Female Fandom and the Anxieties of Agency: A Feminist Reading of the Indian Female Fan in *Guddi* (1971)

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ABSTRACT

Academic research on fandom has sometimes stereotyped female fans, potentially influenced by the gendered dichotomy in fan studies. In the context of Indian fan discourses, there has been insufficient academic engagement with gender which poses a significant gap that requires attention. This article explores the intersection of gender, specifically focusing on women, in Indian fan studies. Through a feminist lens, the article undertakes a textual analysis of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), possibly the first Hindi film to diegetically represent a female fan. The study examines how the film portrays female fandom and yet acknowledges that it falls short in successfully dismantling the pathologising stereotypes associated with femininity. Nevertheless, the film successfully initiates a dialogue on the presence and importance of female fan practices in India. It explores how the film acts as a catalyst for a narrative that highlights the agentic potential of fandom. Additionally, the article delves into the broader implications of the film within Indian fan studies, including its capacity to challenge gender norms and inspire further research on female fan practices in the context of Indian cinema.

Keywords: agency, fan studies, female fans, gender, Hindi film, India

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-one minutes and twenty-four seconds into Hrishikesh Mukherjee's iconic film *Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), Professor Gupta (Utpal Dutt), guffaws loudly at his niece Kusum (Jaya Bhaduri), who expresses her love for the actor Dharmendra and says*, kaun bacha he aaj filmon ke asar se?* ('who is spared from the influence of films?'). This scene is significant for two reasons: first, the scene epitomises the influence of cinema as a cultural form on social beings, and secondly, it can be considered as the first open admission and celebration of (female) fandom in mainstream Indian cinema[1] (Sharma, 2021). The choice of a female protagonist in what is possibly the first Indian film about fandom, despite its ideological conformity to patriarchal structures, speaks volumes about the development of female agency in uncharted territories. What sets *Guddi* apart and renders it memorable is its distinctive focus on the rarely explored theme of the eroticism associated with female spectators' cinephilia (Katyal, 2020). The film delves into the nuanced dimensions of female fandom, recognising and portraying the deep emotional and sensory connections that female viewers form with the objects of their cinematic adoration. Before delving into the complexities of these concepts, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of their definitions. The notion of spectatorship in film studies encompasses the intricate relationship between the viewer and the cinematic experience (Colman, 2014: 72), while fandom denotes a collective and fervent adoration for a film star, enacted within tangible or virtual public spheres. Fandom reveals the interconnectedness of cinema, religious practice, and politics, particularly in regions like South Asia where cinema's popularity coincides with mass politics (Srinivas, 2021: 83). Unlike the spectator, who is positioned within the spectatorial situation and subject to the film's influence, the fan serves as a convergence point between the audience and the film star (Colman, 2014: 72; Srinivas, 2021: 83).

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[1] In 1913, Dada Saheb Phalke introduced India to motion pictures with *Raja Harishchandra*. It heralded the beginning of the Indian cinema industry, which continues to cover a wide range of films in regional languages including Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, etc. These industries are often referred to by their sobriquets Bollywood, Mollywood, Kollywood, Sandalwood and Tollywood, and so on.

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By placing the female fan at the centre of the narrative, *Guddi* challenges prevailing assumptions that portray female fans as passive consumers or mere objects of desire. The film's exploration of the eroticism of female fandom is a significant departure from these conventional narratives that tend to prioritise the male gaze and thus objectify women on screen. The film instead, offers a refreshing perspective by recognising and celebrating the agency and desire of female fans. It acknowledges that women's engagement with cinema extends beyond mere admiration and underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of their cinematic experiences.

The primary objective of this article is to analyse the portrayal of the female fan in *Guddi* and highlight how the film becomes a significant intervention. Through a close examination of the female fan in *Guddi*, the article aims to shed light on how the film presents female fans as active participants with agency and desire, challenging the prevailing notion of passive consumerism. Additionally, this study seeks to critically reflect on the construction of female desire and subjectivity within the cinematic realm as depicted in *Guddi*. Moreover, this research aims to examine the broader implications of *Guddi* within Indian fan studies, recognising its significance in advancing our understanding of the complexities and agency of female fans in the Indian cinematic landscape. By contextualising Guddi within the larger discourse on female spectatorship, this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on Indian fan studies and pave the way for further research on female fan practices in the context of Indian cinema.

INDIAN FAN CULTURE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

This celebration of stars as both textual subjects and facilitators of fan engagement embodies the essence of Indian fandom (Srinivas, 2021: 85; Dasgupta, 2021: ix). It speaks to the profound impact of cinema on Indian society and the role celebrities play in shaping popular culture. Within the context of Indian fandom, this lens allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play. The celebrity assumes a central position as the object of fascination, analysis, and interpretation. Their on-screen performances, off-screen personas, and public appearances became the subject of scrutiny and discussion, shaping the narrative of their stardom, and by extension fandom. The visible escalation of fan activities (Srinivas, 1997: 8) resulted from the popularity of cinema as a social and public activity (Srinivas, 1997: 19). The rise in organised fan activities began in the southern states of India (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh), such as the All World International MGR Fan Club Conference in 1986 (Dickey, [1993] 2007: 23), which then expanded to other regional film industries. While the presence of organised fan activities (fan clubs) was a rarity in Bollywood[2] (Srinivas, 2021: 84), fandom held a pivotal role within the cinematic landscape. The phenomenon not only contributes to the longevity and viability of the film industry but also signifies the cultural significance and impact of fandom as a dynamic social phenomenon in shaping the trajectory of Indian cinema. As mentioned before, notwithstanding the dearth of organised fan activities in the form of fan clubs within the realm of Bollywood, the enduring presence and influence of fan culture remained an integral and inseparable aspect of Hindi film culture. This assertion is substantiated by the profound influence and popularity garnered by Dev Anand, a highly celebrated Hindi film actor with a distinguished career spanning over six decades. A notable recollection shared by Hindi film actress Asha Parekh further accentuates the overwhelming devotion of fans towards Dev Anand. She nostalgically recalls how 'people were crazy about Dev Anand… we were shooting at a hotel which had beautiful flowers, and by the time we started the shooting… there were no flowers because people were going crazy about Dev Anand' (Arya, 2022). By the beginning of the 1970s, Rajesh Khanna[3] (a Hindi film actor), who was called the 'first Superstar of the Indian cinema' (Sarin, 2012), became the centre of fan attention in the Hindi film industry. Particularly popular among female audience members, his fans often followed his car chanting his name and leaving lipstick on it (Vivek, 2020). The enduring and dynamic nature of fan culture within the Hindi film industry signifies its intrinsic presence and profound impact on the Indian audience. The passion, dedication, and active participation demonstrated by fans towards iconic actors reflect a deep-rooted fascination that transcends mere entertainment. The recognition of fandom as a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon necessitates comprehensive scholarly exploration to unravel its intricacies, understand its implications, and shed light on the interplay between stars, fans, and broader sociocultural contexts.

And yet, the fandom landscape in India exhibits a distinct gendered nature, characterised by pronounced disparities between the representation of and attitudes towards male and female fans. This gendered dimension

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[2] Bollywood, often referred to as the Hindi film industry, holds a prominent position within the global cinematic landscape. It is known for its prolific production of Hindi-language films, which captivate audiences not only in India but also across various parts of the world. With its origins dating back to the early 20th century, Bollywood has evolved into a powerful cultural force, influencing fashion, music, dance, and storytelling trends.

[3] Described as the first superstar of Indian Cinema (Imam, 2012), Khanna was best known for his 15 consecutive solo hits between 1969 and 1971 (*Aradhana* ['Worship'] in 1969, till *Haathi Mere Saathi* ['Elephants Are My Companions'] in 1971), still an unbeatable record (Pothukuchi, 2019).

becomes apparent through the marginalisation of females in fan clubs and activities (especially in the South Indian states), as well as the limited scholarly attention given to female fan practices (Osella and Osella, 2006). These observations raise crucial inquiries regarding the problematic gender dynamics prevalent within Indian fandom (N and Tripathi, 2023: 4). The dearth of extensive research on Indian female fans sheds light on the oppressive nature of patriarchal constraints that compel women to assume a fragmented identity, thereby impeding their ability to fully embrace their fan identities (Pronin, Steele and Ross, 2004). Within this gendered framework, women encounter limitations in actively participating in fan communities, which subsequently perpetuates epistemic injustices by depriving them of recognition and agency within the fandom space. The patriarchal structure of Indian society reinforces traditional gender roles and norms, positioning women as subordinate and relegating them to the margins of fan culture. The dominant perception of fans as primarily male has resulted in a lack of attention given to the experiences and practices of female fans. Consequently, the voices and contributions of female fans remain largely unheard and unacknowledged in scholarly discussions and popular discourse. The gendered aspects of fandom in India not only restrict women's active involvement in fan communities but also impede their opportunities for self-expression and self-empowerment within the fandom space. By denying them the recognition and agency they deserve, this gendered framework perpetuates inequality and reinforces existing power dynamics. Through the diegetic representation of a female fan, *Guddi* attempts to address the broader discourse on Indian fan studies by foregrounding the experiences of a female fan. Furthermore, the film's treatment of female fandom addresses the need for a more inclusive and diverse fan community. It encourages a re-evaluation of the gendered dynamics within fandom spaces and advocates for the recognition and empowerment of female fans.

GUDDI (1971)

The release of the film *Guddi* in 1971 holds significant socio-political and cultural relevance in understanding the evolution of the 'new woman' in Bollywood and the feminist movements of the time. The 1970s marked important milestones globally, such the initiation of the Equal Rights Amendment passed by the US Senate in 1972 and the founding of America's first national feminist magazine, *Ms.* (1971) (Foussianes, 2020). In India, the period was characterised by social and political upheavals, including the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) (Tripathi, 2018: 185) and the declaration of the International Year of Women in 1975. These events contributed to the growing feminist discourse and the emergence of autonomous groups advocating for women's rights and social issues.

Within the Indian cinematic landscape, the 1970s witnessed a shift in the portrayal of female characters. Directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee (*Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), *Anand* (1971), *Bawarchi* ('The Chef', 1972), and Basu Chatterjee (*Us Paar* ('That Side', 1974), *Chitchor* ('The Heart Stealer', 1976)), amongst others who negotiated a middle ground between the 'extravagance of mainstream cinema' and the stark realist perspective of art cinema (Gulzar, Nihalani and Chatterjee, 2003: 592). They portrayed the uncertainties of 'romantic and marital' quagmires as opposed to the narratives of the 'vigilante superhero' (Poduval, 2012: 38), thereby designing a spectacle or narrative that could be understood by the general populace (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 161). Additionally, the feminist movement brought the 'woman question' central to the national agenda, which prompted directors such as Mukherjee to speak out about gender norms (Poduval, 2012: 43). Similar to the shift in the cinematic oeuvre, there was a perceptible transition in the treatment of female characters in the films of the 70s. Middle and parallel cinema featured more meaningful roles for female characters (Chamola, 2019: 752), creating a new female trope in Hindi cinema. One such film that vividly captured the spirit of the times was *Guddi*.

The film played a significant role in introducing the female fan trope into Bollywood's cinematic archives. Hailed as one of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's best light-hearted comedies and Jaya Bhaduri's acting debut, *Guddi* is often summarised as a film that 'show[s] the unreality of the commercial cinema' (Singh, 2015: 83). But *Guddi* is more than a didactic deconstruction of the fantastical world of cinema. The film traces the life of Kusum, an enthusiastic fan of Bollywood actor Dharmendra[4]. Her fandom, while initially presented as harmless, is seen as a transgression by her family members when she declines the proposal of a desirable groom (Navin), for she has surrendered her heart to Dharmendra – the object of her fandom. Kusum's apparently liberal family cannot digest the notion that she would 'waste' her life on a film actor. Her uncle engages the help of Dharmendra (the star) to cure Kusum (the fan) of her affliction (fandom). The pathologising of fans (Jenson, [1992] 2001: 13), here the female fan, who needs to be cured, is a clear reflection of the societal stigma against fandom in general. The film effectively portrays the pathologising discourse by presenting a scene in which Dharmendra himself refers to Kusum as crazy when discussing her intense devotion to him. When Professor Gupta seeks Dharmendra's

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[4] Best known for his roles in *Sholay* (1975), and *Anupama* (1966), Dharmendra is an Indian actor popular for his works in Bollywood. He 'created an influential image as a markedly North Indian, even specifically Punjabi macho man devoted to his mother and committed to upholding the honour of the family or of the village' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1998: 90).

assistance in helping Kusum disengage from her excessive admiration, Dharmendra's response reinforces the prevailing societal tendency to stigmatise and pathologise individuals with passionate fandom. He casually remarks that the film industry already has a reputation for attracting obsessive fans, effectively labelling Kusum as Professor Gupta's *paagal bhaanji* ('crazy niece') in the process. This dialogue encapsulates the larger cultural perception on the stereotypes and judgments imposed on fans, challenging the notion that being a fan is inherently negative or indicative of psychological abnormality.

In India particularly, fandom is considered an important cultural intersection of desire and (or as) transgression. The structural confines created by the patriarchal as well as the class (and/or) caste structures attribute a derogatory label to the homo or heterosocial desires that characterise fandom. While the male fans are privileged as '"natural owners" of the fandom habitus' (Friedman and Rapoport, 2020: 54), the idea of a woman experiencing desire for someone outside the familial paradigm is condemned and, thus, branded as a rebellion against the dominant structures that oversteps the bounds of proper feminine behaviour. Madhava Prasad in his seminal work *Ideology of the Hindi film* (1998) highlights the significance of films like *Guddi* and Basu Chatterjee's *Rajanigandha* ('Tuberose', 1974) in raising questions about the potential threat to class identity posed by external influences, particularly affecting women (164). In *Guddi*, Kusum disrupts the sexual economy of a middle-class, upper-caste extended family through the allure of cinema. She challenges the established norms by expressing her love for a film star, which jeopardises her role as a future wife within the endogamous network (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 170–171). The enforcement of endogamy, which signifies class solidarity, becomes necessary to maintain patriarchal authority and uphold the existing social order. Prasad's further observation though on Deepa from *Rajanigandha* can be extended to Kusum in *Guddi* as well. Both female characters embody a transgressive nature that seeks personal fulfilment without discriminating between social classes. Their pursuit of satisfaction through cinema threatens to establish undesired connections with the lower classes, thereby endangering the preservation of class identity and reinforcing the anxieties associated with it (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 174–178). As Nivedita Menon argues, 'Isn't it also more likely that humans experience sexual desire in a variety of ways, of which the heterosexual is only one? But the point precisely is that only the heterosexual, patriarchal family is permitted to exist' (2012: 23). A female fan breaks this extreme patriarchal policing of desire by society and by encroaching on an 'obsessive, predominantly male, working-class, and rowdy' (Punathambekar, 2007: 205) space.

Ironically, it is the star himself who spearheads the treatment of Kusum to cure her of her affliction (fandom). Dharmendra takes them to the shooting set, where Kusum is enlightened about the various processes and people involved with the production of a film. The lesson imparted to Kusum can be characterised as a two-fold process that simultaneously demystifies the cinematic image and attempts to remystify the image of the legitimate (real, not reel) hero, and patriarchal system. Throughout her interactions and experiences, Kusum is made aware of the realities behind the idealised portrayal of film stars, recognising their inherent fallibility, flaws, and limitations. This process of demystification challenges the uncritical idolisation and worship of actors that often pervades popular culture (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 171). The film concludes with Kusum realising that her love for Dharmendra was an illusion and accepting Navin's love and proposal for marriage. As she expresses her love for Navin, it signifies her voluntary acceptance and endorsement of the societal norms and expectations that dictate a reinforcing of the heteropatriarchal structures. This instance provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics and constraints faced by female fans in the Indian context. It illuminates the pervasive societal pressures and limitations imposed on women, compelling them to prioritise traditional roles and conform to established norms, often necessitating sacrifices of personal interests and passions. Kusum's manipulated transformation serves as a poignant illustration of the inherent tensions and conflicts experienced by female fans as they navigate the complexities of their desires within the rigid confines dictated by societal expectations.

At the outset, *Guddi* is a movie that warns the glossy-eyed audience (fans) of the reality of the film industry and what Mukherjee addresses as 'star charisma' (Singh, 2015: 212). Beginning from his introduction of Bombay, the cinematic hub in the film, there is a deliberate emphasis on the influential nature of the cinema world on the Indian populace. This is effectively conveyed through the use of an establishing shot that pans through the mammoth film posters and hoardings, capturing the attention and shot from the perspective of a star-struck young girl. By showcasing the massive film posters and hoardings, Mukherjee not only highlights the visual grandeur and scale of the cinematic world but also signifies its omnipresence in the lives of the people. Furthermore, the point of view shot adds an immersive quality to the scene, allowing the audience to experience the Kusum's sense of wonder and awe firsthand. It invites viewers to empathise with her fascination and serves as a reminder of the collective enchantment that cinema brings to the Indian populace. In a 1997 interview in *The Hindu* Mukherjee talks about an encounter with Chatura, a female flight attendant and an ardent fan of Rajesh Khanna. The meeting served as a catalyst for his introspection on the concept of star charisma, prompting the realisation of its elusiveness. Inspired by this reflection, Mukherjee directed *Guddi* as a cinematic exploration that critically examines the complex relationship between cinema and reality (Singh, 2015: 81).

The success of *Guddi* led to a regional Tamil remake titled *Cinema Paithiyam* within four years (1975). The titles of both films offer an interesting observation. The Hindi title *Guddi*, which is also the (nick) name of the protagonist, translates to 'Doll'. A doll, as De Beauvoir opines, is a capitalist strategy to foster maternality and passivity in young girls ([1953] 1956: 282–284). This conscious association of the female fan to with a symbol of naïveté is a manipulative strategy serves to remind the transgressive female (the fan) of her predetermined role (in the home-space). On the other hand, the Tamil remake's title (*Paithiyam* in Tamil translates to 'madness' / 'insanity') reinforces the popular characterisation of fandom, particularly female fandom, as madness. This problematic association of the madness trope with female fans becomes a controlling manoeuvre to reinstate the hegemonic gender hierarchy within the socio-cultural structure of the nation. Similar to Gilbert and Gubar's observation about the heroines of Jane Austen, Guddi (and Jaya from *Cinema Paithiyam*) is manipulated to accept their 'adolescent eroticism(...)as an outgrown vitality incompatible with womanly restraint and survival' ([1979] 2000: 161).

Female fandom, and the broader issue of female spectatorship, has long served as a site of resistance against hegemonic structures that seek to restrict women's agency. The anxiety surrounding female sexuality becomes heightened when women challenge socially prescribed norms, even within the realm of fandom. In response, men often feel compelled to tame these non-conforming women and mould them into docile wives, as a means to establish their own virility and honour (Pandian, [1992] 2015: 78–79). This dynamic is exemplified in the film where the male characters—Professor Gupta, Navin, and Dharmendra—regard Kusum as a non-conforming woman and devise an elaborate plan to eliminate her non-conformity and transform her into a subservient wife for Navin. These negative stereotypes associated with female fan practices, aimed at curtailing and controlling women's agency, are further perpetuated through subsequent filmic representations. Films such as *Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam* ('A Shining Star' in Sreekrishnapuram, 1998), *Julie Ganapathi* (2003), and *Mohanlal* (2018) contribute to pigeonholing female fans into stereotypes, portraying them as comical figures or femme fatales (George, 2017: 100). These representations reinforce societal expectations and limit the scope of female spectatorship within predefined boundaries.

THE DYNAMICS OF FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP IN *GUDDI*

The constraints imposed on female spectatorship are deeply intertwined with social, sexual, and historical contexts. As feminist criticism highlights, the existence of constraints indicates the necessity for critical engagement with cinema. Roland Barthes, in his essay 'Leaving the Movie Theatre,' asserts that the film image functions as a lure, captivating spectators, and retaining its effect on the viewer ([1986] 1989: 347). This becomes particularly relevant when examining the female spectator, who is often portrayed in popular culture (films like *Guddi*) as succumbing to the mesmerising power of the cinematic image. By considering the constraints faced by female spectators, the allure of the cinematic image, and the dynamics between fans and stars, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in female spectatorship. This analysis not only contributes to the broader discourse on gender and cinema but also highlights the importance of recognising the agency and diversity of female spectators.

It is important to recognise that the female spectator is not an essential category, but rather an effect of discourse (Doane, 1987: 9). Feminist film theorists have emphasised the need to move beyond the limitations of sexual difference in spectatorship analysis. Scholars such as Juli D'Acci (1990) and Annette Kuhn (1984) have emphasised that the shift in focus from the male spectator to the female spectator reflects a significant political gesture in contemporary film theory. Pam Cook argues that women's understanding of cinematic representations is often dismissed as naïve or innocent, underscoring the need for feminist analysis (1983: 17). Female spectators may form strong attachments to cinematic representations, repeatedly watching the same film or avidly consuming fan magazines, as a result of their desires and identification with idealised versions of themselves. Although focused on the male spectator, Laura Mulvey's work on scopophilia and narcissism (1975: 10) significantly contributed to the theorisation of the role of desire in female spectatorship, revealing the ways in which women engage with and invest in the cinematic imaginary. In addition, Mary Ellen Brown also argues that society tends to perceive the act of women deriving pleasure from popular narrative forms as inherently problematic (1990: 201). This perspective underscores the underlying challenges and biases that women face in their engagement with media texts and further emphasises the significance of critically examining the dynamics of female spectatorship.

Through Kusum, *Guddi* explores the vicissitudes of female spectatorship, capturing the interplay between cinematic representations and the desires attached to them. The film's effectiveness lies in its ability to create a relatable character. The dynamics of Kusum's relationship with Dharmendra encapsulate the complexities of female spectatorship and fan culture. The film oscillates between the dreamlike sequences where Kusum imagines her fandom acknowledged and legitimised by the star and the harsh reality where the divide between the cinematic world and her own life becomes apparent. Mukherjee brilliantly exemplifies this divide through a scene which unfolds during Kusum and Dharmendra's second meeting at the film studio. The scene unfolds as a dreamlike

reverie, depicting Kusum's anticipated encounter with Dharmendra and contrasting it with the stark reality. In her reverie, Kusum envisions an idealised response from Dharmendra *Aap ko ek baar dekh liya toh kaise bhool sakte hain?* ('Having seen you once, how could I ever forget you?'). Equally enamoured, she responds with a filmy touch, questioning, *Aisi kya khoobi hai mujh mein?* ('What is so special about me?'). However, as the daydream nears its end, the film jarringly cuts back to reality. The transition sharply shifts the scene back to reality, where Kusum is portrayed standing under the harsh glare of studio lights. Dharmendra, observing her with a hint of discomfort, appears distant and reserved. This stylistic choice, employing naturalistic elements in the dream sequence, serves a specific purpose in the film's storytelling. This deliberate cinematic technique blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, engaging the audience in the illusion that a movie star belongs to them. The unexpected transition (cut) from the dreamlike state to reality further creates a jarring impact, evoking a sense of surprise and emotional resonance for both Kusum and the viewers.

By weaving together, the narrative of female fandom and the exploration of patriarchal control, *Guddi* illuminates the complexities involved in female spectatorship. Andrea L. Press' assertion that television exerts a 'class-specific' hegemony for working-class women and a 'gender-specific' hegemony for middle-class women (1990: 179–180) prompts us to examine how these power dynamics intersect with the representation of women in cinema. *Guddi* captures this interplay exposes the ways in which Kusum's desires and aspirations are shaped by societal norms and expectations, reflecting the complex negotiation of agency within a patriarchal framework. The film raises crucial questions about agency, representation, and the negotiation of desires within a patriarchal framework. By highlighting the struggles faced by Kusum, the film underscores the urgency of critically examining the influence exerted by patriarchal systems on the agency and aspirations of women spectators. It underscores the necessity of unravelling the mechanisms through which patriarchal control manifests itself within the cinematic realm and beyond.

GUDDI'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE INDIAN FANDOM SCENARIO

In the Indian context, women's fandom is often viewed as a 'clandestine affair, which implies that it is deemed unacceptable' (Herrmann, 2008: 86). While Mareike Herrmann's observations were focused on German female fans, they can be aligned with the situation of female fans in India. Even in India female fandom is frequently perceived as a clandestine affair, lacking acceptance and failing to be recognised as an empowering agency. However, fandom can serve as a means for women to reshape the status quo and challenge existing norms. From the beginning of the film, Kusum is portrayed as a fiercely independent character who bends the rules to exercise her choices. Despite her family's attempts to regulate her immense fandom for Dharmendra, she never misses an opportunity to sneak out to the theatre and watch the star's films. Furthermore, Kusum fearlessly challenges the societal expectations that dictate her marriage and conformity to the subservient role of a wife. Moreover, Kusum's unwavering commitment to her fandom, exemplified by her refusal to marry Navin, becomes the very reason she is manipulated into sacrificing her relationship. This manipulation exposes the prevalent societal dynamics that seek to suppress and undermine women's agency, particularly when it defies traditional expectations and challenges the existing power structures. The film subtly underscores the struggles faced by women who dare to assert their desires and navigate the complexities of societal norms.

FANDOM AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN *GUDDI*

In its exploration of female fandom, *Guddi* presents a nuanced exploration of sexual autonomy that intertwines with the broader socio-cultural fabric of its time. The film not only celebrates the assertiveness and yearning for sexual autonomy demonstrated by a young woman but also sheds light on the struggles and compromises women encountered while asserting their agency within a patriarchal society. Consequently, *Guddi* emerges as a poignant commentary on the complexities and limitations imposed on women's desires, even as it hints at the potential for change and the inclusion of women's perspectives.

The analysis of particular scenes in *Guddi* offers valuable insights into the limitations placed upon the sexual autonomy and agency of the female fan depicted in the film. By examining these scenes closely, we gain a deeper understanding of how the character's self-expression and desires are constrained, revealing the intricate dynamics of power and control that shape her experiences. The first notable instance is the scene where Kusum, prepares to go out with Navin to watch a film. The choice of costumes in this scene, as an integral part of the *mise-en-scène*, becomes a significant visual element that conveys the societal constraints and negotiations surrounding Kusum's self-expression. Initially, Kusum plans to wear a short skirt, inspired by the popular actress Mala Sinha, who embody modernity and nonconformity in films like *Paisa Ya Pyar*. However, her sister-in-law intervenes, emphasising the impropriety of such attire in a public space, particularly a film theatre. This intervention reflects

the social constraints imposed on Kusum's choices and underscores the cultural expectations that dictate appropriate clothing for women in public settings. Kusum's initial inclination towards Western attire symbolises her aspiration to defy traditional boundaries and assert her individuality. However, the subsequent transition towards Indian clothing signifies the constraints imposed by societal norms, resulting in a diminished sense of agency for Kusum and reinforcing the expectation that female expression should conform to cultural conventions (Dwyer and Patel, 2002: 203).

Another significant scene is a dream sequence which serves as symbolic expressions of desire. Although not explicitly, the introduction of this dream sequence enables his heroine to express her sexual desire. The sequence depicting Kusum in a bridal attire, ready to celebrate her *suhag raat* [5]with Dharmendra, is an adolescent reflection of claiming her sexual desires rather than shying away from them. Kusum's '*risqué*' dream sequence (Pandian, [1992] 2015:76), which is presented through a song, was originally included in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's 1962 film *Asli-Naqli* ('The Real and the Fake').

> The star: *Tujhe jeevan ki dor se bandh liya hai, bandh liya hai* ('I've tied you with the string of life')...*Tere zulm-o-sitam sar aankhon par* ('All your traits (imperfections) are welcome').

> The Fan: *Maine badle mein pyar ke pyar diya hai, pyar diya hai* ('I've given you love in exchange for love')...*Teri khushiyan aur gham sar aankhon par* ('I'll bear all your joy and sorrow').

Mukherjee contextualises this song to accommodate the star-fan paradigm. The star is singing what the (female) fan wants to hear. The sequence aligns with M. S. S. Pandian's perspective on female characters in MGR[6] films: 'The young and beautiful heroine (here, the fan) who takes the initiative, dreams of the hero …and pursues him, a behaviour that would in real life be treated as brazen' ([1992] 2015: 76). The dream signifies the maturation of a young female fan who, through her fandom, used to believe in the realness of her idol's (super)human talents. The song becomes a representation of a woman's desire for a partner who can embrace all her imperfections and create a deep emotional connection. The inclusion of this sequence in the film contends with the conventional notions of femininity, presenting a young fan who openly expresses her desires and challenges societal norms.

In *Guddi*, the examination of sexual autonomy intertwines with the socio-cultural dynamics shaped by the hetero-patriarchal framework prevalent in the nation. By doing so, the film transcends mere individual narratives and reflect the experiences of countless women (and fans) in Indian society. Yet, the empowering note with which the movie begins, slowly surrenders to the patriarchal notion of stripping a woman of her agency (here her desire and fandom) and forcing her to conform to the hegemonic structures that frames the society. While the film celebrates the assertiveness and yearning for sexual autonomy demonstrated by its young protagonist, it also reveals the compromises and struggles women encounter in their pursuit of agency. By juxtaposing moments of liberation with instances of constraint, *Guddi* acknowledges the complexity of women's experiences and the multifaceted nature of their desires.

RESISTANCE TO FANDOM AND AGENCY IN *GUDDI*

One key aspect explored in *Guddi* is the pervasive resistance encountered by Kusum in her pursuit of fandom. This opposition is emblematic of a broader pattern of marginalisation and pathologising of female fans in Indian society. In the narrative, Kusum does not understand the problematics of the resistance towards a woman performing fandom in India. The people who have decisive control over Kusum's life, such as her sister-in-law (the stand-in for her mother), Prof. Gupta, Navin (potential suitor), and even Dharmendra (object of her fandom) always offer strong resistance to her independence which includes her fandom. The instance from the film wherein Navin and Prof. Gupta belittle her fandom is a classic example of the opposition to and pathologising (Jenson, [1992] 2001:15) of female fandom in India. The characters associate Kusum's devotion with madness, employing such narratives to control and suppress her desires. This manipulation is often veiled as a means to facilitate her maturation or 'coming of age' (Raheja, 2002). However, it ultimately reveals the deeply ingrained hostility of society towards women who dare to challenge prescribed notions of femininity.

The manipulation of Kusum aimed at curing her of her cinephilia and curtailing her agency, is perceptibly manifested through a pronounced shift in point of view within the film's narrative. Initially, during her visits to the shooting set, the camera predominantly adopts Kusum's subjective perspective, vividly capturing her active engagement and fervour as a fan. However, as the orchestrated manipulation devised by Professor Gupta and

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[5] *Suhag raat* is a culturally significant term in South Asian traditions, representing the wedding night or the first night of marriage. It holds symbolic importance as the initiation of the marital bond and the beginning of intimacy between the couple.
[6] M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) was a prominent figure in the South Indian (Tamil) film industry and Tamil Nadu politics, known for his charismatic on and off-screen presence and strong connection with his fans.

Dharmendra unfolds, the focal point progressively shifts away from Kusum and increasingly centres on these characters, as well as Navin. Navin is portrayed as the embodiment of an ideal suitor, who unlike the film actors doesn't need 'duplicates' to rescue Kusum from goons. This deliberate alteration in camera perspective effectively symbolises Kusum's gradual erosion of agency within the narrative. Visually, it signifies her diminishing presence and significance as the focus pivots towards characters seeking to control and shape her desires. This shift in point of view functions as a narrative device that mirrors the broader socio-cultural context within which female fandom and agency are constructed. By distancing the viewer from Kusum's subjective experience, the film subtly reinforces the prevailing patriarchal gaze, which tends to dismiss or pathologise female desires and aspirations. The altered camera perspective aligns with the vantage points of those who endeavour to curtail Kusum's agency, effacing her subjectivity and perpetuating the inherent power imbalances ingrained in gendered relationships.

While in a completely Mukherjee fashion, none of the characters are evil, their actions reveal the complex subtleties of institutionalised hegemony that mediated depictions try to inject into the cultural psyche of the society. But it is also important to acknowledge the monumental achievement of creating a film that places a female character at the forefront, embodying agency and autonomy, especially considering the challenges prevalent in the 1970s. Borrowing from what Namita Bhandare suggested about *Padman* (2018), films such as *Guddi*, which aim to depict unexplored experiences, warrant some leniency despite their imperfections (2019: 203). The film emerges as a daring first attempt to establish a narrative that challenges conventional gender roles and advocates for the empowerment of women. By intertwining themes of agency, resistance, and the social construction of femininity, *Guddi* sheds light on the broader socio-cultural context surrounding female fandom and the suppression of women's desires. The nuanced portrayal of characters and the deliberate manipulation of Kusum's agency, as exemplified by the shift in narrative perspective, serve as devices that illuminate the power dynamics inherent in gendered relationships. The film exposes the patriarchal gaze that dismisses or pathologises female aspirations, effectively perpetuating hegemonic structures and denying women the right to exercise their agency fully.

CONCLUSION

Guddi emerges historically as a compelling and transformative intervention within Indian cinema, defying conventional assumptions about female fans and their place within fandom. By centring the narrative around the female fan, *Guddi* disrupts prevailing notions of passive consumption and objectification, instead celebrating the agency and desires of women as they engage with and form deep emotional and sensory connections to their beloved cinematic icons. *Guddi*'s release in the 1970s coincided with a momentous period of socio-political and cultural transformations in India, marked by the emergence of feminist movements and the public discourse on women's rights. The film reflects this evolving landscape by portraying the uncertainties surrounding gender norms and exploring the tension between societal expectations and individual desires. The film is also relevant to the praxis of Indian fan studies since it creates an inceptional conjunction between feminist studies as well as fan studies facilitating the mapping of female fandom within the corpus of Hindi (and Indian) cinema. The film serves as a catalyst for a more inclusive and diverse narratives on fan community, advocating for the recognition and empowerment of female fans. It prompts a critical re-evaluation of the gendered dynamics inherent in fandom spaces, compelling scholars and researchers to attend to the long-overlooked voices and contributions of female enthusiasts. While the narratives on female fandom have gained substantial traction in recent years, particularly with the continuous exploration into the possibilities of digital fandom, the film remains a landmark in the history of Indian narratives on fandom.

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