

# City Flicks

INDIAN CINEMA AND THE URBAN EXPERIENCE

EDITED BY PREBEN KAARSHOLM



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Editorial offices:

1st Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street,  
Oxford OX4 1AW, UK

1 Washington Square Village, Apt 1U, New York,  
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26 Circus Avenue, Calcutta 700 017, India

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VIGILANTISM AND THE PLEASURES OF MASQUERADE:  
THE FEMALE SPECTATOR OF VIJAYASANTHI FILMS

TEJASWINI NIRANJANA

In the first sequence after the credits in the Telugu film *Streetfighter* (dir. B. Gopal, 1995), we are shown a top-angle shot of a street blocked by dozens of *bindas*.<sup>1</sup> The hero is lying on the vessels, head cushioned on one arm, right ankle casually crossed, surrounded by the multi-coloured plastic *bindas*; we can see the jeans and shirt, the sports shoes. The water tankers drive up. The coloured vessels block the road with the women lined up behind them, sari pallus tied around their waists. The tankers come to a halt. We see a pair of shoe-shod feet plant itself on the ground. Camera moves slowly up from shoes to trousers to flowered shirt knotted over an orange T-shirt. The face of the hero is covered with a brass vessel which is about to be thrown at the tankers. In the next shot the vessel goes crashing through a wind-screen. The tanker drivers jump out of their cabins and demand to know what's going on. 'How dare you do that? Who are you?' they ask. Camera pans to Vijayasanthi's ponytailed face as she produces a few cheeky aliases. 'Do you know whose tankers these are?' one driver asks. She replies that the tankers belong to the builders who are illegally diverting the water meant for her locality to their construction site. 'Give us the water or else . . .' Vijayasanthi thumps the vessel menacingly. The drivers turn hosepipes on the women, and then the fight breaks out. Somersaulting and kicking, jumping on top of parked cars, Vijayasanthi disposes of the men, two at a time. A young man on

a bicycle comes by, and places his camera to his eye to record the scene; he later appears as the besotted suitor of the star. The dramatic entry of the 'hero'—with the camera tracking from feet to face, followed by the eruption into action—is in no way different from the entry of a male star into the cinematic narrative. Other Vijayasanthi films too follow this convention with minor variations.

My interest in Vijayasanthi dates back to discussions over the last decade in women's groups about film and media, to our embarrassment about weepy women, anger against the 'degradation' of female bodies, and our discontent regarding female stereotypes. Our reaction was to seek positive images of women, to read for character and plot, which would 'empower' women viewers. Our attention was drawn to the popularity of the Vijayasanthi figure, and we wondered if our applause for a woman beating up the villains would be wholly unqualified. We noticed that both feminist and non-feminist women spectators for different reasons felt some discomfort at watching Vijayasanthi, and were confused about the compulsion to celebrate vigilantism. My paper is an attempt at exploring the reasons for that discomfort (did it have to do with the replication of male violence, or with the fluidity of sexual identity in the films?). Are characters and plot the most interesting aspects of these films? Or would a focus on the problems of spectatorship yield a more nuanced reading of our admittedly ambivalent responses?

#### *Masquerade*

In this paper my main concern will be to work out a theory of masquerade, which can account for both representational issues and those of spectatorship in the 1990s vigilante films of Vijayasanthi. While this paper will desist from making claims about empirical spectators of these films, having not (yet?) embarked on the more properly ethnographic enterprise that would yield information about such spectators, it will however suggest that an analysis of the spectator positions created by the films extend, even challenge, in interesting ways the theories of female spectatorship put forward by writers like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane. Mulvey has famously asserted that in classic Hollywood cinema the gaze of the camera is congruent with the male gaze, and that the spectator position of popular narrative film is a

masculinized one (Mulvey, 1975). This assertion is premised on the to-be-looked-at-ness and glamorous/seductive framing of the female star. Doane takes this argument further in her 1982 essay 'Film and the Masquerade', pointing out the close relationship between theories of the image and theories of femininity, and calling for a dissection of 'the *episteme* which assigns to the woman a special place in cinematic representation while denying her access to that system' (Doane, 1991:19).

Drawing on the work of the psychoanalysts Joan Riviere and Jacques Lacan (and those writing in the wake of Lacan, such as Luce Irigaray and Michele Montrelay), Doane talks about how theories of femininity constantly foreground the almost 'claustrophobic closeness' of the woman to her body/image, a closeness that has severe implications for the ability to see herself. The necessity of creating a distance between self and image allows for the possibility of understanding femininity as masquerade. The masquerade is seen as a reaction against the persistent female desire to be a man, a desire at the heart of the cultural construction of femininity, according to Doane via the psychoanalysts (Doane, 1991:25). The excessive femininity represented by masquerade is seen as a form of 'resistance to patriarchal positioning' (Doane, 1991:25). Thus, by 'flaunting femininity', the woman is creating a distance between herself and her image, denying their seeming convergence. As Doane rightly points out, in her case this analysis is still at the level of the cinematic representation, and needs to be extended in the direction of the spectatorship question. Let us stay with the first level for a while and see what is happening there in the Vijayasanthi films.

The screen image of Vijayasanthi in the films studied here is hardly one of masquerade as feminine excess; on the contrary, it appears to disavow almost every aspect of the socio-cultural construction of Indian femininity. Given that Vijayasanthi is shown as a biological woman dressed in men's clothing (but not passing for a man), there is clear evidence here of the presence of masquerade, defined not as pretending to be something other than what one is, but behaving contrary to public expectations (here, those expectations attaching to one who appears to be female). Perhaps we can consider defining masquerade, then, as consisting in this case of the disavowal of femininity.

Even as I attempt to put forward a theory of masquerade, I will assemble the kinds of information that might help us contextually historicize the vigilante female figure in male clothing. This information is varied, ranging as it does from data about Vijayasanthi's career to more general issues relating to Telugu cinema. Vijayasanthi is a six-time Nandi Award winner (the Andhra Pradesh State award for best acting), as well as the winner of the National Award for Best Actress for her acting in *Kartavyam* (dir. A. Mohan Gandhi, 1990). Speculations about her imminent political career have been rife. She campaigned for the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party in the 1998 general elections and is likely to consolidate eventually a political future with that party. In the 1999 general elections Vijayasanthi was supposed to contest for the BJP if Sonia Gandhi, President of the Congress (I), announced her candidacy in Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh. There was also speculation that she would oppose Priyanka Gandhi, Sonia's daughter, in Bellary (a border district in Karnataka State with a substantial number of Telugu speakers) in the by-election of 2000. Some of her audience consider this career with a right-wing party at variance with her screen persona in the enormously popular 'Naxalite' films, *Osey Ramulamma* (dir. Dasari Narayana Rao, 1997), and *Adavi Chukka* (Dasari Narayana Rao, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Vijayasanthi's career in Telugu films is nearly two decades old. In the 1980s she played both heroine and 'sister' roles. There are many films where Vijayasanthi played the glamorous, hip-shaking, utterly feminine heroine. In the late 1980s, Vijayasanthi was associated with T. Krishna (*Neli Bharatam*, *Pratighatana*, both 1989) from Ongole in Andhra Pradesh, a director with strong connections with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Krishna was known for his social criticism films, concerned with the exposure of corrupt politicians and the criminal underworld. Here we find the early version of the female vigilante figure: in these films she is still modestly sari-clad, the good woman roused to anger by attacks on her chastity or her *mangalsutra*. With the untimely death of Krishna, Vijayasanthi moved on to work with directors such as A. Mohan Gandhi, Kodi Ramakrishna and others in the 1990s. It is not until after *Kartavyam* (1990), then, that the distinctive woman-in-male-clothing becomes the central image of Vijayasanthi's films.

What makes Vijayasanthi a phenomenon in Telugu cinema? The popular journal *Sivaranjani* dated 29 July 1994, carries an article with the title—"Mr" Vijayasanthi—Confined to "Magarayu" Roles?"<sup>3</sup> The article went on to quote sources in the Telugu film industry which said she 'lays claim to an image which could hitherto not be imagined'. The sources felt that '... The kind of image that a "top command hero" has in terms of business (referring to the film industry) Vijayasanthi too has. Her films have the same drawing power.' A producer called her Mr Vijayasanthi: 'Vijayasanthi herself is the hero of my film. Going by the kind of business interest there is in both Telugu and Tamil in this film, anyone would call her Mr. Vijayasanthi.'

In a more recent article in the Telugu film magazine *Number One*, dated 2 July 1999, the writer eulogizes Vijayasanthi's career: 'She has grown from the kathanayika (heroine) image to the kathanayaka (hero). Our screenplay writers have had to write new stories for her.' Vijayasanthi is seen to have 'overcome the competition from hero-oriented films', and the reasons for her success are obviously that '... there are spectators to watch her films. There are producers to make her films. There are "buyers" to purchase the films. There are exhibitors to show her films.' The article mentions how the star is pursued by producers who feel that she is the main cause for a film doing well at the box-office: '... At a time when a film without a hero is thought of as a low-budget film, just on the basis of Vijayasanthi's image producers who are willing to get suitable stories written for her and invest crores of rupees are waiting for her call sheets.'

The above quotes are meant to illustrate the star-value of Vijayasanthi for the Telugu film industry. The rest of the paper, focusing on four key Vijayasanthi films, will speculate on the reasons for her success, and for the popularity of the vigilante figure, by situating the films in a specific historical context. The films chosen are *Kartavyam* (dir. A. Mohan Gandhi, 1990), where Vijayasanthi plays a police officer; *Aasayam* (dir. A. Mohan Gandhi, 1993), in which she is student turned cabinet minister; *Police Lock-Up* (dir. Kodi Ramakrishna, 1993), where she is a Central Bureau of Investigation officer/housewife (double role), and *Streetfighter* (dir. B. Gopal, 1995), where she takes on the role of a neighbourhood tough.

Other important films starring Vijayasanthi include *Neti Bharatam* (dir. T. Krishna, 1989), where she becomes a Physical Education teacher in a school, *Bharatnari* (dir. Muthyala Subbiah, 1989), where she runs a school in a slum, *Pratighatana* (dir. T. Krishna, 1989), where she is a college teacher,<sup>4</sup> *Osey Ramulamma* (dir. Dasari Narayana Rao, 1997), where she is a rural dalit, and *Bharataratna* (dir. Kodli Ramakrishna, 1999), where she is an army officer/petty thief (double role). In 2000, she acted in *Adavi Chukka* (dir. Dasari Narayana Rao) as a demure middle-class urban housewife with a tribal/Naxalite past.<sup>5</sup> Also in 2000 was released *Vijayanthi* (dir. K. S. Nageswara Rao), where the star plays an 'orphan' separated from her family by wicked feudal lords, becoming first a soldier and later an undercover officer for the Home Ministry.

#### *Genealogy of the Vigilante*

I give below a brief listing of the diverse representational strands that feed into the construction of the female vigilante in the Vijayasanthi films:

- the social reform woman, the transformative force: e. g., the good daughter-in-law, as in *Ardhangi* (dir. P. Pullaiah, 1955), and other films from the 1940s and 50s; the nationalist (as in *Malapilla*, dir. Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, 1938); Mahila Mandali films; the heroine-as-teacher films.
- the cowgirl: *Rowdy Rani* (dir. K. S. R. Doss, 1970); *Korada Rani* (dir. K. S. Rami Reddy, 1972); *Rowdy Ranganamma* (dir. Vijayanirmala, 1978).<sup>6</sup>
- the bandit/costume drama: *Oku Nari Vandha Thupakatu* (dir. K. V. S. Kutumba Rao, 1973).
- masquerade gender reversal: *Jambalakidipamba* (dir. E. V. V. Satyanarayana, 1992).
- Ramoji Rao's Ashwini Nachappa films, with the main protagonist being an athletic champion in real life (1980s and 90s).
- the male star/hero/vigilante of Hindi, Telugu and Tamil films—also circulating in the cinema-viewing space of the Telugu audience, in the case of Tamil—in dubbed versions or re-makes (Amitabh Bachchan, Chiranjeevi, Rajnikant).
- the Hollywood male star as vigilante, e.g., Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone.
- the Hong Kong martial arts film: first Bruce Lee and then Jackie Chan are hugely popular with male audiences in Andhra Pradesh.

Of course, these antecedents cannot be traced in linear fashion, and we have to keep in mind the many criss-crossings and borrowings, and consequent transformations, which produce the Vijayasanthi star-persona.

#### *Situating the Female Vigilante*

The historical context is that of the late 1980s to the 1990s, a period in India when the vocabularies of dominance include as their central feature a kind of neo-nationalism. This is a nationalism, which, as I have shown elsewhere, depends in its cinematic representations on the figure of the male lover as exemplary citizen (as in the films of Mani Ratnam through the 1990s). I have argued that the new nationalism of the 90s was premised on a leaving behind of the national-modern, on a refiguring of modernity to include the newly valorized 'ethnic' (often displayed by the female body), and on the private citizen taking over the functions of the inefficient welfare state (Niranjana, 2000). Central to this nationalism was also the formation of the conjugal bond and the creation of the private sphere of the nuclear family. But here we have a different kind of narrative. In the Vijayasanthi films, the focus is not on romance or the citizen-lover, but on the citizen-in-arms, engaged in doing what the state has failed to do, that is, usher in the modern.

Here the citizen is female, and being female she cannot be both lover and citizen, since that particular subjectivity is gendered male (the lover-as-citizen, the citizen-as-lover). Vijayasanthi is always portrayed as an austere figure—she does not show much emotion vis-a-vis men interested in her. I refer specifically to the films discussed here—*Kartavyam*, *Streetfighter*, *Police Lock Up*, *Aasavam*—unlike the earlier *Neti Bharatam* and *Bharatanaari* where the loss of the lover is what spurs the heroine to attack the criminals. An aspect of this austerity is to be seen in her clothing: we always see Vijayasanthi in white sari, police uniform, army uniform, pants and shirt, or tracksuit.<sup>7</sup> The camera does not linger on her bosom or behind like in other commercial films. While watching her daredevil stunts and martial arts sequences, one sometimes even suspends knowledge of the sexed identity of the persona, concentrating instead on appreciating her sheer strength and grace.

Why is it that this phenomenon can be observed only in Telugu cinema? Kannada, Tamil and Hindi have a few films like this, but their success is not on the scale of that achieved by the Vijayasanthi films in Telugu. One can only speculate that Naxalism from the 1970s on, and the availability of a broadly leftist popular critique of feudalism, combined with a powerful and visible women's movement in Andhra Pradesh and its contribution to the popular understanding of female empowerment are some of the factors relevant to an understanding of how the Vijayasanthi persona is constructed. Clearly the films present anti-feudal narratives, and locate themselves specifically within urban landscapes. In their depiction of the vigilante's attempt to cleanse (and/or form) civil society, they embark on what might be called a cinematic re-figuring of the feudal.

In the ruralist melodrama of early Telugu cinema (eg. *Rytu Biddu*, dir. Gudavalli Ramabrahman, 1945), or in the new wave (eg. *Maa Bhoomi*, dir. Goutam Ghosh, 1980), or in the pro-ML films of R. Narayanamurthy (1980s to the present, e. g. *Andhrawaatri Sawaatantram* (1986), *Lal Saluam* (1992), *Dandora* (1993), *Errasainyam* (1994)), or in Maadaala Ranga Rao's films *Viplava Sankham* (1982), *Yerra Mallelu* (1981) the feudal—presented as the canker at the heart of the nation—is (a) situated in the rural, (b) viewed through its individualized representatives (the zamindar, the good peasant, the revolutionary), (c) sought to be addressed in public modes (political organization, insurrection, execution, confrontation in the fields). In the more familiar idiom of the family sentiment films (eg. *Roadyagari Pellam*, dir. K. S. Prakash, 1991), the attempt of the heroine is to reform the alcoholic or wayward husband, the bad-tempered father-in-law, the corrupt brother, etc. The feudal is re-sited here within the family (although often in an urban location), and therefore needs to be overcome or transformed only in that space. In the re-figured feudalism of the Vijayasanthi films, the family is no longer central to the narrative, although the Vijayasanthi figure is often part of an extended, troubled or dysfunctional family (in *Aasavam*, Vijayasanthi and mother are rejected by her corrupt brother and sister-in-law; in *Kartavyam*, Vijayasanthi's father has remarried and his second family dislikes his closeness to his first daughter). Vijayasanthi's marginality in the family

narrative seems to enable her to perform other functions elsewhere. Earlier, the reforming woman worked within the family; now her aim is to transform society itself.

What is interesting about the Vijayasanthi films is the re-representation of the problem—the feudal is now at the centre of urban life (corruption of the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the police force, the politicians, and the whole of civil society; the arch-villain Muddukrishnayya in *Kartavyam* says he has both truth and justice with him, since the Circle Inspector and an important criminal lawyer are in his pay). The feudal is also that which is illegal (not just a family problem), against the law (when the law is good, it is on the side of modernity; when it is not, it sides with the feudal). We are shown repeatedly the courtroom scenes where justice is denied due to the manipulation of the judge by the lawyers. The citizen-vigilante addresses the problem in public, out in the street, but only sometimes in public modes (demonstration, dharna, or speech). The more common resolution is the single-handed pursuit of the criminals.

I would like to connect the discussion of masquerade from the earlier part of this paper with the question of feudalism by referring to the centrality of the female vigilante in the various Vijayasanthi films. Although involving different scriptwriters and directors, the films appear to have a similar frame of reference, hinging as they do on the star-persona of Vijayasanthi and the cinematic memories of her films which audiences bring to each new viewing. The historical moment which makes this representation of violent individual agency possible relates, as I suggested in 'Nationalism Refigured', to the dismantling of the functions of the developmentalist post-colonial nation-state in the age of liberalization. The nation-state which set out to abolish feudalism could only produce its contemporary versions. The horrors of the feudal, imaged repeatedly (in the Naxalite films in particular) as what it does to women, are sought to be countered by one who is unwilling to be its victim. The masquerading vigilante is clothed in such a way as to confound our sense of her gender identity, since it is only by slipping away from womanliness and into its antithesis that the feudal can be challenged and overcome.

Given the centrality to the narrative of the female vigilante, it is important that this challenge to the feudal not be confined to spaces defined as conventionally private. Much of the action, therefore, takes place in the public gaze. There are very few encounters in enclosed spaces, except the lockup, the interrogation chamber, or courtroom. And even these are not private spaces. Witness for example the ubiquitous lockup and courtroom scenes where the vigilante is sought to be thwarted in her pursuit of justice by those who claim to uphold the law. Or the courtroom, as in *Police Lock Up*, where we see the manipulation of the judiciary by lawyers, and where the fighter for justice is framed as a criminal. Or the interrogation chamber in *Aasayam*—where false accusations and torture turns a justice seeker into a criminal. Interestingly, in most instances the crooked lawyers and police accuse the character played by Vijayasanthi of being a Naxalite (asking questions like ‘Which forest are you from? Which is your “squad”?’).

The public spaces of this society in transformation form the representational staple of the Vijayasanthi films. We have the street (*Streetfighter*, *Kartavyam*, *Aasayam*) for fights and processions, the latter associated with conventional modes of democratic protest, and the former with individualist vigilantism, the lower middle class urban neighbourhood (*Streetfighter*), carparks/basements of highrise buildings (*Police Lock Up*), parks (where Vijayasanthi goes jogging, conventionally a male activity in most Indian cities, as in *Aasayam* or *Police Lock Up*), the Tank Bund in Hyderabad (where Vijayasanthi stages a dharna with hundreds of fellow students in *Aasayam*), the mansions and living rooms of the politicians and criminals, the rooftops of chase sequences, the rooftop restaurant where Vijayasanthi confronts the villains (*Police Lock Up*), the public platform, the courtroom, the lockup, the police station, and the hospital. The most memorable aspect of the representation of these public areas is the visibility they afford to the female vigilante, practically showcasing her effortless negotiation of urban space.

We should remark here on the secularism of these urban spaces—Vijayasanthi’s ‘modern’ clothing, her occasional use of English, her occupation, references to family background (her father is a joint-collector, a bureaucrat, in *Aasayam*, and a public prosecutor in *Kartavyam*).

Of course this is a secularism of class: her caste and community are not known, or rather remain unmarked, although the latter can be guessed more or less accurately from the social mobility available to her. Unlike in the ‘family sentiment’ films, we never see the female star praying, standing in temples or puja rooms, expressing devotion to the gods. On the contrary, in *Aasayam* she says at the end, after losing her husband, that she will ‘live for this three-foot flag’ (we see her face framed against the national flag).

The good citizen is herself pure, incorruptible, because female (the good policemen in *Kartavyam*, for example, are often feminized—the young cop Suribabu who is seen as slightly mad, and the older man who has lost his legs and is confined to a wheelchair). To remain incorruptible, and in order to remain mobile in the pursuit of justice, she cannot have any ties. In *Kartavyam* and *Aasayam*, she emerges from within the family and moves away and above; in the first, she handcuffs her would-be lover for murdering the arch-criminal who tried to kill her; in the second, her husband dies in a bomb-blast at a political rally and she swears eternal loyalty to the national flag, which is what she wants to live by; in both films, her father is killed by the villains.

Does the Vijayasanthi persona have a private life? Except in *Streetfighter*, she is alone at the end, usually moving on to higher things. Her lover/husband is dead or imprisoned. Her other family members, if any, are either dead or invisible. Also, there are either no song and dance routines at all, or they do not involve the star, except for *Streetfighter*, with Vijayasanthi doing a Holi dance in her customary male clothing. In *Police Lock Up*, she is a completely lone figure. She comes out of nowhere, authorized by the state to solve the crime, and goes back after the task is done. Sometimes she shows grief at the loss of a father (*Kartavyam*, *Aasayam*), a friend (*Police Lock Up*), a sister (*Streetfighter*); but this emotion is almost immediately transformed into rage, leading to the pursuit of the villains and their eventual decimation.

How does one understand this apparent isolation and lack of emotion on the part of the vigilante? If the character’s subjectivity is an issue for feminist criticism, and if the conventions of psychological realism allow for the cinematic characterization of female subjectivity by representing the inner life of the protagonist, this is clearly not a

feature of the Vijayasanthi films. Here it is precisely the absence or negation of a private life that produces the character's subjectivity/agency. If the private sphere is equated in the common-sense of our times with questions of sexuality and sexual identity, and this is usually counterposed to the public sphere, what happens to the sexual identity of a protagonist who does not inhabit the private realm at all, except fleetingly?

*The Spectator and Masquerade*

Here the de-sexing of Vijayasanthi through her clothing and movements actually draws our attention to the conventionality of modes of female sexualization. Just as excessive femininity draws attention to how femininity is constructed, so does the negation of femininity 'naturalized' in the Vijayasanthi films. Nowhere is this double process more obvious than in *Police Lock Up*, where the norm itself is shown up as masquerade. The coy and flirtatious Santhi—behaving like most Telugu cinema heroines—comes across as engaged in masquerade as much as the tough CID officer Vijaya.

Moving now to the question of female spectatorship, we can speculate on another kind of disavowal that manifests itself in discussions with actual viewers. (This reference is not meant to suggest any ethnographic fullness but merely to provide an additional bit of data for the larger argument about spectatorship.)<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the star's presence on the screen—overwhelmingly not feminine by conventional standards—invokes a kind of refusal even to acknowledge the actual clothing of the actress. Spectators seem to be engaged in a disavowal, therefore, of the star's femininity. Randomly selected interviewees, all of whom were women, said that Vijayasanthi wore a sari only once in *Kartavyam*, the film which in a sense inaugurates the genre for which she is now famous. A quick count indicates that in fact she appears in saris, although mostly in semi-private situations, upto *seven* times! This impression is counterpointed by the star's own disavowal of masculinity, as in her *Sivaranjani* interview (*Sivaranjani*, 1994), where she continually proffers an alibi for why she dresses like a man: Replying to a question about the dress and image of the star—'In all three films (*Magaravayudu*, *Streetfighter*, *Lady Boss*) you wear pants and shirt . . .' Vijayasanthi answers: 'In *Magaravayudu*, I don't wear pants and shirt in

the first half; until the interval I wear a sari and appear as an innocent lady doctor. After the interval, after the dead hero's spirit enters into the heroine's body, she starts behaving and dressing like the hero. But you don't see the star Vijayasanthi on screen; you see the hero in Vijayasanthi's body. No matter who plays that role, she has to wear pants and shirt. Coming to *Streetfighter*, when there are several girl children in a middle-class family, we notice that the last girl is dressed like a boy and pampered. I play one such girl, who then—just as a boy would—tries to avenge the wrong done to her family.'<sup>9</sup>

*'Pleasure' of the Female Spectator?*

The argument made by Doane seeks to complicate Mulvey's assertion of the masculinization of the spectator-position in the cinematic apparatus by showing how masquerade (defined by Doane as the production of feminine excess) can perhaps undermine that position, thereby providing for the female spectator an alternative to passive identification. The idea of the masculine spectator-position is based on the over-visible image of the woman (to be looked at, to be acted upon); what happens, then, when the woman's image at the heart of the film is no longer that of the feminine female but the almost anti-feminine Vijayasanthi? What then is the spectator-position in relation to the masquerade, since this is a different kind of masquerade? Would it be appropriate to talk about the de-masculinization of the spectator-position of classic narrative cinema? (A far more complicated question of course, which I am not yet competent to deal with, is that of the non-approximation of the Indian cinemas to the classic model.)

What happens, then, in the case of Vijayasanthi? Take the example of *Kartavyam*. If there is a matching of the look with male subjectivity in the feminist film theory referred to so far, we have to deal with a different kind of problem here. We do see the policewoman played by Vijayasanthi always *looking*—at her father, at the slack cops, at the series of villains. There are both spectator and point-of-view shots showing this. The film, of course, is alluding to the spectator-cinema relationship, as in other scenes of looking in the cinema in general. But here we find not a simple reversal as a reaction to the voyeurism and fetishism of the male gaze; here there is no simple claiming of the

pleasure of the female gaze vis-à-vis male figures. The classic scenario is confounded because of who looks (not a 'woman' instead of a man, but a woman in man's clothing). If feminist film theory suggests that agency in looking confers a male subjectivity on the looker, this argument would not be able to make sense of the film in question. The drama of subjectivity is far more complicated in this instance. Vijayasanthi's is not a gaze of power. But it is precisely her helpless gaze which reveals the scenes as reeking of corruption (the rapist cutting his birthday cake—the politician hailing the rapist as a leader with a bright future—the police 'controlling' the crowds).

Within what subject position, then, are women viewers of these films located? If—since the hero is female—what is no longer available to them is the masochistic identification with the male hero, a process that requires a trans-sex movement or transvestism (Mulvey on *Duel in the Sun*), how does one describe the psychic processes at work here (Mulvey, 1989)? We look at Vijayasanthi knowing she is woman. But the prohibited female body is not represented in such a way as to enforce what Doane calls the rules of prohibition (a combination of revelation and disavowal) (Mulvey, 1989:19-20). So if 'spectatorial desire' is conventionally only voyeurism or fetishism, neither would work for male *or* female spectators of the Vijayasanthi films.<sup>10</sup>

For men, given the representation of Vijayasanthi's body-in-action in crucial fight sequences, for instance, the voyeuristic gaze cannot quite come into being (compensatory processes may include the occasional representations of her sari-clad, feminized body; and therefore the double knowledge of her as woman-but-not-woman, like-but-unlike other women). For women, by definition voyeurism and fetishism do not obtain; however, the same double knowledge does obtain. But if women have to bring to bear on the Vijayasanthi image the same desiring gaze they would bestow on the male star (one of envy?), they would need to engage in masquerade too. The process of creating the 'distance between oneself and one's image' (Doane, 1991:26)—if this is indeed what the female spectator of Vijayasanthi films is doing—is enabled by the film not just by clothing Vijayasanthi like a man, but displaying to us her strength and mobility.

'Women can't be like this. But she is a woman'. It is precisely this disavowal on the part of the spectator which involves masquerade. The disjuncture produced between the frame and the spectatorial gaze here manifests itself as masquerade, leading, I suggest, to a demasculinization of the spectator-position. To recapitulate the argument: Mary Ann Doane's formulation about masquerade as feminine excess countered the supposed stability of the to-be-looked-at female image from classic feminist film theory; extending this idea to include the reframing of the masquerade question as one involving not the display of femininity but rather its opposite would show up the screen-image of Vijayasanthi as unstable on both counts. Contributing to this process would be the representations of the male lover, as in *Streetfighter* or *Aasavam*; and the representations of other women which counterpoint the representation of Vijayasanthi, as in *Kartavyam* or *Police Lock Up*. Both, I would argue, draw attention to the masquerade at the level of representation.<sup>11</sup> Both destabilize the normed spectator-position, the gaze as male.

As Doane points out in the context of the masquerade involving the excessively feminine, but which applies also to the kind of masquerade displayed in the Vijayasanthi films, 'Masquerade . . . attributes to the woman distance, alienation, and divisiveness of self (which is constitutive of subjectivity in psychoanalysis) rather than the closeness and excessive presence which are the logical outcome of the psychoanalytical drama of sexualised linguistic difference' (Doane, 1991). One of the key functions of masquerade, then, is to point to the instability of the feminine, to show up the norm itself as a disguise. Here lies perhaps one of the causes for women's discomfort in watching the films of Vijayasanthi: in that the female image is not offered up for the narcissistic gaze but instead stages the visual confusions of gender identity. As Vijayasanthi in *Streetfighter* dances her vigorous Holi dance in jeans and sports shoes and bandanna tied round her leg, as the men and women of the locality swirl around her in their 'ethnic' clothes, as her bespectacled suitor stares on bemusedly, they solicit the off-screen spectator's participation in the detachment of masculinity and femininity from bodies biologically male and female.

## Notes

- 1 *Binda* is Telugu for the vessel, made of metal or plastic, that holds water.
- 2 The 'Naxalite' films are hugely popular commercial films claiming inspiration from the revolutionary Naxalite armed struggle. These films, made by mainstream Telugu filmmakers and using the idiom of the commercial cinema, are often criticized by the ideologues of the revolutionary parties for what they contend are distorted representations of the movement.
- 3 The reference is to the film *Magaraayudu* (Mr. Son) (dir. E. V. V. Satyanarayana, 1995) starring Vijayasanthi.
- 4 The genealogy of this teacher figure can be traced back through the narratives of the social reform movement and through nationalist discourse in India.
- 5 *Deccan Chronicle*, the local English-language newspaper, carried full-page advertisements in colour purporting to be letters written by Vijayasanthi to her female fans: 'My sweetest wishes to the overall set of audience, in particular to the respectable women who adore me and hold me in high esteem' (*Deccan Chronicle*, 2000).
- 6 There is a reference to 'Rowdy Rani', played by her real-life aunt Vijayanirmala, by Vijayasanthi in the opening scenes of *Streetfighter*, when the truck-drivers ask her who she is, and she replies that they can call her what they will, like Rowdy Rani for example.
- 7 Vijayasanthi is almost always, with very few exceptions, a state functionary (police officer, army officer, criminal investigator, cabinet minister). The vigilantism does not result from a rejection of her state-enabled role but is enhanced by it. Among the films I analyse, it is only in police lock-up that she is actually (and as it turns out, mistakenly) arrested by the police in spite of being an investigating officer. She escapes from jail and carries out her task of punishing the evil doers.
- 8 The remarks about the 'actual' spectators of Vijayasanthi films are based on a sample set of interviews done by L. Chaitanya in different regions of Andhra Pradesh during the research for the workshop on 'Telugu cinema and politics' conducted by the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, and Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, in August 1999.
- 9 Why she needs an alibi: Vijayasanthi is not a cosmopolitan figure, and therefore the narrative is required to provide reasons as to why the

'good Indian woman' should wear western clothes. Note that the star does not wear Indian—i.e., non-western—men's clothes. This detail serves to mark her modernity. Another common connection is made between militancy and male clothing. In her Naxalite films, Vijayasanthi makes the transition from rural dalit or tribal woman's blouse-less sari to khaki pants and shirt, and red bandanna.

- 10 Voyeurism: desire to look at an object outside the subject (Freud); object of the look is outside of and distanced from the subject, no punishment for looking, no reciprocity (Metz); the spectator's look stands in for the look of the camera (Mulvey). Fetishism: unpleasurable aspects of looking have to do with the castration anxiety; this anxiety is dealt with by turning woman into fetish—through lingering close-ups, glamorous costumes, settings, lighting around female star. This interrupts the flow of the narrative, and constitutes woman as spectacle. The excessive idealization of the female star-image is fetishization (Mulvey, 1989).
- 11 Suribabu in *Aasayam* is told sarcastically by his grandmother that he is the 'server', not lover, of his object of affection. He is always shown not in the centre of the frame when Vijayasanthi is present, but in the margins—as helper, not initiator of the action. The besotted photographer in *Streetfighter* is a similar figure. In *Kartavyam*, we have the figure of the teenaged Karuna who has been raped, and who comes to Vijayasanthi the policewoman seeking help in bringing the criminals to justice. In *Streetfighter*, we have the lower middle-class neighbourhood women in homely saris who demand water, posed against the 'hero' in her jeans and bandanna. In *Police Lock Up*, there are the sequences of CID officer Vijaya with Santhi the housewife, played by Vijayasanthi herself.

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