

## A Study on Transnational Cultural Spaces in Bollywood Cinema

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### Abstract:

Bollywood cinema has shifted from projecting anti-colonial understandings of moral and sexual female boundaries to emphasizing a more liberated, diasporic female figure, in the last three decades. The genre has traditionally found ways to restrict feminine sexuality within the confines of a nation-state, and only in a post-nation-state world, within transnational cultural spaces,

can the female figure achieve some degree of liberation. The present research paper chronologically explores the development of depictions of females in the Indian diaspora in five major Bollywood films: *Pardes*, *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gam*, *Salaam Namaste* and *Love Aaj Kal*.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Bollywood, Cinema, Women, Film Studies*

### INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

### **1. The (Re) Birth of the Diasporic Film in *DDLJ* and *Pardes*:**

*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) is perhaps the foundational text for modern diasporic films. The film is a clear departure from original monolithic classifications of the NRI as either longing for the homeland or morally depraved: Shah Rukh Khan as Raj represents an NRI figure that has, to a degree, negotiated the straddle of being both Indian and English. Raj has adopted some 'immoral' Western traits which we first see when he tricks Amrish Puri's character Baldev, the main character's father and a migrant from India to London, into selling him beer; he flirts with Simran (Kajol), Baldev's daughter, and flaunts his sexual exploits to his friends. But Raj reasserts his Indian-ness to the audience in a scene when a drunken Simran falls asleep in his bed and awakens wearing his clothes. Terrified, she asks what happened the night before. Raj reminds her that he is Hindustani and understands the value of an Indian girl's honor.

Raj assures Simran, and more importantly an audience concerned about the translation of values across oceans, that he remains morally 'Indian,' and in doing so, immediately changes the story from an innocent love story to a love story infused with the traditional values of the homeland. In doing so, Raj inscribes what Patricia Uberoi calls the 'tyranny of tradition' into the story. (Uberoi, 322)

Though he was fully in control of Simran's body the night before, he benevolently spared her solely because he understands what an Indian girl's honor means. These are the two central elements of womanhood as defined by Bollywood the nation and feminine sexuality and Raj, in recognizing their inviolability, reinforces Bollywood's essentialist interpretation of the woman. He protects Simran, yes, but by protecting Simran's sexual purity, he robs her of the ability to protect herself. (Mankekar 739)

The NRI, central in negotiating the unidentified cultural space spanning the diaspora and India, is defined in terms of two distinct gender roles: the male NRI is wealthy, an archetypal knight in-shining-armor, and most importantly, he protects female sexuality from the moral groupings of the Western world, "his female counterpart is simply chaste and often lacking personality." (Mankekar 734) Though Simran's sexuality is not eliminated instead, it is veritably flaunted in scenes where she dons a short skirt and dances sexually in the rain it is acceptable only because it exists beneath the authority of men.

"Most critics have treated *DDLJ* as a film somewhat radical for its time, arguing that it treated the diaspora not as a place of total moral depravation where the Indian spirit goes to die, but as a potentially new cultural space in which Indian values can be transported and negotiated by a willing NRI." (Mankekar 742) However, this negotiation is only possible for the male NRI "... not only does *DDLJ* disallow a space for the female NRI to negotiate this new cultural space,

but in fact indicates that the only reason the male NRI can exist as this cosmopolitan figure is because of the suppression of the woman and the overt “protection” of her sexual purity.” (Mankekar 749) Robina Mohammad argues this with dexterity:

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

On a metaphorical level, this need for female chastity in the diaspora speaks to the metaphor of woman as a site for the valorization of the Indian nation a concept that dates back cinematically to the iconic *Mother India* (1957) Threats to the Indian woman are threats to the nation itself; Indian womanhood represents the “nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family.” (Bhattacharjee 31) The essence of India must remain alive away from the homeland, and the male NRI is the soldier protecting it. This interpretation of Indian femininity can be seen clearest in *Pardes* (1997), a film made two years after *DDLJ* and starring two of the same actors: Amrish Puri as the father and Shah Rukh Khan as the good male NRI figure. *Pardes*, meaning “Foreign Land,” lacks whatever subtlety

*DDLJ* managed to include in its narrative. “The film hearkens back to the 70’s era portrayal of the diaspora in some ways, wherein its central conflict is between the nation and the West.” (Uberoi 326). The cultural space negotiated by *DDLJ* for the male NRI to easily exist economically and physically in the West but morally in the East is strained and threatened. The storyline revolves around Kishorilal (Amrish Puri), an immigrant Indian who has made a fortune in the States but whose heart yearns for India. His yearning is painfully obvious and drilled into the viewer’s mind in an early set of conversations where he lauds the beauty of India, down to her very soil, and in the song sequence “I Love My India,” in which he declaims, “I saw London, I saw Paris, I saw Japan...there isn’t another India in the whole world.”

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