

# *Popular Culture: Issues & Perspectives*



# Study of popular culture is central to the agenda of cultural studies



- Popular culture stands for the culture of the ‘people’.
- Who are these people?
- Undifferentiated collection of persons irrespective of their class, gender, ethnic and racial specificities.
- Such an understanding of ‘popular’ (as an adjective of people ) becomes highly problematic because popular culture stands for everything what all people experience as ‘culture’

# Raymond Williams on Popular Culture



- Well liked by many people
- Inferior kind of work
- Work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people
- Culture actually made by the people for themselves

## John Storey's Six Interpretations of Popular Culture

- The culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people *like films, music, festivals etc.*
- The culture which is leftover after we have decided what is high culture --- *Inferior 'Other' of the High Culture*
- **Mass culture**--developed by Frankfurt School which looked at mass culture as an *imposed culture, imposed on the helpless masses by the powerful 'culture industry'*

(Adorno & Horkheimer)





## Stor(e)y Continued.....

- The culture which originates from the people—  
*folk-culture*
- A site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups in society and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups in society

Stuart Hall: *“Popular culture is one of the sites where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it....”*

### **The Postmodern Idea of Culture**

# Critiquing the Elite Polemics



- Herbert Gans, an eminent American sociologist contests the binary opposition between high culture and popular culture. In his *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1973) he offers a critique of both Frankfurt School and the Leavisites for creating the artificial distinction between mass culture and high art. According to Gans, their contention that commodity based mass culture being emotionally destructive and intellectually sterile is both empirically and theoretically untenable. He states clearly that **there is absolutely no distinction between high, mass and popular culture and that they are only different dimensions of cultural production in modern industrialized society which calls for sociological investigation**

# What does it include & do?

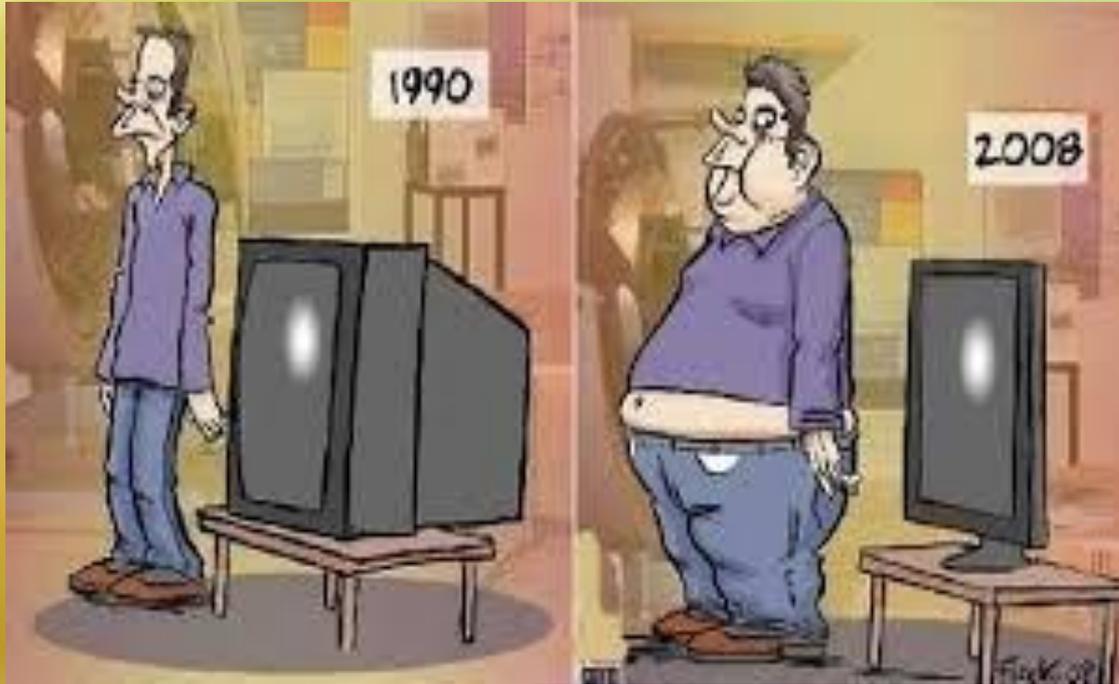


- Popular culture includes varieties of cultural forms like television, radio, newspapers, magazines, music, films, internet etc.
- It is all pervasive, reaching people cutting across national and cultural boundaries .
- Simon During asserts that popular culture *“is a bank of pleasure and meaning .”*
- Popular culture is committed to **immediate pleasure** which wraps its seriousness in entertainment.
- Unlike ‘timeless’ classics, its first requirement is to be consumable now

# **All Fun & No Work.....**

- **Official culture preserved in art galleries, museums and university courses demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge**
- **But popular culture doesn't demand our cultivated taste because of its 'transitory' nature. Its main purpose again, is to impart fun and pleasure.**
- **Simon During even goes to the extent of declaring that popular culture is aimed at those who do not have a serious interest in culture: it is in the culture of people seeking to relax, forget work and have a good time in their leisure hours.**

# John Fiske on Pleasure Dynamics



- *Television Culture* (1987)
- *Reading the Popular Culture* (1989)
- *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989)

# Fiske goes pop.....



I have a strong vulgar taste and my academic training has failed to squash my enjoyment and participation in popular pleasures---I watch T.V game shows....I experience them both as a fan from the inside and as an academic from a critical distance .... I love the sensational tabloid press, I read trashy popular novels and enjoy popular blockbuster movies ..... Despite all this, I do not think I am the **dope** of the capitalist system because I can find great pleasure within it ; in fact, my pleasures typically have an edge of difference to them, an awareness that they are my pleasures that I produce for myself out of their resources, and that in some way, I am, from their point of view, **misusing their resources for my pleasure**

# Mission Impossible...



- The dominant and hegemonic groups may be guided by commercial interests and ideological motives while producing popular cultural forms like films and television serials . However, modern consumer is intelligent enough to accept or reject them based upon his own choice

# A Site of Resistance too.....

- These popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural source
- Pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts , fracture its homogeneity or coherence, raid or
- **encroach upon its terrain**



# Semiotic Democracy



- **Consumer here succeeds in resisting the dominant forces of capitalism by manipulating and altering the cultural meanings to suit his needs**
- **Participatory nature of popular culture where consumers are empowered to create their own meanings**
- **A popular text treats its readers as members of semiotic democracy, already equipped with the competencies to make meanings and motivated by pleasure**

# Television as a 'Producerly' Text

- Even though cultural texts are produced by powerful capitalist corporations, the consumer exhibits remarkable resilience and courage in resisting their ideological imperatives by adopting novel semiotic tactics.
- Therefore, popular culture becomes a 'semiotic' battleground which enacts a struggle between the dominant market ideology and the consumer armed with his own strategies to resist and create meaning for himself .



# Popular Culture in India



- **Harmonious Co-existence of the Classical & Desi**
- **Various Versions of *Ramayana* & *Mahabharat* in Popular Culture**

# **Bollywood & Other Woods.....**

- **Dominance of Indian Films**
- **More than 1600 films made annually**
- **Films, television & Cricket are the 3 dominant components of pan-Indian Popular Culture**



# Arrival of Television



- **Came to India in 1959**
- **Confined only to the Metropolitan Centers**
- **Explosion of Television Culture in 1990s**
- **150 million TV sets**
- **More than 500 channels**
- **Instrumental in popularising Cricket**

**MORE THAN 45% OF ELECTRICITY  
WILL BE SAVED IN INDIA**



**IF SAAS-BAHU SERIALS  
ARE BANNED**

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# Dominance of Saas-Bahu Stereotype



- Intense Family Drama
- Endless recycling of the Same theme with Marginal variations
- Conflict between Tradition & Modernity
- Portrays a modern woman coming to terms with Tradition & Patriarchy

# Regressive Narratives

- Erase concerns with social and gender justice to foreground the interests of a unitary family
- Contest modern secularism
- Offer ‘traditional’ notions of community obligations and mutuality as liberatory
- **Undoing of feminism in Indian popular culture**



# Bollywood is equally culpable.....

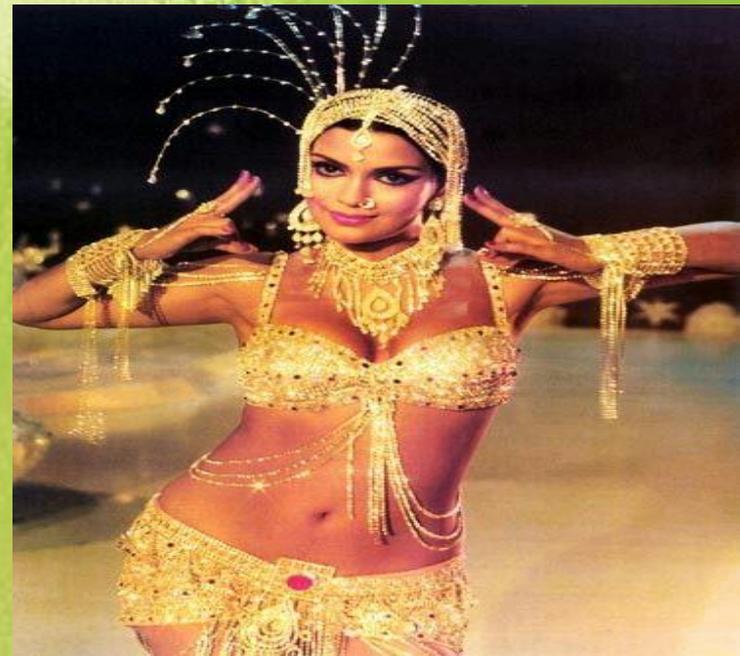
- Regressive themes in films that include subjugation of women provide men with moral reinforcement to perpetuate gender stereotypes and sanction acts of domestic violence
- Woman described as item/maal



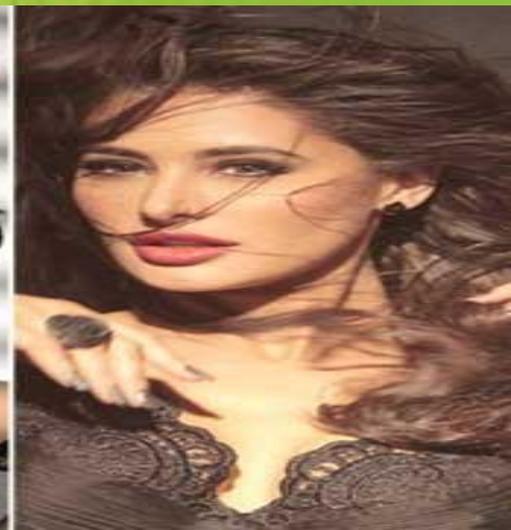
- **Commodification of Woman's Body by the Market**
- Visualize her as a collection of measurable assets that are available for scrutiny and consumption
- **Entrapped in Market oriented Regressive Modernity**

## Objectification of the Female Lead

- Three categories of sexual objectification
- 1) The tribal costume: cabaret dance, exposure of vast expanses of the woman's body, short skirts, brief blouses and veil-less upper torso



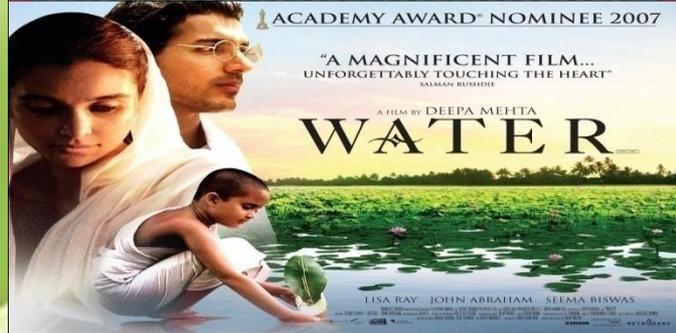
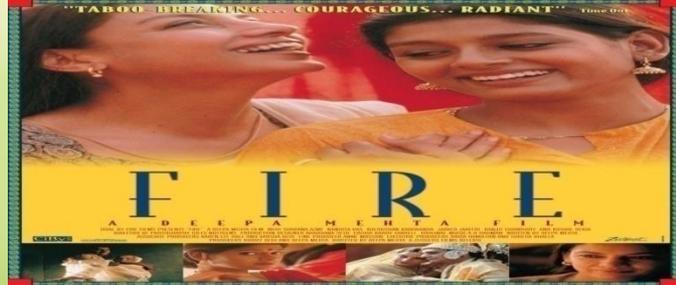
- 2) The wet sari: legitimized by “a sudden torrential downpour that soaks the woman’s flimsy sari and allows for a very provocative and sexually tantalizing exposure of the female body
- 3) the behind the bush scene
- The camera’s point of view caters primarily to this male sexual fantasy.
- **Scopophilia**



- stereotyped mothers, sisters and wives are all images that are well thought of before being implemented.



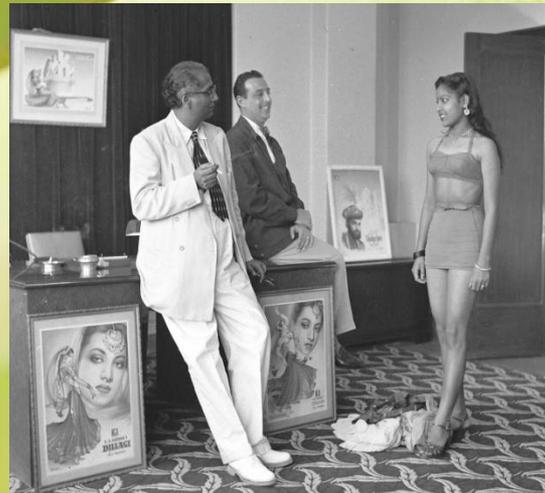
- Films are rarely told from the point of view of the woman because such films do not sell.
- **role of lesbians, role of the independent widow(Fire/Water)**
- The woman is actually surrendering herself to the male gaze and rapidly losing control over how her body is used in films and what it is used to portray
- The female lead is mostly a supporting cast to the male hero's lead in the film
- **Socio-cultural and historical factors – the power structure in society, patriarchy and the dominance of male fantasy**



- Epic prototypes like Sita, Radha, Draupadi and Savitri, who cater to the patriarchal fantasy of what a women should be like, overrule the feminist epic character traits of the Goddesses (Kali, Durga)
- The Film viewing audience has certain beliefs, values and attitudes which they want cinema to conform to
- The masses are not mature enough to challenge various notions in scholarly and academic fashions and choose to resort to mobilizing mass political propaganda and violence instead.



- Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at
- As "bearer, not the maker of meaning"



# **English educated Elites: High Culture?**

- **Consumers of Hollywood &  
English TV Serials**

**American Popular Culture  
is transformed into  
High Culture in India**



# To Conclude.....



All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume.

(Noam Chomsky)

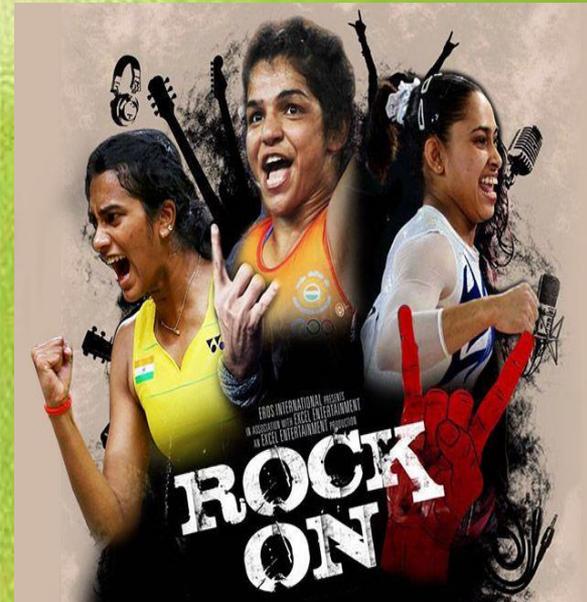
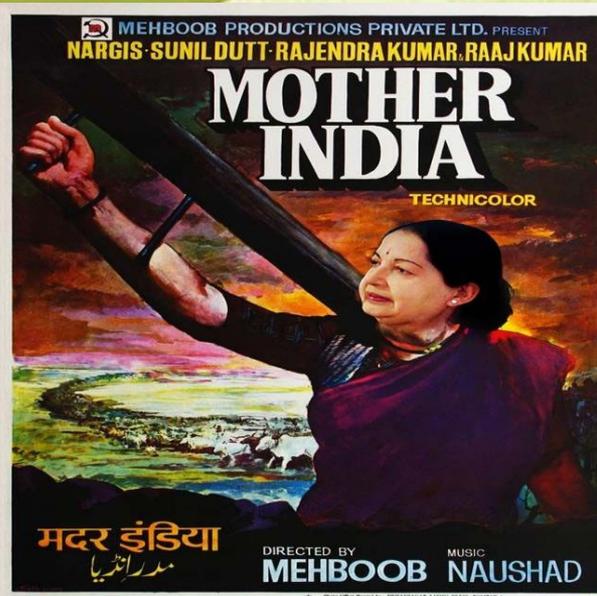
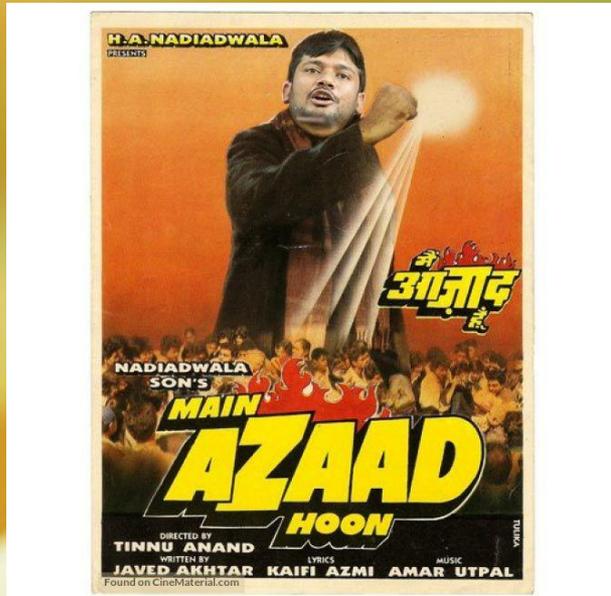
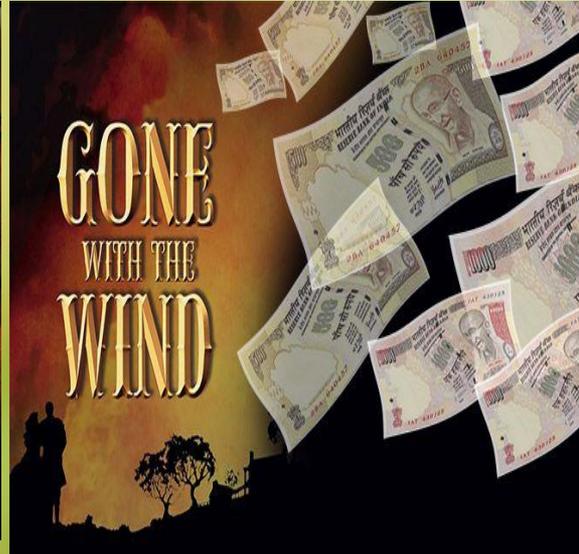
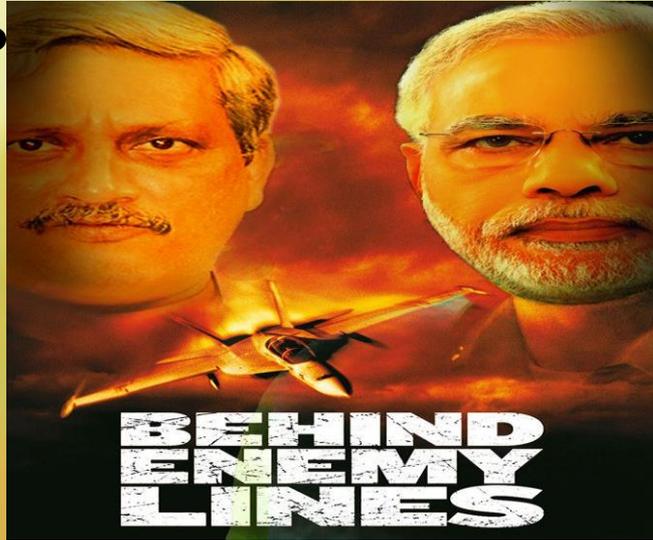
# Doing Cultural Studies: A Model

## *Interrogating Female Sexuality, Patriarchy and Power in Popular Hindi Serials*

- **I Introduction—History of Television in India**
- **II Television and Popular Culture**
- **III Regrafting Stereotypes in Popular Imagination: Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan***
- **IV Myth of Negotiation: Patriarchy and Power in Ekta Kapoor's Tele serials**
- **V Conclusion**



JUST FOR FUN!!!!!!



RHF

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