GULABI, GULABO, GULABIYA: REPRESENTING GENDER NARRATIVES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

When women engage in (re)naming practices, especially names such as Gulabi, Gulabiya, and Gulabo, they perform a kind of spatial intervention that materially transforms how gender is mapped onto and understood within geographic spaces. This paper attempts to understand the act of (re)naming as an embodied writing practice through which South Asian women performers inscribe new meaning(s) onto contested spaces while simultaneously (re)positioning themselves within patriarchal spatial hierarchies. This paper examines the cultural metaphor of Gulab as a dual symbol that both idealizes and confines a woman within the structured society. This paper also analyses contemporary media representations to chart out how rose operates as a gendered symbol that naturalizes limitations on female agency and reinforces entrenched power dynamics under the guise of beauty. The analysis treats the performative act of renaming as a form of spatial authorship, where women write themselves into and out of places through identity reconstruction. When women adopt, modify, or reclaim names embedded with rose imagery they create alternative narratives. These narratives transform the semiotics of Gulabi within feminine ideals to strategic territorial claims.

Keywords: Women Performers; Femininity; Bollywood Movies.

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1.1 Introduction: Of Names and Narratives

Our research was still in its preliminary stage in the spring of 2020 as my co-author and I wandered through the meandering lanes of Varanasi[1]. Occasionally we found ourselves in quiet temples cloaked in incense; other times amidst bustling ghats where the river's eternal flow mingled with the sounds of songs and stories. The city seemed to lead us rather than the other way around, where every chance conversation with a shopkeeper or priest seemed to unfurl the place's shrouded mysteries. We spent our days perusing antiquarian bookstores, walking through the ghats and gullies. One late afternoon, following a rumor of an old library, we arrived at the gates of *Mumukshu Bhawan*[2] a place as storied as Varanasi itself, known as a hospice for those seeking to spend their final days in the holy city. There is a belief in Kashi[3] "*kashayam maranam muktih*" which roughly translates to " a person who dies in Kashi attains *moksha*, or liberation." This devotion is a guiding principle that draws many to Varanasi, and this *bhawan* stands as a passageway for this journey. As we stood on the premises of *Mumukshu Bhawan,* my co-author and I gazed around, enchanted by the aura of the place. Every corner of the *Bhawan* represents one of the four stages of life in Hinduism, as stated by the Indologist Pandurang Vaman Kane[4] in his monumental seven-volume work History of Dharmaśāstra (1930-1962). *Sri Mumukshu Bhawan Veda Vedang Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya*[5], the school within the Bhawan, symbolizes the first stage of a man's life, i.e., *Brahmacharya*. In this stage, bachelors (mainly male students) focus on education, laying the foundation for their future. The wedding lodge symbolizes the *Grhastha* stage, signifying the initiation of family life. As we moved further inside the Bhawan, we caught sight of the *Vanaprastha* stage, symbolized by the old age house. It marks a time away from active family life, where individuals seek spiritual solitude. The journey culminated in the *Sannyasa* stage which is symbolized by the closed quarters where people are waiting for their death. This is the stage of complete renunciation where individuals detach themselves from all worldly affairs and prepare themselves for *moksha*. These contrasts made the building feel alive. Just outside, a wedding procession was dancing to loud music, and the street was filled with a whirlwind of lights and colors. Before entering the quiet courtyard and leaving the chaos of the street behind, we stood there for a moment, utterly captivated by the spectacle. We finally entered the quiet courtyard, escaping the mayhem of the street.

Inside the gates of *Mumukshu Bhawan*, the atmosphere was solemn as it held the weight of countless lives nearing their end. We wanted to visit the *bhawan's* library, drawn by stories of its books, but were gently told we had arrived too late for the day. Disappointed, we lingered in the courtyard, feeling the pull of its stillness. We met an elderly woman clad in a white cotton sari. She sat beside the stone bench, silently combing her hair, oblivious to our presence. Her movements were unhurried, shaped by years of quiet routine. We struck up a conversation with her. She introduced herself as "Gulab," a name that held a certain beauty and which later inspired us to write this research paper. She was nearly, ninety

and originally from a small village in Madhya Pradesh. She had come to Varanasi three decades earlier with her husband, hoping to spend their final years together in the sacred city. Her husband had passed away some years after their arrival. As she shared her story, we learned that she had been waiting for liberation. We did not realize it then, but Gulab's choice to remain in the *bhawan*, patiently awaiting her own *moksha*, would later become central to our research paper. It was in her story, and her chosen name that we found an anchor that would shape the path ahead. As we spoke, Gulab shared with us a piece of information, a local astrologer had told her that she would die in April of the coming year. She spoke of death with neither fear nor sadness. For her, death was a freedom she had been awaiting. Over the days, Gulab gradually opened to us, sharing memories from her life in Itarsi, a town in Madhya Pradesh, and her early days in Varanasi. She described her children, grandchildren and the fields where she grew up. Amidst all these recollections, there was one detail she pointedly withheld: her birth name. She had chosen the name "Gulab" for herself when she arrived at *Mumukshu Bhawan*. When we asked why she had adopted this name, she replied simply, "*Yahan log mujhe Gulab ke naam se jante hai, aur main bhi khud ko gulab samjhti hoon.*" It means, "People here know me as Gulab, and I see myself that way too." Her given name, the name she had carried through childhood and family life, was something she had relinquished. For her, Gulab was an identity she had shaped for this final chapter. By leaving behind her old name, she had severed her ties to the roles she had once played, preparing herself for the journey to *moksha*.

Our chance encounter with Gulab and the story she chose to share with us revealed the transformative potential of names, which became central to our research. In choosing "Gulab" as her name, this elderly woman was crafting an identity that would serve her in this final chapter of her life. Just as the performers of *Nautanki*[6] and *Kalbeliya*[7] dance assume the persona of "Gulab," "Gulabi," or "Gulabo," Gulab had shed her birth name. In a way, she was rejecting the expectations that came with her name. She embodied the fluidity between the public and private, suggesting that a name could serve as both a mask and a liberation. This idea became the focal point of our paper. We found that this act ricochets with the lives of performing women. By taking on names such as "Gulab," these women gain access to public spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. It aids in (re)defining these spaces through self-expression. For both Gulab and these performers, the name acts as a safety valve that resists reduction to a stereotype. Gulab's story thus became the lens through which we approached our research, investigating how the act of (re)naming enables women to digress from the confines of societal expectations. While conducting further research, we understood that "Gulab" represented a larger discourse on identity, particularly in how borrowed names allow women to contest their traditional confinement within private spheres. This insight guided our exploration into the roles and spaces that "the Gulabs" of society inhabit, spaces in which they can be both seen and unseen, remembered and intentionally forgotten. This paper specifically examines the transformative act of re-naming, focusing on how the

adoption of new names by women can serve as both a means of maneuvering through the social structure and a tool for survival. This research is grounded in the study of semiotics, power dynamics, and the way names and identities are constructed and negotiated, particularly in spaces of cultural performance[8]. The paper also focuses on women who adopt such names within diverse performative traditions ranging from *jatra*, *arkestra*, to characters in movies to explore the sociocultural weight these pseudonyms carry. The following sections will first outline the theoretical approach, then examine cultural texts to understand how names function as metaphors and masks in the ongoing performance of identity.

1.2 Methodology

This study attempts to observe, understand, and explore how the act of (re)naming shapes identity(s) for women in performative spaces associated with marginalization. We first attempt to understand how names function as tools of agency for women. The second question explores how names tied to floral metaphors create a link between these women and South Asian ideals of femininity. We explore how representations of femininity in popular culture, especially through names like Gulabi, Gulabiya, and Gulabo, (re)enforce societal stereotypes around female beauty.

This study adopts a qualitative research design using an interdisciplinary approach. We have borrowed extensively from performance studies, sociology, and literary theories in our work. We have used discourse analysis to understand how power operates within society and how renaming gives agency to the marginalized sections in the performative spaces. We also used structuralism to understand the concept of signifier and signified. We have supplemented our analysis with ethnographic work where we have interviewed female performers, orchestra dancers, and cultural practitioners from South Asian communities, specifically those who identify with or are associated with the names Gulabi, Gulabiya, and Gulabo, in their performative spaces. For this purpose, we interviewed performers from the field and analyzed their personal narratives. Our study employed the method of shadowing, enabling a close observation of participants in their natural contexts. We conducted semi structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into artists' self-perception as performers and how performers perceive the audience reaction. The interviews were conducted in local language to ensure participants could articulate their experience with ease. Their interviews and stories were transcribed and translated by me and my co-author. We took help from our field informants in understanding cultural subtleties. We also took notes to document observations about the associations of such names with stereotypes. This study also includes an analysis of popular culture and archival materials to explore the broader representation of names like Gulabi, Gulabo and Gulabiya across cultural texts. This approach will provide a deeper appreciation of the rose-associated symbolism embedded in these representations. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussions about

identity confidentiality was maintained, and pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy.

1.3 Call me Gulab: Signifiers of Beauty and Femininity

> *Gulon mein rang bhare, baad-e-naubahaar chale,*
> *Chale bhi aao ke gulshan ka karobaar chale.*
> Let the flowers bloom with color, let the spring breeze blow,
> Come, beloved, so the garden's beauty may truly show. (Faiz Ahmad Faiz)[9]

The term *Gulab* or *Gulaab* (gul+a/aab) is steeped in cultural significance across South Asia. Etymologically, it is derived from *gul* which means flower or rose and *ab* which means water. The word literally translates to "rose water," an essence distilled from roses, prized in South Asian cultural tradition(s). In its broader sense, it embodies an entire spectrum of ideals around beauty, delicacy, and femininity. In Indian culture, *Gulab* translates to "rose". In the Northern belt of the subcontinent names such as *Champa[10]*, *Chameli[11]*, *Gulab[12]*, *Jasmine[13]*, *Juhi[14]*, *Shiuli[15]* are commonly used for women (this has been separately dealt with in section 1.4). In our ethnographic work at *Mumukshu bhawan*, we asked Gulabi Bai to share why she chose her name as Gulabi. She replied, "*Gulab ki pankhuriyo ki komalta, uske kanto ke sath milkar sritatva ki jatil prakriti ka pratik banti hai, jo komalta aur majbuti ke beech santulan sthatip karti hai.*" which roughly translates to that "the delicacy of the rose petals, combined with its protective thorns, serves as a metaphor for the complex nature of femininity, which achieves a balance between softness and strength, in this sense, the rose is often used in South Asian literature(s) to represent womanhood. It stands as a quintessential symbol of feminine grace and power.

1.4 Cultural Iconography of Gulab: Gender Representation in Indian Popular Culture

In South Asian popular culture[16], especially in Bollywood mainstream cinema, there exists a prevalent trend of assigning the name Gulabo to onscreen female characters who play the role of prostitutes, or courtesans. Within the film, these names undergo further degeneration and are articulated as Gulabi or Gulabiya suggesting the prevailing insignificance of the character both in the film and society at large. In Bollywood movies, such names are often used as a euphemism for prostitutes. Names such as *Gulab, Chameli[17]*, *Chandramukhi* (2005)[18], *Anarkali[19]*, embody the cultural perceptions that surround the archetype of lowly women (prostitutes, servants). Women characters involved in prostitution are frequently imagined through metaphors that liken their bodies to tender and fragile elements such as flowers, which reinforces ideas of allure. These characters are supposed to be the epitome of sensuality, and their given names are imbued with meanings that society has historically associated with such characters. By

naming these characters synonymous with flowers, the filmmakers try tapping into a metaphor of beauty, a quality that is inevitable in prostitutes portrayed in the films. The film portrays these significantly marginalized characters as symbols of female eroticism. This practice of naming these characters after flowers also implies their inherent transience and eventual disposability, mirroring the ephemeral nature of a flower. Society adores these women for their grace and beauty, only to discard them once their grace fades. This trope, therefore, lays into a problematic cultural framework where femininity is valued in a way that is at once idealized and instrumentalized, rendering the flower characters an object of both reverence and pity.

The association of floral metaphors with female bodies reflect the stereotypes embedded in patriarchal societies. The bodies are diminished to mere cliches of beauty. For example, in Indian households, the preference for *gori-chitti ladki* (fair-skinned lass) for marriages is quite common. Likening women to delicate blooms perpetuates the notion that they are subjected to wither and need to be protected. This perspective reinforces traditional gender roles, suggesting that femininity is synonymous with muted identity. Such comparisons not only objectify women, reducing their value to their physical appearance, but also undermine their agency. The use of floral motifs reflect the transience of women. As flowers are subjected to brief existence, similarly a woman's worth in a society is tied to her youth and beauty, this implies that such attributes may be appreciated temporarily but are not regarded with enduring significance.

When we turn our attention to the name in question, Gulabo, it brings to light several iconic portrayals in Bollywood cinema. In Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Saawariya*[20], Rani Mukherjee steps into the role of Gulabji, a prostitute who embodies both vulnerability and resilience (see fig. 1.).

Fig. 1. A still of Rani Mukherjee from the movie *Saawariya* (2007), where she plays the role of Gulabji, a prostitute. "Image of Rani Mukherjee", *X*.

Similarly, in Guru Dutt's classic *Pyaasa* [21] Waheeda Rehman portrays Gulabo, a prostitute whose compassion and humanity stand in stark contrast to her marginalized social status (see fig. 2.)

Fig. 2. A still of Waheeda Rehman from the film *Pyaasa* (1957), where she plays the role of Gulabo, a prostitute. "Image of Waheeda Rehman." *Pinterest*.

In Srijit Mukherjee's *Begum Jaan* (2017) [22], Pallavi Sharda plays Gulabo, a character whose life, though constrained by social judgment, exudes strength and individuality. Across these films, the characters named Gulabo share a common thread: they are women relegated to the fringes of society. Yet despite their marginalization, these women are depicted as enduring figures. These "Gulabos" are crafted as symbols of bodily beauty, and compassion, with a tragic backstory that led them to choose the path of prostitution. For many of these women, becoming "Gulabo" helped them reclaim their agency. Their profession provides them with a constrained yet new identity that confers upon them a new recognition as an independent individual.

Rani Mukherjee in *Saawariya* plays the role of a brothel madam who has a complex personality. She is caring and protective towards other girls in the brothel; this feeling comes from her own tumultuous past and emotional vulnerability that gave her an understanding of human relationships. Her dialogues reflect on the incessant hatred that she has received from men in her life, yet she possesses the strength to adore herself as a rose every day. Despite the scorn she faces, she adorns herself with powder, painted lips, kohl in her eyes, and a rose or two in her hair, embodying both beauty and resilience like a rose.

Waheeda Rehman, as a prostitute and a dancer in *Pyaasa*, offers a poignant portrayal of unrecognized dignity, inspired by Guru Dutt's close encounter with a prostitute in real life. Waheeda Rehman, named Gulabo, a streetwalker, resonates with the same kind of pain. Vijay, the poet protagonist of the film, meets Gulabo when she is purchasing his poetry from a scrap seller. Gulabo, who has never experienced love in her life, buys his poems because she resonates with his unspoken pain and social rejections. She could relate the rejection that she

received all her life to Vijay's situation where he was being abandoned by all his dear ones, including his ladylove and his family. Vijay's poetry was a voice that echoed Gulabo's feelings towards the society. The film ends with the poet and prostitute renouncing a society that denies dignity to both of them.

Srijit Mukherjee's *Begum Jaan* portrays a brothel as a haven for eleven prostitutes who refuse to vacate their brothel during the partition of India. Managed by the brothel's madam (played by Vidya Balan), these women who are victims of societal rejection consider this brothel their home, their *watan*[23]. The film shows Begum Jaan, a ruthless woman, who has offered shelter and solace to these young women, all of whom were rescued in different ways and now owe allegiance to the Begum. These women have either been forsaken by their own families or are rape victims. Begum Jaan gave them a new identity, a new name, and a newfound freedom. Even though they are sex workers, they are free and survive as individuals, away from the dominance of men. Pallavi Sharda as Gulabo was gang-raped during a communal riot. Even though there is no reference to what her original name was, according to the brothel's tradition, she is given a more business-specific name that will attract clientele. Taking reference from another very similar incident from the film itself, where Begum Jaan names a new girl "Shabnam" (meaning dew drops), as she is much fair and her skin has a reddish tint, we can conclude the choice of names is solely based on the girl's outlook. Gulabo, played by Pallavi Sharda, plays a fair-skinned Haryanvi girl who is popular among the brothel visitors. The movie shows her having flashbacks of her horrific past, when she was abused by men. Moreover, by tracing the journey of these characters from hardship to the relative stability provided by the courtesan's life, Bollywood often romanticises their suffering, suggesting that their entry into this world is both inevitable and redemptive. This narrative glosses over the lack of real agency many women face in such circumstances, casting their role as Gulabo in a fatalistic light that makes their hardship appear almost naturalised.

There is a recurring cultural practice of assigning names derived from flowers to women engaged in certain professions (prostitution). This naming convention appears to serve a dual purpose, which is to obscure their individual identities and hide their profession. However, this raises critical questions about gender. We ask why is there a need to veil these identities, and why are such euphemisms predominantly reserved for women? We must understand that the naming convention is not arbitrary but a commentary on intersections of gender and socio-cultural values in South Asia. Names are not only labels but are embedded with socio-cultural expectations and cultural symbolism. In the Indian context, these naming conventions are deeply rooted in texts like the *Manusmriti* (2.3.1), which suggests that a girl's name should be "easy to pronounce, pleasant, indicating prosperity, and ending with a long vowel." In the book *Namakaran* (2002), the writers Madhvi Kapur, Neeta Datta and Sharmishta Das suggest that "A girl child is usually named after birds, flowers, deities, or the softer qualities of

a woman. A boy child is usually named after qualities of valour, honour, bravery, or joy." (Preface 4)

Similarly, Sumana Roy, in her non-fictional text *How I Became A Tree* (2017), suggests:

> Bengali girls are often named after flowers-my neighbourhood was full of girls whose names made them relatives of flowers. Golap and Golapi, the rose; Jui, a variety of Jasmine; Padma, the lotus; Dopati, balsam; Shiuli and Shefali, the coral jasmine and the night flower jasmine; Madhobilata, Parijat, Henna; Chandramallika, the chrysanthemum; the sweet-smelling Beli and Rajnigandha; and also the English names Dahlia, Zinnia, Jasmine, even Rose. (9)

Further, Goody (1993) argues that the symbolic meanings of flowers "were uniformly positive, harbingers of good, concerned with the three basic wishes of mankind for longevity, happiness and fertility" (370). These gendered patterns in naming practices illustrate the linguistic choices which serve to perpetuate social ideals.

Popular songs, especially in mainstream cinema, have long played a role in typecasting women through repetitive portrayals. Women are frequently depicted as objects of beauty and desire. In many songs, a woman is either the innocent angel or the seductive siren, rarely portrayed with depth or agency. One of the most common motifs is the rose imagery where women are compared to roses. From the movie *The Train* [24](1970), the song "*Gulabi ankhein jo teri dekhi, sharabi ye dil hogya*" (1970) roughly translates to "When I saw your rose-tinted eyes, my heart became intoxicated." In "*Gulabo jara ittar gira do*" from the movie *Shandaar*[25] (2015), which translates to Gulabo, why don't you sprinkle some perfume Gulabo. In the song, rose and its derivatives are used to describe a woman's eyes and face, which illustrates the physical appeal of the female subject. These playful tracks personify Gulabo as a vivacious and sensual woman who has the capability to intoxicate people with her eyes and the smell of her body. The metaphorical association of women with flowers such as roses reinforces societal ideals of femininity. In the selected songs, the rose stands as a symbol of love and bodily lust.

1. 5 The "'Gul'-ab, -iya,-o" as Performers on Stage

The words Gulabo, Gulabiya and Gulabi originate from the root term Gulab. which means rose. We have dealt with the etymology at length in the previous section. Gulabi ends with the suffix -i, which adds a sense of relating to or having the qualities of a rose. On being asked why she is called Gulabiya on stage, Pinky, an orchestra performer from Banaras, winks her eyes and says, "*Gulabo naam me lagal -o aur gulabiya naam me laga -iya aadmi ke khubsurti ke auri badha dela*" (Pinky 2023) which roughly translates to "the name Gulabo with the suffix -o and

Gulabiya with the suffix -iya adds to the sensuality of the person". Adrian Room in his *Dictionary of Pseudonyms* (1989) states:

> One of the most common and striking situations in which people will change their original names for new ones is to act, to a greater or lesser degree, traumatic, of emigration and subsequent naturalisation. A person leaves his or her native country for some reason-often driven out by war, persecution, or destitution-and, arriving in another where very likely a new language is spoken, officially or tacitly starts a new life, assumes a new identity, and takes on a new name to go with it. (6)

Pinky's adoption of this pseudonym may not directly refer to her traumatic displacement, yet it functions as an act of (re)branding her identity within a sociocultural and performative context. Her stage name, Gulabo, signifies her transformation from one social identity to another (from a native household girl to that of a public dancer), particularly within a performance. This can be understood using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler (1990) suggests, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that conceal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (126). The name Gulabo, with its associations of sensual appeal, becomes a performative tool that enables Pinky to embody and project the qualities expected of a public dancer within the cultural milieu. The suffixes -o and -iya further enhance her stage persona, thereby reinforcing the femininity she performs. She actively constructs and enacts an identity that aligns with the demands of her profession.

In his influential essay, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1973), Clifford Geertz explores the deeper cultural significance behind rituals. He writes, "The cockfight does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the hierarchical relations among people or refashion the hierarchy; it does not even redistribute income in any significant way" (443). Rather than functioning as a means of tangible social change, the cockfight is a cultural performance where gestures, emotions and communal values are reaffirmed. One finds a similar form of symbolic "deep play" in the representation of the rose particularly in literature, mythology, cinema, and religious practice. The rose, then, becomes a contested symbol/site through which society (re)imagines its cultural realities. Within South Asian cultural traditions, the rose has long functioned as a potent symbol of femininity, and for its emblematic association with romantic yearnings. In Indian mythology, a wife of Vishnu was discovered in a rose. Wealthy Hindu grooms give their brides attar of roses. Abeer (or Abir), a foremost perfume of India used to scent clothes and linens, is made of rose, civet, sandalwood, aloewood, and zedoary" (Miller 1990, 65). Further through centuries South Asian writers and poets have worked towards establishing Rose as a symbol of love and longing. Urdu elegist Mir Aneesh (1872) writes:

Gulshan men saba ko justaju teri hai
Bulbul ki zaban pe guftagu teri hai
Har rang men jalva hai teri qudrat ka
Jis phul ko sunghta hun b uteri
Na gul chaman men rahenge na gul men bu baqi
Yeh sab tujhi pe mitenge rahega tu baqi
Allah hu, Allah hu, Allah hu, Allah hu

Which translates to
In the rose garden the zephyr yearns for You
From the nightingale's lips Your talk springs
In every hue Your majesty shines
From every flower, Your fragrance emanates
Neither will the roses last in the garden
Nor their perfumes dwell there
All these will perish for Your sake
You alone will stay
God, just He
God, just He
God, just He
God, just He
(Hyder 2011, 27)

"*bhari bahar mein ik shaakh par khila hai gulaab*
ki jaise tu ne hatheli pe gaal rakhq hai" (Faraz)

which translates to "In the height of spring, a rose blooms on a branch
As if your cheek has found its place, softly cradled in my hand." (own translation)

As Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) suggests in his theory of semiotics, the relationship between a signifier (such as a name) and its signified concept (the qualities it evokes) is arbitrary (Stoltz 2019). The relationship between the signifier (the name) and the signified (the meaning) is not something fixed by nature, it is decided by cultural convention. He suggests that a sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but a link between a concept and a sound pattern (Stoltz). It is crucial to acknowledge that the sound pattern is not solely the audible sound, but rather our psychological interpretation of the sound. For instance, we can mentally represent the sound /kæt/ when we read the word, despite not actually vocalizing it. The sound pattern and the concept are so closely linked that they can both evoke the other. The image of the actual animal is immediately conjured in your mind upon reading the word cat. In contrast, the term cat is immediately invoked when one comes across a genuine cat or a photograph of one. Consequently, a sign effectively integrates the concept it represents and the sound pattern it produces.

An analysis of Bollywood from the 1950s to the 2020s reveals a notable continuity in the representation of feminine beauty, with leading actresses across generations consistently embodying and reinforcing dominant aesthetic ideals. From Madhubala, Sharmila Tagore, and Waheeda Rehman to Madhuri Dixit, Juhi Chawla, and more recently Kareena Kapoor, Deepika Padukone, Alia

Bhatt, and Janhvi Kapoor, the industry has persistently favoured features such as fair skin, symmetrical facial structure, and slender body types. These beauty norms have significantly influenced casting decisions and have been perpetuated through fashion, advertising, and popular media, thereby sustaining a hegemonic visual standard. While Indian society has undergone considerable socio-cultural change, including the emergence of feminist discourse and growing demands for inclusivity, mainstream cinematic portrayals of the ideal woman have remained remarkably consistent (see fig. 3.-7.).

Fig. 3. Bollywood actress Hema Malini. Hema Malini began her career in the year 1969, where she became labelled as "Dream Girl". She had a glorious reign as a leading actress during 1970-85. "Image of Hema Malini." *Pinterest*.

Fig. 4. Bollywood actress Amrita Singh. She debuted in the film *Betaab* (1983) and became a popular actress, particularly in the 1980s, appearing in over fifty films. "Image of Alia Bhatt." *Pinterest*.

Fig. 5. Bollywood actress Juhi Chawla. She debuted in the film Sultanat (1986). Her active period spanned from late 1980s to early 2000s. "Image of Juhi Chawla." *NDTV Movie.*

Fig. 6. Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor Khan, who debuted in the year 2000 and is performing in the industry for more than 25 years. "Image of Kareena Kapoor." *Blogger. com.*

Fig. 7. Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt debuted in the year 2012 with the film Student of the Year. Her Bollywood career spans thirteen years. "Image of Alia Bhatt." *FiLMiBEAT.*

"An actor's stage name is vitally important. There is no getting away from the fact that when people are considering you for a role, your name will have a subconscious effect on the way they see you. Exploit that fact! A name that does not say anything about you and your skills is redundant" (Craig 2017,

56). Here, Fergus Craig makes it evident that the stage name of the performer serves as an extension of the performer, closely integrated into the very spirit of their performance. Similarly, examine the situation of a performer referred to as Gulabo. The mere mention of this name prompts the audience to envision beauty, immediately recalling the attributes of the rose. Prior to the performer taking the stage, the audience already brims with anticipation. The name functions as a concise representation, enabling the performer to convey her persona without requiring extensive elaboration. The Hindi proverb "*gulab ki khushboo bina khila hua phool*" suggests that "the fragrance of the rose exists even prior to its bloom." In a similar way, the name(s) Gulabi, Gulabo, or Gulabiya serve as a compelling prelude to the performance.

The evolving relationship between audience and performer has become a central concern in contemporary performance theory, particularly since the performative turn of the 1960s, which emphasized live, embodied experience over fixed textual meaning with the need to reconceptualize the spectator's role as a co-creator of the performance. Richard Schechner (2006) raises pivotal questions in this regard. He asks, "What about audience participation?" and "performances whose…demands [include] a blurring of the boundaries separating audience and performers" (104-105). These questions reflect an increasing recognition that performance derives much of its meaning from the interaction between those who perform and those who witness. Schechner finds compelling evidence of this in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed,* which he describes as "most effective when the boundary between spectators and actors is blurred or entirely effaced" (Schechner 2020,105). As the audience interacts with the performance, they are predisposed to perceive her through the associations linked to her name. Here, the signified concept is a performer who embodies the qualities of a rose, which means something which is sensual. The cultural meaning(s) around roses ensure that these names evoke specific ideas of femininity. As mentioned earlier, there is nothing about the sounds in Gulabo that means beauty or femininity. Instead, people over time have agreed, through cultural appropriation, that roses symbolize these things. The rose is commonly seen in poems, songs, and art as a symbol of beauty and even desire. When a performer uses a name like Gulabi or Gulabo, she links herself to this cultural understanding. Pinky, our field informant from Arkestra[26] group, says, "*Agar kauno performer aapan naam kuch sadharan, jaisan Gita ba Reena rakh leti, ta u asae na hokhit*" (Pinky), which means "If a performer named herself something neutral, like Gita or Reena, it would not have the same effect. These names do not carry the same symbolic meaning of attraction." Similarly, during fieldwork at Asuriya village in Bishnupur district, we met Rosy and Jui (Dolon, Tabassum), both performers of an amateur Jatra (folk theatre of Bengal) troupe. Around thirty years of age, Jui and Rosy have been part of this Jatra troupe since childhood. Dolon's mother worked as a make-up didi, who spent her life behind the curtains, transforming actors into stars. When Dolon was just 12, Madan Dada (brother), the theatre owner, suggested she step onto the stage. Her mother, torn between ambition and

concern, agreed, hoping the stage might give her daughter a life better than her own. To make her more marketable, the manager of the troupe replaced her with "Rosy", an English name thought to be glamorous and eye-catching. Rosy (see fig. 8.) started her career playing side roles such as sister-in-law, maid, and others. Behind her radiant smile, there existed a persistent sense of sorrow, a desire to be recognized not merely as a performer, just as a performer, but as an individual of significance: "*Ma sara jibon kosto korte gelo charte takar jonne, amakeo namte holo choto boyeshe. Dekhte sunte bhaloi chilam, tai Madan kaku bollo tui Jatrai nam ma ke sahajjyo korte parbi. Kintu Dolon naam toh ar Jatrai chole na, tai cinemar heroine der shathe miliye Rosy naam rakhlo.,*" which roughly translates to "Ma spent her whole life working hard, struggling for a few coins, and I had to step in at a young age too. I was-good looking, so Madan uncle suggested that I could join the theatre troupe to help my mother. However, the name Dolon would not work for the theatre, so they gave me the name Rosy, to match the heroines in the movies. I agreed to whatever they said" (Dolon 2022). Rosy's mother, too, bore her own silent burdens, spending her days creating beauty for others while suppressing the dreams she once had for herself, Tabassum was not very keen on sharing her story. At first, she ignored the questions but gradually she opened up. Her boyfriend, already struggling with poverty, abandoned her when the weight of their hardships became unbearable. Desperate and alone, she wanted to survive. She knocked on the door of her *khala's* (paternal aunt) house for help. She said to Tabassum that "you can only stay here as a servant." Fate led her to a travelling jatra troupe, where she hoped to start afresh. Yet even here, her identity became her burden. As a Muslim woman in a society that clung to caste and religious divides, she faced harsh prejudice. The troupe leader renamed her Jui and offered her the role of dancer. She survived, not by choice but by necessity, carrying the weight of a stolen identity.

Fig. 8. Dolon before her performance. Shot by Kuntalika Jharimune during field work.

To formulate this study further, we have taken into account three established female performers from three different fields of performance, i.e., Gulabo Sapera of *Kalbeliya* dance, Gulab Bai of Nautanki theatre, and Golap Sundari of professional Bengali theatre.

Gulabo Sapera was born into a nomadic family of snake charmers in Rajasthan. In a family that held little regard for a girl child, she was buried alive after her birth. However, her determined parents fought against all odds and dug her out. She was miraculously found to be alive. She was brought home and named Dhanvantri. A young Gulabo started accompanying her snake charmer father, as a child. Gulabo Sapera became a pioneering figure who brought the *Kalbeliya* dance form, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the global stage. Her efforts and talent have earned this traditional art form international recognition. Her journey began humbly, performing as a young nomadic dancer alongside the women of her community. It was during one such performance at the Pushkar Mela that her talent caught the attention of Hanumat Singh and Tripti Pandey, government officers with the Rajasthan Tourism Department. Gulabo grew up accompanying her snake-charmer father, who played the *pungi*, a wind instrument. She recalls being captivated by the music and moving instinctively, mimicking the swaying movements of the snakes. However, this freedom came with challenges. Her father was often criticized for making her dance, accused of earning off her back. His response reflected their harsh reality. When she danced with him, she was safe. Her father was apprehensive of leaving her alone at home. Dhanvantari, her birth name, was changed by her father to Gulabo, possibly reflecting a significant transformation. The name Gulabo means rosy or pink-hued in Hindi, which could symbolize her personality. Her journey from Dhanvantari to Gulabo Sapera indicates a transformation in her dancer identity (see fig. 9.).
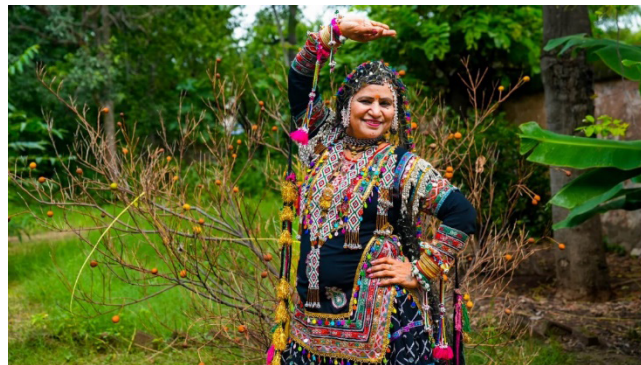

Fig. 9. A still of Gulabo Sapera performing. "Image of Gulabo Sapera." *Anahad Foundation.*

Nautanki Queen Gulab Bai was born in 1926 in Balpurva, in a lower-caste Bedia family who were a backward community of entertainers. Gulab Bai's father, Lal Bahadur, who had grown up seeing his mother sing and dance on the roads, was reluctant to let his daughter Gulabiya join a traveling theatre company. However, Gulab tagged alongside her aunt Chandrabhaga and roamed around performing in village melas and street fairs. At these fairs and festivals, she would dance gracefully with anklets tinkering. Moti Jaan and Chandrabhaga influenced her and provided her with an atmosphere where she absorbed and learnt music with enthusiasm. Gulab Bai became the first established performer of the Nautanki

stage after she had received wide acclaim performing the lead heroine in plays such as Shireen Farhad, Raja Harishchandra, and Laila Majnu. Pursued by countless male admirers but stigmatized due to her caste, over time, Gulab Bai became her own person, careful to retain autonomy and independent identity.

Fig. 10. Gulab Bai. "An image of Gulab Bai." *Facebook.*

Gulab Bai's journey of transcendence from being a neglected poor outcast, "Gulabiya" who danced to fill her stomach, to becoming Gulab Bai, a name that immortalized her in the history of theater and its renowned practitioners. This reflects her shift of identity from a regional, folk-based persona to a more mainstream, legendary social icon. Renaming her as Gulab Bai reflected her increasing fame and the industry's strategic rebranding of her image.

The third performer that we discuss is actress Golap SundariBorn as Golap Sundari, Sukumari Dutta was one of the first four actresses hired by the professional theatres of Calcutta in the 19th century, which marked the transition from male actors impersonating female roles to the introduction of women performers. Four actresses, namely Golap Sundari, Elokeshi, Shaymasundari and Jaggatarini, entered the theatre amidst a lot of controversy, as they came from lower social backgrounds. Many of these women were associated with the "prostitute class", further fuelling the opposition from the elite. Despite this resistance, Golap Sundari and her contemporaries played a crucial role in transforming Bengali theatre, opening the door for future generations of women in theatre.

The name "Golap", which means rose in Bengali, is similar to Gulab in Hindi. The life of Bengali Golap was also very similar to that of the other above-mentioned Gulab's in question. Golap Sundari was born to a prostitute mother, and thus belonged to the lowest strata of society. Proficient in music, Golap could remember all hymns and songs that she heard from wandering Vaishnav minstrels[27]. When she was a teenager, her mother brought her to Calcutta to train her as a *kirtaniya*[28]. Her beautiful voice brought her to the attention of Saratchandra, who introduced her to the Bengali stage. Golap played the role of Molina in Jatindramohan Tagore's play *Vidya Sundar*[29] (1874), which brought her to the limelight. She further appeared in several other prominent plays such as *Sarat Sarojini* and *Puru- Bikram*. Once popular, she shunned her name

Golap, which was her identity as a fallen woman and adopted a more *bhadralok*[30] middle-class name, Sukumari. It was Upendranath Dutta, the writer of the play Sarat-Sarojini, who wanted to raise Golap from the status of fallen women to respectability, arranged a marriage between her and Goshthabehari, a young actor. However, their marriage led to a renewed attack on the theatre from the elite. They had come to accept these fallen women actresses, but vehemently opposed the idea of accepting her as a part of their society. Unable to bear the society's taunts, Goshthabehari abandoned Sukumari and ran away to England. Sukumari however, fought her way back to the theatre and gained acclaim as an actress and writer. She wrote a famous play *Apurba Sati*[31], which was autobiographical in tone and revolved around the tragedy of a prostitute's daughter, and it was the first play written by a woman to be staged. Her language was bold and outspoken; it articulated women's desire and denounced socio-sexual double standards. Sukumari persisted in her endeavour to serve the cause of theatre, continuing her efforts until shortly before her death. Born Golapi, she was a woman who came from a background of prostitution. However, as she transitioned into the world of film and entertainment, she changed her name to Sukumari Dutta to better align with a more socially acceptable, middle-class persona. This change in name represented a shift in her social status, as she redefined herself within the changing cultural norms of the time. These names and transformations speak to the way identities, especially those of women, are shaped by cultural, social, and professional pressures. Each of these women navigated the challenges of their respective worlds by altering their names—whether for personal reasons, social mobility, or professional transformation—and in doing so, they left their mark on the cultural landscape.

Conclusion

This study tries to understand the sociocultural significance of names like Gulabi, Gulabiya, and Gulabo for women who are trying to traverse the complex terrain of identity in South Asian performative spaces. Through the narratives of female performers, this study suggests that names act as powerful tools of agency and transformation. It reveals that the act of renam(ing) or adopting a pseudonym serves as a liberating digression from patriarchal constraints.

By examining the parallel experiences of women associated with performances, across different performative spaces – be they, contemporary or historical, this study undertakes a nuanced exploration of agency and identity. It encourages a study that connects time, space, and cultural contexts. We have analyzed Gulabi Sapera (Kalbeliya dancer), Gulab Bai (nautanki actress), Golap Sundari (Bengali theater actress), Gulaab aka Pinky (Arkestra dancer), Rosy aka Doyel Saha (Jatra actress), and her friend Jui aka Tabassum (Jatra actress). The names provide a metaphorical mask that allows them to cross the threshold, enabling them to occupy cultural spaces that otherwise may be closed due to social restrictions. These pseudonyms create an alternative public persona that shields them from

stigma while simultaneously allowing them free expression. For instance, the research uses symbolic interactionism to analyze how these names operate within a collective framework, providing women a shared cultural reference point that bridges individual and community identities. These ethnographic insights reveal how rose symbolism is reduced in stereotypes woven into South Asian femininity on a large spectrum. In a broader context, this study highlights the need for further research on the intersection of naming, identity, and agency, especially in spaces where cultural, social, and personal identities merge. The findings from this study encourage a deeper understanding of how names can serve as dynamic symbols of autonomy and resistance, offering women an avenue for reclaiming their identities within a framework that balances tradition with self-expression. As more stories like that of Gulabi emerge, the cultural and symbolic dimensions of names will continue to reveal the profound ways in which individuals can rewrite their own narratives, not just as passive bearers of tradition, but as active participants in shaping their identities and roles within society.

Notes

1. Varanasi is a city on the Ganges river in northern India that has a central place in the traditions of pilgrimage, death and mourning in the Hindu world. Located in the middle-Ganges valley in the southeastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi lies on the left bank of the river. Varanasi is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities.

2. *Mumukshu Bhawan* lies close to Assi ghat, Varanasi. This place offers room to people who wait for death and are in search of liberation.

3. Another name of the city Varanasi.

4. Pandurang Vaman Kane is known for his *magna opus* history of Dharmaśāstra (1930-62). A seven-volume treatise on law in ancient and medieval India. he was awarded the Bharat Ratna India's highest civilian award in 1963.

5. Sri Mumukshu Bhawan Veda Vedang Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya is located inside the *Mumukshu Bhawan*.

6. Nautanki is a folk performance tradition that is particularly prominent in northern India, with it's roots deeply embedded in the rural landscapes of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, and parts of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

7. Kalbeliya dance is a traditional dance performance of the Sapera or snake charmer community of Rajasthan. The Kalbeliyas lead a nomadic lifestyle and are mainly concentrated in the regions of Ajmer, Chittorgarh and Udaipur. The dancers dress gracefully in colorful clothes and their movements are akin to the fluid and rhythmic movement of serpents.

8. The term Cultural Performance was coined by Milton Singer in 1959. "Cultural Performances are structured and possesses a limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience and a place and occasion." Quoted in Erika-Fisher Lichte (Culture As Performance, 2009).

9. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a Pakistani poet and an author of Punjabi and Urdu literature. He was the first Asian poet to be awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1962 by the Soviet Union and is also nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature.

10. The scientific name of Champa is *Magnolia Champaca*.

11. The scientific name of Chameli is *Jasminum sambac.*

12. The scientific name of Gulabi is *Rosa spp.*

13. The scientific name of Jasmine is *Jasminum officinale* (Common Jasmine).

14. The scientific name of Juhi is *Jasminum auriculatum.*

15. The scientific name of *Shiuli is Nyctanthes arbor-tristis.*

16. Popular Culture encompasses the shared ideas, practices, and symbols widely embraced by society which is shaped by media, and social trends. Through film, music, and digital platforms, popular culture influences public perceptions and sociocultural norms.

17. In the film Chameli (2003), directed by Sudhir Mishra, Kareena Kapoor plays the role of a prostitute Chameli. Chameli is the Hindi name for the flower Jasmine. Link: https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0GI1N884FSNG0JP658DM9K4Z1E/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

18. In the film adaptations of the novel Devdas written by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Madhuri Dixit (Devdas, 2002) and Vayjanthimala (Devdas, 1955) play the role of Chandramukhi, a renowned tawaif. In the Indian context Chandramukhi is the name of a flower, popular in Manipur and West Bengal. Link: https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0P57THGCDU88AAD52VWYWXIETH/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

19. In the film Mughal-e-Azam (1960) directed by K.Asif, in which actress Madhubala plays the role of court dancer Anarkali. Originally named Nadira, the emperor renamed her as Anarkali, which means Pomegranate blossom. Link: https://youtu.be/BGL6zt5fs0c?si=66rZxtOhmAjOAxif.

20. Saawariya is a 2007 Indian Hindi-language romance film produced and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, based on Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1848 short story White Nights. The story of a couple's chance encounter and the advance of their parallel obsessions over four successive nights. Link: https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0L48CH7HEL7XYF1AVF81JCNTAY/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

21. Pyaasa is a 1957 Indian Hindi drama film directed and produced by Guru Dutt. Set in Calcutta, the film tells the story of Vijay (played by Dutt), a disillusioned Urdu poet whose works are underestimated by publishers. However, he gets unexpected assistance from Gulabo, a prostitute who falls in love with him and his work. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJK45r-j6TU.

22. Begum Jaan is a 2017 Hindi language period drama film directed by Srijit Mukherjee, that shows the struggle of 11 prostitutes during the partition. Link: https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0L48CH7HEL7XYF1AVF81JCNTAY/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

23. Motherland.

24. The Train is a 1970 Indian Hindi language film starring Rajesh Khanna, Nanda. In the movie an honest CBI officer investigates murders on a train. Link: https://youtu.be/Xsn0QjMN3fM?si=r_Mzl-FqNu02qV2T.

25. *Shandaar* is a 2015 romantic comedy film directed by Vikas Bahl. It shows a dysfunctional family planning for their daughter's wedding. Link: https://youtu.be/bUTdUaVmj8o?si=pQF5l4cndSotbvo7.

26. Arkeshtra refers to dance groups that put up public performances in the rural and urban areas of Bihar. These dances are often sexually aggressive.

27. Vaishnav minstrels are devotional singers who are associated with Vaishnav traditions i.e the worship of Krishna, and Chaitanya.

28. *Kirtaniyas* are wandering minstrels who sing the praise of Lord Krishna and Chaitanya, through ballads. They are deeply engaged in devotional practice of kirtan.

29. *Vidyasundar* is a romantic poem about the lovers Vidya and Sundar written by Bharatchandra Ray. Jatindra Mohan wrote an adaptation of the play.

30. Bhadralok refers to the Bengali "gentlefolk," an intellectual and upper-class group that emerged in Bengal in the 19th century. They are characterized by their education, and refined behaviour.

31. *Apurba Sati* (1875) is a play written by Sukumari Dutta and Ashutosh Das.

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