



## Female Collaboration at Regional Junctions

### Traveling Pakistani Cinema and Unmoored Militarism in the 1980s

This article examines the material culture of Urdu action heroine films released in the era of Pakistan's Islamization (late 1970s through 1980s) by a woman-led company called Shamim Ara Productions, which was headed by the illustrious female star, director, and producer of the Urdu screen Shamim Ara. With titles such as *Miss Hong Kong* (1979), *Miss Colombo* (1984), *Miss Singapore* (1985), *Lady Smuggler* (1987), and *Lady Commando* (1989), the action films released by Shamim Ara Productions bear the imprint of a traveling culture of production roving through urban South and Southeast Asia. Not only do we find here a mobile industry, headquartered in Lahore, fostering collaborations between small-scale film and tourism entrepreneurs strewn across South and Southeast Asian cities (Colombo, Dhaka, Manila, Hong Kong), but we also encounter a hybrid cinema led largely by women and cross-fertilized by global images of female action and public mobility flowing into Pakistani cities with the video trade and its piracy, and satellite television (video and VCR having come to the country in the late 1970s). In this article, I situate the gender politics of the ensemble heroine narrative *Lady Smuggler* (1987) in its material culture of production and reception, with attention to the diverse locations of that culture.

Keywords: Urdu—film—Shamim Ara—South Asia—Southeast Asia

This article examines the ambivalent spatiality of a women-led, collaborative production culture of heroine-fiction films that flourished in Pakistan under the militarized Islamic economy and Cold War maneuvers of the 1980s. My focus is on a company headed by the illustrious female star, director, and producer of the Urdu film industry, Shamim Ara. With titles such as *Miss Hong Kong* (1979), *Miss Colombo* (1984), and *Miss Singapore* (1985), the fiction films released by Shamim Ara Productions bear the imprint of a border-crossing practice of coproductions. While the company was headquartered in Lahore, the films indeed were shot on location across South and Southeast Asia through collaborations between small-scale film and tourism companies. The ensemble action-heroine film *Lady Smuggler* (1987), which followed soon after *Miss Singapore*, is exemplary both of this border-crossing production culture as well as the leading roles taken by women in the growth of a small-scale traveling cinema in the 1980s. Shot in the Philippines and advertised in its poster-booklet as a “Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sari [sic] Lanka Joint Venture,” the film is known to have been directed by Shamim Ara and coproduced by Shamim herself, star and producer Babita of Bangladesh, star and producer Sabita of Sri Lanka, and tour-entrepreneur Mary of the Philippines (albeit she is unnamed in the credits). This article situates the gender politics of the ensemble heroine fiction *Lady Smuggler* in its contexts of production and reception, with attention to their diverse and conflicting locations. I argue that a reading of the coproduced work in relation to available production records illuminates the filmic text as an archive bearing the traces of regional junctions—that is, as an imaginary that assembles dissimilar regional ways of belonging and being. On the one hand, we find a women-centric imaginary of give-and-take that exceeds conventional national and culture boundaries, seeming to embody a collaborative practice. On the other hand, we encounter signifiers of violently masculine spatial control that encroach upon boundary-defying lives and ways. Invoking a masculinized military region of violence and sexual censorship, the latter gestures at a Pakistan that was transforming in the 1980s under the US-backed military Islamist dictatorship of Zia Ul Haq, which intersected with the economy of the Afghan War in the region (Pakistan-Afghanistan).

That being said, chroniclers and historians of these small, region-roving film companies of South Asia paint a picture largely at odds with my approach. What they do acknowledge is that small-scale production companies and artists collaborated across religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences from the late 1970s through

the 1990s, with the multi-sited films being released in local-language versions to audiences across the participating countries (Ziad 2010, 261; Ahmed 2015). *Lady Smuggler*, for instance, was dubbed in Bangla and released in Bangladesh in 1990, three years after the release of the original Urdu version in Pakistan. Yet, the recent accounts of these small-scale transnational film circuits of South Asia typically ascribe an instrumental logic of competitive expediency to such low-budget coproductions, especially since these inexpensively made films mostly doubled on the spectacular action and adventure genres rising from the big budget industries of the 1970s and 1980s (Hollywood, Bollywood, American television, Hong Kong martial arts). Mushtaq Gazdar, for one, maintains that film entrepreneurs from Lahore (such as Shamim Ara) were “compelled” to move beyond national borders in search of spectacles that could stem a decline in the local film business and manage rising production costs (Gazdar 1997, 205). In a similar vein, Abdullah Ziad argues that Bangladeshi film producers were led to collaborations by a poor market and the dearth of stars (2010, 260). The underlying assumption that film producers were driven solely by an instrumental logic of competition to reach across borders for new sensations and markets forecloses the possibility of meaningful correspondences between filmic aesthetics and the heterogeneity in their production and circulation process. We are led, instead, to a nationalist picture of native capital out to exploit and commodify regional resources.

Accounts from 1980s Pakistan, being specific in delineating the momentum behind coproductions, are somewhat more helpful for my study. While such accounts from the time similarly reinforce the view that an instrumental thinking drove the small-scale collaborative cinema from Pakistan, they also highlight a compelling logic of regional diversification behind the routes of coproduction. As put by the (unfavorable) words of an article titled “Government Sponsored Film Awards” published in 1987 by the state-sponsored *Platinum Jubilee Film Directory* of Pakistani cinema: “With the wild expansion of video piracy, the cinemagoers wanted . . . new exotic locations, fresh faces and high adventures . . . [such that] the [Pakistani] filmmakers had little choice but to go [down similar routes]” (Slote 1987, 42). Infrastructures of video piracy—rampant under the state-supported parallel economy in 1980s Pakistan—have been known to generate diverse modes of spatiality that link disparate social geographies and imaginations and foster hybrid spatial exchanges (Larkin 2008, 240). By inhabiting and doubling upon the infrastructures of video piracy, such Pakistani filmmakers as Shamim Ara were actively pursuing the same logic of diversified linkages. They were forging connections between regional geographies, resources, creative entrepreneurs, and audiences available in the small-scale, low-budget production routes they traversed. Yet, if collaborations between multi-sited producers meant that the films were distributed in different countries, their primary frames of reference and concern tended to be that of Pakistani directors and producers, Shamim Ara’s in our case at hand.

The production archive of *Lady Smuggler* that I assembled, from oral histories given by the late Shamim Ara’s crew members and family as well as tidbits from Urdu magazines, offers us glimpses of a women-led informal process of border-crossing collaborations. Forged through cultural commonalities (of language, sensory

inclinations, and attitudes) that bridged national and religious borders, the Shamim Ara production process seems to have functioned to an extent like a pre-capitalized economy flourishing through reciprocity and interdependency. Far from unusual, such imperfectly capitalized economies of film production as these were habitual to the South Asian region in the eras preceding state-supported corporatization of film industries (which began in Pakistan in the 2000s and in India in the 1990s). The allocations of labor and authority within the Shamim Ara production economy arose from what is well-described in terms of Madhava Prasad's study of the early Hindi film industry as a "heterogenous" process of producing the filmic commodity, an interdependent process "in which the whole is assembled from parts produced separately by specialists" (1998, 32). Still, the specificity of the small-scale traveling production companies of Pakistan or Bangladesh lay in the fact that the specialists and their repertoires came together from across national and cultural borders; mutual negotiations of both of resources and of difference were integral to the assembled whole. As such, the bridgework is noticeable not only in the records of offscreen production activity but also in the expressive and narrative modes of commodifying difference on the screen.

In the ensemble text of *Lady Smuggler*, coproduced from different countries by women and female stars, figurations of female solidarity embody a territorial boundary-defying logic suggestive of a mimetic correspondence to the familial gift-type economy characterizing Shamim Ara's production mode. We find looping through the combined production records and profilmic text an archive of reciprocity that conjures a new kind of region as collaborative practice. Yet, this vision of collaborative regionality remains partially forked, engaged in contestation with a masculine statist conception of region and social space (De 2020, 2021). In short, the text of *Lady Smuggler*, working in the tradition of a popular Urdu cinema prone to internalize historical contradictions (Dadi 2016, 90), constitutes an archival junction of conflicting regional traces. The following sections elaborate how the film form at once interacts with and internalizes the territorial tensions of militarizing Islamic Pakistan and at the same time repurposes the gift-type energies of a female-led production economy thriving through regional commonalities and collaborations.

### **Female solidarity and unmoored military manhood: *Lady Smuggler* (1987)**

*Lady Smuggler* is an ensemble heroine action drama depicting three women who meet in a Philippine prison cell. Played by female stars from three different countries—Babra Sharif from Pakistan, Babita from Bangladesh, and Sabita from Sri Lanka (the latter two coproducers as well)—the roles themselves evoke diverse ethnicities and religions not only offscreen but also onscreen. While an outreach to audiences from multiple regional and religious backgrounds is implicit in the diverse narrative roles, the stardom of the heroines in their respective countries only reinforces the appeal of cross-regional collaboration in the circuits of reception. The bulk of the plot itself depicts how these three women who meet in prison forge what is essentially a cross-border friendship to avenge the violence inflicted on them and their families by misguided and territorial masculinities. They have all landed in prison either because

they were framed by drug lords and their loved ones captured or massacred, or they were misrecognized by unjustly righteous state officials as drug smugglers.

Objects in the orbit of the filmic text reinforce the narrative of female solidarity through evoking desirable linkages. Noteworthy in this regard is the film poster of *Lady Smuggler*. Pirating the logo of the American television serial *Charlie's Angels* (figure 1), the poster explicitly doubles on the American female buddy action genre of the 1970s and 1980s, effectively mining the infrastructure of audience desire constructed in and beyond Pakistan through the circulation of pirated videos of American productions. The narrative of *Lady Smuggler* at the same time refuses the assertion of women's independence customary to the liberal Western action-heroine genre embodied in works such as *Charlie's Angels* (Tasker 1993, 18–19). The heroines of *Lady Smuggler* fight, instead, on behalf of honorable patriarchs and take up familial causes in lieu of men. Yet, the complexity of the plot lies in the fact that the ideal men are all slaughtered. Those men who remain active are emblematic either of militarized violence and social impurity (as drug dealers) or of a righteous pursuit of statist-patriarchal boundary logic that grows blind to the latter's injustice (policemen and a prison warden acting on behalf of an unjust Pakistani state embody this category of manhood). The action heroines, on their part, bond together to reclaim righteous indignation against territorial phallic violence as a women's prerogative. Dramatizing the purity of female outlaw anger against militaristic boundary logic, the three heroines strike a friendly pact to share their obligatory missions of vengeance and of rescue (of an abducted sister, played by Nepalese actress Dolly) by escaping from prison. This familial story of female friendship is choreographed onscreen as ludic juxtapositions both of dancing and touching female bodies and of a contagious feminization of phallic forms that visibly unmoors militaristic manhood. Focusing on scenic juxtapositions in this vein, I consider how the images could have been collaboratively constructed and inflected offscreen. My point is to follow the images and their masculine boundary-defying logic as objects made and changed



Figure 1. *Lady Smuggler* poster-booklet. Source: Salman Carim. (The error in spelling “smuggler” suggests the painter’s incomplete knowledge of English; in 1980s Lahore, poster-painting was still a hereditary artisanal trade practiced by non-Western-educated urban men.)

within available geographies of cultural resources, creative talent, and audience expectations.

Medium-long takes track the mobility of a strong working woman. We see the expatriate Pakistani woman and snake farmer Momie (played by Pakistani star Babra Sharif) in a white sleeveless blouse cruising in her motorboat. With a smile of confident freedom, heightened by a montage of the blue lagoon against verdant greenery, she effortlessly swoops her hand into the waters to grab up snakes for her pail. This euphoric imagery of the independent mobility and deportment of Momie, clad in a sleeveless Western-style blouse, is soon to be comically contained by her boyfriend's (Nepalese actor Shiva) head bobbing up next to the boat to remind her of the tryst she failed to keep. If the frame is set for a narrative of bourgeois heterosexual coupling common to the Urdu Social and other South Asian screens, the visual configuration of seemingly companionate manhood implies a phallic formation poised to control and censor the woman's freedom of mobility. The heightening of sexual censorship in Zia's Pakistan seems immanent to the scenic configuration—especially if we consider the fact that this Urdu film, by Shamim Ara's own testimony (*Film Asia* 1987), was submitted and approved by the Censor Board and thereafter was a commercial hit in Pakistan. Setting up a male-dominant couple-mode, the scene leads to the dance sequence expected also of couple-forming narratives from Urdu and Hindi screens. Yet, precisely the dance performance starts to unmoor the stable coherence of the masculine form.

The performance, which commences with shots of dancers in myriad colorful costumes and headgear presenting folk dance moves from the Philippines and neighboring regions, cuts to frequent medium close-ups of Momie and her boyfriend executing Pakistani dance moves. In the diversity of these performance shots we find a hybrid aesthetic containing traces of participatory regional talent and their respective gendered performativity. Since Shamim Ara's collaborators on the Philippine location shoots, including coproducer Mary, were tour operators, the material resources (dancers, exotic tourist spots) and sensuous attractions (images of villages and folk dancing) customary to their entertainment and advertising practices were being repurposed for the screen performance. What is noteworthy for my argument is that the collaborative business practice of invoking tourist attractions of performance and location comes to be internalized by the semiotic form and politicized by gender. The community performance in a substantial sense turns into the performance of a female-focused community. First, it limits the form of heterosexualized couple-dancing commonplace to the Hindi/Bollywood screen, including the blockbuster Hindi action-hero film *Sholay* (1975, directed by Ramesh Sippy) upon which the outlaw friendship narrative of *Lady Smuggler* doubled. While the narrative similarity reveals that *Lady Smuggler* was inhabiting the infrastructure of viewership set in place by the trade and piracy of Hindi film videos both in Pakistan and across the collaborating countries (Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in this case), the sensuous telos of the female-directed action-heroine narrative clearly differs. Second, the juxtaposition of dancing bodies in the performance under discussion begins to comically unwind the coherent male form through contagious correspondences with feminizing moves.

As panoramic shots of ensemble folk dancing cut to medium-range focus on the couple dance, we find a queer synchronicity of body movements beginning to characterize the romantic performance. Momie's artistry starts to prevail over her male partner's in its skillful boldness and titillating curvature. Performed by the talented *mūjra* (courtesan dance) virtuoso Babra Sharif, Momie's moves execute, in a muted form appropriate for the censored Urdu screen, the defiant hip and breast jiggles and writhes of the upstanding female body known to typify the Pakistani version of the celluloid *mūjra* (Ahmad 2016b, 11). What is provocative about the screen choreography in this case is the mimicry by her male partner of Momie's hip and shoulder jiggles (figure 2). The man's movements are repeatedly led by Momie/Babra Sharif's superior dancing skills into reproducing these feminine sexual motions, enhanced by hand and leg loops. Beyond this, the euphoric femininizing of the man's movements comes to be accented time and again by de-coupled formations. In more than one shot, we see the gyrating man performing at the forefront of (female) Filipina folk dancers (figure 3) rather than the few male folk dancers who also appear onscreen. There is little doubt that heterosexually arousing spectacles do appear, accompanying a wedding song playing on the soundtrack.



Figure 2. Synchronous writhes and jiggles. Source: *Lady Smuggler*.



Figure 3. Female focus and the male mimic. Source: *Lady Smuggler*.

For example, a momentary odalisque pose is struck by Momie and felt over by her partner. However, these occasional shots pale in impact by comparison to the man's comically emasculating moves. What these provoke is the consumption of cinema as a physical experience—an experience driven by a “contagious movement that renders . . . porous the boundaries between inside and outside,” subject and object (Bean 2002, 436). In mimetically tracing these movement arts to their making, I seem to see the bodies and the corporeal choices at once of the Pakistani *mūjra* virtuoso Babra Sharif, the star-director Shamim Ara, who also was known for her expert exposition of the celluloid *mūjra* (Gazdar 1997), as well as the Filipina tour and film entrepreneur Mary and her women-dominant dancing troupes combined.

Being choreographed through a mimetic juxtaposition of male with sexy female moves is a softening down of potentially violent phallic musculature in favor of the corporeal dexterity of the dancing woman to turn action heroine. The viewer is being affectively conditioned to expect the narrative role of this hero as a secondary figure, a relatively inactive guardian of patriarchal territories of domesticity and the military state alike. For, soon enough, a dwindling of bourgeois domestic patriarchy begins entwining with that of state patriarchy. While her father is killed and sister abducted by the arch villain drug lord of the narrative, Momie herself also is mistaken by an unrelenting police force to be a smuggler and hurled into prison. Thereafter, the plot arrests Momie's heterosexual romance. Her boyfriend, himself a policeman in military uniform righteously safeguarding state regulations, embarks on his territorial pursuit of the outlaw women after Momie and friends break out of prison. This boundary logic of the legal narrative jostles, however, with that of an overpowering story of boundary transgression mobilized both by female rebellion against injustice and by mutual emotional solidarity. Leading up to the escape is another euphoric performance by women that is to turn vicious in its ludic inversion of military masculine guardianship.

Wide-angle frames capture a women-only prison yard in which Momie frolics hand-in-hand with newfound female friends, the other two heroines also betrayed and set up as smugglers. The collaborative and co-creative regionality spawning *Lady Smuggler* comes alive onscreen as Shamim Ara's lead Pakistani heroine Babra Sharif is showcased alongside the Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan heroine-producers, Babita and Sabita, respectively. The three smiling women turn and twist as they lip-sync a song about *dostī* (friendship). They sing of how *terā dūshman* has become *merā dūshman* (your villainous enemy has become my enemy), of being together in life and death, and of a mutual *vādā* (promise) never to be forgotten. The camera follows the euphoric abandon of interdependent female homosocial desire, lingering on the women's bodies moving together and caressing one another. Soon after, the camera is pulling back to frame a field full of women prisoners moving and circling in synergy around the three friends. This harmonious, region-girdling collective of women, enervated by the jubilation of female *dostī*, has displaced earlier scenes in which the inmates of this women's prison grouped themselves under separate regional identities and randomly attacked one another (the South and Southeast Asian inmates displaying mutual hostility). The montage of harmony is dialectically juxtaposed, however. Menacing images of rifle-bearing guards, dark phallic shapes



that stand tall upon the prison walls, frame the dancing women and bear down upon the kinetic synergy of the feminine space. Indeed, this montage of a dance of cross-regional female mutuality bounded and patrolled by military men nicely embodies the overall claim of this article—my argument that the ambivalent spatial politics of the profilmic text seen in relation to the production economy offers us an archival junction of conflicted regional ways of belonging. One of these ways to belong in sociopolitical space through being menacingly bounded and censored by phallic identities refers to the Islamizing military region of Pakistan and contiguous Afghanistan (being maneuvered in this era by Cold War flows of arms and cash). The other and more compelling way to belong—at least within the scope of the filmic imagery—is that of women who breach boundaries of state and region through rendering phallic domination and military manhood ineffectual. Precisely along these lines, the phallic shapes of guards and rifles are rendered inert at the same time that key symbols of a militarized legal system are unmoored and upended. For one, the heroines are shown at medium close-up twining with careless mockery between the erected guns and hardened musculature (figure 4). Note also that look and frame are made frontal, such that the dancers break the invisible fourth wall and gaze out of the frame as if to address and to include female audiences in the fold of defiance. For another, emasculated queerness is soon found at the heart of the prison itself and, more generally, of the state and its legal system.

The camera pans to show the prison gate being held open. Enter the prison warden, Rangila Jailer, played by the eponymous comedian. The trailblazer of gender-queering artistry on the Urdu screen of this era, Rangila was a “polysexual” (Ahmad 2016a, 472) male performer of *bhānd* comedy indigenous to the South Asian region (Pamment 2017). Having directed a carnivalesque drag comedy titled *Aurat Raj/Women’s Rule* in 1979, Rangila grew to be Shamim Ara’s steady collaborator and became active in coproduction routes across the region (we see images of Rangila in Bangladeshi coproduction stills as well). In this instance, the stocky, uniformed figure of Rangila Jailer is hurrying and tripping, Charlie Chaplin mode, until he



Figure 4. Female moves and military-phallic inertia. Source: *Lady Smuggler*.



Figure 5. Unmooring militarized manhood. Source: *Lady Smuggler*.

arrives center-frame. He whips out a phallic cigarette and turns an exaggerated glare upon the dancing heroines. Then shot-reverse-shot show him at close range looking and beginning to twitch in uncontrollable mimicry, breaking and curving up his militarized heterosexual musculature (figure 5).

The implication of performing tactile perception in the Pakistani legal context of the time would have been profoundly unsettling for the sexual-boundary logic of censorship. For, through playing upon masochistic anxieties the performance undoes the proprieties of dominant gazing relations and invokes the offense of *zina* (illicit intercourse), to be further discussed in the following paragraphs. In effect, Rangila performs the masochistic man prone to gaze into a secluded women-only space, such that he implicitly touches the frolicking women and loses his militarized, hetero-manly resolve. Soon enough, he is surrounded by the three dancing heroines who further entice his body into jiggly moves. Having let down his sexual guard, Rangila Jailer visibly unsettles phallic stability. Therewith, he has forfeited his symbolic guardianship of unjust state discipline and paved the way to the women's lawless fight for justice. Taking Rangila Jailer as hostage, the three women prisoners steal a truck and escape. As the stolen truck pulls away from the prison gate, we hear Rangila's enamored voice asking in a self-indulgent tone: "where do you take me, *haseené* (pretty ones)?" In a ludic vein, this region-girdling cohort of heroines and filmmakers confronts boundary logic at different levels—that of an unjust patriarchal statist system, of policing and incarceration, and of the potentially violent identity of a militarized religious-state representative (a prison warden in uniform).

Soon thereafter, the ludic performance of cross-gender play transforms into a violent one. The heroines' anger against systemic tyranny leads into intense confrontations as the three proceed to exact revenge on the *dūshman* (villainous enemies) who have destroyed their families and lives. The climax is a prolonged slasher sequence that locks heroine Momie in mortal combat with arch opponent Mashiyyar, played by the leading villain of Urdu and Punjabi screens, Humayun Qureshi. Shot in Hollywood-style slow motion, constituting yet another cinematographic trace of infrastructures of video trade and piracy, this sequence is overrun with sadomasochistic "bodily sensations . . . [that invite] cross-gender identification"

(Clover 1987, 215): a sharing of masculine aggression and the reducing of male bodies to abjection. In these hybrid performances by Pakistani artists Rangila and Humayun Qureshi, we find a robust play on local and global (Hollywood) tropes of gender queerness. The performers inhabit images and genres found in videos and selectively repurpose the influences. What we find in these images are traces of collaboration between the male artists and a women-dominant production and performance mode. Moreover, the collaborative mode of creativity takes boundary-defying paths to a collective regional screen. Along these lines, affect shifts again in the closing shots of *Lady Smuggler*. As the soundtrack picks up the familiar song of female *dostī*, we see the prostrated and blood-bathed bodies of the three heroines, who have triumphed over Mashiyar and gang at the cost of their lives. While separated takes seem oriented to the multiple audiences of this coproduction in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—and to the desires to gaze upon the local star—the final long takes emphasize female friendship. The heroines reach out to one another with rays of smile, and they touch and caress in ways that imply a quintessentially erotic union—in effect, a union between the regions, bodies, and desiring peoples of a divided and war-torn South Asia replete with commonalities. The women’s bodies are shown to be sinking to a happy death.

### **Regional crossings and familial bridges: The production archive**

If we take the images studied in the preceding paragraphs as objects made and located in the multiple production and reception sites of the itinerant film company of Shamim Ara, we find in them sentient emissaries of a women-prone practice of familial collaboration bridging regional, religious, and linguistic divides. Familial depictions of film business relations recurred at once in the oral histories given to me by Shamim Ara’s crew members, in photographs taken on sets, as well as in news tidbits and interviews found in the extra-cinematic Urdu sphere of promotion and publicity at this time. In exploring the familial and women-focused metaphors of work relations in extant accounts of Shamim Ara’s company, we excavate a mode of film production engendered as something of a traveling gift-type economy.

Parallel stories of the familial route along which *Lady Smuggler* came to be shot in the Philippines were told to me at different moments both by the late Shamim Ara’s associate director Syed Hafeez Ahmed (2015) and by the local facilitator and line producer for *Lady Smuggler* in the Philippines, Raja Riaz Khan (2016). A Pakistani Muslim himself, Raja Riaz described that he had been running a small tour company in the Philippines in partnership with a Filipina Catholic woman named Mary and an Indian Sikh man named Mohan Singh Makkar when word came to him that a Pakistani company wanted to shoot a film in that country. On his part, Syed Hafeez Ahmed (2018) elaborated on this linkage process by noting to me that Shamim Ara Productions frequently made word-of-mouth contacts, based on familiarity and trust, even though contracts were later signed for “tax purposes.” Speaking of coproductions from the Dhaka end, Md. Fokrul Alam, who introduced himself as the research officer at the Bangladesh Film Archive, illuminated for me an inclusive and

polycentric linkage by noting that these small-scale collaborations required bringing in (*neeté hoto*) “local talent” and resources (2014).

On location in the Philippines, this “requirement” was fulfilled by the woman tour entrepreneur Mary becoming another coproducer of *Lady Smuggler*, in line with Shamim Ara herself and the female stars and producers Babita and Sabita. There is little doubt that, in the various accounts he gave of the coproduction experience, Syed Hafeez Ahmed sought to hold on to the familiar nativist logic that Pakistanis maintained authorial control over directorial and aesthetic directions; the underlying implication, not unlike Fokrul Alam’s, would be that local people were recruited to play instrumental parts. Yet, on more than one such occasion, Ahmed went on to note, as if to throw in a caveat, that work relations with Filipina coproducer Mary were extensive *and* familial. Reminiscing in the latter vein, the elderly Ahmed would break into smiles anytime he spoke of Mary. He would add quite unrelated stories of how she came to be a “sister” to him, and that, to this day, they exchange letters and greeting cards on birthdays and celebrations.

The photographs from his personal archive shared with me by Syed Hafeez suggest that the physicality of work relations on the set may well have fostered familial affect. One such photograph taken during a *Lady Smuggler* shoot shows Shamim Ara flanked by Mary and Syed Hafeez Ahmed seated in close proximity in a cramped and sweaty studio space pouring over what appears to be a script (figure 6). Another photo (figure 7) of crew members on the set reveals one man busily holding up another’s body to mount a camera on a tree (rear of photograph), while others squat around to share a moment of relaxation. Stories told to me by Syed Hafeez Ahmed illuminated that mutual corporeal aid was a practice central to gathering resources for these low-budget productions. For example, the “manual crane” was a standard practice (i.e., men climbed up on one another to hold the camera at a high angle). A third outdoor photo, taken on the set of *Lady Smuggler*, reinforces how female-familial and cross-regional relations led these collaborative efforts. We see a smiling Mary posing



Figure 6. Mary, Shamim Ara, Syed Hafeez Ahmed. Source: Salman Carim.



Figure 7. Manual mounting of a camera for high angle shots. Source: Salman Carim.



Figure 8. Mary behind camera and Shamim Ara seated (with hat on). Source: Salman Carim.

behind a camera on tripod with Shamim Ara seated next to her, bearing the trace perhaps of the latter's role of an elder sister and maternal guide on how to shoot film (figure 8). Known in the Lahore context to have been a maternal mentor to women in the industry (Khan 2014, 19), Shamim Ara may well have been building similarly familial work relations with women across the regional routes of production.

We find in these photos of production activity configurations of bodies and things that could be useful as a “methodological *bricolage*” for studying the cultural production of (familial) memory knitting together visual text and material context (Kuhn 2007, 283–84). Whereas I learned from Ahmed that a still photographer would accompany the company on its production routes (2019), I did not hear of any clear destination for these photographs. Pakistani magazines and government reports do publish occasional stills from coproductions of this era, but none that I have seen carry such behind-the-camera photographs of the production unit. Where these photos from Shamim Ara Productions do reside today is as private treasures of the late star-director-producer's crew members, helping them to remember the familial ties and retain contact with erstwhile colleagues. In this light, a *bricoleur* approach to the processes of bonding made tangible by photographs taken on the sets of this

small-scale film company permits an understanding of how tangible affect circulating in the physical form of photos cemented and extended familial infrastructures for film production across national borders as well as within. As meticulously delineated by Gwendolyn Kirk, to this day, the Lahore film industry survives on kin relations, be they based on blood ties or on cultivated “fictive kinship ties” (2016, 91). The tactile habits of cultivating kinship as the way to sustain film business were extending across cultural and geopolitical borders in the 1980s.

This fact is well illustrated by a captivating account published in the Urdu periodical *Film Asia*. Titled “Eid Mubārak,” the article graphically describes the Islamic ritual of giving gifts of sacrificial meat on the occasion of Eid-ul-Adha in order to cement family ties and kin-like relations with close friends. We learn that Shamim Ara and other industry stalwarts distributed packets of sacrificial meat to film personalities located not only in Lahore or Karachi but also in neighboring countries such as Nepal (1987, 25). All in all, habits of cultivating sociality in palpable forms of affect seem to have worked as a regionally recognized way to sustain both economic interdependence and co-creative cinema across cultural differences and statist divides.

Dependent on contributors and specialists in diverse locations, such small-scale traveling film companies as Shamim Ara’s seem to have functioned, at least to an extent, through what Michael Taussig describes as the “sentient reciprocations” immanent to pre-capitalized economies (1992, 72). Exceeding the capital logic of accumulation and ownership, pre-capitalized economies initiate “cross-connections” between giving gifts, practicing “mutual aid,” and building economic relations (ibid., 68, 72). Taussig adds the provocative point that these economies generate tactile reciprocations between the spirit of giving or trading things and the spirit of miming another’s sensory aura (sights, sounds, motions, speech forms) in order to be on an even footing with the other (ibid., 70–72). I have recently demonstrated that a similar gift-type logic of trading in cinema in a multireligious and multicultural region animates Shamim Ara’s own descriptions of her artistic practice (2020, 170). Intertextually examining the oral and visual records of Shamim Ara’s familial and multi-sited cinematic trade in relation to the filmic text of *Lady Smuggler*, I find the traces of a sensory miming and correspondence along the same lines. Yet, as discussed in the previous section of this article, the sensory mimicry works in opposite ways. On one side, performances of tactile reciprocity and mimicry overrun the female-focused imagery such that sentient bridges are built across differences of regional, ethnic, and religious identities. On another side, the very staging of mimicry and correspondence between dissimilar identities and conflicting gender norms unmoors the boundary-keepers and unsettles (militarized) territories. In the entwined archive of cinematic text and context, then, we see how the reciprocal sensory aura born of a gift-type region-crossing economy is comprehended and repurposed anew in relation to the intense contradictions of body politics within a militarized-religious structure of regionalism. Seen another way, the different locations of the production process, replete as these are with multiple ways of social and economic belonging, trigger textual interactions with the militarized formations of gender and aesthetics

in 1980s Pakistan and contiguous war-torn spaces. I round out the article by briefly considering the latter.

### **Female action and Urdu cinema in a militarized region and Islamizing state**

The Shamim Ara action artistry in *Lady Smuggler* arose from a local and global boom in this era of what Tom Gunning calls the spectacular new “cinema of effects,” a film form whose primary appeal and meaning are “rooted in stimulus” rather than in the narrative (cited in Tasker 2004, 7). Scholarship on action cinema in 1980s Pakistan situates this proliferation of confrontational stimuli on popular screens in relation to the prevalent culture of gun violence and brutal censorship, under an Islamizing regime and the Afghan War. Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad delineate the rise of an influential Punjabi action-hero genre, addressing the everyday oppressions of peasant and working-class men under the gun-and-drug economy in the region, which dramatized the purity of violent anger “against an oppressive state [embodied in a] monstrously impure society” (2016, 124, 126). Iqbal Singh Sevea, while concurring with the view that the new Punjabi hero depicted an “unabashedly violent” masculine type that had “little to do with the nation-state” (2014, 132), remarks upon the patriarchal inflection of the Punjabi manly code. He observes that even though strong women figure in Punjabi action films, and they “infringe” on typically male forms of activity, these roles “ultimately serve . . . to further entrench a code of masculinity” (ibid., 130–31). This Punjabi macho tradition at the same time was being complicated through the agency of actresses who crisscrossed the screen and the commercial stage. Entwining confrontational physicality with irreverent dances and acts, their performances evoked a carnivalesque sexual practice overlapping with the *māhi mūdā* or Punjabi tomboy theater. The queer burlesque tradition of *māhi mūdā* combined “macho-body language” with seductive moves (Pamment 2015, 207–8, 213).

While these insurgent Punjabi aesthetics of pure anger, masculine violence, and burlesque were influential on the Pakistani film market of the time, their impact on the Shamim Ara repertoire was mediated by its own Urdu legacy of a cinema made in the national language. This linguistic parameter accounts for its relatively close relationship to the state and script surveillance as well as its historically urban middle-class address. As such, the body politics in *Lady Smuggler* must be seen in relation to the altering middle-class urban formations in the Cold War–governed state of 1980s Pakistan. Women’s workforce participation was fast expanding under what Saadia Toor describes as a Cold War–fueled “macro-economic revival” (2011, 154). Hand in hand arose a groundswell of Pakistani women’s movement against the brutally censorious Islamist dictatorship (ibid., 138–49). Thus, in the ludic camaraderie and the technological independence of the Shamim Ara heroines we find, on the one hand, a euphoric celebration of women’s upward mobility and collective freedom under urban change. The combative cross-gender action, on the other hand, combines insurgent local imaginations with global forms to produce a practice that is politically referential, entwined with what Lalitha Gopalan describes, in the context of the Indian Rape Revenge heroine from the same period, to be a practice “throw[ing] up the aggressive strands of feminism” (2002, 51). Yet, the impact of liberal ideas such

as female freedom and rights, found from local and global sources, necessarily was mediated by the popular Urdu address of Shamim Ara's repertoire.

In Pakistan, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, women's mobility and feminist mobilization alike are located in a culture inextricable from religion as well as the state's regulation thereof (Weiss 2012, 52). Beyond this, vernacular entertainment cultures such as Shamim Ara's Urdu cinema appealed to tastes across urban class divides. In these vernacular domains of women's entertainment, liberal representations of "individualized agency," argues Kamran Asdar Ali, could well be "tempered with other visions of the self . . . [such as] the desire to be . . . modest" (2004, 140). At the core of feminine modesty, explains Hamid Naficy with reference to post-revolution Iranian cinema, is a premodern supposition that the self is "more collective, communal, familial and hierarchical [such that] . . . women are a constitutive part of the males to whom they are related" and hence to be shielded from other men (Naficy 2012, 8). The encoding of modesty in this communal male filmic gaze makes looking relations more tactile than voyeuristic (Mottahedeh 2008, 9), such that men are seen as prone to be "masochistic" (Naficy 2012, 106-7) in looking and effectively engaging in *zina* (illicit intercourse) if nonfamily women expose themselves in public without a proper "visual shield" (Mottahedeh 2008, 9). To remain attentive to the specificities of Pakistani women's bodily practices of modest segregation, prior to and during Zia's Islamizing regime, we must also note that Pakistani women's somatic practices of nationalism, shared among women across South Asia, had always been both voluntary and fluid (Rouse 2004, 98). What came with Zia's state was a brutal proscription precisely of the fluidity of women's illiberal modern life-worlds, in the name of corrupting men. The sphere of obscene exposure necessarily included the cinema, such that the revised Motion Picture Ordinance of 1979 banned no less than three hundred Pakistani films.

How is *Lady Smuggler* emotionally triggered by these boundary logics of militarization and censorship in Pakistan at the same time that it moves against the bounds in reciprocal ways, mobilized by a women-led process of crossing cultural borders and mimicking the others? As earlier detailed, the ensemble filmic text, coproduced by four women from different cultural and political regions, depicts appealing ways in which "impurities" of militarized and statist regionalism are decentered in favor of a heroic female friendship forged between three strangers. Coming hand in hand are emasculating performances of manhood that suggest resourceful collaborations between female and gender-queering artists (from Lahore and elsewhere) and the tour operators who brought the production to the Philippines. Bearing sensory auras of multiregional collaborations, the text and context of *Lady Smuggler* entwine to constitute a gender-focused archive of collaborative regional sensibilities that repurposes the masculinist boundary gaze in order to unmoor militaristic and heteropatriarchal formations in South Asia.

## Conclusion

I have argued that in exploring the South Asian region through the lens of cinematic archives, we learn to think transregionally (Chowdhury and De, 2020). For, we grow



alert to the heterogeneity of cinematic movements. These encompass aesthetic and material processes moving both across borders of states and cultures in South Asia, and beyond the historical space of the subcontinent to interrelate with other regions of the global South. Such region-crossing film cultures reveal that, as a “collaborative medium” (Cook 2012, 252) of producing knowledge in multiple sensory forms, the cinema could well be open to hybrid social claims made by makers, financiers, and target audiences. The film form could be deployed to exceed or riddle division and hierarchy—be they statist or regional—through the very processes of shooting, editing, and interweaving expressive and narrative codes. If we approach popular South Asian cinema as a collaborative mode, in other words, we find archives of contradictory insights on sociality and social emergence that embody conflicted regional junctions of belonging, of resistance, and of border-breaches. As shown by my study of Shamim Ara’s coproduction *Lady Smuggler*, these archives of sociocultural border-crossing must be sought both onscreen, in the aesthetic politics, and offscreen, in the materiality of a region-traversing production and reception scene.

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#### AUTHOR

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