

Good Woman



Bad Woman

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With her shady, seductive, and sensual ways, Hindi cinema's bodacious Vamp invited you to drink with her in a seedy bar and to sleep with her in her velvety boudoir.

She was fashionable, modern, stylish, adventurous, and she danced and danced and danced. And it did not matter to the audience or the filmmaker why she danced, whether she was happy or sad or tormented. What was important was that she was beautiful and she danced. For those few minutes in a film, the audience was drawn into a zone of complete fantasy, and it was all magical and all good. And this was ultimately, really, most emphatically, what the Hindi film vamp was really loved for. She danced for you. She seduced you into cinema.

It is this obsession with music and dance that remains the essence of the Bollywood formula.



Aa Jaane Jaan Oh Meri Jaan Main Ne Kaha

Hindi cinema's vamp (or moll) character was partially inspired by Ian Fleming's James Bond girls – the James bond film theme song is in fact mixed into the infamous Piya tu ab to aaja song, composed by the groove master R.D.Burman and sung by the ever versatile Asha Bhosle in *Caravan* (1971). The song is 'picturised' in a giant nightclub set; decorated with pink - plaster of Paris - flamingos, a human-sized golden bird cage, and a replica of Big Ben (she is waiting for her man). But, unlike her British counterpart, the desi vamp is a singing, dancing whore with a heart who never has on screen sex, is careful to control the amount of flesh she exposes and does not directly pose a threat to the nation. But cinematically, her presence allows for aesthetic interventions of the bold kind -- lurid cabaret sequences (Helen dancing in a bottle, surrounded by girls in spinning wine goblets in the song from *Sachai*, 1969 and the caged man in *Aa Jaane Jaan* from *Intaqam* 1969), risqué lyrics (*Kaanp Rahin Main* from *Joshila*, 1974), funky grooves (*Oh Meri Jaan Main Ne Kaha* from *The Train*, 1971, composed by R.D. Burman), and catfights (Reena Roy and Helen in *Zakhmee* 1975), – all perfect ingredients for Bollywood style 'suspension of disbelief'. Needless to say, all this sexploitation satiated the male gaze, legitimised male notions of desire, and ultimately gave the film a sexual energy that kept male audiences transfixed and guaranteed the sale of tickets.

Glamorous, sexually desirable and super foxy, the Vamp was essentially the forbidden fruit...erotica desi style... a patriarchal construction of 'liberated' female sexuality. Located in the 'dark' zones of sexual debauchery and criminal behavior, this shady lady stood in complete opposition to the good girl heroine of the time who was prohibited from venturing too close to this bad girl. Sometimes though the poor good girl heroine was forced into these dodgy spaces when her lover (usually the hero) was captured by the villain and she had to dance for his royal evilness under duress, so that he would set the hero free or, more typically, so that she could buy time until the hero's friends or the police showed up to rescue everyone. The heroine's narrative arc was designed to propagate social convention and domesticity, homeliness and romance. In complete contrast, the vamp was portrayed as a pissed off, manipulative, and oversexed, bitch! She was made to appear jaded and cynical, so that she could smilingly shake her booty for the baddies, mix heady cocktails, do drugs and alcohol, stuff a suitcase full of gold biscuits, double cross the hero so that he falls into the villain's trap, and finally throw herself in front of a bullet and die in repentance for her sinful existence. And yet the audience loved her for it all.





From the very beginning of any hindi film, the trajectory of the vamp character is very clear. There is little mystery around where she will end up and it is in fact her amoral wicked ways that keeps the voyeuristic audience enthralled. By standing in judgment of her, the audience is able to keep its own morality intact and continue to validate normative understandings of 'good' and 'evil'. As they leave the cinema hall, everyone can breath a sigh of relief, and collectively thank both God (and the film's director by default) for reinforcing the notion that good girls live happily ever after, while bad girls are punished with a rather melodramatic death.

“Mera naam chin chin chu Chin chin chu baba chin chin chu
Raat chandni main aur tu Hello mister, how do you do?”

“Mera naam chin chin chu Chin chin chu baba chin chin chu Raat chandni main aur tu Hello mister, how do you do?” Howrah Bridge 1958 ... with these enticing lyrics, a 14 year old French-Burmese girl sashayed her way into Bollywood. Meet Helen Richardson Khan, better known as Helen, the actress who changed the entire scenario of the female character in Hindi cinema in the early 1950s - when Indian women on screen were expected to look demure and do only sugar sweet roles. Helen, the 'hazel eyed', 'gorgeously glamorous', 'twinkle toed charmer' had begun her reign as the ultimate moll and cabaret queen of Bollywood. This sensuous danseuse who exuded an aura of class, cabareted her way into audience's hearts. She was beautiful, sexy, daring, and hung out with the bad boys. In Teesri Manzil (1966), Shammi Kapoor refuses to reciprocate the affection of a devastatingly attractive Helen. And yet, in the film's climax, she comes to the hero's rescue and is stabbed with a dagger in her back, only to bleed to death in his arms. Often, this good bad blonde bombshell inspired fear with her femme fatale ways. With her enviable wardrobe of feather boas and array of wigs (blonde ones most especially), by the 1960's, Helen had become Bollywood's very own Marilyn Monroe. She was sensual and provocative without being vulgar. With her graceful moves (her mid riff and legs covered with a body sock or stockings respectively), she was able to skirt government censors and respect social mores around the public display of sexuality. Jerry Pinto in his book Helen - The Life And Times Of An H-bomb describes the Helen magic --- “the inimitable ease with which she executed whatever steps she was asked to do, moving from flamenco to belly-dancing to kathak as to the manner born. But the most important element was her joyousness, the exhilaration of her dancing. She could create the ultimate male fantasy: the dancer who wanted to dance; the woman for whom dancing was as much about her enjoyment of her own body as it was about your enjoyment of it.”



In the late 60's and 70's, a slew of Helen imitators appeared. They entered the space she had monopolized for years on the dance floor, and tried to carve out their own vamp status. Some, like Faryal, Bindu, and Padma Khanna, were successful. Most others, were not. Jerry Pinto explains this --- "Perhaps this was because Helen was always an unseen presence that they were all, without exception, desperate to exorcise. Perhaps it was because they were not very good dancers, or that they did not seem to be enjoying themselves in the way Helen seemed to enjoy herself. Whatever the reason, the imitators did not seem present as people. It is not as if they acquiesced to being objectified; just that the male gaze succeeded with them. It did turn them into dancing dolls, into faceless women with generic bodies. Helen escaped that fate by leaving a very personal imprint on the dances by which we best remember her."

Around the same time Farhat Ezekiel (or Florence Ezekiel) or just simply - Nadira - the Baghdadi Jew from Bombay also rose to cinematic prominence in Aan 1952. She raised her (already) significantly arched eyebrows, and became considered the first sophisticated vamp of Hindi cinema. The classic song 'Mud mud ke na dekh' from 'Shree 420' in which she woos Raj Kapoor stays firmly etched in cine lovers' minds. Together, these two confident and sensuous young women shaped and gave meaning and depth to the vamp character that became the hallmark of Bollywood for many decades thereafter.

*'Mud mud ke na dekh
Mud mud ke'*



Mera Naam Hai Shabnam

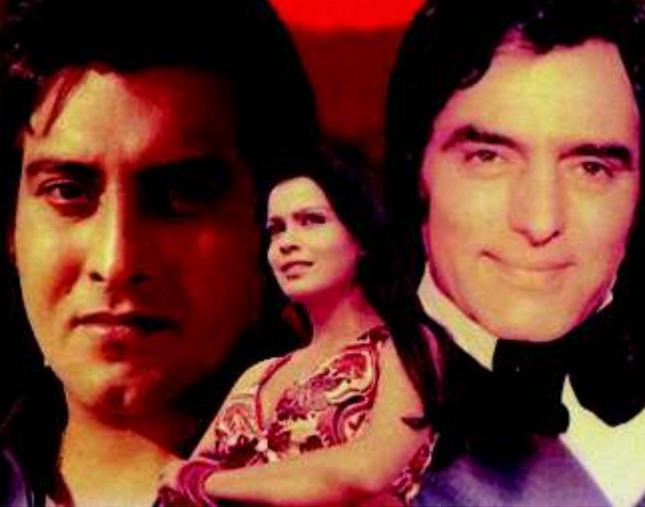


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But what of the success stories amongst the innumerable wannabes? The former airhostess, half jewish-half arab, 'sex bomb' Faryal, was first seen with Shashi Kapoor in *Biradari* (1966) and really made her presence felt with her gyrations in Dev Anand's *Jewel Thief* (1966). There was also the intensely hot Padma Khanna whose infamous dance sequence to *Husn Ke Laakh Rang* from *Johny Mera Naam* (1970) was discussed in hushed tones as she stripped down to her bra and panty for a lecherous, bloated Premnath. The thunder thighed bad desi chick had arrived, and audiences began to reject the foreign looking 'Helen type' vamp. This new aesthetic was epitomized by the uber voluptuous Bindu. Larger than life, with big hair, and oodles of oomph - that is how Bollywood remembers her. She was camp and kitsch, and some film critics consider her the most brazen in her characterization of the vamp. Her roles in *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Hawas* (1974) were classic Bollywood representations of the 'bad girl', as was her psychotic cabaret with *Mera Naam Hai Shabnam* in *Kati Patang* (1971).

The 70's were a complex time for the female character in Hindi films, as socialist mother India began to exercise her control. Indian society found itself in a state of post colonial confusion - attempting to resist western value systems on the one hand while embracing industrialization on the other. This complexity is best understood through the blonde haired, smoking, drinking, mini skirt wearing, 'westernised' character of NRI girl Preeti played by Saira Banu in *Purab aur Paschim* (1970) who constantly spouts phrases like "What sar?" when the virtuous Indian hero (Manoj Kumar) praises Amritsar or saying "Who is Geeta? Is that the heroine of the novel?" when he refers to the Bhagavad Gita. By the end of the film, of course, her shockingly amoral and blasé character is tamed and she is clad in a saree and is shown how to be a good Indian woman by a good Indian man. This radical representation set the tone for a slew of more such intriguing female characters being written for the screen. This new heroine appropriated the vamp's glamour by donning equally flashy clothes and adopting sexually assertive body language. The good-girl heroine had begun to transform and Hindi cinema's designated bad girl, the vamp, was slowly beginning to lose her charm. Her unchanging narrative arc was boring in contrast to the new modern, urban and exciting leading ladies of the 70's - epitomised by the leggy Zeenat Aman and the sassy Parveen Babi. The urban Indian woman was growing into her modern avatar, and Hindi films needed to depict this transition in some way – not to participate in the emancipation of women but to prepare the gents for what they were up against.





It was during this period that the scriptwriter duo Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar (or Salim-Javed) began to take over Bollywood's studios through their angry young man – Mr. Amitabh Bacchan and his leading ladies who had to match up to his antics by nonchalantly accepting his uncompromising and brutish behavior.

In their crime thriller Don 1978 for example, Amitabh Bacchan was a smooth talking, betel leaf chewing, back flipping, murdering, street dancing gangster with a heart of gold. His female heroine played by Zeenat Aman was a high kicking, gun toting, karate chopping, vengeful chick. Around this time super stylish actor Feroz Khan began to direct his super stylized, super modern, wide angle'd heavy, potboilers like Dharmatma (1975) and Qurbani (1980). By 1980 Bollywood flicks clearly asserted the identity of the new age sex diva. Such representations of the female character as an urban struggling chick with attitude who would take no shit from nobody – only from the hero of course – was lapped up by urban audiences. In many ways this Charlie's Angel's inspired character was a manifestation of a modernity and cosmopolitanism that existed in pre-liberalized India. In Qurbani for example, Zeenat Aman was dressed in jeans, and lapelled shirts on the one hand and boob and hip revealing slinky sequenced gowns on the other. She engaged in hand to hand combat and unabashedly displayed her sex appeal. Ever since her first role in Hare Rama Hare Krishna as the chillum smoking NRI hippie who gets converted to the goodness of Indian culture – reasserting the position Saira Banu found herself in in Manoj Kumar's self righteous 'Purab aur Paschim' – Zeenat was hailed as the original modern heroine of modern Bollywood.



Kalpana Iyer and Prema Narayan in Armaan

And thus the death knell was rung for the vamp character. She was unceremoniously ditched! But the audience's libido had still to be satiated. So, a cabaret or two (no matter how tragic or funny or melodramatic the narrative context) was a necessary addition in most films. This was when oomph and gyrations became all important, and when two Miss India girls - Kalpana Iyer (winner) and Prema Narayan (runner up) - took centre stage. They were the last of the true blue Bollywood vamps, but their miniscule roles made evident the transition of the vamp character into a mere cabaret girl who's only job was to entice audiences into lusting after her in the hope that they would come back for more. Kalpana Iyer was the original disco queen who sizzled to the disco beat with Hari Om Hari in *Pyaara Dushman* and *Rambha Ho Sambha Ho* in *Armaan*. For 15 years she was at the top of the Bollywood pops with hits like *Loot Maar*, *Disco Dancer*, *Satte Pe Satta*, *Wardaat*, *Suraksha* and *Anjaam*.

By the late 80's, audiences grew to love the female lead character who led an excitingly complex onscreen life. It was at this time that Madhuri Dixit – referred to as the Bollywood queen of the 80's – did a cabaret number with 'Ek do teen' in *Tezaab* 1988, and thus introduced the singing dancing contemporary female Bollywood heroine. At a time when most actresses were concerned about dancing on screen because of the fear of being tagged obscene, Madhuri used her charm and graceful gyrations to captivate audiences and make the dancing girl a virtuous way of being. Finally, audiences began to enjoy seeing their favourite actresses sing and dance to a sexy number. Since this breakthrough several actresses began to put on their dancing shoes and boldly accept the character of the dancing girl, not as a replacement of the vamp, but as a bold example of the sexually comfortable contemporary Indian woman.



And so, by the early 90's, the vamp character had vanished completely from Bollywood's screens.

For a short while the audience was comfortable with this absence, as the modern narratives brought heroine's with attitude, and it was exciting to watch these bad-good girls be both mean and gentle and shimmy their blues away. By the late 90's, post liberalized India created a media blitz across the country. People from every state and town began to make their way to Bombay to stake their claim on the fame and success promised by this new 'free' media. This massive influx of sexy wannabe heroines and heroes changed the film industry quite drastically and the pressure to sell sell sell (in a context where 800 films are made per year) brought in a whole new filmic event – the item song! And that's where we are today. The item song/number is an extension of the cabaret song and the item girl has replaced the cabaret singer. She is a huge money spinner, and her gyrations are replayed obsessively on Television. The item girl thus becomes a star(let) in her own right. Malaika Arora, Mallika Sherawat, Raakhee Saawant, Kangana Ranaut, Bipasha Basu are just some of the money spinning divas who have grown into prominence post their silicon heavy item songs. For all of 5 minutes, this uber voluptuous dancing girl struts her stuff for the film's hero and the audience --- transporting both into the realm of sexual fantasy. And yet again, with this brief moment of raunchiness, the essence of Bollywood shines through, and the men watching Bipasha Basu in Omkara, and the men watching Helen in Sholay (the 'internal' audience) and the audience in the cinema hall (the 'external' audience) become one and the same. So, ultimately, you are inside the film with the other men, watching the girl who loves to dance, dance for you - and therein lies the magic of Bollywood!



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