

**Michael Lawrence (Ed). *Indian Film Stars: New Critical Perspectives*. London: The British Film Institute/Bloomsbury, 2020. pp 231. ISBN 978-18445785542.**

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In recent times, the study of film stardom has grown exponentially, emerging as a field that engages critically with film and popular culture. Stardom in the twenty-first century, in both Hollywood and Bollywood, is converging more than ever, directing our attention to an increasingly global audience. In the Indian context, recent scholarship has looked at film stardom from historical, sociological, and ideological perspectives, in examining the crucial role played by stars in giving Indian cinema its international appeal. Indeed, India displays an extraordinary celebrity culture in which stars are accorded godlike status and placed under constant media scrutiny.

Within this scholarship of film stardom in India, *Indian Film Stars: New Critical Perspectives* brings together appraisals of Indian film culture from the 1930s to date. Carefully analysing the careers of film stars through their personal and public trajectories, the sixteen essays in this collection open doors and sometimes windows into the lives of a selection of stars. Touching on a wide range of issues such as industry culture, media image, socio-political factors, and historical contexts, the book is to be commended for the length and breadth of the star system it traverses. The editor, Michael Lawrence, has organised his introduction to guide us through the chapters, meticulously and chronologically stitching together various decades (from the 1930s to the 2000s) in Indian cinema.

With a focus on stars from across “several major Indian film industries – Hindi cinema (the most popular and dominant one), as well as Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, Punjabi, Marathi” – the volume opens up a pan-Indian discourse, culminating in the phenomenon of “transnational stars, whose careers have crossed political borders and cultural boundaries” (6). Critically reviewing ‘the gossip press’, popularity peddlers who have existed since the 1930s, the book offers us insights into the role played by popular media in crafting the star persona, and in splicing their personal and private lives and affairs for public consumption. A number of chapters analyse the influence of media and press culture on the making of stardom, while others explore the many textual and visual elements of *mise en scène* (costumes, hairstyles, performance, setting, and frame composition).

An appraisal of the lives of three female stars of Indian cinema's nascent era constitutes the book's first three chapters. Chapter one by Anupama Kapse examines the place of Shanta Apte, the ultimate singer-actress of the early talkie era of Hindi cinema. Kapse highlights Apte's distinct feminine presence and strong-headed persona which drew attention to the issue of gendered salaries in the film industry with the ingénue charm that fostered her stardom. In the second contribution, drawing from a memoir and digital archives, Ranita Chatterjee focuses on Kanan Devi, the quintessential Bengali starlet of the 1930s and 1940s. Examining the contradictory place and status of 'new women' in Indian cinema (Bengali cinema in this case), Chatterjee shows how the trope of the "new woman" was deployed to redeem the status of cinema as sinful and corrupting by often casting actresses in educational and motivational roles. This was also a tactic that forwarded "a claim for the much-maligned film industry to be accepted within the home as a progressive art form, in keeping with high nationalist ideal" (36). With its focus on Miss Kumari, the first Malayalam female star of the 1950s, Chapter three draws attention away from male stars in Malayalam cinema. These chapters highlight the many challenges faced by female stars in their struggle to accommodate the demands of their reel and real lives.

Continuing the grand narrative of stars' walking, talking, singing, and dancing between tradition and modernity, Rosie Thomas makes several crucial observations. Her chapter on Hema Malini's celebrity status and longevity credits the ultimate 'dream girl' with amalgamating contradictory ideas of womanhood in the post-Nehruvian era. Balancing both "desirable popular Indian womanhood and strong women characters within Bombay Cinema" (169), Hema was as easily the daredevil superwoman as she was the comic and glamour girl. Together these chapters unfold the paradoxes of negotiating modern Indian womanhood while still retaining elements of tradition.

The chapters on Dharmendra, Salman Khan, and Mohanlal that follow broach the subject of masculinity — a much glamourised and popular cinematic trope. Anustup Basu introduces us to Dharmendra, the star of all seasons and actor of the masses who enjoyed a long career delivering multifaceted performances. The icon of post-independence masculinity and poetic endurance vis-à-vis the reformist Indian films of the 1960s, Dharmendra oozed heterosexual masculinity and raw physicality. Well-known for his dancing, Dharmendra was the quintessential 'two-fisted action star' who appeared in dozens of generic films annually for over two decades. The masculinity Dharmendra embodied, a literal instance of how the body of a star becomes the text upon which stardom is constructed, is a trait he shares with Salman Khan.

Chapter fourteen pieces together two and a half decades of Salman serenading women with his 'spectacular ripped and muscular body' in a heady mix of romance and action films. The iconic bad boy of Hindi cinema (or Bollywood), Salman dominates the underbelly of India's cinematic landscape by forging

unique affiliations with the subaltern working-class audience in whom “desires and apprehension collide in equal measures” (202), claims Shohini Ghosh.

In the post-economic liberalization era, Indian films have moved on to a new generation of stars characterising new notions of masculinity. The separate chapters on Mohanlal and Harbhajan Maan converge in discussing the post-liberalization period and how representations of these stars catered to the changing middle-class imagery for their respective cultures. Mohanlal and Maan successfully consolidated a homogenous regional identity for their people. Closing in on Maan’s stardom, Harjant S. Gill explores idealised notions of success, respect, masculinity, and diasporic identity for Punjabis while Mohanlal blended feudal nostalgia into the now. Both these stars opened up new geographies of consumption and individualism. At the pinnacle of this transnational and diasporic globalised film industry is the king of Bollywood — Shah Rukh Khan, an outsider-turned- superstar and a global brand. Chapter eight articulates brand Khan in the context of neoliberal consumerist fantasies, as a global cultural phenomenon that blurs the “route between capitalistic and entrepreneurial culture and film acting” (216).

In chapters four and thirteen, we revisit two legends of the Indian screen — Johnny Walker, the comic icon of the 1950s, and Sridevi, the undisputed queen of farce in the 1980s and early 1990s. Walker redefined the role of side or supporting actors, landing himself important roles as well as solo songs. From within the marginal characters he played, Walker was able to problematize and challenge postcolonial nationalist perspectives, carving a “different Indian male subjectivity that inhabited issues of gender, caste, poverty, class, religion and idealised heterosexual norms” (61), suggests Radha Dayal. Reading into Sridevi’s “polysemic stardom,” Nandana Bose addresses a long-existing lacuna in Indian film star studies. Sridevi, perhaps the most celebrated of female stars in mainstream Hindi cinema, reinvented the idea of female comic stars in a central role. “Her spontaneous energy, instinctual comic timing, infantilised voice and feminine features manifest in anarchic comic acts that challenged patriarchal social and gender norms, subverting the strict role defined for women characters as well as comic stars” (184), argues Bose.

Engaging with another crucial aspect of stardom, chapters eleven and sixteen discuss the hybrid identity of Helen, the “feisty other in dancehall dramas of the 60s and 70s” (153), and current heart throb Katrina Kaif, respectively. Representing modernity, rebellion, sexual promiscuousness, betrayal, and the underworld, Helen delighted audience in “many avatars of otherness such as courtesan gypsy, a vamp, item song dancer, femme fatale, foreign enemy’s ally” (152). For Sudesh Mishra, Helen was the “sacrificial foil,” a trope employed to validate the national imaginary. In the globalised Bollywood film industry, Kaif’s stardom, as an NRI (Non-Resident Indian), reflects a shift in the discourse of female ethnicity. Embracing a commodified sexuality with a new-found consumerism, Kaif unlike Helen and other foreigners, is not reduced

to cameos and item numbers. Capitalising on the appeal and popularity of her femininity, NRI origins, looks, and global audience, Kaif symbolizes the ‘new woman’ of the times.

The other chapters in this volume explore the careers of stars like Rajkumar, Rattan Kumar, and Sajid Khan and examine regional and national identities alongside emerging migrant perspectives. Overall, this book offers a glimpse into the inner lives of the stars juxtaposed against their public personas and paparazzi vignettes. The book asserts that stardom is not a monolithic category but one that needs to be understood through an array of lenses. For fans of Indian cinema, it is all too easy to lose sight of the diversity of the social, historical, cultural, and regional industry contexts and internal politics which impinge on the making of star personas. This book is a welcome and timely addition that helps us understand how we construct our stars, revealing the invisible world that lies behind the popular cinematic imagination.