Introduction

Hindi cinema, the inevitable force in most of our lives, here in India has gone on to be pampered and feted around the world, making its presence felt at the Oscars and also in a minuscule way at the annual snob show in Cannes. Once neglected and derided for its standard formula 'masala (spicy flicks)' Bombay cinema, is the toast of the decade. Though cinema has been subject of serious concern among the academia for decades, 'Bollywood' as the moniker of Mumbai's Hindi cinema was looked down upon as low-brow and vulgar. A section of scholars argued that studying popular film was like studying Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare by the fate of traditions in contemporary life and arts. Above all, it is negotiating the country's past and present, located not at the center, studying caricatures of ourselves, but at the peripheries, standing as spectators and looking at others studying themselves and us. The cultural elite, as official guardians of “Indianess” often labeled the commercial cinema as impersonating, debasing and parasitic form, thereby seeking to maintain and police cultural boundaries.

A sort of a cultural Renaissance started out with Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses and Dom Moraes's, From East To West: A Collection of Essay who succumbed to its succulent charms and Hindi popular cinema, through its density of allusion became, what Sumita Chakravarty (1993) calls, cultural transmitter, emanating and capturing countless bits and fragments a collective consciousness. Bombay cinema has gone on to become an abominable giant to reckon with, attracting global audiences and the academia alike. As Amitabh Bachchan, (2004) the star of the millennium says that, it is a golden period for the film industry, but it is also linked to the fate of the nation, as it has been for some peculiar reason for the past 30 years. Everything looks good, even the graphic violence, especially against women. From being an embarrassment, running around trees has become a statement but so as far as the portrayals of women in cinema are concerned Hindi popular cinema retains its commodifying flavour. It has successfully played its part by reducing violent images as acceptable norms and thereby perpetuating and perhaps justifying the secondary status that it imparts to women in its narratives.

Therefore studying cinema is not just a question of studying films, n indeed the institutions, which produce the films and the economic structure which sustain them. Studying how we watch the images of women in films -
multiplexes, on video, in theme parks, on television - is an important part of understanding what films mean within a culture of violence and how they fit into the broader range of entertainment activities, which might be on offer to audiences. Studies of cinema architecture, of patterns of film narratives and screening of the sexes can help us build a picture which is richer than the cinema studies model which tends to center on the isolated spectator gazing at the screen. India despite being home to one third of the world’s most poor always managed to what Paul Addison (1985) suggests relief at being alive combined with a little extra money found an outlet in mass entertainment. The scale of cinema going made it 'the most popular form of popular entertainment in the 1940s, and its domination meant that cinema could be presented as if it were part of everyone's experience.

By definition popular culture occupies the lower levels of socially and historically constructed cultural hierarchies. Popular cinema is no exception. Social convention permits most people to oppose films made intentionally for exhibition to the largest possible audience to films with artistic value. However, upon closer inspection neat divisions between popular and art films inevitably become untenable. Making an open appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of mass audiences and the ambition to produce works of art or intellect are by no means mutually exclusive goals. Ultimately an appreciation of how the aesthetics of popular cinema are constructed is an essential part of understanding cinema more generally.

This study deals with a decade of violence in the history of Indian cinema, from the 1980's and the 1990's and will attempt to introduce concepts and issues that have historically been salient in the analysis of popular films. These include 1) the study of cinema as a mass produced commercial product; 2) the organization and construction of pleasure through genre; 3) the politics of addressing audiences; and 3) the social construction of women as victims of violence and as mere objects. In order to study films representing violence against women a textual and historical approach will be taken. Textual will consist of conclusions derived from film texts. A look into the content analysis of these four selected films (Ram Teri Ganga Maili, Khalnayak, Lawaarais and Mohra) with a view to uncovering the ideologies which dominate the text which in turn represent the hidden desire, myths, rituals and thought processes will be taken into account. This study will adopt an eclectic approach and not limit itself to one ideological school of thought because popular films are multi-layered and their effects are a lot too many. As a researcher focused on the sexual- psychological themes of violence present in popular Hindi films, an extensive reading of each of these films was sought, by examining and documenting any evident themes of violence,
victimization, isolation, and alienation to uncover strong parallels in the larger society. The research proposed a series of questions to aid in determining if events and images portrayed in commercial Hindi films closely determine our own images in the society.

Most of the available literature on all these topics is oriented to analysing films that will be at least somewhat familiar to most students—box office formula films of the last one decade. The recurrence of violence against women in the politics of film culture in India is also a politics of nostalgia, mapping the genealogy of ideal images of women in the past. Women in many parts appear as cinematic spectacles not quite different from their contemporaries who could choose marriage and family or remain cursed as senile haridans. Through the four films selected for the study one will seek to extrapolate the meaning of violence from its sociological aspect, focussing on the visual and narrative devices employed in the films. The corpus of Indian films is far too vast to analyse adequately in one single study. From 1931 to 1987, the number of talkie films produced was 6,597 and the industry churns out an average of about 800 films every year. In order to handle a more focused and uniform body of work, only a decade of commercial box office hits were selected for the present work.

The goal therefore is not to map the chronological history and changes within the film industry or to cover as many films as possible but to provide an interpretive framework within which Hindi cinema can be apprehended as a distinctive agency to portray violence against women. Violence in cinematic text and in the historical context allows us to explore on the cinematic meaning and codes that further the social control of predominant ideologies and social structures. Cinema as a popular cultural institution helps to mediate a broad spectrum of social meanings, values, and structure, yet depictions of violent behaviour are special because they invoke society’s most central and guiding values which justify the use of force and illuminate the parameters of social order and also compartmentalize women’s images into idealized stereotypes.

From its earliest years, popular cinema has negotiated the role of women both on the screen and as viewers. In fact, its centrality to various narrative and generic patterns, violence against women has been conceptualized as immanent in classical Bombay cinema and across more recent popular cinema. Juxtaposed between all, remain, social structures that bind women to all forms of violence, physical as well as those of the mind. And this is where film studies as a rich and fascinating area of academic study diversify the subject of violence pertaining to women and explores the most
popular art form of modern culture and assesses its impact upon the
contemporary world. Film Studies open up the opportunity to engage
rigorously with moving images and enables one to think historically,
thetically and analytically about a wide range of cinematic forms. Alongside
theoretical, cultural and historical approaches to film, studying women in
films also provide a framework for analysing individual films and
understanding the techniques of film production in the context of marketing,
distribution, exhibition and consumption of these special images.

In spite of the happy picture, films produced in our country share
qualities that employ what is referred to an ‘excess of signification’, and all
challenge our understanding of the concept of willing suspension and
disbelief. The most difficult thing to grasp about films in India is what exactly
goes on during that suspension of disbelief. What allows viewers to greedily
devour the melodrama, the silliness, the extravaganza and the regular
formula, while cheering for the hero and turning only the libidinal eye of the
female actor is what makes an interesting study. Stereotypes in Hindi popular
cinema remain the same, invisible as ever, the violence alluring. Often critics
have slammed Bombay cinema’s fantastic formulaic flicks as the post Marxist
opium of the people (the spectacle as fascist, the signifier as sedative, and so
on.) The point here is that people participate in this spectacle of Hindi cinema
by using its images and constructions to perhaps perpetuate violence in their
own lives.

Unlike porn where all is explicit, at the heart of cinematic
representations of female violence there is a gap. But this ellipsis, by its very
nature provides a space for the invisible to be made more visible. Women
onscreen were always either terribly bad or angelically good. Because most, if
not all, representations were one-dimensional, female characters hardly ever
seemed human. Instead, stereotypes limited women to portrayals as noble
mothers, virtuous daughters, loyal secretaries, duplicitous vamps, cunning
gangster molls, and scantily-clad singers or dancers. Aside from the negative
representations and stereotypes, at issue as well was the lack of stories told
from a woman’s point of view. So what was the real purpose of women
characters in the movies? Female characters were designed to be sexual
objects. Whether these characters danced suggestively or wore skimpy
clothing, they appeared onscreen to provide an enjoyable experience for male
viewers. Therefore, the purpose of these women characters was to be looked at
and desired. But that’s not all. Movies have always reflected the prevalent
views of society, and if these views happened to be sexist, then movies were
too. Society, as a whole, continued to believe that these representations of
women were “real” because of over-saturation with these images in the media.
Stereotypes of women as wives or vamps were intended for women to identify
with, and women not only identified with these stereotypes, they even came to appreciate them. Not only were the plots and storylines in the movies very compelling, these were the only representations that women had of themselves. Thus, for a long time, the representation of women in film was another way of exerting control over women.

We live in a climate of violence. Violence is everywhere: in city and suburb, in mean streets and quiet lanes, in private conversations and public media. Our society knows violence through abuse and rape, rising crime rates and diminished trust. We acknowledge that the climate of the psychological violence of words, as well as physical violence, breeds fear and rapidly escalating concerns for personal security. This in turn leads to more violence and contributes to societies tightening cycle of violence.

Violence is simple and brutal, but its roots are complex. We know it to be bred in families where children and spouses are abused and maltreated, where problems are met with force or threat of force. Women all over the world are largely in submissive positions to authority, actual or perceived, are particularly vulnerable to violence. And we know that violence is exacerbated in communities and families living in poverty, and by the prominence given to it in films, television, and other media. Violence against women has got to be understood in a way more complex than it appears. Violence is just not physical, it’s also about societal norms and the traditional ways of treating women. Patriarchal, domestic and marital rape may be something that is understood as a conflict, as an aggression in theory but for the common front bencher, nothing goes amiss, when films show women getting battered or tortured. Women often are portrayed in the media as being subjected to sexual violation and violence. These sexual situations would appear to create no harmful effects for women, when in fact the context of the encounter is a power or authority relationship. The electronic media and film often reinforce this authority/victim relationship, depicting it as harmless or neutral. Violence cannot be reduced to one cause. It is clear, however, that films and television play a role not only in reflecting but also in contributing to a violent and mean world. The chapter on the on Violence attempts to locate the stereotypes that women are encapsulated into, its ramifications and its effects. Women actors and new age directors in Mumbai admit to being bored with the stereotypes of women in Hindi cinema. Several agree that here were better roles written for actresses in the 50’s and 60’s. And perhaps the boldest of these women was Rosie from Vijay Anand’s Guide. Actor Waheeda Rehman who played Rosie, recalled that when her producers heard that she was considering Dev Anand’s offer, they warned her against messing around with what many termed a ‘vamp role’.
For most people in our country, the question of sexuality is still supposed to be hidden behind closed doors or shot in a sleazy way. It opens up the voyeuristic side of our personalities but at cost of objectifying women. Over the decades, sex in mainstream cinema has been equated with gangster’s molls, cabaret queens, blowsy vamps and victimized women with revenge on their minds. The distinction between the vamp and the virgin may be blurring but, as actress-activist Shabana Azmi pointed out at a conference in South Africa, there is still a very clear division between the moral space occupied by the wife and mother and that by the vamp. In appearance the heroine may have become more westernised, but beneath the short skirts she remains a staider-than-thou virgin who’s wary of crossing the lakshman rekha.

For the most part, our leading ladies are allowed to express their sexuality only through unnecessarily provocative songs-and-dances. The business of cinema is the business of images, and when one sees fragmented bits of a woman’s body such as a heaving bosom, cleavage or a fragmented bit of naval vibrating to the sound of music, women become a commodity and an object. Popular films will have to move away from that and reflect on the reality of modern Indian women today, which is of a thinking, independent person who perhaps occupies a fair degree of autonomy within the social structure. Yet there are academics who believe that traditional stereotypes can be shattered by the help of films. It has been widely argued that cinema as one of our primary social languages of the 21st Century, can uniquely address social and cultural issues from around the world. Viewing the cinema of other cultures could reduce our tendency to stereotype, and thereby demonstrating respect for those cultures through our willingness to reconsider our a priori notions.

The four films analysed in this study are not women oriented movies as they are popularly called. These are commercial box office hits, which in spite of being popular have in their own ways, type-cast women over and over again. Education, professionalism and technology have not affected the roles of women in Hindi popular cinema; in fact they have become a marginalized sexual entity, who is either employed to show off enough flesh to titillate front benchers and all alike. Films are getting bolder not in their meaning terms but only in visual content and female actors are at least putting on a brave pretence show of agreeability. The lines between meaningful cinema and commercial cinema are finally blurring. People want to see bolder movies, where violence is even more graphic and prolonged and the women even more vulnerable. The earlier films, in a way reflected a ‘society’, though with its regular dose of violence. But over the years film content has changed a lot.
The content that is there is no doubt glossier, colourful and glitzy but as far as women and their on-screen portrayals are concerned, everything just goes against them. One cannot help but to agree with Nandy (1998) when he says that conventional Hindi cinema unlike great works of art, is subservient to the dominant ideologies since they fail to distance themselves from such ideologies, and instead of challenging the ideological assumptions of their times, tend to reinforce and perpetuate them.

Feminist criticism has no single definition – it is a collective term, which has various critical perspectives and historical background. Feminism has established links with other established critical theories like psychoanalysis (psychoanalytic feminist theory), Marxism (Marxist-feminist theory) or postcolonialism (postcolonial feminist theory) etc. Even within feminism of today there is dominance – marginalization pattern, but the basic attitude is common in all forms of feminist criticism. They recognise the under-representation of woman in artistic activities, which they want to confront. Thus feminist criticism, like other feminist activities struggle around artistic expression and representation.

Laura Mulvey, celebrated feminist theorist’s works extensively explores about women being the object of the male gaze. In reference to cinema, Mulvey claims that film is a system of representation that raises questions of how the unconscious structures, the ways of seeing repeatedly represent women as fetishized and stereotypical objects. This study has tried to analyse the violence against women in films through these deconstructive readings that recognises the hierarchy, dismantles them and delineates them in either direction with violence. It tries to expose the meaning created out of the language of narratives relating to the scope of the roles of women on the screen.

Feminists suggest that when a woman appears as a text in films, she can construct a sense of self – the question of representation is a political question. The humanist group of feminists argues that ‘the image of woman’ as represented in literature, cinema and popular perception is incomplete, false and misogynistic. Feminist movement aims at improvement of visibility of woman, ability to express woman’s own inner self, her authentic representation, development of true image of woman in male dominated patriarchal society.

Chapter One is concerned with the dynamics of violence, gender and to explore how Bombay cinema has figured importantly in its efforts to posit itself as a significant force in the consolidation, extension and continuation of violent images of women on the screens. The variables that give rise to sexual
violence in India are numerous and complex. However, for feminist media scholars, the idea that popular cinema lays a significant role in shaping notions about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context, is of special interest and concern. It was necessary, in brief to look into the United Nations declaration on violence and its recommendations to improve the portrayals of women in the media.

Chapter Two provides the a background account of cinema as it developed over the years since the colonial era and the power of the Hindi film industry, which caters to the all India market and is devoured by a majority of Indian population making it undoubtedly the most coveted achievement in India’s poly-lingual society. Bombay cinema’s fascination with calling itself by the popular moniker of Bollywood is also briefly mentioned because it maintains its own intrinsic formula and the ongoing debates of it unashamedly aping Hollywood. A brief history of Indian cinema and the content of violence over the decades are also outlined in this section.

Chapter Three provides the theoretical basis of understanding violence against women in broader sociological and psychoanalytical terms. Laura Mulvey’s seminal work Narrative and Visual Pleasures (1975) provides a useful insight in debunking theoretical underpinnings of negotiating the identities of women in popular films. From its earliest beginnings, popular cinema has negotiated the role of women on and off the silver screen. In fact underscoring its centrality to various narrative and generic pattern, violence against women has been conceptualized as eminent in Bombay cinema. Realizing that the call of positive imaging of women were just not enough to change the underlying structures in films, critiques moved on to investigate the overwhelming power of patriarchal imagery. This section will also takes a look at Western academic interventions on popular cinema and the scholarly treatment that Bombay cinema is gradually getting from the sub-continent. While Western film theorists developed the study of spectatorship and explored the many contradictions inherent in film theory, closer home, Indian academics built up on the history and culture that Bombay cinema brought forth in its wake. Violence has been a focus of study for many but our understanding of Indian cinema has perhaps lacked a water-tight feminist approach to the understanding of violence against women in our films. Given the plethora of books now available on Indian cinema a few were selected and reviewed to introduce and aid the thematic aspects dealt within the study. We cannot deny the contribution of semiotics and psychoanalysis through which structuralistic frameworks proved the necessity in understanding gender stereotypes encoded in our films.
The following chapters investigate these themes through the films like *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, *Khalnayak*, *Lawaaris* and *Mohra*, all belonging to the period of the 1980's and the 1990's, an extremely turbulent decade in respect to the portrayals of violent images of women on the silver screen. In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, the employment of women as cinematic metaphors, and the issues of virginity are dealt with. The obscenity debates, arising out of such portrayals with its relation with the Central Board of Certification are also briefly analysed. *Khalnayak* which sparked off a national debate on its controversial song, *Choli ke pecchey kya Hai*, initiates the aspect of viewing women through song and dance, and the politics of desire and the gaze in cinema. The role of the mother as the insignificant other also occupies a pivotal part of the analyses in this section. The portrayals of sexuality and rape are examined through another box office hit of the 1990’s, the film, *Mohra*. The role of the moll or the other woman is also a subject of interest, because violence against such women remain invisible to the eye because such portrayals inscribe patterns of unacceptable norms and outline boundaries of permissibility or what a woman should not be in order to be accepted in the social milieu. Male narcissism and the masquerade in films is examined through the last film, *Lawaaris*. Mothers in Hindi films have for long led iconic lives on the silver screen representing piety and family values. The ideal of motherhood and maternal purity is examined in this section since it dealt with a child borne out of wedlock, a taboo topic in that period. The romantic traditions in Hindi films are also analysed through the role of the female protagonist in the film, who is turned into a dutiful marriageable object, from a vain shrew by the male character in the film.

Though the 1980’s and the 1990’s were period of chaos, where crime showed its ugly face almost everywhere, a force so great that it managed to impinge itself on the political ideology, on the economy and on the silver screens. This study has deliberately confined itself to the study of women and violence in cinema because the corpus of films has a magnitude too vast to cover through one single study.

Despite being called hopelessly backward-looking, regressive and kitschty, Bombay cinema continue to arouse attention and help to provide several frameworks for the understanding of the mechanisms of violence against women in popular films. An understanding of contemporary agents of media like popular cinema throw light on how we treat women in the real world.

The challenge for scholarly intervention into studying popular Hindi cinema will be to see if there really are new kinds of filmmaking giving women a space to negotiate their images. While it would be wrong to discredit the
amazing work that has been going on since the birth of film as an art form in world cinema, the films that make us question film itself, our society, and ourselves are necessary for it to fulfill its promise as an art form rather than just entertainment. A challenge for the future will be to facilitate a way for this art to reach not only the converted audiences that will appreciate it, but also the unconverted that will be changed by it.