Understanding Bollywood

"This is an impressive study of the aesthetics and social impact of Bollywood on Indian society. It explores the complex synthesis of tradition, culture, religion, patriarchy, nationalism, and gender which shaped this spectacular indigenous cinematic tradition with a growing international and diasporic reach. Ayob sheds light on the history and controversies centered on assertions that patriarchal culture and the subordination of women inscribed in the aesthetics of Bollywood can be linked to the subordination and abuse of women in postcolonial and contemporary India. By investigating the extent to which Bollywood's aesthetics are embedded in precolonial Indian society and how this has been gradually superseded, Ayob has produced an incisive, nuanced and illuminating study. Her scrupulous attention to detail and incisive application of cinematic and postcolonial cultural and gender theory, framed by family history and personal experience, has resulted in a ground-breaking and highly readable work on popular Indian cinema."

—Andries Walter Oliphant

Professor of Theory of Literature, University of South Africa

"Ayob balances incisive analysis with a refreshingly personal take on Bollywood cinema. She treats these fascinating films as complex texts that both affirm and critique cultural and patriarchal norms, while never losing sight of her own history and identity within the Indian diaspora. Understanding Bollywood serves at once as a useful introduction to the sub-genre, and a repeatedly rewarding deep dive."

—Greg Taylor

Associate Provost and Professor of Cinema Studies, Purchase College, SUNY; Author of Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism

Understanding Bollywood:

A Calling

By

Asma Ayob

I dedicate this book to those who have endured physical, emotional, and mental pain. I hope this book becomes an inspiration to those who find themselves at a point of no return, and a source of strength to those who need encouragement. But most of all, I pray that this book affects change.

A despot sees no reason
looms over its victims like an impending tornado.
bending, twisting, twirling
till they lie limply
like ragdolls spent.
After a milieu of gloom
a glimmer of light
tiny currents of evolution
redemption.
spurts of sunlight disrupt the status quo
Rapturous torrents cleanse the darkness
the tide turns.

—Asma Ayob.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.

—Toni Morrison

I have had a love-hate relationship with Hindi-language films or Bollywood, as it is known today, for as long as I can remember. Even when I try to jog my memory, the tug between love and hate is always there, and I remember that the feeling was born during my adolescent years.

I am a third-generation member of the Indian diaspora. In the early 1940s, more than two decades before I was born, my paternal grandmother passed away in India. By 1946, India was full of anxiety, and tension was rife - rumours about the impending partition filled the air. It was during this time that my grandfather left India with my father, who was only seven years old. Accompanied by a large group of Indians determined to venture abroad in search of better pastures, they piled into a ship called the Karanja. The seas were rough as they travelled from the port in India to South Africa, and the ship threatened to capsize several times along the way. When they set foot on solid ground after four grinding weeks, they were elated. Their euphoria, however, was short-lived. As reality sank in, they realised that their passage to freedom had merely dislodged them - out of an inferno and straight into the pit of apartheid. And back in India, the cataclysm that was looming over the nation was about to erupt. There was no turning back.

In 1947, at the stroke of midnight, on August 14th in Pakistan and August 15th in India respectively, an unprecedented catastrophe occurred. It was the sudden, British announced partition of India. As the British Raj formally came to an end, power was transferred to the Indians; and two independent nations, India and Pakistan were born. From that moment onwards, all Indians - Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs were identified according to the Radcliffe Line. The clumsy line of division was drawn by lawyer Cyril Radcliffe without any consideration for the actual spaces and lives that this demarcation would destroy.

During the partition of 1947, an estimated 14 million people were displaced according to religion and over a million were killed. And these are only the reported cases. Those who lived through this horror did not

know it then, but this incident would come to be known as the worst massacre in the history of humankind. Acclaimed Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal later called this partition "a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, but an event in time that continues to influence how the people and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present, and future".

My father was a victim of this event. He was not able to return to India to visit his mother's grave; he was told by his elders that Porbandar, the city where she was buried, was in shambles. Images of mass graves, bloodshed, and anarchy filled his mind, and he lost the will to return to the place that he had once called home. He focussed on his career and put the idea of returning to India out of his mind. There was no comfort to be found in family. They were scattered across the globe, working hard to build new lives in foreign lands. And he did the same; living in South Africa, amid apartheid, trying to find a space that would allow a brown surgeon to advance in his field of expertise.

I was born in a small town in South Africa and then moved with my parents into the city of Pretoria. Being of Indian descent, or non-white (as we were classified), we were not allowed to live in the affluent areas of South Africa; the group areas act that enforced racial segregation was rampant. We settled into one of the small communities designated for people of our kind. Indians, the brown people - Muslims and Hindus, we shared the same space. Included in our mix were coloured people, the South African term for mixed-race individuals.

After a couple of years, my father's profession took us to New York, and I was exposed to a radically divergent culture. The notion of growing up in two distinctly different continents may sound exhilarating, but the reality is quite challenging indeed. After convincing my American friends that I did not leap from tree to tree in the African jungle, I had to convince my South African friends that I did not live on TV dinners and party all night long. Without any warning, I had inadvertently become the "other".

As the thought of ever having a single identity slipped through my fingers, belonging too, became a foreign notion. I was raised a Muslim, but when filling out forms, I checked the box that said Indian in South Africa, and Asian in America. And when at home, whether in South Africa or America, I was part of a patriotically Indian family. But I had never been to India!

Nevertheless, the essence of India filled my senses and blessed our home as I gathered around the dinner table with my family every evening and feasted on biryani, dhal, curries, and roti's. My mother is a proud housewife and stayed true to her Indian heritage - that included teaching me to master

making the "perfect" round roti, and learning how to make every Indian dish on the planet. But cooking and eating Indian food was not enough to solve my identity crisis. I still had to decipher who I was - South African, American, or Indian? No culture or custom resonated with me fully. I was always the outsider. And I feared that may never change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

> Art helps us identify with one another and expands our notion of we - from the local to the global.
>
> —Olafur Eliasson

My first encounter with Bollywood happened in 1982, at the age of fourteen. I had just finished reading Danielle Steel's *The Promise*, the classic love story of endurance, faith, and perseverance, and my first introduction to the wonders of plastic surgery. We lived as an extended family; my maternal grandparents were an intrinsic part of my life. My grandmother was born and raised in India and didn't speak a word of English. Since being displaced from her homeland, the only connection she had to her beloved India was through Hindi-language films.

Later that year, *Yeh Vaada Raha*, the Indian version of *The Promise* starring Rishi Kapoor, Poonam Dillon, and Tina Munim was released. Back in those days, watching movies on a little square box was one of the ways we bonded. My grandmother would make *chaat*, *samosas*, and *bhajias*, accompanied by her signature homemade chutneys. And the whole family would settle down for a good two and a half to three hours. For me, it was solely the connection that the movie made with Steel's text that drew me into the film. But for my grandmother, and other members of my extended family who were forced to flee India, it was a connection with their past, their home, their interrupted legacy.

I often settled down with my family as a courtesy - at least once a week, sometimes twice, to journey to a land that was alien to me. Except some of the customs that played out on screen seemed familiar, because my family, like other families that came from India, had kept Indian traditions and rituals alive. I remember watching certain Bollywood films over and over again, falling in love with the spectacle, the dances, the catchy tunes, the glamorous costumes. But I soon lost interest. The films all had the same elements - romance, a ton of melodrama, lengthy comedic scenes, tragedy. Punches were always thrown, ensuring that action was a part of the films. When least expected, the hero and heroine would run around trees, singing and dancing as if the world were a utopia. This bumbling mixture, I would soon come to realize, was what defined the signature Bollywood masala film.

It was the masala film that caused fans in India to dance in the aisles during screenings at the theatre; it was the masala film that prompted fights to break out in defence of favourite characters; it was the masala film that made men and women in India fall in love after viewing the promise of romance. But most importantly, it was the masala film that humbly allowed an average of ten million moviegoers in India, a form of escapism from their daily lives[1]. And, if I take this concept one step further, it was the same masala film that allowed me to bond with my grandmother over language barriers in a foreign country that categorised us with labels, and pushed us into inferior spaces because of the colour of our skin. Might I add, that the classification of colour is not as straightforward as it appears on any document or form. Indians, who with a broad brushstroke were labelled brown, are in reality, also as fair as milk and as swarthy as coffee.

Coming back to Bollywood. The masala film continued to draw audiences and was even exported across the globe. My grandmother and I continued to rent video cassettes of the latest Bollywood films and I watched them with my fingers often fixed onto the fast-forward button so that I could push through the lengthy comedy scenes and extensive dance sequences. Johnny Lever, Jeetendra, and Sri Devi were the flavours of the decade. The movies were almost always set in India, embedded with tradition, culture, and various rituals that were colourfully displayed on-screen. Suffice it to say, the time spent watching these movies provided my family and so many other Indians who were forced to flee India with a nostalgic connection to their heritage. But for those who had not been to India, it was just another exotic location.

For me, India was simply a locale to be put on my bucket list. Yet, for some unfathomable reason, even those of us who had never been to India were vested in Bollywood trends, and we donned the latest fashions straight out of Bollywood films. We emulated the dance movements of our favourite actors and actresses during *sangeet* (Indian dance) parties. Without realising it, I had, together with other community members, formed a dialectic relationship with the characters and cultural traditions in Bollywood films.

While my fascination with dance was short-lived because of my two left feet, my interest in Bollywood representations was piqued. As I watched more Bollywood films, I noticed that the narratives often mirrored the challenges that we faced as a family, and as members of a community. And when I looked beyond the melodrama, I found myself identifying with certain characters on screen. Later, when I least expected it, I was connecting. Or was Bollywood connecting with me? I'm not sure exactly

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[1] as quoted in Gokulsing and Dissnayake (2004, 1).

what transpired, but there was an association, an attachment, a bond that developed between onscreen representations and my deep-rooted sense of self. My buried identity. And if for that reason only, I believe that Bollywood should be honoured, for providing millions of people, myself included, with a sense of belonging.

When I began my study on Bollywood cinema, I was driven by the formidable duo of Shah Rukh Khan and Karan Johar - the star par excellence and the young new-age director who I believe have changed the face of Bollywood. While studying the representational techniques employed by Karan Johar in his three blockbuster films, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998)*, Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *and Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006), I felt as though I was unlocking a coded message.

Later, I was intrigued by the project of Salman Khan in films like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Khan 2015) and *Bharat* (Zafar 2019) - both are films that deal with the bereavement of people because of partition. In the twenty-first century, through powerful messages in his films, Salman Khan and his co-star Katrina Kaif re-united actual victims of partition. When I screened these films in my *Film, History, and Trauma* course, students were in tears. Many of them identified with the partition victims because their emigrant status in the US had separated them from their loved ones.

Research then pointed me in the direction of representations of women in specific Bollywood films. I welcomed the refreshing manner in which seasoned directors such as Yash Chopra, Subhash Ghai, Aditya Chopra, Zoya Akhtar, and others were framing the challenges faced by Indian women in a changing world. But it was Johar's style of direction and narrative structure that captured my attention. I decided to focus my Ph.D. study on Johar as an auteur in relation to the representation of women in an evolving Indian society. The notion of identity became the central focus of my work. Being of Indian descent, I appreciate the nuances of culture that he portrays in his films. I am especially grateful for his unique, discerning representations of identity because they mirror the constant chasm that I, as a woman of the Indian diaspora experience in various aspects of my life.

My study was interrupted in December 2012, when yet another catastrophe hit India. A young woman was gang-raped on a moving bus in Delhi. This was not the first incident of rape in India and most certainly not the first documented case worldwide. Yet, due to the wide media coverage of this particular incident, an international dialogue on both the issue of rape, as well as the general treatment of women in India was re-ignited. Bollywood activist and actress Shabana Azmi joined the conversation on *BBC News* (2013) and argued that a core reason for the violence is a general lack of respect toward women in India which is based on an internalised

patriarchal mindset within the country. American activist Eve Ensler branded the incident a "catalytic moment" which provides us with a chance to re-think the degradation of women globally (Wolfe 2013). Subsequently, a survey conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* in 2013 cited Bollywood cinema as playing a contributory role in fuelling the culture of rape in India. And it was back to the drawing board for me.

 I decided to use the international arena as my backdrop in evaluating Johar's films, while at the same time, addressing this heinous crime and its interrelation with Bollywood filmmakers. The first thought that sprung to my mind was the potential persuasiveness of Bollywood cinema, and then I pondered about whether or not Bollywood filmmakers were aware of the influence they yielded over audiences. My study was transformed from analysing representations of women to include probing the allegations made against Bollywood filmmakers. Serious allegations held them responsible for playing a causal role in fuelling the culture of rape in India.

According to Pugsley and Khorana (2011, 360), contemporary Bollywood films often represent the realities of life in India. From this perspective, one cannot deny the strong link between Indian society and Bollywood films. Since many Bollywood films often mirror the realities of life in India, Bollywood cinema, in its role as a cultural role player, has contributed to the ongoing dialogue on women's position in India. In order to fully understand the relationship between Bollywood cinema and its audiences, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of both films and the people of India.

Chapter one outlines the steady rise of Bollywood from its humble beginnings in Parsi theatre to its position as a transnational/cultural role player for Indian diaspora audiences worldwide. The three eras of filmmaking in India from 1947 through the post-1991 period are discussed. Interestingly, Bollywood drew inspiration from Parsi theatre before developing a language of its own. In this chapter, the changing preferences of audiences are considered in relation to literacy rates, as well as aesthetic proclivities.

The tendency of Bollywood filmmakers to be faithful to the nationalist project and its articulation of the operation of the joint family system, patriarchal structures, and the subjugation of women is also examined. Part of the nationalist agenda included using mythology and archaic Indian traditions to ensure that women in India would always be repressed under the domineering cloak of patriarchy.

To further coerce women in India into subordinate positions, personal laws were favoured over decisions of the Supreme Court. Women were often intimidated into following constructed personal laws to avoid becoming outcasts of society. The combination of nationalist principles, myths, and personal laws were instrumental in shaping the psyches of

women in India. As a result, many Indian women were silenced. This is vividly explained through an analysis of Jaya Bachchan's character in Karan Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*.

Chapter two highlights how Bollywood as an industry has grown, from being an indigenous cinema for its people to a global phenomenon. The period during which Bollywood as an industry became economically liberated is explored. This was also the time when the Indian diaspora became a lucrative market for Bollywood. As Indians migrated to places across the globe, transnationalism allowed for the creation of a space that synthesised the older ideologies of India with the formation of new identities in foreign lands.

In Chapter three, the evolution/reshaping of women in Bollywood films is discussed - from their earlier stereotypical representations to their transformation into autonomous beings. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity sheds light on the idea of cultures meeting on neutral ground, a concept that is exhibited in many contemporary Bollywood films. From this perspective, the following is important,

- Bollywood cinema has changed/evolved;
- Evolution is linked to what has happened in society – changes have been brought on by transnationalism;
- Change is seen in the depiction of female characters who are less conventional.

These cumulative changes make it clear that Bollywood cinema continues to evolve. With increasing migration and the splitting up of families, Bollywood filmmakers have been forced to change the basis of their narratives which previously focused on large families sitting around a dinner table, and sharing stories about their woes and joys. The contemporary female character now has to shape her own identity. And while this may disrupt the joint family system, it simultaneously opens up a hybrid of possibilities for the creation of a new identity for the Bollywood heroine.

Chapter four deals with the issue of rape in India and the reasons why it has been linked to the Bollywood industry. According to Hundal (2013), many Bollywood filmmakers have been profiled as fuelling the objectification of women through specific song and dance sequences. The employment of women as eye candy is explored alongside the cultural significance of song and dance sequences within the Bollywood film tradition.

Chapter five focuses on the dream team - Shah Rukh Khan and Karan Johar. In a sense, their relationship and success is a symbol of the futility of

partition. This chapter also focuses on the role of Johar as an auteur in relation to the various novel and diverse representations in his films. Shah Rukh Khan's identity in India as a parallel text is explored through the observations of various scholars.

Chapters six, seven, and eight explore Johar's three films, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham,* and *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*. The manner in which Johar develops his ideas about feminism and transnationalism within the contexts of the three films is analysed. Johar's discerning style of representation suggests that he is aware that "feminism in India has been greatly influenced by feminism in the West" (Kumar 1989, 20). His films are layered with subtexts. His unique technique of presenting two heroines as the antithesis to each other is a theme that runs through all three films. In addition to the representation of women, the undertones of his narratives often allude to the history/legacy of colonialism. These aspects will be explored in detail.

Finally, the various discussions in this book are concluded.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STEADY RISE OF BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood - what a strange name! But stranger still is the wide acceptance that the term has gained over the last few years in a country where the dominant prevailing view is that Indian popular cinema is an entirely indigenous product. Today, the English language media, the Indian language press, journalists, and film scholars employ this term to talk about Indian popular cinema.

—Madhava Prasad

Bollywood films have been examined as cultural texts by scholars from as far back as the mid-1980s. Since then, academic interest in Bollywood has increased and scholars have continued to study Bollywood cinema from various angles. For avid cinema-goers across the globe, Bollywood films provide a fascinating account of Indian antiquity and cultural politics.[2] As such, it has a unique and extensive history that merits taking time and patience to understand.

Previously known as Hindi-language cinema, the term Bollywood was popularised by the English language press in India in the late 1970s. Subsequently, it has become accessible to global audiences and has a mass-market appeal that continues to grow. Today, instead of being accused as a mimic of Hollywood as it was in the past, Bollywood has come to be known as the tongue-in-cheek term that refers to the prolific and box-office oriented Hindi-language film industry located in Mumbai.[3]

When studying Bollywood cinema, it is essential to keep in mind the causal relationship that exists between popular Bollywood films and Indian society. Based on the understanding of this relationship, Bollywood cinema has, to a large extent, been shaped by various cultural practices in India. An understanding of the origins of Bollywood cinema is key to understanding the various conventions, strategies, and representations that are seen within the context of many Bollywood films.

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[2] as quoted in Virdi (2003, 1).
[3] as quoted in Ganti (2004, 2).

Parsi Theatre

Both classical Sanskrit theatre and Parsi theatre have impacted representations in Bollywood films. As Pande (2006, 1646) notes, it is from Parsi theatre that Hindi cinema inherited its audiences and many of its histrionic traditions. However, while Sanskrit theatre is known for being "highly stylised with an emphasis on spectacle", it is from Parsi theatre that the content of many older Bollywood films was derived.[4] Historical sources indicate that the Parsi community migrated from Iran to Mumbai. This minority group practiced the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia and was very much influenced by European culture[5]. They studied European classical music, enjoyed ballroom dancing, established literary clubs, and were involved in dramatic performances. Parsi theatre was therefore largely influenced by mid-Victorian stage conventions. Since theatrical conventions of the times encouraged the display of over-the-top performances, Parsi theatre was celebrated and welcomed by local audiences and became a thoroughly commercial affair.

For audiences of the times, Parsi theatre was a wonderful form of artistic entertainment. Based on the audience's reception of Parsi theatre, many Bollywood filmmakers integrated various conventions of this popular theatre into their on-screen narratives[6]. However, while Parsi theatre was hugely successful, films that adopted this style of representation were criticised. As Thomas (2008, 1) argues, "these films were ignored within the context of first-world culture and society." Films that emulated the conventions of Parsi theatre were viewed with mixed responses by different audiences. Nevertheless, to cater to the masses in India, even to this day, many Bollywood filmmakers often integrate the conventions of early Parsi theatre into their narratives.

Parsi theatre is defined by certain distinctive characteristics. Cohen (2001, 316) outlines these briefly as follows:

- Performances were generally long; they often began at around nine or ten o'clock in the evening and continued into the early hours of the morning;
- Performances contained a mixture of elements such as song, dance, and comedy;
- The content was drawn from diverse sources such as Sanskrit epics,

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[4] as quoted in Gokulsing & Dissanayake (2004, 98)
[5] as quoted in Cohen (2001, 316).
[6] as quoted in Prasad (1998, 30-31).

Shakespeare, local legend, and history.

After skimming through the conventions of Parsi theatre, it is befitting to draw the inference that many representations in Bollywood films have been shaped by the tastes of audiences in India. Due to this unique style of representation, within the context of a worldview, Bollywood films were dismissed as technicolour fantasies that catered to the masses[7]. However, for the countless numbers of rural peasants who moved to Indian cities during the economic depression of the 1930s, Bollywood was an escapist cinema that provided them with simple and colourful repetitive stories with archetypal characters. It is worth mentioning that of India's 900 million people, an average of 10 million moviegoers buy tickets every day, and many of these people often spent their daily earnings at the cinema.[8] These audiences were happy to consume fantasies that mesmerised them by the slick imagery that carried them into other worlds:

> *where men with superhuman qualities successfully conquered all odds, including bad landlords, greedy industrialists, corrupt politicians, and sadistic policemen. Women were generally the icing on the cake – upholding traditional virtues of virginity, devotion to God and family, and service to men.*
>
> (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004, 12)

Audience Reception/Tastes

Ganti (2004, 24) differentiates between three eras of filmmaking in India: post-1947 after India attained independence, the early 1970s during which there was widespread political and social unrest, and post-1991, which was the period influenced by economic liberalisation.

During the post-1947 period, the general masses of India preferred films that were fashioned upon the conventions of ancient theatre forms. Prasad (1998, 31) outlines the characteristics of these favoured films - each film included a version of a romantic narrative, a comedy track, an average of six songs, a range of familiar character types, and narrative closure in which a threatened moral/social order is restored by the hero. The combination of these elements resulted in a format that has popularly come to be known as the masala film (the term masala means mixture).

According to Nandy (2008, 77), the masala film has to have everything from the classical to the folk, from the sublime to the ridiculous, and from

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[7] as quoted in Dudrah and Desai (2008, 1).
[8] as quoted in Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004, 12).

the modern to the incorrigibly traditional. Masala films blend drama, comedy, action, romance, and tragedy with a good dose of melodrama. In other words, the masala film is made up of a combination of genres that are naturally separated in Western films.

Successful masala films are those that are worth repeat viewing; especially because these films continue to attract audiences for years after their initial release dates. Over time, the audience for masala films expanded to the general population of India. For many years, the masses of India were content to consume these sub-standard fantasies because they served as a form of escapism from their own lives. Even after India attained independence from British rule in 1947, filmmakers were catering to a demographic with an 18% literacy rate.[9]

The Nationalist Project

Between 1947 and 1990, in addition to the masala format of representation, there was a constant perpetuation of the ideals of the nationalist project into Bollywood narratives. The main focus of the nationalist project was promoting the idea that India, or the idea of Indianness, was superior to the West. This is because Indian nationalists were zealous about maintaining their distinct Indian identity after being colonised. They did not want to succumb to the West by losing their cultural traditions, and therefore, resisted modernity. As a result, within the context of the nationalist movement in India, Bollywood cinema played an important role in constructing and defining dichotomies such as tradition/modernity, Indian/Western, and spiritual/material (Ganti 2004, 3).

The dichotomies, or structured oppositions, were used to divide India from the West and were fuelled by discourses of nationalism in colonial India. This resulted in the creation of a space that was deemed superior. As Indian nationalists aligned themselves within the "superior" geographical space occupied by India, an imaginary ideal was born. Since the main focus of the nationalist project was to uphold a distinctive Indian culture, discourses of nationalism in colonial India deepened the lines of division between India and the West.

Within the context of Bollywood films, the nationalist imaginary is represented as the home that is physically located in India. And it is this home that exemplifies an idealised paradise within which Indian traditions are depicted as being superior to Western ideals. These traditions include constructed ideas about family, patriarchal regimes, notions of ideal

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[9] as quoted in Ganti (2004, 25).

subservient women, and loyalty to ancient traditions.

In maintaining the concept of Indianness as the core of the nationalist project, the role of women was foregrounded. As a consequence, women in India inherited a complex relationship with the West, especially because a large part of Indianness includes the Indian family social system. In Indian culture, family is considered the zenith of a woman's being. And it is within this structure that the woman assumes the role of either wife or daughter. Regardless of her role, the woman is placed in a position of subordination.

According to the nationalist project, patriarchy is embedded in and has come to be accepted within Indian society. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998, 76) take the position of women within the nationalist project even further in their view,

> *Women who seek to live by traditional norms find happiness, while those who dare to transgress them are punished and victimised.*

The above statement validates how Indian nationalists have aligned their project with the ideals of patriarchal societies. In a sense, the conflation between the nationalist project and patriarchy forced Indian women to always be cognisant of the burden of nation and family that they were brainwashed into thinking was theirs to carry.

Fully aware of the state of affairs about women in India, Bollywood filmmakers integrated many real issues of women in India into their narratives. In doing so, the representation of women in Bollywood films began to evolve according to the status of real women in India. Therefore, from time immemorial, women in Bollywood films were depicted as bearers of nationalist and patriotic regimes. As Gangoli (2005, 148) opines,

> *The ideal Indian Hindu woman, represented by the heroine, the hero's mother, and /or sister is quintessentially Indian and is compliant with the wishes of the hero, embodying the male/patriarchal view. In contrast, the vamp is Anglo-Indian or "westernised", most often sexually promiscuous and knowing as opposed to the "innocent" heroine. Thus, the vamp is located as being the outsider to Indianness and Indian norms and traditions.*

In line with these sensibilities, the nationalist project positioned the ideal Indian woman as one who sacrificed everything to attend to the needs of her husband, his extended family, and their children. Essentially, the nationalist project aimed to perpetuate notions of women who would always be, as Ram (2002, 30) observes, "supplicants in a male-ordered universe". In line with these ideals, representations of women in Bollywood films pre-1990 have often echoed the principles of the nationalist project, according to which

women were to exist in subordinate positions and remain compliant.

The constant references to the constructed dichotomies were instrumental in fuelling the ideas of the nationalist project according to which tradition triumphed over modernity, Indianness was depicted as superior to the adoption of Western habits, and finally, the spiritual space (as represented by India) was deemed to be far superior than any space in the Western world. In a sense, India became a constructed space that was shaped by the imaginations of the nationalist project.

In films that were faithful to the nationalist project, the West was almost always represented as a marker of negativity. For example, characters that were not Indian were always represented as breaking laws, displaying signs of immorality, and therefore, they were always in conflict with traditional Indian values. The negativity of the West is highlighted in *Purab Aur Paschim* (Kumar 1970), which translates as East and West. In this film, the Indian character who has relocated to the West exchanges his soul for material comforts. The onus then lies with the character who is still located in India to put his counterpart back onto the right path. The subtext indicates that the Indian man who lives in India is morally superior. It can therefore be argued that it is not the nation, but the construction of the Indian nation that is represented in popular Bollywood cinema. This construction draws upon myth and history and encapsulates India's trajectory of transition from colonial to post-colonial.[10]

Mythology

In order to further coerce women into powerless positions and relegate them to a subordinate status, the nationalist project also drew upon tales from Hindu mythology. Many Indian myths were translated into tales that were used to subjugate women. Interestingly, these myths were embodied in rituals and traditional ceremonies, and Indian women were expected to place themselves within the paradigms of these stories in the real world.

Concerning film representations, two popular tales that are often enacted by female characters in Bollywood films are those of Draupadi and Sita, the goddesses who represent the glorification of female suffering. Through these tales, suffering is portrayed as being equivalent to purification and is endorsed by Indian nationalists as a fate that is both inevitable and highly recommended for women.[11]

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[10] as quoted in Gooptu (2011, 768).
[11] as quoted in Katrak (1992, 398).

Lakshmi is another goddess important to Hindu-Indian mythology. Historically, the status of women in India has fluctuated drastically, and even though Hindu culture has afforded women the title of Lakshmi[12] and Mother,[13] the same culture has forced women to climb onto the funeral pyres of their dead husbands and accept self-immolation or *sati* as a symbol of virtue. *Sati* is an upper-caste Hindu custom in India in which the widow is burnt to ashes on her dead husband's pyre. Women who acquiesce to this process are considered virtuous. In past nationalist discourse, *sati* was both perceived and accepted as a societal norm.[14]

The social order in Indian culture and society was given great importance and can be summed up in an archaic Marathi street verse that embodies all the qualities that Indian women were expected to measure up to,

> *Do not abandon the vow of womanhood taken by you;*
> *You have to mind the hearth and children;*
> *Do not ask questions; do not exceed the boundaries,*
> *Do not get out of control,*
> *Do not abandon the vow of womanhood,*
> *Do not speak with your face up, be inside the house,*
> *Wash clothes, clean utensils, cook and serve food,*
> *Observe the fasts,*
> *Bend your neck downwards, look downwards,*
> *Walk without looking up; do not let your eyes wander.*[15]

This image of femininity is imposed on young girls even before they are old enough to distinguish between the two biological sexes. The differences in sex roles are highlighted in the above verse. This, in turn, leads to sex-role stereotyping which is the core concept of the Indian family social system. As a result, Indian women who have any link to their Indian heritage are always subconsciously aware that their place in Indian society is beneath men - be they fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons.

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[12] Lakshmi means goddess of wealth and prosperity. According to ancient Hindu culture, a woman is the best gift of God to man. If she is properly treated, she brings prosperity (Roy 2006, 33).

[13] "Mother" in India is a highly respected and revered entity.

[14] as quoted in Gangoli (2007, x) and Niranjana (2006, 78).

[15] as it appears in Roy (2006, 117-118). This particular street verse is entitled, "A Girl is Born."

Reality vs Ideal

There are multiple accounts of Indian women who have subjugated themselves or been subjugated by myths, nationalist principles, and personal laws. India is a country characterised by diverse cultural and religious groups. The major religious groups in India are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi and they are all governed in family matters by their respective personal laws.

Personal laws[16] in India are laws that have been modified by the state based on a combination of religious laws, customs, and practices. These laws serve the function of discriminating against women and endorse them being located within the private sphere of life. As a result, they suffer from gender inequality under the jurisdiction of a created law. Historically, Hindu women in India were subjugated through the application of various myths that form an inherent part of Indian mythology in Hindu culture. On the other hand, Muslim fundamentalists emphasised the institution of family and Islamic religion as markers of a collective identity. They argued that this identity needed protection from state intrusion and the imposition of the norms of the rest of the non-Muslim society.

A parallel can be drawn between the myths of Hindu culture and Islamic personal law. While Hindu women were being subjugated through myth and tradition, Muslim women were being subjugated through the institution of family, religion, and personal laws. Both myths and personal laws placed Indian women in disadvantaged situations. While various myths promoted an unnatural idealised vision of what ideal women ought to be, Islamic personal laws strategically posited women into private spheres through the enforcement of discriminatory laws of marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, and succession.

In a sense, personal laws and mythology were instrumental in stripping both Muslim and Hindu women of their basic human rights, thereby reducing them to mere objects. In the two specific cases discussed below, the idea that women were expected to live up to in India as per concepts such as the Marathi verse, personal laws, and myths, were favoured over their real challenges.

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[16] The concept of personal law is referenced in Narain (2007, 499-501).