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STRADDLING MULTIPLE BORDERS: EXPLORING THE CONFLICTED 'SELF-IDENTITY' THROUGH DIASPORIC CINEMA

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Abstract:

The diasporic filmmaking, located within multiple sites of diaspora space, has been a critical mode for articulating and experiencing the diaspora. Diasporic cinema interrogates and imagines the meaning of home, belonging and citizenship and inversely brings forth the centrality of the national and transnational to our theorization of cinema and media. This cinema is not a pre-existing or self-evident formation. In other words, filmmaking within the diaspora did not necessarily and immediately inaugurate and establish a Diasporic cinema that simply extends forward from some original films. Frequently, diasporic films are identified as those films made by diasporic filmmakers who feature diasporic thematics made in an independent or interstitial mode. For some, diasporic cinema is synonymous with Bollywood itself, as both are deployed as indices for the liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian nation state during the last three decades. Diasporic films are identified with Bollywood not only as they frequently have transnational modes of production, distribution and circulation but also because Bollywood itself is seen to be thematically diasporic-centric. In this context, Bollywood Bound is a documentary film where the national continues to exert the force of its presence even within the transnational filmmaking practices. The paper traces two journeys – that of the actor seeking fame and that of the person seeking place.

Keywords: *Diasporic-centric, interstitial, transnational, globalization, etc.*

The term 'diaspora' generally emphasises physical and psychic displacement from a stable national home. Thinking of the diaspora not as an empirical category but as a conceptual frame, Diasporic critique brings into question the centrality of a fixed and stable home where both homeland and diaspora are understood as inter-related and mutually constituted spaces. "The concept of diaspora space foregrounds the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put" (Brah, 16). In this entanglement, the diaspora space has become a critical means for understanding global and transnational processes within the post-colonial nation states.

Diasporic filmmaking, located within multiple sites of diaspora space, has been a critical mode for articulating and experiencing the diaspora. Diasporic cinema interrogates and imagines the meaning of home, belonging and citizenship and inversely brings forth the centrality of the national and transnational to our theorization of cinema and media. This cinema is not a pre-existing or self-evident formation. In other words, filmmaking within the diaspora did not necessarily and immediately inaugurate and establish a Diasporic cinema that simply extends forward from some original films. Frequently, diasporic films are identified as those films made by diasporic filmmakers who feature diasporic thematics made in an independent or interstitial mode.

First, the geopolitical trajectory and the social identity of the filmmaker are identified as significant to the aesthetics and narratives of the films. It is, nevertheless, imperative to attend to the



subjectivity and location of the filmmaker within society and media cultures. Second, diasporic cinema frequently engages thematics associated with colonialism, nationalism and capitalism, through depictions of diasporic dislocation, citizenship, racism and loss. Third, in addition to the material and geopolitical location of the filmmaker and diasporic thematics, diasporic cinema is often identified as a genre by the ecology of its production and circulation as much as its content and style.

Most diasporic films are seen as being located outside of dominant national cinemas and media industries: they are considered to be independent or interstitial because of their supposed marginalised mode of production within the context of xenophobia, empire, nationalisms and global capitalism. Diasporic cinema can provide an analytical model for understanding cinema at a variety of scales so that diasporic films can be located within multiple cinemas that span the spatial continuum of cinemas from minority and regional to national and transnational cinemas.

For some, diasporic cinema is synonymous with Bollywood itself, as both are deployed as indices for the liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian nation state during the last three decades. Diasporic films are identified with Bollywood not only as they frequently have transnational modes of production, distribution and circulation but also because Bollywood itself is seen to be thematically diasporic-centric. In this context, *Bollywood Bound* is a documentary film where the national continues to exert the force of its presence even within the transnational filmmaking practices.

The documentary follows four Indian-Canadians who journey to Mumbai, the home of India's film industry, Bollywood, in search of fame and fortune. However, for these children of immigrants reared on Punjabi/Hindi culture from a distance, the dreams they chase aren't just of stardom but of belonging. The realities of returning to their family homeland rarely resemble their fantasies, and the subjects are caught between two places: 'too Indian' for Canada and 'too Canadian' for India. The film is an exploration of the relationship between NRIs and Hindi Cinema.

We remain a strange community, struggling to find our place in the world – torn between a country which has yet to fully let us in and a country we have yet to let go. Bollywood films allow us the illusion that somehow, we can go home again. As Ruby Bhatia puts it in the film, “weekdays we'd be totally Canadian and on the weekends we'd be totally Indian... salwaar kameez, Diwali functions, Holi functions and the songs...we'd always dance to Hindi film songs and the more you knew about the movies, the more Indian you were...” (*Bollywood Bound*, 2001).

There are four central people in the film who are at various stages of success. Neeru Bajwa is a young, candid 18 year old who goes from Canada to India when a director calls her promising her a screen test for his first film. Vikram and Vekeana Dhillon are a brother and sister team who have been in Bombay for eight years and have had some degree of success as VJs but are still waiting for the mythical big break. And finally, there is the enigmatic Ruby Bhatia, who will surely make the history books as India's first star VJ and has tasted the kind of fame the others are seeking.

There are two journeys documented here – that of the actor seeking fame and that of the person seeking place, both in some ways are fantasies, as ephemeral and as intangible as those incredible epics we grew up watching. It is to this end that many film clips and film songs have been used so that they become part of their own deconstruction and the poignancy of certain moments becomes much more intense. Neeru responds to Bombay like an immigrant shocked at the reality of a foreign land. Part of her disappointment is the realisation that India was far more complex than the fantastically simple one they had grown up with.

What draws one to her and Vikram is their absolute identification with Hindi film stars and their desire to become the next Bachchan and the next Sri Devi. They were never interested in Hollywood for their idols were made in India. One of the central questions asked in the film is whether they would have made that journey back if North America was a place which recognised the complexity of their experience – if they recognised themselves in their adopted landscape, would they



return to the country their parents left behind? The director, Nisha Pahuja, set out to make a film really for NRIs, specifically for a generation of NRIs for whom Bollywood meant the ability to escape from the strangeness of their skin. Living a dual life is not at all unusual – living between worlds, shifting and negotiating two different realities is commonplace. Though there is no doubt that this is a difficult space to inhabit, it is also an exciting place, for they are on the cusp of something. In some sense they are pioneers, telling their stories, creating a history for themselves – a history of the search to find that elusive history, that phantom ‘zameen’ they could claim as theirs – with no borrowed pasts.

Bollywood, India’s vast filmmaking centre produces over three hundred films annually, which is far ahead of Hollywood. Every day many descend on the city of Mumbai with Bollywood dreams in their eyes. They come from the fields of Punjab, the plains of Gujarat, of Rajasthan and, more recently, from the suburbs of Canada. No one knows more about their dreams than Indo-Canadian filmmaker Nisha Pahuja. The 34 year old followed four fellow Indo-Canadians on their trip from Canada to India, the country with the largest film industry in the world. As they crossed the seven seas with stars in their eyes, Nisha was there, camera ready to roll. Thus, in the film *Bollywood Bound*, she captures their every hope, tear and frustration through her lens. The film, which marks Nisha’s directorial debut, won her rave reviews at Toronto’s Hot Docs Film Festival. The film was shot at one go, while the filmmaker was in Mumbai between 2000 and 2001. The film moves between India and Canada using innovative cinematography, and has a remarkable mixture of documentary reality and stylish surreal video techniques to meld emotion and action. The film has some actual shooting sequences from a few films and comes interspersed with song and dance.

Nisha also tries tracing the history of Indian cinema along the way. The song from *Silsila, yeh kahan aa gaye hum* fills the background as the aspiring stars land in Mumbai symbolising their quest for a new or more substantial identity. But the metro that looked flawless and beautiful in the movies is full of chaos, beggars, splashing rain, heat and dejection. Success in Indian cinema does not seem such a distant dream to these young actors. On their Canadian home ground, they would consider themselves lucky to land small ethnic roles in television or movies, but feel they can hit gold in Mumbai. *Bollywood Bound* examines the ways in which these four very different young people experience both rejection and exhilaration; their childhood dreams sometimes close at hand, sometimes tantalisingly out of reach.

For filmmaker Nisha Pahuja, the film is one of self-appraisal and recognition of the South Asian identity. She understands the need to tell stories and be more visible through art and literature. The documentary film also allowed her to escape her own skin. In the West, one always lives with the shame of being Indian or brown. One always tries to hide ones identity and one’s culture. But the film helped her discover herself as it taught her to get over the shame of not being white and that being Indian could be very beautiful and very heroic, just like the movies.

The issue of belonging also comes through well in the film. The aspiring stars are ‘too Indian’ in the Canadian mosaic and ‘too Western’ in the Indian ambience. Nisha’s own journey to Mumbai was filled with incredible heartache and sadness. It was like homecoming when she went to Mumbai after a gap of almost twenty years. She was shocked to see the satellite-influenced city, with rich kids emulating the western culture on the streets of the city. By the end of the film, Pahuja started feeling for the actors. She had started to share their dreams and each rejection came as a personal blow to her. She started to hope for them and badly wanted for them to succeed, for, somewhere in their success, lay her own personal victory.

The world is more complicated than it often appears and *Bollywood Bound* is all about the peculiar global attraction of the Indian film industry. The four characters with their western influence seem to be considered an asset and this paradox lies at the heart of their story. Ruby Bhatia, a former Miss India-Canada, is the most successful and the most big-headed of the four. When she isn’t



introducing pop videos on Star TV, she is swanning about in rags, playing the pious Hindu. If she provides the comic turn, the most interesting character is young Neeru, who at the time of filming was still trying to get her first screen test. Neeru claims never to have felt at home in Canada, and this spiel is accompanied by mocked-up footage of her walking along a high-school corridor in a sari, with the other students pointing and staring. When she gets to Mumbai, and things aren't working out for her, Neeru quickly has a change of heart and she starts hating the city. Her frustration is neatly captured when she tries to call her parents from a phone box as a truck trundles past, with an audience of street urchins watching as she shouts the hotel phone number over and over again. In this way the individual stories are strangely wedded to the broader themes.

Bollywood Bound tells us less about Bollywood than it does about the complicated relationship between culture, ethnicity and taste. It is a fascinating and spectacular journey of finding oneself amidst two identities. What is poignant about *Bollywood Bound* is its focus on the seepage of the process of thousands of mere mortals wishing to become stars among the South Asians in the diaspora. The documentary systematically portrays the urge to go to Mumbai and make it big on the celluloid screen. But the question this documentary attempts to unravel is whether we know about the millions of people who do not make it to the coveted celebrity status. Pahuja and Kazmi's camera capture the journey of four such aspirants and begin with their initial identification of Indianness among the diaspora with the filmy world. From the initial identification to the actual attempts at getting auditions filled with many disappointments, are all poignantly caught by both. The narrative is tinged with pathos, sadness and some victories. Coming from communities in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, the common experience shared by the four characters was the lack of cultural identification with anything they experienced in Canadian media representation and the mutual desire to live out their Bollywood-inspired dreams. Cinematic cultural identification experienced by the four youths was ironically not with Canadian culture, but with an American myth that perpetuates the notion of a white and wealthy nation. Mass consumed Hollywood does not feel the need to change its recipe for success to appease other markets. The force of Bollywood industry far surpasses Hollywood in both production and consumption, with a staggering output of over 900 films each year churning out of India. Bollywood is undeniably the world leader in film production. With this in mind, it is easily understood why the myth of Bollywood would be alluring to India's diasporic communities who find self-identity in its cultural reproductions. In these mass-produced and mass-consumed films, their native heritage is idealised and real Indians are represented beyond the displaced stereotype as found in most local offerings. The only trouble, thereafter, is that Bollywood, much like its American counterpart, is based entirely in fantasy-based representation of a fabricated ideal.

Understanding Bollywood through a transnational lens, Bollywood can be described as having at least three connotations. First is the inherently hybrid constituency of Bollywood, second is its role of a global conveyor of Indianness to diverse audiences and third is that it acts as a means of negotiating both Indianness and its transformation, particularly when representing and being received by diasporic populations. All the youths in *Bollywood Bound* desired to emulate the songs and dance of Bollywood cinema, but more than anything they longed to experience their culture, the culture of their parents, glorified on the silver screen and lacking from their everyday existence. Set in their homeland India, itself an estranged and exotic place for second generation Canadians, their identification with Bollywood is the equivalent of those chasing the American dream of fame and fortune in Hollywood. And this remains the conflicted reality of self-identification in the 21st century.



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