Commodity, Citizen, Copy: Bollywood and the Aesthetics of Consumption

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to provide a conceptual critique of the new horizon of Bollywood that comes into view in post-1990s filmic texts and their attendant discourses. I examine the penetration of a logic of consumption into Bollywood – its institutions, products, lifestyles, personalities, and above all, narratives. As India underwent neoliberal reforms that introduced ideals of wealth, leisure, and glamor into a society previously shaped by nationalist restraint and utilitarian thrift, Bollywood cinema emerged as the template for a new visual economy of excess and spectacle. Central to this inquiry is the problem of "commodity aesthetics" (*Warenästhetik*), a methodological perspective developed by the German philosopher of the interwar Frankfurt School, W. F. Haug. Taking my initial theoretical cue from Haug, I explore the ways that neoliberal ideas have not only been successful in transforming ideologies of the market into a new moral order, they have also made consumption into an ethical responsibility. Focusing on the representational strategies of popular Bollwood films, I show how they solicit a different kind of attention from spectators – one that is geared towards cultivating desire for newly available commodities. By tracing the evolution of the spectacular aesthetics of Bollywood, my dissertation takes up a threefold set of theoretical concerns. First, I elaborate how neoliberal imperatives have, since the 1990s, transformed the Hindi film industry and its cultural production. Second, I map the extent to which these transformations, in turn, enable Bollywood to symbolize the epicentre of a new visual and affective economy. And finally, I explore the ways that Bollywood, through various cinematic and extra-cinematic manoeuvres, engenders what I designate as "consumptive citizenship." The

resulting amalgam, I argue, expresses an ideal of the citizen based on conspicuous consumption of both newly available global commodities and a reified notion of Hindu identity.

Table of Contents

List of Figures viii

Introduction
A World After Its Own Image 1

Chapter One
The Neoliberal Turn: Bollywood and the Consumptive Citizen 18

Chapter Two
Shah Rukh Khan: Reconfiguring Stardom 66

Chapter Three
Of Home and Elsewheres: Cosmopolitanism and the Travel Film 124

Chapter Four
Rang De Basanti: Merchandizing Dissent 177

Epilogue
The Same, But Not Quite 211

Filmography 220

Bibliography 223

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Consumption and waste, screenshot from *Yes Boss.* 41

Figure 1.2 Consumption and Identity, screenshot from *KANK* 48

Figure 1.3 Desire without Form, screenshot from *Maine Pyaar Kiya* 52

Figure 1.4 Old Delhi/New York, screenshot from *Dilli 6* 53

Figure 1.5 Times Square and Delhi squares, screenshot from *Dilli 6* 59

Figure 1.6 Shashi discovers NYC, screenshot from *English/Vinglish* 60

Figure 2.1 The final scene, screenshot from *DDLJ* 77

Figure 2.2 *DDLJ* as an invitation to world travel 84

Figure 2.3 A new aesthetic of mobilization, screenshot from *Swades* 94

Figure 2.4 Recreating the '70s, promotional material from *Om Shanti Om* 104

Figure 2.5 Film poster*, Fan* 117

Figure 3.1 Antevasin in the marketplace, screenshot from *Eat, Pray, Love* 140

Figure 3.2 Osho, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Radhe Ma, Ram Rahim Singh 159

Figure 3.3 The making of a cosmopolitan, screenshot from *Queen* 170

Figure 3.4 Tomatina Festival, screenshot from *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* 173

Figure 4.1 Bhagat Singh at the gallows, screenshot from *Rang De Basanti* 187

Figure 4.2 The carnivalesque countryside**,** screenshot *Rang De Basanti* 195

Figure 4.3 Sue recreates freedom struggle, screenshot *Rang De Basanti* 198

Figure 4.4 Coca Cola launches special *Rang De Basanti*-edition bottles 205

Figure 4.5 The Afterlife of *Rang De Basanti* 207

Figure 5.1 Restaging history, screenshot from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* 214

Figure 5.2 The present as history, screenshot from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* 216

Introduction

A World After Its Own Image

> The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization… In one word, it creates a world after its own image.
> Karl Marx[1]

"Commodity, Citizen, Copy: Bollywood and the Aesthetics of Consumption" is an exploration of the transformation of mainstream Hindi cinema into Bollywood, a commodity whose successful capture of spectatorial consciousness depends to a large part, I will argue, on an aesthetic driven by consumerist impulses. Perhaps the best conceptual source for pursuing this line of argument remains Marx's analysis of the commodity with which he inaugurates his critique of political economy. For Marx, the commodity is not a mere physical thing; instead, he reads it as the product of specific human interrelations. In the form of the commodity, Marx locates not just the physical object, but coterminous with it, both metaphysics and theology. Pointing to the ambiguities inherent in the commodity, Marx writes:

> A commodity appears, at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it. … But, soon as it

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 477.

> steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was.[2]

Marx uncovers the contradictions inherent in the form of the commodity, illuminating its dialectical logic, one that points to the extraordinariness of a seemingly mundane object. The paradoxes that Marx seeks to locate in the commodity are mirrored in his language. What appears "trivial" turns out to be "queer", the "common" morphs into "something transcendent", and what is an inanimate object now seems capable of producing its own "grotesque ideas."

While Marx seems to make no clear distinction between needs and desires in his exposition, nevertheless he does not forsake the social determinants of use-value. Instead, he begins charting it, almost immediately, in terms of the problematic of mediation: "use-values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth."[3] The process of mediation involved here is two-fold: first, Marx points out the needs are mediated (by the mind or the body); and second, use-value itself is mediated by exchange-value (which he also calls "phenomenal form"). In foregrounding the processes of mediation, Marx locates the problematic of representation as the heart of the commodity. Given the centrality of representation in this account of the commodity, it is curious that Marx omits the category of aesthetics, which in addition to metaphysics and

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[2] Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," from *Capital Volume One*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 319-320.

[3] Ibid., 46.

theology, animates the commodity, and renders it fantastic. It is this absent category in Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, that is, aesthetics and its mediation of the commodity, that I explore in my dissertation.

The aesthetics of the commodity does not only bypass the claims of metaphysics and theology, it subsumes the subtlety of the metaphysics of the commodity and the niceties of its theological referents. Aesthetics, then, is not merely one of the many aspects of the commodity; rather, it is central to and inseparable from the commodity. To be commodified means to turned into an aesthetic object. Terry Eagleton highlights the mutual constitution of art, social reality, and the commodity under late capitalism, extending the scope of Fredric Jameson's analysis of art under late capitalism.[4] He points out:

> To say that social reality is pervasively commodified is to say that it is already 'aesthetic' – textured, packaged, fetishized, libidinized; and for art to reflect reality is then for it to do no more than mirror itself, in a cryptic self-referentiality which is indeed one of the inmost structures of the commodity fetish.[5]

Eagleton adds the category of the aesthetic into a discussion of commodity in the age of late capital and points out the impossibility of distinguishing one from the other. The artefact is a commodity, and the commodity, simultaneously, is an artefact. To talk, then, of one is to necessarily talk about the other. In other words, a study of cultural production

[4] See: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). I discuss Jameson's argument in a subsequent chapter.

[5] Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* no. 152. (1985): 62.

and aesthetic objects has to be, at the same time, an investigation of the logic of the commodity.

An inquiry into the relationship between aesthetics and the commodity gathers an urgency in our present moment, one marked by the global aspirations of neoliberal capital. Neoliberalism entails what calls "economization," i.e. it brings all aspects of life under the purview of the economic domain.[6] And at the same time, it leads to what Mike Featherstone calls the "aestheticization of everyday life."[7] In the era of neoliberal globalization, culture industries, across various national contexts, obliterate the distinction between culture (the traditional domain of aesthetics) and everyday life. The aestheticization of the everyday takes place when societies across the globe are saturated by the spectacle, reducing reality, and our very perception of it, to a mere simulation.[8]

Bollywood: The Locus of New Desires

In "Commodity, Citizen, Copy: Bollywood and the Aesthetics of Consumption," I employ the theoretical lens of commodity aesthetics and explore the constitution of Bollywood as a culture industry that comes into being after the introduction of neoliberal market reforms in India. By situating Bollywood as a culture industry, my dissertation

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[6] I have adopted this particular usage of the term from Wendy Brown. See: Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015), 17-18.

[7] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 64.

[8] Jean Baudrillard points out that reality no longer remains its own frame of reference in a society where the spectacle dominates the existing modes of perception,

> … reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image. Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream.

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 151-52.

seeks to provide a conceptual critique of the new horizon of Bollywood that comes into view in post-1990s filmic texts and their attendant discourses. While it has, of late, become customary in academic and popular discourse to refer to mainstream Hindi cinema as Bollywood, in my reading, the moniker does not limit itself to cinema. Rather, my employment of the term signifies the cultural conglomeration that aligns cinema with ancillary industries like fashion, advertisement, home décor, tourism, and the dotcom sector.[9] Thus Bollywood, in this reading, is also a periodizing category and does not encompass all of Hindi cinema, i.e. Bombay Cinema before the introduction of economic reforms.

By tracing the evolution of the spectacular aesthetics of Bollywood, this dissertation takes up a threefold set of theoretical concerns. First, I elaborate how neoliberal imperatives have, since the 1990s, transformed the Hindi film industry and its cultural production. Second, I map the extent to which these transformations, in turn, enable Bollywood to symbolize the epicenter of a new visual and affective economy. And finally, I explore the ways that Bollywood, through various cinematic and extra-cinematic maneuvers, engenders what I designate as "consumptive citizenship." The resulting amalgam, I argue, expresses an ideal of the citizen based on conspicuous consumption of both newly available global commodities and a reified notion of Hindu identity.

Central to my inquiry is the problem of "commodity aesthetics" (*warenästhetik*), a methodological perspective developed by the German philosopher of the interwar

[9] Ashish Rajadhyaksha terms the process by which Bollywood becomes a culture industry "Bollywoodization."
See: Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena," *Inter-Asia cultural studies* Vol 4, no. 1 (2003): 25-39.

Frankfurt School, Wolfgang Fritz Haug. He sums up the law of commodity aesthetics in the following manner:

> This law states that the motivation to exchange, that is to buy, is determined by the 'aesthetic promise of use-value', that is, by the use-value I subjectively promise myself on the basis of what the commodity objectively promises me.[10]

The aesthetic, in Haug's reading, is polyvalent. It refers, on one hand, to sensual understanding, and on the other, as deployed by commodity aesthetics, it refers both to beauty in general, and to beauty developed for the purpose of the valorization of exchange value in particular. Commodity aesthetics refers to the sensual appearance of a commodity that has become more important than the commodity itself. As an aesthetic illusion, this appearance assumes the independent function of creating a need to buy. In this way, Haug argues, commodity aesthetics reshapes needs by reifying sensuality into a consumable and exchangeable object. The commodification operative in such processes is not limited to commodities; rather, it involves the reification of the modes of perception. Commodity aesthetics, in this approach, designates both objective material phenomenon and the sensual subject-object relations created by this phenomenon. In this manner, i.e. by emphasizing the often-overlooked subjective element in political economy, Haug argues that manipulation in consumer society is effective because it addresses real needs.[11]

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[10] Wolfgang F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 144.

[11] Ibid., 134.

The methodological perspective offered by commodity aesthetics, Haug points out, is not only immensely useful in the study of the Global North where societies are already saturated by the manipulations of the commodity image, it is equally helpful in understanding the transformations of Global South in the light of the relatively recent turn towards consumerism. Commodity aesthetics lures people, even those without any actual power to procure commodities, into the dreamwork of capital by offering them a glimpse into an unrealizable good life. For people who have the power to purchase goods and lifestyles, commodity aesthetics fuels the circle of unending desire and consumption; and for those without such economic wherewithal, commodity aesthetics culminates in "images of happiness that constitute a use-value promise that surpasses every possible use value."[12] Commodity aesthetics creates the image or model that the consumers have to reproduce. Objects, in this new worldview, attest to the social class of their owners, and also come to designate the potential for social mobility. Consumption comes to signify more than taste and the desire for distinction; rather, it points to the endless possibilities of what one can become.[13] Consumption, in all consumer societies, established or emerging, severs its connection to any particular set of needs, but manifests as a reason for living.

Commodity aesthetics enables us to interpret the global travels of neoliberal capital as a political economy of desire and understand how consumer societies are being created all over the world. This theoretical perspective has enabled me to illuminate the mutual entanglements of desire, aesthetics, and commodity culture that we encounter in

[12] Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Commodity Aesthetics Revisited," *Radical Philosophy* 135, (2006): 24.

[13] For a sociological account of taste, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Bollywood cinema and its attendant discourses. Taking my initial theoretical cue from Haug, in the chapters that follow, I map the ways in which the introduction of neoliberal ideas in India have not only transformed ideologies of the market into a new moral order but have also made the aesthetics of consumption into an ethical responsibility. Although neoliberal politics in India have been the subject of quite a few academic inquiries, such studies, often conducted in the field of the social sciences, do not adequately engage with the cultural domain.[14] Employing the theoretical lens of commodity aesthetics, I map the changes brought about by neoliberal market reforms in the cultural sphere. Focusing on the various processes of mediation involved in such transformations, I explore how the expression of wishes unleashed by neoliberal globalization is drawn into the aesthetics of consumable goods.

Bollywood as Culture Industry

This dissertation joins a steadily growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship on Bollywood. Let me, very briefly, outline some of the directions in which the research on Bollywood has progressed so far. While this is not an exhaustive list, it will provide a preliminary idea of the intellectual terrain in which I situate my work. Several scholars of Indian cinema including Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Madhava Prasad, focus on film narratives, language, and new technologies, and argue that Bollywood, despite the early resistance to the name, effectively creates a (reified) image of Indianness in a globalizing

[14] For a detailed account of the impact of neoliberalism in India, see Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
Also, Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2012).
C. P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, *The Market that Failed: A Decade of Neoliberal Economic Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Leftword, 2002).

world.[15] Ravi Vasudevan queries the link between economic forms and cultural modes in a globalizing world.[16] Tejaswini Ganti offers a nuanced anthropological account of the transformations of the film industry after the introduction neoliberal reforms.[17] Focusing on the multiplex films, i.e. small budget films that target an urban middle class audience, Amit Rai, draws on biopolitical cultural criticism and explores how these emerging genres unleash a new sensorium.[18] Jigna Desai employs a feminist framework and extends the scope of the research on Bollywood and also accounts for its transnational appeal as she interrogates South Asian diasporic cinema and its relationship to both Hollywood and Bollywood.[19] Other scholars, including Sangeeta Gopal, read the global travels of Bollywood cinema, focusing on cinematic elements like the film song, overabundance of weddings, i.e. characteristics that are decidedly Bollywood's own.[20]

One of the goals of my dissertation is to chart the emergence of Bollywood as a culture industry. Critical studies of the culture industry often tend to focus on Hollywood,

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[15] M. Madhava Prasad, "Surviving Bollywood," in *Global Bollywood*, ed. Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41–51.
Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen. "Rethinking the State after Bollywood," *Journal of the Moving Image* Vol. 3 (2004): 47-90.
Rajadhyaksha, "The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian Cinema".

[16] Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[17] Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi film industry* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[18] Amit S. Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[19] Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
Also see: Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai, "The Essential Bollywood," in *The Bollywood Reader*, ed. Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (London: Open University Press, 2008), 1-17.

[20] Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

arguably the first culture industry in the Adornian sense, and read other cinemas as simply national cinemas, as if the emphasis on the national context (both as a site of production and reception) somehow inoculates them from the ideological implications and economic manipulations that culture industry signifies. I map the rise of Bollywood (the film industry along with its ancillary industries) as a culture industrial complex and examine this new direction of popular Hindi Cinema in relation to both neoliberalizing India and globalizing capital. In this manner, I provincialize Hollywood's status as the ubiquitous culture industry and explore how the global aspirations of capital creates conditions for the rise of culture industries wherever it makes headway. In so doing, this dissertation opens up the possibility of a comparative study of culture industries across the world, i.e. not just in the global metropole, but also in the periphery.

The dissertation questions the Hollywood/Bollywood antonymy that has become something of a recurrent trope in a lot of current writing on Indian cinema. For example, in an anthology on Bollywood, the editors argue: "One fundamental difference between Hollywood and Bollywood is that the former pushes world cultures towards homogenization, whereas the latter introduces in those cultures a fragmentary process."[21] However, to insist on Hollywood's homogeny, against which this so-called heterogeny of Bollywood is valorized, is to argue that Hollywood is untouched by the processes of globalization. As several scholars, including Miriam Hansen, note, the hegemony of Hollywood is itself a result of not just product differentiation, but also heterogeneity in

[21] Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema Through a Transnational Lens* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 15.

that it routinely calibrated and altered itself to suit different markets.[22] It would then be untenable to claim that Hollywood aims at a singular, homogenizing textual effect while Bollywood valiantly resists it. Instead of adopting a similar stance, which carries traces of cultural essentialism, my hypothesis is that cultural dimension of globalization is simultaneously global and local. A comparative study of culture industries across transnational contexts would allow us to take both aspects into consideration and also extend the terms of Jameson's argument about the logic of late capitalism across various national contexts.

Consumption as an Aesthetic Project

My dissertation maps how Bollywood, as a culture industry, undertakes the pedagogic task of the "sentimental education of the Indian consumer."[23] The entry of global capital into a hitherto conservative and protectionist Indian economy created a shift from an emphasis on thrift to an era of unprecedented conspicuous consumption. While in previous decades advertisements aimed at the working classes emphasized utility over conspicuous consumption, in the neoliberal age, the commodity, with its promise of freedom and self-realization, draws all consumers into an unprecedented fantasy of branded goods.[24] Commodity consumption, in this new worldview, ceases to

[22] Hansen, Miriam. "Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale." *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (2010): 287-314.

[23] I borrow this phrase from Aravind Rajagopal. See: Arvind Rajagopal, "Advertising, Politics and the Sentimental Education of the Indian Consumer." *Visual Anthropology Review* 14, no. 2 (1998): 14-31.

[24] For a detailed overview of the changes brought about the globalization in Indian advertising, see: William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
Also: Arvind Rajagopal, "The Violence of Commodity Aesthetics: Hawkers, Demolition Raids, and a New Regime of Consumption," *Social Text* 19, no. 3 (2001): 91-113.

be about the commodities themselves, and instead hinges on the ideas (of class aspiration, mobility, distinction, etc.) that they represent. The aesthetics of culture industry carries out the pedagogic task of training everyone as potential consumers. This tutelary function of the culture industry becomes all the more important for social groups who have been newly indoctrinated in the consumerist worldview.[25] Towards this group, all the armature of the culture industry is geared, teaching them everything, from wellness to home décor. Consumerism, Jean Baudrillard reminds us, emerges as a means to social salvation when commanding any real social or political power is not possible for most people.[26] Political powerlessness is obfuscated by the false sense of power that is created by the plenitude of consumer choice.

Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes the centrality of aesthetics in a consumer society where it replaces the work ethic of the previous era. He points out:

> It is aesthetics, not ethics, that is deployed to integrate the society of consumers, keep it on course, and time and again salvage it from crises. If ethics accord supreme value to duty well done, aesthetics put a premium on sublime experience.[27]

Bauman's formulation moves away from the Weberian model of Protestant work ethics under capitalism and locates the ideological torque of consumer society in the realm of the aesthetic, which he argues subsumes all means and manner of consumption.[28] Let me

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[26] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 2016).

[27] Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2005), 31.

[28] For a discussion of the Protestant work ethic and capitalism, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2002). I discuss the Weberian formulation in a subsequent chapter.

amend Bauman's formulation slightly. In a consumer society, aesthetic becomes ethical. What is beautiful must also be good, or at the very least, desirable. Aesthetics does not merely govern the form of commodities, or how we desire things, but, in the age of marketable regimes of self-care and wellness, it becomes the site where self-worth is both created and measured. In a world created in the image of commodities, we are always already consumers. In the chapters that follow, I query how Bollywood implements the aesthetics of consumption by addressing the cinematic spectator as a consumer of newly available global commodities. In the epigraph that I began this introduction with, Marx traces the global travels of a capitalist mode of production which draws even the most "barbarian nations" into civilization. This dissertation maps the global aspirations of a capitalist mode of consumption, which has a similar civilizing influence, one that I explore in my study of Bollywood through the lens of commodity aesthetics.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: The Neoliberal Turn: Bollywood and the Consumptive Citizen

The first chapter maps how the introduction of neoliberal market reforms in India in the late '80s and early '90s led to an era of unprecedented conspicuous consumption. In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical terrain in which I situate my project, bringing into conversation sociological accounts of consumption with scholarship on neoliberal market reforms in India. Through an exploration of the popular Vicco Turmeric Cream advertisements, I explore the ways in which neoliberal market reforms produce a shift from thrift to conspicuous consumption. I offer a brief summary of the transformation, at

the industrial level, of Hindi cinema into Bollywood as a result of these market reforms. The ideological implications of Bollywood, I argue, are two-fold. First, it performs a pedagogic function in that it instructs its consumers on newer modes of consumption by upholding for them the image of the desired good life. Second, it creates a consumable Indian identity. I argue that Bollywood creates what I call a "consumptive citizenship" by addressing the cinematic spectator as a consumer of newly available global commodities, as well as a reified Hindu identity**.** Consumption, in the neoliberal consensus, is more than the means of social distinction, but is also the site where one's political power is demonstrated. By constellating the big budget films with the multiplex films, I argue that Bollywood mobilizes all genres to install consumption as the new morality.

Chapter Two: Shah Rukh Khan: Reconfiguring Stardom

While the first chapter argued that Bollywood espouses a consumptive citizenship, the second chapter maps how Shah Rukh Khan, the paradigmatic star of Bollywood, comes to symbolize its very ideal. I argue that the characters he plays in the big-budget movies, his wide range of product endorsements, along with his rise to superstardom from humble origins, set him up as the model citizen to emulate. I explore the star-text of Shah Rukh Khan, reading the star-image as an amalgam of the film text, the status of the persona, and the global system of exchange. While Shah Rukh Khan's long career and the large number of films that he has starred in make it impossible to provide an exhaustive overview of his star-image, I identify four key moments in his career which illuminate how Bollywood mobilizes his star appeal in order to create the template of the consumer-citizen modelled in the image of its biggest star.

The first film that I examine is *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, henceforth *DDLJ*, (*The Bighearted Will Take Away the Bride*).[29] *DDLJ* is the first Bollywood film where the Non-Resident Indian (NRI), played by Shah Rukh Khan, emerges as the inheritor of traditional patriarchal values associated with a reified notion of Indian-ness. It is this figure of the NRI, that, for the decades to follow, provides the model for the locals to copy – both in terms of conspicuous consumption and hegemonic identity.

The next film I discuss in this chapter is *Swades* (*We, the People*), where Khan plays yet another NRI character.[30] The successful diasporic character provides the template for the ideal consumer-citizen, and also emerges as the one who, in his private capacity, contributes to social development. While Bollywood films increasingly veer away from engagement with the social, *Swades*, through its deployment of the star-image, addresses some of the social problems faced by rural India and mobilizes the star-image to provide a narrative resolution.

The chapter goes on to explore the implications of Bollywood's self-reflexive turn and its self-fetishization through an examination of *Om Shanti Om*, and *Fan*.[31]

Chapter Three: Of Home and Elsewheres: Cosmopolitanism and the Travel Film

This chapter presents a comparative study of travel films from Hollywood and Bollywood – as both of these industries come to represent the neoliberal ideal of cosmopolitanism. I constellate three Hollywood films: *Eat Pray Love, The Hundred Foot*

[29] *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, directed by Aditya Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 1995).

[30] *Swades*, directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar (Mumbai: UTV Productions, Ashutosh Gowarikar Films, Dillywood, 2004).

[31] *Om Shanti Om*, directed by Farah Khan (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, Eros International, 2007). *Fan*, directed by Maneesh Sharma (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, VFX, Yash Raj Films, 2016)

Journey, and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, with two Bollywood films: *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (*You Will Not Love Twice*) and *Queen*.[32] The figure of the cosmopolitan, as articulated by both sets of films, I argue, is the same as the ideal consumer. I argue that the open mindedness that cosmopolitanism has come to signify is quintessentially the openness of the consumer as she encounters the world of commodities from which she is free to choose. This chapter traces the many avenues the cosmopolitans have to prove their broadmindedness –through travel, through food, and through what I call "cosmo-spirituality." All of these means to achieve the status of the cosmopolitan, I argue, are predicated on consumption.

My reading of cosmopolitanism contradicts the recent tendency in many academic inquiries that seek to recover the concept from being implicated in the politics of neoliberalism. Instead, the chapter, through its exploration of travel films from various national contexts, argues that the version of cosmopolitanism that such films often represent is not only privileged, but also ineffectual as a political stance, irrespective of whether the cosmopolitan of such travelogues is a First-world citizen travelling through the Global South, or citizens of the Global South who find themselves at home as they travel across the Global North.

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[32] *Eat, Pray, Love*, directed by Ryan Murphy (Culver City, California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010).
The Hundred Foot Journey, directed by Lasse Hallstrom (Burbank, California: Touchstone Home Entertainment, 2014).
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, directed by John Madden (Beverly Hills, California: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011).
Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara, directed by Zoya Akhtar (Mumbai: Eros International Media, 2011).
Queen, directed by Vikramaditya Motwane (Mumbai: Shemaroo Entertainment, 2015).

Chapter Four: *Rang De Basanti*: Merchandizing Dissent

The chapter focuses on *Rang De Basanti* (*Color it Saffron*), a film that nostalgically recreates India's anticolonial struggles and contrasts those political struggles with the apathy that marks the present consumerist era.[33] *Rang De Basanti*, to some extent, marks the return of the "Bombay social" the dominant film genre of the '70s that was replaced by the big-budget family melodramas in the neoliberal era. The chapter queries the valences of nostalgia operative in the film that uses the mechanism of the film-within-a-film to juxtapose the Indian freedom struggle with the political awakening of the present-day youth and their fight against political corruption. I argue that Bollywood creates a form that I term "restorative melodrama" (a concept that I adapt from Svetlana Boym's argument about restorative nostalgia), which, despite all the posturing of social commitment, is ultimately parochial, and even regressive.

Epilogue: The Same, But Not Quite

I end my discussion with an exploration of the copy. I explore the implications of Bollywood's self-reflexivity and its anxiety of influence. If cinema creates a world whose authenticity is measured against the world that it represents, Bollywood forecloses this possibility by creating endless copies that only refer to themselves as copies. Bollywood's motions towards irony, in this manner, becomes an empty gesture.

[33] *Rang De Basanti*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (Mumbai: UTV Productions, 2006).

Chapter One

The Neoliberal Turn: Bollywood and the Consumptive Citizen

> *Hazaaron khwahishen aisi ke har khwahish pe dam nikle*
> *Bohut niklay mere armaan, lekin phir bhi kam nikle*
> (So many desires such that each takes my breath away
> Many I have realized, still they remain.)
> Mirza Ghalib

The introduction of neoliberal market reforms in India in the late '80s and early '90s was felt in the everyday life of its citizens as a shift from an ethic of thrift to one of conspicuous consumption. While the transition from a society of producers to a society of consumers necessarily entails a shift in emphasis from parsimony to conspicuity, the tension between thrift and luxury has been the subject of a longstanding debate in political economy, predating the rise of consumer societies. Marx notes the mutual constitution of frugality and luxury when he writes:

> It is true that a controversy now arises in the field of political economy. The one side (Lauderdale, Malthus, etc.) recommends luxury and execrates thrift. The other (Say, Ricardo, etc.) recommends thrift and execrates luxury. But the former admits that it wants luxury in order to produce *labor* (i.e., absolute thrift); and the latter admits that it recommends thrift in order to produce *wealth* (i.e., luxury).[34]

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[34] Marx, in the same passage, goes on to establish that this contradiction between thrift and luxury is a false binary:

> The Lauderdale-Malthus school has the romantic notion that avarice alone ought not to determine the consumption of the rich, and it contradicts its own laws in advancing *extravagance* as a direct means of enrichment. Against it, therefore, the other side very earnestly and circumstantially proves that I do not increase but reduce my *possessions* by being extravagant. The Say-Ricardo school is hypocritical in not admitting that it is precisely whim and caprice which determine production. It forgets the

The contradictory attitudes of political economists regarding luxury and thrift, Marx argues, is reconciled when it comes to the working class. While capitalist production, from its very inception, aims to produce luxury (or cater to the "refined needs" of the bourgeois as opposed to the needs of the workers), it insists on absolute frugality on the part of the working class who are denied even their most basic needs.

Luxury, as its own use-value, was not unknown in the society of producers about which Marx wrote; rather, it was deemed a necessity because the refined needs of the bourgeoise, i.e. needs that are not utilities, determined production. In fact, the whole system worked, as it now does, on the extreme privation of a large social group to enable the excesses of a small one. Conspicuous consumption, Thorstein Veblen argues, is not about wanton hedonism, but functions as a social marker of class.[35] Not all forms of consumption are created equal. Some types of consumption accrue social prestige while some socially necessary ones do not. Veblen uses the term "pecuniary emulation" to designate the social hierarchy created by the distinctions offered by consumption.[36] While consumption, as opposed to production, is an individual act, conspicuous consumption has to be displayed in order to demonstrate one's social standing.

> "refined needs", it forgets that there would be no production without consumption; it forgets that as a result of competition production can only become more extensive and luxurious. It forgets that, according to its views, a thing's value is determined by use, and that use is determined by fashion. It wishes to see only "useful things" produced, but it forgets that production of too many useful things produces too large a *useless* population. Both sides forget that extravagance and thrift, luxury and privation, wealth and poverty are equal.

The absolute thrift, in addition to the work ethic, that was demanded of the worker, also spilled over into the discourse of population. The bourgeois, in line with Malthus, believed that the production of people exacerbates the production of misery.
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,* trans. Martin Milligan (Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1988), 119.

[35] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Random House, 1934), 81.

[36] Ibid.

Not only does wealth bestow honor, but, when the Protestant ethic is fused with a capitalist worldview, it leads to the assumption that those who are financially well-off must be morally good as well.[37] Consumption is the means to social distinction and difference. Conspicuous consumption is not just a demonstration of wealth, but also a demonstration of the power to consume commodities that might not have any use-value other than social prestige. In other words, things no longer have to be useful to be desirable. Consumption, with all its aesthetic value and ideological implications, becomes the site where one's social standing is both claimed and performed.[38]

While in a society of producers, political economy promises the satisfaction of needs but demands that the worker exercise restraint or thrift bordering on asceticism, in a society of consumers, it promises the fulfillment of desires only when the consumer loses all restraint and moves on from commodity to commodity with an abandon that

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[37] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic: Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992).

[38] There is a growing body of thought, in both academic and journalistic discourse, which highlights the supposed outdatedness of Veblen's theory of the elites and their conspicuous consumption. The proponents of this model of thinking emphasize that modern day elites prefer inconspicuous consumption over shows of conspicuity. In an era of mass-produced luxury goods, inconspicuous consumption, its adherents argue, displaces earlier models of conspicuous consumption. One such study points out that race plays a role in determining patterns of consumption. It argues that since Blacks and Hispanics in the US have lower incomes, there is a greater need for members of these groups to distinguish themselves and elevate their status in order not to be judged by the racial stereotype of poverty. Such studies posit that the true elites, the Joneses that do not require the semblance of keeping up, spend their money on inconspicuous items, like health, education, and food (organic/artisanal etc.). And social groups that have been historically less privileged spend their newfound wealth or disposable income on conspicuous consumption.
See: Giana M. Eckhardt, Russell W. Belk & Jonathan A.J. Wilson, "The Rise of Inconspicuous Consumption," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31:7-8, (2015): 807-826.
However, even the authors cited above concede that Veblen anticipates a kind of conspicuousness that masks itself as inconspicuous, as good taste, as the subtlety of snobbery. This masquerading of the conspicuous as the inconspicuous, the elitism of the "less-is-more" crowd, the delicate balance of the expensive and the ascetic is not limited to wealthy nations and their better-off citizens. This seemingly intangible question of taste explains why Govinda, the star performer of the early '90s Hindi cinema lost his popularity even in the relatively early days of neoliberal reforms and the consumer culture it entailed. Govinda and his kind of comedies, by no means lacking in conspicuity either in life or sartorial styles, when seen through the lens of the new consumers, seemed flashy, tacky even, and therefore out of step with the aesthetics of the times. Govinda, like the country bumpkins of the neoclassical comedy of manners, could not keep up with the city fops who could fluently "speak designer." This new inconspicuous consumption too has to be displayed and emulated. For example, college degrees often become wall-decor.

borders on profligacy. Consumption is the neoliberal ethic, the morality of our present. The terms of the discourse change: the worker moves on from being addressed as a producer to being addressed as a consumer, the system promises the fulfillment of desires as opposed to needs, the ethics of thrift are abandoned in favor of the aesthetics of consumption.[39] Whereas, in the earlier age, the worker was allowed to consume just the bare minimum in order for him to work and create surplus value for the capitalist, the consumer today is not only encouraged but required to consume beyond his needs and even his means. If the worker of the earlier era of capital was judged on work ethics (which also included thrift), the consumer today is judged on the aesthetics of consumption. While ethics, associated with labor and with thrift, implies a moral angle, consumption, at least on the surface, implies the lack thereof. It implies pleasure and the promise of happiness. And in addressing everyone as consumers, the aesthetics of consumption seem to put on a democratic façade.

In a consumer society, desires become needs. Desires of this new kind have no fixed address and no fixed end because ends are the anathema of desires. While there is nothing new or even radical about this new consumerism, Zygmunt Bauman points out, in a consumer society:

> …the relationship between needs and their satisfaction is then reversed: the promise and hope of satisfaction precedes the need promised to be satisfied and will be always greater than the extant need.[40]

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[39] Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*.

[40] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 82.

What we buy is hope, while our needs, ironically, become secondary. What is being consumed is not so much the thing itself, but the sensation that is produced by consumption. Each act of consumption produces a short-lived thrill, which then becomes integral to the act of consumption itself. When the moment of that sensation passes almost immediately after the act of consumption, the desire to relive the moment leads to the repetition of the same process. Consumers, as desiring subjects, are no different from thrill-seekers. While needs can be fulfilled, this desire (for difference, prestige, or simply thrill) is unquenchable.

Put differently, consumption is now a process of the endless deferral of satisfaction**.** The satisfaction that each act of consumption guarantees is so short-lived that the process has to be repeated over and again. Consumption, Bauman notes, permeates more than the marketplace. It is a way of life, operating on multiple levels. Consumption, more than anything else, is a manipulation of the symbolic.

> Consumption is not just a matter of satisfying material greed, of filling your stomach. It is a question of manipulating symbols for all sorts of purposes. On the level of the life-world, it is for the purpose of constructing identity, constructing the self, and constructing relations with others. On the level of society, it is in order to sustain the continuing existence of institutions, of groups, structures and things like that. And on the systemic level, it is in order to ensure the reproduction of the conditions in which all this is possible.[41]

[41] Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 223.

Bauman, tracing the transformation of a society of producers into a society of consumers, argues that consumption, in as much as it constructs identities and sustains social relations, is also predicated on destruction. Consumed things cease to be – either they are literally used up, or they are no longer able to satisfy one's desire, and hence are rendered obsolete. For the consumer, happiness is always just around the corner. In other words, happiness is always what comes next. It is the mythic moment after consumption that never quite arrives. But the endless deferral, instead of putting off consumers, only lures them to the next object meant for their (instant) gratification. Consumers literally live in the moment, because each commodity directs its consumer to other commodities, making the moment when desire is temporarily whetted shorter and shorter.

India's Neoliberal Turn

Though certain measures of economic liberalization had been introduced by the Indian government as early as the late 1970s, the process gained momentum under the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government in 1985. Following Gandhi, the Narasimha Rao government introduced more reforms in 1991 when India's foreign exchange reserves collapsed. To respond to this crisis, the government had to borrow money from the International Monetary Fund and was forced to implement new economic policies and structural reforms in the financial sector. The economic reforms entailed deregulation of foreign investment, denationalizing of several public sector financial institutions, reduction of state involvement and investment in social welfare, and the arrival of

multinational companies in the domestic sector, tapping into huge domestic labor reserves.[42]

It was not just the threat of an impending economic disaster that generated the conditions for market liberalization. The move towards liberalization, in the form of relaxation of duties on imports and opening up the market to foreign goods, was supported by the urban middle class.[43] This social segment, although small in number, was a politically and socially powerful group. And, like its counterparts in other developing countries, it asserted itself by emulating the lifestyles and patterns of consumption of the metropole. Economists Jayati Ghosh and C. P. Chandrasekhar observe that the Indian urban middle class pushed for liberal market policies because:

> it was not satisfied with having more domestically produced goods; rather, its demand was increasingly for the new goods produced in the metropolitan centers, which could not be locally produced using only indigenous resources and technology. This created an imbalance between the possibilities of domestic production and the patterns of domestic

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[42] For a detailed explication of the economic reasons and social implications of neoliberal market forms in India, see Prabhat Patnaik and C. P. Chandrasekhar, "Indian Economy under Structural Adjustment," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 47, (1995): 3001–3013. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4403485
Also, C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, *The Market That Failed: Neoliberal Economic Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Left Word, 2009).
For an analysis of the social and cultural implications of neoliberal market policies and emergent discourses of citizenship, see:
Kanishka Chowdhury, *The New India: Citizenship, Subjectivity, and Economic Liberalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
For a global overview, see: Samir Amin and Patrick Camiller, *Obsolescent Capitalism: Contemporary Politics and Global Disorder* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

[43] While the middle class was driven by thrift in the era prior to liberalization, this worldview was conditioned not only by the socialist rhetoric of the early independence era, but as Ghosh and Chandrasekhar point out, was conditioned by inadequate redress of asset and income inequality. In addition, the private sector failed to guarantee employment or income growth. As a result, the market for goods for mass consumption remained limited.
See: Chandrasekhar and Ghosh. *The Market That Failed*, 6.

> demand, since much of the additional demand for consumer goods came from richer social groups. The international demonstration effect has been a powerful instrument in the hands of metropolitan capital in its efforts to prize open the markets of developing countries, and India is no exception.[44]

The move towards liberalization, then, was fueled by the consumerist aspirations of a small but politically powerful group comprised of the urban and semi-urban middle class and the rich rural class, who lobbied for an economic strategy that was better suited to their own consumerist ambitions. In other words, even before the Indian market became flooded with luxury commodities from the metropole, it was already primed for such goods. The new Indian middle class was eager to distinguish itself from other classes through the "demonstration effect" of luxury goods.[45] The immediate impulse behind market liberalization in the late-1980s was not export-oriented, rather it aimed at producing and importing more luxury goods for the domestic market. Ghosh and Chandrasekhar argue that although the market for luxury consumer goods in India was limited, given the size of the middle class with disposable incomes, both the middle class and the government believed that it was sizable enough to ensure economic growth and that the effects of this growth would eventually trickle down to the poorer sections of the

[44] Ibid.

[45] Perhaps demonstration effect is best explained by the marketing slogan for Oneida television sets. The advertisement, popular in the early '90s, features the devil advocating for the electronic brand. Oneida's slogan was "Neighbor's envy, owner's pride" – the television set, like any luxury good, had to incite envy in the neighbor. The owner is proud of the TV because it causes jealousy in the neighbor (who, presumably, does not own an Oneida television). Demonstration effect, a term I borrow from the social sciences, refers to the phenomenon of asserting one's financial means, taste, and social standing through luxury goods. Demonstration becomes a use-value.

society. For the middle class, then, consumption was not just a route to distinction but also a social and political duty.

The change in attitudes towards consumerism after the introduction of neoliberal reforms, which lead an unprecedented number of foreign brands making their way into the Indian market, is perhaps best demonstrated by the way in which domestic products rebranded themselves to cater to this new outlook. For example, in the era preceding liberalization, the popular Vicco cream advertisements which targeted a middle and lower-middle class audience did not brand their product as cosmetic but as antiseptic.[46] To call its products cosmetics would associate them with a kind of frivolousness that was then associated with lifestyle products, so instead, the Vicco advertisements dwelled on the fact that its salve was an antiseptic, a remedy targeting a need, rather than a cosmetic catering to desires.[47] Fast forward two decades and Vicco Turmeric Cream releases another advertisement, targeting a similar audience as the first one, at least in terms of class composition. This time it features a middle class mother and her three daughters walking into a shopping mall (a novelty of the neoliberal era). To save money, the mother

[46] Vicco, instead of focusing on television, which was then yet to make inroads into semi-urban and rural households, worked with cinemas to promote their products before the start of every film. Vicco's marketing and promotional strategy enabled it to reach remote areas of the country and poorer sections of urban India that did not yet own television sets but had access to single screen movie theatres. Its target base was the relatively lower-income families.

[47] Compare this to a Vicco Turmeric Cream advertisement in the mid-1980s featuring a bride preparing for her wedding by applying Vicco Turmeric on her skin. The advertisement promotes a popular home remedy, a salve of sandalwood and turmeric, now marketed in a tube. While much can be said about the discourses of feminine beauty that frame advertisements such as this, what is more striking about this image is the contrast between the actual product, a staple beauty regimen for women on a budget, and the lavishness of the wedding venue in the backdrop. This duality undergirds the commodity image of the pre-neoliberal India. Despite the display of rich, ostentatious consumption in the form of the wedding, the commodity itself is framed by a discourse of thrift – the advertisement insists that it is not a cosmetic. In this advertisement, beauty, although clearly marked as desirable, is underemphasized as it does not have the trappings of use or utility. Though conspicuous consumption was not unknown to the middle and aspiring middle classes in India, such occasions marked a departure from the everyday, which was primarily dictated by parsimony.

buys the daughters identical t-shirts on sale instead of the clothes they want. The daughters then head to the "beauty department" and, much to the chagrin of their mother, start demanding a beauty cream. The salesman helps them find the affordable Vicco Turmeric Cream and everyone seems happy. The daughters get their beauty cream and the mother can shop on a budget. However, this time Vicco sells what it previously insisted was an antiseptic cream as a beauty product. Its affordability is a desirable addition to the cream's list of magical properties and is no longer its primary selling point. The salesman proceeds to enumerate the various uses of the beauty cream in an "one-cream-fits-all" manner. As the three girls test the miracle balm, they fantasize about what it will do for them. While one of the girls fantasizes about a candle-lit dinner date, another sees herself as a film-star, and the third girl sees herself being felicitated with a bouquet of roses.

While it is hardly surprising that a product rebrands itself after two decades, what merits attention are the new forms of desire the product addresses. The advertisement shows two generations – the middle-aged mother, belonging to the generation that valued thrift, and the daughters, who value the aesthetics of consumption. The advertisement primarily targets the latter, though it nods to the former by hinting at the affordability of the cream. However, it makes the mother's insistence on shopping on a budget seem ludicrous when she forces all her daughters to buy the same t-shirt. Thrift is not only rendered comical but also unaesthetic, given that the black t-shirt looks rather uniform, and not conducive to the expressions of the daughters' individualities. The cream, on the other hand, promises the daughters the individuality that the t-shirt fails to offer. The same cream promises to enable the daughters to achieve their individual (and innermost)

dreams. Each daughter, in her own way, is promised to be made into a canny purveyor of the new consumerist cornucopia. While wearing the same t-shirt makes the unhappy sisters look funny and even sad, conforming to the same standard of beauty that the cream offers promises to enable them to realize their individual dreams. One form of standardization becomes the subject of mockery, while, at the same time, conforming to the requirements of a standardized self-care or beauty regimen promises to catalyze individuality. The commodity, in a consumer society, is not merely the thing in itself. It is the gateway to other commodities and, ultimately, to our ideal self.

For the three daughters in the advertisement, the actual consumption or use of the cream is not the realization of its value. The realization of value (or the use-value promise) of the commodity takes place, or at least is promised to take place, much after the actual act of consumption, i.e. when the daughters find fame, love, and success, which they will owe to this miraculous beauty cream. The cream does not merely guarantee beauty, but also romance, distinction, and prestige. Hence, the realization of the use-value promise takes place in a dream. In reality, this realization is forever delayed. We want things because we are wanting. Commodity aesthetics addresses what is wanting in us, what is lacking, and makes us aware of this deficit, simultaneously setting us off in an unending and impossible journey to overcome that imperfection. While certain needs might seem, at first glance, superficial or even false, this does not mean that needs are imposed on passive subjects. If that were the case, the cure would be simple indeed. Consumer society does not create false needs, instead it offers superficial solutions to real needs. For example, consumers addressed by the advertisement are asked to believe that a beauty cream will cure them of their loneliness. Consumer society is pernicious in that it

promises the end to all our miseries, including the alienation of labor under capitalist systems, with its commodities. It makes us believe in the efficacy of retail therapy. Or, we have to believe in retail therapy because other means to address our real problems seem impossible. In more general terms, consumption offers us a false sense of agency in a disenfranchised wilderness.

Theories of consumer society often portray the consumer as passive or as feminized. W. F. Haug counters this portrayal by drawing on the insights of the Frankfurt School and psychoanalytical theory. Haug extends the scope of what Marx called use value by emphasizing the independence of the promise of use-value in the realm of exchange. He points out:

> The use value promise can deploy its real-imaginary power by affecting our self-image. Like the shoemaker from Koepenick, the commodity goes to the costumiers, though the uniform into which it changes in most cases is no military but a civil one; more often it is the uniform of intimacy. Never is it more in disguise than when it is naked. Deploying its imaginary powers, the commodity borders on illusion or even deception. In deception, the appearance of a use value becomes a deceptive appearance, detaches itself from its reference to reality as a mendacious illusion.[48]

Haug, taking his cue from both phenomenology and psychoanalysis, points out that use-value promise refers to our imaginary relation to reality. In consumer society, our drives and needs are articulated in images. Commodities, harnessing all our senses, promise us the realization of our ideal self-image. The commodity image provides us an imaginary

[48] Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Commodity Aesthetics Revisited," *Radical Philosophy* 135 (2006), 18.

resolution to our real problems, and in order to do so, it detaches itself from reality. The solution it provides is not just an illusion but is also illusory, in that it makes us chase it relentlessly. The illusion, however, is a necessary one as it keeps us from realizing the impossibility of our self-image that we have both internalized and idealized.

Haug points out the centrality of the image in consumer society by tracing the human fascination for technological representations of reality as far back as Plato's parable of the cave. He maps the ways in which this fascination for illusion is harnessed by capitalism. He emphasizes that the image becomes central to the ways in which consumer society manipulates its constituents:

> An innumerable series of images are forced on the individual, like mirrors, seemingly empathetic and totally credible, which bring their secrets to the surface and display them there. In these images, people are continually shown unfulfilled aspects of their existence. The illusion ingratiates itself, promising satisfaction: it reads desires in one's eyes, and brings them to the surface of the commodity.[49]

Consumption is not tied to a particular set of needs or desires, real or imagined. Rather, it imposes itself on the subject as a reason for living. The use-value promise of commodities in a consumer society integrates the consumer into the structure of the commodity when the consumer begins to conceive her own worth in economic terms. Our value is expressed by what we consume. Our worthiness (even to our own selves) is attested to by consumption. Commodity aesthetics brings to the forefront our deepest anxieties and promises to solve them. Far from being passive, consumers participate in

[49] Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 52.

this mass deception because it draws on the real needs of the consumers, offering a magical cure.

Consumer culture, Mike Featherstone points out, always creates room for self-improvement.[50] This self-improvement, he argues, could be redefining oneself vis-à-vis one's sartorial preferences, or the way one looks, or simply refurnishing the home. The possibility of improvement, which consumer society is premised on, is not limited to those who can afford such self-improvement projects; instead, it reminds everyone that there is room (and necessity) for improvement. In doing so, consumer society does not seem like one where consumption is forced or coerced. Instead, in and through consumption, we become the best-yet version of our own selves, realizing our identity through things. However, the realization of the best in us is also continually deferred, forever binding the impoverishment of the consumer's self and the rapid rate of superannuation of consumable things. Despite the impossibility of its realization, the ideal self-image of the consumer is constructed by commodity aesthetics. The use-value promise of commodities does not only guarantee to self-improvement, but, as I will argue in the following section, in nations new to the neoliberal ethos, it contours the emergent discourses of citizenship.

The Consumptive Citizen

The transition from a society of producers to a society of consumers entailed, as I have outlined in the previous section, a shift in emphasis from ethics to aesthetics, from needs to desire, from thrift to luxury, and from being addressed as workers to being

[50] Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 84.

hailed as consumers. For the worker in a society of producers, even basic human needs were considered a luxury. Marx, remarking on the condition of the working classes in the relatively early days of capitalism, points out how the work ethic, in conjunction with the imperative on the worker to save money, impoverishes the realm of needs. He writes:

> Light, air, etc. – the simplest animal cleanliness – ceases to be a need for man. Filth, this stagnation and putrefaction of man – the *sewage* of civilization (speaking quite literally) – comes to be the *element of life* – for him. Utter, unnatural depravation, putrefied nature, comes to be *his life-element.* None of his senses exist any longer, and (each has ceased to function) not only in its human fashion, but in an inhuman fashion, so that it does not exist even in an animal fashion.[51]

Even things held in the common, like sunlight and clean air, were luxuries that the workers could not afford. If absolute thrift, as utter self-denial, reduced the workers to being less than animals, surely the transition to consumer society would imply its opposite? The transition from what Marx calls "the *sewage* of civilization" to the "great civilizing influence of capital" should ideally indicate an overall betterment. The movement away from the desensitizing conditions under which the workers lived and worked to a consumer society functioning on the basis of the "technocracy of the senses" would, at first glance, seem to be a welcome move. However, the alienation of the worker in a society of producers finds its compliment in the alienation of the consumer in consumer society.

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[51] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 117.

I argue that the shift to a society of consumers engenders a form of citizenship which I designate as the "consumptive citizen." Neoliberalism brings every non-economic aspect of life, including citizenship, under the purview of the economic domain.[52] In the neoliberal consensus, the political rights and obligations of the citizens are fulfilled through consumption. The consumptive citizen is the product of a moment of the Indian economy when a small, but politically and economically powerful, middle class establishes its hegemony over the economic strategies of the state. This group, fueled by its consumerist aspirations, influenced the change in the economic policies of the Indian state and resulted in the fiscal strategies that opened up the Indian market to foreign money and foreign goods. Consumption, of a hitherto unprecedented conspicuous kind, came to be seen as an exercise of one's duty as a citizen. In other words, a small group was able to build the discourse of citizenship around its consumerist ideals. What I designate as the consumptive citizen of neoliberal India belongs to the affluent and aspiring classes whose claims to citizenship are confirmed by the market. This mode of citizenship, based on consumerist ambitions, is consumptive in that one quite literally wastes away in one's desires, pun intended. Consumption, in this worldview, both confers social distinction and affirms one's political status as a citizen. In this sense, it provincializes Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, making it no longer the forte of the leisure class, but marking it as the domain where the affluent or aspiring middle class demonstrate both their economic wherewithal and political power.

Susan Bordo points out the pathology of epidemic consumerism; it involves, she argues, the sublimation, delay, and even repression of desires for immediate gratification,

[52] For a detailed explication of this process, see: Brown, *Undoing the Demos.*

while being afflicted at the same time by the hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction.[53] The consumptive citizen implies this wasting away wanting of a politically powerful group led by the Indian middle class. The wanting of goods by the consumptive citizen is also predicated on the citizen's state of wanting, that is, their suffering from a lack that can be temporarily compensated by consumption. The irony is that the lack can never be completely compensated for, leading to a consumptive disorder that seeks pyrrhic comfort in consumption. Like the travails of Sisyphus, the consumptive citizen endlessly pursues instant gratification which is forever deferred. Through the pursuit of consumerist pleasures, the consumptive citizen only indulges in the pleasures of the global consumerist culture. Moreover, each act of consumption, which involves the right to choose from a vast array of goods, becomes a metonym for exercising one's rights as a citizen. The suffering of this tubercular sort appears to the consumptive citizen not as a disease, a passively caught contagion, but as an actively undertaken affirmation of one's duties as a citizen, akin to suffrage. Being a consumptive citizen, in my reading, does not only imply being afflicted by a wasting disease but a wanting disease. Here, wanting refers to both needing and lacking. It symbolizes both the excesses of wanting and never quite having enough. Desire, or the pursuit of pleasure, now takes on delirious hues. Like in medicine, the outlook for the consumptive citizen is hopeless. Yet consumption, or the desire to consume, fills them with a false hope that will never materialize. The consumptive citizen wastes away in the pursuit of his desires and is consumed by his desires. Like the worker in the society of producers wasted away because his basic needs

[53] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 199.

remained unmet, the consumer in a society of consumers wastes away because his desires remain, and are fated to remain, unfulfilled.

It is in and through consumption that one's sense of belonging to a class or even to a nation is reaffirmed. Consumer society, especially when operating under the neoliberal consensus, creates a new citizenry whose duty is to consume and be consumed by desires for goods and lifestyles. Returning to the couplet in the epigraph, the all-consuming desire that Ghalib complained about, ails the consumer-citizen as well. Although Ghalib was not concerned with a desire for things, the desire the consumer feels registers itself with the same intensity and immediacy. And just as Ghalib's desire is an unending process, the consumer's desire too is relentless. Consumer society is a society of endless desires, a constant tiptoeing between waiting and wanting. One act of consumption leads to the bountiful world of other luxury commodities. In the neoliberal consensus, things emerge as the new sacred as there is salvation in consumption. For the consumptive citizen, endless consumption is the panacea for its psychopathology. In other words, the tubercular sickness paradoxically appears to the diseased mind as its cure.

While these consumptive citizens, as I have outlined above, belong to the middle class, a politically powerful group whose social aspirations are now coupled with disposable incomes, they are in many ways the successors of the leisure class as outlined by Veblen almost a century ago. Leela Fernandes, mapping the shifting roles and aspirations of the middle class, sums up the 'new' consumerist middle class.

> My central argument is that the rise of the new Indian middle class represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a

> proponent of economic liberalization. This middle class is not "new" in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words, its "newness" does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class. Rather, its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. At a structural level, this group largely encompasses English-speaking urban white-collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunities (particularly in private-sector employment). However, the heart of the construction of this social group rests on the assumption that other segments of the middle class and upwardly mobile working class can potentially join it.[54]

In the context of neoliberal India, it is the urban middle class that positions itself as the social group to be copied. The urban middle class is the hegemonic sociocultural embodiment of India's transition to a committed liberalizing nation. Additionally, the figure of the NRI (the Non-Resident Indians, the Indian diaspora), the protagonist of an ever-increasing number of Bollywood films, provides the model for a new discourse of citizenship formed around the practices of consumption.

Fernandes points out that the growing visibility of this new Indian middle class embodies the emergence of a wider national political culture, one that has shifted from older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class–based culture of consumption. While in the early years of independence, large dams and mass-based factories were the national symbols of progress and development, cell phones, washing

[54] Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xviii.

machines, and color televisions now seem to serve as the symbols of the liberalizing Indian nation. While earlier state socialist ideologies tended to depict workers or rural villagers as the archetypical subjects of development, Fernandes argues that such ideologies now have to compete with mainstream national political discourses that increasingly portray urban middle class consumers as the representative citizens of a new neoliberal India.[55]

Citizenship is framed around rights and obligations, and in a neoliberal economy, the discourse of citizenship also includes the right to consume. As is the case with every right, this right to consume has to be earned through the fulfillment of some obligation. The ideal citizen, Kanishka Chowdhury points out, is the one who has earned this right through earning a living.[56] This merit badge of earning of a (a certain amount of) living confers on the consumptive citizen the right to consume, which then becomes the performance of both class duty and also duty to the nation. The Indian middle and aspiring middle class were bolstered by the belief (one that was even shared by the state) that such acts of consumption were also the duty of the citizens since it would accelerate the growth of the economy whose benefits would then 'trickle down' to the poorer sections of the population.[57]

One of the effects of the trickle-down theory was that the domestic market tried to catch up with the foreign imports and rebrand themselves like the Vicco product which I discussed in the previous section. What the Vicco rebranding demonstrates is that domestic production and marketing too had to recalibrate itself in the face of this

[55] Ibid.

[56] Chowdhury, *The New India*.

[57] Chandrasekhar and Ghosh. *The Market That Failed*, 10.

consumerist boom. From the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, everyday products, targeting the middle and lower middle classes, started emphasizing other qualities in their products, going beyond the sole emphasis on utility (utility here defined as necessary and not something that meets a more secondary or 'frivolous' need, e.g. antiseptic vs. beauty cream) to emphasize consumer desire or pleasure as their selling point. While accounts of neoliberal imperatives on the consumer often focus on the urban upper-middle and middle classes and their experience of global consumer goods, local products that aimed at the lower and semi-urban middle classes (like Vicco) had to recalibrate their marketing strategies to suit the changing nature of consumer demands as well.[58] Neoliberalism, then, heralds more than aspirations of the upwardly mobile in a world of newly available global commodities. It ushers in new aspirations, whether for local or global goods. A Pepsi jingle sums up these new desires unleashed by the neoliberal market economy succinctly: *Yeh Dil Mange More* (This heart wants more). Neoliberal market economies change the way all people, aspiring for the image of class mobility, desire things. It creates novel types of conformity while promising new modes of distinction.

Even the sites where people buy things have changed, further altering the relationship between people and commodities. Whereas earlier the relationship was mediated by the shopkeeper, it is now the commodity that gives its own sales pitch as the shop-counter makes way for the department store aisle where the interaction of consumers and goods are unmediated by the shopkeeper's sales-talk. The seemingly

[58] This new-found desire for consumer goods was by no means uncontested. William Mazzarella gives a very detailed account of the challenges of "the commodity image" faced by Indian advertising professionals due to the entry of global brands and multinational corporations into the Indian market. The market, now saturated by both national consumer goods and global consumer goods, witnesses a crisis of value.
See: Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke,* 20.

unmediated nature of the relationship between the consumer and the commodity is further heightened in the age of online shopping where even the physical properties of the commodity are considered secondary to the commodity-image and its use-value promise. Online shopping, without salespersons and fellow shoppers, creates a more intimate relationship between the consumer and the commodities. With the apparent privacy of online shopping, the commodity-image both concretizes the consumer's innermost anxieties and also promises a cure.

Consumer society, in India and elsewhere, works on the premise that consumers exercise their choice, and by extension their autonomy, when they favor a particular product over others. This choice and the concomitant sense of agency is, however, a false one. No matter what the consumer chooses, the imperative is that she has to choose. Contrary to common perception, commodity aesthetics makes its subjects ill-equipped materialists. Raymond Williams points out that if consumers were 'truly materialist' then advertising would be irrelevant. What Williams means is that being canny materialists would imply that consumers focus on the product itself and not on the trappings of commodity aesthetics. Instead, consumers buy the idea that the commodity is peddling, and not so much the commodity itself. Taking beer as an example, Williams suggests that the drink in itself should be enough to motivate customers to buy it. However, what is advertised in most beer advertisements is not the drink itself, but qualities like masculinity, youth, amiability, and so on. Objects must be validated by other qualities, even if "only in fantasy, by association with personal and social meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be directly available."[59] The material use of a thing is not

[59] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2010), 185.

what makes it desired, instead, it is the fantastic implication of the commodity that makes it desirable.

While before the inundation of the Indian market with luxury goods, both foreign and domestic, consumption was a means to an end, after market liberalization, consumption becomes an endless process for those with means. Christiane Brosius claims that the effect of globalization on the liberalizing Indian market is one that reconfigures the relationship between the (aspirational middle class) citizen and nation-building, and by extension between the state and the citizen.[60] The desiring subject now replaces the demanding state, and the citizen's responsibility comes to be understood as contributing to the economy through consumption rather than the earlier demands on the citizen to contribute to the process of nation-building through savings and sacrifice. If consumption offers prestige, this prestige, for the consumptive citizen, is also national prestige (in addition to individual or familial prestige) because the middle class now establishes itself as on par with its compatriots in the first world. Consumption not only attests to class-standing in that it allows the consuming class to distinguish itself from the other social classes, but according to the consuming classes, it also confers prestige on the nation by painting a rosier picture of its economic well-being. A nation's economic well-being, in the neoliberal consensus, is measured in terms of the disposable incomes of its citizens and their willingness to spend.

[60] Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Bollywood and New Consumerism

In *Yes Boss*, Shah Rukh Khan woos Juhi Chawla on the streets of Switzerland, which by then had become synonymous with the idea of romance in Hindi Cinema.[61] He serenades her with a song, *Main Koi Aisa Geet Gaoon* (I will sing you such a song). He sings: *Main koi aisa geet gaoon, ki aarzoon jagaoon, agar tum kaho* (I will sing you a song that will awaken all your desires, if you so command). Dressed in an over-sized trench coat, Shah Rukh Khan manages to make things appear from nowhere, like a magician conjuring objects from his top hat. Once the song is over, the lovers walk out of a train station, leaving behind them a trail of things – a useless medley of discarded objects like umbrellas, rubber ducks, flutes, fruits, mirrors, confetti, and so on.



Figure 1.1 Consumption and waste, screenshot from *Yes Boss*

[61] *Yes Boss*, directed by Aziz Mirza (Mumbai: Eros International, 1997)

The song, shot in the early days of neoliberal reforms in India, articulates new middle class desires, wherein desires are expressed as things. There is an object for each desire. Shah Rukh Khan woos Juhi Chawla with things because, in a society of consumers, the language of love and desire can only be spoken by and through things. The abundance and the superfluity of things increasingly come to signal, more than anything else, love and other human emotions. The object of romantic love has to be wooed through objects which then become metonymic for love itself. The film song, instead of interrupting the narrative, carries out the ideological task of the film narrative in the age of the neoliberal consensus. It is through cinematic moments like these that Bollywood cinema emerges as the template for a new visual economy of excess and spectacle. Because economic liberalization inundated the Indian market with foreign and domestic consumer goods at an unprecedented scale, Bollywood cinema was tasked with instructing the fledgling consumers on new ways of desiring and on newer entrepreneurial technologies of the self.

The opening of the Indian consumer market to foreign capital and foreign goods came with the promise of liberating the masses from parsimony which now came to signify privation. The debate on economic liberalization, however, was not framed solely around the questions and implications of economic policies, culture played an important role in how these policies were received and disseminated. The effect of economic liberalization on culture, though welcomed by both the new consuming elites, often came to be viewed through the prism of the impact of Western culture (or Americanization) on "Indian Culture." Liberalization, though perceived by many as freeing the consumerist desires of a small group of citizens, was often seen as destabilizing the Indian way of life,

corrupting minds with, among other things, sexual liberation and rampant individualism that threatened to weaken the patriarchal authority of the joint-family. When the market was deregulated, there was an emphasis on to the need to regulate the sphere of Indian culture against the corruptive influence of "Western culture," while simultaneously weakening labor unions and labor laws that protected the rights of workers. In other words, it was a reified notion of Indian culture that needed to be saved from the influence of Western lifestyles and desires and not the people who were victimized by the new neoliberal market policies.[62]

The move by the Indian government to bestow an official industry status on the Bombay film industry was partially motivated by this desire to safeguard Indian culture from foreign influence. In this manner, the protectionist stance of the state shifted from the sphere of economy to the realm of culture. For the film industry, this status as a formal industry as opposed to its informal organization in the preceding era meant that while constraints on film finance came to be deregulated, film content now came to be regulated both by the corporations that now financed cinema and by the government that gave more financial incentives to film production and export. Although Bombay cinema was no stranger to film export, with economic liberalization the Indian state took a more proactive role in championing the export of film and other cultural products.[63] The film industry was encouraged by both the state and by the audience (of both national and diasporic origins) to promote Indian culture in the form of family-oriented cinema.

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[62] See Aijaz Ahmad, "Right-Wing Politics, and the Cultures of Cruelty," *Social Scientist* 26, no. 9/10 (1998): 3-25.

[63] For instance, in the Cold War era, Hindi cinema, especially the films of Raj Kapoor, were extremely popular in the USSR.

Monika Mehta argues that this genre, which she calls "family films," became central to the agendas of the film industry and the Indian state.[64] In a related move, both the government and the film industry wooed the diasporic Indians as potential investors. Bollywood projected the savvy NRI as the inheritor of Indian values. The NRI not only provided the template of the consumptive citizen for the locals to emulate, but also, in being hailed as the repository of Indian values, was encouraged to invest in the Indian economy.

While the content of the films came to be regulated by the state in the form of encouraging certain genres and narratives, in 1998 the government deregulated the economic aspect of film production thorough the reduction in custom duties, exemption of recorded audio and video cassettes from excise duties, and tax incentives. By 2000, the industry was also exempted from tariffs on export profits in addition to the earlier set of economic perks. In 2000, under the Industrial Development Bank Act, the film industry became eligible for financial support from banks and other legitimate financial institutions. Mehta argues that this made it possible for the industry to sever its ties with the informal economy (including money from illegal and mafia-linked sources) and streamline its mode of production.[65] In sum, the effect of liberalization on the film industry was that while production processes became more organized and film exports were encouraged, its content came under closer scrutiny by the state. It became a part of the state apparatus working to promote Indian culture, both at home and abroad, and

[64] Monika Mehta, "Globalizing Bombay Cinema: Reproducing the Indian State and Family," *Cultural Dynamics* 17.2 (2005): 135-154.

[65] Ibid.

instructing native viewers on their duties as citizens to prove themselves to be canny consumers so as to encourage more foreign investment in India.

Whereas "social" films, the dominant genre of the pre-liberalization (i.e. pre-Bollywood) era, displayed some concern for social issues, nearly all of popular Bollywood cinema contains unapologetic displays of consumerism. The prodigality is an attempt to woo the diasporic audience and simultaneously instruct the Indian middle class on new avenues of consumption. Bollywood, now officially conferred industry status, comes to the aid of the Indian state in its new role as the overseer of big business, both national and transnational, working to promote consumption of a hitherto unseen kind. It is only with the advent of Bollywood that Hindi cinema associates itself with allied industries like fashion, home décor, tourism, and so on. For the new audience of Bollywood cinema, films are to be lived as much as seen. A new consumptive citizenship comes into being through the new narratives that Bollywood promotes. "As seen in the movies" becomes a measure of a good and desirable life. Bollywood provides the template of the aesthetics of consumption.

The ideological implications of Bollywood are two-fold. At one level, it performs a pedagogic function in that it instructs the new consumers on how to conduct themselves in a fledgling consumer society. And, simultaneously, it creates a consumable Indian identity that is steeped in the Hindutva doctrinaire. The consumptive citizen that Bollywood creates consumes not only the newly available commodities but also a religious identity as a way of life. The new discourse of citizenship charts itself on the dual axes of consumerism and identity politics. It is not an accident that the rise of Bollywood coincides with the re-emergence and popularity of Hindutva politics. In a

way, the present-day Hindutva politics is a legacy of colonial capitalism. While colonialism created and intensified racial hierarchies, Aijaz Ahmad points out that the nationalist recourse to a mythic Hindu past and heritage created its own hierarchy in order to bypass the hierarchies of race.[66] Neoliberalism, despite treating everyone as a potential consumer, does not erase the social hierarchies created by either race or religion (often interpreted as reified tradition). Instead, it catalyzes the social polarization on religious, class, and caste lines. Amidst all the desire for branded goods and consumerist lifestyles, the middle class also gravitates towards religion, or what it considers to be the vestiges of Indian tradition. A regressive Brahmanical, patriarchal ideology gains cultural and political traction as if to mitigate the feeling of inferiority and insecurity that this insatiable desire for foreign goods and consumer-cosmopolitan lifestyle invariably creates. Bollywood negotiates this duality between reified tradition and rampant consumerism through its recourse to the family.

The family melodrama becomes not only Bollywood's most lucrative export, it also emerges as the site where the conflict between patriarchal Hindu tradition and consumerist aspirations find their ideological resolution. Bollywood films mobilize a desire for the family, specifically the affluent, joint Hindu family, which forms the locus of identity form the consumptive citizen. Ravi Vasudevan argues that the family romance in its new Bollywood format is the result of a burgeoning world of newly available commodities:

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[66] For an expansive and persuasive argument about present-day Hindutva politics and its relationship to colonialism and the processes of decolonization, see Aijaz Ahmad, *On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2004).
Also: Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000).

> The drama of the extended family provides the generic format to explore these drives not only across territorial boundaries, but also across the emergent boundaries initiated by the unleashing of new forms of desire at 'home'.[67]

In this light, Bollywood does not merely unleash a desire for goods and lifestyles, but also a new form of desire for home. Home, for the consumptive citizen, the addressee of the Bollywood narratives, is not only where new commodities are fetishized by their careful staging in the cinematic mise-en-scène, but is also the site where mythologies, especially from Ramayana, are routinely invoked in order to bestow an ethical dimension to these new consumptive practices. This trend started with *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun…!* (*What Am I to You*) which fetishized the Hindu family and its *sanskar* (a shorthand for Brahminical patriarchal values).[68] It is not an accident that the family temple with huge idols of Rama and Sita occupies the entrance to the lavish mansions in most big-budget films. New forms of consumption take place under the supervision of Rama, the god in whose name the Hindu Rightwing mobilized popular consent to demolish Babri Masjid in 1992. Rama is not an innocent cultural marker that occupies the mise-en-scène. Rather, Rama sacralizes the new modes of conspicuous consumption, imbuing such acts with an ethical dimension. For example, in the figure below, a slightly out-of-focus Rama, Laxmana, and Sita look on as both conspicuous consumption and tradition are performed in a scene from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (*Sometimes there's Happiness, Sometimes*

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[67] Ravi Vasudevan, "The Meanings of 'Bollywood'," *Journal of the Moving Image* vol. 7(2008): http://www.jmionline.org/article/the_meanings_of_bollywood

[68] *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun…!*, directed by Sooraj Barjatya (Mumbai: Rajshri Productions/Eros,1994).

there's Sorrow).[69] By rendering identity into a consumable object, Bollywood enables the translation of the Hindutva project from a cultural enterprise into a political project.



Figure 1.2 Consumption and Identity, screenshot from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*

This new Hindu-way of being is rooted in what Rajagopal calls the Hindu-way of seeing, i.e. the spectacular visual regime of Bollywood. Rajagopal emphasizes this connection between a culture of consumption and Hindutva politics. He argues:

> Even in the absence of a Hindu nationalist domination then, we may have in India a Hinduized visual regime, evidenced for example in commodity consumption in daily life, acting as a kind of lower order claim than

[69] *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham,* directed by Karan Johar (Mumbai: Dharma Productions, Yash Raj Films, 2001).

> national identity and continuing to have a force in politics, albeit of a more dispersed, subtle, and less confrontational kind, in a kind of capacitance effect whereby social energy may be accumulated and stored via the allegiance to such images, to be put to use at some future moment, although in ways that would be hard to predict. The greater presence of consumption and of commodity images in public life as an aspect of larger political equations calls to mind a remark by Goebbels in one of his early writings, that politics is the plastic art of the state. … As individuals are exposed to the vagaries of the world market without the minimal buffers strong states used to be able to provide, an explosion of political conflict ensues, as different groups struggle to define new terms of identification and alignment.[70]

It is in the popular cultural domain that the bulwark of political identity is created. While state-protectionism is withdrawn from almost all spheres of production and consumption, it is the performance of Hindu identity that saves the citizenry from the onslaughts of "western corruption." This reified Hindu identity becomes the recourse for citizens to fall back on in times of the crises in national identity caused by globalization. Consumption (of commodities and a regressive patriarchal Hindu identity) comes to designate both social salvation and the assertion of political power for the consumer-citizen.

Bollywood, like any culture industry, concretizes new desires as needs through the cinematic spectacle. It enforces the morality of the market as the good life. Not only does cinema involve the fetishization of stars (as I discuss in a following chapter), it also

[70] Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 283.

fetishizes objects that occupy the mise-en-scène. As Many Ann Doane argues, cinema does not merely display objects but objects in their fetishized form as commodities. She argues:

> The glamour, the sheen of the cinema and its stars metonymically infect the objects of the mise-en-scène … The film in its commodity form promotes a certain mode of perception which is fully adequate to a consumer society and which, for the female spectator, initiates a particularly complex dialectic of "being," "having," and "appearing."[71]

Doane's study, which focuses on the female spectator who is increasingly addressed as a consumer, argues that the female spectator participates in her own oppression. Consumption, for the female spectator, is as passive as the act of film viewing. On the other hand, Judith Mayne makes a similar claim about cinema and consumerism, but points out that consumption is not simply a passive state, but an active and democratic process.[72] In Mayne's reading, consumerism temporarily suspends social hierarchies by presenting spectators with the image of a homogeneous society where everyone who paid the admission fee was treated to the same tropes of a consumerist good life. This nod towards egalitarianism empowers women, especially immigrant women. The audience, irrespective of their social standing, share in the images of consumerist cornucopia that the films represent. While I share both Doane's and Mayne's view about the centrality of the cinematic medium in a society of consumers, I posit that, while consumerism is enforced on the spectator/consumer through cinematic aesthetics (including the spectacle,

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[71] Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Georgetown University Press, 1987), 24.

[72] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 2002).

the narratives, and the mise-en-scène), such acts of consumption are neither completely passive nor completely empowering. Such acts enable only a select few, the urban middle class in the Indian case, to not only brandish their economic wherewithal but also assert and claim the privileges of citizenship by performing their duty to the nation through consumption.

I now turn to two cinematic moments, the contrast between which will throw light on the conspicuity of new consumptive practices that, I argue, mark the aesthetics of Bollywood cinema. The first moment is a song sequence from the pre-Bollywood era. *Mere Rang Mein Rangne Wali* (The one who is colored in my love) from *Maine Pyar Kiya* (*I Fell in Love*) features young lovers, Prem (Salman Khan) and Suman (Bhagyashree), who express their desire for each other through the film song.[73] There are many notable aspects of the film in general, and the song's musical arrangement and visualization in particular. For example, the use of the music from *The Final Countdown* by Europe in this song is an instance Hindi cinema's intertextuality before it became almost formulaic in the form of the game of *antakshari* (a musical parlor game) played by the characters. However, what is of importance to my analysis here is the mise-en-scène, i.e. the staging of the song. Suman and Prem go about the usual song-and-dance, quite literally, while five neon signs glow in the distance. The signs read Mafatlal, Shemaroo, ice cream, *aakar*, and suiting, respectively. Mafatlal, a well-known fabric company, and Shemaroo, which, by the time the film was made, had successfully made its way from a book-rental company to a video distribution company, were successful

[73] *Maine Pyaar Kiya*, directed by Sooraj Barjatya (Mumbai: Rajshri Productions, 1989).

brands and hence the two neon signs can be somewhat conveniently read as an early exercise in product placement.



Figure 1.3 Desire without Form, screenshot from *Maine Pyaar Kiya*

What would make such a reading tenuous, however, are the other signs with which they share the skyline. The other signs variously say ice cream, without pointing to any particular kind or brand of ice cream, *aakar* (literally, form) spelt in Devanagari without a matching product that it directs the spectator towards, i.e. desire without a form, and finally a sign that says simply "suiting" – the sign could easily be associated with the prominently displayed Mafatlal logo, but here in the mise-en-scène it refers to no particular kind of clothing. The neon signs that are a part of the mise-en-scène remain outside the narrative – desires without corresponding objects, or at best, in the nascent stage of the one-on-one correlation of desire and object, product placements with an inadequate number of products. They present, in a very embryonic form, the rise of the

society of the spectacle that Bollywood and its allied industries entail. The neon lights, signs without signifiers, signify desires without corresponding objects, i.e. desires which have not yet manifested as needs for specific things.



Figure 1.4 Old Delhi/New York, screenshot from *Dilli 6*

Let me fast-forward two decades to the second moment: Old Delhi seamlessly melts into New York in a song sequence *Dil Gira Dafatan* (My heart fell suddenly) in *Dilli 6*.[74] Roshan, an NRI, back in India for a visit with his grandmother, wakes up on the terrace of his old ancestral property in Delhi and finds that the skyline of the crowded neighborhood is not only adorned with the Jama Masjid, but the Statue of Liberty too raises her head from the jostle of the surrounding low-rise buildings. A bewildered

[74] *Dilli 6*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (Mumbai: Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra Pictures, Dilliwood, UTV Motion Pictures: 2009).

Roshan goes into the street, opening a large gate, the likes of which are often found in Old Delhi, only to find himself in Times Square, amongst the billboards, the neon signs, the hoardings that dot the much-visited site in New York, which now also has on the side-walk the street vendors from Old Delhi, selling *jalebi* and *golgappa* (popular streetfood).

Not only are the people from Old Delhi, his neighbors, transported to this new scenario, but even mythologies and urban legends change locales with absolute ease. The cast of "Ram Leela" (stage-actors who perform the *Ramayana*) and the Sacred Bull throng the busy streets of the Times Square. The cinematic legend of King Kong blends with the urban legend of the "Kala Bander," the monkey man who supposedly attacked people in Delhi around the early 2000s, atop the Empire State building. And the Delhi locals are at home, amongst the billboards, the neon signs, the branded goods, and the department stores. Old Delhi, which is not as upscale as South Delhi, does not even blink when it finds itself at the site where tourist attraction and product placement and promotion are one and the same. The reverie, initially captured in slow motion, now gives way to the fast pace of Times Square, where advertisements, the window dressing of the desired good life, dissolve into the cinematic image. The not-yet-ness of the "imaginary waiting-room of history" is finally realized, even if in a dream-like sequence, and in a song-sequence at that, which is, arguably, a moment of interruption to the film narrative proper.[75] While the Jama Masjid and the Statue of Liberty, tucked away behind the low-rise buildings and the electric poles, denote the spatial frames of reference within

[75] I borrow this term from Dipesh Chakrabarty's double take on John Stuart Mill's formulation. See: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

which this song unfolds, it is Times Square, the site in service of the whole armature of promotion and consumption of the global consumer society, that acts as the proverbial melting pot. The inhabitants of this dream-work, the middle class residents of Old Delhi, are part of this social salvation by consumption, at once prodigal and sumptuous.

That the displacement of the old-world charms of middle class Old Delhi to Times Square takes place within a dreamlike sequence is not insignificant. The illusion of a dynamic consumption is, to adopt Baudrillard's terminology, "a new slave morality."[76] In this new arrangement, social salvation can only be achieved through consumption, thereby making consumption the destiny of particular classes who otherwise do not have any other social power. Times Square, in its presentation as the hub of consumptive practices, is therefore only a phantasm of this Promised Land. The dream-world recalls what Baudrillard called the "new-found nature of prodigious fecundity. Those are our Valleys of Canaan where flows, instead of milk and honey, streams of neon on ketchup and plastic…."[77] Consumption, in promising us the world and beyond, plebianizes the sacred by reimagining it in mundane terms. And, by the same act, it sacralizes the mundane.

The chief difference between these two cinematic moments is the ease with which the emergent modes of consumption find visual residence in the latter song sequence. In other words, unlike in the former song sequence, the new modes of consumption are integrated into the narrative and visuals of the second film-song. The key distinction between the 1989 film, set in the early days of neoliberal reforms in India, and the 2009 film, when neoliberalism has made its inroads into the Indian society, then, is the

[76] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), 27.

[77] Ibid.

transformation of the sphere of consumption. The market place in *Dilli 6* has penetrated the "old world" charms of the secluded and lower middle class Old Delhi. The neoliberal imperative makes itself most visible in the changes to patterns of consumption. What we encounter in the sequence from *Dilli 6* are the locals enacting their consumerist and cosmopolitan aspirations. It is only in a reverie that the contradiction of consumerism, its characteristic duplicity, can be temporarily suspended. Everyone is a potential consumer, and therefore everyone has the potential for happiness. Its actualization is, however, remains another story.

The sequence from *Dilli 6* creates multiple visual parallels: between the "chowks" (squares) of Old Delhi and Times Square, between the Statue of Liberty and the Jama Masjid, between myths and cinematic legends. In creating and linking these visual tropes, the film comments on the new-found cosmopolitanism of Indians, not just the NRIs but also the locals, who now are at home in the world. Cosmopolitans are not simply at home in the world, rather, the cosmopolitan is always at home in his world. Home is an eternal constant even as the cosmopolitan trots all over the globe. In the visual melting pot of cultures that the scene creates, the chariot of the cast of Ram Leela races past the bright yellow New York cabs. The monkey god, *hanuman*, shares the screen with the urban legend of the Kala Bandar who, in a nod to King Kong, is climbing the Empire State Building. The *jalebi* and *pani-puri* hawkers of Old Delhi share the pavement with multinational stores like Sephora. In this happy mélange, the formal and the informal economy amicably share the screen-space. The visual portmanteau of two worlds, no longer incommensurable, creates the effect of an eternal Indian-ness that seamlessly

merges with the consumerism of the West. Being at home in the neoliberal world means navigating both worlds with unprecedented ease.

The eternal India, thus visually recreated, evokes nostalgic memories of Ramanand Sagar's popular televisual retelling of *Ramayana* and also of watching the cinematic spectacle of King Kong. The scene then not only collapses the *chowks* (squares) and *mohallas* (streets) of Old Delhi with the hyper-real neon-lit spectacles of Times Square, it collapses the visual markers of the '80s with the present. It not only bridges space, but also telescopes time, thus creating a vision of an eternal aspiring middle class by yoking Old Delhi to New York and the '80s to the present. The scene is filmed in soft, almost pastel, colors, thus compounding the nostalgia-effect that further accentuates the myth of the 'since time immemorial'-ness of the Indian middle class. The nostalgia-effect, as I discuss in a later chapter, imbues myth with the stature of history. This nostalgia for an authentic timeless India was channeled by the Hindu Right which reasserted itself in the Indian political arena around the same time as the neoliberal market reforms were introduced. All antinomies, between the formal and informal economy, between the traditional and the new-fangled consumerism, between myth and history, between the pre-neoliberal and the neoliberal, and between the East and the West, coexist in harmony in this sanitized cinematic mélange.

The dreamscape also represents the changing urban landscape owing to the assertion of an aspiring middle class identity now articulated as a political project. The right to the city is now the right of the mobile urban population, pushing the urban poor further and further to the periphery, a process that is accelerated by both the decline of the informal sectors of the economy owing to market reforms and by the neoliberal policy

of "accumulation by dispossession."[78] Writing about the neoliberal city as a contested site, Fernandes points out the stakes that the 'new' middle class has in the gentrification of the global cities:

> the processes of economic restructuring also unfold through the spatial reorganization of neighborhoods within cities and small towns. In this reorganization, the middle class develops new suburban aesthetic identities and lifestyles that seek to displace visual signs of poverty from public spaces. Such middle class practices provoke conflicts with the urban poor over the control of public space. [79]

It is, then, perhaps only logical that the conflict between the urban middle class and the urban poor finds a temporary respite in a reverie. The urban poor, in this dream sequence, become idyllic. In this dream they are not viewed as encroachers of the contested public space, rather as glorified agents of the informal economy that harmoniously coexist within the formal global economic networks. Even though they are situated in the present, the poor become the abject object of nostalgia.

[78] For an overview of the term, see David Harvey, "The 'New Imperialism': Accumulation by Dispossession," *Socialist Register* (2003): 63-87.

[79] Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*, xxii.



Figure 1.5 Times Square and Delhi squares, screenshot from *Dilli 6*

Consumption in the Multiplex

Being at home, for the Non-resident Indian and native inhabitants alike, can only happen in the hub of consumptive practices. If the song-sequence from *Dilli 6* captures the new-found being-at-home-in-the-world-ness of middle class Indians in the manner of a reverie, then Shashi, the middle class housewife, in *English Vinglish* finds her bearings in New York in a hyper-real song sequence. Shashi is a middle-aged mother and wife who runs a home-based catering business.[80] However, despite all her qualities, she does not quite fit into her convent-schooled daughter's world or the managerial world of her husband. It is Shashi's inability to speak English that prevents her from blending into the English-speaking urban middle class world that her daughter and husband inhabit.

[80] *English Vinglish*, directed by Gauri Shinde (Mumbai: Curbside Films, Eros International, Hope Productions, Lola's Production, 2012).



Figure 1.6 Shashi discovers NYC, screenshot from *English/Vinglish*

Shashi finds herself alone, without her husband and kids, in Manhattan when she travels to the United States to attend her niece's wedding. The song, *Manhattan*, captures Shashi's first experience of the big city. It is the disjunction between the visual and the song-lyrics that sums up what it is to become of the consumer-cosmopolitan, the ideal template of the Indian urban-middle class citizen. The lyrics translate Manhattan for the non-English speaking Shashi.

Man… Hat…Tan.../Man Aadmi, Hat Topi/

What's Tan in Hindi/Uh Uh Tan Matlab Woh Uh Dhoop ki Chhaanv/

Aadmi topi dhoop ki chhaanv/ Mannhattan/

The song is meant to assuage Shashi's fear of the city, where she is not only an outsider but is also unable to communicate with the locals. Breaking down Manhattan into three syllables, man-hat-tan, the song makes the intimidating experience of the city relatable by

translating the alien-sounding word into three relatable ones– man, hat, and shade. Broken down into syllables and translated into ordinary, relatable words, the global city appears less daunting to Shashi. This act of translation takes away the constraints of being a non-English speaker in a big global city.

The song also renders the experience of arriving in a big city less overwhelming – "*New York mein lambi lambi buildings hoti hai na? Plane se dekha tha!"* (New York has tall buildings/ As you saw from the plane). The bird's eye view of Manhattan from the plane (not pictured in the song) makes the tall buildings seem puny and, therefore, less threatening. Once the name of the city and the dizzying heights of its skyscrapers are rendered less inhospitable by putting them in relatable contexts through acts of translation and through invocations of aerial views akin to the theatrical *deus ex machina*, the song creates its own roadmap of navigating the city.

… to your left is Prada

To your right is Zara

Giorgio Armani, Thank God it's Friday!

Gucci and Versace

Jimmy Choo, Givenchy

Diesel, Dior, Hokey Pokey, Gap and Bloomingdale

Louis Vuitton… Vuitton…

Moschino, Valentino…

While the name of the city has to be translated, the big brands do not require any such assistance. The stores and brands form the map of Manhattan, which is no longer identified by its architecture and distinctive skyline, but by international brands and their

stores. While the names of the stores and brands, unlike the name of the city, are not translated, I argue that mapping the city with store-names instead of real landmarks is in itself an act of translation. Shashi does not need any assistance with store names (even with the French ones), even though she kept tripping over the relatively simple word Manhattan.

Manhattan, made accessible through an act of translation, could in fact be any metropolitan city. If a city is an assemblage of international stores and brands, then it does not limit itself to New York. The song provides Shashi (and by extension, the spectator) the road-map to navigate all big cities by invoking the present-day commonality between all the metropolitan cities – not a shared humanity but a shared network of international brands. Reducing the city to a long list of brands is the way present day cosmopolitans travel the world – the shared networks of multinational brands makes every city the same. The cosmopolitan being-at-home-in-the-world, in fact in any world, is being canny in one's fluency to speak the language of global capital (and not just English, the language that prevents Shashi from being a part of the world that her husband and daughter inhabit), that ability alone makes the world less alien, less uncanny.

The visuals that accompany the song, though, form a sharp contrast to the lyrics that break down one's first experience of the global metropole into easy, relatable words, along with the roll-call of known brands. Unlike the lyrics, the visuals capture the dizzying effect of the big city with extreme low-angle shots, fast cutting, and dizzying pans, swishes, and tilts. The song, at least visually, sums up, through its camera movements and fast-paced editing, the experience of the modern-day big city. The visual

captures a kind of urban delirium. It also briefly touches on the inequalities that exist in the big metropolitan city when it cuts from the Gucci storefront to a homeless man asking for money with a cardboard sign. But this experience of first world poverty is quickly dismissed (or amassed within the gamut of experiences of the metropolitan exotic and thus rendered less stark) when the camera swiftly cuts to a quick procession of store logos. The scene, edited with the visual tempo of an action movie, presents a disjuncture between the song lyrics and the accompanying visuals. While the song lyrics render the city accessible, with the names of brands preventing the Babel-like experience of myriad tongues in a globalizing world, the visual captures the thrill of arriving in the big city.

This delirium is a direct contrast to the slow-paced reverie-like quality of the sequence from *Dilli 6* that I discussed earlier. The urban delirium in this scene, shot from the point-of-view of Shashi, an urban middle class housewife on her first trip abroad, is unlike the establishing shots in other Bollywood films. In other Bollywood films of the big budget variety, pioneered by the production houses of Yash Chopra, Karan Johar, and the like, the characters are far more affluent than the humble housewife of *English Vinglish*. There is no need for establishing shots to set the relationship between these characters and the metropolitan cities that the films are set in as these characters can navigate the big cities without the need for directions of the kind that the lyrics offer to Shashi. The establishing shots in these big budget films, featuring affluent NRIs and rich Indians, are not shot from the point-of-view of the characters, and therefore do not have the delirious feeling that permeates the visual template of the *Manhattan* song sequence.

Whereas in the era prior to the "bollywoodization" of the Hindi film industry, big stars did not appear in small or middle budget films, the advent of Bollywood made it

possible to make economically viable small budget films. Stars, who had only been seen earlier in big productions, could now act in these films with smaller budgets. *English Vinglish* marks the comeback of the popular icon of the '80s, Sridevi, a pre-liberalization era star who here navigates the world of global consumerism. The small budget film, often hyped as the *hatke* (literally, different) film, could only be financially successful in the age of the multiplex theatres that are located in shopping malls and directly combine movie-going with shopping and dining out. It is an urban middle class cinema, and, unsurprisingly, such films often deal with the aspiring urban middle class's experience of India's nascent consumer capitalism.

The multiplex film, along with its big budget counterpart, becomes the classroom of the consumer citizen. The multiplex film is, in many ways, like the middle class cinema of the 1970s. The multiplex film is the new "prestige genre" of Bollywood. If big-budget films travel internationally and their growing acceptance worldwide is not limited to the diaspora, the multiplex films travel to international film festivals. The main audience for these films, however, is the Indian urban middle class (or what Sangeeta Gopal calls the "domestic cosmopolitans") who are both able and willing to pay the relatively high admission fee that the multiplexes charge.[81] The multiplex film does not directly take on the pedagogic mantle that the big budget films do, as in, they do not instruct their viewers on conspicuous consumption.[82]However, the venues of these film

[81] Sangita Gopal, "Sentimental Symptoms: The Films of Karan Johar and Bombay Cinema," in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, ed. R. Mehta and R. Pandaripande (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 15-34.

[82] For an overview of multiplex films, see: Amit Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

screenings, the shopping malls, already determine that the audience of these films know their way around in a consumerist world.

Chapter Two

Shah Rukh Khan: Reconfiguring Stardom

In the age of mass media, aura, so long associated with traditional artwork, finds its residence in what Walter Benjamin calls the phony cult of the film personality, or the pantheon of stardom. The star becomes auratic in the same manner as traditional artwork did in the time preceding mass reproduction. Aura, in this reading, points to the desire of the contemporary masses to bring things closer, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of such an endeavor. In this vein, Benjamin writes,

> What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. … It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: *the desire of present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.* Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image.[83]

Aura in Benjamin's reading is both the recognition of distance and the attendant desire to undo the distance. While this paradox results in the need to bring traditional artworks closer through their reproductions, the auratic personality of the star, even though it is a degenerate cult, inspires the fans to seek to reduce the distance by imitating the star,

[83] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in The Age of Its Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 104-105

while being simultaneously aware that the distance cannot ever be completely transcended. In what follows, taking my cue from Benjamin, I argue that the star-image remains auratic because of the distance between the star and the fan – a distance that the fan seeks to negate through both cinematic and extra-cinematic consumption of star-endorsed goods, star-texts, and star lifestyles. This desire, and the concomitant knowledge of its futility, makes consumption of the star-image and of star-endorsed lifestyles an endless process.

A theory of stardom becomes difficult to piece together in the age of celebrity culture. With the internet and the rising popularity of reality television, not only do sites of circulation and consumption of the star-image proliferate, but these new sites, in turn, create their own celebrities who are circulated, consumed, and followed in the same manner in which traditional movie-stars are. Richard Dyer's theorization of the star-image remains relevant to this day even as the market is saturated by celebrities with their short-lived claim to fame. While the conflation of the star and the celebrity, even in film studies, is a result of reading the star-text strictly on the basis of its reception, Dyer's method, combining semiotics and sociology, locates the star-image at the intersection of the industry and the film-text and of films and their social contexts. Among other things, Dyer argues,

> Stars are examples of the way people live their relation to production in capitalist society. Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual'.[84]

[84] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2011), 5

To Dyer's reading, I would add that in a consumer society, stars do not merely articulate what it is to be human, they embody its very ideal. Stars are the greatest adverts of the neoliberal good life. In the persona of the star, their lifestyles, their patterns of consumption, is the greatest endorsement of consumer capitalism.[85]

Stars become the symbol of the consumerist tendencies potentiated by the neoliberal era, and by the same token, they advertise its use-value promise. They provide an ideal, of not just what to buy but how to live, to which the fans aspire.[86] As I argued in the previous chapter, neoliberal market reforms in India engender a consumptive citizenship, and the stars of Bollywood cinema signify both its idealized version and its embodiment. While this new emergent model of citizenship, which Bollywood promotes, emerges as the result of addressing the cinematic spectator as a consumer of newly available global commodities and lifestyles, the stars, as emblems of this new discourse, make this frenzied, unending consumption appear to their fans as not a tubercular sickness, but as its remedy.

Shah Rukh Khan, more than any other Bollywood star, emerges as the ideal citizen of neoliberal India. The characters he plays on screen, including the successful

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[85] On similar lines as Benjamin, Dyer points out how the star is made:

> First, the person is a body, a psychology, a set of skills that have to be mined and worked up into a star image. This work, of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, varies in the degree to which it respects what artists sometimes refer to as the inherent qualities of the material; make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features they start with, and personality is no less malleable, skills no less learnable. The people who do this labor include the star him/herself as well as make-up artistes, hairdressers, dress designers, dieticians, personal trainers, acting, dancing and other teachers, publicists, pin-up photographers, gossip columnists, and so on. Part of this manufacture of the star image takes place in the films the star makes, with all the personnel involved in that, but one can think of the films as a second stage. The star image is then a given, like machinery, an example of what Karl Marx calls 'congealed labor', something that is used with further labor (scripting, acting, directing, managing, filming, editing) to produce another commodity, a film.

Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 5

[86] See Christine Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London: Routledge, 2003.

diasporic characters which form a sizeable chunk of his oeuvre, his brand savviness and wide range of product endorsements, and his rise to stardom from middle class origins, set him up as the model for the citizenry to emulate. The star-image of Shah Rukh Khan, a fusion of all three things mentioned above, provides the template of the possibilities that neoliberalism has to offer. This chapter explores the star-text of Shah Rukh Khan, the paradigmatic icon of Bollywood cinema, reading the star-image as an amalgam of the film text, the status of the persona, and the global system of exchange. In what follows, I chart the rise of Shah Rukh Khan into the emblem of neoliberal India – exploring how his star-image comes to epitomize a citizenship that is consumerism-friendly yet steeped in reified Hindu patriarchal values. But before discussing the ideological implications of Shah Rukh Khan's star-image and the desires it creates, I would like to turn to a moment in Bollywood cinema where, in a film without any recognizable star, the industry consecrates its myth of stardom.

The Star as the Rainbow's End

Pari and Chhotu, orphaned siblings, travel across the Thar Desert to meet Shah Rukh Khan in *Dhanak* (*Rainbow*).[87] Pari is a Shah Rukh Khan fan, and her younger brother, Chhotu, is a Salman Khan fan who wears a turquoise stone wristband like his beloved star. Chhotu has lost his eyesight because of malnutrition (or, inadequate consumption, if you will). Before he completely lost his vision, Chhotu watched Salman Khan's hit action film, *Dabangg* (*Fearless*, Abhinav Kashyap, 2010). His last memory of sight is a memory of his favorite star. As the kids walk to school each day, Pari narrates a

[87] *Dhanak*, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor (Mumbai: Reliance Big Entertainment, 2016).

story to her brother. The protagonist of the tale is decided by a coin-toss. If Pari makes the right call, it is a Shah Rukh Khan story, but if Chhotu wins the toss, Pari has to tell a story about Salman Khan. The stories that Pari narrates are not film plots, but they are "filmy", i.e., inspired by the movies. These are informal and highly personalized fanfictions. They lean towards action or romance depending on the protagonist: Shah Rukh Khan features in romantic stories, whereas Salman Khan gravitates towards action. The on-screen personas of these stars travel beyond the screen into elaborate fan-fictions that enliven the kids' daily trudge to school. The stars become the siblings' own as they concoct stories about the adventures of these stars premised upon an underlying conviction in the innate goodness and invincibility of these stars. While each Shah Rukh Khan story (*mera Sah Rukh* or 'my Sah Rukh' as Pari calls him – the palatal fronting involved in the substitution of the 's' for the 'sh' renders the star closer to the kids, even if it makes him uncharacteristically less urban) has Shah Rukh Khan as a rich man, it is his good nature that is the highlight of these narratives.

Pari chances on a poster of Shah Rukh Khan as a goodwill ambassador for eye-donations. The poster, encouraging people to donate their eyes after death, is pasted on a wall covered by countless film posters, aligning the reel and the real-life star. For Pari, this poster combines both Shah Rukh Khan's cinematic roles, where the protagonist is guaranteed a happy ending, and Shah Rukh Khan, the mighty and rich movie star who has the power to restore Chhotu's vision and ensure the kids get their happy ending. Pari writes to Khan for help but does not hear back from her idol. The kids do not give up on the star as they imagine the various reasons that could have kept their "Sah Rukh" from replying. Fortune smiles on the kids as they hear that Shah Rukh Khan is shooting a in

Jaisalmer, a town about three hundred kilometers off from the kids' village. The kids run away from home to meet Shah Rukh and convince him to help them. The film chronicles the adventures of these kids as they make their way across the Thar Desert to reach Shah Rukh Khan, the star who is the object of this epic quest.

Dhanak is not just a kind of pilgrim's progress about two orphans and their many adventures but also a story of fandom. It is a cinematic fanfiction, not just about Shah Rukh Khan, but the entire star-pantheon of Bollywood. While current fandom is associated with changing consumption patterns in the neoliberal era, i.e. consumer tendencies as set by stars and celebrities, *Dhanak* presents a different kind of devotion, a sort that renders sacred even the coffee mugs from which Shah Rukh Khan supposedly drank. It is the piety that makes two kids believe that if they meet Shah Rukh, Chhotu can see a *dhanak* (rainbow) again. The kids walk for miles to meet the star, but before their arduous journey ends, they faint from severe dehydration. Someone takes them to a nearby hospital where they are not only nursed back to health, but Chhotu regains his vision. The film does not reveal the identity of the person who saved the kids and paid for Chhotu's surgery. But Pari, who catches a glimpse of their benefactor, is convinced that Shah Rukh Khan, like in all his movies, ultimately saved the day.

The desire to be close to the star not only informs consumer choice, i.e. a tendency to gravitate towards products and lifestyles endorsed by stars, but also causes fans to click selfies with the star's supposed discarded coffee mug. For Chhotu, who has not watched a film in a while, stardom is not about looking at the star or identification with an image, but a sacred devotion that is built on the condition of the star's transcendent position. As Chhotu nonchalantly points out to a priestess, he did pray to

god to restore his sight. But since god did not heed his prayers, he has put all his hopes in Shah Rukh Khan. Khan's stardom, here available to the kids through movies and through his status as the goodwill ambassador for an eye-donation campaign, makes him the sacral figure who can ensure that these kids find their happily ever after.

The interchangeability of Salman and Shah Rukh Khan in the homespun stories that the kids narrate to each other as they trek across the desert illuminates the nature of stardom. The narratives, both action and romance, are predicated on the innate goodness of the star that transcend the differences of genres. The star-image functions as a moral framework that predetermines narrative closure. Even in a film like *Dhanak* where Shah Rukh Khan does not play a character but is only present as a poster among many other film posters, the moral economy is supplied by the star's characteristic goodness. It is a secular moral goodness, one that prevails over the corrupt purveyors of religion the kids encounter on their way, including a priest who is a part of a child-smuggling ring. Shah Rukh Khan and his stardom (which could be replaced, in this instance, by any other star, including Salman Khan to whom the film refers many times) is the guarantor of the happy-ending the kids seek. "Like in the movies" is not just the lavish life depicted in films and lived by their stars; rather, "like in the movies" is the guarantee of wishes coming true. And keeping true to a tradition quite popular in devotional films, where divine intervention is not depicted on-screen but is only hinted at, *Dhanak* remains open-ended as to the identity of the person who saved the kids. And the spectators are left wondering as to the identity of this mysterious benevolent person and simultaneously believing in the power of the star to ensure their individual happy endings. They never

quite meet the star like they never meet god. Nevertheless, their prayers are answered, our wishes fulfilled, and we believe once again in the invincibility of star-power.

The star-image is auratic because the star always remains distant. The invincibility of the star, the erasure of all traces of mediation from the star-image, and the felt immediacy (and simultaneous distance) of the fans to the star is what makes the star-image auratic. Aura, for both Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, is the unique phenomenon of distance, hinging on the dialectic of illusion and reality. While aura, with its roots in ritual and magic, germinates from the feeling of distance, whether fostered by ritual or the uniqueness of the art object, it wanes in the age of technological reproducibility. While newer art forms like the photograph or the film, ontologically speaking, are not auratic since they are in the realm of the "here and now" and their reproducibility renders the question of uniqueness moot, aura finds its latest location not in the work of art proper but in the cult of the movie-star. For Benjamin, aura finds its residence in the phony cult of personality in the age of technological reproducibility. The aura resides not in the person, but rather in the person rendered into a personality, i.e., consumable. The star's aura is conditional on this inauthenticity. The star-image, in Benjamin's reading, is inauthentic because it renders the person into a commodity. When the exhibition value of art overtakes its cult value, the reified aura of the commodity is further reinforced. This degenerate aura (which includes the cult of the personality), Keya Ganguly notes, attests to the "ongoing transformation of perception and experience under capitalism."[88]

Not only is the star-image inauthentic on account of its commodification, but also because film-acting requires a kind of estrangement of the actor. Benjamin notes that the

[88] Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 94.

star offers not just his labor, but his whole self, now made strange, to the market for consumption. Taking his cue from Pirandello, he writes,

> The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation. The nature of this use can be grasped through the fact that the film actor's estrangement in the face of the apparatus, as Pirandello describes this experience, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's appearance in a mirror… Now the mirror image [*Bild*] has become detachable from the person mirrored, and is transportable. And where is it transported? To a site in front of the masses. Naturally, the screen actor never for a moment ceases to be aware of this. While he stands before the apparatus, he knows that in the end he is confronting the masses. It is they who control him.[89]

Technological mediation separates the actor's image from his self and transports this image to distant places. As the actor is distanced from himself, he is brought closer to the fans/viewers who consume this absentee-presence as presence itself. What estranges the star from himself also makes this estranged image proximate to the fans.

The desire of the fan for the star is a kind of approximation – the desire to be proximate to the star and also to approximate the star. This need to be close to the star, to emulate the star, and to find in the star's on-screen image her own ideal-self-image creates an estrangement in the fan in the movie-theater that parallels the estrangement of the star in front of the movie-camera. This desire could be enacted through consuming

[89] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in The Age of Its Reproducibility," 113.

products and lifestyles endorsed by the star or by creating mythologies of the star (like Pari does). In either case, the aura or the appeal of stardom rests on the indefinite deferral of this desire for proximity. The desire is temporarily whetted through consumption of star-endorsed goods or star-narratives in films or magazines. However, this momentary satisfaction only spurs the need for more and also underscores the fleeting nature of the auratic.

The *dhanak* (rainbow) that the kids chase across the desert is a metaphor for the star-image. Fans pursue the star in the same way as Adorno characterizes children chasing the rainbow's end:

> One thinks that going there would bring fulfillment as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed, the feeling now is one of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason.[90]

The star as the auratic retains the appearance of distance, physical closeness notwithstanding. This indefinite deferral of fulfillment of expectation makes consuming the star-image pleasurable and, by the same token, unending.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge: The Arrival of the NRI

Stardom garners its own secular mythology that is no less powerful than ones that have a more theological origin. The make-over of Shah Rukh Khan into this object of secular devotion did not happen overnight. The repackaging of Shah Rukh Khan into the consumption-friendly superstar that he has now become can be traced back to *Dilwale*

[90] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 373.

Dulhania Le Jayenge (*The Bighearted Will Take Away the Bride*), henceforth *DDLJ*.[91] It was only with *DDLJ* that Shah Rukh Khan emerged as the exemplar of metrosexual masculinity. In his earlier films, including *Baazigar* (*Gambler*), *Darr* (*Fear*), and *Anjaam* (*Consequence*), Khan played obsessive and even psychologically damaged characters.[92] In other early films, like *Chamatkar* (*Miracle*), *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (*Raju Becomes a Gentleman*), and *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* (*Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No*), he played lovable, albeit somewhat naïve, characters from small towns that arrive at the city in search of work and success.[93]

DDLJ, the directorial debut of Aditya Chopra, is the story of two Non-Resident Indians (henceforth NRI), Raj and Simran, who fall in love as they travel through Europe with their friends. However, Simran's father, Baldev, has already arranged her marriage with his friend's rather boorish son Kuljeet, who lives in Punjab. Simran and her family go back to India for the wedding. A smitten Raj follows them to India. After much ado, Raj manages to convince Simran's father to accept their relationship. The film ends with Baldev letting go of his pride and telling Simran to go live her life with Raj. The now-iconic final sequence takes place on the railway platform. Playing on melodrama's rather well-known structure of "too-late" and "in the nick of time", *DDLJ* ends on a railway

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[91] *Dulhania Le Jayenge*, directed by Aditya Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 1995).

[92] *Baazigar*, directed by Abbas Alibhai Burmawalla -Mastan Alibhai Burmawalla (Mumbai: United Seven Companies, Venus Records and Tapes, 1993).
Darr, directed by Yash Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 1993).
Anjaam, directed by Rahul Rawail (Mumbai: Eros International, 1994).

[93] *Chamatkar*, directed by Rajiv Mehra (Mumbai: Eagle Films, 1992).
Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman, directed by Aziz Mirza (Mumbai: Sippy Film, 1992).
Kabhi Haan Kabhii Naa, directed by Kundan Shah (Mumbai: Bambino Video Pvt. Ltd, Shemaroo Video Pvt. Ltd., 1994).

platform.[94] Raj has already boarded the train, while Simran stands on the platform as she pleads with her father to let her join Raj. Finally, almost as the train is about to leave the station, the father lets go of Simran's hand. As Simran runs to the train, the tension heightened by the use of slow-motion, Baldev gives his final stamp of approval to Raj with a thumbs-up sign. With this gesture, the NRI yuppie passes muster as the inheritor of Baldev's traditional Indian values.



Figure 2.1 The final scene, screenshot from *DDLJ*

[94] Melodrama as a cinematic modality employs what Linda Williams terms the "dialectics of pathos and action." While all melodramas function with the understanding that the virtue of the victim-hero will be ultimately recognized (by the audience if not by the characters), what gives the mode its affective push/pull is the tension between "being too late" and "just in the nick of time" of said discovery. It creates suspense by delaying the recognition of virtue. In *DDLJ*, Raj's virtue is recognized only when Baldev gives him his blessings.
Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised", in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42-88.

Although Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen approach the film as "chronicling the hero's passage from the British-Asian diaspora into traditional Indian patriarchy," I argue that the film emphasizes the co-existence of the two seemingly antonymic set of values.[95] Functioning within the melodramatic modality, *DDLJ* subscribes to the Manichean binary of a clearly depicted victim-hero and villain. Raj is the victim-hero who, through his suffering and constant deferring to the wishes of the patriarch, proves his virtue.[96] In so doing, Raj, the ideal NRI, establishes himself as the inheritor of the traditional values that Baldev exemplifies. Unlike Raj, Kuljeet, representing the older traditional feudal patriarchal order, is the villain who is at odds with the new Indianness and therefore unfit to win the girl's affection. The new hero of new India does not replace the patriarch but follows in his footsteps. The consumer citizen, whose characteristics I have outlined in the previous chapter, takes his cue from Raj – consumerism-friendly, yet steeped in a reified notion of patriarchal Hindu identity in equal measure. Aditya Chopra wanted the film to resonate with a younger audience,

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[95] Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999), 528.

[96] Melodramatic protagonists are victim-heroes who always emerge victorious. Their virtue is ultimately established, and they triumph over the clearly-identified antagonists. This Manicheanism animates all melodrama, thus making the mode a popular one, especially during times of social crisis.
See: Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996).
Christine Gledhill *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Pub, 1987).
Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media, and National Cultures*. (Irvington: Columbia University Press, 2018)
Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002).
Tania Modleski, "Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies," *American Literary History* 22, no. 1 (2009): 136-158.
Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11." *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (2005): 22-37.
Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

particularly with the younger diasporic population who embrace both traditional Indian culture and a consumerist-cosmopolitan sensibility.

DDLJ was released a year after *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun…!* (*Who Am I to You*?), the film that marked the emergence of the big-budget family drama that has become Bollywood's greatest export.[97] *DDLJ* stands out from *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* on two accounts. First, it reimagines romance in the neoliberal era, paving the way for other directors, like Karan Johar, and their repackaging of the big budget *masala* films. Second, unlike *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* which revolved around the extended Indian family, *DDLJ* presents the NRI as the true inheritor of the values of a mythical, eternal, and reified "Indian-ness." It is this figure that provides the template for the locals to copy – both in terms of conspicuous consumption and hegemonic identity. *DDLJ* is in many ways the first nostalgia film that addressed the homesickness of the diaspora. If *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* mobilized a nostalgia for the extended family which was being replaced by the nuclear family, *DDLJ* mobilized a diasporic nostalgia for the homeland, now imagined as the 'authentic' site of traditional values. Jigna Desai argues that the nostalgia that animates *DDLJ* is that of the patriarch, usually a first-generation immigrant:

> In *DDLJ,* it is the patriarch who longs for the homeland and finds the West threatening in terms of contamination and corruption; in contrast, for Baldev's daughters, diaspora is home. In this film, men are the subjects and women the embodiments of nostalgia. The displaced patriarch, emasculated and disempowered by race and class in the postcolonial

[97] *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun…!*, directed by Sooraj Barjatya (Mumbai: Rajshri Productions/Eros,1994).

> metropole, consequently produces an overcompensating iron grip on his family.[98]

Nostalgia, here, is the result of spatial displacement and the dissolution of the heteronormative patriarchal family. While the figure of the second-generation diasporic man provides the narrative resolution to this anxiety, the women (even the patriarch's wife) do not evince this hetero-masculine nostalgia for the homeland or for the traditions associated with it.

In many ways, the family romance, exemplified by *DDLJ*, is a carryover of what Madhava Prasad calls the "feudal family romance" from the 1950s.[99] Ravi Vasudevan argues that this new genre is a response to neoliberal globalization and the new desires for global commodities as it

> …mobilizes a desire for narratives that both express and draw upon this fascination, while seeking to generate an identity equilibrium within which these desires can be cohered, made happy.[100]

The family romance, catering to the diasporic population, creates the nostalgic image of an authentic homeland whose values the NRI, even though he physically inhabits a different space, exemplifies. Though it manages to allay the fears of the diasporic population about the withering away of traditional patriarchal values, the narrative resolution that the film provides is different from the way in which the angry young man

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[98] Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 127.

[99] See M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Also, Monika Mehta, "Globalizing Bombay cinema: Reproducing the Indian state and family." *Cultural Dynamics* 17, no. 2 (2005): 135-154.

[100] Vasudevan, "The Meanings of 'Bollywood'".

films from the 1970s were resolved.[101] Unlike the angry young man, the neoliberal yuppie, already secure in his place in the modern world, does not assume the role of the patriarch and seeks the patriarch's blessings instead.

Not limited to *DDLJ,* this deference to the authority of the traditional patriarch is a theme even in films that depict a conflict between the traditions upheld by the patriarch and the modern values that the diasporic protagonist represents. This includes *Mohabattein* (*Love Stories*) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (*Sometimes there's Happiness, Sometimes there's Sorrow*).[102] It is not without irony that in both these films, Amitabh Bachchan, who has now been established as the very patriarch that the angry young man displaced in the heydays of the Bachchan phenomenon.[103] If the authority of

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[101] The angry young man of Hindi cinema became a popular trope in the 1970s. Amitabh Bachchan's rise to stardom was based on these iconic roles. The Bachchan phenomenon ensured that extraordinary traits of the elite hero of the feudal family romance that formed the staple narrative of the earlier era with the associated iconicity of such an image give way to the figure of the angry young man. With the figure of Bachchan, the ordinary enters the filmic resolutions of the dissonances with the nation state in the form of the dockworker, the mineworker, the petty smuggler, and so on. Bachchan emerges as the "industrial hero" in both senses – first, as portraying the working class and second as the hero of the industry. However, as Madhava Prasad points out, Bachchan's cultural and political associations played into the star-persona and thus legitimized it for the middle class. The "subaltern" roles created the scope for a new mode of address – the mobilization aesthetic. The angry young man's coming to be as such was premised on the loss of the father or the father figure. The untimely (and often unnatural) death of the father installs the star as the new premature paternal figure, taking over the function of the head of the household. The narrative legitimizes this paternal figure with the introduction of the subplot of the sister's romance with the "fan-figure" of the sidekick. The star becomes the protector of the innocent love of his sister and the sidekick. Thus, the traditional patriarch is replaced by the star who upholds the traditional patriarchal values but can make his way in the modern world – an efficient narrative technique "for a star to emerge out of diegetic immanence to a position of transcendence." The angry young man films are the culmination of a long-drawn process of restructuring the dominant narrative form installing the star as the new moral framework within whose aegis the narrative unfolds.
For an in-depth discussion of the Bachchan figure, see: M. Madhava Prasad, "Cine-politics: on the political significance of cinema in south India," *Journal of the Moving Image* 1, no. Autumn (1999): 37-52.
Also see Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*.

[102] *Mohabattein*, directed by Aditya Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films: 2000).
Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, directed by Karan Johar (Mumbai: Dharma Productions, 2001).

[103] Amitabh Bachchan makes his comeback to Bollywood not as the iconic angry young man of the '70s but as the traditional patriarch. However, the Bachchan image from the '70s was so saturated that Bachchan had to detour via television, as the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (an Indian remake of the gameshow *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), before he could be accepted as the patriarch of the big-screen. The post-

the angry young man is based on the loss of the father whom the protagonist then proceeded to replace, then the yuppie of Bollywood cinema, who does not replace but coexists with the patriarch, draws his authority from his comfort in navigating the world of newly available commodities. The star no longer has to emerge as the moral epicenter of the narrative because such narratives begin in *medias res* as far as their morality, supplied by the neoliberal consumerist ethic, is concerned. The star is always already moral. He draws his ethics from traditional patriarchy and from the logic of the market in equal measure.

If Bachchan had to be rehabilitated for Bollywood cinema (via a detour through television) by stripping him off the anti-establishment anger associated with his earlier star-image, Bollywood repackaged Shah Rukh Khan as the metrosexual star with designer clothes and foreign brands, and also by removing all traces of failure from the lovable small-town bumpkins that he had played earlier in his career**.** Anger has no place in the neoliberal imagination. Neither does failure. While the bumbling small-town characters essayed by Khan on his way to superstardom were characters who, because of their struggles and their aspirations, were ones with whom the audience could identify, the shift in Khan's star-image from *DDLJ* onwards provided an image of success to which the audience could aspire. The small-town, middle class characters have been phased out of the big-budget films and relegated to the now commercially viable multiplex screens and their all-surface brand of realism. Khan's early characters presented not only the aspirations of the middle-class, semi-urban population as they

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liberalization Bollywood cinema did not have any space for the anger of the Bachchan figure of the '70s. In other words, the star of the neoliberal era does not carry the burden of the angry young man – he is no longer angry, rather is at home in the world of consumerist activities.

sought success in the city; they also contained a critique of the ambitious ruthlessness that the city demanded of them. The psychotic anti-heroes that Shah Rukh Khan also played early on in his career were, in fact, an extension of this critique. However, even the possibility of such, did not find its way into the new narratives of Bollywood which made the ethics of the market-place into an aesthetic project. In this aesthetic economy, success is moral goodness, and the star in such a cinematic universe is already successful, therefore already good.

DDLJ did not just allay the anxiousness of the diasporic population about the co-existence of traditional (feudal and patriarchal) values and consumerist-cosmopolitan (often conflated with the modern or western) customs, it also gave expression to the desires of the locals for the exotic elsewhere. Cinema and tourism became intertwined in a manner that hitherto unprecedented. For example, Yash Raj Studios, the producer of *DDLJ*, tied up with the tourism industry, cashing in on the desires for European getaways created by the film. An advertisement, placed by the Kuoni Travel Group, claims to be an invitation from Yash Raj Studios, for various package tours all over Europe. The iconic picture of Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, as Raj and Simran respectively, invites the readers to set sail on "an enchanted journey to Switzerland" – the one that the protagonists of the film had embarked on.[104] In this instance, consumption is packaged as experience.

[104] Although the advertisement serves as a direct invitation to its readers to travel to Switzerland, the obsession of Bombay cinema with the Swiss countryside long predates this. The first Hindi film to be shot in Switzerland was *Sangam* (Convergence), directed by Raj Kapoor (Mumbai: RK Studios, 1964). It was Yash Chopra, Aditya Chopra's father, who shot most of his films in Switzerland. The Swiss tourism industry recognized the contribution of Yash Chopra in making Switzerland a popular holiday destination for Indians by naming a train after him.



Figure 2.2 *DDLJ* as an invitation to world travel (source: NFAI)

DDLJ is no accidental choice for such promotional material, as its success is premised on its depiction of an image of the desired "good life" based on global mobility,

consumption of branded goods, and a reified notion of tradition. The advertisement encourages the reader to "get photographed on the same bridge just like Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol", "feel like a star when you get photographed as Abhishek Bachchan and Rani Mukherjee", and even "experience the magic of the same location where Shah Rukh Khan fell in love with Kajol." The advertisement, with its fusion of the travel brochure and the film-still, is one of the many examples that demonstrates that it is no longer enough merely to watch cinema; the spectator now wants to live it as well. The films, depicting Indians at home in the world, provide the template for Indians at home to which to aspire.

Bollywood is not just cinema; it is a whole way of life. It is the culture industry, with cinema at its center, instructing new consumers on canny and savvy ways to navigate not just the world of newly available goods, but also the world itself as cosmopolitan tourists. Stardom, then, is not just an invitation to cinema; it opens for a newly globalizing market the door to all manners of consumption. And nothing sells like Shah Rukh Khan, as he himself notes in an interview that appeared in *Filmfare*:

> I like to wear my stardom like a T-shirt and not a tuxedo. Stardom is not a special occasion for me. Stardom suits me comfortably. Without sounding pompous I'd just like to say that stardom feels easy, I can sleep in my stardom, I can brush in my stardom, I can run in my stardom, I can play with my kids in my stardom.[105]

Consumption has the appearance of a more democratic model – we can imitate our stars, i.e., consume as do they. In and through consumption, the world appears more

[105] Shah Rukh Khan interview. *Filmfare*. Vol 59, Issue 4. (February 17, 2010), 85.

egalitarian. The star image of Shah Rukh Khan has a greater appeal in this regard. By emphasizing the rise of Shah Rukh Khan from a middle-class background to superstardom, this star-narrative provides a model that produces both identification and aspiration. The star now embodies both the material and ethical ideal of life. Drawing on Veblen's theorization of "pecuniary emulation," Dyer makes a connection between stardom and conspicuous consumption. He points out,

> [T]he stars become models of consumption for everyone in a consumer society. They may spend more than the average person, but none the less they can be, on a smaller scale, imitated. Their fashions are to be copied, their fads followed, their sports pursued, their hobbies taken up.[106]

It is the nature of stardom to associate conspicuous consumption with the success of stars – consumption, for the stars too, is a measure of success, just as it is for their spectators.

On similar lines as Dyer, Barry King argues that stars exemplify the myth of success, the dream that capitalism peddles to ensure its untamed and unequal expansion worldwide.[107] Shah Rukh Khan exemplifies this myth to a greater degree than his contemporaries as he emerges as the true mascot of neoliberal India.[108] The celebrity, in

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[106] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Pub, 1998), 39.

[107] Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," *Screen*, Volume 26, Issue 5, 1 (September 1985): 27–51. Also, Barry King, "Stardom, Celebrity, and the Money Form," *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 65, no. 1 (2010): 7-19.

[108] Every biography and almost every documentary of Shah Rukh Khan underscores that Khan came to the Bombay film industry without any prior connection. The ambition to succeed in a nepotistic industry is referenced in a BBC documentary on Khan, where he tells the interviewer that when he came to Bombay (now Mumbai), he wanted to own the city. Tales about Khan, then a fledging star, standing in front of Ville Vienna, a sea-facing bungalow, vowing that he will own it someday are now part of the Bollywood folklore. That he did buy it a few years later and renamed it *Mannat*, which roughly translates to desire, serves as a reminder to his fans that in capitalism wishes do come true. *Mannat*, with its view of the sea, six lavishly decorated floors, is a citadel of conspicuous consumption. It has been featured countless times in lifestyle and entertainment magazines and has become a tourist attraction for fans. Khan's rise from a

the era of the free-market and the proliferation of sites of consumption, both of the star-image and otherwise, heralds "a new stage in the commodification of personality and the formation of exchange value out of what appear to be the natural values of the person."[109] King argues that the hype around celebrities is just another instance of what Marx called commodity fetishism, with the added caveat that celebrity fetishism is an advanced expression of commodity fetishism in the mode of personification. The celebrity is the finest example of what political economy desires of us – to make every personal attribute saleable, i.e., seem useful to others. King's argument is predominantly about Hollywood where celebrities are directly equated with the money form and certain star attributes, including looks, are assigned monetary values. However, this argument about the nature of stardom can be applied to Bollywood stars from the mid '90s. Whereas stars before the neoliberal era generally avoided product endorsements, the current era places a huge premium on advertisements. The star-text of actors in the pre-neoliberal era would comprise of the films and the extra-filmic materials like print or audio-visual interviews and product endorsements. The star-culture of the neoliberal era is markedly different formulation from that of the 1970s which was built on the aesthetics of mobilization around the figure of Amitabh Bachchan as the angry young man.[110]

Shah Rukh Khan is more self-reflexive about his stardom than any of his contemporaries. His star-image does not suffer from a disjunction between the screen

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middle-class, Delhi University graduate to the superstar that he is now exemplifies the myth of success upheld not only by capitalism, but also the film industry whose narratives promise happy endings.

[109] King, "Stardom, Celebrity, and the Money Form," 10.

[110] What this formation meant for the film form was an integration of star-value with the film narrative. The collapse of the extra-filmic and filmic star-image made it impossible to read these star-texts through the prism of western star studies, which assumes a parallel existence of the filmic narrative and the star-image, both acting as an invitation to the other in a circle of unending consumption. See: Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film.*

image and the "real life" images in circulation outside the film, unlike, for example, Salman Khan whose larger than life screen image is at odds with the various controversies and court cases in which he is embroiled. In fact, both the onscreen and off-screen star-image of Salman Khan is based on excess, i.e., in as much as his onscreen roles evince moral goodness, his off-screen image is mired in scandals including a drunk-driving accident that claimed two lives. Shah Rukh Khan's star-image is also unlike that of his other contemporary, Aamir Khan, who as Akshaya Kumar points out, emerges as a sacrificial figure with his involvement in the "*Narmada Bachao Andolan*" (a movement by farmers, tribals, and human rights activists protesting against dams being built on the Narmada river on account of their environmental impact and largescale displacement of people), his television show *Satyameva Jayate* (a talk-show that deals with social issues), and with films like *Taare Zameen Par* (*Like Stars on Earth*), *PK*, and *3 Idiots.*[111] Aamir gains this moral authority, one that Shah Rukh Khan does not command despite his popularity, by discouraging any of the products he endorses from advertising on his television show. Unlike Aamir, who shows some degree of social awareness when it comes to endorsing products, Shah Rukh Khan's attitude, like the neoliberal ethos that he comfortably inhabits, is more relaxed.[112]

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111 Akshaya Kumar, "*Satyamev Jayate*: Return of the Star as a Sacrificial Figure," *Journal of South Asia Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 2, (2014): 239-254.
Taare Zameen Par, directed by Aamir Khan (Mumbai: Aaamir Khan Films, 2007).
PK, directed by Rajkumar Hirani (Mumbai: Rajkumar Hirani Films, Vinod Chopra Productions, 2014).
3 Idiots, directed by Rajkumar Hirani (Mumbai: Rajkumar Hirani Films, Vinod Chopra Productions, 2009).

[112] Shah Rukh Khan points out the following in an interview regarding the controversy about pesticides in aerated beverages, including Pepsi, that he endorsed:

> I sell ideas. It could be a film or biscuits, polio vaccines, cars or the 'One Mumbai' campaign… just about anything. I don't have to justify myself. If the government believes that aerated drinks are harmful to public health, shouldn't they be banned? Shouldn't the media ban the drinks instead of plastering their pages and gobbling up air time with ads promoting them? Ban the products and I will not sell them.

Swades: A New Mobilization Aesthetic

The state, David Harvey notes, once neoliberalized, becomes "a prime agent of redistributive policies, reversing the flow from upper to lower classes that had occurred during the era of embedded liberalism."[113] This happens, Harvey argues, through privatization of resources once held in the common and through huge cutbacks on state spending. In this model, while private citizens perform their duties of citizenship through consumption, they are also increasingly encouraged to take part in welfare programs which were previously the domain of the state. This altered function of the state and private citizens, vis-à-vis welfare, results in a new mobilization aesthetic employed by in Bollywood cinema.

The aesthetic of mobilization, a recurring leitmotif in Hindi Cinema in the 1950s and in the angry young man films of the 1970s, ceases to be a dominant theme in Hindi cinema in the 1980s and thereafter.[114] Though the village and the small town mostly disappear from the big budget films, they make a few, albeit infrequent, appearances on screen as fetish objects, or abject objects, around which a new aesthetic of mobilization

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Pepsi did take up the question of safety in 2003 when both Pepsi and Coca Cola were caught in the controversy regarding the presence of pesticides in their aerated beverages. Coca Cola was at that point being endorsed by Aamir Khan, who directly addressed the issue in an advertisement. Aamir is shown inspecting a Coca Cola plant and shares information on the various health and safety measures employed by the plant to ensure consumer safety. In another advertisement, Aamir plays a Bengali man who is finally convinced by his wife that Coca Cola, drunk across the world by millions of people, is safe. While both Aamir ads touch upon the question of safety of the drinks directly, the Pepsi ad featuring Shah Rukh Khan and the cricketer, Sachin Tendulkar, the twin idols of consumption, obliquely make the reference. Shah Rukh addresses the camera and declares that the drink is not safe and proceeds to show us how he locks up his drink in a safe to keep it away from prying hands. Sachin and Shah Rukh both try to outsmart each other and steal the drink. The star-images of respective film stars decide how the two cola giants frame their advertisements around a time when the health code violations portended a rough patch for the companies.

[113] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17

[114] For an overview of the aesthetic of mobilization, see: Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film,* 138-159.

pivots. Mobilization as an aesthetic and political enterprise are, however, witnessed on few (through increasingly rare) occasions, including the scene from *Swades* (*We, the People*), which uses the star-image to convey its message of social cohesion.[115] However, the mobilization aesthetic that I will discuss in this section addresses the NRI as the pilot of national development and not the locals. The NRI, after *DDLJ*, is not only the template of the ideal consumer-citizen; as the trope/architype becomes predominant, the NRI also emerges as the one who, in his private capacity, takes up the state's function of social development and thereby encourages locals to do so as well. *Swades* revolves around Mohan Bhargava (Shah Rukh Khan), a scientist from NASA who finds himself in Charanpur looking for Kaveri-amma, his old nanny.

Swades is widely regarded as one of Shah Rukh's more relatable roles, one where he gives up the flashy Manish Malhotra clothes for the more 'everyday' Van Heusen shirts, does not romance the leading lady in picture-postcard settings, and has a regular job instead of being the scion of a large family-held business empire. In short, *Swades* is, on many accounts, a film where Shah Rukh Khan is least like his usual screen-persona. It is notable that Khan's star-image, in a film that for reasons mentioned above does not sit comfortably with his oeuvre, subsumes the logic of the narrative. The film emphasizes a certain Gandhian sensibility, opening as it does with a quote from Gandhi: "Hesitating to act because the whole vision might not be achieved, or because others do not yet share it, is an attitude that only hinders progress." *Swades*, incidentally, was released the year after the Government of India introduced The Citizenship Amendment Bill which introduced the category of Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) that can be held in conjunction with

[115] *Swades*, directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar (Mumbai: UTV Productions, Ashutosh Gowarikar Films, Dillywood, 2004)

any other nationality in order to encourage the Non-Resident Indians to invest in Indian development even after they become citizens of other countries.[116] The film, based on the lives of Aravinda Pillalamarri and Ravi Kuchimanchi, NRIs who returned to work in India on development and infrastructure, does not pin its hopes on the goodwill of Indians who continue to reside abroad. Rather, it claims that true development is only possible when these highly trained professionals renounce the comforts of foreign shores and return home. The return of the NRI, in 2004 at that, that is before the markets crashed in 2008, makes *Swades* somewhat of an anomaly in Khan's repertoire which predominately consists of NRI characters comfortably settled in the West.

Two cinematic moments from *Swades*, both film songs, illumine this new aesthetic of mobilization employed by Bollywood. In the first, the village has gathered for an open-air screening of the Zeenat Aman-starrer *Yaadon Ki Baraat* (*Procession of Memories*).[117] Unlike the dark theatre where the captive audience is seated according to their ticket type, here in Charanpur, situated in the Hindi-heartland, the screen divides people on caste lines. On one side of the screen sit the upper caste (and relatively well-to-do) men on their charpoys, while on the other sit the Dalit (formerly untouchable) villagers. One side of the screen has the landowners and on the other side are the farmhands, the blacksmiths, and the potters. A technical glitch causes the film being screened to be suspended in the middle of the song *Chura Liya Hai Tumne Jo Dilko* (Now that you have stolen my heart), leaving the spectators on both sides of the screen

[116] See: Maya Ranganathan, "Towards a More Inclusive Indian identity? A Case Study of the Bollywood Film *Swades*, " *National Identities* 12, no. 1 (2010): 41-59.

[117] *Yaadon Ki Baraat*, directed by Nasir Hussain (Mumbai: Nassir Hussain Films, 1973).

very disappointed. Mohan seizes this opportunity and walks up to the screen and breaks into a song that comments on the lack of social cohesion that caste creates.

The song *Yeh Tara Woh Tara* (*This star, that star, every star*), penned by Javed Akhtar, is one about all-inclusive development, national unity, and nation building – a project that has been mostly ignored in the post-liberalization era. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

yeh taara who taara har taara

dekho jise bhi lage pyaara

yeh sab saath mein, jo hain raat mein

toh jagmagaya aasmaan saara…

tumne dekhi hai dhanak to,

bolo rang kitne hain

saat rang kahne ko,

phir bhi sang kitne hain

samjho sabse pahle toh,

rang hote akele toh

indradhanush banta hi nahin.

ek na hum ho paaye tho,

anyaay se larne ko

hogi koi janta hi nahin

phir na kehna nirbal hai kyon hara

The song, translated roughly, is as follows:

This star, that star, every star,

Whichever you look at, is beautiful.

And when they all twinkle,

They light up the night sky….

If you have ever seen a rainbow,

Tell me how many colors are in there?

The seven colors,

See how close they are?

Had they been not been so close,

There would never be a rainbow.

If we do not unite,

To fight injustice,

It would be futile to even wonder

Why the defenseless never win.

Visually, the sequence draws inspiration from shadow-theatre, especially when Khan's larger than life silhouette dwarfs Khan's presence in front of the screen, as shown in the figure below. The use of the silhouette here plays on the absence-presence that marks the essence of cinema. But more importantly, the larger than life shadow of Khan, with his arms spread open in a gesture that has become iconic and almost a signature Shah Rukh Khan pose, is a self-reflexive gesture that, at least in that moment, enables the star-image of Shah Rukh Khan to overshadow, quite literally, the everyday character that Mohan Bhargava is. The lyrics, in the light of this reading, can be interpreted as a commentary on stardom. The star is both, to quote T. S. Eliot, "more distant than stars

and nearer than the eye," so close and yet unattainable. The star-image is one that is always in excess of the narrative. The resulting tableau, in its very iconicity, interrupts the narrative through this self-reflexive gesture. Similar autotelic gestures mark the star narratives of many of Shah Rukh Khan's recent films. The audience at the open-air theatre remains just as captivated as they would have been if the film had continued to roll without any glitch. Instead of the film they gathered to watch, what captivates them is the figure of Shah Rukh Khan. If the star represents the triumph of the individual over the collective, this triumph is one that is consensual. The star's authority is what Max Weber would qualify as charismatic, as opposed to traditional or legal authority, and sometimes can have a revolutionary scope, however pyrrhic that moment might be.[118]

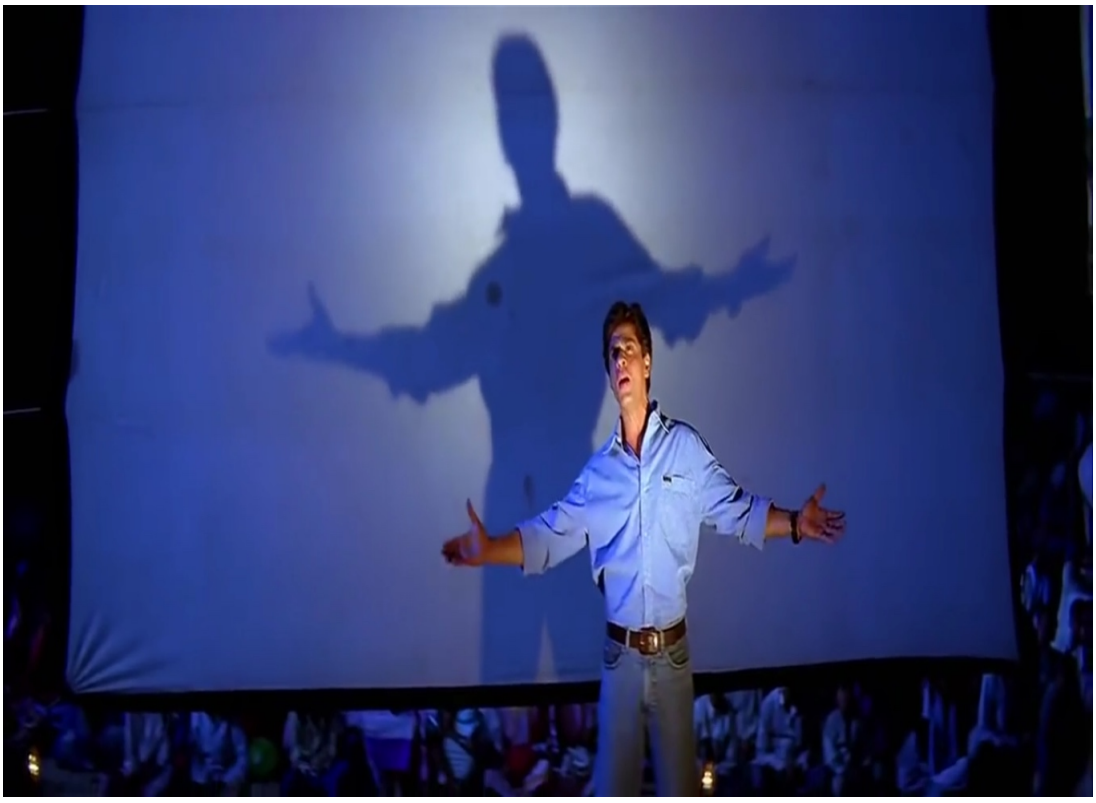


Figure 2.3 A new aesthetic of mobilization, screenshot from *Swades*

[118] Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

The overshadowing of Mohan Bhargava by Khan's superstar image not only enables Mohan to make a call for social unity, but also has great implications for the way development is envisioned in the neoliberal era. But it must be made clear that the song, even as a meta-commentary about social structures, does not emphasize the dissolution of caste as much as it emphasizes the need for different castes to coexist in harmony. The song symbolically brings down the curtain that separates the castes and also addresses the issue of the dignity of labor, especially the labor of farmers and the artisans. However, it is reticent beyond that point. Even so, the symbolic defiance of caste is made possible by the towering Shah Rukh Khan icon on the screen, and the fact that Khan plays an upper caste character does come in handy to garner this temporary social sanction.

The iconicity of the star-image on the makeshift screen does not only momentarily destabilize the caste-lines; it also legitimizes a different view of developmental politics. As the economist, Kalyan Sanyal, notes that it was only after Asia and Africa became decolonized when development, especially in the newly post-colonial nations, came to be understood as

> …a systemic change that was to be brought about by purposeful, rational action, a task to be performed, a goal to be achieved and a mission to be carried out. It was posited as a task for which plans had to be prepared, programs designed, and calculations made. And finally, the programs had to be implemented to radically transform the conditions that constituted underdevelopment.[119]

[119] Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 107.

The developmental stance taken by the postcolonial state was one which viewed development as techno-scientific knowledge, which had at its helm universities, think-tanks, and planning commissions. While the postcolonial state played a pivotal role in such developmental missions, the importance of the role of the state did not rest on the its political authority as much as the technical rationality of the developmental discourse. With the waning of the state welfare under the conditions of neoliberalism, the state's role as promoter of development further recedes, and cinematic moments like the sequence from *Swades* highlight that development too becomes an individual imperative like consumption. Also, science and technology, instead of planning and welfare, emerges as the direction towards which national development should be geared.

It must be noted that the song is not from the vantage point of a villager or even a resident Indian, but from one of diasporic origin, an NRI. As I discussed in my reading of *DDLJ*, the NRI emerges as the ideal of the consumer-citizen of neoliberal India. This trope of the NRI consolidates the world-view that tradition is the domain of the immigrant (or the newly affluent mobile classes). In producing the eternal truth of immigrant goodness, the spatial fixity of Indianness is discarded in favor of a consumption-oriented cosmopolitanism embodied in the persona of Shah Rukh Khan. In the canonized and fetishized star-image of Shah Rukh Khan is the desired self-image of aspiring locals. The consumerist desires that were not realized in the earlier era of economic protectionism are now established as the new morality. And once the NRI has cemented his claim to be the true inheritor of traditional Indian values, he also has to play his role in national development. It is the NRI and not the state that is now responsible for developmental projects. The iconicity of the "consumable hero" of Bollywood cinema

makes this argument about minimal state intervention in national development both legible and desirable.[120] However, unlike most diasporic protagonists of Bollywood, Mohan, is more than a successful NRI, he is also an established scientist. It is scientific rationality which, *Swades* seems to suggest, will help in overcoming the problems posed by caste, religion, and superstition.

The individualism promoted by activities of consumption now spills into the realm of development as well. Instead of the onus of development and social reform falling on the state, it is now the "exceptional" individual on whose capable shoulders rests the responsibility of development. According to the director, Ashutosh Gowariker, *Swades* is "an attempt to ignite a sense of social conscience, which may lead people's participation in various social and developmental issues…. Change ignited by an individual regardless of how small it may be, is a beginning."[121] Change can be catalyzed by the exceptional figure of the star, someone like us, but somehow better positioned to mobilize such reforms. Hence Shah Rukh Khan is able to mobilize his star-image, reinforced by the frozen tableau of the iconic Shah Rukh Khan arms-wide-open pose on the makeshift screen, and temporarily disrupt the boundaries set by caste and class. The "excess" that the star-image is, i.e., in being able to transcend the requirement of the narrative, provides the torque for social change. The star-image is not just the pied-piper leading the spectators to the shopping mall. The use-value promise of the star-image

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[120] Sudhava Deshpande, in his reading of Shah Rukh Khan, calls him "the consumable hero" of India after globalization.
See: Sudhanva Deshpande, "The consumable hero of globalised India," in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*, eds. Raminder Kaur And Ajay Sinha (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005): 186-203.

[121] Interview. *Filmfare* Vol 58. issue 3. February 2, 2009. p 108.

spills over into the developmental discourse by making it the realm of individual purposeful action.

While *Yeh Tara, Woh Tara* temporarily disrupted the fault lines of caste differences with its use of the star-image acting as a cohesive device, the next song sequence (also from *Swades*) directly addresses the NRI, reimagined as the savior on whom rests the onus of developmental initiatives. After Mohan returns to the USA, leaving behind Charanpur, he continues to feel restless. The song, *Yeh Joh Desh Hai Tera* (This country of yours, your homeland), captures this restive sentiment.[122] The film song, in the formal aesthetics of the Hindi film, is one moment in the narrative where the two categories of object-language and meta-language collapse into one.[123] Either in the first person or in third-person omniscient narration, and with certain plot functions, these songs provide a social commentary that is not necessarily limited to character point of view. The song is the rhetorical device in the film where the metalanguage draws attention to itself through the heightened music, the choreographed movements, and the cadence of the lyrics. The collapse of the categories of metalanguage and object language

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[122] The lyrics of the song are as follows:

yeh jo des hai tera swades hai tera
tujhe hai pukaara
ye wo bandhan hai jo kabhi toot nahi sakta.
mitti ki hai jo khushboo tu kaise bhulaayega
tu chaahe kahin jaaye tu laut ke aayega…

The song translated roughly is as follows:
Your country, your motherland,
Is calling you back.
You share a bond that can never be broken.
How will you ever forget the scent of its soil?
Wherever you wander, you will always trace your steps back home.

[123] For a discussion of object language and meta-language, see:
Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," *Screen.* 15, no. 2 (1974): 7-27.

in the film song, then, serves not only to highlight Mohan's homesickness, but also to address other NRIs, the intended audience for the film's larger message, to return back home and perform their duties of citizenship. The song serves as a direct address to its diasporic audience to return home.

The song cuts between shots of Mohan in the USA and shots of India. The India that the song paints for us is the one left behind by "India Shining." It is the village of Charanpur and its people, frozen in Mohan's memory, almost like a tableau. The Indian-ness, the authenticity of this "not quite shining" India, is captured by the notes of the *shehnai* (oboe) and by close-ups of the spice-box that Mohan carried with him to the USA to remind him of the smells and colors of home. It cuts to Mohan's travels in India on overcrowded trains, on scooters, and on a boat. A slow tracking shot of wheat fields refers to the overlooked and underdeveloped agrarian economy (here presented as the true marker of the authentic homeland). Through these images, the song depicts the India that does not make it into the developmental discourse and rehabilitates it as a nostalgic object for the NRI's personal consumption. The authenticity of this India is a recurring theme in this song. For example, when Mohan wakes up and puts his feet on the rug, he imagines stepping into the cool waters of the village lake.

Through its lyrics and its visuals, *Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera* emphasizes the authenticity of rural India in comparison to the inauthentic immigrant life elsewhere. It refers to all the markers of diasporic nostalgia – food, *mitti ki khusbu* (smell of the soil), and even people to call one's own. Nostalgia, invoked in this manner, provides a sense of cultural belonging through which one's political identity is reaffirmed. Nostalgia holds a special function for the diasporic population. In this vein, Ganguly notes,

"disambiguating the past permits people to make sense of uncertainties in the present," and memories of the past provide the bedrock of reconsolidating ideals of (immigrant) selfhood.[124] Nostalgia for the diaspora serves to reinstate a sense of belonging by articulating identity in cultural terms. Nostalgia thus re-creates a sense of Indianness that transcends both time and cartographic lines.

The song urges the NRI, in exile in a foreign land, to come back home. Not to the city, but to the village – to the underfed, the overworked, the malnourished, the uneducated India. While the abject poverty of the farmers that he encountered during his stay in Charanpur took Mohan by surprise, now, as memory, they represent the India to which he longs to go back. His work at NASA seems insignificant to the Herculean task he performed in Charanpur where he saved the village from being plagued by power-outages by building them a hydel power-generator. In contrasting these two jobs, the film indicates that there is greater fulfillment in a task performed to help those who are not helped by the state. A. R. Rahman, the composer, mixes jazz with the Raaga *Hamsadhwani*, a popular musical arrangement for patriotic songs. The song orchestrates its visual, aural, and linguistic elements to invite a certain group of NRIs, ones with scientific and technological know-how, to come back home and perform their duties as citizens. The NRI of a certain kind not only is the ideal for the neoliberal citizenry to copy, he is also the savior who will uplift the nation, especially at a time when state-sponsored welfare is woefully inadequate.

[124] Keya Ganguly, *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2001), 93.

***Om Shanti Om*: Nostalgia as Self-reflexivity**

If *Swades* displays a nostalgia for the "authentic India", i.e. the underdeveloped villages and small towns, many of Shah Rukh Khan's films display a nostalgia for Bollywood itself. Like *Swades,* these films channel this nostalgia through the star-image. In other words, a history of Hindi cinema becomes the history of stardom. While the iconicity of Khan's star image is a key referent in *Swades*, this image (and in fact Khan's stardom) is more directly invoked in his later films, including *Om Shanti Om*, *Billu*, and *Fan*.[125] *Om Shanti Om* is of particular importance to this discussion because the film, with its cornucopia of cinematic allusions, is take on the history 1970s Bombay cinema retold as a history of stardom.

Om Shanti Om takes its name from the eponymous song from *Karz* (*Debt*).[126] *Karz*, and to some degree *Madhumati*, is the urtext for Farah Khan's second directorial venture.[127] *Om Shanti Om* is a film about love, revenge, reincarnation, and above all, about the power of cinema to fix everything with its happy endings. Om Prakash Makhija, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is a junior film artist (the extra), who aspires to be a big movie star. He is in love with Shanti Priya (Deepika Padukone), who is already a big star. However, Mukesh Mehra (Arjun Rampal), a film producer, who also happens to be Shanti Priya's husband, murders Om Prakash and Shanti Priya. Om Prakash is reincarnated as Om Kapoor or OK, the son of the star Rajesh Kapoor. The second half of the film takes place thirty years later when OK, now a superstar himself, remembers his past life and vows to avenge Shanti's death. Om Kapoor manages to convince Mukesh

[125] *Om Shanti Om*, directed by Farah Khan (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, Eros, 2007).
Billu, directed by Priyadarshin (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, Eros, 2009).
Fan, directed by Maneesh Sharma (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, Yash Raj Films, 2016).
[126] *Karz*, directed by Subhash Ghai (Mumbai: Mukta Arts, Shemaroo,1980)
[127] *Madhumati*, directed by Bimal Roy (Mumbai: Bimal Roy Productions, Shemaroo, 1958)

Mehra, who has returned to Bombay after a successful career in Hollywood, to produce the film *Om Shanti Om*. The shooting takes place on the very set that was destroyed in the fire that had killed Shanti Priya and Om Prakash. Using Shanti's double, OK is able to scare Mukesh Mehra into admitting that he had murdered Shanti and Om. At the moment of denouement, however, it is the ghost of Shanti Priya that avenges the tragic deaths and kills Mukesh.

The film, with the thirty years that has gone by between the two halves, is a self-reflexive take on Hindi cinema in the 1970s and present-day Bollywood. It incorporates elements that have become the stuff of Bombay folklore, referencing anecdotes like Sunil Dutt saving Nargis from a fire on a film set, idiosyncrasies of film stars like Manoj Kumar's gesture of covering his face with his hand, an aging Dev Anand's penchant to launch young girls as his leading ladies, and the present day hype around award ceremonies.[128] It even shows how the director and producer, Sooraj Barjatya, then a young man, eavesdrops on a conversation between Om Prakash and Shantipriya and comes up with the popular dialogue – "*Friendship mein no sorry no thank you*" (There is no thank you or sorry in a friendship). The film, supposedly irreverently, even makes fun of the overacting that marked the popular melodramas of the '70s and of the petty jealousies, competitiveness, and media savviness of the present-day film stars.

The first half of *Om Shanti Om* offers an insider's look into the workings of Bombay cinema through the eyes of an extra. That the protagonist of the first half is an extra is significant – it is someone who works in the industry and yet is an outsider in the sense that the extra or the junior artist is always unacknowledged, always on the fringes,

[128] Not all stars from the '70s were happy with their parodic representation on-screen. For example, Farah Khan's parodic portrayal of Manoj Kumar led to court cases and subsequent public apologies.

thus giving an outside-in view of the industry. The film opens with a director saying, "*Roll sound, camera, action*!", signifying the commencement of shooting. It ends with the film premiere – as the credits roll, the actual film crew arrive at the premiere venue. The film, about the magic of the movies, is structured like one, from production to exhibition. In the opening scene, Subhash Ghai, known for making Hitchcock-esque cameos in his films, is shooting the famous *Bolo Om Shanti Om* song sequence in the RC studio (referring to the RK studios). While Rishi Kapoor, referred to in the film as Chintu, as he is popularly known as in the industry, is dancing on stage, Shah Rukh Khan as Om Prakash, the extra, plays the on-screen spectator. The scene splices scenes from the original song with fantasy scenes where Om imagines himself in the place of Rishi Kapoor. Om is therefore both the fan and the aspiring-star at the same time.

While the film acknowledges the debt to *Karz*, it is not the only instant where the film weaves into its diegetic world the world of Bombay cinema in the '70s.[129] The star-studded film premiere of *Dreamy Girl* is a not-so-subtle reference to the Hema Malini starrer *Dream Girl*.[130] To spell out the reference even more clearly, Shanti Priya enters the theatre, dressed like Hema Malini in *Dream Girl*, in pink chiffon with silver

[129] Bhaskar Sarkar points to the various ways in which the song recreates the look and feel of Hindi cinema in the 1970s. This includes Farah Khan scouring the flea market for film posters, cameras, etc. for the mise-en-scène. The costumes, designed by Manish Malhotra, recreate the 1970s look with "loud colors", and an abundance of polka dots and floral motifs. The set, Sarkar points out, is a "vertiginous assemblage of classical Indian grandeur, modern art deco, and 'Punjabi Baroque'." While for the archivist of aesthetic styles this ad-hoc mix would be shocking, for the cinephile, Sarkar argues, "this performative bedlam – as other multi-sensorial cues in the film – would ring in an even broader incestuous repertoire", including the films of Raj Kapoor, the sets of *Citizen Kane*, and even the world of Hollywood musicals. Sarkar argues that "the overall 'period look and feel' they achieved was less a direct, mimetic reproduction than their re-imagination of the seventies."
Bhaskar Sarkar, "Metafiguring Bollywood," in *Figurations in Indian Film*, eds. Anustup Basu and Meheli Sen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 205-235.

[130] *Dream Girl*, directed by Pramod Chakraborty (Mumbai: Eros, 1977).

threadwork, the famous '70s hairdo, wing-tipped eyeliner, and the look is completed with the three pink roses tucked into the elaborate coiffure that was Hema Malini's signature.

The song *Dhoom Tana* in the fictional *Dreamy Girl* premier depicts Shanti Priya dancing with Sunil Dutt, Rajesh Khanna, and Jeetendra. Digital innovations enable Deepika Padukone to be serenaded by past screen heroes, some dead and some past their prime. The song sequence has clips spliced from the Sunil Dutt starrer *Amrapali*, Rajesh Khanna's *Sachaa Jhutha*, Jeetendra's *Humjoli*.[131]



Figure 2.4 Recreating the '70s, promotional material from *Om Shanti Om*

[131] Amrapali, directed by Lekh Tandon (Mumbai: Eagle films, Shemaroo, 1966)
Sachaa Jhutha, directed by Manmohan Desai (Mumbai: Ranjit Studios, Shemaroo, 1970)
Humjoli, directed by T. Ramanna (Mumbai: Tirupati pictures, RK studios, 1970)

The song, captured from the point of view of Om Prakash, at once the extra, the fan, and the aspiring star, also inserts Om Prakash in key sequences, including the choreographed badminton scene that was made famous by Jeetendra.[132] To further evoke the feel of the '70s, Pyarelal of the Laxmikant-Pyarelal fame composed the music. *Dhoom Tana* is one of the many instances of Bollywood's self-referential tendency manifesting in a song sequence.[133] Such self-reflexive moments function, Madhava Prasad argues,

> [a]s the symptom of a formal transformation…Bollywood is capable of affording us crucial insights into the changing modalities of Indian national identity in a globalizing world…. Bollywood also signals the advent of a certain reflexivity, becoming a cinema for itself as it were, recognizing its own unique position in the world, the contrastive pleasures and values that it represents vis-a-vis Bollywood. This reflexivity is as much a form of self-awareness as it is a know-how that enables the Hindi film to reproduce itself for a market that demands its perpetuation as a source of cultural identity. At a time when Indian cinema is far more diverse than it has even been in the past, Bollywood is an attempt to hold on to the idea of an essence of Indian cinema. Indian cinema's marketability is becoming a matter of Indianness, which is its

[132] The badminton scene also reminds the spectator of Deepika Padukone's real-life father, Prakash Padukone, a former national badminton champion.

[133] The self-referential trend of Bollywood started with Farhan Akhtar's *Dil Chahta Hai* (*The Heart Desires*)
when two characters go to the movies on a date. Instead of the movie they are supposed to watch, the characters find themselves on the screen, lip-syncing to a song that telescopes Hindi cinema's iconic couples from the '80s and the '90s.
Dil Chahta Hai, directed by Farhan Akhtar (Mumbai: Excel entertainment, 2001)

Bollywoodness. Bollywood keeps alive a sense of continuity amidst change.[134]

Prasad suggests that Bollywood's self-reflexive tendency is occasioned by the turn towards globalization. Bollywood is not just the negotiation of national identity through such self-reflexive gestures, it is a cynical attempt to create a consumable national identity.

In constellating Shah Rukh Khan with the pantheon of former film-stars, Bollywood presents a timeless image of Hindi film-stardom. It draws attention to the magic that movies are. And as though the references were not enough, the film reminds us that movies are all about happy endings. When OK goes onstage to receive his *Filmfare* award, he says if the ending is not happy, then *picture abhi baki hai mere dost*! (The film is not yet over, my friend). OK, the humble and enthusiastic extra Om Prakash, reincarnated as the son of a popular actor and now a star himself, reminds the film fraternity that "*agar kisi cheez ko dil se chahoto, saari kaaynaat tumhein ussey milaaney ki koshish mein lag jati hai*" (If you want something with all your heart, the whole creation strives to make your wishes come true). The consumerist desires of the neoliberal India are not only attested by the film industry, the film industry self-reflexively acknowledges itself to be the magical world where all such desires cohere.[135] However, it deploys the aesthetics of camp in this rendition of self-reflexivity.

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[134] Prasad, "Surviving Bollywood," 48.

[135] The tendency to nod towards its cinematic excesses is not limited to Farha Khan's directorial ventures. In *Chennai Express*, Shah Rukh Khan dances on a set resembling a railway station under a huge poster of the South Indian superstar, Rajnikanth. The song, 'Lungi Dance', is a both a homage and a pastiche of the South Indian cinematic spectacle. The refrain *thalaivar* (Tamil for "leader") is a reference to Rajnikanth's stardom which surpasses the mass appeal of Bollywood stars in the South. The kitschy assemblage not only pays homage to both the star and to South Indian cinematic aesthetics, but having created a provisional unity of North and South India with images like *coconut mein lassi milake* (mixing *lassi*, a North Indian yogurt drink, with coconut, a South Indian favorite), the song anticipates its own afterlife "disco mein jab

Om Shanti Om, with its allusions to earlier films, functions as a pastiche, which according to Dyer, is a slippery genre because of its proximity to other kinds of aesthetic imitations, including plagiarism, copying, camp, and homage. Pastiche involves an understanding between the producers and the intended consumers. After all, a pastiche is only is possible by a tacit understanding between the producers and consumers of such works: "… every pastiche has its particular group that gets it."[136] A pastiche needs to "be got" – that is, the allusions that the text makes to previous works needs to be understood by the consumers in order for it to be successful. In other words, for pastiche, the anxiety of influence works the other way around. The text is anxious to make its influences legible. In being necessitated by this concern, pastiche often combines both quasi-homage and parodic modes and also presupposes the competence of its intended audience that understands the references made to the earlier text(s) that are being imitated.[137] In the case of *Om Shanti Om*, the humor stems from the intended audience catching up on the allusions the text makes. For example, when Kirron Kher runs towards OK's car,

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yeh gaana baajega, on the dance floor aana parega" (when this song plays in the disco, you have to go to the dance floor). In imagining its afterlife on the dancefloor, the film delineates its intended audience – the kind that will frequent discos and download the ringtones on their phones. Invitation to cinema then is an invitation to consume the wares of Bollywood's ancillary industries. Films increasingly become about other things – one form of consumption leads way to another form of consumption. The consumptive citizen is created at the interstices of these multiple sites and forms of consumption.
Chennai Express, directed by Rohit Shetty (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, UTV, 2013).

[136] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

[137] Although the parodic element often constitutes pastiche, according to Dyer, the distinction between parody and pastiche is that one imitates in order to make fun, mock, or even ridicule, while the other does not. Pastiche is, for Dyer and Gerard Genette, "imitation without satire". Or as Fredric Jameson argues, pastiche is "blank parody", i.e., mimicry without laughter. Dyer argues that pastiche and parody differ in their tone. While parody is informed by social and political criticism, and often involves a critique of attitudes and behaviors as much as aesthetic forms, pastiche is uncritical and does not aim to correct. Thus, they differ on their attitudes to what they imitate.
See: Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* vol. 8 (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press,1997).
Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (WA: Bay Press, 1983), 111-25.

claiming that he is her long-lost son, the comic effect is not so much from the implausibility of reincarnation narratives, but from the campy reference to the "*mere Karan Arjun ayenge*" (my Karan and Arjun will come back) scene from *Karan Arjun*, also starring Shah Rukh Khan before his neoliberal avatar was consolidated.[138]

Even the direct references to the melodramatic excesses of '70s cinema, with dialogues like "*Ek chutki sindoor ki keemat tum kya jaano Ramesh Babu?*" (What do you know, Ramesh babu, about the worth of a pinch of vermillion?), is not so much intended as satire, but as Bollywood self-consciously owning up its excesses as a part of its eternal essence. It proclaims itself distinct from Hollywood by virtue of such elements. Laughter, here, is then more for the sake of product-differentiation than ridicule. In addition to creating a niche for the excesses of Bollywood's melodramatic aesthetics, through numerous allusions to previous decades of Hindi cinema and to other regional film industries, these films create the image of the ideal audience of Bollywood cinema. The ideal audience gets these "in jokes", these allusions, and these not-so-subtle hints. Knowing all the cinematic references characterizes the spectator as one who lives his Indianness by consuming the wares of Bollywood cinema without prejudice. In fact, the spectator has to be familiar with a wide range of cinematic practices (including pre-neoliberal and regional ones) to appreciate the campy, comic effect that the film tries to generate. The consumption of Indian cinema is metonymically the consumption of an Indian identity. Like Raj in *DDLJ* had to prove his mettle by proving his Indian values, despite being brought up in London, the spectator has to prove his Indian values by demonstrating the range of his consumption of Indian cinema.

[138] *Karan Arjun*, directed by Rakesh Roshan (Mumbai: Eros Entertainment, 1995).

In reducing Indianness to a few visual and cultural tropes, *Om Shanti Om* and similar films cater to a selective nostalgia – especially that of the diasporic audience for the homeland that is left behind and of the locals for simpler times. It does not necessarily follow that such nostalgic retellings potentiate a desire to go back to those easier times, before the reification of everyday life by neoliberal morality; rather, it is a celebration of the mythic simpler times without the desire to live them. It is not without irony that *Om Shanti Om* uses computer-aided graphics to recreate a vision of the past, given that, as Svetlana Boym argues, digital memory gathers "no patina of history, and everything has the same digital texture."[139] For Boym, nostalgia and digital technology have an antonymic relationship. If nostalgia sutures personal memory with collective remembrance, digital memory coats everything with the same texture. Nostalgia stems from the impossibility of a return in either time or space, much like Heraclitus' river. The only return enabled by digital media is the return to a memory-effect of the past, stripped of any affective dimension. Digital recreations of the past make the past lose its historicity; losing the distance that history demands, the past is now concomitant with the present. Instead of collective remembrance, all we are left with are a few visual tropes (here, polka dots, bright colors, bell-bottomed pants) and some intertextual references. The past, in this fashion, is reduced to a look of pastness. Nostalgia of this order works well as pastiche which involves both perception and memory. As Dyer suggests,

> The form of a pastiche's likeness is subject to perception. A pastiche imitates its idea of that which it imitates, its idea being anything from an

[139] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 347.

> individual memory through a group's shared and constructed remembering to a perception current at a given cultural-historical moment.[140]

In keeping with this tendency of the genre of pastiche, what *Om Shanti Om*, with its carefully chosen mise-en-scène and digital manipulation of footage from past films, recreates is not so much history, but a memory effect. It is memory effect that not only caters to a cinephilic nostalgia but is also made doubly rewarding by the cinephile's ability to spot the various cinematic references the sequence makes.

By placing Om Prakash in the same frame as the stars of the '70s, *Om Shanti Om* in its presentation of an era of Indian film history disavows the very distance that history (even film history) requires. Pam Cook suggests that one effect of this reconstruction, this incorporation of real events into the diegetic world of the film, is to bring the spectators closer to said events through the production of a "second hand testimony". Such reconstructed histories stand in opposition to history proper.[141] Whereas history avoids the elements of fantasy in the narrative of the past that it creates, nostalgia seeks to foreground these very elements. Cook contests the view that in presenting history as an affective experience and as a spectacle, these media ventures obscure the spectator's understanding of the political, social, and cultural forces at play. Unlike history, these

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[140] Dyer, *Pastiche*, 55.

[141] Cook has as her example of such media reconstructions the film *Forrest Gump* which foregrounds the processes of reconstruction by mixing news footage with fictional constructs, thus taking away the distance that history demands and, in the process, underscoring the dialectical relationship between history and myth. What such media retellings or reconstructions achieve is not so much an education of the spectator; rather, they elicit, Cook argues, "an affective response", a feeling of pastness. Such reconstructions challenge the authority of history itself, and simultaneously the objective truth claim of history is rendered questionable. In addressing the spectator as nostalgic, films and associated media create "a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable but is sought anyway. In so far as it is rooted in disavowal or suspension of disbelief, nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy and regarded as even more inauthentic than memory."
Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

texts do not aim to educate the spectator about the past; rather, these films teach the spectator about her relationship to the past. The spectator is the center of such retellings – not so much the events themselves. *Om Shanti Om* in general and '*Dhoom Tana'* in particular are similarly, with the aid of digital manipulation, not interested in the history of a particular period of Bombay cinema. Instead, they allow the spectator to re-live what the spectator already knows about the era. It does not give a novel insider's view of the workings of the industry. Rather, it only confirms via the very decipherable clues and a mélange of cinematic allusions what the spectator has already pieced together about the '70s.

The past is all "surface" – a hybrid assemblage of clothes, mise-en-scène, and music. Not only does the song sequence telescope a decade of Hindi cinema into a few minutes, it looks back past the anger (epitomized by the angry young man films) that marked the period in question. The version of the '70s that we encounter in *Om Shanti Om* elides the angry young man and his anti-establishment stance altogether. Anger has no place in the neoliberal vocabulary. Its use-value promise, like that of Bollywood cinema, is the guarantee of a happy ending. Not only is anger missing in this retelling, so is the man who played those characters. Instead, the stars that it presents onscreen are the very elite heroes of the feudal family romances whom Bachchan replaced. When Om Prakash imagines himself as the onscreen hero, he positions himself as the successor of the elite stars of the feudal family romances. The ordinary (the non-star, the extra) becomes extraordinary (i.e., elite) in this fantastic recreation. In omitting the angry young man, this happy medley of the song sequence erases all traces of dissonance with the nation-state that the figure of the angry young man represented.

The nostalgic recreation does not merely revisit a past time, it also erases the distance between the then and the now. The end of temporality, Fredric Jameson notes, is a condition of consumer capitalism:

> …when the premodern vanishes, when the peasantry shrinks to a picturesque remnant, when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogeneous over all space, then the very sense of an alternate temporality disappears as well…[142]

While nostalgia for Boym renders time consumable, for Jameson the nostalgia film is never about the veracity of the historical representation. Rather, it pertains to the stylistic recreation of a feeling of "past-ness", often using aesthetic style to refashion and replace the real history. The possibility of conveying a sense of past-ness, instead of real history, makes pastiche an integral element of the nostalgia film.[143] The nostalgia film satisfies a deep and even repressed longing since it enables the audience "to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again."[144] Neoliberal nostalgia, however, has no wish beyond a stylistic rehashing of old genres. It offers no pointers to larger social conditions. What nostalgia films offer, then, is not history or formal innovation but the rehashing of older styles – carrying the autotelism of modernism to an extreme, both stylistically and in terms of its ideological implications. Nostalgia here becomes celebratory of past

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[142] Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 699. doi:10.1086/377726.

[143] Nostalgia, in the era of neoliberal capitalism, necessitates a turn to pastiche and not the historical film because, as Jameson notes, "stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum." Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 115.

[144] Ibid.,113.

images, simply images calling on images, without historicity. The anesthetics of neoliberal capitalism and the aesthetic forms it engenders make us numb as to the present by keeping us warm in the reified afterimages of what has gone by. As a feel-good pastiche, *Om Shanti Om* depoliticizes the past, as it looks back, selectively, at the aestheticized eternal '70s.[145]

Bollywood films do not only sell the family as the locus of all desires, but the industry also presents itself as a family.[146] Complementing and echoing the glitz of the film premiere in the first half, the second half presents the award ceremony where Bollywood celebrates itself. Not only is the past rendered depthless in this pastiche, the self-reflexivity of *Om Shanti Om* also encompasses the present moment. The award show, where the petty squabbles between stars become evident, is also the moment when OK, upon receiving a Filmfare award, remembers his past life. He accepts his award with a speech that an inebriated Om Prakash had delivered with a liquor bottle in his hand. This scene connects the two halves/timelines of the film via the flashback. Also, Shubhash Ghai and Rishi Kapoor play a cameo in the scene as presenters of the Filmfare Best Actor award. The scene also refers to the current Bollywood cinema – referring to fictitious films that are not-so-subtle references to real films. In the same way that *Dreamy Girl* referenced *Dream Girl*, the films which are nominated for the Filmfare award spell out their references. For example, *Dhoom 5* refers to the *Dhoom* series; *The*

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[145] As Jameson observes in an interview, "…nostalgia art gives us the image of various generations of the past as fashion-plate images that entertain no determinable ideological relationship to other moments of time: they are not the outcome of anything, nor are they the antecedents of our present; they are simply images."
Fredric Jameson and Ian Buchanan. *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008), 60.

[146] The Bombay film industry calls itself a fraternity.

Return of Khiladi refers to Akshay Kumar's *Khiladi* films; and *Main Bhi Hoon Na* and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai NRI* refer to Shah Rukh Khan's *Main Hoon Na* and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* respectively.[147] The replacement of the Hindustani in the actual film with the NRI nods to the predominance of NRI characters in Bollywood cinema, particularly Shah Rukh Khan's oeuvre. In addition, the music track that accompanies both clips are from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Something Happens)*, another Shah Rukh Khan hit.[148]

Not limited to rehashing old images, Shah Rukh Khan's films have, of late, a way of referencing his own cinema, not unlike the manner in which his films pay homage to previous generations of stars. In the scene under consideration from *Om Shanti Om*, i.e., the film award ceremony, the movie clips shown at the award show refer to Shah Rukh Khan's famous dialogue from *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (*The Heart is Crazy*): "*Rahul*, *naam* to *suna hoga*" (The name is Rahul. You must have heard it already).[149] The repetition of the dialogue in the clips in the award show has two purposes. First, it is an in-house reference, although unapologetic, to the repetitive nature of Bollywood cinema, its pathological lack of originality. Second, it is a montage (with the chiffon sarees, the pull-over draped over the shoulder, and choreographed romance in Switzerland) of all the visual markers of love found in Bollywood cinema. Using such intertextual references, Bollywood, despite some earlier protests about the word itself, acknowledges its own

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[147] *Main Hoon Na*, directed by Farah Khan (Mumbai: Eros International Media, 2004).
Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani, directed by Aziz Mirza (Mumbai: Dreamz Unlimited, 2000).

[148] *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, directed by Karan Johar (Mumbai: Dharma Productions, 1998).

[149] *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, directed by Yash Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 1997).
This dialogue has become somewhat of a running joke in later Shah Rukh Khan films. For example, in *Chennai Express*, Shah Rukh Khan repeats the same dialogue as he helps Deepika Padukone to board the moving train, again a reference to the ultimate scene in *DDLJ*.
Chennai Express, directed by Rohit Shetty (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, UTV, 2013).

Bollywoodization.[150] And, through such repetitions that have gone on to become cultural clichés, Khan is canonized as the king of romance, the successor to the superstars presented on-screen in the song sequence from *Dreamy Girl*. If Bollywood is even in the slightest self-deprecatory in such scenes, even the possibility of such a critique is short-lived as the Filmfare scene is followed by a party scene where all of Bollywood gathers to celebrate itself as a family of "cool boys" and "hot girls."[151] Such moments of self-reflexivity then are not so much as Bollywood attesting to its various excesses as flaws but reminding its audience that it is the excess that makes it Bollywood. While earlier Hindi cinema often was measured against the yardstick of realism, Bollywood, in the moment of its fetishization, has no such qualms, and no shortcoming for which to apologize.

If the frequent references to previous generations of film stars is an exercise in nostalgia, then the references to Shah Rukh Khan's own cinematic repertoire are no less nostalgic. That the tendency to refer to Khan's blockbusters from the mid'90s manifest in most of his current films makes Khan an object of nostalgia. The references to Khan's films, whether it is a shot-by-shot reproduction or an oblique reference to a popular dialogue from a film, are not nostalgic recreations in the same manner as the scenes from '70s Hindi cinema that were spliced and digitally manipulated and woven in with the film's diegesis. Unlike the old and manipulated footage that serve as a film within a film, a common technique employed by the pastiche, the clips from the Shah Rukh Khan films are from fictitious films with not-so-subtle allusions to real Shah Rukh Khan films. In evoking memories of films, through dialogue, cinematography, and allusions to movie

[150] See: Rajadhyaksha, "The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema."

[151] The words here are from the film song and not my own.

titles, the films are a nostalgic reference to the present, or at the very least, to an almost immediate past. The newfound upper-middle class mobility and validation in the world of consumer goods are, by this process of recycling the present as though it were the past, made to seem eternal. In removing the traces of the new or the novel from relatively current images, i.e., by repackaging them as the eternal, these images canonize Shah Rukh Khan not just as the eternal hero of Hindi cinema, but also as the embodiment of the neoliberal citizenry's ideal – consumerist and consumable in equal measure. This mythologized star-image becomes the ideal motif of what it means to be traditional in a consumer society.

This move, to equate consumerism with a consumable idea of tradition, also requires that the star-body does not age. Thus, the item-number *Darde-Disco* from *Om Shaanti Om* is remarkable neither because Shah Rukh does an "item number," the raunchy song and dance number traditionally performed by female stars nor because it is a self-deprecatory commentary on the item number itself. It is remarkable, rather, because it presents the six-pack flaunting bare-torso of Shah Rukh Khan, chiseled and glistening, as the Dionysus of the consumerist bacchanalia. Shah Rukh Khan's body, almost plastic in its presentation, positions this heteronormative masculine body as the site where the neoliberal entrepreneurial technologies of the self becomes the most legible. In the neoliberal era where obsolescence is ingrained into all commodities, including the consumable body, the self has to be constantly refashioned and remade. Shah Rukh Khan embodies this logic more than any of his contemporaries, a fact that is further underscored by his successful career as a producer and as the owner of a cricket franchise.

Fan: Flawed Adulation



Figure 2.5 Film Poster, *Fan*

The insider's view of the Hindi Film industry that *Om Shanti Om* offers is not unique to Bollywood. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Guddi* was about the sentimental education of a young girl who falls in love with the film-star Dharmendra.[152] The film is about the young protagonist's belief that the star is exactly like his screen-image. Dharmendra, playing himself on-screen, helps the young girl to distinguish between the real world and the make-believe world of cinema. Self-reflexivity of cinema, then, is not a novel subject in Bombay cinema. But the difference is that whereas *Guddi* is premised on the fact that stars are just as human as the rest of us, and that life is nothing like the

[152] *Guddi*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee (Mumbai: DEI, 1971).

movies, *Om Shanti Om* celebrates that cinema is nothing like real life – it is magical. It celebrates reification and fetishizes itself.

While Guddi realizes that her favorite film star is also human, the same realization leads to disastrous consequences in *Fan*.[153] *Fan* features Shah Rukh Khan in a double role – one as the film star Aryan Khanna and the other as his biggest fan Gaurav Chandana. Gaurav, Aryan's greatest fan, fashions himself after his favorite movie star. The fan looks like the star – the star is the fan's desired self-image.[154] As a testament to his adulation for the star, Gaurav wins a star-lookalike contest. That is not enough for Gaurav who needs the star to acknowledge his devotion. Gaurav heads to Mumbai to meet Aryan and give him the trophy he won for the lookalike contest as a birthday gift. When he reaches the star's mansion, Gaurav is one in a sea of fans dying to meet the star. He catches a glimpse of Aryan when he steps out to wave to his fans. Gaurav imagines that the star takes note of his biggest fan even in the crowd. In imagining a connection between himself and Aryan Khanna, Gaurav tries to prove his devotion to the star. He attacks another star, a younger star who hopes to replace Aryan as the reigning superstar. However, to Gaurav's dismay, Aryan Khanna is not impressed by this act. To make matters worse, Aryan challenges Gaurav's conviction that he is entitled to the star's time, thus ending the fan's illusion about the bond between the star and the fan. Disillusioned, Gaurav returns home and plans to exact revenge on Aryan. He does that when he

[153] *Fan*, directed by Maneesh Sharma (Mumbai: Red Chillies Entertainment, Yash Raj Films, 2016).

[154] They are not identical – expensive prosthetics were used to ensure that Shah Rukh Khan could play the part of a young man.

impersonates Aryan at Madam Tussauds' wax museum.[155] Gaurav molests a woman at a wedding where Aryan is supposed to perform, and Aryan is blamed for the act. Gaurav also destroys the public-private divide that stars uphold when he impersonates Aryan and breaks into Aryan's house. Finally, Aryan manages to catch up with Gaurav when he goes to Gaurav's residence.

The film's denouement takes place at another talent show in which, this time, the star imitates his fan. After a protracted fight, Gaurav jumps off a building to his death, reminding Aryan, "*Rehne de, tu nahin samjhega" (*Leave it, you won't understand*).* Even with his last words, the fan pays a homage to the star. At one level the dialogue refers to the fact that the fan's love for the star is not only unrequited but is also not understood. Also, it hints at another popular dialogue from Kuch Kuch Hota Hain: "*Kuch kuch hota hai Rahul, tum nahin samjhoge*" (Something happens, Rahul. You wouldn't understand.) The use of the informal pronoun '*tu'* instead of the more formal '*tum'* (which is used in the dialogue from which it takes its cue) suggests an intimacy between the fan and the star. The intimacy evoked by the use of the informal pronoun points to the immediacy that is felt by the fans who consume the star-image. The star is at once the person who provides the fan an ideal (of success, of lifestyle, of being) to emulate and also someone the fan knows intimately – distant and close at the same time.

Fan comments on the intermedial ways in which the fans consume the star-image. The song *Jabra Fan* (Big Fan) narrates the discourse of stardom from the point of view of the fan. The song begins with a medium-shot of the fan, with his back turned towards

[155] Madam Tussauds is also significant because one of the markers of Bollywood's coming to worldwide recognition is the rising number of Bollywood stars whose wax figures are displayed at the "museum." That the desecration of the star-image takes place at the wax museum is symbolic – the first step of Gaurav's revenge takes place at the site where people go to see life-like replicas of stars, playing on the absence-presence on which consumption of the star-image is based.

the camera, looking at the countless pictures of the star covering all the walls of his room. In a relatively dimly lit room, the overabundance of pictures seems overwhelming and obsessive. Gaurav's voiceover accompanies this visual: "*Gharwale bhi na mere, samajhte nahin hai kabhi kabhi. Woh sirf star nahin hai, duniya hai meri*" *(My family often does not understand. He is not just a star, he is my world*). The fan is always misunderstood – by his family, and even by the star. The song celebrates not only the fan (who in turn is celebrating the star), but also the various ways in which the star-image is consumed:

Follow karun Twitter pe

Tag karun Facebook pe

Tere quiz mein Google ko beat kar diya

Mirror mein tu dikhta hai

Neend mein tu tikk ta hai

Tere madness ne mujhe dheet kar diya…

Tune jo jo kaha, maine ditto kiya.[156]

The song lists the ways in which the star-image circulates and is consumed in the digital era, where Twitter and Facebook allow the fan to have a semblance of an unmediated relationship with the star. The star, with all the associated ideological underpinnings, is our desired self-image, and hence we see the star in our reflection and in our dreams. The song also makes stardom more everyday – while the huge hoardings of the star endorsing different products dot the skyline, there is also an informal economy that partakes in the

[156] Roughly translated, the song articulates that the fan follows the star on Facebook and Twitter and is more knowledgeable about the star than Google itself. The fan sees the star in his reflection and in his dreams. The star-fever has rendered the fan crazy. The fan does everything that the star says and does.

star-image. The roadside popsicle seller uses the same image as the manufacturers of an international brand of instant noodles. The star image is not only an invitation to the shopping-mall; it invites us into an auto-rickshaw, adorned with posters of film stars, as well. The excesses of the star-image, through these intermedial circulations of the star-image, become the norm.

For Zygmunt Bauman, "The saints of the stardom cult are, like all saints, to be admired and held as an example, but not emulated. They embody, at the same time, the ideal of life and its inachievability."[157] Bauman's argument, tracing the shift from the work ethic of the industrial era to the consumerist aesthetic of neoliberal capitalism, posits that the fans do not make or intend to make the same sacrifices as the star whose success demands both dedication and self-denial. Though the star's success is unachievable for the fans, consuming like the star provides a way for the fans to be closer to the star. However, as much as the fan might want to be like the star, this relationship is predicated on distance. Undoing this distance does not only destabilize the fan-star relationship, but also undoes the star's privileged status in consumer culture, that of its biggest spokesperson, the ultimate use-value-promise of the neoliberal worldview.

While pedagogic aspect of the star-image is to instruct the fans on the myriad ways of consumption of newly available goods and ways of being, *Fan* is one instance where this project goes awry. Consumption of the star-image presupposes a distance between the star and the fan, a distance that the fan ceaselessly seeks to diminish through consumption of the star-image, films, and star-endorsed commodities. However, in this case the fan seeks to negate that distance altogether by getting the star to acknowledge

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[157] Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 36.

not only the depths of his fandom but also that the fan is the mirror-image of the star. Gaurav initially traveled to Mumbai to present Aryan with the star-lookalike trophy he had won. Aryan's refusal to do so, coupled with the star's assertion that the star does not owe his fan anything, not even his time, is what drives Gaurav to crazy lengths to destroy Aryan. The star-image not only teaches us to desire, but also *how* to desire. The fan can desire the star, and even desire to be more like the star, but to desire to *be* the star violates the star-fan relationship. Gaurav, in his obsession, desires the star in ways that transgress the unwritten laws that govern the relationship between the star and the fan. In his attempt to undo the distance on which the star-fan relationship is premised, Gaurav does not only prove to be a wanting fan, but also a flawed consumer.

The consumptive citizen implies, among other things, the predicament of consuming ceaselessly, yet never quite consuming enough. It rarely appears to the afflicted consumers as a disease. However, in cases like Gaurav's, the pathology becomes more prominent. In attempting to undo the distance between the star and the fan, he attempts to negate the relationship between stardom and conspicuous consumption. It is this very distance that ensures that the star remains forever worthy of imitation, drawing the fans into a never-ending cycle of consumption. Gaurav, like any other fan, is the prospective consumer-citizen who learns to consume under the tutelage of the star-image. His obsession, however, takes this relationship to its limits and even transgresses it. Transgression, for the fan, is the undoing of distance between the star and the fan, the last vestiges of aura, even if it is a degenerate aura, in our modern world. The film predictably ends with Gaurav's death and with Aryan's reputation restored. It also symbolizes the death of the pre-neoliberal image of Shah Rukh Khan – Khan had, after all, made a name

for himself by playing obsessive neurotic characters before he was repackaged as the consumable NRI yuppie in *DDLJ*. *Fan* is a cautionary tale about the making of a consumer gone wrong. The film ultimately underscores the innate goodness and the moral-compass of the star who tries to save Gaurav from dying. Even in nightmarish situations, the star can do no wrong. The mascot of neoliberal India always retains his moral high ground.

Chapter Three

Of Home and Elsewheres: Cosmopolitanism and the Travel Film

> So I learned
> that there are two directions, out and back,
> from the still center of the compass rose.
> There are two places: home, away. I lack
> a map that shows me anywhere but those.
> Ursula K. Le Guin

Cosmopolitanism, an idea that we inherit from the Cynics of the 4th century B.C., is a portmanteau of 'cosmos' and 'polis'—the universal city. The neologism is an uneasy one – indicating the unworldliness of the cosmos and the worldly polity of the city at the same time. The cosmopolitan is both a transcendental figure with civic and political allegiance to the local. The cosmopolitans, belonging to the *kosmopolis*, then, are both not of this world and of it, unlike the locals who are rooted in their *polis* and the *apolis* refugees.[158] It is to this triad – the cosmopolitan, the locals, and the refugees – to which I will return, over and over, in this chapter to understand the particular inflection that cosmopolitanism garners in our present era of neoliberal globalization. The triad will help elucidate how the cosmopolitan differs both from the non-travelers (locals) and the travelers whose journeys are dictated by extraneous circumstances that require them to be on the move for the sake of self-preservation (refugees and economic migrants).

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[158] For a genealogy of cosmopolitanism, see Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
Timothy Brennan provides an expansive overview and incisive critique of the theories of cosmopolitanism. See: Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).
More recently, Anthony Appiah offers a history of cosmopolitanism, tracing its trajectory from the Cynics and the Stoics of Greece to the present.
See: Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

Cosmopolitanism, often understood as a cross-cultural broadmindedness, is celebrated in not only 'woke' social media/popular culture but also in academic discourse where the concept increasingly replaces multiculturalism as a theoretical means to understand and negotiate difference in the age of globalization.[159] Against this celebratory account of cosmopolitanism, this chapter will sound a more cautionary note.[160] In my reading, the figure of the cosmopolitan is the same as the ideal consumer. And the open mindedness that the cosmopolitan embodies, especially in the face of other cultures, is quintessentially the openness of the consumer as she encounters the world of commodities from which she is free to choose. While the spectator of Bollywood cinema is the consumptive-citizen, the cosmopolitan of travel films is the consumptive world-citizen. The gestures that the cosmopolitan makes towards openness is enabled by, above all else, the cosmopolitan's financial ability to choose different aspects of different cultures to consume at will. It is this peculiar pecuniary power that grants the cosmopolitan traveler the ease of access that is denied to other kinds of (less privileged) travelers in the world. This disposable surplus enables the cosmopolitan to navigate the world like the shopper makes her way through the aisles in the shopping mall, picking and choosing different aspects of different cultures. The very ability to steer through a

[159] Anthony Appiah points out that for the Stoics, the figure of the cosmopolitan was a "rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged in a community among communities". Appiah's hopeful, and even euphoric, vision of cosmopolitanism, one that he favors over globalization and multiculturalism, places a premium on being civilized, tacitly acknowledging that one is not born rather becomes a cosmopolitan.
Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 14.

[160] There are many new portmanteaus and permutations of cosmopolitanism circulating across various academic disciplines. They include: cosmopolitanism from below, subaltern cosmopolitanism, vernacular cosmopolitanism, and following the current trend to 'complicate' things/concepts by tacking on a 's' to signify polysemy, cosmopolitanisms. My approach remains more conservative for I believe that to simply pluralize existing terms does not necessarily help in expanding the scope of a term nor does it clarify what remains politically or even theoretically at stake. This chapter does not go down that rabbit hole of indefinite regressions, as tempting as that might be for many.

fast-globalizing world, which presents, putatively, as the proverbial melting pot of cultures, of being able to choose what aspect of which culture to consume at will, is in itself is a position of privilege that manifests as cultural openness. The cosmopolitan, already privileged, travels through the world with this characteristic broadmindedness, an equal among unequals.

The merit badge of cosmopolitan does not require physical travel. Some locals can become cosmopolitans without ever leaving home; some locals remain forever natives whose everyday becomes consumable for cosmopolitans. Like the world comes to the shopper meandering through the aisles of the department store, the cosmopolitan encounters the world in the form of exotic food from all over the world ((hence the ubiquitous "The World" aisle at every supermarket), from "foreign films" on streaming networks, and also from media-savvy, jet-setting (not quite itinerant) spiritual *gurus*, the newest import from the Orient. In what follows, I map the myriad ways in which cosmopolitans are made. More precisely, this chapter isolates three discrete modes of cosmopolitan broadmindedness, of cosmopolitan encounters with other cultures: physical travel, food, and "cosmo-spirituality." Each iteration of cosmopolitanism, I argue, is predicated on consumption. Travel for the cosmopolitan entails the ability to consume the native's everyday as the cosmopolitan's exotic. While food is readily associated with consumption, food in the form of world cuisine is also one of the occasions for the cosmopolitan to find both self-worth and a perverse progressivism in having experienced the world thus. The cosmopolitan literally ingests other cultures through consumables. And, finally, with cosmo-spirituality, the ethic of late-capitalism, what is consumed is the cosmopolitan's own self. Cosmo-spirituality reinforces the cosmopolitan's conviction

that her ethical duty as a world-citizen is fulfilled through consumption. While the cosmopolitan qua traveler devours the native's everyday as the exotic, the cosmopolitan qua cosmo-spiritualist consumes the banality of her own existence as new-age morality.

Focusing on travel films, from Bollywood and those that involve India as a destination, I explore what it means to be a cosmopolitan today. I argue that the cosmopolitan depicted by such cinematic travelogues does not have to deal with the bureaucratic and financial rigmaroles that other kinds of travelers encounter (refugees, economic migrants, exiles); thus, the version of cosmopolitan that these films depict is a limited (and privileged) one. This reading contradicts the recent tendency in many academic inquiries into the nature of cosmopolitanism that attempt to resurrect a version of cosmopolitanism immune from the politics of neoliberalism.[161] Instead, I contend that the version of cosmopolitanism that such films often represent is not only privileged, but is also ultimately ineffectual as a political stance that resists the violence of globalization, irrespective of whether the cosmopolitan of such travelogues is a First-world citizen

[161] For example, Fukuyi Kurasawa posits cosmopolitanism as a kind of "solidarity without bounds", one that becomes a political tool that counters the rising tide of ethnic nationalisms and religious tribalisms all over the world.
See: Fukuyi Kurasawa, "A Cosmopolitanism from Below: Alternative Globalization and the Creation of a Solidarity without Bounds." *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, vol. 45, no. 2, (2004): 233–255.
Gilbert Leung, following Appiah, explores the possibility of the ethics of a cosmopolitanism from below.
See: Gilbert Leung, "Cosmopolitan ethics from below", *Ethical Perspectives* 20.1, (2013): 43-60.
Arjun Appadurai, in a similar fashion, explores the cosmopolitanism of Mumbai slum dwellers.
See: Arjun Appadurai,*The Future As Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, (London: New York, 2013)
Most of the above-mentioned theories draw on an understanding of cosmopolitanism as a counter-hegemonic process, a corrective and ethical dimension to globalization, which was introduced by Boaventura de Sousa Santos.
See: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and César A. Rodríguez-Garavito. "Law, Politics, and the Subaltern in Counter-Hegemonic Globalization," in *Law and Globalization from Below: Towards a Cosmopolitan Legality*, ed. Boaventura De Sousa Santos and César A. Rodríguez-Garavito (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005) 1–26.

travelling through the Global South or citizens of the Global South who find themselves at home as they travel across the Global North.

All Those Who Wander: The Cosmopolitan in a World of Refugees

Eat, Pray, Love, adapted for the screen from Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 bestselling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia*, does not mention the word cosmopolitanism.[162] But it displays a certain notion of cosmopolitanism, one that reflects an ethos of amicability which, somewhat tenuously, bypasses the unevenness and inequalities of present day geopolitics.[163] The film begins

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[162] *Eat, Pray, Love*, directed by Ryan Murphy (Culver City, California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010).
Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, And Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
Unless otherwise mentioned, all later references to *Eat, Pray, Love* will be about the film. Likewise, Gilbert refers to the character in the film and not the author, if not specified otherwise.

[163] A vision of cosmopolitanism of this kind, one that espouses a kind of openness that stands in contradistinction to the physical, intellectual, and even juridical limits of the local, is found in the works of thinkers who were not directly concerned with cosmopolitanism or world citizenship per se. For example, Francis Bacon encourages travel as a pedagogic activity for young aristocrats, preferably under the tutelage of an experienced instructor, to gather experience and cultivate friendships with people of high standing. Bacon, however, cautions the young traveler to strike a balance (one that tils slightly in the favor of the local) between the foreign and the local when the traveler returns home:

> When a traveller returneth home, let him not leave the countries where he hath travelled altogether behind him … and let his travel appear rather in his discourse than in his apparel or gesture; and in his discourse, let him be rather advised in his answers, than forward to tell stories: and let it appear that he doth not change his country manners for those of foreign parts; but only prick in some flowers of that he hath learned abroad into the customs of his own country.

Bacon's young traveler, I argue, is not much different from the present cosmopolitan travelers who are, likewise, not only informed about the places they visit, but are also in a position of relational superiority vis-à-vis the cultures they travel to in that they are able to pick and choose aspects of the culture they are going to adopt and adhere to. Like Bacon, Gilbert's travels have this sense of a rigid, agenda-bound itinerary and hinge on knowing beforehand what one desires and expects from one's travels. There is nothing left to chance as everything is preprogrammed and rarely ever falls out of place for the cosmopolitan traveler, unlike the travels of refugees and illegal immigrants whose travels are riddled with uncertainties, including death and other mortal perils.
See: Francis Bacon and Mary Augusta Scott. "Of Travel". *Essays of Francis Bacon,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 79-82

with Elizabeth Gilbert (played by Julia Roberts) cycling through picturesque paddy fields in Bali on her way to meet a ninth generation medicine man. As the opening credits roll, there are aerial shots of waves breaking on a beach, a tropical forest full of coconut trees and with tree-covered mountains in the backdrop, followed by a bird's eye view of paddy fields dotted by even more coconut trees. It cuts to a close-up of a woman's feet (presumably Gilbert's) paddling away on a bicycle, followed by a long shot of Gilbert crossing a makeshift bridge over a brook, and the camera leaves Gilbert to zoom in on the ocean. More aerial shots follow – a flock of birds are seen flying over the paddy fields, which then cuts to a close-up of a group of ducks. The establishing shots, in all their beauty, convey not only the ethereal nature of the island, enabling the spectator to participate in this vicarious travel, but also a certain idea of unfettered travel, like the waves and the birds on screen and like cosmopolitans in real life.

Gilbert's inner-monologue that accompanies the lush visual frame sums up what it means to be cosmopolitan today. She narrates:

> I have a friend, Deborah, a psychologist, who was asked by the city of Philadelphia if she could offer psychological counseling to a group of Cambodian refugees, boat people, who had recently arrived in the city. Deborah was daunted by the task. These Cambodians had suffered genocide, starvation, relatives murdered before their eyes, years in refugee camps, harrowing boat trips to the West. How could she relate to their suffering? How could she help these people? So guess what all these people wanted to talk about with my friend Deborah, the psychologist? It was all, "I met this guy in the refugee camp. I thought he really loved me,

> but when we got separated on the boat, he took up with my cousin, but now he says he loves me and he keeps calling me. They're married now. What should I do? I still love him." This is how we are. … I mean here I am with a ninth-generation medicine man, and what do I wanna ask him about? Getting closer to God? Saving the world's starving children? Nope. I wanna discuss my relationship.

With that one topic (i.e. relationships) in common, while everything else remains unequal, the film shows the refugees fleeing the problems in the Far East and the Western traveler dabbling in all things exotic in the Far East to be connected. This strong investment in the personal creates a parallel between the refugee woman that Gilbert's friend was tasked to counsel and Gilbert herself. However, despite the parallel, the Cambodian refugee is not granted the status of the cosmopolitan. She remains only one among the nameless "boat people," a status Gilbert foregrounds in her opening narration. The visual corroborates the same sentiment – while the first mention of the nameless refugee is accompanied by an aerial shot of a flock of birds flying over lush green paddy fields, followed by a close-up of a flock of ducks being herded by a woman wielding a coconut leaf; Gilbert is captured in her singularity, with close-ups, long shots, and soft lighting that lends an angelic quality to her image, her blonde hair with the use of back lights adds to the ethereal, almost timeless, aura. It is no accident that when she points out that the investment in the personal, i.e., the need to find love, is what is held in common and of the highest value by both Gilbert and the nameless refugee, Gilbert, crossing the threshold into the medicine man's home, appears beatified with the use of backlighting. She has found divine wisdom and grace even before she meets the medicine man. It is the

commonality with the nameless Cambodian refugee, i.e., the investment in the shared personal desires, which grants Gilbert the prerogative to prioritize the personal over any other investment or ethical responsibility towards others.

To make her case that that the personal trumps geopolitical inequalities, Gilbert scaffolds her narrative with frequent references (three, to be precise) to Deborah. Not just any other lay person, Deborah is a practicing psychologist and is therefore a more credible source of such psychological wisdom, should we not be otherwise convinced by the argument that Gilbert is trying to make. Her argument is that considerations of contexts – like individual history trammeled by events like genocide, starvation, mass murders, and the arduous task of seeking asylum – are of minor import. Thus, finding God, amelioration of the pains of starvation, or healing the psychical wounds of a lifetime rife with war and genocide are all of lesser importance to the real question: finding love. And if we do not believe Gilbert herself, she has as her ally anecdotal evidence, here passed off as the truth inherited/bequeathed from the veritable science of the mind, psychology itself. The critical thrust of Gilbert's entire monologue comes down to a callous and casual denial of her own privilege and accompanying responsibility that turns on an anecdote and a whiny, yet persistent, obsession over the personal that entirely circumvents the social, economic, and political.

The perversion of the cliché that "the personal is the political" is now complete. Drawing her justification from the overshadowing of the political and all its determinants by the personal, Gilbert (and to an extent Deborah) claims her status as cosmopolitan. However, the refugee, one of the boat people, whose narrative enables Gilbert to claim the priority of the personal over everything else, remains unnamed; in fact, in her very

namelessness, she can stand in for almost anyone else with a similar past, refugees and (illegal) immigrants all over the world. Gilbert renders the refugee's past inconsequential as she promptly discards it as not being relevant to this present tale of cosmopolitan travel. The dismissal of the past does not make the refugee's travails a cosmopolitan one. Not all those who wander are (or can ever be) cosmopolitan. The cosmopolitan traveler does not only have unhindered access to a host of alien spaces; she also has access to time, i.e., a past from which she, unlike the refugee, can choose moments for her personal consumption. For the cosmopolitan, time and space are equally consumable.

What makes counseling the refugee seem such a daunting task for Deborah, despite her training in psychology, is that the refugee does not fit into her/Gilbert's world. Georg Simmel's sociological account of the stranger sheds light on why the refugee remains the stranger who never fits in into the place where she currently resides.[164] For Simmel, the stranger is "the *potential* wanderer," forever caught between being a drifter and a local. The stranger is, in certain ways, not unlike the refugee who is displaced and dispossessed from her homeland, living in camps that are often on the outskirts of her new habitat but almost never quite a part of it. It is, however, here that the similarity between the refugee and the stranger ends. Not all strangers are dispossessed. Simmel's stranger, for example, is the itinerant merchant who, at least for some time, settles down in a strange land, but remains at liberty to leave at any time. The refugee does not have that choice; she has to remain (for the foreseeable future, till home becomes habitable again) in a foreign land as the outsider who has not quite assimilated. The natives value

[164] Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402 - 408.

the stranger because by virtue of his non-belonging, the stranger possesses an objectivity that often eludes the natives.

Though Simmel explores the stranger qua traveling trader who thus commands a semblance of objectivity, a bird's eye view of things, the modern-day stranger, with his openness and lack of prejudice, is the cosmopolitan. The cosmopolitan here is the citizen of the world, as Diogenes declared himself to be, not tethered to a single state but welcome everywhere. The figure of the cosmopolitan is the same as the ideal consumer; the open mindedness that the cosmopolitan signifies, especially in the face of other cultures, is quintessentially the openness of the consumer as she encounters the world of commodities from which she is free to choose. The cosmopolitan openness hinges on the ability to choose different aspects of different cultures to consume at will, a kind of privileged acculturation that the refugees do not possess.

While Simmel's stranger demonstrates an intellectual broadmindedness and is received, in turn, with a similar openness by the place in which he finds himself in the course of his travel, Zygmunt Bauman conceptualizes the figure of the stranger as destabilizing the local's carefully organized world of friends and enemies.[165] Bauman's stranger, like Simmel's, has no fixed relationship to a place in that he too is not born there but arrives in *media res*. While Simmel's stranger is one without local and existing prejudice and therefore is not only objective but is also often the confidant of the locals because of this objectivity, Bauman's stranger is a threat because of his ambivalence. If Simmel's stranger is the figure of the cosmopolitan in these travel films, Bauman's stranger is the figure of the refugee. For even in a world where there are enemies as well

[165] Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 138.

as friends, enemies do not possess the ambivalence the stranger signifies. Enemies are simply non-friends. But the stranger who is neither friend nor enemy, is therefore a potential threat. The uncertainty that marks our perception of the stranger makes this figure more threatening than the hazard posed by the enemy. It is the threat of never quite knowing – a quality the enemy, insofar as his intentions are known, never quite possesses. For Bauman, ambivalence always marks the stranger, the quintessential outsider. In disrupting the neatly organized world of friends and enemies, the stranger poses a threat to the security of everyday life.

Eat, Pray, Love by not depicting the refugee on-screen, contains the threat posed by the stranger, i.e. the refugee, who also remains nameless. She remains forever one of the 'boatpeople'; she cannot get rid of that tag even long after her arduous, refuge-seeking boat journey is over. The refugee simply lends her story to Gilbert's cosmopolitan narrative and is soon dismissed from the diegetic world once that function is fulfilled. Through maneuvers like this, simultaneously employing anecdote and elision, most cinematic mediations of a world full of refugees contain (in both senses) the refugee, making her a secondary, nameless character, not unlike the 'extras' that films hire. Her story is important because it makes us believe in the cosmopolitan's open-mindedness, but once we buy this myth, the refugee is promptly cast-off from the narrative and from our minds. Even when Gilbert narrates the refugee's story, she dismisses her past as a parenthetical aside. What remains of importance is that even for people like refugees, finding love is the most important task in life. It makes the refugee somewhat more like us, more relatable, once we have been able to brush off their fraught history. The refugee, in such cinematic depictions, can only be humanized by the

cosmopolitan who make them more like us, less alien. The refugee becomes a synecdoche for all kinds of non-cosmopolitan travel and forced migrations. And through the very act of rendering the refugee less strange, the cosmopolitan assuages her guilt (if any) about privilege, or at least makes the quintessential cosmopolitan privilege inconsequential when compared to her broadmindedness.

Though *Eat, Pray, Love* elides the question of the ambivalence associated with the figure of the stranger qua refugee by reducing the real refugee to a cinematic anecdote, one that is not even shown on-screen but merely gestured towards, the disruption caused by the stranger is a major plot element in *A Hundred Foot Journey*.[166] The film depicts the journey of the Kadam family, displaced from their home and business in Mumbai by communal riots and forced to seek asylum in Europe. London, the initial port of entry for the Kadam family, turns out to be too cold and too rainy, thus forcing the family to move again. On their way to Paris, on a journey that starts with an unfriendly immigration officer (again, a missing character in Gilbert's narrative – the always-already cosmopolitans like Gilbert do not have to deal with such rigmaroles), luck intervenes, and the family decide to set up home and shop in Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val in the Midi-Pyrénées. The first part of the film depicts the reservations the locals have towards these newcomers; at the same time, it shows the futile efforts by these newcomers to transform their little corner of France into their own little corner of India. The loud décor, the lights (creating a façade of the Taj Mahal), and the blaring music are unappealing to the local sensibility, and this clash of tastes makes settling down challenging for the Kadam family. Like the treatment that Bauman's stranger receives at

[166] *The Hundred Foot Journey*, directed by Lasse Hallstrom (Burbank, California: Touchstone Home Entertainment, 2014).

his new place, the locals of the little French town eye the newcomers with ambivalence and perhaps even a little mistrust. While the stranger is threatening to our perception of our world and society by virtue of his ambivalence, Bauman does not discount the possibility of the stranger becoming un-strange. But in order to become no-longer-strange, the stranger has to exorcise the very ambivalence that constitute him.[167] Assimilating into one's host society as an equal is not a possibility for the stranger. In other words, to be un-strange, the stranger has to admit and accept that he is less than the people whose ranks he seeks to join.

Unlike Simmel, Bauman is writing in a fast globalizing world, and from this vantage point, he notes that globalization makes everyone strangers who now outnumber locals. In a similar vein, Chris Rumford argues that globalization is not just the global movement of capital and people or that by virtue of this movement, globalization makes the world a shared habitat where everyone is at home.[168] Globalization, for Rumford, does not make the world less strange and instead of making the world more accessible, it achieves the exact opposite.[169] In Rumford's view, then, cosmopolitanism is a strategy

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[167] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), 73.

[168] Chris Rumford, *The Globalization of Strangeness* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[169] There is an instance of unexpected friendships forged in the middle of all the strangeness and strangers of a globalizing world in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* when Evelyn, widowed after forty years of being married, is trying to make changes to her internet connection. To the background score of "Strangers in the Night", a song about strangers who find love and companionship, Evelyn is frustrated by the faceless voice on the other end. The person on the phone is presumably an offshore call-center employee who, restricted by her script, is unable to sympathize with Evelyn's situation even when Evelyn tells her about her recent bereavement. That the phone call is occasioned by Evelyn's need to switch to a wireless internet service is not insignificant. Cosmopolitanism, as we understand the term today, is concomitant with the movement that globalization offers. Globalization, in many celebratory accounts, offers the possibility of world-citizenship, real or imagined, as in the case of the netizens. The darker side of the global spread of capital, i.e., the whole question of unequal development, is never broached either by those who celebrate it or those who benefit from the newfound mobility. New sites like the internet and better communication are thus hailed as ushering in a new world of global solidarity. The internet, the site where strangers often find

one develops in order to live under this pervasive condition of strangeness than a question of ethics.[170] In *A Hundred Foot Journey*, bridges are built, cautiously, between the locals and the strangers when Hassan (Manish Dayal), a talented cook, takes lessons in French cuisine from Madame Mallory (Helen Mirren), the proprietor of the local Michelin-star restaurant.[171] The two cultures find a meeting ground when Indian spices are gently folded into a French omelet, where cilantro, popularly used in Indian cuisine, replaces the parsley that Madame Mallory's recipe demands. The frying pan becomes the metaphorical melting pot where the strangers lose some of the ambivalence and locals some of the animosity. Globalization forces us to encounter others who are not in the

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themselves coming together, fails Evelyn. It is unable to resolve Evelyn's frustration and sense of loss when she encounters the other woman's pithy business pitch, rendered perhaps more so by the medium of the telephone itself and heightened by the clearly "foreign" accent of the faceless phone-company employee. Evelyn, later in the film, finds herself face-to-face with a call center employee; perhaps not the same person she talked to over the phone earlier, but someone with a similar script. The conversation that could not take place earlier over the telephone happens now. Evelyn talks to this girl from her imaginary home, teaching her, in her in-found capacity of the cultural advisor, how to converse and read the cues from the other side. The conversation takes place only when she is no longer at home. However, even in that make-believe conversation, Evelyn is imagining herself at home watching her "telly", talking to a stranger who finally begins to understand her. Thus, being-at-home in the world is only possible when she is at home (however imaginary) in her world.
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, directed *by* John Madden (Beverly Hills, California: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011).

[170] Recent accounts of cosmopolitanism take into consideration the very conflicted nature of the figure of the cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism, in such accounts, is polyphonic, a constant state of negotiation between being at home and being in exile. In a manner not much unlike Appiah, Bruce Robbins argues that cosmopolitanism is a constant state of becoming. Cosmopolitanism as a strategy for living under perpetual conditions of strangeness, Robbins points out, "offers something other than a gallery of virtuous, eligible identities. It points instead to a domain of contested politics."
Bruce Robbins, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1998),12.
Brennan, on the other hand, argues that internationalism offers possibilities of global solidarity, a task that cosmopolitanism falls short of.
Brennan, *At Home in the World.*

[171] Though we will explore the relationship between food and cosmopolitanism in detail later in the chapter, let me add here that the Michelin star, the highest honor for culinary arts, has its origin in the automobile (more specifically, tire) industry. In the early 1900s, in order to encourage people to drive (and thus buy more tires), the tire company Michelin started publishing a handbook that included, among other things, a list of restaurants that people could visit in their cars. Over time, the handbook solely focused on restaurants, and the Michelin star came to signify culinary excellence. Thus, what started as a way to promote tire sales morphed into a universally revered and desired honor for the restaurant industry.

least like us. While such encounters sometimes lead to resistance, even violent xenophobic events, sometimes they create friendships among the most unlikely people. For Rumford, cosmopolitanism entails a "society of strangers" where:

> …strangeness is more than a perception of the difference associated with "them". It is a disorienting experience resulting from an engagement with globalization, especially the openness/non-openness of the world. The world does not always open up before the grateful cosmopolitan: the world can be experienced as rushing in on us in a troubling and possibly threatening way….[172]

People do not always start off from the popular cosmopolitan stance of openness towards others; they often arrive at such feelings. People do not plan to become cosmopolitans; instead, cosmopolitanism is an accidental byproduct of social interactions.

Although the film *Eat Pray Love* never mentions the word cosmopolitan, it continuously nods towards an open-minded attitude towards other cultures that cosmopolitanism purports to uphold. Without articulating it directly, the film frames Gilbert, her boyfriend from Brooklyn who introduces her to Hinduism, the Indian guru, and Gilbert's friends in Italy, both locals and expats, as inhabiting the cosmopolitan headspace where others and other cultures are embraced. In contrast to these people and effaced from any direct reference, there are the refugees. As I discuss later, Gilbert's portrayal of travel is similar (though perhaps unwittingly so) to Bauman's characterization of people on the move as tourists or vagabonds.[173] Throughout the film, Gilbert looks for a word that best describes her situation. At the final stop, Indonesia, she

[172] Rumford, *The Globalization of Strangeness*, 114.

[173] See: Bauman, *Globalization*, 156.

finds that word: *antevasin*. As Gilbert and Felipe walk through a local market on their way to a temple, Felipe asks Gilbert about the number of stamps she has on her passport. Felipe explains that Gilbert, with forty-nine stamps on her passport, is like him, an *antevasin*. He explains that the word means in-between, referring to people who live at the border after having renounced the comfort of familial life in order to seek enlightenment. The context in which the word is introduced, however, does not hint at the concept of renunciation entwined with the word's Sanskrit etymology. *Antevasin*, in Sanskrit, is comprised of the words *ant* – end – and *vasin* – dweller. *Ant* does not merely refer to the limits of society. It also means the end – a temporal element. *Ant* therefore signifies the limits of both time and space. An *antevasin* is the person who dwells between this world and the next, at the threshold of worldly time and space. The *antevasin*, as interpreted by Felipe, however, is poised between two worlds and can access the best of both worlds.

The *antevasin*, in Felipe's reading, or misreading, of the Sanskrit word is in fact the cosmopolitan (albeit window-dressed in a spiritual garb), whose privileged in-between status is predicated on, I argue, consumption (of excess, accumulation, variety) rather than an ascetic renunciation of worldly pleasures. That the conversation takes place in a market is not insignificant. The market through which Gilbert and Felipe make their way is a local one that attracts tourists. In the background there are flower sellers, vendors selling decorative items made from coconut leaves, local handicrafts and textiles, and, in a distinct nod to the tourists, various "I Love Bali" memorabilia. Though the local vendors are slightly out of focus and the scene is shot in soft colors, the market-friendly nature of the cosmopolitanism of the likes of Gilbert and Felipe is undeniable. The new-

age *antevasin* dwells at the border of the local and the global, in the *bazaar*, where the natives/vendors and the tourists/buyers jostle together, where local arts share the platform with western inspired memorabilia for tourists. The mix of the local and the global, particularly the "I Love Bali" paraphernalia, inspired by the likes of the "I Love NY" merchandise, is an instance of how the exotic is subjected to the rules of sameness in a globalizing world and exemplifies the cosmopolitan desire for sameness made strange. The new-age *antevasin* is always at home in a world of consumable exoticism.



Figure 3.1 Antevasin in the marketplace, screenshot from *Eat, Pray, Love*

Travel, for the likes of Gilbert, involves the element of what Bauman terms "sensation gathering", the cornerstone of modern consumer society where consumers

move on from commodity to commodity, chasing the thrill of the purchase.[174] Consumption, the realization of value, is for the consumer in the realization of this thrill (use-value promise) much more than the realization of use value. Thrill as a use value is much more readily discernable when one considers the commodities peddled by the mushrooming tourism industries all over the world, for example, the *bazaar* scene described in the preceding paragraph. The consumer-cosmopolitan is always on the move, transitioning from commodity to commodity and from place to place with equal ease. For most travelers, such movement, however, is not unconstrained. Returning to the parallel drawn between the refugee and Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love*, the constraints and the lack thereof are what distinguishes the tourist from the vagabond, the cosmopolitan from the exile, the friend from the stranger. These categories of wanderers, self-motivated or forced, help us understand how consumption allocates what status one is given when one is on the move.

Consumption, or the financial power to consume, is the main marker of the cosmopolitan traveler so much so that one need not even leave the confines or comforts of one's home to be a cosmopolitan. Gilbert's friend David can be the cosmopolitan "yogi from Yonkers" without ever leaving home, but the Cambodian refugee, for whom no place is ever home, can only remain one of the nameless "boatpeople" whose story can be appropriated by Gilbert to legitimize her own status as a cosmopolitan. As opposed to the unquestionable status of Gilbert, Felipe, or David as cosmopolitans, if the figure of the refugee is to be read as a subaltern cosmopolitan, then subalternity must be understood as, in the words of Timothy Brennan, "a form of ontological resistance that

[174] Bauman, *Globalization*, 83.

must be preserved - but only in that form: in a perpetually splintered, ineffective, heroic, invisible, desperate plenitude."[175] There is no corrective dimension to this casting, despite its seeming openness. It exists only to attest to the "broadmindedness" of the other travelers, the real cosmopolitans. The subaltern cosmopolitans, if there ever are any, are what Bauman calls vagabonds, people who are "travelers refused the right to tum into tourists. They are allowed neither to stay put (there is no site guaranteeing permanence, the end to undesirable mobility) nor search for a better place to be."[176] The privileged status of the cosmopolitan traveler pivots on this distinction. There must always be some unwelcome refugees or vagabonds so that other travelers can be welcomed as tourists.[177]

In *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Immanuel Kant explores the figure of the world citizen, or the cosmopolitan, as we understand the term today.[178] Though the trope of the "world citizen" has been around since Diogenes, it is Kant's idealism that crystalizes this amorphous idea into something less protean. For Kant, world citizenship is limited to conditions of universal hospitality. Thus, the Kantian notion of world citizenship is not a given, nor can it be established as long as there remains geopolitical coercion either by military or economic means.[179] As long as there remains the threat of war or the scourge of national debt, peace among states cannot be attained, let alone sustained. Cosmopolitanism, in the Kantian sense, is never fully attainable, however lofty

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[175] Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 17.

[176] Bauman, *Globalization*, 93.

[177] Sometimes, to invite foreign tourists, domestic tourists are discouraged from traveling to certain destinations in their own country.

[178] See: Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

and morally desirable it might be, as long as all people are not equal. What is possible, given the geopolitical situation, true as much for Kant's time as prescient it is for ours, is to be hospitable, even to strangers. An expectation of that hospitality, even from people who are not like us, arises from the common possession of the earth.

Kant, however, clarifies that this hospitality to strangers is nothing more than simply tolerating the presence of each other. For Kant the first premise to world citizenship was simply the hospitality meted out to strangers, a safe passage, not a permanent abode in a world not theirs, but a minimum courtesy shown to someone who will move on to the next stop on their itinerary in the foreseeable future. Cosmopolitanism, then, in present academic parlance is fundamentally a Kantian inheritance. As Brennan observes, it is often understood to be "the thirst for another knowledge, unprejudiced striving, world travel, supple open-mindedness, broad international norms of civic equality, a politics of treaty and understanding rather than conquest…"[180] Cosmopolitanism, thus, as it is commonly interpreted, espouses a sense of courtesy, especially towards those who are not exactly like us. Turning our attention back to Gilbert's narrative, the nod towards decency is not missing from her monologue. The attempt to find something held in common, between the Western tourist and the Cambodian refugee, is a cosmopolitan gesture. However, the gesture towards a common interest (here, a stake in the personal) is one that only Gilbert (or Deborah) can make. She, by virtue of her position, can seek out the common. And Gilbert's attempt to focus on the similarities between the two women makes the boat people less strange, less alien. But the erasure of this sense of strangeness is also a disavowal of history. The price the

[180] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 205.

refugee has to pay to be the subject of this cosmopolitan decency is a spatial and temporal dislocation, a double dispossession (of home and history). However, the cosmopolitan traveler, howsoever far from home, is never displaced. She is never not at home.

Cosmopolitanism is a matter of orientation and cultural-competence, not just world-travel. Ulf Hannerz, on similar line as Bauman, makes a distinction a between cosmopolitans and other travelers who travel the globe for economic reasons.[181] Such a distinction rests on the assumption that the economic migrant, already faced with the onus of securing better financial position, does not make the effort to acquire the cultural competence demanded of the cosmopolitan to navigate different cultures. To be culturally competent does not imply a lack of autonomy, in fact it points to the contrary. This is true for Gilbert in all her interactions with other cultures in the course of her travels. Gilbert is the one who gets to decide; in fact, her already-existing cosmopolitan credo ensures that she decides, before she even engages with the local culture that she is sampling, what aspect of each culture she is going to experience. The cosmopolitan traveler is both a connoisseur and a dilettante, and this unique status enables her to pick and choose elements of different cultures willy-nilly. Other cultures cater to such whims of the cosmopolitan. And in having this knowledge, cosmopolitans mark themselves as different from the tourists, even those from the metropole. Thus Gilbert, even before she embarks on her travel, knows that she is going on a gastronomic exploration of Italy, will meditate in India, and will finally focus on her heart when she goes back to Bali to meet the medicine man. That her travel, segmented and organized as such, has the financial backing of a major publishing house, only proves that the cosmopolitan's ability to

[181] Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2–3 (June 1990): 237–51.

decide which aspect of which culture is worth engaging with is only made possible by access to capital.

The new mobility, real or virtual, considering that cyberspace enables a travel of sorts without leaving the comforts of one's home, does not mean that all that travel have the same status. The travelers of today fall into two broad categories, as Bauman points out. They can be either tourists or vagabonds.[182] The tourists, the ideal category that everyone aspires to be, including the vagabonds, are the ultimate consumers. Not all travelers are tourists, not because they don't want to be, but because they cannot afford the monetary requirements that the role demands. For those whose desires exceed their financial means, the tag of the cosmopolitan-consumer remains forever elusive. In foreign lands, refugees and vagabonds are forever the strangers who outlive their welcome. And when they do settle down, the need for assimilation into the foreign culture is more acutely felt by them than the cosmopolitans, who like other consumers, are enticed by the world of commodities yet retain the power to choose between objects to consume.

In Gilbert's case, it is not just her travels that exemplify the unrest typical of the modern-day consumer fleeting from the one thrill to the next, where each transient thrill is associated with the initial thrill of commodity consumption. Her unrest in her relationships, the penchant to be quickly dissatisfied, whether by her romances, friendships, or any other activity that she immerses herself in, is symptomatic of this consumerist condition which is no longer limited to shopping malls or online catalogues but rather permeates every aspect of the consumer's being. Her first husband, who shows

[182]Bauman, *Globalization,* 156

a lack of commitment to any profession, is not quite unlike Gilbert. It is the case that Gilbert, in being a professional travel writer, has earned the right and the financial means to be able to afford pursuing the thrills (and the disaffection that comes soon after the thrill wears off), unlike her husband who does not yet have that right. The ability to move on is essential for Gilbert. When Gilbert toys with the idea of a baby, her friend warns her that having a baby needs the same conviction and commitment as getting one's face tattooed. Not being tied down by such commitments, and without any desire to be weighed down by responsibility either, Gilbert shifts her attention to her own wish-list: travel brochures and *National Geographic* cut-outs. She sets out to travel through Italy, India, and Indonesia, knowing even before she leaves New York what she precisely desires from each place. Her travel is not motivated, as she clarifies to her editor and her friend, by anything other than spending time with herself, looking for novelty, being able to rhapsodize about the things that one usually takes for granted. The book, *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, from which the film has been adapted clarifies the quest: "One woman's search for *everything*" (italics mine). Things, by their newness or by their sheer volume, are the measure of life. The limitedness of Gilbert's life in New York is attested by the fact that all her possessions fit into a small storage locker. But, even here, unlike the Cambodian refugee with whom Gilbert had earlier on in the film drawn a parallel, Gilbert has a life, full of things neatly packed and stored for her to come back to, should her travels fail to give her what she is looking for elsewhere. To be a cosmopolitan, then, is always to have the assurance that there is a home to come back to, no matter where one's travel takes one.

Cosmopolitanism and Gastronomic Consumption

All other kinds of consumption aside, the consumption of food is a major trope in travel films. The openness to food, particularly from other cultures, has become one of the chief signifiers of cosmopolitan broadmindedness. The taste of other cultures, literally, happens through ingestion. Mapped against this gastronomic introduction to other cultures through food is the desire to cling on to the last vestiges of home for many on the move, because distant homelands are nostalgically recreated, however briefly, through the cooking and consumption of food. For some, food is an encounter with exotic elsewheres. For others, food is the only viable (and mobile) link with homelands that have been left behind, sometimes for good. Roland Barthes, reading a wide range of food advertisements, comments on the three functions that food serves: First, it is a link to a national culture.[183] Barthes, here, is of course writing about the myth that French culinary arts have accrued, but we can extend that reading into our current situation as well. Advertisements would have us believe that a "mother's love" can be nostalgically experienced through the eating of a microwavable dinner. Second, food is eroticized and presented with associations of a sublimated sexuality. By this logic, some types of food are rendered, through such semiotic manipulations, desirable, while others are not. Third, Barthes emphasizes that food mimics our current condition, i.e., the obsession with health, with being fit. Barthes elaborates,

> …food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means a certain way of life is emphasized, much more than expressed by it. To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends,

[183] Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Esterik P. Van (New York: Routledge, 1997), 20–27.

> replacing, summing up, and signalizing other behaviors, and it is for precisely these reasons that food is a sign. What are these behaviors? Today we might say all of them: activity, work, sport, effort, leisure, celebration – every one of these situations is expressed through food.[184]

Food ceases to be mere substance, to be just sustenance, and instead presents itself as a situation. Barthes' example of this transformation of food is coffee, which instead of being associated with its traditional role as a stimulant, is increasingly associated with the idea of a break (from work). Food becomes its own signifying system. And more to our point here, food expresses what is home and where is away. *The Hundred Foot Journey*, as I have indicated in my reading in the previous section, depicts food as a way to retain some semblance of a connection to the homeland from which the asylum-seeking Kadam family had to flee. The sense of alienation created by forced migrations is further reinforced when Hassan, the talented chef, is "discovered" by the high-end culinary world in Paris, and the constant experimentations with food take Hassan further away from his family and the local community.

Food connects us to our homelands, even when that homeland is far away and is a place to which we cannot return. Food is an important metaphor in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, an ensemble comedy about a group of British retirees who find themselves in Jaipur. Their travel is variously occasioned by bleak financial situations at home, a desire to find love (both new and forgotten), and also medical tourism despite a lack of faith in the capabilities of the local doctors (in fact, of any doctor of color). Whereas in *Eat Pray Love* and *Queen* (which I discuss in the following section), the

[184] Ibid. 29.

home that protagonist has shared with her husband or was planning on building, seems undesirable; in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, the tourists arrive at the hotel which aims at outsourcing old-age and thus attracts the motley crowd of retired English travelers, for whom home has been rendered either inhabitable or unaffordable. The retirees, as the proprietor of the hotel, Dev (Dev Patel), reminds us, are not wanted back at home; their exile is not one that is a self-motivated quest for everything, but one that is catalyzed by an age where there are few, if any, countries for old men. Food in the film is a metaphor for the homeland. The unease that the new arrivals feel in Jaipur is only accentuated by the fact that the food served in the hotel, rich and spicy, owing to Dev's desire to showcase the culinary heritage of India, causes the retirees severe stomach discomfort. As they slowly begin to settle down, their stomachs too learn to deal with the local cuisine. Food, in this film as in *The Hundred Foot Journey*, is the site or the occasion where unlikely solidarities are forged. An appropriate instance of such a new camaraderie is when Mrs. Donnelly (Maggie Smith) offers cookies to the hotel maid Anokhi. This gesture is particularly important because these cookies are all that Mrs. Donnelly has left of home. Mrs. Donnelly, who at the beginning is clearly and unapologetically racist, finds herself invited to the house of Anokhi. Despite her reservations and her disdain for the natives, Mrs. Donnelly, who had earlier attempted to bring her home with her in the form of familiar and therefore trusted edibles, like cookies and pickles, transcends not only her ill-concealed racial prejudice, but by sharing a meal with the lower caste family, also overcomes a barrier that even the locals cannot. She becomes the first person to visit Anokhi's home – locals would not do that, the interpreter tells her, because Anokhi is an "untouchable" whose shadow even is considered inauspicious.

The cosmopolitan's right to gastronomic consumption, earned through work (which funds her travel, an activity denoting conspicuous leisure) or birth (thus always already having the means to such pursuits), distinguishes such travels from the others who find themselves on the road without the means to sample the fares that one finds on the way. The conspicuous nature of the cosmopolitan consumption, of both food and culture, makes the cosmopolitan traveler the modern-day successor of the leisure class. The cosmopolitan can only become worthy of the privileged status by demonstrating competence in matters of taste. Thorstein Veblen argues that it not a matter of choice for the leisure class to consume in both quality and quantity in order to attest to the class stature. Consumption is a matter of taste, for it is incumbent on the leisure class to be able to discriminate between consumable objects. The cosmopolitan traveler, like the leisure class before her, is the connoisseur of things that exemplify the good life. She leads by example for others to follow. Those who cannot emulate at least aspire to do so. As Veblen points out, in order to confer consumption with prestige, the leisure class has to commit to a "more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way."[185] For consumption of this particular order, there is a skill-set that has to be both mastered and demonstrated. Consumption has to be becoming – hence all the aesthetic devices of the moving image are used to ensure that Gilbert's culinary experience in *Eat, Pray, Love* demonstrates both a refinement of taste and command of local knowledge. The aesthetics of consumption of another culture confers honor on the consumer-cosmopolitan Gilbert, thus making her travelogue a

[185] Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 75.

worthy one to emulate. She provides the model for the spectator by addressing her as an aspiring cosmopolitan.

Though Gilbert declares that her travels are motivated by the desire to make things new again, as it were, she only relies on the stock stereotypes in her quest. The first stop on Gilbert's itinerary, Italy, begins with a panoramic shot of Rome, with the camera focusing on a sun-washed, almost haloed, face of Gilbert with a slightly out-of-focus Rome in the background. Her internal monologue that accompanies this picture-postcard visual is a joke about a man who prays for a winning lottery ticket without ever actually buying a ticket. Now that Gilbert realizes the irony, she buys not one, but three tickets. The premise that happiness comes for a fee is present throughout the film. To be a cosmopolitan is to be able to pay this fee. It is not just Gilbert who knows what she is looking for in each place she visits; the spectator also shares that knowledge. Gilbert's self-exploration in Italy limits itself to the clichés -- loud gesturing, food, monuments, and football (soccer). Gilbert's travels in Italy are pages from any travel magazine; indeed, there is nothing about her travels that deviates from the magazine articles she has been collecting. Her choices were determined even before she made them. Despite all the claims made on behalf of cosmopolitan openness, the list of what the cosmopolitan is or can be open to, is a limited one. The only thing she looks for in Italy is indulgence, primarily gastronomic; hence, the camera captures food in a tactile and sensuous way. From multiple shots of wine being poured in slow motion, to innumerous shots of oozing cheese, to parmesan being sprinkled, and from close-ups of Gilbert as she eats her spaghetti, seemingly unmindful of table manners, as she relishes it, Italy is unbridled hedonism. These aesthetically pleasing images of food transform them into what Barthes

would call a "situation."[186] The slow motion in which the images of food are captured, as they are prepared, served, and consumed, elevate them from being mere sources of sustenance to a performance and demonstration of leisure. As a character in the film observes, unlike America, where pleasure has to be earned, in Italy, pleasure is a given.

Returning to the motif of food, it is not unimportant that the film presents food in such sensual and fetishized manner. Gilbert is escaping two failed relationships: her marriage and her relationship with a younger actor. Unsurprisingly, her relationship with food is presented in the same manner as human romantic relationships in their haptic, visceral, and almost libidinal nature. For example, the film contrasts the oozing of the melted cheese with frequent cuts to lovers in the street. This sensual presentation of food, or any other consumer good, is what W. F. Haug calls commodity aesthetics, where the "aesthetics of the monopoly-commodity, i.e. the form in which transnational enterprises in particular intervene directly in the collective imagination of cultures."[187]Commodities, Haug reminds us, borrow their charms from the language of human courtship. Sensuality cannot be divorced from commodity aesthetics. The technocracy of sensuality, after having borrowed its language from human courtship, turns this language on its head insofar as human courtship now speaks the language of commodities. It is not any food, but food that looks a certain way that would be deemed desirable. In the aesthetic presentation of commodities lies their economic function, and the presentation of food in the travel film is no exception.

In presenting multiple images of food being prepared and consumed, alone or with friends, the film harkens back to an era before the prepackaged TV dinner. There is

[186] Barthes, "Towards a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption," 28.

[187] Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 11.

a sense of timelessness that the film associates with consumption of food. The segment of the film that is shot in Italy often cuts from shots of the tourist hotspots of the city, including the Piazza Navona, the Colosseum, the Trevi Fountain, and the Vatican, to close-ups of food being prepared or consumed. This juxtaposition of the here-and-the-now, i.e., the immediacy, of the act of eating and cooking, on the one hand, and images of the eternal Rome, on the other, imbues the presentation of food in the film, particularly in this segment, with a distinct nostalgic quality. At the same time, the past, presented as architecture, is remade as an object of consumption. The film invites the spectator to consume vicariously both the food and the past that is rendered consumable via its juxtaposition with the multiple shots of food. This element of nostalgia, this commodification of classical antiquity, is not limited to the travel film that gestures towards a (privileged notion of) cosmopolitanism. Nostalgia is a recurrent theme in what Diane Negra terms "food films":

> Our investment in fetishizing ethnic food involves nostalgia for modes of food production that are no longer typical in either U.S. homes or restaurants. Placed in the context of ethnic family fantasies, food becomes not only a channel for sincerity and emotional expressivity but a sign of non-industrialized production that bespeaks the values and customs of an earlier era. Labor-intensive work in the kitchen is accompanied by rituals of food procurement that the films mark as pleasingly anachronistic.[188]

The anachronism is in keeping with the rest of the scenes in Italy which are carefully shot using filters that give the image a warm hue. The camera obsessively focuses on worn-

[188] Diane Negra, "Ethnic Food Fetishism, Whiteness, and Nostalgia in Recent Film and Television", *The Velvet Light Trap-A Critical Journal of Film and Television* (2002): 63

out wall paper, scaffolds that hold the crumbling *pensione* together, old marble fountains, and small family-owned businesses. The film avoids any glimpse of supermarkets or multinational fast food chains. Cosmopolitanism, thus, is as much about time as it is about space. In living the pre-industrial fantasy in the modern world, the cosmopolitan can access and even relive times gone by, something that the locals cannot. Locals are not just bound to their native places; they are also tied to their present. The cosmopolitan traveler does not have such constraints. Tourism industries thrive on this cosmonautic desire to traverse (and consume) both space and time.

Cosmo-spirituality: 'The best things in life are not things'

If food, time, and space are rendered consumable for cosmopolitan travelers like Gilbert, then, in the segment of the film shot in India, it is her own self that is presented to her spectators as consumable. While consumption**,** primarily gastronomic, marks Gilbert's experience of Italy, her sojourn to India, to the *ashram* of the guru, might seem to be marked by the complete lack thereof. While Italy, in its sumptuousness, presents one kind of exotic excess, Gilbert's travels in India present the other kind. Gilbert's travels never feature the everyday experiences of travelers, like queues at the visa counters in foreign embassies, emigration, or customs inspections. Each episode starts in *medias res* – she is already there. Unlike the refugee she alludes to at the beginning of the film, cosmopolitan travels do not face (or do not feel the need to depict) these real-world impediments. Her travel in India begins with the taxi ride to the ashram of the guru. In a sharp contrast to the sepia-toned, quiet, and reverie-esque slow motion shots of Italy, the film depicts India in sharp colors, with fast camera movements, and excessive diegetic

sound. The film presents the movement from Italy to India with an abrupt cut from the American Thanksgiving dinner Gilbert cooks for her Italian friends which goes on till the wee hours of the morning. As they eat the turkey, the camera focuses on the carving of the turkey, the friends passing it around, and finally settles on Gilbert's smiling face as she looks at her friends with love and satisfaction. In sharp contrast to the tranquility of this scene, the next scene is jarring – a speeding taxi, followed by a close-up of the driver's feet on the accelerator. The breakneck speed of the taxi as it rushes through the early morning streets of Mumbai, coupled with all the traffic, the constant honking of car horns, the people on the street, the people on the sidewalk – amplified by the music (presumably playing on the taxi radio) – are all in sharp contrast to Italy which the film represents as a nostalgic recreation of timeless antiquity in all its poise. Gilbert initially seems to have lost the composure that she had found in the ruins, in food, and among fellow expat friends in Italy. Instead, she finds herself slightly bewildered as children beat on the window of her taxi; her confusion is only magnified by the chaos of the busy street.

Arriving at the ashram, she realizes that as she made her way here from New York, the guru made hers to her ashram in New York. When showing her the meditation cave, her guide tells her that it is "open 24X7 and is air-conditioned." The act of finding god or the reclaiming the self through meditation takes place in the comfort of an air-conditioned room. This re-discovery of the self, in a glass-walled "cave," so to speak, is distinct from the other activities of the ashram. The visitors find their selves through choreographed *seva* – an act of service that the devotees perform during their time there. *Seva*, for such new-age spirituals, is in mildly physically taxing work; for Gilbert, it is

mopping the ashram floor. After her tour of the ashram, Gilbert proceeds to her room where her new roommate dons an "I am in silence" badge. The badge, that Gilbert declares is the exact thing she needs, is sold at the bookstore. Each act that the devotees undertake at the retreat is signposted with a store-bought bauble. Later, when Gilbert buys the badge, she learns that she is in-charge of hosting devotees from all-over the world visiting the ashram as a part of a ten-day spiritual retreat. The hostess, referred to as Miss Suzy Cream Cheese, is supposed to be social, bubbly, and smiling all the time. Gilbert promptly exchanges the "I am in silence" badge for one that says: "Hello My name is Liz." As she watches over the new devotees, Gilbert sums up her newfound wisdom in one line: "God dwells within you as you." The cosmopolitan subject, then, is the center of divinity in all its immanence. The merit-badge of this divinity can be collected at a gift shop for a price.

The pop-spirituality espoused by Gilbert (the author), one that got her into Oprah's book club, has an unmistakable orientalist character. The film shares this mindset. The pop-spirituality that the film liberally doles out points to another kind of consumption. The asceticism that the film promotes is a kind of gift-shop spirituality, one where a Ganapati idol sold on the streets, or a badge bought at the ashram bookstore, denote one's stage in this personal (not allegorical) pilgrim's progress. Whereas religious activity, or loosely, spiritual pursuits, was one of the very few activities that the leisure class could indulge in, Veblen argues that devout consumption is in fact a subcategory of the canon of conspicuous waste.[189] However, such wasteful consumption regards physical comfort and spiritual well-being as fungible. Read in this light, Gilbert's adventures in

[189] Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 295.

the ashram, her pursuit of God, belongs to the realm of conspicuous waste only made to seem not wasteful by the fact that she is not deriving any physical comfort from it. There is no difference, then, between the gastronomic delights she indulged in Italy and the spirituality that she seeks in Indonesia and India, since both are predicated on the same premises of wasteful consumption. The quest for the divine, like the one that Liz is after, is only for the ones who can afford this pilgrimage. The spiritual retreat is no different in this regard from a corporate retreat.

While Gilbert has traveled all the way from New York (with the long stopover in Italy) to meet the guru at her ashram in Mumbai, the guru, meanwhile, has traveled from Mumbai to her ashram in New York. While the guru's disciple, another white expat, explains this away as one of the guru's many "tricks", this new wave of spiritual exports from the Orient might offer us another way of thinking about cosmopolitanism and consumer culture. Spiritualism is an Oriental export to the West, one that brings European and American travelers to the East and also leads to many of these spiritual leaders to open their ashrams in the West. At first blush, it might seem like this spiritualism stands in opposition to the materialism and consumerism espoused by neoliberal ideology. However, I contend that what is being marketed as a soul-recovering spiritual experience is not something that evades commodification, but in fact is the commodity that sells us the experience of being something more than just consumers. We consume the spiritual experience so as to attest the existence of something authentic in us, something that has not been corrupted by the world of consumption. We consume in order to be not-just-consumers. The spiritual quest understood as an affirmation of a non-reified version of ourselves, then, is not much different from the "defective, faulty and

deficient – in other words, inadequate consumers" who riot and shoplift.[190] The guru's ashram is a "members-only" retreat – where you consume the privilege of being addressed as a non-consumer. Spiritualism, of this manner, is a quick and temporary fix for the unhappy consciousness begot by all-pervasive consumerism. What on the surface seems to offer a counterpoint to reification is, in fact, the ultimate example of reified consciousness.

Instead of offering an alternative to commodity aesthetics, this new age spirituality sells us our own selves back to us, repackaged with all the necessary feel-good trappings. In an alien and estranged world, it (falsely) makes us feel whole again. Or, it gives us temporary respite from being consumers, and we drink this Kool-Aid instead. It is not surprising, then, to observe that such spiritual retreats, exemplified by Auroville, in Pondicherry, India, became popular only in the neoliberal era of Thatcher and Reagan. Not all kinds of spiritual experience engage the cosmopolitan imagination, however. There is a reason why figures like Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) or Sri Sri Ravi Shankar have a worldwide following, as opposed to other godmen or women like Radhe Ma or Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan, whose appeal remains limited to India. The latter have closer ties to more mainstream Hinduism and are, as performances of faith, more ostentatious. As the figure below shows, the way these spiritual figures represent themselves clearly indicates the kind of devotees they attract. For example, Osho, with his white tunic, long white beard, and with the fawn colored drape on the tunic that matches the trees in the background recreates the timeless image of divinity,

[190] Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 38

but also nods to the yuppies that he seeks to attract with the peace sign that he makes with his hands.



Figure 3.2 Clockwise: Osho, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Radhe Ma, Ram Rahim Singh Insaan

There is a distinct sense of serenity in the attire, the color composition, the use of light, and what could have pointed towards asceticism is softened with the peace sign and the smile on Osho's face. The image combines a sense of timelessness with the topical –

creating the perfect image of cosmo-spirituality that the likes of Gilbert seek. Osho, a self-advertised pro-capitalism guru, cynically weds the spirituality of the East with the materialism of the West. Similarly, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is dressed in white cotton fabric – a cotton shawl draped around him. While Osho does not have any significant marker of "Indianness," Sri Sri Ravi Shankar presents himself as an Indian spiritual leader – his shawl is of a distinct South Indian provenance, his forehead is adorned with sandalwood paste. But like Osho, he channels with same sense of the timeless mystic; and the smile on his face, the hand-gesture of a blessing, all indicate the absence of any severe form of asceticism.

While Osho and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar display both simplicity of attire and a smiling disposition, Radhe Ma and Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan are draped in more ostentatious clothes. Radhe Ma wears red, the color associated with a bride. Her make up is heavy and her jewelry gaudy. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan (whose adopted name merges three religions – Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism – and gestures towards a casteless society by adopting the sobriquet *insaan*, i.e, human) is known to his followers as *pitaaji* (father) and to all for his sartorial flamboyance, a grotesque ensemble of sparkling, gaudy, and (here) almost medieval clothes. The figures of Osho and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar have a carefully curated simplicity, a faux asceticism, that makes their brand of spirituality attractive to people like Gilbert. This spirituality, by no means ascetic, has the façade of openness, both in outreach and interpretation that attract not only Westerners but also Indians of a certain class. Radhe Ma and Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, with their over-the-top attires, attract a huge number of followers in India, but do not capture the imagination of the cosmopolitans. The spiritualism espoused by Osho and Sri Sri Ravi

Shankar are able to attract the cosmopolitans because they, at least on the surface, offer an alternative to the consumer culture from which the cosmopolitan travelers seek to abstain, at least for the duration of their spiritual retreat. Figures like Osho or Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, while steeped in Hindu and Buddhist myths, offer an experience that treads the fine line between religion and spiritualism. They do not need their followers to convert or even strictly adhere to Hindu practices, thus not being at odds with the Judeo-Christian beliefs of many of its members. Instead, they repackage the religious experience as a spiritual one, thus making it accessible for everyone.

This cosmo-spirituality does not require its followers to denounce the material world. For example, Osho describes his philosophy as epitomized by "Zorba the Buddha" – "capable both of enjoying the earthy pleasures of a Zorba the Greek and the silent serenity of a Gautama the Buddha", drawing on both popular mysticism and popular fiction, and encourages his followers to pause reading and embrace life.[191] Auroville's website declares itself as a "universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities."[192] We can forever marvel at the cosmopolitan nature of such aspiration as did the townspeople at the emperor's new clothes. Cosmo-spirituality gently reminds us that all is well with the world. The problem is not in the consumerist-role preordained for us. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar promises that his breathing exercises will make us accept this imperfect world, warts and all, and our role in it as consumers And Gilbert has more notable predecessors who take the spiritual detour to not shy away from the world, but

[191] "Osho: About Osho", *www.osho.com/iosho*, accessed Dec.1, 2017.

[192] "Why Auroville?", http://www.auroville.org/, accessed Dec. 1, 2017.

embrace all its materialist hedonism – the Beatles had been there and done that way back in the late‘60s.[193]

Cosmo-spirituality is the ethic of late capitalism much in the same way that Max Weber characterized Protestantism as the ethic of capitalism. According to Weber, the shift brought about by the Protestant reformation was compatible with the principles of capitalism. Protestantism espouses a doctrine of predestination, or in other words, only a select few are chosen to be saved from eternal damnation. Who gets saved and who does not is predetermined by God. Thus, it became one's moral imperative to deem oneself as chosen. Any lack of conviction in this regard would point to a lack of conviction in one's faith. "Good works" became the sole site to demonstrate this moral certitude in one's faith and by extension in one's salvation. In doctrine of predestination, Weber argues, capitalist accumulation of wealth is morally sanctioned as one's having met the demands of duty in one's calling. Like present day cosmo-spirituality, Protestantism does not call for a renunciation of the material world; instead, it equates material well-being with spiritual upliftment. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber demonstrates an "extraordinary capitalist business sense is combined in the same person and groups with the most intensive forms of piety which penetrates and dominates their whole life".[194]

As was the case for the Protestants, i.e., doing well in terms of capitalist accumulation of wealth is a mark of faring well on the register of faith, for the consumers

[193] Unlike the hippies who trekked across South Asia in the 1960s in their caravans, traveling light, mixing with locals, and often under the influence of marijuana and other psychedelic drugs, The Beatles sought in Oriental mysticism the transcendence drugs failed to give them. They flocked to Mahesh Yogi for their "mantra", something that would ameliorate their spiritual crisis. But this crisis, one that manifested when they were at the peak of their popularity, is not at odds with their material success. Rather, through this brand of mysticism, they were able to be at home with their material success. The Beatles started what the likes of Gilbert follow. This new spiritualism is not anti-materialism; in fact, it compliments *materialsim*.
[194] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 9

of cosmo-spirituality, spiritual wellbeing is yoked to consuming more. The shift from capitalism to late-capitalism is the shift in emphasis from production to consumption, and we are witnessing a complimentary shift in spiritual leanings as well. From Protestantism which emphasized production (and accumulation) as our ethical duty, we now have cosmo-spirituality which reinforces our conviction in our roles as consumers. However, both Protestantism and cosmo-spirituality do not completely mitigate the feeling of "unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual."[195] And as Protestants were encouraged to act as if they were guaranteed salvation through accumulation, Elizabeth Gilbert and her likes are encouraged to act as if they are guaranteed salvation through consumption. The belief that God helps those who help themselves finds expression in *Eat, Pray, Love* when Gilbert recollects the story of the man who prayed to a saint to help him win a lottery without ever buying a ticket. Gilbert's act of buying three tickets does change the adage slightly. For the seekers of cosmo-spirituality, God only helps those who can (already) help themselves.

Cosmopolitanism Now: When the Locals Go Global

Finding and reclaiming one's self via travel is a privilege, since not all travelers, as I discussed in the previous sections, are cosmopolitans. Privilege, and the lack thereof, often places the natives and the cosmopolitan tourists in an antagonistic relationship. For the native, the cosmopolitan traveler represents her own aspirations to be elsewhere. That the cosmopolitan traveler consumes the quotidian and even oppressive elements of the native's everyday life as some exotic experience only adds to the resentment that the

[195] ibid., 60

native harbors towards the cosmopolitan. It is this antagonism that Jamaica Kincaid captures in her anti-travelogue, *A Small Place*:

> That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go—so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.[196]

The cosmopolitan represents for the native her own desires that she cannot turn into her reality. The native's own existence becomes for the entitled cosmopolitan traveler an exotic experience to be consumed. The travel film, in the age of globalization, mediates the desire for the exotic through the traveling subject's consumption of cultural difference. Globalization is not just a process of homogenization that threatens diversity, but one that produces sameness and difference simultaneously. As a result, travel, in the form of commercial tourism, shares in globalization's contradiction as the same process

[196] Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), 18-19.

that facilitates free movement of people also produces a world of poor rooted locals. Travel films offer a celebratory vision of globalization, one that conceals the insidious workings of imperialism under the larger idea of global unity. But what happens when the local goes global? The question can be framed in another way: What happens when the local can afford global travel? Can we challenge the implicit Eurocentrism of cosmopolitanism, which assumes that the cosmopolitan traveler is American or European, traveling through different (including Third World) locations? Can a cosmopolitan traveler like Gilbert have an Indian counterpart?

Elizabeth Gilbert's Indian counterpart in certain ways would be Rani (Kangna Ranaut), the protagonist of *Queen*.[197] Like Gilbert, Rani decides to travel; she, in fact, goes on her honeymoon by herself, after her fiancé breaks off their engagement right before their wedding. Travel for Rani, like Gilbert, is a way to reclaim her own identity in the aftermath of a failed relationship. While Gilbert breaks free from her marriage because her husband constantly fails to commit to a profession, Rani's fiancé Vijay opts out of the relationship because Rani, who has lived in Delhi all her life, is not cosmopolitan enough for the "foreign-returned" techie. According to Vijay, his stay in London has transformed him in a way that Rani, who has had a sheltered middle-class life in Delhi, would not be able to understand. *Queen* is a film about a middle-class Delhi girl on her way to be a cosmopolitan.

The film follows Rani's travels and personal growth Paris and Amsterdam, a cinematic *bildungsroman* of sorts. Like India with its excess of sights and sounds and clamoring bodies was initially an overwhelming experience for Gilbert, traveling alone

[197] Queen, directed by Vikramaditya Motwane (Mumbai: Shemaroo Entertainment, 2015).

for the first time, Rani arrives in Paris, dazed and confused. That she cannot pronounce *Champs-Élysées* to give her cab driver directions to her hotel is only the beginning of her travails in a strange land. She wakes up in her hotel room to the sound of raucous lovemaking in the next room – the sound of sex for the uninitiated Rani is a frightening experience. When she walks the streets of Paris, the Eifel Tower overwhelms her – it seems to loom large over the city – and even as Rani tries to run away from it. However, there is no escaping the Eifel Tower. If not the real tower, there are the miniature Eifel Towers that tourists all over the world carry home for keepsakes or as the quintessential gifts for friends and family, a reminder of one's having been to Paris. Rani is unable to cross the busy streets on her own – she looks in vain for Vijay to hold her hand. With her *kurta* over a pair of jeans, Rani stands out among the *chic* Parisians. Clearly a vulnerable outsider, she is mugged as she walks through dark and deserted alleys to look for a travel agent to book her a ticket back home at the earliest opportunity. The language barrier is insurmountable for Rani as she walks into a fancy sidewalk café for dinner. Unable to read the menu, she points to a random item. When the server brings her food to the table, Rani is horrified at the sight of slightly agape fish head garnished with a cherry tomato. Nauseous, she runs out of the restaurant, without having paid her bill. As she throws up outside the restaurant, a group of East Asian tourists start clicking her photograph. Her first tryst with globalism was quite unsavory and becomes a spectacle for other tourists.

But is this Rani's first tryst with globalism? The film opens with Rani's *mehendi*, a North-Indian pre-wedding ceremony where the bride gets a henna tattoo on her hands, and in the age of conspicuous consumption, the ritual is marked by choreographed dances of friends and family. The song that Rani's family members dance to weaves in global

aspirations into the fabric of an Indian marriage ritual. The lyrics of the *London Thumakda* (London Dances) song are as follows:

Heellan de chaldi, Tuk tuk tu kardi

Make up tu kardi yaar

Angrezi padhdi, git-pit tu kardi

Jimme queen saddi Victoria

Tu ghanti big ben di

Poora London thumakda

Oh jaddo nachche pehn di

Poora London thumakda.

(You walk on high heels,

and wear makeup.

You read English, and speak English

Like the Queen Victoria.

You are the chime of the Big Ben.

And London dances to your tune,

Each time you dance, my lovely.)

The song is addressed to a Westernized Indian girl, who wears heels, dons make-up, dresses in transparent clothes, and speaks English like Queen Victoria. She is the chime of the Big Ben, and when she dances, all of London dances with her. Spiking Hindi/Punjabi songs with the odd English loan word is not a new phenomenon. But what is notable here is how cosmopolitan desires permeate the traditional wedding song. The Punjabi lyrics seamlessly weave in the traditional folk-song "*latthe di chadar"* into its

foreign aspirations.[198] The neo-imperialist tendency of globalization ensures that the lyrics blend the legacies of the colonial era (by virtue of which Queen Victoria remains the prototype of the ideal ambitious woman) with the cosmopolitan dreams of the locals. Here cosmopolitanism is not so much about the universal humanism of Kant, but a tendentious mix of the global and the local. The cosmopolitanism invoked in this song hints towards Westernization, which is unsurprising since Punjabis constitute a large chunk of the Indian diaspora. What makes the lyrics stand out is the way such desires are naturalized, especially as it merges the folksong into its structure.

Though the film is about Rani's "sentimental education" in foreign shores, some of it began long before she left on her honeymoon. The naturalization of the foreign in local contexts finds an instance in Rani's home-science class, a subject that trains young women into accomplished wives, where she learns to bake cakes and cook pasta dishes. While she stands in the queue at the bank to withdraw her money before she closes her account, she tells the accountant that she is going on her honeymoon to her favorite place. The accountant assumes that Rani is headed to Goa. Rani corrects her and proudly declares that her favorite place is Paris and Amsterdam is her second favorite place. Rani does not know where Amsterdam is, only that it is a train ride away from Paris. But even without having ever been there, Paris is her favorite place. That one can have a favorite place without experiencing it (one can assume that Rani has not been an avid virtual traveler) says a lot about the way locals now reimagine the world.

In Paris, Rani befriends Vijaylakshmi, a single-mother of French-Spanish-Indian descent who works at the hotel where Rani is staying. Vijaylakshmi goes by the name

[198] The lyrics include the refrain from the popular Punjabi folk song "latthe di chaddar." However, while the tune remains intact in this intertextual reference, the lyrics of the folk song are changed so as to make it more topical.

Vijay, incidentally the name of Rani's former fiancé. While the film does not clearly depict a queer relationship between the two women, this unlikely friendship has an element of the queer. This friendship, a female variant of the kinds in the buddy film, helps Rani to shed her earlier inhibitions and open up to questions of sex, sexuality, and desire. This friendship encourages Rani to let go of her fears and experience Paris as she had not been able to do so far. Vijay takes Rani around Paris, and this time she is not overwhelmed by the Eifel Tower. Rani feels at home in Paris when the nightclub plays a Hindi song "*Hungama Ho Gaya"* (Madness ensued). Like food for the exiles and expats, the song is not only a reminder of home, but also a cue that Rani is finally at home in the world.

Emboldened by this friendship with Vijay, Rani now leaves for Amsterdam by herself; this time she leaves her suitcase behind and carries a rucksack instead. Not only the change of luggage, her fashion choices, too, attest to a new-found confidence. The sartorial changes signify that Rani is now joining the backpacking globetrotters of the world. In Amsterdam, Rani is horrified when she realizes that the hostel room she has booked is to be shared with three men. It takes her some time to adjust to what she perceives as a culture-shock, but she ultimately befriends her roommates. The friendship that grows between the four travelers highlights Rani's coming of age – signaling that she has overcome the gender and national stereotypes she has had all her life. The film subtly reminds us, however, that Rani still remains somewhat naïve, though she has gained in confidence through her travels. As the four friends walk into an adult-entertainment-store, Rani is clueless as to the real purpose of the merchandise. She picks up her gifts for

the family from the store – for example, she picks up a dildo for he grandmother, thinking that it is a massager.



Figure 3.3 The making of a cosmopolitan, screenshot from *Queen*

The film also briefly touches on other kinds of expats who are often erased from the body of representation on cosmopolitan travel. Rani meets Rukhsar, or Roxette, who works as a sex-worker to earn money to support her family in Pakistan. They become friends on Facebook – hinting at the world of virtual friends without ever quite needing to leave home. Like Gilbert's narrative began with a monologue about refugees and the commonalities between the refugees and the cosmopolitans, Rani's story, too, briefly touches on other kinds of economic migrants, working outside the formal economy, but ultimately uses the sex-worker to demonstrate Rani's new-found openness while eliding the question of other kinds of travelers. Like Gilbert appropriates the refugee's narrative

to claim her status as a cosmopolitan, Rani appropriates the sex-worker's narrative to attest to the same kind of cosmopolitan openness.[199]

While Rani, through the course of her travels, emerges as an Indian counterpart of Gilbert, the protagonists of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (*You won't get this Life again*) are, from the beginning, presented as savvy cosmopolitans.[200] *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* is a coming of age film, in the style of the buddy film, about three affluent young men who renew their friendship and find themselves again (inadvertently so) as they embark on a road trip across Spain as a part of a pact that they had made years ago. The three friends, Arjun, Kabir, and Imraan, travel to Costa Brava, Seville, and Pamplona, where they take part in death-defying adventures. While Arjun (Hrithik Roashan) is a workaholic who works for multinational corporation in London, Kabir (Abhay Deol) is settling for a convenient but loveless marriage to a very controlling Natasha, and Imraan (Farhan Akhtar) is looking for his long-estranged biological father (Nasiruddin Shah).

While *Queen* deals with finding oneself in strange lands – in fact, what motivates Rani's self-discovery is the very alien nature of the places she finds herself in – the three friends in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* do not feel any strangeness in their foreign travels. They are very much at home in every world that they find themselves in. The cosmopolitan encounters the world as un-strange, even when much cosmopolitan travel is dedicated to a pursuit of the exotic elements in other cultures. Unlike refugees and the less privileged diasporic or displaced population, the world seldom appears to the

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[199] For a study of the legalities of sex-work and the cosmopolitan outlook, see Julianne Collard, "Standing Outside the Law: Prostitution-free Zones and the Power of Property," in *Negative Cosmopolitanism: Cultures and Politics of World Citizenship After Globalization*, ed. Kent, Eddy, and Terri Tomsky. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 187-199.

[200] *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, directed by Zoya Akhtar (Mumbai: Eros International Media, 2011).

cosmopolitan traveler as uncanny. Uncanny (*unheimlich*), as Freud, in a rare venture into the realm of aesthetics, reminds us, is the antonym of *heimlich* which refers to not just the familiar but also means "belonging to home."[201] *Unheimlich*, or the uncanny, thus, refers to not just the unfamiliar but also to unhomely. For the cosmopolitan, secure in his/her ability to be a consumer is always at home in the world, unlike the non-cosmopolitan travelers who are overcome with a sense of the uncanny in strange places in an inhospitable world. The fiscal power to consume and the cultural know-how to do so render the world welcoming and increasingly un-strange to the cosmopolitan travelers, and the absence of the same means makes the world more alien to the non-cosmopolitan vagabonds.

If the genre of the buddy film, with associations of "bromance" between heterosexual males, is simultaneously a cinematic *bildungsroman*, what *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* also stands for is the coming of age of the Indian cosmopolitan traveler. *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* is the logical continuation of *Dil Chahta Hai* (*The Heart Desires*), not simply because of the presence of Farhan Akhtar in both films, but because the cosmopolitan desires that the earlier film hinted at are now more clearly pronounced.[202] *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* unambiguously and rather proudly declares the coming of age of a certain class of Indians – Indians who by virtue of their privileged social position are unencumbered by the stereotypes found in popular Western representations. The decade that separates *Dil Chahta Hai* and *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* was the decade when the upwardly mobile classes in India reinvented themselves as

[201] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 74-101.

[202] *Dil Chahta Hai*, directed by Farhan Akhtar (Mumbai: Excel Entertainment, 2001).

canny samplers of the bounties of neo-liberal markets all over the world. While such a consumerist-cosmopolitan worldview is present in the NRI of *Dil Chahta Hai*, by the time of *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara,* all upper and upper-middle class Indians subscribe to this mindset, whether they live in India or abroad. In one scene in *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara,* Natasha sharply reprimands Kabir for speaking in *Hinglish* (a colloquial mix of Hindi and English) in public. According to Natasha such behavior tarnishes the image of Indians in the world. Of course, Natasha has a certain section of Indians in mind here – i.e., conspicuous consumers like herself who can afford a Hermes Birkin handbag. Like the model minority segment of the NRIs, the Chanel-wearing model cosmopolitan from India knows how to conduct herself as she navigates the world.



Figure 3.4 The Tomatina Festival, screenshot *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara*

Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara emphasizes travel as an instance of conspicuous leisure. The film, with its panoramic shots of the Spanish countryside, the lavish villas in which travelers reside, emphasizes this excess. The film suggests that making money is a means to ensure leisure – for example, Salman Habib (Nasiruddin Shah), Imraan's biological father, makes a distinction between writing for oneself and writing as a means to earn money. Arjun works as a determined and ruthless financial broker to make money so that he can retire in style by his forties. The film undermines money or at least downplays the desire to amass a fortune as something that holds back someone from seizing the day. Yet, and not even ironically, it highlights a kind of lifestyle that is impossible for those with limited means. *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara* in its apparent lack of materialism (though it is stepped in the material comforts that very few Indians can afford) is not much different from the cosmo-spirituality that *Eat, Pray, Love* preaches. Arguing against materialism amidst the picture-postcard backdrop of the Spanish Riviera and denouncing consumerism in new-age Indian ashrams is tantamount to the same thing. These moments constitute a break from one's everyday role as earner or consumer, moments that renew the desire to earn and consume so that one can enjoy such moments again. Such are the never-ending travails of the modern-day Sisyphus.

The consumerist tendency of *Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara,* one that emphasizes consumption yet treats materialist tendencies as a disease, is not limited to the film alone. The film has a long song and dance sequence choreographed around the Tomatina festival that was recreated for the film using the original setting in Bunol with tons of tomatoes imported from Portugal for the sequence. The song inspired many in India to

import the festival to India. Indeed, Mumbai, oblivious to the state-wide draught and rampant farmer suicides, is all set to celebrate its own Tomatina festival this year.[203] The film, shot like an ad for the tourism industry, fuels the cosmopolitan desires of the aspiring locals. Advertisements by travel websites invite the local consumptive-citizen, one who consumes and simultaneously suffers from a surfeit of such consumption, to experience what the three Indian amigos did in Spain. An invitation to cinema is an invitation to consume – directly and conspicuously if one is able to afford such luxuries, or vicariously, i.e., by importing exotic festivals from abroad to our own streets. Bollywood, in yoking the film industry with allied industries like tourism, holds the novice and untrained hands of its spectators as they take their fledgling steps to becoming the canny consumers of the neoliberal marketplace. Till the spectator emerges as the ideal consumptive-citizens that Bollywood espouses, cinematic heroes must consume in their place or at least show the novice spectators how it is done.

What links these various travel narratives is the precondition that one can be one's most true self only when one is least at home. This specific route to self-discovery, whether motivated or accidental, is a cosmopolitan stance. The self can be found only in face of otherness – even when that otherness is rendered consumable by this very act of self-discovery that it has to enable. The cosmopolitan sensibility, owing to the neoliberal impetus, makes it possible for anyone around the world, and not just Western tourists traveling the world, to demonstrate a cosmopolitan mindset. An IT specialist in Bangalore can be as cosmopolitan as a faux yogi from Yonkers. The world will embrace them with open arms and an almost equal lack of prejudice. The caveat being that these

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203 Shilpa Jamkhandikar, "*A Fake Tomatina Festival Just for Bollywood*," Reuters, July 5, 2011. http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-58097220110705

aspiring cosmopolitans must demonstrate that they possess the monetary means that set them apart from other kinds of travelers – present-day Syrians or Rohingyas, for example, travelers caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, “abject cosmopolitans” for whom no place can ever be home.[204]

[204] See Peter Nyers,"Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-deportation Movement," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1069-1093.

Chapter Four

Rang De Basanti: Merchandizing Dissent

In the previous chapters, I have outlined how Bollywood, in the moment of its emergence as a culture industry, creates a form of consumptive citizenship by addressing its spectators as consumers of newly available global goods and of a reified Hindu identity. Through consumption, the spectator does not merely emerge as the ideal citizen of neoliberal India, but also as the cosmopolitan world-citizen, a status equally predicated on consumption of cultural difference. Consumption in the neoliberal weltanschauung, I have argued, is not just one's patriotic duty but also a political right. In this final chapter, I move away from the neoliberal Indian citizen's right to consume goods and identity to the new citizenry's being consumed by righteous anger. Some anger is, to be sure, more consumer-friendly than others. I query what kinds of anger, and more importantly, *whose* anger, are rendered legitimate and worthy of awakening our collective conscience and what types of anger become ineffectual media spectacles. Not all kinds of anger are capable of motivating people to take part in political action or fueling collective struggles for justice. Some anger is consigned to our collective amnesia. To be a consumptive citizen, then, is to tiptoe, continuously, between remembering and forgetting, between anger and apathy. If the discourse on citizenship is a constant negotiation between rights and obligations, then this chapter examines whose rights and what obligations are legitimized in the emerging discourses of citizenship within the neoliberal consensus.

The chapter explores the righteous anger of *Rang De Basanti* (*Color it Saffron*).[205] Anger, as I noted in my reading of the makeover of Shah Rukh Khan's star-image, has no place in the neoliberal worldview. While the angry young man of the Bombay Social was, in many ways, an antiestablishment figure, the neoliberal yuppie who replaces him has no such axe to grind. *Rang De Basanti*, on the surface, might seem to contradict this reading as it gestures towards some form of protest and seeks to awaken an entire generation of urban youth from their apolitical, apathetic slumber. However, the anger animating *Rang De Basanti* is a borrowed anger. The film borrows not only its language of dissent and the form of its protest from its nostalgic reconstruction of the anticolonial struggle; it also purloins its anger. In repurposing the Indian freedom struggle, *Rang De Basanti* not only renders it one-dimensional but also consumable. Through close-reading of the film, I explore how *Rang De Basanti* mobilizes the anticolonial struggle to pass off what is essentially a protest as a revolution. *Rang De Basanti* mobilizes what I call a "restorative melodrama" to commodify dissent. This form of protest, I demonstrate, does not question the inequalities created by neoliberal market reforms; instead, it endorses them. Through an examination of the film's rendition of history, nostalgia, and the valences of anger it articulates, the chapter maps the many reasons why the "Indian Johnny," too, cannot dissent.[206]

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[205] *Rang De Basanti*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (Mumbai: UTV Productions, 2006).

[206] Tom Frank, "DARK AGE: Why Johnny Can't Dissent." *The Baffler*, no. 6 (1995): 5-192. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43555671

Retelling History, Retailing History

Rang De Basanti opens with a quote from Bhagat Singh: *Ab bhi jiska khoon na khaula, khoon nahi woh paani hai, jo desh ke kaam na aaye,woh bekar jawani hai* (If, even now, your blood does not boil, then it is not blood but water that courses through your veins. That youth, which is not dedicated to the country, is meaningless). The words, written in the Devanagari script, slowly appear on a dark screen. Accompanying the epigraph is the distinct voice of Aamir Khan, one of the film's protagonists. Through the disembodied voice of Khan, it is as if Bhagat Singh speaks to the audience. Although no character looks directly at the camera, breaking the fourth wall, this dramatic conjugation of the epigraph with Khan's voiceover serves the purpose of a direct address.[207] The film uses Bhagat Singh's now famous words, rallying young Indians to join the anticolonial struggle, to mobilize its own audience to prove its patriotism. In this manner, *Rang De Basanti* seeks to make patriotism as relevant today as it was during the India's struggle for autonomy from British rule.

Mehra's film comes in at the heels of several big-budget biopics of Bhagat Singh, including: *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *23rd March 1931: Shaheed*, which had varying degrees of success at the box office.[208] According to Mehra, these biopics ultimately failed to resonate with their audience because they could not get the present-day spectators to identify with the historical nature of their subject matter. The reason for the failure of these films, in Mehra's view, was the genre itself. The biopics, with their emphasis on historical reconstruction, did not seem pertinent to their audience after six

[207] For a detailed account of the functions of the direct address in cinema, see: Brown, Tom. *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*. Edinburgh: Univ. Press, 2013.

[208] *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi (Mumbai: Tips, 2002).
23rd March 1931: Shaheed, directed by Guddu Dhanoa (Mumbai:Vijayta Films, 2002).

decades of Indian independence. Mehra attempts to bypass this limitation of the genre of the biopic by constellating the Indian nationalist struggle with present-day protests against political corruption. *Rang De Basanti* uses the film-within-a-film mechanism to emphasize the points of contact between the past and the present, and the two timelines, i.e., colonial era and the present-day, overlap and ultimately collapse into one in its narrative resolution. The dual timelines, I argue, serve two distinct sets of purposes. First, they make the anticolonial movement relatable to the present audience by plotting it alongside current social problems. Second, and as a result, the present-day social struggles gain significance from this comparison with the Indian anticolonial movement.

Rang De Basanti revisits a relatively lesser known moment in the Indian struggle for political autonomy. Instead of retelling the story of the Indian anticolonial movement with Gandhi as its protagonist, the film focuses on the armed political struggles of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. A British amateur filmmaker, Sue Mckinley (Alice Patten), wants to make a documentary about five Indian revolutionaries: Chandrasekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Shivaram Rajguru, Ramprasad Bismil, and Ashfaqulla Khan. Her documentary is based on the diary of her grandfather, an officer of the British Raj, who chronicled the bravery of these five young revolutionaries in the days before their execution. Sue fails to secure financial backing for her film from her bosses in London who believe that any film about the Indian anticolonial movement has to be a film about Gandhi in order to be successful. Sue, however, does not give in to the pressure to make yet-another film about Gandhi and decides to go ahead with her film about the five revolutionaries without any external financial support. She travels to New Delhi where Sonia (Soha Ali Khan), a Delhi University student, helps her look for amateur actors to

play the revolutionaries. The auditions for the film do not go as planned, and Sue is demoralized when she realizes that the present-day Indian youth do not share her enthusiasm or her conviction about the relevance of the struggle for Indian independence in today's world. The scene where Delhi University students audition for the documentary is comical, and even a little pathetic, because the aspiring actors cannot even say Bhagat Singh's famous slogan, *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live the Revolution), with any conviction.

Frustrated at the lukewarm response to her film, Sue is about to give up on her project when she meets Sonia's friends: DJ (Aamir Khan), Siddarth (Siddharth Nararyan), Sukhi (Sharman Joshi), and Aslam (Kunal Kapoor). As she shares a meal with her new friends, Sue, in a moment of epiphany, realizes that she has found the cast for her film. DJ plays Chandrasekhar Azad, Siddharth is cast as Bhagat Singh, while Sukhi and Aslam play Shivaram Rajguru and Ashfaqulla Khan respectively. Sonia is cast as Durga Bhabhi. Sue's search for an actor to play Ram Prasad Bismil finally comes to an end when she decides to cast Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni), a Right-wing political activist, to play the character. Although she has found what she believes to be the perfect cast, the filming is not easy. Laxman disapproves of the "westernized" lifestyles of the rest of the cast, and his thinly-veiled Islamophobia creates some friction and resentment. Moreover, much to Sue's disbelief, her easygoing young(ish) cast fail to comprehend the importance of the subject matter, and their lack of patriotic zeal is made even more apparent by their indifference to the current state of affairs in the country.

While the first half of the film frequently cuts from Sue's documentary to the everyday life of DJ and his friends, who drink, dance, and drive around Delhi, there is no

real thematic overlap between the two. They continue filming without being completely persuaded by the subject matter and its relevance to their own lives. This lackadaisical attitude finally changes when Sonia's fiancé, Ajay (R. Madhavan), a pilot in the Indian Air Force, tragically dies in a plane crash, allegedly caused by faulty mechanisms. Sonia and her friends organize a peaceful protest against the corrupt Minister of Defense who had authorized the purchase of the defective aircraft that led to Ajay's untimely death. The vigil takes a violent turn when the police, at the Minister's command, attack the protesters. Disillusioned by the unprovoked police brutality and the government's denial of any wrongdoing, the friends assassinate the minister. When the government claims that the minister's death was an act of terror, the friends go to the All India Radio station, and in a live broadcast, tell their story to the nation. They are gunned down by armed commandos, but by then their story has reached the entire nation–and college-going youth all over the country vow on live television to carry on this movement to fight political corruption.

'… and then as farce': A Depthless History

Mehra conceptualized *Rang De Basanti* as a film that would rekindle patriotism in its audience by making its subject matter resonate with the present. Its subtitle, "A Generation Awakens," attests to this desire. The so-called awakening of the educated urban youth, the addressee of the film's mobilization aesthetic, draws its rhetoric from the anticolonial struggle, as the epigraph highlights. While the epigraph serves the mobilizational and pedagogic functions of a direct address, the film repeatedly underscores the lessons that the armed resistance to colonial rule has to offer to the

present-day Indian youth by creating several narrative parallels between the anticolonial struggles and that of Sonia and her friends as they seek justice for Ajay. The friends draw their plan of action from Sue's documentary as they plan to assassinate the Minister of Defense who deliberately authorized the purchase of faulty MiG aircrafts. The scene where the friends discuss their plans to assassinate the minister after the unprovoked police attack on their peaceful protest cuts from the present moment to a similar scene in Sue's documentary where Azad plans to assassinate the police chief. The friends, taking their cue from Sue's documentary, shoot the minister when he steps out of his bungalow for his daily morning walk, in a frame-by-frame copy of the scene in the documentary where Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajaguru shoot a British police officer, John Saunders, to avenge the death of Lala Lajpat Rai.[209] The frequent match-cuts between the present-day struggles of the friends as they fight political corruption and the anticolonial struggles of Bhagat Singh and his comrades give this present-day struggle its legitimacy. In its words, in its actions, and even its inspiration, the film gestures towards past revolutions. To phrase it differently, in window dressing its dissent in the borrowed gear of the Indian anticolonial movement, the film presents its protest as a social revolution.

Rang De Basanti, in its conceit, summons the ghosts of revolutionaries of a bygone era, but through that very act, the film, instead of creating a tragic world, conjures a farcical one. Marx points out the reactionary implications of invoking past revolutions. Commenting on the spectral nature of history, Marx observes,

[209] Lala Lajpat Rai was protesting the arrival of Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission headed by Sir John Allsebrook Simon) in Lahore in 1928. He was critically injured when the police attacked the nonviolent protest. Bhagat Singh, Azad, Sukhdev, and Rajguru planned to avenge his death. The killing of Saunders was, however, a case of mistaken identity. Singh and other members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association intended to kill John Scott, the police superintendent, who, they believed, was responsible for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai in Lahore.

> The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present the new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.[210]

In other words, to be successful, new revolutions cannot borrow their content (or even their form) from the past. Revolutions presided over the ghosts of the past can only be parodic, and therefore ineffectual. New revolutions need to forge new language, new forms of representation; otherwise, they run the risk of becoming parodic caricatures. Revolution involves, among other things, the task of letting go of the past. Nostalgia, the mode of recollection that *Rang De Basanti* adopts, is revolution's reactionary other. Its invocation of the past cannot augur revolution.

The historical account offered by the film serves as a reminder of Marx's double-take on the Hegelian formulation: "all great, world-historical facts and personages appear, as it were, twice… the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."[211] Ironically, farce never recognizes itself as (or even appears as) farce. Instead, it presents itself as tragedy, albeit tragedy shorn of its depth or cathartic potential. In *Rang De Basanti's* collapse of the two timeframes (historical events from the colonial era and the fictional events of the present), its dissent borrows its gravity from the anticolonial struggle. But,

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[210] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 595.

[211] Ibid., 594

by that same token, the stakes of the colonial struggle are diminished. The film, then, is not a quest for the spirit of revolution; it is only interested in making its ghost walk again. Not all dead can return as ghosts, for ghosts typically have unfinished business. Ghosts, spectral relays as they are, connect the present to the past.[212] Ghosts symbolize the incompleteness of history – they reappear in moments of present crises, signaling that the ties with the past have not been completely severed. The ghosts of revolutionaries past return to haunt *Rang de Basanti*; however, they do not serve as a reminder that the project of decolonization remains unfinished. Instead, in this particular rendition of the anticolonial struggle, the past becomes a mere narrative technique used to equate the British colonizers with present day corrupt politicians.

The parallel between the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 when the British army, led by Colonel Reginald Dyer, fired at a peaceful gathering, killing over a thousand people, and the police attack on Sonia and her friends at the India Gate is a depthless one. In positioning the Defense Minister as Dyer and Ajay's ailing mother as Lala Lajpat Rai in the same sequence, the film cynically conflates two historical events, demonstrating a striking lack of nuance and its political myopia. This scene, which motivates the friends to assassinate the minister, in equating Dyer with the corrupt minister, also equates present-day political corruption with the violence of colonialism. Its attempt to demonize corruption as the gravest problem faced by independent India via its comparison to colonialism renders colonialism less violent. While the film seeks to make the anticolonial movement seem legible and relevant to the Indian youth of today, its overuse of blatant parallels devalues the stakes of the freedom struggle. Also, in claiming that it is

[212] Incidentally, the word *bhoot* in Hindi signifies not only the past but also ghosts.

only political corruption that prevents the realization of the goals of the anticolonial movement, the film fails to acknowledge the real ways in which decolonization remains an unfinished task in the postcolony.[213] The reference to Jallianwala Bagh massacre also serves as a reminder of Bhagat Singh's disillusionment with Gandhi's politics of non-violence. *Rang De Basanti* points out the failure of Gandhian politics on multiple occasions. Sue refuses to make a film on Gandhi despite being told by her supervisor that a Gandhi film would find the required financial backing. The peaceful protestors at India Gate are met with police brutality, signaling the limitation of such non-violent political means to usher social change. In its nostalgic recreation of the Indian freedom movement, *Rang De Basanti* remains naively reductive and one-dimensional.

While Bhagat Singh becomes the icon of this nostalgic retelling, his secular, socialist politics are disavowed by the film. In its selective nostalgia the film creates a consumable version of nationalism from the very beginning. Immediately following the epigraph that I discussed in a previous section, the film cuts to close-ups and medium close-up shots of the four revolutionaries. An extreme close-up of Ashfaqulla Khan looking into a mirror as he lines his eyes with *surma* (kohl) is followed by a medium close-up of Ram Prasad Bismil as he chants *shlokas* (verses) from the *Bhagavad Gita* during his ablutions. It then cuts to a medium-shot of Shivaram Rajguru who smiles as he slowly turns to face the camera. The camera movement, with a series of whip-pans, mimics a tracking shot. It finally settles on Bhagat Singh who is hunched over a book. The camera pauses on the text for a brief second: Bhagat Singh is reading Lenin's "Letter to the Tula Comrades." He looks at McKinley and says, "*Ek krantikari ka dusre*

[213] For an expansive overview of ways in which the decolonization project remains largely unfinished, see Ahmad, *On Communalism and Globalization.*

krantikari se mulakat ho rahi hai" (One revolutionary is meeting another). The next shot clarifies who the other revolutionary is – Lenin's profile is embossed on the leather-bound book cover.



Figure 4.1 Bhagat Singh at the gallows, screenshot from *Rang De Basanti*

The only direct reference to Bhagat Singh's progressive socialist political ideals is the blink-and-miss shot of the book cover, his Leninism forgotten as soon as he shuts the book. Although Bhagat Singh seems to emphasize the intellectual and ideological kinship between Lenin and himself, the film skips any further gloss of his socialist ideology and constricts him to the role of a freedom fighter who understood the limits of Gandhian politics and endorsed political violence to overthrow the British colonizers. The opening

sequence, shot in sepia tone, awash with backlighting and fill-lighting, renders the past almost hallowed and mythical. And in keeping with its particular rendition of Indian anti-colonial struggle, the film refers to Khan and Bismil's religion later, but makes no further reference to Bhagat Singh's socialist ideology or his secularism. Instead, it romanticizes these four revolutionaries in a manner that might resonate more with the "hashtag-activism" that is popular in the era of the internet. In its one-dimensional representation, in eschewing the complexities of the historical personages, and in fixing the identities of the revolutionaries to their religions, the specters that the film summons from the past become parodic caricatures.

The film does not stop at comparisons between events (the event at the India Gate with the protests against the Simon Commission) or people (General Dyer with the corrupt Defense Minister); it stretches the associations it creates to their limits when the friends die in a manner that is eerily similar to the revolutionaries they played on-screen. If Sue's documentary was meant to make the Indian youth cherish the revolutionary ideals of its protagonists, then the death of DJ and his friends, telecast live on television and radio, is meant to galvanize the urban Indians into taking active roles in the fight against corruption. *Rang De Basanti* does not make the freedom struggle relevant in the current moment, it merely uses the anticolonial movement to justify its brand of vigilantism as social justice. For all its use of sepia, the film's consumable morality is rather black and white, very much in keeping with its particular mode of nostalgia. Returning to the specters of Marx, by associating "Eighteenth Brumaire" with the lesser Bonaparte, Marx suggests the futility of recreating historical revolutions of the past. Refusing to learn this lesson, *Rang de Basanti* clings to the nostalgia of past revolutions

in its misguided attempt to not only make it meaningful for the present, but also to reenact it. The result, as Marx predicted, is a farce that passes as tragedy.

Two Valences of Nostalgia

Rang De Basanti, in its retelling of the anticolonial struggle, employs what Svetlana Boym calls a "restorative nostalgia." Pointing out the reactionary nature of such nostalgia, Boym writes,

> Restorative nostalgia knows two main plots: the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory. The conspiratorial worldview reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a simple premodern conception of good and evil. This worldview is based on a single trans-historical plot, a Manichaean battle of good and evil, and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy. Ambivalence, the complexity of history, the variety of contradictory evidence, and the specificity of modern circumstances are thus erased, and modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Extremist conspiracy theory adherents imagine that "home" is forever under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy.[214]

Boym contrasts this reactionary nostalgic mode to reflective nostalgia which does not seek to return to a mythical past. Restorative nostalgia creates a paranoid worldview – one that cannot accommodate contradictions. Nostalgia of this kind not only ignores Marx's cautionary note about resurrecting old revolutions, but it even fails to realize that the time that it posits as its referent is long gone. It reduces history to simplistic binaries

[214] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 43.

of good and evil and draws its legitimacy from such reductionism. Restorative nostalgia, in this manner, seeks to undo time.

Boym distinguishes restorative nostalgia from reflective nostalgia by emphasizing that while reflective nostalgia "thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately," restorative nostalgia lays its emphasis on *nostos* (home) and seeks to reconstruct the imaginary homeland.[215] It is the political uses of this kind of nostalgia, epidemic in our present moment, that Boym cautions against: "When nostalgia turns political, romance is connected to nation building and native songs are purified. The official memory of the nation-state does not tolerate useless nostalgia, nostalgia for its own sake."[216] Such nostalgia animates the current rise of vitriolic nationalisms all over the world.

Employing this restorative nostalgic mode, *Rang De Basanti* purges the narrative of the anticolonial struggle, rendering it into a sepia-toned narrative of blood and belonging. It is this not-yet-nation that it seeks to reclaim through its nostalgic manipulations. *Rang De Basanti* is as singularly myopic in its rendition of the current socio-political milieu as it is in presenting a one-dimensional view of the politics of the revolutionaries that it seeks to deify.[217] The film renders Gandhian politics, one that it is

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[215] Ibid. xviii.

[216] Ibid., 14.

[217] *Rang De Basanti* is but only one of the many instances of current popular cultural rendition of depthless and easily consumable history. For example, the comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha,* founded by Anant Pai in 1967, which initially confined itself to Hindu mythological stories, expanded its scope in the 1970s to include historical figures, including Bhagat Singh and Gandhi. The series, Karline McLain points out, connects manliness, patriotism, and the revolutionary path, while associating non-violence with both a lack of patriotism and masculinity. She observes that the series connects Gandhi with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (which is also referenced in *Rang De Basanti* as the moment that Bhagat Singh decided to take up arms against the British) and ultimately argues that the path of non-violence is one that lacks moral conviction and courage, and therefore is ineffective. The "father of the nation" did not die fighting, unlike Godse, his assailant.

too keen to disavow, one-dimensional. And at the same time, it depoliticizes Bhagat Singh, the revolutionary that it seeks to recuperate.

Zygmunt Bauman extends Boym's observation about the current epidemic of nostalgia, as he points out that in a globalizing world, nostalgia has taken over the baton from an equally pathological "epidemic of progress."[218] Nostalgia questions progress and proceeds to undermine it. In his latest book, published posthumously, Bauman revisits Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* and also Walter Benjamin's reading of the image as the angel of history. Benjamin's angel of history is blown backward into the future, fixing his gaze on the past as it unravels like a catastrophe and helplessly surveys the ruins and wreckage

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See Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Commenting on the series which includes, along with Gandhi, Nehru, and Bhagat Singh, figures like Dayananda Saraswati and Veer Savarkar, S. Krishnamurthi observes,

> But this nation is a rather specific one: the fathers of the nation are largely Hindu; devoid of the specific context of Hindu nationalism, and the communalist violence and hatred associated with it, these men become "air- brushed" heroes of a united India. However, in comic book form, Savarkar certainly seems more exciting and heroic a "personage" than Nehru. The construction of narratives allows for a privileging of some heroes over others. With these representations, the "real enemy"—the British—is clearly marked, and the history of communalism itself obscured. Amar Chitra Katha thus plays a role in the transformation of Hindu nationalist ideology from an anti-Muslim to an anti-British one. While Pai himself has taken pains to be seen as without a political agenda, then, it appears that the series itself cannot help but have one. His choices of strategic abridgment and inclusion point back repeatedly to the larger ideological construction of "the nation." The series bills itself as representing "the glorious heritage of India." That India is carefully constructed so that the ugliness of Hindu fundamentalist nationalism is diligently avoided. Thus sanitized, nationalist "pride" becomes ideologically safe and accessible to young people—and this opens a door to the fundamentalism of which we now see such an increase.

Sailaja Krishnamurti,"Constructing "The Glorious Heritage of India": Popular Culture and Nationalist Ideology in Indian Biographical Comics." In *Culture + the State: Critical Works from the Proceedings of the 2003 Conference at the University of Alberta*. Ed. Zezulka-Mailloux, Gabrielle E. M, and James Gifford. (Edmonton: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003), 123

The history that *Rang De Basanti* presents works on similar lines. Though it does not present figures like Savarkar, it espouses an anti-Gandhian sentiment as it repeatedly emphasizes the failure of Gandhian politics to navigate the current social crises.

[218] Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 2.

piled at his feet.[219] Almost a century later, Bauman, in his double-take on Klee's angel and Benjamin's reading, proposes that the angel is now caught in the middle of a U-turn. Whereas the angel, in Benjamin's reading, looked at past horrors while being driven by the storm called progress into the future, Klee's image, Bauman contends, has now undergone a lateral inversion. As the uncertainties that mark the present moment render the narrative of progress invalid, the angel now turns his gaze from the past to the future. The storm now blows in the other direction, propelling the angel backwards into the past, away from the "imagined, anticipated, and feared in advance Hell of the future."[220]

The past towards which the angel is now forced, is not a lived past, but one that is retrospectively imagined, piecing together what is left of its ruins and wreckage. The angel's gravitation towards the past is therefore a rejection of both the present and an anticipation of the horrors that the future supposedly holds. Bauman explains this double negation in the following manner:

> It is now the future, whose time to be pillorized seems to have arrived after being first decried for its untrustworthiness and unmanageability, that is booked on the debit side. And it is now the past's turn to be booked on the side of credit – a credit deserved (whether genuinely or putatively) by a site of still-free choice and investment of still-undiscredited hope.[221]

Bauman argues that the angel reverses its course when the future seems like an impending hell that it now seeks to escape, and the past, conversely, now appears before it as a paradise shored from its ruins. The balance-sheet of history, Bauman suggests,

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[219] Walter Benjamin,"Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed.Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968), 253-64.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.

determines the angel's direction. When the future holds little hope, the angel is propelled backwards to the past, not a lived past, but one that is only nostalgically reconfigured as a piecemeal paradise. In a world where the myth of progress has been rendered hollow, looking backwards seems to be the only hope. The past, functioning as a myth and not history, provides the template for the future.

A comparative study of *Swades* and *Rang De Basanti* will help illuminate the two valences of nostalgia that animate the few Bollywood films dealing with social issues. *Swades*, as I discussed in a previous chapter, too employs a nostalgic mode to encourage Non-Resident Indians, particularly ones with technological know-how, to return to India and share their knowledge to develop the country. Built around the star-figure of Shah Rukh Khan, *Swades* posits that the technocrat NRI is the savior who will rebuild the nation, especially at a time when state-sponsored welfare is inadequate. *Swades* mobilizes the diaspora, while *Rang De Basanti* addresses urban middleclass Indians. While *Swades* mentions uneven development and under-development, for *Rang De Basanti,* poverty, overpopulation, and unemployment, are the main impediments to national development. The film also briefly touches on religion as a contested site of identity, but soon zeroes in what it claims to be the real problem with India – corruption. For *Rang De Basanti*, in its overzealousness, the list of what ails the nation coincides neatly with the pet peeves of the consumerist urban middleclass. Shifting the blame on to corrupt and bad governance and onto poor people whose very presence denies the middle classes their *right* to be in basking in the glory of "India Shining," the emerging neoliberal marketplace and its attendant morality are spared any critical scrutiny.[222] *Swades* presents an India that has

[222] India Shining was the electoral slogan of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2004. The slogan was a failure, and the NDA lost the election.

not made it into the neoliberal developmental discourse. *Rang De Basanti*, on the other hand, imagines the country as the urban India's carnivalesque dream complete with fairs, wrestling matches, folk dances, and endless mustard fields. In locating villainy squarely in the realm of corrupt politics, the film evades the question of neoliberalism (in fact, it is comfortable with the neoliberal market reforms which it tacitly equates with development) and Hindu neo-nationalism altogether. By presenting an easy fix to all social problems faced by India, the film makes its viewers forget that neoliberal tendency towards privatization is large-scale social privation.

Rang De Basanti's vision of the future is urban India, and it fetishizes and reduces rural Indian to a few visual clichés. The country exists as the space that remains uncorrupted by globalization, a visual contrast to the city and its ideological other. The country is the site where the film finds its narrative closure. In an idyllic sequence, immediately before the closing credits, the friends are seen looking at Bhagat Singh as a child, who is planting mango trees with his father. The use of low camera angle makes it look as though the child Bhagat Singh is looking up at the friends. The friends smile at the child and then walk away towards the horizon. The film's resolution takes place in the country-side – an idealized country-side with mustard fields in bloom stretching as far as the eye (or the wide camera angle) can see. The countryside makes its way into the narrative denouement as an unreal, idealized, and even fetishized space. In the visual lushness of the scene, all poverty is erased, even from the rural hinterland. The country, thus represented, is the idyll of the neoliberal era. The countryside, to borrow Louis Marin's terms, becomes a "degenerate utopia," the mythification of ideology.[223]

[223] Louis Marin, "Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland," in *Utopics: Spatial Play. Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1984): 240.

The wilderness, restored in this nostalgic manner, is paradise regained rather than lost. In not specifying if the child is indeed Bhagat Singh or is simply a child named after him, the countryside stands in for that space when the past, present, and the future co-exist. Prior to this scene, the past was shot in sepia and the present in color, even when they coexisted on a split-screen. In the final moment, i.e., in this idyllic sequence, the past, the present, and the future come together in a mélange of bright colors, most notably the iridescent hues of the mustard fields. Even though the color scheme changes, it creates the same sense of unearthliness as the sepia tone throughout the film conveyed.



Figure 4.2 The carnivalesque countryside**,** screenshot from *Rang De Basanti*

Rang De Basanti does not only mobilize a restorative nostalgia to render its message of social change meaningful; what sets its action into motion is Sue's nostalgia. Nostalgia is as much about time as it is about space. The home that it longs for or seeks to recover has a location in time as well as space. The history that Sue's documentary seeks to represent is one that is narrated by her grandfather, a British jailor, who records the last days of the four revolutionaries in Lahore Jail. In its earnestness to make the anticolonial struggle meaningful, the film shows a remarkable lack of irony. It presents the jailor as not only strangely sympathetic, but also as the only one realizes the true heroism of the young revolutionaries. In comparison to the sympathetic British jailor, the Indian guards seem bloody-minded.

Parvinder Mehta notes the ways in which the film positions Sue as the chronicler of both the colonial era and the present-day awakening that film seeks to set in motion:

> Is Sue, then, a mere ethnographic historian that wants to share the stories of the forgotten freedom fighters, or is she a scapegoat in the exchange of dissipation of history, guided by her genealogy, in this case her grandfather's private documentation? In her passionate desire to articulate the unheard stories of history's martyrs, Sue is initially an ardent emissary of colonial history that has been relegated to oblivion or selective remembrance.[224]

Not unironically, Alice Patten, whose father was the last British Governor of Hong Kong, one of the final frontiers of the British Empire, plays the character of Sue. In concocting its crude and consumable "patriotic" Kool-Aid, *Rang De Basanti* even gives up the

[224] Parvinder Mehta, "Predicaments of history and mimetic agency: Postcolonial return, repetition and remediation in Rang De Basanti," *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (2011), 204

pretense of historical nuance. It is Sue who awakens a generation into political action. In its parallels between the past (colonial era) and the present (neoliberal era), the film unwittingly posits the two British characters as the only suitable chroniclers of the respective timelines. Manisha Basu notes, "Much as the imperial British had to induct the 'history-less' subcontinent into a grand movement of the world-historical Spirit, Sue has to assume role of an objective historical intelligence."[225] Sue emerges as the only character who has any real wisdom about the Indian struggle for freedom, a secondhand knowledge gleaned from her grandfather's diary. And it is ultimately Sue who gets to decide what kind of anti-colonial struggle is worth dramatizing, i.e., can choose between a crude understanding of Gandhian politics and a depoliticized Bhagat Singh. The Indian characters do not seem to have access to their own history. Even the spectator can access her history only through Sue's camera.

The sepia tone of Sue's documentary does not only distinguish the past from the present, but also makes this representation of the past seem reliable. The digital sepia tone is achieved post-production with the use of special plug-ins which approximate qualities of the "film" and make digital images appear authentic like "real" footage. It is Sue, who, with her use of digital manipulation, endows the anticolonial movement for with its mythical quality. It is hardly a surprise, then, that it is only Sue who can catalyze the spiritual awakening that the film purports to achieve. Sue is so self-righteous that she does not address (nor does the film ever question) her grandfather's role in the deaths of the revolutionaries whose spirits she is so keen to resurrect. Her moral indignation is

[225] Manisha Basu, "'Rang de Basanti': The Solvent Brown and other Imperial Colors," in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, ed. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 102

further fueled by the sacrifices she has made for the documentary. After all, she took what she calls “bloody Hindi classes” in London. The film’s nostalgia, then, is in essence Sue’s nostalgia for a different time, for it is her narrative that ultimately sets the terms for the film’s denouement.



Figure 4.3 Sue recreates the freedom struggle, screenshot from *Rang De Basanti*

Restorative Melodrama

Rang De Basanti employs the overarching modality of Indian cinema, melodrama, in not only its nostalgic representation of the past, but also in its assertion that its version of the anticolonial struggle provides a blueprint for present-day struggles for social justice. In a recent anthology on melodrama, Christine Gledhill notes that the mode,

> … arises as part of a broader shift from structures of feeling invested in hierarchic social formations—organized according to the authority of church, king, and aristocracy—to those supporting slow processes of individuation and democratization that would release the intellectual, entrepreneurial, and revolutionary energies of an evolving modernity.[226]

Melodrama emerges during times of social chaos and helps us to make (moral) sense of the prevailing uncertainty. Gledhill, here, takes her cue from Peter Brooks who proposed that melodrama, during social upheavals, endows everyday life with a moral legibility. Tracing its origins back to the French Revolution, Brooks points out that melodrama "comes into a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern."[227] Melodrama, in world bereft of the "traditional sacred," seeks to provide the moral coordinates. Melodrama, then, is an epistemic mode because, in a Manichean fashion, it unambiguously identifies what is morally good and what is not. It seeks to recuperate the sacred in a post-sacral universe. In so doing, melodrama also serves a restorative function as it seeks to reimbue everyday life with moral certainty by undoing the ethical ambiguities that creep in when older traditional forms and symbols are called into question.

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[226] Christine Gledhill, "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), x.

[227] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 15

Melodrama is doubly restorative on account of its relationship with time. Melodrama, as Brooks argues, seeks to recover the space of innocence that has been lost with the fall of church and king. The space of innocence, I would add, is not a spatial category, but a temporal one. What is lost is not an actual space where conventional overseers of morality like the church or the king bestowed everyday life with ethical certitude, but time itself. Melodrama seeks to undo the passage of a time in its bid to return to a moment when everyday life was morally comprehensible. It seeks forever to go back to a time (and space) where virtue was recognized and was not imperiled by villainy. It attempts reconceptualize both the lost sacred and the lost time, i.e., the time before the traditional sacred was thrown into uncertainty, in secular terms.

Melodrama, then, seeks to turn back historical time. Jane Gaines, in a recent essay, emphasizes this vexed relationship that melodrama has with time. She points out,

> We might then argue that melodrama evidences a wish for both the future and the past. … Melodrama, in its flawed attempts to rectify past mistakes, to reverse time, to tack on the happy end that "awards" a future to uncertainty or resolves differences with unjustifiable coincidences, might then be understood as demonstrating a willingness to buck the givens of historical time.[228]

Melodrama, which looks before and after, can only construct a relational and a provisional now – i.e., a present contingent on the past and the future, never quite independent of these other temporalities. Poised in an unsteady equilibrium between

[228] Jane Gaines, "Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*. Ed. Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 338.

these two temporal axes, melodrama could be redemptive or reactionary. It is no surprise, then, that melodrama emerges as the ur-genre of narratives that involve historical retelling, because melodrama, as a mode that works across generic divides, always looks back. This looking back is not limited to melodrama's rediscovery by feminist film scholars, making it a retrospective subject of academic inquiry, but extends, as I have argued, to the innermost workings of the mode itself.

Rang De Basanti, unlike most big-budget Bollywood films, does not employ the melodramatic mode to reinstall the traditional patriarch as the guarantor of morality. As I discussed in a previous chapter, the big budget family melodramas that form the staple of Bollywood's cinematic export, mobilize the nostalgia of the Indian diaspora for the authentic homeland, equating a reified Brahmanical patriarchal order with Indian tradition. While this aesthetic deployment of melodrama locates the space of innocence in the private sphere of the family, *Rang De Basanti's* recourse to the melodramatic mode serves a different purpose. It does not seek to reinstall the traditional patriarch as the overseer of morality, nor does it address the diasporic nostalgia for the homeland. Instead, it seeks to make urban Indian youth take pride in their country and play an active role in the struggle against corruption. Therefore, unlike the family romance which seeks to return to a past when this traditional Hindu identity was unchallenged and passed for national identity, *Rang De Basanti* seeks to return to a moment during the anti-colonial struggle when the desire to free the homeland from foreign occupation was felt most acutely.

Restorative Melodrama and Right-wing Revivalism

If the big budget films deploy a melodramatic nostalgia for the homeland left behind, *Rang De Basanti* employs the same to reclaim a homeland that has not yet been realized. Its imaginary home, its space of innocence, is the vision of independent India as imagined by those who sacrificed their lives to fight British imperialism. This India, the film implies, has not been actualized even six decades after independence because of the vested self-interests of corrupt politicians. *Rang De Basanti* employs what I call restorative melodrama, a particular iteration of the melodramatic mode which hinges on restorative nostalgia. *Rang De Basanti* returns to a past moment because it cannot make patriotism relevant in present terms since it is unwilling to address any social issue other than the corruption faced by neoliberalizing India. Thus, its restorative melodrama, like restorative nostalgia, stems from its inability and also its unwillingness to deal with social contradictions. And in its attempt to go back to a past that perhaps never was, this restorative melodrama (with its attendant nostalgia), runs not just the risk of being myopic, but abets in creating rigid social hierarchies and traditions of blood and belonging.

Like restorative nostalgia, restorative melodrama too espouses a Manichean worldview. In its oversimplified personification of good and evil, the structural problems are neatly resolved at the level of the personal. The film's resolution to the problems faced by present-day India falls within the realm of individual action – urban youth are called upon to join the administrative services and politics to serve the nation and fulfill the dream of the freedom fighters. The restorative melodrama employed by *Rang De Basanti* is unwilling to address the rise of Hindu nationalism. While the family romances

establish a reified Hindu identity as the cultural hegemon, *Rang De Basanti*, despite all its sound and fury about the current state of affairs in India, does not question the Hindu Right-wing revival, instead, it tacitly romanticizes it through its representation of the character of Laxman. Although his character is initially depicted in an unsympathetic light, this outlook changes when Laxman reads the poem "*Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna ab hamare dil main hain"* (The desire for revolution is in our hearts), penned by Bismil Azimabadil and immortalized by Ramprasad Bismil, with great feeling. His rendition of the poem not only earns him the role of Bismil in Sue's documentary, but also makes his Hindu-nationalist views ring true (or at the very least, sound like a somewhat misguided patriotism) to the audience. Laxman is further romanticized when he refuses to take money from the party-funds for himself and his followers. Presented in this light, Laxman humanizes the Hindutva nationalist agenda and presents it as patriotism.

Even though it humanizes the Hindu Right, *Rang De Basanti* cryptically acknowledges the religious nationalism then brewing in the country. It briefly mentions the persecution that Muslims face in India. However, in presenting the liberal Aslam and his more devout brother as the two prototypes of the Indian Muslim, the film displaces the question of minority persecution onto the question of assimilation. The film depicts a westernized, university-educated Aslam as the ideal Muslim citizen of neoliberal India, unlike his brother who is presented as a conservative Muslim who lacks patriotism. Kunal Kapoor, who plays both Aslam and Ashfaqulla Khan Khan in the film, was the brand ambassador for clothing brand Provogue which also was one of the film's key merchandise partners. By using Kapoor, a well-known model-turned-actor, to play Aslam, *Rang De Basanti* further emphasizes what the ideal minority for the neoliberal era

must be like. It reduces the question of Islamophobia in India to the question of inadequate assimilation.[229] The film draws its justification for this sleight of hand by alluding to the past. In Sue's documentary, Bismil tells Khan that he might consider escaping to Afghanistan where there are many more (Muslims) like him. Khan retorts by saying that he has every right to die for this nation. The Muslim character, in both timelines, has to prove his belonging to the nation by dying for it. He finally proves his virtue, as melodramatic victim-heroes always do, but only through his death. The recognition of virtue in melodrama often takes place in the "nick of time", but for the Muslim characters in *Rang De Basanti* it is always "too late."

Consuming Anger

Rang De Basanti cannily merchandizes a consumable dissent as the new revolution. Unsurprisingly, several multimational companies endorsed this supposed social movement. The film collaborated with major multinational companies including Coca Cola, which released *Rang De Basanti* Special Edition Bottles, inspired by the "spirit of *Rang De Basanti*." The spirit of this dissent is, thus, literally consumable. The

[229] Ironically, *Rang De Basanti* was released in the same year as the Sachar Committee Report. The seven-member High Level Committee, chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, was created by the-then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in 2005, to prepare a report on the social, economic and educational status of the Indian Muslims. The committee submitted its findings in 2006. The report points out, "Our analysis shows that while there is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states, (and among the Muslims, those who identified themselves as OBCs and others), the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development. In fact, by and large, Muslims rank somewhat above SCs/STs but below Hindu-OBCs, Other Minorities and Hindu-General (mostly upper castes) in almost all indicators considered…. In addition to the 'development deficit', the perception among Muslims that they are discriminated against and excluded is widespread, this exacerbates the problem." The report pointed out the social problems faced by the Muslim community in all Indian states and summarily debunked the claims of the Hindu Right about the Congress's policy of minority appeasement. The BJP-lead Gujarat Government called the report unconstitutional.
Rajindar Sachar "Sachar Committee Report", *Government of India* (2006).
http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/reports/sachar-committee-report

special edition bottle featured the film poster and the slogan "*piyo sar uthake"* (drink with your head held high). Consuming Coca Cola now becomes an activity that not only gives pleasure but also confers pride – to the consumer and to the nation (by virtue of its association of *Rang De Basanti* and its brand of patriotism). The rewriting of morality under new market conditions is now complete – patriotism too has to be enacted through consumption. By the same token, the inability to consume renders many citizens less patriotic, and as a result, they are demoted to a lesser category of citizenship. This new nationalism, parochial as it is, is not opposed to transnational capital or multinational companies. Instead, it derives its legitimacy from its proximity to global capitalist companies. It does not deem it ironical that consuming Coca Cola, a foreign product, makes us better Indians.



Figure 4.4 Coca Cola launches special *Rang De Basanti*-edition bottles

The dissent that *Rang De Basanti* gives voice to is not only consumable but also is consumerist. And it comes dressed in fancy gear as well – the clothing brand Provogue launched a whole new range of clothing inspired by *Rang De Basanti*. The electronics brand LG also cashed in on the film's quick-fix patriotism and launched a new phone which featured exclusive wallpapers and screensavers from the film. It also launched a video game about young people fighting corrupt politicians. Patriotism has now become play-acting. *Rang De Basanti's* triumph in rendering patriotism consumable and profitable (for MNCs) is completed when a still from the film, showing Aamir Khan riding a horse, appears on the cover of the magazine *Business & Economy*. The cover has the caption "Lose Control" (a song from the film), referring to the boom in the Indian economy.[230]

[230] In addition, the cast and crew of the film visited a Delhi University college and interacted with students, asking them to "Express Yourself!", which is also the tagline of Airtel, one of the film's media sponsors. The event was covered by NDTV – the same news portal that was featured in the film as the TV news channel that covered the protest at the India Gate and the final sequence at the All India Radio station. The other brands that cashed in on the hype around *Rang De Basanti* were Berger Paints, Hindustan Petroleum, Radio Mirchi, Channel V, and the web-portal MSN.
For a detailed summary of product placements in *Rang De Basanti*, see: Dilip, Meghana. *Rang de Basanti: Consumption, Citizenship and the Public Sphere*. Dissertation (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2008)
Also see: Ana Cristina Mendes, ""Buy the World a Coke:" Rang de Basanti and Coca-colonisation." *Empire Building and Modernity*: 69.



Figure 4.5 The Afterlife of *Rang De Basanti*[231]

[231] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rang_De_Basanti - /media/File:RDB_advertisements.jpg

Rang De Basanti makes its protest not only consumable but also appear as a legitimate social revolution. Its tepid criticism of the apolitical placidity of urban Indian youth resonated with its audience precisely because its idea of social change suited the consumerist dispensation of the film's target audience, the urban middleclass. The version of dissent that the film peddles allowed the urban middleclass to be consumed with righteous anger while not giving up their privileged consumerist aspirations. While *Swades* asked for sacrifice (of First World comforts), Rang De Basanti makes no such demand. Neelam Srivastava notes the ways in which *Rang De Basanti* gives form to dissent in neoliberal India,

> …it sparked forms of middle-class activism from people who had never previously shown any interest in politics…. The issues taken up by the 'RDB generation' were matters significantly related to their own class interests… many took to the streets to protest against quotas in university places and government jobs for those who belonged to 'scheduled castes', namely people belonging to castes traditionally excluded from access to higher education and well-paying secure positions.[232]

The film's demand for social change is limited to better governance and not to increased welfare. In fact, the demand for welfare is rooted out when the underprivileged are erased from its body of representation. While dead military personnel are capable of resuscitating the dormant social conscience, the debt-ridden farmer or the oppressed

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[232] Neelam Srivastava, "Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema: Violence, Patriotism and the National-Popular in *Rang De Basanti*", *Third Text* 23, no. 6 (2009): 714.

classes rarely cause the middleclass citizenry to agitate. The depressed classes are not even in the frame of any of the TV cameras across the country, covering the public outrage and support for DJ and his friends in their final moments. Not having earned the right to consume, the poor have forfeited their right to protest, along with many other rights of citizenship, including state welfare. The demand for social change becomes a middle-class prerogative. In other words, only certain demands are deemed worthy of fighting for or for awakening our collective conscience. The rural and the urban poor, lower order citizens in that they do not have the means to exercise their obligations as citizens via consumption, do not have the right to be angry. Anger, like any other consumable, becomes a privileged right.

Rang De Basanti gave the urban middle-class (also upper-caste) the means to express their own interests as national interests. It mobilized, among other things, anti-Mandal protests in the universities.[233] The film also resonated with urban Indian youth because this *yeh-dil-mange-mor*e (this heart demands more) Pespsi-Cola generation is portrayed as the harbinger of social change in India. While the discourse of citizenship is built on rights and obligations, *Rang De Basanti's* resolution bars large constituents of the population from demanding their rights or fulfilling their obligations of citizenship. The film points out the lack of education and illiteracy as one of the many problems faced by the nation. And in positioning the college-going youth as the successors of the movement started by DJ and his friends, the film remedies the problem, not by doing

[233] The Mandal Commission, headed by B. P. Mandal, sought to identify the socially or educationally backward classes in India. Although the Commission completed its report in 1983, its suggested reforms were implemented in 1992 after protracted legal struggles and social resistance mostly from the middle class/upper castes.

away with illiteracy or poverty, but by erasing the illiterate and poor masses from its discourse of citizenship.

Epilogue

The Same, But Not Quite[234]

Let me pause on a motif that has appeared throughout the dissertation – the copy. While this trope has not been fully fleshed out in the previous chapters, the epilogue, I hope, will give me the opportunity to explore the motif in some detail and perhaps open another possible line of inquiry into Bollywood and other contemporary culture industries. The very name, Bollywood, attests to a certain anxiety of influence on account of its closeness to Hollywood. While the moniker has gained popularity in both popular and academic discourse, the term has faced some resistance from the Bombay film industry itself. For example, Amitabh Bachchan prefers the term "the Indian Film Industry" to Bollywood. The term Bollywood, for Bachchan and many like him, is problematic on two counts. First, the homophone suggests a proximity to Hollywood that the industry feels is unwarranted. Second, Bollywood is often associated with potboiler musicals, an image that the industry is only too keen to overcome, especially at a time when its films are being critically recognized by international film festivals, an honor that was previously only reserved for art-house films. Bachchan wants to override the implied comparison to Hollywood by replacing the term Bollywood with Indian cinema. Not Hindi cinema, but *Indian* cinema. Bollywood, in this logic, is Indian cinema that travels globally. The rest are regional cinemas that are limited to their linguistic domiciles.

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[234] I have adapted the title of this epilogue from Homi Bhaba's observation about the nature of colonial mimicry and the status of such representations, which Bhaba argues, are "Almost the same, but not quite." For Bhaba's use of the phrase, see: Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *October: The First Decade*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 318.

Bachchan's unease with the term Bollywood conveys an anxiety of influence on two very different counts. First, it seeks to disavow any influence of Hollywood on its own films. Second, in staking it claim to the national cinema status, Bollywood wants all other regional cinemas to be subservient to its logic, to its global visibility, and to its growing influence. It seeks to foreground its influence.

Walter Benjamin notes that works of art evince two distinct, and somewhat contradictory, sets of anxieties. One seeks to conceal influence, while the other desperately seeks to foreground it. Benjamin makes a distinction between a copy and a fake. He writes,

> While a fake (deceptively) wants to *be* the original, a copy (overtly) tries only to *imitate* it. Thus, the purpose of a fake is to conceal, while a copy proposes to reveal. A fake is essentially opportunistic, it does not question the system: undetected, it is the original; uncovered, it is discarded as a forgery. On the other hand, a copy is out in the open, obvious and blunt; once it is incorporated in the system, it starts questioning everything. [235]

While both the fake and the copy require an original; the fake seeks to replace the original, while the copy is an imitation that acknowledges its mimicry. The fake and the copy both presuppose an original in relationship to which their status is evaluated. While the copy overtly acknowledges its debt, the fake passes for the original till its inauthenticity is discovered. Once discovered, the fake loses its value, while the copy gains its value from the discovery of its source. Copy requires knowledge, fake needs ignorance. The fake conceals presence of the original, whereas the copy foregrounds it. If

[235] Walter Benjamin, "On Copy," in *Walter Benjamin*: *Recent Writings* (Vancouver: New Documents, 2013), 21

the fake, upon being discovered as such, negates its own value and thereby increases the value of the original; the copy, in acknowledging its debts, increases its own value and that of the original. Imitation is high compliment, and aesthetic imitation is no exception to this rule. Copies attest to not only the original, but simultaneously, by highlighting the imitation, underscore the original's worth (as something to be imitated).

Bollywood, through its unending self-parodying as I discussed in the previous chapters, creates endless copies. Through this ceaseless proliferation of copies, Bollywood establishes its own authenticity. There can be no copy without an original. Its copies, therefore, serve as proof of its originality. Let us, by way of an example, consider the following song-sequence from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (*A Match Made in Heaven*).[236] The song, "*Phir Milenge Chalte Chalte"* (We will meet again on this journey), takes place in a dream-sequence when newly-weds, Tani (Anushka Sharma) and Suri (Shah Rukh Khan), go to watch a film. When Suri fails to make his bride fall in love with him, he is inspired by Bollywood cinema to pose as a fictional character called Raj in order to woo Tani. As Tani watches the film, she imagines that it is Raj who is serenading her with songs borrowed from roughly fifty years of Hindi cinema. The song telescopes five decades of Hindi melodrama, with Raj (also Shah Rukh Khan) playing the superstar of each decade. The musical journey begins with Raj Kapoor from the '50s, followed by Dev Anand, Shammi Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna, and finally comes to an end with Rishi Kapoor.

[236] *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi,* directed by Aditya Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 2008).



Figure 5.1 Restaging history, screenshot from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*

Not only are the lyrics borrowed, the music also rehashes the tunes of old Hindi songs, and their sets, too, are similarly recreated. The sequence also cannily uses color to create this memory-effect. While the sequence where Shah Rukh Khan plays Raj Kapoor is shot in black-and-white, the Dev Anand sequence is shot in sepia (with some added greenish tint), and the Shammi Kapoor and Rajesh Khanna sequences are shot in extremely bright, almost fluorescent, colors. The song sequence keeps reminding the viewer of its status as the copy on multiple levels. The tramp's hat associated with the cinema of Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand's golf cap and striped scarf, the gold waistcoat of Shammi Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna's floral shirts, and Rishi Kapoor's bell-bottomed pants, all make their way into the song's iconography. The song, on the surface, pays homage to Hindi cinema by re-presenting its famous on-screen couples, its music, its lyrics, and its iconography. However, in recreating the "authentic" past images on multiple levels, the song, ironically and also somewhat cynically, creates a world of endless copies and signals the impossibility of originality in the present moment.

The song does not only recreate the past, it weaves the present into the past as well. Its repackaging of each decade ends with the chorus where Shah Rukh Khan and the leading ladies switch into the current Bollywood dance mode**.** The emptiness of this self-reflexive gesture of Bollywood, of which this song is but one of the many examples of this type that Bollywood routinely generates, is best evinced by the segment featuring Shah Rukh Khan playing Rishi Kapoor, with Rani Mukherji as Nitu Singh. Although Rani Mukherji replicates the '70s look with her dress and hairstyle, she is also replicating herself. The costume, the hairstyle, the dance movement, also point to Rani Mukherji's

character (Tina) in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something…Something Happens).[237] In this sequence, she is therefore, at the same time, Rani Mukherji, Nitu Singh, and Tina. And Raj, the character who narrates the whole song, playing the screen-heroes from the previous decades, is modelled on all the yuppie characters played by Shah Rukh Khan himself from *DDLJ* onwards. Raj is Shah Rukh Khan recreating Shah Rukh Khan.



Figure 5.2 The present becomes history, screenshot from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*

In this world of copies, the original, although repeatedly adduced, is ultimately made superfluous. The copy-within-a-copy, a structure that Bollywood routinely uses, is

[237] *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai,* directed by Karan Johar (Mumbai: Dharma Productions, 1998).

not a simply a homage to its own history; rather this recurring device signals that cinema as a commodity now coalesces around recycling and repetition. The authentic, through this constant self-plagiarizing, is rendered phony. If cinema creates a world whose authenticity is measured against the world that it represents, Bollywood forecloses this possibility by creating endless copies that only refer to themselves as copies. Bollywood's motions towards irony, in this manner, becomes an empty gesture.

The proliferation of copies that now mark the cultural production of Bollywood is neither new nor unique to it. The reproduction of copies in the post-modern age replaces the emphasis on originals in the modernist era. Umberto Eco explores the various ways in which repetition and seriality in mass media pose new questions for the sociology of culture.[238] He distinguishes modern aesthetics and post-modern art by tracing the shift in emphasis from innovation to repetition. The modernist criterion for art, Eco suggests, was artistic innovation. For the modernists, he argues, the pleasures of repetition and the joy of discovering of patterns were associated with crafts and with industry, and not art. Modernist art, even in its most auto-telic moments, aimed at finding new ways of looking at the world. A stark contrast to the modernist motto of making things new, Eco argues, is the mass media of the postmodernist period which emphasizes repetition, iteration, seriality, and even redundancy. Eco emphasizes that seriality is the main of characteristic of contemporary art which is the commodified product of an industrial process and not a product of artistic innovation. The products of the Bollywood film industry are no exceptions to this rule of the thumb. If the pleasure of modernist art was in novelty of both form and content, then the pleasure that postmodern aesthetics promises is in the

[238] Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics." *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): 161-84. http://www.jstor.org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/stable/20025015.

anticipation of repetition, and in the materialization of the foreseen. The production of fake genres and formulaic plots cater to this kind of pleasure.

Intertextuality was not unknown to the practitioners of modernist art. On the contrary, such intertextual references were the hallmark of experimental art, and modernist literature required a reader who was culturally sophisticated enough to piece together the clues that the text offered. Postmodernist art pieces the intertextual clues together for its reader/viewer through repetition. The viewer of postmodern mass media seeks repetition which now becomes, as Eco suggests, the site where aesthetic value is realized. The present-day viewer seeks sameness and takes pleasure in the "not quite-ness." Instead of novelty, we now value variations. The realm of the authentic has not been exhausted in the post-modern era, it has simply been rendered superfluous. Originality has now been eclipsed by the seriality of the copy. Bollywood, however, does not create the conditions for this loss of originality, it only calculatedly exploits it.

While this desire for "almost the same, but not quite," which both marks and drives the postmodern aesthetics of seriality, has been cynically manipulated by Bollywood, this desire is not exclusive to the production and consumption of aesthetic objects. Consumption of all commodities, including aesthetic ones, is driven by the urge to seek distinction through conformity. As consumers, we copy in order to be different. We emulate films and the lifestyles they depict and seek to approximate the consumerist ideals epitomized by film-stars. In following in the consumerist tendencies evinced by Bollywood and its stars, the spectator, who is also simultaneously addressed as the consumer of newly available goods and lifestyles, becomes a copy herself. The spectator/consumer, however, is a work in progress, an incomplete copy. Consumption,

and the need for consumption, ends when the spectator/consumer emerges as the perfect copy. Bollywood perpetually defers this process as it encourages the spectator-consumer to undo this "not quite"-ness through relentless consumption. What ails the consumptive citizen, the accidental protagonist of this dissertation, is not only the tubercular sickness of consumption, but the impossibility of realizing her desire to emerge as the perfect copy.

Filmography

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