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Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage

Kathryn Hansen

The latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century was a period of transition when the public image of Indian womanhood was being crafted not only through literature and social experiments but also through the commercial media of the Parsi theatre and silent cinema. Gender and racial masquerades commonly found in these a confusion about the demarcation between male and female and between 'white' and 'Indian'. The female image this presented perpetuated patriarchal control not only of the material female body but its visual manifestations.

I

SITA, Draupadi, Subhadra, Damayanti and other heroines from epic and myth have long been celebrated in the visual and verbal arts and rightly credited with establishing gender roles for women in Indian society. But what did it mean when men played their parts, as was so often the case in pre-modern performance traditions?¹ Were the paradigms of womanly virtue parodied by the cross-dressed actor, or did his masquerade contribute to the construction of a powerful ideal? How was the spectator's gaze focused by the conventions of female impersonation? How closely did the stylisations of dramatic genres in different periods correspond to social practices of female attire and comportment? Such questions have rarely been asked, perhaps because they expose to self-conscious inquiry a practice so ubiquitous and widely accepted in south Asia as to appear invisible. Bringing theatrical transvestism into the limelight, moreover, threatens to reinvigorate stereotypes of effeminacy among the male population, a bitter legacy of colonial domination that lingers in post-colonial India.² Yet surely if one is concerned with issues of representation, one cannot ignore the fact that, for most of the history of the theatre in south Asia, women have been represented by men. And when women do come on stage in the late 19th century and appear in the cinema in the 20th, their identity is constructed as racially other: actresses of Anglo-Indian, Jewish, or mixed parentage (including courtesans) predominate. What does it mean for women as a social group when they are figured on such alien bodies? For whom, or in whose interests, are these anomalous gender categories produced, and how are they consumed?

Here I will attempt a limited response to these questions by looking at evidence

I have gathered from the Parsi theatre and the early Indian cinema. My context is the commercial entertainment industry arising from new entrepreneurial modes, uses of urban space, structures of leisure time, and the consumable pleasures of music, dance, and drama, all in complex interaction with technologies and cultural forms introduced during colonial rule. The period covered is from 1853, when Vishnudas Bhave and his troupe performed 'Raja Gopichand' in Hindustani before a public audience in Bombay and sparked an upsurge of theatre activity to 1931 when the first sound feature film, *Alam Ara*, was released, also in Bombay, following which Parsi theatre began to wane. While the geographical focus is on western and northern India, the extensive tours of the Bombay-based troupes to Madras and Ceylon, Calcutta and Rangoon, Peshawar and Sindh, and points in between, and the founding of innumerable local and regional groups styled after the Bombay companies, extend the implications of the thesis to a wider territory.

My argument has a broad theoretical contour and a more narrowly focused critique to offer. At the first level, I find that gender and race in these popular venues can be considered 'categories in crisis', modifying a notion from Marjorie Garber (1992:16-17). The representation of gender and race is negotiated, exploited, avoided, and displaced for decades. I do not mean to imply that the Parsi theatre and the silent cinema were not significant sites of gender formation. Bringing the heretofore invisible woman onto the stage and screen constituted a rupture, both with the systemic segregation of respectable women and their exclusion from public life, and with the practices of 'mehfil' and court performance, wherein patrons exercised exclusive control over female performers. But within the urban entertainment

economy, factors such as the high degree of publicity and access, the new set of relationships between spectators and actors, and the profit-making goals of management configured the represented woman – the actress or her surrogate – as an object of visual consumption. Female accoutrements like hair style, jewellery, and clothing, together with the fair skin and sexual availability symbolised by the exotic 'foreign' woman, were enshrined as denominators of desirability. Although the popular theatre and early cinema created a public space in which societal attitudes towards women could be debated (particularly in the melodrama of social reform), the actress herself retained a disrespected status. Only towards the end of the period does one find moves towards what became the normative representation of the 'Indian woman', the 'bharatiya nari' of the nationalists; before that, she is neither truly bharatiya, nor indeed a nari.

More specifically, I argue that preconceptions about the difficulty of finding actresses have been utilised to dismiss or evade the phenomenon of female impersonation.³ It has been held that because of the stigma connected to acting and the relegation of singing, dancing, and other performance arts to a marginalised courtesan class, 'respectable' women were at an extreme social disadvantage with respect to the stage, and were not only unwilling to become actresses but were ill-equipped for its rigors and lacking in skills. Even in the early years of filmmaking, suitable women were said to be unavailable, and directors like Dadasaheb Phalke resorted to using female impersonators. While acknowledging that debates about the propriety of women in acting careers, as in any kind of public role, were at the forefront of bourgeois colonial society, I will detail the strategies by which actors, managers, and reformists

restricted women's access to the profession. The historical record shows that, for a considerable duration, the employment of female impersonators and actresses overlapped, and they effectively competed against each other. Companies and publics, then, chose those whom they wanted to represent women on stage – men or women. The contest remained unresolved well into the 1920s, when Bal Gandharva of the Marathi stage and Jayshankar Sundari of the Gujarati stage achieved unparalleled popularity with sophisticated urbanites. I maintain that tensions within the theatre-going public about the nature of spectatorial pleasure are crucial to understanding this contestation. The discourse of respectability promulgated by reformists existed uneasily beside a fascination for erotic display, the staple of audience enjoyment, and both were manipulated by the profit-seeking proprietors in a struggle for control of the represented female body.

II

While there is no need to outline the major themes of social history and the status of women in this period, several points about the Parsi theatre and its relation to the Parsi community need to be clarified at the outset. The term 'Parsi theatre' is used herein to indicate a broadly based commercial theatre, whose influence extended far beyond the community of Zoroastrian immigrants from Iran from which it took its name. Amateur theatrical activity became fashionable among Parsi college students in Bombay around 1850. Shortly thereafter, Parsi business managers and shareholding actors organised the first professional theatre companies. Until roughly 1875, the languages of the plays were English and Gujarati, and plots were based on the Persian 'Shah Nama' and Shakespearean comedies and tragedies. After the successful staging of the 'Indar Sabha', a song-and-dance spectacle written by Amanat of Lucknow, companies turned increasingly to Urdu dramatists and the Indo-Muslim corpus of legends and fairy tales. Until the 1920s, almost all the Urdu dramas – and there were hundreds – were written under contract for the Parsi theatre. In the first decades of the 20th century, the Hindu epics became very popular along with romantic 'social dramas', and Hindi gradually became the language of choice.

Writers, actors, company managers, musicians, and theatre service personnel belonged to a mix of backgrounds. Generally, paid employees (including actors) were more disadvantaged with regard to education and family income than company owners. Audiences similarly

were diverse, comprised initially of British officials and elite Parsis, then centring on the middle class of 19th century Bombay, particularly the various trading communities and professional groups. The working class, especially immigrants to the growing city, also formed a significant part of the audience by the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th century. A range of ticket prices accommodated the different classes of public. They spoke Gujarati, Marathi, Urdu, Hindi, Tamil and other languages, and the dramatic medium was fluid and polyglot. It is important to remember that the literary forms of these languages were over this entire period undergoing change and stabilisation; certainly the association of community with linguistic identity was not yet rigidly fixed.

The notion that the Parsi theatre had a special relationship to the Parsi community is thus highly problematic, at least beyond the first two decades of its development. Parsi business interests, specifically the Madan family, did manage to retain control until the 1930s, partly by converting their empire of theatre halls to cinemas. The important theatre houses of Bombay, while owned mostly by Parsis, were not utilised solely by Parsi theatre troupes. Most of these were on Grant Road in the so-called Black Town, but there was also the prestigious Gaiety Theatre opposite Victoria Terminus in the Fort area. Both the Marathi and Gujarati stage got their start in the metropolis and remained important to Bombay's cultural life, and their companies performed in the same theatres, as did visitors from other parts of India and abroad. This meant a great deal of imitation and rivalry within the entire urban theatre economy, and it is within this larger context that I wish to situate the questions about performing women.⁴

The young Parsi men who pioneered the cosmopolitan practice of female impersonation were of high social standing, unlike their forebears in the rural or 'folk' theatres found all over the subcontinent, who were traditionally of low rank.⁵ When the students of Elphinstone College formed a club to rehearse Shakespeare and try out new Gujarati scripts, it was probably obvious that some of them would take up women's roles, although it is not known by what criteria they were chosen.⁶ The first on record to play female roles was D N Parekh, later a medical doctor and lieutenant colonel in the Indian Medical Service. He was a close associate of Cowasji S Nazir (1846-85), who had entered Elphinstone College in 1863 and founded its influential dramatic society. Parekh's notable roles included Portia in

'The Merchant of Venice' and Mrs Smart in G O Trevelyan's 'The Dawk Bungalow'. The Elphinstone Dramatic Society's productions were held under the patronage of notables such as Sorabji Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy and Jagannath Sunkersett [Gupta 1981:133-37, Namra 1972:93-95, Mehta 1968-69:262-64].

Even at a time when theatrical activity was principally conceived as an amateur pastime, anecdotes suggest that a considerable premium was placed on successful female impersonators. Framji Joshi completed his matriculation in 1868, and in the same year played the lead in a Gujarati version of Lytton's 'Lady of Lyons' presented by the Gentlemen Amateurs Club. His performance was so original and impressive that the club's director feared his star performer would be lured away by another company. He delivered a stern lecture to the membership, but it backfired. Framji Joshi left ('the bird flew from his hand', as Gupta says) and joined the Alfred Company, where he went on to do several new female roles. In 1871 he resigned from the stage and became superintendent of the Government Central Press [Gupta 1981:122, 147-48, 174-75].

With the establishment of the long-lived Victoria Theatrical Company in 1868, the Parsi theatre entered a period of professionalisation. Young men of pleasing figure and superlative voice were sought out to play women's roles. An acting career normally began with a period of apprenticeship involving schooling in female roles, especially in the minor parts of 'saheli' or 'sakhī', companions of the heroine.⁷ Certain actors became known as 'all-rounders', capable of performing the role of hero, heroine, or comedian, as needed. In other cases, with age and changing physical characteristics, the performer shifted from female to male roles. Khurshed Baliwala (1852-1913), who later managed the Victoria Theatrical Company and became one of the most renowned Parsi theatre personalities of his time, provides a typical example. In 1870 when he was 18, he played the female role of Sohrab's beloved Gorda Farid in a production of 'Rustam and Sohrab' [Namra 1972:52, Gupta 1981:108]. This play was written by Edalji Khori (who later became a prominent barrister in Rangoon) and it was performed in Gujarati. A year later, Baliwala appeared as Firoz, the hero of 'Sone ke Mul ki Khurshed', in Victoria Theatrical's first venture into Urdu drama [Namra 1972:55]. From then on, he acted primarily in male roles. He normally played Gulfam, the princely hero of the 'Indar Sabha', as an example [Gupta 1981:112].

Other actors specialised as female impersonators. Success in a role led to the public affixing the name of the character to the actor's name or nickname. Two brothers of the influential Madan clan acquired this popular status as successful female impersonators. Nasharvanji Framji Madan became famous as Naslu Tahmina for his performance as Sohrab's mother in 'Rustam and Sohrab' (1868) [Gupta 1981: 201]. Naslu's younger brother, Pestanji Framji Madan, was called Pesu Avan, after the heroine Avan in a Gujarati version of Shakespeare's 'Pericles'. He played the heroine Khurshed, opposite Baliwala in 'Sone ke Mul ki Khurshed'. Pesu was greatly favoured by Dadi Patel (1844-76), the manager of the Victoria Theatrical Company from 1870 to 1873. In 1873, there was a split in the Victoria Theatrical Company. Dadi Patel took Pesu Avan and some other actors with him and formed an offshoot called the Original Victoria Theatrical Company. C S Nazir, who became the new manager of the Victoria, was at a complete loss without his female lead. He organised a group of recruiters to begin looking for new boys, and finally found Edalji Dada aka Edu Kalejar and Ardeshar aka Ado to fill the gap left by Pesu Avan. This was particularly urgent as Nazir wanted to make a strong showing at a large function in Delhi, probably the Delhi Darbar of 1877. He could not outdo his rivals and win a sizeable audience without topnotch female impersonators [Gupta 1981:109-10].

Female impersonators seem to have played various types of stage roles. On the one hand there was the romantic heroine, beloved of the hero and inevitably an embodiment of feminine perfection and modesty. On the other, there were the women magician roles, like the Jogin in 'Harishchandra' [or 'Gopichand'], Gupta 1981:111, 166]. During Victoria Company's tour to Delhi in 1874, Kavasji Manakji Contractor, a female impersonator whom Nazir affectionately called 'Bahuji', created a sensation by delivering countless lashes to the tormented dancing figure of Baliwala playing Lotan. This particular gesture was later to become a trademark of the actress Nadia, known as 'Hunterwali', who appeared in stunt films in the 1930s and 1940s.

III

By the early 1870s, the debate regarding the admission of actresses was not only commonplace in the theatre but being discussed by society at large. Male company proprietors feared the stigma that would attach to their shows if women from the singing and dancing trades were

allowed onto the stage. But professional women were eager to join the Parsi companies. While the Victoria Company was away on tour in 1872, the Parsi Natak Mandali put on a performance of the 'Indar Sabha' with Latifa Begam, an accomplished dancer, in the role of the Sabz Pari (emerald fairy). At the play's conclusion, just as she entered the wings, she was abducted by a Parsi man. Throwing his overcoat over her costumed body, he whisked her into his waiting carriage. The company owners did not have the courage to confront him. Latifa's disappearance created a sensation and was widely discussed in the newspapers, as a result of which the introduction of women on stage received a setback. But soon Amir Jan and Moti Jan, two Punjabi sisters, replaced Latifa with the company [Gupta 1981:140].

Meanwhile Dadi Patel had been invited by Salar Jang, diwan to the nizam of Hyderabad, to visit the state with his troupe. In 1872, before long-distance transport was available, he made the difficult trip with his entourage, and once there met with tremendous success. Dadi Patel's performances before the harem of royal women are recounted with particular gusto. This could have been the moment when he became persuaded of the virtues of employing real women, for when he returned to Bombay he brought several Hyderabad singers with him [Namra 1972:73, Gupta 1981:109, 210]. His groundbreaking use of these women in his 1875 production of the 'Indar Sabha' turned fairies into females, although the play is said to have been a flop. Dadi Patel was still engaged in intense competition with Nazir. To insult his rival, he prepared a drop scene with a picture of himself as a beautiful youth and Nazir as a huge snake, presumably illustrating the theme of Krishna subduing the serpent-demon Kaliya.

The transition had now begun, and other companies continued the trend to bring in actresses, although not without controversy. Female impersonators likewise held their ground and remained as popular as ever. When Jehangir Khambata founded the Empress Victoria Theatrical Company in Delhi in 1877, he took full advantage of the talents of a popular female impersonator known as Naslu Sarkari (Nasarvanji Ratanji Sarkari). Famed for his sweet, 'cuckoo' voice ('kokil kanth'), Naslu played the Sabz Pari to Kavas Khatau's Gulfam in the 'Indar Sabha'. S/he was Laila with Khatau as Majnu; Bakavali with Khatau as Tajulmulk; and performed a number of other classic themes opposite the hero known as 'India's Irving'

[Gupta 1981:118-19]. What happened to Naslu Sarkari when Mary Fenton entered the scene? This story has not been told, but what is recounted is that during one of the rehearsals of the 'Indar Sabha', a 'doll carved out of marble, a houri from heaven' came looking for a 'deshi admī'. Mary Fenton, the daughter of a retired Irish soldier, was herself an entertainer; she put on magic lantern shows, and had come to book the hall where the Parsi troupe was performing. She admired Khatau's acting, met him, and a romance ensued. Mary, who already spoke Hindi and Urdu, is said to have been trained in singing and acting by Khatau. Eventually she and Khatau were married but they separated later; she bore him a son, Jehangir Khatau [Gupta 1981:120-21, Namra 1972:99].

Mary Fenton's appearance on the Parsi stage launched a new era. Her ability to mimic Parsi and Hindu modes of femininity, her touching singing, accurate pronunciation, acting talent, and fair skin, as well as the salacious stories circulating about her relations with Khatau, created a sensation in the theatre. But it also sparked dispute. Khatau split with Khambata, left Delhi for Bombay, and joined the Alfred Natak Mandali. Its owner, Manek Master, was opposed to allowing Mary to act, and as a result Khatau separated and started his own Alfred Company. In 1890 Fenton appeared in 'Gamdeni Gori' at the Gaiety Theatre, a play which was performed many times by Khatau's Alfred and Baliwala's Victoria, and which later became a popular silent film starring Sulochana (1927) [Gupta 1981:46-47]. Mary Fenton also featured in Alfred productions of 'Alauddin' (1891), 'Bholi Gul' (1892), 'Tara Khurshid' (1892), and 'Kalyug' (1895). She is said to have died at the age of 42, perhaps in 1896, which would indicate a birthdate of 1854 and a likely first meeting with Khatau at the age of 23 or 24. Khatau died in 1916 [Gupta 1981:124-25, Namra 1972:110-11].

K N Kabra (1842-1904), the original founder of the Victoria Company in 1868, was an important figure in Bombay society, a reformist and community leader. Aside from organising theatrical groups and writing plays, he edited *Rast Goftar*, a major Gujarati journal established by Dadabhai Naoroji. He also started the magazine *Stribodh* in 1857, one of India's first publications for a female readership. Kabra's opinions illustrate an important trend of thought at the time. He argued for greater independence for Parsi women, including the freedom to move outside the home and to wear socks, boots, and carry an umbrella.⁸ Simultaneously, he criticised

the lewd behaviour ('bhrashtachar') that supposedly flourished with the arrival of courtesan performers and opposed the acting of women on the stage. To combat this 'defect' as well as to protest the increasing use of mechanical stage devices, he started a company called the Natak Uttejak Mandali in 1876. This company performed plays in Gujarati, among which the most successful venture was 'Harishchandra', which played for 100 nights with Ardeshar Hiranik in the role of Taramati. In the company's 16-year history, the lifelong female impersonator Darasha Patel also achieved great distinction. He poured himself into his roles as Damayanti, Subhadra, Shirin, Tahmina, and brought the company considerable profit [Namra 1972:72, 96-97, Gupta 1981:34-40, 129-32, 210].

The Natak Uttejak Mandali's productions of 'Harishchandra' and 'Nala and Damayanti' attracted large Hindu audiences, especially women. Cradles were set up for infants outside the hall with childminders to tend them: these servants fetched the mothers if the children began crying. Although K N Kabra wanted to keep actresses off the stage, he campaigned for the freedom of Parsi women to come to the theatres to watch, preferably accompanied by their husbands and brothers, and it was not considered improper for women to attend theatre shows under such conditions. Sometimes performances were held for women only, 'Pardanashin' women would be accommodated within a special seating area. Prostitutes from the town also frequented the shows and apparently would sit in the same secluded section [Gupta 1981:213-14].

A similar policy was followed by the New Alfred Theatrical Company; again, the actress issue was held accountable for internal dissension. Mohammed Ibrahim joined Manek Master in opposing Kavas Khatau's performances with Mary Fenton. Leaving the Alfred, these two formed the New Alfred and engaged Sohrab Ogra (1858-1933) as company director. Ogra, unlike Kabra, was from a poor family and had no formal education. He was known for his complete opposition to allowing women to perform, and never even permitted his wife or children to see a play, let alone perform in one. Because of his rigid stance, the company banned actresses for over 40 years, until his death in 1933. He is said to have enforced strict discipline within his company, for example, outlawing the backstage prompter and making the actors memorise all their lines. On stage he mostly acted the role of the comedian. Not surprisingly, the New

Alfred acquired the reputation of being one of the most orthodox and 'respectable' Parsi troupes, and as a result attracted the likes of Madan Mohan Malaviya and Motilal Nehru to its performances. A number of female impersonators were associated with the New Alfred - Amritlal (Ambu), Narmada Shankar, Master Nisar (who later played opposite actress Kajjan in films), and Motilal - and Ogra is said to have sought young boys from the Gujarati Hindu Tirgara caste [Namra 1972:106-09, Gupta 1981:125-28].

IV

Although the New Alfred was the last major Parsi theatrical company to hold out against women performers, female impersonation as a stage convention continued well into the 20th century, retaining its popularity with audiences and with company managers. The long list of men who played women's roles in the history of Parsi theatre is remarkable; they seem to form the majority rather than the minority of the class of actors. Those who became dedicated to portraying feminine parts and who achieved success in this pursuit were of course fewer. Unfortunately, these actors have been virtually forgotten. Written documentation of their lives, their habits, even their careers are extremely limited. No biography or autobiography has emerged to illuminate this important institution.⁹ However, records are somewhat more complete in the case of two non-Parsi actors, Jayshankar Sundari from the Gujarati stage and Bal Gandharva from the Marathi musical theatre ('sangit natak'). Both the Gujarati and Marathi theatre movements were heavily influenced by the Bombay Parsi theatre. Indeed, they were in competition with Parsi productions for the heterogeneous cosmopolitan audience throughout the latter half of the 19th century. Linguistic and communal differentiation became more marked after 1900, but the mutual contact and exchange among these theatres continued, particularly in the areas of musical style, popular stories, and scenery and costume design.

Jayshankar Sundari (1889-1975) received the Padmabhushan in 1971. He dominated the ranks of female impersonators in the Gujarati theatre from 1901, when he starred in 'Saubhagya Sundari' (the role that gave him his stage name), to 1932, when he retired from the commercial theatre. For most of this time he was a member of the Gujarati Natak Mandali, based at the Gaiety Theatre in Bombay. The early stages of Sundari's career may be representative of other female imper-

sonators. Sundari was born to a village family with a musical background. His grandfather, a sitarist named Tribhuvandas, took him to see a touring drama troupe when he was eight, an experience that created a memorable impression on him. Disliking school and possessed of charming features and fair skin, he was discovered by recruiters from the Urdu-language Parsi company of Dadabhai Thunthi. His parents essentially leased him to the company for a period of three years, and he left for Calcutta. At the age of nine, he received a salary of six rupees a month for performing in the chorus of 'girls' (saheliyan) every night at the Thanthania Theatre. During the day he attended rehearsals, presided over by the strict disciplinarian Thunthi, who frequently caned the boys. His first important role was, as with so many other aspirants to the field, that of the Sabz Pari in Amanat's 'Indar Sabha'. He went on to perform the female leads in 'Chitra Bakavali', 'Gulru Zarina', and 'Sitangar'. On Sundays, he attended theatre shows at the Madan Theatre, known for its gorgeous sets and actresses. The Madan company was the chief rival of Thunthi, and Jayshankar is said to have filled the vacuum created by the departure of actresses from Thunthi's troupe to the Madan [Panchotia 1987:2-23].

Sundari perfected his knowledge of Urdu and developed his characteristic feminine gait during his apprenticeship with the Parsi company. His trademark became a distinctive stage entry which created a 'mesmeric appeal'. He returned to Gujarat for studies briefly at the age of 11, but a year later he was chosen by Bapulal Nayak as his female counterpart and joined the Gujarati Natak Mandali in Bombay at 20 rupees a month. He soon mastered the Gujarati language and achieved resounding success with his debut in 'Saubhagya Sundari' (1901). He then played the character of Rambha, the 'dudhwali' in 'Vikram Charitra' (1902). This play lasted three years and was performed 160 times, every Saturday night. Sundari's fame in the dudhwali role seems to have been based on a particular scene, wherein he enters with a pot ('matki') on his head and offers milk to the hero, while singing 'Koi dudh lyo dilrangi'. Maintaining 'the thin line of demarcation between a refined conduct of a cultured woman and that of acting verging on vulgarism', Sundari enthralled his audience. The song became so popular that Bombay textile companies printed it on their milled dhotis and saris [Panchotia 1987:42].

Throughout his acting career, Sundari kept his hair long and his face clean-

shaven. He modelled his characterisations on real women, for example basing his portrayal of Lalita in 'Jugal Jugari' on close observation of one Shrimati Gulab, the sister of Babubhai Seth [Panchotia 1987:45-46]. K M Munshi found in this role 'the ideal model of a true Gujarati woman'. Aside from his method of total identification with women, Sundari appears to have excelled at the depiction of feminine pathos or 'karuna ras'. In 'Kamalata' (1904), an adaptation of the Shakuntala story, he played his part with such finesse that it moved the audience to tears [Panchotia 1987:48]. Like Bal Gandharva, his stage movements, attire, and speech became models for women offstage. The Padmabhushan citation observed that 'it was a fashion for ladies in Bombay to imitate him in their daily lives' [Panchotia 1987:131]. Although Sundari appears to have been married, next to nothing is known of his personal life. Upon retirement, he reverted to a masculine public image, grew a moustache, and cut his hair.

Bal Gandharva (aka Narayan Shripad Rajhans, 1888-1967) was a contemporary of Sundari: the two men met on several occasions and are said to have been friends. Born into a middle-class brahmin family in Satara district, Bal Gandharva acquired his name at the age of 10 by singing before Lokamanya Tilak. His family members had various musical interests, and like Sundari, he did not distinguish himself at school, but rather was fostered by several male relatives who introduced him to music and drama. In 1905, he joined the Kirloskar Drama Company, replacing Bhaurau Kolhatkar, the first successful female impersonator of the Marathi musical stage, who had just died. His debut was in the title role of 'Shakuntala' on a newly built stage before the prince of Miraj. The object of adoration and esteem from the start, Bal Gandharva became the pet of the students of Deccan College, where he was frequently invited to sing, and he struck up a special friendship with one of them, Balasaheb Pandit [D Nadkarni 1988:41].

In 1911, on the opening night of Khadilkar's drama 'Manapman', Bal Gandharva's eldest child died, but he carried on with the performance, adding a particularly tragic aspect to the role that moved his spectators to tears [M Nadkarni 1988:23]. This play marked the beginning of the appeal of Marathi Sangit Natak to wider audiences, including the offspring of genteel Gujarati, Sindhi, and Kannada families. Bal Gandharva formed his own company in 1913, and over the next two decades he produced increasingly lavish

productions based on mythological and social themes. For the court scene of the Kauravas and Pandavas in 'Draupadi', he spent Rs 75,000 on decor and scenery [M Nadkarni 1988:34]. During the height of his fame, 1921-31, he earned Rs 1.75 lakh annually but was chronically in debt, and he died in penury. Like Sundari he received the Padmabhushan, in 1964. He was a major recording artist and cut over 200 78-rpm discs. His birth centenary was observed in 1988, resulting in several English-language biographies and the reissue of some of his recorded songs.

To an even greater extent than Sundari, Bal Gandharva set fashions for women's dress and behaviour. First, he expanded the nine-yard Maharashtra sari to 10-yards. Later in life, when he had gained weight, he switched to the six-yard version, which does not wrap between the legs, a factor leading to greater liberation for women, according to one commentator [D Nadkarni 1988:59]. He popularised embroidered jackets that were worn over sari blouses and brought into vogue hairstyles such as the bun. Strings of flowers worn in the hair, jewellery such as the 'nath', or nose-ornament, and the practice of carrying handkerchiefs are also credited to him. Equally, he set the tone for men's fashions: the Gandharva cap, Gandharva turban, and Gandharva coat and trousers. Photos of him in his female roles adorned the drawing rooms of elite homes, and many firms used his image to advertise their products, e.g. calendars, diaries, and stationery [M Nadkarni 1988:67-68]. The appellation 'Gandharva' itself was imitated by several singers and performers.

In the accounts of the impersonations of Bal Gandharva, erotic allure is more clearly indicated than in most other references. He possessed an attractive appearance and sweet voice, the two features that were considered essential for all female impersonators, but he appears to have exploited their seductive potential more overtly. One way of doing this was by displaying his long hair, which flowed to the waist. In 'Manapman' he entered the stage with his hair undone, indicating that the heroine had not yet had her bath, while in another scene he turned his back to the audience to reveal a long pleated braid [D Nadkarni 1988:36, 49, 57]. These gestures, rather than being read as crude, were understood as modest and charming representations of the educated young women of the day. As a biographer notes, 'The manner in which Bal Gandharva made himself up and the way he moved on the stage fully evoked the persona of the contemporary young woman of the middle

or upper middle classes' [D Nadkarni 1988:34]. Similarly, his songs are considered memorable for the expressivity and emotional quality in them, particularly the projection of 'shringara' and karuna. His voice production was not falsetto but midway between today's male and female registers, as was true of other singer-actors of the time, regardless of gender. His spoken voice is said to have been an idealised version of (presumably upper-caste) women's speech [D Nadkarni 1988:118].

In 1922, Bal Gandharva began to attempt male roles in the theatre, but he was deemed unsuccessful at shedding his feminine mannerisms and returned to female impersonation, despite increasing obesity and baldness [D Nadkarni 1988:95]. A bid to enter the film world, as the male saint Eknath in 'Dharmatma' (1935), resulted in financial failure. The subsequent effort to portray the female saint Mirabai, in a film of the same name in 1937, also flopped but perhaps for different reasons: the picture was a stiff, unmodified rendering of the musical stage play.

Not surprisingly, Bal Gandharva was opposed to women acting [D Nadkarni 1988:105]. Kamalabai Gokhale, one of the first women on the Marathi stage and an actress in Phalke's film company, recounts:

In my time we faced fierce opposition particularly from actors who were playing female roles on the stage. We were their first natural enemies. They hated us. Some companies actually would not have women performers as a matter of policy, like Bal Gandharva. He wanted my husband to join his company for major male roles opposite his female roles, and when my husband accepted only on the condition that myself and my mother should also be taken in the company, Bal Gandharva refused, saying that no woman will ever appear in his stage productions [Kak 1980:25].

Yet eventually, Bal Gandharva surrendered his reputation and control of the stage to a woman. Contrary to the image of respectability he assiduously maintained earlier, later in life he entered into a sustained liaison with Gohar Karnataki, a Muslim singer. He taught her his female roles and handed her the reins of his company. After her death in 1964, he was deserted by his former friends and is said to have lapsed into a state of 'complete degradation' [M Nadkarni 1988:56].

V

Bal Gandharva's story points to some of the themes that can now be summarised on female impersonation in relation to issues of spectatorship. First, spectators

were fascinated with the idea of a man passing as a woman. The desired end of this performance of gender was that the female impersonator appear so 'natural' that he could not be distinguished from a real woman. Thus, an anecdote concerning Bal Gandharva's attendance at a 'haldi kumkum' ceremony for married women in the Baroda Palace emphasises that he was able to negotiate the event undetected even by the maharani [M Nadkarni 1988:64-65]. For the audience, whether in the theatre or in everyday life, such an act of passing was lauded as a virtuoso feat. It provoked a sense of awe and wonderment, akin to the 'adbhuta rasa' of classical dramatic aesthetics. From the repeated mention of the necessity of the female impersonator having an appropriate voice and physical features, it is clear that hearing and seeing were the senses actively engaged by this spectacle. The training of these senses through the act of theatrical spectatorship, a process which quickened in the late 19th century, is evident in the larger frames within which the female impersonator performed, notably the proscenium arch with its elaborately painted backdrops and curtains and the predominance of musical sound through orchestration, singing, and musical interludes.

Second, the masquerade motif was multivalent; it could be read in various ways depending on the dramatic text and the spectator's preconditioned interpretive apparatus. Many classical and folk tales from the subcontinent employ gender disguise as a narrative device to bring the hero into closer proximity with the heroine. The hero disguises as a female to get past a guard, enter a garden, or penetrate a bedchamber, whereupon he reverts to his masculine role and seduces the heroine. Transvestism in these cases only thinly cloaks a somewhat aggressive male heterosexuality, and the transvestite, rather than being read as a woman or as identifying emotionally with her, is actually understood as very much a man, and potentially a threat to the woman's honour and that of her male kin. That such ruses were still employed in everyday life is suggested from reports that during 'family shows' in the Parsi theatre, when no unaccompanied men or women were allowed, 'rasiks', i.e., men in women's clothing, would be caught attempting to gain entrance [Namra 1972:48]. This ribald, comic mode of cross-dressing is found in various folk theatre forms and may have featured in the farcical skits that were presented after the main drama in an evening of Parsi theatre. For some

spectators, it was likely the primary position from which female impersonation was viewed.

In contrast, the kinds of roles mentioned in connection with Sundari and Bal Gandharva suggest a high mimetic mode of female impersonation, particularly in conjunction with scenes of pathos and tragedy as found in the epics and domestic melodramas. The many references to an acting method based on identification with feminine sensibility suggest that, in these roles, actors tried to disguise their male gender characteristics entirely. Photographs of our male heroines with heads bent in submission, or eyes gazing up to the hero, or body turned away coquettishly, show the match between these actors' poses and iconic postures of the feminine. The internalisation of these gestures by the female spectatorship marked a new direction in theatre art, for instead of fearing the transvestite, the viewer was instructed to model herself on him. Particularly through the figure of the tragic woman, the wronged wife, the victim, the 'abala nari', the female impersonator was rendered non-threatening, a stimulant of tears rather than titillation. This spectatorial position made possible the notion that the female impersonator portrayed the societal ideal of femininity. Indeed, by virtue of his allegedly superior histrionic talents deployed in the summoning of pathos, the female impersonator was said to surpass any woman in his representation of the beauty of womanly suffering.

Not in opposition to these kinds of reading, but more difficult to trace in the historical record, I would suggest an underlying homo-erotic valence that linked the gazes of hero and male heroine on stage, and heroine and male spectator in the theatre hall. Hints of this emerge in comments such as that of actor Londhe, who playing opposite Bal Gandharva felt a 'unique thrill' pass through his veins when he stood close by [D Nadkarni 1988:106], or references to the 'lusty applause' of the college boys when Bal Gandharva as Shakuntala entered the stage surrounded by her 'companions' [M Nadkarni 1988:17]. The physical attraction generated by the cross-dressed performer through the gaze and the voice could travel into various types of roles and dramatic situations, intersecting with other kinds of responses. My understanding is that the male-to-male dynamic was a major factor in the passionate idolisation of impersonators like Bal Gandharva, whether it was acknowledged or not.

My third observation is that the kinds of pleasure produced by these spectatorial positions – the pleasure of witnessing a gender 'stunt', or of weeping while feeling a homo-erotic 'buzz' – may well have surpassed the pleasure of seeing a real woman on the stage, a sensation that could have been quite discomfiting, at least initially. The sight of a woman in public was enveloped in such moral condemnation, and the actress's low status was reinscribed in the theatrical discourse itself so continuously, that the spectator's response could not be expected to be one of authentic attraction or sympathy. For the viewer thus incapacitated in his/her ability to read the actress as other than 'prostitute', the female impersonator offered a more palatable surrogate. Naturally, his acceptability was exploited by company managers and advertisers, and the fixation on clothing, jewellery, and other fetishes of feminine appearance cannot be accounted for without reference to the burgeoning consumer economy and the creation of new markets in an industrialising society. For actresses who managed to gain access to the theatre, conformity to the new norms of glamour could at least partially offset the stigma of being 'essentially' female.

Fourthly, through the institution of female impersonation, a publicly visible, respectable image of 'woman' was constructed, one that was of use to both men and women. This was a representation that, even attached to the material male body, bespoke modernity. As one response to the British colonial discourse on Indian womanhood – the accusations against Indian men on account of their backward, degraded females – the representation helped support men, dovetailing with the emerging counter-discourse of Indian masculinity. Moreover, women derived from these enactments an image of how they should represent themselves in public. Female impersonators, by bringing into the public sphere the mannerisms, speech, and distinctive appearance of middle class women, defined the external equivalents of the new gendered code of conduct for women. That such tastes were crafted by men (albeit men allegedly imitating women) gave them the imprimatur of acceptability. I would argue that it was the possession of the external markers of femininity – the armour of correct sari style, hairdo, and jewellery, together with appropriate gestures – rather than (or at least in addition to) some internalised essence as suggested by Partha Chatterjee, that made it easier for women to begin to move in public. Without a visual template

that enabled recognition of their 'spiritual' essence, Indian women could not actually become visible.

Yet women were kept at a distance from this process of gender formation, in several senses. Insofar as female impersonators usurped the position of actresses within the entertainment world, they not only denied women opportunities for employment but intensified the misogynist discourse that held that women had to remain off-stage and out of the public eye. Furthermore, by asserting that female impersonators could 'do gender' better than women, the theatre system and its public served to perpetuate longstanding male control over the female body and its representation.¹⁰ The satirical overtones of some impersonated female roles as well as the use made of the homo-erotic address – both factors whose precise reception remains to be determined – would have further strengthened the marginalisation of women as spectators and undermined their centrality as represented subjects (characters). In this way, female impersonators and the commercial theatre system behind them served to 're-form' women, much as male novelists, journalists, and social activists attempted to do throughout the same period.

VI

Returning now to those women who did make space for themselves in the theatre, with the arrival of Mary Fenton (aka Meharbai), actresses gained a certain degree of access to the Parsi companies. Around 1880 Baliwala brought women into the Victoria Company, beginning with Gohar, who was followed by Malka, Fatima, Khatun, and others. Lurid tales accompany some of these names: Fatima once entered Baliwala's room while he was sleeping, and the sight of her when he suddenly woke up caused him to have an attack of paralysis. Khatun's nose had been cut off by a lover. Gulnar ran a 'pan' shop in Rangoon [Gupta 1981:210-12]. Whether these stories have any truth, they confirm that the actress continued to signify 'prostitute' and was remembered for her off-stage behaviour (imaginery or real) rather than her abilities as a performer.

The 'foreign' or Anglo-Indian actress, however, managed to avoid much of this savaging. Perhaps it was assumed that she was a loose woman, like all of her tribe, and was incapable of reform. More likely, the stereotype of Anglo-Indian women as sexually available followed rather than preceded their entrance into the entertainment industry. These 'white' actresses represented the epitome of

perfection for a heroine. Not only were they appropriated to pre-existing conventions of the beloved as a pale fairy or a *houri* from paradise (see previous anecdote re Mary Fenton), they allowed for a powerful transformation of the colonial gender hierarchy. Through the exercise of the gaze, the male Indian spectator could possess the 'English' beauty, and in so doing enact a reversal of the power relations that prevailed in British-dominated colonial society. These relations, while grounded in economic and political control, were figured as a gendered domination of the 'masculine' west over the 'feminine' east. Moreover, the Anglo-Indian actress could be read within an existing complex of literary under-standings of the ideal feminine. Here was a beloved, an idol, who truly could be 'worshipped'. To prostrate before such an 'immortal', that is, to become a fan, invoked the familiar vocabulary of sexual mastery under the guise of masochistic self-surrender, a legacy of the Indo-Muslim *ghazal* tradition. Perhaps what appealed the most was the conjunction of the two: the fantasy of duping the master by turning the Anglo-Indian half-caste, the dishonourable offspring of a humiliating act of sexual domination, into an image of purity, and then proving one's masculinity by possessing her.

A given actress could racially be Irish, British, Anglo-Indian (i.e., Eurasian, of mixed parentage), or Jewish (generally Baghdadi); the distinctions were often lost on the audience or muddled. Mary Fenton was said to be 'Irish' or 'Anglo-Indian'. Patience Cooper is most often listed as 'Anglo-Indian', but she is also called 'Jewish'. Gauhar is occasionally described as Jewish as well. Later, confusion was consciously manipulated by film actresses who masqueraded under Hindu names, e.g., Sulochana (Ruby Myers),¹¹ Sita Devi (Renee Smith), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolet), Manorama (Winnie Stewart). The primary constructed identity, in each case, was as 'white' or 'foreign'. In a secondary formation, whereby an Indian name was substituted for the foreign name, the 'white' actress was denominated within the indigenous system. The shift from Parsi or Gujarati aliases in the 19th century ('Meharbai') to Sanskritised aliases in the 1920s ('Sulochana') says a great deal about the ways in which nationalism and gender formation were increasingly being brought into alignment. In this period, moreover, Anglo-Indians were classed together with the British in many contexts. When the Indian Cinematograph Committee was constituted in the 1920s to investigate the

progress of Indian cinema, it included '114 Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Americans' and '239 Indians' [Barnouw 1980:45]. Spectator bias probably gave the benefit of the doubt to the actress who was trying to pass as anything Other, because this made her more desirable and alluring.

Meanwhile, the woman of one's own community remained safely at home, or at least by the side of her male chaperone, protected from the public gaze. It is important to remember that, as a rule, Parsi women did not appear on the Parsi stage.¹² Hindu actresses in the Parsi theatre were also next to non-existent. What the audience wanted from the Anglo-Indian actress, nonetheless, was a convincing portrayal of the Hindu or Parsi middle-class housewife. Mary Fenton's ability to imitate the signs of the respectable married woman – the use of the sari 'anchal' over the head, the jewellery, the particular cut of the bodice – earned her the highest esteem from the public. Once more, the spectator's pleasure lay in the seemingly effortless impersonation of domestic femininity.

The advertising employed by Parsi theatre companies overtly appealed to audience desire to gaze upon 'whiteness': Handbills for Pandit Narayan Prasad Betab's plays in the 1920s advertise 'gori-gori misen', 'white misses who will present enchanting songs and dances' [Singh 1990:61]. Another posterboasts, 'Houris from Iran – Fairies from Bombay – Magician ladies from Calcutta...will take part'. Just as the Parsi companies had used the names of the British monarchy to exploit the appeal of the foreign and exotic, they used the foreign-sounding actresses' names to lure the public. One interpretation is that these ads were intended to fool the public into thinking that the Parsi companies were actually composed of English actors, and that the spectators would get to see English memsahebs dancing, preferably men and women dancing together [Lal 1973:35]. The memsaheb fantasy was not only fed by the Anglo-Indian actress, it was perpetuated by playwrights who were required to craft particular kinds of narratives. As Betab noted in his autobiography, 'If the dramas of that time didn't have a 'gori bibi' and a 'kale miyan', they were not plays at all' [Lal 1973:55]. In this way the slippage between the fantasized English memsaheb, the material Anglo-Indian actress, and the fictional Indian heroine enabled a fluidity of spectatorial positions. She could be Other, as well as one's own, affording the pleasures of both attraction and control.

The photographed image of the actress's face became a critical marketing vehicle and acquired a mobile life of its own. Billboards would be taken around the city advertising a drama and its actors, and when actresses began appearing on stage, their names and pictures were featured on these boards [Gupta 1981:214]. Actresses' faces began to adorn the covers of the song books and libretti that were sold at the performance site and followed during the performance. Match boxes and postcards featuring famous actresses circulated, although apparently they were printed abroad [Kak 1980:1, 8, 79]. In the first decade of the 20th century, the voices of singing actors and actresses were first recorded on wax discs, and these too began to move independently of the stage performances. Among the female theatre artists, Gauhar Jan and Binodini Dasi of Calcutta were heavily recorded in the first five years of the industry (1902-07) [Kinneer 1994]. Both the circulation of images and recorded voices were to increase exponentially as the film industry and its star culture subsequently developed.

The quest for fair-skinned representations of the female form carried over into the first two decades of Indian's cinema history. In 1912, when Dadasaheb Phalke began making silent films on mythological themes, he searched for actors and actresses through a newspaper ad that read, 'Handsome Faces Wanted for Films' [Kak 1980:39]. Although he received replies from prospective artists from the red light district, his search for women to play the female roles turned up only 'dark, ugly and emaciated persons' [Chakravarty 1993:39]. Consequently, he engaged Anna Salunke, a female impersonator, to play Taramati in 'Raja Harishchandra'. In the famous fountain scene in the film, the king cavorts with a whole bevy of cross-dressed men in wet saris. Salunke later played both Sita and Rama in 'Lanka Dahan' (1917), Phalke's greatest success, making him simultaneously 'the most popular film actor and actress in India' [Barnouw 1980:14]. Other examples of the use of men to play women's roles in films are K P Bhava as the heroine in 'Shakuntala Janma' (1918) and Master Vithal as a dancing girl in 'Kalyan Khajina' (1924) [Kak 1980:30]. In south India also it was common for men to play female roles. The screen was poorly paid, and performing before the camera was considered not only more degrading than stage acting but potentially injurious to one's health [Kak 1980:63].

By the 1920s, female impersonation on the screen had virtually ended, having been considered anachronistic even in

Phalke's time by such leading figures as Baburao Painter [Kak 1980:39-40]. Principally Anglo-Indian women were recruited and employed throughout the silent film era. Several of these, such as Patience Cooper (b 1905?) and Sita Devi (nee Renee Smith, b 1912), had come from the theatre world. Cooper started as a dancer in Bandmann's musical comedy, and later was employed by the Madan's Corinthian theatre [Rajadhyaksha 1994:77]. She also played in the Parsi Elphinstone Theatrical Company. Some of her chief roles were as a comic actress in 'Bharatiya Balak', as the supporting actress in 'Dil ki Pyas', and as Uttara in 'Vir Abhimanyu' [Lal 1973:135]. In the film world, Agha Hashra Kashmiri, a major Urdu dramatist for the Parsi theatre, adapted several of his plays especially for her, e.g. 'Turki Hoor' and 'Hoor-e-Arab' [Rajadhyaksha 1994:77]. Sita Devi had been a star at the Madan Theatres' Elphinstone. Apparently she had a sister, Percy Smith, who V K Dharamsey suggests also appeared under the name Sita Devi in the films she/they made with Himanshu Rai [Rajadhyaksha 1994:84]. Other actresses, such as Sulochana (nee Ruby Myers 1907-83), came from the 'modern' class of young working women. Sulochana had been a telephone operator, a theme used as an autobiographical reference in the 1926 film 'The Telephone Girl'. She made her debut in silent films as a stunt actress and was billed as Queen of Romance or the Jungle Queen. In the mid-1930s she started her own Rubi Pics production company, although she continued acting until the 1970s [Rajadhyaksha 1994:207].

Because these films had no sound track, actresses were not required to be fluent in any Indian language. The experience in the cinema hall was hardly a silent one however. Along with the loud whirring of the projector, orchestras provided almost continual accompaniment, either of a western variety in the big cities (piano and violin) or the 'deshi' version of harmonium and tabla. Narrators read out the titles for the benefit of non-literates or translated them into the local language if it was not represented by titles. Sometimes a narrator improvised upon the script or enacted it in dialogue with a partner [Kak 1980:117-18]. Actual theatre pieces, such as comic skits, could also be interpolated between reels. How the voice of the actress (particularly the Anglo-Indian actress) was represented in such a setup, particularly by a male narrator, is a logical question proceeding from this research. As far as is known, the Anglo-Indian actress in this medium could claim no specific 'voice'.

Any voice attributed to her was disembodied, emanating from elsewhere; her representation operated almost solely in the realm of the gaze.¹³

The absence of sound in these early films has been held to be the source of their detachment from specific national and regional referents, assimilating them to a global visual culture. Within this, the Anglo-Indian actress has been interpreted as an outright imitation of the Hollywood icon. The imitative strategy could have been adopted by filmmakers to counter the popularity of American films, which far outnumbered British, European, and Indian productions in the early days of Indian cinema. No doubt Indian cinema acquired more national characteristics once it entered the sound era, not only in the area of language use but in the representation of gender as well. The postures and dress characteristics of silent screen actresses certainly show the influence of western fashions and a new assertive stance for women. But considerations of the larger performative environment in which screen images were consumed, as well as the inflections created by narrative structure and genre, prompt me to interpret the reading of these Anglo-Indian actresses on a continuum with the spectatorial practices of the Parsi theatre. Since only 13 of the over one thousand silent films made in India have survived, and since there is no moving image record of the Parsi theatre as such, my argument remains beyond definitive proof. All I will attempt to do, in this final section, is look at a few key roles that brought these Anglo-Indian actresses to fame.

The first part of Patience Cooper's film career, the decade of the 1920s, is dominated by mythologicals. She appeared in such classics as 'Nala Damayanti', 'Dhruva Charitra', 'Raja Bhoj', 'Bhagirathi Ganga', 'Ramayan' and others. Her first important role within the 'social' genre was 'Pati Bhakti' (1922), whose English title, curiously, was 'Human Emotions'.¹⁴ This Madan hit was adapted from a very popular play by Agha Hashra Kashmiri, and it may be that Patience Cooper had already performed the role on stage. The film had Cooper as Leelavati, a dutiful wife advocating devotion to the husband [Rajadhyaksha 1994:226]. Signora Minelli, an Italian actress, played the Other woman in 'semi-transparent costumes', while Patience Cooper portrayed, according to J B H Wadia, 'the Adarsh Abla', ideal Hindu wife, who worshipped the very ground on which her wayward husband trod'. The film was a rage at the box office everywhere in India

[Kak 1980:94]. A highlight in Cooper's career, 'Pati Bhakti' became a significant prototype of the 'social' genre.

It was followed in 1927 by 'Gun Sundari', or 'Why Husbands Go Astray', directed by Chandulal Shah. This film featured Gohar ('Glorious Gohar', 1910-1985, a different individual from the Gohar of Calcutta's Parsi theatre), one of the most popular actresses of the silent film. Again the story focused on the dilemmas of a dutiful wife. To win her husband away from his dancing girl mistress, the heroine begins to act 'modern'. Going out at night alone, and transforming herself into the all-round companion, she wins him back [Barnouw 1980:34]. Both 'Pati Bhakti' and 'Gun Sundari' were remade in sound versions, the former in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, the latter in Hindi, Gujarati/Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. The 1934 'Gun Sundari', again with Gohar in the lead, was a more traditional, and more complicated, version of the original plot [Rajadhyaksha 1994:241].

If these films indicate a successful negotiation between earlier definitions of wifely devotion and the new roles for women emerging in the cities, other socials work to construct images of 'tradition' and 'modernity' that appear unreconcilable, putting the actress in the position of oscillating between the two. 'Gamdeni Gori' or 'Village Girl' had been a successful Parsi theatre play for decades before it was filmed by Mohan Bhavnani in 1927. Sulochana, the most popular of the silent film actresses, played the role of Sundari, an innocent village belle of light skin colour cast adrift in the big, bad city. While lustful men try to lure her into prostitution, she meets the hero, a film actor. Features of the urban landscape such as electric trains, cars, buses, a race course, theatres, and cinemas were featured in the *mise-en-scene* and generated a special allure [Rajadhyaksha 1994:231-32].

One year earlier, Sulochana starred in two parallel films, 'The Telephone Girl' ('Telephone ni Taruni') and 'Typist Girl' or 'Why I Became a Christian'. As her most famous silent film, 'Telephone Girl' played upon public fascination with Sulochana's real-life occupation as a telephone operator and it pioneered the use of authentic locations, being shot in the Grant Road telephone exchange in Bombay. The village 'gori' and the telephone/typist girl suggest two halves of the bifurcated female, one presumably closer to Sulochana's constructed screen identity as a modern, sophisticated young woman, the other displaying the ability of the Anglo-Indian outsider to masquerade

as an innocent village maiden. Her most virtuoso performance, however, was in 'Wildcat of Bombay' (1927), remade as the sound film *Bambai ki Billi* in 1936. In this film, Sulochana performed eight roles, including a gardener, a policeman, a Hyderabad gentleman, a street urchin, a banana seller, and a European blonde. (The gender of these roles is not specified, but presumably many of them involved cross-dressing.) Her main role is as a mysterious criminal nicknamed the Wildcat, who in the end is revealed as the daughter of a judge who had been kidnapped long ago [Rajadhyaksha 1994:232, 248].

In the silent films then, the 'white' female image not only affords the pleasures of colonial inversion through sexual domination, but adds the pleasures of consumption of the 'modern'. The Anglo-Indian actress's outsider status permits her a relatively greater degree of freedom of dress and action, and several films openly flaunt the possibilities, even showing the later-banned kiss. At the same time, these films demonstrate the continuing desire of the public to dress up the Anglo-Indian as a good Hindu girl, whether as a mythological heroine, rural damsel, or dutiful city wife. A doubled racial passing animates these images. The Anglo-Indian actress first masquerades as 'white', and then assumes her domesticated role within the Indian narrative frame. All of this manipulation is performed while she remains mute. The equivalent of the 'dumb blonde', the silent gori continues the displacement of agency from the represented figure of the woman, and in this way forms the counterpart and logical successor to the female impersonator.

To sum up, this article has focused on a period of transition when the public image of Indian womanhood was being crafted not only through literary representations and social experiments, but in the highly accessible, widely circulated commercial media of the Parsi stage and silent cinema. Within these, the use of female impersonators and Anglo-Indian actresses to represent women was widespread. Although taboos on acting, particularly women acting, are frequently cited to explain the social necessity of these practices, I believe that deeper issues of representation are involved. The high incidence of gender and racial masquerade points to a crisis in the understanding of these categories, a confusion focused on the boundary between male and female, and between white and Indian. Indian women were most often represented by Indian males passing as females,

particularly on the Parsi stage, or as white females passing as Indian, in the silent films. Both images afforded greater spectatorial pleasures than those accommodated within the conjunction of female and Indian. Both perpetuated the patriarchal control of not only the material female body but its visual manifestations. Nonetheless, these practices made women, finally and on a mass level, publicly visible, no longer objects of imagined desire but represented in the flesh (even if not female or Indian flesh), with a cluster of visual signs, habits, and gestures to denote femininity. As a passing phase, so to speak, this period was later forgotten with the emergence of the full-blown *bharatiya nari*. But in all its ambiguities and blurred boundaries, it remains worthy of further study and interrogation.

Notes

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- 1 Among the traditional and folk theatre forms that employ female impersonation, Jiwan Pani (1977) lists Krishnanattam, Kathakali, Ras Lila, Ram Lila, Ankiya Nat, Yakshagana, Therukuttu, Vithi Natakam, Svang, Nautanki, Khayal, Bhavai, Bhand Jashan, Jatra, and Chhau. Many of these are primarily devoted to dramatising the epic and Puranic story corpus.
- 2 T M Luhrmann's 'The Good Parsi' uses the theory of colonial discourse to account for the shift in the Bombay Parsi community's self-image from hypermasculinity in the late 19th century to effeminacy in the late 20th.
- 3 Carla Petievich points out that this evasion is analogous to the silence regarding gender representation in the Urdu ghazal, based on the argument that the Persian language lacked gender distinctions.
- 4 The 19th century literary and theatrical worlds centred in Bombay are described in essays by J V Naik, Françoise Mallison, Sonal Shukla, Shanta Gokhale and Amrit Gangar in *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*, edited by Patel and Alice Thoner (1995).
- 5 The cosmopolitan theatrical practice of female impersonation also must be distinguished from the ritualised performances of the cross-dressed 'hijaras', a community formed primarily of transvestites and transsexuals (often termed 'eunuchs'). While this group is perhaps the best-known to western students of drag and queer theory, the scholarship on hijaras lacks historical and methodological sophistication. I suspect that hijara performance has an organic relationship with certain regional 'folk' dramatic and dance forms, and therefore is important to the discussion of female impersonation in those contexts. Regarding a relationship between Parsi theatre and hijaras, my intuition is that

- the association is closer, but I am by no means ready to draw conclusions. I wonder if audience perceptions engaged the same vocabulary used in reference to hijaras. Were female impersonators ever spoken of as hijaras, or compared to them, or abused by association with them? Regrettably, a fuller treatment of these issues is beyond the scope of the present paper. See Jaffrey (1996), Nanda (1990) and Marmon (1995).
- 6 It would be useful to investigate further the all-male college environment of Victorian India to determine whether it developed the rituals that infused British public schools with homo-eroticism.
 - 7 This practice continued well into the 20th century. The actor Fida Husain, who received his initiation in the New Alfred Company starting around 1918, became famous first for his female roles [Namra 1972:83; see Agraval 1986].
 - 8 While the right to wear shoes and carry an umbrella appears today an insignificant step in the history of women's advancement, it was a highly charged issue at the time. These accoutrements were required only for women who intended to step out of doors: thus their acquisition symbolised that fraught process of moving beyond the threshold of the home into public, heretofore 'male', space. When Kashibai Kanitkar, Maharashtra's first female novelist, and Anandibai Joshi, its first woman doctor, ventured out wearing shoes and carrying umbrellas, they were stoned in the streets for 'daring to usurp such symbols of male authority' [Kumar 1993:32].
 - 9 Jahangir Khambata's autobiographical *Mahro Natakni Anubhav* may constitute an exception. The 1914 volume has recently been located in the University of Bombay library.
 - 10 A similar process was at work as the 'classical' dance traditions of the subcontinent were constructed in the early 20th century, largely by male practitioners (gurus) who defined canons of feminine costume, gesture, and repertoire, and then taught these 'traditions' to respectable middle class women.
 - 11 Ruby Myers (or Meyers) was also apparently Jewish. See Ramchandran (1985:27), 'Sulochana, a Jewess by birth, named Ruby Meyers'.
 - 12 Only one exception is recorded, in which a Parsi woman performed at the suggestion of Khamvada Navsherji, a female impersonator who had left the Victoria Company under Baliwala to form his own troupe. The appearance of the Parsi actress caused an uproar in the Parsi community, and she left the company eventually [Gupta 1981:170] Saraswati Devi [Khurshid Manchershah Minocher-Homji, 1912-80], a female Parsi music director, also had to face fierce opposition from her community for her association with films.
 - 13 The assumption that Anglo-Indian actresses had to drop out of cinema after 1931 because of their deficiencies in Indian languages is not corroborated by the filmographic record. In the case of Patience Cooper, already a popular theatre artist, language was obviously

not a problem; between 1931 and 1944, she made 27 sound films. Sulochana continued making films through 1978; of the 35 films after 1931, many were remakes of her silent hits. Ermeline, another popular silent Anglo-Indian star, continued making films into the 1930s, although Sita Devi's last film was in 1932. Some lesser known actresses, like Jones, Indira Devi, and Thelma Wallace, do apparently disappear in the talkie era for unknown reasons.

- 14 Another version of the English title was 'Human Evolution' [see Ramchandran 1985:25].

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