

Screening the Nation
Producing the Bollywood Star in Contemporary India

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(Communication Arts)

at the
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
2012

Date of final oral examination: 05/16/2012

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To my parents,
Srila & Proshanto Mitra

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the generous warmth, love and support of my family, friends, and mentors. First and foremost, my parents, who have been my loudest cheerleaders – Ma and Baba, thank you for not only being such wonderful parents, but also, for indulging and enabling my obsession with Hindi films. Whether it was covering every inch of my bedroom wall with posters of sixties’ matinee idols, or spending my hard-earned pocket money on gossip magazines and audio cassettes, or staying up entire nights watching marathons of black & white classics, you were my partners in crime. They’ve always been encouraging and supportive of my decisions, even when I opted out of a Dilbert-esque corporate life for graduate school in the United States. Thank you for everything...I could not have come this far without you both!

I am also indebted to my doctoral committee – Dr. Michele Hilmes, Dr. Mary Beltran, Dr. Julie D’Acci, Dr. Jonathan Gray, and Dr. Aswin Punathambekar. I could not have asked for a more understanding, patient, and encouraging advisor than Mary Beltran. Mary’s encouragement, support and reassurance were perfect antidote for the dissertation stress. Her work on stardom not only helped me realize the critical value of star studies, but has been instrumental to my own research. Michele Hilmes’s office is definitely one of the most welcoming places in Vilas Hall, and I can’t thank her enough for all her support and encouragement through the years. It was also while working on a seminar paper for Michele’s history of broadcasting class that I first realized my love for Bollywood stars could be transformed into a viable academic project. Julie D’Acci’s seminar class on gender and sexuality remains till date one of my most memorable graduate school experiences. Julie’s enthusiasm, encouragement, and the camaraderie in her classes were

always inspiring. Jonathan Gray's emphasis on audience dynamics and global discourses of reception and consumption has added more nuances to my work. Aswin Punathambekar has been a wonderful friend, mentor, and fellow Bollywood connoisseur. Whether it was graduate housing, or dissertation angst, thank you, Aswin, for answering all my questions so patiently. This project also owes a significant debt to Dr. Michael Curtin, who was my advisor during my coursework years. Michael's classes were always intellectually stimulating and challenging, and his work on globalization and media industries has shaped my own interest in industry dynamics. During the two weeks that I spent in Mumbai, interacting with media professionals, Michael's work on media capitals foregrounded my own research.

Another person who deserves mentions is Dr. Alope Thakore, my undergraduate advisor who convinced me to apply to graduate school, despite all my procrastination and plans of postponement. Thank you, Sir, for making me take the plunge! Looking back, I am really glad that I chose the University of Wisconsin-Madison over my other alternatives. The generous support, positive encouragement, and the camaraderie between students and faculty made my graduate school experience really memorable. A special shout out to my "pals," Liz Ellcessor, Matt Sienkiewicz, Colin Burnett, and Gayathri Sivakumar, without whom graduate school just would not have been the same. My friends "back home" have always been there for me, despite the distance and the difference in time zones. Gee, Sumo, Monjima – thank you for all the endless phone and Skype chats, and for being the "bestest" friends ever! Gee, without you and Louise, my research trip would never happened! You are the best! A big thank you to everyone who made my two-week layover so eventful – Gargi Mukherje, Advait Shelke, Louise Banerjei, Shantanu Hudlikar, Sujoy Ghosh, Shaad Ali, Jerrit John, Shweta Dogra, Joydeep Ghosh Roy, Soumik Sen, Riya Mitra, Preeti Puri Sharma, Meena Iyer, Raja Sen, Deepa Gahlot, Pooja Varma,

and Anjum Rajabali. My extended family in the U.S. – Mashi, Mesho, Rana, Tubluda, Kajoridi, Isha, and Moby – you were my “home away from home”! It was always such a reassuring feeling to know that “family” is only a phone call away, especially during those moments of homesick blues.

And Joel Jose...you are my Rock of Gibraltar! Thank you for being the most patient boyfriend, fiancé, and husband ever! And for being there, always!

Abstract

For the Hindi film cineaste, the star often functions as the focal point of his/her filmic experience, dominating almost all realms of the cinematic idiom, from its economic structuring to its textual and narrative conventions. However, despite their significant cultural and cinematic currency, the Hindi film star has rarely been the subject of scholarly research. By focusing on discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom, and examining them in the context of an increasingly globalizing India and its changing media landscape, my dissertation attempts to address this crucial gap, thus making an intervention not only in the existing scholarship on popular Indian cinema and South Asia, but also, the discipline of star studies. Employing a case studies approach, I examine the star texts of four contemporary Bollywood stars – Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai, and Shilpa Shetty – emphasizing the Bollywood star's role in mediating and articulating crucial issues central to the Indian national imaginary. My detailed discussion of Bachchan, Khan, Rai, and Shetty underline how discourses of Hindi film stardom intersect with questions of national identity, class, gender, diasporic citizenship, and transnational cultural economics. Amitabh Bachchan's transformation from "Angry Young Man" to "Benevolent Patriarch" speaks to the nation's own transition from a socialist ethos to a consumerist ontology; Shah Rukh Khan's star text highlights millennial India's negotiation of both diasporic and minority (Muslim) citizenship; Aishwarya Rai's signification of the "New Indian Woman" underlines discourses of contemporary Indian womanhood; and Shilpa Shetty's triumph in an international reality show and the subsequent remaking of her star image foregrounds both changing dynamics of Hindi film stardom and its emergent global/transnational cultural currency. As I demonstrate, the contemporary Bollywood star is now not only conceived

in global/transnational terms, but also, as a transmedia celebrity and brand, effortlessly straddling multiple venues and platforms. While mapping discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom to the nation, I also emphasize the need to read the Hindi film star beyond the realms of the national construct and the cinematic idiom, bringing into context popular Hindi cinema's global dissemination and consumption, and its increasingly synergistic relationship with other media industries and sites.

Introduction

Reading the Bollywood Star

“*Mughal-e-Azam* was one of the five main texts of my youth, and its star, Dilip Kumar, was my guide and pathfinder. He was not just my ‘hero’... No. He was my guide through the complex world of human emotions; he opened certain paths and invited me to journey through them, to examine and cross-examine what I discovered *en route*, to dissect and analyze what I encountered.” Ziauddin Sardar¹

For noted writer and scholar Ziauddin Sardar, Hindi film stars² like Dilip Kumar³ and Guru Dutt⁴ were an integral and intrinsic part of his immigrant experience as a South Asian teen in Britain. As Sardar describes, it was not only popular Hindi cinema but also the presence of its larger than life stars, which was instrumental in molding his notions of citizenship and social and cultural identity. For the Hindi film cineaste like Sardar, the star often functioned as the focal point of his/her cinematic experience. As Neepa Majumdar, in her study of early Indian film stardom, has pointed out, “Dominating the cinema at all levels, from the economic structuring of the film

¹ Ziauddin Sardar, “Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It,” *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, Ed. Ashis Nandy (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 25-26.

² While referring to pre-1990s stars, I employ the term “Hindi film star,” primarily since the concept of ‘Bollywood’ would not be applicable to them or their films. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has noted, the “Bollywoodization” of popular Hindi cinema is a particularly contemporary phenomenon, and refers to the dissemination of popular Hindi cinema as a cultural commodity, not only in the national but also in the global arena.

³ Born Yusuf Khan (the actor like many other fellow Muslim actors in the 1940s-50s adopted a Hindu name on joining the Hindi film industry) in 1922 in Peshawar (part of erstwhile British India, and now in Pakistan), Dilip Kumar was one of Independent India’s biggest stars. Known for his tragic roles in films like *Deedar* (1951), *Amar* (1954), and *Devdas* (1955), Kumar is famously referred to as ‘The Tragedy King,’ and along with actors Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand, formed the famous triumvirate of Hindi cinema’s “golden age,” who embodied the quintessential post-independence fifties’ Hindi film hero.

⁴ Guru Dutt (1925-1964) was a critically acclaimed actor, director, and producer, whose films attempted to blend aesthetic style with commercial elements. Dutt’s films were an eclectic mix of comedic romances, film noir, and serious, angst-ridden narratives. In recent years, Dutt and his films have witnessed renewed interest and revival, and he is probably one of the very few Indian filmmakers (apart from Satyajit Ray) whose films like *Pyaasa* (1957) and *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959) have not only been screened at international film festivals, but have also enjoyed commercial success in recent years when released in countries like France and Germany.

industry to the formulaic nuances of textual strategies, stardom is a crucial area of study for Indian cinema because it has come to take over, almost exclusively, the function of product identification that genres have had in Hollywood cinema” (2009: 11). Though popular Hindi cinema has witnessed crucial changes at pivotal points in its history – the transition from the studio system to independent producers in the 1940s, and the more recent emergence of multiplex theaters, which has consequently impacted both movie-going practices as well as narrative and generic conventions of Hindi films – nevertheless stars still retain their omnipotent prowess and similar to their predecessors in earlier decades, function as the primary mode of product identification for the Hindi film industry.

The culmination of various historical and industrial factors has contributed significantly in demarcating the unique iconic value of Hindi film stars and underlining their distinctiveness. In the pre-independence era, particularly during the 1930s, the popularity of genres like socials and stunt films resulted in the rise of stars like Ashok Kumar, Devika Rani, and Nadia. Following the demise of the Bombay and Calcutta film studios in the WW II years of the 1940s, and the subsequent emergence of independent producers, the star became a further crucial factor in determining not only the commercial prospects of film, but also their textual norms and strategies.⁵ The Hindi film star’s immense significance became further crystallized with the country’s independence in 1947. As popular Hindi cinema increasingly gained currency as the nascent nation-state’s cinematic alter ego, its stars, through their on-screen and off-screen personas, became synonymous with not only the nation’s “anxieties” and “difficulties” but also its hopes and aspirations. A cursory look at Hindi film stars reveal their underlying relationship

⁵ See Madhava Prasad (1998) for a detailed discussion of the Bombay-based Hindi film industry’s shift from the studio system to independent producers in the 1940s.

with the national imaginary – in the pre-independence era of colonialism, stars like Sulochana⁶ and Nadia⁷ signified discourses of modernity and nationalist struggle; in the post-independence years, fifties’ stars like Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor embodied the ideals of Nehruvian socialism; during the seventies, superstar Amitabh Bachchan's “Angry Young Man” image underlined the angst and disenchantment of the politically turbulent era; and two decades later, Shah Rukh Khan’s “yuppie” on-screen persona symbolized the consumerist aspirations of a rapidly globalizing India in the nineties.

However, in spite of their significant cultural value and their centrality in the cinematic idiom, the Hindi film star has seldom been the focus of scholarly discourse. Scholarship on popular Hindi cinema⁸ has predominantly focused on its pivotal role in mediating questions of national identity (Chakravarty, 1993) and social history (Virdi, 2003), and discourses of diasporic citizenship in the transnational sphere (Punathambekar, 2005; Srinivas, 2005). Hindi film scholars have rarely ventured into the realm of star studies.⁹ By focusing on the Bollywood star

⁶ Born Ruby Myers, Sulochana (1907-1983) was one of the biggest stars of the Bombay film industry in the 1920s and 30s. The actress, who was of Jewish descent, was one of the few non-Hindi speaking actresses who succeeded in successfully transitioning from the silent era to the talkies. During her heydays, Sulochana was one of the highest-paid stars in the Hindi film industry, earning more than even the governor of Bombay. Priti Ramamurthy’s work on Eurasian female stars in Indian silent cinema (2006) and Neepta Majumdar’s scholarship on early Indian female stars (2001, 2009) both offer critical analysis of Sulochana’s star persona.

⁷ Born Mary Ann Evans, Nadia (1908-1996) was an iconic Indian female star in the 1930s. Rosie Thomas has discussed in detail how the European actress, known for her popular stunt films (she is often referred to as “India’s Original Stunt Queen”) in the thirties, embodied not only notions of gender and sexuality, but also discourses of emergent modernity and nascent nationalism.

⁸ Though scholarship on popular Hindi cinema often refers to it as popular “Indian” cinema, I attempt to avoid such a classification since it would amount to replicating the hegemonic value of Hindi as the primary national/Indian lingua franca. Employing the term “popular Hindi cinema” also implies that my study excludes regional popular cinema as well as Hindi parallel/art cinema, and is confined to only the Bombay-based popular Hindi film industry.

⁹ The work of Neepta Majumdar (2001, 2009), Rosie Thomas (2005), and Priti Ramamurthy (2006) are rare instances when Hindi film scholarship has engaged with discourses of stardom. Though there has been significant scholarship on South Indian film stars and discourses of stardom and fandom (Dickey, 1993; Hardgrave, 1993), South Indian cinema, particularly Tamil cinema, function on very different parameters from popular Hindi cinema – a long enduring association between cinema and politics, and the significance of male film clubs – which deems it crucial that Hindi film stardom is not conflated with other regional stardom discourses.

and his/her role in negotiating issues of national identity, class, gender, and diaspora, I attempt to address this crucial lack and also in the process, provide a more nuanced understanding of popular Hindi cinema. In a departure from the existing Hindi film scholarship, my work focuses on discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom and attempts to examine them in the context of an increasingly globalizing India and its changing mediascape. What role has the Bollywood star¹⁰ played in the nation's shift from socialist ideals to consumerist aspirations? If popular Hindi cinema is central to the collective social imagining of the nation, as scholars like Sumita Chakravarty and Jyotika Viridi have argued, then how has the Bollywood star navigated the recent socio-cultural and economic changes? If hegemonic notions of class, gender, sexuality, and national identity are continually being challenged and reconfigured in the new millennial India, then how have the on-screen and off-screen trajectories of stars impacted these re-readings? Moreover, with the changing mediascape, the advent of private cable and satellite television in the nineties, and more recently, the proliferation of Internet, which has subsequently engendered an increasing synergistic relationship between film, television, and new media, how has the Bollywood star responded and adapted to these new evolving scenarios? These are the questions I interrogate in my research.

My project is primarily concerned with discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom in India, which I examine through the star texts of the following actors – Amitabh Bachchan (1942–), Shah Rukh Khan (1965–), Aishwarya Rai (1973–), and Shilpa Shetty (1975–). These four Bollywood stars each function to mediate and articulate crucial issues pertaining to the Indian national imaginary, which also consequently intersect with discourses of nationhood, citizenship, class, gender, and diasporic/transnational identity. By focusing on the narrative of

¹⁰ I employ the term “Bollywood star” in this instance since the focus of my research is contemporary Hindi film stardom, which speaks explicitly to Rajadhyaksha’s discussion of the “Bollywoodization” of popular Hindi cinema.

the nation, and its attendant questions, I also emphasize popular Hindi cinema's shift in recent years from an imagined "national" audience to a transnational audience, underlining both the changing rhetoric of citizenship and national belonging, and evolving industry dynamics. In doing so, my detailed discussion of these specific star texts thus highlights the emergent discourse of a transnational/global Bollywood stardom,¹¹ and consequently, attempts to read the Hindi film star beyond the physical paradigms of the national imaginary. As I argue, crucial shifts in the national topography and its cinematic counterpart warrant a rethinking and reevaluation of existing archetypes and concepts pertaining to Hindi film stardom. The Bollywood star today is conceived not only in transnational/global terms but is also, now a transmedia celebrity, negotiating the multi-faceted and increasingly segmented media environment.

In examining the star texts of Bachchan, Khan, Rai, and Shetty, I not only address a crucial gap in Hindi film scholarship, but also underline how discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom are intrinsically and inherently linked with changes in the Indian mediascape. Whether it is Amitabh Bachchan's role as the host of a global format show, Shah Rukh Khan's on-screen renditions of the diasporic Indian, Aishwarya Rai's international film ventures, or Shilpa Shetty's triumph in a British reality show – the contemporary Bollywood star signals an industry (and consequently, its stars) in flux. Thus, though my project engages primarily with star studies and questions of national identity, it nevertheless also highlights the tsunamic

¹¹ The global dissemination and consumption of popular Hindi cinema (and consequently, its stars) is not a recent phenomenon. The Hindi film audience has tended to include not only Indians and the South Asian diaspora, but also, an interesting and varied mix of international viewers and fans. The popularity of Raj Kapoor in the fifties and later, Mithun Chakraborty in the eighties, among Russian fans, and Amitabh Bachchan's phenomenal fan following in middle-eastern countries speak to Hindi cinema's international reach and consumption. However, what has changed in the past two decades is the film industry's concerted efforts to appeal to a transnational/global audience (though the focus remains largely Non-Resident Indians) and also, to develop more cohesive distribution and exhibition networks in the "overseas market," particularly in North America and Britain. These developments are emblematic of larger shifts in the industry dynamics. See Tejaswini Ganti's exhaustive work on the recent shifts in the Hindi film industry (2012).

changes that the Indian cinematic, televisual, and new media realms have undergone in the past two decades. I argue that any close examination of stardom discourses in contemporary India is not possible without taking into account not only the monumental changes that the nation has witnessed since the nineties – the shift from a socialist ethos to an increasingly consumerist one – but also the increasing synergistic relationship between film, television, and new media, which consequently demands a re-reading of the Bollywood star. However, before examining in detail discourses of Hindi film stardom, particularly in the context of contemporary India, it is crucial to employ some of the foundational star studies scholarship to gain a more effective understanding of the Bollywood star's crucial role.

Star Studies and the Bollywood Star

Though stars have been described as “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1962) devoid of meaning, or as “powerless elite” (Alberoni, 1972) whose social and political power is almost non-existent, Richard Dyer and other scholars of mediated stardom have argued that stars should instead be perceived as crucial sites of mediation and articulation of socio-cultural anxieties and aspirations. As David Marshall has remarked, stars and celebrities are significant not only because they underline the investment of the collective in the individual entity, but also since they articulate the voice of the collective and are crucial to the construction of identity in the social world (1997). As Dyer, in his seminal work on stars, further points out, “the value embodied by a star is as it were harder to reject as ‘impossible’ or ‘false’ because the star’s existence guarantees the existence of the value s/he embodies” (1998: 20). Thus, stars not only function “to present the organizing concept of a film, but they also serve as a crucial link between representation and reality, and in many instances, are indicative of the complex relationship between representation

and social history” (Negra, 2001: 9). Scholars like Linda Mizejewski (1999) and Gaylyn Studlar (1996) have further discussed the crucial role essayed by stars. Mizejewski, in her study of the iconic figure of the Ziegfeld Girl, argues how this image of the “Glorified American Girl” functioned not only as “a fantasy of American womanhood,” but also as a powerful symbol of national identity, race, sexuality, class, and consumerist desires in early twentieth century (1999: 3). As Mizejewski points out, the imagery of the Ziegfeld Girl essayed a crucial role for the national imaginary – it not only counteracted the cultural threat posed by immigrants and consequently, was in dialogue with racial and eugenicist discourses, but most importantly, helped delineate notions of national belonging and identity at a time when the country was grappling with the question of who qualified as an American, and who did not. Similarly, Gaylyn Studlar, in her work on stardom and masculinity in the Jazz Age, points out how the star texts of Hollywood icons like Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, and Rudolph Valentino redefined and reiterated notions of masculinity during a period marked by a “crisis of masculinity,” fuelled by increasing industrialization and urbanization.

In spite of the extensive work by star studies scholars, the distinctiveness of Hindi film stardom often problematizes the employment of western theoretical models. Neepa Majumdar, in her analysis of early discourses of Indian stardom, has underlined the potential problems inherent in applying a Hollywood-based model of star studies, with its emphasis on the stars’ private lives, to the Indian context, where early film stardom was largely devoid of any such discourse on the stars’ private lives. Majumdar, whose work focused primarily on 1930s-50s female stars, mentions how the lack of any written discourse on the stars’ private lives during this period made it difficult to employ frameworks such as Dyer’s in the study of early Hindi film stars. As she explains, “Even though the term *star* was used readily and frequently in relation to Indian players,

its connotations did not match my assumptions that there would be a dense extra-textual discourse surrounding individual stars, with private ‘revelation’ of the sort that was readily available in Hollywood” (2009: 8). “Challenged by the realities of historically situated practices,” Majumdar realized that her project “demanded theoretical defamiliarization,” and the incorporation of a more pluralistic approach (2009: 8). As she notes, scholars like Arthur Knight and Bruce Babington have also emphasized the need for expanding star studies scholarship to include different embodied practices and contexts. Hindi film stardom, with its own exigencies and specificities, thus warrants a rethinking of existing theoretical models. In focusing on discourses of Bollywood stardom, I not only address a crucial gap in Hindi film scholarship, but also, attempt to provide a scholarly intervention in underlining the demand for alternative frameworks. My project is not merely about Bollywood stardom, but raises pertinent questions about the core theoretical and methodological concepts that have framed star studies, particularly its focus on Hollywood star personalities.

Though I argue against the unproblematic employment of western star studies scholarship to the study of Hindi film stardom, I have also found it useful in some instances to apply the work of scholars like Richard Dyer and others. Dyer’s notion of stars as sites of contested meanings, with the star text being consumed and read across multiple texts and sources, speaks to the contemporary Bollywood star and his/her negotiation of a multifaceted environment, where the star text is no longer anchored to only one medium. Instead, as Bollywood stars like Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan demonstrate, their star texts can be read and consumed across multiple sites – film, television, advertisements, and interviews. Dyer further defines the star as a “structured polysemy,” encompassing not only a multiplicity of meanings and cultural values, but also characterized by the attempt to structure these meanings and values, so that

certain meanings are foregrounded and others undermined, masked or displaced. While examining the star text of Bachchan, Khan, Aishwarya Rai, or Shilpa Shetty, it is particularly helpful to employ Dyer's notion of the "structured polysemy." A closer scrutiny of these Bollywood personas reveal the inherent multiplicity of their star texts – Bachchan is simultaneously modern, urbane, cosmopolitan, as well as traditional and parochial; similarly, while Khan's "Muslimness," underlines his secular credentials, his role as the "model minority," it also, at times, brings into question his citizenship and national allegiance; for Rai, her star text reveals the convergence (and contradiction) of her public image as an embodiment of the nineties' "New Indian Woman" with her recent off-screen persona as the "dutiful *bahu*" (daughter-in-law); and Shetty's acquisition of transnational fame and celebritydom reveals the careful negotiation of globality with national antecedents. Dyer's attempt to read the star image across multiple sites – films, publicity, promotional material, criticism, and commentary – is particularly helpful in the case of the contemporary Bollywood star, who effortlessly dons the multiple hats of film actor, television host, product endorser, brand ambassador, and model. In examining the discourses of stardom underlined by stars like Bachchan, Khan, Rai, and Shilpa Shetty, I also engage with Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's argument that the encoding of the star image is dependent on the reinforcement of some aspects and the suppression of others (Allen and Gomery, 1993).

With the Bollywood star's increasing presence on the small screen, it is imperative that my work also engages with discourses of television stardom. Early work on television stardom tended to conceive it as distinct from film stardom, with television stars often described as "agreeable voids rather than sites of conflicting meanings" (Ellis, 1982). John Langer further underlines the distinction between the movie star and the television star – while the former was

revered and desired, and existed outside the realm of the ordinary, the latter's star status relied on their ability to be perceived as the familiar and the ordinary (Langer, 1981). The movie star was endowed with a sense of “other-worldliness” and “aura of mystery” courtesy the theatrical experience – the darkened hall and the demand of attention from the audience marked the movie star as a larger than life persona. On the contrary, the television personality, confined to the domestic realm of the home and the television screen, was devoid of any such other-worldliness or aura (Langer 1981), and instead marked by familiarity. As P. David Marshall has discussed, television stars’ aura was founded on familiarity, underlined by the domestic setting and the frequency of their appearances (1997). Consequently, this also endowed them with a “weaker” aura (Marshall, 1997). However, recent scholarship on television stardom has attempted to read television stardom in a different light. Scholars like Christine Becker define the television stars’ familiarity and ordinariness as not indicative of the medium’s drawback; rather, it was its uniqueness, its attempt to distinguish itself from its big-screen counterpart (Becker, 2008). Susan Murray, in her work on early television stardom, also emphasizes early television’s “primary aesthetic properties – immediacy, intimacy, and spontaneity,” and how the ability to embody these “aesthetic properties” was the defining factor for television stardom, delineating the ideal television star as one who was unglamorous, relateable, and “sincere,” and whose star persona (like Arthur Godfrey’s) was not defined by any “talent,” but rather by his “everyday guy” image (Murray, 2005).

In the case of contemporary Bollywood stardom, where superstars like Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan host format shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?*, how does one employ the existing scholarship on television stardom, where television stars are equated with ordinariness and familiarity? Deborah Jermyn’s

work on contemporary television stardom offers a different perspective, one that proves useful while analyzing the Bollywood star's multi-platform star presence. Jermyn, while discussing Sarah Jessica Parker and her on-screen persona, Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, argues against the delineation of the television star as "ordinary," instead pointing out how some of the erstwhile differences that existed between cinematic stars and television personalities have eroded in recent years (2006). James Benett has also put forth the argument that instead of stardom, the television personality should be conceived in terms of fame, performance style, and wider cultural meanings (2008). Benett advocates that the television personality's ordinariness and authenticity should be understood not in terms of "lack," but rather in the context of their ideological, cultural, textual, and economic meanings. This emphasis on meanings, whether ideological, or cultural, or textual, or economic, can prove to be useful when analyzing the Bollywood star, particularly with respect to his/her presence on television. Thus, Bachchan and Khan's appearance on the small screen as game show hosts should not be merely conceived as reiterations of their ongoing star rhetoric, but should also be seen in the light of the new meanings that they engender in the process. In this context, it is also helpful to bring in Christine Becker's work on early television and Hollywood stars. Becker has noted that television's living room intimacy could provide a privileged view of the film star that was offered by neither cinema nor the theater (Becker, 2008). Thus, instead of undermining their aura and otherworldliness, the "authenticity" of television was capable of revealing their true talents and their true persona, thus engaging in the de-mythologization and de-construction of their stardom.

Furthermore, Christine Geraghty's suggestion, that the film star should be read extratextually (across different platforms) as well as intertextually (across different texts) can also be employed as a useful tool to examine the Bollywood star's "television personality"

(Geraghty, 2007). An “extratextual” approach to Bachchan, Khan, Rai, and Shetty’s star texts would thus allow us to look beyond their cinematic texts, and include their endorsements, television appearances, and interviews. As Geraghty underlines, film stardom needs to be perceived “in the context of the drive in the media to create and exploit the status of being famous across the whole range of entertainment formats” (2007: 100). Though Geraghty’s categories – star-as-celebrity, star-as-professional, and star-as-performer – allow us to undertake a more detailed analysis of star texts, they might also fail to suffice, especially in the case of the Bollywood star. For instance, how would one classify Amitabh Bachchan? Is he a star-as-celebrity, characterized by more emphasis on the biography (or the celebrity element) than on the actor? Or is he a star-as-professional, where “a stable star image is of crucial importance (and too much difference from the established star image may lead to disappointment for the intended audience”? Or, is he a star-as-performer, where there is emphasis on a consistent persona and not much contradiction between the public and private? I would argue that a Bollywood star like Bachchan effectively belongs to all three categories – the star-as-celebrity, the star-as-professional, and the star-as-performer. While the box-office fate of his films rarely has any repercussions on his star image and celebrity stature, thus making him a star-as-celebrity, his star text is also contingent on “a stable star image,” a star image that he cannot afford to subvert. This would then classify him as a star-as-professional; however, the actor is also characterized by a consistent persona, with the private and public overlapping, thus making him a star-as-performer.

As Amitabh Bachchan’s example demonstrates, the case of the Bollywood star is a rather unique one, which often renders the employment of western star studies scholarship problematic. Though theoretical frameworks such as Dyer’s and Geraghty’s are definitely useful for examining the Hindi film star, one needs to keep in mind the context of Hindi film stardom and

also the Indian mediascape. The emergence of increased synergy between the Bombay-based Hindi film industry and Hindi-language television in recent years not only marks a significant shift from the pre-cable and satellite television era, where the public service broadcasting nature of television limited popular Hindi cinema's presence on the small screen, but also underlines the symbiotic relationship between the two domains. While for the film industry, television functions as a lucrative platform for the dissemination of cinematic (and star) discourses, for the television channels, the presence of star power often holds the promise of more rewarding TRPs (Television Rating Points). Unlike the monopolistic days of Doordarshan, the state-owned television network, private cable and satellite broadcasters now have to compete for both viewer attention and TRPs. In this scenario of increased competition and audience fragmentation, where the viewer is inundated with multiple options, the Bollywood star plays a crucial role in the TRP wars. Geoff King, in his analysis of Will Smith's star power, has underlined how Smith's star persona and appeal traverses across music, television, and film texts, thus emphasizing the role of media industries and synergy, and also, contemporary Hollywood, where the major studios have now become part of global multi-media corporations (2003). Looking at the "cross-media dimensions" of *Men in Black* (1997) and *Wild Wild West* (1999), King interrogates how such cross-media appeal "is located in terms of the relationship between a star 'franchise' such as Smith and the contemporary version of the Hollywood star system" (2003: 62). For the Bollywood star, his/her transmedia celebrity stature and "brand value" is intrinsically connected to both the changing dynamics of the Hindi film industry and the recent shifts in the Indian mediascape. However, before we interrogate the discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom, it is crucial that we also examine the pivotal relationship that exists between the national imaginary and the idiom of popular Hindi cinema, and consequently, the Hindi film star.

Reading the Bollywood Star

Similar to Benedict Anderson's discussion of the crucial role essayed by print capitalism in engendering the emergence of nation-states in the nineteenth century, and the subsequent delineation of the nation as an "imagined community" characterized by a "shared sense of belonging" and a "deep horizontal comradeship" (1983), popular Hindi cinema has also been conceived as pertinent to the Indian "national imaginary." Thus, questions of national identity and nationhood have functioned as the predominant tropes for the Hindi film scholar, with the popular cinematic idiom often perceived as the nation's cinematic alter-ego, employing "a stock set of tropes, symbols, characters, and narratives that are meant to first air, and then resolve, contemporary anxieties and difficulties" (Viridi, 2003: 9). Early instances of seminal Hindi film scholarship (Chakravarty, 1993) offer an unequivocal mapping of the national imaginary onto its cinematic counterpart. Even later works conceive the nation as the focal point for analyzing filmic discourses (Viridi, 2003). Examining Hindi cinema's role in underlining the social history of the nation, Jyotika Viridi argues, "Hindi cinema positions itself as a national cinema not only by privileging the traditional over the modern, but by naturalizing and idealizing the nation's imagined community as one that commands fierce love and loyalty" (2003: 94). As the work of Viridi and other Indian film scholars demonstrate, Hindi film scholarship has been primarily concerned with questions of national identity and nationhood (Chakravarty, 1993; Viridi, 2003; Punathambekar, 2005; Srinivas, 2005).

However, in their attempt to map discourses of nationhood and national identity onto the cinematic idiom, Indian film scholars have primarily engaged with the text, and its narrative and

formal elements. The Hindi film star has rarely figured in any scholarly discussion,¹² though, in contrast, the on-screen renditions of stars, specifically the male star's portrayal of the hero,¹³ has received considerable attention. The Hindi film hero is conceived as intrinsically linked to tropes of nation and national identity in the cinematic idiom, with the two spheres of the nation and the family often coalescing in the hero's personal narrative (Viridi, 2003). Consequently, "The malaise the hero struggles against and overcomes...contains a 'message' about the state of the nation and its problems" (Viridi, 2003: 92). Sumita Chakravarty has also underlined the pertinent relationship between the hero and popular Hindi cinema's signification of the nation. Examining discourses of national identity and masculinity in post-independence Hindi cinema, Chakravarty notes that the shift in the hero's persona, "from the deglamorized heroism of Raj Kapoor's Indianized Chaplin to the more cosmopolitan rambunctious personality of the sixties hero," symbolized a nation no longer threatened by the forces of westernization (1993: 205).

In contrast to the forties and fifties hero, personified by Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar, the sixties hero embodied by Shammi Kapoor "is most comfortable straddling – and thereby eliminating – the distinctions between different social and national worlds" (Chakravarty, 1993: 208), and thus, unlike his predecessor, "is no longer anxious to proclaim his 'Indianness'" (Chakravarty, 1993: 210). However, this eagerness and ease at negotiating the Occident was contingent on the sixties hero's belief and confidence in his "Indianness" – thus, signifying a national-heroic image unencumbered by the remnants of a colonial past and ready to embrace

¹² Majumdar's work is probably the only book-length project that attempts to interrogate discourses of Hindi film stardom. Interestingly, in contrast to Hindi film stars, who have rarely been the focus of scholarship, there has been significant work on South Indian film stars, particularly Tamil cinema stars (Dickey 1993; Hardgrave 1993).

¹³ The Hindi film hero, largely due to his proactive role in the cinematic narrative, has been regarded not only as the films', but also the nation's protagonist. Though there have been films with strong female protagonists, with sometimes even the narrative trajectory centered around the figure of the woman (*Mother India*, dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957), the Hindi film heroine has traditionally been identified with the home/ domestic domain, and consequently the national/cultural ethos, thus often configuring her as a passive character, and in the process, rendering her as incapable of a more active narrative role.

diverse cultural currents. It is this potent relationship between the filmic hero and the national imaginary, coupled with popular Hindi cinema's embodiment of the nation, which further reaffirms the crucial significance of the Hindi film star in the Indian context. However, though scholars like Chakravarty (1993), Viridi (2003), and Sanjay Srivastava (2006) provide an extensive and detailed analysis of the Hindi film hero and his role in delineating discourses of national identity, their discussion is primarily concerned with the on-screen personas and the socio-political realm, and does not engage with the star text of the actors.

Similar to Raj Kapoor's Chaplinesque "tramp" screen persona, seventies' star Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" image also received considerable scholarly attention (Chakravarty, 1993; Sharm,a 1993; Prasad, 1998; Kazmi, 1998; Vachini, 1999; Mazumdar, 2000, 2007; Mishra, 2002; Viridi, 2003, 2008). However, with the exception of Vijay Mishra (2002) and Jyotika Viridi (2008), few scholars have attempted to engage with the actor's star text and his off-screen personification of the "Angry Young Man." Instead, the focus has been predominantly on Bachchan's reel persona, "The Angry Young Man," a brooding protagonist filled with silent rage at social inequities and injustice, which echoed the sentiments of the disgruntled and disenfranchised Indian youth of the seventies. With his angry tirades at the "system," he represented not only the marginalized subaltern, but more significantly, a nation battling political ineptitude, corruption, and the demise of Nehruvian idealism. Similarly, scholarship on the contemporary Hindi film hero remains largely concerned with his on-screen persona, and rarely attempts to interrogate the off-screen personas of stars. Ranjani Mazumdar and Sudhanva Deshpande have both discussed the shift in the on-screen persona of the Hindi film hero. Mazumdar argues that the shift from Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" to Shah Rukh Khan's "psychotic hero" in the nineties embodies the crucial change in the national

imaginary, a move from the emphasis on the collective to the individual (2000). Similarly, Deshpande also discusses how Khan's "yuppie" screen persona should be read not only in the context of the nineties' tsunamic socio-cultural shifts, but also, in light of the Bombay film industry's response to a changing industrial climate (2005). However, in spite of the phenomenal popularity of contemporary Bollywood stars like Khan, there has hardly been any attempt to examine their star texts and their role as crucial sites of mediation and articulation of socio-cultural anxieties and aspirations.

Though star studies remain largely an overlooked and neglected field in the context of popular Hindi cinema, there have been some significant attempts in recent years to examine discourses of Hindi film stardom. Foremost among these is Neepa Majumdar's seminal work, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom in India, 1930s-1950s*, which traces the early culture of film stardom in India, from its emergence in the silent era to the decade following the country's independence in 1947 (2009). As Majumdar demonstrates, Indian cinema had not only inherited the technology of cinema, but also the accompanying "cultural apparatus" of Hollywood cinema, which included "the institution of stardom in all of its aspects" – "From the format of film magazines to the look of stars and star photographs, the entire mise-en-scene of stardom as practiced in Hollywood became a ready-made model of stardom" (2009: 18). Discussing the emergence of early Hindi film stardom in the 1920s, Majumdar points out how this emergent phenomenon was characterized by a "divided discourse" (2001, 2009). As her close study of 1930s film magazines reveal, the concept of stardom in India "was invested with highly contested meanings arising from a crucial dissonance between the cultural imperatives of India at that time and the desire to import wholesale from Hollywood a 'finished' concept of stardom as a technology of publicity" (2009: 20). Thus, early Indian film stardom was underlined

by this “split discourse,” with Hollywood regarded as the model for “a rationally functioning machinery of stardom,” as a “superior Western technology worthy of emulation,” while Indian star profiles, “especially in their articulation of the private discourses of female stardom,” were governed by the diktats of “nationalist conceptions” of (Indian) morality and cultural etiquette (Majumdar 2009: 55).

While examining the emergent discourse of early stardom in India, Majumdar situates it within the context of nationalist ideology of the 1930s. As Partha Chatterjee and other postcolonial scholars have noted, Indian nationalist thinkers, in response to colonial critique, conceived the twin realms of the interior/inner/home and exterior/outer/world, which consequently signified the spiritual and the material, and were embodied by the feminine and the masculine (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001). The woman’s role as the custodian of the nation’s spiritual and cultural ethos, and her subsequent deification was further underlined by popular Hindi cinema’s deployment of her as “an idealized insignia” (Viridi, 2003: 13), signifying “a wishful desire for a utopian, unified nation” (Viridi, 2003: 86). However, this binary distinction perpetuated by nationalist ideology and the subsequent delineation of the Indian woman as the custodian of the domestic/cultural space was invariably in conflict with the “public-ness” of female stars. As Majumdar points out, “the connotation of public performance and thus, of visual availability, shared by the female star, the stage actress, and the courtesan, makes them all occupy an analogous space in the public imagination, a space which is morally defined in opposition to the domestic space of the wife” (2001: 8).

Priti Ramamurthy’s discussion of the “Modern Girl” archetype, popularized by the twenties and thirties’ silent films, underlines this inherently problematic discourse of the Indian female star. Bestowed with the epithets of *sitara* (starlet), *swapno ki rani* (dream girl), and

romance ki rani (queen of romance), the “Modern Girl,” in the interwar years, was racially ambiguous and religiously hybrid, embodying a cosmopolitan model of Indian femininity (Ramamurthy, 2006). As Ramamurthy argues, it is precisely “because she is not easily recoverable as an anticolonial project” (197) that the cosmopolitan, urbane “Modern Girl” has been eclipsed and obliterated in successive public and cinematic discourse. Her ambivalent place in the nationalist discourse was further problematized by the dubious and ambiguous trajectories of her off-screen star personas, the morally questionable film actress. Often portrayed on screen by Anglo-Indian,¹⁴ Jewish, and Muslim actresses – Ruby Myers, Renee Smith, Iris Gasper, Patience Cooper, Zubeida, Jahanara Kajjan¹⁵ – their dubious racial, class and caste antecedents functioned to configure the (westernized) “Modern Girl” as “a code for the expression of un-Indianness” (Ramamurthy, 2006: 210). It was precisely this underlying association of the Anglo-Indian female star with Indian silent cinema that would prompt a demand for “cultured ladies” and cinema’s moral upliftment.

Though in its nascent years, Indian cinema was not regarded as a lowbrow entertainment since its audience was predominantly the European and Indian elite,¹⁶ but with increasing popularity and circulation, concerns over its moral impact would significantly bring into question its cultural (and class) affiliation. As Neepa Majumdar has pointed out, Indian cinema’s

¹⁴ The term “Anglo-Indian” refers to Indians of mixed-race descent, with European paternity and the maternal line usually including an Indian woman, often as far back as the eighteenth century. While some were children of mixed-raced marriages, many were also offspring of illegitimate unions between British/European men and Indian women (usually assumed to be of lower class and caste stature). Westernized in habits and Christian in religious affiliation, Anglo-Indians are regarded as culturally inauthentic, and morally and sexually lax – a perception often reiterated in popular Hindi cinema’s stereotyping of Indian Christians.

¹⁵ Though many of these early female stars adopted Hindu ‘screen names’ – Ruby Myers was “Sulochana,” Renee Smith “Seeta Devi,” Iris Gasper “Sabita Devi” – but their off-screen texts still marked them as the culturally hybrid (and thus, inauthentic) “Other.” See Ramamurthy for a more detailed discussion of early female stars and the “Modern Girl” rhetoric (Ramamurthy, 2006).

¹⁶ Interestingly this also worked to reconfigure “low brow” Hollywood genres like serials and westerns as “high brow” since their audience in India was not the lower- or working-class demographics, but rather the European and the Anglicized Indian elite.

(re)configuration as a lowbrow cultural artifact was largely due to the implicit association of female public performance with prostitutes. Consequently, this resulted in, what Majumdar terms as a “series of equivalences” – “the moral status of cinema became feminized as it was conflated with the moral status of its stars, and their moral status, in turn, was determined by their class origins” (2009: 61–62). The emphasis on the iconic value of the woman invariably demarcated the female star as responsible for Indian cinema’s moral status quo. In the context of the anticolonial nationalist discourse of nationhood and gender, cinema’s aspirations of moral uplift and class mobility could thus only be realized with the participation of “cultured ladies,” the prototype of the upper-class, educated (Hindu) woman from a respectable family, and not by the licentious and sexually dissolute Anglo-Indian female star. Implicit in this demand was also the reiteration of the “ideological value” of the home/domestic/spiritual space “by ascribing the superior moral characteristics of women in the home to cultured women in public performance” (Majumdar, 2009: 69). In contrast to the Anglo-Indian, Eurasian and Muslim stars of silent cinema, the advent of talkies in the thirties also engendered a new generation of female stars – educated, “cultured ladies” from respectable (Hindu, upper-caste) families – Durga Khote, Devika Rani, Shobana Samarth. Subsequently, Indian cinematic discourse in this period was marked by attempts to bridge the gap between “the woman at home” and “the woman in public,” notably by emphasizing the stature and “culture” of upper-class actresses, though the “ideological value of the distinction” was nevertheless maintained by “ascribing the superior moral characteristics of women in home to cultured women in public performance” (Majumdar, 2009: 69).

However, “by relying on upper-class women as its means to social respectability, the discourse of improvement was caught in a paradox: cinema’s low reputation made it impossible

to attract educated women, and yet educated women alone could redeem cinema's low reputation" (Majumdar, 2009: 64). For the "cultured ladies," the "public-ness" of a film career was inherently problematic, besieged with the threat of moral corruptibility and shame. Durga Khote, the star of such "nationalist" films like *Amar Jyoti* (*Eternal Light*, dir. V. Shantaram, 1936), embodied the paradox of the "cultured" female star – while her Maharashtrian Brahmin Hindu convent-educated credentials were "routinely touted so as to anchor her public image more firmly in her origins than in her present occupation, she also strained the limits to which class and education would serve as protection from the shadow of the 'mere actress'" (Majumdar, 2009: 82). In her autobiography, *I, Durga Khote*, the actress describes the "traumatic loss of social and familial face" (Majumdar, 2009: 82) in the wake of her cinematic debut. Though contemporary discourses frame Khote as a pioneer, who was instrumental in changing societal attitudes towards female actresses¹⁷ – in a special millennial issue in 2000 the English-language magazine, *India Today*, included her in its list of "100 People Who Shaped India"¹⁸ – her decision to join films is also constructed as one motivated by financial need and familial responsibility. As a young widow with children, the actress already inhabited a space on the margins of marital domesticity, a status quo that was further aggravated with her film career. Though Khote and her contemporaries, Devika Rani and Shobana Samarth, imbued Indian cinema with an aura of respectability, however, in the process, they also found themselves assigned to a position of marginality, incapable of being recuperated within the paradigms of the domestic realm. Their star texts are equally emphatic about their educated, upper-caste, upper-class, respectable Hindu origins, as the inevitable marital dissonance and social threat to their

¹⁷ In spite of the participation and involvement of "cultured ladies" like Durga Khote, Devika Rani, and Shobana Samarth, the film actress is still framed in Indian public discourse as an ambiguous figure, often perceived as socially and morally incompatible with the expectations and obligations of her (private) domestic life.

¹⁸ Anil Dharker, "Women of Substance – Durga Khote and Madhubala," *India Today*, 2000.

reputation engendered by their film careers – Durga Khote’s short-lived marriage to a Muslim, Devika Rani’s marital infidelities, and Shobana Samarth’s divorce and subsequent affair with fellow actor, Motilal.¹⁹

Despite their dubious distinctions, the female star, as Rosie Thomas demonstrates in her work on the 1930s’ “stunt queen” Nadia, functioned as a crucial cultural icon in embodying discourses of gender, class, and national identity. Thomas, in an article co-authored earlier with Behroze Gandhi, had discussed Nadia’s star text along with that of fifties star Nargis and eighties art-house actress Smita Patil in the context of Indian femininity and national identity (Gandhi and Thomas, 1991). In a recent article, she further examines the star text of Nadia, providing a detailed analysis of not only the European actress’s mass appeal but also her iconic embodiment of the Indian nationalist struggle during the pre-independence era (Thomas, 2005). As Thomas argues, the “Nadia persona” was the result of a complex process, which engaged with a range of diverse discourses – Hollywood influences, the warrior woman trope of the Indian *virangana*²⁰ tradition, and cosmopolitan modern Indian femininity (2005). Nadia’s whiteness did not so much mark her as the “racial Other,” since the black and white films often rendered her coloring ambiguous, but instead enhanced her exotic appeal and also functioned to set her apart from the docile, suffering Indian femininity of contemporaries like Devika Rani. As Thomas further points out, the tendency to refer to Nadia’s on-screen persona as “Bombaiwali” (the woman from Bombay) effectively situates her within and from the cosmopolitan realm of

¹⁹ Early Indian film magazines often refrained from salacious gossip, particularly when it pertained to female stars, instead relegating to the realm of oral gossip. It was only with the publication of *Stardust* in the seventies that film fanzines became more ‘gossipy’ in nature. See Rachel Dwyer (2008) for a more detailed discussion of *Stardust*, and Indian fanzines.

²⁰ The *virangana* warrior woman trope refers to the familiar motif of an Indian woman who dons male garb and ventures into the battlefield, but whose active participation in the public arena is prompted by the absence of a suitable male figure and consequently, the need to fulfill masculine/public duties and obligations. The *virangana* trope is common not only in oral and literary traditions, but is also echoed by historical figures like Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, who fought against the British in the 1857 Revolt to safeguard her dominion.

Bombay city, and consequently, explains her modernity as not an alien, foreign modernity but rather as an Indian modernity that was distinctly urbane and cosmopolitan (2005: 51). Moreover, Nadia's aggressive, active, mobile femininity resonated with both the Gandhian call for a greater participation of Indian women in the public arena and colonial India's embrace of twentieth-century modernity, particularly symbolized by the recurrent motifs of technology and automobiles in her films (Thomas, 2005: 56).

However, though Majumdar, Ramamurthy, and Thomas's work is extremely useful in historicizing discourses of Hindi film stardom, changing industrial contexts necessitate a contemporary re-reading of the Hindi film star. With the Indian mediascape witnessing tsunamic changes in the past two decades, it becomes imperative not only to focus on the hitherto neglected realm of stardom, but also to extend the focus of scholarship beyond the cinematic text and include the varied range of sites and venues where Bollywood star circulates. A cursory look at contemporary Bollywood stardom underlines how it intersects with a range of varied discourses, forging in the process star texts that are no longer contingent only on the cinematic idiom. Consequently, any attempt at comprehending discourses of Hindi film stardom also requires a similar examination of the industrial context, a closer look at the changing dynamics of the Hindi film industry, the increasing synergy between Bollywood and television, and mapping the recent shifts in the Indian mediascape.

Contemporary Indian mediascape and the Bollywood star

Economic liberalization policies initiated by the Indian government in the early nineties not only ended decades of red tape and bureaucracy, but also heralded a significant shift in the nation's ethos – from Nehruvian socialism to consumerism. Consequently, the “opening up of the skies”

–the advent of private cable and satellite television – not only signaled the end of the hegemonic public service broadcasting, but also engendered significant changes in the social and cultural sphere. Scholars like Pavan Varma (1998) and Melissa Butcher (2003) have discussed at length the tsunamic changes brought forth by these developments – while the country’s burgeoning middle-class forsake decades of socialist caution for a hedonistic indulgence of consumerism, which now had the official stamp of approval (Varma, 1998), the introduction of private satellite broadcasters would not only radically alter the Indian television scene, its consumers’ habits, but also have far-reaching ramifications in the social and cultural realms (Butcher, 2003; Thusuu, 2005).

However, the nineties were a crucial decade not only for the national imaginary, but also for its cinematic counterpart. While the nation navigated the transition from socialist values to consumerist aspirations, the Hindi film industry similarly negotiated with changes in industry dynamics and audience tastes. The preceding decade had been a dismal period for the industry – Amitabh Bachchan’s sudden decision to forsake films for politics coupled with the lack of good scripts had pushed the middle-class family audience away from the theaters. The proliferation of VCRs and the popularity of the neighborhood video rental store further dented the box-office fortunes of Hindi films. However, with the success of young filmmakers like Mansoor Khan (*Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, 1988), Sooraj Barjatya (*Maine Pyar Kiya*, 1989; *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 1994)), Aditya Chopra (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, 1995), and Karan Johar (*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, 1998) and the popularity of their bubblegum romances, family audiences again returned to the theater. The emergence of multiplex theaters, ensconced within sanitized shopping malls further tempted the middle-class family, promising a cinematic experience that also included trips to McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Moreover, in response to the demands of a

younger and increasingly globalizing audience, Hindi cinema also had to subsequently reformulate its generic conventions and norms – Jyotika Viridi has underlined how the romantic films of the nineties, with more emphasis on the individual will, embodies the changing socio-cultural values (2003), Ranjani Mazumdar has also noted how the shift from Bachchan’s “Angry Young Man” to Shah Rukh Khan’s “psychotic hero” signifies a similar move from the exterior to the interior, from the collective to the individual (2000). Consequently, the popularity of the “NRI flicks,” with their diasporic characters and foreign locales, underlined the Indian nation-state’s claim on the global/transnational arena (Punathambekar, 2005).

While Hindi cinema courted the diaspora abroad, at home they strived to satiate the eclectic taste of the urbane, cosmopolitan multiplex-frequenting audience with songless, quirky, non-formulaic ventures. This increasing segmentation of narratives, audience, and exhibition sites, and subsequently, the popularity of new genres like “multiplex films” and “NRI films,” also significantly redefined notions of commercial success. A film could now be declared a “blockbuster” based on the earnings of the first weekend itself – a vast change from earlier decades when a film’s commercial success or failure was decided by the length of its theatrical run. In the aftermath of the “multiplex boom,” terms like “golden jubilee”²¹ and “silver jubilee”²² became redundant and obsolete as parameters of commercial success became increasingly reliant on the number of prints and screens. In this changing mediascape, the star’s role as a potent product differentiator²³ was further crystallized, with his²⁴ presence ensuring the success of the crucial opening weekend.

²¹ In Hindi film terminology, “golden jubilee” refers to the successful completion of a 50 weeks’ run in theatres.

²² Similarly, “silver jubilee” refers to the continuous run of a film in theatres for 25 weeks.

²³ As Neepa Majumdar has argued (2001, 2009), the Hindi film star has always functioned as the most crucial and potent form of product identification for popular Hindi cinema. However, the ‘commodification’ of the Bollywood

However, economic liberalization and globalization did not merely engender changes in industry dynamics and audience tastes, which would become instrumental in reformulating discourses of cinematic fame, but also set into motion other developments which would further modify notions of stardom. Foremost among these was the introduction of cable and satellite television. As I had mentioned earlier, the nineties also witnessed the advent of private cable and satellite broadcasting. For the Indian television viewer, this move implied the shift from regulated public service broadcasting to a plethora of 24x7 channels that catered exclusively to audience demands and TRPs (Television Rating Points). Television programming no longer strived to provide an entertainment that was educational in character, but rather one that was unadulterated and guaranteed to hook the viewers' attention. The introduction of private broadcasting consequently engendered a more synergistic and collaborative relationship between film and television, which had previously existed as two separate and discrete entities. The increasing synergy between the two was not only prompted by television's need for content that would guarantee high TRPs, but also popular Hindi cinema's realization that enhanced visibility was the survival key in this evolving media scenario. For Hindi cinema, television did not pose any threat or competition; rather, with its 24x7 channels, it presented a potent means of mobilization, not only as a publicity vehicle for films and stars alike, but also for redefining films as a more intimate and familiar aspect of everyday life.

Equipped with increased familiarity and enhanced visibility, the cinematic personality's presence on the small screen significantly altered notions of Bollywood stardom. The Hindi film

star is a rather recent trend, fueled by the synergy between television and film, and also the increased visibility and consumption of the stars' private lives in recent years.

²⁴ Though there has been the occasional female star – Sridevi in the eighties and later, Madhuri Dixit in the nineties – who was considered as capable of guaranteeing an “opening,” it was (and still is) the male star, who is considered responsible for ensuring the film's commercial success.

star was no longer a larger-than-life figure, to be revered and awed from a distance. Instead, the star, by virtue of hosting game shows, talk shows, and reality programs, now became a more familiar and intimate presence in the Indian television viewer's living room. Consequently, this has not only bridged, and elided to a large extent, the distance between television and cinema in India, but also necessitates a re-reading of discourses of Hindi film stardom. Neepa Majumdar has mentioned how the tendency of refraining from discussing the stars' private lives was a common recurrent motif in discourses of early Indian stardom (Majumdar, 2001, 2009). However, with the increase in media outlets, print as well as television and web portals, the Hindi film star became resignified as a highly visible commodity. Discussion of the stars' private lives was no longer confined to film magazines like *Stardust*, but instead was widely circulated with even the 24x7 news channels regarding them as "breaking news."²⁵ The changing industry dynamics along with the Bollywood star's enhanced capital and presence across multiple sites necessitates a re-examination and re-reading of stardom discourses. The Bollywood star is no longer simply a film personality, but now straddles and inhabits multiple media platforms, guaranteeing high TRPs (Television Rating Points) as the television host and ensuring enhanced brand visibility as the product endorser. Consequently, with the advent of private television networks, 24x7 entertainment channels, and even news networks with dedicated Bollywood coverage, the circulation and consumption of the stars' private lives increased exponentially. Moreover, contemporary Bollywood stars, with their blogs and twitter feeds, seem to facilitate far more accessible and participatory celebrity and fan cultures than their predecessors, and also, in the process, inhabit multiple media platforms – film, television, Internet.

²⁵ During the January 2007 engagement of Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan, television viewers were not only bombarded with constant "breaking news" coverage of the impending nuptials, but news channels even brought in astrologers and tarot card readers to speculate if Rai and her future mother-in-law, Jaya Bachchan, would have an amicable relationship

With the contemporary Indian mediascape now marked by increasing fragmentation and segmentation of media platforms, texts, and viewers/consumers, the Bollywood star has ceased to be merely a cinematic personality, but is instead, reimagined as a transmedia celebrity and brand entity. The tabloidization of mainstream print and television news media, engendered by the “media explosion” of the nineties, private satellite television’s emphasis on TRPs and “grabbing eyeballs,” the advent of Indian editions of international fashion magazines, the popularity of Internet blogs and social networking sites – have all been instrumental in resignifying the Bollywood star. While the stars’ presence as talk show hosts guarantees TRPs and sponsors for the television channel and producers, their endorsements provide international multinational corporations an Indian face to “connect” to the Indian viewer, ensuring brand recognition and access to the Indian market. In the post-liberalization milieu, with the nation’s avowed espousal of consumerism, the Bollywood star functions not only as an endorser of brands and products, but also, of millennial India’s new consumerist ontology.

The stars’ “selling power” has thus magnified and extended, from guaranteeing a film’s success to a television show’s viewership and a product/brand’s visibility and success. Consequently, their transmedia celebritydom and brand value ensures not only enhanced visibility for the stars, but also supplements them with multiple sources of income. As Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan acknowledges, “The money that I have is by selling products. It’s got nothing to do with my acting.”²⁶ With A-list stars like Khan featuring in only one or two films a year, the bulk of their earnings is now derived from other avenues – endorsing products, hosting or judging television reality shows, performing at award functions and stage shows, hosting award ceremonies, and even, appearances at weddings or private events. Moreover, compared to their film remunerations, which tend to be rather fluid – stars are known

²⁶ *Living with a Superstar*, Season 1, Ep. 4, TLC. Telecast date: 19 March 2010.

to “adjust” their fees if it’s a familiar producer/director (Shah Rukh Khan charges much less than his 25 crore fee if it’s Yash Raj Films, or Dharma Productions) – endorsements and television shows offer a more viable and stable means of income. Interestingly, in the Indian context, the contemporary Bollywood stars’ ubiquitous presence, in television shows, product commercials, televised events, does not undermine their star aura, but rather, this enhanced visibility is perceived as crucial to sustaining their stardom. What has further facilitated the shift in Bollywood star discourses is the emergence of celebrity management companies – a far cry from previous decades, where the star’s PR and publicity was handled by either a family member, usually a parent or sibling, or the trusted secretary. The past few years have witnessed the launch of celebrity management firms like Atul Kasbekar’s Bling (2007), Anirban Das Blah’s Kwan (2009), and Vinita Bangad’s Krossover Entertainment (2010), which handle not only brand endorsements, but also the star’s television shows and stage appearances. As Kasbekar remarks, “We do not just sign an actor and get them some brand endorsements; we work on helping them monetize every aspect of their personality and build them as brands” (Ambwani, 2011).

In this new media environment, with the resignification of the Bollywood star as a transmedia celebrity and brand entity, the emphasis is now on “seamless integration,” between the star’s “brand” (incorporating both off-screen and on-screen texts) and the corporate venture. Thus, the pre-release publicity and promotion for Sonam Kapoor’s 2010 film, *Aisha*, not only explicitly referenced the upcoming actress’s off-screen image as a fashion icon, dubbed as the “next best thing” (Choudhary, 2009), “fashion’s IT girl” (Dhondy, 2010), but also, her role as brand ambassador for Maybelline and L’Oreal – both “seamlessly” blending with her character in the film, “Aisha,” a young, rich fashionista. The company launched a new line of make-up products, The Aisha Collection, to coincide with the film’s release, and television commercials

featured the young Bollywood star walking the red carpet, in designer wear, with shots of her, using L’Oreal and Maybelline products, from the film. The Bollywood stars’ “seamless integration” with the brand is thus, integral to their contemporary reimagining, from a predominantly cinematic personality to a transmedia entity. The tagline for Sony Vaio X – “the new size zero” – is a nod to both the laptop’s “ultra slim,” “ultra light” dimensions, but also, to its brand ambassador, Kareena Kapoor’s “size zero” body. In the print campaign and promotional material, the actress is featured in a black body suit, holding the laptop, with her body balanced on one toe, her side profile accentuating her transformation from a curvaceous body type to a size zero. Similarly, actress Genelia D’Souza’s campaigns for LG Mobile, Titan Fast Track watches, Cadbury’s Perk, Fanta, Colgate Max Fresh, Garnier, all tap into her effervescent, youthful star image, a persona she often reprises in her films. For Sunny Deol and Salman Khan, their endorsements for Lux Cozi and Dixcy Scott innerwear speak to their mass appeal and hyper-masculine physicality; Akshay Kumar’s television commercials for Thumbs Up, featuring daredevil stunts, reiterate not the cola drink’s image as a “manly” drink, with more vigor and fizz, but also, Kumar’s own action hero persona and his role as the host of *Khatron ke Khiladi*, the Indian franchise of *Fear Factor*. Straddling and inhabiting multiple venues and platforms, the contemporary Bollywood star is no longer merely a cinematic presence, but instead needs to be read as a transmedia celebrity and brand entity. It is this dispersed character of the Hindi film star that necessitates a discursive and interdisciplinary approach.

Methodology

My project does not attempt to offer an exhaustive and overarching analysis of contemporary Bollywood stardom; instead, by focusing in detail on specific stars, it examines and interrogates

how discourses of Hindi film stardom function to underline crucial and pertinent issues of national identity, citizenship, class, and gender in an increasingly consumerist India. The Bollywood star does not unequivocally embody the shifts in the nation's cultural and socio-economic topography, but rather, as their star texts reveal, are themselves embroiled and enmeshed in the nation's ongoing transformation and transition. Employing star studies scholarship, I conceive Bollywood stars as cultural texts and sites of negotiation and mediation, where contradictions and conflicts are played out and anxieties and aspirations articulated. In *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*, Diane Negra employs a case study approach to examine discourses of Hollywood stardom and ethnic femininity. As Negra points out, such an approach affords her the opportunity to "read star personae as cultural texts in which our understanding of gender, ethnicity and national identity are embedded" (2001: 9). Similarly, the case study approach also provides me with the opportunity to interrogate and examine specific instances of contemporary Bollywood stardom through the detailed analysis of individual star texts, which underlines the intersecting discourses of nation, class, gender, and sexuality in the postcolonial "global" India. The focus on individual star personalities also facilitates my attempt to map evolving dynamics of contemporary Bollywood stardom as it seeks to negotiate with changing social, cultural, and industrial contexts.

My choice of case studies each function to highlight certain crucial aspects of the national imaginary. My first case study, Bollywood legend, Amitabh Bachchan, helps me map the shift in the nation's narrative, from socialism to consumerism. As I argue, Bachchan's own professional reincarnation and transformation, from the iconic "Angry Young Man" to what I term as "Benevolent Patriarch" can be seen as emblematic of post-liberalization India's avowed espousal of consumerism. As the nation's erstwhile socialist cinematic ideal, Bachchan's reinvention

holds particular significance, signaling not only the shifts in the nation's ethos but also, in the Indian mediascape. While a detailed discussion of Amitabh Bachchan's star text helps me chart the discourses of national identity and class, my second case study, superstar Shah Rukh Khan, highlights another crucial facet of the Indian national imaginary – religion and the nation's attempt to define itself as a secular entity. As a Muslim Bollywood star in a Hindu-majority country, Khan's star text encapsulates the inherent contradictions and conflicts that define “Indian secularism,” particularly as the nation tries to assert its emergent role as a global player. Similar to the Bachchan case study, my discussion of Khan also connects his star text to discourses of class and national identity, but further expands it to include issues of diasporic citizenship and belonging.

In my third case study, Aishwarya Rai, I move on to the Bollywood female star, and examine the role gender essays in the articulation of contemporary Indian nationhood. Rai, often regarded as the “global face” of Bollywood,²⁷ presents in her star text the rhetoric of the post-nineties “New Indian Woman,” and also, highlights the production of the Bollywood celebrity as an emerging “global” entity. Aishwarya Rai's international film ventures, her annual appearance at the Cannes Film Festival, and her endorsements for global brands – all signal the changing narrative of Bollywood stardom, from “national” to “global”/“transnational.” However, Rai's star text, in its mediation of the “New Indian Woman” and the “dutiful daughter-in-law,” also reveals the inherent contradictions in discourses of contemporary Indian womanhood, and consequently, the nation's attempt to navigate the twin realms of the “national” and the “global,” the “traditional” and the “modern.” The choice of Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, and

²⁷ Though Rai is more globally known and recognized, particularly in the US, than stalwarts like Bachchan and Khan, whose appeal is limited to the diaspora (though Khan commands a sizeable fan following in Europe, South-east Asia, and the Middle East), her box-office currency is, however, not as impressive as other Bollywood heroines like Priyanka Chopra or Katrina Kaif. She owes her celebrity status as much, if not more, to her 1994 Miss World win, her modeling career, and her global/crossover presence than to the commercial success of her Bollywood films.

Aishwarya Rai was not dictated by their A-list stature, but rather how their star texts can be employed to map the intersecting discourses of national identity, gender, and class against the backdrop of the post-liberalization India and also, the changing Indian mediascape. My final case study, Shilpa Shetty, though not regarded in the same league as Bachchan, Khan, or Rai by Bollywood pundits, also offers the opportunity for a rich discursive analysis of national identity, globalization, gender, class, and diasporic belonging. The reinvention of Shetty's star image, from a Hindi film heroine to a corporate diva and transmedia celebrity, following her participation in the 2007 British reality show, *Celebrity Big Brother*, highlights the increasingly transnational character of Bollywood stardom, the global dissemination of popular Hindi cinema as a cultural commodity, and subsequently, the changing definition of its stars. As Shetty's example illustrates, contemporary Bollywood stars are now being conceived as not just film personalities, but as transmedia celebrities straddling multiple platforms venues. A closer examination of her star text also reveals the shifting dynamics of the Bombay film industry, specifically with respect to the female star.

For each of the case studies, I focus on particular aspects of the actors' star persona, employing in the process the dissemination and circulation of their star texts in both cinematic and extra-cinematic realms. For Amitabh Bachchan's contemporary star image as a consumerist icon, I examine his recent films as well as television appearances, endorsements, interviews and media coverage in popular publications. For Shah Rukh Khan, I discuss not only his film texts, but also his television shows, endorsements, interviews, and media discourses to underline his star text as an (Global) Indian Muslim. For Aishwarya Rai's embodiment of the "New Indian Woman," I primarily focus on interviews and media coverage, but also, briefly reference her films and endorsements. For my final case study, Shilpa Shetty, I employ detailed discussion of

print and television coverage, interviews, and her corporate initiatives to underline the reinvention of her star persona, from “Hindi Film Heroine” to “Savvy Businesswoman,” following the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy.

Thus, my project essentially follows a discourse analysis methodology, involving scholarly articles, popular publications, film and television texts, interviews and media coverage. As mentioned earlier, Hindi film stardom has received scant scholarly attention. Neepa Majumdar’s exhaustive study of female stars in Hindi cinema, spanning the decades, 1930s-1950s, is probably the only book-length project on Hindi film stardom. Behroze Gandhi (1991) Rosie Thomas (1991, 2005), Vijay Mishra (2002), Priti Ramamurthy (2006), and Jyotika Virdi (2008) are the few others who have also attempted to analyze Hindi film stars. However, in contrast to the lack of scholarly focus, Hindi film stars have received considerable attention in the popular press. While the film fanzine culture, in both English and Hindi language press, has had a long tradition – beginning with film critic Baburao Patel’s *Film India* in 1935, followed by *Filmfare* in 1952, and then later, a slew of gossip magazines (*Stardust*, *Cine Blitz*, *Star & Style*, *Mayapuri*, *Movie*) in the seventies and eighties – in recent years, the trend has been glossy, expensive coffee table books. Penned mostly by film critics and journalists, and in collaboration with the stars themselves, these recent publications (Somaaya, 1999; Mohamed, 2002; Sheikh, 2006) highlight both the Bollywood stars’ investment and involvement in the dissemination of their star texts, and also, their cultural currency in popular rhetoric.

Employing Richard Dyer’s concept of “structured polysemy” and Christine Geraghty’s contention that film stars should be read not only intertextually, but also extratextually, my discussion draws upon these instances of popular press and also, journalistic accounts that help provide a more detailed and thorough analysis of the actors’ star texts. Neepa Majumdar has

underlined the role of film journalism in formulating early discourses of Indian stardom (2001, 2009). Similarly, Rachel Dwyer has also argued for the inclusion of film magazines like *Stardust* when interrogating popular Hindi cinema (2008). In my project, I engage extensively with star interviews and features in both the print (film magazines, mainstream newsmagazines, high-fashion magazines) and the television media (talk shows, interviews on Indian and international news channels). Underlining the increasing synergy between the Hindi film industry and television networks, my work draws heavily on television texts – format game shows, talk shows, and interviews featuring Bollywood stars – thus emphasizing the circulation and dissemination of their star image beyond the cinematic realm.

As far as my source material is concerned, the deciding factor in most cases was the question of accessibility. Conducting research on popular Hindi cinema while situated at an American university included its own challenges and restrictions. While I was able to access some of my sources (mainly Indian newspapers and newsmagazines) through library databases like Proquest, for the most part, I had to rely on various Internet websites, whether online editions of mainstream print publications, or video-hosting sites like YouTube. Leading English-language print dailies like *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*, and fortnightly newsmagazines like *India Today* and *Outlook* were readily available online. Television news networks like NDTV and CNN-IBN not only posted videos and transcripts on their websites, but also had YouTube channels, where I could download the videos. However, not all the sources afforded such easy access. For the Aishwarya Rai and Shilpa Shetty case studies, where I extensively refer to interviews and cover features in Indian editions of fashion and lifestyle magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *People*, *Hello!*, *Marie Claire*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, the only way I could access these magazines was to purchase them on eBay. Since the magazines

were shipped from India, it was both a time-consuming and expensive proposition. Though certain publications like *Cosmopolitan* (the Indian edition) and *Verve* had extensive websites, they would often feature only truncated versions of the interviews/features. The only publication, which I could easily access, was the English-language women's magazine, *Femina* – the UW Memorial Library has copies of the magazine in diligently bound volumes dating back to 1969. This was incredibly helpful when discussing the “New Indian Woman” rhetoric and the nineties’ popularity of beauty pageants for the Aishwarya Rai case study.

While websites and eBay were my primary means of accessing mainstream print publications, for television texts, it was YouTube. Whether it was format game shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, TLC’s reality series, *Living With a Superstar*, celebrity talk shows and interviews like *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal*, *Koffee with Karan*, *Beautiful People*, *On the Couch with Koel*, *Bombay Talkies*, *Seedhi Baat*, or television commercials and endorsements featuring Bollywood stars, YouTube was the only place where I could view them. Websites for Indian television networks would often include synopsis and schedules, but not the videos of the interviews and talk shows. However, though extremely convenient in terms of access, the ephemeral character of YouTube presented its own challenges and problems. While some networks and production houses had their own YouTube channels, where the shows were diligently archived, many of the videos that were uploaded by individual users would often be removed in case of copyright violation. There was also the problem of “dating” the YouTube videos, particularly the ones uploaded by individual users, since they would include the upload, but not the telecast date. In such instances, I would often need to check with other sources (online transcripts, reviews, etc.) to confirm the telecast dates.

Though I employed textual analysis of films only selectively (primarily for the Bachchan and Khan chapters), access to Bollywood films was not a problem – they are readily available on shopping websites like Amazon and even for online streaming on sites like Netflix. However, issues of accessibility also meant that I had to exclude, at times, film magazines like *Filmfare* and *Stardust*, which were not very easily available. Unlike the mainstream print publications, the *Filmfare* and *Stardust* websites usually do not include complete transcripts of interviews and features. Occasionally I was able to purchase copies at the local Indian grocery store in Madison, or on eBay. However, magazine scans and images are readily available on the Internet, and at times, I would use these instead of the complete interview transcript to gain more insight and add to my research. Thus, in a way my means of accessing my sources were, at time, unorthodox, and often dictated by the exigencies of their availability.

I also spent two weeks in Mumbai in July 2010, conducting a series of interviews and informal conversations with media professionals (journalists, film critics, public relations and marketing executives, directors, scriptwriters) to gain a better understanding of the workings of the Hindi film industry, particularly in regard to discourses of Bollywood stardom. The funding for this trip was made possible by the Elliot Dissertation Scholarship, awarded by the Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and also, the UW Graduate School's Vilas Research Travel Grant. The Hindi film industry functions on rather informal networks of kinship and quasi-familial "connections," which are often closed off and inaccessible for outsiders. As a graduate student, without any "contacts," it would have possibly taken me months to gain audience with some of the people I interviewed. What facilitated my access was my own personal relationship with certain media professionals and industry insiders. My undergraduate training was in mass communication and video production, and many among

my cohort are now working in the Hindi film industry. It was this social network of friends and former classmates that helped me gain the initial access.

The whole process was rather interesting and informal – friends and acquaintances would usually call “someone” and “introduce” me (a graduate student at an American university working on her PhD on Bollywood); if they were “free,” I was asked to call them and schedule appointments, which would then include another series of phone calls and text messages. Very rarely I met anyone in a professional setting. Most of the interviews were conducted at coffee shops, or even at homes. The appointments would also be, at times, rescheduled at the last minute. The informality of the process is perhaps also emblematic of my trajectory of access, as a “friend” of a friend/acquaintance/colleague. However, while my own personal “connections” helped me gain access to filmmakers like Sujoy Ghosh and Shaad Ali, who have directed Amitabh Bachchan, and critically acclaimed scriptwriter Anjum Rajabali, my “contacts” also determined *who I could* interview – those who they themselves had easy access to. Thus, my choice of interview subjects was not so much, at times, determined by their relevance or appropriateness, but more importantly, by their accessibility. Moreover, with only two weeks at my disposal, I was also working with a rather tight timeframe, which further restricted the availability of my sources.

Though I eventually decided to only use the interviews selectively for specific case studies,²⁸ the experience was extremely illuminating and productive in its own right. The informal structure of scheduling appointments and rendezvous venues helped me gain an insight into the everyday working and rituals of the Bombay film industry. It also underlined an industry in flux, where the previously disorganized, quasi-professional structure now had to engage with

²⁸ Most of the discussion centered on the changing industry dynamics, which I plan to include later in an industry-centric project.

the dynamics of increasing corporatization and cross-media collaboration. Interestingly, in my conversations with journalists, critics, scriptwriters, and filmmakers, after the initial, “Why the Bollywood star?” (speaking to the underlying and dominant stance of regarding Hindi film stars as vacuous icons, devoid of any cultural currency), the focus would invariably turn to “how much the industry has changed,” a discussion that often oscillated between celebratory and disparaging tones. While the recent shifts in the Bombay film industry – corporatization and media synergy – need to be examined, it is also crucial to interrogate how they have impacted discourses of Bollywood stardom. Though this project examines the role of contemporary Bollywood stars in underlining and enumerating questions concerning the nation and its varied tribulations and vicissitudes, it also signals the need for a more industry-centric approach to analyzing Hindi film stardom. Thus, as I attempt to interrogate discourses of Bollywood stardom, and the stars’ embodiment of crucial questions confronting post-liberalization India, I also bring in references to the industry shifts and changing dynamics of the mediascape.

Overview of Chapters

As I have discussed, the Bollywood star, despite his/her significance as a potent cultural commodity, has rarely received scholarly attention. A closer examination of the star texts of contemporary Bollywood stars reveal their role in enumerating both the questions confronting the national imaginary and the changing shifts in the Indian mediascape. By focusing on the Bollywood star, I not only attempt to address a crucial gap in Hindi film scholarship, but also, emphasize the need to rethink some of the core concepts of star studies, and to expand it beyond the paradigms of the west/Hollywood.

In Chapter One, “From ‘Angry Young Man’ to ‘Benevolent Patriarch’: Amitabh Bachchan and the remaking of post-liberalization India,” I examine the reinvention of Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan’s star persona, from the seventies’ iconic “Angry Young Man” to the contemporary “Benevolent Patriarch.” Bachchan’s new star image, as the ubiquitous symbol of consumerism, I argue, underlines the shift in the national imaginary, from socialist ideals to consumerist aspirations. As the nation’s erstwhile socialist icon, the actor’s enthusiastic espousal of consumerism holds crucial significance, particularly in light of the Bollywood star’s cultural capital and social currency. Employing a detailed discussion of his star text, I situate Bachchan’s “Benevolent Patriarch” against the backdrop of post-liberalization India’s changing socio-cultural dynamics, particularly the nascent consumerism of its burgeoning urban middle-class. Analyzing his transformation from a cinematic legend to a television personality and promiscuous brand endorser, I also engage with discourses of transmedia stardom. Incorporating detailed references to the production history and reception of the popular format game show, *Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC)*, and subsequently, Bachchan’s new on-screen (and off-screen) persona as the “hip,” “cool” patriarch, I argue that in his own explicit transition, the Bollywood star encompasses the trajectory of post-liberalization India. As I seek to analyze the contemporary remaking of Amitabh Bachchan’s star persona, my discussion focuses not only on his film and television texts, but also, his brand endorsements, interviews, talk shows, new media initiatives (web blog and Twitter), as well as conversations with media professionals in Mumbai.

In Chapter Two, “‘I am a Bloody Good Indian’: Shah Rukh Khan, the ‘Global Indian,’ and minority citizenship in contemporary India,” I continue the discussion of post-liberalization India’s espousal of consumerism with my second case study, Shah Rukh Khan, but also, attempt to complicate the imaginings of contemporary India. My analysis of Khan’s star text, as a

Muslim superstar, underlines notions of subjectivity, citizenship, and nationhood, unpacking in the process the myth of Indian secularism. As I demonstrate, similar to the schizophrenic nature of contemporary India, where claims of globalism and modernity exist alongside inherent fissures of sectarian violence and communal strife, Shah Rukh Khan's star text embodies the inherent contradiction between his dual selves, the "Global Indian" and the "Indian Muslim." In his on-screen persona as the archetypal NRI protagonist, Khan is the epitome of the "Global Indian," effortlessly navigating the seamless boundaries between local/national and global/transnational, an image further reiterated in his television texts and brand endorsements. Furthermore, as the Muslim celebrity, the actor is the "ideal" citizen, his minority status functioning to reaffirm the secular credentials of contemporary, global nation-state. However, it is his Muslim identity, which also marks him as the perpetual traitor, bringing into question his citizenship and national belonging. Employing textual analysis of Khan's films, interviews, endorsements, and media coverage, I argue that the contradictions and duality of the actor's star text speak to the contemporary Indian national imaginary's inherent fissures and ruptures.

While the first two case studies focus on Bollywood male stars, in the next two chapters, I examine the role of the female star in delineating notions of national identity, gender, class, diasporic citizenship, and transmedia stardom. In Chapter Three, "'Miss World' meets 'Dutiful Daughter-in-Law': Aishwarya Rai, the Bollywood female star, and negotiating the contradictions of contemporary Indian womanhood," I look at how the star text of Aishwarya Rai can be read as emblematic of the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Indian womanhood, specifically in her personification of the nineties' iconic symbol, the "New Indian Woman." While her celebrity image and career trajectory as a former beauty queen (Miss World 1994) and subsequently, as the only Bollywood star to actively pursue international film projects and brand

endorsements, was employed in media discourse to denote her as the professional, successful Indian woman, her recent star text, as the “dutiful daughter-in-law,” is often perceived as reiterating dominant and hegemonic values. However, as I argue, Rai’s public rendition of her newly acquired familial role does not signify the dissonances of her star image, but rather, speaks to the inherent contradictions and incongruences that often structure contemporary discourses of Indian womanhood. This chapter illustrates the crucial role essayed by the female star in enumerating questions of national identity and socio-cultural aspirations, particularly in the context of post-liberalization India, and the gendered rhetoric of the nineties’ “New Indian Woman.” As my discussion engages extensively with the extratextual dissemination of Aishwarya Rai’s star text in magazine features, television interviews, talk show, and media coverage, I also underline the changing dynamics of contemporary Bollywood stardom.

My final case study, while retaining the focus on the Bollywood star’s enduring role in mediating the issues concerning the national imaginary, also extends the discussion to incorporate the emergent discourses of transmedia celebritydom and the remaking of the Bollywood star as a brand entity. Chapter Four, “From ‘Heroine’ to ‘Corporate Diva’: Shilpa Shetty, transnational cultural economics, and the ‘star as brand,’” examines the reinvention of Shilpa Shetty’s star image, from a Hindi film heroine to a transnational celebrity and subsequently, a corporate diva, following the 2007 *Celebrity Big Brother* racism controversy. Analyzing in detail the public rhetoric and media coverage of the controversy, as well as the media discourse (interviews, magazine features, television appearances) following her win, I attempt to interrogate her role in underlining questions of national belonging and diasporic citizenship, and also, how the controversy functioned to facilitate the remaking of her star persona. Similar to the preceding chapter on Aishwarya Rai, my analysis of Shilpa Shetty not

only seeks to map discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom, but also looks at how the Hindi film heroine's star text speaks to notions of class, gender, and national identity in the context of the new, "global" Indian.

Chapter One

From “Angry Young Man” to “Benevolent Patriarch”: Amitabh Bachchan and the remaking of post-liberalization India

The season premiere of *Kaun Banega Crorepati 4*, the Indian franchise of the globally successful format quiz show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, was one of the most eagerly awaited televisual events for its countless viewers and fans. Premiering on 11 October 2010, on the occasion of the sixty-eighth birthday of its celebrity host, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, it marked not only the show’s return to the Indian television screen after a hiatus of nearly four years, but also the return of its iconic host. The special ninety-minute episode began with a montage of sepia-toned photographs of the actor’s childhood, with a voice-over reminding viewers the significance of his year of birth, 1942 – a landmark year in Indian history, when Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement. Bachchan’s indelible link with the national imaginary firmly established, the montage then recounted the literary and intellectual heritage of his father, renowned Hindi litterateur, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, and his own narrative of cinematic fame and stardom. As the two-minute homage drew to a close, the superstar emerged from a 24-foot structure in the form of an “A,” reciting his father’s poetry and dialogues from his popular films, before finally breaking into a song and dance routine along with a troupe of eighty dancers. At the culmination of the nine and a half minute long segment, which seemed more of a homage to his iconic stature than the premiere of a format quiz show, Amitabh Bachchan finally turned to the audience and expressed his happiness and gratitude for being given the opportunity to host *Kaun Banega Crorepati* for the third time since its debut on Indian television in 2000. Bollywood’s legendary star was back on the small screen, the medium that had facilitated the

reinvention of his star text, from a cinematic idol to a transmedia star, and more importantly, from an embodiment of socialist values to a signifier of consumerist aspirations.

While the phenomenal popularity of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, or *KBC*, as the show was more popularly known, underlines the successful localization and innovation of a global television format (Thomas and Kumar, 2004; Kumar, 2005), in the Indian context, the communion between the big-money quiz show and Bollywood stardom marks it as distinctly different. *KBC* not only introduced the Indian television viewer to the big-money quiz show, but was also instrumental in orchestrating Amitabh Bachchan's professional reincarnation, from a fading cinematic icon to a transmedia celebrity, and the subsequent reinvention of his star image, from the erstwhile "Angry Young Man" to what I term as "The Benevolent Patriarch," a transformation that also underscores the Indian nation's transition from Nehruvian socialism to the nineties' aspirational consumerism. Bachchan's avowed espousal of consumerism, both within the context of the show's monetary stakes and also in his off-screen text, as a consummate brand endorser, presents the Indian viewer (and consumer) with a role model who not only embodies the crucial shift but also, explicitly ratifies it. With the Hindi film hero occupying an iconic role in enumerating the national imaginary's anxieties and aspirations (Chakravarty, 1993; Viridi, 2003), the resignification of Bachchan's star persona holds crucial and pertinent significance.

Employing Richard Dyer's notion of reading stars as crucial sites of socio-cultural mediation and negotiation (1986, 1998), I examine how Amitabh Bachchan's contemporary star text as the "Benevolent Patriarch" is emblematic of the nation's own espousal of consumerism, and transformation. In doing so, I not only engage with a detailed discourse analysis of Bachchan's star image, but also juxtapose it against the backdrop of the nineties' economic

liberalization and changes in the Indian mediascape, particularly the increasing synergy between the erstwhile distinct realms of popular Hindi cinema and television. Though my discussion of Amitabh Bachchan's contemporary star text focuses largely on *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, and its role in engendering the reinvention of his star person, I also extend the scope of the project to include his recent films, advertisements and brand endorsements as well as television and print media discourse (features, interviews, talk shows). Examining his portrayal of the "cool," "hip" father figure in Bollywood films, further reaffirmed by his off-screen narrative as a "buddy" to his own children, I look at the dissemination of Bachchan's "Benevolent Patriarch" image across varied, dispersed texts. My analysis of Amitabh Bachchan and the shift in his star persona also explicitly references the changing dynamics of both the Indian mediascape and Hindi film stardom – increasing synergy between film and television (and also, new media and social networking sites) and the resignification of the Bollywood star, from a primarily cinematic star to a transmedia celebrity, effortlessly straddling the multiple venues of films, television shows, brand endorsements, web blogs, and social networking sites.

The "One Man Industry"

They called him the One Man Industry and for sixteen years he churned out hits with assembly-line regularity...The distance between him and his rivals was so vast that in the number game, they'd allotted the numbers 1 to 10 to him, the competition really took place way down there and it never affected the big man at the top.¹

¹ *Filmfare*, June 1986. Cited in Chakravarty, 1993: 230.

With more than a hundred and eighty films to his credit, and a career spanning four decades, Amitabh Bachchan is arguably Hindi cinema's most iconic star. Hailed as "a mythic figure,"¹ and regarded as "the last of the pan-Indian film heroes" (Mishra, 2002: 127), Amitabh Bachchan occupies a central place in the pantheon of Indian celluloid gods, with his larger-than-life persona permeating films, television, and product endorsements, and inspiring even doctoral theses and comic book series. Jessica Hines, in *Looking for the Big B: Bollywood, Bachchan and Me*, describes the actor as "a cross between Clint Eastwood, Al Pacino, Elvis, but with a more than a hint of John Travolta" (2007: 7). Conferred with both national and international awards and honors, he also holds the distinction of being the first living Asian to be immortalized in Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London – a testimony to his immense popularity among the Indian diaspora. In fact, his adulation abroad, both among Indians and fans of other nationalities, was such that he was even judged the "Greatest Star of the Millennium," edging out thespians and stalwarts like Lawrence Olivier, Alec Guinness, Marlon Brando, and Charlie Chaplin, in a 1999 BBC poll.² Unlike his contemporaries, most of whom have retired from the arc lights, Bachchan, at sixty-nine, is not only active, but also enjoys an extremely prolific career, as an actor, television host, and endorser and brand ambassador for countless products.

However, Bachchan's celebrity status and iconic stature does not merely exemplify the fanatical fan following and adulation enjoyed by Bollywood stars, or even his own popularity as a legendary actor, but more significantly, underlines his role in articulating the national imaginary. Popular Hindi cinema has often strived to reiterate and reaffirm the nationalist ethos,

¹ Filmmaker Gurinder Chadha, quoted in Alex Perry. "The Big B: With a return to TV and a series of acclaimed cinema roles, Amitabh Bachchan proves there can be second acts in Bollywood," *Time*, 26 September 2005.

² "Bollywood Star Tops the Poll," BBC News, 1 July 1999.

with the male protagonist, the Hindi film hero, functioning as a site of articulation and mediation of social issues (Chakravarty, 1993; Viridi, 2003). Bachchan's stardom is intrinsically linked to his portrayal of "The Angry Young Man,"³ a brooding protagonist filled with silent rage at social inequities and injustice, which echoed the sentiments of the disgruntled and disenfranchised Indian youth of the seventies. As Jyotika Viridi has pointed out, the working-class protagonist was "the insignia of and vehicle for Amitabh Bachchan's superstardom" (Viridi, 2003: 107). Often playing "the urban ghetto product," the actor challenged the dominant class hierarchy "either from his underdog position, or by rising to the top to vindicate past (inevitably familial) humiliation," thus, exposing in the process the workings of the Machiavellian system (Viridi, 2003: 107). In his on-screen avatar of "The Angry Young Man," Bachchan not only symbolized "primordial anger and populist leadership qualities" (Prasad, 1998: 131) that embodied the disillusionment and anti-establishment mood of the seventies (Gehlot, 1995: 234; Kazmi, 1998: 143), but also "an India no longer comfortable with the Gandhian ideology of non-violence" (Mishra, 2002: 136). With his angry tirades at the "system," he represented not only the marginalized subaltern, but more significantly, a nation battling political ineptitude, corruption, and the demise of Nehruvian idealism.

For the Indian cinemagoers of the seventies and eighties, Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" persona was not merely a figment of their celluloid imagination. Rather, the actor's on-screen and off-screen roles seemed to accumulate and merge in a collective text, which further magnified and authenticated his reel image. As Madhava Prasad has pointed out,

³ Though Bachchan made his debut in 1969 as a shy, soft-spoken poet in K. A. Abbas's *Saat Hindustani* (*Seven Indians*), it was only in 1973, with the action film *Zanjeer* (*Chains*, dir. Prakash Mehra), that he achieved commercial success and stardom. *Zanjeer*'s brooding, angry protagonist, Vijay, not only marked a crucial shift in the portrayal of Hindi film heroes, but also immortalized "The Angry Young Man," which would become a hallmark of most Bachchan films during the seventies and eighties.

Bachchan's star persona is markedly different from that of his predecessors "because in it there is a degree of integration of star-value with narrative that is unprecedented in the Hindi cinema" (1998: 133). Bachchan himself, through his star text, attempted to obliterate the line between the reel and real. In interviews, he emphasized the intrinsic connection between his on-screen and off-screen personas – "There seems to be a strong sense of revolt within me. Probably it is in my genes...When I tried to show anger on screen, it seemed to come through beautifully."⁴ Bachchan's off-screen narrative often reiterated the notion that the "Angry Young Man" was not merely a celluloid creation, but rather, as he often described, a legacy of his father, echoing the anger and rebellion of his poetry, and also, his own brooding persona. Though extroverted and affable on sets, Bachchan's close associates and family members often describe him as a loner, a "brooder" who "works in isolation,"⁵ and whose favorite pastime at home is to stay cloistered in his den reading. His brooding nature and penchant for isolation becomes intrinsically linked to his on-screen persona, as wife Jaya Bachchan remarks, "I understand his work pressures and understand that he needs to be given space. The kind of work he does, the kind of creativity he has, he has to be left alone...How else is he going to re-fuel himself?"⁶ Thus, the actor's brooding persona off-screen, and his frequent references to the underlying discontent and turbulence in his father's work functions to configure his on-screen angst and his rant against the unjust "system" as more than just a superlative performance.

Interestingly, Bachchan's own personal antecedents reveal a stark contrast to his on-screen persona. As the son of Harivansh Rai Bachchan, a celebrated Hindi poet and English

⁴ Interview of Amitabh Bachchan in *Movie* (September 1983: 41). Cited in Mishra, 2002: 128.

⁵ Jaya Bachchan in conversation with Bhawana Somaaya, quoted in Somaaya, 1999: 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*

academician, and Teji Bachchan, a socialite and close friend of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Bachchan symbolized the dominant elite, and not the marginalized subaltern. However, the actor's elite background did not contradict his disgruntled "Angry Young Man" image, but rather functioned to stabilize it further. For the middle-class audience, who failed to derive any sense of identification with Bachchan's on-screen avatar, "the power derived from (his) elite affiliations," particularly his close relationship with the Nehru-Gandhi family, served to legitimate it (Prasad, 1998: 141). Unlike other Hindi film male stars, Bachchan's story was not one of rags to riches, with rural or lower middle-class roots, where physical appeal often compensated for a lack of western upbringing and command over English.⁷ Instead, his off-screen narrative included references to elite residential schools, Shakespearean theatre, westernized social etiquettes and childhood friendships with the Nehru-Gandhi family. While his on-screen renditions resonated with the country's disgruntled, marginalized populace, his "elite affiliations" endeared him to the middle-class. Bachchan's star appeal, thus, extended beyond class affiliations and socio-economic barriers, endowing him with a truly "national" persona.

However, in spite of its pan-Indian appeal, the "Angry Young Man" was a persona that encapsulated and encompassed the concerns and anxieties of a socialist India, and not an India embracing a consumerist culture. Though Bachchan's brooding, angry on-screen avatars echoed the travails of a nation battling corruption, autocratic governance, and political apathy, it was still a national imaginary steeped in the legacy of Nehruvian socialist ideals. The "Angry Young Man," as Susmita Dasgupta points out, "never actually had any problems with the Socialist principles of the Nehruvian state – he had a problem only with the way it conducted itself in the

⁷ As Leela Fernandes has discussed, English education and acquisition of English-language skills are integral aspects of the Indian middle-class identity (Fernandes, 2006: 69). Thus, Amitabh Bachchan, with his elite educational background, not only presented a contrast to other Hindi film actors, but also possessed the appropriate credentials to be hailed as a middle-class icon.

pragmatic affairs of everyday life. Amitabh's films wanted the Nehruvian state to do better what it was good at...not change its nature and purpose" (2006: 110). In spite of the angst, Bachchan's cinematic alter egos never advocated an end to Nehruvian socialism, but rather voiced their disillusionment at the way things were. However, with the shift in the nation's ethos – from socialist principles to aspirational consumerism – Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" would find itself woefully inadequate as a national icon.

"To buy is Indian"

After nearly four and a half decades of a socialist infrastructure, the Indian government introduced economic liberalization policies in the early nineties, a move that not only attempted to end bureaucratic impediments and encourage private enterprise, but also consequently engendered, in its wake, tsunamic changes in the social and cultural fabric, particularly for the Indian middle class. Coupled with the advent of private satellite and cable broadcasters, the economic liberalization marked the country's renunciation of Nehruvian socialism for an unapologetic embrace of neo-liberal consumerism. This was particularly evident in the nation's middle class denizens, a demographic that holds crucial significance for the Indian national entity. As Arvind Rajagopal has argued, Indian national culture "secures its status as an upper-caste, middle-class phenomenon" (1999: 60), with the middle class being "fundamentally defined in terms of national narratives," a rhetoric that is "part of a longer historical trajectory in which the middle class has claimed to be a central agent in the definition of the relationship between the nation and external global processes" (Fernandes, 2006: 32). This "historical trajectory" further defines the new emergent consumerist urban middle class of post-liberalization India as "the embodiment of the liberalizing nation-state rather than of a localized

city elite or of a Westernized global aristocracy,” the “central agents” in the “revisioning” of the national imaginary, representing “an idealized national standard of living that other social groups can aspire to and potentially achieve through practices of consumption” (Fernandes, 2006: 32).

Pavan Varma has discussed in detail the shift in the Indian middle-class ethos in the nineties: “The urge to move up the consumption ladder, to somehow put an unbridgeable gap between the squalor of the poor and the plush material insularities of the rich, was always there. But now this urge had the stamp of ‘official’ acceptance, the justification of an ideology” (1998: 176). The economic liberalization policies introduced by the government not only engendered far-reaching changes in the economic realm but also in the socio-cultural domain, setting into motion “a process of reimagination of the Indian nation through new signs and symbols” (Fernandes, 2006: 40). The post-Independence citizenship model, characterized by Gandhian austerity and Nehruvian socialism, which often defined individual consumerism as “inherently elitist” (Mazzarella, 2003: 13), gave way to a “new notion of collectivity” founded on the idea of “democratization of aspiration” (Mazzarella, 2003: 98). As William Mazzarella points out, “Previously, consumption had to be justified in terms of collective economic growth. But now, individual consumer desire began to take on an absolute moral priority” (2003: 88). Thus, where earlier the national imaginary was conceived “in terms of *jai jawan, jai kisan*⁸...and generally espoused a credo of Nehruvian cooperativism,” in the post-liberalization period it became reimaged “more in terms of achieving fulfillment through consumption; from Be Indian Buy Indian, it is now, *To Buy is Indian*” (Rajagopal, 1999: 73). The country’s burgeoning middle-class denizens now seemed determined to unyoke all remnants of their conservative, socialist

⁸ *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan* (Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer) was a slogan popularized by Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, in 1965, as a mark of homage to both the Indian soldier and the Indian farmer, when the country had to deal with both the 1965 India-Pakistan war and acute food grain shortage.

past, and embark on a whole-hearted embrace of consumerist aspirations. In the inaugural issue of *India Today Plus* (1996), a lifestyle magazine for India's upwardly mobile, Editor Aroon Purie describes the change in India's middle-class,⁹

They have become far more international in their outlook and aspirations, more sophisticated and liberal in lifestyle and attitudes...One of the psychological legacies of the Nehruvian socialistic era was that the more affluent sections of society were branded as being rather vulgar, and spending money to live well was considered an even greater sin. Today, that stigma seems to have vanished for many. With the new Manmohanomics,¹⁰ there are many more opportunities to make money and even more avenues to spend it.

With this new emphasis on the individual and his consumerist aspirations, Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man," with his grievances against the "system," was rendered incapable of functioning as the nation's cinematic ideal. His working-class protagonist was perceived as an antiquated relic from the past, an anomaly for the upwardly mobile Indian subject. Moreover, Bachchan's star persona had also declined since the heydays of his alpha male persona. A failed stint in politics, commercial failures, a self-imposed exile, competition from younger stars, changing preferences of moviegoers, and unsuccessful corporate ventures – the superstar was now merely a shadow of his former self.¹¹ His on-screen couplings with actresses thirty years his junior in the formulaic revenge vendetta films failed to find favor with a younger audience who preferred candy-floss romances set in New York and London, and the legacy of his iconic image made a transition to character roles difficult and formidable. As film critic Raja Sen describes the

⁹ Cited in Varma, 1998: 177.

¹⁰ "Manmohanomics" was a term coined by the media to refer to the economic reforms initiated by the then Finance Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh in 1991.

¹¹ Saira Menezes, "Aby Baby is now Aby Maybe," *Outlook*, 5 January 1998.

actor's dilemma, "He was too old to stay the leading man, yet that mammoth last name had spent far too much time as the headline to allow him to drift smoothly into the comfortable unshowiness of the character-actor niche."¹² Bachchan's foray into corporate ventures and his attempts to market himself as a "brand" in the mid-nineties were disastrous failures. His company, ABCL (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited), in spite of a promising start, was soon embroiled in controversies, and in financial disarray. By the late nineties not only was Amitabh Bachchan a sorry caricature of his former self, but also heavily in debt, and almost on the verge of losing his house. As Alex Perry mentions, Bachchan made two fortuitous decisions that reinstated him in the pantheon of Indian celluloid divinity – first, he decided to host *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, and second, he made a conscious attempt to experiment with roles and break out of his formulaic "Angry Young Man" mold.¹³

"The Show of the Millennium"

For the Indian television audience, quiz shows had traditionally comprised a 'schoolteacher' host asking students questions that tested their scholarly and academic knowledge. Often conducted in English and showcasing some of the country's best educational institutions, these early quiz shows catered primarily to urbane, middle-class school and college students, thus, reaffirming the state network Doordarshan's educational agenda as a public service broadcaster. Promising prestige rather than monetary reward, the quiz shows seemed to underline the Indian state's focus on academic accomplishments as a desirable pursuit for the modern democracy, particularly for its middle-class denizens. In contrast, *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, modeled on the

¹² Raja Sen, "Forty years, and counting: the Amitabh Bachchan interview," *Man's World*, March 2010.

¹³ Alex Perry, "The Big B: With a return to TV and a series of acclaimed cinema roles, Amitabh Bachchan proves there can be second acts in Bollywood."

international format show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, presented the Indian television viewer with a very different proposition – the big-money quiz show. *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, or *KBC*, as the show is more popularly known, made its debut in 2000 with Amitabh Bachchan as the host. Billed as the “show of the millennium”¹⁴ and with an advertising budget that surpassed the combined annual expenditure of its competitors,¹⁵ the quiz show was Star TV’s biggest gamble. The network, which reportedly invested nearly half its annual programming budget in the show,¹⁶ was clear about its objective. As Peter Mukerjea, CEO, Star TV network, emphasized in an interview, “This is not about money. Ratings and revenue are a byproduct. The moot point is that Star TV gets elevated to a position of leadership.”¹⁷ Inundated with competition from other players like Zee TV and Sony Entertainment Television, and struggling to maintain its foothold in the burgeoning Indian cable and satellite market, Star realized that not only would it have to significantly localize its programming to cater to a primarily Hindi-speaking demographic, but as Sumantra Datta, another Star honcho pointed out, it also “needed a unique differentiator. A killer programme with killer content.”¹⁸ *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, with its assured success as a global format show, and with its promised novelty for the Indian television scene, provided Star with the perfect solution, “a unique differentiator...with killer content.”

Described as “England’s most successful cultural export” (Boddy, 2001: 81), *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* is decidedly one of the most globally successful format shows. With the

¹⁴ Shantanu Guha Ray and Payal Kapadia, “Too Many Questions,” *Outlook*, 31 July 2000.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ V. Shankar Aiyar and Anupama Chopra, “Great Gamble,” *India Today*, 17 July 2000.

¹⁷ Peter Mukerjea, “This is not about money,” Interview by V. Shankar Aiyar, *India Today*, 17 July 2000.

¹⁸ V. Shankar Aiyar and Anupama Chopra, “Great Gamble.”

exception of Japan, where anti-trust laws have forced the show to limit the prize money to only \$10 million yen (roughly \$108,000), the show has been a resounding success worldwide.¹⁹ As of 2007, the format had been licensed in 67 countries across the world, from Argentina to Vietnam, making it the most popular and most viewed quiz show of all times (Keane, Fung, and Moran, 2007: 101). Local versions have been telecast in Latin America (Waisbord, 2004), the Middle East (Khalil, 2004; MacKenzie, 2004), East Asia (Keane, Fung, and Moran, 2007), and South Asia (Moorti, 2004; Kumar, 2005). Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung, and Albert Moran, in their discussion of format shows, underline the reasons for the show's global success – “*Millionaire* is a model format: its copyright has been managed successfully and localisation has been accommodated incrementally – that is, without moving too far from the original concept” (2007: 97).

Keane, Fung, and Moran argue that the reason why big-money quiz shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* find more easy acceptance and popularity in Asia than winner-takes-all reality shows like *Survivor* is because of their inherent focus on the knowledge/money dialectic (2007: 112). The knowledge/money dialectic not only reiterates the dominant ideology and subsequently, stabilizes the hegemonic status quo, but also functions as reassurance during periods of socio-economic and cultural shifts. *Kaun Banega Crorepati* employs similar knowledge/money dialectic as its East Asian counterparts. Though seemingly different from the earlier Doordarshan quiz shows, which promised prestige rather than monetary reward, *KBC* also emphasized the importance of education and knowledge acquisition, thus reiterating the dominant national ideology. Moreover, *KBC*'s phenomenal popularity also marks the crucial shift in socio-economic and cultural dynamics, particularly for the Indian middle-class, in the

¹⁹ Chidanand Rajghatta, “Mother of *Crorepati* celebrates a year of couch potato coup,” *The Indian Express*, 18 August 2000.

aftermath of the economic liberalization policies introduced by the Indian government in the early nineties.

For the Indian middle-class, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* was not merely a quiz show, but rather, with its high monetary stakes presented an opportunity to indulge consumerist aspirations and fulfill dreams of socio-economic mobility. As Siddharth Basu,²⁰ the show's producer, emphasized, "It is not just another quiz game. It's really about human drama. About hope and disappointment."²¹ Drawing a distinction with prestige quiz shows like *Mastermind*, Amitabh Bachchan also stressed, "The beauty of the show is that even the common man can get in. Something like *Mastermind* sends very elitist signals. But here it's a nice mix... There are many sections in Indian society and *KBC* gives an equal opportunity to all."²² Conducted in Hindi, and with Bachchan often repeating the question and answer choices in Hindi (which would appear in English on the screen), *KBC* did not demand of its contestants any proficiency in English, or the access to an English-medium education. Instead it positioned itself as an inclusive show, availing "equal opportunity" to all Indians, irrespective of their socio-economic background, as long as they diligently applied themselves to attaining knowledge.²³ Thus, in spite of its emphasis on the one crore rupee²⁴ reward, the show continued to reaffirm the importance of education.

²⁰ As the producer and host of some of the most popular Doordarshan quiz shows like *Quiz Time* and *India Quiz*, Siddharth Basu was a familiar face for the Indian television viewer. Basu's production house, Synergy Communications, also produced the Indian versions of *BBC Mastermind*, *The Weakest Link (Kamzor Kadi Kaun)*, and *Dancing with the Stars (Jhalak Dikhlaa Jaa)*. Currently Basu has teamed up with Ad Films, a Bombay-based media production company, and has diversified into other television genres, like fiction.

²¹ V. Shankar Aiyar and Anupama Chopra, "Great Gamble."

²² Amitabh Bachchan, "It's really frightening," Interview by V. Shankar Aiyar and Anupama Chopra, *India Today*, 17 July 2000.

²³ However, considering that *KBC* debuted in 2000, barely a decade after the launch of private satellite and cable networks like Zee TV and STAR TV, when cable and satellite penetration was still primarily restricted to the urban areas, it can be argued that the show's "imagined" and "ideal" audience was still the urban, middle class viewer.

²⁴ INR 100,00,000 is equivalent to USD 200,000.

Bachchan's use of the term "computer-ji," addressing the computer with a deferential suffix, served to transform the computer from a mere tool of knowledge acquisition to a repository of knowledge. Consequently, in reiterating the value of education and knowledge acquisition, particularly as means of socio-economic mobility, *KBC* offered both legitimization and justification for the nation's nascent consumerist ethos.

However, contrary to its later iconic stature, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* initially encountered a tepid response. Avid quizzing enthusiasts dismissed the show as an "inverted mastermind."²⁵ Media critics voiced apprehensions that it would encourage and legitimize a gambling mentality.²⁶ Media critic Amita Malik described it as "inane, almost corrupt because it provides easy money...The only reason one can't call it a cheap gimmick is because of the money involved."²⁷ Bachchan himself was reluctant to host the show, and agreed only after a visit to London and reassurances that *KBC*'s production values would equal that of the original.²⁸ However, in spite of the initial criticism, the show soon captured the national imagination, gaining 41% of the viewership.²⁹ The popularity of the show was such that theatre owners were even forced to cancel their late-night screenings. Encouraged by the success of *KBC*, rival networks Zee TV and Sony Entertainment Television churned out their own versions of the big-money quiz show, which also boasted of the Bollywood glamour quotient. Sony's *Jeeto Chappad Phad Ke* was hosted by popular Bollywood star Govinda, while the hosts of Zee TV's *Sawaal Dus Crore Ka* were actors Anupam Kher and Manisha Koirala.

²⁵ Shameem Akhtar and Manu Joseph, "The Great Gambler," *Outlook*, 17 July 2000.

²⁶ Shantanu Guha Ray, "Bettor Nationality," *Outlook*, 11 December 2000.

²⁷ "What The Critics Say," *Outlook*, 17 July 2000.

²⁸ Usha Thomas, "25 Women Who Matter: Anita Kaul Basu," *Indiantelevision.com*, 22 July 2006.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Zee and Sony both positioned their shows as “100 per cent home-grown”³⁰ indigenous shows, as opposed to *KBC*, which they argued was merely a local version of an international format. However, in spite of attempts to mark them as “different” – with Zee doubling the prize money, and Sony marketing *JCPK* as part of its weekend entertainment and also including dance sequences featuring Govinda³¹ – both *Jeeto Chappad Phad Ke* and *Sawaal Dus Crore Ka* failed to dent *KBC*’s immense popularity. Actress and television host Simi Garewal described them as “copycats,” as a “knee-jerk reaction that shows the panic button has been pressed.”³² As Garewal proclaimed, “The benchmark has been set by *KBC*. Everything can only be a copy. And how can you copy a show which has everything...?”³³ Swaran Kapoor, a New Delhi housewife, also voiced a similar preference for *KBC* – “I prefer Amitabh’s style. Govinda has no command over the language. *KBC* is a far more intellectual show.”³⁴ Moreover, Bachchan’s presence also functioned as a marker of authenticity for *KBC*. Viewers on online discussion forums, while discussing the show’s originality, often asserted that the “copied version” was better than the “original” because of Bachchan (Kumar, 2005: 330-331). As journalist Vir Sanghvi also points out, Bachchan was crucial to the show’s success,

In all quiz shows...the contestant pits his wits against the quizmaster. It is the interrogator who knows the answers and has power over the players...The genius of Amitabh Bachchan lay in the manner he changed the rules of the power game...A contestant in *KBC* is not trying to outguess Bachchan. Instead, he and Bachchan are allies who try to outwit ‘Computer ji’

³⁰ Namrata Joshi, “Cash and Carnations: It’s Govinda’s antics versus Amitabh’s charm,” *Outlook*, 29 January 2001.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Shameem Akhtar, Sutapa Mukherjee, and Charubala Annuncio, “The Zero Sum Game,” *Outlook*, 30 October 2000.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Gauri Bhatia, “Bringing the Roof Down,” *Outlook*, 12 February 2001.

together...Bachchan redefined his role so that he was on the contestant's side. [The other quiz shows] failed – despite larger prize money – because the anchors did not come across as the sort of allies you wanted in a life-changing experience.³⁵

For the viewers as well as the contestants, Amitabh Bachchan proved to be the USP (unique selling proposition) of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. The nation seemed mesmerized by Bachchan as the fifty-eight year old Bollywood legend delivered a sermon at the beginning of each episode, which proved to be so popular that they were later published in a collection titled *Soul Curry for You and Me*. In fact, as journalist Jerry Pinto recounts, after the initial euphoria over the show ebbed, viewers were still tuning in, if only to listen to Bachchan's "sermons" and then tune out again.³⁶ Contestants professed love and admiration for the actor, and Bachchan was often inundated with requests to recite some of his famous film dialogues. It almost became a ritual – the superstar reclining in his chair, mouthing legendary lines from his films, while the contestant sat mesmerized in awe and admiration. For the viewers and contestants, *KBC* was as much about the millions at stake as watching Bollywood's most famous superstar from close quarters. Bachchan's presence on the small screen did not diminish his larger-than-life screen persona; rather, it facilitated the reinvention and transformation of his star text, from the anachronistic "Angry Young Man" to the more appropriate and appealing "Benevolent Patriarch." Endowed with a new-found respectability, the erstwhile cinematic icon now "began to represent all that was refined, intellectual and knowledgeable in the nation's life...(and) became the cultural icon

³⁵ Cited in Dasgupta, 2006: 118.

³⁶ Jerry Pinto, "The Trouble with Being Reborn," *Outlook*, 16 October 2006.

of India” (Dasgupta, 2006: 118-119), and as industrialist Anil Ambani describes, “the avuncular older citizen who embodies the materialist aspirations of India’s emerging middle class.”³⁷

From the “Angry Young Man” to the “Benevolent Patriarch”

“It was a masterstroke. On television Bachchan appeared older and wiser, with a natty beard and banker’s suit. And to its delight, India found that the brooding action man of the 1970s was now sophisticated, self-deprecating, and witty, exuding comfortable prosperity rather than rebellion. Just what was needed at a time when India was dreaming about getting rich.” Alex Perry³⁸

Judith Mayne, in her seminal work, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, suggests that, “the appeal of stardom is that of reinvention, the dissolution of contraries” (1993: 138) – a reinvention which in Bachchan’s case, was brought forth and facilitated by television. As Christine Becker, in her work on early television and Hollywood stars, argues, television often essayed a crucial role in reiterating and reaffirming the star aura of movie celebrities, often at times setting in motion a reinvention of their star persona (2008). Discussing Betty Hutton’s June 1958 appearance on *What’s My Line?*, Becker points out that in spite of Hutton’s waning career, “her appearance opened and closed with affirmations of her stardom...leaving viewers with the thought that her entertainment career was not only still active, it was even thriving once again” (2008: 45). *Kaun Banega Crorepati* functioned as a similar reaffirmation of stardom for Amitabh Bachchan. As contestants professed their love and adulation for the star, and the actor obliged their requests and recited legendary dialogues from his films, *KBC* seemed to reiterate his superstar stature,

³⁷ Alex Perry, “The Big B: With a return to TV and a series of acclaimed cinema roles, Amitabh Bachchan proves there can be second acts in Bollywood.”

³⁸ Ibid.

obliterating from public memory his recent decline and failures. The quiz show signaled a second coming for the “Angry Young Man,” albeit in a different avatar. The popularity of *KBC* underlined Bachchan’s own resurrection, and his transformation from the brooding “Angry Young Man” to a “Benevolent Patriarch.”

The show also performed another crucial function – it presented the erstwhile superstar as a far more accessible and approachable figure than his seventies on-screen avatar, a portrayal made possible by television’s “primary aesthetic properties – immediacy, intimacy, and spontaneity,” and its delineation of the ideal television star as one who is relateable and sincere (Murray, 2005). In his reincarnation as a televised star, it became imperative for Bachchan to encompass both the larger-than-life aura of his seventies persona and also, simultaneously the “familiarity” and “ordinariness” demanded by television. Though early scholarship on television stardom often conceived television stars as ‘inferior’ to their cinematic counterparts – as “agreeable voids rather than sites of conflicting meanings” (Ellis, 1982) – lacking the “other-worldliness,” “aura of mystery,” and reverence commanded by the latter (Langer, 1981), recent scholarship has tended to disagree, instead choosing to read the medium’s familiarity and ordinariness, its domestic setting and the frequency of its stars’ appearances as indicative of its uniqueness, rather than lack (Murray, 2005; Jermyn, 2006; Becker, 2008; Bennett, 2008). As Becker underlines, television’s living room intimacy could often provide a privileged view of the film star that was not offered by either cinema or the theater (Becker, 2008). Instead of undermining their aura and other-worldliness, the “authenticity” of television was capable of revealing their true talents and their true persona, thus engaging in a de-mythologization and deconstruction of their stardom. Though Amitabh Bachchan’s cultural cachet as the nation’s erstwhile superstar was crucial to the dissemination and circulation of his star text, a similar de-

construction and de-mythologization was imperative for his reinvention as the familiar, genial, and effusive paternal figure.

In spite of the media lament about how financial penury had reduced the superstar to a quiz show host, and Bachchan's own apprehensions regarding television and *KBC*'s sustainability,³⁹ for the Indian audiences it was a rare opportunity. The big-money quiz show had bridged the distance between the movie star and his fans. No longer was Bachchan confined to only his larger than life screen persona; he was now in the living room, four days a week, revealing a facet of his personality that had hitherto been reserved for only a intimate few. In his impeccably attired television reincarnation, Bachchan was not only more identifiable than his "Angry Young Man" image, but also more "real" than "reel." As he himself asserted, "This is something unique. I am not acting. I'm playing myself."⁴⁰ In interviews, the actor repeatedly emphasized the difference between his film and television experiences – the *KBC* set, with all its comforts, was more like home rather than a film set; he was not acting, but merely being himself.⁴¹ Moreover, Bachchan argued, unlike other shows like *The Weakest Link*, *KBC*'s format allowed him to treat the contestants as guests, extending to them the same hospitality he would reserve for visitors to his residence.⁴² Bachchan's repeated assertions – "For others, *KBC* may be just a game show but for me it's a slice of life"⁴³ – not only served to position the quiz show as more unique than its rivals, but also marked the actor's "performance" as authentic and real. Also, as Anjum Rajabali points out, the show also facilitated Bachchan's comeback as "himself"

³⁹ Amitabh Bachchan, "God in First Person," *Outlook*, 13 August 2001.

⁴⁰ Amitabh Bachchan, "It's really frightening." Interview by V. Shankar Aiyar and Anupama Chopra.

⁴¹ Amitabh Bachchan. "God in First Person."

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

– whereas earlier, it was the “Angry Young Man” screen image that defined the actor and his stardom, now he could lay claim to a celebritydom that was contingent on his own persona as “Amitabh Bachchan,” as the older patriarch who encapsulated in his star persona the nation’s ethos.⁴⁴

The coupling of the Bollywood superstar and the big-money quiz show holds pertinent significance for *KBC*, Amitabh Bachchan, as well as the show’s audience. While Bachchan’s star presence elevated *Kaun Banega Crorepati* from a mere quiz show to a prestigious television show, *KBC* in turn facilitated the actor’s transition from a socialist icon to a capitalist role model, and for the Indian middle class, the presence of the erstwhile “Angry Young Man” in a big-money game show legitimized and provided the final seal of approval for their consumerist ambitions. Shanti Kumar argues that one cannot comprehend Bachchan’s “uncanny ability to make a personal connection with the average television viewer” by comparing him with the other *Millionaire* hosts. Rather, as Kumar points out, “Given Amitabh’s status as the undisputed megastar of Hindi cinema, we must recognize that his performance as the host of *KBC* is akin to the role of a *sutradhar*⁴⁵ who skillfully connects cultural texts with audiences by drawing upon their common understanding of the codes and conventions of old and new genres” (2005: 331).

Bachchan’s role as the mediator and facilitator of consumerist values was further underlined in the second season of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. After a hiatus of four years and with the prize money doubled, *KBC*, along with the superstar, returned to Star Plus in 2005 with a promise of “umeed se dugna” (“more than you could have ever hoped for”). Though the

⁴⁴ Anjum Rajabali, Personal interview, 26 July 2010.

⁴⁵ The *sutradhar*, which literally translated means “the holder of strings,” was an important aspect of Indian theatrical tradition. Distinct from a narrator, the *sutradhar* functioned primarily to link the performance and performer with the audience, often interjecting the play with commentary that helped the audience understand the narrative more effectively.

emphasis on Bachchan's iconic status was still there, with initial promos declaring, "The King is Back Again," it also spoke to the actor's current star text. In the intervening years since 2000, buoyed by the success of *KBC* and his novel, experimentative new screen roles, Bachchan's star persona had altered significantly. Unlike his previous distant brooding screen image, Bachchan was now genial, approachable, friendly, a benevolent patriarch. Endorsing almost every possible product, from hair oil to ball pens, from banks to chocolates, the actor was a ubiquitous presence on television and hoardings. With his streaked hair and immaculate white beard, Bachchan was the ideal choice for the patriarchal figure in countless Hindi films. While television viewers were treated to his constant product endorsements on television, moviegoers witnessed in his father-son pairings, with younger stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Hrithik Roshan, the reconciliation between Bollywood's "Old Guard" and "Young Turks." Moreover, in films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Ek Rishtaa* (2001), and *Waqt: Race Against Time* (2005), where his on-screen avatars were usually business magnates and millionaires, with private helicopters and chateaus, Bachchan presented not only a contrasting picture to his earlier working-class protagonist, but also, seemed to endorse and approve whole-heartedly the new shift to consumerism.

The second season of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* highlighted this new aspect of Bachchan's image – the "Benevolent Patriarch," comfortable and at ease with the nation's ardor for all things consumerist. In its second incarnation, the quiz show was not only "racy and spicy...(with) a hipper atmosphere,"⁴⁶ but also featured the superstar in a "rapper's hat and his attire, courtesy a top fashion designer, transformed from aristocratic to hip-hop."⁴⁷ The change was not simply in

⁴⁶ "Here Comes the Hotstepper – *KBC 2*," *Indiantelevision.com*, 4 August 2005.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

sartorial style. Bachchan now rapped, delivered his lines in Hinglish,⁴⁸ and presented an image of a patriarch in sync with the “MTV generation.” While *KBC 2* referenced the show’s phenomenal popularity and Bachchan’s superstar stature, it also exhibited a quirky irreverence that was absent in the first season. As part of the promotional campaign, Star Plus aired a series of one-minute promos, each centered round a different character – a struggling actor, a singer devoid of any talent, and a cricket fanatic.⁴⁹ As the promos chronicled the story of the character’s struggle and failures in a humorous tone, with voice-over and a “guest appearance” by Bachchan, it evoked the quirky, irreverent MTV and Channel [V] promos that the urban youth were familiar with. Recounting the characters’ indomitable spirits, it encouraged viewers and potential contestants to persist in their endeavor to become the next *crorepati* (millionaire) – “jis ne seekha life mein in se na jhukna, hot seat pe milega bhaiya umeed se doogna” (“those who have learnt from these people never to give up, they will achieve on the hot seat more than they could have ever hoped”). Concluding with the tagline, “don’t lose hope is the moral of the story,” in Bachchan’s sonorous voice, it reaffirmed *KBC*’s promise of not only monetary reward, but also transforming dreams into reality. In Amitabh Bachchan’s own transformation, from the erstwhile socialist icon, “The Angry Young Man,” to an avowed endorser of consumerism, “The Benevolent Patriarch,” the superstar presented, through his star text, the narrative of the nation’s transition, from the austerity of Nehruvian socialism to the aspirational consumerism of Manmohanomics. As I further discuss, this shift, in Bachchan’s star persona was embodied not

⁴⁸ Hinglish is a blend of English and Hindi, with the two languages often combined to form words. Mostly spoken in urban and semi-urban areas, and popular among the youth, Hinglish is often regarded as a cultural consequence of increasing globalization and the proliferation of satellite and cable television.

⁴⁹ Hetal Adesara, “Max, Lola Kutty, KBC 2...and the creators describe how they did it,” *Indiantelevision.com*, 11 February 2006.

only in the actor's role as the host of a phenomenally popular big-money quiz show, but also in his subsequent film roles.

“Daddy Cool”

In *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (*Never Say Farewell*, dir. Karan Johar, 2006), the audience is introduced to a rather unconventional Hindi film patriarch – “A widower who dresses like Snoop Doggy Dogg and cavorts appropriately with blondes,”⁵⁰ the flamboyant and flirtatious Samarjit “Sam” Talwar (Amitabh Bachchan) is an anomaly in the cinematic world of grey-haired, balding, pot-bellied fathers dressed in traditional Indian attire. In contrast to the authoritarian patriarch, who was often his children's adversary, Talwar, is a friend and confidante to the Generation Next; his relationship with his son, Rishi Talwar (Abhishek Bachchan) is marked by informal camaraderie, where father and son address each other as “dude,” and his irreverent sexual behavior, instead of defining him as licentious and debauched, further emphasizes his ageless aura, as the eternally young at heart. Bachchan's role as “Sexy Sam,” as Talwar prefers to call himself (and as the soundtrack also repeatedly reiterates), is the epitome of the quintessential “cool,” “hip” dad that has become, in recent years, the hallmark of the actor's performance. In his split on-screen persona as the flirtatious “Sexy Sam” and the wise family patriarch Samarjit Talwar, the actor seems to encompass the twin dualities of the “new” Indian nation, where modernity is deemed to exist unproblematically alongside tradition.⁵¹ Similar to his earlier role as the “Angry Young Man,” where he encapsulated the collective disillusionment and angst, in

⁵⁰ Raja Sen, “KANK is an exhausting watch: the never ending story,” Rediff.com, 11 August 2006.

⁵¹ It is interesting to note that this performance of a modern yet traditional-at-heart patriarch is possible, to a large extent, because the film is a quintessential “NRI flick.” Set in New York, *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* is centered round the romantic travails and marital infidelity of its NRI protagonists. Patricia Uberoi (2006) and Aswin Punathambekar (2005) have both discussed at length the appeal of these NRI narratives, particularly with regard to notions of national identity and citizenship for their diasporic audience.

his new avatar as the “Benevolent Patriarch,” Amitabh Bachchan also articulates the hopes and anxieties of millennial India. Bachchan’s reinvented screen persona, as the “hip,” “cool” father figure also underlines a crucial shift in the portrayal of the Hindi film patriarch – a shift that is again indelibly linked to the changes in the nation’s socio-cultural fabric.

Discussing the intense mother-son relationship in Hindi cinema, where the Hindi film hero often engages in a “purposeful deployment of masculine agency to rescue the mother figure, by performing valorous acts through which he declares his intense love for her” (sometimes even embracing death), Jyotika Viridi brings into focus also the father’s position – “Initially present, the father becomes absent, displaced, or avenged by the son, who ultimately instates himself close to his mother, successfully excluding the father” (2003: 90). Along with the objective of upholding and safeguarding the nation’s law and moral ethics, the Hindi film hero is also driven by “a consuming desire to avenge the sins against his mother” (Viridi, 2003: 90). This thematic motivation finds resonance not only in post-Independence films like *Mother India* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957), where the maternal figure often embodied the nation, but also in later films like *Aradhana* (*Prayer*, dir. Shakti Samanta, 1969), *Deewaar* (*Wall*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1975), *Trishul* (*Trident*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1978), and *Laawaris* (*Vagabond*, dir. Prakash Mehra, 1981). In these narratives, the father is often either an absentee figure, who shirks his familial responsibility as the patriarch (*Mother India*, *Deewaar*), or is the cause of the mother’s suffering and humiliation (*Trishul*, *Laawaris*). The relationship between the protagonist/son and the father is further complicated by the narrative tropes and conflict between good/moral and evil/immoral, with the judge/policeman/father often compelled to bring to justice his truant criminal/outlaw/son (*Awara*, dir. Raj Kapoor, 1951; *Shakti*, dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1982). Films like Raj Kapoor’s *Awara* (*Vagabond*) and Yash Chopra’s *Deewaar* and *Trishul*, with their absentee fathers and their

intense mother-son bonding, as Virdi points out, “collectively articulate a metanarrative: changing family politics within India’s feudal-patriarchal culture giving way to capitalist patriarchy” (2003: 114).

Amitabh Bachchan’s patriarch roles, though in sharp contrast to these earlier authoritarian archetypes, also emphasize, in a similar vein, the transformations and shifts in the national imaginary. Though his early roles as the father figure (*Mohabbatein*, 2000; *Ek Rishtaa*, 2001; *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, 2001) exhibit remnants of the earlier model, they also expose their implausibility, particularly for a post-liberalization India. Commenting on the romance films of the nineties, where the patriarch was often configured as the villain (*Qyamat Se Qyamat Tak*, 1988; *Maine Pyar Kiya*, 1989; *Dil*, 1990), Virdi further points out how these new narratives are responses to the transformations in the nation’s ethos – “No longer under the umbrella of the aging patriarch, the new and smaller nuclear family unit finds itself under the power of sons who have asserted themselves as the new patriarchs, wresting control and power from their fathers” (2003: 120). Bachchan’s early portrayal of the patriarch in films like *Mohabbatein* (*Love Stories*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 2000) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Happiness Sometimes Sadness*, dir. Karan Johar, 2001) reveal a similar questioning of patriarchal authority and its hegemonic dominance. In Chopra’s *Mohabbatein*, he is Narayan Shankar, the authoritarian, disciplinarian principal of Gurukul, a prestigious residential school, a figure who strongly opposes any semblance of change or modernity. A stickler for *adarsh* (principles), *parampara* (tradition) and *niyam* (rules), Shankar’s dictatorial control even drives his daughter (Aishwarya Rai) to suicide, as he is unwilling to accept the man she loves (Shah Rukh Khan). Bachchan’s on-screen character is configured as the prototype of discipline, restraint, and order – encapsulating the self-imposed barriers of socialist India – while Khan’s Raj Aryan is the

harbinger of change, modernity, love, and uninhibited acceptance and openness, signifying the “new” India, willing to explore and lay its claim on a global citizenship. In the end, Bachchan’s Shanker could only be redeemed of the guilt of his daughter’s death, and accommodated in the film’s narrative (and consequently, in the nation’s narrative) when he accepts Khan’s beliefs and convictions, and thus, in the process, not only acknowledges his own defeat, but also that of his antiquated norms.

In Karan Johar’s *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, popularly known as *K3G*, Bachchan’s Yashvardhan Raichand is not only a millionaire businessman, a sharp contrast to his seventies’ proletariat hero, but also, a man whose class prejudices drive a wedge in the family. Raichand’s unwillingness to accept his son’s working-class bride not only results in a fractured relationship between father and son (Shah Rukh Khan), but also, brings about a disjuncture in the family dynamics and even in his own marital relationship with his wife (Jaya Bachchan). It is only in the end, when the contrite and penitent patriarch begs the son to return to the family fold that the family is restored to its earlier order. In films like *Mohabbatein* and *K3G*, Amitabh Bachchan’s on-screen characters, in their conformity to antiquated traditions and norms, and their consequent acquiescence and defeat, underline the need for the nation’s socialist ethos to give way to a new consumerist, capitalist ideal. Moreover, with post-liberalization India’s poster boy, Shah Rukh Khan as the films’ protagonist, Bachchan’s confrontation with Khan was further configured as not only a clash between the old and the new, but also, between the remnants of a socialist, anachronistic India and the promise of an emerging, global India. In the cinematic trajectories, Narayan Shankar and Yashvardhan Raichand were both *ziddi* (stubborn) old men, patriarchs who were unwilling to accept and reconcile with change and modernity, and in their refusal to do so, also seemed to impede any possibility of narrative resolution and closure – thus, emphasizing

how the “old” India’s reluctance at embracing the forces of globalization and capitalist economy might hinder the nation’s dream of ascendancy.

While in his early patriarch roles, Bachchan embodied the transition and shift in the national imaginary, his more recent portrayals present a much more contemporary “Benevolent Patriarch” (*Armaan*, dir. Honey Irani, 2003; *Baghban*, dir. Ravi Chopra, 2003; *Kyun...! Ho Gaya Na*, dir. Samir Karnik, 2004; *Veer-Zaara*, dir. Yash Chopra, 2004; *Waqt: The Race Against Time*, dir. Vipul Shah, 2005; *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, dir. Karan Johar, 2006; *Baabul*, dir. Ravi Chopra, 2006; *Aladin*, dir. Sujoy Ghosh, 2009). In *Baghban (Gardener)*, he is the sixty-year old who still romances his wife and celebrates Valentine’s Day with her, a sharp contrast to the stereotypical Bollywood youthful romance; in *Kyun...! Ho Gaya Na (Look What’s Happening Now)* and *Veer-Zaara*, he is the supportive patriarch who urges the lovers to persevere against obstacles; in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, he would rather prefer his son and daughter-in-law to terminate their relationship rather than continue with a loveless marriage; and in *Baabul*, he is the father-in-law who advocates a remarriage for his widowed daughter-in-law. While in his early patriarch roles (*Mohabbatein*, *K3G*), Amitabh Bachchan was the upholder of the old order, resisting the forces of change, in his subsequent bourgeois reincarnate, he is not only the antithesis of his erstwhile “Angry Young Man,” but also the embodiment of a patriarch ideal that had long been absent. As Santosh Desai argues, Amitabh Bachchan, in his contemporary roles, offers an image of a paternal icon that his own seventies’ screen counterpart, Vijay,⁵² was denied.⁵³ Bachchan’s Vijay in his “Angry Young Man” films (*Deewaar*, 1975; *Trishul*, 1978;

⁵² Vijay was Amitabh Bachchan’s most famous screen name during his “Angry Young Man” years. In a span of sixteen years (1975-1991), Bachchan appeared in fourteen films as ‘Vijay,’ some of them his classic hits (*Zanjeer*, *Deewaar*, *Don*, *Trishul*, *The Great Gambler*, *Do aur Do Paanch*, *Dostana*, *Shaan*, *Shakti*, *Aakhree Raasta*, *Shahehshah*, *Agneepath*), thus making it his most memorable screen moniker.

⁵³ Santosh Desai, “Finally, a father we can believe in,” *The Times of India*, 26 June 2004.

Laawaris, 1981; *Shakti*, 1982) was a son thwarted in his futile search for a patriarch, underlining the nation's "prevalent disappointment with all father figures,"⁵⁴ with his actions often defined and determined by the abandonment and rejection he experienced at the hands of his (absentee) father. In contrast, as Desai points out,

Today's Amitabh has come full circle — he is, in some ways, the father *Vijay* yearned for. His authority comes from active performance, not ossified custom. He can out-sing, out-dance and out-fight anyone and yet be inclusive, accommodative and gracious. It is important for him to be affluent — his legitimacy comes from his success more than the ideals he holds dear.⁵⁵

In his reinvented avatar, Amitabh Bachchan epitomizes the ideal patriarch for the new, emergent, global India — "cool," "hip," successful, and in tandem with the modern times, yet with his kernel of traditional values and culture intact and secure. However, in spite of the apparent disjuncture, it is also an image, which similar to its predecessor, the "Angry Young Man," derives its authority and authenticity from the actor's off-screen text. Bachchan's contemporary star text, as the "Benevolent Patriarch," is underlined not only by *Kaun Banega Crorepati* and his recent cinematic forays, but also by his off-screen narrative as a father. Amitabh Bachchan's off-screen trajectory as a father, who is more of a friend than a disciplinarian, has become, in recent years, intrinsically connected to his contemporary persona of the "Benevolent Patriarch."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

“Dad first...Amitabh Bachchan Next”

In a recent episode of *Koffee with Karan*, the actor ranked himself number four as an actor, number six as a husband, but number eleven as a father,⁵⁶ an opinion that son, Abhishek Bachchan, daughter, Shweta Nanda, and daughter-in-law, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, seem to be in agreement with. In talk shows and interviews, where he often appears with his family, discussion often revolves around Bachchan’s familial role as “Paa,” a new age patriarch, who is more of a ‘buddy’ and a friend to his children than an authoritarian father figure. On *Koffee with Karan*, Abhishek Bachchan admits how his father is privy to everything in his personal life – “He’s the first person I tell everything to.”⁵⁷ His father nods in agreement, “If he was going to be seeing someone seriously, he would come and tell me a month in advance, ‘I’m contemplating seeing this one seriously.’”⁵⁸ In talk shows and interviews, Bachchan often recounts his father, poet Harivansh Rai’s advice – the day your son starts wearing your shoes, he ceases to be your son, and becomes your friend – emphasizing his own relationship with his son, as the “cool,” “hip,” liberal father. Similar to earlier media narratives, where Bachchan’s “Angry Young Man” screen image would often be paralleled with his off-screen brooding, quiet persona, in recent media texts, it is his “Benevolent Patriarch” facet that is now foregrounded and privileged. In interviews, his children discuss how his “Angry Young Man” image was never a source of intimidation for them; instead, he was the antithesis of his disgruntled reel counterpart, with “not a sign of that image...He was calm and consistently gentle.”⁵⁹ Describing his father as “friendly,

⁵⁶ Amitabh Bachchan, *Koffee with Karan*, Star World. Telecast date: 26 December 2010.

⁵⁷ Abhishek Bachchan, *Koffee with Karan*, Star World. Telecast date: 7 January 2005.

⁵⁸ Amitabh Bachchan, *Koffee with Karan*, Star World. Telecast date: 7 January 2005.

⁵⁹ Abhishek Bachchan in conversation with Bhawana Somaaya, quoted in Somaaya, 1999: 69.

in fact overfriendly,”⁶⁰ as “dad first and Amitabh Bachchan next,”⁶¹ Abhishek Bachchan often discusses the crucial place his father holds in his life – “Apart from being my father, he’s also been my best friend. He’s been the only person who’s stood by me, unrelenting and supportive, regardless of what it was.”⁶² Similar to his on-screen counterpart, the “Benevolent Patriarch,” he is father, friend, and professional mentor to his son, offering constructive criticism and advice on film roles, encouraging him during his moments of professional lows, and imbuing in him “the hunger to improve and learn.”⁶³ In contrast to the archetypal Indian authoritarian and disciplinarian father, Bachchan is constructed as a father who never reprimands his children (“He has never shouted at us, ranted, or raised his hand”⁶⁴), but instead, “He always explained it to us before we could do something wrong. He would sit us down and have long chats, explaining to us about who we were and what were our responsibilities towards the family.”⁶⁵

In contrast to his earlier narrative, he is no longer the brooding loner bringing to screen the angst in his father’s writing, but rather, he is now the jovial, liberal father who is a role model to his children, successfully inculcating in them the respect for traditional values and familial responsibilities. Often reminiscences of Bachchan’s professional and personal lows become texts that reiterate and underline his dignified demeanor and principles, which now inspire his children. Talk shows and interviews where Bachchan participates with his children are marked both by informal, witty repartee (particularly those with son Abhishek) and also, an acknowledgement of

⁶⁰ Quoted in Somaaya, 1999: 65.

⁶¹ Shraddha Jahagirdar-Saxena, “The Bachchan Badge of Honour,” *Verve*, Nov-Dec 2004.

⁶² Shraddha Jahagirdar-Saxena, *Ibid.*

⁶³ Abhishek Bachchan, *Koffee with Karan*, Star World. Telecast date: 7 January 2005.

⁶⁴ Shraddha Jahagirdar-Saxena, *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Abhishek Bachchan in conversation with Bhawana Somaaya, quoted in Somaaya, 1999: 64.

an unwavering dedication to his scruples and values, and his belief in religiosity and spirituality. In talk shows and in his web blog, the actor often reiterates the family's motto – “man ka ho toh achcha, man ka na ho toh zyada achcha” (“it is nice if it is as per one's wishes, but it is better if it is not as per one's wishes”) – a quote by his father underlining that though it is nice to have one's wishes fulfilled, it is better when it is not since, as Bachchan points out, “Woh phir bhagwan ka man ka hota hai. Bhagwan jo hai woh aap ke liye kabhi bura nahin chahega. So it's always better” (“Then it is as per God's wishes. (And) God will never wish you ill”). In his contemporary star text, Amitabh Bachchan is the ideal father – a friend and confidante to his children, yet endowing and cultivating in them their cultural legacy.

New Narratives, New Roles, New Platforms

In his post-*KBC* films, often essaying the role of the successful ‘Benevolent Patriarch,’ Amitabh Bachchan presents an image of a patriarch in sync with the times, not an antiquated relic of the past, but rather a vocal endorser of the future. Equipped with his new ‘cool,’ ‘hip’ avatar, the actor seems to transcend the boundaries of age and formulaic conventions often conformed by Bollywood. Bachchan is now imbued with an ageless aura, evident in both his film roles and his countless product endorsements and advertisements. In his ad films, the actor often shares space with children, further emphasizing his child-like nature, and “the apparent incongruence between his stature as the nation's greatest superstar and the trivial things which make him ecstatic, just as they make us ecstatic” (Dasgupta, 2006: 121). This ageless, irreverent persona is also reiterated in his recent on-screen renditions. In *Cheeni Kum* (dir. R. Balki, 2007), a quirky, non-formulaic Bollywood love story, he is the eccentric, pony-tailed sixty-four year old chef, Buddhadev Gupta, whose closest friend is his precocious nine-year old neighbor, “Sexy,” and

who falls in love in love with a woman thirty years his junior, much to the chagrin of her father; in *Aladin* (dir. Sujoy Ghosh, 2009), he is Genius, a genie with a penchant for dancing and informal, irreverent speech (“Brother,” “Yo”); and in *Paa* (dir. R. Balki, 2009), he is a young boy, afflicted with the accelerated aging disease, Progeria, who doesn’t let his medical condition subdue his *joie de vivre* and zest for life. In this new avatar as the ageless, irreverent cinematic icon, Bachchan has not only redefined the norms of paternal behavior in Hindi cinema, but also seems to be inculcating the idea that yes, old can also be “cool.” A senior Public Relations executive with extensive experience in the Bombay film industry underlines how Bachchan helped make old “cool”:

Bachchan helped in making (us) think that old is cool, it’s okay if you are old...He was fine (with) having salt and pepper hair, he was fine having a French beard, he was fine playing his age. He never wanted to play a forty-five year old when he fifty or sixty...(And) the films that he did, he was old, but he was hep, he was modern, he was fine with kids dating, going out, sleeping around, he was perfectly fine with that.⁶⁶

This new reincarnation of Amitabh Bachchan as the “cool,” “hip,” ageless cinematic icon – a far cry from yesteryear idols like Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand, who insisted on maintaining their façade of youth with dyed hair and minimal public appearances – was also made possible, to a large extent, by the directors of these new narratives. The actor’s repertoire of directors no longer included those who were the architects of his “Angry Young Man” image (Prakash Mehra, Manmohan Desai, Yash Chopra), but rather, as film critic Raja Sen points out, it was a new generation of filmmakers, men who had grown up on his films, idolizing him, and are

⁶⁶ Personal interview.

unapologetic in their adulation for the star.⁶⁷ While introducing Amitabh Bachchan as a guest on his talk show, *Koffee with Karan*, filmmaker Karan Johar recounts how he had fainted on the first day of *K3G*'s shoot – the prospect of directing his childhood idol had been too overwhelming.⁶⁸ As director Shaad Ali also confesses,

See, I come from an era, which has grown up on his films. I can only celebrate him. When I feel there is something that he will lend his popular appeal to, I'll make him do that. Where I feel that maybe tomorrow I want him to do really a role that he also must have never thought of, I will try and pick something like that also.⁶⁹

For filmmakers like Johar, Ali, and Sujoy Ghosh, working with their childhood icon presents the perfect opportunity to celebrate their memories of his stardom, an aspect that is implicit in their own texts.⁷⁰ As Ali remarks, the actor's "Angry Young Man" image is "kind of imprinted in your heads. You don't get really nitty-gritty about it, but that's what you've grown up with."⁷¹ Ghosh, who employs epithets such as "an institution," "a film school"⁷² for Bachchan, elaborates on how *Aladin*'s song sequences evoke the actor's "Angry Young Man" star text.⁷³

⁶⁷ Personal Interview, 21 July 2010.

⁶⁸ *Koffee with Karan*, Star World. Telecast date: 7 January 2005.

⁶⁹ Personal Interview, 19 July 2010.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, in an interview with Raja Sen, Bachchan himself admits that he finds this fan-ish attitude of his young directors, and their references to his seventies' "Angry Young Man" persona, often problematic at times. Raja Sen, "Forty years and counting: the Amitabh Bachchan interview," *Man's World*, March 2010.

⁷¹ Personal Interview, 19 July 2010.

⁷² Personal Interview, 19 July 2010.

⁷³ "Making of the film," *Aladin*, DVD Special Features.

Most of these songs in this film are actually an ode to Amitabh Bachchan films. When you see, “O re sawariya,” it will remind you of *Khuddar*, you’ll see Mr. Bachchan in his *kurta*⁷⁴ and dress...you will see him doing his *Namak Halal* “Pag ghunghroo bandh,” the same costume, the same *pagri*.⁷⁵

Describing Bachchan as “a phenomenon,” “a legend,” as an actor who will “always, in every era till he lives, will have somebody or the other waiting to write a film specifically for him, or to write a character specifically for him,” Shaad Ali mentions how, in his films he strives “to pitch something that is young, and yet, he (Bachchan) can do it, because I want to see him in an young avatar...I can’t see him grow old, lying in bed, or falling sick...I want him to be fighting, singing, and dancing all the time.”⁷⁶ Ali’s desire, as a Bachchan fan, to see his icon in an ageless reincarnate, is evident in the roles he crafted for the superstar. In *Bunty aur Babli* (2005), an irreverent Bonnie and Clyde narrative, Bachchan’s role as the cop in pursuit of the two con artists, was conceived with specifically the actor in mind.

The day we thought of that character, we thought that it has to be Mr. Bachchan, before writing the first line of that guy. From then on, the character was written for him, and it didn’t matter who was going to play Bunty and Babli. He was the first guy that we decided was going to be in the film.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ The *kurta* is a traditional Indian menswear, worn usually over loose pants, or other Indian attire like *dhoti*.

⁷⁵ The *pagri* is traditional Indian headgear.

⁷⁶ Personal Interview, 19 July 2010.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

As DCP Dashrath Singh, an earthy policeman determined to capture the con duo, Bunty (Abhishek Bachchan) and Babli (Rani Mukherjee), Bachchan's character was not only more irreverent rather than authoritarian, but also, drew explicitly from his off-screen text. With his leather jacket, *gamchcha*,⁷⁸ Ray Ban Aviator sunglasses, and his penchant for *bidis*,⁷⁹ Dashrath Singh presented a rather interesting confluence of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, evoking in a way Bachchan's contemporary star text. Moreover, Singh, a character firmly rooted in the semi-feudal, semi-rural milieu of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, also echoed the actor's own Uttar Pradesh roots, and his recent attempts to not only align himself with the political interests of the state, but also project himself as Uttar Pradesh's cultural ambassador. Discussing his experience of working with Bachchan, Ali emphasizes two crucial aspects, "The first thing you keep in mind is how integral he is to the film, and (the) second thing you keep in mind is how you don't make him jar his image...he's a larger than life personality, which is why he works best in larger than life films."⁸⁰ Ali mentions how in *Jhoom Barabar Jhoom*, Amitabh Bachchan's character, which had not been originally conceived with the actor in mind, changed dramatically once Bachchan was on board – "then it became little more flamboyant"⁸¹ – keeping in mind his "larger than life" persona.

Though, for self-confessed fans like Shaad Ali and Sujoy Ghosh, working with the legend not only presented the fulfillment of a childhood fantasy, but also the opportunity to

⁷⁸ Made of coarse cotton, the *ghamchcha* is a piece of cloth that is variously used as towel, headgear, scarf, or even, loin cloth, particularly in rural India. In the film, Bachchan's character, DCP Dashrath Singh uses the *gamchcha* as a scarf.

⁷⁹ *Bidis* are local indigenous hand-rolled cigarettes filled with tobacco flakes, which are popular in South Asia. However, it also has certain implicit and at times, negative class connotations, often associated with rural, working class, or lower middle-class men, with the cigarette accorded a higher class stature.

⁸⁰ Personal Interview, 19 July 2010.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

evoke his erstwhile glory, with references to his seventies and eighties classics, but for the actor himself, his “second innings” provided the means, at times, of escaping the travails of his “image trap.” During his reign as the nation’s cinematic alter ego, Amitabh Bachchan had often been critiqued for encouraging and promoting the repetitive recycling of his revenge vendetta films. As former co-star Rakhee once lamented, “He has the capacity to change Indian cinema...he doesn’t need crutches...Price, market, budget, banner, media, shouldn’t matter to him. He can initiate projects...If the opportunities are not coming, it’s because the image has become bigger than the actor....That’s a cross Amitabh will have to bear.”⁸² Salim Khan, who along with fellow writer Javed Akhtar is credited for creating Bachchan’s “Angry Young Man” persona, also lays the onus on the actor – “Gradually, they (the audience) trapped him in his own image. What’s worse, he accepted the trap willingly. If he wanted, he could have created a little more elbow room that he did.”⁸³ Bachchan himself also concedes that following the success of his early action films, “the writers and producers...perhaps reached a point where they didn’t know what else they could give me.”⁸⁴ In contrast, the films offered to him, in his post-*KBC* “comeback” were not only “challenging,” but some, in the actor’s own words, were “absolutely phenomenal.”⁸⁵ No longer encumbered by the burden of playing the protagonist, or shouldering the film’s success, Bachchan could now experiment with both his roles and his star image. He not only embarked beyond the realm of commercial Hindi cinema, working with critically acclaimed regional directors like Rituparno Ghosh (*The Last Lear*, 2007), but his performances as Debraj Sahai, an aging teacher grappling with Alzheimer’s disease in *Black* (dir. Sanjay Leela

⁸² Cited in Somaaya, 1999: 91.

⁸³ Cited in Somaaya, 1999: 181.

⁸⁴ Amitabh Bachchan, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta, “Beautiful People,” CNBC TV-18. 19 December 2009.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Bhansali, 2005) and as Auro, a teenager afflicted with Progeria in *Paa* (2009) earned him a plethora of awards, critical acclaim, and commercial success. As Raja Sen comments,

Even as the country fell back into enchantment with its biggest cinematic icon, the actor within discovered a gamut of highly experimental roles. No boundary seemed sacred anymore... Over the last ten years, Bachchan's been them all — from ghost to God to Gabbar Singh — and even been brave enough to just play a dirty old man.⁸⁶

Interestingly, in spite of the successful recuperation and reinvention of his star persona, Bachchan denies any attempt at consciously engendering this shift. Rather, he terms it as a mere fortuitous turn of events, motivated by his pressing need to find work and pay off the financial liabilities he had incurred in the wake of ABCL's debacle, and driven by his desire, as a dutiful son and a responsible father, to clear the family name. In response to a question by journalist Anuradha Sengupta on his post-2000 stint, Bachchan commented on this second phase of his stardom:

I doubt if there was ever a moment during this period where I felt I shouldn't be doing this, or what is the result going to be, or looked at it in a manner where I think that, 'is this going to be successful or not?' No, I looked upon it as an opportunity to get work...my desire was to search work, not to establish myself as an actor, but to earn money to be able to pay back people. And that was my main concern, because I would never have been able to face those people, and the other factor, of course, was that a company that bore my name, my father's name rather, I'd never wanted it to be looked upon in bad light. So, I needed to work...Fortunately, that happened...(and) then, I just kept accepting work that came my way, not with this intention that

⁸⁶ Raja Sen, "Forty years, and counting: the Amitabh Bachchan interview," *Man's World*, March 2010.

yeah, you know, this is my comeback or all these wonderful vocabularies that the media uses for me. No, not at all. I am just happy doing work. That's it.⁸⁷

However, as a Mumbai-based film journalist for a leading English daily points out, though Bachchan's initial reasons for hosting *KBC*, or endorsing products and brands might have been primarily financial, he was quick to realize the potential and tap into this new "cool dad," "cool pop" image.⁸⁸ His product advertisements and brand endorsements not only provide him with an extremely lucrative means of income, but is also crucial to the dissemination of his star persona and celebrity stature. Discussing his new star text, Susmita Dasgupta has pointed out how his television advertisements "captured the softer side of the star and explored it, amply demonstrating that even though his films were not doing well, his worth as a celebrity remained" (Dasgupta, 2006: 119). Though his past few films – *Rann* (2010), *Teen Patti* (2010), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Buddha Hoga Terra Baap* (2011) – have all failed at the box-office, his brand value has remained intact. Charging 8-10 crores (approx. 2,000,000 USD) per endorsement, Bachchan's fees are only matched by two other celebrities, cricketers Sachin Tendulkar and Mahindra Singh Dhoni.⁸⁹ In 2009, his two film releases, *Paa* and *Aladin*, accounted for 8-10 crores, while he garnered 30 crores from his endorsements and another 20-30 crores the following year from his stint as the *KBC 4* host.⁹⁰ His earnings signal not only the recent transmedia character of contemporary Bollywood stardom, with both the dissemination of star texts and income sources becoming dispersed; it also emphasizes his own cultural and social currency as a national icon.

⁸⁷ Amitabh Bachchan, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta,

⁸⁸ Personal Interview.

⁸⁹ Robin Bansal and Aaron Rohan George, "Brand Bachchan," *Hindustan Times*, 21 May 2011.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Along with son Abhishek and daughter-in-law Aishwarya, who are also fervent brand endorsers, Amitabh Bachchan and his *parivar* (family) present an aspirational image of the ideal (new) Indian family,⁹¹ and as trade analyst Taran Adarsh remarks, “the core values, which click with the Indian middle class.”⁹² The resonance is even more pronounced since in their familial visage, the Bachchans present an idealized image, which speaks more to the aspirational ethos rather than the reality of contemporary middle-class existence. It’s a family that lives together – a sharp contrast to the urban middle-class milieu, where constraints of space and changing socio-cultural norms are making the joint family anachronistic, increasingly being replaced by the nuclear family – where tradition and modernity exist without any apparent conflict, with Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan essaying the roles of the dutiful and obedient son and daughter-in-law, effortlessly balancing their global, urbane Indian personas with their familial responsibilities and obligations. George Koshy, Senior Creative Director, Innocent Worldwide Ad Agency, connects the Bachchans’ brand value to the new consumerist aspirations of the middle-class, “It’s all about aspiration. This is what people want to be like and that’s exactly what advertisers want in their brand endorsers.”⁹³

As the patriarch, Amitabh Bachchan encompasses in his persona both the collective hopes and aspirations of his family, and those of middle-class India. His endorsements showcase not only the varied facets of his personality, but also, speak to multiple audiences (and

⁹¹ However, despite the media image of the Bachchans as “the ideal family,” public perception, particularly the discourse of oral gossip, often contradicts it. The Hindi film industry and its stars have been traditionally regarded as morally ambiguous and disreputable, and this attitude holds true even today. Amitabh Bachchan’s rumored extra-marital affairs, Abhishek Bachchan’s broken engagement with fellow actor Karisma Kapoor, Aishwarya Rai’s tumultuous relationship with Salman Khan are thud often seen as emblematic of the Hindi film stars’ inability to lead a “normal” and “respectable” life.

⁹² Robin Bansal and Aaron Rohan George. *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

consumers) – in a Reid & Taylor suit, he is the elite and distinguished achiever; advising the harried middle-class man about ICICI bank personal loans, he is the wise and practical patriarch; as the clueless husband shopping at a Tanishq jewelry store, he is the new urbane consumerist; his rural, grassroots characters in the Pepsi and Cadbury commercials speak to both his new irreverent persona, and also to the emergent aspirations of the Indian hinterland; his advertisements for Parker Pen, Navratan Hair Oil, and Eveready Industries underlines his pan-Indian appeal; as the brand ambassador for the Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group (ADAG) and the premier Indian search engine, Justdial.com, he is the face of corporate excellence and technological innovations; and in his Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat tourism campaigns, his “India Poised” and polio eradication television spots, he is the epitome of the model citizen, aware of his civic duties and national obligations. As Deepak Khaitan, Vice-Chairman and Managing Director, Eveready Industries India Ltd., remarked, “The brand Amitabh Bachchan actually transcends all barriers in India and can reach both the North as well as the South of the country and appeals to both the young and the old. This is the quality that is needed to promote the Eveready brand.”⁹⁴

Amitabh Bachchan’s new persona as the “Benevolent Patriarch,” encompassing the perfect confluence of the global and the local, the traditional and the modern, is further reiterated in his new media forays. In 2008, the actor started blogging, and followed it up two years later, at the insistence of his son, with his debut on the micro-blogging site, Twitter.⁹⁵ A prolific blogger, his daily blog posts and incessant tweets not only reaffirm his image as the “hip,” “cool,” tech-savvy patriarch, in tandem with all things modern, but also underline the emergence of the

⁹⁴ Kohinoor Mandal, “Eveready ropes in Big B to promote batteries, torches,” *The Hindu Business Line*, 6 April 2004.

⁹⁵ “Amitabh Bachchan is on Twitter,” *Mid-Day*, 22 March 2010.

Bollywood star as a transmedia personality. Contemporary Bollywood star discourses are no longer merely contingent on film roles and fanzine interviews, but explicitly reference the stars' television appearances and new media visibility. Bachchan's blog also reflects the recent collaboration between business corporates and the film industry – not only does he endorse business magnate and friend Anil Ambani's group, ADAG (Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group) in television commercials, but his blog is also hosted by ADAG's youth networking site, bigadda.com. While the superstar's presence enhances the brand value of bigadda.com, for Amitabh Bachchan, the blog offers the opportunity to interact with his fans more intimately and present a glimpse of his true, authentic self. Exhibiting his trademark humility ("I am still illiterate towards this medium and beg to be excused for any errors or expectations from me") and an almost child-like glee ("It seems like a new life altogether") in his first blog post, the actor thanks his readers "for entering my heart and providing me an opportunity to enter yours," and effusively describes what this new platform means for him,

My blog will allow me to express myself, share and reflect my emotions, thoughts, opinions and listen to what people have to say to me...This would help me to show the audience the real side to my larger-than-life image that they usually see through the media. Here, I can control and share my unedited thoughts.

In interviews, Bachchan often frames his blogging and social networking initiatives in emancipatory rhetoric, drawing a sharp distinction with the manipulative and mediated mainstream media, particularly the print and tabloid press, with whom he has often shared an antagonistic relationship. During his heydays, the actor and some of the popular fanzines were engaged in a fifteen-year mutual ban, and his relationship with the press would further deteriorate during the infamous Bofors scandal in the late eighties. Bachchan, who was then a

Member of Parliament, following his emphatic electoral victory in 1984, was accused of receiving kickbacks from an arms deal with a Swedish company, along with other top government officials, including the then Prime Minister and his childhood friend, Rajiv Gandhi. The scandal, which rocked national politics and led to Gandhi's electoral defeat, also ended Bachchan's brief stint in politics, with the actor then accusing "vindictive journalists" (Virdi, 2008: 234) of a smear campaign to malign his reputation. Responding to recent controversies, whether the brouhaha over son Abhishek's nuptials with Aishwarya Rai, or the Barabanki land dispute, where he faced litigation for owning agricultural land, the actor holds the media responsible – "It becomes a controversy because the media wishes to put it that way...I don't want any more controversies. I don't like media attention. I don't like the way I am being accused and abused. My job is to be in front of the camera and work in movies. That's the only job I know."⁹⁶

As Jyotika Virdi notes, Amitabh Bachchan's "own narrative of each segment of his trajectory is told as a story of victimization" (2008: 236), where the perpetrator is often a malicious and vindictive media. Often portraying himself as the helpless celebrity, held hostage by the whims of a capricious and self-seeking media, the actor welcomes the intervention of Internet blogging, and the opportunity to present his perspective. Speaking in an interview to the television news network, NDTV, he emphasizes,

There is an opportunity now for me to express something without it going through a medium, which may have the possibility of interference, of modulation, of wanting to correct the script, or the draft, or whatever. And because this was a direct approach and contact with the reader,

⁹⁶ Amitabh Bachchan, "Amitabh fights back with élan," Interview by Sreenivasan Jain, Bombay Talkies, NDTV 24x7. Telecast date: 17 August 2007.

fan, whoever you want to call him, I felt that I needed to speak to him as frankly and honestly as I possibly could.⁹⁷

Thus, the Internet's democratic prowess not only facilitates a more real and honest display of his "authentic" self, but also equips him with the means to counteract malicious allegations and respond to detractors. As he religiously blogs and tweets, posts photographs of fans waiting outside his Mumbai home, or shooting stills from his upcoming film, announces new projects and collaborations, shares intimate family moments, his philosophy of life, and rants against the Machiavellian designs of the media, Amitabh Bachchan is the Bollywood star (and patriarch) comfortably at ease with and effortlessly navigating new modes of communication and technology. In his contemporary star persona as the "Benevolent Patriarch," Bachchan embodies a global India, willing and ready to expand its horizons. In a 2008 television endorsement for ADAG, the rhetoric is again focused on new horizons and global India's desire and need to conquer them. The commercial begins with a shot of the actor flipping through one of his coffee-table books, *AB: The Legend*. Attired in elegant Indian formal wear, his iconic and legendary stature is emphasized in the setting – framed portraits and photographs of Bachchan's many moods and facets. In his sonorous baritone, he recalls the journey to his superstardom, and the difference between "then" and "now," the past with its inherent limitations and the present and future, with their immense possibilities and hopes.

Un dinon mein mehnat, lagan, nishchay, josh, sab tha, par soch ka dayra bahut seemit sa hota tha. Soch jab seemit ho, toh insaan sapne bhi chote dekhta hain. Par aaj, aaj toh aisa lagta hai jaise soch ki koi seema hi na ho. Sab kuch badalta ja raha hai. Raastein, manzilein, umeedein,

⁹⁷ Amitabh Bachchan, "There is no dignified silence: Big B," Interview by Sreenivasan Jain, *Bombay Talkies*, NDTV 24x7. Telecast date: 20 June 2008.

sab. Ab toh woh din durr nahin jab passport ke vajiye password par chalegi yeh duniya. Kya time hai zindagi jeene ka, apni soch ko sapno se bada karne ka. It's time to think bigger, think better!

Those days there was perseverance, dedication, determination, energy, everything was there, but the thinking was very limited. When the thinking is limited, then our dreams tend to be limited too. But today, today it feels as if there is no limit to our thinking. Everything is changing. Roads, destinations, hopes, everything. Now that day won't be far when instead of passports, the world will run on passwords. What a time it is to live our lives! To extend our thinking beyond our dreams! It's time to think bigger, think better!

In his avowed espousal of both global India's immense potential and ADAG's corporate excellence, Bachchan reminds the viewer not only of the crucial shifts engendered by the nineties' economic liberalization, but also, his own role within the context of the nation's meta-narrative. Amitabh Bachchan's new avatar, as the proponent of modernity and globalization (and consequently, consumerism) is also underlined in a 2007 television spot for the "India Poised" campaign.⁹⁸ Titled "India vs. India," the two minute black and white television spot features Bachchan, immaculately dressed in a dapper suit, against the backdrop of the prestigious Bandra–Worli Sea Link project,⁹⁹ as he exhorts,

There are two India's in this country. One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us; the other

⁹⁸ The "India Poised" campaign was launched by the Times of India (TOI) Group of publications to commemorate India's christening of 2007 as the "Year of India."

⁹⁹ Officially known as the Rajiv Gandhi Sea Link, the Bandra-Worli Sea Link is a cable-stayed bridge that connects Bandra and other western suburbs of Mumbai with Worli and central Mumbai. One of the most ambitious and expensive engineering projects ever commissioned in modern India, it reportedly reduces the commute time between Bandra and Worli from sixty to seven minutes.

India is the leash. One India says, “Give me a chance and I’ll prove myself,” the other India says, “Prove yourself first and maybe then, you’ll have a chance.” One India lives in the optimism of our hearts, the other India lurks in the skepticism of our minds. One India wants, the other India hopes. One India leads, the other India follows. These conversions are on the rise. With each passing day, more and more people from the other India are coming over to this side. And quietly, while the world is not looking, a pulsating, dynamic, new India is emerging. An India, whose faith in success is far greater than its fear of failure. An India that no longer boycotts foreign-made goods, but buys out the companies that makes them instead...And one India, a tiny little voice at the back of the head, is looking down at the bottom of the ravine and hesitating. The other India is looking up at the sky and saying, “It’s time to fly.”

It is Amitabh Bachchan’s legacy as the nation’s cinematic alter ego, as its erstwhile socialist icon, that marks him as the most ideal candidate for this espousal of the nation’s nascent ethos and emergent values. Standing against the backdrop of one of modern India’s architectural and engineering marvels, designed to transform Mumbai into a global city, Bachchan evokes not only the imagery of a Janus-faced millennial India, poised at the crossroads of change and modernity, but also, the transformation of his own star persona. However, Amitabh Bachchan’s own transformation, from a socialist icon to a consumerist emblem is not devoid of problematic rumblings, underlining also the debates confronting the nation.

The travails of the nation’s *pater*

“Amitabh Bachchan who made the unlawful, illegitimate rogue figure so attractive in the cinema of the 1970s has turned his face away from anything even remotely oblique.” Kuhu Tanvir¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Kuhu Tanvir, “The changing face of Amitabh Bachchan,” Edit Room, Wide Screen Journal Editors’ Blog, 3 February 2010.

In recent years, Amitabh Bachchan has increasingly found himself under attack for his purported conformity to traditional norms, his display of uber religiosity, and his political allegiances. As journalist Kuhu Tanvir writes, “From the Angry Young Man to a submissive and increasingly right-wing presence – his shifts can cause mostly sadness and a great deal of worry given the unprecedented fan following he commands even today.”¹⁰¹ Bachchan is no longer simply the “Benevolent Patriarch,” signifying the perfect merger of tradition and modernity, but rather, a reminder of global India’s umbilical relationship with hegemonic norms and conventions. The recent controversies underline his vulnerability not only as a Bollywood star, but also as a national icon.

In 2007, as the superstar was celebrating son Abhishek’s nuptials with fellow Bollywood star and former Miss World, Aishwarya Rai, the wedding soon became embroiled in multiple controversies – while Indian intellectuals and feminist activists expressed their shock and anger over the family’s adherence to superstitious customs, particularly their rumored concern over Rai’s astrological natal chart, fanzines reported how many of the industry’s biggest stars felt slighted at not being invited for the event. Though Bachchan vehemently denied having consulted astrologers, conducting religious ceremonies, or even getting Rai married to a tree to ward off the inauspicious effects of her natal chart, the image of the successful actress demurely accompanying her fiancé and future in-laws to temples seemed a jarring contradiction to his (and also Rai’s own star image) public persona as the global, modern Indian. As veteran filmmaker Mrinal Sen remarked, “The ritualism of so many temple visits and marrying trees is ridiculous.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

It's shocking that a person of Amitabh Bachchan's stature should be indulging in this."¹⁰² Bachchan's iconic stature as a cinematic and national icon further problematized his actions and elicited more criticism. Artist Paritosh Sen pointed out, "Amitabh Bachchan has set a dangerous example by displaying superstitious beliefs. Because of who he is, the public watch and believe that much more."¹⁰³ Not only was the actor criticized for endorsing archaic, anachronistic beliefs, but also for undermining his father's legacy. According to noted Hindi litterateur, Rajendra Yadav, the Bachchan's behavior was contrary to the secular philosophy of Harivansh Rai Bachchan who was "almost an atheist...For him, a man bowing before a statue was a servile gesture." As Yadav laments, "The new generation of Bachchans doesn't display any of this literary thinking and reflection, or the grace and culture that's their legacy. The frenzy with which they performed various rites shows a deep insecurity, it shows their cultural poverty."¹⁰⁴

While Amitabh Bachchan's supposed insistence on "traditional" norms and diktats elicited shock and disapproval from both the nation's intellectuals and his urbane, middle-class fans, his recent public utterances and political allegiances have further antagonized his detractors. In September 2008, when the right-wing political outfit, Maharashtra Navanirman Seva (MNS), known for its regional, parochial agenda and "Mumbai for Mumbaikars" rhetoric, criticized Jaya Bachchan for speaking in Hindi at a public event,¹⁰⁵ Bachchan apologized on her behalf to placate the party. While his wife's remarks – that she will speak in Hindi since she hails from the northern state, Uttar Pradesh – was seen by many as taking a stand against MNS's attacks on

¹⁰² Smruti Koppikar, "The Big Belittling: The Bachchans' big-banner ritualism is a travesty of Harivanshrai's legacy, say intellectuals," *Outlook*, 7 May 2007.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Shubhangi Khapre, "Forgive me, I prefer Hindi: Jaya Bachchan," *Daily News & Analysis*, 8 September 2008.

North Indians in Mumbai – Bachchan’s response revealed a public personality, cautious of controversies, and ready to appease and align with the Hindu right. His blog posts often recount his camaraderie with right-wing politicians like Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, which seem not only disconcertingly at odds with his earlier incarnate as the disgruntled, disenfranchised “Angry Young Man,” but also, his contemporary star text as the urbane, modern, and liberal patriarch.

While Amitabh Bachchan’s ubiquitous presence and media visibility, coupled with his iconic role as the nation’s cinematic ideal, makes him the perfect brand ambassador and endorser, it also encumbers his star persona with greater responsibility and expectations. His decision to promote the western Indian state of Gujarat at the behest of Modi, regarded by many as the architect of 2002 state-sponsored pogrom against Muslims, provoked controversy, with even the Congress-led Maharashtra government snubbing him at the 2010 inauguration of the Bandra-Worli Sea Link.¹⁰⁶ Though Bachchan had been previously associated with the Nehru-Gandhi family, even contesting the 1984 general elections as a Congress candidate, his recent allegiances have been with the caste-based Samajwadi Party, and the right-wing BJP, a marked departure from his supposed secular credentials. Responding to public and media criticism of his political endorsements, Bachchan often situates his role as brand ambassador in the context of his responsibilities and obligations as a dutiful citizen. In a 2007 interview, he described his participation in Samajwadi Party promotional videos as merely an attempt to promote his home state, Uttar Pradesh – “I am promoting the state—talking about its progress, development and, in

¹⁰⁶ Priyanka Kakodkar, Ketki Angre, and Yogesh Damle, “Sea Link row: Congress humiliates Amitabh Bachchan,” NDTV.com, 25 March 2010.

turn, inviting investment.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, when asked about his recent role as Gujarat’s brand ambassador, he reprises the familiar narrative of the nation and his responsibility as a citizen.¹⁰⁸

Modi ka ambassador nahin, iss baat ko main spasht kar doon. Maine Gujarat, jo ki ek desh ka hissa hai, uska main tourism badhane ke liye kaam karne ja raha hoon. Main iss desh ka nagarik hoon aur mera yeh adhikar banta hai ke agar desh ke kisi bhi hisse ke bade mein prachar karna ho tourism ke liye, uska prachar kar diya...Main na toh Gujarat sarkar ka prachar karne ja raha hoon, ya Narendra Modi ji ka prachar karne jar aha hoon...Main toh kewal Somnath mandir...Dwarka...Harappa...Gir...unke baade mein charcha hogi. Gandhigram ke baade mein charcha hogi. Sabarmati ke baade mein batayenge logon ke. Iss mein kahan rajneeti aap le rahen hai?

I am not Modi’s ambassador, let me clear this matter. I am endorsing Gujarat, which is a part of the country, working to promote its tourism. I am a citizen of this country and it is my right to promote the tourism of any part of this country...I am not trying promote the Gujarat government, or Narendra Modi...I will be only talking about the Somnath Temple, the ruins of Dwarka, the Harappa civilization, the Gir forest...Telling people about Gandhigram and Sabarmati. Why are you bringing politics into all this?

As Bachchan repeatedly emphasizes, in his role as Gujarat’s brand ambassador, he is merely fulfilling his duty as a responsible citizen – informing and educating fellow Indians (and also, global denizens) about the country’s wilderness and natural preserves, cultural and historical antecedents, and political legacy. Allegations of his questionable political allegiances are thus dismissed with a brusque “main rajneeti mein nahin hoon” (“I am not in politics”), evoking

¹⁰⁷ “I’d be UP’s brand ambassador even if another party comes to power,” *Outlook*, 26 March 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Amitabh Bachchan, Interview by Prabhu Chawla, *Seedhi Baat*, Aaj Tak. Telecast date: 28 March 2010.

claims of national solidarity and citizenship. Amitabh Bachchan's contemporary star text embodies not only, in the reinvention of his own persona, from "Angry Young Man" to "Benevolent Patriarch," the shifts in the nation's ethos, from socialist values to consumerist aspirations, but also consequently, the fissures and inherent contradictions behind millennial India's global, modern visage. As Harsh V. Pant points out, Bachchan "is a product of a society that remains conservative to its core despite all the outward trappings of modernity...Amitabh Bachchan and his family do not exist in a societal vacuum. Today's India is an India where conformism is the new mantra, no one has any time to rebel, including the Angry Young Man of our films and his progeny."¹⁰⁹

Amitabh Bachchan's star text, with its inherent contradictions and duality, is symbolic of contemporary India's own schizophrenic character, where the modern exists, albeit a little uneasily, with the traditional and the archaic, and where its claim on a global modernity is juxtaposed with decades of sectarian violence and communal strife. The slogan of "India Shining," as critics argue, masks the nation's innumerable failures, particularly the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the state's neglect of its rural populace. While Amitabh Bachchan's reinvention, from the "Angry Young Man" to the "Benevolent Patriarch," embodies post-liberalization India's trajectory from Nehruvian socialism to Manmohanomics' aspirational ethos, his recent controversies and critiques underline the national imaginary's underlying rumblings and fissures.

¹⁰⁹ Harsh V. Pant, "The False Gods We Worship," *Outlook*, 2 May 2007.

Chapter Two

“I am a bloody good Indian”: Shah Rukh Khan, the “Global Indian” and minority citizenship in contemporary India

In January 2010, as Bollywood superstar, Shah Rukh Khan, was touring Britain and North America, to promote his upcoming release, *My Name Is Khan*, incensed protestors back in India were burning his effigies and demonstrating outside his palatial Mumbai home. In a span of a few days, Khan had been demoted from the nation’s cinematic idol to a traitor, a vilified figure devoid of any patriotic fervor or national allegiance. The controversy was over the actor’s rather seemingly innocuous comments on the recent Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket teams’ draft. Khan, who is co-owner of the IPL team, Kolkata Knight Riders, had voiced his dismay and disappointment that none of the teams had picked any of the eleven Pakistani cricketers, who were up for bidding. Though there was no official boycott against the players, deteriorating relations between the two countries, particularly in the aftermath of the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack, had prompted the IPL franchises to refrain from bidding on them. Describing the entire episode as “humiliating,” Khan had commented, “We are known to invite everyone, and we should have. If there were issues, they should have been put out earlier so that things could happen respectfully.”¹ Though this collective embargo was criticized by many, including the Indian home minister P. Chidambaram, who termed the non-inclusion of Pakistani players as a “disservice to cricket,”² Shah Rukh Khan’s public stance earned him the ire of the Hindu Right.

¹ “IPL’s Pak boycott humiliating: Shah Rukh Khan,” *The Times of India*, 26 January 2010.

² “Chidambaram slams IPL for not picking Pak players,” *The Times of India*, 25 January 2010.

Shiv Sena, the Maharashtra-based regional, right wing political party, was quick to denounce the star as a traitor, and threatened to boycott *My Name is Khan* (incidentally a film that examines Muslim subjectivity in post-9/11 America). In a scathing editorial in the party mouthpiece, *Saamna*, Bal Thackeray, Sena's octogenarian supremo declared, "Shah Rukh was, after all, no ordinary Indian; he was a Muslim."³ Party spokesman, Sanjay Raut, exhorted, "This is not Shah Rukh, but the Khan in him that's saying all this. Let Shah Rukh go and stay in Lahore, Karachi or Islamabad. He is not needed in Mumbai."⁴ Other Hindu Right leaders also weighed in on the actor's supposed lack of patriotism. Praveen Togadia of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, argued, "by favoring the inclusion of Pakistani cricketers, Shah Rukh has proved that he is a Muslim first and foremost and that he will continue to support Pakistan at the cost of our own national interest."⁵ As Khan promoted his much-awaited Bollywood venture abroad, the picture of the global Indian, urban, suave and cosmopolitan, at home, his religious affiliation was deconstructed as an implicit acknowledgement of his inevitable betrayal. His "Muslimness" marked him as the Indian subject incapable of professing loyalty or patriotism to the nation, and consequently, evoked the familiar rhetoric of the (unpatriotic) Indian Muslim's allegiance to neighboring Pakistan.

Though media outlets, social networking sites, and Khan's fans rallied in his support, and public sympathy was clearly in his favor, the controversy exposed the vulnerability of both the Bollywood star and the Hindi film industry to the moral policing of religious and political right-wing political outfits. The central and state governments were quick to condemn Shiv Sena's

³ Badri Raina, "Constructing Shah Rukh Khan," *Outlook*, 3 February 2010.

⁴ Bhattacharjee, Subhadeep, "Shiv Sena threatens Shah Rukh Khan over IPL," Oneindia Entertainment, 29 January 2010.

⁵ Badri Raina, *Ibid.*

exclusionary diatribe and assured the film's producer and theater owners that all necessary precautions would be taken to prevent any acts of violence. The Maharashtra Chief Minister, Ashok Chavan ordered the preventive detention of nearly two thousand Sena cadres,⁶ and multiplex owners, after the initial apprehension, decided to go ahead with the film's release. Though some single-screen theaters decided against screening the film, *My Name is Khan* received a record turnout, perceived by many as a public display of support for Khan. As film journalist Kaveree Bamzai mentions, Khan's "unbending stand against the Shiv Sena made watching *My Name is Khan* a badge of honor for anyone who believes in a more liberal India."⁷ Despite critiques of the film's rather simplistic and naive treatment of a serious issue, *My Name is Khan* was a commercial success, earning \$19 million worldwide in its first weekend.⁸ In due course, the Shiv Sena also toned down its attack, and both Khan and prominent Sena politicians declared a mutual truce in media interviews. However, the controversy does not merely underline the Hindi film industry, and consequently, its stars' susceptibility to moral and cultural diatribe, but more significantly, also highlights problematic questions of nationhood, citizenship, and "global" India's secularist ethos.

The nation, and consequently, its anxieties, aspirations, and dilemmas are central to the cinematic idiom of Hindi films, and consequently, "all ethical dilemmas revolve around the nation: good and bad, heroes and villains are divided by their patriotism and antipatriotism"

⁶ Jim Yardley, "Bollywood and Politics Collide in a Red-Carpet Standoff," *The New York Times*, 11 February 2010.

⁷ Kaveree Bamzai, "His Name is Khan," *India Today*, 1 March 2010, 47.

⁸ However, despite its "record-breaking" opening weekend in India, *My Name is Khan* was more successful internationally (primarily Britain and North America) than domestically. While the domestic collections dropped after the first week in India, the film became the highest-grossing Bollywood film overseas. With its theme of Muslim/minority citizenship and identity in a post 9/11 America, *MNIK* seemed to appeal more to the NRI audience than to either the urbane "multiplex audience," or the working-class "single-screen audience" in India. Its box-office revenue in India was also affected by its limited release in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra following the IPL controversy, which made it difficult to recover its high costs.

(Viridi, 2003: 9). As Jyotika Viridi has pointed out, “Hindi films are sites which intersect political life and spill into its social text. They address issues that trouble the nation...(and) deal with the same political and cultural issues using a constellation of myths, utopias wishes, escapism, and fantasies” (2003: 23). Employing Neepa Majumdar’s assertion of Hindi film stardom’s significant and crucial role (2001, 2009), and Richard Dyer’s delineation of stars as sites of mediation and negotiation, particularly during moments of transition and change (1986, 1998), I argue that the star texts of Bollywood personalities need to be read in the context of the nation’s trials and tribulations. In my discussion of Shah Rukh Khan’s star text, as the “Global Indian,” I analyze how the actor’s “Muslimness” marks him both as the “ideal” citizen, and also, as the Muslim “Other,” bringing into question his allegiance and loyalty to the national imaginary. The inherent contradiction of Khan’s persona speaks to Dyer’s notion of “structured polysemy,” necessitating the need to examine the star image in terms of “the multiplicity of its meanings” (1998: 63). As Dyer explains, while at times “the various elements of signification may *reinforce* one another...In other cases, the elements may be to some degree in *opposition* or *contradiction*, in which case, the star’s image is characterized by attempts to negotiate, reconcile or mask the difference between the elements, or else simply hold them in tension” (1998: 63-64).

Shah Rukh Khan’s repeated assertions, “I am a bloody good Indian,” in interviews following the controversy,⁹ replicates the recurrent and underlying narrative omnipresent in his star text – the narrative of the secular *and* urbane Indian Muslim. Equipped with a middle-class upbringing, a nationalist father, and a Hindu wife, the actor epitomizes not only an acceptable variant of “Muslimness” for post-liberalization India, but also, facilitates the global imagining of the contemporary India as a “secular,” “modern” nation-state. However, as I argue, Khan’s

⁹ Shah Rukh Khan, “‘I am a bloody good Indian’: SRK to NDTV,” Interview by Barkha Dutt, NDTV, 8 February 2010.

image as the model citizen, and that of India, as the secular, global entity, are both inherently tenuous, fragile, and vulnerable to the slightest provocation. Fraught with fissures and ruptures, the constructs of both the “*Indian Muslim*” and “*secular India*” expose the schizophrenic character of post-liberalization India, where two decades of economic growth and global visibility have simultaneously been accompanied by sectarian violence and religious strife. In this chapter, as I analyze Shah Rukh Khan’s star text, as the “Global Indian” *and* the “(secular) *Indian Muslim*,” I attempt to not only unpack the above-mentioned categories, but also, map the dissemination and consumption of the Bollywood star to the socio-political and cultural rumblings of contemporary India.

“Global India” and the “New Heroic Prototype”

“Shah Rukh Khan is the face of a glittering new India... The rise of Shah Rukh Khan can be understood as a metaphor for a country changing at a breakneck pace.” Anupama Chopra¹⁰

In popular Hindi cinema’s world of myth, romance and celluloid dreams, Shah Rukh Khan, or SRK, as the star is popularly known, occupies the place of a demi-god. Endowed with epithets such as “King Khan” and “Badshah of Bollywood,” and with a filmography of more than seventy films, including some of millennial India’s biggest blockbusters, Khan is phenomenally popular, inspiring fanatical adulation both at home and among the diaspora. Every morning, star-struck Bollywood aficionados travel to the Mumbai suburb, Bandra, and wait for hours outside his palatial home, Mannat, to catch a glimpse of their favorite star; fans pick up his cigarette stubs as souvenirs; and one dedicated Australian fan even named a star after the actor in the

¹⁰ Chopra, 2007: 11.

Scorpius constellation and bought him a plot on the moon. For Bollywood's global audience, as film critic Anupama Chopra remarks, Shah Rukh Khan "is bigger than Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt combined" (Chopra, 2007: 11). Immensely popular not only in the Indian sub-continent, and among the South Asian diaspora, the actor also has legions of fans in the Middle East, Indonesia, Malaysia, Germany, and Austria. In fact, the extent of his popularity in Germany and Austria is such that his films are regularly premiered there, he is a star attraction at the Berlin Film Festival, and the Austrian government even organized a conference on him in 2010. Interestingly, for a man who inspires such hysteria and devotion, Khan was an unlikely candidate for superstardom and cinematic fame. With neither iconic good looks, nor any claims to a famous Bollywood lineage,¹¹ the actor's rise to fame is an anomaly in the Bombay film industry's world of formulaic norms and conventions. His star text and media discourse often positions him as the veritable "Outsider," the middle-class aspirant from Delhi, whose stardom is as much a story of chance and luck, as it is of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. As Khan himself dismissively remarks, "I am a great fantastic accident of being the right person at the right place at the right time. That's the description of my success" (Shiekh, 2006: 58).

Prior to his film career, the actor had been active in Delhi's theatre circuit during his undergraduate years, and had even gained a certain degree of success and stardom as Abhimanyu Rai, the young, irreverent army commando in the popular Doordarshan television serial, *Fauji* (*Soldier*, dir. R. K. Kapoor, 1988). Khan's subsequent television appearances – starring roles in Lekh Tandon's *Dil Dariya* (1989) and Aziz Mirza's *Circus* (1989) – made him a popular television star, particularly among teenage female viewers. However, despite his stardom and

¹¹ Most contemporary Bollywood stars are either famous "star kids" (Abhishek Bachchan, Ranbir Kapoor, Saif Ali Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Karisma Kapoor, Sonam Kapoor, Sonakshi Sinha, Sunny Deol, Bobby Deol), or related to successful directors/producers (Hrithik Roshan, Aamir Khan), or even scriptwriters (Salman Khan, Farhan Akhtar).

popularity, his decision to join films elicited surprise, since television actors rarely made the transition to celluloid, and were seldom successful. But Khan's "arrogant," confident, self-assured demeanor – rather uncharacteristic for a newcomer – soon attracted not only the attention of filmmakers, but also popular film publications like *Filmfare* and *Stardust*. As Nishi Prem, former editor of *Stardust*, describes, Khan's attitude was a marked departure from the archetypal Bollywood aspirant:

I thought he was very original. He spoke a different language. We had rarely heard a newcomer talk like that, for that matter, even an established star talk like that. He had a point of view, he had an opinion, very strong, very different. He spoke fearlessly. I thought that something was waiting to happen to this film industry. I knew at that time, that I would not want to lose sight of this person ever.¹²

Despite a rather tepid debut as a second lead hero, who makes his appearance only after the interval (*Deewana*, dir. Raj Kanwar, 1992), Shah Rukh Khan quickly rose to prominence. Accepting unconventional roles that were rejected by others, the actor soon developed a reputation of subverting Bollywood's formulaic norms and dominant diktats. While off-screen, ignoring the advice and warnings of producers that a married hero is anathema to female fans, he married long-time girlfriend, Gauri Chibber, and openly flaunted his marital status, on-screen he challenged cinematic stereotypes and conventions with his "anti-hero" protagonists. Khan's initial rise to stardom was marked by a series of "psychotic lover" roles, where instead of cavorting with his heroines in picturesque locales, he terrorized and threatened them, even at times causing their death. In *Baazigar* (*The Gambler*, dir. Abbas-Mastan, 1993), as Ajay Sharma, who pushes his fiancé to her death just after muttering sweet-nothings, he shocked the Hindi film

¹² Quoted in Shiekh, 2006: 129.

audience, accustomed to the moral rectitude of the hero. In *Darr: A Violent Love Story (Fear*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1993), he was the obsessed stalker, carving his beloved's name on his chest, harassing her relentlessly, and attempting to even kill her husband. And in *Anjaam (The End*, dir. Rahul Rawail, 1994), his obsession drives him to kill the heroine's husband and daughter, before meeting his ignominious end at her hands. With the exception of *Anjaam*, where his murderous character might have been too much for the Hindi film audience to fathom, his anti-hero protagonists proved to be phenomenally popular, with viewers cheering Khan as he rained blows on the film's hero (Sunny Deol) in *Darr*.

Attributing the popularity of these “psychotic lover” narratives to the shift in the nation's ethos,¹³ from the collective to the individual, Ranjani Mazumdar notes, “The psychotic hero of contemporary cinema no longer speaks the broad social language of the earlier ‘angry man’ but remains within a world of seemingly unrelated individual obsessions” (2000: 250). Contrasting Shah Rukh Khan's “psychotic hero” with Amitabh Bachchan's iconic figure, the seventies’ “Angry Young Man,”¹⁴ Mazumdar further argues, “Bachchan's portrayal of the wronged man, unstable but always ‘morally’ bound, an outlaw but committed to the family and the ‘honour’ of the women in his life, seems a different image from that of the psychotic whose apparent retreat on screen from the values of social justice...has opened up new possibilities, the least of which is the changed architecture of *desire*, where the psychotic's action holds out the utopian possibility of breaking all boundaries” (2000: 252). For the nation's cinematic public, Khan's “psychotic hero,” with its unbridled and all-consuming drive and passion, embodied their own unapologetic embrace of the new consumerist ontology, and the utopian possibility of millennial India. The

¹³ See Chapter 1 (Amitabh Bachchan) for a detailed discussion of the social and cultural shifts engendered by the nineties' liberalization policies.

¹⁴ See Chapter 1 (Amitabh Bachchan) for Amitabh Bachchan's seventies' star image as “The Angry Young Man.”

rising Bollywood star's enunciation of the new national ideology would become further consolidated with his popular "NRI films" – *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Braveheart Will Take the Bride*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (*The Heart Is Crazy*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something is Happening*, dir. Karan Johar, 1998), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Happiness Sometimes Sorrow*, dir. Karan Johar, 2001), and *Kal Ho Na Ho* (*Tomorrow Might Never Come*, dir. Nikhil Advani, 2003). It was in these "yuppie" romantic films, speaking to the cultural aspirations, anxieties, and travails of both the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) abroad, and the new (modern) middle-class Indian at home, that Khan achieved his superstardom and iconic fame.

Patricia Uberoi, in her discussion of the phenomenally popular *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (or *DDLJ*, as the film was more commonly known), notes that the nineties' trend of NRI narratives was "a testimony at once to the enabling opportunities of the liberalized economy of the 1990s, and to the emergence of a new transnational Indian elite class as the reference group for the upwardly mobile Indian middle classes" (Uberoi, 2006: 200). The economic liberalization policies, introduced by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's Congress government in the early nineties, signaled not only the demise of the infamous and notoriously corrupt "license raj,"¹⁵ thus reducing the bureaucratic red-tape that had previously impeded fiscal growth and welcoming more foreign direct investment, but also, in its wake, engendered crucial shifts in the socio-cultural realm. The earlier emphasis on Gandhian frugality and Nehruvian socialism was now increasingly being undermined by a nascent, emergent endorsement of consumerism, particularly evident in the changing behavioral and consumer habits of the (urban) Indian middle

¹⁵ The term, "license raj," refers to the system of excessive regulations, permits, and licenses that characterized the Indian private sector in the post-Independence years, prior to the introduction of the economic liberalization policies in 1991.

class (Varma, 1998; Rajagopal, 1999; Mazarella, 2003; Fernandes, 2006). After decades of stringent regulatory measures, Indian consumers could now avail of the commodities and luxuries hitherto denied to them.

The new state-endorsed shift to consumerism was also accompanied by changes in the broadcasting and televisual sphere. The decade witnessed the launch of a slew of private satellite broadcasters with STAR TV and ZEE TV in the early nineties, followed by SET (Sony Entertainment Television) in 1995, and SAB TV and Sahara TV in 2000. For the Indian television viewer, the bouquet of 24x7 channels not only offered a much-needed respite from the monolithic control of the state public broadcaster, Doordarshan, but also, presented a new paradigm of social and cultural values. Premarital and extramarital liaisons, promiscuity, conspicuous consumption and display of wealth became the defining traits of the new television narratives, engendering in their wake the inherent dilemma of the nation's globalization. The nineties' economic liberalization coupled with the advent of private cable and satellite television brought about tsunamic changes in the nation's ethos, and consequently, for millennial India, poised at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, it became imperative to ask, "What does it mean to be an Indian?" At this crucial juncture, it was the idiom of popular Hindi cinema, traditionally employed in the task of reaffirming dominant and hegemonic norms (Chakravarty, 1993; Viridi, 2003) that strived to provide the answer.

With narratives based in London, New York, or Melbourne, the (new) Hindi film hero, often portrayed by Shah Rukh Khan (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*), presented the Indian cinematic public, both at home and abroad, with the archetype of the "millennial (global) Indian," effortlessly navigating the seamless boundaries between the local and the global, the national and the transnational. Even when the geographical

setting was India (*Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*), Khan's protagonists presented a demeanor and attitude similar to their diasporic NRI counterparts, thus reiterating the imagery of a "global" Indian nationhood and citizenship. As Lakshmi Srinivas notes, these popular films signified "spaces where the lifestyle of the urban middle class is sustained and reproduced in the context of an expanding globalist imagination and where the global and the local encounter one another or are juxtaposed" (2005: 333). In his on-screen "yuppie" incarnates, as *DDLJ*'s Raj Malhotra, or *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*'s Rahul Khanna, Khan embodied post-liberalization India's key mantra – "Indian values are portable and malleable" (Chopra, 2002: 73). Shah Rukh Khan's cinematic avatars personified the emergent ethos of cultural hybridity, where tradition and modernity were expected to exist in complete harmony, devoid of any conflict or contradiction. As Anupama Chopra, in her detailed discussion of *DDLJ* underlines,

DDLJ told Indians that an Indian is a hybrid who easily enjoys the material comforts of the West and the spiritual comforts of the East. In the push and pull of a liberalized economy, this synthesis was a comfortable answer. You didn't have to choose between the two – the twain could meet, without friction or confusion... Like fusion clothes and fusion food, *DDLJ* presented a fusion lifestyle... The insecurities thrown up by a fast-changing culture were assuaged by a retreat into traditional values.¹⁶

In *DDLJ*, Shah Rukh Khan's Raj is a second-generation immigrant, born and brought up in Britain, and yet, imbued and endowed with more "Indianness" than his rival from the homeland, the boorish, chauvinistic Kuljeet. In contrast to Kuljeet, whose "Indianness" is contingent on his physical and geographical affiliation, Raj's "Indianness" is inherent, intrinsic, and consequently, more authentic. As he emphatically declares to the film's heroine, despite his foreign bearings

¹⁶ Chopra, 2002: 56.

and (Western) external accouterments, he is still a *Hindustani* (Indian) at heart, aware of his cultural heritage, traditions, and values. Traversing and navigating the global (and national) milieu effortlessly, Khan's Raj is the epitome of "the new millennium Indian who combines a global perspective with local values and is at home with the world" (Chopra, 2007: 14). Comparing *DDLJ*'s Raj to Amitabh Bachchan's iconic "Angry Young Man," Chopra elaborates, "Amitabh's Angry Young Man image was buried and gone. Raj wasn't an anti-establishment rebel. He was a yuppie who worked the system to get the desired results. He was an articulate global Indian who was equally at ease in a nightclub in Paris or in a village in the Punjab. Raj was trendy and traditional" (2007: 138).

Hindi cinema's new archetypal hero, ubiquitously essayed by Shah Rukh Khan, no longer espoused the socialist beliefs of the fifties, or the anti-establishment rhetoric of the seventies; rather, his on-screen "yuppie" counterparts "set up a new heroic prototype" (Chopra, 2007: 138). Sudhanva Deshpande remarks, "the new, liberalized hero is neither angry nor is he particularly anti-establishment. He is, on the other hand, rich and conformist in his social attitudes" (2005: 187). *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*'s Raj and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*'s Rahul, with their branded Gap and Calvin Klein apparel, swanky sports cars, and high tech gadgets, embodied the new, emergent consumerist ontology of millennial India, and its claim on a global citizenship. As Khan himself emphatically acknowledges in his avowed espousal of consumerism,

If the 1970s hero was anti-establishment, as a yuppie I promised a better world. The yuppie doesn't bash a truckful of goondas [goons]. He's smarter. He doesn't have to kill in the battlefield, he can make a killing in the share market. The yuppie believes in capitalism, not communism. Actually, he believes in a new 'ism' every day.¹⁷

¹⁷ Interview of Shah Rukh Khan in *Filmfare*, August 2001. Cited in Deshpande, 2005: 181.

Indian film scholars have discussed at length the role of these new Bollywood narratives in enumerating notions of national identity and cultural ethos, particularly in the context of both India's economic liberalization and the nation-state's recent courting of its diasporic subject¹⁸ (Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Deshpande, 2005; Kaur, 2005; Punathambekar, 2005; Srinivas, 2005; Uberoi, 2006). Discussing the "Bollywoodization" of popular Hindi cinema, Ashish Rajadhyaksha has pointed out how these contemporary films emphasize "cultural nationalism in a global arena" (2003: 25) and consequently, "a freer form of civilizational belonging explicitly delinked from the political rights of citizenship" (2003: 32). As Lakshmi Srinivas argues, the objective "is to convey a transnational way of life as Indian and as accessible to Indians, thereby establishing a modern identity that is achievable" (2005: 335). In their transnational tales of diasporic prosperity, the "NRI films" not only offer an imagery of comfortable coexistence between tradition and modernity, but also for the NRI, present an "acceptable variant of Indianness" (Punathambekar, 2005: 152). Analyzing the rhetoric of the national/cultural citizenship implicit in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, Aswin Punathambekar underlines how the film facilitates "in imagining an India that is no longer solely associated with poverty and corruption, but rather an India that is entering an international economic order" (Punathambekar, 2005: 157). *K3G*, as the film was popularly known, and similar narratives offer the transnational subject, the NRI, "a picture perfect world of diasporic Indians," where it is easier to indulge in "a refusal to acknowledge the presence of 'third world-ness'" (Punathambekar, 2005: 157). As

¹⁸ In recent years, the Indian nation-state has actively courted expatriate Indians with events such as Bhartiya Pravasi Divas, reaffirming the NRI's "Indianness" and celebrating their success. Though India does not allow dual citizenship, the PIO (Persons of Indian Origin) and OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) cards, introduced in early 2000s, extend many citizenship benefits to the NRI – the NRI can now avail of visa-free travel, and also, own property and make investments. There is also provision for even third-generation Indian immigrants to apply for Indian citizenship.

Jigna Desai also remarks, unlike South Asian diasporic films, Bollywood is “rarely concerned with issues of location, racism or citizenship faced by those in the diaspora, concentrating instead on representing and reinforcing the transnational ties between the homeland and the diaspora through the maintenance of ‘traditional’ Indian values” (Desai, 2005: 59). This erasure of both diasporic realities and millennial India’s inherent, underlying fissures reiterated the familiar rhetoric of the global/transnational Indian who effortlessly retained his “Indianness” – a rhetoric that was central to both post-liberalization India’s emergent consumerist aspirations and Shah Rukh Khan’s own star text in encapsulating them.

“I am the Great Indian Dream”

“With Shah Rukh, the distance between actor and image blurred. The audience believed that Shah Rukh was Raj. He became...every girl’s fantasy lover, every sister’s brother, every mother’s son.” Anupama Chopra¹⁹

Unlike predecessor Amitabh Bachchan, whose off-screen image as the suave, urbane, erudite elite was sharply in conflict with his on-screen persona, the disgruntled, disenfranchised, working-class “Angry Young Man,” Shah Rukh Khan’s stature as millennial India’s favorite cinematic icon and superstar is contingent as much on his personification of the “Global Indian” in films like *DDLJ* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* as his off-screen trajectory, which embodies the very essence of the new consumerist ontology. In his Bollywoodesque narrative of fame and stardom, Khan epitomizes millennial India’s dream of achieving the impossible. While Bachchan’s off-screen text, as the son of acclaimed Hindi poet and litterateur Harivansh Rai

¹⁹ Chopra, 2007: 139.

Bachchan and the childhood friend of political scion Rajiv Gandhi, underlined his elite affiliations, Shah Rukh Khan's humble middle-class antecedents marked him as the ideal role model for the nation's nascent ambitions. In interviews, the actor repeatedly emphasizes his middle-class origins, evoking *leit motifs* that are central to the urban (and urbane) Indian middle class – the prioritization of education and a secular upbringing. Khan graduated from Delhi's prestigious St. Columba's School, where he was awarded the Sword of Honour, the highest accomplishment for a graduating senior, and received his undergraduate degree in Economics from the popular Hans Raj College – educational accomplishments, which are constantly reinforced and reiterated in his interviews and television features, along with his achievements in sports and dramatics. In his off-screen persona, as the English-educated, urbane, well read, “Global Indian,” the actor presents not only a marked departure from the stereotypical image of the Bollywood star, but also, an identifiable celebrity for the burgeoning (urban) Indian middle class. As the Bollywood star who personally supervises his son's math homework, teaches his daughter history lessons, and attends their tae kwon do matches, he is the epitome of Indian middle-class parenthood and values, inculcating in them both the traditional reverence for education and the “new age” drive to succeed.

Shah Rukh Khan's media discourse as Bollywood's reigning superstar – print and television interviews, magazine features, the TLC reality show, *Living With a Superstar* (2010), and the Nasreen Munni Kabir directed documentary, *The Inner/Outer World of Shah Rukh Khan* (2005) – not only explicitly reiterates the overlap between his on-screen and off-screen avatars (particularly *DDLJ*'s Raj and *Chak De! India*'s Kabir Khan), but reveals his own implicit investment in the dissemination of his star text. His production company, Red Chillies Entertainment, has co-produced both *The Inner/Outer World of Shah Rukh Khan* and *Living With*

a Superstar, as well as many of the star's television commercials, and celebrity-based TV shows in collaboration with the new network, UTV Stars (*Up Close & Personal with PZ*, *Live My Life*). Khan's involvement with the dissemination of his star discourse is emblematic of both contemporary Bollywood's transmedia character and its increased emphasis on media visibility, a fact that he himself is acutely aware. With his Twitter handle, Facebook page, and countless print and television features, the actor not only provides his fans with a more intimate insight into his "real" persona, but also, engages in constant reiterations of his star trajectory – the middle-class boy from Delhi who achieved the impossible through sheer dint of hard work, dedication, and perseverance – exemplifying the promise of millennial, post-liberalization India. As Khan himself acknowledges, he is "the Great Indian dream,"²⁰ or rather, the "Great Indian *Middle-Class Dream*" [emphasis own].

In his interviews, Shah Rukh Khan constantly evokes his middle-class antecedents, thus framing his iconic superstar stature within the context of "middle class-ness." Even references to his Mumbai home, *Mannat* (Wish), a palatial sea-facing heritage bungalow built in 1896, which also houses a swimming pool, a movie theater, and the actor's corporate office, is couched not in terms of Bollywood luxury, but as his simple desire to provide security for his family. While the 26,300 square foot of land might signify wealth and grandeur, particularly in the context of the city's cramped urban landscape, for Khan, it merely underlines his nostalgia for the verdant spaciousness of his hometown, Delhi. In the TLC reality show, *Living With a Superstar*, as the camera gives the viewers a sneak preview into Mannat's extravagant interiors, Khan's voice over recounts his father's early death, the financial insecurity during his teen years, and his desire to provide his children with financial and emotional stability. As the narrative emphasizes, despite

²⁰ *Up Close & Personal with PZ*, Season 1, Episode 7, UTV Stars. Telecast date: 15 October 2011.

the grand exteriority, the Bollywood star is, at heart, a middle class denizen – “I have a big house, but inside that house, we live like simple people”²¹ – the luxury and grandeur are the mere “peripherals” of his stardom.

It’s very strange to be sounding on about middle class when you have a BMW outside your house, which is one acre big. But these are the peripherals of the job. You know, people think I bought this big house (because) I wanted to live in a big house. But the idea is I am from Delhi and everybody lives in big bungalows there. For a Delhi-ite it’s not a big house even though I am a middle class boy. It is very strange but the thought is that we are very middle class as far as how we deal with things is concerned, how we talk in the house, we don’t have a lavish lifestyle beyond the fact that the peripherals that come with my filmmaking of film stardom.²²

Shah Rukh Khan’s quotes and sound bytes underline millennial India’s mantra for success – hard work, dedication and perseverance (“The idea that I have worked with since childhood is that if you study hard, you can’t fail. If you work hard with enthusiasm and belief, you can’t go wrong”²³); the willingness to take risks (“If you don’t risk taking the odd wrong turn in the quest for breaking set patterns, you will go nowhere”²⁴); and the desire and drive to win (“In my blogs, and in my write-ups, and in my interviews, I may say, yes, losses teach you how to be resilient, they teach you patience, they teach you how to be better, but I hate to lose...It distresses (me), it

²¹ Shah Rukh Khan, “Everything In Life Can Be Turned Into Entertainment, Even Death,” Interview by Sandipan Deb, *Outlook*, 25 December 2000.

²² Shah Rukh Khan, “I wish to be always remembered,” Interview by Saisuresh Sivaswamy and Savera R. Someshwar, *Rediff.com*, 15 February 2007.

²³ Shiekh, 2006: 134.

²⁴ Shiekh, 2006: 223.

kills me within, any kind of loss”²⁵). In his new avatar as a television personality, as the host of format shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*) and *Kya Aap Paanchvi Pass Se Tez Hain?* (*Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader?*), and as the star of *Living With a Superstar*, and countless other celebrity-based talk shows, Khan repeatedly extorts,

You just got to have patience, you got to have resolve, and most important of all, you got to have belief. There is nothing more important than belief. If you have belief, that ‘this is going to happen,’ it will happen. You dream it, you imagine it, you believe it, you think it, you sleep it, you wake it, you eat it. You have to have belief like that.²⁶

Shah Rukh Khan’s attitude and public demeanor, often termed as arrogant (“I am not scared of being overshadowed by anyone. I am Shah Rukh Khan”²⁷) and overtly ambitious (“By my own standards if you ask me whether I’m successful, no I’m not. I want even aliens from Mars coming down to earth to see my films”²⁸), also underlines millennial India’s new uninhibited embrace of success and consequently, its rewards. In a marked departure from the post-Independence fifties’ milieu, where both the national and the cinematic imaginary attempted to respond to the nascent nation-state’s “problem” of “economic backwardness” with a “deliberate embracing of poverty” (Chakravarty, 1993: 100), for post-liberalization contemporary India, consumption and its conspicuous display were perceived as “means to emphasize globalization locally” (Srinivas, 2005: 334). No longer tainted with guilt and embarrassment, acquisition of

²⁵ *Living With a Superstar*, Season 1, Episode 3. TLC. Telecast date: 12 March 2010.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Living With a Superstar*, Season 1, Episode 2. TLC. Telecast date: 5 March 2010.

²⁸ Shiekh, 2006: 81.

wealth and consumerism became equated with perseverance and dedication. As Khan admits in talk shows and interviews,

I am very happy being a star. I love what comes with it. I also appreciate the hard work that I have to do for it, and I don't want to wear dark glasses to hide from the world that I am a superstar. And I really enjoy it.²⁹

Khan's espousal of millennial India's consumerist aspirations was not merely underlined by his cinematic roles and media discourse, but also, in his extra-cinematic ventures, as a prolific brand endorser and a corporate entity. The actor embodies the discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom, where the star essays a plethora of different roles – actor, television personality, brand endorser, and corporate czar. Though his first business initiative, Dreamz Unlimited, a production house in collaboration with actor Juhi Chawla and director Aziz Mirza, failed, his subsequent venture, Red Chillies Entertainment, which he launched in 2002, proved to be much more successful. Red Chillies is not only involved with film production and distribution (the company has produced two of his recent blockbusters, *Main Hoon Na* and *Om Shanti Om*, as well as his magnum opus, *Ra.One*), but also, television content, advertisement commercials, and post-production special effects. In 2008, Khan also acquired the IPL team, Kolkata Knight Riders, for \$75 million; in 2009, the brand value for KKR, as the team is popularly known, was estimated to be \$42 million, making it the richest IPL team.³⁰ Coupled with his corporate initiatives and entrepreneurship, his endorsements for global brands like Pepsi, Tag Heuer, Compaq, and Hyundai also reaffirms and reiterates his embodiment of the nation's consumerist ethos and global economy.

²⁹ *First Ladies Club with Abu Sandeep*, NDTV Good Times. Telecast date: 28 March 2009.

³⁰ "IPL valued at \$2.1 bn; KKR richest team," *Business Standard*, 10 May 2009.

Endorsing everything from biscuits (Sunfeast), health supplements (Emami Sona Chandi Chwyanprash), aerated drinks (Pepsi), and beauty products (Emami Fair & Handsome, Lux, Head & Shoulders) to computers (Compaq), luxury watches (Tag Heuer), cars (Hyndai Santro), telecom service providers (Airtel), the “SRK Brand,” as Gyan Prakash remarks, is “eminently marketable.”³¹ In his on-screen persona as Raj and Rahul, the “yuppie who loved and pined in Armani suits, but rarely got his hands dirty,” Khan’s brand image was “innately urban” (Chopra, 2007: 161). A “promiscuous brand endorser,” the actor had appeared in 281 print advertisements and 172 television commercial between 1994 and 2006, and at times, endorsed as many as 34 different products in a year (Chopra, 2007: 160). Though he is often criticized for indiscriminately endorsing practically everything under the sun, Khan’s rationale is simple, and couched in familiar (and identifiable) middle class rhetoric – “I need money for my bungalow. I need money to secure my son’s future. I need money to become financially firm. If that means plugging everything from colas to condoms, that’s fine by me.”³²

Moreover, Khan’s star image and public persona as “everyone’s perfect brother, son, lover, and husband”³³ further facilitates his brand value as “the ubiquitous symbol and conduit of the new consumerist society” (Chopra, 2007: 160). Ad filmmaker Ram Madhvani underlines how the actor’s television commercials tap into his star text,

You write the script knowing that Shah Rukh’s going to be in it. So, you don’t write it for any other actor or character. You know that...Shah Rukh is going to be in it, this is what he does well, so might as well craft the script to that.³⁴

³¹ Cited in Chopra, 2007: 161.

³² Jitesh Pillai, “One on One,” *Filmfare*, May 1998. Cited in Chopra, 2007: 158.

³³ Karan Johar, quoted in Alex Perry, “Shah Rukh Khan: Bollywood’s Biggest Star,” *Time Asia*, 4 October 2004.

³⁴ *Living With a Superstar*, Season 1, Episode 4. TLC. Telecast date: 19 March 2010.

As Madhvani further elaborates, “In the West, they use celebrities as celebrities. In India, what we’ve managed to do is, we’ve managed to take our celebrity and make him into a character in the ad. So, it’s just not Shah Rukh, but Shah Rukh playing an actor and a character in the ad.”³⁵ As the face of “global India,” Khan’s off screen and on-screen personas offer a “seamless integration” with his brands. In the Lux commercial, reclining in a bathtub full of rose petals, he is the “New Indian Man,” comfortable with his masculinity and sexuality; in the Sunfeast and HP Compaq Presario ads, he reprises his familiar romantic, flirtatious self; and for Airtel, he offers his many diverse personalities, as the eternal romantic, the love guru, the jet-setting celebrity, the Bollywood star, and the cricket fan. The increasing synergy between the erstwhile distinct realms of television and film is also evident in the explicit referencing of Khan’s films in his recent commercials (Sona Chandi Chwyanprash and *Ra.One*; Airtel and *Don 2*). In the 2010 television commercial for the health supplement, Emami Sona Chandi Chwyanprash, Khan is an Indian mythological superhero, a character that speaks to both his upcoming superhero film, *Ra.One* (2011), and also, to the almost Herculean prowess required from the middle class Indian to confront the stressful demands of everyday urban life. Ashish Khazanchi, Creative Director, Publicis Ambience, describes why Shah Rukh Khan is the ideal brand endorser for the product.

SRK fits into this (the commercial) because, you know, it’s the tale of a modern-day Maharaja (king). The ground that he walks on is real, but he is the Maharaja, and no better person to do this than the swashbuckling Khan. He is the King. And also, the appeal that he has across various cross-sections, various socio-economic categories, strata. People just embrace him.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

However, it is not merely Shah Rukh Khan's espousal of consumerist aspirations that configure him as the embodiment of millennial India, but also, his religious identity and affiliation – he is a Muslim superstar in a Hindu-majority country. It is by virtue of his “minority” status that he becomes doubly demarcated as the “ideal” citizen, the ultimate validation of India's secular credentials and a further attestation to its claims to global modernity.

The Muslim Superstar in a Hindu World

“Such is his charisma that he made a religious, conservative and traditional expression like ‘Inshallah’ very cool, fashionable and secular.” Javed Akhtar on Shah Rukh Khan³⁷

As a Muslim cinematic personality, Shah Rukh Khan is not an isolated case of a celebrity from a minority demographic; rather, he underlines the long, and at times, complicated history that Muslim artistes and technicians have had with the Hindi film industry since its very inception. During the early decades of the Indian film industry, the presence of Parsi, Jewish, Anglo Indian, and Muslim actors and filmmakers deemed it as morally questionable and unsuitable for “cultured” (upper caste) Hindus, particularly Hindu women.³⁸ As Sanjay Srivastava notes, “In an era when film-work of any kind was treated as disreputable and association with film-workers as equally suspect, it was natural that the industry's mainstay would be those already stigmatized by mainstream society” (Srivastava, 2006: 137). Muslim presence was considered particularly disreputable and immoral because of the *tawaif* (courtesan) antecedents of many of the performers. (Srivastava, 2006) Discussions of actresses would often include references to their

³⁷ Shiekh, 2006: 136.

³⁸ See Priti Ramamurthy (2006) and Neepa Majumdar (2009) for a more detailed discussion of early Indian film stardom and discourses of gender and morality.

“tainted” history. Writing about Nargis in the late forties, the acclaimed writer Saadat Hasan Manto spends a considerable time on her mother, the famed courtesan, Jaddan Bai.

In Jaddan Bai’s family there was Mohan Babu, Baby Nargis and her two brothers. All of them were the responsibility of Jaddan Bai. Mohan Babu came from a rich family and been so fascinated with the musical web Jaddan Bai’s mellifluous voice had woven around him that he had allowed her to become his entire life. He was handsome and he had money. He was also an educated man and enjoyed good health. All these assets he had laid at her feet like offerings in a temple. Jaddan Bai enjoyed great fame at the time. Rajas and nawabs would shower her with gold and silver when she sang. However, after this rain of gold and silver was over, she would put her arms around Mohan because he was all she really cared about. He stayed by her side until the end and she loved him deeply. He was also the father of her children.³⁹

As Manto’s account of Nargis illustrates, the Muslim actress could never really divorce herself from her tainted past – the courtesan mother, the illegitimate union of her parents, their unorthodox and unconventional familial structure – and consequently, her own inevitable lack of moral rectitude (Nargis’s affair with married co-star, Raj Kapoor). Though there was a conscious attempt in her star text to mark her as distinct and different from her mother,⁴⁰ her “Muslimness,” and subsequently, the association with *tawaif* culture, coded her implicitly as morally derelict and lacking.

It was the Hindi film industry’s “disreputable” image that prompted the call for “cultured ladies” in the thirties (Majumdar, 2009), and also, galvanized organizations like All India League of Censorship, a self-proclaimed Hindu culture policing force established in 1937, whose

³⁹ Manto, 1998: 80.

⁴⁰ As Manto recounts, Jaddan Bai ensured that Nargis did not receive any professional training or knowledge in singing, and thus could not be assumed to be a successor to her mother’s *tawaif* (courtesan) tradition.

objective was to “cleanse” the film industry of all its non-Hindu elements (Mishra, 2002). The League’s aim “was not limited to matters of representation (of the Hindu body or of Hindu thought) but extended to the question of who should control the means of representation” (Mishra, 2002: 217). Not only did the League attempt to rally support against the “contamination” of the Bombay film industry by Muslims and Parsis, both groups with “decidedly anti-Hindu agendas” (Mishra, 2002: 117), but also, emphasized “artificial connections between textual (or on-screen) ideology with the presumed general ideology (as read by the Hindus) of the Muslims” (Mishra, 2002: 217). Consequently, as Vijay Mishra has pointed out, the All India League’s rabid ideology compelled many Muslim actors, during this era, to camouflage their “Muslimness” with Hindu names (2002) – Dilip Kumar (Yusuf Khan), Meena Kumar (Mahjabeen Bano), Madhubala (Mumtaz Jahan Begum Dehlavi), Ajit (Hamid Ali Khan), Jayant (Zakaria Khan). Thus, despite the presence of many notable Muslim writers and directors (Mehboob Khan, K. Asif, Kamal Amrohi, Abrar Alvi, Shaheed Latif), lyricists (Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Hasrat Jaipuri), music directors and playback singers (Naushad, Mohammed Rafi, Talat Mehmood), and actors (Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Nargis), references to their religious identity remained strictly consigned to the personal and familial realm.

Shah Rukh Khan’s star text as a Muslim superstar needs to be read not only in the context of Hindi film industry’s rather ambiguous relationship with the community, but also, against the backdrop of the nineties’ rise of Hindu extremism. While secessionist movements (Punjab, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, North-East) and events of national trauma (Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 followed by anti-Sikh riots) scarred the national psyche in the eighties, the nineties were marked by sectarian violence and religious strife (Babri Masjid demolition, 1992 Hindu-Muslim riots, 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts). In his work on the rise of the

Hindu Right in the late eighties and early nineties, Gyanendra Pandey underlines how the extremist rhetoric was inherently contingent on “a brazen division of India into the civilized (Hindus) and the barbarian (Muslims)” (1993: 2),

The former are said to be educated, rational and ‘modern’ – or potentially educable, rational, and ‘modern’. The latter are declared congenitally incapable of attaining these conditions, and unwilling to even try. The civilized are concerned about the problem of rapid population growth, and attentive to the needs of hygiene, science and medicine. The barbarians choose to live in ghettos, dirty, over-crowded, and unventilated; they multiply like rabbits, and spread filth and disease. For all these reasons, the pronouncement goes, as well as on account of their innate religious bigotry and aggressiveness, the Muslims are a source of grave danger to society, ‘modernity’, ‘civilization’.

Historian Mushirul Hasan also underlines how the exclusionary and violent diatribe of Hindu Extremism “conjured up the image of a community outside the ‘national mainstream.’ Muslims were depicted as aggressive fundamentalists and demonized as descendants of depraved and tyrannical medieval rulers who demolished temples and forcibly converted Hindus to Islam” (Hasan, 1996: 185). The slogans of Hindu Extremist political outfits – “Jo Ram ka nahin, who hamara nahin” (“He who does not worship Ram, does not belong to us”), “Babur ki santan, jao Pakistan ya kabristan” (“Son of Babur, go to either Pakistan or the graveyard”) – reiterate the familiar rhetoric. Moreover, the Hindu Right’s demarcation of Mughal rulers (Babur, Akbar, Aurangzeb) as invaders and oppressors, and consequently, Hindu kings (Shivaji, Rana Pratap) as true “sons of the soil” and nationalists, further marks the Muslim subject as the “Outsider,” incapable of being incorporated and accommodated within the realm of the national imaginary.

As Hasan has discussed, this problematic inclusion/exclusion of the Indian Muslim within the national imaginary is not confined to the recent past (1996). Rather, the antecedents of this rhetoric can be traced back to nationalist discourses during the colonial era. In an attempt to counteract the colonial discourse of defining the colonized as the “barbarian,” the “uncivilized,” and the colonizer as the truly “civilized” and “modern,” Indian nationalist thinkers constructed an image of a spiritual (and hence, superior) India untainted by the materialist (and thus, inferior) West (Chatterjee, 1993). Defining the colonized national imaginary in such paradigms entailed its conception as a site of a glorious, ancient civilization – a conception that not only foreclosed the inclusion of the medieval/Muslim history within the national polity but also made the terms “India” and “Hindu” interchangeable. For the Indian nationalists like Veer Savarkar, Muslim and Christian subjects could lay claim only to a subordinate citizenship since they did not subscribe to the customs and rituals of the (Hindu) homeland. Following the 1947 Partition and the delineation of a separate territory for the Muslims (Pakistan), the perception of the Indian nation as analogous with the Hindu community gained further ground. As Pandey points out, “Explicitly or implicitly, Pakistan (and since 1971, Bangladesh) has become the place where Indian Muslims belong” (1993: 251). Even historian and statesman K. M. Panikkar argued that not only was Muslim identity distinct, but their explicitly communal outlook made their integration and assimilation within the postcolonial national imaginary a rather difficult proposition. Compared to other religious minorities, the distinctiveness of the Indian Muslim posed a threat to the (Hindu) nation – “Unlike the Christians who, though they profess a different religion, are not in their way if life different from the Hindus, the Muslims whether in the South of Kerala, or in Kashmir, represent a culture of their own” (Panikkar, 1963: 60).⁴¹

⁴¹ Cited in Hasan, 2005: 199.

Shah Rukh Khan's embodiment of millennial India's new consumerist ontology, and the nation's emergent claims to a global citizenship, thus holds particular significance, not merely due to the Indian Muslim's contentious relationship with the national imaginary, but also, because of the Hindu Right's divisive rhetoric of sectarian violence. While Khan's (Muslim) religious affiliation marks him as more vulnerable to insinuations and accusations of unpatriotic behavior, it also positions him, especially in the context of contemporary India's global, modernist ethos, as the ideal (secular) citizen. In contrast to other contemporary Muslim Bollywood stars (Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Saif Ali Khan), who maintain a discreet and private demeanor when it comes to their personal beliefs, Khan has been rather vocal and public in professing his faith. Though he maintains that he is primarily an entertainer ("Films are for entertainment, messages are for the post office,"⁴² "I don't give messages, I try to entertain people"⁴³), the actor also recognizes the crucial significance of his role as a (Muslim) celebrity, not only as a Bollywood celebrity, or an Indian Muslim, but also, in the context of the Indian nation-state's claims of secular credentials and global ethos.

You know, in a strange sense, just being a movie actor has made me stand for a lot of values and iconic things. And one of the things that I suddenly stand for is that I am a Muslim in a Hindu country. And I suddenly realize that nobody has ever made me feel that way. So can I tell people that? Can I explain to people that I am a Muslim in a country called India, and it's not just a Hindu country or something? We've never been made to feel this is a Hindu country,

⁴² Shah Rukh Khan, "Films are for entertainment, messages are for the post office," Interview by Namrata Joshi, *Outlook*, 22 October 2007.

⁴³ Shah Rukh Khan, "I don't give messages, I try to entertain people," Interview by Saisuresh Sivaswamy and Savera R. Someshwar, Rediff.com, 14 February 2007.

which means we are amazingly secular. And if I feel like that in this country, then I think Islamic people should feel that way in every country.⁴⁴

As the liberal, urbane “Global Indian,” Shah Rukh Khan offers not only a stark contrast to the much-maligned stereotype of the “barbarian” Muslim, but also, underlines the distinctiveness of the Indian Muslim. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, it became imperative for the Indian nation-state to define its “minority,” not as the incompatible “Other” and “Outsider,” but more significantly, as the resolutely patriotic citizen-subject, whose national allegiance (Indianness) superseded his religious affiliation (Muslim). Indian media rhetoric in the post-9/11 years regurgitated the nation’s familiar espousal of secularism. As journalist Barkha Dutt notes, despite a significant Muslim population of 150 million, the country was not besieged by any Al-Qaeda links, and thus, could rightfully claim its “badge of honour.” This new emphasis on the Indian Muslim as the endorser of the nation’s secularist ethos is evident in Shah Rukh Khan’s contemporary star text. In interviews, the actor often emphasizes his secular credentials – “I would like to believe that I am an educated liberal Muslim, who has a Hindu wife and two kids”⁴⁵ – presenting himself as the very epitome of a suave, cosmopolitan, and urbane *Indian* Muslim.

With a middle-class secular upbringing, a father who was one of the country’s youngest freedom fighters, a Hindu wife, and children inculcated with both Hindu and Muslim traditions, Khan was undoubtedly the perfect spokesperson for millennial India’s global persona and its secular agenda. As he exhorts the youth to combat communalism and uphold the principles of

⁴⁴ Shah Rukh Khan, “Jihad is about killing the badness in you,” Interview by Saisuresh Sivaswamy and Savera R. Someshwar, Rediff.com, 19 February 2007.

⁴⁵ Shah Rukh Khan, “Interview: SRK on Mumbai siege and terror,” Interview by Rajdeep Sardesai, CNN-IBN, 7 December 2008.

Indian secularism,⁴⁶ and critiques Islamic fundamentalists (“There is an Islam from Allah and...very unfortunately, there is an Islam from the Mullahs...I appeal to all of them to please give the youngsters the right reading of Quran”⁴⁷), he presents a viable and acceptable variant of “Muslimness” for the Indian national imaginary. For the Indian (Hindu) middle class denizen, Shah Rukh Khan’s urbanity offers a comforting and palatable departure from the dominant images of ghettoized Muslims, insular and illiterate. As he underlines his familiarity with Hindu religious texts and attempts to clarify the true meaning of *jihad*, the inherent threat of his Islamic affiliation is assuaged and subsumed by his Indian secularist and pacifist ethos.

I have read the holy Quran. It states that if you heal one man, you heal the whole mankind, and if you hurt one man, you hurt the whole mankind. Nowhere in the Quran does it say that *jihad* will lead to *jannat* (paradise).⁴⁸

If some person is using the name of Islam and confusing it with *jihad*, I think one needs to understand the meaning of *jihad*. And *jihad* means overcoming your own frailities, your own streak of violence...*jihad* is not about killing other people. *Jihad* is about killing the badness in you. It’s an emotional war, and when people use it for a physical or material war, then it’s a wrong use of the term...People should realize that Islam, like Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism, is about being kind.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shah Rukh Khan, “I don’t give messages, I try to entertain people,” Interview by Saisuresh Sivaswamy and Savera R. Someshwar,

⁴⁷ Rajdeep Sardesai, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Shah Rukh Khan, “Jihad is about killing the badness in you,” Interview by Saisuresh Sivaswamy and Savera R. Someshwar.

In the public professing of his faith, Khan however presents a rather palatable and acceptable variant of not only “Muslimness,” but also of religious faith and belief for the “modern,” “global” Indian denizen – “My religion is sacred to me. I don’t wear it on my sleeves. I am not a fanatic, but yes I am God-fearing. And I believe your deeds define you. You get your brownie points and your whiplashes here during your stay on earth” (Shiekh, 2006: 231). However, this rather sanitized version of religion is disconcertingly at odds with the public and social discourse of contemporary India. As the country reiterates its role as an emergent global power, it is also confronted at home with caste politics, ethno-religious strife, gender, and class inequities. While the Hindu Right political outfit, BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party), has emerged as one of the major national parties, in the aftermath of the nineties’ divisive rhetoric, the fissures underlying the facade of India’s secularism has become even more apparent with the current debate over conversions to Christianity. It is in this context again that Shah Rukh Khan’s star text warrants a closer reading, particularly his depiction of Muslim characters – Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India* (dir. Shimit Amin, 2007) and Rizvan Khan in *My Name is Khan* (dir. Karan Johar, 2010) – protagonists who present a marked departure from the formulaic stereotypes of Muslims screened in Hindi cinema.

Screening the Muslim “Other”

Discussing Muslim representation in Bollywood films, Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori describe the community’s cinematic depiction as “exoticized, marginalized, and demonized” (Chadha and Kavoori, 2008). Similar to Hindi cinema’s other stereotypes (the dissolute and drunk Christian, the Bengali, South Indian, and Parsi comic caricatures with their accented speech), the Muslim character also functioned primarily to reiterate and reaffirm the

hegemonic, dominant value of the Hindu, North Indian, (and) upper caste male protagonist's primacy in the narrative world. As Manisha Sethi notes, "Traditionally, mainstream Bollywood has reserved normalcy for the Hindu hero while encoding minorities with signs of cultural exaggeration...These characters are essential to complete the cinematic tableau of national integration" (Sethi, 2002). Thus, "Centralizing a north Indian hetero-normative Hindu male, upper middle class, and upper caste subject, Hindi cinema projects him as national citizen" (Khan, 2009: 128). Consequently, unlike his Hindu counterpart (implicitly coded as North Indian and upper caste), the Muslim was rarely accommodated within the cinematic space – signaling, in a sense, the nation's own rather ambiguous and problematic accommodation of its Muslim citizen-subjects. Presented either as remnants of an antiquated culture in the popular fifties and sixties' Muslim Social films, or more recently, vilified as "figures of violence, betrayal, inhumanity, bestiality, irrationality, deracination and irresponsibility" (Rai, 2006), the Muslim in Hindi films has been traditionally (and still is) designated as the perennial "Outsider."

During the early years of postcolonial Hindi cinema, the Muslim appeared, safely and reassuringly ensconced within the world of the "Muslim Social" genre (Kazmi, 1994; Kesavan, 1994). For the nation emerging from the trauma of Partition, it was imperative to designate a space within the national (and cinematic) imaginary for its Muslim subject (and thus, reiterate India's secular ethos as compared to Pakistan's Islamic ideology), while simultaneously both maintaining and reinforcing the Muslim's crucial distinction. In the popular "Muslim Social" films of the sixties (*Chaudhvin ka Chand*, 1960; *Mere Mehboob*, 1963; *Benazir*, 1964; *Bahu Begum*, 1967; *Mere Huzoor*, 1968; *Pakeezah*, 1972), the Muslim protagonist, with his chaste Urdu, *sherwani* (traditional Muslim attire), and strict observance of religious norms (*namaz* and Haj), seems to inhabit an antiquated social and cultural world, far removed from the modernistic

and industrial ambitions of Nehruvian India. As Fareed Kazmi has argued, by employing such “explicit codes” of their exteriority, Muslims in Hindi cinema “emerge as stereotypes represented by well-defined signs of speech, appearance, dress, social and religious practice” (1994: 239). Consequently, not only is the community presented from the perspective of a (Hindu) “Majoritarian Us” perspective, but also “as an undifferentiated mass...homogenous and monolithic,” negating, in the process, both its inherent socio-economic, cultural, regional, and linguistic differences and the real-life issues confronting the Indian Muslim (Kazmi, 1994). As Kazmi further points out, the emphasis on “unifying symbols” (Id, dargah, namaz, aadab, burqa) also effectively “ensures the participation of the entire Muslim community in the world of film” (1994). For the postcolonial Hindi film audience, the “Muslim Social” thus “seem to have created an enduring image of Muslims imbued with a certain mystique that rendered them a profoundly exotic “Other,” distinct from the majority community, so distinct that in fact the very world they inhabited on screen rarely had a non-Muslim character!” (Chadha and Kavoori, 2008: 138).

With the increasing popularity of action vendetta films in the seventies and eighties, particularly the “Angry Young Man” narratives of Amitabh Bachchan, the Muslim protagonist, with his chaste Urdu, *sherwani*, and religiosity, seemed an archaic and antediluvian figure, disconcertingly at odds with the decade’s socio-economic and political angst. As film critic Iqbal Masud remarks, “After the 70s, the Muslim Social gradually petered out because it no longer met the urgent need of harsher times.”⁵⁰ Instead, the decade witnessed the emergence of “a new stereotype” – “This was the common or garden Muslim. He would be a model of loyalty and discipline and when he died, it would be with the *Kalma* (or Proclamation of Faith) on his lips.

⁵⁰ Iqbal Masud, “Muslim Ethos in Indian Cinema,” 1997. Reproduced in *Screen*, 4 March 2005.

He no longer talked the flowery Urdu of the Shahenshah (kings) and the Nawabs (aristocrats) but the patois of the street” (Masud, 1997). Moreover, the more “pedestrian” Muslim character also spoke to the changing audience demographics, with the Hindi film audience now comprised mainly of urban, working-class youth (the middle-class family audience would return to the theater only with the nineties’ “clean” romance films and family dramas). While the eighties and early nineties witnessed the occasional Muslim character, usually as the hero’s loyal friend or the elderly servant, it was the late nineties and early 2000s, with films like *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (*Patriot: A Love Story*, 2001) and *Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (2003) that reimagined the Muslim in a completely different perspective.

Unlike the “Muslim Social” of the sixties, these narratives of “cine-patriotism” (Sethi, 2002) presented a rather threatening caricature – no longer was the Muslim character a symbol of nostalgia, reminding the viewers of a bygone era, but now, spewing hatred and religious fundamentalism, he underlined the threat of (Islamic) terrorism. The *sherwani* was replaced by skull caps and flowing robes, the chaste Urdu by religious rhetoric, and instead of *namaz* and Hajj, his religiosity was defined by his obsession with Jihad. Even in critically acclaimed films like *Sarfarosh* (*Self Sacrifice*, dir. John Mathew Matthan, 1999), *Fiza* (*Air*, dir. Khalid Mohamed, 2000), and *Mission Kashmir* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000), which featured the patriotic, loyal Muslim, the violence and treachery was invariably perpetuated by the Muslim villain (Ghulam Hasan in *Sarfarosh*, Murad Khan in *Fiza*, Hilal Kohistani in *Mission Kashmir*). As Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali underlines, in her discussion of *Sarfarosh*, the Indian Muslim must prioritize and privilege his subscription to the nation over his affiliation to his religious identity, thus, ensuring “that all identity and culture can only be naturally located in a territorially rooted homeland” (2002: 183). The failure to do so can only be resolved by the violent, brutal, and

lonely death of the (unpatriotic) Muslim subject (Sultan and Gulfam in *Sarfarosh*). Thus, the only trustworthy Muslims in these recent narratives “are those who place India first” (Hirji, 2008: 64), and consequently, the religiously devout Muslim (*Sarfarosh*’s Salim, *Fiza*’s title character, *Mission Kashmir*’s Inayat Khan) can only be accommodated if their devotion to the Indian nation-state triumphs over their subscription to their religious faith.

The Muslim stereotype in these millennial Hindi film narratives thus embodies the “mediated stereotype” as discussed by Charles Ramirez Berg in his work on Latino stereotypes in Hollywood cinema (2002). As Berg argues, the mediated stereotype, “an agreed-upon vision and a shared sign of the Other in precise and material form,” thus “operates by gathering a specific set of negative traits and assembling them into a particular image” (2002: 38-39). Though the Muslim villain in this new genre of jingoistic patriotism was often identified as Pakistani or of dubious antecedents, it was the Hindu protagonist who was called upon to eliminate this threat. As Amit Rai remarks, “Today, in India, the figure of the terrorist is being constructed in a way that demands a certain identification by all citizens with a Hinduized nation” (2006). In the aftermath of the 1999 Kargil conflict with Pakistan, increasing sectarian violence and communal strife, and the specter of global Islamic terrorism in a post-9/11 world, accommodating the Muslim character in the Hindi film narrative became even more problematic and implausible. It is in this context that Shah Rukh Khan’s portrayal of *Chak De! India*’s Kabir Khan, an urbane, secular Muslim, holds crucial significance.

From “gaddar” (traitor) to “Bharat ki shaan” (the pride of India)

Though produced by Yash Raj Films, known for its popular NRI narratives and escapist romances (*DDLJ*, *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, *Mohabbatein*, *Veer Zaara*), and starring Shah Rukh Khan,

whose on-screen appearances now seemed to be mere regurgitations of the familiar Raj and Rahul prototype, *Chak De! India* (dir. Shimit Amin, 2007) was a marked departure from both their oeuvres. *Chak De! India* was, by Bollywood conventions, a *hatke* (different) film – it did not feature any elaborate song and dance sequences, or romantic interludes, or even a lead heroine; rather, the film narrated the tale of the Indian women’s hockey team’s journey, from the perennial underdog to world champion, under the guidance of their coach, Kabir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan). With its rather unconventional plot, *Chak De! India* underlined not only director Shimit Amin’s cinematic sensibilities, who had already gained a certain degree of fame and industry creed with his debut film, *Ab Tak Chhappan (Till Now 56)*, 2004), a gritty look at the Mumbai police and underworld nexus, but also, Bollywood’s recent attempts to appeal to an urbane audience. Though the film’s focus on women’s empowerment, national integration, and hockey, the erstwhile national sport now relegated to the sidelines and eclipsed by the more glamorous cricket, prompted Khan (who was himself a former star hockey player during his school years) to accept the role of Kabir Khan, the actor was highly skeptical of *Chak De!*’s commercial viability. Speaking to journalist Girish Rao, prior to the film’s release, Khan admitted,

I am scared of *Chak De*. Over the years, my audience has seen me doing the usual song and dance stuff. Suddenly, I am doing a film where I am surrounded by 16 girls and I don't even have a single song...it's a non-SRK film. I'm aware of that and it scares me.⁵¹

Apprehensive about the film’s box-office fate, and cautious after the dismal performances of its much-hyped recent releases (*Ta Ra Rum Pum*, dir. Siddharth Anand, 2007; *Jhoom Barabar*

⁵¹ Shah Rukh Khan, “I am scared for *Chak De*,” Interview by Girish Rao, Rediff.com, 6 August 2007.

Jhoom, dir. Shaad Ali, 2007), Yash Raj decided to release *Chak De! India* on a limited scale, a mere 400 prints compared to the usual 500-660 prints.⁵² Despite a rather slow start, the film proved to be a success, buoyed by favorable audience response and rave reviews. Critics praised not only Amin's treatment of a genre rarely encountered in popular Hindi cinema, the sports film, the film's themes of gender equality, national unity, and secularism, but also Khan's restrained performance – “measured, straight from the heart and minus all mannerisms” (Nikhat Kazmi, *The Times of India*),⁵³ “outstanding...intense and steel-like...shunning any traces of glamour” (Khalid Mohamed, *Hindustan Times*),⁵⁴ “without any of his typical trappings, without any of his trademark quirks” (Rajeev Masand, CNN IBN),⁵⁵ “the prodigal Khan returns” (Raja Sen, Rediff.com)⁵⁶.

However, the film was noteworthy for another reason – Shah Rukh Khan's portrayal of hockey coach, Kabir Khan, a liberal urbane Muslim, who presented a stark contrast to popular Hindi cinema's formulaic Muslim stereotypes, and reiterated the actor's own liberal politics. As journalist Saisuresh Sivaswamy remarks, “For someone like me searching for the kind of Muslim SRK will play, and I daresay the kind of Muslim SRK is, Kabir Khan is the answer. For Muslims caught in the pincer between extremism and majority skepticism, Kabir Khan provides the answer.”⁵⁷ Unlike the formulaic Muslim stereotypes in Hindi cinema, there was nothing in Khan's demeanor or appearance that marked him as explicitly Muslim. Apart from his habit of

⁵² Aminah Sheikh, “Waiting for a winning formula,” *Business Standard*, 13 August 2007.

⁵³ Nikhat Kazmi, “*Chak De! India*,” *The Times of India*, 11 August 2007.

⁵⁴ Khalid Mohamed, “Review: *Chak De! India*,” *Hindustan Times*, 10 August 2007.

⁵⁵ Rajeev Masand, “Review: *Chak De*'s...a winner all the way,” CNN IBN, 10 August 2007.

⁵⁶ Raja Sen, “Shah Rukh leads hockey babes to glory,” Rediff.com, 10 August 2007.

⁵⁷ Saisuresh Sivaswamy, “SRK and the M word,” Rediff.com, 13 August 2007.

saying *aadab*, the Muslim term of greeting, and his evoking of a Muslim prayer at a crucial moment in the film's narrative, there is little that betrays his religious identity. But in spite of the lack of "explicit codes" and reiteration of a liberal cosmopolitanism, Kabir Khan's tenuous claims to (Indian) citizenship are underlined, thus also, implying the Muslim subject's problematic accommodation within the national imaginary.

The film begins with the final of the Men's Hockey World Cup, with the host nation, India trailing archrival Pakistan by a goal in a game that has at stake more than just sporting laurels. The Indian team is awarded a penalty shoot-out and an opportunity to level the score. In the crucial penalty kick, Kabir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan), the Indian captain and Asia's best center forward fails to deliver and India loses to Pakistan. With a Muslim last name, Khan falls an easy prey to media frenzy and a nation desperate for a scapegoat. As angry fans burn effigies and 24x7 news channels hold court on whether the player is to blame for his team's debacle, the Indian Hockey Association decides to sack him from the captaincy. The graffiti on his house proclaims him a *gaddar* (traitor), neighborhood kids clamber to look at the Muslim traitor who betrayed the nation, and onlookers snigger, "Aise logon ko Partition ke waqt hi Pakistan chale jaana tha" ("Such people should have left for Pakistan at the time of Partition"). The ignominy and shame forces Khan to forsake familiar surroundings and his favorite sport.

As Kabir Khan's fall from grace illustrates, the Indian Muslim is perilously vulnerable to accusations of being a *deshdrohi* (traitor). His religious identity exposes his loyalties to constant interrogation. In the film, Khan's failure to deliver comes to haunt him again and again. The selectors ridicule him, and even his players bring it up. Senior player Bindiya Naik, disgruntled with Khan's control, reminds the team of his ignominious past – "Pakistan ka captain tha, India ke uniform mein...World Cup mein desh ko bech diya" ("He was Pakistan's captain in the

Indian uniform...he sold the country's honor at the World Cup"). As Khan himself rues, "Afsoz is baat ka hai ke main apne mulk se haar gaya, jisko mera khoon pasina, dil jaan deke bhi yakeen nahin hota ke main uske team se khela tha aur zindagi bhar uske team se khelta rahoonga" ("What I regret is that I lost to my country, and in spite of all my blood, sweat, and toil, I cannot convince it that I played for its team and all through my life I will play only for its team"). Thus, Kabir Khan's failure is not merely confined to the arena of sports, but rather embodies his failure to convincingly assert his loyalty and subscription to the Indian nation-state, and consequently, underlines the "dilemma" of the Indian Muslim. As Sivaswamy points out,

It cannot be easy to be a Muslim, in India and especially in these times. The moderate Muslim, who is in an overwhelming majority I am certain, has to constantly fight two demons: One from the past, of Partition and his/her perspective on Pakistan, a Muslim-majority nation inimical to India; and another ghost from the present, when Muslims are usually accused of engineering terrorist plots in India. Their silence often is reflective of the silence of the majority, of which we all are guilty of, but the silence of the Muslim is the one that is constantly highlighted.⁵⁸

Though the film attempts to underline the contentious issues of Muslim citizenship, it also positions Khan as a liberal Muslim, and thus consequently, invests him with the ability to articulate the anxieties and hopes of the national imaginary. Kabir Khan is not marked as different or distinct courtesy his Muslim identity. He is never shown as offering *namaz*, or speaking in chaste Urdu; rather, he is always shown dressed in western attire, and he never makes any reference to his religious beliefs. Thus, devoid of any explicit markings of his religious identity, the Muslim protagonist now becomes eligible to represent the nation. It is Khan who chides the girls for their regional and linguistic differences and extorts them to

⁵⁸ Ibid.

perform as a national team. In his first interaction with the team, he drives home the point – not only is he the boss, but they have to conform to his nationalist rhetoric. As each girl rattles off the name of her state, he asks them to leave; they will be allowed to play only when they realize they are playing for their country, and not their state. As he reminds them sternly, “Mujhe states ke naam na sunai dete hain na dikhai dete hain. Sirf ek mulk ka naam sunai deta hai, India” (“I can neither hear nor see the names of the states. I can only hear the name of a nation, India”). In a country still divided by regional, linguistic, caste, and religious fissures, Khan seems to transcend the barriers more effectively than the hegemonic Hindu, Hindi-speaking North Indian protagonist.

However, in spite of his lack of “explicit codes,” *Chak De! India* still emphatically underlines Kabir Khan’s religious identity. After a humiliating defeat at the hands of defending champion Australia, Khan is shown reciting a Muslim prayer – “Nasrum Min Allahe wa fathun qareeb” (“Allah, bring me strength and bring victory closer”) – possibly one of the rare moments in the film when his “Muslimness” is emphasized. However, instead of contradicting his liberal persona, the scene only reaffirms his claims to his Indian citizenship and secular credentials. Khan’s recourse to religion is not construed as a sign of his religiosity but rather his fervent desire for the team’s victory, for the nation’s triumph. Consequently, in the aftermath of the team’s victory in the Championship’s final, Khan is hailed as the “sachcha Hindustani” (“true Indian”), “India ki jaan, Bharat ki shaan” (“the spirit of India, the pride of India”). Khan’s embodiment of Muslim citizenship is further underlined in his portrayal of Rizvan Khan in *My Name is Khan*.

“My name is Khan. And I am not a terrorist.”

Co-produced by Shah Rukh Khan’s Red Chillies Entertainment and Karan Johar’s Dharma Productions, distributed worldwide by Fox Searchlight Pictures, and starring Bollywood’s favorite celluloid couple, *My Name is Khan* was one of 2010’s most eagerly awaited releases. The film promised to not only reprise Johar and Khan’s successful collaboration (*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*) but also, reunited Khan with co-star Kajol after a hiatus of nine years. The duo had starred together in some of Bollywood biggest blockbusters (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*) and their on-screen coupling figured prominently in *My Name is Khan*’s pre-release publicity. Apart from the much-hyped reunion of its lead stars, *My Name is Khan* also promised to present Shah Rukh Khan in a rather different avatar. In the film, the actor plays Rizvan Khan, a man with Asperger’s Syndrome, a far cry from his usual suave, cosmopolitan, urbane avatar. As the awkward, shy, hesitant Rizvan, who hates physical touch and is reluctant to make eye contact, *My Name is Khan*’s protagonist was an antithesis of Khan’s usual screen archetype – “It was a role without any crutches of stardom. There was no star gaze, because Rizvan had trouble looking people in the eye. There was no flamboyant walk, as his character tends to hop like a penguin. There were certainly no outstretched arms, the signature Shah Rukh gesture seen in countless songs.”⁵⁹ Interviews and features recounted in detail the actor’s meticulous preparation and research, as he read books and watched documentaries on autism, met people with Asperger’s Syndrome, and even recorded himself in character. For Khan, who often craved “something different” from his stereotypical and formulaic romantic roles (“I want to beat people up. I tell them [directors], ‘The next time I knock on a door and a girl opens it, can I slap her? Or

⁵⁹ Kaverree Bazmi, “His Name is Khan,” 48.

shoot her?''⁶⁰), *My Name is Khan* provided the opportunity to showcase his acting prowess. However, it also marked Khan's return to the Muslim protagonist, albeit in a different setting than the critically acclaimed *Chak De! India*.

Contrary to *Chak De! India*'s Kabir Khan, who embodied the problematic accommodation of the Muslim subject within the national imaginary, *My Name is Khan*'s Rizvan Khan speaks to the travails of Muslim citizenship in a post-9/11 America. Unlike Kabir Khan, Rizvan is not concerned with questions confronting the national imaginary; instead, his notion of community and citizenship are now articulated in the diasporic realm. Like most of Dharma Productions' recent releases (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, 2001; *Kal Ho Na Ho*, 2003; *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, 2006; *Dostana*, 2008; *Kurbaan*, 2009), *My Name is Khan* is also situated beyond the physical realm of the national imaginary. The film's protagonist, Rizvan Khan, though originally from Mumbai, moves to San Francisco, after his mother's death, where he meets Mandira (Kajol), a single mother with a young son. Despite the objections of his brother to their inter-religious nuptials, Rizvan and Mandira get married and settle down to blissful domesticity in the fictional California town of Banville. In its Hindu-Muslim coupling, *My Name is Khan* presents one of the rare instances of inter-faith conjugality in popular Hindi cinema.⁶¹

However, unlike the reality of contemporary India, where the transgressions of inter-religious and inter-caste unions are often met with violence and brutality, Mandira and Rizvan, by virtue

⁶⁰ Alex Perry, "Shah Rukh Khan: Bollywood's Biggest Star," *Time Asia*, 4 October 2004.

⁶¹ Though Hindi films have occasionally portrayed inter-faith unions, these have tended to be usually Hindu-Christian, with invariably the Hindu man paired with the Christian woman (*Bobby*, *Julie*) – underlining not only Hindu masculinity's prowess to rehabilitate the (fallen/westernized) Christian woman, but also the spiritual "purity" and cultural fragility of the Hindu woman, which deems her as inaccessible for the non-Hindu man (particularly the Muslim). Interestingly, the occasional Hindu-Muslim coupling in Hindi films also tends to pair the Hindu man with the Muslim woman (*Bombay*, dir. Mani Ratnam, 1995; *Veer-Zaara*, dir. Yash Chopra, 2004; *Break ke Baad*, dir. Danish Aslam, 2010; *Ishaqzaade*, dir. Habib Faisal, 2012), where either the Muslim woman is coopted into the Hindu cultural realm (*Veer-Zaara*), or has to face violent consequences for her "transgressions" (*Bombay*, *Ishaqzaade*). *My Name is Khan* (dir. Karan Johar, 2010) and *Kurbaan* (dir. Rensil D'Silva, 2009) are rare exceptions that depict interfaith romance between the Muslim man and the Hindu woman.

of their international/global locale, seem to transcend the issues that beset the nation. The couple have a secular wedding ceremony, where references to their individual religions are almost negated, and their marital life seems to reaffirm contemporary India's secular imagining. As Rizvan offers *namaz* and Mandira prays to her Hindu deities, their peaceful cohabitation not only reiterates post-liberalization India's secular ambitions, but also, Shah Rukh Khan's own assertion of his secular and cosmopolitan familial life, where Hindu idols and the Quran are accorded equal respect.

In a talk show on Muslim subjectivity in contemporary India, Khan mentions how the decision to downplay Rizvan's "Muslimness" was a conscious one – "Can we play him like we play a hero? We don't need to play the religious part of him as the hero. Let it be absolutely *normal*, because I am a Muslim, and I don't wear it any other way"⁶² [emphasis own]. Yet, Rizvan Khan's identity as a Muslim, particularly in a post-9/11 world, is central to the film's narrative, and emblematic of the (Indian) Muslim's global citizenship. As Rizvan greets everyone with a "salaam alaikum" (peace be unto you), offers *namaz* in public, recites verses from the Quran, emphasizes the compassionate ethos of Islam, and reiterates, "Musalman hona buri baat nahin hain" (being Muslim is not a bad thing), his identity as a Muslim is emphatically foregrounded. While contemporary India necessitated the camouflaging of the Muslim's religious ethos under the cloak of nationalism (*Chak De! India's* Kabir Khan's display of religiousness was justified only when employed in the service of the nation), the (Indian) Muslim, in the diasporic realm, confronted by the specter of post-9/11 racial profiling and discrimination, is prompted to reaffirm his distinctiveness.

⁶² Shah Rukh Khan, "Being Muslim in Today's India," *We The People*, NDTV, 8 March 2010.

In its narrative focus on post-9/11 America and questions of the (Indian) Muslim's global subjectivity, *My Name is Khan* marks the recent trend in Bollywood cinema, with films like *New York* (dir. Kabir Khan, 2009) and *Kurbaan* (dir. Rensil D'Silva, 2009) that underline a post-9/11 psyche. While the presence of the Muslim protagonist in these narratives might imply his inclusion within the global fold, it also emphasizes his increased vulnerability. As Rizvan and Mandira's idyllic world is disrupted with their son's death in a schoolyard skirmish, and Mandira blames her husband, and his religion ("I should have never married a Muslim"), the Muslim protagonist's tenuous sense of belonging is further exacerbated. Taking his wife's angry outburst at face value – "Why don't you go tell the President of United States, 'Mr. President, my name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist?'" – Rizvan embarks on a journey that transforms him into "a Forrest Gumpian folk hero...(who) attempts to make America see the errors of stereotyping Islam."⁶³ As the film's narrative progresses, and Rizvan's quest takes him across America, his repeated assertion, "My name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist," embodies not only a post-9/11 world, but also, the vulnerability of the Indian Muslim's global subjectivity. His allegiance and loyalty to his "new" homeland is only validated with his acts of "patriotism" – reporting Muslim extremists to the FBI and rescuing the inhabitants of a hurricane-hit Georgia town.

The contentious citizenship of the Indian Muslim, both in the national and the global sphere, is underlined not only in Shah Rukh Khan's on-screen renditions, Kabir Khan and Rizvan Khan, but also, in the actor's own star text. While the controversy over his IPL remarks reiterate the Indian Muslim's problematic inclusion within the national imaginary, his detention at U.S. airports (at New Jersey's Newark Airport in August 2009, and then recently at New York's White Plains Airport in April 2012) are often perceived in the context of the Muslim's vulnerability in a post-9/11 world. The opening sequence in *My Name is Khan* is reminiscent of

⁶³ Kaverie, Bamzai, "His Name is Khan," 48.

Khan's own experience – as airport officials question Rizvan, viewers are reminded not only of the off-screen reference (Khan's own detention at Newark Airport in 2009), but also of both Rizvan and his off-screen counterpart's vulnerability as Muslims. Khan's response in the media, following the IPL controversy, further underlines the fragility of the Indian Muslim's citizenship. In exclusive interviews to select media outlets, the actor repeatedly emphasizes his allegiance to the nation, making frequent references to his father, who had participated in the country's freedom struggle.

I pay my taxes, I try to be okay law-wise and then, suddenly you are subjected to questioning of this form, and I get very emotional about the things that people say, because my parents gave me nothing else. I am very proud of the *Tamrapatra*⁶⁴ that my father has and I feel very special, especially with the people of my age group because my father was a freedom fighter, he gave me this country. So, I have this strange positive chip on my shoulder that I really like this. And when somebody asks and says that you are not a nice guy and you are not patriotic enough, I find it very strange...I'm not saying I'm the most patriotic, but I believe that I'm emotional about being an Indian...I think I'm great at being an Indian. I'm a good Indian.⁶⁵

In his interviews, Khan also emerges as the voice of the “secular,” “cosmopolitan” India, as he questions the undue importance accorded to regional and ethno-religious identities, pointing out the incongruity of such rhetoric with the narrative the “modern,” emergent “global India.”

⁶⁴ A *Tamrapatra* is a copper scroll awarded to those who had participated in India's freedom struggle against the British.

⁶⁵ Shah Rukh Khan, “‘I am a bloody good Indian’: SRK to NDTV,” Interview by Barkha Dutt.

All this (religion, regionalism) is a subset of your country identity, of your national identity. When did subsets become more important than the set itself? And that is something that is unacceptable.⁶⁶

It's so old fashioned to talk about it in modern India. Because if we're going to be like this all our lives, all this talk about India going forward, economically, is complete nonsense. If we are going to talk about regionalism every second, if you're going to talk about religion every two minutes, if you're going to talk about Khans and Kumars and Khannas every 30 seconds, all this is nonsense. I think nobody should talk about India shining and India becoming bright.⁶⁷

Shah Rukh Khan's own star text, particularly his cinematic portrayals of Muslim subjectivity, reiterates not only the Indian Muslim's tenuous claims to (Indian and global) citizenship, but also, contemporary India's inherent fissures and contradictions. As Khan responded to the Shiv Sena diatribe with repeated assertions of his secular credentials – "I'm a bloody good Indian" – and his legacy as the son of a freedom fighter, the controversy exposed his vulnerability as a Muslim, both within the national and the global space. While incidents involving his detention at U.S. airports are often couched within the rhetoric of his religious affiliation, thus underlining the Indian Muslim's vulnerability in a post-9/11 world, the questioning of his patriotism, at home, speaks to the nation's inherent fissures. Post-liberalization's claims of modernity and secularism thus are juxtaposed with its recent history of divisive politics, sectarian violence and communal strife.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Three

“Miss World” meets “Dutiful Daughter-in-Law”: Aishwarya Rai, the Bollywood female star and negotiating the contradictions of contemporary Indian womanhood

Following the engagement of his son in January 2007, Bollywood veteran Amitabh Bachchan was asked in a television interview what was it that impressed him the most about his future daughter-in-law, Aishwarya Rai. Echoing the attitude of an old-school family patriarch, the thespian responded, “She’s a very simple girl, very traditional. She’s also very domesticated,” thus implying that Rai, with her “simple,” “domesticated” nature was indeed suitable wife and daughter-in-law material, the perfect candidate for a “Bachchan *bahu*” (daughter-in-law). Urban, middle-class viewers reacted with shock and disbelief at the actor’s parochial comments. As an indignant viewer wrote on the CNN-IBN website: “Ya, domesticated as in a cow or other ‘tamed’ animal...a wonderfully successful, intelligent and independent woman suddenly gets discussed in terms of her ‘homeliness’¹...suddenly becomes the property of someone else – and like many other women in India – we see her too as a cow – to be tamed and used.” For urban, middle-class Indian denizens, who prided themselves on their socially progressive and cosmopolitan beliefs, Bachchan’s views was symbolic of an archaic and anachronistic mindset, disconcertingly at odds with the image of a global, modern India. Though Amitabh Bachchan’s comments reveal his own problematic star text as the nation’s *pater*,² it also underlines the contradictions inherent in

¹ In Indian English, the word “homely” means domesticated and family-oriented, rather than plain and simple as implied in American English.

² See Chapter 1 (Amitabh Bachchan) for a more detailed discussion of Amitabh Bachchan’s contemporary star text as the “Benevolent Patriarch.”

Aishwarya Rai's own star text as the quintessential "New Indian Woman," and consequently, in discourses of contemporary Indian womanhood.

With a repertoire of more than forty films, including mainstream Bollywood, regional cinema, and international projects, the former beauty queen (Miss World 1994) is arguably Indian cinema's most recognizable face in the West, the "international face of the country."³ Her occasional Hollywood forays coupled with A-list Bollywood ventures and prestigious endorsements make her one of the highest-paid Indian movie stars. Yet, in spite of her numerous achievements and laurels, Rai's star text, in recent years, has become increasingly defined by her off-screen role as a wife and a daughter-in-law. In interviews and magazine features, Aishwarya Rai is often portrayed as an epitome of perfection – "a Greek goddess with an Indian soul,"⁴ "a genetic masterpiece (whose) beauty transcends cultures and languages,"⁵ "India's most glamorous face," "destiny's child"⁶ – the perfect woman blessed with the perfect life. But she is also framed as the quintessential "New Indian Woman," who effortlessly juggles family with career, professional commitments with familial obligations, supervising her father-in-law's lunch along with magazine photo shoots. The saga of her wedding and her consequent star text as "Mrs. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan," the "Bachchan *bahu*" (daughter-in-law) not only underlines the contradictions of contemporary Indian womanhood – where tradition and modernity often co-exist as uneasy bedfellows – but also discourses of female stardom in India.

As Neepa Majumdar argues, discourses of female stardom in Indian popular cinema need to be understood in the context of late nineteenth century nationalist rhetoric with its binary

³ Shirin Mehta, "Ah! Aishwarya," *Verve*, June 2009.

⁴ *CBS 60 Minutes*, CBS. Telecast date: 29 December 2004.

⁵ Anupama Chopra, "Aishwarya Rai: Global Goddess," *India Today*, 12 May 2003, 37.

⁶ Shirin Mehta, *Ibid.*

delineation of the (Western) material and the (Eastern) spiritual realm, with the former situated in the (masculine) outer domain and the latter identified with the (feminine) inner domestic sphere (2001, 2009). Consequently, this problematized discourses of female stardom, since “the connotation of public performance and thus, of visual availability, shared by the female star, the stage actress, and the courtesan, makes them all occupy an analogous space in the public imagination, a space which is morally defined in opposition to the domestic space of the wife” (Majumdar, 2001: 8). This inherent contradiction and underlying tension implicit in the persona of the Indian female star – occupying a place in the masculine/material domain of the public/outer world, yet entrusted with encapsulating the feminine/spiritual kernel of the private/inner sphere – is evident in the on-screen and off-screen trajectories of popular Hindi cinema’s female stars.

With a stardom that is ephemeral and a much shorter career span than their male counterparts, the Hindi film actress occupies a rather ambiguous space, promising the fantasy of an ideal Indian womanhood and femininity to their male audience, while in reality consigned to the irrecoverable and irreconcilable place of the “public woman,” incapable of being recuperated within the private realm of domesticity. Thus, while on screen she could portray the ideal daughter, wife, and mother, the very “publicness” of her star persona deemed her as unsuitable for essaying any of those roles off-screen. It is in this context of the public-private contradiction of Hindi film female stardom that Aishwarya Rai’s contemporary star text as the “dutiful *bahu*” assumes such crucial significance, especially in the light of her erstwhile role as a beauty queen, a cultural ambassador espousing notions of Indian national ethos and contemporary womanhood on the global stage. Couched in the nineties’ post-liberalization rhetoric of the “New Indian Woman,” Rai’s star text underlines both crucial shifts in discourses of Indian womanhood and

female stardom.⁷ To better comprehend the complexities underlined by Rai's star text, it is useful to refer to some of the foundational scholarship in star studies that addresses the inherent contradictory nature of the star image.

In his seminal work, Richard Dyer has argued that the complexity and multiplicity of the star image often configures it as a site of contested meanings, where its numerous and varied facets both reinforce and contradict each other (1986, 1998). In his discussion of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Fonda's star texts, Dyer underlines how the star image can encapsulate multiple and contradictory meanings – while Monroe embodied both overt sexuality and “naturalness,” thereby undermining the threat of the sexual female (1986), Fonda's star persona was defined by the conflicting notions of radicalism and feminism coupled with ordinariness and Americanness, thus simultaneously redefining norms of female sexuality while engaging in continued reaffirmations of heterosexuality (1998). Mary Beltran has also discussed how the “crossover stardom” of Jennifer Lopez employed the “Latina body” simultaneously as a site of containment and as a site of empowerment, bringing into question the hegemonic power of the dominant while engaging in a homogenization of the “Other” (2002, 2009). Similarly, I argue that Aishwarya Rai's star text should be perceived as a site of contested meanings, encapsulating contradictory norms and ideologies, which both reinforce and problematize the two distinct aspects of her star image – “The Global (New) Indian Woman” and “The Dutiful Daughter-in-Law.”

⁷ As I discuss further in Chapter 4 (Shilpa Shetty), the changing dynamics of contemporary Bollywood stardom, particularly the emphasis on the star as a brand entity, has consequently also engendered crucial shifts in discourses of female stardom. The public persona of the female star is no longer perceived as incongruent with her familial role as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, but rather, as in the case of Rai, is often appropriated as part of their new star text as a married heroine.

Employing Dyer's notion of "structured polysemy" (1998), where a star is conceived as encompassing multiple, but finite meanings, I examine how these two seemingly divergent and contradictory facets function in unison to define Rai's iconic value as an emblem of a contemporary, cosmopolitan, urbane Indian femininity. In doing so, I argue that this apparent disjuncture in Rai's narrative is not merely specific to her star text, but rather, is inherent and intrinsic to the nineties' post-liberalization rhetoric of the "New Indian Woman," a rhetoric that is the kernel of her persona. Employing a detailed discussion of Rai's media narratives, I look at how the actress's star text, as a global icon and consummate professional, and also as the traditional *bahu* reveals the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Indian femininity. It is precisely this dualistic play between tradition and modernity that not only defines and structures the idea of the "New Indian Woman," particularly in the context of an increasingly consumerist post-liberalization India, but also Rai's star text as the new, "glocal" Indian celebrity, equally at ease in the global milieu of the Cannes red carpet and in the local and familial domain of the Bombay film industry. My detailed analysis of Aishwarya Rai's star persona provides an insight into both discourses of contemporary Hindi film female stardom as well as current debates that structure Indian femininity, thus underlining the Bollywood female star's employment as a site of mediation and articulation. However, to comprehend the contradictions and complexities inherent in Rai's star text and the figure of the Hindi film heroine, it is crucial to understand the underlying notions that structure discourses of Indian womanhood and femininity.

The Home & the World

As Hindi film scholars like Jyotika Viridi (2003) and Sumita Chakravarty (1993) have pointed out, the figure of the Indian woman holds crucial significance and iconic value, not only for the

nation's ethos, but also for its cinematic counterpart. In both Indian history and cinema, the woman is configured as an "embattled" site (Virdi, 2003: 13), marked by contentious debates and conflicts. During the colonial era, the question of female emancipation occupied center stage in the first half of the nineteenth century, with debates over *sati* (immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands), child-marriage, and widow remarriage not only eliciting controversy among Indian religious leaders and social reformers, but was also often employed to perpetuate the rhetorical binary of the "enlightened West" and the "barbaric East." However, as Partha Chatterjee argues, the "women's question" receded from public discourse in early twentieth century, predominantly because the nationalist ideology offered a resolution with the home/world, spiritual/material divide (1989, 1993).

In response to colonial critique, which often demarcated the colonized elite as ineffectual and effeminate, the masses as sexually degenerate, and consequently, the colonizer as the only truly masculine figure (Sinha, 1995), Indian nationalist thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century devised the twin binary realms of the *ghar* (home) and the *bahar* (world) – the home/inner sanctum signifying the spiritual kernel and the world/outer milieu representing the material attributes. Thus, though the ascendancy of the West in the (material) domains of science, technology, and economic organization was acknowledged, with an insistence that "there be no rule of difference" from Western models (Chatterjee, 1993), it was offset by simultaneous claims of (spiritual) superiority of the East, and an emphasis "on its own markers of cultural difference from the West" (Chatterjee, 1993). The nationalist conception of the *bahar* as the material space and the *ghar* as its spiritual counterpart also facilitated their reconfiguration as specific gendered domains: the man was permitted to occupy the material world, thus inculcating and imbibing the benefits offered by the West, and the woman was designated with preserving the home, the

cultural and spiritual essence of the East. While the masculine outer domain embodied the (Western) virtues of modernity, the feminine inner domain underlined the ideological power of (Indian) “tradition,” exempt from any colonial authority. The nation thus was reimagined on the lines of the gendered rhetoric of the domestic realm. As Anne McClintock has pointed out, “Despite their myriad differences, nations are symbolically figured as domestic genealogies” (1995: 357).

The emergent female icon in the nineteenth century nationalist imagination, the “New Indian Woman,” was thus, one who was (spiritually) superior to her European counterpart and also, one who maintained a crucial distinction from other Indian women of lower class and caste stature (Banerjee, 1989). The “New Indian Woman,” in her persona, combined the upper-caste Hindu narrative of a glorious past⁸ with the “now naturalized Victorian ideals of domestic virtue, patient and long suffering and autonomous, and conscious of her power and of the strength she could find in tradition: a gentle but stern custodian of the nation’s moral life” (Tharu, 1991: 172). Consequently, “‘modern’ ideas recasting the ‘new woman’ became acceptable – so long as women’s roles in the domestic sphere remained intact” (Viridi, 2003: 65). With the intensification of political agitation in early twentieth century, the figure of the Indian woman assumed further crucial significance, with the image of the long suffering *bharat mata* (Mother India) fettered in chains in nationalist iconography⁹ symbolizing the nation’s subjugation at the hands of colonial dominance. However, the re-imagining of the iconic feminine in the cinematic realm was

⁸ See Chakravarti (1989) for a more detailed discussion of the employment of religious and mythological symbolism in nineteenth century discourse of nationhood and the Indian woman.

⁹ Sumathi Ramaswamy provides an excellent and detailed analysis of the iconographic employment of the ‘Bharat Mata’ imagery in anticolonial and nationalist discourse, and also in Indian cartography (Ramaswamy, 2010). The symbolic value of *Bharat Mata* still occupies a crucial rhetorical space in contemporary Indian public discourse, as was evident in the right-wing Hindu extremist outrage in the nineties against the late Maqbool Fida Husain’s depiction of a naked *Bharat Mata*.

inherently problematic. While the public domain of cinema, and her (visual) availability to male viewers/patrons, marked the female star as morally ambiguous, and thus, inherently contradictory to the nationalist rhetoric of the Indian woman, who was imagined ensconced within the spiritual/domestic space of the home, yet she was also designated, both on-screen and off-screen, with the responsibility of embodying “the moral core of national identity” (Majumdar, 2009: 53).

Priti Ramamurthy’s discussion of the “Modern Girl” archetype, popularized by the twenties and thirties’ silent films, underlines this inherently problematic discourse of the cinematic feminine icon (Ramamurthy, 2006). Bestowed with the epithets of *sitara* (starlet), *swapno ki rani* (dream girl), and *romance ki rani* (queen of romance), the “Modern Girl,” in the interwar years, was racially ambiguous and religiously hybrid, presenting a cosmopolitan model of Indian femininity. As “an icon and a social persona,” the “Modern Girl,” with her “flagrant eroticism and sensuality” was distinct from both the “traditional Indian woman,” who was “the sign of a procreative middle-class femininity within the terms of heterosexual marriage,” and the “archetypical New Woman of the anticolonial movement, who was iconized as the spiritual, self-sacrificing bearer of a higher capacity” (Ramamurthy, 2006: 204). Though the “New Woman” of nationalist rhetoric did occasionally occupy a place in the public space, with her participation in the nationalist struggle, it was merely a response to the Gandhian call for action, and not symbolic of her role in the nascent national imaginary. In spite of the occasional forays into the public arena of politics, the “New Woman” was resolutely ensconced within the parameters of the domestic realm, thus further magnifying the umbilical relationship between the home and the nation. In contrast, the “Modern Girl,” a mobile subject at ease with navigating the *bahar* (world), “a global modern” who functioned as “a dense node of transcultural exchange” (Ramamurthy,

2006: 204), was inevitably rendered devoid of any markers of domesticity, and consequently, deemed incapable of embodying the nation.

As Priti Ramamurthy (2006) and Neepa Majumdar (2001, 2009) have both discussed, the figure of the early Indian female star was inherently ascribed with contradictions and ambivalences. While her public performance and display marked her as inhabiting a space/place incongruent to that ideally assigned to the Indian woman, her iconic role as the nation's cinematic female archetype simultaneously encumbered her with domestic responsibilities. Thus, while the taint of an *abhinetri* (actress), *sitara* (starlet) deemed her as unsuitable wife material, it was precisely the fulfillment of her marital aspirations and ambitions that promised her rehabilitation and recuperation within the familial-national imaginary. Marriage and consequently, her recasting as wife and mother – underlining the transfiguration from the public world of cinema to the private space of the home – was, and still is, central to the female star's identity as a (Indian) woman. However, the need to be ensconced within the private/domestic space of the home was inherently oppositional to her public performance and display as an actress. Behroze Gandhi and Rosie Thomas, in their discussion of three Indian female stars, have underlined the contradictory underpinnings that dominate discourses of female stardom in India (1991).

While thirties' star Nadia could lay claim to a model of cosmopolitan femininity by virtue of her racially ambiguous antecedents¹⁰ and her repertoire of stunt films, which evoked nationalist and anticolonial ideologies, the star texts of post-independence actresses, Nargis and Smita Patil, reveal complicated trajectories underlined by the quintessential home/world divide.

¹⁰ See Rosie Thomas (2005) for an interesting discussion of how Nadia's racial affiliation (she was of Scottish and Greek parentage) was often masked, and at times, employed to assert her cosmopolitan, modern, urbane screen persona.

The star image and public discourse of fifties' popular actress Nargis was dominated by the rumors of her off-screen liaison with actor-director Raj Kapoor, a married man with children, which inevitably cast her in the irrecoverable mold of the "other woman." It was only with her domesticated recasting as wife and mother, and her subsequent renaming as "Mrs. Dutt" – a rhetoric that also subsequently functioned to undermine her morally dubious (Muslim) antecedents¹¹ – that her public persona could be recuperated, setting the tone for her later role as a social activist and Member of Parliament. In the case of Smita Patil, an eighties' actress known for her art-house films and feminist activism, it was again the association with a married man, fellow actor Raj Babbar, which marked her not only as the "other woman," but also earned her the ire of her feminist female fans.¹² As the daughter of a progressive Maharashtrian politician father and a social worker mother, and with her repertoire of strong, empowered female protagonists, the actress embodied middle-class urbane intellectualism, which marked her personal transgression as even more unfathomable and unacceptable for her fans. Unfortunately, Patil's star image could only be salvaged with her death from post-natal complications following the birth of her son, thus redeeming her from the taint of the "other woman" and "home wrecker" with the most definitive and ultimate maternal sacrifice. The need for the female stars' rehabilitation and recuperation within the domestic/private fold invariably necessitated either her post-marital retirement from films (seventies' stars Mumtaz, Babita, Neetu Singh), or her desperate recourse to domesticity with a "second wife" status quo to an already married actor (Hema Malini, Smita Patil, Jaya Prada, Sridevi).

¹¹ As the daughter of a Muslim mother and a Hindu father, Nargis was not regarded as symbolic of middle-class familial respectability. Moreover, her mother, Jaddan Bai's past – a former courtesan who had been married twice before her union with Mohanchand Uttamchand, Nargis's father – further marked her as the "disreputable" performing woman.

¹² Patil's feminist activism, her popularity among middle-class, educated women, and her subsequent perceived "betrayal" by her female fans need to be all read in the context of the eighties' Indian women's activism, with debates around dowry harassment, family and personal laws occupying center stage in public discourse.

However, the problematic binary of the private/spiritual/home and the public/material/world would undergo significant revisions with the advent of the nineties' economic liberalization, resignifying in the process not only discourses of Indian womanhood, but also female stardom. In the nineties, with the familiar evoking of the "New Indian Woman," the nation, and consequently, Indian womanhood is confronted (yet again) with the dilemma of reconciling tradition with modernity, the indigenous local with the global other. Though the earlier divide between the home/inner and the world/outer domains needed to be modified in response to the demands of a new, global, modern India, but it also could not be entirely dismissed since that would undermine the very ethos of Indian culture and national identity. Thus, what emerged, in response, was a new model of the (ideal) Indian woman, who seemed to comfortably straddle both the realms of the (outer) world and the (inner) home, combining in her persona an unproblematic communion of the traditional with the modern. This notion of the (new) "New Indian Woman" engendered by the post-liberalization consumerist rhetoric is further underlined in the discourse of the Miss India beauty pageant, a crucial aspect of Aishwarya Rai's star text.

Showcasing India on the global stage

In *Bunty aur Babli* (*Bunty and Babli*, dir. Shaad Ali, 2005), the film's heroine, Vimmi Saluja (Rani Mukherji) inhabits one of India's countless nondescript small towns, Pankhinagar. Though her parents are busy trying to find a "suitable boy" for their daughter, Vimmi has other plans. She spends her days browsing through the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, adorning her room with posters of international supermodels Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford, dreaming of fame and fortune, and preparing for the Miss India pageant. For Vimmi, it is the Miss India pageant

that holds the promise of not only a successful modeling career, but also the escape from the stifling, claustrophobic environs of Pankhinagar.¹³ *Bunty aur Babli*'s fictional heroine and her Miss India ambitions underline the cultural significance and importance that beauty pageants have come to acquire in the Indian urbanscape in recent years. Susan Dewey, in her work on the Miss India pageant, argues that though the pageant is “certainly an instrument of male domination at a structural level,” it also functions “as a space of female empowerment and social mobility” (2008: 6). As she further points out, the pageant “serves as an excellent site within which to examine the complex connections between femininity, beauty, and power in India” (2008: 4).

Media and feminist scholars have discussed at length the role of beauty pageants not only in delineating notions of feminine beauty, but also in negotiating issues of cultural and national identity (Banet-Weiser, 1999). As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, the beauty pageant “is a profoundly political arena, in the sense that the presentation and reinvention of femininity that takes place on the beauty pageant stage produces political subjects” (1999: 3). In the Indian context, the genesis of the Miss India pageant served a very specific objective – present an idealized unified image of the national imaginary, exempt from the numerous fissures and disjunctures that defined its reality. The pageant was launched in 1959 by the English-language women’s magazine, *Femina*, whose demographic was primarily the urban, middle-class, English-educated Indian woman. The magazine itself was designed to serve “as a tool to help create a homogenous Indian woman who would transcend the boundaries of caste and ethnicity

¹³ Interestingly later in the film when Vimmi attempts to audition for the pageant, she is ridiculed by her fellow contestants for being a *vern* (an Indian English slang for vernacular), lacking the benefits of Westernized, English education they possess, and thus, consequently, also lacking the class attributes requisite for a Miss India. Susan Dewey also discusses how in spite of its promises, the Miss India pageant is invariably closed off to the majority of Indian women, and can be availed of only by the urban (and urbane), middle-class, westernized, educated women (Dewey, 2008).

to unite a nation” (Dewey, 2008: 208). As Vimla Patil, the magazine’s former editor (1959-93), comments on how the newly independent Indian nation was faced with the crucial question – “Who is the Indian woman? Nobody knew. Who was going to put all these threads together and make one fabric? ...And the answer to that was *Femina* and the Miss India” (Dewey, 2008: 19). Couched in such “progressive” nationalist rhetoric, *Femina* addresses its reader “as a total woman who is a wife and a mother as well as a citizen and consumer, a woman who is Indian rather than regional in identity and is also fluent in English” (Dewey, 2008: 208-209), a rhetoric that also percolates the Miss India pageant, and its idealization of the Indian woman, an embodiment of a homogeneous national identity.

However, the ascendancy and increased popularity of the Miss India pageant in the nineties needs to be seen in the light of the crucial socio-economic and cultural shifts engendered by the country’s increasing espousal of consumerism in this decade. As Vanita Reddy remarks, in the context of a post-liberalization India, *Femina* attempted to “resolve the contradiction between a grassroots feminism committed to social change and a liberal feminism that is tied to a consumerist ‘love of the beautiful’ by invoking the iconic figure of the new Indian woman: the Indian beauty queen” (2006: 67). As Reddy further argues, employing Arvind Rajagopal’s notion of “aspirational space,” in the new consumerist India, “the ‘beautiful’ exists as a space of social mobility” for the (urbane) middle-class Indian woman, a space “of ascendancy into a leisure class,” to be availed by the Indian woman who has “the time, money and desire to attend to her physical appearances” (2006: 66). In this new, changing scenario, discourses of beauty and physical appearance not only shifted “from the private to the public space” (Munshi, 2001: 86), but was also now reimagined through an individualistic prism. In contrast to earlier decades, where feminine beauty was invariably always contingent on “approbation, either from the

husband or from the family” (Munshi, 2001: 83), post-liberalization India witnessed, as Shoma Munshi underlines, “a shift from the representation of women in terms of their roles as wife and mother to an increasing emphasis on tropes of glamour, sexuality and appearance” (2004: 165). This shift in discourse corresponds to Susan Bordo’s argument in her work on the female body in the Western context – “At different historical moments, out of the pressure of cultural, social, and material change new images and associations emerge” (1993: 4).

The Indian obsession with beauty pageants in the mid-nineties was thus, above all, yet another embodiment of the crucial change in middle-class ambitions and aspirations (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Bhaskaran, 2004; Munshi, 2004; Parameswaran, 2004; Reddy, 2006; Dewey, 2008). The success of Sushmita Sen (Miss Universe 1994) and Aishwarya Rai (Miss World 1994) not only reiterated the increasing globalization of the Indian woman, but also configured beauty pageants as yet another mode of socio-economic mobility, the new mantra for success. In their garb of the “New Indian Woman,” the “Woman of Substance,” the beauty queens underlined the aspirational ethos of the nation’s emergent middle-class – “Right on top of the world,” who “refuse to compromise” and “settle for nothing but the best,” fueled by “The fire to excel. The thirst for perfection. The sense of achievement. The satisfaction of being on top of the world.”¹⁴ The triumph of Sen and Rai, both with middle-class antecedents, was followed by others like Diana Hayden (Miss World 1997), Yukta Mookhey (Miss World 1999), Lara Dutta (Miss Universe 2000), Priyanka Chopra (Miss World 2000), and Dia Mirza (Miss Asia Pacific 2000), further reaffirming the Indian middle class’ claims on a global citizenship. Showcasing India on the global stage, with bowed heads and hands folded in a *namaste*, the Indian beauty queens successfully aligned individual achievements with their “patriotic mission to bring glory to the nation” (Parameswaran, 2004: 362).

¹⁴ “Chosen to Lead: Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai in a never before feature,” *Femina*, May 1995.

In her research on the media coverage of Miss India winners, Radhika Parameswaran argues that the Indian beauty queen needs to be perceived as an embodiment of “empowered middle class femininity at a specific moment in India’s history” (2004: 366). As Parameswaran and other feminist media scholars have pointed out, the success of Indian beauty queens on the global stage, and their consequent adulation back home emphasize the crucial role essayed by these young women as figures of emancipation and modernity for an increasingly globalizing nation. As Shoma Munshi remarks, “What is new in this rapidly changing urban socio-economic climate is how representations of the body of the woman in particular span both the national and international as a site of identification, being instilled with notions of India’s ‘modernity’ and increasing visibility on the international arena” (2004:163).

Parameswaran, in her detailed discussion of print media texts, has shown how media narratives engage in “the public fashioning of the beauty queen as an ideal worker of a global economy” (2004: 352), where the images of beauty queens as “industrious professionals, tenacious upwardly mobile achievers, and hybrid global and local citizens” seem to echo and “resonate with the priorities of global consumerism” (2004: 348). Even the beauty queens’ bodies are reconfigured as sites of diligence, perseverance, and labor, with their dedication to exercise regimens and dietary restrictions marking them as “diligent women, obedient disciples, and meritorious achievers....the ideal professional whose dedicated labor promises success in the globalizing nation.” (Parameswaran, 2004: 357) As Susan Dewey mentions, the success of Indian beauty queens in the global arena helped “position India as ‘on par’ with the rest of the world,” configuring, in the process, the beauty queens as stars and cultural ambassadors in their own right (2008: 201). In her introductory film at the 1994 Miss World pageant, Aishwarya Rai emphasized the uniqueness of her country, its innate global, cosmopolitan, diverse ethos:

What I'd say is really beautiful about India is, besides the definite culture that we have, it's like we have a world in India. It's more cosmopolitan, we've got so many religions in India within India, we got so many races, so it's an amalgamation of so many cultures, and people have learnt to live together in that. And that in itself, I think, is incredible and beautiful.

For the Indian nation-state, the beauty queen, with her modern demeanor and traditional essence, was the ideal representative, encompassing in her public persona not only the unbridled aspirations of the Indian middle-class, but also, its emergent role as a global power. The beauty queen, with her “authentic Indian heart that pulses beneath the outer cloak of the West’s body politic” (Parameswaran, 2004: 366), embodied the successful navigation of the global with the local, modernity with tradition. As the nation’s cultural ambassador, the Indian beauty queen was entrusted with the responsibility of “educating” the world about the “new” global, modern India. Speaking about the Miss World experience, a decade after her iconic win, Rai describes it as a “mission,” which provided her with the opportunity to clear people’s stereotypes and misconceptions, and instead, enlighten them about the new, global India:

For me, it went beyond being a beauty queen. For me, it was about being the 20-year-old girl from India on international platform and a lot of people actually would assume that I wasn't even educated in India because of the way I'd speak. And they'd be like, ‘Have you studied in India? Do you actually speak English out there?’ and, I was like, ‘This is so interesting that so many people know so little about my country.’ And this is exactly what I wanted to do when I set out on this little mission in my head.¹⁵

The rhetoric of the Indian beauty queen as “a woman who treasures her cultural heritage even as she masters practices of global consumer culture” (Parameswaran, 2004: 366) would

¹⁵ *CBS 60 Minutes*.

subsequently frame Aishwarya Rai's public persona as a Bollywood star. On her international sojourns later as an actress, she not only essays the role of an Indian glamour queen, but also that of a cultural ambassador. In 2003, when she was selected to be part of the prestigious Cannes film jury – an experience she has described as both educational¹⁶ and humbling¹⁷ – Rai took Indian souvenirs for her fellow jury members. During the pre-release promotion of *Bride and Prejudice* (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2004), her appearances on Oprah and Letterman seemed less about her forthcoming release, and more of a cultural insight into her country. While she taught Oprah Winfrey how to drape a sari, on *The Letterman Show* she attempted to explain why young adults in India still live with their parents, emphasizing the familiar rhetoric of (Indian) family values and tradition. Similarly, on the *BBC Hard Talk* and *CBS 60 Minutes* interviews conducted prior to *Bride and Prejudice*'s release, we find Rai engaged in the familiar discourse – accompanying the interviewers to Hindu temples and high-end boutiques, presenting a visage of the “new” India – comprising both the kernel of tradition and culture, and the benefits of a consumerist, global economy – to the Western audience. Her triumph as a global beauty queen had explicitly marked Aishwarya Rai as an embodiment of the “New Indian Woman,” particularly in the context of post-liberalization India's espousal of consumerism and global citizenship. However, the beauty queen's pristine role as the nation's feminine ideal, its cultural icon and ideal citizen, was in sharp contrast to the public rhetoric of the Hindi film heroine, who was often relegated to the margins of middle-class respectability and deemed inappropriate for the domestic realm. A closer look at Aishwarya Rai's star text reveals not only the inherent

¹⁶ Anupama Chopra, “Aishwarya Rai, Global Goddess.”

¹⁷ Shirin Mehta, “Ash: The Diva Speaks,” *Verve*, June 2003.

tension between her dual personas – the beauty queen and the film heroine – but also, her constant efforts to navigate the problematic divide.

Screening the ‘New Indian Woman’

“What does the No. 1 position get you? The best directors, arguably the best scripts, a good paycheck and good standing...if those are the trappings then they were there for me right from the beginning. If there’s something like No. 1, the industry treated me like the No. 1 from day one.” Aishwarya Rai¹⁸

Unlike her Bollywood contemporaries, who are defined primarily by their on-screen and off-screen roles as Hindi film heroines, Aishwarya Rai’s star image is contingent not only on her filmography, but also on her past laurels as a supermodel and a global beauty queen. Prior to embarking on her beauty pageant sojourn, Rai had been an Indian supermodel, endorsing brands like Pepsi, Titan Watches, Palmolive, and Lakme. A familiar face on magazine spreads and television screens, her campaigns often celebrated her exquisite beauty, and also, the nineties’ iconic imagery of the ‘New Indian Woman’. Whether it was as Pepsi’s sexy, sensual next-door neighbor, Sanjana (1993), or Lakme’s eternal child-woman (“She’s got the look,” 1994), the commercials exuded the confidence and modern demeanor of the “New Indian Woman,” thus also underlining the nation’s nascent globality. In her interviews, Rai is careful to emphasize her successful career as a model and a pageant winner, thus, hinting at a celebrity status that preceded her film stardom and also, subsequently, distancing herself from the disreputable implications of being a Hindi film heroine – “At the risk of sounding conceited, I must say fame isn’t new to me. This is the third crest in my life – the first was modelling, the second was

¹⁸ *Filmfare*, November 2009. Excerpt from interview originally published in *Filmfare* August 2002 issue.

winning the Miss World Title and now doing well in the movies.”¹⁹ As the triumphant beauty queen, Aishwarya Rai’s star text was embedded with discourses of post-liberalization India, particularly the aspirational ethos of its middle-class denizens. In contrast to the aspiring Hindi film actress, who struggled with notions of decorum and respectability, Rai presented a picture of the ideal middle-class domesticity – a marine biologist father, a homemaker mother, a brother pursuing engineering, and Rai herself, a budding architect, who once nursed dreams of becoming a doctor. During her modeling stint, her educational achievements were often touted as examples of her dedication, perseverance, and commitment – attributes that would later be invoked in her star text as a Bollywood star. As the driven, successful “New Indian Woman,” Aishwarya Rai underlined the infinite possibilities now at the disposal of the nation’s burgeoning middle-class populace.

Rai’s marked departure from the formulaic conventions of Hindi film stardom was also reiterated by her choice of films. In charting her career trajectory, the actress has often taken unconventional, risky decisions that subvert industry norms – contrary to popular expectations, she made her debut in a regional-language film instead of the quintessential Bollywood musical; she was also the first Bollywood star to explore international projects;²⁰ and unlike her contemporaries, has judiciously avoided the numbers game, a strategy that may well be the reason for her professional longevity and commercial viability. As she herself admits, there was always a very conscious attempt to be “fairly radical...trying to break out of the predictable journey of a leading lady,”²¹ a Herculean task in the formulaic, cliché-ridden world of Hindi film

¹⁹ *Filmfare*, November 2009. Excerpt from interview originally published in *Filmfare* September 1997 issue.

²⁰ Though 60s-70s Hindi film star Shashi Kapoor (b. 1938) and 80s critically acclaimed actor Om Puri (b. 1950) have often featured in Indo-Western productions, most of these were niche, art-house productions and not mainstream, commercial releases.

²¹ Shirin Mehta, “Ah! Aishwarya.”

stardom. Working with Indian and international filmmakers, Rai's filmography is an eclectic mix of Hindi and regional-language cinema, coupled with American and British projects. Unlike other Bollywood female stars, her professional life is not dictated by her on-screen pairings with specific male co-stars, or patronage by certain filmmakers. Responding to a question on her lack of industry loyalties and camp affiliations,²² she remarked,

The answer lies in my career up until date, in the kind of choices I have made, in the movies I have worked in...I've always tried something new and different. I've worked in films and with filmmakers, not with co-stars. I must be the only actress who does not have a steady screen pairing. I don't look at it as a disadvantage because that's not the lens I'm using.²³

In interviews and magazine features, Rai emphasizes her dedication to her craft, her willingness to experiment and take risks for the sake of creativity, thus setting herself apart from the stereotypical notion of the Hindi film heroine. While her work with successful Bollywood directors helped maintain her star stature and visibility in the Bombay industry, her collaboration with critically acclaimed regional filmmakers, as well as her international projects, reiterated her image as the consummate professional, the "New Indian Woman," dictating the terms of her own career trajectory. Rai's portrayal of the young rebellious widow, Binodini, in Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh's period film, *Choker Bali* (2003), Kiranjit, the abused wife in Jagmohan Mundhra's British production, *Provoked* (2006), and the feisty Lalita in Gurinder Chadha's Jane Austen inspired *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) were a marked departure from the formulaic roles

²² The Hindi film industry is famously known for its kinship affiliations and camp loyalties, where invariably actors work predominantly with specific co-stars and filmmakers.

²³ Ashish Virmani, "Aishwarya without prejudice," *Man's World*, October 2004, 81.

available to the Bollywood female star. However, it was not merely her filmography that sets her apart, but also the dissemination of her star persona in non-cinematic, extratextual platforms.

In contrast to her contemporaries, whose stardom was tethered to their films and industry partnerships, Aishwarya Rai's public persona, in recent years, has become increasingly defined by her sojourns outside the domain of popular Hindi cinema – international film projects, appearances at the Cannes Film Festival and other international events, brand endorsements and advertising campaigns – though she also, simultaneously, has maintained her industry presence with roles in A-list Bollywood films. As the brand ambassador for Longines and L'Oreal, attired in Chanel, Dior, and Versace, Rai embodies not only the global face of Bollywood, but also, that of millennial India, thus evoking her earlier celebrity text as a global beauty queen. The tagline in her Longines campaign – “Elegance is an attitude” – and her endorsement of the L'Oreal Group's “Beautiful Beginnings,” a social awareness project aimed at empowering underprivileged girls in Mumbai and Pune, speak as much to her (global) Bollywood star persona as her image as the erstwhile beauty queen, the nation's cultural ambassador. Consequently, her image as an international/global celebrity has not only enhanced her standing in the Bombay film industry, but also, made her less reliant on the commercial fate of her films. Thus, despite the poor showing of her films and critiques of her acting prowess (“non-actress,” “stylised, plastic performer”²⁴) Rai's star image remains largely unaffected, her ability to attract prestigious film projects and international brand endorsements still intact. As filmmaker Rohan Sippy remarks, Rai “has always been a bigger star than the movies she's been in.”²⁵ The actress

²⁴ Rauf Ahmed, “The Unlikely Career of Aishwarya Rai,” *Man's World*, May 2003, 65.

²⁵ Divia Thani Daswani, “God is in her details,” *Vogue India*, October 2008, 237.

herself is well aware that her professional standing and celebrity stature are not defined primarily by the success or failure of her films. In a 2004 interview, she comments,

There is no formula for success. Despite the fact that I haven't had a hit for two years...It has made no difference to the kind of films I'm being offered. It has not even made a difference to the kind of fees I'm commanding.²⁶

Aishwarya Rai's refusal to conform to the Hindi film industry's hegemonic diktats helped define her star image as more enduring and stable, and consequently, marked her as distinct from other Bollywood female stars. However, as a Hindi film heroine, occupying a place in the public realm, she was also vulnerable and susceptible to rumors, scandals, and the inevitable scrutiny of her personal life. During her initial years in the Bombay film industry, the media rhetoric presented Rai in familiar narratives – the driven, but lonely female star (“There’s no love in my life!” *G*, April 1998); catfights and rivalries with other heroines (“The Madhuri-Ash clash!” *Cine Blitz*, August 2002); and, tumultuous love affairs (“Is the Aishwarya-Salman affair destroying them?” *Stardust*, October 1999; “Was Aishwarya’s love for Salman a farce?” *Stardust*, December 2002). As a single, unmarried Hindi film heroine, the threat to her reputation was inescapable, evoking the familiar middle-class disdain for performing women.

Confronted with the inevitable schism in her public persona, between her dual selves of the “New Indian Woman” and the (disreputable) Hindi film heroine, Rai often attempted to bridge the gap by evoking middle-class notions of social decorum and modesty. Her repeated assertions in interviews – “I am not the kind to be splashed across the magazines...there’s a certain way in which I mould my sentences, the way I choose my words, I like that to come

²⁶ Ashish Virmani, “Aishwarya without prejudice,” 81.

through”²⁷ – affirms her star image as the dignified, elegant cinematic personality, and also subsequently, marks her as distinct from the (disreputable) Hindi film heroine. In her refusal to discuss her tumultuous relationship with Bollywood’s *enfant terrible* Salman Khan, or even publicly acknowledge her other liaisons, the actress frames her stoic response not only as a personal desire for privacy, but also, as a dutiful daughter’s concern for her family’s reputation. As she emphasizes, she is not a “soloist,” living in an “I, Me, Myself” world, but has to keep in mind her family’s reputation and social standing.²⁸ Her “dignified silence” on controversies and scandals reiterates her middle-class family’s stance that ‘unless essential, there is no need for this drama.’²⁹ Speaking in 2010, she credits her family for the support and strength to maintain her public veneer of respectability and decorum:

I’m so grateful that I had the strength to remain silent on controversies. Sometimes it was frustrating to hear how I was being misrepresented, and I was tempted to offer my side of the story, but my parents gave me the strength to keep my silence.³⁰

Rai’s frequent references to her family, and her family’s reputation, speaks to the rhetoric of the post-liberalization “New Indian Woman,” particularly the figure of the beauty queen, whose success as an individual is contingent on her compliance to the collective, her family. As Radhika Parameswaran has noted, “The production of the beauty queen as ‘uncontaminated’ national citizen, a wholesome woman who does not abandon the fundamental values of her culture, takes place through the narrative construction of her dutiful loyalty to family” (2004:

²⁷ *Filmfare*, November 2009. Excerpt from interview originally published in *Filmfare* August 2002 issue.

²⁸ *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal*, STAR World. Telecast date: 29 October 2006.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Deepa Menon, “You did good, girl,” *Femina*, June 2010, 168.

364). Similar to the Indian beauty queen, whose success story is often framed in media rhetoric as contingent on the support and encouragement of her family, “a tapestry of family values that nourished women’s aspirations” (Parameswaran, 2004: 364), Rai attributes her achievements to her family and her stolid middle-class upbringing. When asked by her father-in-law, Amitabh Bachchan, where did she derive the strength and will to pursue her numerous ventures, the actress replies:

From you all, our parents. You have ingrained it in us, you have taught us from childhood...a commitment is nothing truer than a commitment. When you’ve committed to it, it’s from that place of wanting to deliver your best to a word given, a deed committed to, that you just go forth and do it. Your family is most precious to you and so is the commitment you take on.³¹

Aishwarya Rai’s embodiment of the “New Indian Woman,” and subsequently, her star text as a Hindi film heroine, is thus, reliant, in equal measures, on her individual achievements and accomplishments as well as her sense of obligation and duty towards her family. Nostalgically recalling her reign as Miss World, when she had to spend a year in London, Rai mentions how though there was a choice between an independent apartment or an accommodation with a family, she “being the responsible one, chose to stay in a house with a very sweet elderly couple rather than alone in an apartment, knowing my family would feel more secure. *It’s a very Indian thing*”³² [Emphasis own]. In interviews and magazine features, the actress underlines her deference to Indian social conventions, defining herself as the quintessential modest Indian woman. While growing up, like any other “nice” middle-class Indian girl, she was careful not to encourage too much attention, particularly from her male admirers:

³¹ *Big B’s Den*, NDTV Imagine. Telecast date: 11 October 2008.

³² Sitanshi Talati-Parikh, “The world according to Ash,” *Verve*, March 2011.

I've had my share of attention from a very young age. There would be blank calls, boys would wait for me near the school gates and some would follow me home. I didn't want to encourage this so I avoided drawing attention to myself. For instance, I would always dress down.³³

In a natural progression of her off-screen narrative, Rai reprised herself as the dutiful and ideal daughter-in-law following her engagement to Abhishek Bachchan. When Abhishek Bachchan could not attend the special screening of his latest blockbuster film, which he had organized for his sister's family in New Delhi, Rai, like the dutiful would-be wife, flew in from Mumbai at the last minute to fill in for her fiancé.³⁴ Even prior to the engagement, when the media vociferously discussed her rumored affair with Bachchan, the actress maintained a discreet silence – evoking again the image of the dutiful daughter, mindful of her family's reputation. As Rai accompanied the Bachchans and her mother on numerous pilgrimages,³⁵ and even supposedly acquiesced to marry a tree³⁶ to ward off the inauspicious effects of her astrological natal chart, her public demeanor was that of the traditional, subservient *bahu*, conforming to the traditions and religious diktats of her *sasural* (husband's home). Despite the media speculation, Rai refrained from commenting on the controversy; instead, it was father-in-law Amitabh Bachchan, the patriarch of the family, who would later respond with an indignant, "Where is the tree? Please show it to me."³⁷ However, Aishwarya Rai's public deportment does not merely underline her compliance to hegemonic norms of Indian patriarchy, but rather, more significantly, reiterates the inherent

³³ Karishma Upadhyay, "Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: Her beautiful life," *People* (Indian Edition), November 2009, 50.

³⁴ Bharathi S. Pradhan, "The Queen of Bahu Basics," *The Telegraph*, 31 December 2006.

³⁵ "Ash-Abhishek puja has Varanasi agog," Rediff.com, 27 November 2006.

³⁶ Prabhu Razdan. "Ash to marry tree first," *Hindustan Times*, 28 November 2006.

³⁷ "Ash never got married to a tree," Times News Network, *The Times of India*, 23 June 2007.

duality omnipresent in the figure of the nineties' "New Indian Woman," the global Indian with a traditional essence. As the embodiment of the "New Indian Woman," facilitated by her past trajectory of a global beauty queen, Aishwarya Rai encompassed in her star text the ability to seamlessly integrate the successful, modern Indian woman with the responsible, dutiful (and traditional) daughter-in-law and wife.

The "Bachchan *Bahu*"

"If there was a 'Bahu of the Year' (Daughter-in-law of the Year) award, Aishwarya Rai would surely be the top contender." Bharathi S. Pradhan³⁸

As magazine features declare how Rai is "married, not history,"³⁹ and hail her for challenging the Hindi film industry's "misogynist"⁴⁰ norms ("She has rubbished the belief that a married woman can't remain a star...that a heroine in her 30s must step aside for younger challengers"⁴¹), her newly acquired matrimonial status is perceived as having "simply amplified her tantalizing appeal"⁴² – she is now truly the "complete" Indian woman, endowed with both a successful personal and professional life. In her new incarnate as the Bachchan *bahu*, Aishwarya Rai connects her "consummate professional, career woman" persona to her off-screen trajectory of the dutiful daughter/daughter-in-law effortlessly, her international laurels and accolades occupying the same place of prominence as her familial responsibilities and obligations. While

³⁸ Bharathi S. Pradhan, "The Queen of Bahu Basics."

³⁹ "Married, not history: Aishwarya Rai Bachchan," *Hi! Blitz*, August 2007, 64-76.

⁴⁰ Pritish Nandy, "Enchantress." *Elle* (Indian Edition), December 2010, 148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Married, not history: Aishwarya Rai Bachchan," 68.

industry insiders like make-up artiste and close friend Mickey Contractor praise her ability to juggle roles – “Ash balances her family and work beautifully”⁴³ – the actress herself, in interviews, gushes how “family time, which is super precious” is what really makes her happy, and how she and husband Abhishek “make the time to be with each other. We will go without sleep and exert ourselves to be able to spend time with each other.”⁴⁴ Moreover, her off-screen image as the dignified, poised woman further facilitated this transition to a new role. In the words of a Mumbai-based senior entertainment television correspondent, “She just shifted from the dignified woman to the dignified daughter-in-law.”⁴⁵ Aided by her newly acquired respectability, Rai’s distinctiveness from her contemporaries becomes even more pronounced. As *Femina*, in its 2011 annual issue, “India’s 50 Most Beautiful Women,” describe her, “The classiest lady in the business, her cultured poise and dignity have separated her from a generation of spotlight-hungry bimbettes.”⁴⁶

Though her marriage to Abhishek Bachchan was seen by many as a strategic move – it enhanced the “brand value” of the Bachchan *parivar* (family) and provided Rai with the opportunity to erase from public memory the personal scandals and controversies that had dogged her in recent years – the actress counteracted, “Whatever the perception is from the outside, we’re two people who really loved each other and fortunately, our families were very happy and supportive of us. It’s a blessing.”⁴⁷ In magazine features and television interviews, Rai often underplayed her newly magnified celebrity status as the “Bachchan *bahu*,” almost

⁴³ Karishma Upadhyay, “Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: Her beautiful life,” 50.

⁴⁴ Karishma Upadhyay, *Ibid*, 54.

⁴⁵ Personal Interview.

⁴⁶ “India’s 50 Most Beautiful Women,” *Femina*, January 2011.

⁴⁷ Divia Thani Daswani, “God is in her details,” 236.

categorically denying the “Abhiwariya” brand value and endorsement opportunities, even making it a point to emphasize how they consciously have not tried to exploit their celebrity status as Bollywood’s “numero uno” couple.

This marriage has not been about names coming together or creating a force to reckon with for a perfect alliance. Very honestly, this is a boy and girl who fell in love and got married with their parents’ blessings...that’s really our story – Abhishek and Aishwarya love each other. We have very consciously in the first two years of our marriage, not commercially exploited our alliance in terms of doing endorsements together. We did not sell the rights of our photographs to magazines and try and make money, even though there were all those offers.⁴⁸

In the years since her April 2007 wedding, Aishwarya Rai’s interviews, now often in exclusive high fashion glossy magazines, emphasize her newfound conjugal bliss – a sharp contrast to her premarital star text, where she maintained a “dignified silence” on her personal life. She effusively describes how marriage “is wonderful, it’s real...It feels normal, comfortable, true,”⁴⁹ what it means to her (“marriage means keeping the faith...it’s the institution both of us believe in”⁵⁰), how it is the “little things that matter,”⁵¹ what she loves about her husband (“He is original and real. Like our relationship”⁵²), how his most beautiful compliment was “asking me to marry him,”⁵³ and how the wedding was the “most real experience” of her life.⁵⁴ As Patricia Uberoi has

⁴⁸ Shirin Mehta, “Ah! Aishwarya.”

⁴⁹ Divia Thani Daswani, “God is in her details,” 236.

⁵⁰ *Koffee with Karan*, NDTV Imagine. Telecast date: 7 November 2010.

⁵¹ Shobhaa De, “Aishwarya Rai Bachchan,” *Hello!* (Indian Edition), April 2010, 104.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Karishma Upadhyay, “Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: Her beautiful life,” 50.

⁵⁴ Divia Thani Daswani, “God is in her details,” 236.

noted, though pre-marital romantic and sexual dalliances are often frowned upon in Indian society, particularly in the light of the negative implications they hold for the woman's "reputation," conjugal romance within the socially sanctioned parameters of marriage is celebrated (Uberoi, 2001). Hailed as "India's No. 1 Power Couple,"⁵⁵ the couple's public display of their conjugality in exclusive high-fashion photo features ("Mr & Mrs Bachchan," *Vogue*, July 2010) and endorsements (Lux, 2009) not only reiterate Indian society's privileging of matrimony, but also its reimagining in the context of the nation's global aspirations. As "Mr & Mrs Bachchan," their intimate poses against the backdrop of exotic, international locales (Istanbul, *Vogue* photo shoot, 2010) and flirtatious exchanges within the privacy of a palatial apartment (Lux television commercial, 2009) present a picture of an idealized (and idyllic) domesticity far removed from both the traditional conventions of Indian society and the realities of urban middle-class existence.

Rai's contemporary star text not only emphasizes her newfound marital bliss, but also her new familial role as a daughter-in-law. Recalling her first few days in the Bachchan home, the actress describes her seamless integration into her "new family," "I remember that my in-laws said that it didn't feel like I was a new entrant in the family. I felt the same because it didn't feel like a new home. That is the greatest blessing for any girl because marriage is a transition with a lot of adjustment and change."⁵⁶ Drawing parallel with her own middle-class family, she often emphasizes how similar the two families are, "[The Bachchans'] interpersonal relationship, their everyday, the way they interact, the way they insist on at least a meal a day together if they are in town. That's what we did. We love spending time at home with each other. This is the way I

⁵⁵ Ashwin Varde, "Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: Ascent of Woman," *Stardust*, February 2011.

⁵⁶ Karishma Upadhyay, "Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: Her beautiful life," 52.

always was at home.”⁵⁷ Rai’s interviews not only underline the cultural significance that conjugality and marital relations enjoy in the Indian domain, but also align her individual contentment and happiness with that of the collective, the joint family.

Post-marriage, Aishwarya Rai, now with the Bachchan suffix also added to her name, presented the picture of the ideal, dutiful *bahu*. Soon after her wedding she announced she would be taking her husband’s name and they would be staying with his parents. Though she now has her own private section in the sprawling Bachchan bungalow in a Mumbai suburb, the kitchen remains common, and as per mom-in-law Jaya Bachchan’s wishes, whenever everyone is in town, the family eats at least one meal together. Rai, in her new avatar, is the quintessential Indian wife, invested in her husband’s success – in the 2008 Unforgettable Tour, she not only designed Abhishek’s costumes, but also his act – and the quintessential daughter-in-law, fussing over her father-in-law’s (Pa, as she lovingly calls him) lunch. Just as she had described herself in the past as her family’s “cub,”⁵⁸ shielded, protected, similarly, in her new narrative as the daughter-in-law, she is configured as the one to be protected and taken care of. In response to a Mumbai tabloid report that Rai had been diagnosed with stomach tuberculosis, both father-in-law, Amitabh Bachchan, and husband, Abhishek Bachchan, came to her rescue. In his blog, Amitabh Bachchan indignantly responded, “Aishwarya is not my daughter-in-law, she is my daughter, a woman, a lady in my house and home. If anyone will speak derogatorily about her, I shall fight for her till my last breath.”⁵⁹ While her father-in-law and husband blogged and tweeted about how no one should make any insinuations about the Bachchan women, and if they

⁵⁷ *Koffee with Karan*.

⁵⁸ *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal*.

⁵⁹ Cited in Sandipan Dalal. “She answers the rumours!” *People* (Indian Edition), December 2010, 54.

dared to do so, they will have the Bachchan men to reckon with, the entire family decided to boycott the awards function organized by the tabloid's sister publication. Instead of her earlier star text as an "independent woman" who intrepidly explored alien, foreign shores, the actress was now a wife and daughter-in-law, whose rightful place was in the domestic space of the home. In a chat show, her father-in-law described her foreign trips not as adventures, but rather as treacherous travails – "pata nahin kahan kaise dikaton se" ("who knows what trials and tribulations you had undergo") – where she has to navigate unknown lands to make her journey back home.⁶⁰ Her global celebrity status notwithstanding, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan is now a married woman, a woman whose reputation needed "protection" and whose international sojourns were no longer adventures, but rather treacherous travails that took her away from her cocoon, her home.

However, though her newly acquired status as a wife and daughter-in-law positions her more squarely within the domestic space, her embodiment of the "New Indian Woman" is also contingent on her success outside the home. Sathya Saran, a former Editor of *Femina* (1979 – 2005), describes the "New Indian Woman" as a woman who "wants to do everything. She wants to take holidays, she wants to be a mother, she wants to work, she wants great sex, she wants everything... (her) lifestyle is very aspirational...there is an upwardly mobile philosophy at work...and it's not just economic or financial. It's emotional" (Dewey, 2008: 211). Echoing this aspirational desire for "everything," Rai's star text offers the ultimate fantasy for the urban middle-class woman – a perfect marriage, doting in-laws, *and* a successful career. The actress also doesn't perceive any conflict or contradiction between the two seemingly different realms of her life,

⁶⁰ *Big B's Den*.

I've never understood women who say, I'm not going to get married as I want to concentrate on my career for the next few years. If you believe in the man, if you have your family's blessings, if you believe you will be happy and comfortable together, why not go ahead? Don't barter work for marriage. It's not a trade-off. These are two different aspects of your life.⁶¹

While Aishwarya Rai Bachchan is the quintessential “New Indian Woman,” Abhishek Bachchan embodies the qualities of the self-assured confident “modern” Indian male, who does not feel threatened by his wife’s success and instead, views himself as an equal partner in the relationship. In their first exclusive interview as a couple, Bachchan declares, “As a man, nothing gives me more pleasure than putting my wife in front of me and seeing her be celebrated...the most amazing thing I can do is be supportive. Anyone who says it isn't the manly thing to do – that's bullshit. That's really regressive.”⁶² When asked about whether his wife will continue working post-marriage, he retorts, “It's Aishwarya's choice...I'd never ask her to give it up. I'd never ask her to do something I wasn't prepared to do myself. That's my general rule.”⁶³ However, in spite of Bachchan's declarations, Aishwarya Rai's narrative as an accomplished, independent, modern Indian woman is contingent on the support and encouragement of her husband and her in-laws, a fact she doesn't fail to acknowledge. And as Abhishek Bachchan himself comments,

When you're done and back in your bedroom when it's all over, and it's just the two of you, she will make you feel like you're the most important thing in the world. And you

⁶¹ Divia Thani Daswani, “Mr & Mrs Bachchan,” *Vogue India*, July 2010, 117.

⁶² Divia Thani Daswani, *Ibid*, 108.

⁶³ Divia Thani Daswani, *Ibid*, 117.

know it meant the world to her to have you there – *that's* what she's so happy about.

That's what's most important to her.⁶⁴

With her supportive and encouraging spouse accompanying her to red carpet events at the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Awards, Aishwarya Rai encapsulates not only the new, emergent discourse of Indian womanhood, successfully traversing the globalscape while retaining her familial priorities, but also, Bollywood's "new breed of married heroines"⁶⁵. Though Rai and her other married contemporaries' enduring stardom and professional trajectories underline shifts in the Indian mediascape and discourses of Hindi film stardom,⁶⁶ particularly female stardom, her star text is inherently and intrinsically linked to the nineties' "New Indian Woman." Similar to the "New Indian Woman," who "wants to do everything,"⁶⁷ media narratives now frame Rai in similar light:

Aishwarya does not want to be slotted at all anymore. Bollywood, Hollywood or Tamil films? The Mani Ratnam, Vipul Shah or Sanjay Leela Bhansali camp? The meticulous daughter, wife or star? She chooses it all.⁶⁸

Her image as the ideal and dutiful daughter (and later, daughter-in-law) not only aids in the recuperation of her star persona from the negative underpinnings of Hindi film female stardom, but also, is explicitly contingent on the rhetoric of the post-liberalization "New Indian Woman."

⁶⁴ Divia Thani Daswani, *Ibid*, 108.

⁶⁵ "Hot & Bold: The new breed of married heroines," *Stardust*, December 2009.

⁶⁶ See Chapter 4 (Shilpa Shetty) for a detailed discussion of contemporary Bollywood stardom particularly female stardom.

⁶⁷ Sathya Saran, quoted in Dewey (2008: 211).

⁶⁸ Deepa Menon, "You did good, girl."

Rai's embodiment of the "New Indian Woman" is fraught with contradictions and complexities, but as I have argued, these apparent contradictions are not only inherent to the rhetoric of the "New Indian Woman," but it is precisely this contradiction between the two realms that define contemporary Indian womanhood, and consequently, Rai's own star text as a Bollywood female star.

Chapter Four

From “Heroine” to “Corporate Diva”: Shilpa Shetty, transnational cultural economics and the “star as brand”

In January 2007, the Indian media was abuzz with the news of Bollywood stars Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai’s engagement, but soon the national obsession with this impending nuptials was undermined by another “breaking news” – the alleged racial abuse of Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, who was in Britain participating in the reality show *Celebrity Big Brother*, at the hands of fellow contestants Jade Goody, Danielle Lloyd and Jo O’Meara. Goody and her cohort’s racial and ethnocentric comments denigrating Shetty’s cooking, eating habits and nationality not only incited viewers’ ire, but also landed the show in the midst of a political maelstrom. In spite of attempts by the show’s producer, Endemol, and its telecaster, Channel 4, to frame the “bickering” as “girly rivalry,”¹ an inevitable clash of culture and class, the controversy soon escalated into a transnational crisis. Outraged at the “racial bullying,” South Asian Labor MP, Keith Vaz, tabled a motion in the House of Commons denouncing the show, while Prime Minister, Tony Blair, tried to reassure beleaguered British South Asians that Britain was still “a country of fairness and tolerance.”² The reaction in India was no less volatile, with the country’s leading English daily labeling the show “Bigot Brother” and protestors burning effigies of Endemol and Channel 4. With Indian parliamentarians more concerned with Shetty’s predicament than discussing bilateral relations, the controversy even threatened to hijack British Chancellor and Prime Minister-in-waiting Gordon Brown’s India visit.

¹ “Anger over ‘Big Brother’ racism,” BBC News, 16 January 2007.

² “World Outrage Over BB Racism,” *The Evening Standard*, 17 January 2007.

In the ensuing weeks, as the controversy became the focal point for asserting Britain's multiculturalism, India's emerging role as a global player, and the Indian diaspora's notions of citizenship and national belonging, Shilpa Shetty emerged as an unlikely poster girl, both for the diaspora and the homeland. While for India, Shetty's sojourn underlined the country's global aspirations, for the British NRI (Non Resident Indian), it articulated new modes of cultural identity and national affiliation. As the British press attempted to defend both Shetty and Britain's image as a multicultural tolerant society, Goody became symbolic of all that was ailing the nation, with her uncivilized and embarrassing "white trash" persona a stark contrast to Shetty's "dignity," "civility" and "poise." There has been considerable scholarly discussion of how the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy underlined issues of race, national identity, diasporic citizenship, cultural politics, and transnational global flows (Bose, 2007; Gies, 2007; Hegde, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Malik, 2007; Virmani, 2007; Zacharias and Arthurs, 2007). However, Shilpa Shetty's triumphant win at the conclusion of the fifth season of *Celebrity Big Brother* was testimony not only to popular Hindi cinema's cultural currency among its diasporic consumers and consequently, its increasingly transnational/global character, but also, the remaking of the Bollywood star from a cinematic entity to a transmedia celebrity.

As Shilpa Shetty was hailed as a symbol of transnational stardom and global cultural currency, "a new brand of star in global cultural circuits between Bollywood, London, and New York" (Zacharias and Arthurs, 2007: 455), her reality television stint transformed her from "Bollywood bombshell to brand guru."³ Examining the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy both in the context of Bollywood's increasing global presence and the changing dynamics of Hindi film stardom, I look at how transnational television engendered the reinvention and remaking of

³ Divia Thani Daswani, "Shilpa means business," *Vogue*, June 2009, 86.

the actress's star persona. In doing so, I not only underline the crucial role of the Hindi film star, particularly the female star, in enumerating questions of national identity and diasporic citizenship, but also, interrogate how Shetty's participation in *Celebrity Big Brother* and her subsequent win functioned to bring about her transformation from a Hindi film heroine to a style icon and savvy businesswoman. Examining the emergence of the "star as brand" in popular Hindi cinema, I look at how shifts in contemporary Bollywood stardom have engendered this remaking of the Hindi film star, particularly the female star. Employing the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy, I also bring in discourses of national identity and diasporic citizenship, and popular Hindi cinema, and its female star's role in enumerating both.

Being "Indian" on transnational TV

Prior to the transformation engendered by *Celebrity Big Brother*, Shilpa Shetty's star text, as journalist Sanjay Suri succinctly describes, had "yo-yoed between stardom and starletdom."⁴ Following her debut in the successful Bollywood vendetta film *Baazigar* (*Gambler*, 1992, dir. Abbas-Mustan), the actress enjoyed a prolific career, often reprising the role of the male protagonist's romantic interest in the quintessential nineties' action narrative. However, in spite of starring roles in more than fifty films, many of them prestigious A-list ventures, her star image revolved primarily around her dancing skills and physical attributes rather than her acting histrionics. Unlike contemporaries like Kajol and Karisma Kapoor, Shetty was never regarded as a critically acclaimed actress, or a serious contender in the Bollywood hierarchy. By the mid-2000s, as her film appearances became limited to extravagant song and dance sequences, popularly known as "item numbers," and fanzines speculated on her mother's attempts to

⁴ Sanjay Suri, "Hip, Hype & Hyper Reality," *Outlook*, 22 January 2007.

procure a “suitable boy,” Shilpa Shetty seemed destined to follow the familiar route of the Hindi film heroine – matrimony accompanied by the inevitable “retirement” from the celluloid screen.

Celebrity Big Brother, with its offer of lucrative financial gain and transnational media visibility, thus provided Shetty’s waning career with a much-needed impetus. As she herself later remarked, “*Big Brother* is one of the most watched television shows in the U.K., and for an Indian actor to be on something like that was huge deal... The offer came to me on a platter and I would be foolish not to take it.”⁵ Debuting in 2001, *Celebrity Big Brother*, like countless other celebrity reality TV shows, offered its participants the opportunity to reinvigorate and reinvent their declining careers. However, despite the phenomenal popularity and global success of the *Big Brother* franchise, Shetty’s decision to participate in the reality show initially elicited concern and apprehension in India, particularly with regard to the show’s espousal of “un-Indian” values.⁶ With its blatant display of nudity, promiscuous behavior and obscene language, *Celebrity Big Brother* was inherently oppositional to the cultural currency of both the Indian woman and the Bollywood female star.⁷ Shetty herself was well aware of the threat posed to her star image and her cultural authenticity. In her contract with Endemol, she explicitly stated that she would not engage in any “un-Indian” behavior – “If they had asked me to kiss somebody for a task, I wouldn’t do it... If they had asked me to jump into a Jacuzzi with a bikini, I wouldn’t do it.”⁸ Demarcated as the custodian of the nation’s cultural ethos, by virtue of her dual role as a Bollywood star and an Indian woman, it was imperative for Shetty to frame her television excursion within dominant discourses of nationhood and citizenship. In interviews following her

⁵ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Kay Burley, Sky News. Telecast date: 1 February 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Chapter 3 (Aishwarya Rai) for a detailed discussion of Hindi film female stardom.

⁸ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Satinder Bindra, *CNN Talk Asia*. Telecast date: 18 May 2007.

win, the actress often situated her participation in the reality show within the context of national and cultural rhetoric:

I just thought it (*Celebrity Big Brother*) was a great platform to showcase our culture. And I honestly didn't go as a Bollywood actor, as just a Bollywood actor. I was going as a responsible Indian citizen and it was a huge responsibility to shoulder.⁹

The Indian female star as the ideal postcolonial subject, encompassing the national imaginary's cultural ethos, was an underlying text omnipresent in Shilpa Shetty's role as a transnational reality show participant. From the very onset, she presented herself not only as a Bollywood star but, more significantly, as a "responsible Indian citizen" representing her country. On being asked by *Celebrity Big Brother*'s presenter, Davina McCall what her expectations were from the show, she proclaimed, "I just want every Indian to be extremely proud that I'm in here" – a narrative she later reprised on winning, when she thanked the British public for "a fantastic opportunity to make my country proud."¹⁰ During her stay in the Big Brother house and later in interviews, Shetty foregrounded her identity as an Indian, espousing "Indian values" – respect for elders and parents, sexual chastity, humility and dignity. As she addressed participant Ken Russell as "Ken Uncle," was overcome with emotion at the visit of an elderly couple as they reminded her of her grandparents, displayed modesty when asked about her love life, and attempted to teach fellow housemates yoga and meditation, Shilpa Shetty's role as a celebrity participant was often subsumed in the larger rhetoric of Indian womanhood and "Indianness." In the very vocal espousal and reaffirmation of her national identity and cultural antecedents, Shetty

⁹ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Kay Burley.

¹⁰ "Shetty wins Celebrity Big Brother," BBC News, 29 January 2007.

seemed to engage simultaneously in the task of demystifying “Indianness,” as well as implying its inherent superiority over the West.

When people talk about me, they talk about an Indian person. You know, that defines me first. I think the most important value is that respecting elders, especially my parents, and I think that’s something our culture can really boast of, because it’s very different in the West. People are very disconnected. With due respect, but here in India, we are all very connected to our roots, and that’s something I’m very proud of.¹¹

This rhetoric of the culturally superior and benevolent East/India was also implicit in Shetty’s public stance towards Goody and her cohort. Refusing to be “judgemental,” she argued that their behavior was not motivated by “contrived racism,” but by “lack of education,” “insecurity” and “jealousy.”¹² Describing her “tormentors” as “juvenile” (Jade Goody), “lost” (Jack Tweed), “immature” (Danielle Lloyd), or hardened by circumstances (Jackie Budden – “She’d been through a very hard life, and I can imagine why she turned out to be the person she is because it wasn’t easy for her”), Shetty presented an almost Gandhian demeanor, forgiving and understanding of her detractors’ failings.¹³ Thus, in the process, consequently, underlining her own public persona and star image as the dignified, mature, poised and cultured (Indian) celebrity, who refused to pander to the demands of voyeuristic reality television. In her first interview following her Big Brother experience, she emphasized:

I didn’t want to make a spectacle. I didn’t want, at any point of time, make it great TV. It was never on my agenda...I wanted to address the issue. I didn’t want to make a big hue and cry

¹¹ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Satinder Bindra.

¹² Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Kay Burley.

¹³ Ibid.

about it... You don't have to rant and scream, and you know, use abusive language and bring down your dignity and your class. And that's what I endorse. And me pulling them down is very easy. I don't want to do that because it brings down my class.¹⁴

As the dignified, poised Indian woman, Shilpa Shetty presented a stark contrast to both her fellow housemates and the brouhaha of archetypal reality television. The rhetoric in the British media, particularly the tabloid press, further reified this binary polarization between Shetty and Goody, casting them in “antithetical terms,” the former as “gracious, refined and well-mannered,” while vilifying the latter as “crass and ignorant, a national embarrassment” (Hegde, 2007: 458). Labeling the altercations between Shetty and Goody as a “Beauty v Bigot” war,¹⁵ media narratives described the Big Brother house as a “house of hate,”¹⁶ “divided between ugly, thick, white Britain and one imperturbably dignified Indian woman.”¹⁷ *The Sun*, in its editorial, declared that the controversy had exposed Goody's “true personality” – “a vile, pig-ignorant, racist bully consumed by envy of a woman of superior intelligence, beauty and class.”¹⁸ For the British media, who branded the show “Bigotry Brother,”¹⁹ Goody seemed to symbolize all that was malignant about British society – underlining not only its inability to unyoke and distance itself from the remnants of an imperial past, but also disconcertingly at odds with its seemingly multicultural present.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nicola Methven and Stewart Maclean, “Beauty v Bigot,” *The Daily Mirror*, 18 January 2007.

¹⁶ Sara Nathan, “House of Hate,” *The Sun*, 17 January 2007.

¹⁷ Stuart Jeffries, “Beauty and the beastliness: a tale of declining British values,” *The Guardian*, 19 January 2007.

¹⁸ “Bigotry Brother,” *The Sun*, 20 January 2007.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In contrast, Shilpa Shetty's embodiment of the ideal postcolonial subject, "nonthreatening," "hyper-feminine" and "amenable" (Hegde, 2007: 458–459), marked her as ideal for cultural appropriation and emulation. Trevor Philips, Chair of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, remarked how, "It has taken a woman from a former colony, thousands of miles away to remind us of what we most value about being British."²⁰ As politicians, public dignitaries, and Church leaders hailed her as an ideal role model for the British youth,²¹ worthy of emulation, Shetty was reimagined as the epitome of the beautiful, dignified Indian womanhood, a remedy for "declining British values."²² Television critic and columnist Stuart Jeffries writing in *The Guardian* proclaimed, "Shilpa Shetty has taken the supposed British virtues of civility, articulacy, reserve and having a stiff upper lip and shown that, at least in what passes for our celebrity culture, we lack them."²³

Examining the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy. Usha Zacharias and Jane Arthurs have remarked how, "Britain's identification with Shetty as the embodiment of its true national values, and its rejection of Goody as its untrue self is a complex moment in the cultural politics of globalization, when the former empire must look for its 'real' image in its postcolonial subject" (2007: 455-456). Radha Hegde, in her discussion of the racial dynamics and national rhetoric inherent in the controversy, has also pointed out how Shetty was perceived as "the nonthreatening postcolonial subject who has just arrived at the global threshold. She is not the migrant, the local Other who can disrupt the national fabric or intends to be part of it. She sets off debate but is the princess who will forgive and forget and move back to India" (2007: 458).

²⁰ Rashmee Roshan Lall, "Shilpa refuses to play race activist," *The Times of India*, 1 February 2007.

²¹ "'Brown pound' turns Shilpa into icon of anti-racism," Indo-Asian News Service, 30 January 2007.

²² Stuart Jeffries, "Beauty and the beastliness: a tale of declining British values."

²³ Ibid.

In contrast, Jade Goody was vilified as “white trash,” a demarcation that not only elicits a “highly emotional response of loathing and disgust” (Hartigan, 2003: 105), but also, consequently marked her as an anomaly to both accepted norms of social decorum and the image of a contemporary, multicultural Britain. As the British media rejoiced at Goody’s departure from the house, *Celebrity Big Brother* became reimagined as a site for reiterating the country’s multicultural identity. Describing Jade Goody’s eviction vote as “the most important in Britain since the last General Election,” *The Sun* proclaimed,

It’s just a reality show. But it became a referendum on whether our nation, with the eyes of the world on us, was prepared to back a home-grown job over a dignified Indian actress. We weren’t and the result has restored faith in the British public.²⁴

For Britain, the vocal endorsement of Shetty and the rejection of Goody, its “home-grown job,” was an unequivocal assertion of its image as a tolerant, multicultural society. Consequently, for India, the controversy presented an opportunity to reiterate its role as an emerging global player. As journalist Priyamvada Gopal notes,

As the country anxiously finds its place within the community of big global players and tries to reconcile its obvious economic successes with the glaring (and often, deepening) inequalities that still mar its social landscape and self-image, it is increasingly obsessed with disseminating the myth of the nation as fundamentally middle-class, professional and successful.²⁵

With her “Indian values” and modern/Western demeanor, Shilpa Shetty represented this “new, emerging India – the one that is arriving into global modernity” (Hegde, 2007: 459). On

²⁴ “Bigotry Brother,” *The Sun*.

²⁵ Priyamvada Gopal, “Of Oriental Princesses And White Slags,” *Outlook*, 27 January 2007.

Celebrity Big Brother and in subsequent interviews, she regurgitated not only familiar stereotypes of the “spiritual East,” but also the image of an increasingly global India, modern in demeanor but traditional in essence – “the very image of cosmopolitan India with the necessary Orientalist exotica thrown in” (Hegde, 2007: 458). As Gopal remarked, “Shilpa understands her task clearly: to ‘show’ the world that India is really about beauty and entrepreneurial success, not slums and poverty.”²⁶ In interviews later, Shetty often underlined the significance of the reality show in mitigating misconceptions and revealing the “new” global, contemporary India to an international audience:

I felt there was a certain sense of respectability, as Indians that came about through the show for Indians, which was a good thing. I think the whole perception of Indian people was very different before the show. And I am not saying that it was me who did the turnaround. I just think they got to see, they got to take a closer look at Indian people, the contemporary Indian people.²⁷

As the successful Bollywood actress, modern and global in attitude and demeanor, but traditional and “Indian” in her values, Shilpa Shetty embodied the “new” India, staking a claim on global citizenship, yet with its cultural individuality and “Indianness” intact.²⁸ Priya Virmani, in her discussion of the *Celebrity Big Brother* controversy, underlines how the actress was “the perfect ambassador to parade the myth of India – an India that like herself is beautiful, glamorous, dignified, and morally pristine. In her own presentation she has encapsulated the re-presentation

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta, *Beautiful People*, CNBC TV-18. Telecast date: 24 April 2010.

²⁸ This negotiation of the global with the national/local, tradition with modernity is also evident in the star texts of Amitabh Bachchan (Chapter 1), Shah Rukh Khan (Chapter 2), and Aishwarya Rai (Chapter 3). Debates and discussions of cultural authenticity have increasingly assumed center stage in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the nineties’ economic liberalization, where globalization is often regarded as a “threat” to “Indianness.”

of the myth of India” (2007: 468). Shetty’s demeanor and behavior on the reality show was in perfect alignment with the “new” image of India, no longer the exotic land of snake charmers and elephants, but a country where modernity existed in perfect alignment with tradition and heritage, a rhetoric that was also underlined by the Indian Ministry of Tourism’s response to the controversy. Counteracting Jade Goody’s racist remarks on *Celebrity Big Brother*, the Indian Ministry of Tourism published full-page advertisements in leading British newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. Styled as an open letter, the advertisement invited Goody to visit India – “one of the world’s oldest civilisations...where the ancient and the modern co-exist and a multitude of religions live in harmony” – and experience its “healing nature,” “modern thriving culture” and “bustling cosmopolitan cities.”²⁹ Urging Goody to visit “the many spas where you can cleanse your stresses away, enjoy yoga in the land that invented it and experience Ayurvedic healing which promotes positive health and natural beauty,”³⁰ the advertisement employed the familiar image of India as a global entity, modern in demeanor but traditional in essence.

Shilpa Shetty’s deployment and appropriation by Britain, India, and consequently, the South Asian diaspora thus underlines her own cultural currency as a Hindi film heroine, particularly for the diasporic Indian subject. Su Holmes has pointed out how, “In celebrity reality TV, participants enter the text with certain meanings already attached to them” (2006: 55). The Bollywood star’s presence in the British reality show was emblematic of popular Hindi cinema’s increasing global presence as well as its iconic value among its diasporic consumers. As a Hindi film heroine, Shetty embodied not only discourses of cinematic stardom, but also gender, national identity and cultural authenticity. In her designated role as the cinematic counterpart of

²⁹ Kristina Pedersen, “Indian tourism board cashes in on Big Brother row,” *The Daily Mirror*, 19 January 2007.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

the nation's feminine ideal, the actress was endowed with cultural meaning, both in her off-screen and on-screen trajectories. Employed as a crucial cultural trope in national rhetoric (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001), the iconic figure of the *adarsh bhartiya naari* (ideal Indian woman) assumes further significance in the context of diasporic citizenship. Gayatri Gopinath, in her discussion of diasporic subjectivities and identity formation, underlines how the female subject and the feminine body is "crucial to nationalist discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of national collectivities, but as the very embodiment of this nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition" (1997: 468).

While the *Celebrity Big Brother* racism controversy was employed by Britain to assert its identity as a multicultural and tolerant nation, and by India to reiterate its new role as an emerging player in global politics, for the South Asian diaspora in Britain, it underlined new modes of citizenship and nationhood, particularly with regard to popular Hindi cinema's rendition of the (Indian) nation. Hindi films have traditionally functioned to "sustain expatriate Indians' desire to perform their Indianness and remain, at least culturally, residents of India" (Punathambekar, 2005: 156). Invoking a nostalgic reimagining of the "home" and the "homeland," the cinematic idiom essays a crucial role in demarcating and disseminating "Indianness." As Priya Virmani notes, British Indian "young adults and adolescents are increasingly deriving constituents of their identity from notions of Indianness extracted from the global projections of imaginings of India" (2007: 468). Shilpa Shetty's reification as a cultural entity by the Indian diaspora in Britain thus holds crucial significance in the context of contemporary Bollywood articulation of diasporic citizenship and national belonging.

In recent years, popular Hindi cinema's "imagining" of the national imaginary has undergone a crucial and seminal shift. Unlike earlier narratives, where "Indianness" was

conceived as strictly ensconced within the physical contours of the homeland, geographical affiliation no longer functions as the primary determinant for national identity and cultural authenticity. The cinematic idiom now engages in the production of the national imaginary “by communicating a sense of place as feeling” (Srinivas, 2005: 319). Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Braveheart Will Take the Bride*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something is Happening*, dir. Karan Johar, 1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Happiness Sometimes Sorrow*, dir. Karan Johar, 2001), with their NRI (Non-Resident Indian) protagonists and international locales, present the diasporic subject not as culturally inauthentic, but rather as someone who “carries India in their heart” (Anupam Kher in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*), thus rendering “the diaspora less of a transgressive Other, and more of an acceptable variant within the fold of a ‘great Indian family’” (Punathambekar, 2005: 162). As Aswin Punathambekar argues, these recent Bollywood narratives need to be perceived in the context of a “larger project of cultural citizenship that has emerged in relation to India’s tentative entry into a transnational economy and the centrality of the NRI (non-resident Indian) figure to Indian’s navigation of this space” (2005: 152). Punathambekar’s detailed discussion of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (popularly known as *K3G*) underlines popular Hindi cinema’s crucial role in mediating relations between the diaspora and “home,” particularly in the context of the latter’s claim on global citizenship.

With “Indianness” no longer contingent on physical and geographical antecedents, the diasporic subject can now lay claim to his national identity irrespective of his physical moorings. As Patricia Uberoi remarks, “The challenge of being (and, more important, *remaining*) Indian in a globalized world is one that must be met equally by those who stay at home and those who live

abroad, by the ‘yuppie’/ ‘puppie’³¹ as much as by the NRI” (2006: 183). Consequently, this reimagining of the national imaginary has also engendered a reconceptualization of the perception of the “alien” and culturally “inauthentic” West. As Jigna Desai points out, “The film narrative has shifted from depicting the West as an always contaminating and corrupting place for being just another location inhabited by the Indian nation. In other words, displacement no longer necessarily functions as a marker of loss of Indianness” (2005: 59). Purnima Mankekar, in her discussion of the phenomenally popular *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, also underlines how the West, in these NRI narratives, was now “a place where cultural purity and authenticity can be maintained” (1999: 738). Thus, the diasporic Indian is no longer marked by spatial and temporal disjuncture, unable to participate in the “everyday process of history-making” (Ang, 2001); but rather, with their newly acquired “global” ethno-national citizenship, could now lay claim to their “Indianness,” irrespective of their geographical/physical affiliation.

In identifying with Shetty “who was born and brought up in India, as one of their own, while refuting any association with the show’s British contestants” (Virmani, 2007: 468), the British Indian youth aligned themselves not with their adopted homeland, but with the country of their origin and cultural antecedents. With her impeccable and dignified demeanor, the actress seemed to compensate and make “amends” for the diasporic Indian’s “perceived cultural fragility” (Virmani, 2007: 468), consequently making her the *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant to be emulated and hailed as a role model. For the Indian diaspora in Britain, as a Bollywood female star, Shetty not only embodied discourses of popular Hindi film stardom, but also constituted what it meant to be “Indian,” encompassing notions of both gender and nationhood. However, Shetty’s subsequent celebritydom, the transformation and reinvention of her star text, does not

³¹ “Puppie” is a colloquial Indian English term that refers to the ‘Punjabi yuppie,’ the upwardly mobile consumerist Punjabi.

merely underline the increasing global visibility and presence of popular Hindi cinema, and consequently, its stars, but also signifies the changing dynamics of contemporary Bollywood stardom.

From “Heroine” to “Brand Shilpa”

Unlike its predecessor, who was firmly ensconced within the cinematic realm, the contemporary Bollywood star is a transmedia celebrity, straddling multiple venues and sites. The emergence of this new incarnate of the Hindi film star is intrinsically linked to changes in the Indian mediascape and also, the nation’s newfound consumerist ethos. With the advent of private satellite and cable broadcasting in the early nineties and the emergence of multiplex theatres, the Indian mediascape has become increasingly fragmented, marked by segmentation of audience demographics and exhibition venues. The recent years have seen further changes, with the entry of high-end international fashion magazines in the Indian publication scene and an increasing tabloidization of print and television news media – which have not only fueled a celebrity-driven culture, but also magnified and enhanced the Bollywood star’s public persona. As a Mumbai-based senior entertainment television correspondent commented, “We’ve always been a film crazy nation (and) the media boom (is) fueling it more.”³² In a fragmented media environment, with the emphasis on “grabbing eyeballs,”³³ TRPs (Television Rating Points), and generating weekend multiplex revenue, the Bollywood star’s saleability quotient has assumed further significance. This enhanced “commodification” of celebrities, particularly the Bollywood star, is underlined by their increasing presence in television commercials – while in 1995, only 15 out of

³² Personal Interview.

³³ Ibid.

1,259 television commercials featured celebrities, a decade later, in 2005, the number was 785 out of 6000 commercials.³⁴

Consequently, the Bollywood star no longer derives his income primarily from films, or the occasional “live show” abroad. Instead, as a Hindi film writer and industry insider points out, the contemporary media scene, with its increasing segmentation, has resulted in the increase of the stars’ “paraphernalia and peripheral modes of income.”³⁵ Films no longer are the only source of income; instead, the star makes his/her money from endorsements, as hosts or judges of television game shows and talent contests, hosting or performing at award functions, or even making appearances at weddings and other private events. Similar to the dissemination of their star texts, their modes of income have also become dispersed. While the emergent media synergy between the erstwhile distinct realms of film and television facilitates their reinvention as game show hosts and judges, the shift to consumerism in recent years has allowed them opportunities for brand endorsements. In a recent article on exorbitant star remunerations, trade analyst Komal Nahta notes that an A-list Bollywood star like Shah Rukh Khan “probably earns more every year by way of endorsement fees than for acting in films. He endorses about a dozen brands, but works in one or two films a year.”³⁶

Meena Iyer, a senior film journalist with the leading English daily, *The Times of India*, attributes the emergence of the Bollywood star as a “brand entity” to the economic liberalization of the early nineties. As Iyer mentions, for the MNCs (Multi National Corporations) trying to establish a foothold in the Indian market, the Bollywood star seemed the inevitable choice – “an

³⁴ Data compiled by The Agency Source (TAS), a national advertising monitoring firm. Cited in Chopra, 2007: 160.

³⁵ Personal Interview.

³⁶ Komal Nahta, “The shocking truth about star prices!” *Hindustan Times Brunch*, 7 April 2012.

Indian face to connect with the Indian consumer.”³⁷ Anupama Chopra, in her discussion of Shah Rukh Khan’s embodiment of millennial India, underlines how Khan’s “irreverent, youthful image” (Chopra, 2007: 159) was ideal for brands like Pepsi, eager to appeal to the Indian (urbane) youth with its slogan, “yeh dil mange more” (“this heart wants more”). For international corporate giants like Pepsi and Coke, youth icons like Khan, Kajol, Rani Mukherji, Saif Ali Khan, Preity Zinta, Kareena Kapoor, Hrithik Roshan, Aishwarya Rai, and Aamir Khan proved to be the perfect brand endorsers and ambassadors. McCann Erickson India’s Prasoon Joshi, the architect of the popular “Thanda matlab Coca-Cola” (“Cold drink means Coca-Cola”) campaign with Aamir Khan, compares the “seamless integration” between a brand and its celebrity endorser to the matching of horoscopes prior to weddings – “Using a celebrity tactically in an ad is an art. The first thing one should do before choosing a celebrity for a brand is match the ‘kundali’ (horoscopes) of the celeb with that of the brand. It’s the same as a marriage of two people.”³⁸

As the ubiquitous and promiscuous brand endorser, the contemporary Bollywood star presents a rather interesting, and stark contrast to its predecessor. Though brands like Lux have had a long and enduring relationship with the Hindi film heroine – the luxury soap, with its tagline, “sitaron ki pasand” (“the favorite of stars”), was first endorsed by thirties’ star, Leela Chitnis, and continues to feature popular Bollywood actresses in its television commercials and print campaigns – male stars were rarely associated with any product or brand promotion. In fact, Amitabh Bachchan’s foray into television advertisements in the mid-nineties was often couched (and still is) in the rhetoric of his impending bankruptcy and financial penury. For the older

³⁷ Personal Interview, 21 July 2010.

³⁸ Prasoon Joshi and Santaosh Desai, “We consider consumers to be human beings,” Interview by Prajjal Saha and Tuhina Anand, Afaqs, 14 November 2005.

generation of Hindi film stars, television commercials were anathema to the mystique of their stardom. In an interview, advertisement guru Praseon Joshi recounts thespian Dilip Kumar's indignant response to an endorsement offer – “Hum ishteharon ke liye nahin bane hain” (“I was not made for advertisements”).³⁹ For Kumar, the very prospect of peddling banal commodities like aerated drinks and biscuits was unfathomable, a sheer travesty of his larger-than-life cinematic fame. However, the contemporary Bollywood star's ubiquitous presence on billboards, advertisement spots, television screens, magazine covers, and tabloid news does not seem to erode or demystify his/her star aura. Rather, as film and theatre critic Deepa Gahlot remarks, it only functions to enhance and magnify it further.⁴⁰ Moreover, as Iyer also pointed out, the new transmedia character of the cinematic star facilitates more opportunities to leverage their star image and reassert their brand identity.⁴¹

Though her *Celebrity Big Brother* triumph and the subsequent media attention did little to reinvigorate Shilpa Shetty's film career, it was instrumental in engendering her reinvention and transformation as a style icon and corporate diva. As a popular Hindi film critic remarks, Shetty's newly acquired transnational fame had equipped her with a “legitimacy” that had earlier been devoid in her star persona, making her an ideal candidate for brand endorsements and magazine covers.⁴² Featured in Indian editions of high-end fashion magazines (*Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper's Bazaar*), Shetty is reimagined in a new avatar – a jet-setting global celebrity, equally at home at the Paris Fashion Week, or glitzy event launches and corporate galas back in

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Personal Interview, 20 July 2010.

⁴¹ Personal Interview, 21 July 2010.

⁴² Personal Interview.

India, or even a gritty Mumbai film studio.⁴³ In her reinvented persona, as a *Harper's Bazaar* cover feature describes, "As much at home in saris as she is in the stunning Dior gowns she wears for the fashion shoot, she perfectly portrays a modern image of a growing India."⁴⁴ As she discusses her favorite designers, dispenses fashion advice and style mantras, her newly acquired global fame and expertise resignify her as a fashion guru and style icon, "chic, gorgeous and the ultimate style diva"⁴⁵ who "epitomizes it all – style, substance, stardom and chutzpah"⁴⁶. With the media rhetoric hailing her "incredible transformation"⁴⁷ from a "middle-rung Bollywood actress"⁴⁸ to a "global phenomenon,"⁴⁹ "an aspirational icon on the international arena,"⁵⁰ now imbued with "a steadily rising brand value,"⁵¹ Shilpa Shetty embodies the new face of Hindi film stardom – the transmedia celebrity, the "star as brand."

With her star image no longer contingent on her film career, Shilpa Shetty is now perceived as a transmedia brand, "the quintessential businesswoman,"⁵² "cracking deals, partnering in ventures, lending her brand name to projects that augur well with her image."⁵³ Shetty's initial projects underlined her new star text as the Bollywood star ascribed with

⁴³ Sona Bahadur, "Madame Butterfly," *Verve*, April 2008.

⁴⁴ Ambarina Hasan, "Shilpa gets personal," *Harper's Bazaar*, October 2009.

⁴⁵ Dhaval Roy, "Everybody loves Shilpa," *Cosmopolitan*, June 2007, 18.

⁴⁶ Mauli Singh, "Woman of the hour," *My World*, October 2008, 87.

⁴⁷ Rima J Pundir, "On top, no matter what," *Good Housekeeping*, June 2009.

⁴⁸ Divia Thani Daswani, "Shilpa means business," 90.

⁴⁹ Cheryl Ann-Couto, "Shilpa Shetty on love, cricket and how she got this hot!" *Grazia*, May 2009, 56.

⁵⁰ Sona Bahadur, "Madame Butterfly."

⁵¹ Divia Thani Daswani, "Shilpa means business," *Ibid.*

⁵² Shalini Sharma, "Shilpa Shetty: IPL's Glamour Girl," *Hi! Living*, April 2009, 48.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

international appeal, the global celebrity with an Indian ethos. Shortly after her *Celebrity Big Brother* win, the actress launched her own signature perfume, S2 – a fragrance she described as “very Indian and very international,” an “amalgamation” that was “synonymous” with her own public persona and star image. Her fitness DVD, *Shilpa’s Yoga* (2007) was framed in both the familiar rhetoric of the “global Indian,” showcasing the (spiritual) East to the (material) West, and her recent star text as a fitness guru. As Shetty describes her motivation for the project – the lack of Indian faces in the international yoga scene (“all done by Westerners while yoga is an Indian export”⁵⁴) – her erstwhile star text as the Bollywood actress with a perfect body is resignified as the fitness enthusiast advocating a holistic lifestyle.

Similar to other contemporary Bollywood stars,⁵⁵ Shilpa Shetty’s “brand identity” presents a “seamless integration”⁵⁶ between her off-screen text and her business initiatives. Following her *Celebrity Big Brother* experience, and her popularity in Britain, she is now a global celebrity, endowed with the requisite knowledge and expertise. As Kiran Bawa, Shetty’s partner in her Mumbai-based spa venture, Iosis, remarks, it is her transnational sojourn that makes the actress an ideal brand ambassador – “Shilpa is a veritable storehouse of information, considering her vast exposure during her travels.”⁵⁷ In interviews, Shetty equates her medi-spa with “reinvention,” a word now synonymous with her (new) star text – “[Iosis] is my true calling.

⁵⁴ Priyamvada Kowshik, “Ms Baazigar: back to the silver screen. Shilpa Shetty on critics, new films and yoga,” *Marie Claire*, May 2008, 94.

⁵⁵ See the Introduction for a detailed discussion of contemporary Bollywood stardom.

⁵⁶ In my conversations with media professionals in Mumbai (July 2010), “seamless integration” was one of the terms that seemed to come up repeatedly – to be a successful “brand,” the Bollywood star had to present a “seamless integration” between his/her off-screen persona, his film roles, and the brand.

⁵⁷ Divia Thani Daswani. “Shilpa means business,” 95.

I like the idea of reinventing myself, of moulding and enhancing one's personality."⁵⁸ Drawing parallels between her numerous brands and her off-screen persona, she explicitly underlines her own investment and 'seamless integration' with her corporate endeavors. Endorsing her range of ready-to-eat low-fat vegetarian entrees in Britain, she remarks how,

It's the stuff that I would use. It's stuff that I believe in. It's stuff that I preach and practice. That's what my brand stands for. And that's what people believe in. So when people meet me at an airport and say that we love your yoga DVD, it just makes me feel better than a box-office success.⁵⁹

Shetty's remark underlines not only the remaking of the Bollywood star, from a cinematic personality to a transmedia celebrity and brand entity, but also, the subsequent engendering of new modes of dissemination and engagement with their star texts. As stars emphasize their personal connection with their brands, in television commercials, interviews, and twitter feeds, they also make available to their fans (and consumers) their "true" persona, the "reality" of their off-screen lives. With the Bollywood star so readily available for consumption, conceptions of what define and constitute stardom have also undergone a significant shift.

No longer confined to only the theatrical screen, the Hindi film star is now ubiquitous, all pervasive, and consequently, more intimate. Unlike their predecessors, who were largely confined to the cinematic realm, contemporary Bollywood stars enjoy a multidimensional, transmedia presence, with their reinvention as "brands" often functioning as a reiteration of their iconicity and cultural currency. Christine Geraghty has argued that contemporary film stardom needs to be perceived in the context of the stars' extratextuality, underlining the need for new

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta.

categories – the star-as-celebrity, the star-as-professional, and the star-as-performer (2007). While Geraghty’s concept of the “star-as-celebrity,” where “a star can continue to command attention as a celebrity despite failures at the box-office” (2007: 101) might seem applicable, in some instances, to the figure of the Bollywood transmedia celebrity, the latter’s communion and “seamless integration” with corporate brands and endorsements engenders the need for a new category in the Indian context – the “star-as-brand.”

For Shilpa Shetty, a Hindi film heroine on the wrong side of thirty and faced with declining career prospects, the resignification of her star image as a “brand guru”⁶⁰ provided her not only with the opportunity to rejuvenate her professional trajectory, but also, a reassuring departure from the insecurities of Bollywood film stardom. In her new avatar as the self-assured, confident businesswoman, Shetty emphasizes the difference,

There is no need for wanting to prove myself anymore. I think when you’re an actor, every release is having to prove yourself, you know, at the box-office, to the audiences. I don’t feel the need to do that anymore, which is a great space to be in.⁶¹

As Shetty’s declining involvement in films and her subsequent role as an “actor-turned-entrepreneur”⁶² is celebrated (“currently in the best phase of her life and it has nothing to do with donning the war paint and dancing around trees”⁶³), the Hindi film industry is castigated for its formulaic norms and conventions. With her erstwhile filmography now being read as the industry’s failure to realize her potential, her transmedia and corporate ventures become a

⁶⁰ Divia Thani Daswani, “Shilpa means business,” 86.

⁶¹ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta.

⁶² Divia Thani Daswani, “Shilpa means business,” 90.

⁶³ Shalini Sharma, “Shilpa Shetty: Her Constant Reinvention,” *Hi! Blitz*, August 2008, 82.

measure of her true ability – “if earlier hemmed in by the fate of her films, she has now slipped through an opportune eyelet into a whole new life.”⁶⁴ Writing in *Hi! Living*, a lifestyle magazine, journalist Shalini Sharms remarks,

Today, she is a far cry from the vivacious but somewhat vulnerable girl one knew a few years ago – one who sensed she had so much more to offer than being Hindi film industry’s best dancer. You could sense the impatience in Shetty then, the occasional bewilderment at her potential not being recognized even after years of unstinted hard work in the industry.⁶⁵

Shetty’s response to questions about her non-existent film career (“So where does that leave films? Has acting been put on the backburner for now?”⁶⁶) offers a critique of the Hindi film industry – “It’s really sad...I really feel that I am ready to, I am ripe, I really want to take on more challenging roles. But frankly, I am not offered it,”⁶⁷ “I’m passionate about acting, but there’s little to choose from. Now it all feels been-there-done-that.”⁶⁸

As the actress gushes about her new role – “I love the buzz when I enter my office. I feel like I am finally doing something in my life without wearing make-up...which gives me a great sense of achievement”⁶⁹ – her transformation is subsequently redefined in an emancipatory rhetoric, particularly in the context of Bollywood’s gendered dynamics. Traditionally circumscribed by the hegemonic diktats of the male-centric Hindi film industry, the heroine was

⁶⁴ Jasmine Ray, “Shilpa Shetty: Britain’s Hottest Diva,” *Hi! Blitz*, March 2007, 132.

⁶⁵ Shalini Sharma, “Shilpa Shetty: IPL’s Glamour Girl,” 48-50.

⁶⁶ Cheryl Ann-Couto, “Shilpa Shetty on love, cricket and how she got this hot!” 56.

⁶⁷ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Koel Purie Rinchet, *On the Couch with Koel*, Headlines Today. Telecast date: October 10, 2009.

⁶⁸ Divia Thani Daswani. “Shilpa means business,” 95.

⁶⁹ Shalini Sharma, “Shilpa Shetty: Her Constant Reinvention,” 85.

often reduced to simply essaying the role of the male protagonist's love interest, displaying her seductive charm in song and dance sequences. With the author-backed roles reserved for the male star, the female star's presence functioned primarily to fulfill the glamour quotient. As Shilpa Shetty comments,

The opportunities you get today, at least in the last 4-5 years, I think certainly has been a welcome change for the 'heroine.' But when I started around 17-18 years ago, there was very little that you could really do. And you were kind of relegated to just being a showpiece. You were typecast very easily, so I got typecast into becoming a glamorous heroine, and there was only that much that you could do.⁷⁰

Shetty's remark underlines Hindi cinema's hegemonic gender norms at work, and the marginality accorded to the female star. While the male star continued to romance with actresses, decades younger than him, his female counterpart found herself resigned to either maternal roles,⁷¹ or the inevitable recourse to matrimony and subsequent demise of her career. The recent shifts in Bollywood stardom, the emergence of the "star as brand," thus offers the Hindi film heroine new modes of engagement and dissemination of her star text. Endowed with her brand identity, the Bollywood female star can now leverage her star image across multiple sites and texts, and avail of opportunities hitherto denied to her. Interestingly, this emancipatory rhetoric seems to apply primarily in the case of the female star; for the Bollywood male star, his "brand value" is still very much anchored to his film career. Box-office failures thus invariably translate into the depletion of his "brand," unlike the female star, whose success as a transmedia celebrity

⁷⁰ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta.

⁷¹ In some instances, the female star would even find herself starring as the mother to her erstwhile romantic interest (Amitabh Bachchan and Rakhee in *Shakti*; Amitabh Bachchan and Waheeda Rehman in *Adalat*).

remains unaffected by her absence in the cinematic realm. For the Bollywood male star, his corporate investments and endorsements are intrinsically contingent on his film success. As Shah Rukh Khan remarks, “My business works because I’m working as an actor. The day I stop working as an actor, all my business will flop.”⁷² In contrast, Shilpa Shetty’s contemporary star persona underlines the liberatory rhetoric implicit in the Hindi film heroine’s emergent transmedia stardom. Discussing her numerous brand endorsements and corporate ventures, she remarks,

I’m really enjoying this slow and steady transition from actress to businesswoman. Very few women (in Bollywood) have gone on to doing things beyond films. And I feel very happy that I’ve been given the opportunity and the platform to leverage my name with so many different things, not just as a model, but as a brand. I want to take this forward.⁷³

In her new incarnate as the corporate diva, the “star as brand,” Shetty also embodies another crucial shift in discourses of female stardom – the *married* Hindi film heroine. In Bollywood annals, the married heroine was an aberration, an anomaly, whose conjugal status quo marked her as incapable of fulfilling the communal fantasies of her male audience. However, though marriage signaled the denouement of their professional careers, it also functioned to redeem their “fallen” status as public women. It was often the recourse to matrimony and motherhood that rescued them from the label of the “other woman,” and elided the remnants of their scandalous off-screen lives (Gandhi and Thomas, 1991). Consequently, this promise of respectability also circumscribed the erstwhile Hindi film heroine within the domestic realm, signifying her sanctified place as a wife and mother. However, with transmedia stardom now facilitating new

⁷² *Living with a Superstar*, Season 1, Episode 4, TLC. Telecast date: March 19, 2010.

⁷³ Divia Thani Daswani, “Shilpa means business,” 90.

avenues for the female star, she can continue her public trajectory, without disrupting her domestic and familial roles. As the married *and* successful Hindi film heroine, Shilpa Shetty embodies both the opportunities offered by emergent transmedia stardom as well as the post-liberalization rhetoric of the “New Indian Woman,” effortlessly juggling both family and career.⁷⁴

With her transnational celebrity stature and cultural currency facilitating the reinvention of her star image and public persona, as the “star as brand,” Shetty underlines the changing dynamics of Hindi film stardom. With films often relegated to the periphery, the contemporary Hindi film star is a multidimensional, transmedia personality, where the key to sustaining the stardom is enhanced media visibility. As female stars like Shilpa Shetty and Aishwarya Rai demonstrate, the emergence of the Bollywood star’s transmedia character has significantly altered hegemonic conventions of Hindi film female stardom.⁷⁵ However, in spite of the seemingly emancipatory gender rhetoric, a closer look at Shetty’s star text reveals some inherent complexities and contradictions.

As scholars like Neepa Majumdar (2001, 2009), Rosie Thomas (1991) and Behroze Gandhi (1991) have pointed out, unlike their male counterparts, who are defined predominantly by their professional accomplishments, public and media discourses of female stars have traditionally tended to emphasize their personal lives. For the contemporary Hindi film female star, despite her attempts at repositioning herself as a transmedia and brand entity, it is still her personal life, which configures and dominates her star text. In interviews, though Shetty is lauded for her numerous achievements and her new, reinvented star image, the focus invariably

⁷⁴ See Chapter 3 (Aishwarya Rai) for a detailed discussion of the “New Indian Woman” rhetoric.

⁷⁵ Despite the emancipatory rhetoric of transmedia stardom, the female star still gets paid much less for endorsements than her male counterpart.

reverts back to her personal life. After the perfunctory questions on *Celebrity Big Brother* and her corporate ventures, interviewers quiz her about the inevitable – When is she planning to get married? Is it going to be someone from the industry, or an outsider?⁷⁶ Will it be a big fat Indian wedding, or an intimate ceremony? Will her career take a backseat post-matrimony, or will she continue working? Unlike the male star, who often responds to questions on his personal life with either dismissive shrugs, or a terse “no comment,” for the female star, it almost becomes mandatory to explain her position. Speaking to the familiar rhetoric of the Indian woman as the custodian of the domestic space and subsequently, cultural ethos, Shetty is careful to emphasize her belief in matrimony and motherhood. This gendered discourse assumes further significance in the context of her own post-marriage star text, where she is no longer simply a Bollywood actress and savvy businesswoman, but in her new role as a wife, the custodian of the domestic realm.

On her Twitter page, the actress identifies herself as an “actor, entrepreneur *and* wife” [emphasis own], underlining the centrality of her marital status in her star text. Shetty’s emphasis and foregrounding of her familial role speaks to the hegemonic gendered rhetoric governing discourses of Hindi film stardom, and also, contemporary India. The “New Indian Woman” of post-liberalization India, though successful in her own right, still needs the domestic realm to reaffirm and complete her. Similarly, for Shilpa Shetty, her transformation can only be rendered complete when she finally “has it all” – a successful career, a doting husband, and of course, the ultimate affirmation, motherhood. Shetty’s 2009 wedding to London-based NRI businessman, Raj Kundra, and her subsequent star text underlines how the female star is still intrinsically tethered to hegemonic discourses of gender and domesticity. In her magazine and television interviews, she repeatedly emphasizes her husband’s role in her image makeover, attributing her

⁷⁶ Interview by Prabhu Chawla, *Seedhi Baat*, Aaj Tak, August 2007.

corporate initiatives to his business acumen and expertise, describing him as the man who “opened up a new world”⁷⁷ for her. As she credits Kundra for encouraging her to leverage her star image, facilitating the development of her brand identity, and managing the financial aspect while she is free to supervise the creative, Shilpa Shetty presents a story of female empowerment contingent on masculine affirmation and support.

Shilpa Shetty’s star text, her reinvention from a heroine to a “star as brand” and transmedia celebrity, is intrinsically tied up in multiple discourses that speak to an increasingly globalizing India – its attempt at connecting with its diasporic populace, the diaspora’s own changing notions of nationhood and citizenship; the nation’s avowed espousal of consumerism; discourses of modernity intersecting with hegemonic and dominant social diktats. Her star text also captures a particular moment in the national imaginary, and its cinematic counterpart, which is marked simultaneously by change and resistance, renewal and rupture. While the emergence of the “star as brand,” underlined in Shilpa Shetty’s own transformation, points to crucial shifts in discourses of Hindi film stardom, it also brings to light the contemporary Indian media environment, increasingly fragmented and synergistic, complementing the Bollywood star’s own fragmented persona.

⁷⁷ Shilpa Shetty, Interview by Koel Purie Rinchet.

Conclusion

“There is no pan-Indian Bollywood star”

A recent article in the leading English daily, *The Times of India*, proclaimed, “Script is the new hero in Bollywood,”¹ alluding to the success of films like *Vicky Donor* (dir. Shoojit Sircar, 2012), *Paan Singh Tomar* (dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia, 2012), and *Kahaani* (*Story*, dir. Sujoy Ghosh, 2012), whose claim to fame was not their A-list star casts, but rather, their well-scripted narratives. With non-formulaic and unconventional plots (*Vicky Donor* was about sperm donation and infertility; *Paan Singh Tomar* a biopic of a national athlete turned dacoit; and *Kahaani*, a taut thriller about a pregnant wife searching for her missing husband), the year’s surprise hits all had one thing in common – the absence of “star power.” As the article’s celebratory tone commended the new breed of intrepid Hindi film scriptwriters for “finding ways to take the audience to new territories,”² it also hinted at the reimagining of dominant discourses of Hindi film stardom. While the Bollywood star still functions as a key requisite for a film’s success, the exorbitant increase in star remuneration in recent years coupled with the urbane audience’s penchant for quirky, realistic “multiplex films” has prompted some filmmakers to look beyond the star, and focus instead on the script and storyline. As John Abraham, the producer of *Vicky Donor* and a popular Bollywood star himself, remarks, “You don’t need a huge star to entertain people. A good story told well will always get its due.”³ With A-list stars like Akshay Kumar, Ajay Devgan, Saif Ali Khan, and even Shah Rukh Khan failing to deliver at the box-office, the mere presence of the Bollywood star no longer suffices to guarantee a film’s success. For a cinematic idiom that

¹ Haimanti Mukerjee, “The script is the new hero in Bollywood,” *The Times of India*, 25 April 2012.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

has, for decades, faithfully regurgitated proven norms and conventions, identifying the “formula” is becoming increasingly difficult. As the popular seventies’ and eighties’ star Jeetendra laments,

One doesn’t understand what runs these days. I just can’t understand the film business today. There was a time when a top star or a set of top stars in a film could ensure that, at least for the first week, the film would draw good crowds. But today, a top team can produce a super-hit picture and then three weeks later, the same team can feature in another movie, which nobody even in the first week comes to see. So you can’t predict who is a top star! Stardom is something that doesn’t exist any more! It has all become a ‘picture-to-picture tamasha’⁴. If the film is good, then you will also get a good opening draw and it will do well. But, then, how do people become aware that a film is good or bad when it is something nobody has a formula to define? How do they smell out a film even before its release?⁵

Jeetendra’s exasperation with the contemporary industry dynamics underlines the shift in discourses of Hindi film stardom – the star no longer functions to unfailingly ensure a film’s commercial success and viability. However, this does not imply, in any way, that their “star aura” has diminished, but rather, signals their resignification as transmedia celebrities, television personalities, and brand endorsers. Though box-office standing still plays a crucial role (particularly in the case of male stars), the cinematic idiom has ceased to be the sole repository of Bollywood stardom. With increasing segmentation of narratives, audience demographics, and exhibition venues, the Bollywood star now straddles multiple venues and platforms. Consequently, the dissemination and circulation of their star image, similar to their income, have also become dispersed. Public relations, brand management, and media visibility are now hailed

⁴ *Tamasha* is a colloquial Hindi word, which roughly translated means, “drama.”

⁵ Saari, 2011: 142-143.

as the keywords. Neetu Singh, a popular seventies' heroine, emphasizes the contrast with the previous decades – “There was no media. There was [*sic*] just two magazines, and that's it. One was *Stardust* and [the other] *Filmfare*. And that's one or two interviews. Print media. That's it. There was no television. So, it's quite different now.”⁶ Singh's own recent trajectory – a comeback after thirty years with a “multiplex film” about a middle-class family's travails with rising inflation and consumerist desires (*Do Dooni Chaar*, dir. Habib Faisal, 2010) – is itself symbolic of Hindi film industry's changing dynamics. Describing her experience with the film's pre-release publicity and marketing, she exclaims, “It's too much pressure!...Getting dressed, *koi na koi aa raha hai* (someone or the other coming), then answering questions. I'm not used to all this, so for me, it was quite a revelation.” As Neetu Singh's comments illustrate, the changing diktats of Hindi film stardom are emblematic of the tsunamic shifts in the nation's media landscape, engendering in its wake, an increasingly hyperbolic and fragmented media environment. With the constant emphasis on “grabbing eyeballs,” the Bollywood star has morphed from merely a cinematic personality to a transmedia celebrity, an all-pervasive, ubiquitous presence in film theaters, television screens, magazine features, advertisement billboards, and social networking sites.

Confronted with a film industry (and a nation) in flux, how does then one map the Bollywood star to the national imaginary? During my first week in Mumbai, a Hindi film scriptwriter, hearing about my project, remarked, “There is no pan-Indian Bollywood star.”⁷ Instead, as he pointed out, there now existed multiple stars, each catering to a different audience segment – Shah Rukh Khan and Hrithik Roshan for the NRI diaspora; Ranbir Kapoor and Imran

⁶ Neetu Singh, Interview by Anuradha Sengupta, *Beautiful People*, CNBC-TV 18. Telecast date: 23 October 2010.

⁷ Personal Interview.

Khan for the urbane youth; Abhay Deol and Farhan Akhtar for the “multiplex audience”; and Salman Khan for the “single-screen audience.” While stars like Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan, and even Shah Rukh Khan (in his nineties’ narratives) had previously presented the national imaginary with its cinematic ideal, encapsulating in their on-screen renditions the dilemmas and travails of the nation, contemporary Bollywood stardom fails to offer such an unequivocal, singular embodiment. Rather, what we have are multiple avatars, underlining the Hindi film star’s inability to subscribe to a generic, all-encompassing classification. While the category of the “pan-Indian Hindi film star,” similar to those of the “pan-Indian Hindi film” and the “pan-Indian Hindi film audience,” reveals increasing fragmentation, it also, consequently reiterates the crucial shifts in both the national imaginary and its cinematic counterpart – post-liberalization India’s transition from a socialist ethos to a consumerist ontology, and popular Hindi cinema’s remaking from a “national” to a “global”/“transnational” cultural commodity.

As I underline the Bollywood star’s continuing cultural and cinematic currency, I also reiterate his/her role in mediating and negotiating the collective anxieties and aspirations of the national imaginary. Despite the changing dynamics of Hindi film stardom, I argue that the star can still be employed as a lens to examine the pertinent issues confronting the nation. In their own inherent contradictions and incongruities, contemporary Bollywood stars encompass the fractured, schizophrenic character of post-liberalization India, where the rhetoric of “India Shining” exists alongside farmer suicides and sectarian violence. Their star texts reveal not only their attempt to navigate the multiple discourses of global/local, national/transnational, tradition/modernity, but also, millennial India’s own response to the forces of globalization. By focusing on the Hindi film star, I attempt to not only address a crucial gap in the existing

scholarship on Indian cinema, but also, highlight the relevance of the contemporary Bollywood star in enumerating questions of national identity, class, gender, diasporic citizenship, and transnational cultural economics. I argue that a closer look at Bollywood stars underlines not merely their articulation of pertinent social and cultural questions, but more significantly, the inherent vulnerability of the national narrative. Thus, each of my case studies, while enumerating specific aspects of post-liberalization India, also reveals the underlying fissures and rumblings. As I discuss, the narrative of contemporary India is replete with contradictions, encompassing moments of both renewal and rupture, a rhetoric that is explicitly underlined in the figure of the Bollywood star.

Mapping discourses of Bollywood stardom onto the national imaginary and employing stars as sites of mediation and negotiation, I examine what each star reveals about the nation and its travails. As I have argued, my first case study, Amitabh Bachchan, signifies, in his own transformation, the crucial shift in the national imaginary. The reinvention of his star text – from the socialist icon, the “Angry Young Man,” to the consumerist conduit, the “Benevolent Patriarch” – corresponds to the nation’s disavowal of Nehruvian socialism and subsequent, enthusiastic espousal of consumerism. However, Bachchan’s transformation as the “nation’s pater” is not without its complications and underlying tensions. The public critique of his son’s ostentatious wedding, his overt religiosity and adherence to “archaic” rituals and traditions, his reiteration of hegemonic values, his political bedfellows, and his new proximity to the Hindu Right, all seem to be disconcertingly at odds with his new reincarnate as the “hip,” “cool” “Benevolent Patriarch.” However, it is this very contradictory nature, underlined by a constant and continuous struggle between tradition and modernity, between the remnants of a socialist past and the promise of a consumerist future, that define contemporary India. The contemporary

national imaginary's schizophrenic ethos is also underlined by Shah Rukh Khan's star text. Khan, in his off-screen and on-screen trajectories, as the urbane, cosmopolitan, middle-class Indian, encompasses the hopes and aspirations of the nation's burgeoning middle-class. However, his embodiment of "global" Indian citizenship is complicated by his religious affiliation, which threatens to subsume and negate his subscription to his "true" homeland (the nation). Shah Rukh Khan's Muslim subjectivity, while facilitating his delineation as the "ideal (minority) citizen," also functions to ostracize him as the perpetual "traitor" – a rhetoric that I map to the rise of the Hindu Right, its divisive politics and sectarian violence that disrupts and brings into question contemporary India's secular credentials. Khan's tenuous claims to his Indian citizenship and national belonging thus underline the nation's own rather fragile claims to a secular identity, the Bollywood star's vulnerability paralleling that of the nation's.

Aishwarya Rai and Shilpa Shetty, also, similarly reiterate the inherent contradictions and underlying fissures of contemporary India, and consequently, discourses of female stardom. Signifying the nineties' iconic figure of the "New Indian Woman," Rai presents the perfect confluence of tradition and modernity, millennial India's response to the cultural threat implicit in globalization. Though her recent star text, as the "dutiful daughter-in-law," obedient, compliant and conforming, might seem contradictory to her embodiment of the "New Indian Woman," I argue that it is precisely this duality and inherent disparity that defines discourses of contemporary Indian womanhood. In her star persona, as the "consummate professional" and the "dutiful daughter-in-law," Aishwarya Rai encapsulates the rhetoric of the 'New Indian Woman,' and the Indian middle-class aspirational dream to "have it all." Shilpa Shetty's star text, as a transnational celebrity, reveals a similar negotiation between global modernity and "Indianness." It is Shetty's subscription and performativity of her "Indianness" that facilitates her reinvention

as a transnational star. Thus, in both Rai and Shetty's case, it is their "Indianness," or rather, the authentic display of their "Indianness" that helps them secure and maintain the subscription to global/transnational fame and celebritydom. Furthermore, as Rai and Shetty's examples illustrate, despite the emancipatory rhetoric of transmedia stardom, particularly for the female star, matrimony and motherhood still function as crucial signifiers of respectability. However, it is her new avatar as a corporate and brand entity that facilitates the continuation of the married heroine's career. Shilpa Shetty's star text, or rather, the reinvention of her star text, and her subsequent remaking as a "savvy businesswoman" and "Brand Shilpa," thus underlines the changing dynamics of Bollywood stardom.

In the past two decades, as the nation grappled with the aftermath of the nineties' economic liberalization, and the onslaught of global and transnational cultural flows, the Hindi film industry also witnessed tsunamic shifts. The increasing segmentation of narratives, audience demographics, exhibition venues, and media platforms has consequently redefined the formulaic notions of both the Hindi film and the Hindi film star. No longer functioning as merely a cinematic personality, the Bollywood star is now a television host, an awards ceremony presenter, a brand endorser, and even a corporate entity. For post-liberalization India, and its explicit espousal of the nation's new consumerist ontology, it is precisely the remaking of the Hindi film star "as a brand" that further underlines and validates the national agenda. Thus, though the contemporary Bollywood star might present a marked departure from his/her predecessors, the umbilical cord with the national imaginary still remains intact.

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