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Tupur Chatterjee

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'I am a porn star!' Sex and Sunny Leone unlimited in Bollywood

Tupur Chatterjee

Radio–Television–Film, University of Texas at Austin, USA

ABSTRACT

Located at the intersections of international porn studies, celebrity studies, gender, sex and globalization, this article looks at the recent and unusual case of Sunny Leone, an Indo-Canadian bisexual pornographic actress who successfully crossed over to Bollywood. By examining her many lives and avatars – as an international porn star, a reality TV contestant, a Bollywood celebrity and now a show host on MTV India, who maintains an active presence on social and digital media – I suggest that the unprecedented situation Sunny Leone has engendered in India presents us with a form of transnational onscenity: in other words, it brings to the fore the centrality of porn in the economies of global cross-cultural exchange and forces us to rethink previous paradigms of both 'pornography' and stardom, two domains that have more or less remained mutually exclusive of each other in the sub-continent. Leone's case brings to the fore economic, social and cultural exchanges between two mammoth entertainment industries, Bollywood and American pornography, which had not encountered each other in these ways before. The capital gains from these exchanges seem to overshadow concerns about preserving the nation's 'moral' fabric and have concurrently given way to newer spaces for accommodating a celebrity like Leone. Given that her crossover from porn presents an absolute rupture from all previous paradigms of female stardom in the Indian context, I place the discourses surrounding her within the tangible anxieties and fantasies of both desire and control over her 'Indian but foreign' and 'pornographic' body. Highlighting Leone's agency through the entire process, which is unique in many regards, this article attempts to further rethink and complicate overarching notions of 'objectification' that often dominate the field.

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Introduction

Karenjit Kaur Vohra, better known as Sunny Leone, is an Indo-Canadian adult actress who crossed over from North American pornography and joined Bollywood in 2012. In the four years that she has now spent in India, she has acted not only in Hindi films but also in Kannada and Telegu films. Before moving to India, Leone had an immensely successful

career as an adult actress in the United States. Born to Sikh parents in Ontario, Canada, Leone started off as a nude model in California before being discovered by *Penthouse* magazine, and eventually became a contract star with American porn giant Vivid Entertainment, transitioning to hardcore pornography. She has also produced, directed and acted in adult content made by her own production company, Sun Lust Pictures, which she co-owns with her husband and manager, Daniel Weber. She was chosen as a participant on the fifth season of the immensely popular Indian reality show *Bigg Boss* (modelled on UK's *Big Brother*) in 2011, which aired on the primetime Hindi language channel, Colours. Initially, her identity was hidden from her fellow housemates and she claimed to be a model from the United States. But the audience was well aware of her real identity and the country outside the *Bigg Boss* house suddenly awoke to a porn star on their television screens for the first time in history. Following this, she trended on Twitter India non-stop for three days and overtook the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bollywood superstar Salman Khan as the most searched for Indian celebrity (a trend that has continued for four years in a row), a cause for concern for many. Some First Information Reports for ruining 'Indian culture' through 'obscenity' have since been filed against her.¹ During the show, veteran Bollywood director and producer Mahesh Bhatt² entered the house to offer her the lead role in his daughter Pooja Bhatt's³ new film *Jism-2* [The Body - 2] (Bhattacharya 2012). The audacious mainstream presence of an international hardcore pornographic actress known best for her lesbian porn work in a country that is supremely conservative, homophobic and hostile to any public expressions of nudity or physical intimacy and has only recently reconciled to heterosexual couples kissing on screen has led to considerable debate and endless scrutiny, awe and curiosity around the spectacle that is Sunny Leone.

I situate my analysis of the unusual cross-cultural and post-pornography career of Sunny Leone at the intersection of transnational porn studies, celebrity studies, gender, sex and globalization. Importantly, we need to locate the Sunny Leone scenario within the meanings and significations of 'pornography' in the current Indian context, and especially recent debates around controlling pornographic content on the internet. This in a sense represents what Linda Williams (2004, 3) has called the fundamental paradox of pornography in contemporary popular culture: 'on/scenity: the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have been designated ob/scene and kept literally off the scene'. This article also follows Feona Attwood's (2004, 7) assertions that terms like 'pornography' and 'objectification' might be extremely limiting to the development of this field and that greater emphasis must be placed on the context of particular images (in this case, events) and the reactions they provoke as a more helpful model for understanding contemporary sexual representations. She argues that the early tendency in feminist media studies focused on anti-pornography criticism of porn as being especially sexist and violent towards women and this has tended to close down alternative ways of thinking about gender and sex. This article contextualizes the mainstream presence of Sunny Leone within the multiple meanings of 'pornography' in India and the increasingly disintegrating borders between the 'real and representational, public and private, high and low cultural forms and acceptable and unacceptable sexualities' (Attwood 2004, 17) in a situation where media proliferates and circulates with dizzying rapidity.

Moving away from the familiar narrative of the 'objectification' of a female adult actress, I argue that Leone has registered in the country's collective psyche in multiple ways and more often than not has disrupted the dominant discourse. I suggest that the unprecedented situation Sunny Leone has engendered in India presents us with a form of transnational onscenity: in other words, it brings to the fore the centrality of porn in the economies of global cross-cultural exchange and forces us to rethink previous paradigms of both 'pornography' and stardom, two domains that have more or less remained mutually exclusive in the sub-continent. Leone's case brings to the fore economic, social and cultural exchanges between two mammoth entertainment industries, Bollywood and American pornography, which have not encountered each other in these ways before. The capital gains from these exchanges seem to overshadow concerns about preserving the nation's 'moral' fabric and have concurrently given way to newer spaces for accommodating a celebrity like Leone. Given that her crossover presents an absolute rupture from all previous paradigms of female stardom in the Indian context, I place the discourses surrounding her within the tangible anxieties and fantasies of both desire and control over her 'Indian but foreign' and 'pornographic' body. How is the present situation different from previous or comparative instances? Highlighting Leone's agency through the entire process, which is unique in many regards, this article also attempts to further rethink and complicate overarching notions of 'objectification' that often dominate the field.

India has had a long-standing history of depictions of sex, sexuality and eroticism in art, architecture and literature, prime examples of which are ancient temple architectures,⁴ a fascinating manual on sexual arousal, erotic love and pleasure – the Sanskrit *Kamasutra*⁵ [A Manual of Sex] – and Mughal and Rajput miniature paintings. Hindi-Urdu cinema, originating in Bombay, however, has long chosen to restrict sex to the heteronormative domain of Hindu marriage (although any actual expressions of physical intimacy are extremely rare) and sexual energy among heterosexual couples is often presented through suggestive song lyrics and sexually charged dance numbers, in which censorship has played a huge role.⁶ Such iterations have become safe and commonplace through the decades and audiences are still encouraged to find pleasure through repression on screen. Frequently, overt expressions of sexual desire or sex have been immediately labelled as 'vulgar' and 'dangerous', leading to moral panic and debates about maintaining the purity of 'Indian culture'.⁷ Long kissing scenes or female actors in bikinis in Indian films have been the subject of speculation and conversations in the media because of their 'boldness'. These were some of the early expressions of moral panic directed against the forces of globalization 'and the paraphernalia that it carries with it; arguments which were eventually mapped onto the arrival of the Internet and easy access to "pornographic" material that it provided' (Shah 2008). Although it might seem dated two decades later, pornography still represents a scandalous extreme, which when not confined to illegal circuits can be 'dangerous'.

Leone has repeatedly claimed in interviews that she is a former pornographic actress and has no plans of returning to the American adult industry. However, her image is entirely consumed and saturated by pornographic sex – it is impossible to imagine her outside it and nobody seems to be in a mood to do so, but Leone exercises considerable agency in producing, managing, packaging and distributing this image. This control, coupled with the literal and metaphorical 'excess' of the nature of her work and finally,

her position as an Indian but ‘American import’ makes her case entirely novel in cross-cultural and transnational porn studies.

Contextualizing pornography in India: debates, definitions and pornophobia

The production and distribution of hardcore pornography is illegal in India and only exists clandestinely. Local pornographic films (mostly softcore) are openly screened in small-time ‘blue film’ cinema halls primarily meant for working-class men all over the country, but this has inexplicably escaped the law’s radar for decades. While some efforts have been made to examine and study these local industries, we still need to contend with the widespread circulation of American and international porn through the web and mobile phones in India post-globalization and the apprehensions they have unleashed in their wake. It is here that we must also make the important distinction between pre-existing forms of visual pornography and erotica (boundaries between which are blurred beyond recovery in India) and internet pornography. In this case, I am concerned primarily with the latter. A recent study by the portal Pornhub (2014) on India’s porn-watching habits positioned the country as the fifth-largest consumer of porn globally. Unsurprisingly, the most searched for porn star in India was Sunny Leone, followed by Priya Rai, another Indo-American adult actress, revealing a dominant taste for *desi* (a colloquial term for Indian or Pakistani) porn stars over the plethora of international sensations, especially white adult performers, on offer.⁸ Although beyond the scope of this article, Leone has also racially been read as ‘Latina’ in some of her adult videos, which may have also contributed to her being the top porn star in Spain. Commonly searched for terms in India were: ‘Indian wife’ and ‘Indian *bhabhi*’ (sister-in-law), a reference to the infamous pornographic comic strip - Savita Bhabhi - chronicling the escapades of a married Hindu housewife named Savita, with an insatiable appetite for sex. The government promptly banned this website, although it is still available through proxy servers.⁹ Pornhub (2014) also revealed that 25% of all porn consumers in India were women, and that 50% of the traffic came from mobile phones and 47.5% from desktops. Interestingly, when Sunny Leone became a participant in *Bigg Boss*, the Information and Broadcast Ministry was inundated with complaints that the TV channel Colours was indirectly promoting and encouraging ‘pornography’ in India, in a show meant for ‘family audiences’, and this was illegal (*Daily Bhaskar*, 29 November 2011). It was alleged that after seeing her on the show, ‘thousands of youth’ were driven to search for her on Google – thus finding hardcore explicit materials. Moreover, Leone’s site had the audacity to say ‘you can watch her on *Bigg Boss*’. Given that the mere presence of an adult performer did not amount to ‘pornography’ per se, the channel promptly moved the telecast of the show from 10:00 to 11:00 pm to assuage offended viewers and left it at that.

Crucial to our current concerns is this slippage between ‘obscenity’ and ‘pornography’ in the Indian legal system and a severe blurring of boundaries between ‘high art’ (like ancient temple architecture), erotica, softcore and content that can be considered ‘lascivious’, all of which has been complicated with the arrival of cyber porn. What is rampant is a pornophobia that seemingly engulfs all manner of things from Hollywood films with sex scenes screened on HBO and Star Movies to sexually suggestive lyrics in

film songs to the aforementioned *Savita Bhabhi* comic strips. In 2014, the government asked the Internet and Mobile Association of India for assistance to suggest a plan to block all offending sites. In a closed-door meeting the 'porn problem' (another example of what Williams has called the 'on/scenity' of porn in politics and policy) was discussed at length and the IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad stated that despite porn being legal in other countries, in India the supreme concern was 'culture and moral obligation to society' (Jayadevan and Alawadhi 2014). The internet service providers, in no mood to toe this line, in turn asked the Supreme Court to clarify the term 'pornography' and whether the ancient erotic sculptures at Khajuraho could be defined as such (*Hindustan Times* 28 January 2015). Rape, molestation and harassment of women were all said to stem from the 'ill-effects' of porn, 'redolent of the pornophobia which had gripped the puritanical English legal system in the Victorian era' (Dutta 2014). These problematic and untenable linkages between pornography and violence against women often suggest that 'it is pornography we must fight, not rape' (Williams 2004, 17) and have also occurred in other parts of the world. Such assertions have been steadily discredited and criticized (see Dworkin 1981; Williams 2004, 11–13). The Indian government has also acknowledged that it lacks the infrastructure to establish the kind of internet control that countries like North Korea and China have done,¹⁰ while other ministers have raised questions about whether or not that should be the goal at all. Further, blocking 40 million porn sites that exist worldwide with servers operating out of countries where porn is legal is also at odds with the government's eagerness to position India as an economic superpower. India's internet speeds are already below average compared with several countries and such a move will only increase the latency of the web (Telecom Secretary Rakesh Garg, in Jayadevan and Alawadhi 2014). This puts the current ruling party, the Bhartiya Janta Party, vocal Hindu right-wingers and against everything 'anti-Indian' and 'western' but champions of economic privatization, shopping malls, 'smart cities' and Special Economic Zones, in a serious predicament – no 'superpower' can run on slow internet.

It is within these contexts and intersections of pornography, pornophobia, cyber porn and gender that we must understand the arrival of 'American import' Sunny Leone. The government's approach towards online pornography has been one of 'reactive resistance', taking measures only when particular things offend people and they report it to the state (Shah 2008). The cyber laws 'blame only the consumer of pornography for his/her (generally his) access to the pornographic material, thus creating a category of a consuming citizen who is responsible, law abiding and "morally chaste"' (Shah 2008, 5). Sunny Leone, as the active producer, entrepreneur, distributor and star of hardcore pornographic material, both lesbian and heterosexual, destabilizes the approach to 'pornographic materials' that have so far existed in the country. If her very presence is equated with 'pornography' then it turns all of us into porn consumers, and since she is a real person and not a website or a mobile phone, she cannot be 'technically' shut down. Leone, 'well in control of her meta-data and meta narrative' (Friese 2015) has acknowledged the illegality of creating adult content in India and as a law-abiding person of Indian origin has refrained from making any of it while in the country. But the internet has given us full and free access to everything she has filmed in the United States. Herein lies the fascinating paradox of renewed anxieties around globalization and this explains the confusion that marked her arrival in *Bigg Boss*: what do we do with Sunny Leone?

It is Sunny in Bollywood!

Leone made her Bollywood debut after her stint at *Bigg Boss* with *Jism-2*, the sequel to the erotic thriller *Jism* (Saxena 2003), which had met with moderate commercial success and critical acclaim. There is no narrative continuity between the two films. The producer of the earlier film, Pooja Bhatt, is the director of its sequel. *Jism* was a rehash of two Hollywood films: *Body Heat* (Kasdan 1981) and *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944). *Jism-2*, however, was a comically bad film with its only Unique Selling Point being Sunny Leone. She was cast as Izna, an ex porn star, although this had absolutely no bearing or connection to the plot of the film, a loophole-ridden thriller about an intelligence officer hiring an ex porn star to entrap her old boyfriend. The dialogue was unintentionally funny and contrived. Critics particularly slammed Leone's acting; as one female reviewer wrote:

Why would any self-respecting woman (so what if she's a porn star in and outside the movie) romp about in provocative, barely-there lingerie while sharing space with a sort-of employer she's getting paid by to spy for? (Rediff 2012)

Jism-2 must be read through its porn-saturated promotional posters and interviews with the directors, producers and cast as the first instance of handling an American adult star's transition to mainstream Bollywood films. The poster shows a wet, naked woman lying on the floor with an arched back covered in a flimsy white sheet (Figure 1). Her face is not visible. Since we know that the film stars Sunny Leone, we assume this woman must be her. Considered 'obscene' and 'too excessive' to be displayed on the city billboards, the Bombay Municipal Corporation ordered the posters to be removed (Dubey, *Hindustan Times* 2012). The second poster shows Leone in a hot-pink bikini in the shower with her co-star Randeep Hooda, who is bare chested (Figure 2), both locked in an intensely passionate pose. Here, we see her face, and the expression of arousal is instantly recognizable: it is Sunny Leone, our laptop fantasy now on our movie screens! When the posters of *Jism* (Figure 3) and *Jism-2* are compared, we can see that the representation has moved from a promise of 'soft' erotica to 'hard' porn, although the actual film delivers neither.



Figure 1. Promotional poster for *Jism-2* [The Body – 2]. Fisheye Network Private Limited (2012), <http://www.fisheynetwork.com/films.html?id=84#images>.



Figure 2. Promotional poster for *Jism-2*. Fisheye Network Private Limited (2012), <http://www.fisheyenetwork.com/films.html?id=84#images>.

Jism-2 was known only for its casting coup. Even before Mahesh Bhatt had met Sunny Leone in person to offer her the role in the film, he held forth at a press conference on the issue:

We are going there [to the Bigg Boss house] to see if Sunny can pull off the lead role in *Jism-2*. Behind the image of a beautiful, magical porn star, there is a person that has gone through the trials and tribulations of life, and dealt with shame and insults. Is she interested in revealing the hidden side to Sunny Leone? (November 2011, translation by author)

Similarly his daughter, the director Pooja Bhatt, remarked:

I think when she came into our living rooms and our television sets through *Bigg Boss*, there is no denying that everybody was quite floored by her charm, and nobody quite had the audacity to go and bell the cat. So we did and the rest is history. (*Hungama Bollywood* 2012)

Further, Pooja Bhatt also revealed in a newspaper interview that her biggest challenge was ‘humanizing Sunny Leone’ and the reasoning for her casting decision was:

Sunny Leone has a kind of innocence stamped on her face. Seeing her makes people think twice about her profession – whether or not she really is a porn star. Sunny too has got some very traditional values, the yearning to be accepted into mainstream industry. (Battacharya, *Zee News* 2012)

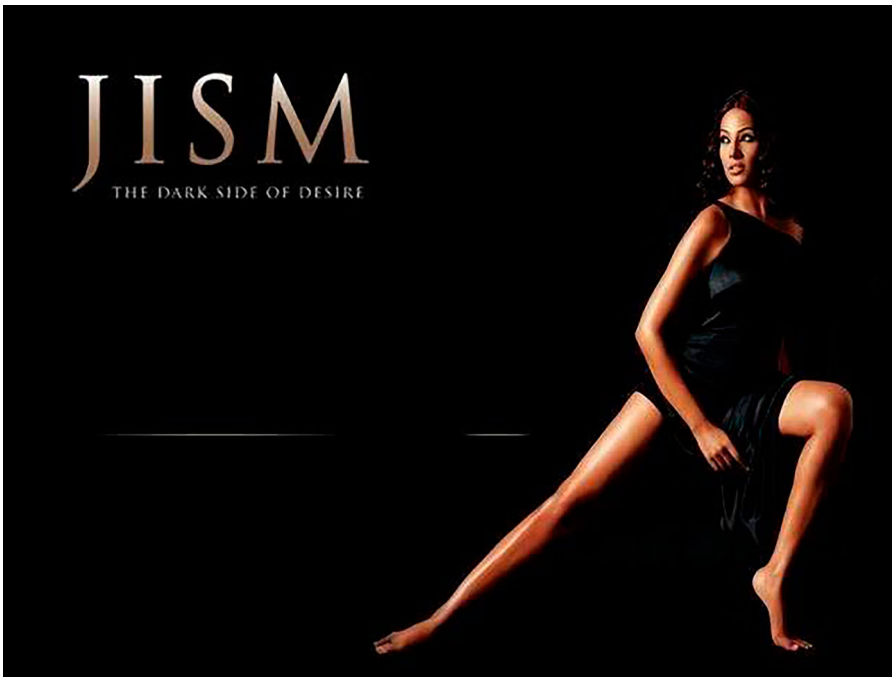


Figure 3. Promotional poster for *Jism*. Fisheye Network Private Limited (2003), <http://www.fisheynetwork.com/films.html?id=88>.

As is apparent from this dialogue, the initial tendency by the filmmakers who chose to cast her was to dictate her larger narrative through the conventional gendered tropes of rehabilitating a porn star into mainstream Indian society by foregrounding her ‘innocence’ and ‘hidden persona’, talking about her ‘traditional values’, touching upon her ‘anguish’ while paradoxically failing to actually depict her as anything but a rather meaningless ‘sexy girl’ in the film. This narrative, however, was disrupted by Leone’s own assertions about her choices and decisions. Stating that she was ‘very much a human being before I met her (Pooja Bhatt)’, she also told the Indian press that her traditional Sikh parents were well aware of her profession and knew they were up against a ‘headstrong and opinionated person’, that her husband had supported all her decisions, and that they work together to build ‘Brand Sunny’ (Lalwani, *Times of India* 2013; Majumdar, *The Indian Express* 2014). She also clarified that at age 32 she had reached the peak of success as an adult actress in the United States, and thus her transition to Bollywood was a strategic career move to explore a new entertainment market: ‘I choose to own a production house so I can produce, own, direct and distribute my own content and of others. It was the logical step to take to be successful in the business’ (*The Indian Express* 2014). Talking about her image, she claimed complete ownership: ‘I created that persona. I can’t get away from it nor do I want to’ (*The Indian Express* 2014). Specifically discussing the hype surrounding the ‘boldness’ of *Jism 2*, an amused Leone said that the film was not as provocative or novel as much as the filmmakers would like to believe, because in India:

you can only go far. You can only push the envelope so far. And that envelope doesn’t even crack open here. The film is not as crazy as you think it is, it’s something parents can watch and children can watch. (Zoom 2012)

'I love everything about the adult industry!'

Another conversation that engulfed Leone was around how much and whether she wanted to dilute and shed her past porn star status, and this tended to hinge on the initial assumption that she must be attempting to 'erase' or 'forget' that aspect of her life. Such a narrative easily fits into gendered socio-cultural expectations of 'tainted women' changing themselves as the popular Hindi expression goes, '*paap dhona*' (to wash your sins away). The lines between pornography and prostitution, however, seemed blurred in the discourse. When Leone alleged that her *Bigg Boss* co-participant, popular television actor Amar Upadhyay, acted inappropriately with her in the house, his violent and conservative reaction spoke directly to the key anxieties that her presence invokes for sections of the Indian audiences. He said:

What the hell have I done to her? I merely kissed her hand in a task! ... Bringing her in a family show like Bigg Boss doesn't augur well for Indian culture. She is ruining the psyche of 12-year-old boys in India ... I wonder why has Sunny come to India? Kya woh yahan apne paap dhona aayi hai? [Has she come to India to wash away her sins?] ... I didn't want to disrespect a woman on national TV, *even if she is a porn star* [emphasis added]. (Chaturvedi, *Times of India* 2012)

Here too, Leone refused to position her 'return to the homeland' as an act of 'purification' and 'purging of sins'. Initially, for the press, her Indian origins and porn star status seemed thoroughly incongruous. She was repeatedly prodded about her family's reaction to her profession. In an interview with a leading English daily, Leone said:

When my father realized what I did, he said, 'you didn't even ask us before you did this! But whatever you do, make sure you do it well.' My mother was also stunned when she found about my lesbian lovemaking videos, but she accepted it. And the fact that my work didn't change me as a person worked in my favor. So there was never any question of being disowned by my family. (Pall, *Times of India* 2011)

The press also seemed uninhibited and unhesitant in asking Leone for details about her sex life. Such an approach is seldom taken with celebrities in India, especially those who are female, but her status as an adult actor seemed to make her 'accessible'. She was asked about when and to whom she lost her virginity and whether her parents had ever watched any of her hardcore videos (to which Leone responded: 'Of course not! Whose parents would do that?') (*Times of India* 2011). Time and again Leone stressed the labour involved in pornography as a profession and the active role she took it in:

I think India does not have an adult entertainment industry – that's why people have no idea what it is. I ran a company that took care of the deals I sealed with firms to sell and share my content online and to other media. Running a company was hard work. I'd work for about 60-70 hours a week. It wasn't a party. I don't regret anything that I have done so far. I have no regrets about who I am. (*Times of India* 2011)

Leone broke it down further for the Indian audience:

Ours [the American porn] is a huge industry, yet a small one. Also every woman has the right to say yes or no to the job. Our blood and urine is tested every three weeks. And everything is recorded in a database. Let's say your HIV +ve tomorrow it gets documented and you're barred from doing porn. What I do as a profession is illegal in India. But I love my job! I love my life! I love everything about the adult industry! (Kandpal, iDiva.com 2012)

As Indians, we are a nation obsessed with sex, but brought up on a potent cocktail of guilt, shame and repression around it. This manifests itself through expressions of panic and insecurity whenever anything ‘ob/scene’ threatens to become ‘on/scene’ and, as Kipnis (1996, 164) writes, ‘a culture’s pornography becomes in effect a very precise map of that culture’s borders’. The knee-jerk reactions to Leone’s sudden presence in the country thus unsurprisingly ranged from rage to befuddlement to anxiety. Leone’s arrival and success has made the country confront the varied repercussions of the trans-national onscene: pornography and Bollywood now collide head-on via Sunny Leone’s body, leading to new collaborations, new identities and possibilities for new sexualities.

In all of her interviews and appearances Leone comes across as warm, affable and vibrant, quickly charming her interviewers with her broken American-accented Hindi. One journalist recently wrote:

Reporters who are assigned to interview Leone bring along their visions of a porn star, only to be greeted by an attractive and intelligent woman who is not ashamed of her past and plays the game the way it’s meant to be played.¹¹

There are thousands of viewer comments on YouTube, several of which claim that they changed their perspectives and views about her after one or another interview video. It is through these responses that we can read the globalization narrative in Leone’s cross-over. She politely refuses to indulge in any Indian cultural fantasies of family shame or repentance, but speaks in a language that is thoroughly indicative of female agency in porn work. Her reiteration of the industrial and business dynamics of her work is in tandem with India’s fantasies of economic globalization, except that the anxiety at the heart of it has always been the preservation of ‘cultural values’ mainly through the bodies of its women. It is here that Leone again completely disquiets and dislocates the narrative of non-resident Indian success, which has long centred on the Indian male and his economic gains in the West. Interestingly, most of these success stories have been tied to the professional realms of technology and entrepreneurship that Indians have excelled at abroad, very much like Leone. Of course, the irony is lost on nobody.

Ragini MMS 2: Sunny Leone as Sunny Leone

Ragini MMS 2 (Patel 2014) begins with a strange disclaimer: ‘This film does not promote any illegal activity of girl kissing or any anti-scientific activity.’ It remains unclear whether ‘girl kissing’ is an ‘anti-scientific’ activity. Whatever the case may be, before the film was released we already knew that Sunny Leone would kiss a girl in this movie (a fleeting few seconds), besides being chased by a witch in a haunted house at night when she is roaming around in her lingerie, and would also dance to the foot-tapping smash hit ‘Baby Doll’ whose previews had already garnered over four million views on YouTube. Borrowing heavily from the cinematic styles and tropes of *Paranormal Activity* (Peli 2007) and *The Blair Witch Project 1* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999) and 2 (Berlinger 2000), *Ragini MMS 2* is a comically self-referential film within a film, a sequel to the 2011 *Ragini MMS* (Kripalani 2011). In the previous film, a couple’s plans for a ‘dirty weekend’ go horribly awry when the abandoned house they choose for their escapades turns out to be haunted by an ancient evil witch and her dead children. Unknown to Ragini, her boyfriend Uday has planned to film their sexual encounters in the hopes of becoming an actor by circulating the clip as an

MMS. Uday is tortured and killed by the witch and Ragini ends up at a mental asylum traumatized and insane. The clip survives and circulates among young men looking for titillation.

In the sequel, sleazy director Rocks (Parvin Dabbas) decides to recreate the 'Ragini MMS Scandal' in the same haunted house where the previous incidents took place. This time he has cast porn star Sunny Leone to play Ragini. In the opening scene of the film, he declares that this film will be a 'horrex' (horror + sex) and after watching it 'the viewer won't know whether to be terrified or aroused', thus spelling out the classic tropes of the erotic-horror genre. We are then introduced to the lead in the film: porn star Sunny Leone as Sunny Leone – she rises out of a bathtub and magically changes into a glittering goddess in a gold dress to lip-sync to the now iconic song: '*yeh duniya, yeh duniya pittal di/baby doll mein sone di*' (this world is all brass/I'm a baby doll made of gold).

The film was a commercial success and Leone even managed to garner some critical acclaim for her acting. It is classically campy, an almost B-horror film in its plot and narrative treatment. A film crew shoots in a haunted house and, finally, the witch decides to possess Leone who then entices the cast and crew to have sex with her. I suggest that this film effectively maps the nation's fascination and desire for Leone by casting her as herself and representing the cultural anxieties around her 'pornographic body' through the tropes of supernatural possession. Linda Williams has pointed out in *Hard Core* (1999) and elsewhere that pornography and horror are genres of excess because they provoke the audience to mirror the bodily responses and actions on screen. Suhani Kanwar, credited for the film's story and screenplay, admits that she initially began work without Sunny Leone in mind ('I don't care if she's a porn star, how does it matter?') but gradually realized that it was the only thing on the producers' mind. She explains:

Because she has been a porn star she cannot connect with an Indian audience as a character anymore. That persona obliterates everything else that might happen in the future. I have reason to believe that she charges a fairly high fee; it's not like any other actor who is just one film old. So technically it's nothing over the top ... because when an Indian actress wears a bikini on screen it makes the news, when they ask Sunny to wear a bikini ... she asks, what's the big deal? Because we are so repressed as a society, people ask for really banal things. So her life's conflict between porn and Bollywood overshadows any film she might be in. Then I began to write around that ... which was odd. Of course the scenes are written for a male audience, scare the women, titillate the men. A woman who is fearsome and sexy at the same time – the ultimate male fantasy. (Personal interview 2013)

In a memorable scene from the film, Leone parodies herself by faking an orgasm. It commences when Leone overhears her co-actor (television actor Maddy) tell the director that 'blue film' actors do not have much to do and lack 'real' acting skills, referencing the actual criticism Leone faced after her first couple of acting attempts in Bollywood. She decides to prove him wrong by giving the cast and crew a 'porn performance': body writhing, voice trembling and moaning, Leone loudly climaxes into a full-blown fake orgasm, leaving everybody (the director, cinematographer, co-actors and actresses, and assistant directors) stunned, shocked and aroused. It is clear that we are meant to mirror the reactions of what the film-crew-in-the-film is experiencing. What is profitable, enticing and ironical about inviting the Indian audience to watch Sunny Leone enact a fake orgasm when they have already seen the real deal elsewhere is the medium: it is not an American porno to be consumed clandestinely but a regular Bollywood film

shows a porn star fake an orgasm with all her clothes on. The film was heavily promoted as the 'hottest date film of the year'.

Sunny Leone unlimited!

In India, Leone is deemed equivalent to 'pornography', an example of 'pornographizing': a transgression of borders and a spill over of something that should have been contained in a particular location and context only. But 'pornification' alone cannot delineate the peculiarities of this scenario, and thus I use another phrase: transnational onscenity. Let us consider the following example: keeping within the larger tendency of Bollywood song-and-dance numbers to take on different lives and trajectories outside the film text, Sunny Leone's 'Baby Doll' became a particularly popular performative number for women in different spaces: offices, fitness studios, weddings, parties and so forth. The song was played and replayed on the radio, at discos, clubs and bars, at house parties, at the gym, in auto-rickshaws and in beauty parlours. A simple search on YouTube reveals several clips of women dancing to this song, among which one called 'Sunny Leone Dance Fever: Baby Doll Employees at Office' where the female workforce of a multinational firm in Bangalore in formal and conservative corporate office wear are seen gyrating in their cafeteria, choreographed like a flash mob. Similarly, a journalist recounts:

Earlier this year a culturally conservative Hindu friend of mine was insisting that her son's wedding ceremony would include a joint family re-enactment of the famously sexy Sunny Leone song-and-dance sequence 'Baby Doll', from the 2014 film, 'Ragini MMS 2'. I have also seen 'Baby Doll' performed with some gusto at the anniversary party of a feminist human rights organization in Delhi. (Friese, *The New York Times*, 2015)

While the song-and-dance sequences are often divorced from the film context, they are rarely disassociated from the performer.¹² The appropriations of 'Baby Doll' might be read as one instance of transnational onscenity and the new spaces that it is creating, both conscious and unconscious. It must also be kept in mind that 'Baby Doll' is a Punjabi song in a Bollywood film, and that the audience is well aware that Leone is ethnically Sikh (albeit Canadian and of course an American 'porn-star'). For most women, performing or dancing to 'Baby Doll' is an act of pleasurable subversion, as have other suggestive film songs in the past, but the knowledge that the song belongs to Sunny Leone, *desi* porn star, makes it an even more radical claim to female desire.

Moving away from their initial bemusement, the Indian press has recently begun to frame Leone as an empowered woman from whom we have much to learn. They have also begun to condemn and criticize the nation's hypocritical attitude towards both sex and pornography. However, this is not to suggest that Sunny Leone has finally managed a feminist triumph in India. Most top male stars have reportedly refused to work with her, possibly uncomfortable with romancing a 'dirty' American porn star as opposed to a 'clean' young heroine.¹³ On 19 January 2016 she gave an interview to a leading English language news channel, CNN-IBN, as part of the promotional activity for her upcoming sex-comedy *Maastizade* [The Pleasure Seekers] (Zaveri 2016). The interviewer, a veteran male journalist, Bhupendra Chaubey, subjected Leone to a series of humiliating and offensive questions, displaying a rampant obsession with her prior career in pornography:

Do you not sometimes get affected that your past, the past that you were a 'porn queen', will continue to haunt you? I wonder, and pardon me if I am being offensive here, how many people would think in terms of growing up to be a porn star? Is your past now literally, figuratively a thing of the past now? Is that something that you think about? I began by asking you if you had any regrets, and you spoke about your mother, and if I were to turn the clock back, would you still do what you did? (Chaubey, CNN-IBN 2016)

He did not ask any questions about her upcoming film or her post-pornography career. He wondered whether he was being 'morally corrupted' by just sitting with her (Leone responded 'I can leave, if you want me to'). Leone was able to maintain her calm and sense of humour throughout this interview. In the aftermath of this, Chaubey was severely criticized for his stance and the Indian internet exploded in an outpouring of support for Leone. Several A-list Bollywood stars have condemned the journalist and expressed public support for Leone via Twitter and Facebook. Aamir Khan¹⁴ wrote 'Sunny, I will be happy to work with you. I have no problems with your "past" as the interviewer put it', in direct response to Chaubey's question: 'So you would want to work with Aamir but Aamir would not want to work with you. How do you feel about that?'. A female journalist angrily retorted:

The judgment that was on display in the *CNN IBN* interview was utterly uncalled for and reeked of misogyny and misplaced moralising. But hats off to Leone for maintaining her poise and confidence through it all. If anything, she should be a role model for all women who are faced with sexism and misplaced male bravado.¹⁵

These examples help us delineate the multiple ways in which Leone and what she represents is currently circulating in the country. What is certain is that the dialogue surrounding her has been relentless. I do not read any post-feminist tendencies of 'progress' in the arrival and depiction of explicit female sexual pleasure in the mainstream through Leone. I do, however, argue for Leone's agency and control over the production and distribution of her image.

What I suggest is that Leone and her situation in India has engendered a space that is different from the one usually occupied by female actresses and celebrities. Female stardom in Bollywood has been an intense and constant negotiation of the boundaries between public and private, between domesticity and career success.¹⁶ The appeal and attractiveness of the Indian actress and heroine has been framed through her sexual innocence and apparent virginity. For decades, this was the primary reason female actors retired from successful careers immediately after marriage and retreated into the private domains of domesticity and motherhood. Bollywood actor Shilpa Shetty, who participated in the UK's *Celebrity Big Brother UK* in 2007, provides a counter-narrative to Leone's presence in *Bigg Boss*. Shetty emerged from that show portraying herself to the Indian and British media as a 'modern-yet-traditional' Indian woman. She refused to react to the racist comments made against her by fellow participant Jade Goody to maintain her 'Indian' poise, calm and dignity (Mitra 2012). Sunny Leone, on the other hand, has already taken off all her clothes and had sex with multiple people multiple times on camera and distributed that content as widely as she could. She leaves nothing to the imagination of the Indian audiences. She cannot offer them pleasure through repression; she is unable to feign sexual innocence. She has reached a point of no return, or what Linda Williams has called the primary aesthetic of pornography: 'maximum visibility'

(1999, 49). She is unlimited. It is for these reasons that we cannot situate her celebrity persona within the same discourse as other Bollywood female actors. Her persona, image construction and media texts must be read as events that share a somewhat relational link to the narratives of female stardom, but concurrently remain outside and independent of it. Leone therefore occupies a unique position in the global circulation of capital and the exchanges between entertainment industries. She cannot be ignored by a film industry that is driven by the logic of profit and hard capital gains because of her net worth and international popularity as an adult star (she was recently placed 45th on the Forbes India list of Indian celebrities). At the same time, Bollywood seeks to maintain its position as a culture industry with 'Indian sensibilities', and thus it is unable to do much with her on screen due to both the Censor Board¹⁷ and its own limited tropes of narrative organization. Neither can it grant her the usual off-screen space of benign acceptance in its cultural story as it has to other 'foreign imports' such as Katrina Kaif¹⁸ and Jacqueline Fernandez.¹⁹ Sunny Leone in Bollywood thus perfectly exemplifies the contemporary paradoxical complexity of economic globalization and its relationship to pornography: capital reigns supreme over rampant cultural anxieties, which are then slowly managed, assuaged, negotiated and placated as they surge from time to time.

Notes

1. Several newspapers and websites reported on Sunny Leone's popularity on Google India (NDTV 16 December, 2014; *Zee News* 17 December, 2014; *The Indian Express* 2 January, 2015). For a full list of First Information Reports so far filed against Leone, see *The New Indian Express* 27 May, 2015. The charges are the Indian Penal Code sections 292 (Obscene and indecent advertisement and display), 292A (Printing of grossly indecent or scurrilous matter) and 294 (Performing obscene act in public place), the IT Act's section 67 (Publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form) and the Indecent Representation of Women Act's sections 3 (Prohibition of advertisements containing indecent representation of women) and 4 (Prohibition of publication or sending by post indecent representation of women) (in *Times of India* 16 May, 2014). The Cyber Crime Cell is currently investigating the case. The police have stated that they cannot block the website because it does not operate out of India.
2. Mahesh Bhatt is a veteran director, producer and writer in the Bombay film industry. He has made several critically acclaimed films that have often dealt with issues considered 'unusual' or especially 'bold' for commercial Hindi cinema.
3. Pooja Bhatt is an actor, producer, writer and director. She is also Mahesh Bhatt's older daughter. She was a commercially successful actor in the 1990s. Besides her film career, she has courted some controversies in her day. She appeared on a magazine cover lip-locked with her father, which drew much flak and criticism for being 'incestuous', and then followed it up by posing only in body paint, inspired by Demi Moore's *Vanity Fair* cover of 1992.
4. Several ancient India temples like Khajuraho in Maharashtra, Padawali in Madhya Pradesh, Ranakpur in Rajasthan, the Sun Temples in Orissa and Gujarat and the Virupaksha Temple in Karnataka are famously filled with carvings and sculptures depicting nudity, erotic art and people engaged in acrobatic sexual positions with multiple partners, and even animals. For a historical account of erotic temple architecture, see Harle (2004).
5. See O'Flaherty (1986).
6. For a full account of censorship and sexuality in Bombay cinema, see Monika Mehta (2001, 2012).
7. Several examples of public concerns over 'obscenity' can be recalled since the early 1990s coinciding with anxieties around globalization. In 1993, major superstar Madhuri Dixit was

accused of propagating 'vulgarity' and 'obscenity' through her hit song-and-dance number inundated with sexual innuendos '*choli ke peeche kya hai?*' (What's behind the blouse?). In 1996, supermodels Madhu Sapre and Milind Soman posed nude with only a python wrapped around them for a shoe brand. The film *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (Nair 1997) went through endless rounds of banning, censorship and shunning. For a complete list, see Nishant Shah (2008).

8. This is interesting because the white female body has traditionally been the site on which Bombay cinema has sought to deflect the Indian male sexual gaze. White women have been depicted in stark contrast to their Indian counterparts, often as the villain's moll, or a bar or cabaret dancer. For more, see Ranjani Mazumdar (2007), Jyotika Virdi (2003), Ajay Gehlawat (2015) and Neepa Majumdar (2009). From the 1980s, the mainstream heroine has encroached upon the space of the white vamp's dancing by performing those numbers herself. The songs have also become especially innuendo-laden, as have the dance steps, like the famous Bollywood 'pelvic thrust'.
9. For an insightful piece on *Savita Bhabhi*, see Shohini Ghosh (2009).
10. Production and distribution of pornography is illegal in North Korea and China, much like in India, but the government infrastructure very effectively supports these laws. In 2010, 60,000 websites were shutdown in China and 5000 people arrested in the process. Regulation and censorship is widespread and brutal.
11. <http://thereel.scroll.in/802011/she-is-nice-she-is-not-like-her-videos-sunny-leone-charms-the-media-ahead-of-mastizaade>. Accessed 18 January, 2016.
12. For an excellent account of how Bollywood song-and-dance numbers by iconic dancing divas of the 1980s and 1990s, Madhuri Dixit and Sridevi, have been used to express queerness and identity by *desi* youth in Bangalore and Chicago, see Kareem Khubchandani 2016.
13. In Bombay Cinema, male actors have far longer lasting careers their female counterparts. Women aged over 35 and/or married are considered 'too old' and film offers for them start to peter out. A few years later, we might see the leading ladies transition to elder sisters or mothers much quicker than the men, who continue to retain their roles as heroes well into their 50s, consistently romancing actresses as young as 21 on screen.
14. Aamir Khan is one of the industry's biggest A-list male stars. Along with Salman Khan and Shahrukh Khan, he is one of the 'Khan trio' who rule the box-office and enjoy immense clout in the industry. All of the Khans have been around for nearly two decades.
15. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/Q7mICmqClnA3F0dpkMysYK/Judging-Sunny-Leone.html>. Accessed 19 January, 2016.
16. See Neepa Majumdar (2009).
17. The Indian Censor Board refused to give Leone's upcoming film *Maastizade* (The Pleasure Seekers) (Zaveri 2016) an A-certificate and banned it entirely, stating that the content is 'unsuitable' for Indian audiences. This film was finally released amid great controversy on 22 January, 2016.
18. Katrina Kaif is a British-Indian Bollywood actress who managed success and fame in the industry despite being unable to speak Hindi, the primary language of Bollywood films. She debuted with *Boom* (Gustad 2003), a commercial and critical failure. Kaif has since said that this film was a mistake she made when she knew nothing of the Indian audiences or Bollywood films. Because of her poor acting and language skills, her success in the industry is often attributed to support from powerful male actors. She had delivered a number of commercial hit films, but mostly those that heavily focus on the male lead. One important skill she does possess is dancing and several of her song-and-dance numbers have been hits that have circulated across spaces outside film texts. Some of them have also been very sexually suggestive, like '*Sheila ki Jawani*' (Blossoming Sheila) and '*Chikni Chameli*' (Slippery Chameli).
19. Jacqueline Fernandez is a multi-racial Sri Lankan actor and model, moderately successful as a Bollywood actress. She too is known primarily for her seductive dance numbers and limited acting skills.

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