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Caste-ing Women in Bollywood:

A Reading of Caste (In)visibility in the Life Writing of Bollywood's Upper Caste Women

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## SUMMARY

The graded hierarchy of caste is the basic organising principle and an important vector of capital and social mobility in Hindu society. In India's current political climate, caste informs not only national politics and governance, but also Indian society and culture as a whole, and yet, it is often absent from public discourse. Understanding caste at the intersection of gender and class is essential to understand what this absence enables and disallows in caste society. In my thesis, I study life writing by upper caste women associated with the Bollywood film industry in contemporary India to understand how self-representations of their lived experiences render their upper caste identity (in)visible. I use Bollywood as a delimited field where social, cultural, media, and symbolic capital circulate. I read Twinkle Khanna's autobiography *Mrs Funnybones: She's Just Like You and a Lot Like Me* (2015) and her newspaper column/blog for The Times of India with the same name, Soha Ali Khan's autobiography *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), and two seasons of the Netflix reality television series *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), starring Maheep Kapoor, Seema Sajdeh, Bhavana Panday, and Neelam Kothari Soni for how these women, who are in positions of influence, use the social, cultural, and aesthetic practice of life writing to narrate their everyday lives in the context of their relationships, their labour, and their politics in the register of caste, without explicitly mentioning caste. In doing so, I demonstrate how they remain complicit in the caste system, which affords them material and social power.

Key words: Bollywood, capital, caste, class, gender, identity, life writing

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## INTRODUCTION

### Caste in Full View: An Introduction

In May 2014, after a particularly vigorous national electoral process, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was overwhelmingly voted into power at the centre and Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India. Modi's election, backed by the Hindutva politics of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's parent organisation, heralded a new era of politics in India. Christophe Jaffrelot, in *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (2019) writes that "[f]rom the moment Narendra Modi took office, Hinduism started being promoted in the public arena" (159). Liberal political commentary in India, dominated by Hindu public intellectuals, was generally opposed to Modi's brand of Hindutva<sup>1</sup>. They made several attempts to assert the difference between Hinduism – understood as a unionised set of varied practices and beliefs without a fixed founder or roots – and the extremist Hindu nationalism conceptualised by Damodar Savarkar which was now being propounded by Modi and the BJP (Sharma 43). Despite this, Modi remained a popular political leader. He was active on all social media platforms, starting campaigns, trending hashtags, and posting pictures with world leaders, renowned politicians, Bollywood actors, and sportspersons (Rao 170-180). Two biopics were based on his life<sup>2</sup>. He published books<sup>3</sup> and conducted a weekly radio show<sup>4</sup>. It gained him sustained support from his voters. His 2019 election campaign promoted the idea of Hindutva in an even more rigorous fashion. After he was re-elected for a second term, he abrogated Jammu and Kashmir's special status

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/shashi-tharoor-shares-old-post-of-hinduism-versus-hindutva-says-still-relevant-101640743357158.html>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/pm-modi-biopic-starring-vivek-oberoi-to-be-released-on-ott/articleshow/86312693.cms> and <https://news.abplive.com/entertainment/biopic-on-pm-modi-titled-ek-naya-savera-directed-by-sabbir-queeshi-to-hit-the-big-screen-soon-1579427>

<sup>3</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliography\\_of\\_Narendra\\_Modi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliography_of_Narendra_Modi)

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/mann-ki-baat/>

in the Indian constitution in a legally dubious move, souring ties with Pakistan further<sup>5</sup>. A month later, he performed a spectacular, traditional Hindu ceremony to lay the first brick for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, at the site of the demolition of the Babri Masjid<sup>6</sup>. At the end of the year, he announced the government's intentions to constitutionalise the National Register of Citizens along with the Citizenship Amendment Act<sup>7</sup>, which jeopardised the citizenship status of Muslims and other minorities in the country.

When Modi rose to power, I was fifteen years old. Over the next few years, I did feel uncomfortable when I had to confront news and discourse about Modi's political moves, but I sided with the public intellectuals. My childhood was full of fond memories of festivals, rituals, prayer songs, and stories about the Hindu religion. It was a strong connection to my family. As a result, I maintained that what Modi was endorsing was not my Hinduism, but that I was still a Hindu. In 2019, while I was at university, one of my professors pointed out during a discussion that I only insisted on remaining a Hindu because of my caste privilege as a Brahmin woman. "You don't see that what Modi is doing is exactly what your Brahminical Hinduism is designed to do. It has been doing it to the people it claims as its own for a long time," he told me. This professor, a sociologist and media studies scholar belonging to an Other Backward Class<sup>8</sup> (OBC)-classified caste, was the only person to challenge my ideological stance in a private liberal arts college in India. It was a harsh pill to swallow not only because it established caste as a current and ongoing form of discrimination rather than a relic of a past, as I had repeatedly been told, but also because it

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<sup>5</sup>See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49234708>

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-uses-silver-brick-to-lay-the-foundation-stone-of-ram-mandir/story-SdjaznicaNTMBh4WSxk8OK.html>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/caa-npr-nrc-confusion-connection-explained-india-1631534-2019-12-26>

<sup>8</sup> Castes which are just above the scheduled caste category, and though not historically 'untouchable', have faced discrimination and are considered socially and economically 'backward'

made me complicit in the kind of violence I conveniently ascribed to Modi. I resisted this accusation for a while. I belonged to a Brahmin family, yes, but I was a girl first. I justified my resistance as stemming from being targeted by a man – he was a part of the patriarchy because he saw me as an oppressor instead of the oppressed. I even rationalised it as him not knowing about my family’s socioeconomic background and therefore, accusing me of being an oppressor. Hinduism, followed by many renowned figures as well as people I looked up to in my family, had given an entire nation its cultural identity. I was quite certain this man was utterly mistaken.

The above vignette of my experience at being made to confront caste as explicitly being at the centre of Indian politics points at an emptiness at the heart of the reasoning of the ideological separation of Hinduism and Hindutva. Hindutva was not a misguided interpretation of Hinduism, it *was* Hinduism. As Kancha Illaiah Shepherd (1996) has pointed out, caste privilege has allowed for the separation of the two, allowing upper castes to retain their structural privilege (n.p.). Jaffrelot (2019) argues that from the beginning, the social conservatism of the Hindu nationalist movement has garnered its support from upper caste Hindus, because “while in theory it aims to abolish the ‘nation-dividing’ caste system, such an ambition does not rule out a strong adherence to Brahminical values and the Hindu traditional social order” (23). Therefore, Modi’s public performance of the rituals associated with Hinduism was also a reinforcement of the caste order. My realisation of my identity as an upper middle class, Brahmin girl in my vignette also points to a struggle towards understanding the repercussions of the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in contemporary India, which is the genesis of the exploration I want to undertake through my thesis. What does Modi’s endorsement of caste mean for upper caste women<sup>9</sup> today? How

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<sup>9</sup> I use ‘upper caste women’ to refer to those women who consider themselves belonging to historically privileged castes. While I do locate them in their ascribed castes in the discussion on my case studies, I formulate their subjectivities from the ways in which they understand and define themselves vis-à-vis caste and gender in their narratives/the selves they construct for themselves in these narratives

are women with caste privilege positioned in Hindu society in contemporary India? What does it mean to be and remain implicated in the perpetuation of caste oppression as a woman? Where and how can one find the traces of this implication? I will begin to unpack these questions through a discussion on caste at the intersection of class and gender.

### Caste at the Intersection of Class and Gender

Bhimrao Ambedkar (1945) formulates caste as a system of “graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” (25). Therefore, moving upwards from the lowest caste to the highest, the status and power that a group holds, increases. At the same time, the lower one’s caste, the more contempt a person is regarded with, since lower caste people have almost no power within a caste society. Although the caste system is often theorised as being divided into four main *varnas* or sects, i.e., Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Shudra (servant), there are thousands of subsects that complicate this hierarchy<sup>10</sup>. Gerald Berreman (1992) attempts to formulate this gradation of caste as a lived experience. He writes that “[t]he human definition of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety” (84). Berreman’s definition frames caste as a relational system of inequalities, wherein privilege and disadvantage are rendered visible and invisible in response to specific contexts and situations. The position of women within the relational as well as patriarchal system of caste is a tense one.

Charu Gupta and S. Shankar (2017) write that “caste and gender are not only constitutive of the social; caste is central to how gender is reproduced” (Shankar and Gupta

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<sup>10</sup>For a comprehensive historiography of caste and its contestations, see Bayly, 1999.



1-2). Therefore, caste mediates gendered experiences in a caste society. Although Ambedkar (1936) characterises caste as a hierarchy based on birth and descent (n.p.), he also frames endogamy – a practice that prevents intermarriage between caste groups – as a characteristic specific to the essence of the Indian caste system (1916, n.p.). In doing so, he argues that the reproduction of caste is made possible primarily through the everyday policing of women’s bodies and sexuality. For Ambedkar, caste and gender are intricately intertwined. Uma Chakravarti ([1993] 2018) argues that marriage is important for the legitimate continuation of caste purity through the organising principle of the male line of descent. According to Chakravarti, “the *principles* of marriage practice are inseparable from the very *principles of hierarchy* at the core of caste-based Indian society. Marriage is thus linked to belief and ritual – it is the *purity* it practices that yields *hierarchy*” (emphasis in original; 29). Through marriage, women participate in the practice of caste. Similarly, Leela Dube, in (2001), also terms caste as a “birth-status group” (154) and identifies three features essential to its maintenance: exclusion (through marriage and social contact), hierarchy (through ranking and ordering as per status), and interdependence (through the division of labour) (154). By identifying caste as a birth-status group, Dube positions women as essential to the continuation of the caste system. Therefore, caste becomes crucial to women’s identities and social roles in Hindu society.

Chakravarti ([1993] 2018) and Sharmila Rege (2006) have discussed the anti-Mandal agitations of 1990 as a pivotal moment in caste politics that stressed the need to engage with caste from a feminist standpoint. In 1990, the V.P. Singh government decided to implement reservations<sup>11</sup> for the OBCs, which would allow them greater recruitment for government or public service jobs, while the share of jobs for the upper castes would reduce proportionately

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<sup>11</sup>Reservation in the Indian context is a constitutionally guaranteed system of affirmative action, which provides historically disadvantaged groups (usually determined through caste background) access to and representation in education, employment, government schemes, politics, and scholarships (Jeenger, n.p.)

(Chakravarti 1). This decision incited large-scale protests all over the country, particularly from upper caste men. What was striking however, was that upper caste women joined the protests especially in support of upper caste men, “on behalf of their husbands” (Chakravarti 1). For Chakravarti, this was an absurd display of solidarity from the women: “here were upper caste women students passing a self-denying ordinance upon themselves; they were proclaiming a *self-regulatory code*, a consequence of internalising the ideology of mandatory endogamous marriages” (1-2; emphasis in original). Here, Chakravarti frames caste not only as integral to upper caste women’s identity, but also as a system that oppresses them. Later in her book, she argues that upper caste women become complicit in the caste system because, despite their subordination, it affords them access to a certain degree of social and material benefit (137). Rege approaches the anti-Mandal agitation as posing “a direct challenge to the assumption that caste identities in urban India were personal and private matters” (2). Thus, by their public assertions of caste power during and through the protests, upper caste people contradicted their own argument about themselves being secular or “casteless” while lower caste people constantly restated their caste identities.

The issue of caste being relegated to the private sphere is an issue marked by modernity, colonialism, and the formation of the Indian nation-state. M.S.S. Pandian (2002) traces modernity in India back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and attempts to read the interaction between caste and nationalism during the colonial period and after. While he agrees with Partha Chatterjee’s<sup>12</sup> formulation of an anti-colonial nationalism that decentres the western imagination of nationalism by locating its ideas of sovereignty in the purview of spirituality and culture. The modern is approached with an ambivalence to preserve the spiritual in this period. However, Pandian argues that “if we foreground

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<sup>12</sup> In “The Nationalist resolution of the Women’s Question” (1989), Partha Chatterjee introduces the spatial dichotomy of *ghar* and *bahir* (literally, home and outside) in the upper caste Hindu nationalist ideology to denote the difference a superior inner Indian spirituality – enshrined in respectable Indian femininity – and the material West (132)

dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern social groups within the nation – instead of colonialism – the divide between spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us other stories – stories of domination and exclusion under the sign of culture and spirituality within the so-called national community itself” (1736). This dominant form of nationalism, subscribed to by the Indian elite, encodes upper caste culture as Indian culture and effectively negates the possibility of caste being spoken about in the public sphere. In post-colonial India, Pandian tracks how modernity becomes central to the idea of the nation. To frame itself as modern, however, the Indian nation-state must simultaneously acknowledge and reject the legitimacy of “othered” communities. In his seminal essay, “The Annihilation of Caste” (1936), Ambedkar writes that there is no such thing as Hindu society, “only a collection of castes” with an “anti-social spirit, this spirit of protecting its own interests” (n.p.) and is therefore, incapable of becoming the basis for a modern nation, which must be formed on the basis of a unified identity. Ambedkar does not see potential for community and inter-caste solidarity in a caste society because of its rigid rules of segregation (n.p.). Similarly, Pandian notes that the “Indian modern, despite its claim to be universal – and of course, because of it – not only constitutes lower caste as its ‘other’, but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste. Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to lower castes” (Pandian 1738).<sup>13</sup> Subramanian (2015), argues that because upper caste people consider themselves “modern subjects” because they are able to inhabit a democratic and universalistic worldview, but fail to acknowledge the historical privilege that enables them to inhabit these ideals (456). By encoding themselves as national subjects in this manner, upper caste people not only continue to uphold the caste order but also invisibilise their complicity in its oppressive structures.

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<sup>13</sup> See also: Subramanian, 2019.

The year after the anti-Mandal agitations heralded new economic reforms for India. In 1991, under the P. V. Narasimha Rao government, India opened up its economy to the world for the first time. The policies included liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation with the objective of making the Indian economy more market-oriented and consumption-driven (Parameswaran 346). These financial reforms altered the socioeconomic status of Indian citizens drastically and resulted in the creation of a “middle class” (Parameswaran 346). Radhika Parameswaran (2004) engages with how this new middle class resulted in greater economic and professional mobility for women, while also compelling them to remain committed to domestic tradition (347). Historically, caste and class in India have always interacted closely. Gail Omvedt (1982) has articulated this relationship as: “Caste is a ‘material reality’ with a ‘material base; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today” (14). Chakravarti ([1993] 2018) traces the roots of the intertwining of caste and class in detail, suggesting that the possession of material resources was crucial for the maintenance of power in the caste system, but that this possession was always in relative to other castes placed higher or lower on the graded hierarchy (15-16). This makes it difficult to recognise the materiality of caste. Satish Deshpande (2013) coined the term “casteless” (32) to denote a subjectivity that comes into existence in the late colonial period in India. Castelessness obscures or invisibilises upper caste identity largely by converting caste privilege, which is traditionally social, into modern forms of capital<sup>14</sup>. In post-liberalisation India, this has often meant that caste identity has translated into material gains. As a result, class identity also becomes determined along this conversion into capital. Trina Vithayil, through an examination of the bureaucratic pushback against including caste

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<sup>14</sup> Subramanian (2015) exemplifies this by showing how, in the public higher education system in India, caste identity – a form of social capital – turns into merit – a modern articulation (293).

as a category in the population census in contemporary India, argues that the invisibilisation of upper caste identity or “castelessness”, allows for the reproduction of the caste system, despite several organised movements by lower caste groups (456).

At this moment, I want to turn back to the questions I began this section with, particularly about where and how the traces of the implication of upper caste women in the caste system can be found. In the review of existing literature that I have just undertaken, there exists the meticulous analysis of the positioning of upper caste women in caste society as objects of analysis. My interest, however, is in understanding the role of upper caste women in the Hindu caste system as subjects with agency<sup>15</sup>. In this thesis, I am thinking with Subramanian (2015), who suggests that there is not enough work on the discursive registers that upper caste people use to navigate daily social life. I want to understand how upper caste women negotiate their simultaneously empowered and subordinated position in society to do the work of caste. For this purpose, I turn to a literary studies analysis of culture in my research. In their introduction to *Reading the Social in American Studies* (2022), Franke et al. examine how the disciplines of sociology and literature may work together to provide better insight into human interaction and sociability. While sociological concepts and methods foreground knowledge about inequalities, social status, and agency, “literature takes a close-up look at personal interactions and their psychological underpinnings, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of, for example, (symbolic) violence, the fashioning of the self, or subtle differences and changes in manners” (Franke et al. 1-2) through its attention to the aesthetic and the subjective in the social dimension. Pranjali Kureel (2021) tracks the upper caste hegemony in Indian newsrooms and production houses, where caste privilege masquerading as castelessness becomes constructed as social reality and is then circulated in society as “modern” culture (103-104). Therefore, castelessness finds

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<sup>15</sup> Shah (2021) and Chitnis (2014) have done work like this in sociology.

representation in popular culture because of the way the elites have controlled the means of cultural production in Indian society. In this thesis, I am studying life writing by upper caste women in Bollywood in contemporary India in order to understand how self-representations of the lived experience of these women renders their upper caste identity (in)visible.

In the following sections, I engage with the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, as a Bourdieusian social field comprising caste networks to understand how caste hegemony is represented not just in films, but also celebrity culture, that is, among representations of those who own the means of production, in India. Here, I will present my case studies. Then, I will engage with the theory of life writing to demonstrate how the practice of life writing becomes an apt space to read for the construction of upper caste women's "casteless" subjectivities.

### Caste in Bollywood as a Social Field

Bourdieu (1992) describes the field as a social arena that consists of hierarchical networks between the positions occupied by agents or institutions within it. These positions are structured and distributed on the basis of the possession of power (or social, economic, cultural, and media capital). Within the field, the occupants try to improve their possession by gaining greater access to or leveraging this capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 97). In this section, I approach the Hindi film industry, based in Mumbai and popularly known as Bollywood, as a field. I suggest that although economic capital enables the agents and institutions – actors, directors, producers, production houses, studios, and so on – to occupy and maintain their position within the field by making and distributing films, the network of the industry is held together and perpetuated by social, cultural and media capital, influenced by social class and the Hindu caste system. Thus, it is as Gaventa (2003) puts it – in a field,

“specific kinds of capital [...] are at stake and certain forms of habitus or dispositions are fitted for success” (9).

Mark Lorenzen and Florian Arun Täube study Bollywood through social network theory and observe that Bollywood was not originally an industry formed through class. They emphasise the role of the family in maintaining the economic and social status of and within the film industry. In a 2010 report, they conceptualise Bollywood as an industry dominated by small, family-owned production firms that work informally “beyond market principles [...] through reciprocity and other personal(ized) transactions” (10).<sup>16</sup> In a 2008 article, when discussing how projects and ideas are communicated within the industry, they write that “[i]n this network, the information exchange is intense, and social trust is abundant. Most people know each other, if not through family bonds, then through frequent professional and social meetings” (292). The scale at which entertainment is consumed ensures mostly profitable money flow, and this caste-, and eventually class-marked network circulates it within itself (296). The owning of production houses, then would also allow one to have symbolic power, which is “[t]he ability to conserve or transform social reality by shaping its representations, i.e., by inculcating cognitive instruments of construction of reality that hide or highlight its inherent arbitrariness (Wacquant 553-4).

Caste in the circles of the Hindi film industry is, in Bourdieu’s terms, a form of cultural capital. Caste informs (access to) tastes, including housing locations, education (especially language), beauty norms, fashion, food, and so on. The higher one’s caste, the likelier one is to gain more prominent positions within the field (for example, spot boys versus directors and actors). Caste privilege also extends to their immediate and extended families, often generationally. These ties are usually expanded through marriage between already established families. The field of Bollywood is densely networked. This

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<sup>16</sup> See “Bollywood Families”: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Hindi\\_film\\_families](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hindi_film_families)

characterization of Bollywood as a field corresponds well to Berreman's (1992) definition of caste as a relational structure. In this thesis, I am interested in how women navigate the field of Bollywood using their caste identity.

I study life writing by six women associated with the Bollywood industry<sup>17</sup> through a comparative media approach. In her autobiographical novel, *Mrs Funnybones: She's Just Like You and a Lot Like Me* (2015), Twinkle Khanna gives an account of her life in relation to her family, friends, neighbours, and employees. The book is divided into twenty-six chapters that do not correspond to each other, except that their titles are organised alphabetically. Khanna uses anecdotes from her everyday life, usually poking fun at everyone involved. Within the Bollywood industry, Khanna is the daughter of Rajesh Khanna and Dimple Kapadia, both well-established actors themselves. Khanna's father was a Punjabi Khatri, while her mother belongs to the Gujarati Ismaili Khoja community. She is married to Rajiv Hari Om Bhatia, popularly known by his screen name Akshay Kumar, who is also a Bollywood actor with a prolific career<sup>18</sup> and descends from a Punjabi Hindu family from the Khatri caste. Khanna herself ventured into movies but failed to maintain an acting career. She now designs furniture and routinely writes a column called "Mrs Funnybones – The Blog" for *The Times of India*, which is also a text that I analyse in my thesis.

I also consider Soha Ali Khan's autobiography, *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017). Khan traces her life from the ancestors of both her parents to the birth of her daughter, Inaaya, in 2017. She engages in an extensive reconstruction of her familial relationships, her marriage, her experience of studying abroad, her experience working at a bank, her tryst with films, and her experience of being pregnant. Although she promises her readers funny anecdotes from her life, she often narrates her life in a tone of awe and pride

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<sup>17</sup> I make the caste identities of my case studies explicit so as to pay attention to cultural specificities as well as to avoid rendering them casteless in this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Kumar is known for acting in movies with nationalistic overtones.



for her family. Khan has taken a hiatus from acting in films and mentions in her book that she owns a production house with her husband, Kunal Khemu. Khemu has also acted in Hindi films and hails from a Kashmiri Pandit family. Khan is the daughter of Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, a former cricketer and a descendent of the Nawabs of Pataudi, and Sharmila Tagore, a retired film actor and a descendant of the renowned Tagore family, who were Pirali Brahmins from West Bengal. Khan's parents had an interfaith wedding, but I include her in my corpus to understand how the Hindu caste privilege carries over into the logic and culture of land-owning Muslim communities in the Indian context in the case of cosmopolitan families like the Tagores and the Pataudis.<sup>1920</sup>

Lastly, I analyse two seasons of the Netflix reality television show, *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-) which chronicles the lives of Maheep Kapoor, Bhavana Pandey, Seema Sajdeh, and Neelam Kothari Soni through their association to the Bollywood film industry.<sup>21</sup> Using the tropes of reality television, the production company Dharmatic Entertainment, provides a sensational representation of the four women's everyday lives in the context of their marriages, children, friends, and employees. Their natal relationships are not emphasised on, as none of them were born into Bollywood families, but have briefly made cameos and done small film roles and are married into Bollywood. Maheep Kapoor (née Sandhu) is married to Sanjay Kapoor, who is part of the renowned Kapoor family of the north Indian Khatri caste from the Hindi film industry<sup>22</sup> and is a jewellery designer by profession. Bhavana Panday (née Khosla) is married to Suyash "Chunky" Panday, a north

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<sup>19</sup> Omar Khalidi (2010) offers insight into how the descendants of Nawabs have assimilated into Indian culture in present times.

<sup>20</sup> Both Khan and Khanna's books are published by the same publishing house, Penguin Random House, in India. They both carry a positive review from prominent Bollywood director and producer, Karan Johar, on their back covers about the use of self-deprecation in their narratives, which points to how female celebrities are unperceived light-heartedly within the industry. Johar has produced my fourth case study, *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-).

<sup>21</sup> I read this case study as an instance of collaborative life writing, where the narratives of the four women are co-constructed by the cinematographers, editors, directors, and producers of the show.

<sup>22</sup> Not related to the Prithviraj Kapoor family, however

Indian, Brahmin, Bollywood actor, and is currently an entrepreneur. Seema Sajdeh was formerly married to Sohail Khan from the well-established Khan family in Bollywood. She is born into a Khatri family, and was married to Khan, a Sunni Muslim.<sup>23</sup> She is a fashion designer. Neelam Kothari Soni is married to Sameer Soni, who is a Bollywood and Hindi soap opera actor, and belongs to the Vaishya caste. Kothari Soni, while trying to return to films, is a former Bollywood actress and a jeweller.

I introduce every section of analysis in the body of my thesis with my own autobiographical vignette (as I have done in the introduction as well). I understand my own lived experience of caste as a “situated knowledge”, to borrow from Donna Haraway. Haraway (1988) writes that “[s]ituated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of ‘objective’ knowledge” (592). Therefore, I use my own experience, memory, and embodied knowledge of caste to bridge the gap on upper caste women’s subjectivity that existing scholarship cannot bridge. As I have asserted before, I am interested in studying upper caste women as agential subjects within the caste order. I treat my vignettes as an exercise in articulating my own positionality as an upper caste woman and as a researcher of caste in life writing, as well as knowledges that are in relation to and are informed by the narratives in my case studies.

### Life Writing as Doing Caste

In my thesis, I approach life writing as the space where the work of caste is done and undone through life narratives. To this end, I use Smith and Watson’s (2010) argument that

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<sup>23</sup> It is unclear whether Sajdeh converted to Islam upon married. Sunni Muslims are considered a superior sect of Muslims because they follow the direct path of the Mohammed.

“the autobiographical might be read [...] for what it does, not what it is. Rather than being simply the story of an individual life, self life writing ‘encode[s] or reinforce[s] particular values in ways that may shape culture and history’” (Couser qtd. in Smith and Watson 19). Therefore, I conceptualise life writing as an enactment of caste identity rather than a reflection of a life marked by caste. In their edited journal edition on life and caste narratives, Charu Gupta and S. Shankar (2017) write that “[L]ife narratives on and of caste [...] underline the complex and subtle manner in which everyday lives and their retellings are sites for the social reproduction of a hegemonic caste order” (2). Gupta and Shankar’s formulation also frames life writing as an apt framework for the gendered caste subjectivity, as I will explain in my theoretical framework later.

I also frame life writing by upper caste women associated with Bollywood as a relational practice. Judith Butler (2003) understands the act of giving an account of oneself as fundamental to the notion of being human. They further argue that this account is always given to another, and therefore, relationality is at the core of understanding oneself:

I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions to myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, I have no ‘you’ to address, then I have lost ‘myself’ [...] one can tell autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an ‘I’ only in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you,’ my own story becomes impossible (Butler 32).

The work of caste is also made possible through relationality. In the caste order, one gains honour in relation to someone’s dishonour, one is revered in relation to someone else’s being looked at with contempt. Therefore, I consider the life writing in my case studies are narrations of the self always in relation to others to be able to critically grasp the lived experience of caste for upper caste women.

### Reading Caste: Theoretical Framework and Method

In addition to anti-caste theory and the theory of life writing, the reading of my case studies in this thesis is informed by Michel Foucault's work on biopolitical power and the normalisation of racism in the context of military regimes in Europe, as well as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. While I acknowledge the critique of Eurocentrism that informs Foucault's work and the western bias in Butler's work, I suggest that their interrogation of structures of power in conversation with the anti-caste line of thought still has great relevance for the method of studying upper caste subjectivity. In Foucault's formulation, caste is a structure of governance that uses power to regulate social and individual lives. In my case studies, I engage with gendered caste identities that are produced and reproduced through prescribed and ritualistic practices. Having conceptualised caste and life writing as relational modes of being and narrating, I use Foucault's (1982) interpretation of power as that which "exists only when it is put into action" (219). Further, he writes that

a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship" that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up (220)

As I have demonstrated before, the hegemonic construction and subsequent invisibilisation of upper caste identities is made possible through the othering of lower castes identities, and it is a register that exists through power. Foucault (1979) discusses political power over life in two forms: through the disciplining of mechanised, optimised bodies used for economic purposes, and through the control of the biological processes of bodies that keep society going (139). Power, in the latter, is set in motion through a series of regulations, the exercise

of bio-power, “a biopolitics of the population” (139), where the Foucauldian power/knowledge intersects with discourse to control a population’s minds and bodies. In B.R. Ambedkar’s conception of the caste system, he argues that it “is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” (“Annihilation of Caste” 16). Caste operates through the subjugation of identities and bodies, and is, therefore, also a biopolitical structure of power. In my analysis, I use Foucauldian conceptions of power and biopolitics as lenses to understand how, within the caste system, upper caste women’s lives are regulated according to the logic of caste through various traditional practices associated with food, clothing, festivities, reproduction, marriage, and familial roles.

Foucault’s considerations of how power functions in relation to race in Western society also informs my reading of my case studies, specifically when discussing the politics of visibility and invisibility of caste identity. Caste, like race, has been ingrained as a social structure of power into people’s minds, and is perceived as the norm. In *Society Must Be Defended* ([1976] 2005), Foucault asserts that society is divided into a binary structure, wherein it is always at war, which is essentially “a race war [...] that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage” (60-61). Thus, racism is not accidental but intentional. Eventually, this gives rise to “a State racism: a racism that society will direct against itself [...] This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalisation” (Foucault 62). By pointing to this underlying war, Foucault renders visible otherwise unquestioningly accepted ways of functioning in society. Racism is normalised to an extent where it becomes invisible. Akila Muthukumar, in “Casteism Camouflaged as Culture” (2020), writes about how casteism, again, made invisible through normalisation, becomes a part of everyday cultural practices

(n.p.). The genre of life writing allows for the everyday to unfold within it, making it a particularly potent space for the visibilisation of the workings of caste.

Lastly, I consider Butler's (1990) notion of performativity as [t]he act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (272).

Butler's conceptualisation of gender as an act that precedes an individual dovetails well with the conceptualisation of caste as a birth-status group. The normative conventions of caste precede the person born into it, and as a woman, one must conform to and comply with the rehearsed rules of the ritualistic performance of caste within the system. Upper caste women's life writing becomes a space where their upper caste subjectivity is agentially constructed and reconstructed through a negotiation with norms and cultural practices, rather than as a static label that they must simply carry.

### Unpacking Caste: Chapter Outline

To study how the self-representations of upper caste women in Bollywood render their caste identity (in)visible, this thesis is divided into three thematic chapters. Each chapter is subdivided into smaller topics, wherein I first situate myself in relation to the topic, and then perform a close reading of an instance from my case studies using the framework I have created in this introduction. My first chapter, titled "Relating," approaches my case studies in the context of their relationships to the people they interact with. Through the topics of natal and marital families, motherhood, friendships, and employees, I explore how the narration of relationships that are forged through caste inform and reform upper caste

women's caste identities and positioning in Hindu society. This chapter focuses primarily on the autobiographical element of identity in the representation of a casteless self. In the second chapter, titled "Work", I elaborate on the labour that upper caste women perform in caste society. My chapter on relating informs the manner in which I read the narrations of domesticity, occupation, and the experience of being a public persona as instances where upper caste women renegotiate their status in caste society. In addition to identity, this chapter uses embodiment, space, and experience to unpack the politics of (in)visibility. In my final chapter, titled "Politics", I analyse upper caste women's representations of their politics through nationalism, feminism, and cosmopolitanism to understand how they negotiate various structures of power. Here, I foreground the use of identity, agency, embodiment, and space as autobiographical elements to construct a casteless subjectivity in my case studies.

## CHAPTER 1: RELATING

### Introduction

Gerard Berreman's definition of caste as a lived experience, first discussed in my introduction, emphasises interdependence and relationality as integral to its functioning as a social order. Similarly, Ajantha Subramanian, in *Making Merit: the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste* (2015), underscores the importance of a relational approach to understanding how upper caste people formulate claims to merit. She argues that meritocracy must be analysed in the context of subaltern assertion "to see the contextual specificity of claims to merit: at one moment they may be articulated through the disavowal of caste, at another through caste affiliation" (293). Therefore, gradation within the caste system relies on how its members relate to each other inside and outside the boundaries of their own castes and subcastes. I would like to add to Subramanian's argument by suggesting this relational approach is also useful to understand how caste (in)visibility is used to negotiate associations within caste groups. In the context of upper caste women, relationality determines their legitimacy in society and becomes their primary mode of identification. Life writing, as a relational practice itself, becomes a fitting space to do the work of caste through the narration and representation of personal and public relationships. In my thesis, I begin the analysis of my case studies from how upper caste women relate the importance of familial and social relationships in their life writing in order to understand how their subjectivity is constructed through the articulation of their identity in the context of the people they relate to.

In this chapter, I will approach the role of relationality within the caste order as being organised in four concentric circles. The innermost circle comprises relations formed within and through natal and marital families, where upper caste women become daughters and



wives and adopt the caste of their fathers and husbands. Here, I analyse Soha Ali Khan's narration of herself in the context of her natal family in *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017) and the Bollywood wives' construction of themselves through their marriages in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-). The second circle is formed by the experience of motherhood, where upper caste women reposition themselves within caste society to produce the carriers of their husband's caste lineage. This transition also reemphasises their status within their natal and marital families. Here, I read Soha Ali Khan's representation of the experience of her pregnancy in *The Perils* (2017). The third circle includes friends and (usually business) acquaintances, who belong to the same or similar castes and subcastes. Bolstered by the cultural and social capital that their natal and marital caste background affords them, upper caste people form in-group networks with these friends and acquaintances. The relationships formed in this circle portray a sense of agency, since people within this circle may belong to different religions and communities, but they retain their position within this sphere through similarities or differences in class status and/or social and cultural values. In this regard, I read Twinkle Khanna's *Mrs Funnybones* (2015) for friendship as a caste-based social network. Lastly, the fourth circle consists of domestic workers and other employees who most often belong to a lower caste and class status. This group is often not considered worthy of forming familial relationships or friendships with upper caste people, but their status and labour remains essential to the smooth functioning of upper caste groups. Through their labour – cleaning houses, doing clerical work, childcare, cooking, and so on – these people are intimately connected to every other circle, but their caste status mainly allows them to be in relation to upper caste people as an inferior group. For this, I analyse Khanna's representation of her relationship with her domestic worker in *Mrs Funnybones* (2015). Borrowing from sociology, I frame the first two

circles as based on the principles of endogamous<sup>24</sup> relating, i.e., bounded and regulated by caste identity, and the next two as based on the principles of exogamous<sup>25</sup> relating, where relationships occur between different caste positionings. This allows me to effectively compare the various modalities in the way the upper caste women in my case studies narrate, in Subramanian's words, their caste affiliation and disavowal within and through different groups.

### Natal and Marital Families: Relating through Origins

In primary and secondary school, something that always seemed to set me apart from my peers was the fact that I could fluently speak, read, write in, and translate between, five Indian languages: Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, Konkani, and English. My grades in my language studies were often very high and put my name in a list of academic achievers which was mostly populated by boys. For some reason, this made a lot of people ask me about my family. First, aside from the usual comments about how studying so much and being this smart would make me unsuitable for marriage (at age eight!), they would begin by asking if I had a language tutor. I would reply in the negative. This would surprise them and then make them ask me how I got such a good grasp on these languages. Questions about my linguistic proficiency prompted me to tell people my origin story, which stemmed out of my parents' *unusual* situation: my mother, a Gujarati woman, married my father, a Konkani man, after they met at architecture school in Bombay, and they made sure their children were familiarised with both their cultures as well as the culture of the city they were brought up in. I always loved how this story surprised people, because "love marriages" – where one chooses their own spouse without any mediation from their parents or other elders in the

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<sup>24</sup> Endogamy is the practice of marrying and therefore, mingling only within one's own group.

<sup>25</sup> Exogamy is the practice of marrying outside of one's own group.

family (and, sometimes, the person they end up choosing is outside their own community) – was such a rare phenomenon among my peers, who were accustomed to marriages being restricted to their own communities<sup>26</sup>. It made me feel unique and special.

The language question would usually be motivated by the fact that my surname – “Chandawarkar”, which is usually associated with Maharashtrian communities – did not correspond to my ability to speak fluent Gujarati. In response, I would narrate my well-rehearsed story about my parents’ marriage, and then clarify that my father was not Maharashtrian, he was Konkani, and hence, from the state of Karnataka. Most people then wanted to know which village he came from. I detested it when the conversation came to this part, but I would continue answering out of politeness. My reply – Chandawar – immediately identified him as a Saraswat Brahmin<sup>27</sup>. The people speaking to me would then begin to listen more closely to my Gujarati. The kind of Gujarati I spoke – the use of *tamey* instead of *tu* when addressing someone in the first person, the use of the “sh” sound when asking “*shun?*” – was a marker that I did not belong to the regular Jain-Bania, Gujarati-speaking community that was dominant in the places where I lived and studied. I spoke the “standard” dialect, found commonly in the big cities, and considered more sophisticated. This observation usually led me to reluctantly locate my mother within the Nagar Brahmin community from Gujarat. Revealing my parents’ backgrounds somehow made my ability to speak five languages make a lot of sense to those asking, and the awe that prompted their questioning in the first place would somehow be severely diluted. “Of course,” they would

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<sup>26</sup> A good example of this being publicly visible is through matrimonial advertisements, which are ubiquitous in Indian newspapers, and are often divided into caste-based and/or religious categories (See, for example, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/classified/groomswanted>). More recently, the concept of arranged marriages has received transnational attention because of the Netflix show, *Indian Matchmaking*, where a professional matchmaker, who goes by the name Sima *aunty*, tries to help young people in India and Indians abroad arrange marriages with suitable matches from within their own castes, subcastes, and religious communities.

<sup>27</sup> My father belongs to the Konkani-speaking Saraswat Brahmin community from the Konkani coast in the state of Karnataka in the western part of India. There are multiple subsects of the Konkani Saraswat Brahmins (for example, Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, Gaud Saraswat Brahmins, Rajapur Saraswat Brahmins). They are primarily merchants and traders, sailors, priests, and scholars.

say. “Of course, you’re a Brahmin girl,” and then praise the status of my mother or father’s caste communities. It always made me feel like people were taking the credit of having learnt those languages away from me, as if revealing my family’s identity invisibilised my personhood. At the same time, the praise that my caste communities received fuelled my pride in belonging to them, and at opportune moments, I began to slip it into personal and professional conversations. Characterising Hindu society as a society segregated and motivated to remain segregated by caste, B.R. Ambedkar writes that caste is a hierarchy based on birth and descent (“Annihilation of Caste” n.p.). Thus, the material and social aspects of caste are ascribed to and inherited by an individual through their birth into a family belonging to a particular caste within the social order, usually traditionally marked by their occupation. My origin story, which begins with my own personal language skills and somehow, by locating me within my family, ends up becoming an exposé on my caste status, is an example of how my identity and abilities are inextricably linked to my family’s privileged identity in a caste society. It is also an example of how the logic of caste continually encourages and invests in this linkage, making it harder to think of one’s identity outside of caste networks. Leela Dube, in *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields* (2001), writes that the link to caste is a particularly crucial connection for women because “[w]omen’s lives are largely lived within familial parameters. The centrality of the family and the household in their lives cannot, therefore, be overemphasised” (Dube 155). Analysing *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), I demonstrate how Soha Ali Khan’s positioning of herself as “moderately famous” while constructing herself in relation to her natal family allows her to both legitimise herself through her identity as an

upper caste woman as well as undermine her complicity in an oppressive system that benefits her greatly.<sup>28</sup>

In her second chapter, Khan reflects on her life and career in the context of her family. She says that although she has “tried to carve out my own path, forge my own identity” (55) in her career, her success “is moderate in comparison to the accomplishments of my various family members” (55). This mode of comparison not only situates Khan within her family, but it also makes sense of her identity as being inferior to that of her otherwise illustrious family. This dynamic becomes Khan’s justification for writing her autobiography as her way of paying tribute to her family, “[w]ithout whom I would not be who I am” (55), and being a part of which has “opened doors and facilitated introductions, provided me with a security and respect that I would otherwise have spent many years earning, given me recognition which brings a power that is not insignificant and afforded me financial security” (53-4). Here, by acknowledging that she owes her success to her family, Khan constructs her relationship to her family as being integral to her public image as a celebrity – her family has facilitated her career as an actress and public persona, a reflection on which forms the basis of her rationale to write an autobiography (Khan 55). Khan’s use of photographs from her personal, familial life that include family portraits, childhood photographs of herself, photographs with her husband, and so on throughout her book adds a layer of signification to her construction of her autobiographical self within her family for her readers. Pramod K. Nayar, in “What the Stars Tell: The Year in India” (2019), uses Marianne Hirsch’s concepts of the “affiliative look” and the “familial gaze” to demonstrate

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<sup>28</sup> Relating to natal families is also discussed in other case studies. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Bhavana’s relationship with her parents (S1E1 00:20:00), Maheep’s reliance on her mother (S1E2 00:16:24), Neelam’s experience of a lack of support from her natal family (S2E4 00:15:23), Seema’s reliance on her natal family in light of her separation and divorce (S2E1 00:11:13). In *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: “B: Beware of mommy dearest” (13-19). In “Mrs Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/a-mothers-day-toast-to-all-the-perfectly-imperfect-moms-in-the-world/>

how celebrity autobiographies invite their readers to identify with the family portraits of the actors because they evoke “dominant mythologies of family life” while the family in the photograph “define themselves in relation to each other in the roles they occupy as mother, father, daughter, son, husband, or lover” (Hirsch qtd. in Nayar 63). Nayar further frames this inclusion of family photographs as “interart”, which enables a celebrity autobiography to incorporate an intergenerational element – and I would add, an intra-generational element – into their stories (63-4). In Khan’s autobiography, the addition of these photos turns her narrative into a story not only about herself, but also about her family. Khan’s self-representation becomes cemented in the context of her family, which is a matter of pride and honour for her, because it provides her access to material and social benefits. In a narrative voice filled with gratitude when presenting the opportunities made available to her through the cultural capital her family has positions Khan as a humble person who admits her privilege rather than constructing her career as completely self-made and meritorious. At the same time, her framing of herself as a “moderately famous” celebrity allows her to portray her privilege as something that has simply happened to her rather than a structure she actively partakes in.

Khan also spends a fourth of her book elaborately tracing her family tree through her father – the Nawab of Pataudi – and her mother – a Pirali Brahmin from Bengal (1-56). When discussing her mother’s family, she begins her chapter with a reference to the anglicization of upper caste Hindu families’ names and surnames owing to their role as clergy during the period of colonial rule in India: “Tagore is the anglicized version of Thakur, just as Chatterjee is of Chattopadhyay or Bose is of Basu” (35). In demonstrating the anglicisation of caste names, Khan actually visibilises the invisibilisation of caste. Specifically, “Thakur” means “chief” or “master” in Hindi and, in North India, is used to signify those who own land. The anglicised “Tagore” erases the meaning of the Hindi word,

allowing room for those unfamiliar with the caste system to remain ignorant of the Tagores' caste power. Khan herself does not link caste to this etymological exploration of "Tagore". Instead, she deflects the influence of caste in this scenario and spends the rest of her chapter building her relation to Rabindranath Tagore, a polymath often associated with the Indian struggle for independence. In the context of Khan's use of self-deprecating humour, her faux pas in a very public setting in this part of her narration – Soha corrects a journalist at a press conference in Kolkata who refers to her mother as "Sharmila Thakur" (35) and is then informed by her manager in private that Tagore is actually the erstwhile Thakur – followed by her abashed tone as she attempts to learn more about her mother's family – "I am afraid I do not speak [Bangla] very well" (35) – shifts the focus away from her ignorance of the history of caste power in her maternal family, and towards the shameful and sensational idea that despite sharing the intimate relationship of mother and daughter, Khan did not know about the history of her mother's surname. Thus, by framing herself as unknowing of the history of her mother's caste, Khan simultaneously narrates her ability to ignore the nuance of caste privilege and to still have caste pride. At the end of her book, Khan admits to her readers that she may have been writing the book for her new-born daughter to read at a later time so that she may familiarise herself with her family's history and "take pride in" it (206). In Khan's narration of her lived experience, where upper caste-ness and the atrocities that come with embodying that identity remain implicit through her constant switching between self-deprecation and familial pride, this is an attempt to teach young upper caste girls like her daughter to continue to proudly tell their origin stories through elaborate sketches of family filled with "history [...] talent and virtuosity" (206) that do not acknowledge caste. In this cyclical performance of compliance to Brahmanical patriarchy through their natal families, upper caste women continue to imagine their lives in the context of their families to the end of retaining their caste power.

In *Gendering Caste: Through A Feminist Lens* [2002 (2018)], Uma Chakravarti critically engages with caste at the intersection of gender and, in the process, also identifies marriage as an integral part of people's perceptions and practices formulated around birth and descent (29). In the Hindu caste system, marriage and reproduction in the interest of preserving and extending caste-based lineages is made possible through women. Chakravarti observes that "the whole ideology and symbolism of Hindu marriage and birth is designed to express, interpret and define the coming and going of women between *vansas* or lines as well as the meaning of being male and female. Women, then, are mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers of a line" (30). For instance, in my aforementioned vignette, my language skill is not perceived as an element of my character. Rather, I become a vessel, a representation of my father's caste. If I marry into a conservative Hindu family, I may be asked to avoid displaying these skills in order to appropriately represent my husband's caste and family values. To explore how upper caste women relate to people within and through marriages and marital families, I read the first episode of the first season of *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), where the four protagonists, Seema Khan, Maheep Kapoor, Neelam Kothari Soni, and Bhavana Panday are introduced primarily through their relation to each other and their embeddedness in the well-established Bollywood network. The very premise of the show, as is suggested by the title, hinges on the lived experiences of these women as being the *wives* of Bollywood actors, that is, in relating to others through marriage. In this section, I look at how married, upper caste, Hindu women in Bollywood construct themselves as exemplary wives and women by simultaneously using and underemphasising their caste positioning.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Marital families play a significant part in the narration of the self in my other case studies. For example, in *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: "I: I refuse to celebrate this Valentine's Day nonsense" (77-87), "L: Love is Perfectly Imperfect" (105-112), "D: Doing the daughter-in-law thing" (33-42), "Z: Zip your mouth for God's sake" (223-233). In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: "It's Complicated" (161-185). In "Mrs Funnybones – The Blog", see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/ek-loo-story-why-romance-stops-at-the-bathroom/>



The episode begins with an unnamed, feminine narrating voice presenting Khan as “[m]arried to Sohail Khan, sister-in-law to Salman Khan, mother to Nirvan and Yohan” who is frequently seen in the company of “her childhood idol”, Soni. Soni is then introduced as being “married to Samir Soni and mother to Ahana.” Kapoor, introduced next, is perhaps part of the densest network among the four: “She is wife to Sanjay Kapoor, mum to Shanaya and Jahaan Kapoor, aunt to Sonam Kapoor, Rhea Kapoor, Harshvardhan Kapoor, Janhvi Kapoor, Arjun Kapoor, Khushi Kapoor, sister-in-law to Anil Kapoor, Boney Kapoor, and the late, great Sridevi Kapoor.” Panday is “[m]arried to Chunky Panday, mum to Rysa Panday and B-Town’s newest favourite, Ananya Panday.” The narrator then adds that Seema is also Chunky Panday’s niece. Chunky Panday has worked extensively on films with Soni, and the two share a professional as well as platonic relationship. Shanaya Kapoor and Ananya Panday are said to be close friends (00:00:30—00:01:55). This is the first thing the viewers are told about these women. By introducing these women firstly, through their marriages, and secondly, through the people they have become related to through their marriages demonstrates how, within a caste society, they receive significance as people by being in relation to other people from suitable castes, i.e., by being wives, and therefore, mothers, aunts, nieces, sisters, sisters-in-laws, and long-time friends. This is further emphasised by the fact that, in this case, by portraying their membership to their husbands’ families as the genesis of their public identities, they can construct themselves in relation to several other Bollywood celebrities. Therefore, they become public figures by being related to other renowned public figures themselves. This is an instance where the practice of endogamy dictates and mediates upper caste women’s affiliations to other groups, i.e., the friendship that the “Bollywood Wives” share is facilitated by their individual marriages.

The narration of these women’s familial relationships is accompanied by a close-up shot of each woman as she is being introduced, smiling coyly while looking straight into the

camera, at the audience, but saying nothing herself. As the narrator embeds these women in their familial and social networks through their relationships, often humorous and personal photographs of the women and the people in question are superimposed on the close-up. This, combined with how the narrating voice speaks in a rapid, upbeat, conversational tone which is often interjected with asides during the introductions such as “Phew” (00:00:30—00:01:55) – humorously denoting that the information she is giving about the women is a lot to list – and “Don’t be rude” (00:00:30—00:01:55) – a direct address to the audience in a teasing manner that chastises them for thinking that Neelam is too old to act in films – invites the audience to recognise and interact with these women and their lives personally. This is facilitated by responding to and managing the audience’s perceived thoughts and expectations on the information being given to them regarding the marital and familial status of these women. However, the producers’ decision to disallow the four women from narrating their introduction themselves to their implied audience or actually speak at all in this segment is where *caste*, at the intersection of media, is performed. Their indirect contact with their audience constructs them as what Steven Shaviro calls objects of allure (*Post-Cinematic Affect* 7-10). Describing objects of allure, Shaviro writes that they make a person “feel involved in every aspect of their lives, and yet I know they are not involved in mine. Familiar as they are, they are always too far to reach” (8). Borrowing Graham Harman’s definition of *allure*, Shaviro defines it as “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partly disintegrate”, emphasising that “the basic ontological condition is that objects always withdraw from us, and from one another. We are never able to grasp them more than partially” (8). In this manner, owing to the collaborative nature of their life writing in the context of reality television, the four wives are co-constructed as televisual products rather than as self-narrators but remain participants in the construction of their televisual selves.

Their screen presence in combination with their own silence and a disembodied voice narrating the details about their family relations makes the four “fabulous” women alluring, demanding from their audience an investment in their lives that is never fulfilled. At the same time, since the caste and class position of the implied audience is not known definitively, allowing someone else to introduce them prevents active and direct access into their group and precludes the possibility of intermingling. Because caste is governed by the logic of Brahmanical patriarchy, upper caste women can exercise their agency and gain a social identity mainly by upholding their caste status by remaining chaste and accepting subordination and servitude to their husbands and their husbands’ families. The structure and form of the above-mentioned introduction scene ensures that the four women remain chaste wives, i.e., role models for the upper caste identity. Hence, even though there is never an overt mention of their caste, the “Bollywood Wives” negotiate their recognition with each other and their audience through caste.

#### Motherhood: Relating through Transitions and Transmission

Jasodhara Bagchi, in *Interrogating Motherhood* (2017), writes that “for class- and caste-ridden societies, the hallmark of privilege lay with the women who were delinked from productive labour and relegated to the reproduction of status through procreation of the species” (xxiii). Upper caste women, according to Chakravarti (2018), “have no function outside reproduction – and are thus reduced to the single axis of providing sexual labour” (82). While modernity and liberalisation has somewhat altered and complicated this function of upper caste women in contemporary Indian society through providing them access to work, rights, and financial and social autonomy, Chakravarti’s point that motherhood further legitimates women within the caste order (66) still remains culturally relevant. Since women potentially carried the child who would take the caste lineage forward, “[m]otherhood itself

was idealised and ritualised, and numerous rituals were prescribed, starting with marriage, going on to conception, and then to the birth of the ‘son,’ to ensure safe delivery of the male child [...] As mothers, women were worthy of worship” (Chakravarti 66). Motherhood, as is shown through my vignette, becomes a site for upholding caste purity, for validating upper caste women’s identity, and consequently, one fraught with anxiety. Extending this argument, I read an example from Soha Ali Khan’s *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017) where Khan reveals that she is pregnant with her first child and narrates the experience of being pregnant as a public personality to demonstrate how Khanna’s experience of motherhood and of herself as a mother in the context of her family involves an engagement with the caste-based ideological construction of motherhood. The erasure of caste from this the representation of this engagement allows Khan to frame it as a gendered but naturalised process, rather than one mediated through her caste privilege.<sup>30</sup>

In her final chapter, Khan recalls how, after she found out she was pregnant and she was going to tell her mother the news, she found herself “imagining how I would now graduate in her eyes from her baby girl to a woman, equal in stature” (197). Here, Khan, through her positioning of the narrating “I”, subscribes to the ideological notion of motherhood as a natural rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood within caste society. Khan also notably shifts from her previous framing of herself as “moderate” in comparison to her family to being “equal in stature” to her mother because of her pregnancy. As Chakravarti notes on the validating relationship between a married woman’s caste identity and motherhood (32), this shift in her narration of the dynamics of relating to a member of

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<sup>30</sup> Narrating the self by being in relation to one’s children forms an important part of all my case studies. For example, in *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: Khanna’s representation of her relationship with her son (4-5; 43-50; 167-172). In *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Maheep’s narration of her relationship with Shanaya (S1E1 00:23:45), Bhavana’s identity as a “Bollywood mother” (S1E1 00:20:15), Seema’s narration of herself in the context of divorce and a strained relationship to her sons (S2E5 00:11:24). In “Mrs Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/a-mothers-day-toast-to-all-the-perfectly-imperfect-moms-in-the-world/>

her family that she has thus far looked up to further demonstrates the value Khan places on the experience of motherhood. The shift also marks a change in Khan's agency as an upper caste woman. In the beginning of her book, she writes that the reason for writing the book is that she has time on her hands – she is forty years old and, owing to her age, does not find substantial work in the film industry anymore. However, in the end, when she reveals her pregnancy, she admits to writing her autobiography for her daughter, so that she can “learn about and take pride in her family and their achievements; discover things about me and my childhood and certainly about an era of nawabs and begums, of tradition and ceremony that is all but gone” (206). Therefore, Khan moves from a representation of herself as a mere receptacle of caste to that of a purposeful transmitter of caste. Through this narrative arc, the coaxes of Khan's autobiographical narrative shifts from her agents and publicists (ix-xi), who encourage Khan to tell her “life narratives to a public hungry for vicarious fame” (Smith and Watson 65), to the “cultural imperative” (Smith and Watson 64) of motherhood that pushes her to write and publish her life story from birth to motherhood for her daughter. This switch from celebrity to mothers enables Khan to turn her life narrative into an exemplar for her daughter, converting the representation of a “casteless” upper caste womanhood into a blueprint for her daughter to follow.

As a part of her narration, Khan includes other voices that engage affirmatively with the news of her pregnancy and further the significance of her experience. For example, she narrates her mother-in-law's reaction to her husband breaking the news to her: “My mother-in-law was ecstatic [...] I felt humbled we could make her so happy. Kunal told me when he gave her the news she fist-pumped as a gesture of victory!” (197). The framing of her pregnancy as a victorious moment and Khan's narration of the feeling of humility evoked by pleasing her mother-in-law asserts the notion that motherhood is a logical progression and a meaningful end to the purpose of a married woman within caste society. Khan mentions her

brother, Saif Ali Khan's reaction as being that of relief at being able to have his sister take care of both their children: "'Thank God,' he exclaimed, slapping his hand on his forehead [...] He was so genuinely reassured it was endearing" (199). Again, her brother's feeling of relief and reassurance signifies how Khan's status changes to being more capable of taking care of her brother's child now that she has a child herself. It further embeds her in her impending role and identity as a mother in society. Khan's inclusion of photographs adds another voice to her construction of herself as an expecting mother. For instance, she intersperses her narrative with photographs from her baby shower. These photographs do not always correspond to the written text but are meant to be read complementarily. In one photograph, Khan stands in between her sisters-in-law, Kareena Kapoor Khan and Karisma Kapoor<sup>31</sup>, holding her pregnant belly. The caption reads "Baby shower, girl power" (201). Using Hirsch's "affiliative look" in family portraits, I read this photograph as a representation of Khan using the norm of motherhood to relate to other women in her family. Khan's evocation of pregnancy as the common, gendered experience which connects her with her sisters-in-law rather than the affiliation of marriage and marital family is an instance where she underplays the significance of her caste identity in facilitating these connections.

Khan also elaborates on the social and embodied experience of being pregnant, where she is "basking in the glow of impending motherhood, graciously accepting people's blessings and good wishes, soaking up all the attention I am owed for my crucial role in the miracle of creation, flaunting my bump in my new maternity wardrobe, planning my artistically tasteful pregnant photo shoot" (202). This narration of the experience of a comfortable pregnancy constructs Khan as an upper-class woman with the money and social

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<sup>31</sup> Kareena Kapoor Khan is married to Soha Ali Khan's brother, Saif Ali Khan. Karisma Kapoor is Kareena's sister.

privilege to be able to rejoice in and enjoy her pregnancy like this. Although she mentions anxiety (195) and some sickness (192), Khan leaves out several common experiences of discomfort experienced by pregnant women – debilitating nausea, body aches, and so on – making her pregnancy appear pristine, as if she were naturally meant to carry a child. She also extensively narrates the importance of good health during her pregnancy (190). Once again, to represent this, Khan includes photographs of her doing yoga while pregnant. The caption beneath these photographs asks, “Did you say you’re glowing or you’re growing?” (202). Soha has a serene look on her face as she bends and folds her body into various poses in each photograph, accompanied by her dog in one photo, sitting near a plant, and always having enough space to comfortably stretch her body. Khan’s space and embodiment become signs of material comforts that are intricately tied to caste privilege. Bagchi (2017) writes that “[a]ll the institutional build-up of motherhood, whether through upper-caste rituals, especially when a woman fulfils the expectation of perpetuating the patrilineal clan by producing a son, or through the glowing effect of the white, well-fed mothers breast-feeding healthy babies with beatific smile, are ploys for reproducing the dominant patriarchal structure of privileges” (xxiii). Khan’s narration of an immaculate pregnancy in the last chapter of a book where she constructs herself as a descendent from the royal Nawabs and Piral Brahmins locates her as a privileged woman within a caste and class order structured by Brahminical patriarchy. Furthermore, although she does not write about it, Khan provides glimpses into her baby shower, celebrated with her friends and family, through more photographs. Khan’s baby shower, where her guests are shown dressed in Western attire, bringing gifts, and playing games with her, is celebrated as per Western customs. However, as I mentioned in the vignette above, it is also common in upper caste Hindu households to conduct rituals to bless and protect the pregnant mother from harm during the pregnancy, and to wish for a boy. In translating these traditional, caste-marked

rituals into a modern-day, Westernised event, Khan's narration of her shower also lies at the intersection of her caste and class privilege, where she partakes in upper caste rituals while muting the role of caste in the ritual. Thus, through her pregnancy and baby shower, Khan navigates the boundaries between the second and third concentric circles of relating without breaking caste boundaries.

### Friendships: Relating through Socialisation

When I turned two, my parents decided they wanted to have another child and would prefer a bigger house to raise us in. So, we moved to the suburbs of Bombay, to a locality named Mahavir Nagar<sup>32</sup> that was built on erstwhile farmlands bought over by Bania businessmen for real estate development. The locality had three Derasars (Jain places of worship), two formal Hindu temples, and strict meat ban within a five-kilometre radius. When big fast-food chains like Starbucks and Tibbs Frankie opened their outlets in Mahavir Nagar, they had to adopt an entirely vegetarian menu that did not even serve eggs. My wing of the residential apartment complex we lived in did not enforce strict restrictions on meat consumption, because the previous landowner of the building lived on the first floor and his family ate fish and chicken on Sundays. However, while I was growing up, I knew very few Muslims and Christians, and even fewer Dalits, Bahujans, or Adivasis, because their daily diets often included eating meat more often or eating beef and pork, and the Hindus and Jains who were in the majority in my locality apparently could not stand "the smell" of meat. Eating meat is historically considered a "dirty" practice in many upper caste communities. In the interest of keeping their living spaces clean, among other things, the Hindus and Jains subtly but routinely denied people from these communities the opportunities to buy or rent houses in

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<sup>32</sup> Property brokerage websites explicitly mention the kind of communities that live here as an asset: <https://www.magicbricks.com/Mahavir-Nagar-in-Mumbai-Overview>



Mahavir Nagar. For years, unaware of this exclusivity, my social circle only consisted of other Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Banias from different parts of the country who shared the same disdain for meat as my family, who worshipped the same gods in the same ways as we did, who had the same (or similar) “poor” women cleaning their houses for them, who studied in the same kind of (or, sometimes, better) schools as I did, who shared the same aspirations of becoming doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and businesspeople, who hoped, one day, to grow up and have families identical to the ones their parents had.

Ambedkar (1936) suggests that the Hindu caste system operates on the exclusivity of the groups that are marked by it – “families, friendships, co-operative associations, business combines, political parties, bands of thieves and robbers” (n.p.). Within the caste system, one cannot simply self-identify as a Hindu. This identity must routinely be performed and qualified through achieving and maintaining membership to the aforementioned exclusive groups (Ambedkar n.p.). By formulating group dynamics within the caste system in this way, Ambedkar not only positions caste as indispensable to Hindu identity, but he also indicates that social groups other than the family also follow the logic of caste by having “a narrow and intensive code, which is often anti-social” (Ambedkar n.p.). This kind of socialisation, where norms make it easy to enforce strict social and cultural boundaries, made me believe that the way I lived was *the* way to live, and if other social realities existed, it was because those who had them were less fortunate than I was.

My friendships in my formative years were rarely deep and were mostly formed out of a spirit of competition with my peers. I was academically savvy and generally made good grades, which made me a good “friend” for the other children who did well. Until very recently, my parents actively encouraged me and were successful in having me believe that I needed to remain distrustful of the friends I made, because they were out to distract me from my academics and career. I was often quite lonely, and my social interactions really only

involved talking to my friends about the people we knew in common or making Western pop culture references while secretly judging each other, rather than genuinely caring for each other. Even today, when I discuss the friendships I have from my master's programme with my mother, she asks if they are a threat to my career prospects and advises me to be ruthless when it comes to competition. Caste society taught me that if resources in society are scarce and one was upper caste, they deserved to have the resource at any cost. I watched as my parents fell out with many friends, often over issues related to property, money, loyalty – material and social gains. These were people I was attached to but was told to never spend time thinking of because they had threatened our sovereignty. Living a life outside family – which my parents made clear was the only group that would support me no matter what – has always been a tumultuous process and family is really the only community I know. In an article titled “Caste, Friendship & Solidarity” (2016), Christina Thomas Dhanaraj discusses how upper caste people “most often form caste groups to maintain intimate friendships” (n.p.). According to Dhanaraj, although *savarnas* or upper caste people articulate and circulate a narrative of castelessness through their hegemonic social networks, which includes friendships, because “[t]he symbols s/he wears of his caste identity, and possibly his/her privilege, become points of connect and hooks of engagement with other savarnas” (Dhanaraj n.p.), these friendships are still upheld and governed by caste. Therefore, my caste background created an echo chamber of upper caste livelihoods where I lived and grew up, and the spirit of competition ensured that I remained within the same circles, relating to the same people as “friends”. In this section, I read a chapter from Twinkle Khanna's novel, *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), where Khanna retells stories of her female friends being mistreated by their mothers-in-law. I demonstrate how Khanna frames the incident of the retelling of these stories as a space that allows the women to bond as friends by erasing the cultural specificity of these mistreatments. This representation of friendship allows the women to

express their frustrations and remain in relation to each other without having to break with the privilege of caste.<sup>33</sup>

In Khanna's text, her friendships with other women are marked by their conversations regarding how they deal with various family members (33-40), particularly their own mothers-in-law. In the chapter titled "D: Doing the Daughter-in-law Thing," the stories that Khanna retells of her friends' experiences that she heard over lunch regarding their mothers-in-law's behaviour towards them (34-36) are all stories that take place within the domestic settings of the women telling them. In Hindu patriarchal households, the marital home is often the site where female relationships formed through marriage often become contentious (Bagchi xiii). In contrast, having lunch together with one's friends outside the home or outside one's husband's home offers upper caste women the space to speak about these relationships to other women, who might face similar situations. It forms what Lauren Berlant (2008) has conceptualised as an "intimate public" where a collective of individuals "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (emphasis in original; viii). Particularly for women, Berlant's notion of intimate publics become "a porous, affective scene of identification" which promises a sense of belonging through sharing and confirming the experience of living as, in this case, a woman in a particular cultural context (Berlant viii). Khanna's circle of friends, then, becomes a public where narrating the private, intimate experience of their mothers-in-law's mistreatment them and cruelty towards the women corroborates their identity in relation to this public. This public creates its own genre of

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<sup>33</sup> Friendships form important aspects of identity in my case studies, as is illustrated by the narration. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: cameos by other Bollywood celebrities (S1E3, S1E5, S1E8, S2E4, S2E5, S2E7, S2E8), the party thrown by Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan (S2E8), fights between the four wives (S2E5 00:15:15). In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: "We'll Always Have Paris" (135-159). In "Mrs Funnybones – The Blog", see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/finding-solace-in-stories-sisterhood/>

upper caste femininity that is marked by the experience of gendered conflict within the marital family.

In this instance, Khanna narrates her friends' experiences of have a strained relationship with their mothers-in-law as humorous stories that incite "uproarious laughter" (36) from the women when shared, but these stories recount the cruelty daughters-in-laws are subjected to in their marital families by other women. Particularly, Friend No. 3's story, in which her mother-in-law did not allow her to rush to the hospital when her water broke and instead insisted they finish dinner at a leisurely pace, and Friend No. 4's story about her mother-in-law who "criticises her, nudges her out of family pictures, grabs the front seat next to her beloved son in the car and keeps repeating how Shonu [...] loves mommy more than anyone else" (36) are examples of violence and abuse against daughters-in-law. Bagchi (2017) notes that this specific kind of conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is located within Hindu patriarchal households, where caste logic determines the locus of power in the son. Since, in an upper caste household, both women have a subordinated role and can only derive material and social power through caste, their relationship with each other through the son/husband becomes a site of struggle. That Khanna creates a setting that gives her friends the opportunity to discuss and complain about these painful experiences within the caste-based institution of marriage in and through her life writing can be read as a feminist move. She uses her own voice and thus, her social standing, to retell these stories, keeping her friends nameless. However, carrying my analysis of this space as an intimate public forward, I argue that Khanna's use of humour taps into the "juxtapolitical" characteristic of intimate public which prioritises emotional and affective recognition in the representations of the everyday rather than a political activism that breaks with the conventions, since "[p]olitics requires active antagonism, which threatens the *sense* in consensus" (Berlant 10-11). In Khanna's case, it would threaten her caste positioning.

Therefore, through her retelling, Khanna encourages her friends and implied readers to laugh at mothers-in-law who “promptly collapsed” (35) when things did not go to plan despite them exercising all their control over their daughters-in-law’s sexuality, food preferences, reproductive agency, household work, and so on, but does not suggest rejecting the institution of marriage, or even questioning the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as a means to put an end to the painful treatment meted out to them. This enables her to construct her friendships as a space where she and her friends may receive emotional support through echoing and confirming traumatic lived experiences that do not threaten the structure of privilege that they benefit from.

#### Employees: Relating through Subordination

My mother’s employment status and my grandmother’s frequent travel to the United States to be with my uncle and his family meant that my brother and I were eventually cared for by the same people also employed to cook our meals, sweep our floors, wash our dishes and clothes, dust our furniture, and water our plants for minimum wage. Domestic work is an unorganised sector of labour in my country and is performed mostly by lower caste women of all ages who often reside in slums in the city. In Marathi, these women are referred to as “Tai” and in Hindi, as “Didi” (tr: older sister), but they are by no means a part of your family. One of my earliest memories is being scolded by my paternal grandmother for eating out of Gangu Tai’s plate. I was two years old, and I rejected the freshly toasted and buttered buns that my grandmother had just bought, wanting, instead, to eat the hard, stale, unbuttered pieces that Gangu Tai was eating. My grandmother complained to friends and relatives about this incident for days on end, and it eventually became a formidable part of my memory of her. Gangu Tai, like every other domestic worker we employed after her, was my mother’s “support system”, because she did all the chores that my mother would otherwise be tasked

with in addition to working a full-time job. Since my grandmother was responsible for household chores in the absence of my mother, Gangu Tai was heavily chastised by my grandmother for missing even a day of work (yes, even on Sundays). Her monthly salary barely equalled what my parents sent me every month as living allowance while I attended university. She took home all the leftovers from our house at my grandmother's insistence, because my grandmother only fed her family freshly cooked food. Gangu Tai loved me. She would call me all sorts of sweet names and would bring along food she had cooked at home if she knew I liked it. She would indulge my childish gibberish. She would watch all my absurd poetry recitals even though I performed most of them in the middle of her workday and she didn't speak a word of English. And yet, most bizarrely, the work she did around my house still made me superior to her, even though all I did was crawl on my hands and knees and recite six lines of a nursery rhyme. According to Ambedkar's (1979) definition of caste, the degree of contempt towards an individual increases as one moves down the gradation of caste (26). This relationship between and towards castes is most visible in interactions between caste groups on different positions on the hierarchy. Since upper castes prefer to uphold strict caste boundaries to maintain their purity, not only do they not engage in certain types of 'unclean' work, such as waste removal, they also do not prefer to come in contact with or relate to people who do such work, i.e., lower caste people (Raghuram 608). This privilege allows them to appropriate the labour of lower caste people by forcing them to engage in "dirty" work. Gangu Tai cleaned our toilets, washed our dishes, washed and folded our laundry, swept and mopped our floors, and somehow, her slice of bread was still unfit for my consumption. In this section, I read a chapter from Twinkle Khanna's *Mrs Funnybones* (2015) as an instance where Khanna constructs herself as an upper caste woman in relation to their domestic worker. However, she eliminates caste from their dynamic through her narration, which allows her to portray their relationship of dominance and subordination as a

matter of a lack of competency on his part rather than her access to structural privilege and power to oppress.<sup>34</sup>

In the chapter “H: Hurricanes Hit My Household,” Khanna narrates her relationship with her unnamed domestic worker. She begins by telling her readers that she has “inherited a splendid member of my mother’s trusted staff. His uncle works for my mother, his brother works for my grandmother, and he used to work for my aunt, but is now all mine” (69). Here, through the narration of her experience of “inheriting” a domestic worker from her mother, Khanna constructs herself as an upper caste woman, whose caste identity gives her the power to use the labour of lower caste people employed by her immediate and extended family as she wishes. As I have discussed in my introduction, the domestic sphere has traditionally been associated with women through care work. However, domestic work often involves engaging in “dirty” work, which upper caste women are forbidden from doing owing to their caste status. Therefore, while their reproductive agency and sexuality is controlled by the Brahmanical patriarchy embodied mainly by upper caste men, they operationalise their material and social standing to relegate work that is considered polluting to their lower caste domestic workers (Chakravarti 82). His family also being employed by hers suggests that domestic work is a familial occupation for him, framing him as lower caste. Although she does not explicitly mention what his work is supposed to be, she calls him her “desi Jeeves” (71). Khanna’s intertextual reference to the renowned literary character Jeeves, created by British author P. G. Wodehouse, suggests that he is her butler or valet, which subsequently implies that she is the upper-class person, and her domestic

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<sup>34</sup> The oppressive relationship between upper caste women and their domestic workers can be seen in different representations. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Maheep’s relationship with Rekha before and after her death (S1E1, S1E2, S2E1). In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: “Big Shoes, Fall Feet” (4-15). In “Mrs Funnybones – The Blog”, see: . <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/desi-jeeves-videshi-apps-and-a-dream-of-stardom/>. These women have also narrated their relationships with their employees in their workplaces. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Neelam’s relationship with her supplier for her jewellery business (S1E2 00:03:40-00:04:56).

worker is her lower-class subordinate. The prefix “desi,” which is a Hindi word for a person of South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi) descent, carries the implicit weight of Hindu caste politics in domestic work. Her “desi Jeeves”, then, is a lower caste man employed to help her in or solely undertake the responsibility of domestic chores like cooking and cleaning. Towards the end of the chapter, when the domestic worker is on leave and has not returned on the date that he said he would, “the man of the house” becomes impatient and “accuses me of driving him away” (76). As Chakravarti (2018) writes, “domestic management is [...] crucial for the maintenance of purity norms and the avoidance of pollution, essential for sustaining upper caste status” (82). Reading this instance in the context of my vignette above, Khanna, as the upper caste, married woman, becomes the one who is responsible for keeping the domestic worker under control and doing the household work well. His performance reflects on her, and “the man of the house” has the power to blame her for any of the domestic worker’s misdeeds. Khanna’s inclusion of her husband’s voice as a dominating one in her narration of her relationship with her domestic worker is a performance of the patriarchal division of labour within the upper caste Hindu household.

Khanna narration establishes her domestic worker as having a very intimate relationship with the workings of her life and home. For example, he guards the house against strangers and informs Khanna about people he finds suspicious, he is trusted enough to receive important papers from Khanna’s bank and keep them safe in her absence, cook and serve food to the family, he ensures that Khanna has her monthly supply of sanitary napkins, and so on (69-75). These directly contribute to Khanna’s ability to keep her house functioning smoothly. Nevertheless, a majority of Khanna’s narration on her domestic worker is a recollection of incidents where he made mistakes or was inefficient (69-74). Even in the title of this chapter, she uses hurricanes as an exaggerated metaphor for the



impact that her domestic worker's behaviour and mistakes have on her home. Khanna's narrated "I" is repeatedly exasperated by and frustrated with his actions, which she conveys through hyperbolic sentences peppered with sarcasm that are meant to be funny: "Grr... [...] I take a deep breath and ask him to lend his invaluable assistance to some other member of the family" (70), "I have no recourse but to go to the kitchen and eat four cups of strawberry ice cream in despair" (71), "I am beginning to think that he is an agent planted by L'Oréal in my house to ensure that my hair turns white overnight and thus I have to spend all my money on hair dye" (72), "I proceed to bang my head on the chair repeatedly till I calm down before asking him to lend his invaluable assistance to some other member of the family" (73), "I [...] take a deep breath and immediately start doing my pranayam as I will need all the patience in the world when he finally arrives to once again lend me invaluable assistance" (74). Khanna's framing of herself as an exasperated employer portrays her domestic worker as relentlessly incapable of doing his job properly. Through her use of humour here, she constructs him as a trivial comic relief or as a source of entertainment who works for her. At the same time, the humour gives her the opportunity to avoid confronting the notion that he shoulders most of the housework responsibility for her because of their power dynamic that positions her as oppressor. Khanna also uses dialogue as a narrative technique to construct him as a comical character, and in doing so, also ends up reconstructing the class, caste, and rural-urban differences between herself and her domestic worker. The things he says to her are framed in broken English – "Didi, I don't think so. Looks villain type of person, come fast" (71), "Didi, I wanted to buy *shenga* chutney for you at Sholapur station" (74) – while her own sentences are grammatically correct. Here, her domestic worker has a voice, i.e., he can represent himself through his own words, but Khanna, as the author and narrator, juxtaposes his voice against her own, more sophisticated

one, thus, co-opting his voice to reinforce the caste hierarchy between them without ever needing to mention caste.

Khanna's use of humour in her portrayal of her relationship with her domestic worker is also a device that puts her further in relation to other upper caste people. Ravikant Kisana, in an article titled "Laughing Like a Savarna" (2023), traces the sociology of humour in upper caste circles, and suggests that the "brand of 'relatable' humour by Savarnas for Savarnas, then, comes at the expense of oppressed-caste, working-class social realities and normalises a certain dehumanisation and humiliation" (n.p.). In this chapter, the inconvenience of her domestic worker's disappearance after a three-week leave is made to seem funny and endearing, but it becomes a moment for Khanna's husband to chastise her for not understanding the value of having him work for them (73), implicating them within the graded division of labour that is the caste order. Elsewhere in her text, Khanna narrates an incident where her friend suspects that her domestic worker has been bribed by her mother-in-law to inform her of any instance of sexual intimacy between Khanna's friend and her husband, so that she can interrupt them (35). Here, the domestic worker's subjectivity is limited to being a diligent informant which facilitates the absurd relationship between Khanna's friend and her mother-in-law and becomes the fulcrum that prompts Khanna's friend to narrate the story to her. Therefore, as she relates to her domestic worker through her contempt for him, she also continues to be in relation with other upper caste people – her usual social network – through this contempt.

## Conclusion

I have argued that relating or relationality is central to how upper caste women articulate and represent themselves within the caste system in contemporary India. Upper caste women narrate their lives as wives, mothers, and daughters to maintain their relation to their natal

and marital families, which, in turn, maintains their access to social legitimacy and material resources. As a means to uphold this power, they tell stories about themselves in relation to friends and acquaintances that belong to similar social realities as them. While upper caste women are subordinated through Brahmanical patriarchy by upper caste men, their caste position still affords them power over lower caste people. The assertion of their power is demonstrated through their stories about themselves being in relation to their domestic workers and employees. The reliance on gendered, familial, and class norms for the construction of their subjectivities through their narration also enables the obfuscation of the fundamental role that caste plays in upper caste women's lives, effectively naturalising and reproducing their superior position in the hierarchical caste system. In the context of my case studies, their celebrity status makes significant contributions to complicate the idea that these caste-based relations occur only in private. Upper caste women as public figures that routinely interact with and through the social networks of the Bollywood film industry, which itself is informed by and represents social and cultural norms through filmmaking, render caste identity public, albeit through its (in)visibility. This is achieved through the aesthetic practice and production of public forms of life writing, oriented towards presenting a persuasive narrative of "castelessness". In the next chapter, I explore how a relational caste identity, at the intersection of gender and class, creates spaces where these women engage in the specific representations of specific kinds of labour based on the logic of caste to continue to negotiate their position in contemporary Indian society.

## CHAPTER 2: WORK

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how the notion of work is represented in upper caste women's life writing. Ambedkar (1936) understood caste as a system that depends on the division of labour for its continuation (n.p.). Since this division is based on "the dogma of predestination" rather than individual preference or aptitude, individuals within the system cannot change the labour ascribed to them (Ambedkar n.p.). Moreover, since the division is a graded hierarchy, the labour they are expected to do is tied to the honour and status they hold in society (Ambedkar n.p.). In other words, the continuation of this ascribed labour is essential to the retention of an individual's caste status. As I have established in the introduction, I approach caste as an act that must, as Butler suggests, must be repetitively reproduced by individual actors for its continuation. I adhere to the definition of the transitive verb form of work from the Oxford English Dictionary as "[t]o do, perform (a task, deed, process, etc.)" (n.p.) to understand the role of work in the construction of upper caste women's casteless autobiographical selves. By specifically investigating their narration of the work they do in the different positions they occupy within the public and private spheres in contemporary Indian society, I argue that upper caste women reinforce their position within the caste hierarchy, and by extension, Hindu society. I begin with exploring labour in the domestic space through the analysis of Twinkle Khanna's representation of motherhood in two columns/blog entries for *Mrs Funnybones*. Then, I consider the role that upper caste women play in the professional space towards the continuation of caste-based, family businesses and occupations through a reading of Maheep Kapoor's representation of her daughter, Shanaya Kapoor, entering the Bollywood film industry. Lastly, I examine Twinkle

Khanna's experience of being a celebrity through her narration of her experience as a public persona in her novel, *Mrs Funnybones: She's Just Like You and a Lot Like Me* (2015).

### Motherhood: The Work of Domesticity

While discussing how upper caste women construct themselves in relation to their employees and domestic workers in the previous chapter, I had mentioned that my mother worked full-time in my early childhood years, and that my grandmothers often stepped in as my caretakers. I often think about how my father or grandfather never really feature as actors in the stories I tell about my childhood, except for the times when I had done something really wrong and was scolded or punished. For me, my mother has always worked as a practicing architect and a teacher, she has always been the parent involved at my school – right from buying textbooks and uniforms to showing up for parent-teacher conferences to taking a six-month sabbatical from her work to ensure I did not fail my grade ten board exams (all this while my father did not even know what grade my brother and I were in). She ordered groceries, cooked, and packed all our lunches, and then, she came home from work and made dinner. When the domestic worker took a holiday, my mother would wash and fold the clothes, wash the dishes, and sweep and mop the house. My mother paid the electricity and water bills, renewed insurances, paid the domestic worker's, the washerman's, the milkman's salaries on time. When we got sick or needed vaccinations, she stayed home to nurse us and took us to the physician.

Because she excelled at her work, she sometimes had to travel for conferences or site visits or internships. Sometimes, she would find the courage to travel and see friends. If that happened, one of my grandmothers would do all this work for a day or two. The older I got, the more I began to notice how much those short travels and the decision to work after having given birth to me were held against her, while all the other work she did around the

house was normalised as her duty. Her own mother would taunt her about having left her husband and children alone at home to suffer without her, all the while comparing her to her younger sister, who quit her job as a speech therapist to have and raise two children and serve her in-laws. When my paternal grandmother (who lived with us) began to show signs of dementia, she would often tell our neighbours that my mother was mistreating her. When the dementia worsened to the point where my parents, my brother, and I began showing signs of being traumatised and depressed, after extensive research, my mother found my grandmother a rare but respectable assisted living facility that would provide her with the best palliative care. Our extended family and neighbours perceived this as my mother ridding herself of her mother-in-law and labelled her as a “bad” mother, a “bad” wife, a “bad” daughter-in-law.

All my life, I have known my mother to be working in some way or another, always traversing this bizarre boundary between tradition and modernity that somehow made her inspirational and pernicious at the same time. Now, when I am twenty-four and my mother is fifty-three, she finds solace in being able to talk to me about these things. Sometimes, I ask her why she put up with the taunts or why she did not delegate household responsibilities to us or my father. Always, in response, I find that she had never, even while she was complaining to me, really considered there to be an alternative way of life – “I just did it.” Chakravarti (1993) writes that *stridharma* (tr: the duties of a woman) and *pativrata* (tr: the duties of a faithful wife), the Brahmanical behavioural codes that framed ideal womanhood in upper caste Hindu society to mean a chaste wife who is devoted to the domestic, were widely accepted and aspired to by upper caste women “as the highest expression of their selfhood” (70). Labour, through the consistent performance of domesticity, is central to the fulfilment of the ideology of *pativrata*, and therefore, to the complicity of upper caste women in upholding the caste order. The work my mother put into

being a mother, a wife, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, was her attempt at being the ideal woman she was taught to want to be.

Motherhood becomes a particularly important aspect of domesticity in the context of caste because of its construction as “an extremely private experience that is made surreptitiously to seem public without an overt acknowledgement of its deep signification in the public domain” (Bagchi xxv). In Bagchi’s terms, then, without the consideration of caste, upper caste women’s labour as mothers becomes unquestioningly naturalised. In this section, I read two entries from Khanna’s newspaper-column-turned-blog in *The Times of India*, titled “The tribe of perfectly imperfect mothers” (2015) and “Ma Ki Baat: Why moms are the real exam warriors” (2018), for how Khanna negotiates the ideological construction of a “good” mother in terms of Brahmanical patriarchal ideals through the narration of her domestic duties. By doing so, I demonstrate how caste, through labour, remains fundamental to Khanna’s understanding of motherhood and yet, is never explicitly acknowledged in her narration. The omission of caste through and from her narration maintains the notion that mothering and care work are natural duties that upper caste women must engage in to maintain their membership to upper caste society.<sup>35</sup>

In “Ma Ki Baat: Why moms are the real exam warriors” (2018), Khanna narrates her experience of a day of having to manage her household around her son preparing for his mock International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) board exams while being extremely tired and sleep deprived. In “The tribe of perfectly imperfect mothers” (2015), Khanna writes about her struggles with being an “imperfect” mother to her children. Both entries are organised like a daily schedule, with time stamps, wherein Khanna discusses

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<sup>35</sup> Domesticity has been a recurring topic of deliberation in the life writing I am analysing in this thesis. In *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Maheep’s dedication to her children’s lives (S1E2, S1E5), Neelam’s decision to leave Bollywood for the first time because of her husband and child (S1E1), Seema’s struggle with the idea of divorce (S1E1, S2E4). In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: pp. 32, 202. In *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: “S: So What’s Changed Mommy?” (167-172). In “Mrs. Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/a-rocky-start-to-mothers-day/>

the chaos of having to do the work that comes with being a mother: quiet the dog, drive her children to school, communicate with other parents from the school regarding the exam preparations, attend meetings at work, get her children to their extracurricular activities (Khanna n.p.). This diary-like format, where Khanna records what Smith and Watson have formulated as “dailiness in accounts and observations of emotional responses” (266) in a chronological fashion, allows her to construct an intimate space for her readers on a public forum, where she shares the chaotic workings of her private home with them in order to make herself seem more publicly relatable and accessible. The short, time-marked entries signify her as a working woman who has little time to write anything lengthier, situating her in fast-paced, post-modern temporality. The diary entries, therefore, become a form of what Wendy Parkins (2004) theorises as celebrity knitting. Parkins writes that knitting is a process whereby celebrities construct their identities in a practical and leisurely manner that “not only positions a celebrity within a tradition of more authentic labour and a ‘real’ form of expertise [...] but it domesticates the celebrity in a way which reassures or consoles the audience that an ordinary way of life is what celebrities really crave” (428). Parkins also formulates knitting as a form of privileged self-care for women who must often balance domestic labour and professional careers at the same time (433-4). I read Khanna’s diary entries as this kind of self-care, i.e., she uses the diary entry as a space for comfort and security to cope with the time pressures of daily life and to construct herself as an ordinary person for her readers. The diary has famously been theorised as a feminine as well as a feminist form (Smith and Watson 266-268) of life writing that has complicated the dichotomy of what constitutes public and private, making it a particularly compelling mode for Khanna’s narration of her experience of motherhood.

In “The tribe of perfectly imperfect mothers” (2015), Khanna lists a series of things that go wrong while she tries to get her children ready for school in the morning. As she



forgets the name of her son's art teacher whom she needs to write to, she admits that she is "rather intimidated in this hallowed cathedral of seemingly perfect mothers who draw up colour-coded charts of their children's daily activities with one hand while whipping up soufflés with the other" (n.p.). Here, by articulating her notion of "perfect mothers", Khanna puts domesticity at the centre of ideal motherhood. Varsha Chitnis, in her dissertation "Women's Lives, Women's Stories: Examining Caste Through Life History Interviews in Baroda" (2014), defines domesticity as "a specific heteronormative gender code that implies women's relentless and undivided *devotion* to the domestic [...] Women are expected to draw their identity from domesticity: a good cook, a good homemaker, a good mother, a good wife, 'a domestic goddess'" (46). Khanna's notion of a perfect mother is someone who can balance managing her children's lives flawlessly while also cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her home. This notion is intricately tied to the aforementioned *stridharma* and *pativratadharma*, where an upper caste woman is considered "ideal" or "perfect", and therefore, worthy, according to Brahmanical standards when her life revolves around efficiently handling her family and home.

Furthermore, Khanna confesses that she feels "far from perfect and I live with that guilt like most other members that belong to this tribe called Mothers" (n.p.). She implies that she cannot do the work of an ideal mother and woman within Hindu society because she is trying to balance her domestic and professional life and is barely managing to do so. When she briefly mentions her professional work, however, Khanna writes that she "sleepwalk[s] through two meetings" (n.p.) and is distracted by "a strange news item, 'Parrot arrested for obscene crime'" (n.p.) while at work. This positions her as a woman who is preoccupied with and prioritises her family over her work. This way, she performs what Smitha Radhakrishnan has termed as "respectable femininity." In "Professional Women, Good Families: Respectable Femininity and the Cultural Politics of a 'New' India" (2009),

Radhakrishnan suggests that “[t]he women who maintain a job outside the workplace while still upholding the norms of the family, then, maximise their symbolic capital and are best able to enact respectable femininity” (202). Therefore, in post-liberalisation India, while (mostly) upper caste women have a significant presence within the professional sphere, ideal, upper caste womanhood is still predominantly defined in terms of domesticity. Subsequently, Khanna’s “imperfect mother” still remains a respectable, upper caste mother because, despite working, she puts her family and home first. In “Ma Ki Baat” (2018), there is an instance where Twinkle’s son finds his mock exam practice papers on a website called “papacambridge.com”:

I am suddenly very offended, not because I missed my lunch, missed picking up my daughter from school and did not manage to miss the left bumper of my mother’s car, but because the website for exam papers is called PAPA Cambridge.

How dare they! What do fathers have to do with education! Check any school WhatsApp group and you will hardly see any bearers of the precious XY chromosome (n.p.).

Khanna interprets the website being named after fathers and is irritated by this instead of by the small list of inconveniences she had to go through for her son, because of her reading of the instance as fathers receiving credit for their children’s exam preparations despite not being involved in them at all. This depicts the sexual division of labour in upper caste households. Bagchi (2015) writes that in caste society, “the hallmark of privilege lay with the women who were delinked from productive labour and relegated to the reproduction of status through procreation of the species” (xxiii). Therefore, since care work and reproduction become the primary labour that upper caste women are involved in, they derive their selfhood from it. When Khanna takes offence at “papacambridge.com”, she does so from a place of not being given due credit for the only work she is socially required to do.

The credit is validation and recognition for her identity as an upper caste mother, and Khanna is threatened when it appears to be taken away. Khanna repeatedly establishes the narrated “I” as doing the work of the upper caste mother, rearticulating her personhood within the ideological construction of the upper caste mother. Her addressal of the “you” when arguing against fathers contributing to their child’s education invites the reader to interact with this assertion of her identity.

As can also be seen in the previous example, Khanna does attempt to push back against this idea of motherhood by complaining about the unfairness and physical discomfort of her experience in extremely inflated terms in her narration. For instance, in “Ma Ki Baat” (2018), she jokes about motherhood being inhumane and compares it to a state of psychosis:

Article 3 of the Geneva Convention states that all prisoners must be treated humanely, and not tortured with techniques like induced psychosis and sleep deprivation. But motherhood is a biologically induced psychosis where detainees volunteer to get tortured for nine months while a parasitic organism, akin to a tapeworm, grows inside their body. And then feeling such extreme pain that it would be slightly easier to lie down in the middle of a highway and have a truck run over us, we expel a creature who often looks uncannily like our mother-in-law! Add a few years of extreme sleep deprivation and you have bone-tired women, convincing themselves in the same manner as victims of the Stockholm syndrome, that they have deep feelings of affection towards their two-foot-tall captors (n.p.).

Here, Khanna switches from singular “I” to plural “we” and “they” pronouns, indicating that this brutal description of motherhood is one that she shares with other mothers. Similarly, the other entry is titled “The *tribe* of perfectly imperfect mothers”, referring to a group of mothers who relate to being imperfect in their mothering. Khanna’s newspaper column/blog in the online format also includes a comments section where her readers interact with her

entries. Most of these responses, usually by people identifying themselves as ‘imperfect mothers’, affirm and extend empathy to Khanna’s iteration of her experiences of motherhood. Thus, once again, Khanna, with her readers, forms what I have, in the previous chapter, conceptualised as an “intimate public” wherein Khanna and her readers relate to each other through a common and collective lived experience. In both instances, Khanna uses the collective as a space where she can dialogue with other mothers about their shared historical experience of the pains of motherhood, and not as a space where she radically rethinks or rejects the labour of motherhood, since the latter would require her to shun the ideals of *stridharma* and *pativrata dharma*, and therefore, the social and material benefits of being upper caste. I read Khanna’s complaint, then, in Berlant’s (2008) vein, as “often a half-truth in the guise of a whole one, hyperbole projected out of a consciousness that observes struggle and registers the failure of the desired world without wanting to break with the conditions of that struggle” (19). Thus, Khanna’s denial of caste in her recognition of the difficulties of motherhood allows her to retain her ties with other upper caste women without breaking from her caste privilege.

I have so far explored Khanna’s labour as a mother inside the space of her home, but in reading both the aforementioned articles, I suggest that Khanna’s narration of raising her children depicts an agency within domesticity that speaks to and follows national and public notions of raising “good” citizens. As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the “national” in modern Indian history has been constructed as being synonymous with “upper caste”. Chitnis (2014) traces the conceptualisation and reconceptualization of femininity and domesticity through the history of nationalism and social reform movements in India, arguing that most recent Hindu nationalist discourse has framed domesticity as synonymous with the nation, thus giving agency to upper caste women in being responsible for raising (usually) men who will fight for and defend the ideology of the nation (88). For example, in

“The tribe of perfectly imperfect mothers” (2015), Khanna is able to successfully justify to her son why he needs to study rather than just attend social events, and she writes that

my main job for the day is done. Because more than making him aloo parathas or even being the perfect mom (who I envy) with the colour-coded activity sheets this is what I think a mother’s job really is. She needs to keep an eye on her child’s mind as much as she does on his homework. She must follow the tendrils of his thoughts, and each time she sees something askew, she has to nudge it back in place and she needs to do this every single day (n.p.).

Even though she uses the noun “child” in the above segment and has mentioned the presence of her daughter in other places, the use of “him/his” pronouns above constructs her exclusively as a mother of a son. This has significance not only in upper caste households, but also historically in nation-building efforts in India. In “Ma Ki Baat: Why mothers are the real exam warriors” (2018), Khanna does the work of grooming and moulding her son using Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s new book, called *Exam Warriors*, where he gives advice to school-going children and their parents on how best to prepare for examinations. In this context, schoolwork like exams and homework become synonymous with nation-building, by framing mothers as the “real exam warriors” in her title, Khanna draws attention to the labour that upper caste women engage in to raise their sons to become warriors for the nation. Since, in a caste society, the familial lineage was carried forth by males, “[t]he role of doorkeeper of the caste Hindu patriarchal order was easily acceded to Indian women in their role of mothers of sons, who glorified their motherhood” (Bagchi 5). Bagchi (2017), Chakravarti ([1993]2018), and Ramaswamy (2009) have extensively noted the correlation between this glorification of mothers of sons in Hindu caste society and the imagination of the nation as “Mother India”, a mother of sons as protectors of the nation.

### Occupation: The Work of Merit

Throughout my childhood, every couple of years, I would have a different answer for family and friends who, when they met me, inevitably wanted to know what I wanted to be when I grew up. Their first guess was “architect”, because my parents were architects and would need someone to take over their practice, but to their surprise, I always responded in the negative. It was a strange pleasure I felt, defying their expectations like that. I was the cool kid, with a mind and dreams of her own. From what I can remember now, at age five, I was going to be an astronaut. In second grade, it was a paediatrician. When I turned ten, I wanted to be a chef, and two years later, it had changed to journalist or “writer”. I sustained the last two options for quite a few years; right up until my second year of college, in fact. Then, however, having joined an elite, private liberal arts college in India, my journalistic ambitions were thrust aside when I was exposed to the fascinating field of Literary and Cultural Studies. My professors eagerly introduced me to Marx, Foucault, and Derrida in Critical Theory, and Spivak, Bhabha, and Appadurai in South Asian Cultural Studies, and I truly believed that by reading them and writing with and about them, I was saving the world. By the end of my degree, I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to have the confidence to stand in front of a classroom in a prestigious university and infectiously profess my love for all of these thinkers to my own set of students. So, I joined a master’s program in the Netherlands to study comparative literature and had a new answer for everyone who was curious about my career prospects. This one, much to my chagrin, did not surprise them at all. See, my parents had shifted careers in the last five years. An educational trust that was run by men from my father’s community wanted him to head a college that they funded, one where my mother was already teaching a couple of times a week. Eventually, finding teaching to be less stressful and more stable than negotiating individual projects through their architectural practice, my parents became involved with teaching full-time. As a result, like a dutiful

daughter should, I will be joining the “family business” now. Just like my father and his father before him. Just like my mother and her mother before her. Ambedkar, in “The Annihilation of Caste” (1936), argued that merely viewing caste as a division of labour was a misrecognition of the system. Instead, he characterised caste as “not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers [...] it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other” (n.p.). Moreover, he observed that the division was based not on the aptitude of the person, but on the social status of their parents. Thus, by becoming a teacher, I am inheriting my parents’ high caste, claiming my space within the caste order near the top.

In the second season of *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), Maheep Kapoor’s daughter, Shanaya Kapoor, is getting ready to make her debut in the Bollywood film industry. Here, I read a couple of scenes from the show to attend to how Kapoor navigates questions of merit<sup>36</sup> and privilege with regards to her daughter’s entry into the film industry by constructing herself as a worried, insecure mother of a child who must face harsh public scrutiny for her choice of career. I argue that, in doing so, Kapoor narrates her autobiographical self in a manner that shifts the focus of the storyline away from her daughter’s inheritance of her occupation, not only making her Bollywood debut possible but also seem devoid of caste privilege. To appear casteless in this case would be to carry what Bourdieu, in “Forms of Capital” (1986), terms embodied cultural capital most effectively: “[b]ecause the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognised as capital and recognised as legitimate competence” (250).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Subramaniam (2009; 2015)

<sup>37</sup> The invisibilisation of caste has been made possible through the representation of merit in other instances in my case studies. For example, in *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: Khan’s narration of the trials and tribulations of being a “working actor” (105-133), Khan’s representation of the idea of working after childbirth (202). In *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: “C: Can Indian Men Control Anything Besides Their Wives?” (23), “N: Not Quite a Feminist, So How Did I Reach Mars?” (123-132). In *The Fabulous Lives of*

In an episode titled “Wild Things: Ep. 6”, Maheep, Bhavana, Seema, and Neelam are seated together in their plush holiday villa in Jawai, Rajasthan, when Neelam brings up the conversation of their young children being photographed by the press without permission. Maheep directs this conversation to how, when Shanaya was nine years old, the paparazzi had clicked a photo of them leaving the airport and printed it with a caption that asked the readers whether Shanaya Kapoor could be an actress. Maheep becomes animated, claiming that “people don’t understand. The good comments are too much for them, the bad comments are too much for them. How does a child understand? I called [the press] and I said, ‘Fucking take them off. She’s a child. She hasn’t signed up for this. How dare you?’ I threw a fit!” Maheep’s voice is raised and assertive, and her use of expletives refutes any possibility of a dialogue that disagrees with her. The space in which she has this conversation – among her close friends, on a holiday, on a heavily produced and edited television show where she does not have to respond to any spontaneous questions – is also conducive to her argument. Bhavana, whose daughter Ananya Panday is also an actor, agrees with Maheep, and adds that the paparazzi should wait until they have grown up and made the decision to enter the industry, after which “they are there for the public to say whatever because they have become public figures” (00:24:32-00:25:35). However, in a confessional aside, Maheep tells the camera that “[t]here are a lot of people out there who are just cruel. And they don’t seem to understand that these kids are someone’s children. Yes, maybe the privilege outweighs the issues. I am not denying it. But the pain I feel,” she says, dramatically holding her chest, “I can’t control it” (00:24:32-00:25:35). Therefore, in recollecting an incident from when her daughter was nine years old, in insisting that “She’s a

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*Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Seema trying to establish her own fashion line (S2E2), Bhavana trying to launch LoveGen (S1E1), Maheep’s jewellery business (S2E6), Neelam’s jewellery business and bargaining skills (S2E2), the discussion on work between the four women and Gauri (S2E7), Neelam’s desire to re-enter the film industry (S1E1, S2E1). In “Mrs Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/keeping-up-with-the-kapoors-and-keeping-away-from-pangas/>



child” and “How does a child understand?”, Maheep attempts to affectively engage the audience to continue to view and judge Shanaya, now an adult at the cusp of a career in the film industry, as Maheep’s child, extending to her the same empathy and sympathy to her as one would to a child.

Maheep further blames the current state of the industry for the pressure her daughter feels: “The era we grew up in, I am so grateful, because I just feel I could fuck up. I made fucking massive mistakes in my life. But there was no scrutiny. Honestly, I love the industry. But very, very little room for error” (00:24:32-00:25:35). Maheep employs the memory of her experience of growing up in a different time in contrast to her daughter’s experience of growing up as a part of the Hindi film industry now to indicate that public scrutiny is a challenge that Shanaya must face that did not exist before. Criticism would entail grappling with Shanaya’s individual talent as an actor, which simultaneously questions her own merit as well as reflects on and questions her family’s image as an established “Bollywood” family. By narrating how the public scrutiny of her daughter pains her, Kapoor privileges her identity and agency as a mother over her caste and class identity, positioning herself as emotionally vulnerable to and protective of her child’s suffering, deflecting questions about whether her child really deserves the career and why.

Maheep facilitates a conversation about the Kapoor family, that has a stronghold within the Bollywood film industry and is the family that she is married into. Through this conversation, she attempts to frame the family as having struggled to establish themselves while also being a competitive space in itself. In “Face Lifts & FacePalms: Ep. 7”, Kapoor and her daughter celebrate Shanaya’s twenty-second birthday by going to the cinema. Shanaya is given a surprise by her cousin, actor Arjun Kapoor, who, at Maheep’s behest, switches the reel of the movie to a reel of Shanaya’s recent modelling shoots. He has rented out the cinema and “asked” a few people to pretend to be the audience in order to give

Shanaya a feel of what it is like to see oneself onscreen, among the audience. Maheep, in a confessional aside, calls Arjun “such a sweetheart. He’s the big brother in the family. He’s constantly just spoiling them [...] My kids know that if they need anything at two, three, five o’clock in the morning, Arjun is there for my kids” (00:14:47-00:18:59). By framing Arjun as an elder brother, Maheep situates him within their familial network. This allows Shanaya to confide her fears to someone who benefits from the same structures as her. Arjun is also represented as a doting brother and an encouraging presence. Hence, Maheep invokes his protective nature while asking him to advise her daughter about the perils of facing public criticism, portraying Arjun as the ideal person to help prepare Shanaya for the inevitable without questioning her social privilege.

Maheep sits next to Shanaya, smiling dotingly and saying very little herself in the scene where Arjun and Shanaya talk about the experience of seeing oneself onscreen as well as being a part of a “Bollywood family”. Shanaya states that the feeling of having watched herself on a screen for the first time was “too much. It’s too overwhelming for me” (00:14:47-00:18:59). Arjun tells her that “to see this, what I just showed you, which firstly rekindled my own memories of how vulnerable you feel – this is the first day of the rest of your life, literally” (00:14:47-00:18:59). Shanaya and Arjun’s attention to feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed in response to being on screen constructs them as relatable and accessible people, once again inviting sympathy and empathy from their audience. Pramod K. Nayar, in “What the Stars Tell: The Year in India” (2019), writes that a major feature of a star or celebrity autobiography often constructs its subject as an “ironic subject” where “the *star* component of [their] lives is toned down and the sentimental [...] component is played up to demonstrate the humanness of the star” (65). Hence, Shanaya and Arjun’s “humanness” superimposed on their celebrity persona in the show co-constructs them as ordinary people, situating them within structures that they occupy with other ordinary people.

Shanaya and Arjun then mention that the experience of being onscreen made them feel like they had to live up to the expectations of the people watching them, that they had to be worth being watched. Shanaya also expresses her fears about not being good at anything except acting:

I feel my focus has been only films. So, my fear also was, like, I'm actually bad at studies, I'm bad at this, I'm bad at everything. Like anything, my exams, nothing. I was good at nothing, except I was like, *this* [acting] is that one thing I have to be good. When there are like, so many people messaging me constantly on Instagram like, 'Oh, I'm waiting, I'm waiting, I'm waiting for your film to start!' I'm like what have I done for this, you know, extreme love from these people. Then it's like, 'Oh, I have to match up this. I have to live up to what they are feeling (00:14:47-00:18:59).

As she speaks, Maheep and Arjun are also seen nodding and validating her account. In the context of Maheep's previous outburst about facing criticism and Arjun's own account of managing familial and public expectations as an actor, the setting of the public yet private space of a cinema hall rented out by Arjun where the three Kapoor engage in an intimate conversation creates a protected environment for Shanaya to express her angst and uncertainty about herself and her abilities. Her narration is meant to break the assumption that celebrities are always confident in their ability to act and perform, to make her seem ordinary, and to thereby avert any strong negative reaction to her debut. The constructed privacy of the conversation does not allow for outside criticism or doubt to enter and disrupt Maheep and Arjun from reassuring Shanaya of her merit.

Arjun describes their extended family as "very boisterous by nature. Everybody loves their attention" (00:14:47-00:18:59), which makes it tough for one to be their own person, "because there's a lot of opinions, because everybody is smart [...] everybody has had a journey which is tougher than yours" (00:14:47-00:18:59). Maheep uses this description to

suggest that being a part of renowned family is proving to be difficult for Shanaya, because she cannot effectively state that acting is her *choice* of career. According to Maheep, the burden of carrying forth “this legacy [...] everything is added. I just fear” (00:14:47-00:18:59). She then states that she only *allowed* Shanaya to act because “[s]he’s been honest and sincere, Arjun. She’s not going half-heartedly [...] I would have never fucking allowed her on screen if she–“ (00:14:47-00:18:59). By declaring her agency in Shanaya’s decision to enter the film industry, Maheep further disconnects Shanaya’s acting talent from being the reason for having landed a role in a film. She becomes the gatekeeper, the contact, the enabler – the receptacle of caste – for her daughter’s initiation into the industry that her extended family already belongs to. Shanaya can only be an actor *through* her mother. Moreover, by explicitly discussing the role of the “Bollywood family” in Shanaya’s decision to act and telling her that the pressure is on her “to be you” (00:14:47-00:18:59), Maheep, Arjun, and Shanaya also end up revealing that the vulnerability, feeling of overwhelm, and the fear of failure is linked to upholding the family name. “Being” Shanaya in this case is to be Shanaya *Kapoor*, a part of a family that is now giving her its legacy to carry forward.

#### Public Persona: The Work of Beauty

As a precocious teen, I was made to feel very conscious about how I looked. My maternal grandmother constantly fretted about how I was fat – “You need to *reduce*! Especially the thighs and arms!” – and repeatedly thanked the heavens that I had inherited her wheatish, rosy-cheeked complexion and clear skin, praying that it would stay that way for the rest of my life. I often caught my neighbour chatting up my mother at our doorstep, eyeing my shoes all the while and trying to express her concern at the size of my feet, advising my mother to force me to wear smaller shoes for a couple of years to prevent my feet from getting bigger and “manlier”. My father once told me I had to stop wearing shorts until I

learned to shave my legs and got them in “rock-solid” shape. Cutting my hair to the pixie-length that I so badly wanted was heavily frowned upon by most people in my family even though the length and weight of my long hair often frustrated me. In the summers, I had to be careful not to get a tan in the strong sunlight, or it would mean hours of my grandmother painfully rubbing raw milk into my skin. At fourteen, when I won a story-writing competition and had to travel to Delhi to attend the book launch event, my mother made me wax my legs for the demure dress I was going to wear. The heat from the wax would eventually damage my follicles and skin to a point where I would have chronic inflammation, but until then, I had to learn to be regular with the waxing, the plucking, the shaving – to be polished, groomed, and presentable at all times. “To look like Aishwarya Rai,” my grandmother would prompt<sup>38</sup>.

My family worried about more than just my looks. They worried about how I sat, how I stood, how I laughed, whether I smiled enough even at the people I felt uncomfortable around or even when I wasn’t feeling very smiley. I could never be angry in public, and especially not at family gatherings or in places where we knew several people. I had to keep my mouth shut in the company of adults, and especially when the adults were men, particularly if the conversation was about politics. Even more so if it was about politics that made my stomach churn. No matter how insulting a person had been to me, if they were older and well-acquainted with my family, I had to be polite in return. When the same people visited us or attended an event we were hosting (and sometimes, even if we went to their house), I had to ensure they were served water and maybe food, checking routinely if they were comfortable. I had to learn the art of the “humblebrag” – to always make my achievements known to everyone around me by cloaking them in ostensible modesty or even

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<sup>38</sup> See: Parameswaran (2004) on Indian beauty queens as global icons.

self-deprecating humour. As a girl, I was expected to put in a lot of time and effort into learning how to be a presentable part of my family.

As a child, I could not understand why existing as a part of my family had to be such painful work. I could sense unease in my own skin and my sense of self was starting to fall apart, and I found that tending to my own needs often came at the cost of looking respectable and presentable, a compromise I was constantly being told was unacceptable. The older I got, however, the more institutions I had to be associated with and the clearer it became to me. How I looked – my arms and thighs, my hair and nails, my clear complexion, my posture, my smile and laugh, all of it – was representative of my family, my school, the organisation I worked for. The more “presentable” and “appropriate” I looked, the more respectable and well-established my family looked. My grandmother eventually stopped saying it out loud to me because I had bitten her head off the previous few times she had tried, but how I presented was also what determined which man I would be eligible to marry and how. Chakravarti (1993) writes that “[t]he honour and respectability of upper caste men are regarded as protected and preserved by women who therefore must be closely guarded and whose sexuality is stringently monitored. Upper caste women are regarded as the gateways – literally points of entrance into the caste system” (64). Therefore, individually conforming to the codes of respectability and presentability through their behaviour and appearance links upper caste women to the ideal and normative expectations of their caste community.

In my case, although I must invest in a similar kind of feminine, bodily labour to be perceived as an upper caste woman in public, I am not a public figure or celebrity. Thus, I do not negotiate expectations expected to publicly represent modern Indian culture on a large scale. The norms I have to conform to are still largely associated with traditional ideologies of modesty and my “public” is confined to a smaller community space. As I discuss further

in this section, the manner in which my case studies engage with being public personas, i.e., “[a]n assumed character or role, esp. one adopted by an author in her or her writing, or by a performer” and “[t]he aspect of a person’s character that is displayed to or perceived by others” (Oxford English Dictionary n.p.), is a construction of themselves as honourable upper caste women that is mediated through a modern Indian public sensibility. Mineke Bosch, in “Persona and the Performance of Identity” (2013), writes that “the ‘persona’ [is] an intermediary between the individual and the institution [...] a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognisable physiognomy” (15). Furthering Bosch’s intervention, I read a chapter from Twinkle Khanna’s *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), titled “M: Masked Bandit on the Prowl”, where Khanna juxtaposes her experiences of being a model for the photo shoot of a fashion magazine and of being clicked in unflattering clothes by paparazzi while on a casual family outing in her narration. I frame this as an instance where Khanna constructs herself as a public persona through her narration of performing and engaging in traditional caste practices of beauty and grooming that invisibilises caste to correspond to a national imagining of ideal womanhood.<sup>39</sup>

In the beginning of the chapter, Khanna tells her readers that she is “ready with make-up and not a hair out of place at the photo shoot for a fashion magazine in a shiny pink dress with massive pearls all around the hem” (114). Here, she uses the narration of her own embodiment to evoke familiar image of a model from a print magazine, who dresses expensively and looks immaculate, almost ethereal in print – what Meenakshi Thapan (2004) has noted as a regular feature of women’s magazines that aim to reach the ‘new’ Indian

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<sup>39</sup> Beauty as work has been approached differently in all my case studies. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020), see: Neelam’s desire to get fillers (S1E4, S2E7), Bhavana’s spiritual approach to beauty (S2E4, S2E7), Maheep on her husband’s complaints about her visits to the salon (S2E7), Gauri Khan’s photoshoot (S2E5). In “Mrs. Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/silicone-stilettos-and-safety-pins-the-pain-of-pretty/>

woman in post-globalisation India. Khanna further writes about multiple other outfits that she is asked to model for the shoot – “[g]littering in an all-gold Pucci dress” (115) and “a black Cavalli dress with a plunging neckline” (115) – which, although she changes the names of the brands slightly, allude to high-end, luxury fashion houses that usually create expensive outfits, making her appear glamorous. Women’s magazines have famously been spaces that depict idealised versions of beauty and femininity (Thapan 420). These magazines present women from upper caste and middle-to-upper class backgrounds as ideals of femininity in a globalised Indian context (Parameswaran 357). On the surface, by wearing what she describes as western outfits for a magazine that circulates publicly, Khanna appears to challenge upper caste ideologies of women’s modesty. However, by centring her body in her narration of the photo shoot, Khanna creates a space where “[c]aste emerges as a felt, affectively charged phenomenon in embodied and sensorial knowledge about what constitutes beauty and who can perform it (and on whom). The representation of creativity and art, in forms of labour, becomes crucial to how caste-based hierarchies are reproduced” (Malik 101). As I have established through previous chapters, Khanna has access to the experience of being chosen to be a part of a magazine through her affiliation to the Bollywood film industry, which is mediated through her caste network – through her family, friends, and professional acquaintances. By giving an account of her experience of being photographed for a fashion magazine, Khanna taps into “persuasive modalities of identification” (Parameswaran 366) for other upper caste, middle/upper class women in India. Therefore, through her narration of the process of the photo shoot, Khanna narrates the process of *becoming* the ideal beauty, and consequently, the ideal upper caste woman.

Khanna’s self-narration enables her to go beyond what being photographed for a women’s magazine allows her to do in terms for normalising and invisibilising her lived experience of caste. She gives her readers a behind-the-scenes account of how she



“magically transforms from a middle-aged, vaguely stylish woman to an ageless goddess”

(113). Making what is seemingly private, public, provides her readers the opportunity to simultaneously view her as a glamorous celebrity figure and as a “ordinary” woman, making her more relatable. Khanna makes several moves towards this construction of herself.

Firstly, she clarifies that this is not her primary occupation, although she has done photo shoots before as an actress and celebrity, and therefore, to be able to do the shoot, her “body, of its own accord, dredges up some rusty skills, and soon I am pouting and preening like this is my daily job” (115). This indicates that, unlike the natural grace that the photographs portray, she needs to make an effort to perform the effortless. Secondly, Khanna also supplements the descriptions of these fashion pieces with the physical discomfort she experiences while preparing for the shoot. Khanna describes how she practices some poses before the shoot when her husband tells her that she looks like she has dislocated her shoulder (113). Similarly, while wearing the aforementioned pink dress, Khanna complains that “every time I want to sit, these pearls dig into my bottom” (114). She has to model while “boiling in Maharashtra’s scorching sun [...] perched on a carriage” (115) and wear outfits that do not have adequate support, so that “the only thing keeping my breasts in place is hope!” (115). Khanna’s framing of her discomfort uses a humorous tone, inviting her readers to laugh at her, evoking a sense of empathy. In the middle of the shoot, Khanna suddenly mentions that her daughter has arrived at the shoot: “My baby is here. I rush to hug her before I go for my next shot where I am leaning on a fairy-tale dwarf” (114). Here, for a moment, Khanna becomes a model who is also a mother, i.e., a public figure who also has a private life like “ordinary”, respectable women do, before she becomes a model again. The contrast in her narration of embodiment and identity in these instances from her previous description of modelling enables her to break out of the immaculate image of a model by appearing more normal, while still remaining a model.

In the latter half of the chapter, Khanna writes about another experience of being photographed in public for the sake of publicity, albeit unwillingly. She goes to the cinema with her family “having hurriedly thrown on my blue worn out kurta; am carrying a bright yellow bag (which clashes terribly but I am too lazy to change it) and not a slick of make-up” (116). She is thronged by paparazzi while leaving the cinema hall and is extremely annoyed at being photographed in unflattering clothes. She directly addresses a preconceived notion that her readers may have about public appearances by celebrities:

For anyone who has ever thought that these encounters with the paparazzi are pre-planned, kindly use some common sense. We have some sort of vanity as well and allowing yourself to be photographed in a state that you would not want to put up on Facebook, let alone be published in national newspapers, would be rather demented (117).

Her use of the collective pronoun “we” locates her as a part of a community of celebrities and public figures and indicates a self-awareness on her part. At the same time, a shift to the “you” is an invocation of empathy from the readers maintaining a sense of a relationship between her and them. As a solution to her annoyance, she proposes to put on a mask of “a 12-inch picture of Mr Modi’s face” (118) every time she leaves the house. As the pros of this solution, she lists:

- 1) I do not have to put any make-up on ever again
- 2) I will prove that I am a loyal, patriotic Indian citizen
- 3) I may become a nationwide trendsetter (118-9)

In a moment where she is unable to embody the idealised, upper caste beauty, and therefore, womanhood, Khanna attempts to remedy the situation by pretending to be the Prime Minister<sup>40</sup>, who is currently a representative of the nation and nationalistic ideals, both in

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<sup>40</sup> For work on Modi in the masculine image of India, see Srivastava (2015)

terms of his political position as well as his political and religious affiliations to Hindutva.

By framing her ideal public persona as substitutable by a mask of a staunch, Hindu, national representative, Khanna creates an identification between ideal, upper caste womanhood and the idea of the current Hindu nation. Moreover, in stating that she would never have to wear make-up again, Khanna indicates encoding ideal womanhood in the image of Modi's Hindu nation would allow her to do less work while still upholding normative codes of femininity.

### Conclusion

I have unpacked to some extent the relationship between upper caste women's subjectivity and work in the caste order. The notion of work or labour is heavily marked by modernity in contemporary India. In this regard, through their life writing, I have tracked qualities or characteristics that are ascribed to different spheres that upper caste women inhabit and labour in. In the private sphere, the performance of domesticity by upper caste women is essential to the perpetuation of caste order. Engaging in the work of domesticity also reinforces the role of women in caste society as being transmitters rather than carriers of caste. In the professional sphere, while upper caste women have been a part of the workforce in India in some capacity since the early twentieth century, their influence has significantly increased in contemporary times. I have explored the pivotal role they play by narrating their identities as professional women and mothers in the caste-based construction of merit, usually for the benefit of their husbands and children. Lastly, my case studies feature women who work in and are associated with the Hindi film industry, which has constructed them as celebrities and public figures in the era of consumer modernity in India. Therefore, considering the relationship between caste and femininity, I have framed the work of beauty as central to the representation of themselves as public personas. I also approach the practice of life writing by upper caste women in this chapter as a form of work in the construction of

a gendered and classed subjectivity that engages in the labour of continuing the hierarchy of caste. In all of the above, upper caste women narrate their experience of work in conjunction with the (in)visibilisation of caste identity. I have argued that this is because the “casteless” representation of their engagement in these specific kinds of work contributes to the naturalisation of their position and role in caste society, leaving their access to power intact. In the next chapter, I look at upper caste and upper-class women’s representation of their politics to understand how relationality and labour inform their notions of and interactions with social, national, and transnational concerns in contemporary India.

## CHAPTER 3: POLITICS

## Introduction

Following Gail Omvedt's (1982) assertion about the tangible reality of caste (14), in this chapter, I explore how upper caste women associated with the Bollywood film industry narrate their relationship to structures of power that enable them to acquire and exercise control over the distribution of material resources in Indian society. To this end, I engage with their politics, which I define and approach in three ways: firstly, I engage with the body politic of the Indian nation-state, that is, "a nation regarded as a corporate entity" (OED n.p.). Considering the body politic of the Indian nation-state is a metaphorical physical body that invites different forms of identification, I consider the ideology of nationalism through Twinkle Khanna's sentimental narration of the Indian identity in the context of *Karva Chauth* celebrations in *Mrs Funnybones* (2015). Secondly, I analyse the noun "politics" that represents "political ideas, beliefs, or commitments or a particular individual, organisation, etc" (OED n.p.), that is, the state of *being* political. In this regard, I approach feminism through a reading of body enhancement procedures in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-). Lastly, I consider "politics" as "policy" (OED n.p.), to refer to the 1991 liberalisation and subsequent globalisation of the Indian economy. In this vein, I explore how celebrities like the women in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-) strategically negotiate with Western culture through caste positioning towards the creation of a globalised but traditional Indian culture through their presence at the Parisian *Le Bal des Débutantes*. I consider life writing by upper caste women as a cultural and political practice that exercises and negotiates the (material) power of caste through narrative and aesthetic constructions of a social self.

### Nationalism: Politics of Sentiment

I loved being on stage in school. Any and every drama competition at school felt like an opportunity to be more and more creative with my performances. Being a voracious reader, for my auditions, I would play a range of characters from books, stories, and fables I knew (I think the one I look back most fondly on is a mono-acting skit based on a folk tale with Mughal Emperor Akbar and his royal advisor Birbal<sup>41</sup>), and my versatility would inevitably find a spot in a skit or play. My school, named after Swami Vivekananda, greatly emphasised patriotism as a virtue and often used it as a theme for school events. As a result, I would end up playing the character of a woman who, in some way, had contributed to making the Indian nation great - a female “freedom fighter” like Sarojini Naidu or Rani Laxmibai, or a mother or sister tearfully sending her soldier son or brother off to war, or Indira Gandhi, India’s first (and only) female Prime Minister, or as a part of a group of women celebrating one of the many “Indian” festivals. The historical context and its accuracy did not really matter here. The women I played were never people in their own right, they existed only in the context of the story of the Indian nation and this what made them worthy of glory.

The most important role I ever played was that of Bharat Mata or Mother India. This was for the biggest event of the year – the Annual Day. My school had rented out a renowned auditorium and parents, friends, and relatives of all students were invited. My part was the big opening act: I had a ten-minute-long monologue, dressed in a pristine white sari with a red-and-gold border, a gold crown, ample jewellery, a large, red bindi, and a wig of long, flowing dark hair. My teachers spent an unbelievable amount of time rubbing foundation two shades lighter than my natural skin on my face, ensuring I looked very fair.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Birbal was, incidentally, a Brahmin from the same community as my father (see: Ashrit, 1965)

<sup>42</sup> See Ramaswamy (2009) on Bharat Mata as upper caste Hindu woman.

Embodying the Indian nation imagined as mother/goddess, I ranted about the ecological destruction, corruption, crimes against women that currently ravaged the nation, urging my audience to remember the glorious past, when “my children” fought and struggled to free me from the shackles of the British Empire. I reminded them of how I had raised and nurtured them, how I had given them the power to become a people. I begged them to change their cruel ways, to protect me from the harm they had been causing so far. Before the stage lights faded, I had to break down hysterically, collapsing on the floor in helplessness. I found this role quite easy to rehearse and perform because this was exactly how I also *knew* my country, as a respectable woman who, instead of being served and taken care of, had been wronged and dishonoured by her children. The image of and the belief in Bharat Mata as the Indian nation frames India as what Benedict Anderson has termed as an “imagined community”. Anne McClintock (1995) explains Anderson’s formulation of nations as imagined communities by suggesting that nations “are systems of cultural representation whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community. As such, nations are not simply phantasmagoria of the mind but are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed” (353). In this case, the feeling of nationalism is fundamental to the identities of people within the nation.

McClintock (1995), while tracing how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality shaped the rise and decline of British imperialism, writes that “the temporal anomaly within nationalism – veering between nostalgia for the past and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past – is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction in the representation of *time* as a natural division of *gender*. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity” (emphasis in original; 358-359). As a Brahmin girl playing Bharat Mata, then, what I embodied was the tradition of a nation with a

specifically upper caste Hindu past. To further explore how upper caste women uphold the caste order through nationalistic sentiment, I engage with a chapter from Twinkle Khanna's *Mrs Funnybones* (2015) where she formulates a relationship between Hindu rituals and festivals that are observed by Hindu women and her idea of the Indian nation through her narration in order to demonstrate how cultural rituals and festivals that are distinctly upper caste become national culture through Khanna's narration.<sup>43</sup>

In a chapter titled "K: Karan Johar Celebrates Karva Chauth", Khanna narrates the experience of celebrating the festival of *Karva Chauth*, where upper caste, married, Hindu women from the northern and western parts of India must forego food and water from sunrise to moonrise for the longevity and safety of their husbands. Here, Khanna constructs herself as a dutiful upper caste woman, who, in the temporal context of the Hindu nation, forfeits modernity to embrace tradition, however begrudgingly. As narrator, Khanna questions why the fast must continue to be followed this severely. She says that she understands why such rituals would be observed "in the ancient times" (98), when women were forced to commit *sati*. i.e., jump into their late husbands' funeral pyre. Today, however, Khanna jokingly argues that one's husband's death "merely frees you up to place ads in the matrimonial column, go on online dating sites and feverishly attend bar nights" (98), hence, there is no longer any need for such extreme fasts. On the surface, Khanna attempts to position herself in a rational relationship with the tradition, which could be read as a feminist move. However, reading it at the intersection of caste and gender alters this reading drastically. By vaguely labelling *sati* as an "ancient" practice, Khanna disengages it from being a prominent feature in the marital practices of high caste Hindus. Ambedkar (1916) identifies *sati* as one of the atrocities committed against women to preserve the sanctity of

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<sup>43</sup> Nationalism has been approached in various ways in my case studies. For example, in "Mrs Funnybones – The Blog", see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/why-everybody-loves-a-boycott/>, in *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2017), see: Khan's discussion on her parents' ancestries in the context of the country (1-57)



caste groups (n.p.). Owing to the removal of caste from her narration of *sati*, Khanna can use *sati* as a humorous example contrasted with modern forms of dating and social mingling, which continue to be marked by class and caste, to negotiate her distance from an oppressive ritual that she does partake in. Furthermore, I read Khanna's use of the "you" when describing how one becomes free after the death of her husband as a deliberate move to indicate her implied reader. Coupled with her use of humour, her implied reader becomes a woman who has the social and material resources to engage in these activities, motivated "feverishly" by the fear or anxiety of practices such as enforced widowhood<sup>44</sup>. These are explicitly upper caste fears. Khanna sarcastically calls herself "one of the many fortunate women" (97) who must celebrate this festival for their husbands. Again, she draws on a communal identity of women *like her* who participate in this festival. Therefore, Khanna's use of humour in this anecdote is aimed at extending empathy to other women who fast for *Karva Chauth*, i.e., upper caste women. By identifying the caste and class dynamics at play, it becomes less relatable to women who do not belong to Khanna's caste and class. The invisibility of Khanna's social positioning, then, allows *Karva Chauth* to remain a universally celebrated festival, challenged only by the gendered expectations women face because of it.

Khanna further extends the group she identifies with to Hindu women who live outside India. She first hints at this transnational extension in the title of the chapter, when she mentions Bollywood director and producer, Karan Johar – a decision she does not address or reflect on in the chapter thereafter. Johar is renowned for making films that appeal to the sensibilities of the Indian diaspora, particularly Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), and these films often involve melodramatic stories about wealthy families living abroad, coded in the language of nationalism, interspersed with extended and dramatic scenes with upper

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<sup>44</sup> See Chakravarti's ([1993] 2018) on enforced widowhood for upper caste women as social death.

caste Hindu rituals and festivals, and dialogues and monologues that reflect on the characters' Hindu-Indian background<sup>45</sup>. By invoking Johar in her representation of the festival, Khanna frames her celebration of *Karva Chauth* in this globalised, transnational aesthetic of Indianness, which has been popularised by Johar's brand of filmmaking, where the celebration of Hindu festivals and the continuation of Hindu traditions is the crux of the Indian identity. In her chapter, Khanna reflects on how "[w]e Indians are a strange race" (101). By adding the collective pronoun "we" to her reflection on the Indian identity, Khanna shifts the position of the narrated "I" to represent a collective. She, as an upper caste, Hindu woman who observes fasts and celebrates festivals like Karva Chauth, becomes the "Indian", the exemplary citizen of the Indian nation-state. Additionally, her use of the "we" pronoun stages yet another scene of recognition with her implied reader, this time creating an intimate space where she can further deliberate on the traits of Indians in a sentimental tone:

One of the better qualities we possess is that most of us will follow traditions and rituals as long as they do not demean or harm us, or cause us to do the same to another, while making our elders happy. We simple do it rather than prove a point as to how liberated and independent we truly are. Perhaps, this is how we harmoniously hold our large families together as we celebrate different aspects of our lives (101)

Here, Khanna makes visible the ideological "I" of the Hindu-Indian citizen in her narration. Her imagination of the "better" or good "Indian" possesses a value and belief system that is identical to that of a traditional Hindu, upper caste woman: someone who is docile and does not offend her elders, who participates in traditional rituals, who prefers to remain compliant for the purpose of keeping her "large families together as we celebrate different aspects of our lives" (101), all qualities that I have elaborated on in the previous chapters. In her

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<sup>45</sup> See Datta (2008) on Karan Johar's filmography as addressing the diasporic Hindu-Indian sensibility.

chapter, she gives detailed descriptions of how women who observe the fast are ill-treated by their own mothers-in-law (98-99), and then enfeebles those narratives by suggesting that “they do not harm or demean” (101) upper caste women. This move shows a focus towards maintaining the cohesiveness of the family unit, and by extension, the nation.

Furthermore, towards the end of the chapter, Khanna’s narration switches even more drastically from sharply criticising the rituals of *Karva Chauth* to a soft and sentimental acquiescence to its celebration. She writes that, “As banal as I find most rituals, I am still swept away by the moment [...] Suddenly, someone spots the hazy orange outline of the moon, and we are now dragging out our men, laughing as we borrow things from each other’s plates, a strainer, a coconut barfi, a flower, laughing as we borrow things from our past...” (101-2). Here, Khanna’s emotional tone imbues a sense of nostalgia for the past that, in McClintock’s vein, is closely associated with the gendered idea of nation, time, and tradition. The sentimentality of her narration creates an affective and intimate space where the celebration of an upper caste festival evokes a sense of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that Anderson associates with the conception of a nation (16). Therefore, Khanna merges the upper caste Hindu identity with the Indian identity in a mode that does not seem unsettling.

Uma Chakravarti (2018) writes that

[t]he compliance of women or the consent they extend to structures that are oppressive is [...] ‘invisibilized’ under the seemingly more neutral notion of upholding ‘tradition’, or the specific ‘cultures’ of families, or of communities, then moving outwards to the Hindu ‘nation’ whose cultural repository somehow resides specifically in women. Women are regarded as upholding traditions by conforming to them; *men* on the other hand *uphold* traditions *by enforcing* them – *not* upon themselves but *upon women* (emphasis in original; 137).

Hence, through her narration of partaking in the rituals of the “Indian” festival of *Karva Chauth*, Khanna shifts the focus away from her caste identity towards her national identity, effectively equating upper caste culture with national culture.

### Feminism: Politics of Choice

My first understanding of solidarity, protest, and collective rage with and for women developed in the aftermath of one of the most heinous and heavily mediatised cases of rape and murder in Delhi, India in 2012. On December 16, a 22-year-old woman, travelling home in a bus with a male friend at night, was sexually assaulted by six men, including the driver of the bus. When the incident reached news and media outlets, thousands of women gathered in protest outside major government offices in Delhi, demanding immediate legal action against the six accused. The protestors were baton charged, shot with water cannons and tear gas shells, and arrested and detained. I was too scared to ask my parents if I could join one of the demonstrations happening in my city, so I resorted to reading as much as I could on the issue and bringing up the topic among my small circle of female friends. We made firm promises to each other about never leaving the house alone at night, always informing each other about our locations, and came up with a codeword (‘Flight’) in case we needed each other urgently in a bad situation. The fear that this could happen to any one of us hung heavy in the air. Things at home changed, too. Suddenly, my younger brother was being sent to accompany me when I had to walk to the general stores two minutes away from home. Travelling in public transport vehicles after dark was strictly forbidden. I found that sex, otherwise a taboo topic in my family, was suddenly being discussed in euphemisms and vague metaphors by my mother, aunt, grandmother, and other women who lived in my neighbourhood. It felt like being a girl had taken on a different, more serious meaning. When the victim of the crime succumbed to her injuries on December 29, 2012, I was at a friend’s

house, and her mother sat us down to have a curt conversation. “You girls have to be extremely careful. Do you understand?” she began. She told us how we carried the honour of our families in our bodies, and how, if we allowed men to touch us inappropriately, we would end up besmirching that honour. We had to “save ourselves” for marriage, after which our husbands would be able to protect us better. To me, that talk made becoming a woman look like it revolved around pleasing and yet, protecting myself from men at all times, and instead of being about equality, my understanding of feminism became about constantly negotiating a position of victimhood.

This view changed drastically as I transferred to a different school in 2015 and interacted with peers from the upper echelons of urban Indian society. Their feminism was one that emphasised personal choice as the highest form of freedom. I often found it hard to keep up with this narrative, because I had grown up feeling quite uncomfortable in my feminine body, and preferred wearing T-shirts and long trousers, while my friends insisted I buy shorts and crop tops, but I tried my best to keep up. I wanted to learn how to look and be desirable and feel confident in my own skin. So, I let my friends straighten my hair, teach me how to wear lipstick and mascara, and buy trendier clothes. I would lie to my parents about study sessions when I actually went out. Having a boyfriend was considered an occasion to perform our “feminist” ideals, where we would deny that our worth was based on a boy while feverishly altering our appearance to look and feel desirable. Our feminism was about sharing Instagram and Facebook posts about self-care and “freedom of expression”. We were very involved with the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, raged about Ben Shapiro’s misogynistic videos, the possibility of Roe vs Wade being overturned, how Kim Kardashian wowed the internet, and the gender pay gap in the United States. These were issues that had little to no material impact on us. It changed almost nothing in our immediate surroundings. We had formed our own solipsistic bubble where we

called ourselves feminists and said nothing when one of our friends loudly berated her domestic worker who had forgotten to iron a shirt she wanted to wear to a party. Or when we found a sanitation worker crying in our school bathroom because she had to empty out trashcans with used, unwrapped sanitary pads that we knew one of our friends had disposed of.

Gail Omvedt, in “Towards a Theory of ‘Brahmanic Patriarchy’” (1998), writes that although class was acknowledged as structure of exploitation by Indian feminists, they were keen on “treating ‘patriarchy’ as an autonomous structure of exploitation and analysing gender conflicts – but they have not looked much at caste and have not been ready, in turn, to see the caste system as an autonomous social institution in the way that the use of the term ‘brahmanism’ signals” (187; see also Rege 1998, Chakravarti 1993). Thus, Indian feminism has been dominated by upper caste women and focuses on the issues of upper caste women. The exclusion of caste from Indian feminist collectivising takes away from its political and revolutionary potential because, as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) argues, “[t]his focus on the most privilege group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination” (140). The feminism that upper caste women have historically subscribed to is one that does not consider the intersections of gender and caste, often erasing the issues of lower caste, working class women in India. In this section, I engage with instances from *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-) where the four women have conversations about their opinions on ageing, its impact on their lives and careers, and anti-ageing beauty treatments like fillers and Botox. In doing so, I demonstrate how upper caste women in Bollywood utilise the body in their life writing as a site to articulate a specific brand of feminism that discounts caste positioning from its politics, is heavily influenced by neoliberal,

individualistic ideals, and is made available to them largely because of their caste positioning.<sup>46</sup>

In the first season's "Feelings and Fillers: Episode 4", Seema, Bhavana, Maheep, and Neelam are seated at a table in a posh restaurant, and Bhavana broaches the topic of Neelam returning to work in the film industry. She recalls how Neelam had expressed concerns about whether she would look good on camera anymore, given her age, and asserts, "I feel you look great. Tell me," Bhavana asks the other two, "Does Neelam need to do anything to her face?" Seema promptly refuses. Neelam looks surprised. The handheld camera hovers over Bhavana for a few seconds as she vehemently shakes her head and a finger at Neelam, and sensational music begins to play in the background. The producers' focus on the dramatic questions and embodied expressions of the women, complemented by the rousing music, makes this an affectively charged, confrontational staging of the conversation they have, pointing to the significance of physical beauty to the professional worth of these women. It becomes a space where their class-marked Bollywood celebrity status and their upper caste identity intersect. Pratiksha Menon (2018) writes that, in Bollywood, the woman given the opportunity to play the empowered female lead is often the "fair-skinned, slender-bodied, Hindu actor"<sup>47</sup>. A majority of the female leads also play Hindu women, mirroring the societal centring of the middle-class, upper caste Hindu woman as the default feminist" (88). Here, Menon establishes a relationship between caste and ideal beauty standards in India through its representation in Bollywood. This standard of beauty is further depicted as being desirable onscreen. Menon frames the genre of Bollywood romances as constructed through

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<sup>46</sup> Feminism features in the narration of the lives of the other upper caste women in my case studies. For example, in "Mrs Funnybones – The Blog", see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/why-i-am-not-a-feminist/>. In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous* (2015), see: Khan's discussion on Lal Didi (43). In *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: "N: Not Quite a Feminist, so How Did I Reach Mars?" (123-133), "D: Doing the Daughter-in-Law Thing" (33-42), "G: Good Grief, This Weighing Scale Must be Defective" (61-68). In *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Maheep's approach to menopause (S2E1)

<sup>47</sup> For work on caste and colourism, see: <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/08/02/colourism-gender-caste-skin-colour-shaming-is-intersectional/>.

the male gaze and desire, where the female lead “is reduced to a passive site of meaning-making while the audience is actively engaged in identifying with the hero’s desire for her” (10-11). This representation is a manner in which a specific kind of upper caste woman comes to embody patriarchal ideals of beauty in Indian society. Wanting a relevant Bollywood career again, Neelam insists that she needs to undergo cosmetic procedures: “The thing is, I’m fifty. I need to start doing things now. Because, you know what, all of a sudden, I don’t want to lump up my face, and then, all of a sudden, look like a duck” (00:04:17-00:06:32), she tells Bhavana. Anne Balsamo (1992) writes that the flawed female body becomes “perfect when differences are transformed into sameness” through cosmetic alterations (693). The urgency in Neelam’s insistence at starting to undergo beauty enhancements indicates an anxiety towards the possible misalignment of her public image and her personal identity as an ideal, glamorous, upper caste, upper class female celebrity because of her possible failure to embody the same. Balsamo understands cosmetic surgery as a physical and material practice where the female body is “surgically dissected, stretched, carved, and reconstructed according to cultural and eminently ideological standards of physical beauty” (687). In other words, cosmetic surgery is a process whereby the dominant cultural norms of beauty become tangible. Therefore, for Neelam to continue to materially embody the ideal female lead in Bollywood – a caste and class-marked norm – for a meaningful career, she must undergo surgical enhancement.

In a confessional aside, Neelam tells the interviewer behind the camera that “[t]his is something I have been contemplating since a really long time. I need to start looking after myself. I am fifty” (00:04:17-00:06:32). As Balsamo puts it, this scene positions Neelam’s body literally as “a vehicle of confession” (683), where Neelam accepts the aforementioned popular conventions of ideal beauty through her articulation of cosmetic procedures as a “need”. The repetition of her age becomes not only a justification for urgently undergoing



enhancements, but also an articulation the anxiety felt by the lack of agency Neelam experiences with regards to the maintenance of her body because of being fifty. In popular culture, the female body – and, in Neelam’s case, an aging female body – is identified in its natural form as “pathological and diseased” (Balsamo 693) and the industries of cosmetic surgery frame women as typical patients. However, Neelam uses the neoliberal framing of individual choice as an instance of empowerment when she formulates the cosmetic procedures as “looking after myself” (00:04:17-00:06:32) instead of something she is pressured into doing due to norms that dictate beauty standards in Bollywood. In “Face Lifts & FacePalms: Episode 7”, the significance of beauty enhancement procedures enters the personal sphere, as the four women undergo treatments in the context of Bhavana’s vow renewal ceremony. All four get four different treatments done. Bhavana specifies that she is doing “face yoga” so that she can be “the most beautiful bride” (00:28:19 - 00:28:58) at her vow renewal ceremony. Maheep also mentions that her husband disapproves of her spending time and money on beauty treatments, but that he does not understand that “takes a lot of work to look like this” (00:31:24 - 00:33:17). Through their reasoning and justifications, Maheep and Bhavana are both responding to how the caste logic associated with marriage in Hindu society polices women’s sexuality and bodies through and for the benefit of a patriarchal system (Chakravarti 22; Ambedkar n.p.). However, their narration is not framed as a dialogue with structures of oppression. Once again, the individual choice narrative is emphasised as Neelam states that “I feel whatever you are comfortable with, do it. If she is doing face yoga, I’m doing injectables. It’s absolutely fine” (00:29:34 - 00:30:17). Then she adds, “Listen, I’m saying vow renewal, but actually I’m doing it for myself” (00:29:34 - 00:30:17). As Sue Tait (2007) argues, the normalisation and credibility of cosmetic surgery occurs through a focus on individual agency and empowerment, where “surgery as a solution to problems of self-identity circumscribes the possibility that women will respond politically

to the social and cultural factors which produce the experience of alienation from one's body" (121). By representing undergoing cosmetic procedures as a matter of body care, therefore, the four women demonstrate a feminism that allows her to disconnect their representation of personal choice from the larger context of Brahmanical, heteropatriarchal, capitalist structures of oppression.

The discussion on Neelam's cosmetic surgery is followed by Bhavana describing her "spiritual" procedure for skincare: "It's like Reiki. It's basically taking energy from Earth and giving it to your body" (00:04:17-00:06:32). Contrary to Neelam's account, Bhavana's narration is ridiculed not only by her friends – for example, Seema asks her, "Can I go back to making fun of you?" (00:04:17-00:06:32) – but also through audio-visual elements like a cartoonish tune in the background and fast cuts of the four friends laughing and giggling at Bhavana. This ridiculing of Bhavana's approach frames the notion of a spiritual beauty treatment, which does not make physical modifications to the female body, as inferior to undergoing cosmetic surgery. This use of dialogue between the four friends frames spiritual healing technique and cosmetic surgery in opposition to each other. Cosmetic surgery becomes constructed as a more modern, pragmatic approach as compared to Bhavana's spiritual healing, which is shown as having no tangible results. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, for upper class (and, in this context, upper caste) society, "[t]he signs constituting the perceived body, cultural products which differentiate groups by their degree of culture, that is, their distance from nature, seem grounded in nature" (193). Thus, the dichotomy of cosmetic surgery and spiritual beauty treatment is narrated by the four women as having no outside, and the notion of women undergoing some form of beauty treatment is normalised.

Later, however, when Neelam is at the doctor's clinic and is being prepped for the procedure, the frame includes the doctor and two assistants who surround Neelam to insert the fillers (00:15:17-00:17:36). Neelam looks nervous, exhales, and tells her doctor,

“Finally, I am doing this, huh? [...] It’s actually not a big deal. Everybody’s doing it. I don’t know why I get nervous” (00:15:17-00:17:36). This universalisation of the decision to undergo beauty enhancement procedures erases the caste and class privilege in Neelam’s narrative. Although her doctor does not respond to her doubts in this scene, through previous scenes where she advises Neelam on the procedure (00:15:17-00:17:36) and is then shown doing the injecting the fillers into Neelam’s face (00:15:17-00:17:36), she is constructed as an expert who establishes the credibility of the procedure and encourages Neelam’s choice. But the two assistants – who clean Neelam’s face, tie a headband around her hairline, holding ice to Neelam’s face, collecting tissues with blood after the fillers have been injected, and holding Neelam’s hand on her demand while she panics, i.e., do the “dirty” work – are not allowed to participate in this discourse of beauty as a choice. They never speak, are dressed in the clinic’s uniforms, and do not wear make-up or have their hair fixed as compared to Neelam and her doctor. Caste is not a visible marker, unlike race. However, Lakshita Malik (2022) notes that caste is elicited through the proxy of aesthetic sensibility – dress, language proficiency, use of cosmetics, and so on (96). The working-class assistants, then, become distinguished from the upper caste, upper class, celebrity Neelam in their work and appearance. Their silence and their hazy or half-cut-out screen presence in the scene marks their perceived irrelevance in Neelam’s representation of the work of beauty and its relationship to feminist empowerment. Therefore, the “everybody” that Neelam refers to in this scene is ultimately a limited group of people who, like Neelam, have the privilege to undergo these procedures. The enactment of a choice-based feminism, however, obscures this privilege, signifying the decision to undergo cosmetic procedures as an empowering one.

### Cosmopolitanism: Politics of Aspiration

In Grade 11, I opted to study Humanities at a posh school in Mumbai which followed the national Indian School Certificate curriculum instead of Maharashtra's state board curriculum. I had to study Sociology as a compulsory subject there, and the syllabus for both Grades 11 and 12 were oriented towards Indian society albeit with theories either directly from or relying on western thought. Among Durkheim and Weber writing on primitive society was M.N. Srinivas, writing on the Indian caste system. His work felt compelling – he seemed to be describing Indian society using tropes and features that were so familiar to me. Srinivas, writing on the Coorgs of South India, theorised that caste was far from a rigid system, and that lower caste people were able to move higher up in the system by adopting Brahminic ways of life, like vegetarianism and teetotalism. He termed this “Sanskritization”. Further, he noted that upper caste people, particularly Brahmins, attempted to emulate the west – a process he termed “Westernization”, because the West, i.e., the same people who had colonised India, was the pinnacle of civilisation. “The position of the Brahmin in the new hierarchy was crucial,” wrote Srinivas, “He became the filter through which westernization reached the rest of Hindu society in Mysore” (488).

Being a part of a family that repeatedly emphasised the supremacy of the Brahmin, as I have mentioned before, as well as consistently declared studying, working, and living in the United States of America as the ultimate dream, Srinivas's argument felt like a strong one. It also allowed me to unquestioningly indulge in the latest American fast-food joint that had opened up in Mumbai or dream of being able to fit into Zara and H&M's unbelievably small sizes or want a love story like the one in the latest sappy Hollywood romantic comedy that had just dropped on Netflix. I would change my accent by rolling my R's, especially when I was around my rich friends. My references would always include American television shows from the eighties and nineties, my playlists had pop, rock, punk, and

classical music from “abroad”. My family prided themselves on never cooking meat themselves and allowing my brother and I to eat chicken outside the house. “At least they will adjust better abroad,” they would say. When I grew up, I wanted to go to an Ivy league school. I wanted to have a nightlife where I went to clubs and drank sophisticated cocktails at two in the morning. It felt normal to be this way because everyone I was surrounded by was like this. We were traditional Indians with the dreams of becoming world citizens. It was an intrinsic part of *being* the Brahmin, middle-class family with its “hardworking” members who had big dreams.

Srinivas’ theories of Sanskritization and Westernization have been criticised heavily, and for good reason. For my thesis, perhaps the most notable argument against Srinivas is made by M.S.S. Pandian, who, in “One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” (2002) and “Writing Ordinary Lives” (2008) points out how Srinivas’ teleological conception of caste and modernity falls apart the minute he is incited to reveal his own caste positioning as the reason for his “Brahmin-centric” theorising, and he defends it as stemming from his concern for his “friends and relatives,” and from his desire to contribute to the “common good” (Pandian 2008, 1738). Following Pandian’s critical project of denaturalising the relationship between modernity, westernisation, and caste hegemony, in this section, I analyse the first two episodes of the first season of *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-) where Shanaya Kapoor and her parents are invited to *Le Bal des Débutantes* in Paris. Particularly, I read Maheep Kapoor’s narration and the corresponding editorial and production techniques of the show that frame the family’s experience at *Le Bal des Débutantes* as a site where the upper caste identity becomes associated with a globalised, elite culture. However, in the backdrop of the liberalisation of India’s economy in 1991 and with reference to postcolonial studies, I demonstrate how invisibilising gendered caste privilege through her narration enables Kapoor to construct her family as cosmopolitan

Indians, as natural, meritorious, and appropriately “modern” (or secular) while still engaging in practices that conform to the conservatism of Brahminical patriarchy.<sup>48</sup>

“Of Waltzes and Water Bras: Episode 1” begins with the four women meeting at Maheep’s house to see Maheep, Shanaya, and Sanjay Kapoor off as they prepare to leave for *Le Bal des Débutantes* (referred to as *Le Bal* henceforth) in Paris. *Le Bal* is presented simultaneously as a commonplace occurrence within the social circle of the four wives as well as a subject of prestige, underscoring the idea of it as an exclusive event. In an aside, Maheep explains *Le Bal* as an event where “[t]hese predominantly prestigious families from all over the world are invited [...] and basically, it’s the girls coming out in society” (00:). Through matter-of-fact tone of her voice and her casual body language during her narration, Maheep presents the notion of a “prestigious” debutante ball as an ordinary event in her life. However, she then proudly states that her daughter is the only Indian girl to be invited that year (00:01:14-00:24:18), concurrently signifying a sense of awe and pride that she feels about her daughter specially being chosen to attend the ball. Bhavana, whose daughter Ananya was invited to *Le Bal* in 2017, furthers the idea of the event as being perceived as grand and eminent when, in her aside, she also describes the event as “very exciting. I knew that it was a very prestigious thing to be a part of” (00:01:14-00:24:18). Her use of the “I” in ascribing importance to the ball positions her as having the knowledge regarding the social value of the ball, locating her within the elite social groups that aspire and/or are able to attend it. Maheep, in “Werk It!: Episode 2”, frames *Le Bal* as “an old-fashioned thing that has been taken down the years” (00:04:50-00:05:18) but that “we need to hold on to these

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<sup>48</sup> Cosmopolitanism has been discussed elsewhere in my case studies. For example, in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-), see: Seema texting Kim Kardashian, the women travelling to Qatar (S1E6, S1E7), Bhavana’s vow renewal ceremony (S1E8). In *Mrs Funnybones* (2015), see: Khanna’s reference to Kim Kardashian (3), Khanna’s reflections of Indians (95). In *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous*, see: Khan’s experience at Oxford (63-82), Khan’s reconstruction of her father’s life through her narration (1-23), Khan’s experience of being in Paris (135-160). In “Mrs Funnybones – The Blog”, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/mrsfunnybones/hello-mona-lisa-bye-jet-spray-the-longing-for-a-new-longitude/>

things” (00:04:50-00:05:18). It is worth interrogating what is being encoded as prestige and tradition here. Kristen Richardson, in *The Social: A Social History of the Debutante* (2019), offers an understanding of debutante balls as a product of the marriage market in England and America. She argues that, in Europe particularly, the debutante ritual of parading young, marriageable girls at dances was born out the anxiety of having too many girls after the Protestant reformation, since they now could not confine them to convents as they had during the Catholic aristocracy. By law, women could no longer inherit their father’s property, so “[t]he type of marriage the debutante ritual would provide was safe – the girls were presented to vetted company – and prevented a bad marriage from dragging down the status of an entire family” (n.p.). Richardson’s historical account of debutante balls dovetails well with Ambedkar’s (1916) concept of the “surplus woman” as the site of anxiety for Hindu caste society: “The problem of Caste, then, ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes within it” (n.p.). Ambedkar writes that a woman with autonomy over her body and sexuality is a threat to the patriarchal and anti-social logic of caste society. The control over and compliance of women to the rules of the caste system are, therefore, tied to upholding the honour of the family and community (Chakravarti 143). Therefore, Bhavana and Maheep’s narration of the debutante ball as a prestigious event in Paris, coupled with Kapoor’s framing of it as a tradition, points to an ideological understanding of the social role of girls and women in society that is informed by caste and class logic. The matter-of-fact tone, however, disconnects the ritual from its gender and class-marked historical context along with its parallels to caste society, and frames it as an opportunity for Shanaya to become modern while upholding tradition by receiving recognition and representing India at a global scale.

Before Bhavana and Neelam arrive, Maheep and Seema have a conversation with Maheep’s domestic worker, Rekha. Rekha wants to know where Shanaya and her parents are

going. Seema describes the ball as, “She [Maheep] will come all dressed up, and Sanjay and Shanaya are going to waltz” (00:01:14-00:24:18). Maheep quickly adds, “This is also for charity! This isn’t just partying, like she’s trying to tell you” (00:01:14-00:24:18). Rekha does not comprehend the concept and asks them if Shanaya will be belly dancing in Paris. Maheep loudly corrects her, saying, “Not belly dance! I said *Le Bal*” (00:01:14-00:24:18) while Seema laughs. The use of autobiographical voice in this scene through dialogue between their upper caste, upper class women and their domestic worker points to a framing of *who* gets to represent the nation at the global scale. Through the uneven editing and cuts in the scene, Seema’s characterisation of Rekha being a part of Maheep’s family in her aside (00:01:14-00:24:18), as well as Maheep’s exasperation and Seema’s laughter, Rekha is constructed as being unable to understand the significance of these kinds of events without any consideration of her individual identity and socioeconomic background. Consequently, she becomes unfit to take part in balls.

Seated in Maheep’s living room before the Kapoors leave, Neelam asks Seema, Bhavana, and Maheep what happens at *Le Bal*, inaccurately suggesting that they only select “people from all over the country” (00:01:14-00:24:18). Maheep and Bhavana immediately correct her: “Not country. World. The world” (00:01:14-00:24:18) and then they laugh at her naivety. Through the act of correcting Neelam, Maheep and Bhavana articulate the superiority of receiving global identification over national recognition. In this move, they construct themselves as cosmopolitans who transcend national identity to be recognised as global citizens. Bhavana then lists other girls who have been invited to the ball in addition to Shanaya and Ananya. This list includes Isha Ambani, Shloka Birla, and Princess Gauravi Kumari of Jaipur, all of whom belong to extremely wealthy and privileged families in India, and Bhavana states that “[t]hey take people from arts and royalty, so it’s a mix” (00:01:14-00:24:18). The juxtaposition of these families, that are predominantly business-owners –



considered “royalty” in post-liberalisation India – with the “arts” families that Maheep and Bhavana belong to enables Bhavana to narrate the immense privilege that celebrity status has accrued in contemporary India as well as forge social connections and identifications between different kinds of elites. This is also an instance in Bhavana’s narration where she articulates caste affiliations without mentioning caste. When reminiscing Ananya’s debut at *Le Bal* with her husband, Bhavana also tries to recollect other Hollywood celebrities that were present, such as Reese Witherspoon and Steve Harvey (00:01:14-00:24:18). Therefore, she attempts to form affiliations to American culture as well. Shanaya tries to explain what a debutante ball is to a father through a reference to *Gossip Girl* (2007-2013), articulating her identity in the context of American pop culture (00:01:14-00:24:18). During the practice for the main ball, Maheep and Sanjay meet Ophélie Renouard, who began the *Le Bal* tradition twenty-five years ago. Through her dialogue between the three, Maheep and Sanjay’s identities become associated with that of French elite. To explain the kind of cosmopolitanism that Bhavana and Maheep as ascribing to themselves here, I turn to Caren Kaplan’s (1996) conceptualisation of a nomadism that seemingly transcended national affiliations. Kaplan argues that this nomadism, common in Europe, still utilised racial and colonial privilege to traverse national boundaries. As such, this kind of nomadism “cannot be seen as a loss of privilege but as an assertion of power” (Grewal 43). The centrality of caste for this kind of nomadism becomes evident when Shanaya is introduced at *Le Bal* by the emcee as: “The next debutante is coming from India. Shanaya Kapoor. She’s so beautiful. Shanaya belongs to an Indian cinema dynasty” (00:13:12-00:14:17). Further, Maheep narrates through her aside: “This is my child. She is out in the world; she is at that brink” (00:13:12-00:14:17). Shanaya does not state her origins herself. As I have established in the first chapter, however, upper caste women in India are recognised largely in relation to their

natal and marital families. In this instance, she becomes a global personality through her caste identity.

Maheep's representation of her family's cosmopolitan status is not smooth, however. Particularly, her narration of Sanjay's modest background as well as the representation of Sanjay's discomfort being abroad through his embodiment on screen signals a reconsideration of local subjectivities. Maheep snaps at Sanjay for making fun of her French by calling it "Peshawari French", demanding that he not speak like that in public (00:11:08-00:15:18). This is followed by an aside, where Maheep states that "Sanjay is son of the soil. You can take him anywhere, but his roots are in Chembur, Bombay. You can't take the Chembur out of him, even in Paris" (00:11:08-00:15:18). Sanjay embodies a misfit when he turns up to the waltz practice session in a suit and sneakers, which leaves Maheep fuming yet unable to do anything about it (00:20:08-00:20:18). He is constructed as a man with tradition values when he is shown as struggling to accept that his daughter has an attractive cavalier (00:15:08-00:16:35). Sitting at the high-end brasserie named Fouquet's in Paris, the camera shows several angles of Sanjay struggling to eat escargots (00:16:30-00:17:00). In a conversation with Maheep at Fouquet's, he points to the Lido across the street and reminisces about the time he could not afford to eat at and visit "these kinds of places" (00:14:34-00:15:02). The camera often focuses on him for an extended period of time when he has these struggles, creating space for the viewer to sympathise with him and to recognise him having enough privilege to occupy the spaces that he does in India and abroad while still embodying the privilege imperfectly. Postcolonial studies have flagged the fact that cosmopolitan subjectivities in the Indian context are tricky constructions. For example, Inderpal Grewal (2005) understands cosmopolitanism as an unevenness in the context of transnational mobilities:

Within the networks of information linked to trade and consumer culture, cosmopolitans were produced by transnational connectivities within which particular knowledges about cultures and nations circulated. As such, divisions based on gender, race, class, caste, religion, and ethnicity were rearticulated within varied transnational connectivities (79).

Grewal creates a space, then, for a falling back on kinds of rhetoric that are conservative in this kind of articulation. Therefore, through their imperfect performance of global celebrities, Maheep and her family embody a kind of cosmopolitanism that also frames them as remaining connected to their roots, accommodating the traditional and modern at the same time.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how upper caste women become and enact the political in relation to gendered, national, and transnational imaginaries. The upper caste women associated with Bollywood in my case studies are positioned strategically at the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Nationalism, feminism, and cosmopolitanism all interact with this positionality in unique ways. Upper caste women narrate their social and material power and subordination to invisibilise caste identity in these structures in order to maintaining their status in relation to these politics. I have argued that upper caste women in Bollywood have access to the social and cultural capital required to represent Hindu culture as national culture through their representation. This is because of the intertwining of the feminine and the traditional in the construction of nationalism. In the context of feminism, I use embodiment in their narration to show how upper caste, upper class women articulate a politics of choice and individualism which allows them to distance themselves from an intersectional politics that holds them complicit in the structural oppression that the caste

system perpetuates. Lastly, I explore cosmopolitanism as a politics that upper caste women aspire to and in the context of which they attempt to represent themselves as global citizens. While their class status enables certain identifications with western and global elites, their postcolonial and local identities complicate a perfect imitation of their culture.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of my thesis, I briefly explored how the election of Modi as India's prime minister in 2014 prompted a shift towards Hindu nationalism in India, and (Brahminical) caste, the basis of the organisation of Hindu religion, began to be endorsed in the public sphere. While there has been consensus that elite, urban, upper caste people with access to good jobs and education had played a significant role in Modi's rise to power, the focus of analysis has usually been men. In the hopes of a feminist and intersectional understanding of the implications of the upper caste endorsement of Hindutva, I began my inquiry for my thesis by asking: when Modi rose to power, where were the elite, urban, upper caste women? What was their role in this political and cultural shift? In the aftermath of the 1990 anti-Mandal agitations, there is a dearth of literature that engages with the subjectivities of elite, urban, upper caste women in India towards a comprehensive and intersectional theorisation of their simultaneously powerful and subordinated role in contemporary Hindu society that enables them to negotiate their identities to uphold the caste order in strategic ways. My thesis has been an attempt to address this gap in some capacity and to further the creation of what Satish Deshpande (2013) has termed "a biography of the general category" (39). To this end, I have studied life writing by upper caste women associated with the Bollywood film industry in contemporary India in order to understand how the self-representations of the lived experiences of these women renders their caste identities (in)visible.

The study of Bollywood as a social field, in the Bourdieusian sense, in conversation with celebrity studies, allowed me to understand the position of these women as agents with access to cultural, social, media, and symbolic capital in both, public and private spheres of society. In my Introduction chapter, I attempt to frame my case studies through anti-caste theory and life writing theory, that is, as spaces and practices where caste is performed through the narration and representation of the self. In Chapter 1, I explore how upper caste

women associated with Bollywood construct themselves as being in relation to their caste networks by telling stories about their natal and marital families, their experience of motherhood, their friendships, and their relationship with their employees and domestic workers. I argue that in their portrayals of these relations, upper caste women adhere to norms that emphasise their gender and class identities to obscure the role of caste in the construction of their subjectivities. In Chapter 2, I engage with representations of labour in upper caste women's life writing. Considering their celebrity status, I look at their work not only within the domestic and/or the professional sphere, but also at the cusp of the two as public personas. Here, I demonstrate how the narration of work in the three spaces contribute to the normativisation of caste-based divisions and conventions of women's labour. Finally, in Chapter 3, I analyse how upper caste women narrate themselves as being political. In this regard, I analyse their versions of nationalism, feminism, and cosmopolitanism in order to show how their formulations of imagined communities associated with these ideologies discredit and, thereby, reinforce their caste privilege. Through this analysis of the various modes of narration in which upper caste women associated with Bollywood enact their complicity in the caste system, I hope to have contributed to a growing scholarship that continues to refute the hegemonic notion of caste as a private phenomenon and of upper caste people as being "casteless".

The conceptualisation of Bollywood as a field of social networks has proved to be a rich space for the analysis of elite, upper caste women's subjectivity. As a public facing but insular network of family businesses and ties that have cultural and social influence because of their hold over the means of production, as a network that has primarily produced films that portray family life, traditions, and cultural notions of honour in the Indian context, it provides an apt structure to read for the circulation of caste capital and power and for the discursive and semiotic formulations of celebrity. However, as is typical of social networks

and cultural industries, the field of Bollywood privileges certain kinds of articulations of subjectivities over others, which influences my approach to my categories of analysis. For example, it has not interacted with the Tamil/Telugu film industry, or the Bengali film industry, or the Bihari film industry to an extent where it can accommodate, negotiate, and be informed by the conflicting and/or complimentary modes of caste in those other networks. Therefore, while the upper caste identity that I read for in my case studies holds some merit, it also signifies a general representation of upper caste lived experience. This limitation is furthered by the fact that the Hindi film industry is not traditionally a caste-based industry. Therefore, it cannot make claims to caste specificity. I encountered this to be a methodological difficulty while attempting to formulate a thesis statement, where the representation that Soha Ali Khan's autobiography and Bhavana Pandey's presence in *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020-) provided as upper caste women was invaluable and provided for enriching dialogue with the other women I have studied, but unlike the others, they are not Khatri women.

This last point presents avenues for (future) explorations that are currently outside the purview of this thesis. The specificity of caste identity would support a sharper articulation of the ways in which specific upper caste women negotiate their position and complicity in the caste order. It also provides opportunities to come across particular anomalies and/or possibilities of intersectional solidarity that a more general approach does. This would entail interdisciplinary research that needs insights from sociology and anthropology for the characterisation of caste groups, followed by mixed-methods approach involving, perhaps, different kinds of public and private life writing, found in archives, online, or even sourced through oral history interviews. The themes I have discussed in this thesis, however, provide a strong starting point with which to think about these prospects

because of the spatial and temporal ground they are able to cover with regards to the representations of lived experience by upper caste women.



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