



Female Stardom and Mysterious Deaths in the Bollywood Industry: The Case of Shantipriya from Farah Khan's Om Shanti Om

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Abstract

Om Shanti Om, a 2007 Hindi commercial film by Farah Khan, is an uncanny story of a male film extra, Om, who gets killed in the attempt to save a popular female star, Shantipriya, from a heinous murder. The uncanny way he is reborn and goes on to avenge Shantipriya's death forms the premise of the film. What is only used as a catalyst but never deliberated upon on its own terms is the mystery created around the murder of Shantipriya. A discussion of Shantipriya's murder may seem of little consequence until one thinks about the history of sudden female star deaths in the industry and how they have been popularized as 'mystery deaths' for gossip by the public and the Bollywood fraternity in explicitly gendered terms. Mysteries are created and circulated in the media around sudden male star deaths as well, but while reporting sudden deaths of female stars, there is a gendered angle to it. In my paper, I deal with mystery-creation in the media by film fraternity members, public and reporters, as a reaction to sudden star deaths. I contextualize this component of star death reactions in the current research on mourning and celebrity deaths and discourses on stardom in Bollywood studies. My questions are--How is a gendered mystery-creation around her sudden death related to the female star's nature of stardom? How can the reaction to Shantipriya's death in the film's narrative be framed within this argument?

Keywords: Star deaths; Controversial narratives; Gender; Bollywood; Stardom; Female stars

Introduction

In the weeks following the Bollywood film star Sushant Singh Rajput's sudden death on June 14th, 2020, the newspapers in India and social media platforms have been flooded with speculations and blame-games on the cause of his death. These conversations bring under focus an area of

discussion that has been brushed under the carpet for a long time in Bollywood-stardom and mysterious deaths. If one takes a look at the reactions in public and in the industry to the unexpected deaths of film stars in the past, one can see the glaring difference between the nature of public and industry reactions initiated by Sushant Singh Rajput, a male star's sudden death, compared to those caused by the sudden deaths of female stars like Divya Bharti, Sridevi, and Jiah Khan. While the reactions to Sushant's sudden death are more sympathetic to the male star, the nature of sympathy with female star deaths is quite different. The female star that I focus my argument on is Shantipriya, a fictional actor from the Bollywood film, Om Shanti Om. I situate the controversy around her sudden death within a larger tradition of gender-biased media controversies around sudden female star deaths--a practice the public is all too familiar with.

The gendered controversies created around sudden female star deaths lend a misogynistic colour to the mourning of their death. When Sridevi Kapoor died, the director Ram Gopal Varma, contributed to a rumour that said that she indulged in too much cosmetic surgery (which led to her heart failure) by writing an open letter to her fans. Varma wrote in the letter that Sridevi was really using too much 'makeup' physically and 'psychologically' to hide her 'insecurities'. He goes on to call her 'naive' and 'a child trapped in a woman's body' for that [1]. Similarly, about Parveen Babi, another female star who reportedly died of starvation in her home, even ETimes along with other tabloids write that she was 'mentally fragile' even though there is no concrete proof of her schizophrenia. It was only 'believed' to have been her mental condition. This assumption has been gendered by producer Mahesh Bhatt who calls her condition the consequence of her bold persona: "She represented everything that can go wrong for people who lay down the rules of what is right or at least what is desirable" [2] Parveen Babi had been a star who had changed the definition of a modern respectable woman with her 'Western' outfits. Such gendered rumors regarding her mental health fueled controversial narratives in the media about the cause of her death. For this paper, I shall examine an extremely metatextual Bollywood film whose plot includes a mysterious

death of a female star and the controversial narrative formed around it.

Om Shanti Om, a 2007 Hindi commercial film by Farah Khan, is an uncanny story of a male film extra, Om, who gets killed in the attempt to save a popular female star, Shantipriya, from a heinous murder. The uncanny way he is reborn and goes on to avenge Shantipriya's death forms the premise of the film. What is only used as a catalyst but never deliberated upon on its own terms is the mystery created around the murder of Shantipriya. A discussion of Shantipriya's murder may seem of little consequence until one thinks about the history of sudden female star deaths in the industry and how they have been popularized as 'mystery deaths' for gossip by the public and the Bollywood fraternity in explicitly gendered terms. Mysteries are created and circulated in the media around sudden male star deaths as well, but while reporting sudden deaths of female stars, there is a gendered angle to it. In my paper, I deal with mystery-creation in the media by film fraternity members, public and reporters, as a reaction to sudden star deaths. I contextualize this component of star death reactions in the current research on mourning and celebrity deaths and discourses on stardom in Bollywood studies. My questions are--How is a gendered mystery-creation around her sudden death related to the female star's nature of stardom? How can the reaction to Shantipriya's death in the film's narrative be framed within this argument?

The female star, Shantipriya, from Om Shanti Om is much swooned-upon, and has made a huge name on the dint of her beauty and versatility as a star. However, the star's influence ends abruptly with her sudden death (masked as disappearance) and she is quickly relegated to an idea of the past in the film's narrative. Before we discuss her death, it is important to examine how the structure of her star image is gendered in the film. I am highly indebted to the discourse on female stardom in Bollywood studies in my examination of the gendered nature of Shantipriya's stardom, and then in making connections to the gendering of the mystery created around her death.

Gendered Components of Female Stardom and Shantipriya

There are multiple components to the star image of female stars in Bollywood that are specific to their personality and some that are quite common among all of them, just as it is with male stars. Gendered components of their star texts fall under the common traits that can continue across generations and also among contemporaries. Kareena Kapoor has faced the same questions as her contemporary Aishwarya Rai about her on-screen desirability after marriage and pregnancy. Veteran female star Sharmila Tagore had been confronted by this concern as well. I shall talk about two gendered components of female star image in this paper, those that female stars across ages have been burdened with.

Middle-class respectability

Shantipriya appears in the film's narrative through her male fan-lover, Om's gaze. Om (short for Omprakash Makhija) works as a 'junior artist' (the term used for an extra in Bollywood parlance) on film sets [3]. The first look the audience gets of Shantipriya's face is on a poster to which Om talks from a bridge. Such strange and obsessive admiration that Om has for Shantipriya shows the effect of her stardom. The star image of Shantipriya, while facilitating her placement on a pedestal, is also heavily gendered. It uses traditional Indian stereotypes associated with the image of a woman, which are based on sexual morality and observation of patriarchal customs. For instance, when Om's mother interrupts his one-sided conversation with the poster in order to participate in his game of fantasy, she says: "Abbey hut! Jara main bhi toh dekhun apni bahu ko!" ("Oh move over! Let me take a look at my daughter-in-law!") (Khan, 11:06--11:10) Right before this scene, when Om's mother asks Pappu (Om's friend) where Om is, he says: "Fir toh zaroor bridge pe gaya hoga apni girlfriend se milne." ("Then he must have gone to the bridge to meet his girlfriend.") (Khan, 2007, 9:41--9:44) Shantipriya's star image as a "girlfriend", "daughter-in-law" or "wife", I argue, comes with the baggage of prejudices associated with these images of women in the traditional Indian society. This provides a gendered aspect to the female star's stardom as I shall argue. In the premiere of 'Dreamy Girl', a film starring Shantipriya as the female lead, we are shown a scene that again contributes to this image of the female star. In it, she holds a pinch of vermilion powder between her fingers and delivers a short dialogue to a man on the importance of 'ek chutki sindoor' or a pinch of vermilion (a traditional symbol of Hindu marriage) for women: "Ek chutki sindoor ki keemat tum kya jano, Ramesh babu? Ishwar ka ashirvaad hota hai ek chutki sindoor, suhagan ke sar ka taaj hota hai ek chutki sindoor, har aurat ka khwaab hota hai ek chutki sindoor." ("What do you know of the value of a pinch of vermilion, Mr. Ramesh? A pinch of vermilion is God's blessing, a pinch of vermilion is a wife's crown, a pinch of vermilion is the dream of every woman.") (Khan, 2007, 15:55--16:16) This scene later becomes iconic to her star image, and is remembered even after her death.

In the early days of the Hindi film industry in Mumbai, films used to be considered a place for women of ill-repute or those from unrespectable families. This had made the public image of a woman from a good family (or women with a good reputation as wife, mother and daughter-in-law) and the image of a woman working in films automatically incompatible [3]. Such a notion has undergone change over the years but at least in the time Shantipriya is shown to be a star--around 70s or 80s-- it was very difficult for women in films to be considered respectable. Therefore, it was important to perform respectability (in terms of the middle-class' definition of it) on screen which is why the character played by Shantipriya says to a man that the sindoor--a traditional symbol of a middle-class respectable and dutiful Indian wife--is the pride and dream of all women. Although the elite film industry members occupy quite an elevated economic position compared to the middle-class Indian population, the fact that their films are so concerned and centered on middle-class

respectability, reveals the “normative power and value of middle-classness in their social world”. At the center of such “anxieties” about middle-class respectability in the films and film industry stand women [3]. This affects the roles written for women and the way their star image is shaped in the public eye, which is of a docile and submissive woman who takes ‘pride’ in the only ‘dream’ she and all other women have, supposedly, always dreamt--the sindur and the regressive customs it represents.

A female star also has to juggle on-screen desirability, which is equally crucial to her star text. In the first conversation between Mukesh and Shantipriya that we witness in the film, Shantipriya is upset and demands why she and Mukesh Mehra cannot openly acknowledge their marriage and Mehra replies: “Kyuki ek shaadi shuda heroine k liye mujhe koi ek footi kauri bhi nahi dega” (“Because nobody will pay me even a penny for a married female lead”). Tejaswini Ganti writes that being recognised as an object of desire is crucial for the image of female stars. However, they are constantly “negotiating between the on screen requirement for physical desirability and the off-screen demand for social respectability” [3]. Marriage for a female star can come with a lot of implications for her star image. From the perspective of middle class respectability as is participated in by Shantipriya, when a female star gets married, she is seen as already under possession of a man and therefore, no more fitting in the male amoral or sexual fantasy. A cultural context exists within the Indian film industry, where a married actress is not expected to be cast in sexy and desirable roles and instead, plays ‘matronly’ characters [4].

Veiling and Unveiling

Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan and Clare M. Wilkinson in the edited collection, *Stardom in Contemporary Hindi Cinema*, mention the concept of *darsan* in which the star, irrespective of whether they are male or female, position themselves in an arbitrary balance of veiling and unveiling, concealment and exposure, which is crucial to their star image. Special to the Indian film industry, *darsan*, as D. Eck explains in his book, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, is “the meritorious and enormously powerful and profoundly tactile exchange of glances between devotee and deity” [5]. Om gets the opportunity to witness one instance of Shantipriya’s “unveiling” at the premiere of ‘Dreamy Girl’ where he also touches her wrist in the process of untangling her dupatta (a kind of scarf) from his dhaga (a red thread tied around the wrist for religious purposes). Not only is the exchange of glances between Om and Shantipriya, the devotee and deity respectively, ‘profoundly tactile’ in the words of Eck, there is literal tactility involved in the encounter as Shantipriya’s fingers touch Om’s wrist.

I argue that the *darsan* in case of female stars, and particularly Shantipriya, is gendered again along the lines of traditional patriarchal customs centered around women. The two parts of *darsan*-- “veiling and unveiling” or “concealment and exposure”-- work like it would have in situations where women from certain households in South Asia are forced to cover themselves from the eyes of men other than their

husbands and certain family members [5]. Viswamohan and Wilkinson highlight in their chapter the relationship of veiling with respectability in case of stars in general, and women in particular in most social scenarios. They write: “That women are the ones formally (if not always actually) forced into selective acts of concealment only underscores how much the ability to manage how much and in what circumstances one is seen is fundamental to certain routine practices of distinction. Female stars are, therefore, holding up the reputation of the film industry not only through respectable roles of good wife and good daughter-in-law but through their own veiling as a symbol of distinction. There is another layer to the significance of veiling for female stars if one takes the particular case of Shantipriya under consideration.

In a film shoot scene, the male star, Ricky Sandhu is seen doing his make-up outside in the open while Shantipriya is the only person with a separate tent. It might have been a budget-issue where only the women on the set (Shantipriya is the only woman in this set) are accorded privacy because it is a necessity. The real reason for this separate treatment to the male and female stars is not shown to us until Ricky gets the chance to speak to Shantipriya. After she emerges from her tent, Ricky makes unwelcome sexual advances on her. He tries to flirt with her: “Shanti, baby, you are too much really! Itni der laga di! Waise pack up ke baad kya kar rahi ho darling?” (“Shanti, baby, you are too much really! You took so long! By the way, what are you doing after the shoot?”) and he rubs his chest with a lustful expression on his face. (Khan, 2007, 31:52--31:57) Shantipriya snubs him acidly to avoid any conversation and moves on to her position on the set. An observation of such a scenario indicates there is increased vulnerability and exposure to the male gaze on a film set, which makes the female star’s position extremely precarious; veiling through the tent becomes a respite in such situations. The reason the women (mainly female stars) are the only people provided with a tent on a set is also because of unwelcome sexual advances. Tejaswini Ganti writes in her book about the efforts taken by female stars to “create a zone of modesty and privacy in the very male and very public space of the set” by retreating to make up rooms even during small breaks between shoots while male stars would sit outside. She justifies such behaviour as arising from the notion that working in films “brings a woman’s sexuality to the foreground, marking her as an openly sexual being, in a manner not experienced by actors” [3]. This is why while the male star, Ricky Sandhu, sits outside for makeup, Shantipriya has to veil herself in a tent. Her vulnerability to unwanted sexual advances, typically blamed on her constantly exposed sexuality as a woman in films, is what makes veiling a gendered requirement for a female star. Along with ensuring invisibility to fans, it also serves as a form of protection. Consequently, this makes her *darsan* heavily gendered.

Connections with Gendered Mystery-Creation around Sudden Death

Social scientists term the one-sided relationships between fans and celebrities ‘parasocial relationships’. Originally

conceived by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956, 'parasocial relationships' are quite like personal social relationships in a way because "both are characterized by a sense of belonging, social enjoyment, and emotional investment." It is an "interpersonal relationship where one person, the fan, knows a significant amount about the other, the star, but such knowledge is not reciprocated. In today's world of social media, parasocial relationships have further blurred the boundaries between personal and parasocial by extending to networking and interactions with celebrities on instant messengers and comments [6,7]. Logically, darsan is therefore also a component of parasocial relationships, in which the 'devotee' (fan) gets the opportunity to interact on a personal level, in whatever form it takes (might only be the sight of them in flesh and blood), with the 'deity' (celebrity). Grief at the death of a celebrity, therefore, can naturally take on a personal colour.

When a star dies suddenly, there are lots of speculations and conspiracy theories circulating in the press and among the public. Different people go through different forms of grieving, depending on the strength of the actor's star image and on the intensity of the parasocial relationship shared with them by the individual [7]. The media's representation of the star's death plays a crucial role in the use of commercialization techniques in the reporting and mourning of a star's death. The creation of mystery around a star's death is one form of commercialization of celebrity death engaged in by the media. If the death is sudden or unexpected, there is a greater propensity of it being commercialized through creation of mysteries around it. A research on the death of celebrities from drug overdose says that the public needs a backstory with a villain in it because a sudden or 'accidental' death demands an identifiable villain who caused such an untimely end to the celebrity's life [8]. This is, logically, increasingly the case when the cause of death is unknown because the public's cognitive failure to register the death (a component of grief) is also increased. The public's cognitive failure triggers a narrative construction of the death, especially in media genres that discuss death where death itself is the story [9,10]. The press exploits this need of the audience for increased sales and publicity. I argue that when a sudden death of a female star is involved, the mysteries created around it are gendered and this gendering is connected to the gendered components of their star image. The mysteries created around Shantipriya's death in *Om Shanti Om* shall then be framed within this argument. When I call the mystery created around star deaths gender-biased, I mean, the controversial narratives that are circulated around their deaths are rooted in gender-bias. These narratives are sometimes propagated with input from people in the film industry. I do not claim that all mysteries around sudden female star deaths from Bollywood are gendered as case-specific factors might certainly be involved.

Mysteries and middle-class respectability

In Bollywood, female stars have to adhere to standards of middle-class respectability much more than male stars as a key component of their star image (previously discussed). As Richard Dyer's work from the 70's and 80's on Hollywood

stardom has claimed, fame and stardom do not exist outside 'media texts'. Later, Graeme Turner writes in his 2004 book, *Understanding Celebrity*, that celebrities are "a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects" [10]. To draw from Petrarch, their fame also necessitates that they die, which means death is a very crucial component of their fame [11]. Therefore, the narratives about their death which are part of their fame and star image are also controlled by the media. Mystery creation is a form of narrativization of star deaths that the media engages in, which sparks speculations and controversies centering the deaths.

As discussed earlier, Mehra yells at Shantipriya that nobody would pay him money for a married female lead because after marriage, she will lose her on-screen desirability. This will definitely affect her star image. The media narratives around the stars which contribute heavily to their star texts are constructed out of three aspects: their private life as is exhibited to the world; glimpses of the real person behind that perception (unveiled from time to time), and professional activities, out of which the private life dominates and contributes most to their star image [12]. The problem with flouting the terms of middle-class respectability in personal life, therefore, can affect the entire star image of the person through disrespectful narratives circulated in the media. Death can only be an exigence for a fresh round of such narratives as there is more conversation on the star in the public domain. How the death is represented in the narratives depends among other factors on the profile of the star or their star text [9].

The controversial, mystery-creating narrative around Shantipriya's death--that of her not being dead but having disappeared--is rooted in middle class respectability. The reason for this is, however, the reason for the murder. Shantipriya's murder sprouts from Mukesh's fear of middle-class respectability and the immense loss Shantipriya's failure to maintain it will have caused him. Revealing her death will cause legal complications for him by way of postmortem so he hides her corpse by burying it. The rumour of her disappearance becomes a necessity after that since questions about the whereabouts of the female star of his shelved film will have come as a question and it infact does (from *Om Kapoor*) (Khan, 2007, 1:56:34--1:56:48). So, the roots of the rumor can be traced through a complicated line to the cause of his murder of the female star, which is because of middle-class respectability.

Mysteries and veiling and unveiling

In the discussion on veiling, I have talked about veiling as a symbol of distinction for a star. It is also a symbol of protection for female stars from unwanted sexual advances on set and in other places that all women face regularly. However, there are other ways in which the veil protects a female star. For instance, in Shantipriya's case, veiling her personal life, which includes being secretly married, protects her on-screen desirability and stardom. On the other hand, the impending unveiling of her married status to the public because of her

pregnant body poses a threat for her stardom and Mukesh's career. The possibility of that unveiling facilitates her murder. However, the rumor of her disappearance is also rooted in this gendered veiling and unveiling of her personal life as a pregnant married woman.

The unveiling of the star's self, that forms a crucial part of their darsan, is always carefully manipulated so that how much is revealed is controlled by how much the audience wants to see. For example, photos of stars at the airport or at parking garages of housing societies are quite common while there is limited photography of them in pajamas or without make-up as the audience will not be interested in the latter [5]. Shantipriya's disappearance is a rumor that ensures a complete veiling of her body, which if circulated in the media by way of information from any postmortem reports, can cause legal issues for Mukesh.

In a scene where Pappu and Om Kapoor are having a conversation about Shantipriya's murder, Pappu says: "Shanti ki laash tak nahi mili thhi wahaan, Om!" ("Even Shantipriya's corpse was not found there, Om!") (Khan, 2007, 1:53:34--1:53:36). So, veiling her corpse and veiling her death by calling it disappearance diverts discussion from the cause of her death. This is a gendered veiling because it is centered on hiding a murder done to uphold misogyny in the treatment of female stars' bodies in Bollywood. Shantipriya's pregnant body was seen to demand veiling because the implication of marriage associated with it would make her less desirable and destroy her stardom. To maintain their distinction as a star, the veiling demanded from the woman here is heavily gender-biased in terms of necessitating the body to be covered to hide signs of marriage. This is especially the case because her stardom affects the profits of the producer.

While the cognitive failure to register star deaths, especially sudden ones, necessitates a narrative framework that promises to put the confusing parts into perspective, it becomes important to identify the gender-biases inherent in the creation of these narratives. At the same time, it is also crucial to reject the gendered elements in female star texts so that a more gender-sensitive Bollywood celebrity culture is ensured.

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