

## Sunny Leone: Sensation, Objectification and Body Genre

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### Abstract

Sunny Leone is a former porn star turned mainstream actress in Hindi film industry. Her entry into popular Indian reality shows *Big Boss 5* (2011) and Bollywood director Mahesh Bhatt's offer of *Jism 2* on that show made a cultural shock to the nation's moral fabric that sparked protest throughout the country by social conservatives. This article aims to map the success of adult star Sunny Leone in Bollywood and the acceptance of porn star in the conservative society. I will analyze, how the film industry exploited the sex image of her and vice versa. I have chosen Sunny Leone's three films *Jism 2* (Pooja Bhatt, 2012), *Ragini MMS* (Bhushan Patel, 2014), and *Mastizaade* (Milap Milan Zaveri, 2016) to discuss the sexual pleasure on screen, double entendre and the objectification of women body. I argue that the study of Sunny Leone's popularity and her films, where she played sexually liberated characters can stage a dialogue between deep-rooted patriarchy, taboo, taste, and public secret.

**Keywords:** Sunny Leone, adult start, body genre, objectification, stardom

### Introduction

One will be surprised that porn star turned Bollywood actress Kareenjit Kaur Vohra better known by her stage name Sunny Leone is the most searched person in India<sup>1</sup>. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bollywood superstar Salman Khan are left behind her in Google trends. Whatever the reason behind the popularity of Leone, it's very interesting to see that our

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<sup>1</sup>It has been widely reported by Indian national media. See for details – <http://www.newindianexpress.com/lifestyle/tech/2017/dec/23/sunny-leone-not-narendra-modi-google-reveals-what-indians-searched-for-in-2017-1735448.html>

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conservative society has accepted the former porn star of the US. She was born in Ontario, Canada to Punjabi Sikh parents and started her career as a nude model for Penthouse magazine at the age of 20. And eventually, she entered into the adult film industry as an actor in California. She has not only acted in the adult films but also produced and directed adult films under her production company Sun Lust Pictures. She came to India to participate in a popular reality show *Big Boss* in 2011 which aired on *Colors* Hindi language channel. She entered on the 49<sup>th</sup> day of Big Boss show; few people knew that she is a porn star as she was introduced as American model on the show. When Indian media revealed that she is an adult actor, she became very popular and she added 8000 followers on twitter handle within two days of participation in the show. Eventually, a case has been filed against entertainment channel *Colors* on behalf of that it is affecting the culture of the country.<sup>2</sup> During the show Bollywood popular film producer and director Mahesh Bhatt offered a film *Jism 2* (Pooja Bhatt, 2012) on the show, she accepted the film without any hesitation. After the success of her first Bollywood film, she has taken retirement from the adult film industry in 2013 and started focus on her mainstream film career in Bollywood. She has now 1.5 million followers on Sunny's facebook and over 12 lakh people followers on Twitter. I situate my analysis of the popularity of Leone and her acceptance in society. I suggest that her success should be read between the cultural transaction and economic exchange between two big industries American porn and Bollywood.

### **Sunny Leone Playing Sunny Leone**

Sunny came into mainstream Hindi film industry with erotic thriller film *Jism 2 (Body 2)* and acted in multiple films with the sexualized image of her body. Here, interesting thing is that most of the times she plays the character of herself on the screen. In *Jism 2*, she played the character Izna, who is a former porn star. In her next hit film *Ragini SMS* (2014), she played the character of her as herself. She has entered the Bollywood industry after her brief stint at Hollywood B grade films. In those films too she played the character of herself. For instance, in 2004 romantic comedy film *The Girl Next Door* (2004), she made a guest appearance as porn star Leone. In 2010 film *The Virginity Hit*, she again played the role of Sunny. I suggest that Sunny Leone has a strong image as an adult actor. The audiences look at her as a porn star and they might not expect as a character which is different from the actual persona of Leone. I argue that her film *Jism 2*, *Ragini MMS* and *Mastizaade* (2016) portrays the desire and fascination of the audience who wants to see sunny as sunny on screen. Her first film *Jism 2* was a sequel of *Jism* (2003) and made on the budget of 7 crores. It performed well on the box office, earned around 35 crores. It was an erotic thriller genre film. The film revolves around a porn star and her ex-boyfriend and one intelligence officer. It received mixed reviews by the critics and the audience. The selling point of this film was Sunny Leone and her revealing promotional film poster. Her film poster suggests that it is a poster of some porn film. The first poster shows a

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<sup>2</sup> See for details –<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bjp-leader-tv-channel-sunny-leone-bigg-boss/1/162383.html>

naked girl lying on the floor covered by slight transparent wet white clothes. This poster attracts a complaint from the right-wing group –“Leone promotes obscenity in society through porn videos on her website” said Hindu activist Anjali Palan.<sup>3</sup> Later, the film poster was removed by the Municipal authority. Another film poster has both Sunny Leone and her co-actor Randeep Hooda. The film performed well on the box office only because of the sensational image of Leone. Pooja Bhatt once said that in the promotional interview that *Jism 2* “will be mentioned in Sunny Leone’s obituary.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Ragini MMS 2*, Sunny play the role of herself a real-life porn star. The film was commercially successful at the box office. Times of India journalist Madhureeta Mukherjee writes about the film and said,

The film provides the usual creepy cliches – creaking windows, ghostly shadows, and bedraggled ghosts. There are a few spooky moments, but fewer leap-out-of-your-seat scenes. Sunny looks deathly desirable and plays the sexed-up baby doll with abandon. While her 'act' is good, her 'performance' doesn't really climax. Yet, she gives us a 'drool-worthy' adult-horror film – one of its kinds for Bollywood.<sup>5</sup>

The film was promoted as ‘horrex’ (horror and sex) genre film. In one scene, when Leone mocked by the fellow actor that she does not know the acting, she responded by playing herself as a porn actor on the sets and fakes an orgasm to show her porn performance, leaving film crew, actor and director shocked. She challenged to the fellow actor to do this act again, he gives up then she replied that “I admit that adult films don’t make you an actor...but you couldn’t do that much either” Here, the problem with Leone is that her porn persona is so strong that she can’t connect with the audience as a character rather than her as a character. That’s the reason the film director exploits the pornographic image of her. The film’s one item number *Baby doll* became a super hit in the disco, parties, marriage ceremony, etc shows that the power image Leone.

*Mastizaade* (“Fun lovers”) is yet another film of Leone, where she played a double role of twin sisters who run a medical clinic for sex addicts. The film was on average hit. Film critic Namrata Joshi writes that “only question left to ask after two hours...would you call this a film?”<sup>6</sup>. The film is full of double meaning comedy that doesn’t make sense at all irrespective of objectifying and degrading women on the screen for the sake of the men’s pleasure. Anupama

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<sup>3</sup> See - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Mumbai-woman-files-FIR-against-Leone-for-destroying-Indian-culture/articleshow/47303642.cms>

<sup>4</sup>See- <http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/pooja-bhatt-jism2-will-make-it-to-sunny-leones-obituary-1272.html>

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<sup>5</sup> See – <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/movie-reviews/ragini-mms-2/movie-review/32423360.cms>

<sup>6</sup> See - <http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/cinema-reviews/Mastizaade-Would-you-call-this-a-film/article14028600.ece>

Chopra criticized this film and said “this film isn’t just bad, it’s soul-crushingly bad. I was depressed for hours after seeing it. I felt like all the color and magic had been sucked out of my life”<sup>7</sup>. I think this genre called adult comedy has not matured in India. In the name of sex comedy, Bollywood is producing gleefully misogynist content. Indian censor board does not allow much for visual sex on screen and our society is somewhere a sexually repressed. These double meaning adult comedies are the product of our repressed society, where society expresses their sexual anxieties by double entendre dialogue and dehumanizing women.

### **Pornographic Image and ‘Body Genre’**

Sunny Leone image entirely revolves around her pornographic image; I called as ‘pornographic body’ which is suitable for condom advertisements and other products. Her sexualized image is exploited by the industry and she also exploited her image to get success in the mainstream film industry. Linda Williams argues in her popular book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989) that “film pornography would simply demonstrate all of the above with the sensationalism endemic to the genre, illustrating a total objectification of the female ‘film body’ as object of male desire.” (xvi) “Foucault reminds us, to further incite—the desire not only for pleasure but also for the “knowledge of pleasure.”. He further argues that “the question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment... that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence?” (1978)

Ira Trivedi, the author of *India in Love: Marriage and sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* said “She’s part of the sexual revolution in India, where sex is coming out of the closet and people are becoming more curious and accepting of it,”<sup>8</sup> Micheal Foucault argues in his essay ‘The Repressive Hypothesis’ that 18<sup>th</sup> century was the beginning of the repression of sexuality which is very similar to the contemporary bourgeois society. He says that the investment of energy of purely pleasurable activities is a waste. Sex was always treated as private affairs that existed only between a husband and a wife. As a result, sex outside of this area is prohibited in fact repressed by society. At the same time, any kind of discourse around sex is denied in society. This condition is also applicable to contemporary India, where physical intimacy is denied in the public space and moral regime of society always works in the public sphere. In that context, I see Sunny Leone as sex symbol figure that translates cultural anxiety in the repressed society. She is like a rebel personality where porn star wants to explore in the mainstream entertainment

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<sup>7</sup> See - <http://www.hindustantimes.com/movie-reviews/mastizaade-review-by-anupama-chopra-this-film-is-awful-and-depressing/story-DtXV17ufyU6nWe5IyD3RSJ.html>

<sup>8</sup> See- <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-c1-india-porn-sunny-leone-snap-story.html>

business. It's interesting to see the recent phenomenon where mainstream entertainment and adult entertainment is merging and complementing each other. The acceptance of Sunny Leone in India has been scrutinized and has been debated around her persona as a lesbian porn actor in American adult business. I placed my analysis in terms of the transnational transaction between American porn film to mainstream Bollywood success and around stardom, gender studies, and body genre. It is to be noted here that making pornography and circulations of it is illegal in India. I suggest that this illegality issues related to porn film are an example of one sort of sexual control by the government that led to the success of Sunny Leone.

I situate my analysis not on the old paradigms of objectification of women but on the openness of the society where sunny like figure can be acceptable in our rigid society. I argue that Sunny Leone is a figure of sexual anxieties over her pornographic body and desire. But the body is itself a construct and cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of gender. Linda Williams in her essay 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' argues that 'body genre' consists of three elements of sex, violence, and emotion. She analyzes three genres of films that is pornography, horror, and melodrama which comes from the body pleasures. These emotions portray generally through women body as she argues "...women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain" (373)<sup>9</sup>. In all three genres especially pornography genre features the "excess of the body" where the body is shown as the spectacle of pleasures. In all the films of Sunny Leone, her body has reached the point of what Williams called as "maximum visibility" and it is through her "sexual saturation of the female body that audiences of all sorts have received some of their most powerful sensations" (373).

### **Unusual Female Stardom**

Sunny Leone has earned an unusual female star in India. She is not just popular but the audience has accepted and welcomed her. This is a unique phenomenon for the study of female stardom where Leone has carved out the different space for herself compare to the earlier or contemporary female star. Neepa Majumdar has studied the female stardom in India in her book *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom in India 1930s-50s* (2009). She argues that female stardom is the constant battle between the screen image and her off-screen persona. Taking reference from the works of Richard Dyer, Rosie Thomas, Majumdar asserts that the star image derives from a complex relationship between multiple personae constructed through film text and extra-filmic discourses. Indian audience has only given star status to only so called cultured women only. In that sense, Leone stardom is different from the earlier female actress. Her approach to understanding female stardom in India goes back to the star discourse in the 1930s where stardom was seen as feminine and implicit equivalences were made between stardom, nation, cinema, and femininity. She asserts that a "star system" did exist in India but

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<sup>9</sup> See - <http://yunus.hacettepe.edu.tr/~jason.ward/ied240popularliterature/GENRE12pgsWilliamsBodyGenres.pdf>

without a printed discourse on the private lives of Indian stars. She states that early film actresses are seen as the object of fascination and moral censure, who take on the burden of generalized anxiety regarding increased female participation in the public sphere. She argues that the early star culture in India was also always already known. Some of the clichés regarding this period include social taboo on acting, recruitment first of prostitutes, then of Anglo-Indian women and only later of respectable women. These accounts do not make a distinction between actors and stars or popularity and stardom. This drives her to ask a few questions to investigate the discourse of stardom – what is a star? How was the idea of the star understood in India? How was knowledge about stars prompted, shaped and controlled? Earlier film actresses get stardom through their off-screen image of domesticity and maintain the ethos of traditional women, who is innocent and maintain one’s virginity. That’s the primary reason generally film actresses get retired and do the duty of housewife after the marriage. Even the audience does not accept the married actress. Some contemporary heroine like Vidya Balan and Kareena Kapoor has broken this stereotype but that’s a different story. Here, I am focusing on the stardom of Leone, who does not maintain her sexual innocence, in fact, she is a porn star and had sex with multiple men or women on the film screen, which is very far from the idea of so-called ‘cultured woman’. Still, she has managed a star status in Bollywood. *Mastizaade* film producer Rangita Prithvi Nandy said. “Sunny is hugely popular and she is a phenomenal human story,” Nandy said. “There’s curiosity, morality, fan-love, a whole host of emotions at play even for the interviewer.”<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Sunny Leone emerged as a feminist queen in one particular interview with correspondent Bhupendra Chaubey.<sup>11</sup> That interview was the part of a promotional campaign of *Mastizaade* film. CNN-IBN journalist Chaubey was only interested in her past career of adult films and has not asked any question related to her mainstream films. He probably had an impression that Sunny might have been indulged in pornographic business due to some financial circumstances or someone had forced herself into it and she would be regretted about her past career. Some of the questions he puts like that

What is your greatest regret? Kapil Sharma has said that he cannot have you on his show because of “family audiences”. Does this upset you? Do you think Aamir Khan would work with you? Do you think your past will continue to haunt you? How many people would grow up thinking of becoming a porn star? There are lots of married women who look at Sunny Leone as a threat to their husbands. You do you not care about all this? Am I being morally corrupted because I’m interviewing you?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See - <https://thereel.scroll.in/802011/she-is-nice-she-is-not-like-her-videos-sunny-leone-charms-the-media-ahead-of-mastizaade>

<sup>11</sup> Watch the interview here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA66yrZt6FY>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

Sunny has neither denied her past nor is guilty about it. She always embraces her past and she made her decision to enter the porn industry with a conscious decision. In one interview, she talks about the infamous interview with Chaubey and said,

I'm not sorry for who I am or for what I have done and I believe no one can push you down and make you feel like that. I tried my hardest not to let it show. There were moments where I did not know what to do, though I was hurt and upset, I just continued with it. I thought people would be upset with me but the opposite of it happened."<sup>13</sup>

She remained calm and composed in the interview and replied with intelligence. The people surprisingly applauded the Leone after the interview gets aired. For years, her male fans have asked for an autograph but when a family with a baby approached her to pose for a photo, she “knew that everything was changing: her life, definitely. And India, too.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See - <https://www.scoopwhoop.com/sunny-leone-after-chaubey-interview/#.m5nix6l5z>

<sup>14</sup> See- <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/why-this-canadian-porn-stars-past-isnt-holding-her-back-in-bollywood/article4098382/>

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