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Hinduism and Its Others in Bollywood Film of the 2000s

Abstract
This article was delivered as a paper at the 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul, Turkey.

Author Notes
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Introduction

This paper will explore the representation of Hinduism and its others in Bollywood Film of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It will deal with constructed notions of "otherness" as revealed in the representation of the "West" and of "India" in popular Hindi film. I will focus on the discourse of difference as well as on issues of nationalism, diaspora and globalization. I analyze the films in the light of ideological criticism and post-colonial theory as represented in the work of Edward Said (1979), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Partha Chatterjee (1993), my own work on the discourse of otherism, and theories of nationalism expounded by Benedict Anderson (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (2003). The films that I will discuss are: *Lagān* (*Rent on Land*) and *Ham dil de cuke sanam (I Have Already Given My Heart Away)*. It is characteristic of these films that they deal with aspects of modernity, westernization and globalization in order to assert a modern Hindu-Indian identity that is different, "other," and often traditional and conservative.

In the following I will discuss briefly the beginnings, development and the different periods of Bollywood film as well as its politics, aesthetic and genres. I will then focus on the theoretical discourse of the 'self and the other,' the discourse of otherism and the differences that it produces in the era of globalization, diaspora and hybridity.

Bollywood film: history, periodization and aesthetic

I use the term "Bollywood Film" to denote the Hindi-Urdu popular cinema of India, which has its center in Mumbai (Bombay). It has been argued that the term "Bollywood" is not a perfect one, "as it implies that Hindi cinema is a derivation of Hollywood and thus an insulting term,"

(Dwyer, 2005: 4). However, it is the dominant global term to refer to the prolific Hindi language film industry in Bombay and has also become part of the academic jargon appearing on the titles of many recent books on Hindi-Urdu popular cinema. Therefore I have adopted it in this essay.

The beginnings of cinema in India go back to 1896, when the first cinematographe show was presented at the Watson's hotel in Bombay. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (Dadasaheb Phalke, 1870-1944) is venerated nowadays as the "Father of Indian cinema." His first film *Raja Harischandra* made its debut in Bombay's Coronation Cinematographe Theatre in 1913 and is considered the first Hindi film. Sound and music arrived in Indian cinema in 1931. In the following two decades several studios, organized along lines similar to Hollywood, made an important contribution to the further development of the Hindi film industry. Four important studios of this era were Imperial Films Company in Bombay, Prabhat Film Company in Pune, New Theatres in Calcutta, and Bombay Talkies. During World War II there were shortages of raw film stock and a thriving black market. The priority that was given to films supporting the war resulted in the production of numerous war movies. During and after Partition the importance of the Bombay film industry grew, as the film industries located in Calcutta and Lahore lost personnel and audiences. The post-independence film industry was shaped by the histories of migration and displacement. Bombay became one of the few centers in India where the Urdu language was kept alive, as Hindi films continued to be made in Hindustani, building on a common Hindi-Urdu vocabulary, and not in the highly Sanskritized Hindi, promoted by the government. Moreover, Urdu poets and many Muslim stars, directors, lyricists and screenwriters have enjoyed prominence and success in the film industry located in Bombay (Ganti, 2004: 8-23).

Scholars have categorized Hindi film-making in post-Independence India in three main eras: Hindi cinema in the “nation-building” Nehruvian era in the 1950s, Hindi cinema during the crisis of the state in the 1970s, and Hindi cinema in the period of liberalization and satellite television after 1991 and up to present day. (Ganti, 2004: 23-43)

The politics of Bollywood have been studied by scholars in terms of the ideology of class, gender and sexuality and of the nation. M. Madhava Prasad’s book on the *Ideology of the Hindi Film* elaborates on the historical construction of class and gender in film. Bollywood film is also seen as a medium for exploring the nation. An important study here is Sumita Chakravarty’s *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987.* Chakravarty deals with questions of identity, authenticity, citizenship and collectivity. As the dominant media institution within India, the Bombay film industry plays an important role in constructing and defining the concepts of traditional and modern, global and local, and notions of “culture,” “nation” and “Indian.” (Ganti, 2004: 3).

The sources and origins of the aesthetic of Bollywood film are to be found in Indian music and dance, folk dramatic tradition, Urdu literature, classical Sanskrit drama, the epic narratives of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, Shakespeare and European drama, especially as transmitted and rendered by the Parsi Theatre of the Colonial period, and of European and World Cinema. The importance of the Parsi theatre cannot be emphasized enough. The Parsi theater groups provided the first writers and performers for the film industry, as most actors of the Parsi theatre switched over to film acting. Assimilation of Shakespeare, Persian lyric poetry, Indian folk traditions and Sanskrit drama, operatic structure integrating songs into the narrative, use of the Urdu language, and dominance of

the genres of the historical, mythological and romantic melodrama are key features of the Parsi theatre. Scholars therefore see the tradition of the Parsi theatre as the immediate aesthetic and cultural precursor of the aesthetic of popular Hindi cinema. (Radhyaksha and Willemen 1999, Ganti 2004: 8)

Important features of the classical Bollywood film are the use of melodrama to heighten emotional response, universal target audience, the understanding of cinema as mass entertainment and as a variety show and the implementation of hybrid business models, in which cinema and music industries are closely coordinated. One of the most distinctive elements of Bollywood film that audiences unfamiliar with the genre notice immediately is the role that songs play. The centrality of music has its roots in older performance traditions, for instance in classical Sanskrit drama, folk theatre, and Parsi theatre, which integrated music, dance and song in the performance. In Hindi films, music and film define and propel the development of the plot. They also convey the heightening of emotion, typical of the melodramatic aesthetic of Bollywood film, especially regarding love and romance. Thus the development of romance in most films is played out in the song sequences.

Songs are also used to represent fantasy, desire and passion that is inherent in the development of the love story. Similarly, allusions to eroticism, sexuality, and physical intimacy are conveyed in the songs. Sometimes the songs contribute to the characterization of the characters, especially when they are used to introduce the leading actors in the film. Last but not least, songs are essential to the marketing of a popular Hindi film and to its commercial success. Tejaswini Ganti has made the observation that songs also operate as virtual tourism, as many songs are shot in exotic locations and abroad, for instance in Europe, North America and Australia. Songs, especially songs in exotic or foreign locations are the critical element in a

film's repeat value. (Ganti, 2004: 78-87) Ganti is right in observing that Hindi films circulate globally, so many governments use Bollywood films to promote tourism in their countries. On the other hand, the continuously growing interest in foreign locations may be the consequence of the increasing globalization in India and the need to address issues related to the global and the local, immigration, diaspora, and hybrid identities.

Most Indian films do not fit in the Western descriptions of film genres such as "musical," "comedy," "drama," "action" and "love story," since each Hindi film may contain all of these elements and more. Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to classify and organize Bollywood films under these rubrics. Thus, Subhash Jha distinguishes between "drama," "comedy," "war drama," "family drama," "thrillers and mysteries," "romance," "historical," "action," and "parallel cinema." (Jha, 2005)

The phenomenal box-office success of the film *Ham āpke haiṃ kaun* ("Who Am I to You"), 1994, established the dominance of the genre of "family entertainers" in the films of the mid-1990s. These are love stories filled with songs, dances, elaborate cultural spectacles like weddings, set against the backdrop of extremely wealthy, extended and frequently trans-national families. This film set the trend for filmmaking in the 1990s in terms of themes, visual style, music and marketing. (Ganti 2004: 39) What is remarkable of the films of the 1990s is the nearly complete erasure of class difference, caste affiliation and the focus on wealth. The protagonists are incredibly rich, but these wealthy businessmen are not the symbol of exploitation and injustice, but depicted as loving fathers. Furthermore, in this type of films, there are no villains and therefore the state and its representatives are absent, too. Additionally, there is a high level of conformism. Thus, in love stories depicted in earlier films, the young people rebelled against parental disapproval. In the films of the 1990s and 2000s, there is parental opposition and

disapproval, too. However, the conflict is internalized as a conflict between individual desire and duty to one's family. (Ganti 2004: 40) Dominant is the theme of compliant daughters and sons willing to sacrifice their love for the sake of family honor and harmony. This compliance with patriarchal norms illustrates the conservative outlook of many contemporary Indian films. It is linked to the deliberate presentation of a commodified Indian identity, which aims at the celebration of "family values" (represented by the stereotypical North Indian Hindu joint family) and an affirmation of "Indian tradition" in an increasingly globalized world.

Another trend is the upsurge of nationalism in films. Tejaswini Ganti argues that the nationalism of contemporary Bollywood films is different from the patriotism and nationalism of earlier films. She states that the focus and subject matter is not the West with its immoral and materialistic culture that is contrasted to the cultural superiority of India, but the figure of the terrorist. She concludes that nationalism is no longer depicted through a simple East-West dichotomy. (Ganti 2004: 42) While the significance of films such as *Bombay*, *Dil se* ("From the Heart,") and *Roja* and their treatment of the evils of terrorism, communalism and separatism would support this inference, I would argue that the dichotomy between India and the West, and the global and the local remains a powerful tool for constructing national and cultural identity, affirming "Indian tradition" and "Indian" values in some of the most influential, successful and trend-setting films of the 1990s and the 2000s.

I will therefore discuss the construction of an Indian cultural identity by means of representing India and its religion, culture and values as distinct, unique and superior and at the same time marking India's difference from other cultures, notably from the West. The "West," as this "Other" was incorporated into India's image of itself. This encounter with difference and the construction of "otherness" is analyzed in terms of the discourses of "self" and "otherness"

through which India came to represent itself and imagine its difference from the West. The two films that I will discuss in this paper are films that belong of the period of liberalization and satellite TV of the 1990s and 2000s. According to Jha's classification, they belong to two different genres: the historical: *Lagān*, and the romance *Ham dil de cuke sanam* (*HDDCS*).

The Discourse of otherism and the construction of difference

In his book Orientalism, Edward Said analyzed various discourses and institutions which constructed and produced the entity called "the Orient" as an object of knowledge. He calls this discourse "orientalism." Said refers mainly to the Middle East and his main focus is French writing about the Middle East. However, by analogy, his methodology and findings can be used to analyze similar discourses about South Asia and India, as reflected in British colonial writing. The discursive practices of "orientalism" involve idealization, the projection of fantasies of desire and degradation, the use of stereotypes, the failure to recognize and respect difference, the tendency to impose European categories and norms and to see difference through the modes of perception and representation of the West. (Hall, 2000: 215) As Said has argued, "the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority." (Said, 1985: 42)

In the era of post-colonialism, globalization, and the emergence of former colonized countries as independent and powerful nations who have become important global players, similar discourses about the "West" have originated in the "Orient." Thus, India has generated various discourses, which have produced and constructed the entity of "the West." The discursive practices are similar to that of "orientalism"-- idealization, the projection of fantasies

of desire and degradation, the use of stereotypes, the failure to recognize and respect difference, the tendency to impose Indian categories and norms and to see difference through Indian modes of perception and representation. For lack of a better term, we may call this discourse "Occidentalism." As is typical of this type of discourse, difference and "otherness" are used to promote the idea of the superiority of India and Indian values. The mass media, and especially popular Hindi film, have contributed significantly to the formation and spread of this discourse.

I will use the term "otherism" which I have coined in my last book, to denote the universal discourse of "otherness and othering." (Dimitrova 2014: 1-19) Unlike Said's "orientalism" (Said, 1979), otherism is a more inclusive term, as it reflects not only on race and ethnicity, but also on gender and sexuality, and goes beyond the "West and the rest"-dichotomy to include each religion's/nations's/culture's inner and outer 'others.' In the discourse of otherism, any religion/culture/gender/sexuality can be the "other" and be "othered," when stereotyped, viewed and talked about from a certain dominant perspective, be it "orientalist", "occidentalist," etc.

It is the narrative of power that defines otherism; the owner of the discourse is the party which sees itself in the position of power to other the other party and marginalize it by producing meanings about it as different or inferior. This could be the 'West' othering the 'Rest' or India othering the 'West,' or Hinduism othering its others who are non-Hindus and therefore do not share the same value system of caste and culture – in order to establish its own position of superiority – as revealed in the two films discussed here.

Hinduism and its others in the films *Lagān* and *HDDCS*

Thus, in the film *Lagān* it is the Indian villagers who are portrayed as morally superior and heroic, while the British rulers are stereotyped as arrogant, cruel and superficial. British rule is exposed as unjust and oppressive. The film is set in a North Indian village, Champaner, which is part of a princely state, in 1893. The villagers have to pay a tax on land, *lagān.* The Rājā pleads with Captain Russel (Paul Blackthorne) to lower the tax, as there was no rain and the villagers would starve, but instead he imposed twice the tax. Annoyed at the rebelliousness of the villagers and of Bhuvan's (Aamir Khan) daring comparison of British cricket to the villagers' game *gulli-daṇḍa*, Russel says that he will exempt them from paying tax for three years if they beat the British at cricket. If they lose, they will have to pay extra tax. Bhuvan succeeds in persuading the villagers to fight against British injustice. The villagers do not know the rules of cricket, but Russel's sister Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley) helps them to master the game. The film shows the villagers united in their fight against the enemy, both across caste lines as well as the lines of religious affiliation: Hindus with caste affiliation and untouchables, Muslims, and Sikhs all take part in the game and contribute to the victory of the villagers. In this way, the film not only constructs the moral superiority and heroism of the Indian villagers by contrasting them to the "otherness" of the British, but also promotes the idea of national unity, of Indian values and "Indianness."

The *pūjā* in the temple and the prayer to Krishna before the decisive game makes the fight of the villagers "sacred." Thus the villagers represent, to use Benedict Anderson's term, the "imagined community" of the Indian nation, which becomes a sacred collectivity. Émile Durkheim called the cultural beliefs, moral values, symbols and ideas shared by any human

group "collective representations." Representations create a symbolic world of meanings within which a cultural group lives (Hall, 2000: 157) Thus, the film *Lagān* constructs a powerful symbolic world of "Indianness:" different from all evils of the West: heroic, just, morally superior, sacred, and universalistic Hindu. One cannot overlook the fact that even though the villagers are Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, it is the Hindu pūjā and prayer to the Hindu god Krishna, in a Hindu temple, which makes their fight sacred.

The difference between "Indianness" and the "West" and the construction of "otherness" is reinforced by the introduction of the female characters. Elizabeth is an educated British woman, while Gauri (Gracy Singh) is a simple Indian village girl. They are both portrayed as being in love with Bhuvan. The love romance between Bhuvan and Gauri, and between Elizabeth and Bhuvan is conveyed in the songs, which present a beautiful mixture of British and Indian musical styles and dances. Elizabeth is depicted as full of admiration for India: she learns Hindi, willingly participates in the Hindu pūjā, and in her dreams she sees herself dressed as an Indian woman living together with Bhuvan in an Indian village. Her love for Bhuvan is an expression of the desirability and attractiveness of India and Indians. By contrast, Bhuvan "chooses" Gauri, thus affirming the attractiveness and desirability of the Indian "self," not of the Western, foreign, British "Other."

It is interesting to note that the interpretation of the love triangle between Bhuvan, Gauri, and Elizabeth is based on the mythology of the Hindu god Krishna, his favourite *gopī* (cowherd girl) Radha and the devotional woman-poet Mira who sees herself as wed to Krishna. The audiences quickly grasp that Bhuvan represents Krishna, Gauri stands for Radha, and Elizabeth signifies Mira. This interpretation, which is in line with Hindu mythology, is reinforced by the beautiful scene, in which Krishna and Gauri enact the rāsa-līlā (love-play) dance between

Krishna and Radha, to the delight of their fellow villagers who watch Bhuvan and Gauri's performance, and to our own delight as audience of the film.

Another film that deals with issues related to Hinduism and its others is the film *HDDCS* (I have given my heart away). Nandini (Aishwarya Rai) is the daughter of a teacher of classical Indian music. She lives in a vast *haveli*. The joint family in which she was raised lives according to Indian patriarchal tradition. Sameer Rossellini (Salman Khan), who is half-Italian, half-Indian and who lives in Italy, comes to India to study music with Nandini's father. He and Nandini fall in love. However, she is promised in marriage to Vanraj (Ajay Devgan). Even though her parents realize that she loves Sameer and not Vanray, they do not consent to their marriage as Sameer is "the Other," a "foreigner," a Christian and therefore outside the caste system. By contrast, Vanraj is Indian, a Hindu and of appropriate caste, therefore he is considered a suitable husband for Nandini. When Vanraj finds out that his wife loves someone else, he takes her to Italy to search for Sameer.[1] On their journey, Nandini comes to appreciate Vanraj. When she finally meets Sameer, she decides to go back to her husband Vanraj.

Symbolically, Nandini decides not only for a life together with Vanraj, but also to stay married, and to live in India and within the Hindu tradition. Had she chosen to stay with Sameer, she would have had to obtain a divorce first, live in Italy, in the West, and live among Christians, outside of the Hindu tradition. The film does not convey the message that this is an enviable option. When Vanraj and Sameer meet in Italy, they drink and sing together, both of them home-sick for India, its festivals and rituals. Sameer who has grown up in Italy and is about to become a successful musician is presented as

[1] HDDCS is actually filmed in Budapest and elsewhere in Hungary and it is interesting to note that the film-makers make no attempt whatsoever to hide this. Thus, the camera celebrates the beauty of Budapest showcasing the Parliament, the river Danube and various buildings, churches and cafés in the city, and we hear the actors in the film speak Hungarian, English and Hindi.

being lonely and longing to return to India. When Nandini leaves him, he cries and tells his mother that he does not want to live in Italy any more. Thus "Indianness" and Indian values and traditions are affirmed and reinforced by contrasting them with the difference and otherness of the West and of non-Indians like Sameer who long to "belong" to India, and not to the West.

It is interesting to note that Vanraj and Nandini come to know each other and become "friends" not in Vanraj's home in India, but in the not so traditional atmosphere of the West. Although they have not consummated their marriage, they share a room in the hotel, eat together and spend the entire day together. They even experience physical intimacy when they embrace in the train in order to avoid the conductor and conceal the fact that they travel without tickets. It is when Nandini is injured and hospitalized when she comes to understand that she and Vanraj are one. As she is unable to do this herself, it is Vanraj who applies the vermilion in the parting of her hair. According to tradition, married Hindu women apply vermilion in the parting of their hair. This is a beautiful image of bonding and affection between husband and wife, which is laden with symbolic meaning for Hindu audiences. Once again, the "otherness" of the West and its culture create a strong sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Another intriguing circumstance is the presence of Christianity and the Christian church in the film. Thoughout the film, Sameer often talks of his Bābā and asks favors of him. It is not clear whether he refers to God the Father or to his own father who has died or to both. He and Vanraj meet accidentally in the church. When he realizes that Vanraj suffers and that a loved one of his suffers and is in pain, Sameer makes him pray in the church and prays with him, that his wish be granted. At that time, Sameer does not know who Vanraj is and that he is praying for Nandini. At the end of the film, when Nandini decides to go back to Vanraj, he remembers that he and Vanraj prayed together for him and his loved one in the church. Therefore Sameer

believes that this is why things take the course they do. We may argue that Christianity and the "Christian" identity of Sameer are used as a marker of his difference and "otherness" and as a means to reinforce the Hindu identity of Nandini and Vanraj. On another level, we may also observe that even though the prayer in the church helps Nandini to recover and also helps Vanraj to get her back, it cannot make up for Sameer's loneliness in Italy and his longing to return to India and to belong there. Though Christian, Sameer is half-Indian. He looks Indian and feels Indian. Living away from India, in the diaspora, he lives in a culture of hybridity. He must learn to inhabit two identities, to speak two cultural languages, and to translate and negotiate between them. The film implies that this culture of hybridity is often linked to loneliness and marginality.

Conclusion

In conclusion we may want to raise the question whether the globalizing process with its tendency toward hybridization and "cultural homogenization" would undermine national forms of cultural identity. Since there is an uneven direction to the global flow, and since unequal relations of cultural power between the West and the rest of the world persist, globalization may appear to be essentially a western phenomenon. It is therefore not surprising that the trend towards "global homogenization" is matched by a powerful revival of "ethnicity." The reaffirmation of cultural roots and the return to tradition and orthodoxy has long been one of the most powerful sources of counter-identification in many post-colonial societies. Thus, alongside the tendency toward global homogenization, there is also fascination with difference, ethnicity and "otherness." As my analysis showed, Bollywood film reverses the "orientalist" discourse in order to produce and construct a discourse of "occidentalism," in which the notions of "the self"

and the "the other" are redefined. Through this discourse of difference and "otherness" a national cultural identity is constructed, which, in the films discussed, is presented as Hindu-Indian and in harmony with traditional values.

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