When Local Meets Lucre:
Commerce, Culture and Imperialism in Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

Bollywood, the most commercially successful form of Indian cinema, presents an interesting contradiction in terms. It consciously mimics some American norms but mines Indian culture for the success it enjoys among diasporic networks of South Asians. In its avowal of nationalism and cultural tradition, it presents a significant challenge to American domination of international film and culture. However, it is too simple to say that Bollywood represents an assertion of cultural independence in the face of an imperialist challenge, as Bollywood films themselves replicate patterns of cultural domination, primarily marketing Hindi-language films to an enormous community characterized by a high level of linguistic diversity. In order to move beyond the complex question of whether or not Bollywood can be seen as a symbol of resistance, this paper investigates how hybridity may explain Bollywood films' widespread and enduring popularity, allowing viewers to accommodate the reality of exposure to different cultures.

India is home to a varied and thriving film industry, spread across various regions, catering to different tastes and languages. In commercial terms, however, the most successful segment of the Indian film industry is the one referred to as Bollywood. While the name itself implies a self-conscious attempt to mimic American norms, the reality of Bollywood cinema is that its continued success within India and among diasporic networks of South Asians presents a significant challenge to American domination of international film, and more broadly, international culture. Rather than representing cultural independence in the face of an imperialist challenge, however, Bollywood demonstrates that hegemony can operate at more than one level. Bollywood films not only ape selected Hollywood tendencies in terms of production, writing and marketing, they also reproduce patterns of cultural domination, primarily marketing Hindi-language films to a diverse community whose languages include Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil, among others. It becomes difficult to reconcile this image of a monolithic entertainment industry with the notion of an indigenous culture that successfully demonstrates resistance in the face of hegemonic oppression. This paper examines whether the idea of hybridity may explain the ongoing popularity of mainstream Indian cinema with people of South Asian origin, allowing them to maintain a commitment to traditional values while acknowledging the importance of an Americanized global culture in their lives.

Preserving or Destroying? Approaching the Theoretical Debates on Global Culture

Rather than attempting to evaluate the artistic merit of Bollywood cinema, this paper focusses on the question of cultural needs and identity politics that may be shaped by the themes apparent in mainstream Indian cinema at a time when globalization can be seen as presenting a threat to local, marginalized and diasporic cultures. In order to discuss this issue, it is useful to examine questions of cultural imperialism, hybridity, globalization and glocalization, with the word glocalization used to address the cultural debates surrounding globalization, rather than economic or political issues. One debate over Bollywood itself is whether its films have any discernible meaning or influence beyond escapism.

As might be expected of an industry that regularly constructs and markets films on the basis of star power, song-and-dance sequences that frequently seem irrelevant to the overall story, a script that is nearly always hastily cobbled together and largely predictable endings, the chief description of Bollywood cinema is that it is pure fantasy. This is a charge that not all of its adherents deny, many of them pointing to the fact that their audiences are often composed of people whose lives contain limited pleasures (see Chakravarty, 1993). If the cinema provides them with the opportunity to temporarily escape the rigours of poverty, political turbulence or family discord, then, some filmmakers argue, escapist drama owes no apologies to its critics. Nonetheless, Bollywood producers often do find themselves on the defensive,

particularly when their work is weighed against that of the so-called parallel cinema, a more artistic stream of Indian film (Pendakur 1990, p. 248) which has focussed on tackling taboo subject matter and winning worldwide recognition for its serious treatment of issues pertinent to Indian life and culture. While these films only account for ten percent of India's total cinematic output, they are central to artistic attempts to "capture a segment of Indian reality" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 23), and their makers sometimes add to criticisms of Bollywood as superficial and outdated (Baghdadi & Rao, 1995, pp. xii, 34, 46, 76, 113).

Such critiques of Bollywood are similar to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's vigorous condemnation of mass culture as instruments used to solidify the power of the elite in a capitalist society, espousing ideological values that promote a false consciousness amongst media consumers. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, who distinguished between a low, common culture that catered to the masses' thirst for superficial entertainment and a high, elite culture that was capable of improving and nurturing the intellect, Indian and foreign opponents of Bollywood films suggest that the movies are vulgar and ridiculous, demonstrating no discernible worth when compared to a more artistic type of cinema (Gaur, 1973, pp. 100, 168; Pendakur, 2003, p. 98). As Sara Dickey notes, those artistic films are frequently judged in terms of their resemblance to European ideals of what constitutes important cinema (1993, p. 5; also see Bhaskar, 1999, p. 140). It is not only American notions of merit and appropriateness, then, that are viewed as normative; parallel cinema filmmakers seem to derive more of an influence from European cinema, while Bollywood filmmakers more frequently look to the United States for inspiration (Baghdadi & Rao, 1995). Likewise, the division between upper and lower classes is reproduced in Marxist terms through the idea that film viewing is often dismissed as a pursuit of the uneducated masses, whereas filmmaking is the responsibility of higher-class individuals, who have considered themselves obligated to control the moral and educational tone of film content for the sake of the audience (Dickey, 1993, p. 6). This divide becomes significant when the debate over cinema addresses values, national and ethnic unity and media influence.

Unlike parallel cinema, Bollywood films may occasionally address cultural issues, but they will nearly always resolve them in a way that reinforces the societal status quo. Discussing, for instance, the question of gender in the enormously popular *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), Shoma Chatterji suggests that the film replicates patriarchal norms embedded in an affluent, conventional lifestyle that every urban Indian family would see as ideal (1998, pp. 5-7; also see Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, pp. 75-79, for a discussion about the female figure and her symbolic identification with India, as well as Virdi, 2003). Similarly, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, a story of marriage and family, "reinforces India's cultural heritage" through its depiction of various rituals, including engagement, marriage and the *mehndi*, the traditional tracing of decorative patterns on the bride's hands using henna (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 44). Religious traditions are also affirmed, normally providing a backdrop of divinely determined justice, even in films that do not involve overtly religious themes, while the political and social issue of caste is also frequently addressed (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, pp. 62, 70).

Gregory Booth, for one, defends Bollywood films from the charge that they represent the encroachment of Western influence and depict only meaningless fantasies, suggesting that such films actually "have their sources in the oral and written epics and the popular dramatic genres of traditional Indian culture" (1995, p. 169). Sumita Chakravarty echoes this observation, commenting that "Hindi cinema has served to reinforce mythical stereotypes in modern clothing" (1993, p. 57). Like Chatterji, she also takes note of the love affair with consumption depicted in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, but suggests that while the film uses such tactics in deference to the reality of India's new economy, it has also "reversed the effects of the global invasion on our culture, implicitly asserting the permanence and stability of all institutions of our traditional culture that are now under severe threat—the joint family, patriarchy, the traditional qualities of the image of the Indian woman, and also, the nation" (1993, p. 55). Sheila Nayar argues that the borrowing of superficial symbols of Western life does not necessarily augur the borrowing of supposedly Western values. She suggests that the fear of those values, such as individualism and sexual liberation, is countered in Indian films by their emphasis on family ties, and the consistently "*successful eradication of all tension between oneself and one's immediate family, and between one's immediate family and one's future spouse*" (1997, p. 86, italics in original).

In any discussion of the significance of Indian film within India's borders and in its union of the myriad elements of the diaspora, the concept of modernity is a key one. Moinak Biswas recognizes the complexity of this oft-used term in his discussion of post-Independence cinema, which temporarily attempted to adopt Hollywood's film-making practices and style but also presented nationalist themes. To Biswas, the debate around Indian film is not as simple as a criticism of its imitative practices, but rather "a question of resignification, of making Hollywood signify something else—let us say a modernity which does not have the same meaning as in the West" (2000, p. 133). While the modern is often quite simply equated with the West, or sometimes more specifically North America, with its emphasis on progress, on liberalism and on individuality, the idea of modernity has come to signify something more nuanced and complex.

For cultural critics such as Homi Bhabha, modernity allows local and/or minority populations to resist the pressures of a dominant culture while also eluding the dangers of marginalization by creating an entirely new entity, a hybrid culture that differentiates itself from the other traditions pulling at it while still fulfilling the needs of the alienated (see Araeen, 2000, pp. 9-17; Karim, 1998, p. 6; Khan, 2002; Kraidy, 1999). In terms of Indian cinema, these alienated individuals can be easily found in an age that has scattered members of the South Asian diaspora around the globe, attempting to reconcile the values embedded in Indian culture with the practices seen in their new homes. In a sense, then, these individuals come to inhabit an entirely new space constructed to meet their layered needs, and as part of that process, the film can be seen as creating a "new space of signification" (Dhareshwar & Niranjana, 2000, p. 195), one which recognizes the importance of the local but also acknowledges that the "MTV culture, as well as more generally the global televisual culture, is here and we have to negotiate it" (Dhareshwar & Niranjana, 2000, p. 193).

In this formulation, then, the notion of displaying spirited resistance to the imperialist culture by encouraging the development of untainted local practices becomes an outdated paradigm. While resistance to cultural imperialism is still widely discussed and promoted by some scholars, advocates of hybridity and glocalization seem to suggest that it is almost naïve, and restricting, to attempt to avoid altogether the dictates of a dominant culture. Rather, it is more realistic to acknowledge that these widespread minority communities will find a need for both their cultures of origin and for the culture that saturates every aspect of their lives once they physically enter a location where new norms prevail. "[T]he desire to work through existing contradictions," suggests Lipsitz, "rather than stand outside them represents...a recognition of the impossibility of standing outside totalitarian systems of domination" (1994, p. 35). As Nayar points out when speaking of present-day Indian practices, "modern life, 'western' life, is very much a part of Indian culture, of urban Indianness, and with it comes numerous 'universal cultural trends'" (1997, p. 77). Javed Akhtar is similarly alert to the conundrum of faithfully retaining only one culture when endlessly confronted by the advantages of another:

This onslaught of consumerism, the existence of multiple television and satellite channels, modernisation and industrialisation have brought Indian society to a point where we are feeling slightly lost. We talk of cultural invasion, of an excess of Westernisation, of a loss of family values....But on the other hand, what's the alternative? (quoted in Kabir, 1999, p. 95)

Kearney notes that in 1992, 100 million people were living outside of the country of their birth, a displacement due to various factors such as military conflict, employment or the lack thereof, or poverty (1995, p. 557). These people, whose numbers are constantly on the rise, are considered transnational migrants who "move into and indeed create transnational spaces that may have the potential to liberate nationals within them who are able to escape in part the totalizing hegemony that a strong state may have within its national borders" (1995, p. 553). For Ananda Mitra, the potentially totalizing hegemony is Western culture, and in order to escape its dominance, it is essential that migrants "find an identity for themselves that maintains the connections with their places of origin as well as develop[ing] a particular niche for themselves in the West" (1999, p. 18).

It is interesting to note that while Bhabha's use of hybridity seems to signal elements of creativity and self-determination, the term hybrid culture recurs frequently in discussions of Indian cinema as a pejorative. Anil Dharker says dismissively that the "trouble with hybrids, especially when they are too deliberately forced to adapt to another culture, is that they don't work" (1997, p. 400; also see Barnouw &

Krishnaswamy, 1980, p. 157; Dickey 1993, p. 58). Marwan Kraidy takes up the discussion of hybridity and postcolonialism, drawing on work such as that of Stuart Hall and Nestor García-Canclini in his analysis of the blurring of boundaries between the local and the global. He notes that while there is a relatively recent body of work addressing the hybridization of cultures, this has been occurring as an actual practice for many years, so that any attempt to distinguish sharply between local and global spaces "glosses over years of osmosis between different national and cultural entities. For centuries immigration, trade relations, colonial expansion, political alliances, wars, and invasions have contributed to blending heterogeneous elements of different cultures" (1999, p. 459; also see Hasa, 2000; Lipsitz, 1994 for further discussion regarding postcolonial exile and hybridity). This process is referred to by García-Canclini as cultural reconversion, in which local cultures accommodate the influence(s) of the global "without being destroyed because tradition is re-articulated in modern processes" (1999, p. 460). This description is similar to that of Sheila Nayar's, who counters the longstanding argument that the seeping of Western habits into popular cinema signals the erosion of Indian nationalism, suggesting instead that selective borrowing from the West can palliate the problems caused by the many competing cultures within India. According to Nayar,

> [s]ince Hindi popular cinema's intention was always to appeal broadly across the subcontinent—a nation ceaselessly struggling to keep its commercial, regional and linguistic factions from splintering—Bollywood came to rely, ironically, on the uniformity of the West (or rather, what it *chose* from the West) to provide its films with a generic coat of all-Indianness. (1997, p. 75, italics in original)

This, then, is an entirely self-conscious attempt at negotiation on the part of those whose dislocation or exposure to external influences has affected their ability "to exclusively belong to one or the other of what they saw as two irreconcilable worldviews" (Kraidy, 1999, p. 464). Kraidy suggests that the term globalization, in reference to the diluting of indigenous cultures, has become so widely used that it has lost its relevance, whereas glocalization addresses all aspects of the cultural exchange, including its national and regional nature as well as further-reaching, global implications (1999, p. 472). In his use of hybridity, it "entails re-formulating intercultural and international communication beyond buoyant models of resistance and inauspicious patterns of domination" (1999, p. 472).

Rasheed Araeen, contrarily, disputes the idea that hybridity can overcome the problem facing the postcolonial Other, whose exiled position is one that he identifies as central to current cultural theory. The idea of exile, as presented by scholars such as Bhabha, Edward Said and Stuart Hall, is one that Araeen sees as a false construct, asserting that "[i]t is in fact a fallacy to presume that migration in itself creates displacement, loss and exile" (2000, p. 11). He critiques Bhabha's hybrid Other, claiming that any victory of this entity represents "a triumph of neo-liberal multiculturalism, a part of the triumph of global capitalism" (2000, p. 15). He reaches this conclusion partly due to Bhabha's endorsement of the notion that this figure of the Other continues, even amidst the ruins of colonialism, to exist on the margins or in an altogether new space, rather than moving freely from the periphery to the centre. For Araeen, it therefore follows that one who is exiled from his or her original culture also develops a natural and regrettable tendency to view that culture negatively, though his analysis does not provide substantial support for this claim. Nonetheless, his critique is an important one. It acknowledges that the entire concept of hybridity is still in flux, as is, similarly, the struggle to overcome "the suffering of the exiled or those who see themselves as diasporic, or the anguish of those who are concerned with events in their own countries" (Araeen, 2000, p. 17; see Hasa, 2000; Lipsitz, 1994). For Araeen, the means that these individuals use to assert themselves can be, to some extent, counterproductive, signalling a rejection both of modernism and of their native identities. This reproof occasionally veers towards oversimplification, denying the Other's attempt at "fighting his own battle for survival in his own way, sometimes consciously, sometimes by default" (Nandy, 1983, p. xv). The methods chosen may sometimes be imperfect, but they are not uniformly opposed to the local culture, as Araeen apparently fears, and it can be argued that their results to date contradict Araeen's thesis that "we cannot build solidarity only on the basis of race, culture, ethnicity or nation" (2000, p. 18).

On Melding and Masalas: Arriving at Possible Solutions

The transnational lure of Bollywood cinema is an open secret to film scholars, with Gokulsing and Dissanayake noting that people of South Asian ancestry, who can be found in areas ranging from Sri Lanka to the Caribbean to Australia to Canada, often find that their understanding of what is Indian is derived, in large part, from Indian films. There is certainly no shortage of films to choose from, with India's prolific industry churning out approximately 900 pictures a year (1998, p. 8). It is estimated that roughly ten million people a day purchase tickets to see a Bollywood movie, and some of these will return repeatedly to view a favourite movie (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, pp. 10, 14; also see Rajadyaksha, 1996, 2000). Despite producing more films a year than any other country, including the United States, India typically does not export its films at the same rate. Nonetheless, there is a global market for Bollywood cinema (Ogan, 2002, p. 212). Most of the costs generated by Bollywood films are actually recouped through the overseas market, rather than within India, due to "the growing market of non-resident Indians, or Indian expatriates, nostalgic for all things Indian" (Mann, 2001, p. F3). Marie Gillespie (1995) suggests that immigrant Punjabi families sometimes use Indian films to ensure that their children receive a sense of their cultural heritage, while Ray (2001, 2003) describes a similar use of Bollywood cinema by twice-displaced Fiji Indians in Australia to build a sense of identity and community.

Within India itself, movies have often been seen as promoting nationalist or religious beliefs, to the extent that British colonial powers saw fit to censor the film industry rigorously, a practice that did not cease with the achievement of independence. Indian film, then, despite its strength in centres such as Madras, Calcutta and particularly Mumbai (previously Bombay), was profoundly affected by the vestiges of colonial practice governing cinema, and reflects, in some ways, the political turmoil that has characterized the nation at different times in its history. One of the greatest sources of conflict within the movie industry, which is companion to a flourishing music sector, is the linguistic diversity that fails to be reflected in the majority of Bollywood films. Bollywood movies, often—though not always—filmed in Hindi, can be seen as imposing a cultural, or linguistic, imperialism, neglecting the reality of the many languages that flourish within India's enormous population. This neglect has prompted speakers of minority languages to mount fierce opposition to the dominance of Hindi (Dhareshwar & Niranjana, 2000; Dickey, 1993; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Oommen & Joseph, 1991; Rajadhyaksha, 2000).

Similarly, filmmakers outside of Mumbai can often face greater challenges in terms of financial resources and smaller potential markets, while nearly all Indian filmmakers are alert to the potential competition presented by foreign films, particularly American ones. Cultural imperialism, then, does not always impose itself exclusively in one direction, nor is it necessarily characteristic only of the American entertainment juggernaut. Indians who do not speak Hindi, the primary language of Bollywood cinema, can and have made an argument that Bollywood films tend to ignore local ethnic differences in favour of a homogeneous portrayal of India. This portrayal is easier to produce given the financial restraints on smaller film production centres in India. In spite of these restraints, Gokulsing and Dissanayake note a significant increase in the number of films being created in centres outside of Mumbai and in languages other than Hindi (also see Prasad, 2000, p. 145).

This fragmenting at the linguistic level is ironic, given the crucial role that sound, language and song have played in establishing India's success in film. Music is a key element of Indian cinema, as is dance. As opposed to a Hollywood-style of categorization, Indian movies are not specifically designated as musicals or non-musicals. Any Bollywood movie tends to incorporate musical sequences, a characteristic that has been enormously influential in determining an individual film's popularity and the profits it can generate (Bhimani, 1995, pp. 127, 316; Pendakur, 2003, pp. 119-44). Although Hollywood musicals can be seen as an influence on the Bollywood tradition, there is not a similar attempt to reconcile the divergent elements of "narrative and spectacle. Instead, song and dance sequences were and are used as natural expressions of emotions and situations emerging from everyday life" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 21). These sequences are crucial for subtle expressions of sexuality, which must not be openly depicted in Indian film lest it provoke the disapproval of the all-powerful censors, who generally do not interfere with the content of imported films but are notoriously strict in ensuring that Bollywood films do not promote sexual licentiousness or any other type of potentially corrupting activity. Songs and sound are among the more compelling elements of Hindi film, with the introduction of sound in 1931 touted as the

reason for the rise of Indian cinema's popularity and the failure of Western cinema to secure the Indian market (Chowdhry, 2000, p. 13). In spite of this, however, Hindi film music is sometimes criticized for its incorporation of Western rhythms, though Western trends do not obliterate this music's unique sounds, derived at least in part from folk traditions (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy, 1980, p. 73; see Pendakur, 2003, pp. 121, 126-39).

Regardless of any criticisms they incur, the fact is that these films capture the imagination of the Indian people in a way that American cinema has failed to accomplish. Popular Hollywood films generally do not perform well within India itself, unlike massive Bollywood successes such as the 1995 film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and 1994's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Rajadhyaksha, 1996, p. 28). While the extraordinary popularity of a Hindi-dubbed version of *Jurassic Park* raised hopes in the United States of finally capturing the stubbornly elusive Indian market, dubbed American films released subsequently demonstrated little or no appeal to the masses (Sidhva, 1996, p. 49), who seem to prefer the version of America found in Bollywood.

Major successes such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) may pay frequent homage to the consumerist dream by displaying American goods such as DKNY, Tommy Hilfiger and Gap clothing, but they also ensure that family conflicts are avoided or resolved by the end of each movie, that marital harmony prevails in a way that allows the male head of the family to retain his authority, and that Indian culture is celebrated in many ways, including the inevitable dances, various traditional costumes, and scenes depicting religious festivals or ceremonial events such as weddings. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, which was notable for the fact that its popularity with South Asian fans helped it enter top-ten lists in the United Kingdom, is described as "a bubble-gum romance in which clean-cut students sport American designer clothes and live by traditional Indian values" (Lakshmanan, 1999, p. W3). Any cultural conflict presented by this juxtaposition is one that viewers either do not find problematic, or have come to accept as a reflection of their own composite existence.

In studying these possible conflicts, observers of Bollywood have differing opinions as to its distinctive Indian character. For Rajadhyaksha, the fervour Bollywood patrons display for their favourite films and for the whole practice of filmgoing itself is enough to set the Indian film industry apart from others (1996, p. 30). Gokulsing and Dissanayake also note the intensity of fan adoration, but they locate Bollywood's uniqueness in some of the same features discussed by Booth; namely, they suggest that "Indian popular cinema has evolved into a distinctively Indian mode of entertainment by imaginatively amalgamating music and dance" (1998, p. 10). They also agree that mainstream Indian films are often based on one or both of two great epic stories, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, but in addition, they locate other traditions that can be seen in the development of Bollywood. Hollywood is identified as one of these, but so too are classical Indian theatre, folk theatre, nineteenth-century Parsi theatre and musical television (1998, p. 17).

Hollywood, viewed here as a factor in Bollywood's evolution, is not a sole, overwhelming influence so much as an example selectively adopted by filmmakers who wanted to fuse the best of both cultures in a way that would appeal to the greatest number: "filmmakers very quickly succeeded in adapting the ethos, resources and inventiveness of Hollywood to suit indigenous tastes, sensibilities and outlooks" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 20; Nayar, 2003). In naming the sources of the "ten master plots" underpinning Bollywood storylines, screenplay writer Javed Akhtar refers to Roman, Greek and Hindu mythology, but not to Hollywood, suggesting that the classic narratives found in these myths, such as stories of lost and found items, vendettas and, of course, romances, are the source of most Indian film tales (cited in Kabir, 1999, p. 34). Akhtar does suggest that there are some commonalities in the way Hollywood has created a mythical story of its past, embodied in the genre of the western, and the way that Hindi cinema has formulated its own myths, describing the latter as a type of "contemporary folklore" (quoted in Kabir, 1999, pp. 35, 72). He also discusses the universal nature of the romance, suggesting that "in India whenever we are confused, we hide behind romance" (quoted in Kabir, 1999, p. 94). This portends escape from life's difficulties, which can be seen as reinforcing the thesis of Bollywood as pure entertainment, but also provides an element that has cross-national appeal and may signify the presence of a greater level of political or social conflict.

As Dickey notes, such types of popular or folk culture can often provide means of resistance that may be less ostensible but more effective than open revolution (1993, p. 11; also see Clarke 1990; Virdi, 2003). In

particular, there is an argument to be made for Indian cinema demonstrating its cultural roots through a melding, however opportunistic, of a time-honoured marketing formula with ideas extracted from more traditional forms of drama (Booth, 1995; Dickey, 1993; Vasudevan, 2000). Under this argument, it is possible to view the popularity of films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* through the glocalized lens: "Western culture and glitter are very attractive. So *Maine Pyar Kiya* and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* offer the solution: a happy marriage between the two worlds. I can have everything offered by modernisation, and still hold on to family values and tradition at the same time" (Kabir, 1999, p. 95). Nandy seems to see a more clearly defined resistance than a marriage of the two elements, but his vision of the oppressor is much darker and more menacing:

when much of the oppression and violence in society is inflicted in the name of categories such as development, science, progress, and national security, there has grown a tacit demand for a different kind of political attitude towards cultural traditions. However much we may bemoan the encroachment of mass culture through the commercial cinema, the fact remains that it is commercial cinema which, if only by default, has been more responsive to such demands and more protective towards nonmodern categories.(1995, p. 235)

The features of Indian drama that Western critics sometimes find most frustrating or incomprehensible, such as "endless digressions, detours, plots within plots," are the very ones that have been identified as "unmistakably Indian," derived from the similarly circuitous nature of classical Indian drama (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 17). Likewise, the extraordinary degree of glamour and artifice, the melodramatic rejection of any pretence at realism, are all puzzling by Western standards, but fairly typical by Bollywood ones (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 33). The word *masala*, signifying a mixture of spices, is sometimes used to describe the typical Hindi film, because of the occasionally illogical elements thrown together. While the apparent randomness of this mix might not strike the avid viewer of Indian film as bizarre, it is only one of several factors that has prevented Bollywood cinema from attracting a widespread audience outside of the worldwide South Asian community. The answer, however, is not to conform to the Western style of filmmaking, but to recognize the strengths of both forms of production. Esteemed parallel cinema director Shyam Bengal, suggests that a dialectical relationship needs to be established: "I cannot see Hollywood films achieving a real grip on our market, at least for some time...Americans know little or nothing about our culture, or what appeals to [us]. We have a lot to learn from them, but they have to learn from us too," a sentiment echoed by Kamal Nahta, a film magazine editor, who says that "'[w]e must realize that however good a western film may be, it cannot answer the cultural needs of Indians as easily as our films can" (quoted in Sidhva, 1996, p. 49).

While it is surely too dismissive of Hindi film's complexities to suggest that the most popular Bollywood films are the ones that assert national identity, it is certainly possible to find a strong strain of national pride in some of the more successful films. The film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) serves as an interesting example because of its layering of identities, its strong bias towards Indian culture and its suggestion of the sense of exile that can afflict diasporic communities. In this case, the exile is almost literal, since the main characters, portrayed by popular actors Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, have left India in reaction to the strong disapproval of their marriage displayed by Khan's parents. Having relocated to London with Kajol's younger sister, played by Kareena Kapoor, the family enjoys an affluent lifestyle, complete with wealthy non-Indian neighbours and friends, expensive cars, and extravagant Western clothes, especially those worn by Kapoor's character. When Khan's younger brother, masquerading as a stranger, makes his appearance on the scene, he appears to be equally Westernized in his clothes and mannerisms. In the midst of plenty, however, Kajol is perpetually dissatisfied, longing for a return to the motherland, equating the reconciliation of her currently fractured family with restoration to India. She frequently mocks her non-Indian acquaintances and is occasionally teased by her family for her unwillingness to adapt to the norms of their new surroundings. Significantly, despite the differences between Kapoor's revealing Western clothing and flirtatiousness, and Kajol's constant wearing of saris and her status as devoted homemaker, eventually both sisters are united in their desire to return to India and to be accepted into the family home, a desire that is fulfilled by the end of the movie.

While the Indian movie can be seen as the conduit through which unity occurs or is strengthened, it does not always follow that cultural or familial unity is the natural counterpart of anti-Americanism, or resistance

to modernization. Mira Reym Binford suggests that the Hindi film provides a means for passing down traditional beliefs and values, but does not appear to imply that this entails a denial of modern norms so much as a way to accommodate them. In this case, accommodation remains possible without a concurrent sacrifice of the self (cited in Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 11). Mitra makes a similar suggestion regarding the fusion of disparate identities, addressing the modern dilemma of the diasporic South Asian who recognizes the limited possibilities for assimilating completely into the new culture or for wholly retaining the old: "It is finding that critical mix that becomes the crusade of many Indians as they increasingly feel marginalized in the Western public sphere precisely because they still retain many of the Indian attributes which they find very difficult to jettison" (1999, p. 204).

Conclusion

Bollywood is an enormous industry, at the heart of which lie numerous issues of culture, identity and values. This paper has attempted to tackle only one of these in depth, that being the question of whether popular Indian films tend to replicate the norms of a hegemonic, Westernized culture (often equated with global culture), or whether they instead strengthen existing cultural norms across the South Asian diaspora. The answer lies somewhere in between. However imperfect it may be in terms of representing regional and linguistic diversity, or in posing challenges to difficult societal issues revolving around gender, class or religion, Bollywood has managed to arrive at a compromise that allows it to assert and affirm traditional values for fans within India and across the diasporic community without becoming mired in what seems like an increasingly fruitless attempt to deny the significance of all-pervasive symbols of Westernization. Such a concession may seem the moral equivalent of defeat to critics of cultural imperialism, but it may also signal the only opportunity to "display a culturally grounded engagement with modernity" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998, p. 24).

While a new wave of non-Bollywood films such as *American Desi* (2001), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and *East is East* (1999) undertake a more detailed, insightful exploration of the type of issues that diasporic South Asians struggle with, such as the inability to reconcile longstanding conservative values surrounding love, religion and behavioural norms with so-called modern standards (see Desai, 2004), these films do not necessarily displace the crucial role played by Bollywood cinema. Ultimately, Nandy sees Bollywood as exhibiting not India's faults but its overall strength: "the uniqueness of Indian culture," he hypothesizes, "lies not so much in a unique ideology as in the society's traditional ability to live with cultural ambiguities and to use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defences against cultural invasions" (1983, p. 108). If the local must increasingly fathom the existence of an all-encompassing culture that crosses all national and social boundaries, then the Indian example, however tawdry it may appear to some cultural critics, may serve as a model worth following.

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