

CINEMATIC TRANSCENDENCE: RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND GLOBAL MIGRATION IN  
THE HISTORICAL EPIC

By

HEATHER BIGLEY

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For Kwang,  
who joined me on this adventure

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CINEMATIC TRANSCENDENCE: RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND GLOBAL MIGRATION IN  
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By

Heather Bigley

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As Hollywood positioned itself as a global cinema over the last generation, minor and alternative cinemas evolved to speak specifically to and for underrepresented groups who hold little to no buying power in Hollywood's expansive markets. Some of these groups characterize themselves via religious communities. This dissertation examines how globalization impacts contemporary minor and alternative cinemas through a discussion of the representation of religious women in historical epics. If cultural production serves to imagine the nation, then religious cinemas imagine the religious community, in relation to the national, transnational, and global, by producing historiographies that place women at the nexus of both religious and national modernities. The historical films discussed in this dissertation embody the anxieties of their religious communities produced by the shifting configuration and responsibilities of nation-states. My work analyzes how these films use female subjectivity to further claims of autonomy and identity for particular religious communities.

My research uses globalization theories about transnational religious growth in the last half of the twentieth century to revise a current academic discourse of female religious victimhood in Hinduism, Islam, and Mormonism with feminist ideas about

agency and autonomy. My project argues that fundamentalism is not a default position for religious communities facing globalization; instead, religious communities may utilize differing strategies, made manifest in their cultural production, to cope with changing power relations between religion and nation, under the influence of globalization.

Though some communities may revert to fundamentalism, others may advocate a progressive reinvention of female roles, while others may reject religious dogmas altogether. The three religious groups discussed in this dissertation experience different globalization trajectories, and for this reason, the filmic representation of their distinct anxieties expands our understanding of transnational religious life.

This dissertation examines the use of the historical epic in these three cinemas; this genre rewrites historiographies created by national, imperial, and colonial media. These revisionary films present women's stories as central to the historical events the films narrativize. The historical film creates opportunities for audiences to empathize with previously marginalized characters associated with these religious communities, and to better understand contemporary community members. In addition, the three disparate industries affiliated studied here have an eye to mainstream expansion, though they must use independent film production and distribution strategies to accomplish this. Further, their films must appeal first to their niche audience, but also have wider appeal for mainstream audiences. Increased budgets and production values are a first step in this process, which speaks to a greater fascination in religious narratives around the world.

My dissertation argues that religious communities do not travel upon parallel trajectories under the burden of shifting nationalisms and economies; a community's

situation within global networks determines an evolution unique to that community. Thus, the films of different religious communities may include similar narrative crises revolving around the confrontation of the religious with the secular, yet these crises are resolved with diverse strategies. For this reason I have chosen to analyze Mormon, Beur, and Bollywood cinemas. Mormon cinema reverts to a neoconservative stance, influenced by its position in the American cultural and political landscape. Beur cinema, affiliated with the North African immigrant community in France, disavows its religious ties (primarily Muslim) in hopes of assimilating to Franco-French cultural norms. Bollywood cinema, targeting diasporic audiences in the West, promotes Hinduism as the vehicle for both spiritual and civic growth.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on films that produce cultural readings of how different religious communities imagine and negotiate globalization through the figure of the female. The films under discussion are made independently of religious institutions and aim for a mainstream market. I argue that these films use different strategies to represent female characters, dependent upon the religious community's distinct situation vis-à-vis nationalism, modernity, and global flows of culture and capital. I focus on the historical genre to show how the films' imagination produces a historical narrative that revises hegemonic historiography, often by creating a monolithic account of an originary tale or charter myth.

In this introduction I investigate the tumultuous relationship between religion, nation, and globalization, which are competing ideological systems that collude, conflict, and contradict from context to context. Historically, each system dissolved previous community affiliations while creating new networks via media, ritual, cultural production, and institutional growth. Religious, national, and global discourses define gender and other "body" ideologies (sexuality, race, class, for example) via hierarchical organizations of its constituents, both confining and constraining the body for systemic uses. My focus on religion situates this oldest global order, perceived as anti-modern, as a revitalized force that transcends established configurations of nation in the new world community.

In the following, I contextualize the three cinemas under investigation: Mormon cinema of the American intermountain West; post-Beur cinema located in the North African migrant communities of urban France; and Bollywood, a global cinema targeting

diasporic Indian and Southeast Asian communities in Europe, North America, and Australia. The three religious groups associated with these cinemas represent different globalization trajectories, and for this reason, their distinct anxieties expand our understanding of the filmic representation of transnationalism and religious life.

I begin with a brief case study of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), in order to outline questions central to this project about audience, distribution, film form, gender and race ideologies, modernity and nationalism, as well as religious aesthetics and accessibility. The film is a popular example that trades in many of the topics under discussion in my dissertation; it presents an account of Christ's final days in captivity in Rome, ending with his death by crucifixion. Much media debate followed the release of *Passion of the Christ*, in large part due to the film's reliance on anti-Semitic stereotypes, Gibson's bizarre public persona, and the film's unexpected and incredible popularity with audiences. Since its release the film has made over \$600 million dollars in worldwide theatrical performance (Box Office Mojo) and over \$200 million dollars in rentals (IMDB). In fact, the first day of DVD sales, the film sold over 4 million copies (*The Numbers*)<sup>1</sup>. The film is one of the top 25 money-makers in recent Hollywood history (not adjusted for inflation). Central to the film's box office success was its grass roots marketing to Christian audiences that lead to word-of-mouth recommendations via new media such as blogs, forums, and email. Just as important though were the passionate testimonials from pastors to their congregations, disciple to disciple, as it were, of the film's vision.

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<sup>1</sup> Box Office Mojo, currently owned by IMDB.com, Inc., has become a dependable source for box office information, providing information to *The New York Times* and other media outlets. The Numbers is the only website that collects DVD sales, and Box Office Mojo relies on The Numbers for that information on its own website.

I trace the film's impact to its torturous aesthetics, the way the film lingers over the vulnerable flesh of its Christ. Slow-motion, animated effects, extreme close-ups that formally dismember the body, reaction shots that present the voyeuristic pleasure of onlookers, and the graphic composition of the torturer and tortured, all work to transfer the extreme physical and mental pain of the main character into emotional catharsis for the audience. Though most could not deny the film's ability to affect viewers, reactions differed among Christian audience members over the appropriateness of the imagery. Some interpreted their viewing experience as a religious witness that brought them closer to an understanding of atonement, redemption, and sacrifice (Youdovin 7). Others felt the gratuitous nature of the film's representation of torture desacralized the mythology of Christ as son of God, by focusing more on the work of men than on the miracles of deity (Youdovin 8). Still others felt the exploitative nature of the film style, the reliance on stereotyped Jewish characters, and its pastiche of religious and narrative influences did little to elevate the film above earlier sex and sand Bible films ("Table Talk" 315-316). These different reactions typify an important sub-thesis of my work, that religious communities and their members engage with film and other cultural production in diverse ways. Yet overall the film worked to unify disparate Christian sects through its violent and excessive portrayal of the fundamental doctrine of the Christian religion. By concentrating on physical violence the film elides other sticking points that have divided Christians in the past.

*Passion of the Christ* provides a cultural parable of contemporary globalization, in which confrontations between nation and religion are played out on the gendered body. The film's overwhelming financial success, with repeated viewing on the part of

individual audience members as well as entire congregations, leads me to a cultural analysis intent on deciphering the film's incredible popularity. The film places its scrutiny of Christ's torture and death in relation to a political face-off between the modern Roman Empire and the pre-modern Jewish community, represented by Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas respectively. This dynamic begins early in the film when the Sanhedrin arrest Christ; Mary Magdalene turns to Roman soldiers for help, who then report to Pilate. The Jewish leaders subvert the modern Roman Rule of Law and manipulate their people through mob tactics: in Christ's trial dissenting voices are hushed or removed from the court. In contrast to the Jewish characterization, Pilate is a sympathetic, humane, and impartial judge who offers Christ water and even words of encouragement. Caiaphas and Pilate negotiate over Christ's punishment in front of Roman soldiers and crowds of interested on-lookers, among them Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene. Pilate, weary and disgusted, sympathizes with Christ but must keep order in his district. He at turns bullies and placates the Jewish leaders, demonstrating the childishness of the Jews. The Jewish leaders play their part in this exchange, and the film characterizes their political machinations as a codicil to their religious rituals, indeed they come to characterize the religious rituals as well.

While Christ is the central victim in this negotiation, Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene become the witnesses to his degradation; their faces and abject bodies mirror his horror. At the same time, the women strengthen Christ along the road to Golgotha, by helping him to stand, wiping his brow, and offering him water. The process of witnessing changes the women and their position to both nation (Rome) and religion (Judaism). Mary Magdalene becomes unveiled in order to nurture Christ; this unveiling

represents her movement into modernity, expressed by her independent stance and knowing stare back to the city from the heights of Golgotha. Mary his mother goes through a similar journey into the modern; she transitions not from Jesus' mother to John's surrogate at the cross, but instead from practicing Jew to believing Christian, through symbolically performing the Eucharist (a reading also found in Mitchell para 10). According to the film's ideological frame, if she's not Jewish, then she is aligned with the Romans and modernity. Her son's death frees her from pre-modern ties and she will return to the city as a modern citizen. *Passion of the Christ* as globalization parable shows us the bloody conflict between religion and nation, in which the male body functions as bridge to the modern over which pre-modern women gain access to modernity. Gender becomes the flashpoint for the intersection of globalization, nation, and religion. The following chapters discuss the differing ways in which Mormon, Beur, and Bollywood cinema cast the figure of the woman at that intersection to portray religious communities in the context of globalization.

### **Religious Cinema**

Religious cinema may appear an oxymoron. How can an anti-modern thought system such as religion make use of the twentieth century's modern art form? Historically, religious people have been suspicious of film as a medium. Mainstream film's use of modern paradigms, individualism, humanism, and liberalism to name a few, refute centuries of religious teaching about man's relationship with God and the universe. Importantly, religious communities do not remain in a dependent relationship with hegemonic institutions for cultural production. In America, Mormon cinema, recent films from Southern Baptist mega-churches such as *Fireproof* (Alex Kendrick, 2008), and the Gideon film festival have all developed over the last decade as religious

communities produce their own films. For others, film and religion are closely aligned in content, form, and reception; the communal experience of the local cinema threatens to replace the communal experience of the synagogue, mosque, or cathedral (Plate, 2003, 1). In a similar vein, religion itself is a collage of ideas and mythologies which presents itself as whole, a description that works for film on many levels: pieces of celluloid arranged to make one coherent narrative; scenes from different times and spaces; a story developed from various influences, mythic, religious, historical, contemporary news, drawing images from just as many sources (Plate 2005).

My project addresses women characters in independent films made by religious communities from three different religions in order to articulate the various possible relationships between religion and nation, as impacted by globalization. I approach religion and nation not as two monolithic opposites of a binary, but instead propose that religion and nation adapt according to their relationship with each other, as well as under pressures from globalization. I am interested in how individual filmmakers interpret their religious and spiritual experience on screen, outside the strictures of official doctrine.<sup>2</sup> To do so, I discuss how these films position and characterize women, who, whatever their background, traditionally maintain cultural boundaries by instructing their children, especially their daughters, in social, national, religious doctrines.

In order to do this, I position these religious communities as aesthetic communities. Religious aesthetics have of course long existed. For Fraser and Schrader religious aesthetics frame transcendental style and the sacramental mode, as

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<sup>2</sup> Also, I am not interested in films made by religious institutions; Thomas J. Lefler has done solid, insightful work in this area in regards to Mormon cinema. See Lefler, Thomas and Gideon O. Burton. "Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in *Legacy*." *BYU Studies*. 46, no 2. (2007). 274-306.

they base their work on earlier religious art forms from many different world traditions. Both Fraser and Schrader see transcendental and sacramental styles as transcultural, even universal. My work differs from these two because I position contemporary religious communities as aesthetic communities distinct from each other. As Clifford Geertz posits, artists create collaborative works with their public (104): "The artist works with his audience's capacities. . . . Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop" (118). Thus, films made by American Mormon filmmakers for American Mormon consumption mobilize Mormon experiences, rituals, mythologies and cosmologies specific to the community in the films, such that those outside the community may not have the tools to read the films, leading to a dismissal of those films as incomplete or inadequate. As Geertz further explains, "The capacity to perceive meaning in [art] is...a product of collective experience which far transcends it. . . . It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art...is possible. A theory of art is at the same time a theory of culture" (109). I propose that the films under review here use the figure of the religious woman to mitigate the communities' relationship with transnationalism and the changing powers of host nation-states, as a way to cope with anxieties produced by globalization. Each religious cinema develops filmic and narrative strategies particular to its community's situation with its host nation, reflecting a history of migration.

Thus these religious communities produce an accented cinema, a taxonomy developed by Hamid Naficy to describe the films produced by exiled, immigrant, or ethnic communities. I add religious cinemas that are marginalized within their host nations, such as the Mormons in America or the Beur in France, and for this reason

produce stories of migrants and exiles. The films I explore here present characters with ties to multiple communities, cultures, and cognitive systems, often delineated as the national versus the religious, who move between these communities, even as they are traumatized by dislocation.

Finally, I concentrate on recent historical epics from these cinemas, the charter myths as it were of how religious communities invent or reinvent themselves in nation-specific contexts. This desire to reconstruct the past in relation to the present, points to some need to redefine the community and to readdress its anxieties in the light of emerging national and global exigencies (Bromley 16). This project turns to historical epics under globalization and each chapter that follows focuses in part on what effects globalization has had on the religious community and its cinema within its specific national context.

### **Religious Community**

For the purpose of this study, I define religion as a system of values “that provides complex strategies for conceptualizing self, time, and space” (Vasquez 5), offsetting the perceived “spiritual emptiness of modern life” (Loughlin 2). This definition of religion allows us to approach the three religious communities here with some room to navigate the individual characteristics of each religion. I consider how religious people, impacted by globalization, create filmic texts about their experience and how the broader religious community and the national society in which they are situated read those texts. Analyzing religious films necessitates an approach that integrates sociological and aesthetic dimensions. This approach differentiates my work from other critics who see the religious imagination untethered from sociological context to the

point of abstraction and reduction (see my discussion of Schrader below) or from critics whose cultural readings overdetermine filmic texts.

A flexible definition of religion also allows for emphasis where the religious community demands it. For example, all three patriarchal religions discussed here (Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism) refer to their sacred texts for strictly structured gender roles, generally interpreted to exclude women from the modern public sphere and certain areas of religious practice. But sacred texts do not constitute the only resource for governance and behavior for members of these communities. Lived experience is “socially constructed, dynamic, and embedded in socioeconomic and political power relations, always in the particular context of specific religious communities” (An-Na'im 26). Religion is “the work of the imagination,” drawing upon Appadurai’s discussion of how ordinary people “deploy their imaginations in the practice of their every day lives” (4), building new ways of living based on the “images, scripts, models, and narratives that come through mass mediation” (6). Accordingly, religions are successful “to the extent that they offer attractive self-help systems to agents. Bad outcomes can be avoided not only by properly performed religious rituals—acts that are partly social—but also by right behavior—acts whose initiation and performance are within the control of the individual” (Tétreault 7). In the modern world this sort of control supplements the trust people must place in nature, the economic markets, and sociopolitical regimes that govern their everyday lives (*ibid*).

With the term “religious community” I refer to both those who practice the religion in strict adherence to sacred texts, as well as those who interpret the religious doctrines in their life independent of hierarchical institutions. Thus my definition allows me to

include those approaching and receding, or simply repositioning themselves in relation to the religion. For this reason I investigate films from filmmakers who are not located within the official structures of the religion, who are not financed or distributed via institutional networks. Filmmakers who work independently from the official religious institution fall along a spectrum of practice and belief, unlike those who work under the institutional auspices of the religious organization—these may be vetted for appropriate belief and practice. This allows then those disaffected with the community to be counted amongst the community, which is especially important in my discussion of films from the North African migrant community in France, where affiliation with Islam has been contested, embraced, and reimagined for generations. Simply because an individual rejects an official membership in a religious group does not mean that they do not engage with doctrines or systems of belief on their own terms.

Geography also impacts my definition of “religious community” at some level. In my discussion of Mormons, I chart how Mormonism became a global religion, yet my main focus concerns the films produced in Salt Lake City, Utah, and how the films reflect the anxieties of that predominantly white, middle-class population. My discussion of the North African migrant community in France focuses on Islam, but I analyze how Islam has been reterritorialized in France. Thus, the syncretic form practiced in French cities differs from that practiced in North Africa and also that practiced in Saudi Arabia or India or America. Lastly, my discussion of Bollywood film describes how that film industry uses representational, narrative, and symbolic strategies to appeal to diasporic audiences in the West. I do not isolate a particular diasporic population here, instead speaking of the diaspora as a whole market. Thus, my idea of what makes a religious

community expands and contracts as needed. The term's flexibility highlights the heterogeneity of each community under discussion.

Religious communities may drift into fundamentalism when they feel threatened by globalization. Fundamentalism solidifies a religious identity for groups who face the dissolution of a national identity, economic power, or territorial claim. Historically defined, fundamentalism calls for a community of true believers to separate from the world and return to living with exactness the doctrines of the religion's originary texts (Tétreault 1-3). Fundamentalist movements exist in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and often these movements exist within the same region in communities competing for limited resources. These resource-conflicts are then aggravated when they are legitimated by the associated religious and fundamentalist groups (Berger 15).

That said, religious communities are “usually more heterogeneous and pluralistic than claimed by advocates of religious exclusivity” as religious homogeneity works as a legitimating factor as well for these fundamentalist communities (An-Na’im 24). This homologizing of many identities to one fundamentalist religious identity serves a number of ideological projects on the political spectrum. It gives more power and influence to extreme religious groups by aggrandizing them, and it offers nation-states an easy target for scape-goating. Globalization both causes and cures fundamentalism: economic globalization threatens communities who turn to fundamentalism for a secure way to negotiate their troubled lives; yet global cultural flows allow religious practitioners to engage in multiple levels of identification and imaginative work. Practitioners can compare the fundamentalist community to other communities, to other belief systems, to

other ways of doing. My project argues that fundamentalism is not a default position for religious communities facing the effects of globalization; instead, religious communities may utilize differing strategies, made manifest in their art, to cope with changing power relations between religion and nation, under the influence of globalization.

### **Religious Women**

Women inhabit particularly vulnerable space in fundamentalist communities, as stringent religious expectation governs their conduct, mobility, responsibilities, and life trajectories. Women risk much in religious institutions in general, as women are often barred from administrative hierarchies that make doctrinal decisions, based on misogynist ideologies that impact the quotidian choices of their lives. Fundamentalist communities, with their heightened tensions surrounding boundaries between the community and the greater society, demand even stricter cultural affiliation from women in an attempt to emphasize peculiarity and authenticity. Even though men may move in and out of secular society for economic pursuits and political advancement, ‘cross-dressing’ and ‘passing’ as it were, fundamentalist communities require women to maintain the boundaries between the public space of the secular and the private space of the religious through their costume, decorum, and mobility. All three religious communities discussed here (Hindu, Islam, and Mormon) have fundamentalist factions within them that influence more moderate co-existent groups.

Though we must consider women's vulnerability within these communities and institutions, too often religious women are constructed and presented as victims for audiences, whether literary, filmic, media, academic; these victims are disempowered and in need of rescue, unable to negotiate the systems that surround them. Most obvious examples are the numerous popular literature, film, and new media that focus

on the veil, female circumcision, and polygyny within Muslim national and regional contexts as exotic, fetishized spectacles of religious brutality. These moments are often eroticized as well for Western consumption. For example, Jean Sasson's Princess trilogy of popular nonfiction for teens is marketed as an insider's view of Saudi wealth and royalty, where even the women of the most culturally elite families suffer abuse and sexual perversion at the hands of their men; the book covers feature a veiled woman staring directly into the camera, creating comparisons to the Odalisques of nineteenth century western art.

In this dissertation I write against the totalizing representations of religious female victimhood within a western, academic, activist, or secular discourse. I argue that the films discussed here can be read for a female subjectivity that resolves challenges to selfhood by maneuvering through multiple religious, national, class, and gender systems. This female agency is constantly in tension with the larger patriarchal society that circumscribes it; these films present female autonomy in ways that both reassure and provoke religious audiences, presenting female spectators with heterogeneous models of modern behavior. This filmic religious modernity appeals both to religious spectators and mainstream audiences, alike.

### **The Case Studies**

In the section below I describe the following the chapters, each of which presents a caste study of each religious community that has endured and may continue to endure incredible stress in relation to its host nation. Each community has had to define itself in relation to its host nation, while at the same time being part of a larger religious global network. And each community has access to a cinema that uses this struggle to define characters and tackle issues of identity and self.

## Mormon Cinema

In chapter two, I discuss recent historical epics from Mormon Cinema, itself a nascent minor cinema. In Mormon historical films about the establishment of the nineteenth century church, current retrenchment ideologies concerning gender roles in use during the latter half of the twentieth century locate the woman in the home as a convert bride, a healing wife, and a domestic goddess. The filmic representations conflict with the historical role of women in the nineteenth century when women had institutional prominence and power, even if such power was circumscribed by a larger patriarchy. These historiographical revisions are attributable to Mormonism's attempts to become a global religion. As missionary work and other transnational financial, labor, and ideological flows create Mormon communities internationally, church members struggle with multiple conflicting anxieties. First, they must assimilate diverse global populations into what is historically a white, middle-class American church. Second, they must maintain a peculiar religious identity in America while insisting on unanimity with other American Christian churches, especially against the backdrop of current polarizing national political debate.<sup>3</sup> Third, Mormons remain particularly concerned about the health of the family, specifically the post-World War II heteronormative nuclear family that they have championed over the last 60 years. Mormon leadership advocates against mothers working outside the home and in the past decade Mormon membership has mobilized against universal marriage rights amendments in Hawaii, California, Texas, and Louisiana. The historical films produced within the community,

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<sup>3</sup> Mitt Romney's recent 2008 presidential bid symbolizes the problem Mormons face: while the majority of church members ascribe to conservative social and fiscal politics, the conservative Christian base of the Republican party rejects Mormons as Christians. Thus, Romney spent a good deal of his campaign convincing Republicans that his Mormon beliefs strengthened his abilities as an American political leader, as seen in his December 2007 speech "Faith in America."

independent of institutional funding and sources, attempt to define a contemporary Mormon identity. This identity is forged on male martyrdom and female domesticity, evidenced by the multiple cinematic presentations of the church's early confrontations with American society. Ultimately Mormon historical films advocate the containment of female power within the private family as proof of the church's stability and success. In sum, women become the site of a regressive consolidation of male power in the articulation of a rigid boundary of religious identity.

### **Post-Beur Cinema**

Chapter three explores independent shorts and films, including historical narratives, influenced by the Beur film trend. The Beur film trend evolved out of a general social and political evolution among young French citizens of North African descent in the 1980s that resulted in films that spoke directly to their marginalized experience and the attendant anxieties of political inclusion, religious freedom, racial harmony, and economic mobility. In historical films from the North African migrant community in France about Algerian migration to France during the latter half of the twentieth century, women sacrifice religious engagement with Islam for autonomous development in secular France. These films create a false binary between religion and modernity, traditionalism and citizenry, relying on a mother-daughter dyad to embody the negotiation between France and Islam. Aging mother characters become agents of patriarchy, confining their daughters to the domestic space against their will. Often the mother embodies a witch or ogre, monstrously exoticized for audiences through costuming and performance. Adolescent daughters, repeatedly experiencing a sexual awakening, rebel against their mothers in a play for autonomy, independent sexuality and mobility, all affiliated with modern France through the film's setting, costuming, and

narrative resolutions. These films' filmmakers are trained in French secularism and influenced through the 1980s Beur political principles of assimilation. At the same time, migrant communities within France are reshaping conceptions of citizenry and discipleship in an effort to create a French Muslim identity. Thus, the films presented here suffer from a disconnect with current community efforts.

### **Bollywood**

In Chapter four I discuss Bollywood films, an industry often dismissed as consumerist entertainment. Yet the historical epics under analysis here reveal that these Bollywood films present a much more progressive view of female autonomy than either North African or Mormon films. The epics of the last decade combine an appeal for a domestic Hindu nation with a recognition of a diasporic westernized audience, resulting in fierce nationalist women who represent a Hindu modernity. These warrior women, often royalty who must sacrifice individual desire for community survival, are tempered by their responsibility to lead various caste, religious, and gender groups in the fight for the Indian nation. These films reflect the 1990s, a period of economic liberalization, cultural openness, and reviving Hindu nationalism, resulting in an amalgamation of tastes found in these films, through the use of spectacle, narrative conceits, and film technique.

## CHAPTER 2

### REFASHIONING FEMALE SPIRITUALITY IN MORMON HISTORICAL FILMS: THE CONVERT BRIDE AND THE DOMESTIC GODDESS

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I explore the creation of a filmic historiography of the nineteenth century origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as seen through recent historical epics from independent Mormon filmmakers. Mormon cinema confirms conventional wisdom about religion and globalization, namely that religious communities revert towards a fundamentalist stance when faced with the destabilizing forces of transnational economic, cultural, and ideological flows under globalization. Yet fundamentalist configurations are more nuanced when closely read.

Mormon cinema manifests fundamentalism via the portrayal of religious women as domestic goddesses within the religious community, happily inhabiting house and home, circumscribed by a male religious economy. These historiographies, intent on educating a burgeoning world-wide membership of the church's restoration<sup>1</sup> by Joseph Smith, reflect American Mormon anxieties about a nascent global identity. The films gender spiritual growth via the repeated use of visual and thematic tropes of female domesticity. These tropes, though dressed up in nineteenth century costumes, reflect twentieth century American norms. Ultimately these cinematic histories rewrite female contributions to the early church, erasing the prominence of nineteenth century women leaders for audience familiarity with twentieth century gender roles. The conservative revisionary process I describe here makes independent Mormon cinema an important

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<sup>1</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was formally organized in 1830 in Fayette, New York. Mormons see the church as a continuation, a restoration, of the church organized by Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament.

first case in exploring how religious communities cope with globalization. At the same time, Mormonism has benefited greatly from global transnational flows, using global forces to expand worldwide. This chapter connects the development of an independent Mormon cinema and the representation of women within historical narratives to the development of a global church.

### **Mormon Film History**

Mormon engagement with cinema has existed since the beginning of the US film industry. Randy Astle's recent scholarship on Mormon film history reveals that the church and its practices were the subject of exploitation films in the silent era, most notably *A Victim of the Mormons* (August Blom, 1911, 60min, Denmark), *A Mormon Maid* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1917, 65min, USA), and *Trapped by the Mormons* (H.B. Parkinson, 1922, 97min, UK) (24). All these films focus on young women (Danish, American, or British) threatened with forced polygamous marriage by roving American Mormon missionaries.

In response to those films and other public image opportunities, the church has produced propaganda and public relations films at different times, such as *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (Norval MacGregor, 1913, 90min, USA) and *All Faces West* (George Edward Lewis, 1929, unknown length, USA) (Astle 24). More recently the church has produced three feature films for tourist consumption at Salt Lake City's Temple Square, *Legacy* (Keith Merrill, 1990); *Two Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd* (Keith Merrill, 2000); and *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* (T.C. Christensen and Gary Cook, 2005). The church has also created a large number of institutional films for membership use, which form the foundation of the church's video catalog, made available via VHS and DVD in the 1980s and 1990s, and staples for the

church's cable distribution to BYUTV, Odyssey, and the Hallmark cable channels.<sup>2</sup> These films serve a number of didactic functions, many of them intended for use in church lessons and in family instruction. Lastly, large numbers of church members, active and inactive,<sup>3</sup> have worked in the Los Angeles film industry: animator Don Bluth (*Titan A.E.*; *Anastasia*; *All Dogs Go To Heaven*), producer Gerald Molan (*Minority Report*; *Twister*; *Schindler's List*), and director Neil Labute (*Lakeview Terrace*; *Nurse Betty*; *In the Company of Men*) are among the most well-known.

Since 2000, an independent Mormon feature film industry has gained a niche market in the intermountain American West and in North American cities with high concentrations of Mormons, producing narrative films for Mormons about Mormon spirituality and culture. These filmmakers differentiate their films from church institutional films by aiming for more realism in characterization, plot development, and mise-en-scene, yet maintain accepted community standards regarding the portrayal of sexuality, violence, and spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Filmmakers also use their Mormon features as entrée to mainstream markets by co-opting Hollywood genres, appearing on festival circuits, four-walling theatrical exhibition practices, utilizing family entertainment distributors for home markets, and casting industry actors. Thus, Mormon filmmakers are out to capture a market share in the established mainstream film industry by

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<sup>2</sup> Odyssey Cable evolved out of the National Interfaith Cable Coalition that founded the VISN network in 1988. Hallmark Channel bought Odyssey Cable in 2007 and reduced religious programming to Sunday viewing. Mormon programs like "Music and the Spoken Word" featuring the Mormon Tabernacle Choir were available through 2007. See The National Council of Churches website: <http://www.ncccusa.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Mormon use of the term "active" simply means a baptized member who attends church and accepts volunteer responsibilities within the organization.

<sup>4</sup> Travis T. Anderson discusses the paradoxes of community viewing standards in Mormon culture in his "Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film, and Literature," *BYU Studies*, 46, 2, 2007. 231-246.

producing assimilationist texts that work to legitimize the filmmakers and their audiences for Hollywood and the rest of America.

Mormon filmmakers produce what Hamid Naficy calls an accented cinema, because Mormon films in general and Mormon historical films in particular explore the tensions surrounding affiliation with a disenfranchised religious community in a secular nation-state, creating an American Mormon identity that embraces both American exceptionalism and Mormon dogma; indeed the former is essential to the latter. Naficy's work divides postcolonial cinema into three groups: Exile, Diaspora, and Ethnic/Identity films. All three interpret the tumultuous relationship of the main character/film maker to the homeland and to the refuge country. Naficy calls these films "accented" and then extends that name past postcolonial cinema: "all alternative cinemas are accented, but each is accented in certain specific ways that distinguish it" (23). Religious cinemas in general may have cultural and ethnic ties to postcolonial structures, but Mormons in particular exist outside this space.<sup>5</sup> Yet Mormon cinema remains a cinema of exile, as I'll discuss below, and identity. Mormon films traverse Mormon religious spaces of revelation such as the Sacred Grove or the Susquehanna River<sup>6</sup> or temples and tabernacles against a backdrop of American iconic landscapes (the Rocky Mountains, the American West desert, New England forests, and megacities such as LA and New

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<sup>5</sup> Research in Mormon Studies argues that Mormons in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were conflated as racially and culturally other because of their disenchantment with American Protestantism and their practice of polygamy. See as a starting point Givens, Terryl. *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith received his first visions of God at the age of 14 in the forest near his childhood home in Palmyra, NY. Other angels visited Smith as a young adult on the banks of the Susquehanna River in relation to questions about baptism and priesthood authority.

York), creating a migrant, mobile Mormon who dominates both religious and secular topographies.

Mormon independent historical films dialogue, answer to, and revise the 1990 institutional film *Legacy*, produced by the church for exhibition at Temple Square for tourists, shown 6 days a week for almost a decade. The film follows a group of Mormons from baptism in the 1830s to migration to Utah in the 1840s. The film was regarded as an event for members, part of a day of sight-seeing while visiting Salt Lake City. Coincident with the exhibition of *Legacy* was the publication from 1990 to 1998 of Gerald Lund's nine novel historical fiction series *The Work and the Glory*, which has sold over 2 million copies. The series covers the historical period from Joseph Smith's early revelations to the Mormon migration west (about 1820 to 1860). *Legacy* and the *Work and the Glory* series proved that a Mormon audience existed for historical fiction centered on the early years of the church.

### **Global Expansion and Correlation**

I connect globalization's impact on the church to this nascent Mormon market; as American members begin to think of themselves as part of a world-wide organization, efforts at self-definition abound. *Legacy*'s production began in 1988, 10 years after the church had lifted restrictions on access to priesthood authority<sup>7</sup> to members of African descent. Between 1978 and 1991, when *Legacy* debuted at Temple Square, church membership had doubled and expanded from congregations in 54 nations to congregations in 130 nations, reflecting new membership on the African continent and

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<sup>7</sup> Currently, priesthood authority is extended to all males over 12. Within the church, the priesthood is understood as the authority and power to act in God's name, and the patriarchal structure of the church reflects this concept.

in post-Wall Eastern Europe (Starke 129).<sup>8</sup> What had once been an American church peopled by white descendants of Mormon pioneers was now a church with a diverse population from all over the globe.<sup>9</sup> Debates within Mormon cinema are often ontological, as academics, critics, and filmmakers decide what constitutes Mormon cinema. These debates parallel the debates within the Mormon community about what it means to be a Mormon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a globalized world.

I argue that this global growth influences American Mormon attempts at self-definition via film production. Hence, as the church grows and international members adopt and adapt doctrines for their own, American Mormons produce cultural images that both respond to and refute these international members. In this cultural production, themes of martyrdom and torture prevail, responding to international members' own experiences of alienation and sacrifice. Even further, American Mormons focus their historical films on the white, American, male founders of the church, insistently defining Mormon participation as the domain of the white, American male.

Historically and culturally an American religion, Mormonism negotiate its own and others' nationalisms as it expands around the world. "The Mormon enterprise faces the necessity of 'marketing identities' and other goods that can be sold in a variety of cultural settings without seriously undermining the integrity of what remains an essentially American product, indeed even a Western American product" (Mauss

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<sup>8</sup> Since 1830, the LDS church has grown to over 13 million members, a slight majority of which live outside the United States. The church's success has caused sociologists of religious groups to use the church as case study in successful cult growth, with projections and predictions for the church's future. The most famous of these is Rodney Stark's calculation that with the present growth rate average of 40% per decade, the LDS church could reach 267 million adherents by 2080 (22).

<sup>9</sup> The recent presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney has highlighted how this American church is not fully accepted in American Christianity, and this acceptance constitutes one of the anxieties American Mormons face.

“Identity and Boundary Maintenance” 12). Several attitudes define American Mormonism that make globalization difficult: including the reification of the American constitution and form of government as divinely inspired and enshrinement of a family model closely resembling Victorian patriarchy, trends which occurred within the parameters of assimilation during the twentieth century, yet still wield considerable influence in defining church identity (Mauss “Identity and Boundary Maintenance” 15).

Mormonism’s American genealogy has also resulted in an attack from postcolonial and anti-imperial groups within different national contexts.<sup>10</sup> These sorts of attacks reinforce for members, whether American or not, the disenfranchised status of the church in national contexts. Even though the church has considerable power within regional culture and politics of the American West, these sorts of events continue to have hold on the American Mormon psyche. American Mormons continue to imagine themselves as victims of state and social injustice, with the male missionary or priesthood holder facing the brunt of the attack. These attitudes manifest themselves in the historical films under examination here, whether through dialogue, plot points, or visuals.

Ultimately the church as an institution created a male face for the church’s public persona, whether the public meets missionaries, hears about the church’s nineteenth century beginnings, or attends local meetings. This strategy, of moving men to the

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s, LDS church buildings in Chile suffered extensive bombings, arson, and vandalism tied to anti-American sentiment (as qtd in Young 51). In 1989 the Zarate Wilca Armed Forces of Liberation assassinated American missionaries in Bolivia and in 1994 the Shining Path in Peru assassinated Peruvian missionaries, both groups interpreting the missionaries as a symbol of American imperialism (Young 50-51). In 1989, the Ghanaian government closed LDS church buildings and required all foreign missionaries to leave in a week’s time; the Ghanaian government was concerned that the church, with connections to both the US and South Africa might attempt to overwhelm Ghana in some way (Young 52).

forefront, was a conscious decision on the behalf of church leaders, which unfolded over the twentieth century, influenced by retrenchment attitudes stemming from what Armand Mauss calls the “predicament of respectability” (“Identity and Boundary Maintenance” 9). In the nineteenth century, the church worked to live down the disrepute of polygamy by assimilating to American cultural norms. By the mid-twentieth century, many felt assimilation had gone too far (Mauss Angel and the Beehive 76). Retrenchment included a “family renewal and retrenchment” that de-emphasized women’s institutional roles and instead emphasized women’s responsibilities within the post World War II nuclear family (Mauss Angel and the Beehive 85). The church leadership explained this paradigm shift to the membership as fundamental in keeping the family unit strong during tumultuous social changes (Tuttle 2<sup>nd</sup> para). This de-emphasis accompanied increased emphasis on priesthood (male) authority (Cornwall 257), and resulted in centralized and standardized church curriculums and programs, seen as necessary if the church were to run efficiently in areas with few members isolated from church headquarters (Mauss Angel and the Beehive 82).

Leaders called the policy change correlation, and it used the priesthood (male) line of authority to accomplish centralization. Instead of church-wide organizations communicating with their local chapters, all organizations transmit their communications through priesthood channels. This lead to greater conformity among organizations under a body of male overseers. In addition, women’s intuitional responsibilities in welfare, education, and healing were handed over to the priesthood quorums, resulting in increased male institutional value in relation to decreased female institutional value (Cornwall 257). Women also lost the authority to perform healing blessings in their

institutional work, a privilege that had been extended to them through various church leaders until the 1940s (Lindsey 439).

Correlation's impact is staggering. Men in the church bear heavy administrative responsibilities while women remain isolated in the private sphere. Contemporary LDS church members may have little knowledge of women's contributions to the growth and stability of the early church because they assume, and are supported in this assumption by cultural production, that male institutional prominence has always been an organizational given.

### **Filmic Responses to Global Expansion**

Filmic responses to global expansion vary from genre to genre. Mormon documentarians working in short forms, television, or vignettes, explore the church's nascent diversity and its stresses. Women and people of color often helm these documentaries. Melissa Puente's *Brides on the Homefront* (2000), winner of a 2001 regional Emmy, presents how World War II affected three women's marital aspirations. Her later *Sisterz in Zion* (2006) follows several female teenage Mormon converts from Harlem who attend a private religious summer camp at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT, charting the cultural shock of black urban Mormons at the geographical and social center of the church. Erin Fox's trilogy of short documentaries, *Heather the Mailman* (1999), *The Merry Widow* (2002), and *Portrait of Enkhzul* (2008) focuses on Mormon women at different stages of life; the last film focuses on a Mongolian return missionary looking for a job in Ulaanbaatar and her devolving relationship with the church as national and cultural ties exert themselves. Tasha Oldham's *The Smith Family* (2002) documents a Salt Lake Mormon couple that must deal with the husband's gay infidelities, compounded by the realization that both are HIV+. Darius Gray and

Margaret Young's *Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons* (2006) explores the experiences of black members in the church, focusing on the last half of the twentieth century when black men were granted access to priesthood authority. Manju Varghese's Salt Lake City-based documentary production company Mirror Lake Films currently holds a contract with the Church to produce a reality series about seven current missionaries.

Independent Mormon feature films, on the other hand, have become the domain of male directors. Judging from the feature films produced, to be Mormon is to be white, male, and firmly situated in the middle class. I focus on historical films in this study because they win wider distribution and are better known by average church-goers than the documentary films. Thus these films and their makers must meet greater audience demands in regards to content and style choices. The historical films examined here attribute the growth of the church to domestic women and martyred men, reflecting the retrenchment ideologies that pervade church leadership decisions over the last 60 years. Even though church members celebrate international growth and expansion, American Mormon popular cultural production conflates spiritual power with white, middle-class masculinity.

At the same time, the historical films are films of exile and migration, portraying the Mormons' move from the then American heartland to its frontiers (New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois) to the Mexican territories (Utah). These films offer communal self-definition through an examination of the separation trauma of the church's beginnings: thrust from the heart of the American nation into a political and physical wilderness to forge Mormon identity. Plot points turn on leaving for a new city, driven from yet another

town, making due in refugee camps, building another home. The visuals are made up primarily of travel by foot, canal, wagon, horseback, and then once arrived, of cutting timber, framing houses, traversing muddy streets, establishing economic networks, and organizing community government. These are then followed by sequences where mobs, militia, or the traitors in the community destroy all the hard work, and the church flees yet again. These departures and arrivals create emotional tensions as loyalty to the church amidst such demanding circumstances separates family members, lovers, and friends physically and psychologically from each other. The films establish the male Mormon as the central martyr of these traumas, but the films also complicate Mormons' relationship to America. The narratives repeatedly portray Mormons as constantly thrust from American society, even while they demand their constitutional rights to freedom of religion, suffrage, property ownership, and due process.

These same films that focus on male martyrdom also revise Mormon historiography about the contribution of women to church beginnings. Contemporary expectations in Mormon culture focus primarily on male prominence, power and responsibilities in the family and the institutional life of the church, and stand in stark contrast to previous understandings within Mormon culture of institutional female power and autonomy. Historical films of the last fifteen years assume that the current priesthood responsibilities and institutional values have always been in place, a strategy that confirms these policies' authenticity by tying them to the church's beginnings. As Roger Bromley argues about British heritage films in Thatcher England, “[the past] is constantly being reconstructed as a means of lining up present economic and social imperatives with certain dominant ideological preoccupations. . . .” (16). Dominant

ideological preoccupations for the church center on identity formation and maintenance in the face of changing tensions between the church and its host nation America, as well as between the American-situated church and its increasingly postcolonial, globalized membership. The historical films under review here argue that their gendered expectations have always existed, and thus should continue, articulated via the romantic figure of the convert bride.

### **Convert Brides in the Male Religious Economy of *The Work and the Glory***

*The Work and the Glory* (Russell Holt, 2004) is the first in a trilogy of films adapted from Gerald Lund's nine novel historical fiction series about the beginnings of the nineteenth century church. This film opens with the Steed family relocating to Palmyra New York after purchasing a farm on the frontier. Ben (Sam Jennings) and Mary Ann (Brenda Strong) have five children, among them two grown sons, Joshua (Eric Johnson) and Nathan (Alexander Carroll). Joshua, stubborn and passionate, begins a romance with the town grocer's sophisticated, educated daughter, Lydia (Tiffany DuPont). Nathan, younger and more cautious, makes friends with the Steeds' day laborers, Hyrum (Ryan Wood) and Joseph Smith, Jr (Jonathan Scarfe). Soon the family is divided over Joseph's claim to have seen visions. Nathan and Joshua become even more distanced when Nathan begins to date Lydia in Joshua's absence. Lydia eventually joins the church and marries Nathan.

While the most obvious example of the convert bride plays out in *The Work and the Glory*, the historical films *Emma Smith: My Story* (Gary Cook and T.C. Christensen, 2008) and *Eliza and I* (Richard Dutcher, 1997) also employ it. Contemporary romances such as *Jack Weyland's Charlie* (Adam Thomas Anderegg, 2002), *Pride and Prejudice* (Andrew Black, 2003), and *The Singles' 2nd Ward* (Kurt Hale, 2007), and other

historical films of different church eras, such as *The Other Side of Heaven* (Mitch Davis, 2001), which narrativizes the church's expansion in the Pacific Islands, mobilize the convert bride for narrative and thematic depth. The convert bride collapses female spirituality with heteronormative sexuality by combining a young woman's quest for romantic love and companionate marriage with her religious conversion to Mormon doctrine and rituals. In this way, the convert bride makes use of conventional Hollywood romance narratives, where young women resolve life challenges through choosing the appropriate marriage partner. Yet, the presence of the convert bride across genres speaks to Mormon anxiety over marriage and the availability of appropriate marriage partners. In these films, male protagonists find a woman outside of the church, who must then be disciplined via conversion. This reflects similar anxieties long-standing members have over the increasing numbers of international converts, who must be disciplined, trained, assimilated into acceptable membership.

The young woman in Mormon romances, smart, capable, and headstrong, finds her romantic interest captured by a young man affiliated with the church; their continued relationship depends on her acceptance of the religion. Once she converts to the church, they can develop spiritually side by side in marriage. This spiritual-romantic union constitutes a cultural and doctrinal Mormon ideal: a man and woman progressing spiritually due to the gender-specific responsibilities of marriage. As we'll see later, those responsibilities are imagined in these films as domestic and familial for women.<sup>11</sup>

These films present women's personal relationship with Deity as coupled to their

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<sup>11</sup> In films like *The RM* (Kurt Hale, 2003), *The Singles Ward* (Kurt Hale, 2002), *Picadilly Cowboy/Anxiously Engaged* (Tyler Ford, 2007), and *Baptists at our Barbeque* (Christian Vuissa, 2004) that propose men must gain religious faith to win their female mates, their strengthened spirituality results in institutional responsibility and prominence.

position as wife. Such conflations and binaries obscure women's individual spiritual growth and confine female responsibilities, interests, and achievement within the narrow parameters of the private.

The convert bride is a central component of a larger religious economy between men. Men in these films share spiritual experiences, challenge religious authority, critique secular and pious attitudes, and mediate acceptable doctrines, forming the plot of the narrative. The male characters occupy various positions on a spectrum of religious belief and engagement. In *The Work and the Glory*, Joseph is the religious visionary, Joshua the logical secularist, Ben the independent believer, Nathan the searching neophyte, the Murdocks (townie friends of Joshua) the sensualist materialists, Lydia's father the man of orthodox religiosity. As these men interact over the spiritual events/plot points of the film, the women's lives and opportunities are impacted by male prerogative. The women are granted or denied access to a spiritual life through their men, and are often literally extended spiritual knowledge (in the form of a book or invitation to participate) from men. The women must function within the men's economy, never truly free to make their own decisions.

This economy opens up possibilities for a patriarchal critique within the film, most obviously commenting that due to the patriarchal nature of Republican America, the women cannot freely make their own religious decisions. *The Work and the Glory* series explicitly argues that mobs, state legislatures, governors, newspapers, and even the President of the United States work to disenfranchise the Mormon community, not only politically, but economically, militarily, and religiously. Via this political critique, the films have set in place the foundation for a parallel critique about female disenfranchisement

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, the feminist critique fails, or the film shuts down the critique, when we see that the religious conversions of women enabled by men are celebrated and valued within the narrative.

For example, Nathan brings his mother to the Mormon truth. Mary Ann is characterized throughout the film as a moral woman, hardworking, knowledgeable in scripture, and loyal to her husband. Once Nathan has heard the visionary experiences from Joseph Smith, he turns to Mary Ann to share his wonder at the story. They find each other awake in the living quarters of their house early on Easter morning. Nathan discovers Mary Ann on the stairs, sitting in the light of a window to read her Bible. As Nathan tells her of Joseph's visions, the light through the window brightens and surrounds Nathan and Mary Ann, visually alluding to the light Smith said fell on him when he first saw God. The scene ends without showing a response from Mary Ann. Later, when Nathan and Joseph again discuss his visions against a backdrop of trees, another allusion to the cinematic iconography surrounding Joseph's early visions, Nathan confides that Mary Ann believes Joseph's stories. The narrative endows Nathan with the articulation of her conversion experience, which is central to the main conflict of the entire trilogy. Nathan speaks her conversion, voices her belief in a way that should be Mary Ann's privilege.

Instead of developing a scene to further characterize Mary Ann and underscore how her decisions and beliefs will affect the entire family, how female agency reforms familial relationships and power structures, the film appropriates her implied character development to strengthen Joseph and Nathan's growing emotional intimacy. Throughout these films, the religious economy defines relationships between men;

women's operation within the economy can strengthen or destroy these male homosocial associations. Nathan's loyalty to Joseph endangers his eventual engagement with Lydia, who recognizes that their male friendship takes precedence over her heterosexual relationship with Nathan. Lydia and Nathan's romantic relationship is intertwined with Nathan's growing belief in the Mormon faith and the two intimacies form the narrative arc of the film. Near the climax of the film, Lydia presents Nathan with an ultimatum, saying, "Are you willing to choose me over Joseph?" Nathan answers no and turns her ultimatum into his own: Lydia will have to join the church or end their engagement.

In a like manner, Ben presents ultimatums to Mary Ann, telling her that she cannot discuss her new faith in the fledgling religion nor read the Book of Mormon. Though Mary Ann accepts this restriction from her husband, Ben's mandates injure his relationship with Nathan. Ben expresses his distrust of the Mormon movement throughout the film, but it is not until Ben blocks Mary Ann's access to the religion, that Ben and Nathan find themselves at odds. Ben's control of Mary Ann can be read as a swipe at Nathan, the man who introduced Mary Ann to Mormon beliefs. Ben and Nathan's paternal relationship only begins to be restored when Ben allows Mary Ann to participate in church meetings and read the Book of Mormon. This moment realigns Ben within the male religious economy.

According to the narrative, for Lydia and Nathan's relationship to succeed, Lydia must change her thinking, and convert. Lydia discovers that her father has thrown away a copy of the Book of Mormon that Nathan has sent her. Angered, she runs from her father's store to Nathan's house, an acceptable pathway in the male economy. While

she waits for Nathan to return from a church conference out of town, she reads the book all night in his house. Her conversion and their marriage are foreshadowed, assumed even, by her presence in the house he had begun to build. The foreshadowing strengthens when Lydia kneels on Nathan's bed, soon to be her marriage bed, to pray about what she's read. In the morning, Lydia leaves the house for the surrounding hills. While she still reads, an extreme long shot presents her as a female silhouette, book in hand, against the glowing horizon. The rising sun becomes a metaphor for the dawning knowledge inside Lydia, the growing testimony she has of the book and its doctrine. When Nathan discovers her at his homestead that morning, she confesses that she knows the book is true and that she will leave her family behind to marry him—quoting Ruth 1:16, “for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” In the Old Testament, Ruth pronounces this loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi, but here the narrative co-opts the verse to capture the ideal in wifely submission and conversion fervor. Lydia tells Nathan, “I want to believe, Nathan. . . . I love you, Nathan Steed.” The dialogue intertwines religious belief with hetero-normative marriage. They emerge from his house together, the day bright about them, their faces joyful, having finally agreed to marry.

The convert bride in these films also represents a twentieth century middle-class ideal. The woman is young, no older than her mid-twenties, beautiful, and marked through costuming, diction, and setting as middle-class. These young women, costumed in brightly colored hoop skirts with carefully dressed hair, are courted in ordered gardens and well-furnished drawing rooms. Lydia is the cultured daughter of a leading town merchant, who has not only been educated in science, literature, and

math, but is also a talented violinist. She first meets Nathan as she practices chamber music. Likewise, Emma Smith in *Emma Smith: My Story* is a young schoolteacher, and she and Joseph play chess together by the fireside in the days leading up to their elopement. Eliza in *Eliza and I* (Richard Dutcher, 1997) is a published poet as well as an accomplished seamstress and educator. Though the film finds Eliza impoverished, her nostalgic storytelling locates her in finer times. These female characters are situated firmly within an established middle-class, distinct from the impoverished frontier living that other female characters experience.

The fact that the convert bride trope connects female spirituality to women's roles as wives reflects Mormon doctrines that require temple marriage ordinances for men and women in order to progress spiritually. These films translate doctrinal exigencies into character and plot points that are culturally recognizable. Yet, these films expand this doctrine by creating an unquestioned male religious economy that circumscribes women's spiritual choices, in and out of the church. Additionally, I propose that the reading sequence as trope is an important component of the male religious economy found in these films, highlighting men as gatekeepers to the religious community. *The Work and the Glory* presents an especially vivid example, which I have discussed above. Variations exist across the films, as I discuss in the next section.

### **Reading Sequences in *Emma Smith: My Story***

Gary Cook and T.C. Christensen co-directed the independently produced *Emma Smith: My Story*, the romanticized narrative of Joseph and Emma Smith's marriage told from Emma's perspective. Cook and Christensen were also responsible for *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* (2005), an institutional film, and *Praise to the Man* (2005) a docu-drama for the production and distribution company Living Scriptures. The

films use many of the same actors and blur the line between genres as well as institutional and independent production.<sup>12</sup> Reading sequences are quite common in most Mormon conversion genre films, including the missionary sub-genre, as conversion within these narratives is contingent upon accepting the Book of Mormon as the word of God. Though, as shown above, conversion is portrayed as occurring within tightly controlled patriarchal parameters, cultural Mormon identity claims ideals of personal witness, independent conversion, reason, and knowledge, even for members whose family heritage reaches back to the church's beginnings. These scenes of personal conversion reinvent for the screen narratives common to family and institutional histories.

Hence, historical films have created their own iconography based on these reading sequences, which function to chart the progress of a woman within the male religious economy, and highlight men as gatekeepers to the religious community. The reading sequence emphasizes one step of the convert bride's discipline within the male religious economy. The sequences illustrate woman choosing, witnessing, and experiencing independent spiritual events, yet these occur within the male religious economy. These gatekeepers include a father or husband who prevents the woman from accessing the religion and they are paired with a husband or son who provides access to the religion. The women are handed off between these gatekeepers, from father to husband, or from husband to son, in ways that mimic patriarchal exogamy. The reading sequences consist of three to four parts: the exchange of the book, the refusal, the reading, and the conversion. The exchange of the book, from hand to hand, among

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<sup>12</sup> Christensen worked as cinematographer on all three films and *The Work and the Glory*, and as a result may be the most influential aesthetician among Mormon filmmakers.

family and friends, generally from male to female, is framed in two-shot, emphasizing the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Close-ups on the book in hand are prevalent, so are torso shots of the book cradled to the chest.

In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Joseph bursts into the house as Emma scrubs the floor. He kneels next to her and hands her the book. The film cuts to a two-shot as she opens to the title page. He reads to her, and they both smile in delight as she finishes, “By Joseph Smith, Jr.” Joseph’s character resonates with an ambivalent duality in this film: he is both the visionary prophet of God and he is the boyish husband whose goofy charm contrasts with Emma’s class, education, and refinement. This moment when he hands the book to Emma contains both these qualities. He embodies both the prophet offering new doctrine and the husband providing access to the religion. Joseph’s arrival from the public space of town and print shop with the book to find Emma on her knees scrubbing the floor typifies my observations about the historical films: women as wives and mothers gain access to religion through their husbands, yet provide for their husbands the domestic stability needed to accomplish institutional success. As I’ll discuss below, the moment is also somewhat strained because Emma helped with the translation and production of the book and so should be well acquainted with the text.

The second component in the reading sequence presents the refusal of the book, by the woman whose husband or father will not allow her to read it. This woman usually shies from the extended book, though she may profess a desire to read and know. The films interpret this woman’s plight as tragic; she’s connected to the wrong part of the male religious economy and has no man to secure for her correct doctrine. In *The Work and the Glory*, Nathan first offers his mother Mary Ann a copy of the Book of Mormon,

but she must refuse because of her husband Ben's edict about the religion. She holds the book hopefully, but must hand it back to Nathan. In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Emma offers the book to her own mother as Emma packs for the church's move to Ohio. Emma's father has never approved of religion in general and Joseph's visions specifically, and so this will be the last time Emma sees her parents. As they pack, Emma's mother offers her an heirloom water pitcher of red and white china. She explains it was her grandmother's, passed down through the women in the family. The camera follows Emma's mother from the sideboard to the table, moving into a two shot as she holds Emma and lets her know "she can always come home." Emma considers the water pitcher, a useful domestic tool, associated with women's work through not only its purpose but also its consumer value as a trade commodity in the eighteenth century. She hands it to her mother to pack and then reaches for a copy of the Book of Mormon.

Via shot-reverse shot, the film captures the rejection of the book, which as an object of leisure re-introduces the male religious economy into their relationship, interrupting the female space of domestic work and maternity with paternal disapproval at marital affiliation. Emma's mother holds the book away from her, examining the spine. She brings the book to her chest in a wistful gesture, and then in a swift motion, hands it back to Emma and flees the room. Emma sorrowfully packs the book with the rest of her things. The moment elides a critique of Emma's father's right to grant permission to her mother, only that he should be recalcitrant in doing so. Hence, the film does not question the patriarchal structure of the nineteenth century family, but the patriarch who does not agree with Mormon patriarchy.

The third iconographic moment in the reading sequence portrays the actual reading. *The Work and the Glory* offers an especially powerful example of Lydia reading on her future marriage bed, and *Emma Smith: My Story* contains an equally effective scene, as the film works to create parity between Joseph and Emma's spirituality. Emma reads the book in the grove of trees that Joseph has shown her when he explained his visions to her, the film's mise-en-scene intimating that she will receive a divine witness of this book in the same place that Joseph first encountered God. She reads standing in the midst of spring foliage, the straight, narrow white trunks of beeches all around her, green light illuminating the scene. The film uses a dissolve, a frequent edit in these films to convey the passing of time and an intensifying of emotion, to move into a medium shot of her figure and the book. The soundtrack utilizes a voice-over of Emma reading from the last chapter of the book, paired with a sweeping musical score. Here she receives some kind of immaterial witness, raising her eyes from the book and looking off-screen left.

This of course is the fourth and last part of the sequence, receiving confirmation. Emma here feels something that we as viewers understand through the mise-en-scene, sound, and performance. Later we will see her stand at her window, looking out into the grey morning light, holding the book to her chest. She sings softly to herself, and then opens the book to study it further. *Emma Smith* does not portray Emma's confirmation with the dawning sun similar to Lydia's in *The Work and the Glory*, but instead as a constant series of small events such as her attendance at the church's formal organization and her father-in-law's baptism. That a reading sequence was developed at all for Emma is a paradoxical choice within the narrative, as Emma was one of

Joseph's transcribers as he translated the Book of Mormon, shown in the film. The source material for the book, referred to as "gold plates" by Joseph's followers, and "gold bible" by detractors, was stored in her home, and the film imagines her contact and interaction with the plates, her desire to page through them, though Joseph refuses her permission to do so.

I propose that Emma's reading sequence functions as a substitute for her institutional presence in the film. The film presents a believing Emma, obedient, hard-working, and supportive, who is still distanced from the institution of the church. Emma is never baptized in the film. We do see her attend meetings, but she is amongst the congregation, one of the many who listen to Joseph and his fellow leaders from the pulpit. The film presents her spiritual progress solely within the private, usually domestic, mise-en-scene. For example, Emma receives instruction from Joseph in the form of a formal revelation, available to the viewing audience in the published revelations of the church, called the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>13</sup> Yet in the film, this revelation is discussed over the dinner table. The revelation required her to edit a collection of hymns for the new church, which we see her do in the different rooms of her house; the dining room, the bedroom, the kitchen. The revelation also requires her to "expound scripture" but this is interpreted in the film as within the private and domestic sphere of women; in the garden, at the general store; in the home. When Emma finally exhorts and expounds men in the film, it is a moment used to show that she has lost control and embarrasses her husband. The film genders Emma's

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<sup>13</sup> The standard doctrinal canon for the church is drawn from the King James Translation of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Revelations, sermons, and essays from church leaders are also important in framing the evolution of doctrine, and though not canonized are published by Deseret Book, a publishing company owned by the Church.

contributions, relegating them to the domestic sphere, careful to isolate her from any institutional power or prominence.

In the historical films, domestic stability and prosperity represent the church's growth and success underscoring the uprooted nature of the church's early years. While the films clearly present both men and women working diligently to build cities and homes and maintain them through hard physical labor, women become symbols of Mormon prosperity and safety through their physical location within the homes as part of the films' mise-en-scene. Female characters throughout these films unpack family house goods, work diligently to clean and produce more house goods, exchange gifts with female relations, and birth and raise children. The film locates the characters in the kitchen, bedrooms, and cold cellars, or peering from behind a glass window, standing in the doorway of the home, or on the front porch. The farthest these women roam is to the grocer's. Only female characters who are not Mormons or not yet Mormons move independently through streets or the night (Lydia at the beginning of *The Work and the Glory* trilogy when she steals away from her family to meet with Joshua) or in a tavern or bar (Jesse, Joshua's first wife in *American Zion*, and Madeline, his second wife in *A House Divided*). In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Joseph and Emma progress through a succession of homes, each becoming larger and more substantial until Emma's red brick home in Nauvoo that she ran as a hotel. In *American Zion* and *A House Divided*, Mary Ann and Ben make several moves following the church eventually to Nauvoo, and Mary Ann constantly recreates a home for her family, cleaning and polishing with some satisfaction at each new stop.

Female domesticity characterizes women in these films, transforming the figure of the convert bride into domestic goddess. Her work inside the home signifies her contribution to the church and the church's growing success, and comes to symbolize church strength. For example, *Praise to the Man* (T.C. Christensen and Gary Cook, 2005), does not recreate Smith's murder; instead the film employs a still life of broken domestic house goods: spilled ink, crushed glasses, broken water pitcher, shattered teacup to represent his assassination. Yet these portrayals of the domestic religious woman elide previous church historiography, which reveal women in the nineteenth century as central to the institutional growth of the church. Women's domestic responsibilities extend to their healing influence in the lives of their men, creating spaces of security and respite for their male martyrs who must face the secular world in violent public spaces.

### **Female Healing and Male Martyrdom in *American Zion***

*American Zion* is the second film in *The Work and the Glory* trilogy, and by far the most violent, echoing the huge success of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), released the year before. Gibson's graphic torture aesthetics cannot be duplicated for Mormon audiences, as an R-rating would severely reduce Mormon box office, but Gibson's approach to religion as a masculinist paradigm with martyrdom as a central proving experience certainly resonates within *American Zion*. Martyrdom is a central dramatic practice in Mormon historical films due largely to the history of persecution, ridicule, and expulsion the nineteenth century members experienced since their first gatherings. Martyrdom is an important prism through which current members understand the contributions of the early Mormons: phrases like "sealed with their blood," "sealed with their lives," or "made the ultimate sacrifice," populate members'

discussions not only of Joseph and Hyrum who were shot to death in Carthage Jail in Missouri in 1844, but the pioneers who died during the migration to Utah. The historical films studied here use the assassination of Smith as a narrative climax (*Emma Smith: My Story, Praise to the Man*); jumping off point (*Eliza and I*), or diffuse the martyrdom's violence to other events in Smith's life and other characters in the film (*The Work and the Glory* trilogy).

For example, most of the films here use tarring and feathering sequences, mob destruction, prison brutality, and expulsion montages to convey the danger the characters face in practicing their religion in a hostile society. The male characters suffer these violent acts in public spaces, vulnerable and unprotected outside the safe havens their wives and mothers have constructed. Female characters heal and nurture their assaulted men within those havens. Strikingly, women are rarely made vulnerable in these films, which sits at odds with contemporary discourse concerning women and the impacts of globalization on religious communities. One expects to see women threatened, whether humiliated, violated, or slain, coded references to the destructive forces that religious communities perceive modern societies unleash on the home and family. The only female character in any danger in these films is the bar-girl Jesse in *American Zion*, and only because Joshua beats her. The films do not concern themselves with notions of female honor, so confidently do they portray women happy within the domestic sphere. Instead, in Mormon historical films, men suffer attack, and then are restored by their women.

*American Zion* employs many of these violent images and events to communicate the growing tensions within the public sphere between the Mormons as a

political and social group and the American frontier communities within which they reside. *American Zion* opens with Nathan and Lydia's wedding, but quickly refocuses the film on the male religious economy of Ben, Joshua, Nathan, Joseph, and Governor Lilburn Boggs (R.D. Call; the Missouri governor who will eventually declare the 1838 Mormon Extermination Order) and his man in the field Sheriff McBride (Jim Grimshaw). Joseph and two other male characters are tarred and feathered in two separate sequences. The men form a militia to protect a settlement in Independence, Missouri. Sheriff McBride tortures Nathan for information. Joshua burns down his house. The final image of the film shows Joshua's silhouette against the orange flames of his blazing home. The film uses violence to transfer Mormon anxieties about affiliation to the film characters; the worst possible consequences for religious alignment play out on the screen.

The tar and feather sequences, such as the reading sequences above, are stylized components of Mormon historical films. In these films, where the gendered body is fully costumed, the tar and feather sequences strip the body, lay bare the male physique, and mutilate its beauty. The films present these sequences in slow-motion with distorted soundtracks to represent the psychological turmoil of the characters. Dark figures surround the victim, shot at an extreme high angle. When a mob tears Joseph from his home to tar and feather him in *American Zion* (as in *Emma Smith: My Story* and *Praise to the Man*), they care little that he holds his infant son in his arms. In the yard, the mob forces Joseph to his knees, as Emma stands witness in the doorway. The film cuts to the terrified infant who sobs inconsolably. The film cuts back to Joseph. The mob scratches and beats Joseph. They tear off his shirt. His nakedness is almost

shocking. In medium close-ups, the film focuses on his chest, shoulders, and throat as strong and handsome, underscoring the humiliation he is suffering. The mob daubs melted tar onto his skin, shot in extreme close-up. In repeated shots, the tar stick takes up the middle ground of the shot, and Joseph's face fills the background. The film cuts to an exchange between Joseph and Emma, locking eyes during the torture. The woman witnesses the man's degradation from the safety of the home.

Two more events, the women caring for Joseph, and then the death of the child, always follow these sequences. In *American Zion*, as in *Praise to the Man*, Joseph's mother Lucy Mack Smith (Anne Sward) cares for Joseph, while family and friends rush around in the background. In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Emma alone cares for Joseph. In these nurture scenes, Joseph rests on a stool in a bedroom, his raw red skin exposed. The caretaker peals the tar from his skin, cleaning the area with a damp cloth. These scenes are generally shot in long and medium shots, with lighting to recreate candlelight. The overall effect is to understand the extent of the beating and the slow process in removing cooled tar from skin; to mark the violence and gravity of the event. Yet, these sequences isolate women from the film's temporal and narrative function. The male characters sacrifice bodily for their belief, and this violent portrayal overwhelms any act that women perform as part of their commitment to church. Female commitment remains, in these films, the dutiful performance of gendered work.

The film codes these moments of violent suffering as necessary to the development of the church, as integral to male spiritual development. The events become trials of faith that strengthen male commitment to the church. Though the men are shown mutilated, the violation binds them closer to the religious community. Ben's

run-in with a mob in *A House Divided*, the third film in the trilogy, drives the point home. Throughout the trilogy, Ben has authorized and made possible Mary Ann's worship practices with the church, though he has never joined. In the final film, the two move to Illinois and Ben becomes Joseph's confidante. Ben remains uninvolved in church membership until one night a mob attacks him in the street. The next morning Joseph visits Ben, resting in his bed, and Ben announces he wants to be baptized. The film asserts that Ben simply needed the pain of physical humiliation to clarify how he feels about the church, and to strengthen his commitment to it.

Latter-day Saint (LDS) filmmakers' representations of women in the early church influenced by retrenchment attitudes, result in historical films that isolate women's contributions to the private familial sphere. These films further reduce the limited, gendered power that women employed during the founding of the church. Historical films use mise-en-scene, plot points, and historical revisionism to depict a limited female engagement with early church growth. Specifically, these films tie female spirituality to female sexuality within marriage through plot development and mise-en-scene. The films limit female contribution to church growth to domestic work in the home and emotional work in the family and use that domesticity to invoke prosperity and stability of the church.

### **Gender Critique in *Fourth Witness: The Mary Whitmer Story***

In the nineteenth century church, women occupied institutional positions of authority and prominence that utilized women's labor, skills, and talents to establish and secure the church. These positions were based on essentialized notions of ideal motherhood and wifery, yet women used these positions to create female support networks, which in turn helped educate, promote, and advance women's

accomplishment in both domestic and institutional spheres. The recent historical films ignore even these limited positions of power by placing women firmly within the domestic sphere and valorizing their private contributions to home and family as their sole contributions to the church. The films concentrate on women characters that exist outside institutional structures and elide narratives about historical women in positions of prominence or authority.

My ideas about women's domesticity as pivotal to church growth and stability are drawn from the short, *Fourth Witness: The Mary Whitmer Story* (Spencer Filichia, 1997, 20min). Produced by students at BYU and later distributed on DVD through Covenant Home Entertainment, the film uses domestic tropes discussed above, but critiques their underlying sexist assumptions. The film title refers to Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, known now as the Three Witnesses, to whom Smith showed the golden plates (source material of the Book of Mormon) in 1830. The three men then signed a sort of affidavit that they had indeed seen the plates, which is currently published in the front matter of the Book of Mormon. Mary Whitmer was David Whitmer's mother, and the film covers the time period during which Joseph and Emma Smith lived in her home while he translated the Book of Mormon. At the end of the film she receives an angelic visitation as reward or blessing for her many domestic labors that provided space and opportunity for Smith's translation work.

The opening scene features Mary (Barta Heiner) awake too early one morning. She lies in bed next to her snoring husband, planning for her visitors. "I want everything to run smoothly for Joseph to translate," she says mostly to herself, but almost as a prayer. Her contribution to the translation consists of female domestic labor highlighted

through the film's visual focus on her work: washing dishes, beating laundry, kneading bread, and directing dinner. The background of these shots includes men lounging, eating, chatting, while Mary and her daughters work to provide for them. This attention to female labor visually inverts the compositional hierarchies we might expect; instead of men at work with women busy in the background, it is the men who become set dressing for the women's all-encompassing labor. The film's composition highlights not only Mary's importance in the narrative, but also her guests' thoughtless impositions. No one offers to help Mary, instead her guests laugh and tell stories, oblivious not only to Mary's work, but also to Mary. This contrasts strikingly with Mary's deep concern for the prophet expressed in the opening scene.

Two different friends visit Mary, her former pastor (David Jensen), and a choir member from her former church (Elizabeth Hansen), each of them worried about her heavy workload as well as her emotional isolation. The film portrays Mary as a lonely character who strains to meet all the obligations her houseguests create, trudging along with water buckets or laundry baskets or platters of food. The musical soundtrack consists of hymns rescored in minor keys, and the film confines its visual palate to grays and blues, while scene transitions use the image of water, rain, and dew to move from plot point to plot point, externalizing Mary's disappointment in the prophet's attitude and obliviousness of her.

The film also visually separates Mary from the men's translation work, even if she may be wistful or curious about better understanding its nature. In one scene, Mary hangs linens to dry in the back yard. We follow her eye-line to the window of the guest room where Joseph (Joel Bishop) sits down at a table to begin his morning's

translations. He draws the curtain across the window, obscuring the translation work. We cut to Mary who draws a sheet across the clothes line, hiding her face. This veiling establishes the boundary between Mary's work and the men's work. Mary makes no further attempts to cross it, even when encouraged by her friends for some sort of compensation for all her effort. In her friends' opinions, she deserves to see the golden plates from which the translations occur. Nevertheless, Mary soldiers on with a tight smile and not much to say.

Ultimately, the film rewards Mary for her domestic work.<sup>14</sup> At the end of the film a stranger, understood to be an angel from an earlier plot setup, stops Mary in her yard, and presents her the golden plates, unseen by the film audience. The film presents the visitation in the same restrained style used throughout the film. The angel, costumed in contemporary dress, calls Mary's name. She glances behind her and after a cut to a medium shot of the man, the rest of the scene captures Mary alone. The scene's transcendence occurs *in her reaction* to what she sees, not in *what* she sees or *who* visits. The film cuts to a medium-close-up as Mary cries out in surprise and ultimately gladness. The film rests here for a moment, and then cuts to a high angle long shot of Mary and the angel as she handles the plates. Mary is overwhelmed and comforted, sustained. The vision confirms her testimony of the work she performs and she picks up her water buckets and continues onward. The film ends on this note, that Mary's reward for her selfless completion of female domestic labor, which supports and makes possible male religiosity, includes a dramatic event such as visitation. Her visitation

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<sup>14</sup> Randy Astle reports that the film evolved as an experiment at BYU, as the filmmakers tested Paul Schrader's theory of "revelation of the imminent" by "depicting many scenes of banality followed by...transcendence" (personal communication, 2010). The filmmakers chose a female protagonist at the church's beginnings because of the oppressive conditions nineteenth century women found themselves in (*ibid*).

does not preclude her from continuing to work. Further, the male religious economy exists only because women furnish, clean, and prepare the spaces where religious transactions, conversions, meetings, and testimonials occur.

The film differs from the others under investigation here because of its subtle critique of the sex-gender system in force at the time. Mary works harder than anyone else to provide for the religious work underway, yet her efforts go unlauded by those around her. She performs labors expected of her, and so the characters within the film, notably her husband and guests, see no reason to take notice of her work. Yet, the film carefully points out that Mary's work is constant, difficult, and confining. She does not have time to talk with the prophet or share her thoughts about his message or his translations. She does not have time to visit with her friends or worship in ways familiar to her such as her participation in choir. In contrast, *The Work and the Glory* trilogy and *Emma Smith: My Story* naturalize female domestic labor and celebrate that labor as the sole contribution women made to the church: i.e., women's fidelity to traditional family roles leads to their spiritual growth, which in turn strengthens the church. Perhaps the distinction seems too fine a point, but the difference I call attention here is important: in *The Mary Whitmer Story* the film critiques the invisibility of women's labor and asks us to question how men regard female domestic labor and how cultural expectations confine women to that labor. In the other films, female labor becomes the activity that the women *should* be doing, that they do well, and that helps them contribute to the work. For example, in *Emma Smith: My Story* Emma's brief tenure as Joseph's scribe ends when a new, male scribe arrives. The scene opens with Emma hauling water in the cold dawn. We glimpse her from the interior side of a pane glass window. The film

dissolves to the new male scribe sitting down at what was previously her desk; her image, burdened with water buckets, fades slowly from the screen. The film argues that she maintains the household so that the spiritual work can continue, and more importantly, that's what she should be doing.

This attention to female work is crucial to understanding the heavy responsibilities nineteenth century women shouldered in the establishment of home, family, and the expansion of the western frontier in America. The detailed re-enactment of this work valorizes female labor in important ways. *Fourth Witness* delicately and sensitively draws our attention to the invisibility and hardship of female domestic labor. Yet, female labor in the nineteenth century church was not simply domestic. Historical films fail to capitalize on the many women's accomplishments throughout Mormon history.

### **Conclusion**

Through visual and narrative tropes, recent historical films revise the historical significance of women's roles in the early church to better reflect current cultural attitudes toward female engagement in church growth and stability via the private familial sphere. These films turn to recent gender models in the church for self-definition. Indeed, the films discussed here are created by those at the center of Mormonism (male, middle-class, living in the American West) in reaction to the ever-expanding, fluid margins of Mormonism's expansion. Even though the filmmakers who produce these films work outside the institutional networks of the church, the films reflect an engagement with and valorization of current church understandings on female power and autonomy. This stands in stark contrast to the filmmakers of the North African migrant community in France and their engagement with Islam.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN CAUGHT BETWEEN RELIGION AND SECULARITY IN A POST-BEUR FILM  
CULTURE: MUSLIM MOTHERS AND FRENCH DAUGHTERS

If in Mormon Cinema, female characters are ennobled through their ability to adhere to foundational texts, to “stand strong and immovable” in the face of change, then in French post-Beur cinema almost the opposite is true (Beck 109-112). Recurring again and again in post-Beur films, young French-Maghrebi women leave behind their minority Muslim communities for full citizenship in secular France. These films set up a false binary between “Muslim” and “French” through the trope of the traditional Muslim mother and the assimilated French daughter who embody the contemporary sociological and political debate facing France (and Europe) through the use of a domestic mise-en-scene such as the kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. In these post-Beur films I find an ambivalent critique of women’s roles in mitigating the effects of migration, in transmitting culture and religious values to their families, and in interpreting the alien French culture for their children and shaping responses to that culture.

I propose the term “post-Beur” to speak specifically about what I see as a change in the Beur film trend, from the original focus in the 1980s on young male protagonists to this current mother-daughter dyad against the backdrop of the patriarchal institutions of religion and government. This chapter defines post-Beur film through its use of the mother-daughter trope in diverse physical and temporal settings that define the historical drama. First I will briefly review the historical and cultural matrix out of which French-Maghrebi artists produce their films in order to situate the concerns that many of these films discuss.

## **Political and Historical Background**

My overarching thesis of this dissertation is that films produced by religious communities embody and negotiate the anxieties facing these communities, brought on by globalization and the changing structure of the nation-state, through representations of religious women. Yet, religious communities engage in multiple ways with forces of modernity, globalization, nationalism, and cultural change and so the cultural representations of women will vary from community to community. Whereas Mormonism, defined as a distinctly American religion, faces anxieties in assimilating large numbers of converts each year to a Church organization that draws on American normative cultural practices in dress, speech, and social behavior, immigrant and ethnic populations in the North African community in France face an altogether different challenge: assimilating to French normative cultural practices for economic, social, and physical security. Mormons, because of their close ties to American culture, are seen as American first, whereas, the French state perceives the French-Maghrebi as Muslim first, French second, if at all. For many Franco-French, who see themselves as secular in spite of their Catholic heritage, Islam typifies the alien status of the immigrant North African community. “Muslims today are seen as challenging basic tenets of French republican culture and identity [secular education being one of the most important aspects of this culture]” (Laurence and Vaisse 55) because of their demands to be recognized as a religious community in the public sphere (54). Thus, “becoming French” has been interpreted by both Franco-French and members of the North African immigrant community as leaving behind Islam and its attendant religious markers, such as the foulard (or headscarf) worn by North African women, a flashpoint in French politics and useful to our discussion here. In this next section I will discuss the historical

and political background that created the North African community in France, the community today, and government policies concerning the community. My historical overview highlights how forces of cultural change make the woman of North African descent vulnerable to both the immigrant community and the French state.

A confluence of events brought North Africans to France in the twentieth century. France declared Algeria a colony in the 1820s but could not establish military control until the late 1840s when France organized Algeria into three departments and began to relocate French citizenry there. Colonial attitudes toward Algerians encouraged a host of stereotypes focused on the lazy, incompetent worker (Laurence and Vaisse 50). Nonetheless, North African men were drafted into the French Army and served under the colonial flag during World War I, World War II, and even in Vietnam during Communist insurrections. The post-WWII French economy, with its new focus on industrialization and modern consumerism created a strong need for workers. North African men were recruited for temporary workers visas for construction, factory, and other low-wage, non-skilled labor. Many of these men were recruited from rural areas in Algeria, thus accounting for the large population of Berbers among the workforce.

At the same time, independence movements in Algeria, and the growing violence between colonists and Algerians led to new stereotypes for North Africans and Muslims: the terrorist was based on reports of Algerian reprisals in public spaces in Algiers, “a cowardly blood-thirsty brute” (Laurence and Vaisse 50). The French loss of the Algerian War in 1962 resulted in the exile of Algerians who fought for the French (known as harkis), who settled throughout France. Postcolonial Algeria’s growing poverty also pushed more migrant workers into France, and in 1974 the Family Reunification Act

allowed temporary workers to relocate their families to France. The worldwide economic recession of the 1970s also aggravated Franco-French resentment toward the growing North African community, with that community's perceived high birthrate, lack of education, and religious practice cited as reasons for governmental action (in the form of local and federal polices) against the group. Since that time, the figure of the North African has evolved politically from the immigrant demanding workers rights, to the leftist Beur fighting discrimination, to the "Muslim citizen," who now argues for religious recognition in the face of a secular state (Laurence and Vaisse 6).

A round of studies on the North African community clearly define characteristics of this population and its integration in Franco-French society. Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse, associated with the Brookings Institute, culled a number of these studies for American audiences in the post-9/11 era, which I rely on throughout this section. France does not collect census data on race and religion and conflates these terms when it comes to the North African community in France. "North African" means "Muslim" and "Muslim" means Arab, which leads to terms such as "potential muslim" or "French Muslim," vague misnomers that do not account for geography, race, or religious engagement (Laurence and Vaisse 18). Instead, these terms merely denote people whose heritage is located in global regions with Muslim populations such as North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Eastern Europe.

Based on over a dozen data collections, the potential muslim population is at about 5 million persons in France (Laurence and Vaisse 19).<sup>1</sup> Only half of these are of

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence and Vaisse point out that conservative political groups tend to inflate their numbers to add credence to their scare rhetoric about "Muslim invasion;" Muslim leaders inflate their numbers as well to claim greater power in the face of government policymakers and the Muslim community at large.

Arab descent; almost 20% are Algerian or Moroccan Berbers (Laurence and Vaisse 21). The greatest concentration of French Muslims lives in Paris, where they make up about 15% of the city's total population (Laurence and Vaisse 22). French Muslims reside throughout France, though they tend to concentrate in city centers such as Marseille, Lyon, and Lille (*ibid*). About half of the French Muslim population is under 24 (Laurence and Vaisse 22). This burgeoning youth population is burdened with stereotypes from the French popular imagination; these stereotypes are most often drawn from media reports about the cités of the suburbs: violent, criminal, macho, gang member. These stereotypes result from Franco-French anxiety over the higher North African fertility rates. In fact, the French-Maghrebi and the Franco-French birthrates are not that divergent: French women overall have a birthrate of 1.94 per woman while Algerian women in France have a rate of 2.57 and Moroccans 2.9 (Laurence and Vaisse 27). Studies prove that immigrant women “adapt to local norms” (Laurence and Vaisse 28) with regards to birthrate. Fertility rates may decline from North African norms because of housing conditions, standard of living, and opportunities for women to work outside the home (Laurence and Vaisse 29). Yet fears about a rising Muslim population continue to circulate in mainstream media.

Unfortunately youth from the North African community have difficulty accessing the benefits France has to offer its Franco-French citizenry. North African youth and children of North Africans are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to be unemployed (Laurence and Vaisse 32). Due to unemployment rates, North Africans and their descendants are more likely to live in government housing: North African families make up 8.5% of immigrant families living in the banlieues (Laurence and Vaisse 36).

School districts with high concentrations of immigrant children have lower graduation rates and other achievement markers (Laurence and Vaisse 39). This reinforces unemployment problems, which leads to higher crime rates. “Two-thirds of minors judged in criminal court [in Grenoble] had a father born abroad (50% from North Africa)” and three-fifths had a foreign mother (Laurence and Vaisse 39). Hence, French muslims make up 70-80% of inmates in urban prisons (Laurence and Vaisse 39). Crime rates are statistically higher for immigrant youth, and this may be because crimes involving these youth are more often prosecuted (Laurence and Vaisse 42). Conversely, crimes against North Africans are rarely prosecuted (see Laurence and Vaisse 42). Yet study after study reveals that self-declared Muslims in France express confidence in local and national government and its education and legal institutions (Laurence and Vaisse 47). Laurence and Vaisse conclude that a French Islam is evolving, pointing toward a growing sense of identity among the North African immigrant community of being both French and Muslim, of holding republicanism and religion in each hand.

The situation of North African migrants has interesting parallels in the experience of Turkish guest workers in Germany, where attitudes towards Islam are also used to preserve divisions between citizens and migrants. At first glance, French and German policies toward citizenship appear dissimilar, positioned at two ends of the political spectrum which imagine the nation: German citizenship is based on genealogy, proof that resident's parents were German citizens, whether they lived in Germany or not, whereas French citizenship is based on a resident's birth in the territory (Brubaker 81-82). Yet when comparing immigrant law throughout Europe, France and Germany actually have much more in common (Soysal 36-39). Sweden, Holland, Switzerland,

and England's incorporation policies allow for easier access to the state apparatus and more retention of cultural practices brought with migrants from their countries of origin (Soysal 46-57). Policies from across Europe allow expression of different religious beliefs, funding for religious activity, space for worship, and training of local religious leaders in order to help mainstream those religious beliefs into the culture of the nation, avoiding a radicalization of the local population by outside imams trained in the Middle East. Indeed, providing materials and space for religious practice has been shown to decrease the influence of other nation-states on local European-based communities (Laurence and Vaisse 136).

France has recently made similar efforts to accommodate Muslim populations. One of the most visible is the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Religion (FCMR), with federal hopes that the council would "encourage development of local sources of authority," minimizing foreign manipulation and extremism of Muslim communities in France (Laurence and Vaisse 138). The FCMR treats the presence of Islam in France similar to Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity in order to domesticate them, to create French versions of each of these that would not disturb the state and public order. As Laurence and Vaisse report, former President Jacques Chirac argued in 2003 that state secularism was "the last protection against the encroachment of religious communities on the state in a transnational and global world" (140). Republicanism and secularity are a proud heritage for the French, hearkening back to the nineteenth century when the French state battled the Catholic church for the hearts and minds of its citizenry.

Immigrant law and policies concerning religious community comparisons articulate a significant tension in globalization: expanding universal rights are superseding the citizenship rights so crucial to postwar nation-building in Africa, Asia, and eventually Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Soysal 42-43, 145). Where Rogers Brubaker describes nationhood as an exchange in unwanted non-citizens over territorial borders, Yasemin Soysal denotes a globalized arena where supranational agencies confer rights based on universal personhood that must be upheld by nation-states. Whether these universal rights are upheld has much to do with which nation-state one resides in and which nation-state one comes from: as Kofi Annan said to the 2002 Conference on Globalization and International Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, “Globalization makes well-organized States if anything more necessary, not less” (241). Etienne Balibar echoes this statement: “foreigners outside the polis have no defense as humans unless they are represented by a sovereign state of equivalent power” (59). Thus, transnational migrants must survive in continually shifting territory, where their nation of origin makes them vulnerable to a various local and federal containment policies within their host nation.

European countries work to manage migrants’ access to rights and benefits in increasingly impoverished social welfare states. The Maastritch Treaty that defines European Citizenship stipulates that only citizens of member countries can be citizens of the European Union, thus disenfranchising even further the some 13 million migrants from Belarus, Ukraine, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Algeria, Morocco, Vietnam, and China who currently reside in Europe as workers and refugees (Balibar 44). The European Union’s formation through nation-states exacerbates the citizenship issues that those

nations already struggle to solve (*ibid*). In fact, national and supranational policies and laws work to keep the migrant in a constant state of instability in relation to governmental agencies.<sup>2</sup>

These instabilities manifest themselves in power relations within migrant communities. Fadela Amara's autobiographical activist text Breaking the Silence documents her vision for renewing France's high-rise suburbs as neighborhoods. Major factors in the dissolution of these neighborhoods were the recession of the 1980s that led to rampant unemployment, and the federal political upheavals that produced conservative policies regarding immigrants and citizenship. Amara points to the rise of militant Islam at a time "when a significant number of young people from the projects were completely disoriented, facing failure in school, unemployment, and discrimination" (95). Militant Islam offered a new way to envision personal identity, even if its interpretation of Muslim texts disenfranchised women within the community. Within the banlieues, women in public spaces risk policing by gangs of young men who themselves feel disenfranchised in the secular state. On one hand women's behavior is monitored by men in their community, on the other hand it is monitored by the state. Women have little room to create their own identities between these two powerful, often violent, forces.

The Headscarf Affair constitutes a microcosm through which to view the French-Maghrebi female struggle for autonomy. In 1989 three young women were suspended for wearing headscarves to public middle school. The young women faced strictures from their parents that required that they veil after a certain age if they were to appear in

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<sup>2</sup> Brubaker and Soysal spend little time in their discussion on how migrants define or frame citizenship, though Soysal describes migrant organizations in her various case-studies and how they advocate for migrant issues, whether on an individual or group basis.

public. These young women also endured the monitoring of the general immigrant community once they were outside the banlieues. Yet when the girls presented themselves in the French civic institution of school, they were penalized for bringing religious symbols into the secular space (Wing and Nigh Smith 754). Since the original events of the Headscarf Affair, other young women have adopted the headscarf out of a sense of cultural heritage and pride.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, in 2004, the French National Assembly voted to ban all conspicuous religious symbols in schools, including crosses, headscarves and yarmulkes. Yet the law was conceived as an attempt to control female Muslim behavior, and its policies burden young French-Maghrebi women.

The Headscarf Affair also brings into question French incorporation and migrant adaptation strategies. In the past, French cultural practice relied on education, military, and work institutions to assimilate previous waves of immigrants (Brubaker 11; Laurence and Vaisse 31). As noted earlier, the high rate of class ghettoization occurring in the French banlieues leads to school populations in certain areas with higher concentrations of immigrant students (Wing and Nigh Smith 743). Unlike France's desired model, these students develop their own youth hybrid culture that yields rich cultural production: music, poetry, novels, and film.

### **Beur Film**

The Beur film trend of the 1980s and 1990s drew as source material stories and characters positioned on the margins of mainstream French culture. At its height, film critics defined the trend as a transitional, male cinema interested in realistic narratives in

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<sup>3</sup> Romain Goupil's 1996 TV movie *Sa Vie à Elle*, follows a high school student through a series of confrontations with family, teachers, journalists, and school administrators, who ask her to explain why she has chosen to wear the headscarf.

contemporary France (Naficy 98). According to Christian Bosséno (50) and Hamid Naficy (98), filmmakers were interested in commercial release and appealing to mainstream audiences, and their films reflect this transition, because many of the filmmakers were creating popular films for the first time, with an eye toward mainstream expansion. Thus, filmmakers avoided portrayals of racism and “miserabilism.”<sup>4</sup> Through interviews with filmmakers, Will Higbee, Hamid Naficy, and Martin O’Shaughnessy have established that filmmakers viewed these first films as hands-on training and a step towards commercial viability. Zaida Ghorab-Volta explains, “People gave me money because they thought that I was going to make a certain kind of film. But when it became absolutely clear that I would not restrict myself to the place they allocated me, things changed” (O’Shaughnessy 52). She and filmmaker Karim Dridi were not interested in returning again and again to autobiographical subject matter situated in the North African immigrant community. Conversely, filmmakers Malik Chibane and Mehdi Charef argue that their Maghrebi characters are French and should be accepted as part of the French landscape (see Higbee).

Filmmakers categorized as Beur rejected the label, fearing that it marginalized them from mainstream audiences. Karim Dridi argues that his film *Bye-Bye* (1995) deals with universal concepts of guilt and responsibility, even if the protagonist is Maghrebi (Higbee 60). Mireille Rosello notes that the Beur label "is imposed by, and perceived in relation to, the dominant cultural norm," and implies a hierarchy difficult for directors to bear (as quoted by Higbee 60). These directors want their films, and themselves, to be

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<sup>4</sup> Miserabilism was the literary and filmmaking style of the previous immigrant generation, essentially the parents of these filmmakers, which concentrated on the isolation, poverty, and racial struggles of immigrants newly arrived in France. See Carrie Tarr’s history of the term in her article “Questions of identity in Beur cinema: from *Tea in the Harem* to *Cheb*”, included in her collection Reframing Difference, pg 29.

recognized as French, reflecting French republican theories of citizenship. For this reason, Dominique Bluher argues, these films "are characterized by the absence of a denunciation of racism" and reflect this population's strategies of assimilation (80), where the culture of origin (North Africa) "signifies only an unknown people, language, and customs" (90).

According to Bosséno, Beur films never held together as a rigid style or school, even at their height, because filmmakers experimented with a variety of realist dramatic conventions destined for consumption by a mainstream French audience (49). Beur films *did* have content and settings in common: anxious male protagonists setting out to find their way in the world, from the grands immeubles of the Paris or Lyon banlieues, or the streets of Marseilles. Both Naficy (98) and Tarr (28-29) consider Beur cinema male because most filmmakers told stories about young men of North African descent in a variety of assimilationist conundrums related to picking up women, finding jobs, and traveling, ultimately separating from their immigrant communities and taking their place in French society, though not altogether smoothly. Malik Chibane's 1996 *Douce France* (*Sweet France*), where four young people try to survive in urban France, and Rachid Bouchareb's 1985 *Baton Rouge*, which follows three young men fascinated by American culture to New York City, are familiar examples of this narrative trend. Naficy attributes this male bias to the cultural assumptions in those communities that "cinema is not a socially acceptable, religiously sanctioned, and economically feasible enterprise for women" (18). Equally important, Franco-French cinema has produced few women directors, and so women minority directors are left with few options, unless they are

willing to create films about female victimization at the hands of the immigrant community.

### **Post-Beur Film Culture**

I define post-Beur film culture in contrast to Carrie Tarr's categorization of a continuing Beur trend. I acknowledge the results of those early Beur films, which brought attention to stories and characters from the North African immigrant community. These early Beur films created space for later films like *Salut, Cousin! (Hi, Cousin!,* Merzack Allouache, 1996), a city mouse-country mouse tale about a young Algerian man visiting his cousin in Paris; *Les Soeurs Hamlet (The Hamlet Sisters,* Abdelkrim Bahloul, 1996), which follows two adolescent Algerian girls through the dangers of Paris at night, protected only by an elderly homeless Algerian man; and *L'Autre Côté de la Mer (The Other Side of the Sea,* Dominique Cabrera, 1997), wherein a pieds-noir visits Paris from Oran for cataract surgery and develops a close relationship with his French-Maghrebi surgeon, who has left Algeria behind physically, culturally, and emotionally.

An exploration of diverse physical and temporal settings also epitomizes the post-Beur trend. Recent films are situated in crucial historical moments of the postcolonial immigrant experience—conscription in the colonial army (*Indigènes* or *Days of Glory*, Rachid Bouchareb, 2006), the Franco-Algerian war (*Cartouches Gauloises* or *French Bullets*, Mehdi Charef, 2007), the first influx of guest workers in France in the 1950s (*Le Gone de Chaaba* or *Shantytown Kid*, Christophe Ruggia, 1997), the Family Reunification Act of 1974 (*Inch'Allah Dimanche* or *God Willing Sunday*, Yamina Benguigui, 2001, and *17 Rue Bleue* or *17 Blue Street*, Chad Chenouga, 2001), and a Europe suffering from the vicissitudes of economic globalization (*Marie-Line*, Mehdi Charef, 2000; *La Graine et le Mulet* or *The Secret of*

*the Grain*, Abdel Kechiche, 2007). Historical dramas are an important development of the post-Beur trend, speaking to audience interest in stories from and of the immigrant North African community. This development signals newly available funding for these projects that eclipse the Beur films' reliance on microbudget strategies. Historical films also allow for a Maghrebi re-writing of French historiographies concerning its colonial past and postcolonial present.

The term post-Beur also marks French-Maghrebi filmmakers of the end of the twentieth century who have directed later films that have little to do with Beur origins: Zaida Ghorab-Volta's last film was the highly successful *Jeunesse Dorée* (*Gilded Youth*, 2001), about two Franco-French girls on a photo tour of France; Djamel Bensaleh went on to make *Big City* (2007), a children's western; Karim Dridi's latest *Khamsa* (2008) is a social realist drama about a gypsy camp; and Rachid Bouchareb's most recent film is about the 2005 London terrorist attacks, *London River* (2009).

This post-Beur culture has also given rise to the popularity of French-Maghrebi actors who benefit from both their exotic positioning *and* their everyman French personas. Jamel Debbouze, featured player in *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) and headlining star in *Indigènes*, is now the second highest paid actor in France (Sciolino para 19). Gad Elmaleh, a comic originally from Morocco, moved from playing French-Maghrebi characters (the country mouse cousin in *Salut, Cousin!*) to the Franco-French characters François and Jean in *La Doublure* (*The Valet*, Francis Veber, 2006) and *Hors de Prix* (*Priceless*, Pierre Salvadori, 2006), respectively. Roscdy Zem has made a career playing assimilated Franco-Maghrebi characters in mainstream films like *Le Petit*

*Lieutenant* (*The Young Lieutenant*, Xavier Beauvois, 2005)—he was the eye surgeon in *L'Autre Côté de la Mer*.

Post-Beur films still explore community and self in relationship to French assimilation as films in the Beur trend once did, yet these contemporary films focus on the challenges and trials of female protagonists and characters, often in relation to an Algeria-based Islam. This aspect of post-Beur film is possible for a variety of reasons. First, more women have had opportunity to make feature films, like Yamina Benguigi and Zaida Ghorba-Volta. Second, male directors like Mehdi Charef have now turned their attention to the stories of their mothers and sisters.<sup>5</sup> Third, Franco-French filmmakers like Phillippe Faucon and Coline Serreau are incorporating French-Maghrebi characters into their narratives. This narrative focus has brought about a change in thematic material, most often introducing a critique of the “Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex/gender system,” the only instance where Islam and its influence in the lives of this community are addressed (Tarr 212). At the same time, suggesting a post-Beur film culture allows me to divorce the Beur-Muslim conflation, and instead focus on French-Maghrebi communities in general, those that are Muslim, non-believing, or Jewish. This allows me then to set Karin Albou’s 2005 *La Petite Jerusalem* (*Little Jerusalem*) in contrast with other films about the North African immigrant community, instead of isolating it in the framework of Jewish transnational film.

### **Modern Spiritual Possibilities in *La Petite Jerusalem***

*La Petite Jerusalem* serves as a counter-example to the general post-Beur sentiment that religion must be left behind in order to embrace French citizenship. *La*

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<sup>5</sup> See the DVD extras of *Cartouches Gauloises*, where Mehdi Charef discusses how the film was dedicated to his mother.

*Petite Jerusalem* engages with Judaism, its rituals, and its philosophies in a way that most post-Beur films refuse to engage with religion, whether Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or indigenous practices of North Africa. The film's choices highlight the paucity of thought found in other French-Maghrebi films regarding women and religious engagement; indeed, it becomes obvious that most post-Beur films use a false binary between "modern France" and "traditional Islam" to create a series of limited choices for their own heroines. *La Petite Jerusalem*, through its more extensive engagement with religious life, allows a greater autonomy to its characters, foregrounds women's prominence in the family, and resists simple binaries between the nation-state and the religious community.

The protagonists of *La Petite Jerusalem* are two Sephardic Orthodox immigrant sisters from Tunisia, Laura (Fanny Valette) and Mathilde (Elsa Zylberstein). Laura lives with her mother and Mathilde's family in an apartment in a cité outside Paris. The film follows Laura through her attempts to create a balanced life between her university studies, her passionate affair with Djamel who is a fellow Algerian at work, and her religious life. When her sister Mathilde discovers that her husband Ariel (Bruno Todeschini) has had an affair, her marital crisis impacts Laura's own spiritual development. Though the film draws from the long tradition of transnational Jewish cinema, the story discusses the specific dilemmas of Maghrebian migrants in France. Many of the issues that Muslim women face have their parallels in *La Petite Jerusalem*: Mathilde's wigs mirror Muslim veiling; Laura's desire to complete school and specialize in philosophy mirror education opportunities in France for Muslim young women; Ariel's sexual indiscretion and the blame Mathilde assumes for it mirror more traditional Muslim

gender roles about sexuality. The film's engagement with religious life situates it in post-Beur cinema, yet its relative graceful resolution of religious challenges places it in contrast with most post-Beur films. At the same time, the film's positive view of living a religious life in republican France falls in line with how many in the North African immigrant community view their future in France.

*La Petite Jerusalem* takes place within the high-rise suburbs, filled with practicing Jews and Muslims. This cultural diversity undergirds the film's discussion of religious difference within the secular state. Muslims are marked early in the film when Laura walks past a basement mosque during her Kantian 7pm excursion; recognizing Djamel from work, she lowers her head shyly as she passes. Religious difference challenges the film's banlieue: masked men randomly attack Ariel and other Jewish friends during a soccer game, the synagogue burns down, and Djamel chooses his Muslim family over Laura when they force an ultimatum over her religion. These events refer rather opaquely to the Second Intifadah, when Muslim activists in Europe attacked Jewish communities in response to the Israeli-Palestine conflict of 2003. But ultimately, the religious, both Muslim and Jewish, harbors the passionate sensibilities of the film. Though the film emphasizes religious differences between Jew and Muslim, the film also explores religious attitudes toward love, family, sex, the body, and intimacy, seen through Djamel and Laura's affair and the close quarters of the family flat, contrasting these with the anonymous spaces of public France, streets, subway cars, university halls. Though Laura wishes to find a small apartment of her own for more privacy, she is supported and sustained through the intimacy of her extended family. Early on in the narrative, she listens to her brother-in-law's morning prayers as she undresses for bed

after an all night study session. The film cuts between her childlike nakedness and Ariel's ritual costume, the sound track of his prayers playing against the image of her putting on her pajamas. His routine and prayer comfort Laura, its constancy grants her the safety needed for experimentation.

*La Petite Jerusalem* refutes the gangsta rap aesthetic prevalent in inter-cultural films about the banlieue, like *La Haine (Hate)*, Matthieu Kassovitz, 1995).<sup>6</sup> The film's style rests upon a gentle appreciation of the sisters' beauty that develops sensuality through extreme close-ups of the sisters dressing and bathing during religious ritual. The screen fills with their glowing skin, arms, thigh, and back. This intense attention demands we notice these women and their position within their religion, their family, and their society. Their bodies are given both a physical and spiritual weight. The washed out palette of the film conveys the spiritual aspect of these women's lives; the mystery of religious life is portrayed through the ghost-like grays and whites that haunt these images.

Crucially, these women negotiate Enlightenment traditions and their religious life, seen through Laura's study of Kant. Laura critiques Kant from her position as a practicing Orthodox Jew, and she adapts Kant's nightly walk to better understand the ghetto she lives in. The choices made available to Laura and Mathilde in the narrative come from both isolation from their culture of origin and the embrace of their diasporic community. Laura can create a life as a philosopher because isolation in France weakens the patriarchy of her home and religious life. Mathilde can reinterpret her

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<sup>6</sup> See Bluher's article "Hip-Hop Cinema in France." *Camera Obscura* 46, Volume 17, Number 4 (2001): 77-97.

sexuality because the community intervenes through new interpretations of scripture, taught her by the mikvah attendant.

The film's discussion of isolation and marginality differs from Beur cinema's assimilation tactics. The film presents Laura and her family on the edge of mainstream society, depicted through the opening scene of Sephardic Orthodox Jews performing a ritual along the Seine. The camera cranes from a low angle long shot of a line of darkly dressed people on the riverbank to a bird's eye view of the community pressed to the river's edge, at the outskirts of the city. Laura, dressed in white, participates in the ritual, yet stands off by herself. Thematically this shot foreshadows Laura's struggle throughout the narrative to cherish both her religion and her philosophical university education; she engages in the ritual, but she does so from her own chosen position from which she can critique the ritual. The shot speaks eloquently to the sociological realities of these communities: practicing religious people, marginalized from the city center, which must reinvent and re-evaluate their involvement in both secular society and religious community. Yet the shot also highlights this community's estrangement from the rest of the city or the broader community. At the same time, the film's use of light and camera work endow the cité's interior with a sensuality unavailable to the streets of Paris. The camera follows Laura through the cité's alleys and twisting avenues past the beating, blinking neon lights of the local vendors. The scene cuts between longing looks from Laura and Djamel, and the long takes emphasize their distance, their lover's biding in the dusk. The cité, which houses both Muslim and Jewish communities, becomes a diverse religious space infused with desire, traced over again and again by Laura's ritual walk.

*La Petite Jerusalem* works out its narrative arc through religious discussion, markers, and characters. Religious films generally demonstrate the protagonist's engagement with an examination of a religious life through a comparison of the religious and the secular, often offering a reinterpretation of how to live spiritually in a secular world. Laura and Mathilde are contrasted with each other, but also with their mother (Sonia Tahar), paralleling the dyadic trope of other post-Beur films. Their mother has no other name in the film, and represents the Tunisia that the two daughters are distanced from. The mother practices rituals using fire, herbs, and chanting to protect both her daughters. She is a source of safety, whether wanted or not, and though throughout the film, the daughters keep their secrets from her, the mother also offers friendship and guidance. At one point, Mathilde chats with her mother about marital sex, circling round and round her own concerns that she is not forward enough with Ariel. This moment of maternal intimacy occurs on a bed with the two women holding photos from Tunisia. Inserts of the family photos occasionally interrupt long takes of medium two-shots of the two women. The mother chats casually, nostalgically, while the daughter returns again and again to the subject of sexual timidity and shyness. The mother here comforts, advises, and offers her own experience of both marital satisfaction and the widow's loneliness. The mother speaks from religious doctrine, generational values, and female experience. Though the film does not conflate these positions, it does offer a space where they may overlap, valuing the religious in a way that other post-Beur films do not.

The relationships between the three women are complex and intense and overwhelm Ariel, the sole adult male in the family. He in fact seems out of place in this close-knit female space, growing more and more haggard under the weight of his

sexual sin, more distanced from his family, and more desperate to secure his authority as the patriarch of the family. The Sabbath meal, an event oft repeated in the film, illustrates his peripheral status. Each of the Sabbath meal scenes begins with Ariel passing the Kiddush cup (for the blessed wine) to his wife, who then passes it to her mother, who passes it to Laura, who passes it to the oldest son. The camera's focus on the cup brings Ariel into view, at the head of the table, yet detached from the glances between the women. Once the short ritual has ended, the women talk voluminously about and around Ariel, yet rarely to him. At one point the mother and Mathilde discuss him in Arabic, which Ariel does not understand. Ariel's character arc involves him finding space in the family for his own desires. This portrayal and development differ from other post-Beur film men, who become violent oppressors to be escaped and defied. Ariel is childish, selfish, and desperate at times, but he also serves as a foil to Laura, who is also childish and selfish and must also negotiate between her desire for self-control and her desire for companionship, here coded as secularity and religious life, respectively.

Ultimately, Laura and Mathilde make choices that illuminate two different ways of balancing religion in a modern world. Laura chooses independence and secular France via her university studies, but she does not refute the philosophical grounding of her religion. In fact Laura's exploration of Kant allows her to better understand her religion, and she interprets Kant through her religious frame. In a university discussion, the professor asks the class definition of freedom. Two other students answer that freedom comes from breaking the law or living without law; Laura answers that it is to obey the law. The professor calls her Kantian, which makes the rest of the class laugh, much to Laura's embarrassment. Yet obviously Kant attracts Laura because his thought has

much in common with her religious philosophy. As a Sephardic Jew, she has an intimate understanding of religious law, and how freedom is defined as the escape from sin, guilt, and shame. For the religious person, this freedom can only be won by exactness to the law. The professor explains Kant's own fascination with law and explains his daily rituals that he created for himself, rituals that Laura adapts throughout the film.

In contrast, Mathilde happily chooses to move to Israel with her husband. While one can reduce her choice to a need for a like traditional community to support her in her interpretation of Judaism, Mathilde's decision reflects the economic realities of the migrant. Ariel reveals his decision to move over dinner, the room brightly lit from large windows behind Mathilde, the family gathered around the table. She smiles in agreement, and the children smile with her. She notes that they'll be able to live in a house, and the film cuts to a later scene of her playing with her children and a Lego house. She has each child pick out its bedroom in the Lego house. Her excitement over Israel reflects not only the potential for safety and inclusion, but more pragmatically larger lodgings that will allow substantially more privacy for family members. With this privacy she can continue deepening her sexual intimacy with her husband.

The narrative arc of *La Petite Jerusalem* presents two models for religious life in a transnational, global setting. In Beur films, Islam was mostly notable because of its absence. Alec Hargreaves' assessment about Islam's absence in narratives from French-Maghrebian novelists applies here, because the production of novelists-turned-filmmakers buoyed Beur cinema. First, second generation French-Maghrebis may not be invested in Islam for a variety of social factors. Hargreaves' interview with Akli

Tadjer, author of Les ANI du Tassili (*The Unidentified Arabs of Tassili*, 1986), reveals that for many Beur writers, Islam is abstract:

For our parents, Islam was very concrete. . . . Islam is easily transmissible when you are born in a Muslim cradle, when there's a mosque, and imam, and all the religious values in a village. Here in France, there aren't any of these things. . . . If it isn't on TV or in the newspapers, it becomes abstract. Even the message, if it isn't in the environment, it doesn't become internalized<sup>7</sup> (Hargreaves 19, translation mine).

Tadjer attributes this loss of transmission to the first generation's widespread illiteracy, explaining that many parents could not read the Koran themselves, so their own knowledge of Islam was reduced to a list of dos and don'ts (*ibid*).

Second, authors restrain from critiquing Islam because of their strong affective ties to the community and a wish to protect parents from offense. Third, authorial desire to remain unperturbed by what Hargreaves terms "ideological harassment" from the burgeoning fundamentalist groups in European city centers may lead to silence regarding a critique or engagement with religious questions. Lastly, many second-generation citizens in the North African immigrant community may have wanted to distance themselves from the growing civil war in Algeria between the army-backed government and the Islamic Salvation Front; laying claim to French secularism may have been one way of dismissing an Algeria now characterized as increasingly fundamentalist in the international press.

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<sup>7</sup> "Pour nos parents, L'Islam c'était très concrete...L'Islam est facilement transmissible quand tu nais dans un berceau islamique---quand il y a une mosquée, quand il y a un imam, quand il y a toutes les valeurs religieuses dans un village. Ici en France, il n'y a aucun de ces-points là...Des choses qui ne sont pas à la télé, qui ne passent pas dans les journaux, c'est abstrait. Même le message, il n'est pas dans l'environnement, il ne s'inscrit pas..."

### **The Religious Patriarchal Order in *Chaos***

Thus while Beur cinema remained generally silent about Islam, post-Beur films about French-Maghrebi female protagonists now offer a critique of how Islam is practiced within the immigrant community in France via the figure of the woman. An example that stands stylistically and philosophically in contrast to *La Petite Jerusalem* is Coline Serreau's 2001 contemporary feminist fable *Chaos*, featuring a young woman's journey from forced prostitute to international financier. The film's dramatic, non-linear plot, combined with its graphic representation of violence in the streets of Marseilles and Paris, and rapid editing maneuver the discussion of female autonomy away from an intimate portrayal of interiority to an adventure in transnational travel. Serreau's landscape is no longer one city but the entirety of French-speaking Europe and the Mediterranean, filled with border crossing on international, urban, class, and familial levels. The narrative relocates the characters from the stasis of a hospital room in the first half of the film to the primary settings of the second half of the narrative: train stations, harbors, trains, and the denouement in a large traffic circle. That the film concerns itself with sex and financial trafficking is clear from these settings, yet the film also emboldens its female characters to take responsibility for their own choices and actions by placing them in these spaces of mobility.

*Chaos* advocates that women exit the male institutions of marriage, religion, and class that trap them in drudgery and emotional isolation. Specifically, French-Maghrebi women are encouraged to leave religion behind to claim their place in France, through the character of Noémie (Rachida Brakni). Threatened with an arranged marriage in Algeria, Noémie runs away from her family and ends up destitute on the streets of Marseilles. Falling into the hands of a prostitution network, she is enslaved to heroin

until she learns the secrets of the global stock exchange from one of her johns. She reinvents herself as an online international financier to escape from prostitution in order to rescue her younger sister from a potential forced marriage. She lulls her family into accepting her visit by sending extravagant gifts, motorbikes for her brothers and assorted appliances and clothes for her parents. Once there, Noémie takes her sister Zora (Hajar Nouma) outside to talk. Behind them, their brothers show off the bikes to the neighbors in the courtyard, the squealing tires interrupting the sisters' discussion. Noémie remarks bitterly, "With one motor bike their honor melts away and their religion, too." Men in this film are hypocrites who forsake their own institutions when they find a better offer somewhere else, yet expect women to maintain those institutions for when the men choose to return. This characterization extends to all the men in the film from the upper-middle-class to the pimps on the street.

The film argues that Zora and Noémie need only relinquish religious and patriarchal institutions for true freedom; the film ends with Zora and Noémie cut off from their Muslim family, but forming a new family of sisters with other women characters from the film. The group stares out at the sea, contemplating the brave world they have made, devoid of men, religion, and marriage. They are a somber, silent group, but the afternoon light softens and ennobles them. This attitude though is out of step with many in the North African community who see the possibilities of living as both French and Muslim. That said, the attitude in *Chaos* is replicated throughout post-Beur films: women must and will walk out on religious strictures to accept their place in France. At the same time, the female protagonists are contrasted with their mothers, creating a

dyad to embody these films' false binary of progressive French versus traditional Muslim.

### **The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Contemporary French Films**

Sociologist Caitlin Killian documents through primary research interviews how recently immigrated Maghrebian women perceive themselves in relation to France, religion, and the Maghreb. Her study, published in 2006, produces a nuanced examination of identity within the North African immigrant community, and reveals that Islam for these women exists on a spectrum from cultural to spiritual framework. Killian cites many factors that influence these women's attitudes: level of education, reason for immigrating to France, age at immigration, class, and marital status are only a few. All the subjects of Killian's study identify as Muslim, even though only a few were exact practitioners, defined as completing prayers, obeying dietary restrictions, and practicing Ramadan and Eid (109).

Other women in the study felt it important that they keep their religious beliefs from irritating their host society by reducing outward displays of religious life, and others found that the opportunities for self-definition in France shaped how they practiced Muslim tenets of personal behavior, specifically sexuality. In effect these women reinterpret Islam for life in France, translating what was once a very public, community-based system of beliefs and rituals into a private, individual affair "of the heart" (Killian 116). It should be evident though that discourse around the 2004 Headscarf Ban is impacting diasporic communities and this privatization is an obvious result. Diasporic Maghrebian communities within France must constantly deal with how they are perceived by the Franco-French, as these perceptions often shape policy decisions and other confrontations between French-Maghrebis and French civic institutions like

schools, police, and employment agencies. Often these perceptions revolve around religious identity as Muslims, which is further conflated and gendered to mean “terrorist” or “fundamentalist” for men and “victim” or “uneducated” for women.

Contemporary French films from or about the North African community use the subjectivity of the migrant woman as the locus of debate over French secularism, linked in these films to modernity, and an Algeria-based Islam, linked in these films to traditionalism. Specifically, I argue that contemporary French films about the North African community embody the negotiation of religiosity and secularism in a mother-daughter dyad that must break with each other in order to allow the growth and autonomy of the modern French daughter. These films set up a false binary between “Muslim” and “French” through the trope of the traditional Muslim mother and the assimilated French daughter. This binary pervades popular discourse about integration, assimilation, and generational changes of North African communities.

These films rely on binaries of youth and old age to represent the struggles that women face as they work to negotiate the conflicts between the society around them and their family. Often this binary is embodied in the youthful second-generation adolescent character (usually experiencing a sexual awakening) and the aging first-generation mother. This trend is seen in other transnational films, like *Real Women Have Curves* (Patricia Cardoso, 2002) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) or played for laughs in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002). In the French films I wish to discuss here, the first generation mother is at a loss to deal with the strange mores of the host society, and so clings to religious law and custom to protect both herself and her daughters from unknown forces. The mother is generally

dressed in traditional North African costume, made up in tattoos, positioned almost exclusively in the family apartment (most likely obeying purdah), and engaged in rituals and prayers throughout the narrative. Often times this character is demonized as a witch or an ogre, instrument and agent for Islam. Other times, the mother is simply ignorant and has nothing more to strengthen her than what she knows of religion.

The young woman character must choose between her traditional family and modern France, with Islam often cast by the wayside as casualty of her transition to fully realized French citizenship. The young woman character is articulate, angry, and active, compared to her mother's submission to enforced domesticity. The daughter is attractive and developing a sexual autonomy. The conflict in these films is between these two female characters; male characters, even those who are threatening, exist only on the periphery of the true drama of the films. These films locate patriarchal domination within the figure of the mother, who herself is vulnerable to the patriarchal norms she is seen inflicting on her daughter. By making the mother the agent of traditional religious patriarchy, the films very often elide the complex network of economic, racial, class, legal, and institutional dynamics that inform these families' position within French society.

One short from the 1990s provides an early template for this oft-used trope. In Fejria Deliba's 1991 12-minute short *Le Petit Chat est Mort* (*The Kitten is Dead*), lycée student Mona (Linda Chaib) practices lines from Moliere's *L'école des Femmes* (*The School for Wives*) with her traditionally costumed mother (Fatima Chatter) as a stand-in. Her mother's lack of education and modern orientation are emphasized not only by the woman's costuming and her placement in the kitchen but also by the woman's inability

to understand the difference between her daughter's attitudes and the young female character's attitudes in the play. The daughter then remembers a date and heads out the door, lying to her mother about where she's headed and applying lipstick as she exits. The short examines confrontations between assimilating daughters and their immigrant parents. The settings involve the family home, a space that the young woman treats as a trap or prison by her clear desire to quickly escape. The young woman is characterized by her facility with mainstream French culture represented by the Moliere play, and her desire to leave the home for the benefits of French culture, i.e. the sexual freedoms of independent dating. *Le Petit Chat est Mort* creates an ultimatum for its protagonist, an either/or situation that forces the character to choose between the film's version of French modernity and Algerian/Muslim traditionalism.

This image of daughters fleeing through doorways, staring out of high-rise windows, gazing from balconies, scurrying through streets, is endemic throughout these films. Mise-en-scene and performance situate the daughter as one who desires, who longs for more. The daughter creates her own identity outside the confines of the home, equated with the religious patriarchal order, in the streets and institutions of secular France. She may do so by partnering sexually with a French man, often a blank slate, a peripheral character who stands by as the daughter explains her choices to her sisters. She may disappear altogether, haunting the text with her absence. At the same time, placing mothers strictly within the domestic space of small apartments, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, characterizes her without offering her subjectivity—she will turn her face to the wall rather than look outside her own proscribed sphere.

### **Sexual Modernity in 17 Rue Bleue**

The narrative constraints of the short form are one explanation for the rough-hewn characterization in *Le Petit Chat est Mort*. Yet feature length films use these same tropes without much change or development. In Chad Chenouffa's 2001 *17 Rue Bleue*, the central character's physicality and beauty embodies a valorized sexual modernity, which this film argues defies the religious strictures of Islam. This film uses the mother-daughter dyad to contrast modern France with a traditional Islam. Adda (Lysiane Meis), a fully acculturated French-Maghrebi woman, lives happily with her two sons in 1970s Paris. Her married French lover promises to leave all his wealth to her upon his death; unfortunately he dies too soon to fulfill the legal requirements for such an arrangement. Adda engages in a legal battle with his widow to win the money she needs to maintain her family's lifestyle.

Adda's health, beauty, vivacity, and grace are only possible because of her embrace of a French lifestyle, here coded as sexually liberated, urban, and modern. The mise-en-scene uses Art Modern styles to characterize Adda. Adda wears bright pinks and red costumes, with dazzling abstract patterns, and dresses her hair in contemporary wigs. She furnishes the apartment, paid for by her lover's estate, in slender lamps, elongated vases, and low couches, with paintings decorating the walls. Adda's two sisters Leila (Saïda Jawad) and Yasmine (Rania Meziani) live with her, and they function as contrasts to her version of modernity. Yasmine, the dour older sister, dresses modestly and plainly. She wears her hair long, which accentuates her narrow, unsmiling face. She becomes a pharmacist, and works hard, only en scene in the evenings after school or work. She also censors Adda and the boys' behavior as she

sees fit. Leila is the youngest sister and Adda's influence on her is unmistakable. She too dresses in bright colors and wears her effervescent sexuality openly.

The story creates a series of escalating disappointments in Adda's legal journey, and illustrates how these disappointments impact the transplanted family. The arrival of Adda's mother (Chafia Boudraa) marks the beginning of the end. Adda's mother represents visually all that Adda left behind in Algeria, traditional dress, attitudes, and morality. The mother's costuming, speech, and behavior situate her as foreign and exotic for Chad (Abdel Halis) and Sam (Aimen Ben Ahmed), Adda's sons who occupy the narrative center. With her arrival, Yasmine's attitudes take on more prominence, blaming Adda's example for Leila's newly discovered pregnancy. On a weekend swimming trip at the beach, Adda's mother drags Adda into the water, slapping her, tearing off her wig, and dunking her into the water. Yasmine stands by and keeps the two boys from intervening. Adda's mother calls Adda a whore and admonishes her to repent. The film cuts from this violent exchange to the airport where Leila meekly follows her mother through customs. Adda appears bleak and tired, the first signs of weakness in her previous cheerful demeanor.

The rest of the film chronicles her slow dissolution brought on by her addiction to prescription medication. As if faced with the stern rebuke of her traditional heritage, Adda admits defeat and destroys herself in response. She attempts suicide at one point. When she returns from the hospital she takes to her bed, never leaving until her death. By the end of the film she becomes the haunting presence that her sons cannot escape, the insistent ghoul that keeps them from fully integrating in friendships, romances, and school. In a sense, she exerts the same influence on her sons that her mother has

exerted on her. The film proposes that Adda's ultimate defeat may be her naïve hope that she can live in both the tightly-knit family, grounded in traditional values, and in the secular openness of the new country. *17 Rue Bleue* portrays the traditional, here Islam, and the modern, France, as incompatible. French-Maghrebi women must choose one over the other.

### **Patriarchal Excess of the Witch in *Inch'Allah Dimanche***

As mentioned earlier, the mother-daughter dyad focuses the narrative drama on the women of the film. The men, who may hold considerable authority within the family or community, are relegated to the periphery. Occasionally the male characters use physical force to re-insert themselves into the narrative, but the female characters wield the true dramatic power. This strategy also displaces patriarchal excesses onto a generation of crones and witches: seemingly husbands would not enforce brutal religious edict if their manipulative mothers did not demand it. In Yamina Benguigui's 2001 *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, the mother-daughter dyad is configured through Zouina (Fejria Deliba), the wife of Ahmed (Zinedine Soualem), and Ahmed's mother Aicha (Rabia Mokkedem).<sup>8</sup> Under the Family Reunification Act, Zouina and Aicha, along with Zouina's three children, join Ahmed in France. He has been working there for ten years, and his relationship to Zouina has been reduced to yearly visits, during which he has taken a second wife. Zouina and Aicha are confined to the row house and each other's company in an effort to follow purdah requirements. Much of the film documents their power struggle in relation to Ahmed. As the mother, Aicha culturally has more power

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<sup>8</sup> See Angelica Fenner's discussion of this film's visual relationship to French heritage cinema in her "Aural Topographies of Migration in Yamina Benguigui's *Inch'Allah dimanche*." *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 2007; 22 (66[3]): 93-127.

than Zouina. Aicha does much to reinforce this power from locking up the food, to controlling Zouina's interactions with the neighbors, to reporting Zouina's behavior to Ahmed when he returns home. One of her coups involves Sunday afternoon outings with her son, while Zouina must stay inside with the children.

The film contrasts Zouina and Aicha through their dress, with youthfulness inscribed to Zouina and traditionalism to Aicha. The film uses close-ups on Zouina's colorful skirts, aprons, and veils to reveal the inner strength and vibrancy Zouina possesses, which may not be immediately evident as she suffers the selfish behavior of her mother-in-law. Aicha's close-ups focus on her tattoos and rituals, her chants and prayers, locating her solidly within a mystical spirituality unexplored or shared by Zouina. Yet, many cultural behaviors that Aicha insists upon Zouina performs for Aicha's benefit. For example, when visitors arrive, Aicha demands certain protocol concerning tea and gift exchange be met, yet it is Zouina who prepares and pours the tea while Aicha converses with the guests. This of course emphasizes the hierarchical relationship that Aicha maintains in relation to her daughter-in-law. This same behavior inscribes Islam and related cultural practices from Algeria with a meaninglessness, an empty attempt at domination. And this is the tragedy of Aicha's character, that she becomes merely a repressive structure that frames Zouina's daily life, but has little subjectivity within the film. The film even gives Ahmed, with his desire to play electric guitar, more inner life than Aicha.

Zouina's few outlets involve listening to a French radio program, a program that all her neighbors listen to every afternoon. The film makes a point that even though the neighborhood women may be separated by age, race, religion, class, or colonial history,

all the modern women sympathize with the radio program's stories of female-centered love and tragedy. Aicha, identified here as the fundamentalist crone, often blames the radio for Zouina's poor behavior, isolating the radio as a modern French influence, in contrast to the proper traditional influences of husband and mother-in-law. Zouina also makes friendships with French people in the neighborhood; her closest ally is a divorcée factory worker who visits occasionally with small gifts. As Zouina gains greater access to the outside world, she builds friendships with the widow of a military commander killed in Algeria, a French bus driver, and the French grocery owners down the street. These relationships not only signify her growing alignment with French culture and mores, but among them the characters represent power, independence, mobility, and access to capital. At the beginning of the film, Aicha announces her desire to isolate herself in tradition when she declares to the neighbors that her son's house is the Casbah. By the end of the film the Franco-French characters gather around Zouina as she makes a stand against Aicha. This stand-off happens in the street, the public domain of France, an escape route from Islam, Algeria, Aicha, and oppression. The film ends inexplicably with Ahmed agreeing to Zouina's request, and turning violently, noisily, against his mother's demands. Ahmed's change of heart is completely unmotivated, but the film presents Zouina's win against her mother-in-law as her remove from traditional, Algerian, Muslim restrictions to modern, French integration.

Other contemporary films employ this dyad for much the same use. In *La Petite Jerusalem* the mother and Mathilde operate together as the traditional figure; they choose life in a religiously-defined Israel over life in secular France. In *Chaos*, the mother is Zora and Noémie's step-mother who urges her husband to marry off his

daughters to create more room in the small apartment for her own children. In *La Fille de Keltoum* (*Daughter of Keltoum*, Mehdi Charef, 2001) the mother and daughter are officially separated by nationality. Rallia (Cylia Malki), an adopted Swiss national, returns to the Magrheb to find the mother who gave her away. By the end of the film, Rallia realizes that her mother is the simple-minded peasant woman Nedjma (Baya Belal) who accompanies Rallia across Algeria on her search. Nedjma lives a life of drudgery with her father in a desert wasteland. Rallia's life in verdant, urban Switzerland where she models and attends college is paralleled to Nedjma's own youth, a blank landscape whose only event is the gang rape at the hands of soldiers that impregnated her. Characters throughout the film question why Rallia would return to the Magreb, where she is forced to veil herself to travel unmolested through the country side and where she witnesses the continued gender oppression of Algeria's female citizenry at the hands of its male institutions. At the end of the film Rallia returns safely to her middle-class, European life and Nedjma, stunted, victimized, and changeless remains behind. Indeed, the films employ an Orientalist fantasy in presenting the mothers and daughters as cultural, philosophical and social opposites who define each other through difference.

### **Maternal Modernity in *Samia***

In contrast to the above films, Phillippe Faucon's *Samia* (2001), based on Soraya Nini's novel and screenplay, advances the mother-daughter dyad in an opposite trajectory, creating a strong mother character that develops a modern sensibility throughout the film. The film juxtaposes the mother figure to her already modern daughter. As Samia (Lynda Benahouda) finishes lycée, she must choose between the insulting expectations of French institutions and her traditional family—unsuccessful

scholastically, she can work as a cleaning woman or she can help her mother Halima (Kheira Oualhaci) run the home for her father and brothers. Neither of these options inspires Samia who longs to escape both. She fights with her brother Yacine (Mohamed Chabane-Chaouche), who has taken responsibility for her honor once her father leaves for Algeria for his health. Halima works to mediate between the two. Halima often must physically separate the two from attacking each other: Samia longing for French independence and her brother Yacine demanding strict adherence to traditional codes regarding female movement and heterosexual relationships.

Yacine is characterized mainly in his capacity to patrol his sisters. He is often shot in extreme long shot waiting outside shopping malls or cruising the streets in desperation to find them. Yacine is insistent to establish gender segregation throughout the film. An oft-repeated composition is of Yacine and his father in the foreground eating on the sofa during dinner with his sisters relegated behind him to the kitchen table. The film provides some motivation for Yacine's insistence at maintaining traditional order, as he has little success in modern, secular France. He cannot find a job, which the film contributes to his North African name, and at one point he has a run in with the police which seems mostly about his skin color. His father's repeated advice to him to "Be a man," begs the question of what masculinity means here in France. Yacine has little to no control over his own life, and so he concentrates on controlling those in his family. This leads to his more desperate attempts at controlling his sisters' mobility and sexuality. By the end of the film he orders his mother to take his daughters to the gynecologist for virginity checks.

While Yacine and Samia at first appear to be our two main characters, facing off over modernity and religion, Halima becomes Samia's true counterpart in the narrative. Samia aims her hottest anger at Halima, who represents Samia's dreaded future. Yet the film characterizes Halima as a practicing Muslim with a developing modernity. Interspersed throughout the film are quiet moments of Halima's devotions, either in prayer, reflection, or in teaching her younger children about God's omniscience. The film captures these moments in 3/4 shots, with only ambient sound to punctuate the scene. At her prayers, Halima bends and kneels awkwardly, as age has made her joints inflexible. Yet she continues to perform these prayers. She prays alone, not joined by anyone else in the family at dawn. Even with the younger children, Halima faces a losing battle as they giggle at her religious teaching and question her lack of logic. Halima herself has little in way of response to her children, facing them only with stubbornness. Yet her religion connects Halima to the community at large through ceremony and ritual. As she participates in Ramadan preparations or wedding celebrations, the film pictures her against a backdrop of other women and families, who have been characterized by their varying responses to French influences, voiced as each attempts to consult with Halima about Samia. The community offers a spectrum of modern responses to Samia's situation, an open exchange and discussion about how to keep the family together in secular France. Halima profits from this intellectual exchange, which brings her to a better understanding of her daughters and their desires.

Thus, Halima proves the most dramatic character that changes throughout the film. The film constructs Halima's subjectivity through her psychic transformation from

Samia's enforcer to her supporter. Halima's eventual domination of the visual image, through her prayers, through reaction shots which capture her thinking about the action unfolding in front of her, also contribute to her evolving subjectivity. Eventually, Halima's decision to divest Yacine of his family power by removing his sisters from his presence solidifies her as the true subject of the film. She confronts Yacine at the harbor, a liminal space of coming and going, entering and exiting, interiority and exteriority, public and private. The daughters gather to one side, the open air and blue sky behind them. Halima holds a suitcase in her hand. The imagery is clear: these women will make their own decisions about how to live their lives. It may or may not include religion but it certainly will not include oppression.

Though the film occupies itself with Samia's burgeoning sexuality and physical longing for freedom, she is more of a victim-type than an actual character. Samia knows all the answers about modern French freedoms from the beginning; she never changes or develops a consciousness beyond her opening scenes. And though the film builds audience identification through the pleasure of her rebellious actions, Samia becomes a catalyst for Halima's development. In this film the mother figure develops a modern consciousness over the course of the narrative, achieved through continual input from the surrounding community, as different neighbors, relatives, and communal leaders offer Halima diverse ideas about appropriate female behavior in modern France. By the end of the film Halima assumes her son's authority telling him that he will no longer treat his sisters as he has. The film offers a spectrum of ideas on female behavior and modernity is achieved within the traditional community through dialogue and exchange.

Glimpses of communal negotiation are rare. More often the case, as in *Le Satin Rouge* (*Red Satin*, Raja Amari, 2002), *Chaos*, or others, the female protagonist must walk away from home-family-tradition-religion to find happiness. A few films show the female's return to Algeria to gain understanding of herself—Ghorab-Volta's *Souviens-Toi de Moi* (*Remember Me*, 1996) or *La Fille de Keltoum* are prime examples. Yet, these returns are a temporary journey of self-discovery, which highlight the protagonist's differences from the community, and end with a return to modern France (or the Suisse Romande in the case of *Keltoum*). Rarer still is the permanent return to North Africa, as demonstrated by the minor character Fathi in Mehdi Charef's *Marie-Line* (2000).<sup>9</sup> *La Graine et le Mulet* characterizes the expansive North African family as a source of strength in the face of the globalizing economic and corporate forces that challenge France and its workers. Yet this film foregoes religious iconography for more general North African irreligious codes like couscous, belly-dancing, and particular musical instruments like the tabl to define the cultural affiliations of the complex family at its center.

My attention to the mother-daughter dyad and its accompanying tropes and characterizations reveal that as the post-Beur film culture focuses now on women and their stories, the dyad trope displaces men from a portrayal of nationalism, patriarchy, religion, and hierarchy. Films that use the trope focus their critique of women's experience on particular women in a particular family and elide the greater institutional forces that influence their lives. The dyad also fails to account for the complex hopes

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<sup>9</sup> Fathi has escaped Algeria after the brutal slaying of her family by Islamic fundamentalists. She works illegally at a supermarket, supervised by the titular character, and she and her co-workers must often dodge the immigration police. Late in the film, Fathi exposes her hiding place to the police by playing Rai music on a portable stereo. When the police take her by the arm to lead her away, she says simply, mournfully, "I want to go home."

and aspirations of the North African migrant community in France, which very often includes creating an identity around a French Islam. The continued portrayal of the fleeing daughter, leaving behind the Muslim home, is ultimately an image of death. The vibrant, modern, sexual citizen flees the despotic religious home and takes with her capacities of rejuvenation, renewal, reproduction, and rebirth. The home is left empty, to whither around the crone.

### **Conclusion**

The films discussed above present a modern secular French identity to its audience, embodied in the French-Maghrebi woman. This character flees from those religious strictures that would hold her back from fully integrating in republican France, from fully embracing her identity as a modern woman, and controlling her own destiny. This representation proves that the filmmakers creating these films have fully absorbed the French republican ideologies of public schools and other institutions. Yet, this representation does not fully articulate the aims of varying members of the North African immigrant community. Some members hope to present themselves as Muslim citizens in France, as evidenced by the importance of the French Council on the Muslim Religion. Others hope to privatize Islam for personal practice, without irritating French society, as shown by sociological studies. Both groups are developing a French Islam, working from opposite sides of the goal. Ultimately, contemporary hopes center on establishing a viable religious identity in secular France, hand in hand with French citizenship.

This secular woman escaping her religious heritage stands in contrast to Bollywood images of the modern, religious Hindu woman. The Bollywood heroine uses

her religious power to expand her role as citizen to one of national leadership as a warrior-princess, potent and prevailing.

## CHAPTER 4

### BOLLYWOOD HEROINES IN THE HISTORICAL EPIC: WIDOW-WARRIORS AND WARRIOR-PRINCESSES

This chapter investigates how portrayals of Hinduism in Bollywood films construct a gendered “authentic” Indian identity for both local and diasporic audiences in order to strengthen national affiliation in the face of globalization’s exigencies. Whereas in post-Beur films, marginalized protagonists leave behind oppressive religious ideology to realize their full citizenship rights in a secular France and in Mormon cinema American citizens are inexorably moved out of the center of political enfranchisement as they affiliate themselves with the new Mormon religion, in Bollywood historical films our protagonists are the government. The focus on royalty in these films is part of the pleasure, with sumptuous mise-en-scene to offer, and the films emphasize sovereignty through religious duty; hence, our protagonists are capable of rule because they are practicing Hindus.

Currently India and its diasporas experience an ongoing conservative political effort to conflate “India” with “Hindu;” Hindu nationalists rush to position Hinduism as a global religion, due in large part to the religious practices and financial donations of diasporic Hindu non-resident Indians (NRI) the world over. Similarly, Bollywood cinema positions itself as a global cinema interested in the NRI market, often adapting narratives and settings to appeal to diasporic communities. As both Hindu nationalists and Bollywood cinema negotiate Western influences, often perceived as a dangerous modernity by both, they must also answer the resulting questions of authenticity that these negotiations bring. This dialogical process between Bollywood, Indian diasporas, Hindu Nationalism, and the West creates a nostalgic national imaginary central to identity formation in global audiences. Female characters are crucial in this imaginary,

and my focus here is primarily on how these characters are developed in contemporary Bollywood cinema.

My use of the term nostalgic national imaginary relies on Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community suggesting that through cultural production consumption a disparate group can imagine itself a cohesive nation. Yet, this chapter also focuses on the process in which images of particular historical events "become part of a system of accepted and ordained ideas that must be negotiated by other versions or images of the same. . . . In turn these iconographies are used in present debates on identity" (Bromley 7). I propose here that historical films of the last decade in Bollywood cinema have created an icon of the "fierce woman," replete with mise-en-scene, costuming, and motivations that make her transferable and recognizable throughout a series of historical epics. This "fierce woman" offers a secularized interpretation of Hindu nationalist female ideals for diasporic audiences who must negotiate their Indian identity within Western nation-states. At the same time, these epics are "seeking an imaginary historical plenitude" through their use of nostalgia for the historical periods they represent (Higson 97). The films discussed below present birth stories of a bold, rich, unified, sophisticated Indian nation, even as the films forego classic Bombay cinema storytelling strategies for linear Western narratives. I concentrate on portrayals of religious female characters in Bollywood historical epics to show how these portrayals communicate a new vision of the ideal woman in the globalized Indian community. Together these films offer us an account of how contemporary Bollywood historical epics imagine female engagement with the nationalist project: women are avenging warriors whose spirituality and responsibility are focused on protecting nation

and community. The community is defined as a confederacy of religious, ethnic, caste and class groups. The responsibilities to all community members tempers the fierce woman as Hindu.

As the Indian nation-state works out a beneficial relationship with modernism and globalization, these films speak not only to the historical moments they wish to recapture but also the current historical moment. These films also create anxieties that may parallel their audiences' experiences on a metaphoric level, whether audiences watch these films in a theater in Hyderabad, on the internet in London, or on DVD in Houston. These anxieties are central to the plots of the films examined below and may include performing religious devotion in a hostile land surrounded by foreigners, threats from other religions, specifically Muslims, how the Indian nation is perceived on a global stage, and the place for women in a globalized Hinduism.

### **Bollywood and Indian Diasporas**

Bollywood, or popular Hindi cinema, produces over 800 films a year and "is screened for approximately 15 million people a day" (Virdi 1), yet constitutes only one of seven main film industries in India: "There is some amount of film production in every major Indian language and there are at least six important non-Hindi film industries, although not all are thriving at the moment: Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Telegu" (Prasad 4). Though Bollywood's Mumbai-based cinema out-produces other Indian cinemas, the Telugu and Tamil-speaking regions support the largest cinema-going public. Yet Telugu and Tamil-language cinema rarely screen outside their own regions. Art-house cinema has been closely aligned with Bengali cinema, as Bengals are supposed by their co-citizens to be more educated and more intellectual than other regions (Dwyer 8).

For this chapter, I draw upon Bollywood as a global cinema intent on reterritorializing nationalist ideologies in multiple diasporas through market flows. Though naming Hindi or Bombay cinema as the Indian national cinema obscures the other major regional film industries (Prasad 4), Hindi cinema is invested in “inheriting and circulating notions of national identity, negotiating conflicts experienced by the imagined community, producing new representations of the nation, and constructing a collective consciousness of nationhood through cultural referents” (Virdi 7). Bollywood’s position as national cinema depends on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community,” and yet Bollywood’s notions of pan-indic identity are too often narrowly Hindu, northern, and urban. In the historical epics discussed below, Hinduism is valorized over other religious traditions either through the presentation of its rituals or its Hindu protagonists. Yet, in the end, Bollywood cinema is already generally accepted as India’s national cinema because it is “not only screened across India, but dubbed into local languages...and is the most widely distributed [of the Indian cinemas] overseas among the Indian diaspora” (Dwyer and Patel 9). For my argument here, I focus on Bollywood’s strategies to present itself not only as a national cinema to a nation-state made up of disparate cultural and ethnic groups, but also as a global cinema to a diasporic and western audience.

Since the 1990s Bollywood producers have been targeting the diasporic Indian audiences in Britain, North America, and Australia. The diasporic audience is considered more profitable than many regions in India because of its upward class mobility and higher ticket prices. This focus has resulted in content changes for Bollywood films, as well as an increase in budgets for higher production values in order

to please Westernized audiences. Though no exact timeline exists for this change, the shifting representation of the NRI from a bumbling, crass tourist trying to buy culture on visits back to India to an integral member of a broader Indian society is one clue to this evolution. Films still critique NRI attitudes and actions, yet very often the main hero is an NRI whose narrative development centers on an acceptance of India on its own terms: see *Swades: We, the People* (Gowariker, 2004) starring superstar Shahrukh Khan as an NRI successfully working for NASA, who returns home full of ideas on how to solve village problems like child marriage, lack of female education, and communal violence, but also learns to respect village wisdom. A female equivalent is *Shakthi, The Power* (Vamshi, 2002) which stars Karisma Kapoor as an NRI bride who returns with her NRI husband to a barbaric and war-torn tribal household in India, characterized by its overt licentiousness and patriarchal oppression—yet it is here where the young woman realizes her full feminine powers, after she becomes a widow she must escape from her father-in-law with her small son.

Throughout the 1990s, Bollywood producers, directors, and stars, have had affiliations with the Rashitrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a cultural/ religious organization known for its implication in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth century mosque, in December 1992, and politically connected to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This leads critics to argue that the family feudal dramas and action films' strong nationalist messages were the ideological expressions of the Hindu nationalist movement, known collectively as Hindutva. Rachel Dwyer, one of the leading film critics of Bollywood cinema, disputes the idea of a "saffron screen" or a Hindu nationalist agenda in Bollywood; she analyzes complex representations of Muslim

characters, the prominence of Muslim actors, the valued place of Urdu symbols and writing in Bollywood films, and how Hinduvta has reoriented “its policy of Indianness to accommodate [diasporic Indians]” (2006 284). Instead, she reads the film industry’s association with the BJP as a self-interested strategy for resources and power.<sup>1</sup> That said, Hindu characters remain at the center of Bollywood narratives, which often establish Indian authenticity for NRI characters by participation in Hindu rituals, worship, and visits to sacred sites. Bollywood protagonists and their goals are also firmly situated within the middle class, with mise-en-scene reproducing a “panoramic interior”: combining “design techniques with architectural space to create a ‘virtual city’ in which the contemporary ‘global’ family could reinvent ‘Indianness’ and modernity” (Mazumdar 110). These filmic and narrative techniques create a nationalist Hindu imaginary. By examining women’s crisis and resolution in these films, I argue that the strong nationalist messages of these films rely upon Hinduvta influence, secularized by a global Bollywood aesthetic.

For diasporic audiences, Bollywood films offer a connection to their homeland and culture, but importantly, diasporic uses of Bollywood cinema exist on a spectrum, where class, religion, and time in the host-country affect diasporic audience use and reception. In Indian, Pakistani, and Afghani communities of Frankfurt, Germany, working class first-generation immigrants, who generally hoped to return to their homelands, used Bollywood films to teach their children about their home traditions, mores, and “consider Hindi films as a ‘fortress’ and agents of authority for generating and enforcing

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<sup>1</sup> For example, under BJP national leadership the film community was finally granted industry status in 1998. Until that time, film production companies could not secure loans from banks, and much of their funding came from underground or illegal sources.

ideas of a paradisiacal homeland and notions of an authentic culture" (Brosius 215). For second-generation informants, who plan on staying in Germany or migrating further West, "India,' and Bollywood films in particular, serve as props of a montaged, exotic spectacle, ready-made and enjoyed for playful consumption" (Brosius 231). Bollywood films then serve multiple functions for multiple audiences, though it would seem that a generational split occurs among audience members.

Yet, an even more nuanced reading of this phenomenon exists. Rajinder Kumar Dudrah sees such a generational split "a flawed claim" made by researchers "unable to...demonstrate more detailed readings or complex uses of Bollywood film cultures by its diasporic audiences" (40). Dudrah, who observed diasporic theatrical audience consumption in different New York neighborhoods, argues that "Bollywood cinema constructs urban India and the diaspora, which is read and reconfigured by and in urban India and the diaspora, which returns to reshape Bollywood cinema itself" (169). For Durdrah, this mobius-like relationship is generally conservative yet constant, and more intense than Brosius' claim about second-generation uses of Bollywood, which Brosius characterizes as emotionally and culturally distant and youthfully brash. The intensity Durdrah isolates results from Bollywood cinema's construction of the diaspora as a reterritorialization of the nation, where the urban, upper-class see themselves on screen as both "signs and vehicles of globalization" (103). In the family feudal dramas, on-screen representations center on Hindu religious ritual that marry male and female NRI characters to the health of the Indian nation as well as to each other.

### **Religion and Nationalism**

"Hindu" provides an inadequate to label the disparate religious groups and cultures that colonial Britain categorized with that term. Recent scholarship in

anthropological and religious studies explores the history of “Hinduism” in India and argues that the term Hindu originally described anyone who was not Muslim; this included Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh communities (Narayanan 25). Within Hinduism in contemporary India there exist several distinct sects, Virashaiva, Lingayat, Brahmo, Prarthna, or Arya Samaj, which have disparate geographic centers throughout India, from southern Karnatake (formerly Mysore) to eastern Kolkata to western Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Each of these has their own founding texts, leaders, and histories, easily disseminated throughout the centuries by word of mouth, pilgrimage, proselytizing, and contemporarily through electronic networks like the internet.

The focus of much previous Western scholarship has been on the Vedas and Vedic texts like the Manusmriti, composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, which outlines laws and ideals for the Brahmin caste, the tiny elite minority at the top of the caste system. Vedic texts, interpreted as authoritative scripts by Western scholars, are used by Hindu communities with varying degrees of authority. In fact, Vedic texts “are not well known and utilized in many parts of Hindu India,” and their influence is “superseded by local culture” (Narayanan 34). Women’s roles exist in the gray area between scripture and practice (Narayanan 35). Women who develop roles outside their proscribed familial duties use one of several strategies to gain authority: they ignore legal texts that would disallow them from leadership, or claim authority from contrasting texts, or work in areas outside of textual domain (*ibid*).

Julie Leslie critiques a western focus on patriarchal texts like the Vedas, arguing that Western theorists perform a great disservice when they assume that women in other societies, religions, or time periods were and continue to be without agency.

According to Leslie, women create their agency where they can, and this agency allows them self-respect and hope as they fulfill their religious and social obligations, “a strategy for dignity in a demeaning world” (190). What others may view as constrictive, religious women may see as a series of negotiations and degrees of engagement. For example, marriage within traditional religious communities brings many responsibilities and proscriptions that religious women may consider the price required for sexual, maternal, and social relations they regard as necessary. My work emphasizes female agency by focusing on female characters within Bollywood historical films who empower themselves through the use of religious ritual, female dharma, female power known as shakti, and spiritual transcendence known as bhakti.

The West traditionally perceived Hinduism as a patriarchal religion that oppresses women through family and spiritual duties. Arranged marriages, child marriages, sati/suttee or widow burning, and other practices are evidence of the incredible vulnerability women suffer in practicing communities. However, these practices are not universal to all Hindu sects and the Bhakti tradition within Hinduism valorizes female contributions of poetry and mysticism, idealizing the woman in devotional relationships between humans and deities. Important in some Hindu traditions is shakti or the female creative power, which imagines the wife the most important asset to a home as she performs crucial rituals for her husband, children, and ancestors. These expectations and ideals can become problematic and research indicates that Brahmin women are especially exposed to a litany of ritual codes that restrict and redirect their behavior. Yet some women find that these responsibilities do offer a path for power and place within Hinduism.

Bollywood's use of the "fierce woman" type plays upon audience familiarity with fierce women extant in the culture, even found within Hinduvta itself (see below). Hindu nationalism's response to economic and cultural globalization has been to emphasize feminine vulnerability to outside dangers. Many nationalist leaders have called for a return to Vedas and Vedic texts as the only way to live Hinduism and the only way to strengthen the nation against the external intrusions of the West and the perceived internal dangers of the Indian Muslim community, often symbolically externalized as "Pakistan." This call greatly impacts women, who are expected to follow legal discourses that would restrict their physical movement, opportunities for education, and their ability to take full advantage of their citizenship rights, as well as their contributions to nationalist strategies. Yet, even within these nationalist movements, women seize opportunities for leadership and self-interpretation, as documented by Paola Bacchetta in her work on the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (referred to as the Samiti below), a sister organization to the RSS.

The RSS is a fundamentalist organization and many of its strategies can be categorized within classic definitions of fundamentalism. The RSS insists on following a Hinduism described in originary texts like the Manusmriti; further, it negatively reacts to Western ideals of modernity while it at the same time deploys technological advances and global economic structures to further its own expansion. Lastly, the RSS distinguishes itself from other Hindu communities: "each Hindu is supposed to peel back the layers of [illusion] that blind him to his 'essential' Hindu nationalist 'self' in order to 'resurrect' the Hindu nation" (Bacchetta 2003 7). The RSS also defines itself in opposition to Islam, using rhetoric to incite anti-Islamic violence among its members.

Within the RSS, the role of women is made sacrosanct: women are believed to need greater protection from forces outside the home and community, as they are the spiritual strength of the home when they fulfill their dharma or duty as wife and mother of sons. Bacchetta interprets and contrasts organizational publications between the Samiti and the RSS, in which doctrines of the self are explained. According to Bacchetta, RSS materials define the male self as individual, unitary, mono-gendered, while Samiti materials construct the female self as relational and merged in conceptions of the family, society, nation, religion, and culture (2003 7-8). One Samiti goal is to reinsert the “feminine at every instance of the Hindu nation, from the symbolic to the social, the Samiti carves out a space for women” (2003 50-51). Central to the Samiti writings is bitterness at the Hindu male’s failure to protect Hindu women from Muslim and other outsider threats (2003 10). This leads to the development of the “fierce woman” ideal in the Samiti publications.

The “fierce woman” in Samiti ideology is a feminine warrior with leadership qualities, often trained in paramilitary tactics and intellectual discussion, and modeled on female warriors and rulers from Indian history and mythology like the goddess Kali or princess-warriors Vishpala, Durgavati, and Rani of Jhansi (Bacchetta 2003 43, 64). Symbolically the “fierce woman” becomes the mother-citizen who must protect her child the nation; yet, she, unmarried, has no male counterpart to control her (Bacchetta 2002 163-164). In praxis celibate women, who claim to be married to the nation, take on the mantle of the “fierce woman” (Bacchetta 2003 42-43) and worship Durga, a form of Kali, the black goddess of destruction and order, as her personal deity (Bacchetta 2003 65). These ideas of feminine power lie outside the symbolic and rhetorical constructions of

the RSS, which construes shakti as that which strengthens husbands and sons. This Samiti ideology critiques the RSS, even if Samiti writings still positively describe the Hindu male elsewhere. Pacchetta further documents how Samiti representatives rally and incite RSS members to action by employing these models of the “fierce woman” who must protect herself because of the RSS’ lack of virility.

Though the BJP, and by association the RSS and Samiti, powerfully influences contemporary Indian politics, Ghandi and Nehru’s vision of the nation hold sway in Indian political and cultural life. The Ghandian-Nehruian vision imagines the nation as a village, a community understood as secular and inclusive. Indian politics define secularism as the respect for all religions and Indian civil code includes laws for each religious community, based on their own codes.<sup>2</sup> Much of Ghandian-Nehruian rhetoric rested on the symbolic ideal of the rural community where slow-paced agricultural seasons and rituals governed, and where every community member was an obvious necessity, either as a laborer to help bring in crops or as a skilled worker who provided necessary services for the growth and sustenance of the village. In an urban setting where communities are larger and less obviously dependent on individual contributions, Ghandian-Nehruian arguments founder. Yet Bollywood has continued to produce narratives which further a Ghandian-Nehruian nationalist imaginary. *Lagaan* (Tax, Aushotosh Gowariker 2001) uses an entire village made up of overtly coded Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Dalits, doctors, land-owners, skilled laborers, and farmers to bring down the local representatives of the British Empire. The villagers are led by a pure Hindu man who embodies both the boyish charm of Krishna and the strict adherence of

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<sup>2</sup> This means that Muslim citizens are governed by Sharia, Hindu citizens by Hindu law, and Christians by biblical statutes.

Ram to ritual and law. Thus historical films draw upon cultural icons as a shorthand in characterization and these icons may be political or religious, ancient or modern. The “fierce woman” type currently prevails due to the influence of Samiti ideology. Yet the “fierce woman” icon combines with the Ghandian-Nehruian vision of a community strengthened through diversity. In the films examined below, a fierce Hindu woman leads the diverse community.

### **Historical Epics**

During the 1990s, films from Bollywood addressed globalization in the form of family feudal dramas that emphasized the strength of the extended family through the marriage rituals of a young, often NRI, couple. Yet over the last decade, the historical epic has been an important component of Bollywood output. With their emphasis on historical costumes and settings, historical epics had been rare until the advent of industry status (1997), which stabilized funding to film projects. Previously, Bollywood funding was unreliable and erratic; producers often shot and edited together song sequences to secure money for the rest of the film production, even before a script had been written. Industry status secured relationships with banks and international production studios, and Bollywood producers suddenly found themselves finalizing scripts, casting choices, and other pre-production details before they approached funders. With the increased budgets new funding could provide, historical epics became progressively more feasible. Some of the first epics produced were remakes of earlier, highly successful historical epics, *Devdas* (Bhansali, 2002), an adaptation of Saratchandra Chatterjee’s 1917 novel critiquing arranged marriage, and *Umrao Jaan* (Dutta, 2006), based on Mirza Mohammed Hadi Ruswa’s 1904 novel about a nineteenth-century courtesan. Other historical films have concentrated on the more

recent past, like *Veer-Zaara* (Chopra, 2004) that explores Pakistani-Indian strife over the previous 20 years or *Om Shanti Om* (Khan, 2007), a send-up of 1970s Bollywood.

This chapter emphasizes historical epics that focus on moments of Indian nationalism, birth stories of the Indian state consciousness, as these films contribute to modern patriotic mythmaking in India, much as 1980s heritage films did for the French and 1990s science fiction did for Americans. Two of the four films chosen reinterpret nineteenth and twentieth-century conflicts with the British colonial power to glorify pan-Indian rebellion, where caste, class, religion and gender are subsumed to nascent national identity. Little critical work has been done on historical epics, even though the last 10 years have witnessed several important entries in the genre, *Lagaan*<sup>3</sup> (Gowariker, 2001), *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001), *The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (Mehta, 2005), *Rang de Basanti* (*Paint Me the Color of Spring* or *Paint Me Saffron*, Mehra, 2006) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, 2008). On one level these films work to deconstruct the British and American imperial cinema of the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> On another level these films also attempt to rationalize a secular, religiously inclusive nation for the new century as they mobilize the fierce woman type leading the diverse Indian community against foreign powers.

In this chapter, I focus on *Asoka*, *Mangal Pandey*, *Rang de Basanti*, and *Jodhaa Akbar*, as four distinct examples of current Bollywood historical epics that mobilize religion and religious ritual to characterize and develop female engagement in

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<sup>3</sup> See Melanie Wright's excellent discussion of this film in her *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Prem Chowdhry's *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (1988), which discusses the ideological constructions of imperial cinema.

nationalism. *Asoka* uses religious ritual as a point of contrast between the two main characters, a fierce woman and a decayed man. *Mangal Pandey* and *Rang de Basanti* use the marriage ritual to elevate seemingly peripheral female characters to the narrative center, where they become fierce women leaders of the nascent nationalist fervor. *Jodhaa Akbar* uses religious transcendence as a chief component of the protagonists' characterization, and advances religious spectacle for audience pleasure, while the female protagonist negotiates ferocity and submission. Though these narratives focus on the nation-state, they are important global artifacts that explore a variety of filmic styles, the impact of modernity and globalization on the role of women, and India's image on the global stage.

The four films discussed here have much in common. They involve heroines battling against external and internal threats to the nation-state, whether corruption, coups d'etat, invading armies, colonizing forces, or cultural gender hierarchy and caste systems. The films' narrative development involves the heroines' awakening to their own duty to sacrifice for the success of the nation-state. The films ennable this sacrifice in order to connect it to greater historical trajectories that over-ride the otherwise grim endings of the films. The films also present the nation as a confederacy of class, caste, religious, and gender differences that strengthen the nation through diversity, because each community brings a skill or talent to battle the external and threats. In a related manner, the heroine progresses through a series of spaces, from domestic to global, in her attempt to battle threats to the nation. Narratively and symbolically the films have much in common as the stories develop the fierce women in relation to their marital status. Often marriage marks maturity and binds the heroine to nation and family.

Female religious experience is equally configured through their dharma or duty as wives, where religious ritual consecrates their actions. The marriage ritual signifies the heroines' full commitment to the nation. Though the film constructs the women's fierceness in relation to their dharma as wives, the use of eroticism varies, as will be discussed below.

The films described below use the “fierce woman” to mobilize themes surrounding religious consecration and civic responsibility in relation to the building of the nation-state. This fierce woman marks an emphatic change from previous globalization heroines, young brides hoping for true love and an auspicious wedding. The films below present the marriage ritual as intimate and secret, a stark contrast to the grand weddings of the 1990s family feudal dramas like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun!* (*Who Am I To You?*, Sooraj Barjatya 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Brave Heart Takes the Bride*, Aditya Chopra 1995), and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something Happens*, Karan Johar 1998). Instead, fierce women characters use their marriage as a stepping stone to further develop as a nationalist warrior along side or in place of their husbands, with their sexuality, spirituality, and maternal powers all components of an expanding feminine arsenal.

In *Asoka*, Kaurwaki epitomizes the fierce woman, sexually autonomous, outspoken, and loyal. In the film, religious ritual consecrates Kaurwaki’s decisions to protect her kingdom and fight against her husband, complicating religious law concerned with patriarchal rule and wifely submission. The film imagines religious life as active engagement with the external and internal attacks on the nation-state.

### **The Royal Fierce Woman in Asoka**

Asoka was released in 2001 to adequate success. It stars Shah Rukh Khan as the eponymous South Asian warrior-king who reigned from 273-232 BCE, and who eventually converted to Buddhism. Khan, the most popular Bollywood male star of the past decade, uses his playful persona to give personality and appeal to a character who eventually descends into madness and brutality. Khan's career has certainly been helped by his appeal to the diasporic audience; he starred in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* as the NRI protagonist and has since played numerous NRI characters, Rizvan Khan in Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan* (2010) being the most recent. Asoka serves as a narrative example of how religious legalisms governing female behavior are abandoned out of necessity; as a media product Asoka introduces the "fierce woman" in a new century where India again occupies the world stage, due in some part to its tortured relationships with Pakistan, its push for nuclear weapons, and horrific religious violence between Hindu and Muslim communities. Asoka hypothesizes the loyalties of the Indian woman and in between the jumpy editing, erotic scenarios, and indulgent romanticism, presents a complex tragedy that points to the necessity of religion (in this case Buddhism) to heal the deep wounds the characters inflict on each other and that patriarchal excesses inflicted on the region and Asoka's family.

The film charts Asoka's early years of conflict with his half-brothers for his father's throne in Magadha. Asoka decides to flee his father's court and go into hiding as a wandering sword for hire in a neighboring kingdom. Here he meets Kaurwaki (Kareena Kapoor), a princess also in hiding, who escaped her home in the kingdom of Kalinga with her younger brother. Her parents were assassinated and now she and her brother roam the country-side with their loyal general. Asoka and Kaurwaki are

immediately drawn to each other and secretly marry, without Kaurwaki ever finding out Asoka's true identity. The film eroticized the question of secret identity when Asoka and Kaurwaki are unable to consummate their relationship because his ailing mother calls Asoka home. True "knowledge" is thus never attained until they meet on the battlefield at the end of the film. When Asoka returns to the wilderness to find Kaurwaki, misinformed peasants tell him her parents' assassins killed her. Thinking her dead, Asoka descends into madness, until Devi (Hrishitaa Bhatt), a beautiful Buddhist maiden nurses him back to physical health. Asoka marries Devi and then embarks on consolidating his empire through the slaughter of his half-brothers and the invasion of neighboring kingdoms. Asoka becomes more callous throughout these scenes, contrasted with Kaurwaki's deepening maturity. The final scenes occur on the battlefield between the kingdoms of Magadha and Kalinga. Kaurwaki has returned to Kalinga with her brother and must fight her husband. At battle's end Asoka realizes the harm he caused through his blood-thirsty quest to dominate the kingdoms around him when he witnesses the death of Kaurwaki's young brother. The film then moves to Asoka's dedication to Buddhism and ends with a voice-over narration concerning the tremendous results of his Buddhist proselytizing.

Asoka, directed by Santosh Sivan, a prolific cinematographer, benefits from an editing and cinematographic style influenced by both MTV music videos and Hong Kong martial arts films. The camera seems to swivel and swirl as it cuts closer and off-center to dream-like compositions suffused with rich color; this is especially true early in the film when Asoka masquerades as a commoner in order to escape the politics of his father's throne. The film introduces Kaurwaki, who embodies the "fierce woman," when

Asoka comes upon her dancing by herself against a backdrop of green hills, costumed in a blood-red cloth wrapped around her bust and a similar fabric as a skirt. We see her as Asoka sees her, focusing on her tattoos, her waist, and her long wet hair in numerous jump cuts and close-up cut-ins. The film eroticizes Shahrukh Khan in a similar manner, with emphasis on his eyes and bare chest and back. Kaurwaki dances her way from a hilltop through a waterfall bath and into a small grove of trees where Asoka finally interrupts her. She interrupts his attempts to romance with: "I am warrior blood. You risk death." By the end of the film Kaurwaki will arm herself and her people for battle against Asoka.

Kaurwaki's sexual autonomy and her mobility symbolizes her freedom. She withdraws herself or offers herself to Asoka according to her own desire. She moves through the landscape, across hills, floating down rivers, through forests, in towns, with decisiveness. She makes a marriage compact of her own accord, and thus adheres to a modern sensibility of romantic love and companionate marriage that has thrilled Bollywood audiences since Raj Kapoor's *Bobby* (1973). Yet these freedoms come at a great price; Kaurwaki's loss of family, position, and wealth speak to the great anxiety that surrounds female agency for both domestic and diasporic audiences. Kaurwaki lives outside the structures, rituals, and security of a Hindu home. Her marriage, so easily entered into, is easily interrupted and cast aside when her husband wonders off and is lost to another woman, another religion, and his own demented lust for power. The larger forces of nationalism, patriarchy, and religion cripple the modern free woman. The film clearly makes this point in Kaurwaki's continual comparison to Asoka's second wife Devi.

The film creates a series of binaries used to characterize Asoka's trajectory from winsome prince to malicious king to remorseful Buddhist. The film contrasts Asoka and Kaurwaki's intimate wedding in the woods with Asoka's grander public wedding to Devi. The film also contrasts Asoka's passionate yet unconsummated relationship with Kaurwaki with his dutiful procreation with Devi, which produces twins. Devi and Kaurwaki serve as complements for each other: the warrior-princess and the peaceful priestess, both beautiful, both in love with Asoka. Only Kaurwaki's presence heals Asoka and only Devi's marriage produces heirs. In *Asoka* the religious and the fierce are separated yet intertwined, as it is Asoka's epiphany at Kaurwaki's two "deaths" which turns him towards Devi's religious example.

Kaurwaki as "fierce woman" develops throughout the film on a character arc of self-knowledge. At the beginning of her story she is a princess in hiding with her younger brother the future king. Her fierceness creates a façade to mask tragic memories concerning her parents' assassination. She later learns that these parents adopted her, and that she is not royalty as she always thought. Asoka precipitates their wedding ceremony with a lecture that it matters little if she is royal, it matters what her heart tells her to do. Thus begins their courtship played out over the course of fencing lessons, skills which help her better protect her brother in hiding—at one point she must kill those attacking their hiding place. Kaurwaki's secret wedding to Asoka grants her royalty and endows her with the skills to defeat threats to her kingdom. Once she returns to Kalinga, she accepts the responsibility to defend her kingdom and fight Asoka, still ignorant of his true identity. The women of Kalinga join her in the fight. Thus, Kaurwaki's stewardship progresses from the domestic space of protecting her brother to

the regional political necessity of leading her kingdom to war. Similarly, Kaurwaki moves from the erotic maiden to enticing bride to dignified queen.

Kaurwaki's preparation for battle intercut Asoka's own preparation, a montage that utilizes close-ups to convey how these actions create an even greater intimacy between the two. The montage also contrasts their motivations to fight through the visual twinning of their actions: Kaurwaki fights to defend, Asoka fights for his own amusement. The montage starts with a close-up of her face as she smudges vermillion in a vivid smear from her brow to her hair line; flower petals are cast onto her hair from above. The film cuts then to a close-up of Asoka's face, half in shadow, his eye-line matching hers. They seem to be looking at each other. The film cuts back to her, where she receives a votive ritual; the film cuts to him undergoing the same blessing. Both have swords blessed, both practice their sword skills, a visual reminder of their courtship. The montage ends on the image of dozens of candles filling the frame with their golden flame, which transitions to Devi, pregnant, who decides to leave her brutal husband for the sake of her unborn child's spiritual safety. It is as if the montage has reunited the Kaurwaki and Asoka through their ritual and displaced Devi.

Kaurwaki's next scene presents her astride a horse at the front of hundreds of soldiers. The extreme low angle and the bright glare of the sun behind her create an iconic image of dignity, beauty, and ferocity. Kaurwaki wears a black choli and black trouser, her long hair stirred by the wind, her chest armored by a large silver breastplate. She wears silver cuffs on her arms and silver chains at her waist. She saves the life of another female soldier in her first heroic act. Her battle scenes create tension through close attention to her female form against a background of male

soldiers, her flying hair, shimmering breast-plate, and the contrast of her black choli and her naked pale back. The camera swirls above her and around her, cutting between her and her comrades. She hacks her way through several soldiers before being brought to the ground by one of Asoka's generals. She loses her sword. Seeing a fresh onslaught from the enemy she lashes a dagger to her hand. She sees Asoka on the battle field: her realization that she fights her lost husband renders her defenseless. She staggers towards him, watching him kill opponent after opponent until a soldier attacks Kaurwacki from behind.

Kaurwaki's fierceness develops through necessity; her continuing maturity augments her growing strength. Like the "fierce woman" in Samiti rhetoric, she must protect herself and her kingdom because the men around her lack the virility or morality to accomplish the task. Her husband, degenerate, immoral, and bloodthirsty, constitutes her greatest enemy. Her battle for Kalinga represents the full flowering of her growth as an adult, as a princess, and as a warrior. Her image as she goes into battle is one of calm discipline, no longer the dancing maiden or the flirtatious bride. This same transformation occurs in *Rang de Basanti* and *Mangal Pandey*, though the metamorphosis in these films also works to center a periphery female character for the final thrust of the plot's nationalist fervor. In *Rang de Basanti*, Sonia/Durga's role in the narrative embodies the Samiti vision of nationalist woman; she guides male violence and nurtures the nation to health.

### **Concealed Feminine Power in *Rang de Basanti***

*Rang De Basanti* or *Paint Me the Color of Spring* or *Paint Me Saffron* combines the nationalist appeal of the historical drama with youth culture romance. The film was released in 2006 and won the Film Fare award of that year; it was also nominated for

the British Academy of Film and Television Art's Foreign Film of the Year award. The film stars Aamir Khan, five years after his global success *Lagaan*, and just a year after his starring turn in *Mangal Pandey*. Set in contemporary Delhi, Sue (Alice Patten), a British documentarian that speaks competent Hindi, has arrived to create an independent film about freedom fighter Bhagat Singh's role in the 1920s Independence Movement. She brings her grandfather's journal, which recounts his role as guard and executioner to Bhagat Singh and his contemporaries in Lahore. Sue recruits five young men to re-enact the events of Bhagat Singh's political awakening and activities. The film weaves contemporary events with the ongoing enactment; the enactment awakens a nationalist sensibility in the politically apathetic young men. By the end of the film they assassinate a corrupt government official responsible for the plane crash of one of their friends.

The scenes set in contemporary India focus on these well-dressed youth emboldened with motorcycles and SUVs, nightclubs, and college degrees. These incredibly mobile characters crisscross the region: they drive around monuments, late at night, saluting; they drive out to an old fort near an airport and watch planes take off; they drive to a temple and participate in a ritual cleansing with thousands of other pilgrims; they take part in a small town festival; they even go to a Bollywood movie and affectionately make fun of the characters "dancing around trees". They are mapping the country, touring the landscape for Sue's benefit, and also for a nostalgic audience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Virdi notes a similar strategy in 1960s romantic comedies: "These films flaunt signs of modernity overtaking the nation at the time: mobility, travel, and tourism worked to erase regional and ethnic boundaries by allowing young people to break away from traditional parochial bonds. Geographically bound regional communities began to dissolve into an expanded social space, the nation" (145).

Surprising for Bollywood, these characters have little contact with their families.

In fact, the young characters have formed their own family, constituted by: Ajay (R. Madhavan), the patriotic pilot, who is engaged to Sonia (Soha Ali Khan), the proud, level-headed young woman whose costuming switches between western styles and saris; DJ (Aamir Khan), a Punjabi farm boy; Karan (Siddharth), a rich, cynical, disaffected Hindi; Aslam (Kunal Kapoor), a poor, urban Muslim; Pandey (Atul Kulkarni), a disillusioned Hindu fundamentalist; Sukhi (Sharman Joshi), a benign drunk; and Sue the Brit.<sup>6</sup> Ajay proposes to Sonia on a day outing with the rest of the group—no matchmaker, no patriarchal oversight, no shy glances from behind a sari. The film never eroticizes Sonia in her relationship with her college friends, nor even in relation to her fiancé; her engagement moves her symbolically from one of the boys to the vengeful widow. The film emphasizes fraternal loyalty in lieu of heterosexual coupling, though their coupling serves narrative purpose. *Rang de Basanti's* band of brothers, each from a different class or religion serves as the most obvious example of the nation as a confederacy of communities, often at odds with each other, yet unified to battle oppression. Most of the scenes feature the entire group, and the scenes are shot in wide angle, with the actors moving casually in and out of the frame, hugging and pestering each other. The re-enactment/historical scenes use this same wide-angle approach—the friends, still caring and physically demonstrative, are now somber adults who envision a day when India will be free from the British.

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible to argue that Sue is a stand-in for the returning NRI: she speaks competent Hindi, she must be taught customs and landscapes, she moves in and out of Western and traditional Hindu costumes, she has a theoretical knowledge of India which must be tested through praxis.

The reenactment serves to educate the audience and the modern characters about the challenges the revolutionaries faced. Acting in the film inspires the young men to revenge Ajay's honor, who dies in a plane crash because of an equipment failure. The young men stage a silent march at a local monument to honor Ajay's death. During the march, the police attack and Ajay's mother falls into a coma from a beating. The group, sans Sue, retreats to the old fort to commiserate over their failed protest. This has had its enactment parallel earlier in the film when Bhagat Singh and his followers protest the hangings of two of their co-revolutionaries. The protest ends in violence, and Bhagat's group plans a response. Durga, Sonia's analogue, suggests they kill the police chief who ordered their protest attacked. She is modestly covered, her eyes downcast, serving tea to the men. To an outsider, she is simply a woman fulfilling her duty to serve, nurture, refresh those around her. But her words are direct, forceful, and brief: "Kill him." And they reveal her true power in the group. Not simply on hand to keep the household running so that the men can plan their revolutionary games, she instead issues commands, softly and with great force.

In the present, Sonia gives the same command to the young men, this time to assassinate the Minister of Defense. The film intercuts the present day and the sepia toned enactment, with the historical characters planning the assassination while the present day characters argue over the morality of the act. As Sonia, the woman keeps her back to the men while they decide whether or not to commit the act. Placed in the foreground, Sonia's hair frames her face, her brow knit in determination, her arms crossed over her knees. Behind her, the men face the large blue sky, the five of them lined across the background. Once decided, the characters resolutely facing the

camera. This group includes a Hindu nationalist, a Muslim, and a rich son of a contractor, but they all defer to Sonia, the Hindu almost-bride. Her loss, her femininity, and her determination move her into a leadership position within the group. The grieving men slip into a stultifying lassitude, but Sonia spurs them forward to act.

Immediately the film cuts to the assassination, which mimics the historical enactment assassination sequence shown earlier in the film. DJ shoots the minister on the street during his morning walk. As Karan and DJ flee the scene, the blood-spattered minister falling to the pavement in the foreground, the soundtrack fills with female ululating. The ululating underscores the female motivations behind the act, a confirmation and recognition that the act has been performed. The ululating consecrates the terrorism by tying it to a singularly female cultural act. At the same time the moment shocks visually, the minister's white pajamas stained with bright red, his own horror rigid on his face. This startling visual contrasted with the female ululating speaks to the anxiety surrounding female power, its feared excesses and unbridled disturbances, even at the moment of its narrative fulfillment.

The five men hole up in a radio studio where they confess the crime to the listening public in an attempt to battle the minister's media controlled eulogies. In a hospital room, the confession playing over the soundtrack, Sonia watches over the prone body of Ajay's mother. The mother serves as a stand-in for India, a common trope in Bombay cinema that dates back to *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957). The film emphasizes the trope through journalistic interviews with the crowd in the street reacting to Karan and DJ's radio confession. Those interviews repeat the metaphor of a slumbering India, who must be woken from political apathy. Ajay's mother awakens

from the coma the moment all the young men are gunned down by the police and Indians around the country voice their renewed interest in the country's politics. Inspired by Sonia/Durga, the young men sacrifice themselves for their country, which brings Ajay's mother back to life. Sonia lives on to care for India, to prepare for whatever comes next. Her fierceness translates into her loyalty to Ajay, her care for his mother, and her strong nationalist feelings. Similarly, in *Mangal Pandey* Heera (Rani Mukerji) as Mangal Pandey's love interest ultimately carries on Pandey's crusade after his death. She moves from the erotic, tempting slave girl to the beautiful, desiring/desired wife (however briefly) to the desexualized warrior. As heroine she must battle both the external colonizer and internal cultural gender hierarchy that place her on the slave-block and in the brothel.

### **Ritual Cleansing in *The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey***

*The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey* interprets the story of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 through a fictionalization of one of its legendary figures, Mangal Pandey (Aamir Khan), a sepoy, or Indian soldier in the British army, caught and executed by the British forces. Pandey leads a revolt against British forces when he and his fellow soldiers are asked to use a new gun and ammunition, requiring them to bite through bullet casings greased in pig and cow fat. Pandey's own integrity inspires those around him to revolt. The uprising spreads throughout all members, castes, and classes of society, from the regional rajas, local prostitutes, townspeople, and other sepoys. The British crush the revolt and execute Pandey at the end of the film. Central to this film is Pandey's practice and dedication as a Hindu, and central to his characterization is his daily ritual, which can then be contrasted to his service as a British sepoy.

Pandey's religious ablutions are key transitions in the film, treated with solemnity and grace. One such scene begins with a long take of the sunrise gleaming on the river. The glinting water fills the screen and we are not made aware of our position or distance from it until Pandey's figure rises from beneath the surface. The shot continues to hold while the camera focuses on Pandey's powerful back and shoulders as he salutes the sun. The film cuts to a medium shot of his wet face, Pandey staring past us to the sun. We then cut to Pandey climbing the stairs from the river and then another cut to his relaxed stroll through the early life of the town. The film uses this worship, or visual allusions to it, three times in the film. Each of these ends with Pandey's run-in with a Dalit cleaner who questions Pandey's relationship with the British. Pandey serves than as a synecdoche for India, metaphorically he is a stand-in for India in its relationship with the British, obedient, exploited, and ready for awakening.

The film introduces the prostitute Heera late in the first act, seen from afar on market day by Pandey and his British friend and captain William Gordon. Historically, the prostitute in Bollywood film is a tragic figure who falls in love with the male protagonist and dies by the end of the film, sacrificing herself for his happiness. *Mangal Pandey* instead recuperates the prostitute through both religious and national symbolism in order to fight the colonial power. Heera stands on the slave block, auctioned to a crowd of appreciative men. Medium cut-ins to Heera emphasize her heaving breasts and her uncovered choli, her long unbound hair. After much heckling from the crowd and rough comments from the auctioneer, Heera knocks the slaver down and calls him a pimp. The slaver punches her mouth, and the resulting close-up contrasts the blood from her lip with her hazel eyes. Eventually a brothel for white

clientele buys her. The film characterizes Heera in this first moment as headstrong and defiantly sexual, emphasized by her later dance routine in the brothel. Performing for the white soldiers at the brothel, a flirtatious Heera stares longingly into the camera. She wears a bright pink veil and matching kurta and churidar, popular costumes for courtesans that evoke the Mughal past. The editing moves between long shots of her dance, often dancing out of reach from white clientele, and close-ups of her taunting eyes staring directly into the camera. Again the film emphasizes her straightforward sexuality and her unwillingness to be shamed for her survival.<sup>7</sup> As another layer of meaning, the entire dance sequence is cross cut with Pandey sitting alone outside the brothel, reflecting over the past day where he was required to fight fellow Indians—these two sequences together are part of the process for both characters to question their involvement with the British Empire, and where their loyalties lie. In fact later in the film when Pandey criticizes the sex workers for their immorality, Heera responds by saying, “We sell our bodies, but you sell your souls.”

Pandey and Heera meet again and again over the course of the plot, until they admit they are in love during the annual spring Holi celebration. They run away from the other holiday-makers to the river, where they stare into each other's eyes. The long shot of their embrace parallels Pandey's ablutions: their small figures surrounded by bright water against the backdrop of dark blue mountains. Their union purifies them and places them in a relationship with the greater physical world. On the eve of Pandey's execution, guards admit Heera to Pandey's cell, where they perform small rituals to

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<sup>7</sup> Contrast this with Umrao Jaan, the eponymous character of the 2006 film. Kidnapped as a small child and sold to a brothel, the adult Umrao mourns her success and power as a courtesan, and her dance performances for her clients reflect her sorrow. She allows herself to be shamed years later by her brother, who tells her she should kill herself to save the family's honor.

marry themselves. Pandey rubs vermillion on Heera's scalp and the part of her hair and Heera performs a traditional votive blessing. She also smears vermillion on his forehead, a mark he wears the next day at his execution. Secret weddings proliferate in Bollywood film: star-crossed lovers who like gods and goddesses before them join themselves ritually, emotionally, and physically under the grace of a tree, as seen in *Asoka*, which uses a similar erotic ritual moment to marry Asoka and Kaurwaki to each other. In *Mangal Pandey*, this moment signifies Heera's marriage to both her religion and her nation, which Pandey has served as symbol of throughout the film.

In *Mangal Pandey*, the British threaten both Muslim and Hindu, and the presentations of community life alternate between the village men who critique their colonizers, the Muslim and Hindu soldiers who must plan an uprising, the rajas who offer support, and the brothel workers who can provide information. These communities are gathered together and unified by the Holi celebration, which also formalizes Heera and Pandey's courtship. Heera becomes the leader of this confederacy once Pandey has been martyred. Generically this makes sense, as courtesans are considered the "national projection of a literal embodiment of Hindu-Muslim unity" (Chakravarty 288). As bride/widow, Heera forsakes her courtesan costumes and dons a tunic, trousers, and turban. Heera's marriage to Pandey recuperates her prostitution for her new role as widow/warrior. Leading a group on horseback, she attacks and burns a Christian cathedral. In the last moments of the film she leaps from her horse and engages in hand-to-hand combat, stabbing a soldier to death. Flames rage behind her. Heera, hitherto simply a romantic love interest of the main character amidst a cramped film canvas that includes British administration, a widow saved from suttee, soldiers, other

prostitutes, and an opportunistic madam, suddenly takes prime position as the leader of a rebellion that will connect Mangal Pandey's execution to the Sepoy Mutiny.

*Asoka*, *Rang de Basanti*, and *Mangal Pandey* employ female characters seizing political power via Hindu marriage, a narrative move that has extensive religious significance within Hinduism. Doctrines of auspiciousness dictate that women gain in spiritual power and importance as they marry, perform householder duties with their husband, and raise up sons. The heroines of these films grow in strength, maturity, and prominence vis their marriages, even the minimal gestures towards marriage used in these films. Kaurwaki never consummates her marriage and loses her husband to political intrigue almost immediately; Sonia becomes engaged, and her husband dies before they marry; Heera spends only one night with her husband before his execution. These female characters, though not especially pious or devout, engage in cultural manifestations of the religion (the wedding ceremony) that communicate strongly to the film audience the heroines' embodiment of both Hindu and Indian ideals.

The last moments of *Mangal Pandey* tie the Sepoy Mutiny to the twentieth century anti-colonial movement through voice-over narration and news footage. Similar rhetorical gestures end *Rang de Basanti* and *Asoka*. *Jodhaa Akbar* uses a voice over narrator throughout to interpret the significance of plot events. The rich male baritone<sup>8</sup> used at these times assumes a patriarchal authority, guiding the audience with paternal firmness, and ultimately containing the fierce woman within the narrative, much as shakti or female religious power in Hinduism is interpreted as best contained within

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<sup>8</sup> Amitabh Bachchan is a popular voice-over narrator, having worked on both *Lagaan* and *Jodha Akbar*. Om Puri completed the voice-work for *Mangal Pandey*, and Steven Mackintosh stars as both Sue's grandfather and the voice-over narrator in *Rang de Basanti*.

marital parameters. *Jodha Akbar*, discussed below, explores shakti within a national context through a filmic representation of bhakti, or divine worship.

Western scholarship on religion and film often focuses on transcendence as a way to discuss how films mimic religious experience for audiences, or critique moments when religious characters experience transcendence or spiritual ecstasy in order to better understand how a visual medium reproduces character interiority. Hindu understandings of spiritual transcendence refer to this as bhakti, which emphasizes devotion and emotional intimacy with the god over legal correctness. Bhakti is a gendered experience, placing the devotee in the position of the female lover distraught and overwhelmed by her lover-God. *Jodhaa Akbar* uses moments of spiritual ecstasy throughout the film to develop the two protagonists: the ensuing love story and political intrigue are characterized by Hindu-Muslim conflict and the film hopes to promote the parity of these religious experiences. Yet, the female protagonist's moments of bhakti are aimed at the husband, creating a unity between Hindu wife and Muslim husband that symbolizes the nation. In my discussion of these transcendent moments I will investigate how the religious woman shifts between physical ferocity and spiritual submission in order to create a new feminine ideal for global audiences.

### **Shakti and Bhakti in *Jodha Akbar***

In *Jodhaa Akbar*, Jodha (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan), a Rajput princess, marries the Mughal Emperor Akbar (Hrithik Roshan) in a political alliance concerned with consolidating the empire. Jodhaa makes two conditions for her marriage with her Muslim husband: first, that he allows her to practice Hinduism, and second, that he allows her to keep a shrine in her palace chambers. Jodhaa and Akbar's marital relationship will proceed along a conventional romantic genre plot; the two will be

initially attracted to each other and then need to overcome a series of obstacles before they gain true union. These obstacles range from misunderstandings between the two of them to missteps by their family members to the continued inability to consummate their marriage, all of which raise questions about spousal fidelity.

The film introduces adult Jodhaa dressed as a swordsman in a duel with her male cousin. She wins the duel when a messenger distracts her cousin, and teases her cousin over his loss with his own instructional axioms. The film emphasizes her affection for her family and her loyalty to her father throughout these scenes, as well as her wit and beauty. Her father announces her marriage to the Emperor, which challenges her obedience to him. Before her family delivers her to the Mughal palace, she turns in desperation to her shrine and sings a ballad of devotion to the god Krishna. Her despair at this marriage is complex: she mourns her broken engagement with another Rajput royal; she must leave behind her family for an unknown family group and culture geographically at some distance from her own kingdom; and she fears the religious consequences of marrying a Muslim. In conventional Hindu practice, a woman's redirects her devotion from her personal deity to her husband after her marriage. The husband becomes the embodiment of the god and the wife dedicates any sacrifices, fasts, and prayers to him and for him. Jodhaa assumes that Akbar's monotheism and Muslim belief system will interrupt her own religious requirements. The song of devotion she sings reifies Krishna as her god and Jodhaa as his unquestioning servant. This sequence focuses on the beauty of the deity and Jodhaa. It characterizes Jodhaa as obedient to both her father and her faith, even if satisfying both would seem impossible.

The film associates Jodhaa with veils, saris, floating drapes, and other fluttering cloth, evident in both the costuming and the mise-en-scene. The veils and saris, specifically feminine, also constantly emphasize Jodhaa's liminality, always on the threshold between the private and the national. Here, Jodhaa has been asked to forego a traditional Hindu marriage for the sake of her people. In this devotional scene Jodhaa sits on her curtained bed speaking with her mother, who offers Jodhaa a vial of poison in case she wants to kill herself. Jodhaa turns toward the camera in a close-up, her eyes filled with tears. The song begins, sung over the visual track as if thought or felt or embodied by Jodhaa. The lyrics of her song align her with Radha in Krishna mythology, the married lover that Krishna chooses from among a crowd of milkmaids. Worship of Krishna is associated with bhakti traditions. The film cuts to a long shot of the Krishna deity, the true receiver of Jodhaa's gaze. The film cuts to her again, fully aware of the direction of her gaze and that the camera is stand-in for the deity. The film then cuts to a tracking shot of her running to the deity, entering the deity's shrine through lustrous veils. She kneels at Krishna's feet, the statue is perhaps 3 feet high, and the film cuts to an over the shoulder shot for the deity and back to her. Jodhaa and Krishna have begun darshan, a valued system of gazing in Hinduism, where the gaze is shared between the worshipper and the worshipped, transferring power between them. The film mobilizes darshan by cutting closer to both the deity and Jodhaa in alternating reverse shots until both are framed in extreme close-ups. A close-up of Krishna from the far right-side of his face breaks the pattern, the camera then slowly tracks in a circle around the deity. Jodhaa falls into a supine position at his feet. The film then cuts to an extreme low angle of the deity. The last shot of the sequence is overhead both, with

flower petals scattered around them. The film transfers darshan from Jodhaa to the viewer; the film is intent on creating religious experience not only for its characters but also for its viewers.

This scene parallels Akbar's own spiritual revelation, received at a small Muslim shrine, that he should marry Jodhaa. During this scene Akbar stands under a delicate tree against a backdrop of blue sky, invoking Islamic symbols of learning and transcendence. Akbar also receives a spiritual confirmation about the marriage received at his wedding celebration as Sufis dance in praise of a local saint. Akbar joins in with the whirling dancers, filmed overhead to create a hypnotizing pattern of flowing cloth mimicking Akbar's own ethereal experience. The viewer witnesses and participates in the Sufi experience just as they do Jodhaa's darshan with Krishna, validating each religious experience as powerful and meaningful. Sufism and bhakti occupy parallel relationships to Islam and Hinduism, respectively. Mainstream religious adherents consider them emotional, mystical manifestations of the religions, often marginal spaces that stand outside traditional hierarchies within both religions. Sufism and bhakti both ascribe to demonstrative practices that celebrate the devotés diminutive status in relation to their god; this often results in a feminization of both Sufism and bhakti traditions.

Throughout the film Jodhaa's song to Krishna plays, as her religious devotions continue, subtly valorizing Jodhaa's devotions over the Sufis. The song also transfers her devotion from Krishna to Akbar and is thus wrapped up in the couple's erotic life. Early in her stay at the Mughal fort, Jodhaa's clear, lovely singing of the same devotional music draws Akbar from court. He follows the sound of her voice into her

quarters passing through a series of veils and translucent drapes. He finds her kneeling in front of Krishna. He looks briefly at Krishna but then transfers his gaze to her. She sings, unaware of his presence, as the camera circles her much as it had circled Krishna in the earlier scene. The film cuts back to Akbar walking around her until he enters her line of vision. The film cuts on her abrupt turn toward Akbar, falling silent. She transfers her gaze to him, experienced in a series of reverse shots held between the two. Finally, Jodhaa stands and leads him through the daily rite of vermillion that a husband rubs on his wife's forehead to mark her as his wife. Though Akbar's Muslim advisors see her worship as a defilement of the palace, placing a god's shrine at the heart of Muslim-monotheistic rule, Akbar and Jodhaa fall in love as he participates in the daily rituals she performs. Her Hindu practice becomes central to their companionship and growing fidelity. Thus, the film presents Jodhaa as an ideal Hindu wife, observant, obedient, erotic, even in her inauspicious marriage to her Muslim husband.

Yet, Jodhaa's refuses to consummate the marriage until she feels Akbar has earned her heart—the erotic highpoint of the film consists of a sword fight between the two in which Akbar hopes to best Jodhaa and bring her back to his palace. Close-ups and the heavy breathing of the two warriors punctuate the long shots of the wide-ranging fight. The visual trajectory of the fight follows Akbar's unveiling and veiling of Jodhaa, shot in alternating long and medium shots. First Akbar removes the cloth piece of her turban covering her nose and mouth, murmuring compliments about her beauty. Later in the fight he pulls off her turban revealing her long hair. She stands unveiled. Then, at a crucial point, he clips the support ropes for a translucent drape hanging from the palace columns. In slow-motion the drape falls around Jodhaa, veiling her again. He

has taken away her masculine clothing and clothed her in traditional feminine, wifely garb. Jodhaa pulls off the cloth and turns to see Akbar throw flower petals at her, a traditional wedding ritual. The fight becomes an analogy not only for their marriage, but also for the union of India: Jodhaa as the beautiful land of Hind; Akbar the strong protector. In this relationship, Akbar's masterful grasp contains Jodhaa's ferocity and transmutes her strength into the sexual. Akbar must not only know how to conquer her, but also how to rule her, a dialogue exchanged between them earlier in the film. And Jodhaa as fierce woman continues to challenge him: she controls both her sexuality and passions, she is physically strong, she comes from a powerful family, and she spiritually consecrates herself to her gods. These characteristics prove her relentless feminine power, or her shakti. The veiling and re-veiling of Jodhaa creates a concrete image of Akbar's mastery and containment of her power, combined with his growing sensitivity to Hindu customs and culture. Ultimately the two will consummate their marriage and stand side by side on the battlefield as the emperor faces his greatest threat.

Jodhaa's willful efforts to maintain obedience to her god characterize her as an ideal woman. Her obedience to her husband sustains her religious life and her loyalty to Akbar signifies her continued purity. Akbar admires her religious devotion and he successfully courts her by lifting a burdensome worship tax borne almost completely by Hindus in the empire. Jodhaa's commitment to herself and her religion effects important change in the life of the nation and Hindu practitioners. Jodhaa must first sacrifice herself for her father's kingdom. Then she must represent a voice for overburdened Hindus. Finally she stands on the battlefield opposite a force that threatens her husband's empire; that threatening force is characterized by greed, power-lust, and the

Muslim clerics that encourage jihad. At the same time, the film envisions the nation as disparate Hindu kingdoms that need a central rule in order to gain strength and realize its potential grandeur. Akbar realizes his place as that central ruler through his own Muslim religious commitment and expansive attitude toward Hinduism and female power, signaled by the last court meeting held by Akbar, where he welcomes Jodhaa by his side as his Consort, and announces that any threat to her and hers becomes a threat to the Empire.

*Jodhaa Akbar* communicates religious experience through the devotional moments of both Jodhaa and Akbar; their religious experiences grant them respect and understanding for each other, as the devotional sequences are given equal treatment via mise-en-scene, editing, cinematography, and musical scores. This sets the film apart from other films discussed in this chapter because *Jodhaa Akbar* celebrates spiritual transcendence, a step past the simple, even if powerful enactments of religious ritual in *Mangal Pandey* and *Asoka*. *Jodhaa Akbar* invests in a bhakti tradition that brings it close to mythologicals with their dramatization of devotee-god relationships or even courtesan films with their melodramatic interiority externalized through gazaals. The emphasis on bhakti functions as a way to interpret the experiences of Jodhaa and Akbar narratively. Bhakti experience encourages the consumption of the film, because the film engages the audience in the transcendent moment via editing and cinematography.

### Conclusion

The four films examined here use the fierce Hindu woman to strengthen nationalist narratives. The trajectory of the fierce woman allows for growing self knowledge, sexual and marital maturity, and physical confidence as she moves from

domestic to global spaces, inspiring her male co-revolutionaries to greater sacrifice. The fierce woman is aligned with Hindu mythology and ritual and the films valorize Hindu engagement in the nationalist project. That said, these films are more complex than a straightforward Hindu-Indian propaganda, as multiple communities are mobilized within the narratives to achieve national sovereignty. Her responsibility to lead various caste, religious, and gender groups in the fight for the primacy of the Indian nation ultimately tempers the fierce woman.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This dissertation analyzes the differing representational strategies in play in the historical films affiliated with select religious communities. Each community under discussion exists within a particular global, national, historical, and cultural matrix, where said relationships result in specific anxieties within the community. Hence, the resulting films differ in how they manage the attendant anxieties of globalization, though they all similarly manifest these strategies around female figures. I discuss these filmic representations below through an understanding of narrative trajectories and film style. All three cinemas work out their aesthetic and representational strategies in relation to Hollywood cinema; use the historical film as a postcolonial strategy aimed at identity formation; benefit from access to expanded resources and funding; and aestheticize moments of transcendence through restrained presentation.

### **Narrative Trajectory**

All three cinemas discuss the relationship of the religious community with the host nation-state. Both Mormon and post-Beur films speak from a position of disenfranchisement. Mormon films argue for inclusion within the nation-state as religious practitioners, imagining their characters as American first and Mormon second through the conversion and restoration story narratives prevalent in historical narratives. The films start with a young, blonde Joseph Smith in frontier America who becomes Mormon, and so the trajectory places us first in the nation-state with a shift to the religious community. The central traumas of these films converge on the realization that one cannot practice Mormonism and remain protected by American rule of law. The films' narratives push the religious community toward constant relocation, always

searching for a geography of freedom, a city, town, or empty land where Mormons can practice their religion and their nationality. Conversely, post-Beur films start within the Muslim home, envisaged as an extension of North Africa and, notably, its religious practices and patriarchy. The home is the Casbah, to paraphrase Aisha the mother-in-law in *Inch'allah Dimanche*. The narrative trajectory moves the heroine from the private home into public spaces, schools, streets, and jobs, where she can develop autonomously into a vibrant French citizen. Post-Beur films imagine religion and nationality as mutually exclusive communities; one must choose one or the other, and true freedom occurs only under French secular law. This directly opposes Mormon films' insistence that one can be both disciple and citizen; yet Mormon films can only maintain both by keeping women in the home where they firmly preserve the boundaries of religious identity.

Like Mormon films, Bollywood historical epics argue that religion and nation can co-exist. In fact Bollywood films imagine (Hindu) religion and its ritual as the foundation of true civic engagement. Bollywood heroines develop through their deployment of marital ceremonies into fierce warriors who lead their people to battle forces dangerous to the state. Thus, Bollywood heroines exist untethered to the private home throughout historical epics, graced with a mobility not found in Mormon and post-Beur films. The Bollywood heroine ranges through cities and forests, sexually autonomous, outspoken, ready to defend herself and her family. Her trajectory is to move from girlish flirtations to wifely maturity, from princess to queen, from isolation to group dominance, usually with a host of armies to support her. Yet, at the same time the films are cinematic fantasies, stylistically at odds with both post-Beur and Mormon cinemas.

## Film Style

All three cinemas examined here work in distinct and developed film styles that greatly shape their reception, marketing, and interpretation. Bollywood's most striking stylistic characteristics remain its investment in glamour, melodrama, and fantasy, used to overwhelm the audience and transport them to a dreamscape peopled with the beautiful, rich, and powerful. Though the epics discussed here draw upon actual historical events, the films themselves are fashioned on romantic melodramas evidenced through the performance, cinematography, and editing, and infused with spectacle via the mise-en-scene. Costuming and set design rely on ornate jewelry and furnishings, sumptuous fabrics of brilliant hues, expansive interiors populated with countless extras. The camera swirls and cranes and pans, snaking fluidly from long shots to close-ups, to reflect the characters' intense emotions. The film narratives use doomed love affairs and tragic misunderstandings to propel the plot forward. The visual imagery and narrative excess of the films work to camouflage the characterizations of the female warriors. Case in point is Kareena Kapoor's portrayal of Kaurwaki in *Asoka* or Aishwarya Rai's embodiment of Jodhaa in *Jodhaa Akbar*. When the film focuses so much attention on Kapoor's bare, lithe back or Rai's blue eyes glimmering with tears, it may be difficult to note the progressive religious commentary that these films evoke. The spectacle, central to the film style, reduces such commentary, and the narrative and visual choices that produce it, to yet another component of the melodramatic excess. The strong religious women who achieve civic power become merely a type in one of Bollywood's many genres.

Conversely, post-Beur film's embrace of naturalist cinema styles, coming from a legacy of Franco-French auteur filmmaking, attributes a truth claim to the films that

evade the Bollywood fantasies. The post-Beur films become social documents that prove or disprove Maghrebi realities in contemporary France. *Samia*, for example, uses non-professional actors, hand-held camera work, naturalist lighting, and on location settings to suggest that Samia is an actual girl in an actual family that exists independent of the writer/director and film crew that surround the actor playing the title character. The film style so effectively argues this truth claim that the films as fiction, as fantasy peopled with witches (mothers, stepmothers, or mothers-in-law), big bad wolves (husbands, fathers, or brothers), and innocent young girls stepping out into the forest for the first time (our protagonist making her way through Parisian streets), becomes difficult to see.

Mormon historical films, intent on copying Hollywood style, succeed neither as fantasies nor as social dramas. Instead these films remain an awkward fit of religious dogma and historical romance. These films use period costumes, handsome landscapes, and occasional historical events to spur on the romantic developments between main characters. The love talk includes religious testimony, and the most impressive settings support the scenes of spiritual witness. In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Emma and Joseph court against lovely backdrops of the changing seasons, as Joseph whispers to her about his divine calling. Only in the two films without a heteronormative romance (*Fourth Witness* and *Eliza and I*) does the spiritual life of the protagonists exist independent of their sexual relationships. As expected, both these films also refute Hollywood style.

### **Relation to Hollywood**

Each cinema discussed here dialogues with the globalizing totality of Hollywood cinema, either as a space of difference or as a global competitor. Mormon cinema,

created in the literal shadow of Hollywood production, mobilizes Hollywood representational strategies, genres, narrative structures, and talent (actors, writers, directors, editors, animators) in an appeal to an American audience raised on Hollywood fare. At the same time, Mormon cinema hopes to become an alternative to Hollywood in content, offering stories about the Mormon experience that rewrite existing Hollywood narratives about Mormons and the devout, or create a space for Mormon cultural or theological concerns where none had previously existed. Mormon cinema's relationship to Hollywood is best understood in the constant movement of Mormon filmmakers in and out of Hollywood production. Directors like Ryan Little [*Out of Step* (2002); *Saints and Soldiers* (2003); *Forever Strong* (2008)], Richard Dutcher [*Eliza and I* (1997); *God's Army* (2000); *Brigham City* (2001); *Evil Angel* (2009)], and Jared Hess [*Napoleon Dynamite* (2004); *Nacho Libre* (2006); *Gentlemen Broncos* (2009)] have moved profitably from Mormon cinema beginnings to more mainstream Hollywood productions, but rarely back into Mormon cinema.

Actors and directors in France's post-Beur film culture have a similar trajectory, moving from banlieue or beur or hip-hop productions to more established funding, production, and distribution resources. Post-Beur filmmakers triangulate their relationship with Hollywood through their liminal status with mainstream French filmmaking. Actors move in and out of mainstream filmmaking, evidenced by the careers of Roschdy Zem and Zaïda Ghorab-Volta, who play ethnic characters and non-marked characters as the need arises. France has long upheld a tradition of auteur filmmaking, which allows new filmmakers access to government grants and funding and provides an institutionally sanctioned approach to their mode of filmmaking. Mainstream

French cinema's emphasis on psychological realism, loose narrative structures, and on-location production, within the context of smaller budgets and smaller distribution markets, allows access to filmmaking apparatus in a way that is unavailable in America, due in large part to Hollywood's cultural and economic dominance of production, exhibition, and distribution. Mehdi Charef, one of the first Beur filmmakers with *Le Thé au Harem d'Archimede* (1985), profited greatly from his status as a novelist in France in order to access government grants for novelists turned filmmakers. His long and varied career has focused on women's stories and themes, creating a filmography of difference [*Au Pays de Juliefs* (1992); *Marie-Line* (2000); *La Fille de Keltoum* (2001)]. Despite Charef's success, many ethnic filmmakers in France are still pigeon-holed in a way that frustrates their career and artistic ambitions, while they find themselves deemed representatives of French cinema in international contexts like film festivals and in comparison to Hollywood films.

Bollywood cinema is the one cinema under discussion here that has the global networks to compete with Hollywood. These networks are related to the Indian diaspora and previous Cold War distribution networks; marketed to audiences who find Hollywood storytelling and representational strategies alienating and offensive. These audiences turn to Bollywood, for its orality, family-centered stories, and political alignments. Yet, Bollywood filmmakers find themselves adopting Hollywood formal choices to appeal to diasporic audiences in Anglo-speaking countries, who are acculturated in Hollywood film. Thus, Bollywood's constant tension with Hollywood provides a viable alternative to Hollywood but also works to gain dominance of Hollywood markets. Bollywood films have long used international locales for musical

production numbers and focused on the NRI as a central character; more recent changes include incorporating Western music styles into the soundtrack (*Rang de Basanti* is one example, but the films scored by A.R. Rahman provide ample evidence of this) and the turn to digital special effects and other computer-generated effects (as seen in *Main Hoon Na*, Farah Khan, 2004). This anxious relationship with Hollywood, manifested by all three cinemas, resolves itself through the creation of historical films.

### **Historical Epics as Postcolonial Strategy**

The production of historical films by North African minority filmmakers in France and from Bollywood studios reveals an obvious postcolonial tactic. In France, Maghrebi filmmakers articulate alternative historiographies to accepted French colonial history through such films as *Indigènes* and *Cartouches Gauloises*. As important, films like *Le Gone du Chaaba* and *Inch'allah Dimanche* combat cultural stereotypes of the North African migrant in France, and open up space for critique of the migrant community itself. Likewise, Bollywood historical epics like *Mangal Pandey*, *Lagaan*, *Rang de Basanti* rewrite British colonial histories about the independence movement. Films like *Umrao Jaan*, *Jodhaa Akbar* and *Asoka* locate a glorious nationalist past in a pre-national India, in an India before the interruption of the British Empire.

These same films combat Hollywood's neo-imperialist control of global film markets, offering audiences specific culturally-defined content, representations, and narratives that Hollywood cannot concern itself with in its attempt to appeal to all audiences all the time. Mormon cinema too uses historical films in an effort to differentiate its film product (and its religious identity) from Hollywood. Mormon historicals revise Hollywood and American stereotypes of Mormon culture by positioning

early Mormons as middle-class, monogamous, benevolent patriarchs, who share household duties and religious truths with their educated, talented wives.

Ultimately, historical films result from expanded funding, production, exhibition, and distribution resources. These resources mark development for filmmakers from the North African migrant community. *Indigènes* was produced for \$16 million, large by mainstream French film standards, and financed by France 2, France 3, and Studio Canal (Variety May 9, 2005). The Moroccan government lent 10,000 soldiers, as well as World War II vehicles, costumes and weapons to the production (Variety May 16, 2005). After the success of *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, Canal Plus picked up a 2-picture deal with director Benguigui (Variety March 11, 2002). All of this speaks to confidence in these films to sell well to French and international audiences, ie, the strength of Maghrebi consumers, and an openness in Franco-French culture to this historical revision. For Bollywood films, historical films mark a consolidation of Bombay cinema as a national cinema. Bollywood creates the national historiography and exports it to Indians and Indian heritage communities around the globe. Remember that the pageantry of Jodha Akbar cost over \$11 million dollars, one of the most expensive films to date in Bollywood. For Mormons, though, the emphasis on historical films I see as a sign of stagnation. Mormons have yet to make a feasible drama that treats Mormon anxieties in the present (though Christian Vuissa's *One Good Man* in 2009 is the most recent attempt).<sup>35</sup> The historical films under discussion here merely recycle official church

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<sup>35</sup> See Richard Dutcher's open letter to the Provo Daily Herald critiquing Mormon cinema's "diminishing quality" ("Richard Dutcher: 'Parting Words' on Mormon Movies." *Daily Herald*. 4/11/2007. Web. Accessed 4/8/2010.)

histories and avoid the challenges of modern Mormonism; this may be the very reason they can secure funding from investors.

### **Restrained Transcendence**

The films discussed here offer a restrained transcendence for audience members. The filmmakers behind these films are aiming at a wider audience than their own community; and even the niche religious community may be uncomfortable watching their religious experiences projected in the public, secular space of the movie theatre. Hence, the historical films explored here use transcendence sparingly in their aesthetics, narratives, or themes. Often enough, the films sublimate sacred experience to romantic intimacy, community affiliation, and the narrative highs and lows of religious-national confrontation. The Mormon context becomes especially pertinent here. The religious doctrine that distinguishes Mormonism from other Protestant religions, that God continues to reveal revelation to a chosen prophet, remains unexplored. Filmmakers make no effort to investigate what this might look like, outside already established Mormon iconography surrounding Joseph Smith's visionary youth, and even these are kept to a minimum. For films from the North African migrant community in France, the paucity of transcendent spiritual experiences results from the ultimate goal of the films, which characterizes the marginalization of women within the religious community. Thus, these films reduce religious experience to the mundane or tie it to female vulnerability, ie purdah, marriage, veiling. Bollywood films, working on a larger scale than either of the minor cinemas, uses pageantry and ritual throughout the films discussed here. But in *Mangal Pandey* and *Rang de Basanti*, these invoke an evolving nationalism; in *Asoka* these bring into play sexual desire and its obfuscation. Only *Jodha Akbar* treats the religious experiences as transcendent and primarily spiritual.

This of course is the goal of the film, to create a religious parity between Hinduism and Islam, and then to advocate for a national secularism to achieve unity, strength, and progress. Ultimately, the lack of transcendence in these films speaks to a continuing struggle with identity, autonomy, and an effort to situate a religious community's stories and aesthetics within a greater global marketplace.

### **Women in Religious Film**

My criticism reclaims marginalized female experience within religious historical epics by centering my analysis on women characters. I advocate for a reading approach that assumes an extant female agency both within and without the religious community, while acknowledging that patriarchal hierarchies very often circumscribe female religious experience. My criticism foregrounds how female characters negotiate these patriarchal hierarchies (religious, national, cultural, or global) through an exploration of mise-en-scene, camera work, and narrative. The changing representation of women throughout these films points to the fluid nature of gender within religious and national cultures. Bollywood films from the last twenty years, for example, illustrate the movement of female characters from middle class brides of the 1990s wedding genres to the powerful warrior-princesses of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both genres engage in fantasy, but the fantasies articulated for Bollywood audiences have reconfigured into one where women demonstrate female power with physical prowess and state authority.

My work defines religious modernities within each of the cinemas examined here, and reveals that the films demonstrate uneven, gendered modernities. In Bollywood film, male characters exist as both civic and religious leaders, while women must claim these through the rituals of marriage. The female characters eventually arrive at the end

of the films at the place where male characters began the film: individuals granted self-definition and choice. Conversely, in post-Beur films, female characters achieve a mobility that is in fact withheld from male characters, brothers and fathers contented with the limited privileges of a withering religious patriarchy. Post-Beur heroines engage with secular citizenship, trading obedience to a religious patriarchy for affiliation with a national patriarchy, and this realignment endows them with a limited autonomy unavailable to male characters. Mormon female characters move in exactly the opposite direction as post-Beur women characters, using secular reason to acquire the security of the religious home.

My dissertation reveals that films from religious communities deploy multiple strategies to engage with globalization's influence. These strategies include validating patriarchal structures within the religion in order to characterize female work and commitment as seen in Mormon cinema; rejecting religious life, patriarchal hierarchy specifically but cultural affiliation generally, for secular autonomy as seen in post-Beur cinema; and creating a fantasy space where women perform religious ritual to gain access to civic power, as seen in Bollywood films. Yet, I propose that these cinemas use female figures as a way to visualize how the fluid boundaries of religion and secularism shift and shape in the lives of their communities. Further, these cinemas use women characters and their experience as a site of aesthetic beauty connected to explorations of the transcendent.

## APPENDIX A

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR CHAPTER FOUR

**Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** Indian People's Party. Conservative political party that controlled Indian national politics from 1998 to 2004. Formed in opposition to the Indian National Congress party in 1980; characterized by nationalist, expansionist ideologies which situate Hinduism as a political regime.

**Bhagat Singh:** A socialist activist based in Lahore (now Pakistan) who assassinated a police officer in response to the execution of a co-revolutionary. His martyrdom inspired youth around the country to rise up against the British colonial power.

**Bhakti:** a devotional tradition within Hinduism which values worship over juridical exactness.

**Choli:** A short blouse worn under a sari, exposing the navel. Until British rule the choli was backless. Contemporarily many styles of choli exist, often influenced by film fashion.

**Churidar:** Tightly fitting pants with excess material that rests in folds at the ankles. Worn by men or women. Women generally wear with a kameez, or long shirt.

**Dalit:** Contemporary self-designation for communities traditionally regarded as untouchables within the caste system.

**Darshan:** A devotional process of beholding a god or guru, where the devotee holds the gaze of the honored one. Often discussed in film studies as an alternative to the male gaze.

**Dharma:** temporal duty which extends to marital, sexual, financial, and parental spheres.

**Durgavati:** A princess of Uttar Pradesh who lead her people in battle against the Mughal army during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. After initial victories she was defeated and killed herself on the battlefield.

**Hinduvta:** an umbrella term to describe Hindu nationalist movements.

**Holi:** a spring holiday characterized by throwing colored powders at people in the streets. This holiday is explained by a variety of legends and myths, dependent on the location of the celebration. One of these legends associates Holi with the courtship of Krishna and Radha.

**Kali:** the black-skinned goddess historically associated with annihilation.

**Krishna:** an avatar of the god Vishnu; characterized as playful, lusty, and seductive in appearance and manner. Krishna is often associated with Radha, his shakti.

Kurta: A loose shirt that drapes wearer to the knees. Often worn with pajama, churidar, or salwar.

Manusmriti: Vedic text which sets out the caste system and associated dharmas.

Rani of Jhansi: Queen in Maratha who participated in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, co-extant with the Sepoy Rebellion and the legend of Mangal Pandey.

Rhada: a young milkmaid or cowherd who falls in love with Krishna, though both are married to other people.

Sepoy: a native Indian private in the British colonial army.

Shakti: female creative power responsible for change. Considered erratic and dangerous in single women, shakti is harnessed through marriage to strengthen families.

Vedas: Sanskrit literature which forms the sacred texts of Hinduism. Many timelines exist to place the creation of this literature, conservative estimates hold that the literature was written between 1500-500BCE.

Vedic: Texts written after the Veda period which extend Veda principles. Examples include the Bhagavad Gita and devotional Bhakti texts.

Vermillion: a red pigment used in marital rituals in Hindu families.

Vishpala: A mythical female soldier with an iron leg

## APPENDIX B LIST OF FILMS

- 17 Rue Bleue*. Dir. Chad Chenouga. Perf. Lysiane Meis. 2001. DVD.
- A House Divided*. Dir. Sterling Van Wagenen. Perf. Jonathan Scarfe. 2006. DVD.
- American Zion*. Dir. Sterling Van Wagenen. Perf. Jonathan Scarfe. 2005. DVD.
- Asoka*. Dir. Santosh Sivan. Perf. Shahrukh Khan. 2001. DVD.
- Cartouches Gauloises*. Dir. Mehdi Charef. Perf. Mohamed Faouzi Ali Cherif. 2007. DVD.
- Eliza and I*. Dir. Richard Dutcher. Writer & Perf. Elizabeth Hansen. 1997. DVD.
- Emma Smith: My Story*. Dir. T.C. Christensen. Perf. Katherine Nelson. 2008. DVD.
- Fourth Witness: The Mary Whitmer Story*. Dir. Spencer Filichia. Perf. Barta Heiner. 1997. DVD.
- Inch'Allah Dimanche*. Dir. Yamina Benguigui. Perf. Fejria Deliba. 2001. DVD.
- Jodhaa Akbar*. Dir. Ashutosh Gowariker. Perf. Aishwarya Rai. 2008. DVD.
- La Petite Jerusalem*. Dir. Karin Albou. Perf. Fanny Vallete. 2005. DVD.
- Le Petit Chat est Mort*. Dir. Fejria Deliba. Perf. Linda Chaïb. 1991. Video Database.
- Praise to the Man*. Dir. T.C. Christensen. Writer. Gary Cook. Interview with Truman Madsen. 2005. DVD.
- Rang de Basanti*. Dir. Rakesh Omprakash Mehra. Perf. Aamir Khan. 2006. DVD.
- Samia*. Dir. Phillippe Faucon. Perf. Lynda Benahouda. 2001. DVD.
- The Passion of the Christ*. Dir. Mel Gibson. Perf. James Caviezel. 2004. DVD.
- The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey*. Dir. Ketan Mehta. Perf. Aamir Khan. 2005. DVD.
- The Work and the Glory*. Dir. Russell Holt. Perf. Jonathan Scarfe. 2004. DVD.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Heather Bigley earned a Bachelor of Arts in theatre and media arts from Brigham Young University in 1999, having interrupted her education for two years to serve a humanitarian mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Suisse Romande. That experience has greatly influenced her education trajectory to date. In 2000, Ms. Bigley returned to schooling at the University of Houston's Creative Writing program in Fiction. The program also provided extensive course work in postcolonial literature, which convinced Ms. Bigley to continue academic work at the University of Florida in 2006. In the interim, Ms. Bigley worked as an admin/lecturer for the University of Houston's College of Technology, developing writing courses, serving on master's thesis committees, completing college service, and training and managing teaching assistants. Ms. Bigley's work at the University of Houston afforded her several grants to develop teaching through new media. At the University of Florida, Ms. Bigley was awarded the Center for European Studies Travel Grant, allowing her to travel to archives in Paris to research narrative short films for her dissertation. She has also been awarded a teaching award from the University of Florida Writing Program. Ms. Bigley is married to Kwang Lee, a poet.