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## Chapter Three

### THE TEXTS OF "MOTHER INDIA"

When Camoens da Gama, Aurora's father, enters the room to which Aurora had been momentarily banished, he sees a painting covering the walls and the ceiling. This huge painting of imperial and post-imperial history, of family saga and those yet to be born, replete with the emotions of love, hate, rage, and defiance, he observes, were all set upon the figure of "Mother India herself . . . who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children" (Rushdie 1995: 60–61). The woman who portrays Mother India is, however, none other than the painter's own mother, dead at 33, when Aurora was only 13. Salman Rushdie writes at this point in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, "at the heart of this first immense outpouring of Aurora's art was the single tragedy of her loss, the unassuaged pain of becoming a motherless child" (61). Motherhood, or more specifically "motherness," we are subsequently told by the narrator, Moraes Zogoiby ("the Moor"), "is a big idea, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land" (137). A big idea certainly, but one that enters the discourse of the novel not through a goddess (Kali, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi) or a warrior queen (the queen of Jhansi, for instance) or even a female renouncer (Sita, the medieval devotional singer Mira) but through Bollywood cinema's greatest epic melodrama, Mehboob Khan's foundational film *Mother India* (1957). Here is the narrator/Rushdie's critical reading of the film:

The year I was born, Mehboob Productions' all-conquering movie *Mother India*—three years in the making, three hundred shooting days, in the top three all-time mega-grossing Bollywood flicks—hit the nation's screens. Nobody who saw it ever

forgot that glutinous saga of peasant heroinism, that super-slushy ode to the uncrushability of village India made by the most cynical urbanites in the world. And as for its leading lady—O Nargis with your shovel over your shoulder and your strand of black hair tumbling forward over your brow!—she became, until Indira-Mata supplanted her, the living mother-goddess of us all. (137)

In *Mother India*, a piece of Hindu myth-making directed by a Muslim socialist, Mehboob Khan, the Indian peasant woman is idealised as bride, mother, and producer of sons; as long-suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive, and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the social status quo. But for Bad Birju, cast out from his mother's love, she becomes, as one critic has mentioned, "that image of an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy of Indian males." (138–39)

These passages are examples of vintage Rushdie prose: broad strokes of the pen that combine an accessible popular style of seeming superficiality (the postmodern "surfaces" without depth) with an ironic commentary functioning as disingenuous social critique. But they also have metacritical value since embedded in them are ways of theorizing *Mother India*. There is the kind of reading that would see female "peasant heroinism" ("O Nargis with your shovel over your shoulder") as a project aimed at strengthening the nation-state. The village community (and even the family or the tribe) in this reading is the larger national community but one that is itself undergoing extensive transformation (Vasudevan 2000a: 17). "Until Indira-Mata supplanted her" refers to the way in which former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi projected herself as India: "India is Indira." The argument (the second reading embedded in the Rushdie passages) has been brilliantly analyzed by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993: 109–10) who has shown how the iconicity of Nargis as Mother India was appropriated (not very subtly but to good political effect) by India's first woman prime minister. Using a preexistent trope of nation = mother = soil, Indira Gandhi in a sense interpellated her own political self through a figure that had become a central symbol of the Indian popular imaginary: Nargis as Mother India. The Rushdie passages allude to something else as well (the third and fourth readings). Rushdie refers to the Muslimness of the producer/director Mehboob Khan though not Nargis's. There are a number of texts and histories at work in this context. The first ("a piece of Hindu myth-making directed by a Muslim socialist") is the highly syncretic, hyphenated Hindu-Muslim nature of Bombay Cinema discourses, production practices, and indeed its very ideology. Some of these features surface remarkably in Saadat Hasan Manto's recently trans-

lated account of his days in the Bombay film industry before partition (1998). The discourse of Hindi cinema remains to this day markedly Urdu and many of its key personalities have been Muslim—Mehboob Khan and Nazir Hussain (producers/directors), Javed Akhtar and Majrooh Sultanpuri (scriptwriters and lyricists), Naushad and A. R. Rahman (music directors), Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and, of course, Nargis (actors). Add to this financiers and the largest single group of Hindi/Urdu speakers (some 120 million), and we begin to get some sense of the importance of Muslims to the industry. The cultural syncretism is so complete that even when, as at present, there is an implicit directive to work within the formal determinants of Hindu culture (in some ways a more rigid directive to conform to the metatextual traditions than before), the cinema continues to represent itself through that syncretism.

The above commentary takes us to Nargis's own Muslimness, absent from Rushdie's account but something which, in a sense, has been the thematic center of much recent writing on *Mother India*. This is an interesting trend since, as we shall see in the next chapter, Nargis the star was never constructed in terms of her Muslimness per se prior to her role as Mother in *Mother India*. Nargis the glamorous "star" before *Mother India* (T. J. S. George's sycophantic biography calls her "the first lady of Indian cinema") had the kind of personal history (and persona) upon which (male) voyeuristic desire could be readily projected: daughter of a *koṭhevālī* (the courtesan, actor, and singer Jaddanbai), unscrupulously marketed as a star by her mother from the age of 14, lover of the debonair Raj Kapoor, and so on. A key critical study in the refiguring of Nargis is to be found in Parama Roy's *Indian Traffic* (1998). In her chapter on *Mother India* she works through a number of filmic and profilmic features as well as the star's post-*Mother India* life to demonstrate the complex ways in which Nargis's Muslimness enters into a general theory of the construction of "the iconicity of the actress" (154). As Roy asks: "how does the Other [marked by an inescapable Muslimness] become an icon that represents [Indian] nationness?" Roy's argument is that the construction of Nargis's body as the modern national goddess (Sita incarnate, so to speak) is not identical with the film but has to be seen in terms of both *Mother India* the film as well as its sequel, the life of Nargis after the film. In our next chapter we shall write about the prequel to these narratives; here with Roy we need to examine the manner in which the signifier "Nargis" has acquired surplus value. To do justice to this argument one needs to unpack, however cursorily, the information given by Roy. Of course, there may be a simpler (or at least an alternative) answer to the ques-

tion posed by Roy: the Mother of *Mother India* is not Indian after all; it is an artificial filmic construct that grew out of Bombay Cinema's Zoroastrian-Judaic-Christian-Islamic construction of the enabling and defiant woman (Das Gupta 1991: 119–23). In the latter argument, what Mehboob's *Mother India* finally brings together is a tendency within Hindu culture toward a "West Asian code of female honour." This tendency was directly linked to the Muslim dominant culture in India during a good part of the second millennium. Das Gupta characteristically overextends his case, but there is something in the empowering presence of the Mother, the Mother as an active agent (in realistic and not in religiomythical terms) that is quite unlike the Mother as the person who suffers. If Das Gupta's implicit argument is that Nargis's Muslimness is the outward iconic representation of the new syncretic Indian woman (who comes into being because of the symbiosis of two cultures), then only a Muslim woman could have captured this newness. With a slightly different inflection, Parama Roy reinforces this reading: "If *Mother India* is, at least partially, an allegory of the repudiation of Muslim difference and of a becoming Hindu, then only a Muslim can assume the iconic position of that maternal figure" (168). The difficulty with the Roy argument, however, is that intense discussions about Nargis's Muslimness is very much a post-*Mother India* phenomenon and more specifically, it seems, a post-Ayodhya phenomenon when both her husband, Sunil Dutt, and her son, Sanjay Dutt (the latter arrested and charged under the notorious Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act or TADA in April 1993 for allegedly smuggling arms and ammunition), were seen by the Hindu body politic as Muslim sympathizers. If there is a decisive image that can be isolated from the film it is the image of the Mother with her two children directing villagers not to leave their homes despite the terrible famine. The directive is, of course, via the medium of the typical Bombay Cinema song ("please don't leave," sings the playback singer Lata Mangeshkar) and is sung against the backdrop of an undivided pre-partition India. Roy sees this as an image that also reinforces Nargis's renunciation of partition (and of her own Muslimness). This observation is certainly true in terms of reception but falters if we recall that the historical time of the profilmic event is itself pre-partition India.

Moor Zogoiby's mother, Aurora, never becomes close to Nargis; nor does she attempt the kinds of theorization that cultural theorists have subsequently advanced. Because she cannot distinguish film from reality, her interest in Nargis is that of the gossip who seems to have uncovered a dark secret. To Nargis, who played Sunil Dutt's mother in the film, she disarmingly

declares, "And now look—you have gone and marry-o'ed him!" Rushdie is, of course, playing postmodern games by collapsing the divide between real lived history and fictionally transformed history, but what he does, thematically, is no different from the Indian spectator's own conflation of the filmic and pre- or postfilmic lives of stars. And it is here that *Mother India* has become a proof text for readings well beyond its own declared aim of representing the great dharma of India. If we follow Das Gupta's claim that there is no "Great Mother in the canon" (1991: 111), we may read Mehboob Khan's film as a text that artificially constructs this figure out of a complex and heterogeneous religious and social history; if we recall Lalitha Gopalan's astute reading of the avenging women in Indian cinema, *Mother India* becomes a prototype of that avenging woman (who is also a mother). In these arguments *Mother India* generates meanings of the kind we associate with seminal texts of the culture.

*Mother India* is, of course, a cultural artifact and, as we have foreshadowed, a pervasive one too. It occupies a central place in Indian cinema history, and especially in the variety of cinema—Bollywood cinema—that constitutes the target texts of this book. But because of its centrality, especially in the North Indian cultural imaginary, the film takes us directly to a key issue in cultural representation: cultures, after all, use their artistic forms to represent themselves (Said 1985: 7). For all its melodramatic design, for all its detachment from the "real," Bombay Cinema is self-consciously about representing, in the context of a multicultural and multiethnic India, the various disaggregated strands of the nation-state—political, social, cultural, and so on. In the symbology advanced here, these strands are reagggregated around an idea—that of the Mother—which, as Rushdie's narrator had enthusiastically noted, was the biggest idea in the land. *Mother India* reworks this "biggest idea" into the most powerful symbolic statement on Indianness and was instrumental in giving it such a wide currency. Even bazaar and calendar art defer to it. There are few Bombay films that do not, in some manner, cash in on this equation.

Released during Diwali week, October 1957, *Mother India* ran for a whole year at Liberty Cinema, Bombay. It received rave reviews in key film journals such as *Filmfare* and *Filmindia* and in *Bharat Jyoti* (Reuben 1999: 261–68) and went on to become the Bombay film dubbed and subtitled more than any other. Baburao Patel called the film in his *Filmindia* review "the greatest picture produced in India during the forty and odd years of film-making," to which he added in a later paragraph, "Remove Nargis and there is no *Mother India*" (Reuben 1999: 266). When shown on Britain's

Channel 4 during its tribute to Bombay Cinema in 1983, *Mother India* was presented as the film by which that cinema is measured. In India it continues to be shown regularly and is part of a small number of Bollywood films (along with *Kismet* [Fate, 1943], *Mughal-e-Azam* [1960], *Sholay* [Flames] 1975), and *Hum Aap Ke Hain Kaun* [Who am I to you? 1994]) that have been granted the apocryphal status of films that are shown somewhere in India every day of the year. Now in its forty-fourth year, it continues to be invoked as the “definitive” Indian film text. Along the way it has won many awards in India, has been widely acclaimed in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and gained an Oscar nomination in the category of best foreign film in 1958.

Mehboob Khan (1909–74), son of a Gujarati policeman with strong agrarian roots, had been associated with Indian cinema since 1935 when he directed *Judgment of Allah*. Five years later he began to produce his own films, initially for a studio (National Studios) but from 1943 under his own banner (Mehboob Productions). Between 1940 and 1957 he produced some extremely popular films such as *Aurat* (Woman, 1940, an early version of *Mother India* indebted to Pudovkin’s socialist realist cinematic adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* [1926] and MGM’s *The Good Earth* [1937], based on Pearl Buck’s portrayal of a Chinese peasant family), *Anmol Ghadi* (A priceless watch, 1946), *Mela* (The fair, 1948), *Andaz* (Style, 1949), *Aan* (Vow, 1952), *Amar* (Forever, 1954) as well as the controversial *Humayun* (1945) for which he was accused of being a revisionist on matters of Mughal history. The “socialist realist” antecedents that I invoke here need to be looked at in the context of the Indian nationalist movement of the 1930s and ’40s. Among the many issues canvassed by the nationalists, two of the most significant dealt with the secular ethos of the nation and sectarianism. Mehboob Khan’s films were in some sense located within the tensions generated by these two issues. Whether it was Western modernity in India (as in *Andaz*) or the reformation of the Muslim *madarsā* schools (as in *Elan*, [A declaration], 1947) or, more significantly, woman as the focal point of social cohesion and genealogical purity (as in *Aurat*), one detects that in Mehboob Khan’s populist interpretation these themes cannot be dismembered from the larger nationalist program. And this program was always predicated upon a visionary egalitarianism dramatically at odds with the real social divisions in the country. There was, however, something else besides in Mehboob Khan that attracted Bombay film critics and the middle classes who would have also patronized Hollywood movies. This is Mehboob Khan’s technical mastery, and it is also why many of his films (*Aurat*, *Andaz*, *Aan*, *Mother India*) have had more cinematic durability than those of many other filmmakers. *Aan*, in

fact, received a letter of commendation for its technical virtuosity from none other than Cecil B. de Mille!

Mehboob Khan's last major film—and the film for which he is best known—*Mother India* is in some ways more diffuse and contradictory than his other films. As suggested by Rushdie, it is in fact not one film but a number of films; not one text but a multiplicity of texts. To come to grips with *Mother India's* heterogeneity we need to think through the layers of meaning that have accrued to the title itself. The first text is obviously embedded in the title itself. *Mother India* goes back immediately to Katherine Mayo's antagonistic and racist book of that name published in 1927. Mayo's book was a best-seller that went into some dozen reprints in just under three years, and was used as a powerful propaganda tool by the British against the Indian Nationalists, Gandhi included. Mayo herself had excellent credentials as a social advocate, having bravely published major exposés of corruption in the Pennsylvania Police Force, as well as taking up issues such as sexual harassment, women's rights, antiquated rape laws in the United States, and so on (Emilsen 1987). She was so implacably opposed to any form of real or perceived sexual harassment and the degradation of women and minorities that in *The Isles of Fear* (1925) she opposed the granting of independence to the Philippines on the grounds that the safety of Muslim and other minorities could not be guaranteed. *Mother India*, published two years later, took her even further into her committed areas of sexual violence and sexual exploitation. It became the most widely read book on India in the first half of the twentieth century and had an enormous impact upon Western attitudes toward the Indian Nationalist Movement. Years later, in 1957, A. M. Rosenthal captured the impact of the book: "There are few people more important in the relationship between India and the United States than Katherine Mayo, few books if any, that contributed more violent coloring to the American mental image of India than 'Mother India'" (621).

In Britain, Clifford Sharp, the editor of the *New Statesman*, called *Mother India* the "most powerful defense of the British raj that has ever been written." So persuasively did Mayo make her case that Gandhi (who privately agreed with many of Mayo's sentiments and whom Mayo had interviewed between October 1925 and March 1926) condemned her to his Indian audiences and sent Sarojini Naidu and C. F. Andrews to the United States to counter the quite staggering influence of *Mother India* upon American attitudes. But the damage had been done. Despite valiant attempts by Indians to counter her charges, and the publication, some years later, of C. F. Andrews's *The True India* (1939), Mayo's version of India remained crucial and influ-

ential. Much to the delight of the critics of India, the 1928 Joshi Report on the Age of Consent commissioned by the Indian Legislature singled out child marriage (a key theme in Mayo's book) as the cause of many of India's social problems. The English title of Mehboob Khan's film may be seen as post-colonial India's response to Mayo's thoroughly colonial thesis.

The title, of course, had been used by the popular film industry before Mehboob Khan. In 1938, Ardeshir Irani (maker of the first Hindi talkie *Alam Ara* [1931]) produced a film called *Mother India*. In the context of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* one expects something of the extended mythic symbology that the title carries. Nothing of that cultural investment is evident in Irani's film. Rather, the theme of the film, as *Filmindia* pointed out (March 1939: 35), was the rather bland "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," an obvious reference to one of the recurring motifs in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916). The narrative here is pure melodrama with melodramatic solicitations from the spectators more important than attention to plot or character. It is difficult to see why the film was given such a loaded title unless of course it too was meant as an answer to Mayo's work since it showed, at the level of plot at any rate, an Indian women's struggle spread over two generations: a village woman is left alone to look after her son following her father's imprisonment and her husband's departure because he couldn't bear the poverty at home. It could be that when reworking *Aurat*, Mehboob Khan's original 1940 version of *Mother India*, he had this *Mother India* text in mind as well.

Even as the title "Mother India" has circulated as critical discourse (Mayo's) or as popular culture (Ardeshir Irani's melodramatic saga), there remains something terribly removed, detached, and alien about the term itself. In Indian culture "Mother India" is a transcendental signifier; it has hegemonic privilege and presence, but it doesn't have a single, unproblematic, originary moment. It is a term around which has accrued many referents and meanings: it carries echoes of the very loaded Hindi *bhārat māṭā* ("mother India"), the softer, poetic Urdu *mādre hind*, the more autochthonous Sanskrit compound *matṛbhūmī* ("mother-earth") as well as Bankim Chandra's famous nationalist song *Bande Mātaram* ("I bow to you, Mother"). Indeed, Mehboob Khan's film opens with the nondiegetic strains of the song *dharatī māṭā* ("mother earth") as the typically establishing shots of the land are given so that the spectator has a firm sense of where the action is taking place. Through yet another system of transformations one can actually connect *matṛbhūmī*, mother-earth, with the figure of Sita, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *dhīram bhāryam* (the steadfast wife) who, in the North Indian

popular imaginary, is one of the mythic/religious prototypes of "Mother India." "Sita" means "of the furrow" and indicates via this name her autochthonic origins. In this respect "Mother India" is a way of talking about Sita, the figure who is really a stand-in for India. Historically, however, Sita is not a given; she has never been there in that form all along; she had to be fought for as Hindu culture and Brahmanical ideology came to terms with what in the epic tradition was the uneasy narrative of Sita's abduction and restitution. In that act of struggle, a whole Sita idiom evolved, and a number of post-epic texts were written to make Sita other than herself. (In the medieval vernacular epic—the *Rāmacaritamānasa* of Tulsidasa—only her image is violated by the demon king Ravana.) The culture invested Sita with excessive meaning, overdetermined her through massive semantic and mythic overcoding, but could not quite remove her epic violation. The guilt surrounding Sita's "contamination" led to excessive circumspection and cultural bracketing for woman generally. This congruity of Sita/Mother-India/Woman thus surfaces as an artificially constructed ideological phenomenon in culture. In projecting that affinity the ruptures and discontinuities are glossed over. Instead we get an excessive insistence upon dharma, the law of culture, and an excessive valorization of genealogy so that Sita may be granted a central position in Indian consciousness. If Mother alone knows the secret of your birth her power within culture becomes inviolate and beyond falsification. "Mother India" then represents a monumental problem of Motherness, Sita-ness, and Otherness in Indian culture. Indian culture, which endorses a predominantly patriarchal point of view, has countered this problem of absolute identity of Mother with a single iconic figure by dispersing the symbols onto a number of icons. Through this iconic dispersal Mother is associated with Goddess (here Sita is Lakshmi), with Wife (here Sita is Draupadi), with Lover (here Sita is Radha), and through the slightly contradictory iconography of Kali and Durga, with the Avenger or Destroyer, where Sita embodies Shiva's female principle. In this final historical compromise woman (femininity) is seen as a total counterpart of the two crucial masculine gods, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.

Mehboob Khan's initial version of the Mother India theme did not carry this loaded title. It declared itself simply as "Woman" (*Aurat*) and was praised, like another film of the period, V. Shantaram's *Aadmi* (Man, 1939), for its "sheer documentary value" (*Filmindia*, June 1940: 35-37). The film was singled out for its "detailed portrayal of village life," for its combination of realism with popular form, and for Sardar Akhtar's interpretation of the mother figure. Some forty years later, the fanzine *Movie* (January 1, 1984:

96–97) returned to this version of *Mother India* and quoted, approvingly it seems, from K. A. Abbas's original review of *Aurat*:

From the heart of rural India is drawn the story which is familiar because it is elemental, eternal. In its tremendous sweep it is a saga. Pictorially *Aurat* is outstanding. Cameraman Faredoon Irani has hardly missed anything that ever happens in a village . . . the fields of corn waving in the breeze, the graceful village maidens, the village well, the mud huts, the spinning wheel, the mango groves, the spectacular bullock cart race. Contrasted with this are the "documentary" shots of vultures hovering over dead bodies, the cracked earth, famine and the parasitical money-lender.

Retrospective reviews of this film often involved comparisons with the 1957 remake. In these comparisons *Aurat* invariably emerges as the stronger film. *Star and Style*, another popular fanzine, called the later version "a sad commentary on the uneven development of the Hindi Cinema" (October 2, 1970: 9). What it noted, furthermore, and rightly I think, is the centrality, in *Aurat*, of the woman character. The film is about her and not about the village and its social problems. But even as it shifts the emphasis to the woman, the film continues to frame her in the melodramatic tradition of Bombay Cinema. *Star and Style* continues the comparison between the two versions by endorsing, after Ajit Merchant's original review in *Bharat Jyoti* (quoted in Reuben 1999: 262), Anil Biswas's musical score in *Aurat* over the heavy orchestration of Naushad's music in *Mother India*. The magazine *Movie* (1984) too made its preference for Anil Biswas's music clear but went even further to favor *Aurat* at every point: Sardar Akhtar over Nargis; Yakub over Sunil Dutt as Birju. The aestheticization of *Aurat* (at the expense of *Mother India*) in the '70s and '80s may have come about because of a nostalgia during the Rajesh Khanna–Amitabh Bachchan years for what seemed like the less heterogeneously produced austere realist texts of colonial India.

Two powerful words, one specifically connected to Indian womanhood, the other more generally connected to civility, dominate the text. These words are, from Sanskrit, *lāj* (shame, honor, a sense of shame) and, from Perso-Arabic, *izzat* (honor, respect, self-respect). These words are so culturally specific that the English gloss fails to capture their cultural resonances. In the context of a colonial discourse of India that registered especially Hindu Indian womanhood in terms of the iconography of the "burning" or the child bride (where both were seen as signs of a decaying culture), the use of these words as thematic strands in the film is understandable. But Mehboob Khan's film does not leave these words there. It links them to an eternal order that

declares the non-negotiable primacy of the eternal dharma in Indian culture. Although such a statement is powerfully metaphysical, its use is fundamentally political as its targets are the writings of people like Katherine Mayo and the Christian evangelists. These "big" themes (themes that underpin Indian culture itself) are, however, recast in a form that is distinctly Bombay melodrama, which, as we have already noted, is a colonial form that mapped European sentimentalism upon Indian notions of karma. Crudely redefined as forms of poetic justice, karma (a highly complex theory of acts and responsibilities) then becomes expanded as a narrative of predestined ends that coexists comfortably with melodrama. As a result, in Indian hands European melodrama is considerably enriched by the concept of karmic suffering. *Aurat* then signals the primacy of *lāj* and *izzat*, of Indian womanhood, even as it manipulates and extends the generic structures of Bombay Cinema. In dialogic terms *lāj* is the first term that strikes the spectator in the film. It occurs after Faredoon Irani's long crane shots that establish Mehboob Khan's aural style. When the new bride discovers that her mother-in-law (Sundar Chachi) mortgaged her land to pay for the wedding she says to herself: "bhagvān lāj rakhna" (O Lord save/keep my *lāj*). The word *lāj* with all its connotations of woman's virtue, but especially of sexual virtue is thus used very early on. Implicit in the term is thus the whole question of chastity in the Indian world, its defense by the Indian, and its function also as a marker of the worth of woman. Its preservation (akin in power to *tapas* or austere practices) can shame even gods who intervene to save a woman's *lāj*, as happens when Sukhilala, the village landlord, wants to take sexual advantage of the hapless mother's destitution. He is struck down by a falling tree, and the drought breaks. What *lāj* finally says is that woman is a commodity to be measured in terms of her chastity. Whatever else the narrative might point toward, this fact alone, this primacy of *lāj*, will dominate the text. Even before the narrative is given full expression, it closes in upon itself, predicting a narrative unfolding in which *lāj* will be its crucial determinant. One wonders therefore what the agenda of *Aurat* in fact is. If *lāj* is metonymic of womanhood in Indian society, what freedom does she have? Could Bombay Cinema ever write a narrative in which *lāj* itself is contested, one that would demonstrate the conditions under which a woman might sacrifice her *lāj* for the greater good, for *her* greater good, or indeed for her desire, as Tabu declares to her husband (Sachin Khedekar) in a much later film, *Astitva* (My being, 2000)?

Let us accept, for strategic reasons, the prescriptive nature of the narrative. Is it then possible to see how Mehboob Khan might destabilize the form? One feature that strikes the viewer is the juxtaposition of the outer and

BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Oh-my-god! O' it Can beleaf dassis V'mally  
happening. O' can kleaf my eye!!

Ice!



Sardar Akhtar and Kanhaiyalal in Mehboob Khan's *Aurat*. A Woman's *tāj* under threat.  
Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

Mama? Wheddis Papa? Whenzies Comming home?  
de Hel' choold O' know! Why de hel' do O' Care!



Sardar Akhtar and her two children in Mehboob Khan's *Aurat*, 1940. Courtesy National  
Film Archive of India.

the inner. Outwardly even in *Aurat* the Indian landscape is rendered essentially pastoral with long establishing shots of millet fields where peasants sing folk songs and celebrate Hindu festivals, notably Holi. Within, however, the pastoral harmony is broken by two things. The first, at this early stage in the film, is Radha's pregnancies, about which even the husband despairs. Cinematically the husband's words of despair are cut to a montage shot of a caged bird, forcefully suggesting that unwanted pregnancy is also a form of caging. The point being that in the seemingly unselfconscious melodramatic narrative are embedded significant social issues that were equally part of Gandhi's nationalist agenda. Under conditions of severe hardship, children tax resources and create tension in the family. The husband, helpless and considering himself a failure, leaves home and disappears. Before departing he wipes off his wife's *bindī* (the large, round forehead mark that distinguishes a married woman), touches his mother's feet, pats his bullocks, and looks back forlornly. We see him walking off toward the sunrise. Distraught, his mother dies soon afterward.

A second form of instability—and this time a contestation that is not simply within the form but is activist—occurs in what may be called the text of *Birju*. Played by the actor Yakub, *Birju* is the rebel son who gambles and lies to his mother. He is shorter than his brother and has a clean-shaven head. Ramu, the obedient elder son, is played by the singer Surendra (whose academic degrees, B.A. LL.B., often appeared on publicity stills). He is tall and handsome, and he has a healthy relationship with a village maiden, Jamuna. In a well-known shot, the mother momentarily confuses Ramu with Shamu, her lost husband. But this identification is in fact illusory: it is really *Birju* who is temperamentally like his father and who symbolically displaces him. The final phase of the film works through subliminal Oedipal desire and the kinds of characterological contrasts intrinsic to the form. Unlike the later version of this film (as *Mother India*) where the *Birju* narrative is more centrally cast in a revenge theatrical structure and is organized around the metadiscourse of justice, in *Aurat* the *Birju* narrative is more staggered and even disjointed. Yakub brings an erratic element to *Birju*'s character and perhaps even a sense of psychological instability because of the absence in his life of a father figure. *Birju*'s life is represented in terms of tableaux shots that show him gambling, stealing a gun, and hitting his mother, brother, and his soon-to-be sister-in-law. He is abusive to the villagers, to the landowner Sukhilala (whom he stabs to death), and is disrespectful of the inviolate concept of a woman's *lāj* and the culture's *izzat*; he abducts the woman he had long desired (but whom he could not marry because their horoscopes were divergent) on her wedding day. It is in

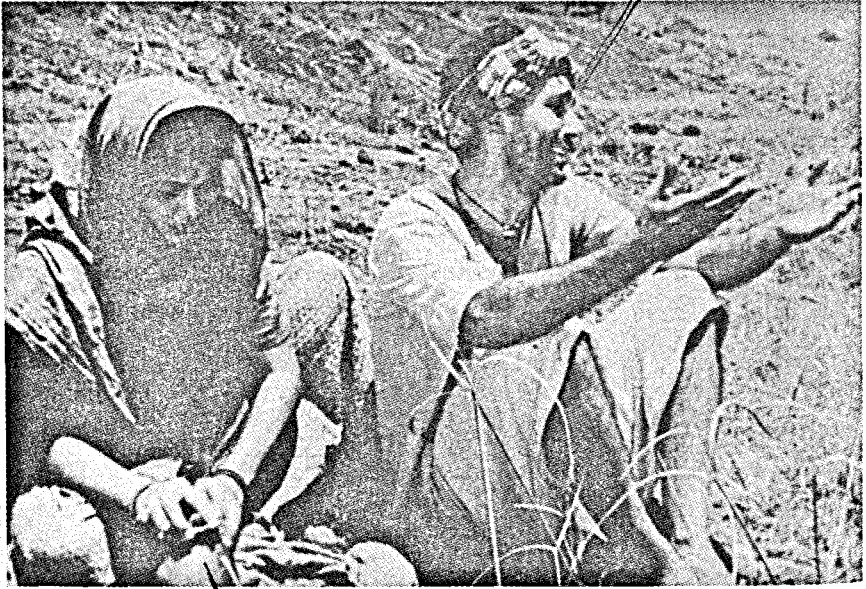
the latter context that *Aurat* confronts the impossible, the radically incommensurable (in terms of the culture's valorization of sons) act of a mother killing her son. Although the genre could not have allowed Birju to live, the manner in which Birju dies—he is shot dead by his mother even as he tries to abduct Tulsi on the day of her wedding—marks a decisive shift in Bombay Cinema. The defense of *lāj* is paramount because *aurat*, woman, is indeed *lāj* incarnate. An anticolonial movement cannot succeed unless it too maintains this equation. Before she herself dies the mother tells the villagers and, in particular, Kamla, Tulsi's mother: "I had given my word to the villagers and I have kept it . . . the Lord has taken the life of a son so that the *lāj* of a woman might be saved." The final shots are of the mother's face, juxtaposed against the figure of a woman carrying a load of wood on her head.

*Aurat* was released a year after V. Shantaram's *Aadmi*, the latter, as we have seen, a self-consciously "social" film. But whereas Shantaram's modernity was the modernity of the city and offered a critique of sexual hypocrisy, Mehboob Khan's *Aurat* locks itself into a nationalist ethos in which the grand narrative of the village and the presumed values it has always enshrined are seen to be redemptive of the nation. For a postcolonial India to come into being it was necessary to return to the idealism of the past, to capture an organic worldview, both epistemologically and materially, so that the epistemes of *lāj* and *izzat* would also be the conditions under which the capitalist bifurcation of use value and work value would be transcended. But it is also clear that Mehboob Khan had inherited a form, not unlike the novel itself, which, being younger than photography (just as the novel is younger than print) allowed him to constantly redefine, fine-tune, and expand on its possibilities. In its dominant form it came to be seen as distinctly melodramatic, but not in any prescriptive fashion, so that epic forms and themes could be unproblematically inserted into it. Beyond the possibilities of a counter ideological critique (*lāj* is, after all, an essentialist patriarchal dogma unrelated to the real conditions of woman in a feudal Indian world order), *Aurat* may also be read cinematically (not just thematically) as the first full attempt at constructing an epic cinema in India. Fareedoon Irani's camera work uses the long shot and montage, constructing images that repeat themselves. In this respect there is perhaps an ideological statement that is being made through the form of a quasi-epic realist cinema about the value of representationalism in cinema. Here the emphasis is on the semiotic system itself as signifying auteurial practice. Fareedoon Irani, who won the *Filmfare* award for best photography for his work in *Mother India*, said in an interview with the magazine published November 30, 1962:

[Film producers] spend huge amounts in paying the fees of their stars but they attach little or no importance to photography and production values. After all how can anyone exploit to the fullest advantage a highly paid star unless competent photography presents the star at his best?

Irani, of course, does not go far enough in his words. In a sense the emphasis on cinematography (and Mehboob Khan's concern with the technical side of filmic production) in *Aurat* meant that in his hands cinema remained an epic spectacle that bonded the spectator to the image (of the mother).

Between the production of *Aurat* in 1940 and *Mother India* in 1957 a number of significant events intervened: the Second World War, Indian independence, and the partition of India into two countries. For Bombay Cinema, two other things stand out: crippling taxation on the film industry by the new government and the 1952 First International Film Festival, which was held in India. The first affected the amount of money that could be spent on film production as returns went straight to the government treasury. The second had a tremendous impact on a film industry that had hitherto been modeled by and large on Hollywood. The film festival rather dramatically brought to the attention of Indian film producers the neorealist films of Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini and the epic cinema of Akira Kurosawa. An immediate consequence of this exposure was the increase in outdoor shooting and naturalist settings for Indian films (George 1994: 109–11). In 1953 Bimal Roy consciously used neorealist techniques in *Do Bigha Zamin*. A by-product of the festival was Rossellini's return to India in 1956 to work on a film entitled "India 57" which received the enthusiastic support of Nehru himself. The venture fell through because Rossellini fell in love with Sonali Dasgupta, wife of his associate, and both departed quite abruptly for Rome. Mehboob Khan's reworking of the *Aurat* theme in *Mother India* needs to be looked at in this varied context. It could be that Mehboob Khan wished to combine Kurosawa's epic realism with the kind of nationalist agenda that Nehru had in mind when he supported Rossellini's project. This is not to say that *Mother India* is primarily a nationalist ethnographic narrative where the cinematic sign has (or claims to have) a largely indexical quality: the "this is really how it is" or "would have been" argument (Nichols 1981: 241). Obviously *Mother India* (or any other Bombay film) cannot possibly pass primarily as an ethnographic narrative, that is, as a text that directly links image with referent. Nevertheless there are some indices in the film that enable spectatorial transformation of diegesis into cinema vérité. The opening scenes of the film, in which Congress Parliamentarians in Nehru caps persuade the



Nirupa Roy and Balraj Sahni in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*, 1953. The realist aesthetic. Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

Teheem to pay you back de ten sheelings  
 he owe you. So we can buy zem real food.

Mother to open a new dam, are meant to direct the spectators' view to the profilmic India of 1957, ten years after independence. In this respect some degree of documentary (and even ethnographic) framing of the film is part of its conscious design. In one sense this possibility—the spectatorial transformation of diegesis into cinema verité—is to be conceded for every Bombay film. But the critical spectator also knows that the representational processes have been carefully ordered and the indexicals are really iconic and even arbitrary signs. To Western readers (or to readers unfamiliar with the signifying practices of this cinema) Bombay Cinema remains, in one sense, ethnographic, an index of cultural practices, what Bazin had called “films with documentary quality” (Bazin 1971: 2.20). It was the absence of the directly ethnographic (realism as denoting an experience of the land) that led the London review *Film and Filming* to despair that *Mother India*, which it called an “extravagant orgy of Technicolor,” would be more appropriately titled “Through Blood, Flood, Fire and Mud with Mother” and was “far removed from the austerities of Satyajit Ray's masterpieces” (*Movie*, September 1984).

To proceed with my reading of *Mother India* I want to return to a key icon with which we began this chapter, the figure of the Mother in Indian culture. The text is obviously held together by this figure, but at one level the

Mother is structured through what may be called the economy of the super-ego, as the censorious object that carries the burden of culture. In other words, although we are meant to identify with Mother India, the metaphorical congruity so essential for absolute identification is not possible because the film is not about Nargis the star (the point of entry in the economy of desire) but about Nargis as Mother, which is how Rushdie's narrator reads her as well. Publicity for the film made the latter point very clearly. An advertisement for the film in *Filmfare* (February 2, 1958), for instance, carried the caption: "From India The Ancient Cradle of Humanity, Two Mothers Rise, Earth and Woman . . . !" Nargis's head is superimposed on top of the northern end of India. In her hands she has a piece of clay which she is examining rather intently. Beneath her gaze India is represented as a mega village. In the film itself, we recall, it is as "the Mother of the village" that she is asked to open a new dam just constructed in postcolonial India, and appropriately in 1957, ten years after independence. Mehboob Khan's original black-and-white version, *Aurat*, did not carry this baggage, largely because the country could not be legally claimed as Indian territory.

The danger posed by collapsing the sign and the referent, the actor as Mother India and the latter as sanctified body is that the film may become associated, however improperly, with the uncompromisingly Hindu mythological genre of Bombay Cinema. *Mother India* is, quite defiantly, not a religious but a secular epic of the new, modern India where a universal moral principle transcending religious and caste difference is the dominant dharma. To maintain that secularity, what was not particularly important for purposes of interpretation with *Aurat* (a product of colonial India) had to be more clearly stated both in name and representation in *Mother India* (a product of post-colonial India). For this reason, although the names of the chief characters in both films are the same, we need to unpack their associations in *Mother India* (and not in *Aurat*) to see how Mehboob Khan bypasses a prior Mother = Goddess (or India as goddess) equation. No epic of India, not even a defiantly secular epic of the nation can totally bypass that equation—this much any reader of Indian cinema has to concede. It is nevertheless important to address the issue as a problematic. The Mother, it strikes us, is not named after Sita or even Durga, Parvati or Lakshmi, names that come to mind immediately when the Hindu thinks of "Mother." The Mother is in fact called Radha, a "goddess" marked by her strong will and illicit passion for Krishna (in one version she is already married). Radha, therefore, is open-ended, canonized as the ideal devotee (of Krishna) but sufficiently flexible so as not to generate an already sanctioned cultural response. Sita, the

dad beat off my feet! oh-  
oh rest veddy-veddy diz bet!



Nargis and her two children in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, 1957. "This lump of clay calls you home." Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

"bye mudda! bye fadda!  
neeva good Vedaq shun!

(Eyes) an please keft  
a koating eggzaden  
(an-never comm back!



Nargis and Raj Kumar in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, 1957. Mother as wife and lover. Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

preferred candidate, although historically deeply ambiguous herself, remains extraordinarily predictable. As a result, Indian cinema can do very little with a figure like Sita. Her field of operation is limited; her relationship with the audience carries with it a very closed and systemic repertoire of expectations and prior readings. I think it is for this reason, among many others, that in *Mother India* the Mother, the Woman, is not called Sita, she is called Radha after Krishna's jovial consort, immortalized in Jayadeva's Sanskrit masterpiece *Gītāgovinda*, the song of Krishna. So while Sita is fundamentally religio-epic, going back to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Radha is "vernacular" or local. Against Sita who does not have referential freedom—she is closed, fixed, immutable, existing only in endless replays of sameness and foregrounds through her iconic presence the primacy or the efficacy of the religious—Radha's presence enables the typically Indian concept of life as play, as a game, as ludic, to surface. In *Mother India*, "woman" is therefore represented as wife, as lover, as Mother in both her role as a preserver and destroyer, so that in representational terms she can bypass, at crucial moments, the censorship of the superego.

It is the erotic in Radha as woman (but suppressed in Radha as Mother) that creates the unstable sexual politics of the Mother's love toward the younger son. The relationship conforms to cultural norms (and these are formal cultural norms) but at the same time endows that love with a replay of the Radha/Shamu (her husband) desire so cruelly brought to an end in the first hour of the film. From this possibility the older brother Ramu is excluded (as a young child Ramu in fact does not say a word throughout the film except perhaps to scream "mām" [mother]). Indeed those who give in to the Law of the Mother, like her husband and her older son, are symbolically castrated and made inarticulate (unlike in *Aurat*, in *Mother India* her husband loses both his arms). It is clear that in making the younger son Birju more like his rebellious father, the film connects sexual potency with rebellion against the Mother even while it plays, unconsciously, with the much more frightening narrative of the Oedipal triangle. Birju in fact dies holding a pair of blood-soaked *kañgans* (his Mother's marriage bangles) he had recovered from the tyrannical landlord Sukhilala. As a son's symbolic restitution of his mother's honor, it is an image that brings to the fore the many transgressive undercurrents of the text.

The mythic-structural antecedents that I draw upon here are not lost on Salman Rushdie. In the section dealing with the encounter between Aurora Zogoiby and Sunil Dutt and Nargis, Vasco Miranda dismisses the mother-son relationship summarily as "sublimation" (1995: 138), and adds that sublimation of "mutual parent-child longings is deep-rooted in the national

psyche." Let us follow how Rushdie reprises the argument I've advanced above:

The use of names in the picture makes the meaning clear. This "Birju" moniker is also used by God Krishna, isn't it, and we know that milky "Radha" is the blue chap's one true love. In the picture, Sunil [Dutt], you are made up to look like the god, and you even fool with all the girls, throwing your stones to break their womby water-pots; which, admit it, is Krishna-esque behaviour. In this interpretation. . . . *Mother India* is the dark side of the Radha-Krishna story, with the subsidiary theme of forbidden love added on. But what the hell; Oedipus-schmoedipus! (138)

Rushdie's agenda is, or course, rather different as he uses *Mother India* as the intertext for Moor Zogoiby's own rebellion against his mother. And insofar as the real-life relationship of Nargis and Sunil Dutt shadows the mother-son fictive relationship in the film, this composite text of actor, wife, and mother shapes the world of Rushdie's Moor Zogoiby as well. Recounting the episode, Moor Zogoiby also establishes two further connecting threads. First, like the husband of *Mother India* in the film, who is made symbolically impotent when his arms are crushed by a rock, his own father may have become impotent. Second, Birju's desire for his mother in the film may be Moor Zogoiby's own: "I have been keeping my secret for too long," he says (139).

Though the foci of the commentaries I have drawn upon in the preceding pages vary enormously, one thing remains constant: "Mother India" is a complex site for the production of meaning. Against the received sanctity of the symbol and a narrative of the proper *lāj* we also have a counter or alternative narrative that is constructed through cinema's endless possibilities around "image-as-word." In one sense in film narratives, the visual dimension, the juxtaposition of stage "properties," produce a body of "suprasegmentals" that ambiguates the dialogic narrative (Penley 1988). Film (as visual medium) has a greater capacity to carry multiple meanings than its prototype, the realist novel. In what is clearly a predominantly male representational form, the visual allows for points of resistance to surface, gaps to be created (a return look that just misses the eye of the camera, for instance) that rupture any presumption of an authorial point of view. In cinema there can always be a collective identification/misidentification against the seemingly seamless nature of the film's representational apparatus. For instance, the Oedipal narrative of separation from the mother and identification with the father (*Awara*, *Laawaris*, *Shakti*) that is a cultural dominant in both Hollywood and Bollywood may be undercut by the grammar of visual cod-

ing. The Oedipal narrative is based on a triadic system of mother, father, and child. The child's initial desire for his mother is deflected onto another female object of desire because of the threat of castration that comes from the father. In *Mother India* the absence of the father leads to an identification with the mother, from whence comes a similar threat of castration. But the "mother" is a body with a lack since the womb is an absent penis. So we have a subject that duplicates a father's aggressivity but succumbs to a threat from precisely the object that it desires (in the absence of the father) but an object, as lack, which should have no power to castrate. The highly contradictory relationship that Birju has with his mother (a relationship that has spilled over into the real-life marriage of Sunil Dutt and Nargis) comes across through the visual narrative of incestuous desire. It is the mother's strength that Birju cannot accept—and which he therefore fetishizes. She cuts him down to size because Birju never completes the Oedipal narrative of separation from mother and identification with the father. The sign of "Mother India"—so effectively deployed by Indira Gandhi—absorbs patriarchal authority into itself. This is why so many power relations do not conform to the established narratives of female lack and disempowerment in Bombay Cinema.

As we have noted, it is through visual ambiguity that *Mother India* turns a lack into something more, into a nonlack, into a sign of such foreboding and relentless negativity that it disrupts the dominant (Western) narrative of the Oedipal triangle. In moving the father out, *Mother India* confronts the spectator with an Oedipal narrative without its third element, the father. In doing so *Mother India* returns cinema to the (dis)comforts of the mother-son binary, to a system of representation in which the father exists only in the periphery of the narrative: *Deewar*, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Khalnayak*, *Baazigar*, to name a few. If some visuals introduce a repressed economy of desire and shift our reading of the film to the patriarchal (and stable) domain of *lāj* and the dharmik order, other visuals reinforce *Mother India* as an allegory of indigenous postcolonial reconstruction and redemption after the ravages of the feudal/colonial order. The latter reading requires us to return to the ways in which the film structures its narrative, visually and thematically.

Except for the opening prequel and the final coda (a return to the prequel) the entire film has two identifiable parts. These parts are differentiated both formally (or filmically) and discursively (that is, at the level of narrative). In the first half of the film the epic form of visual representation is relatively unified. Here the text is much more centrally epic in its design, with the great Russian masters of the form—Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Mayalovsky—as the cre-



Sunil Dutt, Rajendra Kumar, and Nargis in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, 1957. Land as nation; sickle as class symbol. Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

ative antecedents. In this part, classic epic shots—long shots of bullock carts stretching on the horizon, a man gazing afar from the top of a scaffolding, mother and sons against the backdrop of bullocks and fields under water, or in profile holding sickle and harvest in their hands—are used to underline land as nation. The narrative is relatively clear-cut and sustained; it begins with Radha's marriage to Shamu, goes through the loss of Shamu's arms and his disappearance, and effectively ends with the growth of the two surviving sons, Ramu and Birju. Although rural India continues to function as a sign of cultural continuity (an idea endorsed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru even as he feverishly followed the Soviet developmental model of heavy industrialization), in the second half of the film the narrative is much more diffuse, both filmically and discursively. The center shifts, and the film offers rasas of love and hate, desire and sexuality, comic buffoonery and the tragic, in ways not very different from that offered by the Bombay film genre as a whole. In this second narrative, epic cinema is much less sustained as the text, in fact, acquires different centers: the Mother; the defiant younger son, Birju; the landlord, Sukhilala; and the woman schoolteacher who finally becomes the revolutionary intellectual and who points out the need for action after Birju fails to learn accountancy. But since this second text, the second narrative, is complex and discontinuous or fractured, its unity has to be found else-

where, beyond the textual domain, beyond the film *Mother India* as we see it, in the base culture itself. It is here that *Mother India*, like the genre of Bombay Cinema, requires a multiplicity of self-justifying and self-explicating discourses.

An informed analysis of *Mother India*, therefore, takes us away from the surface expressions of culture to those imaginary relationships (or ideologies) in the presumed "deep" structure of Indian culture that hold Indian society together. Rather simplistically Louis Dumont once declared: "There are two kinds of men in Hindu India, those that live in the world and those that have renounced it" (1960: 33). Dumont was of course invoking a binary that had been documented in early Sanskrit texts in which dharma itself had been referred to as either *pravṛttidharma* (the dharma of real social relations) and *nivṛttidharma* (the dharma of transcendental absolutes exemplified in the figure of the renouncer). In terms of this proposition one either followed the dharma of the man-in-the-world or the dharma of the renouncer. In real social terms, this abstract binary cannot account for questions of agency, nor of human motivation and individuality. But if we stay with this as an organizing principle in the domain of art, and as a structure for the construction of meaning, we are struck by a number of things. The first is that the figure of the Mother in *Mother India* becomes an active agent (for the primacy of the dharma of *lāj*) when she symbolically affirms the code of the renouncer. We see this in her looks, in her black clothes, in her dark face. We see a figure who seems to be marked by austere practices, who is capable of the great act of *tapas* (immense piety and self-denial) that moved gods in Hindu cosmogyny. Here the renouncer (like the Mahatma himself) is not the Dumontian (or the Hindu canonical) ascetic whose self-denial implies rejection of the world as it is. The figure of the Mother then intervenes into a hallowed abstraction and transforms it into a social force. This much is clear enough and seems to get cultural endorsement. Where it becomes unstable is when the renouncer is mapped onto the figure of the rebel who doesn't simply "interpret" dharma but believes that the point of rebellion is to change metatexts themselves. If Mother as philosopher can only interpret the world (for which the killing of the son is necessary), the son as revolutionary must change it. It is this point that leads to narrative and representational uncertainty. So the question of justice and the ethics of revolutionary change get telescoped through other imperatives. If Sukhilala is the ultimate feudal lord, he is a father as well; if he wishes to defile other women, he has a daughter as well. Between the roles of feudal lord and father, between the lecher and the father it is the figure of the father that acquires greater significance and makes

his killing an act against dharma even when it is just. Thus *Mother India*—ostensibly about struggle against tyranny/feudal colonialism—is faced with a real dilemma between an old metaphysics that had sustained a civilization (or so the Brahmanical texts had argued) and a new modernity in which the feudal past may be laid to rest. The difficulty here is that dharma cannot take sides on the basis of historical truth; it can only act in terms of its own absolute imperatives. The logic of the dominant epic would have led to the triumph of Birju through self-sacrifice in which his death (not at the hands of his Mother) would have been redemptive, with the visuals of a new dawn endorsing this. Since *Mother India* the film cannot countenance this, the dominant epic narrative has to be distorted.

There is then a shift in the narrative order. Since rebellion cannot be condoned—but in fact is condemned outright—it has to be located in a subplot that is not a direct continuation of the blighted lives of Mother and two children under a tyrannical overlord. The subplot is about the honor of a village girl (the landlord's daughter) who is abducted by Birju the renouncer/revolutionary toward the very end of the film. It is this subplot—so far completely irrelevant to the underlying revolutionary impulse of the text—that suddenly becomes the narrative in terms of which *Mother India* resolves the terrible crisis of the Indian revolutionary in a postcolonial world. Mehboob Khan's ploy here is to introduce a facet of Mother India we've already outlined. In the face of the shame brought upon the village girl, Mother India must now be reinscribed into her role as the law, as the renouncer who is also the upholder of dharma. Thus in reintroducing the notion of law as dharma, the film returns Mother India to the larger paradigmatic narrative that has generated this complex discourse as well as to the "nation-building project as inscribed in the popular cinema" (Chakravarty 1993: 126). The end of the feudal world order comes not because Birju kills Sukhilala and abducts his daughter, but because in upholding the eternal dharma, the Indian body politic effectively demonstrates its own moral uprighteousness. It is this specific conjunction of Mother as upholder of the law and Mother as the renouncer/avenger that bespeaks the radical impossibility of action in Indian society. United India after Independence needs a guerrilla warfare like a hole in the head. In allowing a son to be killed by a mother, *Mother India*, the epic of postcolonial India, bares the contradictions upon which this massive civilization is based. The resolution, when it comes through Birju's death at the hands of his mother, remains incomplete because the immemorial difference between the serf and his feudal lord remains virtually untouched. In an interview recorded on December 26, 1990, Sunil Dutt, by then producer, director, and parlia-

mentarian, made the following remarks when asked about his filmic portrayal of Birju:

He [Birju] was revolting against the system in his own way like a Bhagat Singh; the Mother was rebelling likewise but in a Gandhian way. Birju's way is not the way since revenge and hatred cannot bring about reform. You need understanding. And also in abducting the daughter of the village bania Sukhilala Birju was doing what Sukhilala had tried to do to Birju's own mother when he was young. If Birju hadn't done that she wouldn't have killed him. You can't have revolution over *lāj*. Birju is a totally emotional human being; his responses were therefore not based on social sense but on attachment to his mother whose suffering he had seen when young. *Mother India* is not a story about revolution; it is a story about a personal vendetta, a rebellion based on a personal tragedy. The revolution solution in India is through non-violence. Gandhi shook the might of the British Empire through non-violence.

Here we have the principle of "hermeneutic containment." Transgression, whether social, sexual, or caste, is inadmissible to the domain of interpretation because it is somehow "false"; somehow transgression needs to be excised from the spectatorial mind. In recalling *lāj*, Dutt invokes yet again another metanarrative, the time immemorial principle of the containment of shame—because *lāj* is a woman's worth defined in terms of its opposite, sexual transgression. The allusion also confirms the post-*Mother India* image of Nargis as wife and mother: the only important film she appeared in after this film was *Lajwanti* (The chaste wife, 1958). The point about *Mother India* is that it is precisely the moments of ambiguation, the moments when the film ceases to be cinematically and thematically seamless—when, for instance, the camera breaks the eyeline matching of mother and son, husband and wife, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and indeed ruptures the suture of shot reverse-shot—that an alternative meaning is posited. At these moments spectatorial binding or suture is both broken and ideologically deflected. Broken because the spectator's pleasure is no longer contained within a predictable line of response, and deflected because the spectator is allowed freedom of transgressive identification.

As we have intimated all along, *Mother India* moves inexorably toward a decisive moment of transgressive identification. Before this there is a moment of celebratory bonding when Birju stabs Sukhilala, the feudal lord. The dialogue here revolves around the question of what constitutes true knowledge. Faced with Birju's hatred of the written word (Birju is illiterate), Sukhilala insists that his books of accountancy, his ledger books, are in fact repositories

of knowledge and as knowledge they should not be defiled. To this Birju replies, "I have no time for this knowledge (*vidyā*). This is the knowledge that took my land away, this is the knowledge that took my bullocks away, this is the knowledge that led to the defilement of my mother." Birju declares that he will not forgive and concludes before stabbing Sukhilala, "You are a bandit, and I too am a bandit; the law (Urdu *kānūn* here, not Sanskrit *dharmā*) will not leave you alone; it will not leave me alone." Although Birju does not raise the alternative to knowledge, the fact of challenging the sanctity of knowledge (*vidyā*) introduces the need for a rethinking of the nexus between knowledge and power. This the spectator endorses. When the transgressive moment comes, the filmic situation is tense as the nondiegetic music and foley effects presage an eerie end. Dressed in black, Birju rides a horse. He has abducted Sukhilala's daughter, Rupa, and she is now "impure," her *lāj* has been violated. He is stopped by his mother, also dressed in black. She carries a gun and gradually lifts it.

Rupa: Radha Auntie, Radha Auntie, save me!

Mother: Birju, leave Rupa alone or else I'll kill you.

Birju: You can't kill me, you are my mother.

Mother: I am also a woman.

Birju: I am your son.

Mother: Rupa is the daughter of the entire village, she is my honor, too. Birju, I can lose a son. I cannot sacrifice my honor.

Birju: If you dare, shoot—shoot. I too shall not break my vow.

(Mother screams "Birju" and fires.)

The final triumph of the Mother confuses and places into disarray the revolutionary act essential for postcolonial reconstruction, but it also establishes a "dialogic" convention (going back to *Aurat*) of a dramatic encounter leading to the killing of a loved one by the socially authorized subject. In *Gunga Jamna* (1961), the younger brother (as dharmik police officer) shoots his older brother (Dilip Kumar); in the Deepak Sadashiv Nikhlaje-funded *Vaastav* (Reality, 1999), the chief protagonist is an underworld don who is shot down by his mother (Nikhlaje is the brother of Chota Rajan, who was recently wounded [in Bangkok], and a bitter enemy of underworld figure Dawood Ibrahim); in Khalid Mohamed's *Fiza* (2000), the Muslim terrorist (Hrithik Roshan) is tracked down by his sister (Karishma Kapoor) and shot (at his request, though). The sister's act here (unheard of in cinema before *Fiza*) redeems not only Indian womanhood generally but more significantly the misunderstood Muslim. The language of the mother in *Mother India* (as

of the other upholders of the nationalist ethos in the films mentioned) is the humanist discourse of the mother in Aimé Césaire's tragedy *Les Armes miraculeuses* (*Et les chiens se taisaient*) quoted by Frantz Fanon in his seminal *The Wretched of the Earth* (1990: 68–69). In Césaire's tragedy the Rebel speaks of the specificities of race and class, those conditions necessary for the raising of class consciousness, while the mother reaffirms the colonial language of brotherhood, religion, and the human race. However, since the mother in *Mother India* triumphs (in the form of Mother as Durga) and upholds dharma as law—Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has called this “her transcendence of motherhood” (1993: 110)—the film refuses to accept the concept of action based upon political (rather than cultural) necessity. That political necessity finds its cause elsewhere—in spectatorial identification with Birju. Thus in allowing this kind of identification to take place, the director's complicity in subverting the law of the Mother (and of culture) and in advancing political action (which may necessitate a radical change of the social order) comes into play. In shot after shot, suture is maintained with Birju. Birju's gaze is the spectator's gaze even as he denounces Hindu ideology and contradicts the spectator's age-old cultural assumptions. In the process, the film is shot through with contradictions precisely of the kind endorsed by Krishna in the battle of Kurukshetra. An action has a legitimacy if it has moral force; in terms of selfless action (*karmaphalatyāga*) it is Birju who triumphs and not the Mother. Perhaps it is the only way in which Mehboob Khan can make his political statement about India: let the Mother affirm the law, dharma, but let the spectator confirm Birju's actions in much the same way in which the Mehboob Khan Production Marxist Logo of the hammer and the sickle is framed by a fatalistic proclamation of divine destiny in Urdu. In this way the overt textual ideology of the film (which is also a symbolic mapping out in fiction of the nationalist agenda of progress within Hindu values) meets a kind of spectatorial conspiracy with the antinationalist agenda of Birju (Césaire's Rebel). Couched in such a contradictory political agenda, *Mother India* becomes outrageously “conforming,” yet so defiantly subversive.