

Finding Home in a Song and a Dance: Nation, Culture, Bollywood

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In this piece, the author considers issues of ethnic, gender, and class identities as she reflects on how Bollywood films can evoke "home" for members of the South Asian diaspora (displaced or dispersed people). Bollywood (a contraction of "Bombay" and "Hollywood") produces commercial Hindi films. It is the largest film industry in the world, producing more than twice the number of films that Hollywood produces annually.

A diasporic community consists of people displaced from their homeland through voluntary or forced migrations. The struggles of diasporic populations center around two ongoing issues: the transmission of cultural values/norms to future generations and coming to terms with multiple home spaces. But what is home? And how do cultural values get transmitted? Chandra Mohanty (1993) reminds us home is not necessarily a physical space, but rather can be a space where we create a sense of belonging emotionally, politically and through our ideas and beliefs. This sense of belonging is actually created through various sites of influence -- our families, friends, school, media, power structures in society and all the various communities in which we are involved. In this essay, I focus on one of these sites (media) for one particular community (South Asian diaspora) and their negotiations with "home." I write from the perspective of a participant observer, someone who is both a participant and researcher within a community. I am a first generation Indian woman, currently living in Los Angeles. First coming to the U.S. at eighteen years of age, I have gone back and forth between India and the U.S., looking for home in different spaces. My family lives in India; I work and live in the

U.S. Like Mohanty, the more I traverse the globe, the more I too believe that home really is an ideological space. Or as they might say in the movies, “Home is where the heart is.”

In this chapter, I unpack how Hindi films and the Bollywood dream machine come to symbolize home, and occupy an increasingly powerful role of transmitting cultural norms within the South Asian community, particularly for first generation immigrants. Yet, there are many different negotiations of home depending on one’s subjectivity, or how one is positioned within society. For example, Gayathri Gopinath (2003) has written about the complicated relationships queer subjects have with “home” and “nation” because of their outsider status to “home” within a social system where men dominate, and which assumes and enforces heterosexuality as the norm (heteropatriarchy).

So when diasporic populations evoke “home,” it is important to ask how exactly home is construed and how it gets conflated with nation. What notions of the nation get reproduced in our imaginary? What are the omissions of class in these reproductions? What equations of gender do these films champion? What notions of “home” are reproduced, by and for different diasporic subjects? Can we complicate those readings?

... The success of Bollywood films in the “overseas” markets post-1990 translates into efforts to be more inclusive of the diasporic experience, which was imagined (and portrayed) as primarily wealthy and educated in Bollywood. Framed through the *mediascapes* Appadurai (1996/2000) theorized, which refer to the images of the world created by the media and their global distribution, the diasporic Indian was increasingly represented as crucial to the Indian economy and nation-state (Mankekar, 1999). The effort to appeal to this group has produced representations in many Bollywood films of Indian identity that are no longer necessarily tied to the homeland. Post-1990 Bollywood notions of identity are based on cultural values, religious customs, even celebrations of wealth that are associated with the diaspora (Malhotra & Alagh, 2004). So increasingly, “home” is located in values,

practices and customs, which can be anywhere physically or literally (although we mostly see it being located in the U.S. or Western Europe). Bollywood speaks to and draws in the diaspora, and increasingly, the diaspora looks to Bollywood to find “home.” ... I find that Hindi films are a powerful vehicle for evoking “home” for diasporic populations. Additionally, they are utilized by otherwise potentially disenfranchised populations to imagine themselves into the nation, even as the nation gets increasingly narrowly re-imagined by Bollywood films.

Queering the Nation, Creating Home through Bollywood

In this section I write about an evening spent with a queer diasporic group reclaiming Bollywood in ways that might open up the exclusions inherent in its representations. Gayatri Gopinath (2003) has written convincingly about how the desire to belong to a home or nation is framed through our particular lens of gender and sexuality. She argues that a traditionally invisible queer subjectivity within the nation might be able to negotiate alternative modes of belonging to the nation. My evening with *Satrang* illustrates her point.

It's a chilly Los Angeles night when I make my way to the BeverlyWoods home where I'm told that *Satrang*, the Southern California-based South Asian Queer group is hosting a *Sholay* night. It is my first time meeting the folks at *Satrang*. I am awkward. But they are welcoming. Hindi and English with varying accents fill the room as I enter its warmth. The latest Bollywood hit songs play in the background and at first, everyone mills about, eating, drinking and reminiscing about their relationship with the film, *Sholay* (which roughly translates as “Embers” or “Flames”). *Sholay* is a film released in 1975, which became one of the highest grossing and longest running films in India. Many people watched the film repeatedly, and it became an instant cult classic of sorts. I overhear conversations comparing notes on how many times they'd seen the film “back home.” The invitation had encouraged attendees to come dressed as their favorite *Sholay* character, and as I look around the

room I see various characters from the film, some of whom are in drag. I watch a beautiful “woman” twirl with her many layered skirt and ask, “How do you like my *Basanti*?” (*Basanti* is the film’s heroine). Most exclaim that the twirler, Salim (I have not used people’s real names in this section), makes a beautiful Bollywood heroine. Someone teases him about the hours he must have spent on his stunning makeup. Soon, the hardwood floor in the living room is cleared as the call goes out to start the film. The gigantic television takes center stage. The film begins. Some are viewing it casually, popping in and out of the room during their favorite scenes, socializing in the next room when not watching. There are a select few though, who are fully committed to the viewing experience and interacting with it.

Roshini has donned the garb of the bandit in the film, *Gabbar Singh*, and is thoroughly enjoying saying his dialogues a split second before he says them. “*Kitne aadmi the?*” (“How many men were there?”) she bellows, complete with gestures, almost drowning out the onscreen dacoit. Some of the other audience members shush her; others join her in the dialogue. Almost everyone in the room knows these lines by heart. In fact most of the lines of the film are being lip synced by the entire audience. Entire decades and continents are spanned in their sing-along to one of the film’s popular songs, “*Yeh dosti*” or “This friendship.” There is particular pleasure taken in this song and the bond between the two male protagonists, because it is one that has been subversively read by critics (Ghosh, 2002) as signifying a possibly gay relationship. When done by this audience, performing the various characters, and the speaking aloud of the lines takes on an embodied intensity because they are inserting themselves into a heterosexually normative script, reading against the grain, finding pleasure in their subversive readings and side comments about what might “actually” be going on between the onscreen friends.

As the film approaches its climax, the heroine, Basanti, begins singing her last song on screen. Salim, who has spent painstaking hours practicing this song in his twirly skirts, begins to mirror her every move in the center of the living room. Her song declares that she will dance as long as she breathes, dancing on broken glass to save the life of her lover (over-the-top drama being essential to the Bollywood formula). Salim puts all the tragedy, the angst, and the grace into his strangely mirror-like dance. She twirls with a flourish. He twirls with a flourish. She glares down the villain bandit. He glares down the world that would judge him by staring down the lifesize bright screen image. In the spinning of his skirts, he embodies her. And in his embodiment of the classic film heroine, he produces a space where the queer South Asian diasporic community finally gets to go home. To a home where they are seen in their fullness, both South Asian and queer, where they are viewed as desirable subjects and are not relegated to the shadows or the sidelines. They return to a home where their queer embodiments of characters reclaim and re-imagine films that evoke the nostalgia of their teenage years. It is a home that exists only in the interstices of fantasy and reality, of here and there, of queer and straight. Yet it is an important home. "For those who live on the borders," Hegde argues, "home is an imaginary construct that shifts between all these (geographical, historical, emotional, sensory) spaces," (Hegde, 2002, p.264).

Salim, Roshni and other members of *Satrang* have formulated alternative modes of belonging to a nation that is not able to embrace their subjectivities in all their fullness. Their gender-queer performances have subverted and rewritten conventional gender norms within these films. There was obviously nostalgia for a film that represented their childhood. But they opened up new interpretations and new spaces for themselves in how they interacted with the film. Nostalgia, Gopinath (2003) reminds us, is a powerful mode strategically deployed to imagine new belongings even as queer South Asian subjects balance a complicated and sometimes contested relationship with

their national identities and home. And so it was on that chilly Los Angeles night. Nostalgia met embodied performance to bring the Satrang folks home on their own terms.

Imaginary Homes, Lost and Found

By looking at the diasporic audiences... as evoked by the *Sholay* night with Satrang, I have argued that when diasporic audiences engage with Bollywood, it can be a powerful way to evoke "home." However, one's relationship with that home is dependent on one's subject position. If one is from a more dominant group, the relationship with home and nation is one of acceptance and even celebration, where Bollywood is seen as equivalent to India, or as a bridge to the culture. But there are many questions one can ask about the home that gets re-created through Bollywood films. When Bollywood becomes the medium through which one gets to "go home," it is crucial to ask about the "homes" that get erased or are no longer portrayed. I have previously argued (Malhotra & Alagh, 2004) that one of the trends in post-1990 Hindi cinema is a move away from films that deal with poverty and the "common" person to films that often glorify wealth. There are numerous gender critiques of Bollywood as well. Therefore, conflating Bollywood with the nation reproduces a nationalist, sexist and classist discourse. When Bollywood becomes the primary framework through which one connects to India, the potential disconnects are many.

However, there may be ways to reclaim Bollywood, to subvert its dominant discourses and recuperate a sense of home and belonging. If one's subject position is marginalized, the relationships among home, nation and Bollywood films can be a complicated and contested one. First, from a marginal position, the conflation of Bollywood and India is contested as hegemonic discourses about gender and sexuality are performed. Furthermore, in their embodied engagement with Bollywood, the marginalized find spaces not only to rewrite themselves but perhaps to re-script the nation's imaginary.

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