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Yaari with Angrez: Whiteness for a New Bollywood Hero

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One of the things I've always appreciated about Indian films in general and Hindi ones in particular has been the relative insignificance of whiteness to their narratives. While white characters do turn up occasionally, they are most often peripheral figures who work to create the effect of historical accuracy, like the British soldiers in both *Umrao Jaan* movies (directed by Muzaffar Ali, 1981; directed by J.P. Dutta, 2006), or, in a more recent trend, to increase the hero's masculine status by functioning as backup trophy dancers in, for instance, *Singh is King* (directed by Anees Bazmee, 2008). When white characters play roles more central to the story's political aspirations, they tend to work as somewhat simplistic foils for nationalist heroes, for example, in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (directed by Rajkumar Santoshi, 2002), where they are shown to be unremittingly cruel and callous in order to highlight the protagonist's courageous resistance to them and the unjust system they represent.

I've appreciated the peripheral nature of whiteness in Hindi cinema because it has always suggested to me that Bollywood² has had other fish to fry, so to speak, issues other than India's colonial legacy to explore and debate. This is not to say that Bollywood films haven't been the site of a certain degree of fixation regarding India's relationship to the

West, but such fixation usually plays itself out through the interaction of Indian characters, one or more of whom are depicted as in some way Westernized, either in terms of their apparent racial heritage or their cultural choices. Gangoli (2005) argues that it is the female characters who are more likely than the male to be the markers of an implied battle between the dichotomously constructed values of the West and those of the Indian, since it is on their bodies (the clothes and jewellery they wear, how their hair is done) and in terms of their fates (whether they die or live, are triumphally happy or tragically miserable by the end of the movie) that the West/India divide is delineated. Historically, then, the dilemmas posed by the West have been dealt with primarily by means of Indian characters.

In Bollywood films, whiteness cannot be said to function, therefore, as it does in the West, where the legacy of imperialism has made it an unmarked category, the invisibility of which allows it to behave as a norm that measures the aberrance of racial/cultural others. Hence, whites in the West get to see themselves, not as privileged or as the historical, local winners in an international structure of domination, but as people whose advantages are the result of their individual efforts, whose successes are all entirely earned rather than hugely over-determined, and, even more important, whites get to set the standards of such social institutions as civility, virtue, intelligence, cleanliness, and so on, without having to be aware of how those standards ensure or at least increase the likelihood that non-white, Western others will fail to live up to them and consequently be called criminal, stupid, corrupt, or dirty. It is, largely, though not completely, the unmarked quality of whiteness in the West that allows for this kind of covert and usually unselfconscious exercise of power. As Dyer insists,

As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.

There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. (1997: 1-2)

But in Indian films (in India generally), whiteness, in its still uncommon appearances, *is* marked: it is markedly white, noticeably there, to be resisted or desired or dismissed. It cannot hide its privilege beneath its ubiquity, since it has no such ubiquity. Far from speaking for humanity,

whiteness is delineated most frequently in an oppositional negative, usually as inferior, though rarely as subordinate.

Without its invisibility, whiteness in Bollywood films cannot truly be said to function as a norm, certainly not in Foucault's conception of the norm as a product of modernity that disguises its own historical embeddedness in order to present itself as a timeless, transcendent moral code. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes a sequential carceral archipelago, which emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century and which included schools for juvenile delinquents, workhouses, lunatic asylums, prisons, and finally, charitable homes for the sick and dying. This network trapped for life those who were believed to be liable to exhibit signs of social disorder or who 'resisted disciplinary normalization' and was the model for the 'art of punishing' (1979: 296) we have inherited. It also allowed for the surfacing of, in Foucault's words, 'a new form of "law": a mixture of legality and nature, prescription and constitution, the norm' (1979: 304). What is implicit in his analysis is that this punitive system was/is dependent on historically contingent values hidden beneath a veil of normativity. For the system to remain fully operative, the normative status of disciplinary norms cannot be questioned, since such questioning would reveal them to be provisional, culturally and historically specific beliefs that they indeed are and so render them unstable.³

Given that whiteness is not a norm in Bollywood film or in India, because it is not hidden and does not go unquestioned, the theoretical and political purpose of naming it cannot be the same as in the West. Here is Dyer's justification for his study on whiteness in mainstream Western representations:

The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world. (1997: 2)

It seems to me that Indian cinema already has a long history of racing whiteness. As part of its ongoing affiliation with nationalism, it has named whiteness to undercut its authority. A number of pre-1990 films have demonstrated the inability of white characters to seamlessly or effectively wield modern modes of power/knowledge. For example, in Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ki Khilari* (1977) not only is the imperial ability of whiteness to propagate norms exposed in the relationship between

Wajid Ali Shah, the Nawab of Awadh, and General Outram, the British resident of Lucknow sent by the governor-general to depose him and annex his kingdom, but the failure of Orientalist discourse to comprehend the principles through which this Indian king rules is also made evident, for Wajid, in all his complexity, ultimately escapes Outram's conceptions. As a justification for empire, Orientalism disintegrates in the film, its efficacy lost, and Outram is left having to rely on treachery and the threat of military might. These are the tools of tyrants, not the hegemonic power of modern empires wielding Orientalist discourse.⁴

So it is not the naming of whiteness that matters in Hindi cinema. What matters is that, though not normative, whiteness retains a structural positioning as dominant. It would be difficult to argue otherwise; in those few films where white characters feature as something more than mere figures of colonial authority or the jiggling symbols of a male protagonist's heroic masculinity, they are fundamental in some way. But what is dominance when it is detached from normativity? What does it do? Which ends, or perhaps *whose* ends, does this dominant but *not* normative whiteness serve in Bollywood films?

To answer these questions, I will examine two films, produced since the turn of the millennium in which white characters play significant roles: *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (directed by Ketan Mehta, 2005), will be examined in this chapter. Both are set during the British Empire, a period which, as Chakravarty states, is 'generally absent from films' generated by the Indian commercial industry (1993: 183);⁵ the previous uncommonness of the colonial setting, coupled with its emergence in these two as well as in other recent films, would seem to suggest the advent of a new trend in Bollywood. I think that what we're seeing here is a shift in the more typical deployment of whiteness as a simple foil for the purposes of nationalist identity formation. While most white characters in these films retain their adversarial meaning, two significant ones—Captain William Gordon (Toby Stephens) in *Mangal Pandey* and Elizabeth (Rachel Shelley) in *Lagaan*—assist in the development of an Indian nationalism that comes to define and be defined by the male heroes of the film, both of whom are played by Aamir Khan, whose body itself signifies as an erotic spectacle. Neither of these white characters functions as a norm through which we are supposed to judge the heroes, though both provide a desiring perspective and represent a structural

positioning that boosts the heroes' status. Significantly, it is the racial dominance of whiteness in a globalized world, in tune with their taken-for-granted middle-classness, that make Captain Gordon and Elizabeth especially well suited to their roles as consolidators of an elite Hindu masculinity in a post-liberalization India that, in the filmic reality of Bollywood at least, is trying to forget its poor.

What first roused my curiosity and made me wonder whether something new was afoot in Bollywood cinema was the character of Captain Gordon in *Mangal Pandey*. As a scholar of the British Empire and the nationalist movement in India and a longtime eavesdropper on Indian movies, I found *Mangal Pandey* was intriguing not only because it was one of the few Indian films that explores an event from the colonial era but also because it chose the Rebellion of 1857 as its subject, which, with rare exceptions, hasn't been of much interest to writers or filmmakers from the subcontinent. I've done a considerable amount of research into the various narratives engendered by the events of 1857, with a particular focus on those by or about poor whites who lived or served in colonial India, reveals that there is a recurrent myth in these narratives about white men who crossed the line and fought with the Indian forces.⁶ In the character of Captain Gordon, *Mangal Pandey* draws on this myth. At the end of the film, after the hanging of Mangal, an act which in this version of the story provokes a massive resistance from ordinary Indians and so incites the Rebellion proper, the narrator tells us that 'An officer by the name of Captain William Gordon was recorded as having joined the rebel forces and fought against the Company Raj.' No such rebellious officer is named in the historical records, or in the official documents or even in the narratives of the revolt. The various white men who are said to have gone over to the other side are usually believed to have been soldiers from the lower ranks,⁷ though one memoir describes among the rebels 'a handsome-looking man, well-built, fair, about twenty-five years of age, with light moustaches, wearing the undress uniform of a European cavalry officer, with a blue, gold-laced cap on his head' whom the writer, a Mr Rees, guesses to have been 'either a Russian or a renegade Christian' (qtd. in Forbes-Mitchell 1893: 279). That the makers of *Mangal Pandey* evoked this historical myth, making it central to the storyline, points to its meaningfulness in the film.

Whether based on a fiction or a fact, Captain William Gordon serves a two-fold purpose: much like Captain Weston in Ray's *Shatranj Ki*

Khilari, he is the compassionate *Angrez* whose empathy for the plight of the Indians under the Empire stands as a testament to its severity, which in turn, supports the implicit argument for nationalist resistance to the British; but, unlike the character of Weston, whose sympathy is confined to verbal and facial expression, he is the hero's best friend. He is rescued by him and then rescues him, hears his doubts about the East India Company, tries to talk him into compliance with the British, and eventually becomes an active supporter of Mangal's growing nationalism and, following Mangal's lead after the film ends, a nationalist himself. Their friendship propels all the action in the film, since it is in reaction to what he perceives as Gordon's lies about the fat used to grease the rifle cartridges—lies that he reads as the white man's betrayal of him—that Mangal decides to take drastic measures against the British, and this friendship also provides the film with its only fully articulated emotional storyline. Mangal's alliance with the courtesan Heera (Rani Mukerji) and Gordon's with the almost-sati Jwala (Amisha Patel) are both much less important to the politics or even the narrative of the film and, it could be argued, work mostly to provide it with the heterosexual romance necessary in virtually every Bollywood production and to deflect any possible questions about the compelling homoeroticism implied by such scenes as the wrestling match between Mangal and Gordon and the bhang-induced cuddling that happens afterwards when the two men wander past a palatial British residence with their arms draped over each other's shoulders. Mangal and Gordon, in fact, are distinguished as characters more by their passionate attachment to one another as well as their antagonism to other, more powerful men—namely the upper-middle class Protestant English officers who occupy the elite echelons of the company⁸—than they are by their connections to any women. Speaking about the US, David Mamet, the well-known playwright whose consistent theme is masculinity, is quoted as saying, 'Women have, in men's minds, such a low place on the social ladder of this country that it's useless to define yourself in terms of a woman What men need is men's approval' (qtd. in Kimmel 1994: 129).

Much the same could be said about the articulation of masculinity in *Mangal Pandey*, where, from very early on, it's made abundantly clear that the story will in large part be about Gordon's efforts to secure Mangal's approval. The wrestling scene begins, for example, with Gordon asking Mangal, 'Why didn't you come today?' obviously referring to

a pre-arranged meeting that Mangal has avoided. Mangal answers, 'I was angry,' and then implies that he was disappointed Gordon did not intervene when, in the previous scene, another British officer, the bully Hewson, almost beat an Indian servant to death. It was Mangal who stepped in to stop Hewson from killing the innocent man. Gordon's explanation—'What was I supposed to do? Stand between a fellow officer and a, a ...' a sentence Mangal finishes with the words 'a black dog!' echoing Hewson's term for the servant—demonstrates that the approval of other men, in this case his fellow British officers, *does* matter in the establishment of Gordon's masculinity. When Gordon apologizes to Mangal and is forgiven, the two men resolve their quarrel. At this point, we are aware that Gordon has switched his masculine allegiance: it is Mangal's sanction, and no longer that of white men, he will now seek, though the seeking of it will cause him great inner turmoil and compel him to turn his back on his ruling racial community. That Mangal is engaged in this passionate camaraderie with a white man and is the recipient of his loyalty appreciably bolsters his masculinity because in the film's world of mid-nineteenth-century India as well as in the contemporary audience's eyes, whiteness is a signifier of dominance and power; Mangal must be some kind of man if Gordon, a white man and his superior in the East India Company's army, loves him that much.

Significantly, all of this emotional and sexual desire is being communicated while the two men are placing each other in the most spectacularly suggestive wrestling holds. And when Mangal laughingly concedes the match to Gordon and they fall back separately to the ground, the crowd of men watching them bursts into shouts of approbation and delight. *Mangal Pandey* is not exceptional in its rendition of men desiring the attention, affection, and approval of other men. According to a number of Hindi film critics, Bollywood movies generally are founded on a blatant eroticism between men that the standard heterosexual romance is meant to dampen and camouflage.

Editor of *Bombay Dost*, a gay news magazine based in Mumbai, Kavi argues that the Bollywood hero is being increasingly eroticized on the Hindi screen, to such an extent that the heroine is ceasing entirely to be an object of sexual desire. While films from the 1950s pursued some storylines that attended to women's lives and cast actresses in commanding roles, but then thereafter, they have been relegated to the sidelines, as 'appendages to this high drama of the eroticization of the

male' (2000: 309). By the 1970s, the era of Amitabh Bachchan and the angry young man, the bonds between the hero and his *yaar* or best friend had so crowded out the female characters that Kavi insists the films could be read as misogynistic in their 'focus on men to the utter exclusion of women' (ibid.: 310).

Amitabh, described by Kavi as 'only apparently the most heterosexual of Hindi film heroes' (ibid.), is also the subject of an essay by Rao, in which, recalling his own experience watching Amitabh Bachchan films in Bombay movie halls in the late 1970s, he theorizes the implications of these narratives as well as of the song lyrics that subtly endorsed the expression of men's love for one another: 'The bond that Amitabh Bachchan formed with other male actors on the screen, complemented by the presence of an all-male audience that had gathered to watch him, engendered a sort of homoeroticism in the dark of the movie hall' (2000: 303). The homoeroticism on the screen sometimes found a physical expression in the hall itself, where, Rao claims, the darkness provided a cover for sexual acts between men.

Deshpande contends that the eroticization of the Bollywood hero has taken a more intense turn since the 1990s and is indicative of a larger shift in the middle-class imagination that drives the mainstream film industry in India. The camera that lingers lovingly on the more muscled bodies of current male stars is a sign that Bollywood has learned how to fashion what he calls a 'consumable hero' (2005: 197), a masculine figure whose body itself, rather than his person or even his story, is an object of consumption. *Jodhaa Akbar* (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) exemplifies Deshpande's argument perfectly; like *Mangal Pandey* and *Lagaan*, this film fixates on the hero's sexual desirability. Though ostensibly about Jodhaa, the wife (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan) of the Mughul Emperor Akbar (Hrithik Roshan), *Jodhaa Akbar* would be more appropriately titled merely 'Akbar,' since it is his agonies, his decisions, and, more important, his body that the film loves. One scene in particular stands out as an emblem of this shift in interest that the camera makes apparent: before their marriage has been consummated, when Jodhaa has not yet learned to adore her emperor, she surreptitiously watches him as, naked from the waist up, he practices his swordplay. Our gaze follows hers as her eyes travel down his almost impossibly superb masculine body to his appealingly sweat-strewn waist, then up again and along his strong sword arm, and finally, up further

to his handsome profile where the camera stops and we find in Akbar's half-smile the sign that he knows she/we have been watching him and that he enjoys our sexualization of him. This kind of travelling body shot has traditionally been reserved for female bodies; that it is now being used in the pursuit of male sexuality and beauty would seem to suggest the validity of Deshpande's designation of the Bollywood hero's body as a new commodity in India.

This commodification of the male body at the expense of the female body, I would further argue, distinguishes contemporary Bollywood cinema from classic Hollywood film, where, as Mulvey has famously asserted, the female body is the object of consumption by a heterosexual masculinized look that structures the filmic text and determines how and with whom all spectators, male and female, can identify. In Mulvey's Lacanian analysis, the female body is vulnerable, subject as it is to a 'controlling male gaze' (2004: 845), and its exposure on the screen as a passive spectacle is a performance of its oppression within a patriarchal scopophilic regime. Mulvey describes woman as 'the ultimate fetish ... a perfect product whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator's look' (ibid.: 844–5). This look is always masculine; further, the male hero cannot be subject to the same sexual objectification because he functions as the ego ideal in the film, the character with whom we—that is, all of us in the audience, male and female—are supposed to identify. In mainstream Hollywood cinema even today, as Chaudhuri points out, 'One is unlikely to find similar sorts of shots of the male hero, unless the shots concern narrative events ...' (2006: 37), or as Tasker has argued, unless that usually brawny male body is engaged in some kind of action that legitimizes its exhibition: 'it is perhaps inevitable that it is the *action* cinema which provides a showcase for the display of the muscular male body' (2000: 118).

The Bollywood male body, on the other hand, is emerging as an erotic spectacle in all kinds of movies: in historical epics, action films, and even the traditional masala film. A link to the action genre appears not to be absolutely necessary to justify the display of this body or to distinguish it from the female body, which in both the West and India, is habitually depicted as the passive receiver of an objectifying gaze that marks the feminine as powerless. This new type of male body is an intensely powerful one (capable even, in *Jodhaa Akbar*, of taming wild elephants!)

that frequently and purposefully looks back at us in such a way as to convey a command over our watching. The close-ups of his muscled torso insinuate not only that this man is beautiful and sexually desirable but that he is strong, authoritative, and potent. The ambivalence associated with the exhibition of the male body in the West for the purposes of sexual pleasure—an exhibition which signals both ‘an assertion of male dominance’ and ‘an hysterical and unstable image of manhood’ (Tasker 2000: 80)—seems to be absent in Hindi cinema. The lack of this ambivalence, I would argue, points to the existence of traditions of viewing on which Hollywood films cannot draw, Bollywood, however, can take them for granted.

Evoking the ritual of *darshana*, M. Madhava Prasad calls ‘darshanic’ (2008: 76) the gaze that makes the Indian viewing of Indian films different from anything to be found in the West. Describing it as a ‘relation of perception within the public traditions of Hindu worship, especially in the temples, but also in public appearances of monarchs and other elevated figures’ (ibid.: 75), *darshana* refers to the practice of going to a temple to view a divine image and to, in turn, be blessed by the divine gaze that looks back, thereby pulling the devotee into the god or goddess’s orbit of protection and affection. Prasad argues that this pre-capitalist ‘set of protocols of perception’ (ibid.: 75) distinguishes the conventions of spectatorship that structure most (but not all) Indian film from the more voyeuristic politics of identification that solely govern the viewing of Western realist film and which Mulvey’s (2004) theory of the masculine gaze has uncovered. Unlike in the mainstream Western performance tradition, where the imaginary fourth wall convention positions the viewer as an eavesdropper whose role is to identify with the protagonist in order to pull together the elements of the narrative into a coherent meaning, the Indian performance is informed by the principle of frontality, which assumes a reciprocity between the actor and the viewer, often evident in a look that moves from one to the other and back again, and more importantly, for our purposes, accords the actor a symbolic and transcendent authority: ‘contrary to the voyeuristic relation, in the darshanic relation the object gives itself to be seen and in so doing confers a privilege on the spectator. The object of the darshanic gaze is a superior, a divine figure or a king who presents himself as a spectacle of dazzling splendour to his subjects, the *‘praja’* or people’ (Prasad 2008: 75–6). Prasad’s theory certainly explains why the actors

who play the heroes in Bollywood film are often so revered and influential in Indian society, but what it cannot account for is how their authority can be maintained in spite of the eroticization of their bodies in more recent films. For that, it seems to me, we need to turn to the aesthetics of *rasa* in the performance traditions of South Asia, specifically the *rasa* of *sringara* or erotic love.

The theatrical and dance traditions of India, out of which film arose, identify *sringara* as one of the eight *rasas* or expressions of human emotion that are evoked by an actor and simultaneously experienced by a spectator.⁹ Most commonly enacted by a female performer, and in some cases by a male playing a female, *sringara rasa* is the expression of her sexual desire for an absent male figure who is often a man but just as likely to be a god. Although there are any number of possible *sringara* roles, Radha is the quintessential *sringara* heroine; in classical Indian dance her desire for her beloved is manifested as an acutely physical state of arousal, through the tingling of the skin when it is touched by a breeze, for instance, or the erection of nipples. Radha's beloved is always Krishna, the mischievous and playful god whose sexual desirability is one of the themes of the famous Sanskrit poem, *Gitagovinda*. In fact, it could be argued that the prevalence of the Radha/Krishna story in all forms of Indian performance—dance, music, drama, television, film, theatre, and so on—has made Krishna's status as a sexually attractive god fundamental in mainstream Indian culture: it's something that virtually all Indians would know about, whether or not they were actually Hindu, and so valued Krishna as a deity and the Radha/Krishna story as an emblem of the relationship between devotees and gods. If Radha is the quintessential *sringara* heroine who can be performed by either women or men, then Krishna is the male erotic spectacle par excellence. In him is combined power and sexual appeal. Linking *sringara rasa* to Prasad's theory of the darshanic gaze reveals a protocol of perception or convention of spectatorship that allows the male body to be displayed in recent Bollywood movies as an erotic spectacle that, unlike the muscled body of the Hollywood hero, is unambivalent, even assured, in its articulation of masculine authority.

But while Prasad identifies *darshana* as one of the foundational ideologies that structures Hindi film, he acknowledges that Bollywood is simultaneously invested in the realist paradigm more common to Western cinema, and this paradigm, as I've noted above, relies on the

politics of viewer voyeurism and identification to make sense of narratives. Bollywood's new hero might be confident in his newly muscular body that is additionally a sign of his commodification, but, drawing on the homosocial mores of India, which allow, as Rao asserts, an easy expression of same-sex affection,¹⁰ he is also, to quote Deshpande, 'the projection of the fantasies of a new spectator' (2005: 187). And I would add that what this new spectator wants to see on the screen through the depiction of the Bollywood hero is an exhibition of his own desire for control of his world and the resolution of his fear.

Kimmel contends that 'If masculinity is a homosocial enactment, its overriding emotion is fear ... [the] nightmare from which we never seem to awaken is that those other men will see [our] sense of inadequacy, they will see that in our own eyes we are not who we are pretending to be' (1994: 129–30). For Kimmel, 'the great secret of American manhood' (1994: 131) is that American men are afraid of other men, specifically that they are afraid of being seen by other men as feminine, and therefore, being assumed homosexual. I see his point and even grant that American popular culture, with its penchant for the uber-masculine type who almost never touches other men except violently—a type which includes every Clint Eastwood character and most of Schwarzenegger's, not to mention countless other male roles—would seem to attest to the existence of this style of homophobia. I'm not convinced, however, that it exists so definitively in Indian public society, where, as Kavi and Rao have testified, same sex relationships are accorded a freer rein than in the US. The 'great secret' of Indian manhood is not that it desires the masculine but that *it fears it cannot protect or control the feminine*, which in India's popular culture is sometimes imaged as actual girls and women and sometimes as typically feminine spheres, such as the home or, even, the nation: *Bharat Mata* or Mother India. The repeated invocations in the mainstream media of *izzat* or masculine honour, housed, as it always seems to be, in female bodies, would seem to point to this fear.

Indian male fear is everywhere in Bollywood cinema: in the rock hard abs of the heroes as well as in the sidelining of the heroines. It is especially evident in what is perhaps the most iconic storyline in Hindi movies, the one in which the feminine—imaged either as an actual female or females, the feminized domestic space of a home and family, or India itself—is threatened and so must be defended, usually violently, by the male hero.¹¹ *Mangal Pandey* certainly follows along these lines,

with the motherland representing the vulnerable feminine that must be protected and the British that which must be purged, but so too does *Lagaan*. Similar to *Mangal Pandey*, in *Lagaan* the threat is figured as the British Empire, even more specifically a tax or *lagaan* that this empire requires from its princes who take it in the form of agricultural produce from an already overburdened peasantry. Unable to pay the tax because of poor rains, the peasants of Champaner, a village in central India, are forced at the whim of a malicious white officer to engage in a cricket match against British players who are likely to win since no one on the village team knows how to play cricket. Given the us-against-them, Indians-against-the-British configuration of the plot, it is no wonder that the film has been read, in mostly positive ways, as an anti-colonial/nationalist narrative.¹² Like so many nationalist films made before and after it, *Lagaan* constructs a simple dichotomous relationship between the corrupt external Western forces, represented here by white men, and Mother India's virtuous children, in this case her most authentic virtuous children, the villagers, whom some contemporary forms of nationalism continue to recognize as the 'real' India.

This 'real' India, as Chatterjee (1989) has argued, also has long-standing associations with the feminine sphere of domesticity. Nationalist ideology of late nineteenth century created a series of what Chatterjee calls 'false essentialisms of home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine' (1989: 252), essentialisms that produced a new patriarchal subordination for women who became the bearers of a transcendent Indian culture correlated primarily with the Hindu home. The task of men, consequently, was to prevent any incursions into this sphere that nationalism had sanctified as fundamentally Indian. This lodging of national identity in the feminine, indeed in females themselves, left men free to engage in the world that, because of the system of dichotomies that structured nationalist ideology, came to be conceived of as masculine, and hence, as their natural place. So men could adopt Western values, don Western clothes, go to Western schools, and fight the colonizer in public spaces without losing their essential Indianness because this Indianness was being sustained by women, who, in their turn, embodied it in their Indian style of dress, their maintenance of Indian domestic customs, and their modest modes of behaviour. In Hindi cinema, this nationalist assumption about the feminine essence of Indian culture and the sanctity of the Hindu/Indian home and family¹³ has

been translated into the narrative I mentioned above. The typical plot sees these essentialized sites endangered by outside forces of evil, which seek either to destroy them or contaminate them beyond recognition. The hero must, therefore, confront the danger and dismantle it, usually by means of masculine rage and violence.

One of the things that makes *Lagaan* unusual is that the threat is not dispelled by violence, but through sport, specifically through cricket. But the displacement of the violent narrative of masculine nationalism on to a seemingly harmless game does not, however, dispel its nationalist nor its violent thrust, for, as Appadurai has argued,

... the bodily pleasure that is at the core of the male viewing experience is simultaneously part of the erotics of nationhood. This erotics ... is connected deeply to violence ... because the divisive demands of class, of ethnicity, of language, and of region in fact make the nation a profoundly contested community. The erotic pleasure of watching cricket, for Indian male subjects, is the *pleasure of agency* in an imagined community that in many other arenas is violently contested'. (Italics in original 1995: 44–5)

Numerous scholars have pointed out that a certain sort of Indianness coalesces around a cricket game, for cricket provides a safe place for men, even those from minority communities, to be Indian. *Lagaan* conjures up this convention when it pits a diverse band of Indian villagers, led by Bhuvan (Aamir Khan), against an all-white team of British officers. It is so easy in this film to root for the villagers and thus affirm the anti-colonialist nationalism that they are producing by defending the 'real' India, the village, against outside forces that would destroy it through excessive taxation and the careless exercise of imperial power. That the village is feminized and meant to stand in metonymically for the motherland is apparent in the film's depiction of Bhuvan's mother as the wise, all-suffering woman who perseveres even in the face of extreme adversity. Indeed, her character calls up another famous peasant woman, Radha in *Mother India* (directed by Mehboob Khan, 1957), which has long been analysed as the prototype of nationalist films, and about which Chakravarty writes, 'The chronicle of one woman's struggle against the oppressions of both man and nature becomes an unconscious encapsulation of India's long history of domination by foreign powers and its struggle to maintain the integrity of its soil' (1993: 151). This conflation of women and the nation, though appearing to imply a heightened valuing of the feminine, works predominantly for the

constitution of the masculine hero as the saviour of India, a hero whose actions in defense of the feminized nation confirm his right to control its/her destiny. In *Lagaan*, Bhuvan's characterization as a playful Krishna figure with a youthful sense of fun and righteous indignation at injustice belies his repeated authoritarian behaviour, as he struts about the village berating others, even his elders, for their cowardice and their flawed traditions. And, although he is a young, still unmarried man, these others ultimately and with little resistance bow to his decrees about how the nation/the village should think and act. For, as his mother says, 'You talk just like your father, He was so spirited, And he spoke the truth.' This is a mother India identifying her son as the true patrilineal heir to a male, nationalist legacy that, following such exemplars as Gandhi, includes the right to determine and even dictate the morals and values that are appropriate to a national Indianness.

Lagaan has repeatedly been read as a subaltern narrative: Stadtler remarks that the film could be identified as 'form of subaltern history' (2005: 520); Rajan insists that it provides 'a subaltern corrective' to history (2006: 1113); and Chakraborty argues that its theme is 'the subalterns' destabilizing of the history of colonial cricket' (2004: 551). But unless the term 'subaltern' denotes a middle-class fantasy about poor people (and, for some post-colonial scholars, it does appear to mean this), then I cannot comprehend how *Lagaan* can be telling us anything about subalterns. I concur with Mannathukkaren (2007) in seeing the film as one in which subaltern agency is nowhere to be found.¹⁴ Instead, what *Lagaan* offers us is a form of middle-class nationalism that uses the idea of the subaltern to justify itself, and in so doing silencing historical subalterns with their legitimate grievances, many of them against the ruling bourgeoisie, by speaking for them.¹⁵ I do not need to rehearse this argument, since Mannathukkaren has presented it so well in his two essays, but I would like to add to it.

Referring back to Chatterjee's theory about middle-class nationalism's response to feminist and imperialist demands for female emancipation by linking the feminine to the nation, I find that its most salient implication is the idea that this correlation was a clever patriarchal move that left Indian men free to interact with the West—whether in pursuit of anti-colonial resistance to it or in imitation of it—without fearing that they might lose their Indianness, since this cultural identity had been lodged in the feminine. After the late nineteenth century, it

therefore became particularly middle-class Indian women's responsibility to embody it. Because the feminine was something already controlled by patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, Indian men could be rest assured that they retained possession of an authentic Indianness by possessing the feminine in the form of women and girls.

In the realm of class relations, *Lagaan* works in a similar fashion to assuage the fear of middle-class viewers, both those in the various diasporas, the NRIs (non-resident Indians) and in India itself, each of which has a particular cause for fear: NRIs because of their residence in the West, where they must raise their children in unIndian lands and so run the risk that their traditions and even their bodies might be diluted by the traditions and bodies of Westerners; bourgeois Indians because of their increased interactions with the West as the result of the liberalization legislation of the early 1990s. What *Lagaan* does with its romanticized image of the villagers and their village is that it reassures middle-class Indians at home and abroad that a 'real' India did and does exist and, more important, that this India is resistant to foreign control: hence, the victorious outcome of the cricket game, which is followed by a truly fantastic scene that seems to re-enact on a small scale the transfer of power in 1947 when the villagers watch in triumph as all the whites desert their cantonment because, we are told, the British government was 'unable to bear this humiliation'. This association of anti-colonial resistance with village India, coupled with the delineation of the village as authentically Indian, works to release elite viewers, particularly male viewers, from having to be actively anti-colonial themselves or even resistant to the West. Instead, because villagers can be imagined to essentially personify an Indianness that defies the West, middle-class spectators are free, like the men in Chatterjee's theory, to interact with the West—whether by living in it, trading with it, or adopting its values, customs, and youth culture—knowing that in India villagers continue to exist and to behave in these predictable ways. What Chatterjee does not say about the feminine but what is certainly required by it if this correlation is to continue to work for men is that women must consent or be made to consent to it. Male control of the feminine becomes, consequently, the lynchpin in the theory. So too with the villagers in this middle-class conception of an authentic Indianness lodged in village India; villagers must remain unthreatening and willing to protect the borders of Indianness. The ending of *Lagaan* thus comforts the

middle-class Indian community, both in India and the West, because it represents these villagers as compliant and willing to act their parts in this bourgeois dream drama and it shows the West being pushed outside of the 'real' India, the village. Mannathukkaren argues that the final effect of bourgeois nationalism generally is 'not only that the 'nation' becomes the legitimate community, but also that the imagined 'nation' becomes the mask worn by the ruling classes to cover their face of exploitation' (2001: 4582). *Lagaan* functions to do exactly this: it appeals to a well-to-do Indian audience in various global South Asian diasporas and in India itself, in its evocation of these various nationalist myths because it does not threaten to expose any undesirable truths about modern India, such as the appalling conditions under which rural dalits actually live now and their historical poverty which nationalism did not alleviate, nor does it reveal the collaboration of Indian elites with the West.

But though the film does not reveal this collaboration, it does hint at it in the relationship between the villagers, Bhuvan especially, and Elizabeth Russell, the sister of the tyrannical Captain Russell (Paul Blackthorne) who initiates the cricket match. In her efforts to teach the village team the game of cricket, she helps them defeat the British players, and so she is like Gordon in *Mangal Pandey* in that she goes beyond the role of the sympathetic white person only occasionally found in Hindi movies and actively contributes to nationalism by assisting nationalist characters to achieve their goals and oust the colonizer. Considering that this is not the usual role for a white character, I find it surprising that despite the copious amount of scholarship on *Lagaan*, very little of it addresses the ramifications of Elizabeth in terms of the film's nationalist politics; in fact, she is usually just barely mentioned and sometimes not mentioned at all.

But Elizabeth is crucial in the reading of the film not only for her potential to normalize an alliance between the West and India, but also because, again like Gordon, she works to eroticize the hero for the audience, who get to share with her the visual pleasure of seeing him frequently naked from the waist up and this eroticization tremendously enhances his masculinity, originating as it does in the gaze of a white woman whose racial dominance in a globalized world makes her desire that much more valuable than that of Bhuvan's Indian beloved, Gauri (Gracy Singh). Gauri's desire cannot destabilize '[c]olonial stereotypes of effete, weak, and passive Indian men' (Rajan 2006: 1115), as Elizabeth's

can. The hero's ability to evoke the sexual interest of a white woman also suggests an even more consequential outcome: the taming of the West by the Indian male, a West that has been feminized in Elizabeth and so made tamable. And, again, this is not something that Gauri's passion for Bhuvan can do.

But Gauri is still vital in the love triangle that involves the Hindu lovers and Elizabeth because the Indian woman is the safe, sustaining option that Bhuvan ultimately must choose in order to avoid the possibility of miscegenation, with all its metaphorical implications about the porousness of the borders that separate Indianness/Hinduness from Westernness. And he has no trouble choosing it since throughout the film he remains indifferent or even oblivious to the white woman's desire. Bhuvan's choice plays to the NRI as well as the elite audience in India. By making the Indian hero sexually attractive to the Western woman but not sexually available to her, *Lagaan* shuts down the possibility of mixed-race children who would threaten to blur the boundaries between whiteness and Indianness. It also dismisses Elizabeth's desire, enacting a sort of reverse psychology that works to assuage the fear of both these groups that their own desire for the West, indicated by their interactions with it, need not undermine their Indianness. They can be in it, trade with it, or adopt its customs—even desire the West and be desired by it—without being polluted by it. Indeed, quite the opposite is suggested by two of the final lines of the film. Taking her leave from the villagers, Elizabeth goes first to Bhuvan's mother, who draws her into the Hindu/Indian family when she blesses her with the words, 'Be happy, my daughter, Live long.' And after we see the pale face of the pining white woman for the last time, the male narrator tells us, 'Elizabeth returned to England, holding Bhuvan in her heart. She did not marry and remained Bhuvan's Radha all her life.' Constructing the now-Hindi-speaking Elizabeth as a Radha, the eternally infatuated lover of the Hindu god Krishna, reassures *Lagaan's* audiences around the world that it is the Westerner and not the Indian who has been and will be altered by their cross-cultural encounter. This implicit moral of the story could perhaps go part of the way towards explaining the popularity of *Lagaan* both in and outside of India.

That Bollywood films in the post-liberalization age are made for and by the Indian elite at home and abroad has been argued by a number of scholars. Athique, for example, writes that Hindi cinema today is,

... defined by the high-budget, saccharine, upper middle-class melodrama which represents a tongue-in-cheek repackaging of the masala movie within an affluent, nostalgic and highly exclusive view of Indian culture and society. These productions are consciously transnational.... Indian politicians have recently become keen to emphasize the worldwide popularity of these films and, in particular, their success as 'ambassadors' for India's growing global ambitions. (2008: 301)

It is to this affluent Indian audience, far more than to any other, that films like *Mangal Pandey* and *Lagaan* speak. By defining whiteness conventionally in the joint depiction of a larger white and simplistically adversarial group of colonizers while introducing this new and more complex character of an active white nationalist, these films allow for the possibility that whiteness/the West can be dichotomously and safely severed into enemy and friend. This splitting of the West into two groups endorses a post-liberalization form of a Hindu bourgeois nationalism that is founded on general contemptuous sentiments towards British colonialism, the enemy outside the nation that draws attention away from the enemies within,¹⁶ but that also espouses a willingness to consort with friendly white others who, far from threatening Indianness, consolidate it through their desire for the masculine hero, whose authority over the feminized nation allows him to represent an authentic India.

It is important to note that only a certain kind of white person can secure the borders and confirm the value of this new nationalist Indian man. Working-class whites, whose presence in the colonial India that these films remember was as much a historical fact as the presence of ruling whites, are entirely absent from *Lagaan* and figure in *Mangal Pandey* only as the British soldiers who rush in to stop Mangal from successfully starting his revolution. They are, in fact, missing from Bollywood representations generally. In *Mangal Pandey*, this absence is particularly revealing, since it is far more likely that an ordinary soldier like Mangal Pandey, if he had a white best friend, rather than finding him in the officers' mess, would have chanced upon him among ordinary British soldiers, with whom he would have had something in common, namely, the subordinate status of another ranker. But in the perpetual state of national crisis that traverses Bollywood films, poor whites are insufficiently white; though white, they are subordinate in the West, even to the many communities of diasporic South Asians that enjoy middle-class status. Their whiteness, which is normed in the West, is not now dominant on the world stage, nor has it ever been, and

therefore, they don't have the capacity to consolidate an elite nationalist Hindu/Indian masculinity or to soothe its apprehension about the dangers of that globalizing economy, being themselves among the losers in that economy. But they were the other side of whiteness in colonial India; that they've gone missing in the contemporary mythologies that structure Bollywood films in this era of open borders and supposedly free markets is a testament to the class alliances that covertly opened those borders and freed those markets.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Brian Patton, Nandi Bhatia, and Emily Campbell for their valuable assistance with the writing of this essay as well as all the participants, from whom I learned so much, in the 'From Bombay to LA,' workshop at the Asian Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, and especially Chua Beng Huat, Anjali Roy, and the student organizers who made that workshop possible.

2. For the purposes of this essay, I use Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha's definition of Bollywood as 'India's commercial Hindi film industry, based primarily, but not exclusively, in the city of Bombay, now officially designated as Mumbai since 1995' (2005: 16).

3. See Foucault (1979: 293–308).

4. I'm grateful to Darius Cooper's essay for this interpretation of *Shatranj ki Khilari*.

5. Sharmistha Gooptu observes in her essay that 'the East-West binary, as seen in *Lagaan*, has been less noticeable in popular cinema in recent years' (2004: 541–42), arguing further that the kind of 'jingoistic nationalism' (ibid.: 541) that requires such a binary has, since the 1990s, constructed the Pakistani rather than the white colonizer as the other.

6. I call this narrative a myth, first, because I've not been able to verify it as a historical fact, and, second, because its factuality interests me less than its multiple iterations, which suggest its significance as a signifier of some kind of psychological reality for those British people who survived the Rebellion.

7. See, for example, William Forbes-Mitchell's *Reminiscences*, where he describes having himself heard an English voice among the rebels taunting the soldiers of his company 'in unmistakable barrack-room English' (1893: 280). He also claims to have spoken to a rebel many years later who repeatedly identified the man as a former sergeant-major (ibid.: 282).

8. Gordon is Scottish and Catholic and, in one scene, makes it clear that he comes from a lower middle-class background.

9. Trying to explain the conventional understanding of *rasa* as a flavour or a taste, Schechner describes it in the following way:

The *sthai bhavas* are the 'permanent' or 'abiding' or indwelling emotions that are accessed and evoked by good acting, called *abhinaya*. *Rasa* is experiencing the *sthai bhavas*. To put

it another way, the sweetness 'in' a ripe plum is its *sthayi bhava*, the experience of 'tasting the sweet' is *rasa*. The means of getting the taste across—preparing it, presenting it—is *abhinaya*. Every emotion is a *sthayi bhava*. Acting is the art of presenting the *sthayi bhavas* so that *both* the performer and the partaker [or spectator] can 'taste' the emotion, the *rasa*. (2001: 31)

10. Rao writes, 'same sex closeness exists in every walk of Indian life, especially among the lower-middle classes: in bedrooms and public transport, on the street. India is like that only. What conspires to give this a sexual coloration is that social mores in India do not permit men and women to be demonstrative until marriage, and even then never in public places. Sex is only for procreation, not entertainment. Also, sex has nothing to do with love. Every Indian thus grows up with a certain degree of sexual repression. Even if one is not born gay, it is so easy to become gay in India' (2000: 303–4).

11. I am indebted to Rai's essay (2006) for his description of this classic Bollywood narrative.

12. For largely or entirely affirmative interpretations of the film, see Chakraborty (2004), Rajan (2006), and Majumdar (2001).

13. The conflation of the Indian with the Hindu, particularly in Hindi cinema of the last fifteen or so years has been noticed by many scholars, including Mishra, who acknowledges that, although the Bollywood industry retains its traditional cultural syncretism, there is today 'an implicit directive to work within the formal determinants of Hindu culture' (2002: 63).

14. See both his earlier argument to this effect in *Economic and Political Weekly* (2001) and his analysis of the film in terms of the contemporary material reality of the cricket industry in India and of dalit politics and life in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* (2007).

15. Though I don't believe that this film can be read as one that promotes the interests of the subaltern, it's still refreshing to see a recent Bollywood film that presents rural poor people in a positive light, as Deshpande states (2005: 195–6), and that depicts cricket being played by non-elite players, since this is a reality in India today, where I have seen boys, whose ragged clothes suggest their poverty, commandeer the open space even in a graveyard to play a game they were so obviously passionate about.

16. See Mannathukkaren's essays for an elaboration of this theory.

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