenation and preaches self-determination in answer to the Hindu preoccupation with fate. John prays to Jesus and promotes expansive ideas about class and destiny that are based on Christian ideology. He defends the children from their abusive aunt, telling them, “March ahead, you’re one in a million, march ahead, after night will come a new day.” He can be silly and playful with the beggar children but delivers chastisement to their parents, saying, “A new world won’t happen on its own, your children will see it.” When, encouraged by John, Bholu decides to quit depending on others and start a shoe polishing service, his aunt opposes him because she sees more profit in begging. John take it upon himself to hide Bholu’s supplies and to teach him how to navigate society: “If you see a gentleman, say ‘First-Class Polish!’ If you see a priest say, ‘Best Indian Polish!’” He
inspires poor children and prompts the newly independent country, saying often, “Sweet is the fruit of hard work.” The Unlikely Sage has no more than his neighbors but he has hope.

-The White Widow dispenses similarly sage advice but lives vicariously through her loved ones as traditional Indian society restricts her to a life of aestheticism. Young widows are portrayed as disenfranchised beauties. Both Manorama of Prem Rog and Radha of Sholay are revealed at unguarded moments with their hair unpinned, laughing, playing with children or animals. Progressive Heroes are the only ones who can release these women from society’s mandates. The outspoken older widow may be Hindi film’s most interesting woman: Hardship has given her something to say and she says it boldly because she has nothing to lose. Mrs. Braganza of Bobby flatly accuses The Butterfly of being less than a mother to Raja and leaves her service.

My great-aunt Clarammachi lost both her husband and her son, but instead of becoming bitter, she became a cheeky left-of-center fairy, the guiding moral force in my father’s life when his father died and his mother went to teach in a faraway village.

-To create a believable Indian community, hundreds of extras fill the screen as The Dusty Villager, The Fallen Bicyclist, and The Support Staff. The story depends on these humble background characters: Rich, lonely children are cheered by governesses and drivers, Don receives constant praise from his entourage, Jai fights for the rights of the Dusty Villagers who look on in awe and name him a hero. Fallen Bicyclists acknowledge the heroes’ sense of purpose as they receive his shove, surrendering their bikes without a shout. In a movie with stunts like Sholay, the dangers these peripheral characters face are real: at the edge of a frame during the bandits’ first assault scene, the discerning viewer may notice a dead Dusty Villager coolly move his head out of the path of a galloping horse.
-The Nosy Neighbor and his two cents may drastically change the direction of a story set in a community-centered society. The running commentary of Nosy Neighbors, extended family, and the local busybody helps viewers contrast common values with the hero’s behavior. At the recommendation of Mrs. Pestonji of Bobby, Raja’s parents send him off to boarding school.

Larger scale villains include The Sadist, The Bad Cop, and The Crime Boss. These speechify terrifyingly before they shoot and make creative use of symbolism when torturing others. Sholay’s Gabbar Singh cuts off Thakur’s arm as a punishment for imprisoning him, yet karma usually pushes such criminals into their own traps: Armless Thakur destroys Singh with a pair of specifically crafted metal spiked shoes. A more believable threat than the flamboyant out-and-out baddie emerges in the resident evil of The Wicked Auntie. She silently harbors jealousies while enforcing the more repressive aspects of social order. When widowed Manorama returns home after being raped by her brother-in-law, her Wicked Auntie tell her she has no place at her father’s house. Like my Aunt Sindha, this powerful villainess generally abuses those in her service but may only strike against her family members after gaining foothold into their weaknesses.

Tragedy

Devdas (1955), Hare Rama Hare Krishna (1971),
Namak Haraam (1973),
Sangam (1964), Umrao Jaan (1981)

Series of stupendous catastrophes befall helpless innocents in great Indian Tragedy. Heroes may die before
they are vindicated or surrender their lives for the sake of redemption. The Tragedy often involves willing sacrifice—love sacrificed for friendship, friendship sacrificed for society, love sacrificed for the greater good, or, in the case of Sangam, life sacrificed for both a friend and a lover. While characters may suffer at the hands of cruel administrators, the enemy often remains faceless and out of reach: a force of nature, oppressive traditional systems, or modern family crises. The siblings of Hare Rama Hare Krishna lose their innocence when their parents divorce and become tortured adults who lose their way, never to find it again. Grandly self-destructive heroes of Hindi Tragedy reveal too that the enemy often resides much closer than the monsters, aliens, and Russians constantly plaguing Hollywood. The Indian Tragedy strikes me as the saddest tragedy imaginable—maybe because the movies are so long that viewers internalize the characters’ anxiety and carry it for days; maybe because characters like pouty Vyjayantimala look so much like me and as a hyphenated American this experience remains a novelty. When Rekha as Umrao Jaan, the fated courtesan, faces one downfall after another—kidnap, betrayal, abuse—my heart breaks mostly because her fiery, impassioned, expressive eyes so closely resemble my mother’s. Females are often the subject of tragedy in films—which only begin to reflect the atrocious suffering they face at the hands of a male-dominated society. The defamed woman of Tragedy has no chance for real restoration to polite society. When Chandramukhi of Devdas sells her luxuries, leaving
Calcutta and life in the bordello, she remains a calumniated woman, shunned even after repenting of her sins, keeping house, and milking cows like a good village girl. Umrao Jaan transcends her life as an entertainer and begins writing, drawing audiences who recite her verses in the streets and at poet’s meetings and tell her, “Your poetry has made an even greater mark than your singing.” When she encounters her brother, however, in the town from which she was stolen as a child, he tells her she should have drowned herself instead of returning home. Her circumstances become her exclusive material as she sings, “The long journey of life I travelled alone, I did not find what I was looking for, but this became an excuse for seeing the world.”

**Characters of Tragedy**

- Umrao Jaan finds consistent support only in Maulvi Saheb, The Teacher. He protects her as well as he can, educates her, and explains the great poetry that forms her ideals. When she tells him, “Sometimes I too feel like composing poetry,” he replies, “Go ahead, there’s no better way of expressing one’s feelings.” He refines her tastes and treats her art with dignity. As she suffers in love again and again he tells her, “Either make someone yours or belong to someone. Try. Try again. You don’t belong in a bordello, the whole world is yours.” Yet she returns after each attempt to leave. As teachers must, Maulvi Saheb sets up hopes and expectations that are only dashed by the limitations of the imperfect human experience.

- My Uncle Vinod epitomizes The Self-Destroyer. Like Devdas, he was a mischievous, handsome, spoiled boy who became a self-indulgent man who used his divorce as an excuse to drop out of the system. The public maintains a fascination with the tragic hero because he began with all the energy and promise of The Modern Hero but allows himself to fall and crash: The Self-Destroyer puts as much money and passion into destruction as might have been used to
build a gleaming life for himself. Vinod earns his living on the sale of family valuables and properties and uses his entire income to support his alcoholism. When Devdas leaves for Calcutta after fighting with his parents over Paro, he too becomes a self-pitying drunkard. He rationalizes his habit by saying, “I drink to be able to breathe and because I don’t have the will to get up and go.” Depression may be the factor that pushes the Self-Destroyer to lethargy and descent. Devdas dwells on a running reel of negative images from which he cannot escape. He gives up his inheritance and lives a dishonored existence far from home, ironically renouncing the things he would have lost had he defied his family and married Paro. When his conscience pricks him for his behavior towards Paro, asking him, “How could you lie that you didn’t love her?” he woefully replies, “There was no way out.” When Chandramukhi tries to help him, he refuses, explaining, “She chose the path of matrimony and I the path of destruction. Why does her memory haunt me like this? Why can’t I forget her? I’m an alcoholic and...okay, so be it. Nothing’s wrong. No hopes, no trust, no happiness. No desire. Wonderful!” he says before collapsing in her arms.

- The Bad Associate often shows the Self-Destroyer to his ruin. When Devdas explains his dilemma to Chunilal, he laughs and says, “You’ll have to become a dandy like me!” Chunilal introduces Devdas to Calcutta nightlife, to brothels, brandy, and the famous courtesan Chandramukhi who becomes his Platonic companion. Chunilal easily manages his vices while carrying on a professional life, not realizing how completely he has damaged grief-stricken, addiction-prone Devdas. Only days after his introduction to her house of pleasure, Devdas tells Chandramukhi, “People come here at night to sin but I come in the day to get sozzled.”
The Bad Associate may also take the form of Sangam’s Sundar who exerts emotional control over his friends. He laughs and makes music and stars as the life of every party, pretending not to notice that his best friend has fallen in love with Chandni, the woman he desires for himself--though he plays a crazed, dissonant accordion when he sees the couple become increasingly intimate. He places an obligation on his friend, telling him, “I love you Gopal, I always have,” before assigning him the task of arranging his marriage to Chandni.

-The Dancing Temptress typically makes only a cameo appearance in the Hindi film, so sultry are her moves, but on close examination her actions reveal a heart of gold. Umrao Jaan and Chandramukhi, both examples of The Gold-Hearted Courtesan, long for domestic lives. After Devdas rebukes her profession and throws thousands of rupees in her face, Chandramukhi asks Chunilal, “Will you bring him back? I wish to see him again. He’s the first man to have given me money without motive.” As she watches Devdas’s condition worsen she shutters her business and tells him, “My life’s ambition is to serve you.”

-The Madame controls every move of the courtesan, filmically representing the larger forces dictating the lives of women. In Umrao Jaan, Khanum appears in a perpetual state of repose, sucking her hookah and surrounded by flatterers like the vendor who tells her, after a roar of false laughter, “Khanum, your jokes priceless!” She looks on approvingly as Umrao, the “weak, dark girl” purchased cheaply from kidnappers wins the admiration of wealthy men with her dance and singing. As Umrao begins to earn, the Madame pushes aside her own, less talented daughter, single-mindedly driven by profit. She concocts lies, manipulates both innocents and criminals, and uses human sentimentality against those in her care. She watches Umrao Jaan carefully and tells her companion, “The filly has started bucking so we’ll fence her in.”
The Madame’s entourage includes a small time rogue whose tendencies she shapes to create The Traitor. Mirza’s small misdeeds become big misgivings: He irreverently eats Umrao’s shrine offering, then attempts to seduce her at a vulnerable moment by giving her a trinket. At male-only poet’s meetings he recites her poetry hoping to pass it off as his own. He meanwhile secures her trust by delivering messages and arranging meetings with her lover prince. When Umrao begins to suspect his treachery and his devotion to the Madame, she confronts him, asking, “Why this sudden show of love? Short on cash?” When she refuses to marry him and protect the interests of the house, he produces a set a falsified documents that summon Umrao to court. She slaps him and screams, “Lies!” The Traitor shrugs and says, “Our fate is to fault,” as if his actions are all taken for the sake of survival. Mirza commits an offense far greater than Somu of Namak Haraam which means, literally “Traitor.” Somu the Buddy turns his back on rich Viki, realizing his moral obligations after spending time with the poor and finding it impossible to ignore their plight. When his friend accuses him of betrayal he cries out, “I’m not a betrayer in the eyes of the almighty!”

Irony


During the 1970’s, Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha, constant costars, scandalized India with news of an affair. In 1981 they made Silsila, an onscreen account of their relationship. They appear as Amit, the noble-minded playwright, and Chandni, a stylish city girl, who suffer in prosaic marriages and defy society by carrying on a very glamourous, barely-concealed romance. Bachchan’s real-life wife, actress Jaya Bachchan, also participated in the charade, replaying her desperation on screen. The film develops guilty, gorgeous hours of Amitabh and Rekha
cavorting while plain Jaya cries until, at the very last moment, Amitabh rescues his lover’s husband from a crashed plane. The couple transforms, shocked into proper behavior, realizing satisfaction can be found in meeting obligations and fulfilling responsibilities. Amitabh/Amit and Rekha/Chandni mutually agree to be faithful to their own mates because so much anguish was associated with the pursuit of their love. *Silsila* was their last movie together. In the final scene, Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan cavort under blossoming trees while the words LOVE IS FAITH, FAITH IS FOREVER flash across the screen.

I am thoroughly unconvinced by this bit of pith, especially as an endnote to a film that spends so long unfolding an illicit romance, taking delight in the illicit romance as opposed to the dreariness of virtuous choice. The couple separate only when they realize their relationship could never function in a society so codified that even wedding celebrations are gender segregated. *Silsila* finds very little time for the wronged wife’s eventual happiness and, in her dull presence, presents Amitabh with a sorry reward for doing the right thing. *Silsila* is neither about love nor faith. It typifies irony in Indian film, following one man’s efforts to be noble and revealing the difficulty of maintaining such virtue when sacrifice becomes involved. The Ironic film follows a metamorphosis and concludes with a sense of confusion, defeat, happiness clouded by ambiguity. Ironic films offer, at best, a sense of closure as the hero settles for something satisfactory, yet a reduced version of his original dream. As characters lose their heroic glow and shed their ideals, a viewer’s pleasure resides in observing folly without personal involvement. Irony reveals the anarchy lurking just below social order. It presents protagonists with Achilles’ heels, flawed souls who suffer disappointment and doubt. By magnifying ordinary human weakness, irony proposes a world without heroes.
The Ironic film details the struggle of a marginalized everyman, the wanderer or the lonely clown. *Mera Naam Joker* begins at the circus, a literal rendering of the crowded atmosphere where the Ironic hero suffers in near anonymity. Plots build to frenzied, desperate action, where *Awara*’s drifter assaults and berates his beloved because he feels undeserving of her affection or wildly drunken Amit caresses Chandni before their respective mates. When fallen heroes come to their senses and social order has been restored, audiences feel a sense of relief because, though it seems like characters are relinquishing their desires, they must make this choice if they are to live in the world. Social institution triumphs and keeps order at the expense of individual happiness. Perfect individualist happiness—described by R.W.B Lewis as possessed by one “emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race”—remains an impossible concept, particularly in the conventional Indian worldview which places a high value on external social systems.

Psychoanalyst Alan Roland observes that Indians maintain a perpetual sense of family-context and feel continuous with their relatives. He posits a familial self, a “self-we regard” and distinguishes no phase of individuation in opposition to parental values. In Ironic film, artist types rarely carry out plans of rebellion to support their personal values, choosing instead self-sacrificing lives within mainstream society. Roland further notes that Indians generally develop a “radar” conscience orienting them to others, making their conversation and actions appropriate to each interaction and context. In his essay, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” cultural commentator A.K. Ramanujan suggests, “Such a pervasive emphasis on context is, I think, related to the Hindu concern with jati—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human jatis are only an instance [. . .] Each jati or class defines a context, a structure of
relevance, a rule of permissible combinations, a frame of reference, a meta-communication of what is and can be done.”

The Ironic Hindi hero gives up something emotionally valuable for the sake of something culturally valuable. He knows his decision impacts more than self—the prospects of his aged father, his yet-unmarried sister, his barrister inamorata, his child—and he takes comfort, finally, in easing the minds of those who love him.

Characters of Irony

-The Martyr goes on after he has lost the will to live. In Namak Haraam, playboy Viki’s friend Somu is martyred by Viki’s father, yet Viki symbolically martyrs himself as he mourns his loss, offering to serve his father’s prison sentence. Viki has become tired of life and attempts higher purpose in his sacrifice, asking, “Doesn’t a son have a right to pay for a father’s sins? He finds purpose and solace in suffering and allows great personal tragedy to color the rest of his life. The poet of Khabi Khabie gives up writing when he encourages his lover to go on with her arranged marriage, bitterly preserving the memory of one lost love by abstaining from the other.

When my grandfather Kurian died, leaving his wife Baby with three small sons, she, legendarily, did not cry. She placed her children in the care of her parents and continued teaching English in another town, returning home only on weekends. She had lost her joy and brought little joy to anybody afterward. The one time she attempted to teach my father he broke her umbrella and ran off. When Babyammachi died I did not cry, and, though my mother called me unfeeling and for a moment made me feel very guilty, I felt justified in my initial reaction. I couldn’t cry because I have currents of her thick discontented blood running through my veins and know she was relieved when death finally came.
I asked Babyammachi to sing a song to me only once. My mother had coaxed Babyammachi out of her austere brown housedress and into a turquoise-blue leopard-spotted swimsuit. She was thus unarmed, shed of her dispassionate uniform of browns and navies, standing bright blue and waist-deep in the swimming pool when I asked her to sing. First she said no. Then she regarded me with exasperation and began, “Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream,” and she stopped. “Did you hear, Life is BUT a dream.” Babyammachi lived modestly. She had reasonable expectations. Maybe because she suffered a blow early in life and forever after identified herself primarily as a widow with three sons, even after her sons grew up and had families of their own. She had simple tastes (grape juice, polyester, Toyotas) and firm convictions. Her sons are all, likewise, men of personal principal. She lived quietly and suffered none of that disillusionment and disappointment that afflict her grandchildren. She saved, she planned, she orchestrated the minutiae of her funeral long before she died; she was self-sufficient, demanding nothing from us. She was tiny and shy. Reading the bad news daily, watching the rain, clutching her prayer book, patiently waiting for this tiresome dream to pass and hoping for the better things to come.

The coffin she chose was gold and pink.

-A father’s conversation with **The Artist**: “What? Can there only be unhappiness in an artist’s life? No happiness at all?” he said after we saw Lust for Life at the Metro. This was meant for me, the artist, whose glum and acned mien tried him greatly in those days. I was meant to respond.” In “Make Mine Movies” Adil Jussawalla essays the connection between temperament and artistic creativity. The Artist of Indian film is noted not for his extreme lifestyle choices but for his intense sensitivity and his ability to create beauty and meaning. Art
helps him to deal with overwhelming emotions. Umrao Jaan’s troubles translate to moving ghazals and Silsila’s Amit delves into writing to avoid his tangled affairs. In film, The Artist can invariably be found alone, biting a pencil in thought, daydreaming: In the 1880’s Rabindranath Tagore wrote of the close association between daydreaming and artistic nature. The Artist may compensate for his self-centered preoccupation with his inner world with default social behaviors. My own persona includes all the characteristics of the free spirit liberal, yet my dearest students, immediate family, and closest friends have discerned that my daily activities are suffused with a sense of doubt and deep sadness. Pain, ironically, can be a productive force: Salman Rushdie writes, “A writer’s injuries are his strengths, and from his wounds will flow his sweetest, most startling dreams.” Introspection pushes the Artist to seek original solutions and creative alternatives.

The Artist’s delicate mental constitution has recently become the subject of increased psychological study. When an Artist loses his balance he may quit his struggle to reconcile his inner world with the hostile outer world and retreat into himself. My uncle Syriac, a nationally renowned guitar player, gradually drifted away from his brothers and broke with many of his friends. He no longer plays with a band, making music only for himself. He speaks little, and awkwardly, and rarely leaves his house. Studies show that many established artists meet the diagnostic criteria for cyclothymia, manic-depression, or severe depression. According to
psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison, these diseases contribute to creativity in certain individuals. In her article, “Manic-Depressive Illness and Creativity,” she writes:

The constant transitions in and out of constricted and then expansive thoughts, subdued and then violent responses, grim and then ebullient moods, withdrawn and then outgoing stances, cold and then fiery states—and the rapidity and fluidity of moves through such contrasting experiences—can be painful and confusing. Ideally, though, such chaos in those able to transcend it or shape it to their will can provide a familiarity with transitions that is probably useful in artistic endeavors[. . .] Ultimately, these fluxes and yokings may reflect truth in humanity and nature more accurately than could a more fixed viewpoint.

The Artists of Hindi film are typically surrounded by admirers who applaud their talents and the companionship of family members who forgive their vulnerabilities and depend on their compassion. As Babyammachi supported Syriac, the Artists’ families often leave them to their esotericism while they manage mundane household activities. Salman Rushdie illustrates the
relationship between an egocentric yet fragile Artist and her all-suffering loved one in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*:

“From now on I will always look after you,” my father told my mother after the first time they made love. But she was beginning to be an artist, she answered, and so “The most important part of me, I can take care of by myself.”

“Then,” said Abraham, humbly, “I will look after the less important part, the part that needs to eat, enjoy, and rest.”

-The Intellectual begins life with dreams of personal achievement and reconsiders his notions of success when he reaches the top. In his frustration my hot-tempered great-grandfather Daniel turned to political activism. He died as a college student, studying the economics of the soap business in Sri Lanka. My great-grandfather L.C. Isaac came from Kerala’s backwaters to Kottayam and became a barrister but soon quit practicing because he could not bear to tell a lie. He became a newspaper editor at Deepika Press and eventually rose to become the head editor, writing book reviews and columns, advising fellow professionals, and lobbying for developments in his town. He helped his wife Thresiamma institute Kerala’s first women’s magazine and taught his children dance, drama, music and writing in a house full of books. By actively creating a
society to his liking he avoided the fate of *The Disillusioned Soul*, who realizes the truth of wise King Solomon’s words: “In the abundance of wisdom there is an abundance of vexation, so that he that increases knowledge increases pain.” Judge Raghunath of *Awara* suffers in life for his devotion to theory, losing his wife and son to his suspicions. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, a Malayali writer, elucidates the tendency of The Intellectual to lose his sense of reality. In Basheer’s story *Walls*, a political writer imagines a female companion who brings meaning to his life. She becomes so real to him that he exclaims, “As we walked on, I was overcome by the most maddening scent in the world. The scent of a woman! Female Fragrance!” When he is unexpectedly released he laments, “The free world...which free world? I’d just be going into a bigger jail. Who wants this great freedom?” The Intellectual’s invention becomes more dear to him than the potential of human companionship.

-A phrase of wisdom my mother learned as a college student was that Boys Make Passes at Girls in Glasses. In *Aandhi*, a veiled biopic detailing Indira Gandhi’s early life, Arti strides into her office in sunglasses and a stiffly wrapped sari while the men around her stand in submission and at attention. When her assistant meets her displeasure, she asks him snobbishly, “What’s wrong with your brains?” In my family, the women of my parent’s generation have exhibited a greater degree of assertiveness and enjoyed more
professional success than the men. This statistic stands at odds with the questions people like to ask me regarding India’s reputation for bride burnings and female slavery. Of accomplished women, economist Amartya Sen writes:

South Asian countries have a terrible record in gender inequality[...]. At the same time, women from the upper classes are often more prominent in South Asia than elsewhere. Indeed, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have all had, or currently have, women Prime Ministers—something that the United States (along with France, Italy, Germany and Japan) has never had and does not seem poised to have in the near future (If I am any judge). Belonging to a privileged class can help women to overcome barriers that obstruct women from less thriving classes.

The India my mother and aunts enjoyed was one of opportunity and promise. The success of Girls in Glasses looms imposingly over others: Aarti arrives onscreen by helicopter while her estranged husband first appears with his back to the camera, digging in his hotel garden. In Namak Haraam, Viki’s father chastises him for not greeting a beautiful visitor, saying, “You haven’t yet said hello to Nisha.” Viki glances, “Hi, how are you.” His father laughs, “That’s all?” Vikram protests, “What else can I say? She will start her lecture on socialism, communism and politics!” He apologizes to Nisha, telling her, “You are very intelligent and it is difficult to be friends with such girls.”

Girls in Glasses are groomed for professional success by their parents. Awara’s Rita and Aandhi’s Aarti receive an extensive foreign education, including law degrees from Oxford.

When Aarti tells her father that she wants to marry a local hotel manager, he angrily tells her, “In our district there are 38 weddings a day and one will be yours. Our maidservant is married with kids. Is this your sole ambition? I’m very disappointed in you. You just
want to be one of those millions of creatures!” Girls in Glasses are, in the end still girls, who swoon, play romantic songs on the piano, and tell their simple, befuddled, supportive men, like Aarti does, “How I wish I could cuddle up to you and cry my eyes out.”

The Drifter appears as the Good Son gone bad, an insolent who carries a grudge against his family or society at large. My Uncle Honey was the youngest son, born into a house already consumed with a Luck Child and a Self-Destructor in the making. He carried a grandiose sense of affliction, lamenting, like Raj of Awara, “My heart is full of wounds but my eyes are always full of smiles.” Feeling his efforts and achievements were always ignored, he spent years skulking around the world, bunking with contacts from his overstuffed black book and smooth-talking a multitude of women whose constant flow of letters, photographs and postcards followed him on his travels. The Drifter keeps his own society while his so-called friends come and go. His tells jokes with a surly edge, using his easy rapport to gain either the sympathy or admiration of those around him, whichever he needs most.

He enters the room with a swagger, groomed nattily, wearing the designer clothing of a playboy, handing out business cards and networking constantly. As Raj sings, “Whether I am rising or falling I am always a star.” The entire effect is casual and effortless.
Honey would occasionally send us parcels of personal items to store for him. In one of them I found a book entitled, *How to Make Friends*.

-The Ironic Hero may use humor as a coping mechanism and take on the role of *The Clown*. In *Mera Naam Joker*, literally translated, “My Name is Joker,” a clown puts on one final show for his friends. “If he jumps around like that he’ll die!” one says. “If he dies, he’ll die here,” another replies knowingly. The Clown immediately confirms this statement, singing of the circus, “There’s no place I’d rather be.” Raj Kapoor produced *Mera Naam Joker* as an autobiographical testament to the entertainer who makes himself a spectacle to give pleasure to others. He continues singing, “To make others laugh I’ll assume a new form!” A friend tells him, “Whatever a joker does he does for others. Who is the greatest joker of all? God. He does all for others and nothing for himself.” The Clown’s work may not be altogether altruistic as his own mother screams and objects when he tells her of his intentions, and he wanders through life, losing in love over and over again. The Clown reveals his real struggle to suffocate his own feelings in lonely moments, saying, “Make laughter to hide sadness [. . . ]I’m just a tramp, my gaiety hides my sorrow.” As The Clown concludes his show, he asks the audience, “Where else can I go?”

-Any character above can drown in disillusionment and become *The Bitter One*. Raj of *Awara* grows anxious, feeling unworthy of the happiness he enjoys with Rita. When she playfully calls him a savage, his insecurities overwhelm him and he hits her for what he sees as showing him his place. Rita apologizes, says she deserves his punishment and says, “Hit me again.” He refuses. He broods. He promises to be good but he can’t keep a job; he appeals to Rita but her servants order him to leave her house. As he sits in the dark street a man trips over
him and calls him a savage. Raj kills him. His life continues to spiral away from his love until he receives a prison sentence. He refuses any appeals, telling the judge, “Let me remain here. Penance is important for me.”

Comedy


As Irony critiques reality, Hindi Comedy celebrates the ridiculousness present in everyday life. Regional genre comedies such as those produced in Malayalam may include a nuanced meld of humor and melancholy, elements of satire, and scathing mimicry but mainstream Indian cinema promotes a slapstick brand of funny that cuts across language. Actors use their entire bodies to entertain, including their distinctively Indian, powerfully emotive eyebrows, handy for suggesting innuendo. Major players step effortlessly between genres and transform from gods to silly mortals: As suave Amitabh trips, stumbles, and rolls down a hill, sultry Rekha giggles riotously. Bumbling robbers squabble over fist-sized diamonds, villains suffer the scoldings of sassy eunuchs, Rishi Kapoor giggles and skips, Mr. Jack Braganza philosophizes with a rum jug in hand. Frequent upturns in fate accompanied by joyous music and merrymaking lend viewers hope in the face of personal despair, for as *Vogue* reviewer Joan Juliet Buck writes of the recent American trend toward fantasy, “Dance and laughter trump debt.” In the film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, three poor boys are separated in childhood and as
adults unwittingly join forces to help an old woman who turns out to be their mother and a man
who realizes that the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian striving for his vindication are his sons.
Each man, of course, has a complementary pretty lady by his side, and a liberal new society
arises as the family reunites. Archetypal characters and plots manifest themselves clearly in
Comedy. Fathers are nothing but fatherly, mothers are lenient and nurturing, boy meets girl,
priests marry them with great sanctimony, and audiences go home happy.

Characters of Comedy

All of the characters in the genres considered above are fodder for comedy. The Self-Destructive
Hero can becomes the Lovable Baddie, a supportive friend the Simpleton, The Modern Hero an
egocentric Charmer, a traitorous auntie the Self-Righteous Maven.

-The Charmer lives at the top of the Comedic food chain. Like Amitabh Bachchan in Mr:
Natwarlal, he possesses the suave and charisma of the Modern Hero but as Indian Comedy
triumphs the slum dweller, the peasant, and the general underdog, he acts as a sort of Robin
Hood, negotiating between India’s poor and it’s rich, shamelessly engaging in shady deals to
achieve his ends. He finds a noisy, spangly sidekick in The Sassy Girl and his cause in
protecting the interests of The Simpleton.

-The Simpleton is a trusting fellow. Girdharilal, the principled police officer of Mr:
Natwarlal falls prey to the evil Vikram before the movie title has even flashed on screen.
Charmer Natwarlal witnesses this great injustice as a child, vowing to exonerate his brother but also renouncing principle forever. My great-grandfather K.C. Chacko was the penultimate Simpleton: calm, placid, kind, sweet, and in his later years, spineless. He lived the easy life of a country squire, selling off a bit of land whenever he wanted some cash. If a stranger at a dark railway station drew him into conversation the Simpleton would happily tell him, “Yes, yes, my daughter is very rich and she is coming tonight by train, wearing lots of gold!”

-The Lovable Baddie has none of the virility of a film hero and none of the gritty allure of the proper villain. Like Raja and Rana of Victoria No. 203, Lovable Baddies can be easily located as the pint sized pals hitchhiking on the roadside. For the purposes of Comedy, the Lovable Baddie must have a partner with whom to discuss his plans and reveal his silly thinking. Raja and Rana are approached by another archetypal figure, The Madman, fully decked with a paper dress and flowers in his hair. Raja says, “Avoid him. He seems to be mad.” Raja replies, “No, no! Such people have the sixth sense. They know everything.” The Madman leads the credulous Baddies into a series of mishaps and then runs away at top speed. The Lovable Baddies get into all sorts of trouble but also face the most bizarre strokes of fortune: Recently released from prison for good behavior, Raja and Rana find a mysterious key in the wig of dead man. This key karmically leads them to a cache of diamonds!

-The Comedic hero, the Charmer, may join forces with the Lovable Baddies to overthrow The Smooth Criminal. In Victoria No. 203 Mr. Durga Das represents everything vile. He puts the filthy in filthy rich with his white leather shoes and oiled bouffant. Das along with Vikram of Mr. Natwarlal are portrayed as caricatures of India’s industrialists who rely on cliched English phrases and extreme fashion to secure their position as trendsetters. They enjoy extravagances
and privileges not enjoyed by other Indians and chat breezily with the police whom they can bribe without difficulty. These criminals capitalize on every opportunity, taking lightly what others hold sacred. Das steals from a museum during the faithfuls’ noisy procession to Ganesha. The Smooth Criminal laughs at society from above, and in Comedy his dark laugh is accompanied by jazzy music, rain, and the murky lighting of film noir.

-The Evil Auntie or the Dictator loses her fangs when comically portrayed as **The Self-Righteous Maven**. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy describes Baby Kochamma, a character who could be any one of the array of my Catholic grand-aunts. While these Kerala Mavens are unaffected by issues related to the Hindu caste system, they are still conscious of standard, status and a desire to preserve propriety. Roy writes:

Baby Kochamma disliked the twins for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother’s house, where they really had no right to be. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman. The sad, Father Mulligan-less Baby Kochamma. She had managed to persuade herself over the years that her unconsummated love for Father Mulligan had been entirely due to her restraint and her determination to do the right thing [. . .]She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter--according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage.

**The NRI** (The Non-Resident Indian) appears as Anthony’s ladylove in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*. He finds her sunglasses, wide-brimmed hat and other heat combating accessories as fascinating as her clueless, pretty, culture-shocked face. She speaks Hindi badly and villains find
her surprisingly easy to kidnap. Indians long anticipate their kin’s return from Germany, Canada, England, or the US, and uncles, aunts, grannies and cousins choke Delhi’s, Cochin’s, and Bombay’s foreign arrivals gates to greet their beloved. In the months before my sister and I visited India in childhood, my grandmother Sosamma would recount and enlarge details of our foreign existence until we became legendary froth in the minds of our young cousins who regarded us, finally, with judgmental, angry little faces. Arundhati Roy records such an arrival through the eyes of the child Rahel, meeting her mythic NRI cousin Sophie Mol for the first time: “She walked down the runway, the smell of London in her hair. Yellow bottoms of bells flapped backwards around her ankles. Long hair floated out from under her straw hat. One hand in her mother’s, the other swinging like a soldier’s (lef, lef, lefrightlef).” Little do the angry cousins know, the NRI feels at home neither here, nor there.
BACK HOME

Even from the simplest, the most realistic point of view, the countries for which we long occupy, at any given moment, a far larger place in our true life than the country in which we may happen to be.--Marcel Proust, Place-Names: The Name

India occupies a large place in my mind. The thought particles of my daydreams include palm trees and Butterflies, and scampering Luck Children, and “Row, Row, Row, Your Boat” in an angry Indian intonation. I carry my ancestors, or at least their stories and their blood, along with me.

“So when was the last time you went back home,” strangers, even friends like to ask.

“I went to Chicago last weekend,” I say. Maybe if I sit still they’ll go away. “Oh,” I laugh graciously, “Do you mean India? I visited India just last year.”

But I know what they mean because India is, after all, the source of my face, my princess complex, my present circumstances. I understand why they mean, because, all said, I love elephants and Hrithik Roshan and the color pink so I’d say India is home too. To many of us...

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine. --Rabindranath Tagore

“So what are you?”

I am a girl with two gray hairs. I am a woman. I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am a boxer-dog lover. I am a Bible student. I am an artist. I am an art teacher. I am a piano player. I am an American. I am a high school level three Spanish speaker. I am a vegetarian because I once heard a chicken cry. I am an ice-cream eater. I am a polka-dot wearer. I am a friend. I have the right to put forth any one or a combination of these identities as I choose. In the context of the myth of Edenic Possibilities that is America, I can take on a persona R.W.B. Lewis calls the American Adam, “a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever await[s] him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” !!!!!!!

As an American hero I can choose to strip myself of a past. Stripped of a past, I am not expected by society to do anything in particular; I can pick and choose to do only those things that enrich my existence. But I’m no Natty Bumppo. I’ve got ancestors in my subconscious.

“But what are you?”
I make them guess. They guess Hawaiian, Samoan, Afro-Cuban, French-Algerian. I apparently do not have strong racial features.

We are all people, originating in the Fertile Crescent. Our ancestors with their stories spread out from there and kept moving in search of space for their children and animals. There are no real boundaries defining country and race. Rarified, specific culture comes from isolation--an infrequent phenomenon, one example being the Japanese pre-1850 who rejected contact with the outside world. Culture has historically been a tale of cross-pollination. In contemporary society, engagement in many different spheres and with many groups prevents one from taking on stereotypical characteristics of a single distinct culture, be it Goths, Buddhists, West County Soccer Moms, or South Indian Christians.

If I choose to limit myself I can pop a dot on my forehead and fit neatly into one “culture.” If I am quiet and deft, stop telling India stories, I can slip easily between many groups. I also have the perk of an ambiguous name: Michelle Sindha Thomas. “Michelle” because my mother was an Indian rebel and made a choice that was contextually outré. “Thomas” after Kerala’s first Christian proselytizer, a name shared by English muffins and many Americans. “Sindha” remains, carefully tucked in the middle, a name used only on forms and situations where a whiff of exoticism is desirable. “Sindha,” not my Indian name, not even a name proper--a name my grandfather supposedly invented and that I share with an unlikeable aunt. I rarely use it.

I have an ambiguous name and inconsistent ethnic features. I can easily pass for a mixed race American. But in my noisy, lengthy wrestling with America and India and cyclothymic successions of creative willpower, anger, and resignation, I have made myself a spectacle.
Not that I am treated like a freak. I live in Saint Louis, a place where people tend to ignore what they do not understand and so I am often ignored. But black boys and children stare at me. Stare at my red high heels, orange lipstick and wild hair, they watch me eating ice cream in the dead of winter with a cashmere wrapped around my neck.

I will not be ignored.

Because before I am an Indian, I am an artist, and before I am a maker of meaning, I am a seeker of meaning. In my search for meaning I learned (from Amartya Sen’s brilliantly named *The Argumentative Indian*) that my middle name, Sindha, derives from the word “Sindhu,” an alternate name for the Indus river. The word “Hindu,” used since ancient times simply to describe the inhabitants of the subcontinent, also evolves from this source. “India” itself takes its name from the Indus river valley, the seat of an advanced culture dating back to 3,000 BC, before the idea of India--past the Kapoors, the English, the French, Portuguese biscotti, the Syrian Christian, Marco Polo, Akbar, Ashoka, the Buddhist, the Hindu--to the very beginning of human civilization. Between Michelle and Doubting Thomas, Sindha sinks its taproot into a past 6,000 years deep.

Because before I am Indian, I am human.