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Understanding Postcolonial South Asian Communities Through Bollywood

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**UNDERSTANDING POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITIES
THROUGH BOLLYWOOD**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Introduction

Historically speaking, painting has been a predominantly white, male art form, that has often excluded or exoticized non-white individuals. Due to the emergence of imperialism and colonialism during the 19th century, these themes of exclusion and exoticism have continued to permeate the psyches of colonized peoples throughout the world. I am most interested in unpacking the effects that colonialism has had on South Asian people, including those who descend from Pakistan and India, by analyzing the world of Bollywood.

Bollywood is an easily recognizable film universe in which song and dance, glamour, drama, love, and madness are oft-recurring tropes. I am most interested in Bollywood films from the 1960s-1990s, when Western influences from Hollywood were beginning to make their way to South Asian screens. Several of these influences arose out of colonialism, specifically the desire for light skin, colored eyes, and an overall racially ambiguous appearance. This can be seen through the Bollywood heroes and heroines, none of whom look quintessentially South Asian, but who successfully charm audiences worldwide. Additionally, several Bollywood films, especially in the 1990s, take place outside of India, in places like London and America. It is not uncommon for love songs to unfold in the uninhabited meadows of the Swiss Alps, allowing “brown” people to take over “white” landscapes.

By using photographs from my uncle’s wedding in Pakistan as references, and painting the figures in a Western landscape, I seek to address themes like location and

dislocation, assimilation, and belonging. As a South Asian woman artist myself, I am also speaking to the male-dominated canon of European and American art, by using oil paint on a traditional, landscape canvas to paint a society of people who have been wholly unacknowledged or exoticized by the art world.



“Here Comes the Bride”



“The Golden Nugget”

Chapter 1: Colonialism in South Asia

In today’s post-colonial world, society has shifted towards an awareness and understanding of people of different ethnic, religious, sexual, and socio-economic backgrounds. Although there are opportunities for improvement in this movement, the fight to end discrimination and to promote equality is at the forefront of the Western world’s political and social issues. Yet, within minority groups, like the Pakistani-American community, insecurities that have been inflicted by colonialism continue to quietly brew. These wounds include feelings of subordination and alienation, instilled by a Western, colonial movement that strove to dominate India before Pakistan’s birth in 1947. It is vital that we investigate colonialism in that region during that time, in order to

fully understand the ways in which colonialism has continued to permeate the psyche of South Asians in the contemporary, Western world.

Prior to its independence in 1947, Pakistan was the north-westernmost region of India, and thus experienced colonialism at the hands of the British beginning in the 18th century. Thomas Metcalfe's *Ideologies of the Raj* thoroughly explains the motivations and implementations of the British occupation in India, whose legacy continues to negatively impact Indians and Pakistanis worldwide. For the British, India was initially perceived as a terrifying, foreign land. At first, the British mysticized India as a land of mysteries and fantasy, as well as the home of the anti-Christ, until the onset of the Enlightenment period in 18th century. This period promoted the acquisition of knowledge about India through the British East India Company, an institution established in India in 1600 which would eventually develop into the British Raj, which modified the British's fear into difference.

In an effort to preserve their dominance as a sophisticated and powerful Western force, the British began to view India as the Other, a term coined by Edward Said. Said argued that the Western world, embodied by the Occident, viewed the Eastern world, including South Asia, as the Other, a term that signified something alien and subordinate.¹ This ideology prompted the British to infiltrate the region in order to “classify, categorize, and bound the social world that was India so that it could be

¹ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. 11-19. Print.

controlled” and thus ruled by the British.² This essentially allowed the British to define India as a savage, backwards land while they defined themselves as intelligent and powerful. In this way, the British used their power over India to create their own nationalistic identity at the expense of India’s dignity and self-reliant identity.³

The British officially crowned India as a British colony in 1858, three years after the decline of the Mughal Empire, allowing them to exercise their imperialist power by implementing the English language and its literature in school curriculums, and by posing as the models of highest society within India. The British essentially attempted to erase Indian culture and history, by encouraging the use of the English language, mannerisms, and dress, thereby rendering the identities of Indian people as subordinate to those of the English⁴. India ultimately gained its independence due to several factors, including the determination of Gandhi. Most importantly, the British were distracted by their heavy involvement in World War II at the time, which further aided South Asian people to attain their goal of independence. Yet despite the freedom the subcontinent ultimately won, as well as the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the effects of colonialism and imperialism continued to exist within South Asian society.

² Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. 5. Print. Princeton studies in culture/power/history; Princeton studies in culture/power/history.

³ Metcalf, Thomas R. *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 3. Print. The new Cambridge history of India, III, 4; New Cambridge history of India, III, 4.

⁴ Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. 5. Print. Princeton studies in culture/power/history; Princeton studies in culture/power/history.

I argue that Bollywood, as the most recognizable and influential South Asian institution, not only showcases colonial effects on South Asian standards of beauty, but also has projected those effects onto its audiences due to its widespread popularity. Many films, like *Pardes*, highlight the conflicts between the East and West, framing the former as home, with all its purity and nationalism, while the latter is perceived as evil and corruptive. This is a standard interpretation of many Bollywood films that have the Westernized, sexually corrupt woman and the demure, pure Indian girl fighting against each other over an Indian man who ultimately chooses the Indian girl over the Westernized woman.⁵ However, I argue that Bollywood, as a system, is still plagued by colonialism and imperialism despite its nationalistic qualities. For instance, nearly every Bollywood actress is far fairer than the majority of Indian women. In fact, several of the most notable female Bollywood actresses, including Kajol, Kareena Kapoor, and Rani Mukherjee, all have colored eyes, which is rare. These casting choices can be extremely problematic, as Bollywood is extremely influential on Indian society. For instance, Bollywood films are so powerful that even older Indian traditions, like “dandiya,” a group dance that involves sticks, have regained popularity and continue to occur at nearly every Indian and Pakistani wedding due to certain popular films that have used the dance as choreography for a musical number.⁶ While this is a harmless example that showcases

⁵ Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya, and Pandharipande, Rajeshwari, eds. *Bollywood and Globalization : Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*. London, GBR: Anthem Press, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. 7. Web. 5 October 2015.

⁶ Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya, and Pandharipande, Rajeshwari, eds. *Bollywood and Globalization : Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*. London, GBR: Anthem Press, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. 5. Web. 5 October 2015.

Bollywood's power, Bollywood's standards of beauty are more problematic once they reach the masses.

Chapter 2: Bollywood and Painted Posters as a Platform for Post-Colonialism

Bollywood is the most well-known South Asian institution, especially in Western eyes. The beautiful heroines, handsome heroes, emotionally charged love stories, colors, songs, and aura of fantasy draw audiences in, making it quite easy for a film to become a cult classic. I am most interested in Bollywood films from the 1960s-1990s, when drama and the fantastical were at their peak, because during this time period, Bollywood films began to incorporate more elements from Hollywood, and thus became more Western. As Bollywood's influence became increasingly widespread, it helped ingrain Westernized ideas onto the masses in India, specifically unrealistic representations of Indian men and women.

For starters, Bollywood stars are dramatically fair-skinned if one were to compare them to the masses. I argue that this is a result of the British colonialists, whose presence in India created a deeply embedded relationships between whiteness, power, wealth, intellect, and sophistication. These relationships have caused fair skin to be extremely desirable, especially among women. In the eyes of many South Asians, a dark woman is much less attractive than a fair woman because darkness entails a lack of education, lack of wealth, and general subordination. Thus, from a young age, Indian and Pakistani girls are urged to protect their skin when going out in the sun, by using sunscreen and beauty

products like “Fair and Lovely” to enhance the fairness of their skin. As a South Asian woman myself, some of my more traditional family members have warned me against going out in the sun for fear of darkening my skin, ever since I was a child. Additionally, when observing potential brides for their sons, many traditional South Asian parents agree to meet the girl, or not, based on photographs of her that display her skin color. Keeping these issues in mind, it only makes sense that the heroine of a Bollywood film would be fair.

One of the most successful ways in which Bollywood ideals, like fairness, are easily spread to the masses is that of the painted poster. These posters, many of which are the size of billboards and are painted by unknown artists, successfully promote Bollywood films to all kinds of people from the subcontinent because of their visual nature⁷. Heavily laden with aesthetically appealing representations of the film’s plot, themes, and stars, these posters serve to make Bollywood inclusive to the 36% of the Indian population that is illiterate, and the 60% who do not speak or read Hindi.⁸



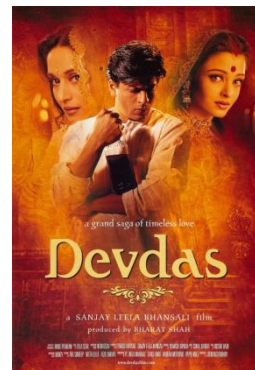
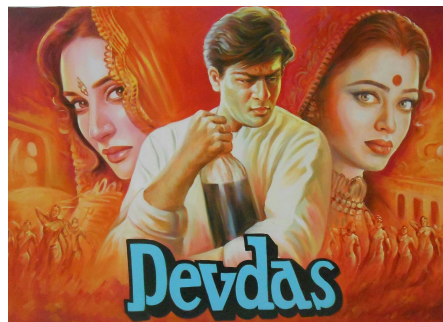
⁷ Pinto, Jerry., and Sheena. Sippy. *Bollywood Posters*. London: Thames & Hud, 2008. Print.

⁸ "Literacy Rate in India." - *Indian Literacy Rate 2015*. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

For example, this poster of the classic *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) displays Madhubala, the film's heroine, in a beautified pose illuminated by mystical clouds and color, while Dilip Kumar and Prithviraj Kapoor are situated to the left in an interaction that symbolizes their relationship as son and father.⁹ To further exhibit the film's subject matter, the bottom left and right corners contain scenes of war and grace, respectively.

This poster also exhibits the success of paint, rather than photography, in the making of Bollywood posters. Paint allowed these artists to include multiple scenes and atmospheres in just one poster. In the above example, the left side is dark with light arriving from the far left, while the right portion is heavenly and frontally lit. Especially in 1960, when *Mughal-E-Azam* was released, this would have been extremely difficult to achieve with photography.

In the contemporary world, most Bollywood posters are executed using photography and photoshop; however, the tradition of painting posters continues to exist with certain timeless blockbusters, like *Devdas* (2002).¹⁰



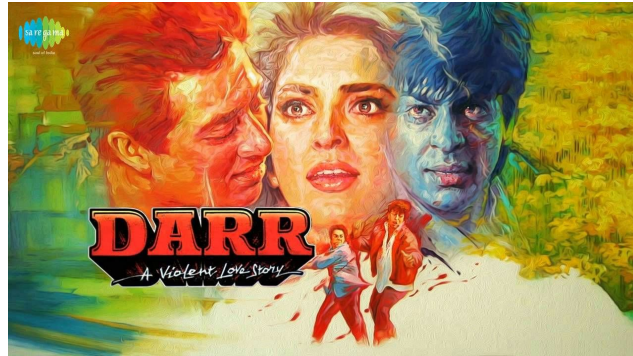
⁹ Nauśāda, et al. *Mughal-E-Azam: Mughale Āzama*. Mumbai: Shemaroo Video, 2001. DVD.

¹⁰ Roy, Bimal, and S. D. Burman. *Devdas*. Mumbai: Shemaroo Video, 2002. DVD.

Here I have juxtaposed a painted poster of *Devdas* with a photographed poster of the same film, in order to see the differences between both representations. Both versions situate Madhuri Dixit, Shahrukh Khan, and Aishwarya Rai in a triad in order to imply that the film is ultimately a love story. Shahrukh Khan is holding a liquor bottle, signifying his alcoholism; Aishwarya Rai is clad in an embroidered veil, and gazes out bravely which hints at her nobility; Madhuri Dixit, meanwhile, peers out from behind a red curtain, which conveys her identity as a courtesan. The fact that Shahrukh Khan stands between these two women implies that his alcoholism is a result of the love triangle. The photographed version includes text that says, “a grand saga of timeless love” while the painted version is so charged with emotional, visual information that it does not need the text to convey what is obvious.

This juxtaposition clearly exposes the ways in which Bollywood painted posters, and Bollywood as an institution, emphasize and enhance whiteness. In the photographed poster, all of the characters have warm, tan skin-tones while the painted poster depicts the trio as having fairer skin. Madhuri Dixit is portrayed as being so white that her pink cheeks look jarring, and her eyes are painted lighter than they actually are. In this way, the painted poster is a means for the already unrealistic elements of Bollywood to be enhanced even more, specifically in terms of whiteness and the fantastical.

An aspect of Bollywood that makes it even more inaccurate and misleading, is its reliance on European landscapes and dream sequences. A film that perfectly encapsulates these ideas is *Darr* (1993), starring Shahrukh Khan, Juhi Chawla, and Sunny Deol.¹¹



As one can see in this poster, Juhi Chawla, whose name in the film is Kiran, is rendered as being much fairer than Shahrukh Khan (right) and Sunny Deol (left). In the film, the former is Kiran's deadly stalker, while the latter is her beloved fiancée. In the beginning of the film, Shahrukh Khan's character, Rahul, is singing about Kiran, who is dressed in a European gypsy dress, corset and all, which immediately refers to Western aesthetics. Later on in the film, Kiran and her fiancée, Sunil, struggle to escape Rahul's evil tactics and go on a honeymoon to Switzerland; what follows are many dream sequences in which we see Sunil and Kiran singing whilst frolicking in the meadows and embracing atop the Swiss Alps.

Not only are these scenes very visually appealing, but they also expose Bollywood's desire for Western, European landscapes that South Asians are not generally

¹¹ Chopra, Yash., et al. *Darr: A Violent Love Story*. Sacramento, CA: Digital Entertainment Inc., 1993. DVD.

seen in. Ultimately, the dream sequences would not be as appealing if they were prancing around in a typical, crowded Indian neighborhood. Instead, European landscapes like the Swiss Alps, allow a South Asian presence to exercise freedom and imagination, and in a sense take control of the area. When Sunil and Kiran are dancing and singing about their love in these vacant Alps, they are also making that place their own, as an area in which they can shamelessly express their true love.



I am interested in this idea of South Asian people taking over a Western landscape. By Western, I mean a location that visually signifies a European or American presence, that looks distinct from a non-Western region. This juxtaposition creates a jarring effect not only due to the fact that we are most used to seeing white people in these locales, but because it creates a discourse about dislocation and belonging in regards to race. These themes are extremely prevalent within South Asian communities in the Western world today, especially through the dissemination of Bollywood.

In *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation*, Bandana Purkayastha explains this phenomenon. She writes that “the increasing popularity of DVDs, which come with English subtitles” has allowed Bollywood films to “reach even larger audiences,” such as

a Western one.¹² More specifically, “second generation youth...sort out their ethnic identity in relation to these movies” because they appeal to both their Western identity as well as their South Asian heritage.¹³ While this seems to be beneficial, Bollywood films have also depleted South Asian culture of its variety and richness by displaying a homogenous beauty standard through their casting choices, such as the ones previously described.

In a sense, it can be said that second generation South Asian youth, in addition to the rest of the South Asian community, find themselves trapped within both these homogenized, unrealistic beauty standards that Bollywood has created out of postcolonial ideologies, and the Western world’s current perception of beauty and being. For this reason, it is common for South Asian girls to apply skin-lightening cream to their faces, and also quite prevalent for the entire South Asian youth community to fear appearing too “brown” or “fobby.”¹⁴ At the same time, there is an immense amount of pressure on South Asian youth to maintain their traditional heritage despite their existence in a Western world. All of these factors serve to complicate the identities of South Asians in the Western world, as well as their relationship to the space that they inhabit.

This can be further illustrated through a personal anecdote that involves my family moving to Las Vegas from New York. As conservative Pakistani-Americans, my

¹² Purkayastha, Bandana. *Negotiating Ethnicity : Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World*. New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2005. ProQuest ebrary. 134. Web. 5 October 2015.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Fobby” refers to FOB which stands for Fresh Off the Boat, a term used to describe immigrants or people who appear obviously non-Western

mother and stepfather felt extremely out of place within the context of Las Vegas, even though my mother was raised in America and my stepfather has been living here for the past twenty years. Their discomfort permeated my own psyche, especially during my early high school years, when I was at the peak of confusion about my identity as a Pakistani-American who attended an extremely white private school and lived in a high income, white neighborhood in Sin City. Despite the fact that I grew up watching Bollywood films that took place in Las Vegas, I was never able to feel comfortable within that environment due to my family's culture. I was constantly in a battle between trying to appear more white-washed at school while also pleasing my parents by trying to act more Pakistani. This made me often questioned the way I related to the space I inhabited and whether or not it belonged to me, or I to it. In this way, postcolonial aesthetics do exist in the contemporary Western world, and continue to affect the psyche of the South Asian community.

Chapter 3: Influences

An artist whose work greatly encapsulates similar ideas and who has inspired me is Salman Toor. Toor is a painter who is based in both Brooklyn and Lahore, Pakistan. His work is extremely figurative and harkens back to the techniques of the old masters, with whom he humorously claims to be in competition with as a third world artist in a first world art environment like New York City.¹⁵ He has painted Bollywood actors and

¹⁵ Shuraka, Violet. "Studio Visit with Salman Toor." *Cheap & Plastique* 10 July 2015. Print.

actresses, as well as himself and his friends in both a South Asian landscape and Western environment. However, because his painting technique is so technically precise, it can stylistically be likened to European art. When asked what his artistic mission is, he says,

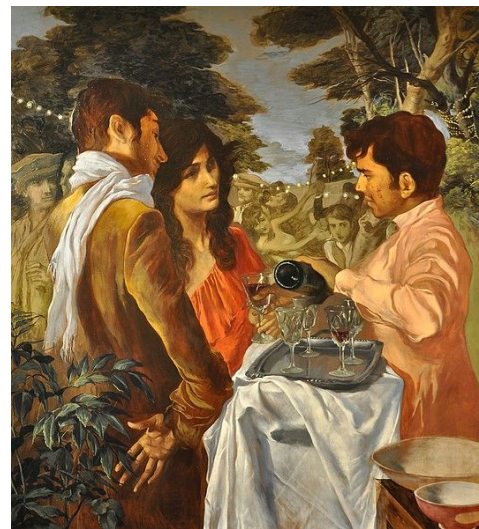
“a) the idiosyncrasy of being from a Post-Colonial culture, having the added baggage of being from a culture that is perceived to be in a state of decay or turmoil, the baggage and profound understanding that comes from imagining myself as a kind of representative of that part of the world and mingling the best of what’s happening in Bushwick with that of Lahore and Karachi.

“b) making fun of the wish to be a painter (in the European sense) from South Asia. Toying with the idea, the need to be progressive, the need for beauty/ aesthetic.”¹⁶

His statements deeply resonate with mine, except that I am interested in understanding Post-Colonial culture within a Western environment, as a South Asian-American woman painter, while he is interested in understanding how the Western world meets the South Asian world through personal experiences.



“Rickshaw Driver’s Dream”¹⁷



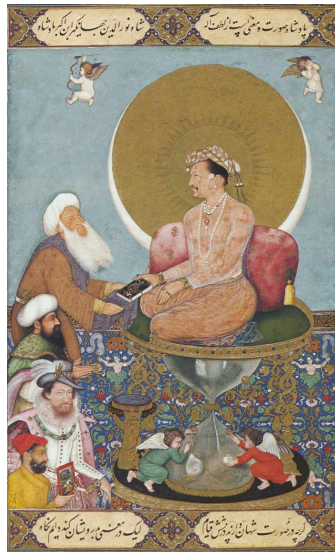
“The Bartender”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Toor, Salman. *Rickshaw Driver’s Dream*. 2013.

¹⁸ Toor, Salman. *The Bartender*. 2014.

Additionally, I am inspired by the paintings done by Mughal miniature painters, particularly during the 17th century when the Mughals were exposed to the artwork of Europeans who arrived on the subcontinent for diplomatic and mercantile reasons. These encounters between European art connoisseurs and the Mughals influenced some miniature painters to incorporate European motifs into their work.¹⁹ For example, some miniature paintings have cupids atop a scenery in which the Mughal emperor is sitting in his garden. Other paintings incorporate a holy halo around the emperor. Below is a painting by Mughal painter Bichitr that embodies both of these stylistic tropes, and additionally includes King James I of England in the bottom left to signify his subordination to Emperor Jahangir.



“Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings”²⁰

¹⁹ Schimmel, Annemarie, and Burzine K. Waghmar. *The Empire of the Great Mughals : History, Art and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004. 275. Print.

²⁰ Bichitr. *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings*. (ca. 1615-1618).

Lastly, I am inspired by the artwork of European painters, like Caravaggio, whose paintings capture a moment between people that appears darkly austere and staged, yet is animate with the individual faces and expressions of its people. I am interested in the ritual-esque component of these paintings, in which the the people appear to solemnly carry out an activity with an air of intensity, which is emphasized through the use of religion.



“Supper at Emmaus”²¹

Conclusion

Influenced by artists like Salman Toor, as well as historical art like that of the Mughal Empire and Caravaggio, I chose to create a series of paintings that seek to analyze the relationship between South Asians and a Western environment. I was further inspired by Bollywood painted posters, which I argue encapsulate postcolonial aesthetics in the form of fair skin, colored eyes, and exoticism. Furthermore, I believe that Bollywood has continued to disseminate these aesthetics to the South Asian collective community. Bollywood and its implicit fascination with the West, in addition to its

²¹Merisi da Caravaggio, Michelangelo. *Supper at Emmaus*. 1601.

inherently South Asian identity, embody the struggle that many South Asians face. This struggle, which I as a South Asian-American woman painter have also experienced, includes a constant internal conflict between desiring to fit into Western culture and trying to maintain one's cultural heritage within a Western environment. Ultimately, through these paintings and this essay, I seek to shed light on this complex relationship between South Asian culture and a Western context.

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