

**GENDER AND NATION IN THE SOUTH ASIAN
DIASPORA: TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL
SPACES IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA**

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ABSTRACT:

In the last three decades, Bollywood cinema has shifted from projecting anti-colonial understandings of moral and sexual female boundaries to emphasizing a more liberated, diasporic female figure. The genre has traditionally found ways to restrict feminine sexuality within the confines of a nation-state, and only in a post-nation-state world, within transnational cultural spaces, can the female figure achieve some degree of liberation. This paper chronologically explores the development of depictions of females in the Indian diaspora in five major Bollywood films: *Pardes*, *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gam*, *Salaam Namaste* and *Love Aaj Kal*.

Modern Hindi popular cinema has undergone distinctive shifts as India increasingly finds its place in a globalized world. Mass migrations and economic integration in the global economy produce a confused cultural space in cinema; now Bollywood filmmakers must cater not only to audiences in Mumbai and Delhi but also to Indians scattered across the diaspora, from Singapore to Australia, from the United Kingdom to the United States. The result is a creation of a new genre within Bollywood: the diasporic film, which includes films catering to a non-resident Indian or “NRI” audience. But a category of Bollywood cinema is rapidly emerging which goes beyond merely creating a story those in the diaspora can relate to: films which use the diaspora for more than mere spectacle. These films are set in the diaspora and portray the lives of Indians living abroad, creating a new, dynamic cultural space in which the South Asian diaspora is ascribed specific characteristics. These characteristics are problematized, however, by their source: the diaspora is imagined through a uniquely Indian lens.

This paper will explore the representation of the diasporic woman figure in Bollywood films, following the progression of the representation of women in five films made between 1995 and 2009. Using a combination of theories of gender traditionally applied to the analysis of Bollywood cinema as well as sociological and anthropological arguments about the creation of “cultures of imagination” in a globalized world, I will argue that Bollywood has moved from an anti-colonial interpretation of morality and sexuality to a post-colonial acceptance of the diaspora as a new cultural sphere, which thereby allows women in Bollywood to move marginally away from representing explicitly patriarchal values.¹ The readings of these films are not specifically feminist but simply attempt to approach criticism of the films' representations from an unattached standpoint, so as to avoid the pitfalls of putting too much emphasis on a single-perspective ideology. I will investigate these portrayals in a chronological order, attempting to understand whether Bollywood cinema has developed enough in the past fourteen years to allow for a diasporic woman to exist as a cosmopolitan figure similar to her male NRI counterpart.

Before delving into a filmic analysis, however, it is imperative to understand the context through which these films should be understood. Popular cinema is an element of mass media that is particularly insidious in creating culture between the homeland and the diaspora; these “texts-in-motion” are some of the most volatile

¹ Based on Arjun Appadurai's thesis of cultural globalization as outlined in *Modernity at Large*, 1996, and off various responses to this thesis.

sites in a battle waged between the traditionalism of the homeland and the modernity of the West.² Too many issues are involved in this fight to fully understand Bollywood's representations of the diaspora, but gender can be seen as emblematic of the problem at large. The woman in Bollywood cinema is a projected space onto which the anxieties of the masculine NRI, lost in modernity, aims to rediscover tradition.

The first major Bollywood film involving an NRI figure was *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970), which portrayed the NRI as morally depraved and in need of a "Mother India" to reinstate him with his Hindustani values.³ This was the pattern of depiction that most older films involving NRI characters followed: the NRI was either the Indian who had traveled West and grown rich, but sought the values and love of the homeland, or the NRI who had disowned the homeland and become depraved by Western society.⁴ Distinct changes in the functioning of the global economy have changed the East/West dichotomy since the production of these films, however. Beginning in the early 1990s, India saw the beginnings of the effects of economic globalization, the results of liberalization that began in the 1970s.⁵ The NRI figure, who re-emerged in Indian cultural narratives in the 1990s, therefore became much more complex.

This new NRI is an identity undergoing a constant process of re-negotiation, and much of this renegotiation occurs within the filmic space.⁶ Physical place and space are important in constructing identity, but in the absence of a state to propagate an identity across a physical space, the cultural element of the state, the "nation" must de-couple from the state; the political alone can no longer unite a scattered nation.⁷ Instead, "cultural spheres" of ethnicity become the foundation for identity and the texts through which we can examine ethnography.⁸ In true Deleuzian fashion, the reality of identity becomes changeable, and the site for this constant mutation is the media of diaspora.⁹ The identities created within Bollywood are merely constructions of diaspora, however, and the Spivakian

² Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 9.

³ Brosius, Christian and Yazgi, Nicolas. "Is there no place like home?: Contesting cinematographic constructions of Indian diasporic experiences." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 41 (2007): 353.

⁴ Desai, Jigna. "Bollywood Abroad: South Asian Diasporic Cosmopolitanism and Indian Cinema." In *New Cosmopolitanisms*, edited by Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 24.

⁵ Oza, Rupal. "Showcasing India: Gender, Geography, and Globalization." *Signs* 26 (2006): 1071.

⁶ Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 238.

⁷ Bhattacharjee, Anannya. "The habit of ex-nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie." *Public Culture* 5 (1992): 34-35.

⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 54.

⁹ Karim, Karim Haiderali. *The Media of Diaspora*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

subaltern, in this case the female NRI, has no space to speak within Bollywood's frameworks of anti-colonialism.¹⁰

This is similarly the case within the actuality of the diaspora: such cultural spaces encounter enormous troubles in attempting to maintain ideals of tradition and the feminine. Scholar of modernity Arjun Appadurai notes this:

Because both work and leisure have lost none of their gendered qualities in this new global order but have acquired ever subtler fetishized representations, the honor of women becomes increasingly a surrogate for the embattled communities of males, while their women in reality have to negotiate increasingly harsh conditions of work ... deterritorialized communities ... may enjoy the fruits of ... capital and technology, [but] have to play out the desires and fantasies of these new ethnoscapas, while striving to reproduce the family as microcosm of culture.¹¹

This argument notes a constant tension between ideals of femininity and the reality of a constantly modernizing woman; such a discursive tension epitomizes the conflict between Bollywood's representations of female figures and the actuality of modern South Asian women.

However, before invoking Appadurai in his entirety, I must respond to his overarching argument that diasporas are cultural spaces in which transnationalism can arise. This argument may be too simplistic to account for the interactions between Bollywood and the diaspora. Jigna Desai's interpretation of cultural globalization is more focused on the politics of the Indian nation and therefore a preferable framework for understanding Bollywood.¹² He argues that critiques and studies of post-colonial nations are characterized by a tension between creating identity through anti-colonial or post-colonial lenses; Desai defends a post-colonial critique as preferable because it allows for a deconstruction of colonial Eurocentric logic, and abandons the "binary logic...of elite nationalisms."¹³ Such a simplistic logic is visible in Bollywood's early construction of the diaspora, and this anti-colonialism prevents the Indian diaspora from truly engaging or creating new cultural spaces. In particular, anti-colonial conceptions of gender prevent women from becoming effective citizens of such new cultural spaces.

The anti-colonial Indian identity that Bollywood exports

¹⁰ Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1988), 275.

¹¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 45.

¹² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*.

¹³ Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

ensures certain patriarchal or traditional gender constructs are perpetuated.¹⁴ South Asian diasporic identity is constructed based not on tangible elements of shared histories but rather on essentialist conceptions of “some shared South Asianness...based on an Orientalist and anti-colonial nationalist formulation of Indian or South Asian difference.”¹⁵ This essentialism manifests itself in an over-fetishization by Bollywood of certain things deemed “Indian” or characteristic of “Indian-ness”—these include notions of tradition, of the value of the physicality of the nation-state (which, for the case of South Asian identity, must remain hyphenated until true transnational cultural spaces can be formed), and familial loyalty. Each of these elements of supposed “Indian culture” projects itself onto gender in a distinct way, and in the context of Bollywood film, shackles South Asian diasporic females to such notions. This paper aims to determine whether cinematic representations of the female NRI figure have allowed Bollywood to evolve into a transnational cultural space, by reaching a post-national, post-colonial discourse, or rather if they simply re-inscribe notions of an essentialist and simultaneously patriarchal Indian society.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION: CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE FEMININE IN HINDI CINEMA

Before attempting to deconstruct representations of the female NRI in the diaspora it is necessary to outline basic characteristics of Bollywood’s historical representation of women. Shoma Chatterji identifies four characteristics of what she considers to be the central characteristics of the traditional cinematic woman.¹⁶ First and most importantly comes the value of female chastity; secondly, if the woman suffers, it must serve a metaphorical purpose to create a resultant new reality; third, her sons must fight for her, and in the absence of sons, characters who play surrogate sons must fight for her; lastly, a fight for justice usually translates to a defense of her honor and chastity.¹⁷ Mythological conceptions of the woman also inform Bollywood’s representation of “ideal woman” figures; these conceptions extend to interpretations of not only benign figures like Sita, Ram’s obedient and docile wife, but also the

¹⁴ This paper is not large enough in scope to delve into differences between post-colonialist and anti-colonialist discourses. I will rely on Desai’s assertions that post-colonialism is a social condition and intellectual movement seeking to critique anti-colonialist notions of nationalism; while anti-colonialism re-engages the specter of the colonial, post-colonialism seeks to create a fully new identity. Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 10.

¹⁵ Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 19.

¹⁶ Roots can be traced to goddesses or goddess-like women: ex. Sita in the Ramayana.

¹⁷ Chatterji, Shoma. Subject: *Cinema, Object: Woman—A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. (Calcutta: Parumita, 1998), 29-30.

powerful (Kali; Shakti). These two extremes in Hindu notions of femininity create an uncomfortable dichotomy for women: since women are either passive or excessively powerful, meaning they have to either be worshiped or tamed.¹⁸

Stuart Hall's ideas about conceptions of cultural identity through film are important to this understanding of the feminine as well: he argues that identity is the product of multiple representations, each of which are formed by unique contexts, and that these cultural identities can be thought of in two distinct ways: first, that there is "one true self" residing as a common spirit among all members of the same ethnicity, and second, that cultural identity is not a question of "are" but rather of "becoming."¹⁹ The latter mode of understanding cultural identity negates essentialist theories of identity, and is the conception Appadurai demands from participants in a transnational cultural space; however, Bollywood's inherent essentialism, particularly in the context of not only South Asian identity but especially South Asian *female* identity, has traditionally placed it in the first camp.

Such an essentialist interpretation of South Asian femininity imagines the ideal woman adorned in a sari, her forehead dotted with a red bindi and hair pulled back in a plait—beautiful but sexually constrained.²⁰ This repressed sexuality is the crux on which constructions of women in Indian cinema operate. Violation of the woman's chastity is a violation of her honor—which implicates the male in control of her, her husband or father, rather than the woman herself.²¹

Such repressions of sexuality mirror real-life suppressions of aspects of many women's experiences in the diaspora. It is important to compare the reality of these women's lives to their filmic counterparts; because the subaltern is given no place to speak in Bollywood cinema, the true voice of the diasporic woman must, and has come, from external sources.²² Some scholars have noted that providing a voice to women in cinema can rupture the dominant narrative of patriarchy.²³ But it must be understood that the voice Bollywood gives to the diasporic woman does *not* do this; this voice is instead a construction of so-called "essential" Indian identity.

¹⁸ Rayaprol, Aparna. *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora*. (Delhi: Oxford University, 1997), 123-125.

¹⁹ Harindranath, Ramaswami. *Perspectives on Global Cultures*. (New York: Open University Press, 2006), 44-45.

²⁰ Chatterji, *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman*, 65.

²¹ Chatterji, *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman*, 136.

²² This paper does not attempt to provide an exhaustive understanding of these other sources, but film examples include Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bhaji on the Beach*.

²³ Datta, Sangeeta. "Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema." *Social Scientist* 28 (2000): 71-82.

The true female NRI creates her own ideas of womanhood through “private spaces” and ultimately abandons the nation-state’s definition of Indian femininity.²⁴ Prema Kurien notes in the results of a sociology study of migrated Indian graduate students that the modern diasporic woman (if she has chosen to migrate on her own, without a male counterpart) in reality is often quite transgressive and hails from a more progressive family.²⁵ However, Bollywood’s traditional representation of women relies on depictions of diasporic women in marriages, as opposed to such independent NRI women. Marriage in Indian culture is traditionally disempowering for the women, particularly in the case of arranged marriages.²⁶ For most Indian women it means leaving home to serve a new family—but with the advent of migration it goes even further to imply migrating across continents for a new husband in hope of a new life.²⁷ Brides “imported” from India are brought abroad in hopes that they can serve as vessels for the transportation of Indian values.

Therefore in reality we see two diasporic women: one who travels independently and is therefore fiercely non-conformist, and the other who travels to follow and is subordinate to her husband. Bollywood traditionally prefers to represent the latter as the desirable diasporic woman, but in more recent films has allowed the first type to play the protagonist, perhaps indicating a slow acceptance of female autonomy in the diaspora.

ESSENTIALISM IN THE 1990S: THE (RE)-BIRTH OF THE DIASPORIC FILM IN *DDLJ* AND *PARDES*

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) is perhaps the foundational text for modern diasporic films. The film is a clear departure from original monolithic classifications of the NRI as either longing for the homeland or morally depraved: Shah Rukh Khan as Raj represents an NRI figure who has, to a degree, negotiated the straddle of being both Indian and English. Raj has adopted some “immoral” Western traits—which we first see when he tricks Amrish Puri’s character Baldev, the main character’s father and a migrant from India to London, into selling him beer; he flirts with Simran (Kajol), Baldev’s daughter, and flaunts his sexual exploits to his friends. But Raj

²⁴ Bhattacharjee, “The Habit of Ex-Nomination,” 38-40; Lessinger, Johanna. “Indian Immigrants in the United States: the emergence of a transnational population.” In *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*, edited by Bhikhu Parekh. (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁵ Prema Kurien’s argument is based off of a small sociological study with a sample size of only 30 people, many of whom are graduate students, so this should not be taken as a sweeping generalization. Kurien, Prema. “Gendered ethnicity: creating a Hindu Indian identity in the United States.” *The American Behavioral Scientist*. 42 (1999): 648-673.

²⁶ Palriwala, Rajni and Patricia Uberoi. “Marriage and Migration in Asia: Gender Issues.” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12 (2005): vi-ix.

²⁷ Palriwala and Uberoi, “Marriage and Migration in Asia,” ix.

reasserts his Indian-ness to the audience in a scene when a drunk Simran falls asleep in his bed and awakens wearing his clothes. Terrified, she asks what happened the night before. Raj reminds her that he is *Hindustani* and understands the value of an Indian girl's honor.

Raj assures Simran, and more importantly an audience concerned about the translation of values across oceans, that he remains morally "Indian," and in doing so, immediately changes the story from an innocent love story to a love story infused with the traditional values of the homeland. In doing so, Raj inscribes what Patricia Uberoi calls the "tyranny of tradition" into the story.²⁸ Though he was fully in control of Simran's body the night before, he benevolently spared her—solely because he understands what an *Indian girl's honor* means. These are the two central elements of womanhood as defined by Bollywood—the nation and feminine sexuality—and Raj, in recognizing their inviolability, reinforces Bollywood's essentialist interpretation of the woman. He protects Simran, yes, but by protecting Simran's sexual purity, he robs her of the ability to protect herself.²⁹

Two scenes in the film between Simran and her mother further illustrate the re-inscription of patriarchy in the film. The first occurs once Simran is engaged to an Indian man whom she has never met. The match is arranged by her father and she blithely accepts the practice, even defending it to a baffled Raj. In order to take her trip to Europe (where she and Raj meet) with friends after graduation, she prepares her home with elements of the homeland, dresses in Indian garb, and asks her father for permission to take this month-long trip so she can have one month of "her own life" between being a daughter and becoming a wife to this unknown man. But in Europe, Simran meets Raj and falls in love—and despite this, Simran returns home to continue with the preparations for the wedding, though she cannot rid herself of the memory of her love. Raj, who loves her as well, accompanies her to India where she is to be married, but refuses to elope with her. Simran's mother tells her to give up on the hope of being with Raj:

When I was a little girl, my grandfather used to tell me that there is no difference between a man and a woman. Both have the same rights. But once I grew up, I understood that it was not the case. My education was stopped....I sacrificed my life; first as a daughter and then as a daughter-in-law. But when you

²⁸ Uberoi, Patricia. "The diaspora comes home: Disciplining desire in DDLJ." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32 (1998): 322.

²⁹ Mankekar, Purnima. "Brides who travel: gender, transnationalism, and nationalism in Hindi film" *Positions* 7 (1999): 739.

were born I took a vow that you would never have to make the same sacrifices as I did. I wanted you to live your own life...Women are born to make sacrifices for men, but not the other way round. I beg you, give up your happiness and forget him [the boy]. Your father will never allow it.

This is one of the only places in the film when we are permitted to hear the voice of a woman; but though she speaks up against tradition, she silences herself and begs Simran to re-submit herself to the order of patriarchy. Some scholars argue that this scene suggests a transgression of traditional lines of morality in Bollywood, but its transgression is barely noticeable.³⁰ The woman barely has time to speak against patriarchy before she immediately re-submits not only herself but also her daughter to its authority.

In a second scene, Simran's mother changes her mind and grants permission for Raj to take her daughter away, hoping to give her daughter the kind of freedom she never had. Raj is humbled by her gesture but pointedly ignores it, holding out for Simran's father, Baldev, to provide his blessing. Again, *DDLJ* reinforces the patriarchal authority of the Indian diasporic family. Though women in *DDLJ* are allowed a voice with which to criticize patriarchal power structures, they are robbed of their agency—in giving up their dreams they acquiesce to a system within which they have no other options.³¹

Raj, on the other hand, can be seen simply as self-sacrificing, and not as the victim of tradition, because as a male he holds the rein to that system of traditions. In making his choice to respect tradition he is a hero-figure, the NRI who has not only found prosperity in the diaspora but has maintained the essence of India within him abroad. Simran, in contrast, is continually defined as a character only in relation to the men to whom she “belongs”—in London, despite having grown up abroad, she and her sister speak perfect, unaccented Hindi, and are thoroughly Indian down to their very body language.³² She knows well enough to turn off the British pop music and replace it with Indian songs when her father enters the home, and even remains faithful to her arranged engagement when defending it to Raj. And yet—Simran is the one who desires to elope with Raj, indicating that a woman's sexual impulses, when let free, have the ability to run wild if not checked by a male counterpart; this demonstrates a severe lack of autonomy for her character as she is pulled between father and husband-to-be with little to no space for her own life.

³⁰ Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 324.

³¹ Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 325.

³² Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, 251.

The NRI, central in negotiating the unidentified cultural space spanning the diaspora and India, is defined in terms of two distinct gender roles: the male NRI is wealthy, an archetypal knight-in-shining-armor, and most importantly, he protects female sexuality from the moral gropings of the Western world—his female counterpart is simply chaste and often lacking personality.³³ Though Simran's sexuality is not eliminated—instead, it is veritably flaunted in scenes where she dons a short skirt and dances sexually in the rain—it is acceptable only because it exists beneath the authority of men.

Most critics have treated *DDLJ* as a film somewhat radical for its time, arguing that it treated the diaspora not as a place of total moral depravation where the Indian spirit goes to die, but as a potentially new cultural space in which Indian values can be transported and negotiated by a willing NRI.³⁴ However, this negotiation is only possible for the male NRI—not only does *DDLJ* disallow a space for the female NRI to negotiate this new cultural space, but in fact indicates that the *only* reason the male NRI can exist as this cosmopolitan figure is because of the suppression of the woman and the overt “protection” of her sexual purity.³⁵ Robina Mohammad argues this with dexterity:

Bollywood reinforces the notion that Indian men's cultural authenticity remains predicated on their ability to control their women...Baldev's control is central to his mission to keep Hindustan alive in London, which has depended on and is manifested in his ability to control his daughters. At the core of Raj's Indian values lies the notion that Indian women remain the property of men, demonstrated by his insistence that irrespective of Simran's own desires he will accept her only if and when her father places her hand in his.³⁶

On a metaphorical level, this need for female chastity in the diaspora speaks to the metaphor of woman as a site for the valorization of the Indian nation—a concept that dates back cinematically to the iconic *Mother India* (1957). Threats to the Indian woman are threats to the nation itself; Indian womanhood represents

³³ Mankekar, “Brides who travel,” 750-51; 754.

³⁴ Mankekar, “Brides who travel,” 742; Mohammad, 1033; Rajan and Sharma, “New Cosmopolitanisms,” 129; Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 326.

³⁵ Mankekar, “Brides who travel,” 749; Sharpe, Jenny. “Gender, Nation and Globalization in Monsoon Wedding and Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge.” *Meridians* 6 (2006): 66; Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 322, 332.

³⁶ Mohammad, Robina. “Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani (Yet the heart remains Indian): Bollywood, the ‘homeland’ nation-state, and the diaspora.” *Environment and Planning D* 25 (2007): 1035.

the “nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family.”³⁷ The essence of India must remain alive away from the homeland, and the male NRI is the soldier protecting it. This interpretation of Indian femininity can be seen clearest in *Pardes* (1997), a film made two years after *DDLJ* and starring two of the same actors: Amrish Puri as the father and Shah Rukh Khan as the good male NRI figure.

Pardes, meaning “Foreign Land,” lacks whatever subtlety *DDLJ* managed to include in its narrative. The film hearkens back to the 70s era portrayal of the diaspora in some ways, wherein its central conflict is between the nation and the West.³⁸ The cultural space negotiated by *DDLJ* for the male NRI to easily exist economically and physically in the West but morally in the East is strained and threatened. The storyline revolves around Kishorilal (Amrish Puri), an immigrant Indian who has made a fortune in the States but whose heart yearns for India. His yearning is painfully obvious and drilled into the viewer’s mind in an early set of conversations where he lauds the beauty of India, down to her very soil, and in the song sequence “I Love My India,” in which he declaims, “I saw London, I saw Paris, I saw Japan...there isn’t another India in the whole world.”

As in *DDLJ*, the site for negotiating the interaction between East and West is through male-female relationships. Kishorilal asks for the hand of his Indian friend’s daughter, Ganga, on behalf of his NRI son, Rajiv. “We NRIs need girls like her very badly,” he says, “we’ve pushed our kids so deeply in English books and manners that somewhere or the other even after seeing so much success we feel as if we’re failures.” This comment swiftly negates the economic value of traveling out of India to find one’s fortune and instead berates the NRI for abandoning the moral center of the nation. Kishorilal is hardly an NRI—simply a businessman away from his country—so the true male NRI narrative occurs through Rajiv and his foster brother Arjun (Shah Rukh Khan).

Pardes represents a clearly patriarchal logic—Ganga is given away in arranged marriage to a man she does not love, who sexually assaults her before they are married, and is “saved” by the man who genuinely loves her, Arjun. Like in *DDLJ*, the possibility that Ganga and Arjun had an affair behind Kishorilal’s back implicates Kishorilal more than Ganga herself.³⁹ Ganga’s character is undeniably an allegorical one, representative of the purity and holiness of the nation—represented by her name, which she shares with the holy and pure Indian river Ganges. When Rajiv takes Ganga to a Vegas hotel room and attempts to have sex with her before marriage, this

³⁷ Bhattacharjee, “The Habit of Ex-Nomination,” 31.

³⁸ Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 326.

³⁹ Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” 320.

potential violation of her purity threatens the purity of the nation. As in *Mother India*, in order for the woman to be the nation, she must be explicitly de-sexualized; the woman can only be represented as a metaphorical and allegorical figure, as the nation in *Pardes* or as representative of the ideals of Indian femininity in *DDLJ*.⁴⁰ Ganga is even described as India herself in the film: “you wished to nestle an Indian girl; India itself—in America?”

According to Mankekar, the narratives of “essentialist conceptions of nation and Indian culture converge with discourses of gender and female sexuality.”⁴¹ The implication for such allegorical representations of the diasporic woman as a holding space for the nation abroad is that diasporic Bollywood is still haunted by both essentialist notions of Indian “culture.”⁴² Bollywood, then, remains trapped within a discourse of anti-colonial nationalism, even its diasporic representations, and this anti-colonialism is inherently limited by the specter of the colonial.⁴³

But within a diegetic space so wedded to nationalism, is there space for transnationalism? More fundamentally, is there space for the creation of new imagined cultural spaces, for the political entity of the state to de-hyphenate from the cultural entity of the nation?⁴⁴ In the case of India, some scholars have found that internationalism manifests itself not in intermingling or integration of cultural spaces but rather in a re-entrenchment of nationalism through seeking distinct recognition of the state on an international scale.⁴⁵ If this re-entrenchment of nationalism is truly occurring, it gives rise to another question: is there space for a female figure to escape the bounds of nationalist allegory and to become a cosmopolitan figure herself?

The male NRI figure is genuinely Indian—Raj in *DDLJ* is the epitome of the mantra “phir bi dil hai Hindustani,”⁴⁶ and Arjun in *Pardes* is essentially Indian in values (preserving Ganga’s chastity until he can truly call her “his”) and actions (composing the “I Love My India” song). But, significantly, these characters are also *wealthy*. They have joined the West in one of the most noteworthy ways: through the elimination of Hindu hierarchy (the caste system) and its

⁴⁰ Chatterji, *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman*, 36-37; Oza, “Showcasing India,” 1081.

⁴¹ Mankekar, “Brides who travel,” 739.

⁴² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 12-15. I use the noun “culture” in quotes here in reference to Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “cultural” in the adjectival form as preferable (Appadurai 1996). He argues that the noun “culture” implies an essentialist substance of culture whereas “cultural” denotes a more changeable element, more appropriate to the new imagined spaces created by globalization.

⁴³ Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 11.

⁴⁴ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 39. These questions are emblematic of Appadurai’s central struggle between primordial identity and modernity, outlined in Appadurai, 139-40.

⁴⁵ Oza, “Showcasing India,” 1076.

⁴⁶ “His heart is still Indian.”

replacement with socioeconomic rankings (where they comfortably reside in the upper-middle class). At the end of the 1990s, with *DDLJ* and *Pardes* in perspective, neither Bollywood's male nor female NRI had negotiated the expanded world of cultural globalization—both, in the imagination of Bollywood, remained beholden to anti-colonial representations. The distinction, however, is that the male NRI was evolving to become a transitionally cosmopolitan figure while the female NRI figure maintained her purely allegorical persona, as the nation, as ideal woman, and as the vessel through which India could remain with the male NRI as he embraced the diaspora.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM RUNG IN: *K3G* APPROACHES CULTURAL COSMOPOLITANISM

Four years after *Pardes*, Karan Johar's film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gam* (2001) brought prominence to the translation of the family drama genre into the diaspora. *K3G*, as it was nicknamed, marks a turning point in diasporic film because its storyline is not entirely dependent on the use of the diaspora—rather, the world outside India seems a natural continuation of the lives of the rich, cosmopolitan Raichand family. This new cosmopolitanism makes way for two new female figures to appear on screen. While the characters of Simran in *DDLJ* and Ganga in *Pardes* both lack autonomy, the two central female characters in *K3G*'s diaspora have distinctive personalities. Importantly, however, this change does not divorce either Anjali (Kajol) or Pooja (Kareena Kapoor) from the realm of patriarchy. Though some argue that *K3G* is a change from *Pardes* and *DDLJ*, its shift is limited, as it ultimately re-entrenches the same values of the 1990s films.⁴⁷

Rahul Raichand (Shah Rukh Khan), the adopted son of Yash Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan), falls in love with Anjali, a girl from the less-than-wealthy Delhi district of Chandni Chowk. Furious that Rahul could transgress his carefully drawn class lines, Yash refuses to give his blessing to the couple. The home, a sacred space in Hindi cinema and in Indian society, is broken, as Rahul and Anjali take their leave. The scene in which the two leave is particularly melodramatic—Yash's wife Nandini (Jaya Bachchan) is left staring longingly after her son while Anjali hysterically begs for Rahul not to leave until Yash gives his blessing.

Rohan (Hrithik Roshan), Rahul's much younger brother, is

⁴⁷ The scholarship I refer to here is that of Aswin Punathambekar, who calls *K3G* "the co-existence of tradition and modernity." Punathambekar, Aswin. "Bollywood in the Indian-American diaspora: Mediating a transitive logic of culture citizenship." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 8 (2005): 151-173.

unaware of this family drama until he finishes boarding school. Upon discovering the schism, Rohan convinces his father to let him go to England under the guise of attaining an MBA. Rohan's arrival in England lacks the intensity of the female NRI's arrival in the diaspora as seen in *Parde*; Ganga watches the sights and sounds of New York City unfold around her, noticeably brighter, louder, and busier than the fields of Punjab she has grown up in. She seems overwhelmed, above all—but there is no trace of such emotion in Rohan as he arrives. “Vande Mataram” plays as the camera pans shots of London, first focusing on tourist attractions like the Eye and Big Ben and then on the sheer wealth of the city by showing shots of designer stores. In the middle of London, Bharatanatyam dancers appear behind Rohan as he smiles jauntily, and he dances in front of white women wearing the green and orange hues of the Indian flag. The message here is not entirely subtle: Rohan is the “super-Indian” who is genuinely Indian but can easily find his way through the diaspora.⁴⁸

The two diasporic female NRIs are introduced when Rohan finds his way to Rahul's house by revealing himself to Anjali's younger sister, Pooja. Rahul's English home is enormous, sleek, and clearly lacking the true essence of a home: the elders. In the absence of parental blessings, Rahul and Anjali have placed on their wall an enormous photo of Yash and Nandini, who smile benevolently on the younger generation's unfulfilled life abroad.

The home space, however, is carefully tended to by our first female NRI figure: Anjali, or the faithful wife, whose only purpose is to *be* India in England. Anjali only wears saris and even shoots nasty words at their white English neighbor in Hindi right in front of her face; she bemoans the “English” nature of the son she and Rahul have raised in England. In one particular scene, Krishna, their son, is due to sing a British song at a concert put on by his school but instead bursts into the Indian national anthem. As Anjali weeps with joy at seeing her son in his Indian skin, the British parents rise and put their hands on their hearts in recognition of the Indian nation. The scene contains all the absurdities common to family melodramas in Bollywood but is further complicated by the convergence of nation and woman. Though Anjali is colorful and spunky in ways that neither Simran nor Ganga are allowed to be, she remains simply a vessel for the nation in the diaspora.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha's arguments about the exportation of “Indian nationalism, now commodified and globalized into a ‘feel good’ version of ‘our culture’” and Aswin Punathambekar's revisions of the argument to account for a “transitive logic” of “complex interactions between a) the diaspora, b) Bollywood, and c) India” are

⁴⁸ Punathambekar, “Bollywood in the Indian-American diaspora,” 162.

both valid theories in an analysis of *K3G*.⁴⁹ To some degree, Kajol is representative of Indian nationalism as Rajadhyaksha says, but Punathambekar's arguments account for the increasingly transnational and multicultural nature of cultural spaces, which contribute to "diasporic public spheres" as new cultural spaces in themselves.⁵⁰ *K3G* is not simply an example of transporting "Indian culture" to the diaspora; the interaction is subtler—the film uses Indian national sentiment not for explicitly political reasons, but rather for moral and familial reasons.⁵¹ Anjali is concerned with providing her son with Indian "values" and translating the cultural *spaces* of the nation to the diaspora, not translating "culture" itself.⁵² This distinction is not liberating to the female NRI, however; *K3G*'s use of Anjali as a vessel for Indian cultural elements still hampers her to anti-colonial interpretations of the feminine and the nation.

Though Anjali's sexuality is not explicitly implicated in the same way Simran's and Ganga's are, her sister Pooja's entire character is dependent on sexuality. The first time we are introduced to an adult Pooja we see her dancing in skintight, revealing clothes to the song "It's Rainin' Men." She is perpetually the butt of jokes and of Rahul's disdain on account of her risqué clothing, and we see that she leads boys on and manipulates her sexuality. This is a new diasporic female protagonist—but her sexuality is soon disciplined. The cosmopolitan male easily imposes tradition, pushes out the modern and saves Pooja's sexuality. When Pooja falls for Rohan, he immediately begins pulling her towards his cultural space, having her sing "Om Jai Jagdish" in morning prayer with him and encouraging her to dress in a more modest salwar-kameez; she additionally fasts for him on the Karva Chauth festival. Pooja, like Simran, is simply tugged between cultural spaces, unable to command them both the way the male NRI can. While certainly Pooja enjoys more autonomy and is not treated as a singular possession the way Simran and Ganga are, she is still not afforded the humanity to exist in multiple cultural spaces.

K3G is the logical continuation of *DDLJ*'s suggestion that Indian values can find a home in the diaspora; while *DDLJ* implies this through Raj's character (and *Pardes* negates it), *K3G* outlines what exactly must be done for this translation to comfortably occur. This is the major shift between *DDLJ* and *Pardes* in *K3G*: we begin to see some acceptance by Bollywood that globalization is not merely economic. *K3G* includes at least an acknowledgement by

⁴⁹ Punathambekar, "Bollywood in the Indian-American diaspora," 164.

⁵⁰ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 147.

⁵¹ Brosius and Yazgi, "Is there no place like home?" 373.

⁵² Again, I refer to Appadurai's distinction of "culture" as essentialist and "cultural" as moveable. While *Pardes* and *DDLJ* treat India within essentialist framings; Indian "culture" is a certain way but in *K3G*, a new space becomes available for trans-cultural flows to create their own diasporic public sphere.

Bollywood of the female NRI's *desire* to be cosmopolitan—she is given some agency, and indeed, some personality in the characters of Anjali and Pooja; ultimately, in reiterating the traditional values of familial relations, Johar simply reinforces patriarchy in a manner that is perhaps more insidious than previously. *K3G* allows the female NRI to not only go to the diaspora but also to test her lifestyle limits within it—and then reinstates her into her “rightful” place in the family, grounding this in tradition.

K3G lies somewhere between an anti-colonial and a post-colonial text: though it still recognizes elements of inherent “Indianness” and translates them to the diaspora, two major changes occur here. First, though this “culture” is essentialist and projects itself onto female sexuality, the act of projecting it into a diasporic space inherently makes the film more transnational. *DDLJ* fixes the East and West with specific characteristics and, though it suggests the possibility of a conciliatory existence of the two through Raj, indicates that Simran has to lose herself in order for such a reconciliation to occur. *K3G*, on the other hand, allows Pooja to adopt some elements of Western society—though her sexuality is ultimately re-subjugated to the same notion of “culture” as Simran, the fact she is afforded some integration of East and West at all is a change from the essentialism of *DDLJ* and *Pardes*. Whereas *DDLJ* and *Pardes* demanded that broken families return to India to become truly whole once more, *K3G* brings the homeland to the diaspora, allowing the Raichands to unite in England.⁵³ *K3G* does not yet reach post-colonialism—such a narrative is only recognizable through its liberation of femininity, since female sexuality is the object onto which anti-colonial discourse is projected.

TRANSNATIONAL SPACES IN PERSPECTIVE IN *SALAAM NAMASTE*, *LOVE AAJ KAL*

In the past decade, the number of Bollywood films set in the diaspora is increasing. The setting of these films is not coincidental; though more recent diasporic films do not often make use of the diaspora to explicitly contrast East and West, such contrasts subtly persist and are still indispensable parts of any diasporic film. In addition, the diaspora has become the site for untouchable issues in India to find a narrative voice—extra-marital affairs, pre-marital sex, casual dating, drinking, and homosexuality. Though in recent Bollywood films even set in India (such as *Fashion* (2008) and *Wake Up Sid!* (2009)), independent female characters are becoming more

⁵³ Punathambekar elaborates this concept as a movement of homelands as well: *DDLJ* and *Pardes* are the diaspora seeking the homeland, while *K3G* is the homeland seeking the diaspora. Punathambekar, “Bollywood in the Indian-American diaspora,” 162.

prevalent, these female characters are more significant when placed in the diaspora, because it means making a concession that the very vessel of the nation abroad has come to espouse different values than those “essential” Indian ones.

In order to interpret these films through the same lens as those discussed earlier, it is important to note the representation of three central elements: the presence of the substantive “culture” of the nation in influencing characters’ actions and the values of the film, the presence and importance of “cultural” elements of the nation, and the portrayal of female sexuality as the subject onto which both “culture” and “cultural” characteristics are explicated.

In many modern films, especially *Salaam Namaste* (2005) and *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), sexuality manifests itself in the development of a more equal male-female relationship as opposed to within the hierarchy of a patriarchal system.⁵⁴ In these two films, which follow a popular Western genre of romantic comedies, the female NRI figure at last achieves autonomy from the nation as an oppressive force; these films are post-colonial by nature because they ignore the existence of a colonial past—even of the motherland in some instances—and therefore the woman is no longer the subject of essentialist interpretations of the nation or cultural elements. This is not to say that these films are female-empowering, nor do they reject patriarchal norms altogether: that would be inaccurate and a sweeping argument to make—however, they do help sculpt Appadurai’s new cultural space, in which the diaspora can exist for its own sake, with this cinema as a site for negotiation of the diaspora’s own problems.

Salaam Namaste and *Love Aaj Kal* share elements of multiculturalism and recognize transnationalism. In place of an ideology of overt Indian nationalism we see a multicultural logic beginning to take hold, through an endorsement of an entirely separate diasporic cultural space. However, this cultural space is not fully transnational in that it exists as an “Indian bubble” within the diaspora. In *Salaam Namaste*, Ambar (Preity Zinta) works her way through medical school by DJ-ing on a radio program called “Salaam Namaste,” where she speaks only in Hindi to a presumably Indian audience in Australia. She speaks to her romantic counterpart Nikhil Arora (Saif Ali Khan)—who goes by “Nick” in an attempt to westernize himself—in Hindi, even yelling at him about how he should identify more with his Indian culture. Despite the fact that the film operates almost entirely in Hindi, ignoring the English that would presumably be spoken all around this Hindi bubble, Nick and

⁵⁴ These two films were chosen because of their particular awareness of their diasporic nature – five other films from between 2003 and 2009 were studied in writing this paper and all of them displayed subtler versions of the same trends observed in these two films.

Ambar are allowed to move in and out of the bubble, almost picking and choosing what aspects of the West and of the East they would like in their lives. They have white friends (who they often still speak Hindi around, inexplicably) – but most importantly, they are explicitly progressive characters.

Despite remaining culturally Indian, Nick and Ambar make moral choices that are distinctly Western, but the film does not operate as a source of discipline, and the consequences are substantially less dire than they would be in the homeland. Ambar is alone in Australia, having left her family (and been subsequently disowned by them) for refusing to marry. Without the institution of the family ready to contain the female sexually and morally, Ambar is able to act more freely. She and Nick move in together and have premarital sex, a rarity even for modern Bollywood, but when Ambar becomes pregnant, Nick breaks up with her. But because they are still living together, they continue encountering one another and eventually come together just in time for the baby. The institution of family concludes the film, but not through the logic of the nation-state: because *Salaam Namaste* is allowed to exist in a multicultural space, and more importantly, because Ambar is a character, and not an allegory, because she breaks with traditional institutions that contain female sexuality within the bounds of national morality, she is a freer character than her historical counterparts.

In *Salaam Namaste*, elements of the homeland are still transported to the diaspora, and these are reminiscent of aforementioned private spaces, the spheres used by diasporic Indians to form their own communities abroad.⁵⁵ These spaces are not transnational; they are distinctly reminiscent of the nation, however, they have achieved the de-coupling of the nation-state. Through these constructions, Bollywood recognizes both a logic of post-colonialism and elements of cultural globalization because, though the new diasporic spheres of Indians are not fully integrated with the rest of society, they are cultural spaces that exist in fluidity, truly as “cultural” rather than “culture,” and simply as a recognition of love for the homeland rather than the imposition of morality by the homeland.

In *Love Aaj Kal* (significantly translating to “Love These Days”), Jai (Saif Ali Khan) and Meera (Deepika Padukone) live a modern life together in London; their relationship is portrayed as casual and they easily break up when they decide the time has simply come for it to end. Like *Salaam Namaste*, the characters are placed in a multicultural setting where the Hindi bubble can continue to exist (Jai and Meera come together by flirting in Hindi in an ostensibly English

⁵⁵ Bhattacharjee, “the Habit of Ex-Nomination,” 38-40; Lessinger, “Indian Immigrants,” 170.

nightclub), but their “Indian-ness” is not essentialized. Instead, it is restricted to cultural elements of their everyday life choices -- namely, speaking in Hindi to each other. Though the two break up, they continue talking to each other and remain, we assume, in love, as they move all around the world. Finally, risking Meera’s engagement to another man and Jai’s relationship with a Swiss girl, they come together – but in order to do so, Meera must break an engagement and violate the rules of the familial and marriage institution. The ease with which she leaves her fiancé represents an enormous change from what Simran and Ganga saw in the 1990s – but, like *Salaam Namaste*, the film must conclude with Indian cultural elements tying it together: they come together only and finally on Indian soil. All the while that Jai and Meera’s story is being told, Khan plays a double-role as a young Punjabi man, Veer Singh, decades earlier, fighting for his love, a girl named Harleen, against her family and a rival fiancé. The contrast is clear: in the past, men and women had to win the right to be together, reaching across long distances and dealing with moral and social codes, but today, Jai and Meera have only their own stubbornness and the troubles of modern communication in a too-big world to blame for their problems.

The film is not judgmental about Jai and Meera’s modern lifestyles. Still, the double storyline reminds the audience that some cultural elements of India should be transported to the diaspora to be integrated into modern life. *Love Aaj Kal* recognizes Meera’s independence to live a free lifestyle, just as Jai does, but still ends the relationship on Indian soil. This is not a logic of nationalism nor does it represent the tyranny of tradition; though Jai and Meera give up their free lifestyle for the sake of being together, they do so based on mutual personal choice. The two travel the world and enjoy their own lives before coming together—the fact that it occurs on Indian soil does not necessarily link the nation with the state but rather implies that the nation in essence—though fragmented—can survive globalization. The traditional story of Veer Singh is a backdrop to the trials and tribulations of modern love, but its terminal purpose is ultimately to compare love across the ages, and to show its essence is the same, not to extract morality from the traditional and impose it onto a transnational modern space.

CONCLUSION

Bollywood’s construction of the diaspora has evolved since its original conceptions of a strict dichotomy between East and West. Originally, anti-colonial notions of nationality projected themselves onto the female figures in these films and prevented the diasporic films from being true texts of transnationalism. However, as Bollywood has evolved in modern times, newer films have treated the

diaspora as an acceptable space—and traditional notions of morality and sexuality attached to anti-colonial nationalism have been abandoned in these spaces. More recent texts have achieved a degree of post-colonial transnationalism. This is not to say that these texts are integrative or accept the intermingling between India and the diaspora itself—only the existence of Indians in the diaspora. The move away from endorsement of particularly patriarchal values does not mean Bollywood is free from the shadow of a male-dominated society, however; the films continue to objectify women’s bodies as sex objects, and often only deal with the female subject through the lens of a relationship rather than as an independent subject. This paper does not attempt to deal with the gaze of the audience, only the morality within the diegetic space of the film. Nor can we assume that, because women have enjoyed more sexual freedom in newer Bollywood films, the diasporic woman’s voice is now adequately heard or represented here. These constructions are still from the perspective of the “East” and include distinct elements of love for the nation, if not overt nationalism. The subaltern has not yet found her voice in the space of Hindi popular cinema—but the growing transnational nature of these films has created awareness and grudging acceptance within Bollywood that a separate cultural space exists, in which elements of India can be integrated with elements of the West in a conciliatory, rather than combative fashion.

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