

## “Fantasy Ladies”: Female Performers and Actresses in Qurratulain Hyder’s “The Missing Photograph”

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### Abstract

This essay examines Qurratulain Hyder’s short story “The Missing Photograph,” as a site that interrupts what Priti Ramamurthy identifies as the relative silence of feminist and film historiography on the role and contribution of actresses in early Hindi cinema, a silence that is attributed to the fact that they did not fit the dominant paradigm of social reform, nationalism, or radical movements. By providing an acute awareness of multiple and intersecting social forces that impacted the lives of actresses, “The Missing Photograph,” I suggest, is an important imaginative fragment that highlights how actresses, while remaining invisible, were central to the early film industry.

### Keywords

Actresses, Qurratulain Hyder, Urdu short story, feminism, film, historiography

His well-furnished lounge displayed framed photographs of Zubeida, Sultana, Devika Rani, Sabita Devi, Kanan Bala, and many others. Their saris were sprinkled with zinc powder and when the chandeliers were lighted the pictures twinkled in a row. One frame was, however, empty. We children had been told never to ask him about the missing photograph. So we didn’t. Thereby hung a tale. (193)

The above-mentioned passage from Qurratulain Hyder’s short story, “The Missing Photograph,” encapsulates the popularity of film actresses whose glamorous image is enhanced by the reference to their shimmering saris “sprinkled with zinc powder” under the glow of the chandeliers. These were actresses who Priti Ramamurthy has identified as the “Modern” girls of early Indian cinema, some of whom belonged to Eurasian, Anglo-Indian or Jewish backgrounds and performed under Indian (Hindu) names. Various called

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“*Sitara* (starlet), *swapno ki rani* (dream girl/queen), and *romance ki rani* (romance queen), Modern girl screen personalities were the first *bax affice* (box office) hits” (Ramamurthy 200). In recovering the story of the “Modern girl of early cinema,” Ramamurthy points out her absence in recent scholarship on gender, modernity and history and attributes this silence to this history’s concern with “nationalism and colonialism and the various possibilities (and impossibilities) of feminist agency and collective feminist organization within that framework” (219). Because the “Modern Girl” is “not the New Woman of social reform feminism, nationalist feminism, or radical movements” (219), suggests Ramamurthy, her story continues to remain overlooked.

What I suggest in this essay is that Hyder’s short story interrupts the silence of feminist and film historiography on the role and contribution of actresses in early Hindi cinema. However, Hyder complicates the story of early actresses by highlighting another absence in her own short story. Among the numerous photographs of famous actresses in Dularey Chacha’s living room, one actress’s photograph remains missing. As the story unfolds, we discover that this frame belongs to a film actress who is relegated to social marginality by an upper-class Muslim household when she marries Dularey, a member of the family. This actress’s presence in the household is thus marked by her absence from a frame that adorns the living room of her husband, Dularey Chacha. In this regard, the frame itself is a site of tension. The jarring image of the empty frame in the intimate space of the living room becomes a visible sign of her as a figure of no importance in a household where rank and bloodline are given primacy. Yet by insisting on keeping the empty frame, Dularey (and the narrator) presents a careful record of the gaps that persist in the stories about actresses. While the title of Hyder’s story itself emphasises this gap, through a narrative that is part prose, part improvised dialogue (as Dularey imitates film actors) and part memoir, Hyder suggests that stories about actresses and female performers should be understood equally through the lens of class relations and how these relations affected the lives of actresses.

A novelist, short-story writer and journalist, Hyder (1927-2007) is remembered as one of the greatest Urdu writers of the subcontinent from the United Provinces (later Uttar Pradesh) who won the Jnanpith award, India’s highest literary honour, in 1989. Known for her experimental style of writing, she also translated several important works of fiction, including her own, into English. Even though, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out, Hyder was committed to “nationalist ideals of secularism, cosmopolitanism, and syncretism,” ideals that “constituted the hegemonic ‘progressive’ nationalist position of Indian elites in the early decades of the nation” (441), “The Missing Photograph” complicates these ideals when it comes to the position of actresses and performers. While critical scholarship on Hyder has focused largely on her depiction of the 1947 Partition (in *River of Fire*, for example), a significant

portion of her writing seems to be preoccupied with theatre, performers, actresses and courtesans. That the subject of actresses, performers and "nautch" girls interested Hyder is evident in her translation of Hasan Shah's *Nashtaar* (1790) into *The Nautch Girl* (1992), a text to which she provides an extensive introduction. It also makes an appearance in her novel, *Ek Ladki ki Zindagi* (Life of a Girl) (1996), in which Bilqeez, one of the characters, is heavily involved in organising "Modern theatre." While the novel chronicles the travails of Sita, the narrative is populated by various characters and situations that reference the worlds of organised theatre and of Meerasins, females who sing at family occasions such as the wedding celebration of a cousin in Karachi. Thus Bilqeez's preoccupation with theatre throws light on Hyder's own interest and awareness of the heterogeneity of theatre groups that operated in the pre- and post-independence years. She mentions the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), Nai Nautanki, Little Ballet Group, Unity Theatre, and playwrights such as Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) and Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918-2016). By bringing actual people and groups within the realm of her fictionalised story, Hyder blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction, implying therefore, that the actress in the short story would be a prototype of actresses at the time. She also represents actresses and performers in search of "respectability" through marriage, as in her short story "Honour" where Miss Kallo Bai of Lucknow, "Gramophone and Radio Singer" (21) marries Aziz Khan, a Pathan from Shahajanpur, to gain social respectability, much to the consternation of Aziz's fiancé, Shamshad Begum. On another level, the purpose of this essay is to highlight Hyder's literary texts as sites that enable the recovery of stories about performers and actresses, stories that may not be available in historical records. To this end, "The Missing Photograph" may be seen as preserving the changing history of early actresses and performers.

"The Missing Photograph" starts by introducing Dularey Chacha, the child of a meerasin, who Dularey's father, a Syed, had "quietly married... and thus impaired the purity of his lineage" (190). As the narrator of the story, Hyder inserts herself and her family to specify her relationship to Dularey, which is that of niece and uncle. Dularey's mother "was now neither fish nor fowl – neither a meerasin nor quite a begum. And her children would be second-class or lower-grade Syeds" (190). Thus Dularey belonged to the "Chhoti Line" (190) or "the small gauge branch line," a railway metaphor for an "outsider" (190) or "second class citizens" (190) of the family, who were "not exactly servants nor quite full-fledged relatives" (190). Even though Dularey remained an integral part of the clan, inheriting his father's estate and living a lavish lifestyle, "he could not hope to marry in the 'clan' or the endogamous family because he was not a pure, high-born Syed; he had meerasi blood in him" (191).

Hyder's foregrounding of class relations provides an effective contextual framework for understanding the intricately intertwined relationships of family ties with class and gender:

[The members of the Chhoti line] were graciously absorbed in the commonwealth of the joint family. They were employed as caretakers of the mango orchards or karindas who collected land revenue from the peasants. Out of sheer courtesy and good manners no one ever mentioned their origin. The girls were usually married off to members of similar 'branch lines' existing in the network of landed gentry. In their old age these people were given as much respect as other elders in the family. (189)

Dularey, who is fascinated by Hindi cinema and has an "encyclopaedic" knowledge of the topic (191), falls in love with a "noted actress" (194) during a trip to Bombay and marries her. When he brings her home, "nobody in the family condescended to meet her" (194). Swallowing this insult, Dularey brings his wife to Dehra Dun in order to introduce her to the narrator's mother (writer Nazr Sajjad Hyder) who adds further insult to injury by refusing to meet them. As the story unfolds, we discover that the missing photograph is of Dularey's actress wife who had been shunned by the family on account of her profession. By highlighting this literal gap in the family's history, Hyder's narrative points to a gap in the nation's history about its actresses and performers, and the links between public lives and social relations in the familial sphere.

In evaluating Hyder's story, Aamer Hussein highlights the theme as follows: "Hyder turns notions of feudal Muslim respectability on their head in this stark, moving parable of belonging, marriage and devotion, showing once again, that her arsenal of techniques – pastiche, satire, memoir, collage – is only a means to take this significant writer to the place most important to her, the human heart in all its varied seasons" (xvi). Given the historical period that frames the story – from pre-World War I to the post-Partition world – Hyder's story can be read on many levels: as a story about feudal and aristocratic Muslim households; the death of feudalism and the zamindari system with the 1947 Partition of India; the dwindling fortunes of bhats (performers who recited family genealogies) who were left without work after the migration of feudal families to Pakistan; and the class structures of the family and its subtle hierarchies. Yet what needs to be further highlighted is the complexity with which the story, despite focusing on Dularey Chacha, portrays how the social subjectivity of actresses and performers is affected by class relations, notions of propriety and respectability for women, feudal structures and the onset of modernity.

In order to appreciate Hyder's contribution to an understanding of the complex story of early actresses, it is useful to draw on the research undertaken

by Ramamurthy (2006) and Majumdar (2009), film scholars who have charted the historical shift from the "modern" actress to the nationalist feminine icon actress between the 1920s and the early years of India's independence from British colonial rule. As pointed out by these scholars, by the 1930s, cinema had attracted large audiences, including middle-class women who "filled the zenana, or women only sections of the growing number of movie halls" (Ramamurthy 200). Based on her research about actresses who were employed by the major film studios located in Bombay, Poona and Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s (by the mid-1930s the three studios of note were Prabhat Studios in Poona, Bombay Talkies in Bombay and New Theatres in Calcutta), Ramamurthy comments on the identity of cinema stars that was created with the heightened popularity of cinema. Ramamurthy says,

[F]ilm stars were photographed, films were advertised and discussed in newspapers and in special film magazines, contests were held to judge the most popular film star, and signed studio photos and postcards circulated. The stars themselves were widely gossiped about. They responded in signed and "anonymous" articles and letters to magazines and newspapers. (200)

The creation of this "star" system, argues Majumdar, was crucial since until the mid-1920s "both the number of films produced and their genres prevented a wide circulation of cinematic fame" (24-25). The setting up of a more formalised Studio system by the end of the 1920s, as well as the proliferation of genres of cinema – mythological, historical, socials and the "more fantasy-oriented stunt film genres" – further enabled the "star" image of the actress (Majumdar 26). These disparate genres produced a conflation of the character and actor and, as in the case of mythological characters, helped many actresses achieve fame because of their "embodiment of characters who were already known to audiences" (Majumdar 26). This star image was heightened under the influence of Hollywood, which functioned as "the preeminent model of modernity" (Majumdar 28).

However, the image of the "Modern girl" of Indian cinema increasingly did not sit well with those who wanted to see cinema as a nationalist art form. Associated with "flagrant eroticism and sensuality" (Ramamurthy 204), the modern girl was distinct from the "archetypal New Woman of the anticolonial movement, self-sacrificing bearer of a higher capacity to withstand pain, especially that of British violence" (Ramamurthy 204). The kinds of roles played by "modern" actresses also seemed to pose a threat to the domestic order:

They were cast in new urban professions, those of cinema star, telephone operator, typist, teacher, and doctor, and one even is the president of a textile mill! They questioned and transgressed gender boundaries. Many featured rebellious, even libidinous, wives, who explored new relationships

with in-laws and husbands, demanding that they share in housework, for example.... In the process, they reinvented what it meant to be sister, daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. "Love" marriages, romance, and overt female sexuality were all celebrated, and so was "indiscriminate" kissing. (Ramamurthy 202)

As opposed to the public world of street protest where women who participated in anti-colonial protests were praised and accepted for "protesting against the British Raj," the public world of cinema was thus seen as erotic and sensual, a contaminating space that violated notions of national honour. Mainstream film magazines presented actresses through "issues of sexuality" and scandals and shaped an unfavourable image of cinema in the public imagination (Majumdar 40). In so doing, they constructed the "modern girl" of Indian cinema in direct opposition to the "traditional" Indian woman who embodied "a procreative middle-class femininity within the terms of heterosexual marriage" (Ramamurthy 203-204), and film acting came to be represented as an unrespectable "profession at the time, especially for women from 'well-to-do', 'good' families" (201). Not surprisingly, says Ramamurthy:

By the late 1930s... the Modern Girl icon and film story lines were transformed. Such Modern Girl cinema stars as Patience Cooper, Seeta Devi, and even Sulochana faded from popular cinema culture. Patience Cooper, acted in sixty-six films between 1920 and 1937 but just two more after that; Seeta Devi made just fifteen films, all between 1922 and 1932; Sulochana acted in fifty-two films between 1925 and 1937, but just seventeen more in the following nearly forty years.... It is possible that they were less in demand as they aged; however, they were replaced not by look-alikes but by the new Nationalist Woman. (Ramamurthy 208)

Further, under the influence of intensifying debates on social reform, national self-determination and the place of women in the community of the nation, discussions around actresses became highly contested in Hindi journals. Several articles on the role of actresses were published in *Madhuri*, *Sudha*, *Ganga* and *Chand* between 1931 and 1940, a period that saw cinema's increasing reliance on actresses with the onset of the talkies (the first talkie was released in 1931). The primary concern in these articles was with the kind of images women would portray on screen and how such images would lend themselves to the interest/well-being of the nation. What these articles were doing was to forge an imaginary national identity through a discussion of women performing on the public stages and films of the nation. While they indicated the centrality that cinema had come to occupy in the social life of the nation, they simultaneously recommended a replacement of the "modern" girl with the "respectable" and educated woman, who would appropriately represent the "ideal" woman. These

magazines thus became sites of "moral censure," taking on what Majumdar calls "the burden of more generalized anxiety regarding increased female participation and visibility in the public sphere" (4). Clearly, with an intensifying nationalist movement, cinema in the 1930s was increasingly envisioned as a forum for a nationalist vision. Under this vision, a moral imperative that would "improve" the "bad reputation of cinema as an institution" was enabled "through the involvement of educated, upper-class women in the role of actresses" (Majumdar 54).

The new nationalist icon found its most visual expression in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*. As identified by Sangeeta Datta:

The nationalist rhetoric of the pre-independence years produced films valorizing the mother figure. Mehboob Khan's *Aurat*, a modest film made in the early forties was remade in colour as *Mother India* in 1956. The making of the new nation, the projection of Indian culture to the world market, the first International Film Festival in Delhi – perhaps all these factors led to the tremendous reception of the film both at home and abroad. It was the immediate postindependence moment that led to the phenomenal iconisation [sic] and identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. (73)

While attentive to such developments, Hyder's story takes a step forward by telling readers about the fate of the disappearing actress and by casting light on familial relations that are embroiled in a class politics that is operative within the private sphere of the home. This telling is particularly important in complicating the actresses' stories because they are available primarily through the public archive of magazines and journalism. For even though magazines reported on the lives of actresses, as Majumdar notes, "no knowledge about the personal lives of actors and actresses, coded as 'private' was circulated in the official private discourse until the 1940s" (38). In this context, an actress who was not a "star" but only a personality in a frame, was easily rendered invisible: "In those days," says the narrator in Hyder's story, "there was no film press, no gossip columns. Cinema had not become a colossus and it had not captured the psyche of the Indian nation. So the marriage of a movie actress and her disappearance from the scene was hardly noticed" (195). This fact is corroborated by Neepa Majumdar, who in her research on female stardom between the 1930s and 1950s asserts that there was little in the way of "a printed discourse on the private lives of Indian stars" (2).

In the context of the class-relations and ideals of social respectability that bring only humiliation to Dularey and his wife when they are castigated by the narrator's mother, the "absence" of a photograph through which she might be identified in the rest of the narrative illustrates how actresses who did not fit the image of a nationalist icon were reduced to invisibility not only in the public

sphere but also within the family. The empty frame withholds knowledge that the children of the family were told by the elders never to ask about. Since it concerns someone who is turned into an object that should not be spoken about, the story can also be read as Hyder's attempt to seek out this knowledge for herself and reveal information that gets buried within the realm of family prejudices, social relations and class politics. The information that Hyder's story provides about Dularey's actress wife, in fact, fills the missing frame with allure and turns her into a figure who is impossible to forget even through this absence. We can even read this as Hyder's way of elevating her status to that of the "stars" in the other photographs.

And yet this elevated stature is highlighted through its difference from the other stars. While Dularey's living room serves as a space that supports the apparatus that contributed to crafting the "star" identity of actresses, it functions as an "unofficial" source of knowledge about the popularity that actresses ostensibly enjoyed through their stardom. Hence, the empty frame sits in an uneasy relationship with the photographs of famed actresses. Where did Dularey find photographs of these actresses? Perhaps they came from film magazines that began circulating photographs in the 1930s to build up the star image of the actress. The absence of Dularey's actress-wife's photo may imply that she is only a "noted actress" and not a "star" like the others, and so may not have received the same attention from the magazine circuit. Yet it also announces the embedded presence of "a tale" in the frame, a tale that the reader should hear.

To this end, Hyder dedicates a large portion of the story to a discussion of early cinema and its actresses through Dularey's numerous anecdotal references to early films and film actresses. He reveals his knowledge of Sulochana (Ruby Myers known for her role in *Telephone Girl*), Seeta Devi (Renee Smith) and Devika Rani; references "publicity pamphlets" and "leaflets" that carried pictures of "fantasy ladies" – Madhuri, Miss Bibbo, Jehan Ara Kajjan, Miss Gohar – and talks about Urdu literary magazines that published their photographs as they "reclined on couches or stood languidly against fake marble columns and looked utterly out of this world" and described their fashionable hairstyles and "quaint" blouses and saris that "had frills and bows stitched on them as borders" (192). In addition to being a comment on the ways in which photography participated in the construction of female stardom, Dularey's description seems amazingly similar to the descriptions of actresses in magazines that Majumdar provides in her analysis of stardom in the early twentieth century (see chapter 1 in Majumdar). One might read Dularey's descriptions of actresses and the film world as a fictionalised record of the vagaries and adventures of cinematic lives in the early 20th century, of their growing popularity and fan base and of the role of print culture and photography in inventing a glamorous fantasy about cinema and its actresses,



for the consumption of readers and viewers. Yet the moral taint attached to the "modern" makes the entry of an actual actress into the household socially unacceptable. Here we encounter the ways in which the discourse around morality, modernity and female sexuality that dominated the public sphere permeates a private sphere that is already steeped in hierarchical notions of propriety, class and lineage.

Several actresses have recounted the difficulties they faced in building their professional lives and careers. Zohra Segal, who enjoyed a long and prosperous career as a stage and film actress, recalls the following: "From my family's point of view, what would perhaps have been ideal was for me to stay home and look after husband and children. Since we had ayahs and servants I could manage the household fairly well when I was in town, but the family was definitely disrupted when our tours began.... As a result, there was constant tension in the house" (34). In spite of the tensions recorded by Zohra Segal, a certain patriarchal sanction did allow middle-class actresses such as her to continue their professional careers. As someone who came from a privileged Muslim household, Hyder seems to be acutely aware of the advantages of class privilege for actresses and the contradictions of class relations that permitted "social sanction" to some while denying it to others. Therefore, while providing a nuanced portrayal of the tensions that characterised the personal life of the actress, she also records the shift in perception about the proper role of actresses, which changed from one that viewed actresses as disreputable because they were often recruited from the "dancing girl" class (Ramamurthy 215) to one in which actresses were sought from "educated" and "respectable classes" in order to make cinema serve the interests of the nation (see Ramamurthy 215). In reminiscing about Dularey's actress wife, the narrator recalls:

Times changed rapidly. Khurshid mirza, daughter of the founders of the Aligarh Muslim Girls College, joined the Bombay talkies as Renuka Devi. Her parents were close friends of my father and Amma. Being a married woman, like Devika Rani, Renuka Devi also had social sanction. "Well, her husband has allowed her," was the general comment. Earlier Uzra and Zohra, from an aristocratic family of Rampur, had joined Uday Shankar's dance troupe. There was no uproar; they too had their family's sanction and, anyway, they belonged to the upper strata of society. So it was also a matter of class. Renuka Devi's sister-in-law became 'Mysterious Neena,' followed by Begum Para, the 'Oomph Girl,' also from Aligarh Muslim Girls College. (195)

But, says the narrator, "Dularey Chacha's wife had no such social backing" (195). This emphasis on the "lack of social backing" is a perceptive commentary on how class relations played out in the social construction of the actress.

Neepta Majumdar points out that discourses of gossip that found their way into film magazines tended to create a split generalised image of actress. One was the “(upper-class) innocent female star endangered by the sexual advances of male studio bosses” and the second was the “(lower-class) female star of ‘loose’ morals presenting a threat to the reputation of others associated with the studio” (49). These were in addition to the circulation of stories that associated actresses with “amorous relationships, always coded as disreputable, between female stars and other studio figures” (49). The narrator’s upper-class mother’s response to Dularey’s wife seems to be informed by the discourse perpetuated through journalism and gossip – which Majumdar identifies as “official” and “unofficial” – that gave cinema its bad reputation. Perhaps it is because of this that Dularey’s Meerasin mother, who stays within the confines of the home, is still accepted, even if partially, but Dularey’s “modern” actress wife is not. Dularey’s wife, the story seems to suggest, is “The Indian Modern girl,” (Ramamurthy 197), who was an object of intense political debate, “decried by nationalist leaders, among them Gandhi” (Ramamurthy 197), and by filmmakers such as Dadasaheb Phalke whose attitudes towards actresses have been brought to attention by Mrinal Pandey (2006). Rejected as an actress, she is reduced to a life where she served her husband “hand and foot and spent her time in Namaz-roza (prayer and fasting). Off and on he came to his house in the qasba. He had removed her photograph from his ‘picture gallery’” (195). Even though in her off-screen presence after her marriage to Dularey her agency is shown in serving her husband, in maintaining her presence through the photograph-less frame in the midst of photos of “stars,” the story of her artistic achievement is rescued through a tone that is not at all gossipy.

In portraying cinema actresses, Hyder’s story further encapsulates the multilayered social codes that circumscribed the lives not only of cinema actresses but of meerasins and courtesans. At a time when educated middle-class actresses were accepted as “respectable,” as a consequence of their patriliney and family connections, and as cultural readers reimagined the performing arts to serve the national interest, performers such as courtesans and meerasins, associated with the feudal worlds of kothas, were relegated to the social margins. Hyder’s story suggests an attentiveness to these shifts when she introduces her readers to meerasins and courtesans, their social positions and livelihoods in the feudal world of middle-class Muslim households in direct juxtaposition to the “modern” actress:

Meerasins were not courtesans. They were genteel purdah-observing housewives who sang only in the zenanas or ladies’ apartments during weddings, childbirth, and other festivities. Their menfolk were sometimes famous ustads or maestros of Hindustani classical music. They were greatly honoured by their patrons as performing artistes, but no one would dream

of marrying his daughter to a meerasi, however celebrated he might be as a singer or instrumentalist. And no one could dare marry in a meerasin family. All this was part of the old world culture. The class structure was such that a meerasin could not sit on the same divan with the begums – women of rank. So how could she become one of them? (190)

This matter of fact introduction is provided in a prose style that is devoid of sentimentality. It is one that rejects the language of morality and social reform and instead comments on the performers' hard labour in acquiring the skills of dance and music. It also differentiates the varying levels of artistic expertise of film actresses, Meerasins and courtesans, and the ways in which their personal lives and lineages affect perceptions about their professional expertise and shape their social subjectivities in a male dominated world. Differentiating Meerasins from Courtesans, Hyder writes:

The Arabic word meeras means inheritance. Hindustani classical music was the cherished and ardently preserved heritage of the meerasis. They married within their own caste or families of distinction called gharanas. Their women were not properly taught music. They simply imbibed it from their male relatives. On the other hand, courtesans diligently learned classical music and dance from the ustads. Nawabs and Rajas kept some of these courtesans in their harems, even married them. (190)

Hyder's emphasis on the artistic achievement of these performers also counters the anti-naught discourse that dominated the 1930s and 1940s (a discourse built primarily around sexuality and prostitution) through the anti-naught campaigns and the loss of prestige that courtesans, devadasis and dancing girls had suffered during and after colonial rule as a result of these campaigns (see Srinivasan). Because many actresses came from the class of these performers, their professions acquired a pejorative image. Yet in alluding to their loss of reputation, which also affected Dularey as the son of a Meerasin, Hyder celebrates these performers in ways that support Oldenburg's research on courtesans. Writing about the courtesans of Lucknow, Oldenburg records the recognition these performers had received as "preservers and performers of the high culture of the court," their role in shaping classical Hindustani music and kathak style of dancing, the wider reach of their style of entertainment in other parts of India and their "enduring influence" on Hindi cinema (263). Their influence on theatre and film, however, had also contributed to the discourse of social respectability (or lack thereof) associated with cinema actresses. As Majumdar points out, "A prior career as dancer, in the Indian context, was precisely what was unacceptable in the Indian discourse on female performance" (33).

Hyder not only captures the social codes regarding gender within upper class Muslim households but also comments on the hypocrisy of middle-class feminism. Describing the moment when Dularey and his newly wed wife are shunned by the narrator's mother, she says:

Amma was in her bedroom. She was one of the early feminists of India and also a famous novelist of her time. She played the sitar and drove a car, but perhaps even she was not willing to meet a fallen woman. She said sullenly, 'I'm sorry. I have high blood pressure, as he knows well, and Dr. Hoon has ordered complete bed-rest. No visitors.'

In later years I often wondered why she did that, but somehow always forgot to ask her. I knew she was dead against bigamists and refused to meet them. But Dularey Chacha had committed no bigamy. Despite her liberation, perhaps she, too, could not socially accept an actress. (194)

Hyder's commentary on class-relations identifies another contradiction that results from Dularey's marginality in a household where he has been an object of affection. Because of the insult to which he and his wife are subjected, he throws himself into upholding the patriarchal and class ideology that forces his wife's exclusion and reduces his actress-wife to a life of seclusion "in the foothills where he had a hunting lodge in his own forest" (195). In this way, her story also serves as an acknowledgement of ideological attitudes to which Dularey succumbs, and of the damaging effects of the intertwined ideologies of gender and class politics on women such as Dularey's wife – in her public career as a performer and her off screen life as his wife.

In his influential work, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee argues that "a diminished importance of the women's question in the period of nationalism" (117) in the late nineteenth century resulted in a "rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate toward the close of the century" (116). He attributes this shift to middle-class nationalism's location of women's "autonomous subjectivity" (137) within the "home" instead of "the external domain of political conflict" (137). The history of women's struggle, therefore, argues Chatterjee, "is to be found less in the external domain of political conflict and more in the 'inner' space of the middle-class home" (137). But as film historians have shown, the lives of actresses also played out in the public domain of political conflict. Yet, they have been glossed over in feminist and nationalist historiography. This is because, claims Ramamurthy, it is "difficult to accommodate" (219) the modern actress within the framework of "an anticolonial project" (Ramamurthy 197). The "Modern" girl is neither an anticolonial nationalist feminist, nor "a critical internationalist of either the communist sort, like women who joined the Communist Party of India, or the liberal sort, like the many women who deployed international ideologies to win rights as 'national' citizens" (Ramamurthy 219). The work of

film scholars then signals the importance of an alternative public sphere occupied by female performers but one that did not fit within the framework of nationalistic ideas on gender. To this, Hyder's story adds another dimension. She suggests that recovering the narratives of actresses solely in the realm of the public sphere also leaves gaps in stories about women's struggles in the inner sphere of the home and insists upon examining the fraught relationship between the public and private domains. What her story does then is to emphasise that the connections of the "inner space" of the middle-class home to the external domain of public performance need to be carefully scrutinised when assembling the individualised stories of actresses. If we read the refusal of Dularey's family and the narrator's feminist mother to meet Dularey's actress wife as a rejection of the transgression of national and upper-class propriety that she is seen to represent, then Hyder's story offers insights on the intersections of class and familial relations and a middle-class nationalism that was being imagined anew.

In attempting to understand the checkered history of early actresses, "The Missing Photograph" is an imaginative fragment that represents Hyder's acute awareness of multiple and intersecting social forces that impacted actresses and performers who were central to the shaping of the early film industry. Instead of making the "noted actress" disappear, the empty frame restores, even if partially, a visibility to the story of the modern actress through Hyder's commentary on the ways in which nationalism and class politics regulated her personal life, career and sexuality.

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