Contested Spaces: Performances of Marginality in Bollywood Cinema

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ABSTRACT

As the most dominant cultural industry in India and with an increasing audience worldwide, Bollywood is becoming a louder participant in global popular culture. Challenging Eurocentric perceptions of inadequacy, this study seeks out performances of marginality that destabilise, disturb and dislocate the apparent hegemonic modality of modern Bollywood. In considering the representation of the other in popular Bollywood, I uncover marginal genres, themes, locations and gender representations. Contested Spaces: Performances of Marginality in Bollywood Cinema traverses the complex relationship between a nation and its cinema, and contributes and connects to a rapidly growing conversation with Bollywood and its others.

This thesis attends to performances of marginality and otherness in popular Bollywood cinema by critically examining the production of contested spaces. In finding spaces where marginalised identities jostle for recognition, I assess the degree to which Bollywood cinema represents the Other. Driven by the urge to uncover alternative performances, I resist Bollywood scholarship that contends Bollywood cinema merely performs a conservative version of national ideology and western scholarship that subordinates Bollywood to Hollywood. I locate this thesis within a setting that contests the idea that globalisation has destroyed the nation, by demonstrating that there are radical and resistant ruptures forming at the margin.

My aims in this thesis are twofold: one, to challenge the myth that Bollywood performs a homogenised rendition of the Nation, and two, to illuminate Bollywood’s increasingly inclusive experiments with the Other. In closely reading twelve popular films I rewrite, or rather restage the performance of national identity through Bollywood, by finding that even within the most mainstream films there are moments of marginality that contest rigid academic notions of Bollywood and nationalism. This thesis advocates for a thoroughly Indiacentric analysis and in seeking occurrences of otherness, travels to new and contested spaces.
Candidate’s Declaration: This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
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INTRODUCTION

The Contested City: Mumbai/Bombay

“Bombay was central, had been so from the moment of its creation: the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities. In Bombay all Indias met and merged. In Bombay, too, all-India met what-was-not-India, what came across as the black water to flow into our veins. Everything North of Bombay was North India, everything South of it was the South. To the East lay India’s East, and to the West, the world’s West. Bombay was central; all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators, and everybody talked at once” – Salman Rushdie, The Moor’s Last Sigh (350).

In beginning its story in the old city of Bombay and ending in the new city of Mumbai, this thesis stands on contested ground. It is therefore, important at the outset, to contextualise the location that is home to both the Bollywood film industry and this study. As the term(s) Bollywood and Bombay Cinema suggest, the city is as integral to cinema as cinema is to the city. While India is a country composed of varying ethnic, linguistic and religious traditions, Bombay has always been “India’s most diverse city” (Jacobson). With a long and fabled history of migration, the city is home to religious minority groups such as the Parsi, Jewish, Catholic and Muslim communities. Drawing from that same well of sentimentality that Rushdie does, poet Jeet Thayil laments the loss of the Bombay of old, saying in an interview, “Bombay and Mumbai are two very different cities, which will never meet” (qtd in Oikonomakou). Thomas Blom Hansen echoes these sentiments in Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Post-Colonial Bombay, suggesting, “most people in the city...will agree that Mumbai is not Bombay” (4). As a result of the loss of old Bombay, it is often remembered in popular culture and in personal memory as an almost-mythical, secular, inclusive and harmonious utopia. But Bombay is, if anything, is a city of contradictions; one that opened her arms to the floods of economic migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and other countries across India that spilled onto her shores desperate to succeed; and also one where the devastating riots of December 1992 and January 1993 shattered the city’s “mythical cosmopolitanism” (Hansen 4). Soon after the riots city underwent major
traumatic spatial and social alterations that culminated in one final, swift change.

In November of 1995, Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai. The State Government, headed by regional party Shiv Sena and the Hindu nationalist Bharaitya Janata Party, declared it was doing away with the residual colonial legacy of ‘Bombay’ by naming the renewed city after the Hindu Goddess MumbaDevi, the patron of the agri (salt collectors) and koli (fisher-folk), the original inhabitants of the seven islands that once constituted Bombay. Aiming to undo the “perversion” (Hansen 1) of the naming act committed by the Portuguese and British, the Shiv Sena’s push to rename the city was seemingly straightforward – naturalising the anglicised word Bombay by converting it into the indigenous Marathi language as Mumbai. But the name-change had political and social ramifications far beyond the semantic. By tying its new name to the pre-Colonial past, the aims of the political act were admirable, but in practice they culturally fragmented the city, shattering the “teeming hinterland of the city with its layered communities” (xxiv) that Homi Bhabha so fondly remembers. In an article in the Express Tribune, writer Vivek H. Dehejia recalls the city that was:

“That lost Bombay, a romantic city of the imagination that struggles to articulate its dying existence in the quotidian commerce of Mumbai, was always premised on the coexistence of its many founding communities, ethnicities and faiths.”

In Imaginary Homelands, Salman Rushdie writes:

“Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim” (10).

The Bombay that sits upon land reclaimed from the sea forms the contested location that this thesis is so devoted to. As a city, Bombay is imperative to Bollywood on and off the screen. My use of the old name (which many people still choose to do) is partly to evoke the open-mindedness the city once stood for (however mythic such an imagining may be), but given that half the films
studied here hail from a time when the city was in fact Bombay, for ease of reading I continue to refer to the city as Bombay, even when referring to films and events after 1995. Hansen gestures to the hybridity of the city, writing on (parts of) the city’s opposition to the official name-change:

“In this name, it was argued, was contained a unique experience of colonial and postcolonial modernity—dynamic, intensely commercial, heterogeneous, chaotic, and yet spontaneously tolerant and open-minded. This was the Bombay of ethnic and religious mixing, of opportunities, of rags-to-riches success stories, of class solidarity, of artistic modernism and hybridized energies that so many writers have celebrated in novels and poetry. Obviously there were many different ideas of Bombay” (4).

In the end, there are competing stories of the city, and the terms Bombay, Mumbai and Bollywood are perhaps as conflicted as the city they hail from. As Rosie Thomas contends, referring to the use of the words Mumbai and Bollywood, “both terms are today crucially marked by who speaks them and from where” (4). In this sense, Bombay and Mumbai mean different things to different people; and like all great stories, the version depends on who is telling the tale.

This study is also born of the Bombay of my own memories: a city where a trip to the local chaiwallah was an opportunity to voraciously debate the merits of the latest Bollywood release; a city where an Uncle and I spent a monsoonal Sunday watching his favourite film Kashmir Ki Kali (‘Blossom of Kashmir’, dir. Shakti Samanta, 1964), twice over to “relive the jadoo”; a city where an ageing Muslim Aunty coaxed me off the street to show me a treasured old photograph of her as a young woman next to Amitabh Bachchan; a city where friends still cut their birthday cakes in front of Shahrukh Khan’s bungalow Mannat each year to make a wish and to say they spent their birthday with Shahrukh; and a city where a rickshaw driver with deep brown and gold-flecked eyes named Ali serenaded me with filmi ghazals along a slow-moving Mohammed Ali road because I said I liked Mohammed Rafi. These anecdotes may be slight and personal but they demonstrate a city, and indeed, a country’s devotion to cinema. To know Bollywood is to love it, and to know Bombay, the same.
Bombay’s financial foundations rested largely on the opium trade of the 1800s, so it is not by accident that the city is often characterised by works of art as a kind of hallucinatory vision. During the heady days of the opium trade, from 1800 until 1940, the land transformed from a disparate collective of islands to a city proper. The East India Company’s two premier exports, opium and raw cotton, proved pivotal in accruing capital for the city’s development as Parsi ship owners helped the company send large chests of opium to China each year. It was opium that ultimately connected the newly minted city of Bombay to the global capitalist economy. In Thayil’s ode to Bombay and her opium dens, *Narcopolis*, his protagonists writes “I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay” (7). This representation is one that still lingers in Indian art and in Bollywood that evokes the heady magic of the city. As the woozy and intoxicating centre of India, Bombay was decidedly decentralised in its early construction. The city grew rapidly as the metropolis sprawled around the sea, taking in large swathes of land and colonising slums and mansions in her wake. As the number of its citizens grew faster than the city could handle, spaces once reserved for farms became slums, houses became apartments and as with all great cities, the face and spirit of the city began to dramatically alter. Thayil begins *Narcopolis* as follows: “Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story...a great and broken city” (1) and it is this great and broken city that forms the land this thesis travels through. As I am invested in an exploration of those in the margins, it is fitting I continue to use the city’s old name. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to rescue and reclaim the marginalised identities shunned by both Bollywood and Mumbai.

**Bollywood: Form and Function**

India is a nation infatuated with cinema. As the world’s largest cinema-going, cinema-producing and cinema-consuming nation; cinema is a national obsession. The Indian film industry as a whole accounts for films produced in languages such as Urdu, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Malayalam. These industries each have varying linguistic, cultural and aesthetic
styles, and there are also devoted art and parallel cinema industries produced in languages such as Hindi, English, Bengali, along with crossover diasporic cinema, documentary films, niche horror and science-fiction films and so on. But of all these industries, Bollywood cinema is by far the “largest player” (Mishra 3) as it is the most globally visible and commercially successful. To refer to ‘Bollywood’ is to refer to the Bombay-based Hindi-productions¹ that form the most significant part of the Indian film industry. The entire industry has an output of approximately 1,000 films per year produced in over 12 different languages, which makes India, when considering output and tickets sold per year, the largest film industry in the world (Punathambekar). Bollywood accounts for some 150-200 of these films, making it the largest producer of all the regional industries. Bollywood is therefore the most dominant cinema in India for two reasons – one, India’s filmmaking history began in Bombay, and two, when Hindi was adopted in 1950 as the ‘official language’ of India the government of the time invested heavily in Bollywood’s potential for the ideological advancement of the nation. These factors posited Bollywood’s potential to become the closest thing to a ‘national’ cinema. Bombay saw its first film in July 1896 with a screening of the Lumière Brothers’ first film at Watson’s Hotel (at roughly the same time as the rest of the filmmaking world). Then, in 1913 Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (fondly remembered as Dadasaheb Phalke (the father of cinema) produced the first Indian feature film² called Raja Harishchandra³ (King Harishchandra), a silent film (as sound technology was not yet available) inspired by Phalke’s epiphany while watching The Life of Christ three years prior. In the Marathi journal Navyug, Phalke wrote an article describing his transformative experience:

“I experienced a strange indescribable feeling while I was unconsciously clapping hands at the sight of the noble incidents in Christ’s life. While the life of Christ was rolling fast before my physical eyes I was mentally visualizing the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramchandra, their Gokul and

¹ The Bollywood film also includes dialogue spoken in Urdu and English but to a far lesser degree.
² There was a small number of films produced in India prior to Raja Harischandra, but they were far shorter and more rudimentary productions.
³ Raja Harischandra was a Marathi film, making the Marathi film industry the oldest of all the regional cinemas in India.
Ayodhya. I was gripped by a strange spell. I bought another ticket and saw the film again. This time I felt my imagination taking shape on the screen. Could this really happen? Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen? The whole night passed in this mental agony” (54).

Then, in 1931 the first Indian talkie, *Alam Ara* (‘The Ornament of the World’) (dir. Ardeshir Irani) was released, and the rest was history.

**Melodrama & Magic: The Masala Film**

The Bollywood film has evolved over time to develop an entirely unique and particular aesthetic. Bollywood has an aesthetic referred to as *masala*; a word that references its blend of popular elements of tragedy, comedy, romance, action and drama. Gehlawat refers to Bollywood as a “hyperkinetic cinema” (xxiii), gesturing to its sometimes-frenetic style. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Rushdie refers to Bollywood cinema as an “Epico-mythico-tragico-comico-super-sexy-high-masala-art” (148). As it is the prevailing genre, form and style in Bollywood, it is consequently something this study encounters numerously. As per Rushdie’s description, the masala film is genre bending, combining elements of genres such as action or romance, and twisting them into something entirely unique. Rather than debate the rigour of the term masala, I use it, as most scholars do, as a kind of blanket term that gestures to the hybridity and uniqueness of the Bollywood form. Influenced by a cultural pastiche of origins including old Parsi theatre traditions; sacred Hindu religious texts, particularly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; ancient Urdu and Muslim cultural plays; Marathi *natya sangeet* and *tamasha*; Sanskrit oral dramas; popular street plays; varied storytelling traditions from the various states, tribes and castes across India; and popular Hollywood musicals; Bollywood is of its own. As it stands, ‘Masala’ and ‘Bollywood’ have come to be interchangeable terms, with both evoking imagery of colourful costumes, lavish sets, extensively choreographed song-dance sequences, passionate romances and dramatic action-sequences. For a film to be considered a masala film, it generally requires the following traits: the appearance of at least two major Bollywood stars; 6-7 song-dance

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*The film was released just four years after America produced its first film with sound, *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crossland, 1927).*
sequences; no explicit sex-scenes (and traditionally, no kissing); a running length of 2.5 to 3 hours long; an intermission; a complex story in which two lovers must overcome various impediments (be it in the form of a villain, disapproving parents, an accident etc.) to their happiness; and an obligatory happy ending. Gokulsing and Dissanayake explain further:

“Bollywood plots have tended to be melodramatic; it frequently employs formulaic ingredients such as — star-crossed lovers and angry parents, love triangles, family ties, sacrifice, corrupt politicians, kidnappers, conniving villains, courtesans with hearts of gold, long-lost relatives and siblings separated by fate, dramatic reversals of fortune, and convenient coincidences” (28-31).

In Hindi, the word masala refers specifically to a combination of spices used in cooking to release the perfect blend of complimentary and opposing flavours.

Given the confusion surrounding the use of the term, there is contention about whether the masala film constitutes a genre in Bollywood. Academic theorists including Mazumdar, Gehlawat and others distilled particular masala traits, but genre remains problematic for Bollywood, because by definition the masala film exhibits numerous generic traits. For example blockbuster film *Sholay* (*‘Embers’, dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975), popularly considered the best Bollywood film of all time, contained elements so synonymous with the classic Hollywood Western that it was referred to as a “curry eastern” for its adherence to the genre. The term *masala* was first coined in relation to Bollywood in the 1970s and referred to a particular all-genre inclusive style best seen in films by directors Ramesh Sippy, Manmohan Desai and scriptwriters Javed Akhtar and Salim Khan. For the purposes of this study though, masala is best conceptualised as the dominant and pervasive style in Bollywood. When referring to whether a film is worth one’s time and money there is a common saying in India, “*paisa-vasool*”, that translates to the English phrase ‘money’s worth’. The saying underscores the need for a film to possess elements of the masala style in order to be successful.

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5 Popular Bollywood films in the last five to ten years have begun showing ‘full kiss’ scenes, with even the famous stars such as Deepika Padukone and Ranbir Kapoor being shown kissing onscreen.
The Bollywood audience (typically) demands a film that contains the gamut of human experience, a-la the masala film.

As a result of the prevailing masala-formula or style, Bollywood is self-referential and self-reflexive in the extreme. The successful Bollywood film demands a deep audience register of prior Bollywood films because contained within each film and each character is a repository of those that came before. The blockbuster masala film *Om Shanti Om* (dir. Farah Khan, 2007) (itself heavily inspired by the Rishi Kapoor-starrer *Karz* (‘Debt’, dir. Subhash Ghai, 1980)) is a perfect example; in it Shahrukh Khan plays a character inspired by Rishi Kapoor’s role in *Karz*. The film opens with a song-dance sequence in which Khan, as Om, is watching Rishi Kapoor singing *Om Shanti Om* in the hit song-dance number taken from *Karz*. Om imagines himself in Kapoor’s place and takes over his role, singing along to the lyrics on-stage before his daydream is shattered. The entire film functions as homage to the heady days of 1970s Bollywood cinema, with each scene, character, song, moment and dialogue referencing a film before it. Given this cycle of reperformance and repetition, Vinay Lal contends that there is often a “limited cast of characters” (229) in Bollywood because the conventions of masala mean that the Bollywood film often impersonates other films.

**A Song and Dance**

The single most defining and unique feature of the Bollywood film and the thing that most separates it most from Hollywood films (aside from musicals) is the song-dance sequence. Largely extra-diegetic; the sequence offers up voyeurism, comedy, romance, tragedy and thrills in equal measure. The sequence often functions as a spectacle that displays desires otherwise proscribed by the narrative by turning a private romantic or sexual moment into a public one. In enabling the hero and heroine to enact their desires outside the narrative of the film, the sequence often transports the lovers to another country in which they can display their private desires in public spaces. By existing outside the narrative, the song-dance sequence is able to host to unofficial desires. The

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6 The title of the hit-song in *Karz*, which is where the film’s title comes from.

sequence therefore, works to enable the character’s to maintain their moral chastity within the narrative and functions as a fantasy-space that allows the characters to perform their transgressive desires. The sequence has meant different things for different generations: in the 1960s the song-dance sequence showcased locations across the world like Paris and Tokyo to the newly upwardly mobile, middle-class Indian; in the 1980s the sequence metamorphosed into a vehicle for the ‘item-girl’ (or the ‘vamp’) who performed often without relation to the film or the characters purely for sexual titillation, usually performing in seedy bars in the company of intoxicated men with her sexually charged performance offering erotic spectacle aside from the chaste heroine; and in the 1990s and 2000s the sequence was a place in which to show off the accoutrements of a globalised lifestyle including luxury cars, alcohol and designer brands. Ultimately, as this thesis will demonstrate the song-dance sequence is mobilised by the narrative for different (alternative) pleasures and meanings.

The Bollywood Contention

In a question that frames the central conflict surrounding widespread use of the term ‘Bollywood’, Meheli Sen asks how one can “characterise something new as the dominant form in ‘popular cinema’, when cinema is itself marginalised in the enterprise?” (20). By (dis)virtue of its naming, the Bollywood industry is marginalised at the outset, because the word instantly signifies the cinema as less-than-Hollywood. A portmanteau of the words ‘Bombay’ and ‘Hollywood’, Ajay Gehlawat argues that Bollywood is “an implied Other, than in turn, implies an (earlier) Other” (118). Symbolising an always-already Other; many academics see the term as pejorative and largely dismissive. Madhava Prasad ponders this controversy in This Thing Called Bollywood:

“Is it Indian cinema’s way of signifying its difference or is it (inter)national film journalism and scholarship’s way of reinscribing the difference that Indian cinema represents within an articulated model of global hegemony and resistance?”

Despite its many detractors, one notably Amitabh Bachchan, who laments that the term Bollywood evokes an other that is somehow less, the word has
become naturalised both in and outside of India. Recently having been adopted into the Oxford Dictionary, the term has become so widespread that it is ultimately impossible to ignore. Though I strongly advocate the denial of western hegemony in Bollywood studies (and Bollywood as a whole) the word ‘Bollywood’ is so widely accepted in global popular culture that even using the term ‘Popular Hindi Cinema’ instantly denotes ‘Bollywood’.

Bollywood functions within a wider discourse that symbolises “everything to do with the Bombay film industry” which includes the films, the actors, the characters, the song-dance numbers, the press and media, the fandom and so-on (Kavoori and Punathambekar 43). Bollywood cinema, more so than any other media industry in India has had an immeasurably profound impact on the Nation and as such, has had a prolific impact on Indian politics. In evidence of this, there is an increasing number of Bollywood actors who dabble in performing politics, with Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan, Rekha, Shatrughan Sinha, Hema Malini, Dharmendra, Govinda, Rajesh Khanna and Shabana Azmi a mere few among many actors who are MP’s. Even those actors and celebrities not directly involved in politics regularly come out in support of the voting process, with some using their social media platforms to promote their chosen political party. In evidence of this, the reverence for Bollywood stars remains zealous in India, with the folkloric Bachchan episode the best example. Bachchan was seriously injured performing a fight-scene for the film Coolie ('Porter') (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1983) and after an emergency splenectomy slipped into a coma. For the long week that Bachchan remained comatose, the media fervently covered each moment of his hospitalisation as the nation fell deeper into hysteria. Wife Jaya famously made a daily pilgrimage on foot from her home in Breach Candy to Siddhi Vinayak Temple to pray for his recovery and even Indira and son Rajiv Gandhi visited the hospital. Though Bachchan made a full recovery, the event remains mythologised by the nation, a moment in history endlessly recounted. Bachchan even refers to August the 2nd as his “second birthday” (IBN Live) as it was the day he considers he was “reborn”.

7 For these reasons, and for ease of understanding and academic identification; I use the term throughout this study.
The event gestures to the religious devotion of fans to Bollywood and its idols but also underscores the important intersection between Bollywood and the political. It is these episodes that indicate the role Bollywood plays in performing a political-national Indian identity.

As with the rest of the world, globalisation profoundly altered the Bollywood and Indian landscape(s). Though Bollywood has always been immensely popular in India and with its diaspora, it recently had a compelling intersection with the global. In 2003 the Oxford English Dictionary adopted the term Bollywood; in 2008 Slumdog Millionaire (dir. Danny Boyle) shone a light on ‘India’ (capitalising on the relentless India Shining campaign), alongside American pop-group The Pussycat Dolls’ rendition of the A.R Rahman song Jai Ho from the film; in 2009 ex-Miss Universe Aishwarya Rai Bachchan appeared on Oprah with husband Abhishek to teach viewers some “Bollywood moves”; in 2011 The Simpsons shimmied to a classic Kishore Kumar song from a hit Bollywood classic film; in 2013 Indian Hindi-English film The Lunchbox (dir. Ritesh Bhatra) won the Grand Rail d’Or at the 66th Cannes Film Festival; and in 2015 the sequel The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (dir. John Madden) was routinely reviewed as a joyful ‘Hollywood/Bollywood’-lite fusion. These moments made it radically apparent that (a version of) ‘Bollywood’ had gone global. Though this thesis remains deliberately grounded in the originary nation, these moments work to contextualise both the growth in Bollywood academia and in the nation’s global profile.

Bollywood Academia

Despite the fleeting global fascination with ‘exotic’ Bollywood, as a subject and site of cultural interrogation and feminist enquiry, it remains a relatively new field (in Western academies). Though the aforementioned global currency has granted Bollywood some cultural legitimacy, perceptions of it (and ‘India’) remain skewed in many Euro-American academies. Summing up this attitude,

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8 A marketing slogan coined by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the lead-up to the 2004 Indian General Elections. The slogan reflected the sense of economic optimism in the nation at the time and was vehemently marketed by the government via TV, radio and print media.
Gregory D. Booth writes, “Hindi film has often been classed among the worst escapist excesses of post-colonial capitalism” (Traditional Content). Similarly, in Philip Lutgendorf’s *Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking*? the author considers the classic outsider reaction to the specific ‘flavour’ of Bollywood:

“An American film scholar, after viewing his first “masālā blockbuster,” remarked to me that the various cinemas he had studied—American, French, Japanese, African—all seemed to play by a similar set of aesthetic rules, “but this is a different universe.” Experienced viewers are familiar with the sometimes negative responses of neophyte visitors to this universe: the complaint that its films “all look the same,” are mind-numbingly long, have incoherent plots and raucous music, belong to no known genre but appear to be a mish-mash of several, and are naive and crude imitations of “real” (that is, Hollywood) movies, and so on—all, by the way, complaints that are regularly voiced by some Indians as well, particularly by critics writing in English. They also know that millions of people, including vast audiences outside the subcontinent, apparently understand and love the “difference” of these films” (227).

In his astute article, Lutgendorf argues for culturally “context-sensitive” readings by mapping out a method for viewing Bollywood. Drawing on the *Natya Shastra* and the *Rig Veda* (amongst others) to organise an argument that considers the key acts of tasting, telling, hearing and seeing in relation to viewing Bollywood cinema, he argues that Western scholarly traditions tend toward “sweeping theory...a handy substitute for having to bone up on a dauntingly multifaceted context” (249). Indeed, Bollywood is still often regarded as infantile, escapist and kitsch entertainment for the Indian masses.

In a chapter in *The Bollywood Reader*, Rajinder Dudrah discusses the brief British fascination with Bollywood in 2002, writing:

“The colourful and larger than life references from Bollywood cinema were used as commodified kitsch and were therefore trivialised in the mainstream appropriation of Bollywood...” (244).

Cultural legitimacy remains the key concern in Bollywood studies and in global perceptions of Bollywood, as Prasad contended back in 1998:

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A landmark text, Bharata Muni’s *Natya Shastra*, written between 400 B.C and 200 A.D theorised the art of stagecraft; listing 8 different rasas (or feelings) integral to the art of performance. These rasas are often evoked as an organising structure for the masala film because they list various opposing emotions.
“students of mainstream Indian cinema confront here a pre-emptive force that defines it in advance as a not-yet cinema, a bastard institution in which the mere ghost of technology is employed for purposes inimical to its historical sense (2)”.

Though the thrust of Prasad’s argument remains true, it is worth noting that has been a considered growth in the academies since his works. In part thanks to the 1980s boom in universities in cultural studies and the global Bollywood moments mentioned above, there has been a growing body of work on the subject emerge. Indebted to theorists like Sumita Chakravarty, whose *National Identity in Popular Cinema* (1996) was one of the first full-length studies into Bollywood; Madhava Prasad’s inimitable *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998) that examined the ways cinema constituted nationalist and ideological discourses; Rajinder Dudrah and Gayatri Gopinath’s seminal works on diasporic crossings and the place of Bollywood abroad; Jigna Desai’s work on the interrelationship between the diaspora and gender; Ranjani Mazumdar’s works on the role of the urban city in Bollywood; along with Ravi Vasudevan’s, Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s, Jyotika Virdi’s, Lalitha Gopalan’s and Aswin Punathambekar’s works; this study situates itself with an ever-expanding school of thought that denies western hegemony in *other* film studies.

There are two dominant approaches to Bollywood scholarship: one emphasises the role of the Nation in constructing Bollywood and the other negotiates Bollywood’s role in the diaspora. Mazumdar argues that the vast majority of scholarship in the last decade (singling out Gopalan’s *Cinema of Interruptions* (2002), Chakravarty’s *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (1996), Prasad’s *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998) and Virdi’s *The Cinematic ImagiNation* (2003)) have tended toward displaying:

“a desire to categorize Indian cinema within a framework of either “dominant ideology” or the “nation” and “state”, this situating cinema within networks that constitute nationalist and ideological discourse” (xxxiii).

But in situating Bollywood within these networks, there emerges a methodology that mutes Bollywood’s potential alternative pleasures.
Rajadhyaksha and Willimen argue that “for millions of Indians, wherever they live, a major part of ‘India’ derives from its movies” (10), and Virdi echoes these sentiments in *The Cinematic ImagiNation*, writing that “popular Hindi cinema provides a fascinating account of Indian history and cultural politics” (1). She continues by proposing that Bollywood deploys a thoroughly conservative national ideology, suggesting the cinema:

> “performs the function of building a national-popular culture, sustaining the notion an “Indian” nation against diverse regional, linguistic, class and city-country disparities, maintaining the hegemony…” (ImagiNation 11).

Petra Lenihan similarly writes in her thesis titled *Rethinking Indian Cinema: Toward a Cinema of Multiplicity*:

> “Through the discursive regulation of the tropes of gender, sexuality, familial relations, tradition and culture, Bollywood cinema articulates the idea of an imagined community that is homogenous, and in that regard curtails the possibility of alternative imaginings of the nation” (37).

These theorists diligently posit the conservative Hindu nation as central to the Bollywood narrative. But as this thesis will demonstrate, this line of thinking is largely reductive because it fails to consider the vast amount of successful, popular and well-regarded Bollywood films that deploy more radical nationalism(s). Recent blockbuster film *PK* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2014), which has just become the highest-grossing Bollywood film of all time, showcased a cross-cultural romance between an Indian-Hindu girl and a Pakistani-Muslim boy and in doing so rejected a long-deployed Bollywood representation of Pakistan and the Muslim as the ‘evil other’. This is just one example among many new (and some older) releases that challenge these conceptions. Virdi argues that popular Bollywood films “deal with the same political and cultural issues using a constellation of myths, utopias, wishes, escapism, and fantasies” (Cinematic ImagiNation 23); a theory that I will contend, is rapidly collapsing. The very presence of highly successful films such as *My Name is Khan* (dir. Karan Johar, 2010) for example, that deliberately resist rigid national ideologies (especially the Hinducentric ones these studies refer to) nullify arguments that
Bollywood performs a mono-static version the nation. The key theory that underpins the argument that Bollywood performs conservative version of the national is that it deploys a thoroughly Hinducentric ideology. Virdi and Mishra argue that Hindu religious epics, namely the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, inform the moral structure of the Bollywood film. They propose that dharma\(^{10}\) provides the foundations for the character’s moral universe. But while they accurately gesture to the prevalent and strong Hinducentric focus in Bollywood, such arguments deny the increasingly number of popular Bollywood films representing other religions (particularly Islam) and pushing against the grain. It figures that in a predominantly Hindu nation, Hinduism remains the go-to for the Bollywood film, but this is precisely why it is so interesting to seek out the breaks in this theory. This thesis finds popular films that deploy sympathetic representations of Islam (along with other marginal identities and themes) that symbolise a shift in the representation of the Indian nation.

In diasporic studies of Bollywood, scholars like Gopinath and Gehlawat locate the spaces the diaspora inhabits in order to analyse how the diaspora reinterprets (and is reinterpreted by) popular Bollywood narratives. Since the liberalisation of the industry in the 1990s Bollywood has directly targeted the diaspora by drawing on an intricate web of nostalgia, belonging and ‘Indianness’ to construct a quasi-homeland on celluloid. These types of films, referred to as ‘NRI films’, serve a purpose that is twofold as they simultaneously romanticise the homeland for the nostalgic diasporic viewer and showcase the global successes of the diaspora for the homeland viewer. Studies into the way these films contain performances of Indianness during the particularly prolific period of the 1990s, when NRI films dominated Bollywood prove plentiful. Ashish Rajadyaksha’s theory of ‘Bollywoodization’ suggests that Bollywood transforms itself to target the diaspora (the process he terms Bollywoodization):

“There are further distinctions to be made: while Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians, and sometimes (as, for example, with Bhangra-rap) exports into India, the

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\(^{10}\) Dharma provides a set of rules, laws, virtues and duties that encompass a ‘right’ way of living for the Hindu religion. The term signifies personal conduct that is in keeping with the *rta* as the order that makes life and the existence of the universe possible.
Indian cinema — much as it would wish to tap this ‘non-resident’ audience — is only occasionally successful in doing so, and is in almost every instance able to do so only when it, so to say, Bollywoodizes itself, a transition that very few films in Hindi, and hardly any in other languages, are actually able to do.”

Rajadyaksha’s works accurately track the way the Bollywood industry is increasingly targeting the diasporic viewer, thereby charting the direct influence those living outside of India, have inside of it. The twofold relationship is both contradictory and complex, and one that Rajadyaksha expertly juggles. Thinking through national representations of India proves integral to diasporic studies because after all, if memory and nostalgia are a home for the exile, then the NRI film constitutes the very foundations. Numerous studies interestingly interrogate how films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (‘The Brave Heart Takes the Bride’, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995), (hereafter ‘DDLJ’, the magnum opus of NRI films) deliberately targeted diasporic capital by reproducing and recreating an intrinsic version of ‘Indianness’. Jenny Sharpe’s works explain this trend thoughtfully (as do Gopinath’s) which is why this thoroughly worked over section of research remains relatively absent from this study. Today, perhaps a film like *PK* does what DDLJ did, present an Indian living outside of India who performs their (good) Indianness dutifully as a way of rebelonging. But what diasporic studies often fail to do is consider how the NRI films are equal blockbusters at home and abroad. The NRI film appeals to the exile’s desire to be reinserted into the narrative of the nation by deploying narratives of Indians living *outside* of India, and it is for this very reason that I have deliberately selected films set *inside* India, because it is these films that interpret and represent those exiled *in* the homeland which is an area of study that remains entirely unexplored.

This project engages in a fluid discourse with alternative representations of gender, sexuality, class, religion and even place. In travelling through minorities I undertake close textual analysis of twelve filmic texts that perform marginality. In discussing the uniqueness of Bollywood as a form, authors Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha propose:
“One fundamental difference between Hollywood and Bollywood is that the former pushes world cultures towards homogenization, whereas the latter introduces those cultures in a fragmentary process” (22).

It is fitting then, that this study employs a fragmentary approach to both gathering and interpreting a series of eclectic sources. As a disclaimer, I am mindful that concepts as dense as nation, diaspora, body, gender, sexuality and ‘India’ are unfixed. It is also not without careful consideration that I mediate on a country I have no claim to. Furthermore, the scope and vastness of the Indian film industry almost enables one to pick and choose any film to make any argument one desires. But, by choosing films from the most dominant cultural apparatus and that meet the (sometimes oblique) benchmark for ‘popularity’, this thesis makes the case that Bollywood does do marginality. The majority of the chosen films are widely considered to be popular: that is, they contain very popular actors or ‘stars’ (Amitabh Bachchan, Rekha, Shahrukh Khan, Vidya Balan, Rani Mukherjee and Madhuri Dixit all appear numerously in this study), were relatively successful at the box-office and most importantly, are generally reflective of the themes, conventions, characters and production values that are characteristic of a masala Bollywood film. I contend that by choosing dominant films that contain marginal representations, these films make a more substantial comment on marginality in modern India than those the parallel or alternative film industries would. I take specific illustrative and textual examples to demonstrate the interrelationship between nation and cinema and by writing substantially on the historical junctures of the film’s releases; it is my intention to show how the nation has influenced Bollywood cinema and vice-versa. Unlike the majority of Bollywood scholarship, I do not contend that Bollywood is merely a conservative mouthpiece for the nation; rather I propose that the Indian nation and its cinema are inseparable – both constructing and deconstructing the other and the Others.

**The Motherland and the Otherlands**

“Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your house, in a room” – Mahmoud Darwish (qtd in Saith).
This thesis invents the concepts of marginality, exile and otherness as lenses through which to view popular Bollywood cinema. By theorising how Bollywood constructs the outsider or the other, there exists potent insight into the way it imagines the insider. The South Asian subcontinent has a veritable historical narrative of exile – from Hindu religious epic the Ramayana where the central conflict revolves around Rama’s fourteen year exile in the jungle along with wife Sita; to the infamous 1959 exile of his Holiness the Dalai Lama (and with him some 80,000 Tibetan refugees) in Assam; Indian-born author Salman Rushdie’s exile from India for nine years after the furore surrounding his The Satanic Verses; the Kashmiri Pandits who remain exiled from Kashmir after some 25 years; and the experiences of exile that echo through India, Pakistan and Bangladesh after Partition. Formative ‘exile writer’ Edward Said suggests that “All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement” (176), which is a statement especially true for India. The disruptive legacy of colonialism is inescapable, but as Dascalu argues, “the notion of the exile – working within the cultural frameworks of the oppressive situation – poses a distinct threat to colonial discourse” (11). The exile then, possesses the power to both resist imperialism and aid in the construction of a new nation. As Edward Said closes his rousing essay Reflections on Exile:

“Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts new again” (182).

This “unsettling force” has inspired countless artistic expressions across the world. In India there is a long and rich tradition of Indian-diasporic writers, filmmakers and artists mediating on themes of exile. As interpreters of exile, these creators travel through the contradictions and complexities of inventing India from afar. Indian-born authors including V.S Naipul, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukerjee and Rohinton Mistry have each traversed states of disconnect from the motherland, and these fictional forces flow into Indian Cinema, particularly in the crossover or diasporic parallel Indian films made by directors such as Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair or Gurinder Chadha, whose narratives intimately explore the lives of Indian characters living abroad.
This study ultimately envisions exile in both a literal and figurative sense; encompassing the experience of being marginalised by a society, a nation or cultural industry. The words used to express states or experiences of exile in Hindi are *nirvasan*, which is also the word for ‘naked’, ‘ostracised’ and ‘deported’; or *pravas*, which can mean ‘journey’ or ‘migration’. In Urdu, the phrase *jala-watan* expresses states of ‘exile’, ‘banishment’, or ‘ostracised’, or the experience of “quitting one’s own country” or “emigration”. Much like the diverse meanings contained in these terms, the meaning of exile is perhaps constantly shifting. The unsettled states of marginalisation and exile are at the heart of this study as they are primarily concerned with the *other*; that or those that the Bollywood motherland typically disavows. The theory of marginalisation – that is the social process by which certain groups or individuals are denied access to social, economic, political or institutional power structures – proves useful to this study because by examining those contained in or relegated to the margins, there emerges a space where alternative/non-normative desires can be glimpsed. As bell hook’s contended in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (xvi).

In his paper, *The Impossibility of the Outsider in the Modern Hindi Film*, in Ashis Nandy’s *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, Vinay Lal argues that there is no ‘Other’ in Hindi cinema. Lal writes that the “Hindi film...has almost no notion of the outsider or the significant Other” (245). It is true that Bollywood deploys a *predominantly* Hinducentric, North Indian, and heteropatriarchal formulae; but by finding films that reject this rigid version of the nation, this thesis suggests that by analysing Bollywood and its otherness on a “dynamic spectrum of fluidity” (Singh) there are definite breaks emerging. This study rejects the notion that there is no place for the other in Bollywood by finding twelve popular Bollywood films that are evidence of Bollywood’s increasing experiments with otherness. Sunny Singh argues in *Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Commercial Indian*
Cinemas for a reformulation of otherness “in culturally relevant manners”, writing:

“In particular, this involves rethinking the constructions and conceptualisations of the ‘other’ and ‘otherness’, for Indian texts, especially as these are often theorised in non-Indic binaries of ‘us vs them’…” (1).

Similarly, this study moves forward by analysing twelve popular films on a spectrum of otherness. By being cognisant of Bollywood’s often-deployed network of rigid ideologies, yet proposing that it is the increasing breaks in this model that represent its radical ability to represent minorities, this thesis uncovers the ‘others’.

Chapter Breakdown

In each of the chapters to follow I explore a particular performance of marginality in popular Bollywood cinema. In the first I begin with the defining chapter of modern Indian history – the post-Independence/post-Partition period. An inescapable paradox, Partition and Independence are the dyad that informs the genre of films remembered in Bollywood as ‘Muslim Socials’.

Though few in number, the Muslim Socials were loved for their adherence to a strictly ‘High-Urdu’ style and for painstakingly recreating an Indo-Muslim bygone era. In examining the two exquisite and exemplary films of the genre, *Pakeezah* (‘Pure’, dir. Kamal Amrohi, 1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (dir. Muzzafar Ali, 1981) this chapter focuses on how the tawaif (or courtesan) embodies the tropes of the subjugated post-Partition Indo-Muslim identity in India. Approximately midway through *Pakeezah* there is a moment when the camera lingers on a shot of small yellow canary. The canary is housed in an ornate cage of gold, a rich metaphor that Cristina Emanuela Dascalu evokes when she writes, “The exile cannot rely on roots – he or she settles only as a bird might” (38). The bird then, in functioning as a stand-in for the tawaif, represents the repressed Indo-Muslim identity which is the central thematic of the Muslim Social (or ‘tawaif film’). Despite being remarkably similar films, *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* diverge dramatically in their endings; *Pakeezah* ends with the tawaif reinserted into familial and social respectability, while *Umrao Jaan* sees
the tawaif end the film alone and despairing in her decrepit kotha. This expository chapter delves into the pathos of the tawaif to examine how her imprisonment and exile (sometimes figurative and at other times literal) contributes to her performance of post-Partition Indo-Muslim femininity and marginality.

Chapter Two addresses the centrepiece of the Bollywood narrative – the hero. Whether he is a brooding macho, violent renegade, romantic poet, sensitive everyman, or hip dandy, the hero is integral to the Bollywood narrative. In light of this dominance this chapter seeks out rogue masculinities, encountering the antihero in the iconic Yash Chopra classic *Deewar* (‘The Wall’, 1975) and in the hugely popular Sanjay Leela Bhansali film *Devdas* (2002). In moving chronologically forward from the previous chapter, Chapter 2 begins in the tumultuous 1970s before travelling to the 1990s and into the 2000s. In the 1970s there emerged a prolific and popular genre in Bollywood referred to as the ‘Angry Young Man Films’. These films chronicled the crises of a nation in the stronghold of the Emergency and deployed an antihero fiercely at odds with the romantic poet-archetypes of the ‘50s. This angry young man was both outwardly aggressive and inwardly troubled and in *Deewar*, Amitabh Bachchan delivers an iconic performance as Vijay, the ultimate angry young man. A victim of circumstance who grows up on the streets of Bombay, Vijay’s path takes him far from the usually morally conservative life of the hero. The antihero embodies an alternative masculinity; he is both a figure of audience derision and admiration in equal measure, thereby staging a resistance of classic Bollywood archetypes of masculinity. With *Devdas*, the chapter moves through the late 1990s, charting the effects of the newly liberalised and globalised economy. Both films work converse with each other to articulate the changing story of the nation with two strikingly similar performances of marginality and masculinity-in-crisis.

Western feminist critical interventions into Bollywood (and India) are, and should be, troubled. In Chapter Three, I invest significant resources into comprehending Indian circumstances and feminisms. Theorising a pan-Indian
feminism in such a heterogeneous nation is complex, but by utilising such complexity this chapter contributes where western feminist interventions meet resistance. The ‘women-centric’ or ‘heroine-oriented’ film in Bollywood contains empowered performances of femaleness that offer a window into shifting womanhood in India. In light of India’s patriarchal roots, Indian feminism can be problematic and especially so, when considering the dominance of the hero. Though Bollywood’s approaches to ‘women’s issues’ have been varied, there has always been a small yet significant contingent of films containing strong and empowered performances of femaleness. In examining a collective of positive and post-liberalisation (post-1998) films, this chapter assesses how Bollywood interprets modern womanhood. Paheli (‘Riddle’, dir. Amol Palekar, 2005), Chak De! India (‘Go India!’, dir. Shim it Amin, 2007) and The Dirty Picture (dir. Milan Luthria, 2011) each deploy performances of empowered Indian femininity to varying degrees of success, but all three demonstrate how modern Bollywood is increasingly negotiating with an idiosyncratic feminism that does not fit neatly into the ‘western’ or the ‘postcolonial’.

Bollywood representations of queer identities are remarkably few. Despite a small number of male faux-queer representations in films, Bollywood tends to exile desires that do not neatly subscribe to the heterosexual. As a result, this chapter uncovers moments of potential female queerness in Utsav (‘Festival’, dir. Girish Karnad, 1984) and Devdas, and subsequently finds an assemblage of queer tropes circulating around the actor Rekha. In analysing her performances onscreen and off, this chapter finds her stardom rife with queer potential. I reread two remarkably similar song-dance sequences in Utsav and Devdas for female queerness, to find that the song-dance sequence acts as a third-space in which desires proscribed by the narrative emerge. I conclude by examining Dedh Ishqiya (‘One and a Half Love’, dir Abhishek Chaubey 2014), a recent Bollywood film that updates the classic radical-queer text Lihaaf, and is subsequently the most prolific and visible example of female-queerness in Bollywood to date. This chapter finds that performing the marginal Indian Queer female identity is an act ripe with subversive potential.
The fifth and final chapter turns its focus to the future of Bollywood. By analysing ‘New Bollywood’, a term I use to refer to a spate of recent films representing radical directions for Bollywood, I find films that play with form and theme to create subversive postmodern projects. Tackling taboo-topics, the films *Gangs of Wasseypur* (dir. Anurag Kashyap, 2012), *Love Sex Aur Dhokha* (‘Love, Sex and Deceit’, dir. Dibakar Banerjee, 2010) and *Kahaani* (‘Story’, dir. Sujoy Ghosh, 2012) each contain performances of marginality that signal a future of experimentalism in Bollywood. In examining these films, I find that the marginalised tropes from the earlier chapters: Muslim-identity, the angry young man and the antihero, and empowered women all coalesce in the New Bollywood film. It is therefore a genre for the marginalised. In acting as a bridge between parallel Hindi cinema and blockbuster Bollywood, New Bollywood pays homage to classic Bollywood while formulating the radically reflexive cinema of the future. Just as Salman Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands*, “Exile is a dream of glorious return...It is an endless paradox: looking forward by always looking back. The exile is a ball hurled high into the air” (22), so too does the New Bollywood film look forward to the Bollywood of the future as looks back to Bollywood past.

This project is ultimately motivated by the apparent invisibility of the Other in Bollywood. As a result, I seek out performances of marginality and/or themes and issues that destabilise, disturb and dislocate the dominant hegemonic modality of Bollywood. In analysing the meanings and pleasures generated from Bollywood more generally, this study examines the transformation and deformation of Indian values contained therein. This conversation is one of change, as this thesis travels through the radical transformation of a nation and its cinema over five decades. For far too long, Eurocentric theories have posited that Bollywood is the Other, so throughout the course of this thesis I intend to make a case for rethinking and reconstructing fluid and Indiacentric notions of gender, sexuality and otherness. I intend to dismantle the myth that Bollywood performs a hegemonic, conservative rendition of the Nation and to illuminate Bollywood’s increasing and inclusive experiments with the marginalised. I
contend that there is often a rigid pan-Indian worldview that emerges in the Bollywood narrative, but will demonstrate that even in the most popular blockbusters, there are in fact radical ruptures forming in the body – and those once at the margins are travelling to the centre. By interrogating twelve popular Bollywood films that feature performances of marginality, this thesis finds a (contested) space for the exile.
I. At the end of 1972’s Pakeezah, Sahib Jaan (Meena Kumari), after having just watched her biological father sacrifice his life for her, sits in an ornate palanquin adorned in wedding jewellery. As she is about to be wedded to her beloved Salim (Raaj Kumar), her uncle Hakim Saheb (Sapru) asks her if she will accept the marriage. Glancing at her father’s body, as it lay shrouded in white flowers, she nods. Hakim Saheb begs the body to permit Sahib Jaan to leave and as the baarat arrives, her father’s body is taken into the afterlife and Sahib Jaan to her new life. The father has laid down his life for his daughter, restoring her to natal and societal respectability and allowing her to be reborn and reinvented the pure ‘Pakeezah’.

II. At the conclusion of Umrao Jaan the tawaif is cast out of her family home (which she has only just rediscovered) and returns to Lucknow to find her kotha looted and destroyed in an attack by the British. Umrao Jaan (Rekha) enters what was once her room to find it empty and decimated. She stands before a full-length mirror in the corner of the room solemnly staring at her reflection. As she places a hand on the mirror to wipe it clean the camera slowly zooms in and in, until all that is shown is an image of her pained face trapped in the mirror. She has become little more than a reflection.

These two endings reflect the rapidly changing circumstances for the Indo-Muslim identity in post-Partition India. Where the former gestures to an ending and an optimistic new beginning, the latter heralds the beginning of a sad demise. In the first, the tawaif is to be wed and to re-join society, yet in the second she is doomed to live a lonely life of despair. Despite these dramatically different endings, Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan are both exemplary and perhaps surprisingly similar Muslim Social films. It is the nine years between the film’s releases, between 1972 and 1981 that explain the film’s different endings. The political Partition of India in 1947 was “one of the great human convulsions in
history” (Butalia 3) and a “massive catastrophe” (Dasgupta 188) that had particularly disastrous effects on Hindu-Muslim relations in India. In a nation where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and numerous others had lived (relatively) comfortably for hundreds and thousands of years, Partition shattered social harmony by drawing a line through the land. *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* converse with the rapidly fading hopes of the Indo-Muslim identity in post-Partition India. In using the liminal figure of the *tawaif*, these films painstakingly recreated a nostalgic, romantic, golden past that has long since been lost. This chapter contends that the *tawaif*’s performance of suffering in these films embodies the tropes of the subjugated post-Partition Indo-Muslim identity and that *Pakeezah*, given its release in 1971 has an optimistic resolution, whilst *Umrao Jaan* resigns itself to an irretrievable loss. It also considers the old films in a new way; considering Arora and Devji’s separate arguments that the Muslim Social permits the pleasure of a “rape-fantasy” for the Hindu viewer. Just like Partition, the *tawaif*ly condition is one defined by struggle, loss, separation and uncertainty. In interrogating her, this chapter ties together the fracturing legacy of Partition with the *tawaif*’s fatalistic (and marginal) performance of femininity. Ultimately, these films demonstrate that the *tawaif*’s historical decline mirrors that of the Indo-Muslim identity in post-Partition India.

**The Shadow of Partition**

“The foundational event of the inauguration of the state brings something new into existence, but the event does not come from nowhere – it is anchored to imageries that already haunt Hindu-Muslim relations” – Veena Das (21-22).

Partition and Independence form the uneasy collective that comprises the most traumatic, disruptive, divisive and decisive event in modern Indian history. The dyad is an inescapable paradox: one moment characterised by optimism, emancipation, freedom, liberation, and the other by bloodshed, displacement, uncertainty and loss. From one line drawn down ‘British India’, two (and much later in 1971, a contested third that resulted in Bangladesh) new nations were born: India and Pakistan. But encoded in the (re)births of these nations were
the deaths of millions of people. In theory, Partition sought to create two utopias – a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. But by splitting the Muslim dominated Northwestern and Northeastern areas of the country in order to create Pakistan and deeming the remainder India, Partition turned out to be a cataclysmic catastrophe. Aside from the vastly different numbers in population between the new Pakistan and India, there was another crucial difference – while most Hindus in Pakistan fled for the new India, a considerable number of Muslims remained in India.

In the waking hours of that fateful morning on the 15th of August 1947, there was a mass exodus of some fourteen million people who set out on the road to their new promised land(s). One of the many problems with Partition was that there were very few arrangements made for the vast numbers of Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs (and others) who would wish (or be compelled) to move to the new nations. This “demographic two-way shuffle” (Arora 60) resulted in spectacularly violent clashes, ethnic riots, kidnapping, rapes, murder and bloodshed; incidents worsened by poor housing arrangements, inadequate food supplies and an ill-equipped, over-crowded transport system. The violence that overtook Lahore and Amritsar, previously peaceful cities, was spectacular. It seemed baffling that such unparalleled, orgiastic violence erupted from people who once countrymen, but Rana Dasgupta considers the event a “mass fantasy of the sort that eludes such everyday causation” (189-90) and one that subsequently sought to annihilate the newly configured Other. Prior to Partition, Islamic and Hindu cultural practices made up the fabric of Indian society. But after it, these forces came up against each other violently. Dasgupta explains these immensely altering and othering effects of Partition:

“It is difficult to express to people who have not known it how shattering is the death of a culture – which is to say that annihilation of everything through which a society comes into being, and therefore of its members’ very selves. The Partition of 1947 killed a culture – an old, shared culture, and the physical-life violence was part of a mad frenzy to survive this psychic death. The new regime of independent nations was narrower than the old culture, and in order for people to squeeze in, a great sacrifice was required: a process of purification and eradication that was essentially infinite because its true theatre was not external but
in the self. It was not only Muslims who were afraid of having no place in
the new India: Hindus, also, were too Muslim to live there. In their
rampages, they killed not Muslims but Islam: the Islam of which they
had always been part, the Islam they carried within themselves, the
Islam they had to annihilate if they were ever to belong” (191).

With the Islam and the India of old dead, the new India was forced to negotiate
an imposed power play that positioned Hindus (the majority) and Muslims (the
minority) at odds. The Muslim community\textsuperscript{11}, once an intrinsic part of society,
were now an instant minority and an instant Other.

As with many conflicts, the atrocities of Partition were particularly abhorrent for
women. The violence of Partition struck at the reproductive potential of women
on both sides; including the “exposure of unborn foetuses, the ceremonial
display of castrated penises – and rape on a colossal scale, whose purpose was
 genetic subjugation: their children will not be their own” (Dasgupta 190). As
women were raped, abducted, forced into sexual slavery, beaten, maimed or
murdered, Partition became a wound inflicted both upon the body of the land
and the body of the woman. Many women were abducted from their homes
and religiously converted, resulting in the rise of figure of the “abducted
woman” (21), a figure that Veena Das puts at over one hundred thousand. So
pervasive was the threat of rape or abduction that family-members often
encouraged their daughters to commit suicide in order to preserve their izaat.

In 1947, when India and Pakistan made an Inter-Dominion Agreement
demanding the return of each nation’s stole property (women) to each other; it
established a legal and social contract between the men of the nations. This
contract sought to restore honour to the nations but in charging the men with
keeping male violence against women in check, was largely unsuccessful. The
recovery and return of these wronged women was both a crucial tool in the
building of the new nation(s) and a crusade of sorts that sought to restore
women and children to their ‘rightful’ nations. In practice, it further fractured
families as some women had finally adjusted to new lives in new countries, yet
were once again shuttled between men and between nations.

\textsuperscript{11} The most recent census places the Muslim community in India at 14\%.
National accounts of 1947 focus mainly on the events of Independence because quite simply, it tells a far more optimistic story than Partition does. Bhaskar Sarkar explains that it became a requirement for nation-building to dismiss Partition as a “one-time aberration in an otherwise continuous tradition of secular unity” (35). This national denial is something that subaltern scholar Gyanendra Pandey argues enforces the separation of “violence” from “Partition”, a distinction “that survivors seldom make, for in their view, Partition was violence, a cataclysm, a world, (or worlds) torn apart” (7). Pandey contends that for those who lived through it Partition remains ever-present in private life, yet largely absent from public life. In a kind of nation-sponsored collective amnesia, the event remains excluded from the histories of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. In each country, national investigations into the events of Partition are largely dedicated to “making a case about how this goes against the fundamentals of Indian (or Pakistani) tradition and history: how it is, to that extent, not our history at all” (Pandey 3). This denial of history is the reason there are no museums, memorials or monuments dedicated to Partition in any of the three nations involved. In India (as with Pakistan and Bangladesh) national discourse on Partition remains stoically devoted to highlighting the aims and achievements of Independence, thereby denying the atrocities of Partition ever even happened. Over the decades these silences have become endemic, with the event barely uttered in daily public life.

**Partition Onscreen: The Muslim Social**

As such an exiled chapter of Indian history, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bollywood has largely avoided Partition. Though parallel and/or diasporic filmmakers have explored the issue, much like the muted official public accounts, the events of Partition remain largely displaced from Bollywood proper. In 1947, directly after Partition the new Indian government set about unifying a fractured nation by envisioning a set of new national ideologies. Bhaskar Sarkar contends that this is precisely what led to the ellipsis in Partition films; because as the government sought to focus on nation building and nation-reflecting, it deployed artistic endeavours (via financial and direct influence on the film industry) that sought to ignore the trauma of Partition.
This “resonant silence” (Sarkar 49) on Partition in Bollywood cinema echoed through the decades. Because of this silence, Bollywood resorted to allegorical representations of the trauma of Partition, and as such, the trauma began to spill onto the screen in oblique ways. Sarkar argues that while cinema is an apt medium to perform the task of mourning (19), the Indian context requires careful consideration and a constant negotiation between filmmaker, traumatic event (Partition) and audience:

“Furthermore, vernacular narrative traditions work through frequent repetitions, detours and deflections – strategies that are well suited to the tasks of fashioning figurations of trauma and mourning. That is to say, popular Indian aesthetic traditions work with formal tropes that can perform the gaps, confusions and compulsions of traumatic memory without self-consciousness in the Western modernist sense, yet produce engagingly reflexive discourse. In such departures, prompted by the interplay of anthropological and historical factors, we begin to evince the singularity of an Indian paradigm of cinematic mourning” (26).

Sarkar suggests this Indian paradigm relies on “displaced figurations” and more veiled allusions to trauma, which is why the Muslim Social reveals itself to function as a mode of trauma representation.

Despite drawing on a rich Hindu mythology, the new national post-Partition ideology seemed initially hopeful for Muslims, particularly as it was the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru’s, view that communalism and sectarianism would be best undermined by the implementation of strong economic policy. But with the concurrent rise of an aggressive Hindu nationalism that perpetuated a view “of the Muslim community as their cultural other” (Arora, 60) and the rise of an aggressive Pakistan, there was a subsequent severe and rapid deterioration in Hindu-Muslim relations. The hopes of the minority-Muslim community gaining their rightful place in the new India began to fade dramatically by the mid 1950s. The very presence of the Muslim Social, whose key purpose is to elegize a fading Islamicate culture, clearly demonstrates the degree to which Islam is instantly configured Other, because there is no equal ‘Hindu Social’ in Bollywood (because, of course, Hindu practices are the cultural and social norm). In light of Islamic restrictions on the
filming or depiction of Allah and/or his Prophets, the Muslim Social turned its attentions the intimate lives of Muslim characters for narrative inspiration. The 1939 film *Pukar* ('Call', dir. Sohrab Modi) was on of the first of the genre and dramatised the historical story of Mughal emperor Jehangir and empress Noorjehan. But it was *Najma* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1943) that was largely considered to be responsible for the Muslim Social genre as we now know it; because it was the first to focus on the lives of ‘normal’ Muslim protagonists. *Najma* was a success across all fronts – it made a profit, and was such a hit with audiences that many girls born at the time were named Najma after the film’s sacrificing and virtuous title character. After the success of *Devdas* (dir. Bimal Roy, 1955), Bollywood turned its attentions more closely on the figure of the tawaif with films such as the eponymous *Mughal-E-Azam* ('Emperor of the Mughals', dir. K Asif, 1960), *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* ('Moon of the 14th Day', dir. Mohammed Sadiq, 1960), *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* ('The Master, Wife and Slave', dir. Guru Dutt, 1962), *Mere Mehboob* ('My Lover', dir. Harnam Singh Rawail, 1963), *Bahu Begum* (dir. M Sadiq, 1967), and, of course, *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* capturing audience attentions. The films above (prior to the early 1970s) in keeping with *Pakeezah*, ended happily, with the tawaif marrying the object of her affection and escaping her fate, but the films after this period are far more bleak. Just as *Umrao Jaan* does, films such as *Salma* (1985, dir. Ramanand Sagar), *Muqqadar Ka Sikander* ('Conqueror of Destiny', dir. Prakash Mehra, 1978) and *Deedar-e-Yaar* ('Seeing my Beloved', 1981, dir. Harnam Singh Rawail) all end with the tawaif suffering fates like abandonment, exile or death. In both *Deedar-e-Yaar* and *Salma*, the tawaif dances literally dances herself to death at the wedding of her beloved to another woman.

**The Tawaif**

A contested character – enigmatic and elusive, aloof and ambiguous, admired for her talents yet reviled for her sexuality, financially independent yet dependent on male patronage for a living, shunned and celebrated – the tawaif is perhaps best described as a contradiction. Historically, the tradition of the tawaif dates back to the Vedic Age (1750 – 500 B.C.E) with the artistic practices of the *devadasi* and *ganika*. While the devadasi were Hindu temple-dancers
who expressed their godly devotion via dance and the ganika were secular performers who were skilled in literature and the arts, both were recognised artistic institutions of the state. Leda Ward explains that both the devadasi and the ganika represent the important link in India between eroticism and the cultural arts:

“Her potent sexuality – the devadasi slept with men to bring them closer to the gods, while the ganika educated men in the arts of the Kamasutra – was cherished alongside her artistic and intellectual achievements” (5).

The tradition of the tawaif emerged when the Mughal rulers infused their own Islamic cultural practices with the arts of both the ganika and devadasi. Skilled in Urdu poetry, arts, Arabic grammar and mannerisms and traditional Islamic entertainment, the tawaif like her predecessors was a highly educated preserver of tradition. The tawaif’s performance, a mujra, took inspiration from the devadasi’s kathak dance and merged it with Urdu arts, usually performing shayari set to ghazals. The tawaif traditionally performed in the Muslim courts for noblemen but resided in a kotha alongside other tawaifs. The kotha (or brothel) was under the control of an older female (once herself a tawaif) and the tawaif’s arts were conducted largely without taboo (unlike the Bollywood tawaif). Her sexual labour, Chakravarty contends, situated her as “an important source of revenue for the state” (277), which is why the institution was protected by the government. The practice prospered and flourished until the late eighteenth-century, when the British arrived and encouraged conservative reformists to join them in launching a violent anti-tawaif campaign. Their efforts were successful and the tawaif and her traditions were redefined as prostitution. With this relabeling, came the imposed shame, strict legislation and stigma often associated with prostitution in Western countries. Tight legislative control crippled the kingdom of the kotha and it soon began to crumble. Over the years the tawaif came to be visited only by European soldiers passing through town, or by rich business men who, argues Chakravarty, “having neither taste nor time, nor money to partake of the pleasures of the nautch, they made short businesslike trips to the chaklakhana (brothel)” (280).
The institution of the tawaif slipped into demise and eventually disappeared into the depths of history.

The vast majority of Muslim Social films were set in the city of Lucknow. In the glory days of the Mughal reign (the 1600s) Lucknow, Delhi, Kanpur, Bhopal and Hyderabad were flourishing “centres of distinct Muslim nawabi court cultures” (Ansari) under the control of wealthy princes. As Rachel Dwyer explains further:

“Lucknow’s rise to fame as a centre for Urdu language and culture was also predicated on a loss, following Nadir Shah’s sack of Delhi in 1789 when many nobles abandoned Delhi, moving to Lucknow” (121).

Lucknow came to be known as the final resting place of Urdu and Islamicate culture, but when the British annexed Lucknow in 1856, and then banned the Muslim elite from living in Delhi after the 1857 uprisings, Islamicate culture began to wane. Decades later Partition forced many Muslim families to flee for Pakistan, which worsened this demise. As a result, Lucknow is romantically remembered for its golden Islamic past and is still informally known as The City of Nawabs to this day. Because of this rich history, Bollywood looked upon Lucknow as a nostalgic “repository for of Muslim grace and flavour, with its impeccable Urdu and renowned etiquette” (Ansari). This particular aesthetic translated into ornate sets dripping in jewels, elaborate costuming and a romantic, if melancholic tone. As an elegy to a time and tradition past, the Muslim Social painstakingly recreated a lost chapter of Indo-Muslim history. Though the Muslim Social showed the tawaif’s world to be intrinsically Islamic, it never explicitly coded her as Muslim. She was rarely shown praying to Allah or attending mosque, rather it was the constant nawabi presence and the abundance of ghazals, qawaalis and shayari that ensured there was no mistaking her location in the Islamicate world of Lucknow. In setting their tales in the fading city, the makers of the Muslim Social staged its mourning of the loss of Urdu culture that encrypted the trauma of Partition.

**Every Tawaif is a Dead Body**
Kamal Amrohi’s *Pakeezah* (1972) and Muzaffar Ali’s *Umrao Jaan* (1981) both chronicle strikingly similar stories of tragic tawaifs. But while both are analogous with the liminal location of the Indo-Muslim identity in post-Partition India, they diverge dramatically in their endings. *Umrao Jaan*, based on the novel of the same name by author Mirza Mohammed Ruswa, who reportedly took inspiration from a real-life tawaif in Lucknow’s chowk area, is widely considered the “quintessential courtesan film of Bombay cinema” (Chakravarty 287). The film begins in the 1800s in Faizabad, where a young girl, Amiran, is kidnapped by outlaws and sold to a kotha for 200 rupees. On arrival she is rechristened Umrao Jaan (Rekha) and taught the arts of singing, writing Urdu, shayari, dancing and entertaining. Despite repeated attempts to escape as a child, Umrao Jaan grows to be relatively content in the kotha and resigned to her fate. She soon falls in love with the handsome Sultan Nawab (Farooq Sheikh), but he marries a more suitable woman and in her heartbreak Umrao Jaan falls instantly for her next suitor, Faiz Ali (Raj Babaar). The pair elopes but on the way Faiz Ali is shot dead by an outlaw gang, forcing Umrao Jaan back to the kotha. She returns to find Lucknow under attack from the British. Later, after being cast out of her family home (after a brief reunion with her mother), she returns to Lucknow once more, picking through the remains of her ransacked room at the kotha. She ends the film staring ambivalently into a mirror at her reflection.

*Pakeezah* begins with tawaif Nargis (also played by Kumari) eloping with her lover Nawab Shahbuddin (Ashok Kumar). Shahbuddin takes Nargis to his family home but his family rejects his alliance with the tawaif, forcing Nargis out. She takes up residence in a graveyard and for ten months lives there, eventually giving birth to daughter Sahib Jaan atop a tombstone. Straight after giving birth Nargis commits suicide, leaving Sahib Jaan to be taken in by Nargis’ elder sister Nawabjaan (Veena) who, also once a tawaif, now runs a kotha. 17 years later Shahbuddin is delivered a letter (found in a book by a good Samaritan) written by Nargis on her deathbed informing him of the impending birth of his daughter. Her rushes to the kotha, but Nawabjaan asks him to return the following day, by which time she, unwilling to lose the financial benefits of Sahib Jaan’s career, has left the city with Sahib Jaan. The now-adult Sahib Jaan
(Meena Kumari) is asleep in the train compartment when a fellow commuter, Salim Ahmed Khan (Raaj Kumar), mistakenly enters her compartment and is entranced by her intricately hennaed feet. He slips a note between her toes, warning her, “I have seen your feet and they are beautiful. Please, do not place them on the ground or they shall become dirty. From a fellow traveller.” He takes a feather she uses as a bookmark as a memento and in the following days Sahib Jaan romanticises the author, soon falling in love with him. After much heartache and in a fateful twist, Pakeezah finds herself at Salim’s lodgings and finds the bookmark. She and Salim fall in love as Sahib Jaan feigns amnesia about her identity. As they are about to wed Salim suggests to the Imam that her name is “Pakeezah” (‘pure’) which causes her to flee in shame. Despondent, she returns to her old life at the kotha and is invited to dance at Salim’s wedding (to another woman). There, it is revealed by Nawabjaan that Shahbuddin is in fact Sahib Jaan’s father. Aghast, Hakim Saheb tries to shoot Pakeezah (because her new-status threatens the family-unit) but mistakenly shoots Shahbuddin (who is his brother). As Shahbuddin takes his last breath Nawabjaan chastises him, telling him the only way Sahib Jaan will ever escape her doomed fate as a tawaif’s daughter is if a marriage procession takes her away. Salim tearfully tells his Uncle he will marry Sahib Jaan. Director Kamal Amrohi concludes the film with a voiceover: “For thousands of years many flowers wither away without any recognition. But only once a lifetime, comes one that is truly worthy of praise. Khuda Hafiz”.

Pakeezah began production in 1955, but the film’s release was delayed until 1972 due to the dissolution of the tempestuous marriage between lead actor Meena Kumari and director Kamal Amrohi. Umrao Jaan was released a decade later in 1981. The film’s diverging endings run concurrently the rapidly changing circumstances in Hindu and Muslim relations in India at the time(s) of their respective releases. In 1972, just after Pakeezah’s release, India and Pakistan went to war over the disputed territory of Bangladesh. So Pakeezah’s construction (mostly of the late 60s) was a product of a time where there still remained a palpable sense of optimism regarding Muslim/Hindu relations and politically there was a strong focus on nation building via religious harmony.
Conversely, Umrao Jaan’s construction was born of a period where, “the ongoing hostilities between India and Pakistan no longer permitted the Muslims of the subcontinent to entertain even the fantasy of a reconciliation with their brethren” (Arora 68). Arora concludes:

“The different endings to the careers of the two tawaifs reflect the Muslim community’s changing perceptions of their prospects of a reconciliation with their separated (now Pakistani) kin as well as of their acceptance into mainstream Indian society” (67).

It is therefore that in Pakeezah the tawaif is married and reinserted in the rubric of respectability but in Umrao Jaan, she exiled from society, staring into a fragmented reflection of a fragmented self.

In India first and last names frequently function as a signifier of identity. Take for example, the title of the 1970s popular hit-film Amar, Akbar, Anthony (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977) that connotes three similar male first names which are Muslim, Hindu and Christian respectively. In India, a person’s full name usually denotes a Hindu, Parsi, Muslim or Christian (or Other) identity. It is for this very reason that the names given to the tawaif are ambiguous. In both Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan the tawaif’s names are signifiers of their fractured identity and their position outside normal society. In classic Hindi films, heroines (usually Hindu) were given names with formal suffixes such as devi (meaning ‘goddess’) or were referred to in terms of their familial relation (i.e. bhabhi who is one’s brother’s wife, or behen who is one’s own sister, and so on). As Gregory D. Booth argues this practice desexualised the women by firmly associating them with the Hindu religion or with their family (7). But the tawaif, unlike the ordinary woman, has a name that is devoid of meaning. Though it symbolises her role as tawaif, the name given to a tawaif is usually one that consists of two ambiguous suffixes. The name ‘Sahib Jaan’ (given to her by her Aunty) consists of two such suffixes used to denote female status, not dissimilar to the English words lady or madam (Ward 22). Umrao Jaan’s name, which was changed by the kotha madam from her childhood name of Amiran, denotes much the same. Ultimately for the tawaif an ambiguous names denotes an ambiguous fate.
Sumitra Chakravarty writes that the tawaif’s (imposed) name-change enacts a transformation that is (usually) irreversible:

“A key element in [the courtesan genre of films] is the idea of woman’s social and psychic transformation...a change that is primarily one of semantics and involves a process of renaming. In the case of the women of this genre, the change or crossover is irrevocable. As women who are renamed and thereby take on the identity of a radically social other, the move can only be in one direction” (276).

Umrao Jaan is unable to escape her tawaifly identity as her renaming from Amiran enacts a traumatic transformation that condemns her to a life of marginality. But Pakeezah proves to exception to Chakravarty’s theory, as Sahib Jaan is able to transform from tawaif to wife. Early in the film when Salim slips the note between Sahib Jaan’s toes, he mistakenly assumes she is in purdah (as an ordinary Muslim woman would be) and his warning about her preventing her feet from becoming dirty is implicitly ironic. Sahib Jaan’s profession requires her to dance barefoot so she figuratively and literally dirties her feet to survive. Her feelings about the note are conflicting to her because she is both elated by the male attention, fixating on and romanticising its author yet is implicitly aware that the chance the author would accept a tawaif is slim. Still, in her growing obsession she begins to recreate herself as the pure woman the letter imagines, confiding to a friend:

“Since several days, I get the feeling I am changing. As if I’m undergoing an unknown journey and that I’m going somewhere. I’m leaving everything. Sahib Jaan is slipping away and I’m being distanced from Sahib Jaan.”

Her comments gesture to the transformation she is undertaking. As she slowly distances herself from her persona as a tawaif she begins to reinvent herself as the respectable woman Salim imagines her to be. Midway through the film this transformative process comes to a head, when Sahib Jaan laments to Salim that she feels as if her “inauspicious sky is never ending”. Salim says he will take her to the “place where the sky never ends” and they visit a cliff where Salim suggests they marry. When the Imam asks her for her name, Sahib Jaan, still feigning amnesia about her identity, is stunned when Salim suggests
“Pakeezah”. The choice of the word, from the Farsi language that has a meaning evoking the English words ‘pure’, ‘clean’ and ‘righteous’, is important. The effect of the name is twofold as it evokes an irony that a woman with an ‘impure’ profession might be considered pure and it is deliberately evocative of the word Pakistan (meaning ‘Land of the Pure’), thereby recollecting the rightful Muslim homeland. Just as Partition was an exceptionally traumatic process so too is Sahib Jaan’s transformation into Pakeezah. In the infamous scene from the film (discussed further in this chapter in greater detail) where Sahib Jaan dances in a frenzied fury at what was to be Salim’s wedding to another woman, her transformation reaches its climax. With the spilling of her blood comes the violent death of Sahib Jaan, the tawaif, and the rebirth of Pakeezah, the wife. This psychic death transcends the limits of the tawaif genre because the film’s production was largely a product of the early 1960s where there still remained a tangible hope for the Indo-Muslim identity.

Along with the tropes of transformation, there are several recurring leitmotifs that contribute to the mise-en-scene and melancholic aesthetic of the Muslim Social. There is repeated imagery of mirrors, caged birds and repeated references to death and dying in each film of the genre. In Pakeezah, Sahib Jaan is gifted a yellow canary housed in a gilded gold cage by a nawab who is trying to seduce her. After her encounter with Salim in the train, Sahib Jaan has her handmaid have a gold cage-like ornament made to house the letter from him in. Once inside her room she lays on her bed, retrieving the letter carefully from her pillowcase and placing it inside the ornament. The birdcage above her swings furiously in the breeze (from the open window) as she tucks the ornament into her hair and leans across to a nearby water pool, staring at her reflection as she replays Salim’s words in her head via a voiceover. In the reflection on the water we see Sahib Jaan swinging the ornament in her hands and the birdcage swinging back and forth. She hears the bird flap its wings and retrieves the cage, opening it and setting the bird free. In Umrao Jaan the opening song, Kahe Ko Byahi Bides (‘Must I Marry a Stranger?’) contains the line “Father, I am a bird startled from your cage”, and Umrao Jaan also has a caged bird in her room (one with its wings clipped – in a heavy handed symbolisation
of her own containment). Similarly, the Muslim Social genre often makes reference to the tawaif’s existence as a tattered kite – as Sahib Jaan says, gesturing to the kite lodged in a tree outside her window, “I too am torn, uprooted, unnamed and ill-fated”. These many recurring motifs work to contextualise the tawaif’s inner-torment and liminal position in society.

The mirror has long been an instrument and indicator of exile in many global texts. As a device that both splits and doubles the self, the psychoanalytical tropes of the mirror are immense. In a book titled *Semiotics of Exile in Contemporary Chinese Film*, author Hong Zeng writes:

“Since in colonial discourse, the disempowered colonized is often feminized, female doubling emblemizes the split allegiance and complex identity of the colonized, and thus figures colonial and postcolonial exile” (61).

If we apply Zeng’s observations of the postcolonial exile onto the post-Partition Muslim identity, the tawaif’s reflected (conflicted) identity becomes clearer. For the tawaif the mirror is a vital tool for her performative identity – she readies herself in front of it and prepares her appearance for performances. But Sahib Jaan and Umrao Jaan also frequently stare into the mirror, seemingly searching for their reflections. The mirror reflects the tawaif’s fragmented self and nowhere is this fragmentation more evident than in the final scene of *Umrao Jaan*. Usamah Ansari writes, of the scene:

“While she stares at her dusty reflection in the mirror, a (classed) configuration of Muslim memory is reflected back to the audience – covered with dust to suggest a blurred and almost lost link to the past. This is a way to make sense of the fractured existence of South Asian Muslims – fractured between nations and occupying an uncertain position within the Indian nation and its official historiography”.

The moment encodes the personal and public destruction of Indo-Muslim identity. Both Umrao Jaan and Pakeezah suffer an uncertain and liminal position in society, which is why the mirror imagery emphasises the metaphor of the tawaif being split. Chakravarty argues that the tawaif is “is no more real than her reflection in a mirror” (271) and in the final scene of *Umrao Jaan* when the
tawaif stares into her reflection we see two fragmented figures. But as the camera zooms into the dusty mirror, we see just one – a reflection trapped inside the mirror.

Though *Pakeezah’s* ending reflects a sense of hope for the Indo-Muslim identity, it is still true to say that both films studied here, and indeed all Muslim Socials featuring tawaifs, converse with the dying discourse of a fading Indo-Muslim culture. Death, dying and psychic violence haunt both films; almost every tawaif in Bollywood history has at some point in the film referred to herself as a *zindalash* (living corpse). Death stalks Umrao Jaan at every turn. When she elopes with Faiz Ali (after suffering the heartbreak of losing her beloved Sultan Nawab to another woman) he is promptly shot dead and when she falls to his bleeding body, she sobs because encoded in his death is her own. She must now return to the kotha with her hopes of a new life all but dead. Just as the tawaif Zohra (coincidentally also played by Rekha) in *Muqqadar Ka Sikandar* laments that her entire life is poisoned, the tawaifly condition is one associated with and yet worse than death. As discussed above, the very transformation from girl to tawaif requires a violent death of a previous self, as coded in Pakeezah’s rebirth is Sahib Jaan’s death, and in Umrao Jaan’s birth, is Amiran’s death. After fleeing her wedding to Salim, Sahib Jaan returns to the kotha, lamenting:

“*Again my vagabond dead body has returned to this pink tomb to be buried. Every tawa’if is a dead body, I as well as you. This market of ours is actually a graveyard for women whose souls have died but whose bodies remain alive. These sumptuous taverns and kothas of ours are just lavish tombs in which the living bodies of us dead women are decorated and adorned. But our graves are not covered with dirt, they are left open; I am but an impatient cadaver from one of these open graves.*”

Sahib Jaan’s analogy is all the more potent considering that she herself was *born* of death as her mother committed suicide immediately after giving birth on top of a tombstone in a graveyard.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes, speaking of his experiences of exile:
“The shards of memory acquired greater stratus, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities...The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present” (12).

The most evocative and climatic scene in *Pakeezah*, and the most memorable of the genre, occurs when Sahib Jaan dances across broken shards of glass at Salim’s wedding. The scene sees Sahib Jaan dance at what-is-to-be Salim’s wedding to another woman. Stepping onto the performance stage (which is a white sheet laid out on the floor) to an all-male audience, Sahib Jaan locks eyes with Salim, who stands ahead of her watching on. As the music intensifies she spins in *chakkar*, when her eye-line returns to find Salim gone. Distressed, she falls against an upright crystal chandelier causing it to shatter as it smashes onto the floor. The audience looks on aghast as Sahib Jaan begins to dance in a frenzied fury, her feet trampling shards of glass as she hypnotically spins. With her feet cut, she leaves bloodied footprints on the white floor with each impassioned step. As she throws herself dramatically to the floor her veil slips off to reveal a flying mass of black hair. She drags herself to her feet again as the camera closes in on her anklet-adorned feet, seemingly possessed – unable to stop dancing. Nawabjaan emerges and as Sahib Jaan collapses she rushes to her, shouting to Shahbuddin who is in the audience. Shahbuddin walks toward Nawabjaan and into a pool of Sahib Jaan’s blood on the floor. Nawabjaan points to Shahbuddin’s bloodstained feet, yelling “*This! This is your daughter’s blood which you’ve stood upon*”. As she curses him, she tells him that Sahib Jaan is in fact his daughter, shouting, “*Look! Don’t you see how this woman’s blood has bloomed and dried up on your sleeves?*” He accepts the revelation with shock, quietly whispering, “*my daughter. My daughter?*”, but Nawabjaan hisses, “*She’s still Nargis’ daughter until her marriage procession takes her far away from my brothel*”. Shahbuddin walks toward Sahib Jaan, but an increasingly incensed Hakim Saheb goes to shoot the tawaif and misses, hitting Shahbuddin instead. Shahbuddin falls to the floor bleeding and a distraught Salim holds his ailing body and says, “*I’ll take the marriage procession Uncle, I’ll go there*”. Shahbuddin splutters, “*take me with you, beta, take me with you*” and then dies. Sahib Jaan’s violent performance here is necessary because it configures
the death of tawaif Sahib Jaan and the impending rebirth of the pure wife Pakeezah. As her small and bloodied footprints stain the white sheet she performs on, the imagery is deliberately evocative of virginity and purity. This is an act of “self-mutilation”, as Gopinath explains:

“The figure of Pakeezah in Bollywood iconography then, embodies a particular form of female masochism in the face of social injustice; the camera’s fetishistic gaze on the courtesan’s feet references her sexual labour as well as the self-mutilation through which she ultimately proves her essential moral purity” (Impossible Desires 87).

After her crimson blood has spilled her moral purity is proven and in the following scene, dressed in bridal red, sitting next to the corpse of her paternal father, she is finally reborn Pakeezah.

The song-dance sequence in the Muslim Social is of great importance to the film. Though as with most Bollywood films, the song-dance sequence provides a moment of countenance to the narrative and permits the characters a space to perform alternative desires, the tawaif’s mujra serves several important historical functions. The tawaif performs a mujra, which is a dance that incorporates steps from kathak set to music such as ghazals or thumris that was historically an important source of the tawaif’s appeal, eroticism and income. In both Umrao Jaan and Pakeezah, the tawaif’s perform their mujras set to ghazals. As a poetic and musical form, the ghazal was “usually recited in the poetry gathering (mushaira), whether in tarranum (semi-melodic chanting), or sung in qawwali or semi-classical style” (Dwyer 127). Featuring rhyming couples and a refrain, with each line sharing the same metre; the ghazal has requirements not entirely dissimilar to the structural necessities of the Petrarchan sonnet. An ancient art, originating in sixth century Arabic verse, the ghazal is typically comprised of a minimum of five and no more than fifteen couplets. It rose to popularity in the 1700s in Lucknow by drawing on Sufi, Arabic and Urdu influences to fuse both the “profane and divine” (Dwyer 127). Thematically it has just one focus – love. An art form rooted in loss and longing, the ghazal’s primary focus is the pain and separation of love – be it unattainable love, illicit love, impossible love, unfulfilled love or lost love. This love can refer
to an earthly or a divine love, but is always written from the point of view of the unrequited lover. The ghazal romanticises the melancholic – it paints yearning as an exquisite pain, and imagines longing as divine. Often metaphysical, the ghazal also uses the moon as a motif for longing. The ghazal’s place in the Muslim Social is primarily to configure the tawaif’s intense longing to transcend her fate.

In the famous ghazal *Yeh Kya Jagah Hai Doston?* (‘What is This Place Friends?’) Umrao Jaan expresses her state of exile; singing to a roomful of strange men as tears well in her eyes:

“What is this place, friends? Which region is this? Where, as far as the eye can see, is dust storm upon dust storm? What is this place, friends? To what resting place has life brought me, where I have neither command over my joy, nor power over my sorrow?”

As she sings, she gazes forlornly into the distance. The camera tracks her eyeliner across the room and into another, where we see an elderly woman watching the performance through a window. Umrao Jaan quickens her footwork, her intricate steps punctuated by the bells adorning her ankles, and begs again, “What is this place, friends? Which region is this? Life asks me for an account of all my years...my heart has no answer, it is full of remorse”. As the music plays, the camera shows a series of flashbacks featuring a mother and child playing hopscotch and frolicking through a green field. The images, shot in soft focus and lit by gauzy mid-afternoon sunlight are a stark departure from the bleak night-time sequence the tawaif performs in. As she sings, “beyond the blinds, who beckons me”, she walks into the other room as the elderly woman walks toward her. The music softens and the women converse:

Woman: “You’re the one from Lucknow?”
Umrao Jaan: “Yes”
Woman: “What is your name?”
Umrao Jaan: “How does it matter?”
Woman: “Are you a tawaif by birth?”
Umrao Jaan: “No, I am one by force of fate”
Woman: “Please, say something about yourself. Who are you?”
Umrao Jaan: “How can I say who I am?”
Woman: “Where is your real home?”
Umrao Jaan: “My real home is beneath my feet.”
Woman (tearfully): “Are you Amiran?”

Umrao Jaan nods and the women sob into each other’s arms. They talk as Umrao Jaan/Amiran’s mother informs her that her father has since passed away and cries as she asks her why she had gone for so long. Deep in embrace, the women are disturbed when Umrao Jaan’s brother storms into the room, shouting, “No! Ma! This is not Amiran. This is Umrao Jaan, the famous courtesan from Lucknow”. As he does so, we see a flashback of the siblings playing as children, before switching back to the scene as Umrao Jaan says softly, “brother”, only for him to hiss at her, “You may have brought glory to your name, but we thought you were dead. But you’re still alive? You should have drowned yourself! It’ll be better if you go.” The women tear themselves apart and Umrao Jaan walks out of the scene with tears streaming down her face.

It is implicitly ironic that the place Umrao Jaan had begged to know of was in fact her childhood home. Poonam Arora calls the moment in which mother and daughter are finally reunited “uncharacteristic” as the women are meeting in a liminal location that “divides the public and private domain” (69). The moment, which casts Umrao Jaan into an uncertain exile once again, evokes the tropes of Partition because she suffers repeated displacement. Ansari argues that “Umrao’s inability to recognise her hometown” is symbolic of the difficulties in connecting old Islamicate culture to physical locations within modern India (a problem Umrao Jaan faces numerously). Ansari argues that the tawaif “mediates the feelings of disjuncture and not belonging that many Muslims face in post-Pakistan India”. Umrao Jaan is unsure of her place within the nation – an exile of both her home and her homeland. The song-dance sequence permits the tawaif a space in which to perform her conflicted Indo-Muslim identity as Leda Ward explains:

“her identity as a dancer and the social implications surrounding her dance allow Muslims to identify with her struggles and allow Indians of all religions to renegotiate the aftermath of Partition” (4).
The sequence therefore, performs an integral function because it demands audience recognition. Unlike the silencing in official accounts of Partition in India (and Pakistan), the Muslim Social resorts to coded allegory by symbolically representing the tawaif’s fractured location.

The Rape Fantasy

*Umrao Jaan* features the most famous ghazal of the Muslim Social genre - *In Ankhon Ki Masti* (‘The Passion in These Eyes’), sung by Asha Bhosle, the iconic number is still re-performed at weddings and functions across India to this day. As the number begins, we see Umrao Jaan seated, shrouded in a jewelled, gauzy *dupatta* sat beneath a crystal chandelier in the ornate performance room, before an audience of men. She sings:

“There are thousands intoxicated by the passion of these eyes. There are thousands grown drunk on them...You are not the only one disgraced by your desire for me. In this city there are thousands of mad men just like you. There are thousands intoxicated by the passion of these eyes”.

Narratively, the song functions as the first time Umrao Jaan sees on the object of her affection, Sultan Nawab, who is an audience member. After their eyes meet they remain locked in a passionate gaze for the duration of her performance. The tawaif repeatedly spins in chakkar, but her eyes return each time to him. As her spinning slows she sits back down, pulling her dupatta back over her face and obscuring it. She drops the veil suddenly and looks directly at Sultan Nawab gesturing with her two fingers for him to gaze deeper into her eyes. The direction of the gesture is both forceful and erotic and in the scene thereafter Umrao Jaan and Sultan Nawab are alone together when he expresses discomfort with her performative identity. She asks him, “but if not for you, who was I performing for?” enacting an ironic conceit because when she sings, “thousands have been intoxicated by the passion of these eyes” she is addressing the public nature of performative profession. I speak of Umrao Jaan’s mujra to demonstrate the archetypical moment in the Muslim Social – when the tawaif unveils herself. The moment, integral to all Muslim Socials, is deployed in much the same manner: the camera begins on the tawaif seated and obscured, until she begins to perform, inviting men to gaze at her through a
series of symbolic hand gestures, direct gazes into the camera and by slipping off her veil and revealing herself to the audience(s).

The act of erotic unveiling in the Muslim Social is extremely significant, because her sexually potent act performs a dual-purpose, in which the she reveals herself to both her (male) audience and the audience of the film, as Poonam Arora argues:

“not only does the representation of the Muslim woman as tawaif seduce her Hindu audience (by, in effect, “asking for” her rape) but the focal point at which this occurs is during certain key scenes in which the tawaif unveils herself to the pro-filmic, and by extension, to the film audience” (61).

This kind of meta-interaction functions as erotic performance on both levels, and as scholars Arora and Faisal Devji argue (in separate, equally interesting works), permits the potential pleasure of a rape fantasy because the tawaif erotically reveals and conceals herself to the male audience(s). Devji’s essay, Hindu/Muslim/Indian covers the “essentialized identity” (9) imposed on Muslims in a post-Partition India, but considers this identity particularly complex in the case of the woman. So while popular modern Bollywood tends to imagine the Muslim character as masculine, dangerous and usually terroristic, the Muslim Social does the opposite, envisioning the Muslim as seductive, feminine and sexual. Though his essay largely avoids cinema, Devji does argue that the woman is “primary medium through which the generally historical romance of the Muslim is made manifest”, but asserts, “this attraction, however; is by no means benign; indeed it frequently elicits pleasure in the shape of a rape fantasy” (9). Devji argues that the Muslim woman functions as a representation of the “seductiveness” of Muslim culture, and perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the case of the tawaif. In the mujra just mentioned, the camera repeatedly to show Umrao Jaan’s red mehndhi stained feet adorned in jewellery. Though the camera shows her quick dance-steps, there is a deliberate evocation of Sahib Jaan’s bloodied feet in Pakeezah. The bloodied feet in Pakeezah represent Sahib Jaan’s sexual-labour (as Chakravarty contends) and also sexually fetishise the spilling of her blood by evoking the traumatic tropes of Partition, and of rape. It is also important to remember
here, the widespread rapes of both Hindu and Muslim women during Partition as a way of enforcing national identity. As a result, the tawaif’s sexual performance invites the Hindu viewer to engage in her ‘rape’, as according to Arora, “The rape-fantasy “functions for the Hindu nationalist imaginary as a displacement of the “original sin” of Partition” (61). Embodying a repressed narrative of Partition, the tawaif stands in for the persecuted Muslim identity. But if there is the potential for the Hindu viewer to engage in a fantasy of erotic domination of a Muslim woman, what appeal remains for the Muslim viewer?

Arora builds on Devji’s essay, by applying it to the Muslim Social, arguing that the tawaif’s public performances turns the traditional function of the devadasi (who danced to worship and appease the Gods), into worship of the Muslim aristocrat (73). Arora suggests that both communities of Hindu and Muslim spectators engage in two diverging different strategies of (erotic) recognition. Given that both Muslim and Hindi cultural practices of veiling are dissimilar (i.e. Muslims use the veiling practice to prevent women from being seen by men outside the family and Hindus use it to order the family by demonstrating subservience to in-laws and differentiate between the bride-givers and the bride-takers (Arora 73)), Arora argues that it is possible to argue that they view the unveiling practice according to their own specific cultural context by drawing on one key difference: that a veiled woman is a stranger to a Muslim man (because women normally unveil in the safety of their family) whereas a newly-veiled woman to a Hindu man is a family member who he is now forbidden from directly addressing or looking at (so as to prevent any possible sexual dalliances between women in the extended family and men). Therefore, Arora asserts, the veiled woman is a far more “sexually-charged” taboo (75), and because the Muslim woman wears a veil for the express purpose of preventing a Hindu man from looking at her, her invitation is all the more erotic. Thus the tawaif possesses a transgressive ability to “cross traditionally-drawn cultural boundaries” (77). This transgression situates the tawaif as both radical and receptive to transgression, thereby making her an object of sexual desire and sexual violation. I have drawn from Arora and Devji at length here, because both are the exemplars of this particular area of study. I wonder though, if the
sexual possibilities the male Hindu viewer sees in the female Muslim tawaif are similar to the male Muslim viewer’s enjoyment of the erotic Hindu item-girl’s performance. Is it perhaps that the pleasure of voyeurism knows no religion; especially if we consider that Hindu actor Rekha played Muslim Umrao Jaan. Ultimately, Arora’s theory explains the appeal and potential pleasures for two different audiences coded within the act of unveiling, which offer both sexual and sinister pleasures to the audience(s).

Though theorising the appeal of the Muslim Social remains complex, what is certain is that at its most basic, it offers a polyglot audience a voyeuristic glimpse into the usually private domain of the mysterious tawaif. Both Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan’s (and every other Muslim Social) song-dance sequences contain repeated returns to the tawaif’s feet and eyes, thereby heightening the audience’s proximity and intimacy to her. So while her sexual meaning remains perhaps unfixed, there is immense potential erotic spectacle in her performance (regardless of religion). For the Muslim however, perhaps the greatest pleasure is that the Muslim Social recreates an idealised, romanticised and nostalgic Muslim world past. There are some schools of academic thought that consider the Muslim Social to be ‘feminist’ because the stories are women-centric. Indeed, the kotha appears as a site of female harmony because it operates under a strict matrilineal system. Further, in remaining, “removed from the control of respectable society and family” (Booth 7), there potential to read the tawaif’s position as one of emancipation. The tawaif exists far outside of the conventional patriarchal familial system that would ordinarily see her fate controlled by her brother, father, husband or male love-interest. In situating the tawaif as a “hero”, Gregory D. Booth argues that the “tawaifs might well offer positive objects for a female subjectivity” (24). He writes:

“None of the normal strategies through which a hero might gain control of a heroine—the establishment of a romantic relationship, acceptance by the heroine’s family, “proving himself” in some socially acceptable way (e.g., success in education, business, sport, etc.)—are available in tawaif films” (6).
If we consider the tawaif in comparison to the classic Hindi film heroine, she appears markedly freer because she operates outside the patriarchy. However, if we consider her sheer desperation to be reinserted into societal domesticity via marriage, it becomes difficult to read feminism into a trajectory that sees her repeatedly possessed, oppressed and dispossessed by her male suitors. The Muslim Social goes to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate the tawaif’s inner-torment, from her repeated references to her body as a zindalash or to her soul as a caged bird, it is impossible to imagine that she gains much enjoyment or pleasure from her ambiguous position in society. The Muslim Social perhaps then, best functions as an early predecessor to the ‘women-centric’ Bollywood films that this thesis encounters in chapter four.

After Umrao Jaan, the tawaif and the Muslim Social faded into relative obscurity. Concurrent with the rise of an aggressive Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, sympathetic representations of Islam slipped into the abyss. Occasionally appearing in modern Bollywood films in appropriated ‘mujras’ as a dancing girl, the tawaif was rarely seen onscreen after 1980. In keeping with the general trends in modern Bollywood item-numbers, her rare appearances were overtly sexualised. In Mashallah (an Arabic phrase meaning ‘God has willed it’), a song from the hit film Ek Tha Tiger (‘Once There was a Tiger’, dir. Kabir Khan, 2012), lead actor Katrina Kaif seductively slithers across the sand, running her hands across her bare midriff as she sings along to the Arabic lyrics, which espouse the virtues of a beautiful woman. In Omkara (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2006) Bipasha Basu begins her ‘mujra’ veiled, before she stands up before the male audience in a tiny choli and skirt, singing lyrics such as, “Come, light your cigarettes with the heat of my bosom, I’m burning up under this choli” and, “Haul me to your court one afternoon/Punish me, handcuff me with my anklets”. Similarly, Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela (‘A Play of Bullets – Ram Leela’, dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2013) featured a “modern mujra” (as declared by the media) in which actor Priyanka Chopra begins by drying her half-wet hair with a piece of cloth before tucking it suggestively into her skirt (which sits much lower than her dangling diamond belly-button ring) and then buttons up her tight, half-unbuttoned blouse over her chest. These instances collectively demonstrative
the new ‘place’ (or lack thereof) for the tawaif in modern Bollywood. The tawaif film proper, save for an *Umrao Jaan* remake in the mid-2000s, has all but slipped into the historical archives of Bollywood. As this discussion will come to in the next chapter, *Devdas* presents us with a tawaif in Chandramukhi, but given that the film is a reinterpretation of a classic text, her presence can hardly be considered as evidence of a modern revival of the Muslim Social or tawaif film. In 2013 however, there were two releases, *Raanjhana* (*Beloved One*, dir. Anand L Rai, 2013) and *Ishaqzaade* (*Rebel Lovers* dir. Habib Faisal, 2012), that featured dedicated Muslim heroines (both coincidentally named Zoya). Alongside *Gangs of Wasseypur*, which I explore in depth in Chapter Five, these films gesture to a more promising onscreen identity for Indo-Muslims.

Before closing this chapter, it is imperative I speak to the prevalence of Muslims in the industry. Because I have argued that the Muslim Social is a representation of a repressed Indo-Muslim identity, is important to briefly canvas key academic arguments that consider the strong presence of Muslim personalities in Bollywood evidence of a kind of cultural utopian ideal (one Kavoori and Chadha consider “exemplar of secularism” (132) in *Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized: The Muslim “Other” in Indian Cinema*). Evoked as a multi-religious, successfully secular industry Bollywood is often imagined by the academy as a mini-utopia where Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsi and other religious artists coexist harmoniously. Vijay Mishra suggests the discourse of Hindi cinema, “remains to this day markedly Urdu”, listing Mehboob Khan, Nargis, Nazir Hussain, Javed Akhtar, A.R Rahman, Aamir Khan and Shahrukh Khan (amongst others) as evidence of the Muslim personalities in Bollywood. He argues:

“The cultural syncretism is so complete that even when, as at present, there is an implicit directive to work within the formal determinants of Hindu culture (in some ways a more rigid directive to conform to the metatextual traditions than before), the cinema continues to represent itself through that syncretism” (63).

Film critic Iqbal Masud echoes these ideals, in an article entitled “*Muslim Ethos in Indian Cinema*”, listing just as Mishra does, a long and dedicated list of successful Muslims in the Bollywood industry. He argues that popular cinema
works in “harmony” with various religious groups in India, optimistically declaring that Bollywood “is the one Indian cultural-industrial structure which has resisted separatism”. Indeed, I wish to make it very clear that Muslims are immensely successful in all facets of the industry, particularly the trifecta of Khans – Salman, Aamir and Shahrukh who comprise a hugely powerful contingent. Perhaps the most powerful three stars in Bollywood today, those three demonstrate if anything, the immense saleability of the Muslim identity. These stars are revered, loved and lauded by Hindu and Muslim fans alike (and others). Their Islamic identities are well received by fans, just as the Muslim stars before them (Meena Kumari or Dilip Kumar for example). But as this study considers in more depth in Chapter Three, Shahrukh only began playing Muslim characters in 2007 with Chak De India! (after many, many roles before as a Hindu), and Salman and Aamir’s roles are largely Hindu. Aamir is well known for his keen sense of social justice but even he has played Hindu characters many times. It should of course, be the role of the actor to play characters from diverse backgrounds, but what repeatedly occurs is Hindu representation by Muslim artists in Bollywood. Unfortunately, while the aforementioned academic ideas illustrate the presence of successful and loved Muslims in the industry, they do little to interrogate the lack of actual (much less favourable) narrative representations of Islam onscreen.

Though Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan are both films that have been studied numerously and well by the academy, it was my intention to breathe new life into the films by placing them in a conversation with marginality. By briefly considering the notion of the rape fantasy, I hope to have posited the old films in a modern discussion. The ensuing chapters of this thesis chronologically examine specific performances of marginality. This chapter began with the most important political event for modern India – Partition. In tethering the fracturing tropes of Partition to the tawaif’s troubled performance of marginal identity, this chapter found the tawaifs Sahib Jaan and Umrao Jaan to be conflicted signifiers of a diminishing Muslim identity in India. Chakravarty once wrote that the “whore’s” body acts as a vessel through which troubled national ideologies are narrated (281) and in this sense, both tawaif’s studied here
narrate, and are narrated by, a complicated and complicating chapter of Indian history. In the following chapter I posit that the antihero’s performance of masculinity-in-crisis is a result of similarly troubled national circumstances, albeit from dramatically different time periods. Ultimately, just like the broken shards of glass Sahib Jaan cuts her feet upon and the dusty mirror Umrao Jaan’s reflection is trapped in, the Muslim Social suggests the post-Partition Indo-Muslim identity is both fractured and refracted.
ANGER AND THE ANTIHERO: 
Masculinity-in-Crisis in Deewar and Devdas

“The antihero can be seen as a performative figure that emerged from a cynical political culture in which the division between “good” and “evil” was becoming increasingly blurred” – Ranjani Mazumdar (7).

“The hero of Indian cinema was ushered in by, perhaps, the best known anti-hero of all times - Devdas” – Rinki Bhattacharya (qtd. in Arora).

The Bollywood cinema-scape is cluttered with heroes – romantic, strong, spirited, sensitive, tough, unrelenting, devoted, domineering; the tropes of the hero are potent and plenty. From the first Indian feature film, Raja Harishchandra, which told the tale of the King who nobly sacrifices his kingdom, his wife and his children in order to honour a promise to the sage Vishwamitra, Bollywood has been a cinema for the hero. There was the ethical ‘everyman’ in the 1960s (typified by Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar); the dashing, dancing heroes of the 1960s and ‘70s (including Dharamendra, Rajesh Khanna and Shammi Kapoor); the action films of the 1980s starring actors such as Jackie Shroff and Anil Kapoor; and the 1990s romantic hero, best summed up by a visual image of Shahrukh Khan atop a mountain in Switzerland, arms outstretched, hair ruffled by the breeze. The hero has and always will be the centrepiece of the Bollywood narrative because crucial changes in the nation repeatedly accompany changes in masculine representation, and vice-versa.

Rohan Sarma writes of the popular Bollywood hero:

“In typical Bollywood representations, the ‘hero’ is the male who fights evils of society, rescues his female lover from the clutches of goons through violence and eventually wins her over and the narrative establishes a happy ending of fulfilled love” (2).

Sarma’s matrix makes it easier to identify those performances that do not meet these benchmarks; which brings us to the figure of the antihero. The antihero meets few of these requirements because he performs counter to the traditional hero. In deploying a new agency of rogue masculinity that does not
fit neatly into popular Bollywood representations of masculinity, the antihero is tethered to troubled and postcolonial tropes of nationalism as his performance emerged during particularly difficult times for the nation. With an unwieldy and radical persona, the antihero subverts what is required of him, thereby challenging the ordered Bollywood universe. In navigating a rapidly changing nation, this chapter traces the relationship between two seemingly opposing performances of antiheroism, one from the 1970s and one from the mid-2000s, to place alternative performances of masculinity central to a dialogue with the rapidly changing post-Partition, postcolonial nation. By taking up classic film *Deewar* alongside modern classic *Devdas*, this chapter examines two iconic performances of antiheroism.

**The 1970s: State(s) of Emergency**

After India awoke to its much-evoked “tryst with destiny” on that fateful day in August 1947, it was thrust headlong into a national narrative that stressed a unified nationhood, modern democracy and most significantly, a global future. In theory, this ‘new India’ was a unified, yet secular nation marching steadily along the road to modernity. In practice however, it was a nation just free from the shackles of colonialism that was waking to a profound “foundational chaos” (Sen 40):

“In other words, India’s encounter with the "profound historical rupture”—colonialism—bequeathed to the nation a troubled relationship with what we understand as modernity. The legacies of colonialism—at multiple levels, political, social, economic—continue to complicate what Partha Chatterjee has succinctly phrased as ‘our modernity’” (40-41).

The first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, steered a post-independence India into this new era by fashioning a national narrative that evoked modernity at every turn. While Nehru’s vision was to modernise India with a triumphant and inclusive rhetoric, as the new India emerged from the shadowy holocaust of Partition, the wheels of progress began to stall. These mechanisms of modernity had well and truly halted in the mid-1950s as a result of poorly executed governmental aims that had to encompass a vastly multifarious country. It was
then that cinema, a product of the embattled postcolonial landscape, emerged as a terrain that could reflect the varied experiences of modernity for the new nation. Nehru, initially a staunch opponent of cinema, began to realise the potential of the film industry and sought to make it his ally. Prasad explains that in this sense, cinema became a state apparatus by which to disseminate national ideology. Prior to independence, at the Indian Motion Picture Congress in Bombay in 1939, Nehru delivered the following speech:

“Motion pictures have become an essential part of modern life and they can be used with great advantage for educational purposes... I hope that the industry will consider now in terms of meeting the standards and of aiming at producing high class films which have educational and social values. Such films should receive the help and cooperation of not only the public but also of the state” (qtd in Rai 33).

Given these strict ideals that cinema act as an ideological and educational tool, it was not long before Nehru found that the films being made were failing to live up to his expectations. As a direct result of this, the government withheld funding to films that failed to meet the rather oblique benchmark of “high class films” and subsequently raised taxes on filmmaking in the 1950s by 33% (Rai 33). Nehru’s efforts to quell the desires of filmmakers to make films that challenged or much less, commented on the state of India were relatively successful, as films from the late 50s and very early 1960s films were generally Indi-centric, pro-nationalist and ‘serious’ in aesthetic. Nehru dreamed a secular, unified India and believed cinema should echo these ideas. As a result, the prevailing films of the period contained socialist and/or nationalist agendas concerned with portraying themes of unity-in-diversity. Films such as Awaara (‘Tramp’, dir. Raj Kapoor, 1951) and Mother India (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957) addressed social issues affecting the ‘ordinary’ Indian citizen. Themes of class, gender or caste discrimination were common as filmmakers sought to disseminate (as per Nehru’s orders) desirable social values for the betterment of a new nation. Within this period there emerged perhaps the quintessential hero of Hindi cinema – the ‘everyman’, best typified by Raj Kapoor. An immense
success, Kapoor’s Chaplinesque roles espoused egalitarianism through a hybridised identity; he was both poor and middle-class, traversing the streets as a vagabond, yet still able to connect with the rural citizens of the village. After this hapless vagabond’s charm, Nehru’s reign drew to a close and the mid ’60s films became decidedly escapist, focusing on frothy romances played out in exotic locations (as it was the first time filmmakers could experiment with locations outside India).

The 1960s ushered in major social and political upheaval and also set the stage for yet another definitive decade for India – the 1970s. According to Jyotika Virdi in Deewar – The “Fiction” of Film and “Fact” of Politics, the Indo-Pak war of 1965 and then the split of the Congress Party in 1967:

“marked the unleashing of Machiavellian politicking within the dominant Congress party and the ultimate consolidation of the Congress in the Parliament and State Assemblies under the stranglehold of then prime minister, Indira Gandhi”.

Gandhi’s rise to popularity had been in part due to her charisma, ruthless determination and stealthy courting of the lower classes (who affectionately referred to her as ‘Indira Amma’). So, in 1971, bolstered by her support of the Indo-Pakistani war (the war a result of Indian-Pakistani tensions during the Bangladesh Liberation War) where she intervened on behalf of Bangladesh, Gandhi’s popularity hit an all time high. She was elected for a second-term with an overwhelming majority and her popularity endured for a year further, until in 1972, when things began to rapidly deteriorate. The monsoons failed to arrive for the year, resulting in acute drought and famine across the country. This led to massive food shortages and subsequent price rises; then the worldwide energy crisis in 1973 and the oil-shock of 1973-4 placed further strain on any already-struggling economy (worsened still by inflation and unemployment); the IMF loan in 1974 saw a widening of the rich-poor gap; and the national Indian Railway Strikes of 1974 (which Gandhi brutally opposed) crippled the economy. As a result of these factors combined, the nation struggled with mass

12 So great was Kapoor’s appeal that Mao Zedong famously said Awaara was his all-time favourite film in an interview (Rai 33).
unemployment, famine and crippling poverty. Under such dire circumstances, a tide of discontentment began to rise amid the masses and Gandhi’s reign appeared to be shaky. Implicitly aware of this tenuous position and of the national crisis, Gandhi took the drastic measure of calling a National Emergency in 1975. Under Section 352 of the Indian Constitution, (under Gandhi’s guidance), President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed declared a State of National Emergency and in doing so ushered in what was to be perhaps the most contentious period of Indian history ever. For some nineteen months, Gandhi suspended elections and civil liberties in a bid to regain and retain her waning power over an increasingly discontented nation and to rebuild its crumbling foundations.

Just as sure as Raj Kapoor was romantic, poetic and passive, Gandhi’s reign after the Emergency was anything but. The next chapter of Indian history marked a decisive and divisive shift in both nationalist rhetoric and in the social fabric of the nation. A fierce militarisation scheme, bolstered in part by the launch of India’s nuclear program in 1975, combined with a staunch censorship campaign that violently hindered any sort of public expression of dissent saw Gandhi forced to resort to leading a litigious leadership. Her reign drew to a close in 1977 when, for the first time in 30 years, the Congress Party was voted out of power. Presiding over an immensely difficult period of history, Gandhi’s legacy remains remembered in dramatically different ways across the country. Revered in many parts of the nation and reviled in some others, regardless of her immense political legacy there is no doubting the effects the Emergency had on the film industry. Gandhi’s strict censorship measures targeted the film industry to ensure that all film-related publicity, content and promotional material including posters, flyers and so on was supportive of the government. Enforced vehemently by the All India League of Censorship, (Gandhi’s weapon of choice, which had been operational since 1939 but was revived with gusto during The Emergency), the ban bordered on dictatorship and required a precarious balancing act for the filmmaker in maintaining one’s own creative

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13 To this day, it remains illegal for any Indian film or related-promotional material to defame the Nehru or Gandhi families.
and artistic vision and the needs of a disillusioned people to see their struggles reflected, versus governmental stipulation for secular and optimistic entertainment. As a result of these rigid and oppressive circumstances, filmmakers were forced to resort to allegorical or coded critiques of the government. In the absence of state funding for the film industry and residual Nehruvian isolationist policies that discouraged global distribution of Indian films, filmmakers were encouraged into illegal avenues of funding (and distribution methods). So began the mutually beneficial relationship between the organised crime industry and the Bollywood film industry that allegedly still occurs today.

Looking Back in Anger: Deewar

Ranjani Mazumdar suggests that “Deewar is in many senses the film that marks the acknowledgement of the crisis of postcolonial nationalism” (2) because its major theme is a country in crisis. In telling the story of two brothers whose lives take dramatically divergent paths, Deewar is a cult classic. The film that cemented Bachchan as the quintessential ‘angry young man’, is part of the genre referred to as the same that chronicled the crises of a nation. A searing social commentary born of social distress, Deewar deploys melodrama to intensify the conflict between two brothers. In the two opposing brothers, Deewar captured the two opposing opinions of the nation. While one brother stands-in for the State (as a policeman) and invests in the dreams of the Emergency, the other represents the hopeless desperation of the disillusioned masses (turning to a life of crime as an illegal smuggler). An epic “civil war between state and community” (Prasad 144), Deewar deftly enmeshes Bollywood masala conventions, song-dance sequences and social commentary which, when coupled with Bachchan’s performance, render the film an easy stand out of its genre. More importantly, for the purposes of this chapter, it contains easily the most iconic antihero in Bollywood with the character of

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14 In proof of this relationship, it is widely accepted that Bombay mobster Haji Mastan was the inspiration behind Vijay’s character in Deewar. Mastan regularly provided funding to filmmakers as his interest in Bollywood was such that he eventually began producing films himself.

15 The genre is not entirely dissimilar to the ‘Angry Young Man’ films that arose in Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s.
Vijay. A stark departure from the sensitive Raj Kapoor, or the swinging style of Shammi Kapoor, Bachchan’s brooding Vijay expresses his anger through a series of unique gestures, expert timing and delivery to project a persona that was “inward-looking yet outwardly-searching” (Mazumdar 8). Bachchan’s vulnerable brand of anger bubbled beneath the surface; unlike the classic villain, he was not mindlessly or illogically violent, instead he was plain speaking, reactionary and discontented with his circumstances. In embodying the struggles of the lower middle classes, Vijay was suppressed by his past and oppressed by his present, exerting his frustrations in a self-destructive manner. Mazumdar posits that it was Bachchan’s “ability to absorb and transmit both the “modern” and the “traditional”, the Eastern and the Western, through a novel body language” (10) that accounts for his “unmatched” status in the Bollywood industry.

Bachchan’s star status cannot be underscored enough, but it was his role in Deewar that solidified his stardom. The first of its kind to establish a tangible antihero – Deewar’s Vijay was a flawed character who despite his criminality, still carried the sympathies of the audience with him. Mazumdar argues that it was Bachchan’s “ability to deal with “interiority” that made him the most suitable actor for the character of Vijay, whose “inner exile” had be performed with tremendous complexity on-screen” (11). This “inner exile” and masculinity-in-crisis, as this chapter will examine, is intimately tied to the conditions of the Emergency and the nation in crisis.

Deewar is presented via a flashback that begins with Ravi (Shashi Kapoor) receiving an award from the police for “bravery and acts of honour” and then travels back through the past. Shortly thereafter there we are shown flashback in which the boy’s father Anand (Satyen Kappu), a dockworker, takes a stand against his corrupt bosses for the betterment of his fellow workers’ rights. Threatened by the bosses with his family’s life and coerced into signing a document ending the worker’s strike (thereby ensuring poor working conditions for the future) Anand is beaten by his disgruntled and betrayed colleagues. Bloodied and shamed, he flees the town and his family. The angry workers capture his eldest son, Vijay and forcibly tattoo the small boy’s arm with the phrase “mere baap chor hai” (‘my father is a thief’) in a traumatic event that
alters the course of his future. Driven out of the village, mother Sumitradevi (Nirupa Roy) moves her young family to the city where they sleep under a bridge. As Sumitradevi toils daily at a construction site, the young Vijay takes up work as a shoeshine boy and together they raise enough money to send the younger Ravi to school. Many years later Ravi takes up a career in law enforcement, while a series of events bear down on Vijay, causing him to turn to a life of crime. These two diverging paths provide the backdrop to a film that functions as an epic struggle between brothers, good and evil, state and subject. Later in the film, in yet another cataclysmic event, Vijay’s gang-rival kills his fiancé Anita on their wedding day and a devastated Vijay, now with nothing to lose, kills his enemy. Ravi, who has been given the responsibility of eradicating crime in the city, is torn between his duty to the state and to his family. In the end he pursues Vijay vehemently, ultimately killing him with the gun handed to him by his unknowing mother. Vijay dies in his mother’s arms on the steps outside a temple and in having completed a full circle, the film concludes with the same scene it began with: Ravi receiving his bravery award.

Deewar contains the potential for multiple readings, which, according to Virdi accounts for its popularity within the heterogeneous Bollywood audience. In an article examining the film Virdi explains:

“Deewar can be simultaneously be read as family melodrama, an action-thriller, a religious-mythical or radical-subversive text. The success of the film therefore lies in its ability to mobilize more than one reading of the film ensuring a wide appeal”.

Within such a wide reach of themes and issues, Deewar contains the radical potential for the audience to haggle with the text’s different meaning(s). Virdi argues that this process of negotiation, “reconciles conflicting interests” between the numerous possible readings, by enabling the audience to “arrive at their own meanings”. Deewar mobilises these meanings by presenting an archetypical story (via the structure of the Mahabharata) in which two brothers; one who represents the State via the traits of lawfulness, nationalism and honour; and the other, who stands for socialism, communalism and the working-classes; battle for their mothers’ love. In this sense the film offers the
audience a choice to identify with either brother. It is an understatement to say that the *Mahabharata* occupies an immense place in (Hindu) Indian public (and private) culture. As Mazumdar writes “One of the central themes of the *Mahabharata* is the rendering of unfulfillment as the normal condition of humanity”. *Deewar* draws deeply from the structure of the *Mahabharata*, framing Vijay’s struggle by his discontent, thereby simultaneously humanising him and familiarising the audience with him because he performs as Karna. Mazumdar suggests the “combination of loss, anger and revenge, which coalesced in the “angry man” drew heavily on the epic structure of the *Mahabharata* and one of its most fascinating figures, Karna” (11). *Deewar* draws deeply from the epic mythic conflict of cousin-brothers Karna and Arjun to articulate its tragedy of two warring brothers.

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of Karna (the central character), the son born to princess Kunti, who was abandoned because she feared being an unwed mother. Desperate, Kunti sent the small Karna in a basket down the river where it was found by the charioteer Adhiratha. Adhiratha and his wife Radha raise Karna happily as their own, meanwhile Kunti marries Pandu, the Maharaja of Hastinapur and bears three sons (and after Pandu’s second-wife passed away, Kunti becomes the mother of another two sons as well). As the epic continues, Karna grows up to be a fierce warrior who is dejected because he was considered a *suta* when he (correctly) believed he was of the *Kshatriya* status. He becomes famous for his skills and strength as a fighter and joins the Kauravas, (the rival cousins of the Pandavas, Karna’s blood-related brothers). On the eve of a great battle between the two sides, Karna discovers the Pandavas are in fact, his brothers. Despite this, he remains loyal to the Kauravas and is attacked and killed by Arjun (Kunti’s third son).

*Deewar* draws on the structure of the *Mahabharata* by placing Sumitra Devi, as Kunti, in the centre of the son’s battle. Prasad supposes her role in the film “serves to allegorise the problem of the internal schism of the modern state, the co-existence of the law and community as conflicting terrains” (150). Sumitra Devi stands in as the mother and the motherland; the feminine placed
within a framework of violent and competing masculinities. As the axis upon which the narrative spins, Sumitradevi’s role becomes mythic as she is rendered a prized possession to be fought for by both brothers. Just like Kunti was, Sumitradevi is split between her duties as a mother and her role as a woman. Prasad explains further:

“Sumitra Devi serves as the link between the world of the citizen, of law and the rule of merit, and that of the poor, the victimized and the reconciled. As a ‘woman’, she is firm in her submission to the law, she takes Ravi’s side and leaves Vijay when his smuggling activities are disclosed. As a ‘mother’ she is equally firm in her love for Vijay, the elder son, the one who has borne the permanent mark of his father’s dishonor. By thus splitting the woman into two functions, the film offers the spectator the pleasure of a secret liaison with the mother as a surrender to the political power of matriarchy” (148).

In serving as this “link” Sumitradevi is able to act as a potential mediator between the competing forces (Vijay and Ravi) by representing a middle ground. In her dual roles as mother and woman, Sumitradevi is able to support both her competing son’s interests, thereby not excluding the audience’s sympathies. But the moment that firmly draws the battle lines between Vijay (as Karna) and Ravi (as Arjun) takes place without Sumitradevi. After much fighting between the brothers, Vijay begs Ravi to meet him under the bridge they once lived as children. As Vijay is rapidly scaling the ranks of the organised crime industry, he tries to convince Ravi to accept a transfer out of Bombay, but angered by Ravi’s reticence, ends up bragging about his material successes and chastising Ravi’s blind devotion to the law:

Ravi: “The consequences of the path I am following may possibly be evil, but my brother, your path is littered with evil alone. Vijay: “Ravi, I’ve played my hand already. But time is still on your side, go. Go away to another city, there are other police stations. Ravi: “Never, my principles and values will not let me do this.” Vijay: “Your principles? What have your principles gotten you? Can they provide you a square meal? You risk your life for these ideals? What have they given you? A job, a small salary, rented rooms, two changes of uniform? A rundown police jeep as transportation? Now look at me: I have a mansion, a car, money. What do you have? Ravi: “Ma. I have Ma. I have our Mother’s blessings”.

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In a line that is famous in Bollywood, Ravi deploys the ultimate insult by suggesting he possesses Sumitradevi’s love and respect. The symbolism of the bridge has a symbolic significance, as it is where the family once lived, but it is also important to note that the brother’s meet under the bridge, suggesting that neither is moving forward. In taking a psychological stance, Prasad imagines Vijay’s innate desire to “place his mother in the position of the Father, as the authority whose desires he seeks to fulfil” (149), which is why Ravi’s comment incenses him so. Vijay’s estrangement from his father as a young boy explains his innate, obsessive and obsessive desire to possess his mother’s love (as it is a proxy for his father’s). Just as his mother abandoned Karna, Vijay’s own abandonment by his father is the most defining event of his life. Towards the end of the film, prior to the showdown between the brothers, Sumitradevi unknowingly hands Ravi the gun that ultimately kills Vijay. Ravi comes to her and tells her that he must fulfil his desire to eradicate crime (Sumitradevi is unaware he is referring specifically to Vijay) and blesses Ravi by handing him his gun. But as he departs she whispers to herself “the woman has done her duty, now the mother will go an await her son.” When Vijay finally arrives at the temple-steps to meet his mother, he is bleeding profusely and rests his head on Sumitradevi’s lap. He asks her to put him to sleep, in a moment that Prasad supposes fulfils “the enactment of the mythical reunion with the oral mother” (149). Vijay’s ending sees him achieve possession of the mother and enacts the circle of life – just as she held him in her arms in birth, she holds him in death. It also arguably functions as a coded victory of sorts, because Vijay dies as a martyr to his cause and possesses the mother’s love as he does so.

Vijay wears his alliance with the marginalised identity on his arm. After his father has fled the village, some drunken and angry workers capture the young Vijay and forcibly tattoo the words “my father is a thief” on his arm. The tattoo serves a symbol of his poor hand in life, as both the camera and Vijay himself repeatedly return to the tattoo as a motif for the disillusionment and disappointment Vijay finds in a world that has seemingly wronged him at every turn. When Vijay declares midway through the film that he believes “fate is written on one’s hand”, the line has a double meaning because it also
references his own misfortune that is permanently scarred on his arm. Vijay’s girlfriend Anita (Parveen Babi) suggests he have the tattoo surgically removed but Vijay declines, telling her that the scar runs far deeper than the ink. He tells her no amount of cutting could ever remove it, at which point she kisses the tattoo in “an erotically charged moment during which she proclaims her solidarity with Vijay’s past/pain” (Mazumdar 25). The tattoo’s function as a unifying factor for the radical coupling is at odds with its function as a divisive factor between the brothers. When Ravi and Vijay are having an explosive argument one day, Vijay points out his tattoo telling Ravi, “This. This is the greatest difference between us”. The tattoo therefore, symbolises Vijay’s alliance with the subaltern.

Aside from the tattoo-episode for Vijay, Deewar underscores two major life-changing events for both brothers early in the film. For Vijay, the moment occurs one day when at his job on the docks when he and the other workers are asked to pay their usual two rupee fee to the bosses. A new employee, Satyadev Dubey, takes affront to handing over a part of his hard-earned wage and voices his dissent saying he has a family to take care of. As Dubey begins to argue, fellow worker Rahim Chacha (Yunuz Parvez) informs him it merely part of the price they must “pay for their poverty”. But as the collection tin nears him, Dubey refuses to pay and is subsequently beaten and pushed in front of a speeding-truck by the extortionists. As his bloodied corpse lay still and paper rupees fly through the air, “the camera zooms in on Vijay’s face, almost imprinting him with the chain of events he has just witnessed” (Mazumdar 16). The moment clarifies Vijay’s alliance with the working class by aligning him with the marginalised, and instantly puts him at odds with the state. The moment also affirms Vijay’s decision to stand up to the extortionists which sets him on-track to enter the criminal underworld in Bombay. After the event he declares defiantly, “What has not happened for 25 years will happen now. Tomorrow, another worker will refuse to pay the extortionists”. Vijay becomes the spokesperson for the marginalised workers (and therefore, the marginalised identity). The decision also reaffirms Vijay’s lack of faith in religion or any
semblance of divine order, as the injustice of Dubey’s death convinces him that he exists in a random, chaotic and unfair world.

Ravi’s moment occurs one afternoon while on duty as a police officer. In a busy marketplace Ravi encounters a shop owner yelling after a small boy who has just stolen something. Ravi takes after him and the small boy gives chase. Struggling to keep up, Ravi shoots the boy in the leg and as the child falls to the ground bleeding, Ravi finally catches up to the boy. Ravi examines the contents of his thieving to find a small parcel of rotis. In just the same way as it did with Vijay, the camera zooms in on the rotis and then on Ravi’s horrified face, as he grapples with the gravity of his actions. Desperate to make amends, Ravi visits the boy’s home to take the family some roti. Once there, he discloses his identity to the boy’s Mother, who lashes out at him, hurling rotis and protesting that neither she nor her family need his charity or pity. She embarks on a political diatribe, inciting the Indian state as hypocritical for privileging the large-scale criminals yet targeting small-scale criminals who are merely desperate to survive. Her husband, who banishes her from the room, begs Ravi’s forgiveness by explaining his wife is “uneducated” and alleviates Ravi’s guilt, saying:

“All stealing, whether it be of a cent or a million, is a crime... if the thousands of people dying of hunger all become thieves, it would make for an impossible situation.”

The man tells Ravi that he is a retired schoolteacher, so Ravi touches his feet as a mark of respect and departs, exclaiming that such a lesson could have only come from a teacher. Virdi suggests the moment completes “the alliance between education and the state”, which is further reinforced by the fact that this alliance is enacted between two men. Narratively speaking, the moment clarifies Ravi’s decision to pursue his criminal brother on behalf of the state, and thereby subvert familial duty in favour of duty to the law.

Along with deploying an alternative performance of rogue masculinity in Vijay, Deewar also contains an alternative performance of femininity. Were it not for
her limited screen-time, Anita could almost be classified an antiheroine. When Vijay first meets Anita in a bar he asks her why she is bothering him and she tells him, “Because no one here is as handsome, nor as alone as you in this bar”. She lights up a cigarette and slowly blows smoke into his face in an overt display of eroticism that instantly codes her as an alternative female. A mini-skirt wearing, smoking, drinking prostitute, Anita at first appears to embody the classic tropes of the vamp: she wears western dress, has a western-sounding name, has an association with the sex industry and clearly eschews traditional ‘Indian values’ (even declaring she does not believe in marriage at one point). Geetanjali Gangoli argues that her appearance is “whore-like” (Bollyworld 154) and that she is merely a vamp, because the film affords her no back-story. But despite her seemingly overt sexuality, Anita’s role in the film transcends that of the merely sexual. While Sumitradevi stands in as the archetypical long-suffering mother and Ravi’s girlfriend Veera (Neetu Singh) is the pretty middle-class girlfriend, Anita’s role is both complex and striking. The importance and intensity of the union between Vijay and Anita silences potential conjecture about her perceived-deviancy because she becomes indispensable to Vijay.

There is a famous scene in the film, where Vijay and Anita share a cigarette in bed after they have made love; Vijay appears shirtless (the first time for Bachchan) and Anita is clad in a black-silk robe, her hair falling around her face. The scene is widely evoked in Bollywood studies to this day, as it was striking for a 1970s film to depict an intimate moment after a sexual liaison has taken place. The radicalism of having the film’s lead male protagonist living with an unmarried prostitute girlfriend and having her eventually fall pregnant cannot be underscored enough. When she does fall pregnant Anita calmly informs Vijay that she will not force him to marry her and that will raise the child alone if necessary. But Vijay is buoyed by the news and takes the opportunity to stop drinking alcohol and devote his life to his new family. Anita functions as a saviour for Vijay, as she and the impending baby provide the only glimmer of hope on Vijay’s otherwise-bleak horizon. Gangoli and Virdi posit that Anita’s murder is punishment for her performance as a transgressive and sexual female; with Gangoli contending her “profession and her blatant sexuality have to be punished by the script” (155) and Virdi certain her murder “is quite
unequivocally a punishment for her sexual transgression, her daring to be an autonomous self-reliant woman...Ultimately Anita meets the fate all such women meet. Death”. But these arguments fail to consider the intense suffering Anita’s death causes Vijay. The tragedy of her murder, I suggest, is not that she is being punished for her transgressions; rather Vijay is being punished for a life that involves a series of cataclysmically cruel twists of fate. Anita’s death propels Vijay deeper into the abyss, confirming his lack of faith in any kind of God whatsoever.

Vijay’s rejection of Hinduism from his childhood marks his marginality. In the beginning of the film we see a small Vijay refusing to enter the temple with his mother and younger brother, choosing to instead wait on the steps. The overhead camera shot of the small boy waiting on the steps dissolves to show the adult Vijay (with Bachchan’s unmistakably long body languishing on the white marble steps) waiting, showing that little has changed. The adult Vijay begins to align himself Islam when he meets Rahim Chacha on the docks, who tells Vijay that Vijay’s badge number 786\(^{16}\) is lucky. The number is significant for some followers of Islam because it forms the Abjad numerical equivalent of the Arabic phrase *Bismilla al-Rahman al-Rahim* (“In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful”) that is the first verse of the Quran. For Vijay, the Islamic talisman becomes a source of protection from a chaotic world and represents his alliance with the Muslim and other minorities. In *Deewar*, after being shot at by Ravi and surviving it, the moment that the auspicious badge falls from Vijay’s pocket is when the bullet finally kills him, demonstrating the badge’s symbolic protective powers. Vijay’s identification with the working-class Muslim milieu performs a major departure from the prevailing Hindu hero of the time, thereby solidifying Vijay’s antiheroism.

\(^{16}\) The number is also of importance to Amitabh Bachchan, because in both *Deewar* and *Coolie* (*Dockworker*, dir. Manmohan Singh, 1983) he sported the badge. While filming *Coolie* Bachchan had the accident that nearly ended his life but believes that wearing the badge played a role in his survival, writing on his social-media account on Twitter on the occasion of his 786\(^{th}\) day on the website, that the badge “saved him” and referring to the number as his “lucky charm”.
Deewar unfolds as a flashback in Sumittradevi’s memory, beginning and ending at the same point. Prasad supposes that this sense, Vijay’s story is “confined to the depths of a mother’s memory” and thereby to remain a secret of sorts. He continues, writing:

“The flashback structure codes the narrative as a mother’s memory hidden from public view, evoking a powerful sense that film will tell an ‘unofficial’ history, one which the audience can share in, although no official record will include it” (Prasad 148).

As Prasad indicates, the audience is complicit to an unofficial story of Vijay (and the Emergency), which arguably positions audience sympathies with Sumittradevi and subsequently Vijay, because they feel as if they are being let in on a private version of events. The award ceremony that frames the film takes place on a stage, which is evocative of a performance of sorts, which is why Ravi’s appearance on the stage encourages notions of inauthenticity, because it seems as if he is a performer. Prasad suggests that when the audience claps for Ravi on stage, the applause has been reassigned to the “rebellious son” (148).

Sumittradevi has a preference for her first-born, Vijay, even admitting as much to Ravi, making it is clear that Deewar ultimately privileges Vijay over Ravi. Deewar ultimately deploys its key conflict between two brothers by using the archetypical-binary clashes between tradition and modernity; state and subject; upper and lower class and frames these tensions with the structural elements of the Mahabharata. A cultural relic of the 1970s, the film encapsulates two opposing masculinities that stand for the dreams and realities of the Emergency. Via its iconic antihero Vijay, Deewar critiques any kind of blind devotion, whether it is to religion, to the law or to a life of crime. The film deployed the first and foremost antihero with the character of Vijay, and in doing so set the standard for performances of rogue, alternative masculinity in Bollywood.

From Emergency to Emerging: Narratives of Globalisation in the 1990s
As the Emergency drew to a close, the tropes of the ‘angry young man’ disappeared into history\textsuperscript{17}. In the 1980s Bollywood churned out many similar violent and aggressive action-films which is perhaps why the decade remains relatively absent from Bollywood academia. But the 1990s ushered in dramatic changes for the nation and for Bollywood. In July 1991, Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao and his government liberalised the economy, putting a final end to the lingering isolationist Nehruvian policies with new inclusive economic reforms. These reforms included measures such as the deliberate divestment of enterprises within the public sector; implementation of currency convertibility over a period of five years; and amongst others, the raising of foreign equity limits to 51% (so as to maintain Indian trade dominance) (Sen 197). Amidst this, there were major socio-political upheavals for the nation that occurred firmly along two axes; one, as a direct result of economic liberalisation, and the other due to “the concomitant and meteoric rise of Hindu nationalism” (Sen 196). As the economy and Indian society began to transform, so too did the rhetoric and propaganda that accompanied these changes. Terms such as ‘liberalisation’ and ‘globalisation’, once burdened with the desperate hopes of a struggling nation in the 1970s, became ‘new’ buzzwords that encapsulated the (‘new’) national optimism. While the Congress Government was responsible for setting wheels of change in motion with liberalisation because their image was so firmly associated with the past the ‘new India’ was desperate to escape, they paradoxically and inadvertently set the stage for a new contender. Enter, the Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter, the BJP), with its revamped Hindu nationalist sentiments (not so far removed from Nehruvian ideals in theory, but more aggressive in practice) that captured the majority Hindu audience. As Arvind Rajagopal explains:

\begin{quote}
“Hindu nationalism worked at two levels, on the one hand offering cultural and ideological accompaniment to liberalization for middle and upper classes, and at the same time translating it into a religio-mythic narrative that would win popular consent...The alliance between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism was opportunistic and\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} These tropes were taken up again in the largely forgettable decade of the 1980s for Hindi cinema, by actors such as Anil Kapoor and Sunny Deol who appeared in pseudo-violent, ultra-masculine narratives that eschewed the socio-political purpose of the ‘angry young man’ in favour of films featuring largely gratuitous and pointless violence.
unstable, but nevertheless, in the context, developed a considerable force and momentum” (qtd in Sen 197).

The BJP capitalised on the brewing tide of discontent with a government seemingly too entrenched in the past by ironically “claiming a return to a deeper, purer past” (qtd in Sen 197). This renewed brand of Hindu nationalism offered its consumers much to buy into, and was a phenomenon marketed with such aggression that Arvind Rajagopal describes it as “Retail Hindutva”. Brand Hindu was ready and available for public consumption and was circulated via “discrete commodified images, such as stickers, buttons, and armbands, and the exhortation of discrete acts of support from token participation at rallies to kar seva” (Sen 197). Sen argues that this aggressively Hindu ideology and the related economic changes comprised “the dyad that best encapsulates the decade politically, economically and culturally” (201).

Liberalisation had profound effects on the Bollywood film industry because it enabled the emergence of dedicated satellite and cable television networks that engendered the viewer with unparalleled viewing choices. This viewing revolution sparked a chain of events that altered the Indian pop cultural landscape irrevocably. With the influx of new channels came the need for new programming, which then lead to the development of one of the most popular Indian TV genres – the mythological serial. Based on popular Hindu epics, the genre become so popular it opened up a mutually beneficial and major tenet of the industry – the partnership between TV and Bollywood. Films began to use advertisement breaks to show pre-release film material, related interviews and pre-release film songs to build audience interest, which then lead to the arrival of the eponymous MTV. Care of the advent of new film financiers (due to renewed interest and potential capital opportunities) and new filmic technology, MTV’s arrival heralded lush, sensual aesthetics, quick-scene changes, even quicker costume changes and jump-cuts that culminated in a twofold effect wherein the video-clip influenced the Bollywood song-dance number and vice versa. This MTV aesthetic also cemented Bollywood’s commitment to courting offshore capital as the industry made vigorous attempts to launch itself on the global market. This launch meant the continued
development of a dedicated online (and offline) fan culture, abetted by Hindi film magazines, Hindi radio stations and Hindi film news on TV stations which all served to strengthen a pervasive ‘Bollywood culture’.

As Bollywood promoted itself on a global market it became increasingly evident that along with the promotional power of TV to raise revenue, there was an as yet vastly untapped revenue possibility – the diaspora. One of the most widely dispersed, the uniquely heterogeneous South Asian diaspora consists of some thirty million plus persons situated around the world (Reeves & Rai 38). Scholarly interventions place the Indian diaspora as emerging at two entirely different moments as Vijay Mishra explains, “in the history of capital”:

“The first moment (of classic capitalism) produced the movement of indentured labor to the colonies (South Africa, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana etc) for the production of sugar, rubber, and tin for the growing British and European markets...The second movement (of late modern capital) is largely a post-1960s phenomenon distinguished by the movement of economic migrants (but also refugees) into the metropolitan centres of the former empire as well as the New World and Australia” (235).

Mishra’s demarcations invite comparison between the vastly different experiences of the old diaspora of the nineteenth century and the new diaspora of the twentieth (and now, twenty-first). The new diaspora’s movements into the West were aided by communication advancements that permitted the diaspora to remain connected with the homeland like never before. With this new communication technology came media developments (including Indian Cable TV) which privileged the diaspora with new avenues to consume ‘Indian’ culture in an unprecedented manner. The influence of transnational media in both creating and re-creating notions of India and Indianness cannot be underscored enough. It becomes evident in the countless studies conversing with this new diaspora that Bollywood’s concept of the diaspora and the diaspora’s concept of Bollywood continually overlap. Gayatri Gopinath, Aswin Punathambekar, Rajinder Dudrah and Ajay Gehlawat track this phenomenon best, working with the diaspora and Bollywood to fashion theories that explore the impact of each on the other. But my particular interest here is framed by
the ways this diasporic interest in Bollywood reconstituted popular homeland cinema.

In 1998 Bollywood was finally granted ‘industry status’ by the government, which saw the benefits of liberalisation slowly begin to trickle down to the industry. Reductions on import taxes; custom duties, new tax incentives and a new act enabled the industry to gain funding through legitimate sources such as banks that changed the film industry dramatically. With the advent of the omnipotent multiplex in India, consumer choice became heightened, marking the beginning of the slow and sad demise of the single-screen cinema. Mostly as a reaction to this landscape of change – the NRI film became inescapable in 1990s. Seeking to represent and recreate the struggles and triumphs of the Indian subject living in a foreign land - a group who, as the narrative imagined, were constantly (re) negotiating the omnipotent and omnipresent place of the homeland in both their hearts and new homes. The new diaspora were now worlds apart from the old diaspora. The romantic, nostalgic and politicised NRI narratives located these Indian subjects as those who, best immortalised by the word of Anupam Kher in DDLJ, “move around with India in their hearts”.

Punathambekar elaborates:

“Over the years, the act of viewing, Hindi film’s ability to permeate various social rituals, and interactions within sociocultural networks that viewing practices have created, have helped sustain expatriate Indians’ desire to perform their Indianness, and remain, at least, culturally, residents of India” (156).

Generally speaking, the NRI film showcased the flashy cosmopolitan and luxuriant lives of the diaspora via a family melodrama, which often took place in the USA, or UK, and almost-always included a return to the homeland in the second-half of the film. If the poster boy for the angry young man was Bachchan, the poster boy for the NRI film was certainly Shahrukh Khan, who embodied a passive, comic, romantic and ‘soft’ masculinity that recollected the sensitive Raj Kapoor dandy archetype. The NRI film appealed to the diasporic and homeland audiences because even though it showcased the flashy lives of the rich diaspora, it still dealt with characters that were inherently Indian (read:
‘good’). The NRI films heralded a shift; as DDLJ with its limitless appeal was such a success because it was “one of the first to signify the diasporic subjects as Indian national subjects rather than as corrupt Westerners” (Desai 133). The NRI films were films for the hero – a hero who was a global (yet fiercely Indian when it counted) romantic citizen able to traverse the world with ease and overcome any obstacle for his love. As a result of the NRI film’s dominance, antihero films from this period (the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s) were exceptionally few and far between. That was, until 2002 when popular director Sanjay Leela Bhansali adapted a classic Indian love-triangle story into a hugely popular film, and in doing so, brought the antihero back to life.

**Excess and Emasculation in Devdas**

“One of the most enduring icons of the Indian film oeuvre is the aristocratic, lovelorn, sexually impotent, politically disengaged, and ultimately tragic hero named Devdas” – Poonam Arora.

“Moreover, there was a lot that intrigued me about the character of Devdas. It was the paradox of a man who was a like a child, utterly lovable. Who wanted love & intensely loved. And yet could not verbalize both. He did all the wrong things, but was so pure and misunderstood that I felt like reaching out to him. I also saw a mirror of my father in Devdas. He used to react to situations exactly like Devdas did. Then is the fact, that there is a Devdas on every street. I honestly feel that this character exists in every male, especially every Indian male.” – Sanjay Leela Bhansali (India Times).

Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s ambitious remake of the classic Bengali novel *Devdas* written in 1917, by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, retells a much-loved story that has been adapted on-screen countless times and in numerous regional languages. Bhansali’s 2002 adaptation is by far the most commercially successful version and the most extensive. Massively popular with the diaspora and in India, the film screened at Cannes and was India’s official entry into the “Best Foreign Language Film” category at the Oscars in 2003. *Devdas* boasted a cast of superstars with Shahrukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit. The film tells the story of Devdas (Khan), a sullen and arrogant young man unable to stand up to his overbearing father for the sake of his one true love Parvati ‘Paro’
(Rai). Upon becoming an alcoholic, Devdas increasingly takes refuge at courtesan Chandramukhi’s (Dixit) kotha, there Chandramukhi falls in love with Devdas (much to his disgust) and becomes friends with Paro, thereby framing one the most tragic love triangles in Bollywood.

The novella has an iconic status in Indian popular culture. Chattopadhyay reportedly considered Devdas to be one of his weakest works, yet the story has proved wildly popular in India and in Indian cinema, spawning some five screen adaptations. Michael H. Hoffheimer contends that “The very name "Devdas" became a byword for melancholic self-absorption, and the reticence and passivity associated with the hero established the model for male film acting” (17). Where Vijay was the classic hero of the classic Bollywood era, this particular Devdas has become the ultimate modern antihero. The text is itself synonymous with doomed love affairs, tortured romances, deep melancholic desire and a simultaneously desirable and deplorable lead character. The tragedy of the Devdas story echoes throughout popular Hindi cinema’s endless love affair with the torrid love triangle; Kagaz Ke Phool (‘Paper Flowers’ dir. Guru Dutt, 1959) and Prakash Mehra’s 1978 film Muqqadar Ka Sikandar for just two examples of films that draw on Devdas. This adaptation of Devdas retells the bleak tale of a tortured love triangle but features a modern performance of antiheroism and masculinity-in-crisis with Khan’s Devdas. Despite being set in the past, Devdas performs as the modern, urban and self-destructive hero. Hoffheimer uses Gayatri Chatterjee’s work to explain how the original Devdas text became a model for Bollywood (which explains its presence in so many romantic films), suggesting:

“The narrative provided mythic material that so profoundly affected film culture that it becomes difficult to separate the influence of the work from the medium as a whole” (17).

Hoffheimer continues, citing Chatterjee’s works, where she finds seven recurring motifs intrinsic to the Bollywood plot:

“1) childhood union/some ideal as given/the village
2) conflict with the father
3) migration to the city/separation
4) fall from the ideal/state of depression of the hero
5) liaison with a woman of "lesser virtue"
6) end in death/or in severe penance-punishment
7) Or in a reunion, but the happiness tarnished by items 4, 5, 6” (17).

*Devdas* perfectly conforms to each of these, (as does *Deewar*) which is precisely why its influence on post-independence Bollywood is so substantial.

Chattopadhyay’s story was first adapted for screen in a silent-version in 1928 but was most successfully adapted in the P.C Barua and Bimal Roy versions in 1935 and 1955 respectively. The Roy and Barua versions drew on the melancholy of the story and were shot in black and white. Stark, restrained films, Roy’s realist style and Barua’s bleak mise-en-scene were worlds away from modern Bollywood’s approach. Bhansali’s *Devdas* is a glittering, hyper-coloured spectacle and was¹⁸ the first Hindi adaptation in colour. An ode to opulence, Bhansali’s production moves so far beyond the original text that it reinvents it; revamping, repackaging and reselling a classic tale for a new generation.

This *Devdas* is not so much dramatised and glamourised, as it is ‘Bollywoodised’.

The film begins with Devdas as a young boy being sent away to an English boarding school. After ten years the adult Devdas returns home and is reunited with childhood playmate and neighbour Paro. In the intervening years Paro has grown into a beautiful young woman who has spent the past ten years longing for Devdas’ return (so much so she has kept a diya burning in his name everyday). The pair rekindles their friendship and soon falls in love. Paro makes plans for the pair to be wed but is devastated when Devdas’ higher-caste family reject the alliance. Desperate, she sneaks into Devdas’ room late one evening begging him to elope but is discovered by Devdas’ father who throws her out, calling her a “whore”. Devdas, furious with his father, flees to Calcutta, taking exile in the city there. From Calcutta, Devdas writes Paro a letter advising her to forget him entirely. A rejected Paro reluctantly accepts her family’s arrangements that she marry an older wealthier man and Devdas, upon hearing

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¹⁸ The only other Bollywood adaptation in colour is Anurag Kashyap’s 2009 film *Dev D*, which reworks *Devdas* into a modern context.
the news spirals into an alcoholic depression. As he does so, he finds increasing comfort and conflict in the arms of courtesan Chandramukhi who also falls in love with him. Chandramukhi and Paro strike up an unlikely friendship with each other and eventually, in the throes of tuberculosis and alcoholism, a dying Devdas rushes to Paro’s doorstep to be with her. As Paro hears he has come she rushes to the gate, only for her husband to have it closed before she can reach him. Devdas takes his last breath on the other side.

The original Devdas text has a dense historico-cultural context that is central to Devdas’ inner-crises. Deeply entrenched in a colonialist setting, or as Rohan Sarma calls it, an “early twentieth century Bengal burdened by the shackles of colonialism, feudalism and patriarchy”; Devdas is contains the tropes of the colonial. The disturbing legacies of colonialism for the middle-class Bengali male are important to the text, as the creation and proliferation of the effeminate ‘babu’ gender stereotype had lasting effects on Bengal. The term, itself a seemingly benign word denoting suffix or stature, not dissimilar to ‘Sir’ or ‘Mister’, took on a more sinister meaning by the late nineteenth century when the colonisers used it as a tool of subjugation and emasculation. The stereotype, which applied to the Western-educated Bengali men who comprised the new middle-class, was created after the British seized control of Bengal following the Revolt of 1857, successfully overpowering the flailing East India Company. Lord Macaulay dreamed of creating a quasi-England of Bengal and gentrified Englishmen of the babu, but as his aims became increasingly difficult to execute and the when nineteenth century began, he and the colonisers set about creating a gender stereotype that enabled easier intellectual, spiritual and physical domination. The construct of the babu characterised the middle-class Bengali male as effeminate, passive and submissive, thereby reminding him of his subjugated place as a colonial subject. In enforcing inferiority to the coloniser this social phenomenon had disastrous psychological ramifications for the Bengali who both internalised and resisted the stereotype. A victim of this infantilising discourse (in public by the coloniser and in private by his father), Sarma suggests that for Devdas the “imposition of emasculation and effeminacy gets registered as a desperate attempt to assert his masculinity through
resistance and hence the text is to be interpreted as a protest against colonial stereotypes of masculinity”. As a result of this desperation, Devdas attempts to resist the colonial stereotypes in troubling ways. He performs this resistance by maintaining celibacy and defeating his own sexual desires, evoking the tropes of Gandhian nationalism. Arora explains further:

“Devdas, the colonial subject, must reject the woman he loves and who offers herself to him more than once; he must vehemently condemn the sexuality of those who frequent prostitutes, and despite his deep friendship with a prostitute, deny himself any sexual gratification with her. In doing so, Devdas establishes his manhood and honor.

This manhood hinges on his ability to defeat and suppress his sexual desires, which makes Chandramukhi and Paro a constant source of libidinal anxiety for Devdas. Arora argues that it is this inability to separate himself from the feminine that compels him to perform “erotic domination” over both women in the text. Devdas performs a sexually violent act on Paro when he scars her face, and repeatedly denies Chandramukhi’s sexual requests, yet spends lengthy periods of time in her company berating her and refusing to touch her. Both Chandramukhi and Paro prove to be such a threat to Devdas because they embody a strong, wilful femininity. Late one evening when Paro’s marriage is fixed to another man, she sneaks into Devdas’ room and begs him to elope with her. Devdas is shaken by her boldness and unable to summon the courage required. Ultimately, Devdas is unable to compete with the female power exhibited by the women, so by inflicting emotional, physical, sexual and psychological violence on the women, he performs a desperate version of libidinal authority. This attempt however, ultimately reads as masculinity-in-crisis.

This particular adaptation of Devdas is a product of both the “tradition-modernity schism” (Sarma) that the original text was such a part of and the mid-2000s globalised Bollywood age of excess. Bhansali’s film balances on the precipice of tradition and modernity precariously. In reacting to this complex position, Bhansali invents an ambiguous place and time, as Corey Creekmur explains further:
“Bhansali’s film places its characters within a modernity that is now so far past that it must be artificially overstated, as Devdas’s arrival in now-comic early 20th-century Western fashion (including a monocle and cigarette holder) emphasizes for a short while. Thereafter, the film’s setting is taken over by the elaborate sets, which compete with the story and characters for the audience’s attention. The film is thus neither updated (by, for instance, making Devdas a drug addict rather than an alcoholic) nor genuinely historical, techniques which might have forced the audience to compare its present situation to the represented past. By creating a fantasy space with only slight reference to the real world or historical context – the film generally avoids specifying its time or place directly – the film constructs a fantastic vision of a romantic “Bengal” that may be as exotic for the film’s (North) Indian audience as for its diasporic (and non-Indian) viewers”.

This version of Devdas dilutes the tropes of historical colonialism that informed the original text by devoting its energies to creating a tragic and romantic mise-en-scene. But it is this unmooring from the historic context that makes Devdas’ antiheroism all the more troubling, as by weakening the primary cause of psychological trauma, he becomes an even more callous and confusing character to consider. Bhansali’s setting is remarkably opulent – the houses the characters live in, the styling, furniture and the decorations are all magnified in size and splendour. So luxurious are these dwellings that it is difficult to differentiate between the much richer Devdas’ mansion and the poorer Paro’s. This pervasive sense of luxury makes for an exceptionally evocative aesthetic. The sets are so exaggerated in scale and appearance that, according to an interview with Bhansali, they were hand decorated in jewels so as to catch the light from any angle. Director Sanjay Leela Bhansali said of his aesthetic vision for the film:

“We have lavishly mounted the film, without offending the spirit of Devdas. We have given the characters a lot of space to compliment their largeness. Their surroundings are as beautiful as them” (India Times).

The settings and aesthetics of Devdas serve to render the story almost artificial in its presentation and also interiorise the action. With very few scenes shot outside, much less on busy streets or in market places (settings once integral to the classic Bollywood film), Mazumdar’s works on the “panoramic interior” prove helpful here. Her works chart the growing emergence of the urban setting
in Bollywood alongside the demise of the rural. She contends that within
Bollywood’s modern proclivity for the urban space there is a clear preference
for the “panoramic interior” (111). This space invented an interior world that
confined the narrative action to indoor spaces that were predominantly part of
the character’s homes. The panoramic interior granted the 1990s film a space in
which to enact a thoroughly political agenda; one that sought to project an
idealised, globalised NRI (in films like *Hum Apke Hain Koun?* (‘Who Am I To
You?’), dir. Sooraj R. Bharjatya, 1994) for example) by focusing intimately on
their domestic and indoor (Indian) lives. In eschewing the traditionally rural
locations such as the communal water-pump, the local bazaar or the mustard-
flowered fields, by interiorising the action these films heightened the audience’s
proximity to the melodrama, as the ‘real world’ was eliminated. In keeping with
Mazumdar’s theories, this version of *Devdas* contains little evidence of the
world outside. Bhansali’s production does away with the original text’s
stipulations that included a ‘modest’ Bengali home for Devdas and his family,
and has four extravagant locations: Devdas’ family mansion, Paro’s childhood
home (and then her married home) and Chandramukhi’s kotha. When Devdas
visits Chandramukhi’s kotha in “the city”, he takes a small boat across a serene
lake (usually empty) toward a glittering Lucknowesque city where the windows
are filled with dancing courtesans. When he arrives at the ghat, the camera
instantly cuts to the inside of Chandramukhi’s kotha thereby eliminating any
trace of the city outside. Even when Devdas is ill on the train, the action is
confined to a small compartment, once again doing away with any semblance of
normal public life. These spaces become then, relatively ambiguous as they are
seemingly indifferent to time and place. As Madhuja Mukherjee argues:

“Bhansali’s Devdas may ironically cater to the nostalgic demands of
diasporic longing by erasing temporal and spatial specificities and
emphasizing transnational mobility”.

This erasure of a historically recognisable time and space, alongside
Mazumdar’s theories of interiorisation render *Devdas’* panoramic interior
intensified. The film permits the audience a voyeuristic glimpse into the
innermost sanctuaries of the three primary characters, enabling a vision of the
interior as “a locus of pleasure, desire, anxiety, and eroticism” (Mazumdar 115). Given that Devdas’ home ultimately becomes the site of the demise of the family unit, Paro’s marital home becomes the site of Devdas’ death, and Chandramukhi’s kotha is the site of intense libidinal anxiety, these spaces become sites which express an intrinsic “crisis of belonging” (Mazumdar 148).

The central refrain of Devdas is undoubtedly Paro and Devdas’ tortured, unfulfilled and doomed romance. Early in the film when Devdas returns from London, he visits Paro in her room and finds her being bothered by a bee. In a romantic shot, he stands at the door watching as Paro, bathed in mid-morning light, tosses her gauzy dupatta over her head trying to cover the face from the insect. Devdas steps forward, capturing the insect in his hand and hisses jealously as he squeezes it to death, “I can’t bear the thought of someone else touching you, Paro”. In articulating the deep intensity of their union (just as Deewar used the Mahabharata as a framework), this production draws on the mythological story of Radha/Krishna also from the Mahabharata, which provides “a deep structure to the Devdas narrative” (Pauwels). Piyush Roy echoes this sentiment:

“.. by frequently alluding to the divine, mythical love story of Radha and Lord Krishna in all its attendant ‘devout imagery’ in the cinematic unfolding of the Parvati-Devdas love story – a tragedy where soul mates Devdas and Parvati never marry – Bhansali elevates the status of his mortal characters to that of their godly counterparts, by innovatively ascribing the metaphor of the eternal (mythic-divine) to just another human love story. Like Devdas and Parvati, Lord Krishna and Radha, in spite of being married to other people, remained in love with each other forever, and, only Radha and none of Krishna’s many wives is worshipped as his eternal consort in Hindu temples.”

The story of Krishna and consort Radha is regarded is one of the major love stories of Hinduism. Notoriously amorous, Krishna was an enthusiastic lover, with an equal devotion to pleasure and play. He and Radha used to meet for trysts on the Yamuna Riverbank and it is this that provides the inspiration for the song-dance sequence Morey Piya (‘My Lover’). By replaying the Radha/Krishna on the Yamuna episode, Devdas permits Paro/Devdas to play at being the mythical lovers by expressing a sensuality otherwise denied to them
by the narrative. The song-dance sequence often functions as a space in which the characters can visualise desires proscribed by the narrative. In Devdas this space becomes especially important because Devdas’ strictly guarded chastity means that he cannot physically engage in sensual or sexual suggestion. In the scene above, when Devdas first sees Paro in her room after returning he asks her if she is a woman yet to which she sensually replies, “the stream becomes a river in its desire to meet the sea”. These sexual undercurrents flow throughout the song-dance sequence.

The song-dance sequences in Devdas take up roughly one third of the viewing time of the film so therefore comprise a major part of extra-narrative dialogue in the film. Aside from the infamous Dola re Dola (discussed further in chapter four) where Paro and Chandramukhi enact their transgressive friendship, Morey Piya occurs early in the film and sees Paro/Devdas performing as Radha/Krishna. The sequence begins at the godh-bharai ceremony of Devdas’ sister-in-law. There, at the behest of Devdas’ mother Kaushalya (Smita Jaykar), Paro’s mother Sumitra (Kirron Kher), who hails from a family of performers, is invited to sing and dance for the Mukherjee’s and their guests. Sumitra begins her performance (mistakenly believing that Kaushalya will announce Devdas and Paro’s engagement that night) by blowing a conch shell as she stands in the centre of the huge, ornate room. The camera frames her from high above as her hair blows wildly, evoking a mystical appearance as she begins to sing of the Radha/Krishna tryst on the banks of the holy Yamuna River. While she sings the camera intercuts between her performance and a scene by a river where Paro/Devdas as Radha/Krishna cavort. Standing on opposite sides of a glittering riverbank at night, Paro fills up pots of water from the river and playfully splashes Devdas until he steps into the river and advances toward her. She turns coy, pulling her translucent veil over her face and shoulders, denying him. As he nears her, she steps on a thorn and balances on one leg trying time and time again to remove it. Once out of the water, the pair stands by the bank (with Paro/Radha still on one leg) and as Devdas inches closer to Paro it appears the pair will kiss, until she pours water over him. In slow motion and an extreme close up we see Devdas’ face as the water spills slowly over it. He then removes
her dupatta and jewellery piece by piece before he takes her foot in his hand and caresses it. He carefully pulls the thorn from her foot as her blood begins to spill. He then places his mouth over the wound (in a sexually loaded trope) and the scene draws to a close with a final shot of the lovers locked in a passionate embrace. The scene is ironic because it exceptionally erotic without requiring an explicit act of sexual or erotic intimacy. The sequence therefore enables Paro and Devdas’ to perform their sexual desire for each other by referencing the divine romance of Radha/Krishna, thereby keeping their romance chaste and unsullied in the narrative proper. When Devdas places his mouth over Paro wound, the imagery is deliberately evocative of virginity but is also important because Paro’s blood functions as an erotic leitmotif that recurs later in the film when Devdas scars her. The spilling of her blood foreshadows the sadomasochistic moments to come.

In the scene directly following Morey Piya, Devdas’ mother Kaushalya cruelly informs Paro’s mother Sumitra she was invited merely to, “provide the entertainment” for the evening. Kaushalya tells her that her family would never consider the lowly Paro as a suitable match for their high-caste son Devdas, to which an enraged Sumitra retorts by vowing to marry Paro to an even wealthier family within seven days. She curses the family (significant given her witch-like appearance in the opening shot of Morey Piya) and storms out. Later that evening, having heard the news, a despairing Paro sneaks into Devdas’ room begging him to elope with her. A shaken Devdas asks her why she is suddenly being so reckless, to which she replies:

“Why does the river head to sea? Why does the sunflower always face the sun? And why comes Paro heedless of her dignity...? Why unheeding my family honour do I venture out in dark of night? Why do I seek refuge at your feet? To all questions, a single answer.”

Paro’s radical romanticism (which once again evokes the imagery of water-bodies) is vastly contrasted by Devdas’ passive evasiveness. He evokes excuses

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19 In popular Indian literature and Bollywood films, the husband would often remove his new bride’s bridal jewellery and clothing on their first night together, as an erotic prelude to sexual activity.
of parental disappointment and warns her that “Where there’s smoke there’s fire and in fires of attrition, I don’t want us to be consumed.” But just as Paro’s eyes begin to well with tears and Devdas appears as if he may be rethinking his denial, Devdas’ father appears at the doorway. Ignoring his son entirely, the father storms in and turns to Paro and says:

“Even the cur is wary of the door it’s kicked out of. What you can’t get away with by light of the day, you try by night? Why don’t you, mother and daughter, start a brothel?”

Paro, stunned into silence, casts her eyes downward in shame, and flees as Devdas and his father begin to argue:

Devdas: “Not even a pimp would advise his daughter to do that
Father: This marriage isn’t happening
Devdas: I shall do no such thing
Father: You forget whom you are addressing
Devdas: A hotheaded landlord who will send his fellow-man’s daughter ...
Father: Gentlemen’s daughters, my son, never steal out of neighbours’
rooms at 2am
Devdas: So great was her compulsion and it was you who compelled her
Father: I will brook no argument from you
Devdas: Nor do I wish to talk to you.”

Paro returns home to find her mother waiting for her. Sumitra tells her, “Were you only to ask me, I wouldn’t have even minded if you were to be a prostitute for the night”. Paro protests but Sumitra continues, “you did not go alone Paro, you carried the honour of your family with you, now, have you left your honour behind?” Sumitra’s inference works narratively to foreshadow the arrival of Chandramukhi in the story, but also demonstrates the archetypical slippages that occur between Chandramukhi and Paro at various points in the film. These events form the build-up to the most troubling scene in Devdas and one that confirms just how deep Devdas’ psychological wounds are.

Poonam Arora writes that, “Regardless of the minor differences between the various Devdas films, one climatic scene is central to all of them”. Indeed, the singular most troubling moment in Devdas regardless of the version, is when Devdas physically assaults Paro. In Bhansali’s version, Devdas sends Paro a
letter from his self-imposed exile in Calcutta advising her to forget him; “it has not occurred to me that I ever truly desire you,” he writes. A heartbroken and rejected Paro acquiesces to her mother’s demands that that she marry the man they have chosen for her. On the eve of her wedding Devdas appears at her house unannounced and manages to convince Sumitra one last visit with Paro (who agrees out of pride that she has fulfilled her promise to Devdas’ family that she would marry Paro to an even wealthier family). Inside Paro’s boudoir, Paro feigns displeasure with Devdas’ arrival, telling him how delighted she is to be beginning her new life as a married woman. An increasingly incensed Devdas accuses her of possessing, “too much pride”, suggesting to her that not even the moon is as vain as she. Paro quips in response, “and why should it? The moon has scars, after all”. The music intensifies as the camera tracks Devdas as he takes a weighty pearl necklace from Paro’s hand, looks away from her, and calmly casts the necklace so forcefully at her forehead that she falls to the ground clutching her bleeding head and crying, “What have you done?”. Devdas kneels to the floor and replies, “I have scarred you. Just like the moon, I have scarred you with the mark of my love.” He then holds Paro in his arms and touching her bleeding wound smears her blood into her hairline. The disturbing moment is crucial to the film for a number of reasons; first, it suggests that Paro (even on the eve of her wedding) belongs to Devdas before she does the groom (because the blood is symbolic of virginity and the act of applying marital sindoor for Hindu women); and secondly, the extreme act is an intrinsic part of Devdas’ desperation and narcissism – he is devastated she is not marrying him, yet is cognizant that he is unable to adequately fulfil her needs.

The psychologically and physically violent act encodes Devdas’ desperate attempt to differentiate himself from the feminine, as he commits an aggressively masculine act in an attempt to reorder his feminine disorder. Bollywood academics, largely dismissive of the excess of Bhansali’s version, tend to focus on previous adaptations in which, staying true to the novella, Devdas hits Paro by a river with a stick. Arora aptly argues the stick is a deliberately phallic object that conflates the erotic with ritual violence, but this adaptation substitutes the stick for a necklace and the outdoor river setting for
an indoor bedroom. I contend that these editorial decisions form part of the overall softening and feminising this version of *Devdas* undertakes. In using a feminine object associated with beauty and adornment to scar his beloved, Devdas performs a sexually violent act that is rather paradoxically *sexless*. By smearing Paro’s blood with his finger he is able to possess Paro sexually and materially without actually having to do either. Later, when Paro emerges from the room bleeding Sumitra is horrified as “there is a suggestion, in the mother’s response, that the scar is a signifier of her defilement or perhaps a violation of her chastity” (Arora). But this suggestion only serves to reinforce how chaste Devdas actually is. For Paro, Devdas’ possession of her is one that she romantically and erotically fetishises via the scar, which she touches and references at various points when she longs for Devdas. Ultimately the moment, which conflates ritualistic violence with romance, despite being inherently disturbing, further serves to confirm Devdas’ position as a sadomasochistic antihero.

The courtesan Chandramukhi evokes the tropes of the tragic tawaif discussed in the previous chapter. Her beauty strikes Devdas when his Uncle takes him to a kotha to forget his woes with Paro, and he soon finds himself unable to stay away from her. When Devdas first meets Chandramukhi he says to her, “How ironic! A prostitute puts on a beauty spot to ward off the evil eye, when in fact, she wants everyone’s eyes all over her”. But Chandramukhi’s “association with the sex industry and her erotic presentation in the films as a dancer only highlights the asexuality of his response to her” (Willis, Jones & Ramdas 83). Devdas both desires and is disgusted by Chandramukhi because she encourages intense libidinal anxiety for him. Her wilful sexuality and association with the sex industry threatens Devdas’ chastity as she repeatedly entices him to touch her. But Chandramukhi’s role is not merely sexual, because she also enacts the role of wife, feeding, bathing, caring and eventually giving up her profession for him. But Devdas must resist her advances, due to both the residual psychological damage of the babu stereotype which demands he control and defeat his own sexual/romantic desires, and because he still loves Paro. Thus, his desire and disdain are in constant competition when it comes to
Chandramukhi, even more so than with Paro, because Chandramukhi’s position in the text (as prostitute and secondary romantic interest) means Devdas could easily enjoy sexual pleasure with her, all the while still preserving the chastity of the text’s primary romance. These competing agencies are particularly evident in a scene when a drunk Devdas lays next to Chandramukhi. On a rug with her long black hair spilling into an oil bath Chandramukhi expresses her frustration at Devdas’ unwillingness to touch her:

Devdas: “Put more into a chalice filled and what happens? It spills to the ground. So too my cup floweth over, with Paro, more can only spill to fall, and in the falling, take you down too”
Chandramukhi: “But in the spilling, the wine must’ve been caressed by the chalice”
Devdas: “Then spill...spill some more”.

In an erotic act she throws her long wet hair across Devdas’ face. Unlike physically scarring Chandramukhi like he does Paro, the violence Devdas inflicts on Chandramukhi is emotional and psychological, as he repeatedly visits her yet continually refuses to touch or compliment her. Midway through the film, Devdas cruelly tells Chandramukhi that it is impossible for a prostitute to teach him about love: “a woman is mother, sister, wife or daughter. When she is none of these things, she is a prostitute.” His line is a commentary on the place of the woman in a patriarchal society and recollects the role of the tawaif discussed in the previous chapter. But Chandramukhi remains resilient in her love for Devdas even when after she recues Devdas drunk from the street, he Remarks bitterly, “How ironic! A prostitute has picked me up from the street!”. Her tolerance and endurance evokes the discourse of Meera’s absolute dedication to Krishna, which keeps with the Radha/Krishna framework of the Devdas/Paro romance. Unlike Meera though, Chandramukhi’s devotion is never rewarded, in keeping with the fate of the tragic tawaif.

In discussing the role of the female protagonists in Bhansali’s Devdas, Arora writes:

“Because audiences’ critical attention to the Devdas films has focused almost exclusively on the male protagonist, the shifts in the
representation of the female protagonists have gone largely unnoticed both by film theorists and by audiences.”

In this version, Chandramukhi and Paro become friends, even performing a song-dance sequence together. A married and devastated Paro hears of Devdas’ descent into alcoholism and promptly visits Chandramukhi at her kotha. Chandramukhi tells Paro at their first meeting, “my obesciences to the woman I shall never replace” and when Paro informs Chandramukhi that she has come to take Devdas back home with her she says, “I will take him away and no one is stopping me. Not you, not social sanction, not even Dev could. Don’t forget, after all, courtesans aren’t destined to have husbands” to which Chandramukhi retorts, “You forget, courtesans have no destiny, lady”. In evoking misfortunes of the tawaifly condition Chandramukhi endears herself to Paro, who is impressed by her wit and sincere devotion to Devdas. Paro invites the courtesan to her home to celebrate the festival of Durga Puja where the pair performs the song-dance number. The song, Dola re Dola (discussed in greater detail further on in this study) enacts their transgressive friendship and sees the women, despite their dramatically different social standings in society, “function as mirror images of each other” (Arora). In the sequence the pair appear strikingly similar, both dressed and made-up to appear the same, thereby collapsing the archetypical differences between courtesan and wife. This archetype folds at numerous points in the narrative – when when Chandramukhi performs as wife, feeding and caring for the ill Devdas, and when Paro strays close to courtesan when she sneaks into Devdas’ room late one night. This repeated straying into the other’s role makes for a more subversive take on femininity than the original Devdas text, which maintained the rigidly classic archetypes of wife and whore. The collusion between two strong female characters ultimately enacts a double-threat of femininity that challenges Devdas’ ordered sense of self.

In a media interview Shahrukh Khan said of his role as Devdas, “He is a spineless lover if you place in a contemporary society. He never had the guts to express his feelings and that was the tragedy behind the story.” This inability forms the core of the conflict in the Devdas text. Devdas attempts to perform his masculinity by violently differentiating himself from the wilful femininity of Chandramukhi
and Paro. But in resorting to these drastic and sexually/psychologically violent measures, he still somehow (arguably) retains audience sympathies for the majority of the film. Much like Vijay, he is a victim of severe socio-political circumstances that render him an antihero:

“Devdas is perceived as heroic rather than pathetic because he has continually striven to demarcate the boundary between himself and the feminine. Not only does he reject first Párabati, then Chandramukhi, but towards the end he has to fight the temptation of returning to his mother” (Arora).

In the end, Devdas’ reward for defeating the feminine is a sad and lonely death. On his way to Paro’s doorstep Devdas collapses outside her house and in a dramatic sequence Paro dashes through the house to be with him one last time, but her husband orders the gates to be closed before she can reach him. As she places a hand on the large gates, they slam shut and Devdas takes his dying breath.

Quintessential antiheroes, both Devdas and Vijay suffer repeated physical and psychological barriers to their happiness. These barriers, worsened by turbulent socio-political circumstances, reflect their masculinity in crisis. Just as a physical wall, in the form of an impenetrable gate separates the lovers in Devdas, in Deewar the “wall that separates the two brothers shows two visions of the metropolitan experience” (Mazumdar 21). This chapter has explored two divisive, tumultuous and vital key moments for the nation in alongside two iconic performances of antiheroism. Though seemingly worlds (and states) apart, this chapter has found two strikingly similar performances of masculinity-in-crisis in two remarkably different films. I have argued the antihero’s performance is one that contains a contradicting and conflicting combination of personality traits to render him simultaneously an insufferable and sympathetic character. Both Vijay and Devdas perform their troubled masculinity by resorting to physical, sexual and psychological violence in a desperate attempt order to reorder their disordered worlds. The antihero therefore, possesses a rogue, alternative masculinity that has the potential to dismantle and radicalise traditional Bollywood tropes of the hero.
Post Devdas: The “Fun and Romantic” Rise of Violence

The introduction to this chapter included Rohan Sarma’s explanation of the quintessential Bollywood hero (i.e. “rescues his female lover from the clutches of goons through violence and eventually wins her over”), which is especially important in briefly considering the years after Devdas. It is perfunctory to suggest that since 2002 Bollywood has deployed dramatically different versions of masculinity, but there is a particularly violent male-representation that has become more widespread in the industry, both on and off-screen. Films like Salman Khan’s Dabangg and Shahrukh Khan’s Chennai Express deployed classic masala generic traits along with hyper-violent scenes. Dabangg featured realistic ‘bone-crunching’ sound-effects and special effects that included flying pieces of human flesh. This commoditisation of violence (particularly in the case of Dabangg) runs alongside the rise in male-violence off-screen, both in a general sense and in regard to the Bollywood industry. In the 1990s much speculation surrounded Salman Khan’s alleged violence against girlfriends. In the late 1990s, ex-girlfriend Aishwarya Rai would confirm the allegations, and since then, Khan has been found guilty of a 2002 hit and run murder and debate continues to rage about his impending incarceration. Cases in the same vein include actor Sanjay Dutt’s incarceration for two years for illegal weapons possession; Sooraj Pancholi’s alleged violent involvement in girlfriend Jiah Khan’s suicide; and Bollywood star Sanjay Khan’s alleged assault against then-girlfriend and actor Zeenat Aman (which resulted in her having lasting eye damage). My intent here is not to recount industry gossip, but rather to consider the repeated and rising acceptance of ‘violent men’. Khan’s success was immense with Dabangg and his role saw him as a vigilante, waging justice and violence across the town in equal measure, but Khan (perhaps like Devdas before him) presents a conflicting figure – the violent romantic renegade. Khan appears to embody the archetypical traits of the angry young man, but without the sense of purpose. Unmoored from the classic tropes of class injustice, Khan’s dual-texts embody a kind of violence for violence’s sake attitude, and one that is a distressing reflection on the mainstream. The introduction to this chapter included Rohan Sarma’s explanation of the quintessential Bollywood
hero (i.e. “rescues his female lover from the clutches of goons through violence and eventually wins her over”), which is especially important in briefly considering the years after Devdas. It is perfunctory to suggest that since 2002 Bollywood has deployed dramatically different versions of masculinity, but there is a particularly violent male-representation that has become more widespread in the industry, both on and off-screen. Films like Salman Khan’s Dabangg and Shahrukh Khan’s Chennai Express deployed classic masala generic traits along with hyper-violent scenes. Dabangg featured realistic ‘bone-crunching’ sound-effects and special effects that included flying pieces of human flesh. This commoditisation of violence (particularly in the case of Dabangg) runs alongside the rise in male-violence off-screen, both in a general sense and in regard to the Bollywood industry. In the 1990s much speculation surrounded Salman Khan’s alleged violence against girlfriends. In the late 1990s, ex-girlfriend Aishwarya Rai would confirm the allegations, and since then, Khan has been found guilty of a 2002 hit and run murder and debate continues to rage about his impending incarceration. Cases in the same vein include actor Sanjay Dutt’s incarceration for two years for illegal weapons possession; Sooraj Pancholi’s alleged violent involvement in girlfriend Jiah Khan’s suicide; and Bollywood star Sanjay Khan’s alleged assault against then-girlfriend and actor Zeenat Aman (which resulted in her having lasting eye damage). My intent here is not to recount industry gossip, but rather to consider the repeated and rising acceptance of ‘violent men’. Khan’s success was immense with Dabangg and his role saw him as a vigilante, waging justice and violence across the town in equal measure, but Khan (perhaps like Devdas before him) presents a conflicting figure – the violent romantic renegade. Khan appears to embody the archetypical traits of the angry young man, but without the sense of purpose. Unmoored from the classic tropes of class injustice, Khan’s dual-texts embody a kind of violence for violence’s sake attitude, and one that is a distressing reflection on the mainstream.

The casual approach to violence displayed by Bollywood is, of course, always at the hands of the male character(s). In a study of sexual violence in Hindi films Ramasubramanian and Oliver found that “severe sexual violence was portrayed
as criminal and serious, whereas moderate sexual violence was treated as fun and romantic" (327). This desensitisation of violence\textsuperscript{20} across the Bollywood industry and in the media is implicitly tied to the representations of women we encounter in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{20} My intention here is to briefly illuminate the changes in the representation of the hero/angry young man in the intervening decades. Ultimately though, such a subject could easily fill numerous theses.
SUBVERSIVE SISTERHOODS?
Performing Bollywood Feminism after the 1990s

Having explored alternative performances of masculinity in the previous chapter, this chapter turns its attention to Bollywood’s representations of modern womanhood. In doing so, it uncovers popular films that contain surprisingly radical performances of femininity. The woman has long served an especially symbolic purpose in Bollywood; by representing the motherland, the female body is a palimpsest of ‘Indianness’ inscribed with notions of the national, communal and familial. Given that much critical attention in Bollywood scholarship has focused on how the heroine’s body and behaviour are regulated by a strict set of moral codes that demand from her chastity, devotion, purity and obedience, I am drawn to performances of femininity that defy this notion. As a result of this, I will posit in this discussion that Bollywood’s women-centric or heroine-oriented films constitute a considerable challenge to an often-patriarchal society and cinema. I also explore how these films are connected to questions regarding gender, sexuality and the performance of an empowered femininity.

In a hero-centric industry where male actors still command top billing and the highest remuneration rates by far, it is worth noting that from as far back as *Mother India* Bollywood has staged exceptions to the hero-rule. As the industry refers to them, women-centric or heroine-oriented films have emerged at numerous and important junctures in Indian history. Though certainly more popular in the parallel cinema(s), women-centric films still remain very much the minority. This chapter examines a collective of three very different 2000s-produced women-centric Bollywood films to assess how they collectively envision modern womanhood. I have deliberately chosen these films because they were hugely popular, contained popular actors, and are indicative of popular Bollywood’s style. Yet despite these similarities the films are dramatically different, demonstrating the increasing diversity of the Bollywood film. During the last few decades, Bollywood has undertaken a major spatial
reconceptualisation of the female body and this chapter examines how these films have responded to these changes in the nation to (re)construct modern Indian womanhood. The texts chosen here are deliberately eclectic; they all constitute popular Bollywood films, but are also each dramatically different in theme, content and treatment. My point here in choosing such seemingly different films is to illustrate that Bollywood is experimenting with empowered femininities across theme and genre. It would be futile to argue that Bollywood is not a patriarchal industry, but each of the following performances gesture to a more positive future for woman onscreen (and off it). By contending that western feminist critical inventions into Bollywood (and ‘India’) have failed, I invest energy into comprehending a specifically Indian feminism. In a heterogeneous nation it is difficult to pin down a pan-Indian feminism, but by utilising this complexity this chapter contributes to a rapidly expanding conversation on Indian women via Bollywood. This chapter finds a contingent of modern Bollywood women-centric films, *Paheli Chak De! India* and *The Dirty Picture* (dir. Milan Luthria, 2011), and examines how well they perform an idiosyncratic version of an Indian or Bollywood feminism.

**Where to now? Women’s Studies in India**

In a discussion on women and heroines in Bollywood it is important to briefly assess the real world before tackling the reel. In light of the multiplicity of states, regions, ethnicities, languages, religions and diverse familial and/or socio-economic experiences of women in India, it is virtually impossible to speak of a singular, static figure of an ‘Indian woman’ (and much less, for Bollywood to do so). Given a subject of this magnitude deserves numerous theses dedicated to the subject, it is important to point out that my discussion cannot even come close to fully canvassing the concept of ‘Indian feminism’. I can however, at least note the burgeoning schools of women’s studies in the Indian academy and the ways in which they negotiate Indian feminism. There is also a dedicated school of feminist theory emerging that works alongside (or within) women’s studies. Malashri Lal argues that “Women’s Studies in India has a divided identity”, because it exists as a part of both “academia as well as activism”. So while grass roots level feminism is still very much a practice in India, now there
is dedicated academic theorising on the issue. As a result of this duality, Women’s Studies as a field ‘belongs’ to both the large NGO contingency and to the university departments. This identity crisis is one that Lal proposes must be negotiated between both different positions (that is by both the academy and by grass-roots level feminist organisations). The notion of the ‘Indian woman’ is a long embattled entity; pulled between competing and complex notions of patriarchy and tradition, feminism and modernity, issues of sexual agency and freedom, religious responsibilities, and for some a daily struggle for survival. In the same issue of *Intersections*, Subhash Chandra suggests there are a series of “obstacles that are placed in the way of their empowerment”:

> “patriarchal, religious, national, discourses continually impinge on women’s struggle for self-definition, self-articulation, and self-actualisation in an environment which continues to be not quite conducive/enabling, is the vast gendered terrain that needs to be traversed”.

This “gendered terrain” proves exceptionally difficult, but entirely necessary to traverse.

As with many other world academies, the insertion of western feminism into South Asian discourses on womanhood remains problematic. Where Chandra contends that “western feminism, as it is understood today, is only fractionally relevant to India”, Lal is more certain that “western models will not work”. In light of India’s gendered history (Partition and Colonialism are just two major events that bequeathed a conflicting legacy for Indian woman and nationhood), western feminist theories tend to miss the nuanced class, caste and cultural differences of the Indian context. Furthermore, as Lal identifies, even Indian feminism itself can sometimes fail to account for women existing in lower socio-economic brackets and in rural areas. Lal cites a study conducted by the Women’s Studies and Development Centre at the University of Delhi immediately after the 2001 census that contradicted the census’ claims that conditions for women had dramatically improved in India. In researching for three years, from 2002-2005, the centre, along with other associated centres in Jaipur, Lucknow, Shimla and Kurukshetra, found the reality to be entirely
different. Lal usefully surmises the findings by narrowing Indian women’s key issues to five areas: the declining male-to-female ratio and subsequent discrimination of the girl child; forced and/or arranged child marriages; issues related to women and ‘work’ (the abundance of women performing hard, physical labour); the lack of political participation and/or possible engagement for women; and the ongoing issue of widowhood. Further, she observes that issues of dowry and sati still continue to plague many rural women’s lives. So it is fair to say that while for many women in metropolises there may have been improvements, many in villages and poorer states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still remain “inferiorised and exploited” (Chandra). As a result of this South Asian feminists argue the dire need for self-empowerment and emphasise the way in which western models of feminism tend to alienate the Asian (or non-white) woman:

“Consequently, while the academic departments of literature, philosophy and sociology and such others are talking about the ‘post-feminist’ phase, the ground reality in India is still witnessing the daily struggle for women to assert their right to livelihood, dignity and employment. Feminism here cannot be limited to theoretical discourses; it has to tangle with life. A 'globalised' India has emerged from complex, ancient and multicultural roots. Embedded within them are certain stereotypes about a woman's place and worth. Women's studies or feminist theory cannot overturn such a dense legacy but it can equip women and men to revisit that past and review its decisions” (Lal).

Lal and Chandra signal a way forward for women’s studies in India by embracing and addressing components of globalisation, yet simultaneously being cognizant of the diverse and ancient histories of the Indian woman past (and present). But within this daily tangle, the idea of the ‘Indian woman’ continues to be constituted and reconstituted by the most dominant media industry in India – Bollywood.

In an example of this tussle between feminism and the media, the wake of the tragic and infamous 2012 ‘Delhi gang-rape’ saw a rise in rhetoric surrounding women, women’s safety and sexual violence in India. Bollywood was hauled before the press and conjecture assembled around whether the industry was
responsible in some way for the event, or if it should be held responsible for the way it portrays women. Filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt explains:

“When the rape happened, there was a divide between Bollywood, the media, and the civil society. While one group blamed Bollywood for things going wrong, there was another group that said that you can’t trivialise such crimes by blaming everything on the film industry” (qtd in Ghosh).

Never before had such immense pressure been placed on the interrelationship between Bollywood, Indian society and women’s ‘issues’. Conversely, Subhash Chandra argues that Bollywood and women’s issues are incongruous:

“There is no room in mainstream Bollywood cinema for feminist concerns: woman’s body, desire and subjectivity do not form part of the main trajectory of the film.”

In *Global Bollywood*, Padma P. Govindan and Bisakha Dutta echo this sentiment (using Sandra Bartky’s initial formulations), that:

“In patriarchal societies there is no need for external surveillance mechanisms to control women. We extended these insights into the realm of the Indian media industry to underscore the mechanisms through which representations of virtuous and wanton female sexuality help discipline women but also the modalities through which women participate in limiting female subject positions” (185).

Govindan and Dutta argue that the Bollywood female actor must perform a juggling act between her performance off-screen and her roles onscreen, arguing that the Hindi film industry more than any other requires its female actors (and to a lesser degree, I suggest, its male actors) to mediate their performances carefully:

“In the Indian public sphere, actresses have to locate themselves strategically within a limited rubric of sexual identities – the vamp, the virgin or some blurring of the two. Although the meaning and content associated with these identity categories are constantly shifting, the necessity of having a label of sexual identification for actresses remains unquestioned in the Bollywood hierarchy” (185).

Govindan and Dutta’s arguments ring true to a certain extent, as many Bollywood female actors remain defined by these reductive categories. But such
categories deny the feminist possibilities that the women-centric or heroine-oriented film permit, something I will rectify in this chapter. These many and competing voices gesture to the contention regarding Bollywood’s place in representing and presenting the Indian woman. Though the general consensus is that Bollywood offers a reductive version of femininity, this chapter will demonstrate that post-2000s Bollywood cinema is increasingly offering up a space for (more) empowered female performances.

With the exception of *Mother India* (and a handful of others) the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s saw roles for female actors in Bollywood mostly confined to wives or girlfriends (or worse still wives-in-training). But in the late ‘60s and ‘70s, roles for women began to become more diverse: Hema Malini was plucky carriage driver Basanti in *Sholay* (‘Flames’, dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975); Rakhee was a doctor in *Kala Pathar* (‘Black Stone’, dir. Yash Chopra, 1979); and in the 1980s there were even a few films featuring female policewomen (Raza). But as the previous chapter contended the 1990s saw Bollywood (and the nation) undergo massive structural changes. With these came a renegotiating of modern Indian womanhood by filmmakers particularly on the fringes of Bollywood in the parallel Hindi cinemas. Any discussion on women-centric films in Hindi cinema would be remiss to mention *Arth* (dir. Mahesh Bhatt, 1982) the defining film of its genre. Situated within the ‘Middle Cinema’ genre, a term coined by Raina in 1986, the genre (and the film) expertly blended commercial and artistic sensibilities. Many of these films chronicled the angst of the post-independence, urban experience that Indian society underwent in the late 1980s and 1990s. These ideological struggles were articulated through the body/character of the woman, which is why middle cinema focused so regularly on female protagonists. In envisioning “an optimistic resolution for the woman, one that privileges her individuality, independence or identity” (Ray 58), Middle Cinema is thoroughly women-centric genre. But rather than consider *Arth*, which has been done well and numerously, I am instead concerned with considering how modern *Bollywood* is constructing renewed versions of femininity.
As a decade of major social and gendered change, the 1990s saw a conflicted approach to heroines by Bollywood. Pre-liberalisation (pre 1998) there was a fleeting period of heroine-focus; Chandini (‘Moonlight’, dir. Yash Chopra, 1989) cemented Sridevi’s star-power and featured the most successful Yash Chopra heroine of all time with the female protagonist. Stars like Juhi Chawla, Madhuri Dixit and Sridevi commanded major billing in the period carrying countless films on their own star-power. Post-liberalisation however, and heroines were recast as docile, domestic, decorative and devoted housewives in films like Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (’Some Things Happen, dir. Karan Johar, 1998), Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (‘Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness’, dir. Karan Johar, 2001) DDLJ, and Hum Apke Hain Koun, where the heroine unquestionably places her partners desires above hers. These films (re)present a world in which the woman must be willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband or family. She exists as the retainer of Indian-identity in lands far away – passive, pretty and pure as the Ganga. These 1990s neoliberal attitudes were a step backwards for women in Bollywood, with the female protagonist powerless beneath the patriarchy, her fate falling squarely into the hands of the hero. Within this period, a wide variety of media flows constituted the new heroine’s identity. Her clothes, style, dialogue and appearance all formed part of a shifting aesthetic that “incorporates the “global” within existing Bollywood idioms” (Global Bollywood, 184). In Bollywood and Globalization, Purna Chowdhury explains these alterations:

“The nineties inaugurates the New Woman, who in these new films is not only seen in western outfits formerly reserved for vamps, but who also throws herself at the scopophilic gaze even as she celebrates her own body with a jouissance, without surrendering her claim to the special status as heroine” (qtd in Mehta & Pandharipande 55).

This “New Woman” appeared as vamp, yet behaved as heroine. The dichotomy between the two representations collapsed causing the once-defined lines between the archetypes to blur. This trend is particularly prevalent today in NRI films. In Dostana (‘Friendship’, dir. Tarun Mansukhani, 2008) the female protagonist Priyanka Chopra appeared archetypical vamp in her mini-skirts, gold bikinis and in her eagerness to drink copious amounts of alcohol. Living alone in
Miami, her appearance and demeanour denoted promiscuity, yet her behaviour and strong desire for (an Indian) husband was classic heroine. Similarly, in 2012’s *Cocktail* (dir. Imtiaz Ali, 2012), there was much interest paid to the way in which the character of Veronica, played by Deepika Padukone performed as a ‘new’ heroine. With a name like Veronica instantly coding her as vamp, Veronica lived her life in London unapologetically, smoking, drinking and engaging in casual sexual relationships. But when the playboy she falls for leaves her for her best friend Meera (who as her name denotes, wears *salwar kameez*, prays, cooks Indian food and is a more preferable wife), Veronica desperately attempts to transform into the classic Indian heroine by learning to cook and wearing traditional Indian clothing. Amidst these regressive quasi-heroine-vamps, there were also the typical masala blockbuster Bollywood films such as *Dabangg* (*Fearless*, dir. Abhinav Kashyap, 2010) and *Chennai Express* (dir. Rohit Shetty, 2013) that deployed heroines who served as little more than arm-candy. In both films the women’s choices are dictated by the men around them and eventually by their uber-masculine love interests.

As the previous chapter contended, popular opinion and Bollywood academia argue that Bollywood cinema is one for the hero, as it has a largely undermining and patriarchal approach to representing women and women’s desires. Chatterji explains further:

> “Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal framework of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema”.

Chatterji’s arguments are true: the ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema. However it is my intention to explore three films that do (or attempt to) represent the ‘ordinary’ Indian woman. Rather than condemning an industry that is often patriarchal (as many cinema industries are), this chapter seeks out positive moments of radical rupture in the hero-dominant form. Whether marginalised, demonised, mythologised or celebrated, the female role reveals fascinating insights into Indian society and as result this chapter finds
films that perform anti-patriarchal departures. Though more popular and prolific in the art-house or parallel streams of Indian cinema, Bollywood has long dabbled women-centric films to varying degrees of success. It is true that Bollywood remains in favour of males, as Ganti contends:

“The prevailing attitude among distributors and producers is that "heroines" – the common term for actresses in leading roles – do not "open" a film, that is, they do not pull in the crowds and generate the sold-out shows that guarantee a successful first weekend at the box-office. Therefore, it is difficult to market a film that is characterized as a "heroine-oriented" one within the industry, as top male stars tend not to act in projects where they play a supporting role” (Bollywood: A Guidebook 61).

Ganti accurately points out that Bollywood male stars still regularly command top-billing and greater remuneration for their roles. But, in 2013 Shahrukh Khan announced at a press conference that his co-star Deepika Padukone would have her name appear before his in the opening credits to his blockbuster film Chennai Express. This decision was repeated with the blockbuster film Happy New Year (dir. Farah Khan, 2014) also starring Khan and Padukone. For a female star in her late twenties to have her name appear prior to a superstar such as Khan is striking. These instances may be slight but they do form part of a subtle shift in the representation of women in Bollywood that is occurring.

**Solving the Riddle of Paheli and Women’s Desire**

*Paheli* is an adaptation of a 15th Century Rajasthani folktale written by Vijaydan Detha. Detha’s story, *Duvidha*, is a retelling of an ancient popular story from his village in Borunda, Jodhpur. The story was adapted for screen by in Mani Kaul in 1973 to critical acclaim, but where Kaul’s aesthetic was spare and the performances muted, Palekar’s adaptation, care of Ravi K Chandran’s cinematography, is a riot of colour. An intensely visual spectacle, *Paheli* is a rich, technicolour dream. Palekar said in a promotional interview that his film was “diametrically opposite to his [Kaul’s] film” (qtd in Bannerjee). Unlike Kaul’s *Duvidha*, which was very much part of the Parallel Hindi Cinema stream, *Paheli* falls within the Bollywood genre. But in interpreting aesthetics from art cinema and utilising masala conventions *Paheli* performs remarkably differently to the
blockbuster Bollywood films of its time. The film’s lush rural aesthetic and magical realism render it a major departure for Bollywood. Its cast – Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, Anupam Kher, Juhu Chawla and Amitabh Bachchan (in a cameo appearance) reads commercial blockbuster, but its subject positions Paheli firmly in the margins of popular Bollywood. In his career as a director Palekar has tended toward creating films focusing on the “condition of women” (Banerjee) and Paheli proves to be no exception. Paheli offers audiences a “glimpse of what love is not under patriarchy” (Banerjee) and it is this vision that makes for an altogether anti-patriarchal film. Banerjee elaborates:

“But the most profound subversion in this film is directed toward film itself because, by taking as its theme and giving shape to the desire of woman, the film counters what many theorists—particularly feminist theorists—have pointed out as a basic character of film: that in cinema woman exists only as the shape of men’s desire. Paheli not only positions itself against popular cinema as the instrument of the hegemony of capitalism and patriarchy while using its idiom but it also counters what has often been recognized as the fundamental character of film as male fantasy”.

Paheli’s key subversion is that it gives a voice to female desire. In portraying an experience of womanhood that deviates radically from the classic Bollywood heroines, the film functions as a surreal and magical fantasy. Paheli features a woman who has both the chance and the courage to say no to convention and expectation.

The film signals its subversive intent from its opening song-dance sequence, Minnat Kare (‘If He Pleads’), in which Lachchi (Mukherjee) the bride-to-be, dances with her female friends and family in celebration of her impending wedding. The matriarchal scene sets the tone for the film and the playful song features lyrics in which Lachchi asks the women how best to deal with an amorous husband, “What if he pleads?” she sings, “No! Don’t give in” a chorus of women chime. The women playfully cajole her, teasingly tapping her on the shoulder as one woman sings, “All your friends with have their ears pressed to the door, listening brazenly through the door latch”, to which she replies, hitting her friend gently on the shoulder, “Off with you my friend! Don’t confuse me
now, when after so many years a night not meant for sleeping has finally arrived”. She rises to her feet and spins around joyously as she sings, “I’ve dreamed these dreams for so long, and finally the night has come to call those dreams my own!” The exuberant sequence signals a rebellion for Bollywood: here, it is the woman eagerly excited at the prospect of sexual activity with her new husband. After the song, Lachchi, husband Kishanlal (Khan), son of a wealthy trader, and the wedding party are en-route to her new home, when they stop for lunch in a small town. There, a local ghost falls in love with Lachchi. The party moves on and once home, Kishanlal refuses to physically consummate the newlywed’s union, saying that he is leaving the next morning to acquire trading accounts in the desert for five years. He tells Lachchi it is wiser to wait until his return before, “lighting the fires of passion unnecessarily”. Lachchi is stunned then, when only a few days later, her husband (who is in fact, the ghost having assumed Kishanlal’s form) unexpectedly returns. The ghost (who, for ease of understanding I will refer to from here on as ‘Ghost’) informs Lachchi that he has taken her husband’s form and offers her a choice to either banish or accept him. Confronted by the proposition, Lachchi says, “No-one has ever asked me what I wanted before”, before eventually permitting him to stay. The pair falls in love (even deciding to have a baby but when the ‘real’ Kishanlal eventually returns and throws the lover’s world into chaos, it is down to a goatherd with mystical powers to deign the real husband from the two identical spectres.

_Paheli’s key subversion hinges on the potency of Lachchi being offered a choice, which is essentially the theme of the film – a woman’s right to choose. But once Ghost appears in Lachchi’s life he moves to the centre of the film’s focus. Wani criticises this decision, arguing the film’s new focus on Kishanlal is because the “film has no use for her”:_

“when the ghost declares himself and confesses his love, the girl sheds a few tears of confusion and then immediately accepts him as her lover. From here on the film has no use for her. The focus is on the ghost, and intermittently on the husband, who is shown to be missing the wife he had been so prompt in leaving”.
Such a reading denies the purpose of *Paheli’s* conceit, which is by deliberately highlighting and fetishising Khan’s body, it reverses the traditional Bollywood-focus on the female body. In objectifying his body, *Paheli* idealises and displays Khan/Ghost as a sexual and romantic spectacle, thereby flipping the traditional gaze on its head. Banerjee echoes this sentiment:

“Some viewers have considered this to be a product of using Shah Rukh Khan’s star power, which they see as leading to a failure of the original intention. However, it is possible to argue that Khan’s star power is precisely what is needed to objectify Lacchi’s desire: the desiring woman as subject remains in the shadow but the object of her desire is displayed before us. The ghost’s body, in other words, functions as the body of the woman in the dominant cinema.”

*Paheli* offers up numerous pleasures for the female audience with the character of the ghost. One morning, he appears shirtless on the rooftop, bathing in the early-morning light. The camera zooms in close on his glistening biceps, his chest, face and black hair as water cascades over him. In a reversal of the wet-sari scene for the Bollywood heroine, his white pants cling to his wet body in a sheer erotic spectacle. *Paheli* also offers numerous romantic pleasures – Ghost is the personification of female fantasy. As an allegory for female desire, he is tender, caring, emotionally intelligent, playful, loving and devoted. Ghost is an idealised lover; one that playfully surrounds his beloved in a sea of red rose petals that prevent her from leaving his sight, and one that almost-improbably adoring. In a scene midway through the film, the lovers awake after a night embracing in the rain (symbolic of sexual activity in Bollywood) to giggle and tickle each other wrapped in blankets on the balcony. But, by far the most romantically and radically demonstrative scene in *Paheli* is where Lachchi informs Ghost she is expecting a child:

Lachchi: “I’m leading such a strange life. Maybe I’ll never really know what you are to me. Do you know this relationship of ours”

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21 One of the few other notable instances of male-body objectification in Bollywood occurs in *Om Shanti Om* where the song-dance number *Dard-E-Disco* (‘The Pain of Disco’) has Shahrukh Khan appear shirtless and being sprayed by a firehouse. But *Paheli* offers its pleasures in a natural setting, rather than in the radicalised fantasy space of the song-dance sequence, which makes it more striking.
“Is unbreakable. I could have never imagined you like this. Only a woman truly makes a man complete”

“You are only saying this because you are a spirit. Had you been a human you would not have ever said anything remotely similar”.

He kneels at Lachchi’s feet and tenderly kisses her stomach as she begins to cry. Ghost hugs her and begs her to give birth to a daughter, “a little girl who bring love and light into our lives”. In a nation where there still remain alarming rates of female infanticide in some parts of rural India, Ghost’s line is significant in confirming his, and Paheli’s position(s) as anti-patriarchal.

As the film builds to its climax the real Kishanlal, having heard word of his wife’s pregnancy begins the long journey home. Once home, he is stunned to find her giving birth and a mysterious doppelganger in his place. The family, understandably perturbed by the double-act, begins to look for a way to deign the ‘real’ and ‘true’ son, and sets off into the desert to visit the King of the region for adjudication. Along the way, Ghost and Kishanlal find themselves alone and an increasingly confused and desperate Kishanlal begs Ghost to return to wherever he came from, saying, “For God’s sake, at least tell me who you are?” to which Ghost replies, “The love that resides in every woman’s heart. That’s who I am. I am love”. Kishanlal, unable to compete with such a grand response falls silent. The party travels on and encounters a local goatherd, Gadariya (Amitabh Bachchan), who offers his help with the quandary. The remainder of the bemused party watches on as there on a sand dune the shepherd devises a series of tricks designed to reveal the ‘real’ Kishanlal. He first asks the real Bhanwarlal son to pick up hot coals, then the real husband of Lachchi to herd the goats into a circle and finally, asks the real lover of Lachchi to enter a water bottle. As the Ghost enters the water bottle Gadariya captures him sealing the lid on the bottle. The film returns to Lachchi at home who is mourning what she believes to be the loss of her one true love. She wears her wedding veil and sombrely prepares for Kishanlal’s return. As he arrives, she tells him that she can never love him fully but will fulfil her wifely duties, but the man then asks, “What about our Looni-Ma?”. Lachchi cries as she realises that
the man is in fact, Ghost (as Looni-Ma was the name the pair decided to name their baby).

The climax in which Gadariya deigns the “real” Bhanwarlal son draws attention to the film’s social commentary on feminism because the entire scene is deliberately unreal. From the minute Bachchan appears onscreen, any potential doubts as to whether he is an apt adjudicator of what is real and what is not are silenced. Bachchan’s star persona in Bollywood, bolstered by his recent role as the host and judge in the television program, *Kaun Banega Crorepati?* (‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’); is that of an elder statesman. As he effectively sanctions the ‘adultery’ between Ghost and Lachchi (by deeming Ghost the rightful lover of Lachchi), Bachchan as Gadariya silences potential audience uneasiness with his judgement. As Banerjee points out the scene is deliberately “hyper-artificial” as it occurs on desert sand dunes where no shepherd would likely graze his herd, and Bachchan’s inimitable place in Bollywood makes him a instantly acceptable judge. These artificial elements remind audiences they are watching a fable of sorts and the reflexive distancing technique is especially evident when Bachchan appears onscreen, breaking the verisimilitude for a moment.

In keeping with these performative elements there are two talking *kathputli* that narrate the events of the film. In the Rajasthani language the words *kath* and *putli* translate to ‘wood’ and ‘doll’, so *kathputli* refers to the brightly decorated wood and material string-puppets popular across Rajasthan. One of the oldest performing arts in Rajasthan, the tradition of the kathputli is reportedly thousands of years old. Two such string-puppets punctuate the action in *Paheli*, and move and talk of their own accord. Voiced by real-life husband and wife Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak22, the puppets, who refer to each other as Maharaja and Maharani narrate and commentate on various events in the film. The puppets engender the film with another element of performativity that permits:

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22 Both popular parallel Hindi cinema, Bollywood and theatre actors.
“a reflexive distance for a critical view of the allegory. This deliberate distancing is made clear by the use of the puppets: we are always kept aware that we are watching an artificial construction, a filming of a story that was originally told through another mode of presentation” (Banerjee).

The puppets and the film’s setting are unmistakably Rajasthan (or a filmi version thereof); from the sweeping shots of the desert with camels to the coloured havelis and colourful costumes. Palekar’s *Paheli* is set in an unspecified time past as indicated by the emphasis on rural costuming, use of horse and carts or camels as transport and the absence of modern technology. It is this ambiguity that lends the film a timeless quality that enables the film to best function as an allegorical study of female desire. The rural setting is also important, because rural Indian women often suffer most from gender-based marginalisation. This in turn, makes Lachchi’s own decision to embark on affair of sorts, all the more radical because she lives in Rajasthan, a typically traditionally feudal and patriarchal social setting. Ultimately, the puppets and the performative elements work to engender the film with a magical realism that draws greater attention to the film’s feminist and anti-patriarchal ideologies.

*Paheli* undertakes a softening of the source text’s ending. In *Duvidha*, the ghost is thrown into a bag and drowned in the river – the adulterer and imposter defeated at last. The woman is cast out, left alone with a baby, without her love and mourning the loss of her reputation. Despite critical attention that suggests otherwise, it is my reading that *Paheli* deviates from this ending not because it is ‘Bollywoodising’ the story to make it more palatable for audiences that expect a happy-ending, but rather, because *Paheli* is deliberately unreal. From the talking puppets to Ghost’s romantic tricks, the magical elements of the film make it worlds away from the realities of female life in rural Rajasthan. These magical-realism elements enable *Paheli* to draw attention to its key issue: representing women’s desire. Jennifer Thomas writes:

“While *Paheli* can be read as remarkably empowering for Indian women, it is significant that it only offers women a model of sexual freedom under a very unrealistic pretense. For one, *Paheli* is set in an indeterminate distant past...By confining Lachchi to the realm of
unrealistic fantasy, the film denies Indian women any real identification with her transgressions of traditional moral codes, and in doing so contains the threat of her sexual power” (Bollyworld 168).

Thomas’ concerns hold merit, but by setting the film in an “indeterminate distant past”, Paheli underscores just how little has actually changed for many rural Indian woman of the present. The fantasy of Paheli is a fantasy for a key reason – because women’s empowerment remains so for many parts of the nation. The pretence of having her lover appear as her husband undoubtedly makes negotiating social and familial circumstances inherently easier while she has what is essentially an extra-marital affair, but Paheli still engenders Lachchi with a strength and resoluteness that is striking for Bollywood. In another article in Intersections, Malashri Lal discusses Duvidha and the ways in which child marriage and folklore coexist in the Indian cultural psyche. Lal argues that the village bride often operates as a “commodity of exchange between families” and writes, after discussing a passage of the (original) story:

“The invisible intervention of the 'ghost,' the 'third party,' disrupts the hierarchal order, and as the story progresses, the bride questions the values she has grown up with. The ghost, Vijaydan Detha's innovative device for engineering social thought becomes the agent of the bride's altered consciousness”.

The same can be said for Paheli as while the Ghost is the catalyst for Lachchi’s personal happiness, that happiness is still very much of her own choosing. Paheli ends with a song-dance sequence set to the rolling credits featuring Lachchi and Ghost flanked by back-up dancers. The pair are dressed and made-up to appear as life-size kathputli puppets on a stage. With their limbs attached to strings, they dance as though they are being controlled by a puppet-master on a giant stage. This final moment of performativity works to reminds audiences that they have been watching a fable, reminding viewers that women’s equality is still a fable in many parts of India, and the world.

‘Girl Power’ in Chak De! India

“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
While *Paheli* allegorised female empowerment by locating it in the past, *Chak De! India* (*Chak De*) brings the issue firmly into the present. In telling the story of an all-girls hockey team, the film works neatly alongside *Paheli* as an exploration of (radical) modern Indian womanhood. *Chak De*’s approach cleverly contains a checklist of marginalised groups in India; exploring issues related to the Indo-Muslim identity, experiences of rural women in urban India, issues of sexism and patriarchy and the more general struggles of women to be recognised in their chosen field. Most significantly, *Chak De* eschews any romance story, features no song-dance sequences, does not glamourise women’s sport and most importantly is a modern popular film devoted almost entirely to women. The film is decidedly ‘un-Bollywood’ in its approach to telling the story of a team of young female hockey players who win the Hockey World Cup. Kabir Khan (Khan), the disgraced former captain of the Indian Hockey Team, is accused of match-fixing a loss to the Pakistani team during an important match some seven years prior and after being forced into exile returns to sports to coach a team of young women to World Cup victory. *Chak De* appears at the outset ostensibly a classic sports film, with Khan keen to take vengeance on a nation that has disowned him and coaching the ailing women’s league to victory to ensure the rag-tag bunch of young women will learn lessons that will take them from the hockey field into life. But *Chak De* subverts and shatters the clichés, creating a subversive and empowered female collective.

*Chak De*’s goal in representing minority groups is signalled at the outset of the film when the young female hockey players sign in for their positions on the team. In the scene, team official Sukhlal (Javed Khan) checks in Nethra Reddy (Sandia Furtado):

Sukhlal: “So are you Madrasi?
Nethra: I’m Telegu
Sukhlal: Oh, Tamil
Nethra: Not Tamil, Telegu
Sukhlal: Same thing, what’s the difference between Tamil and Telegu?
Nethra: The same difference that there is between Punjabi and Bihari”.

Surrounded by 16 girls and I don’t even have a single song...it’s non-SRK film. I’m aware of that and it scares me” – Shahrukh Khan (Rediff).
The moment is indicative of *Chak De*’s treatment that deploys humour as a means of drawing attention to its key minority issues. Initially most of the women appear as regional caricatures, particularly Balbir Kaur (Tanya Abrol) as the hot-tempered Punjabi; but these near-stereotypes work to highlight the caste, religious, regional and gender discrimination women in India face. As the film progresses the caricatures turn into characters and each member acts a stand-in for marginalised groups across India. From the Northeastern players who struggle with the Hindi language, to those from rural areas who must contend with jokes about them riding elephants to school, each of the women come to be emblematic representations of various Indian minority groups.

Following the scene above Khan takes to the grass for his first day as a Coach and begins asking each woman to introduce herself. Khan systematically sends each woman off the field as they introduce themselves with their name and the state they are from. When one finally says her name and then, “India” she is permitted to stay in the line-up. When another arrives late and is forced by Khan to undertake seven rounds of the oval, she breathlessly complains, “but I’m the captain of the state team” to which Khan replies, “And I’m the coach of the Indian national Women’s Team. I neither hear the names of states, nor do I see them. I only hear one name: I-N-D-I-A”. The rallies for unity throughout the film may be heavy-handed but in hammering the point home so, they draw attention to the film’s key (feminist) aims.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Khan has his work cut out for him as the divisions in the team appear almost impossible to conquer. Just as it seems he will never win over the disillusioned, difficult and despondent team he begins to make headway. By being unyielding in his firm coaching approach that includes benching players for unspecified amounts of time (often overnight) when they refuse to play as a team, he encourages the team to soften. But the team’s most experienced player Bindiya Naik (Shilpa Shukla) senses the team shift in sentiment and engineers a revolt of sorts, by regaling the women with stories about how Khan betrayed India during a crucial hockey game several years ago. Capitalising on the team’s physical and emotional tiredness, she
incites them to sign a petition stating they will no longer train under Khan’s coaching. The team presents him with the petition and he accepts his dismissal calmly, inviting the team to join him at McDonald’s with the staff the following day for a last lunch together. The scene that follows marks a turning point in Chak De’s narrative, and is one of the most famous scenes in modern Bollywood history.

Inside a local McDonald’s eatery, Molly Zimik (Mazochon V Zimik) from Manipur and Mary Ralte (Kimi Laldawla) from Mizoram, are walking back to their seats after having placed their orders. Two (seemingly) local young men ogle them and one says to them, “Hey beautiful! Join us hot babes, come on!” Molly and Mary ignore them as the man smirks and then says to his friend “They’re totally red hot”. The women reach their table and sit down but Punjabi player Balbir overhears their continuing comments and yells at the boys, “Harassing girls are you? Try it again. Go on, I dare you!” She slaps one boy hard across his face and as both men rise to their feet her challenge is accepted. The young man pushes her and a brawl breaks out. As Mary, Molly and Balbir begin to fight with the boys and tables fall and chairs are upturned, about six more young men rush in yelling and join the fight. As the rest of the women join in, a large melee breaks out in the restaurant. Some women hit the men with hockey sticks, while others punch, kick and slap them. The team shout and help each other throughout the physical ordeal, pinning men to the floor. Assistant Coach Krishnaji (Vibha Chibber) and team-assistant Sukhlal are disturbed by the brawl and rise to their feet to intervene but are stopped by Khan, who watches on bemused. Khan briefly interjects to stop a young man wielding a cricket bat from behind by chastising him for his “cowardly” attempt, telling him, “See, there are no cowards in hockey!” The brawl draws to a close as an overhead camera shot shows the restaurant utterly destroyed: food is strewn across the floor, seats and chairs upturned and an outside car window is smashed. The camera then zooms in on Sukhlal’s devastated face as he says, “is this a hockey team or an army of devils?” to which Khan replies, “It is spirit, not strength that makes a team. For the first time today I have seen team spirit.” The girls gather around Khan, hair ruffled and clothing dishevelled and hastily try to make their
apologies. Khan tells them he will see on the field at 5am tomorrow. The song *Chak De! India*, sung by Sukhwinder Singh plays as the team walks out of the restaurant in unison, led by Khan, their silhouettes filling the screen as the scene fades to intermission.

As it is my intention to uncover performances of empowered womanhood in Bollywood, this particular scene is of key importance. It is the only instance in Bollywood where a group of young women violently assault a group of young men in Bollywood. For this reason, it had a particular resonance with the female Bollywood audience. By contextualising two different viewer responses to the scene it is possible to read how *Chak De* stages a feminist intervention into gender representations in Bollywood. The scene has a close relation to ‘eve-teasing’; an unfortunately widespread experience for many Indian women. Though varying in scope and severity, eve-teasing is conducted usually in public spaces – on public transport, in cinemas, at markets, on roads, etc. The ‘trend’ rose to prominence in the 1980s and the rise is largely attributed to the root cause of ‘globalisation’, but it was also during this time that women began to take up study positions in colleges and higher-education facilities and made moves into the workforce, resulting in a more visible public Indian womanhood (Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms* 64). The joy of *Chak De’s* reaction to eve-teasing is that it is not measured, nor academic, it is purely physical.

As there remains such a lack in Bollywood scholarship when it comes to women-centric, heroine-oriented or feminist films, it becomes important to illuminate female voices on the matter. In the absence of ethnographic sources, in the following I read two responses to the scene sourced from two popular Bollywood blogs. These reactions form part of a devoted online readership that is part of a considerable online fan base consisting of hundreds of thousands of Bollywood blogs devoted to dissecting the films, stars, songs, outfits and gossip surrounding the industry. Due to its uniqueness, *Chak De* attracted particular attention for its apparently feminist themes. It is true that the online world has

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23 A euphemism used to describe sexual harassment, molestation and/or sexual aggression against women in India.
become of greater importance to studies such as this and these particular film-based blogs, where commenters and authors interact in regards to film reviews, discussion and analysis, open up a third space that enables glimpses into audience responses otherwise unavailable. Both the responses below from 2008, one by an Indian and one by an American (Caucasian) author, sum up the opening point in this chapter: that western interventions into Indian feminism are often reductive. ‘Amrita’\texttrade;\texttrademark; s blog \textit{Indiequill}\textsuperscript{24} combined Bollywood reviews, discussions and occasional unrelated posts considered her personal experiences of being a young Indian woman. One of her most popular posts, titled “\textit{16 Angry Young Women}”, surmised her opinions on \textit{Chak De! India} and was also a direct response to another popular Bollywood blogger’s reaction to the scene (which is reproduced below). In an evocative personal piece, she wrote:

\begin{quote}
“This is why that scene in Chak De struck such a chord in every single Indian woman I know. There is not one of us that has not experienced a moment like that one. A moment when we would have done anything just to rip some motherf*****’s throat out but had to satisfy ourselves with a few choice insults or maybe a dignified silence depending upon the circumstances, our personalities and our upbringing. If there’s something that Indian women across caste, class and regional lines can relate to, it’s being harassed. Therefore it was a cathartic moment to watch those guys get beaten up – our long suppressed wishes were being fulfilled on screen in one glorious scene. And unlike other Bollywood movies, where women only get to beat up evildoers in the most “eeks! Don’t break my itsy bitsy fingernail” uber-ditsy feminine manner possible by using lampshades and sandals, and that too only with the help of either a cunning, faithful dog or a massive crowd, these women were using hockey sticks, those oh-so-macho tools of every gangster’s trade and they didn’t care if they broke a few tables along with their fingernails”.
\end{quote}

Amrita’s personal response underscores the way in which the fight back sequence works as a fulfilment of a particular, Indian female fantasy. The scene offers the female viewer an opportunity to act out against her own (or her sisters, her friends or her cousins) experiences of eve-teasing in a way that social decorum and circumstance do not dictate. Amrita’s own assertion that the most common experience for Indian women of class, regional, ethnic,

\textsuperscript{24} The author stopped writing in 2012, but left the blog online for readers.
relational and caste differences is male harassment is both troubling and true. In the remainder of the post she goes on to explain that she was sexually harassed as an eleven-year old in South India and in the comments, roughly thirty women share their own eve-teasing experiences in cities across India (both rural and urban), offering sympathy and support to each other. In this sense, Amrita’s post acts as a small forum for a group Indian women to share their experiences of eve-teasing via Chak De’s scene, which is the catalyst for the discourse.

Conversely, Beth Watkins, a Caucasian-American Bollywood blogger (who Amrita’s post is a response to) has a difficulty with the scene. Watkins’ blog, Beth Loves Bollywood is an immensely popular website in which Bollywood fans, both Indian and Other, interact with Watkins’ reviews. In her review on Chak De she wrote:

“Here’s what’s bugging me. Apart from this scene, Chak De! India is for me a feminist film, unapologetically, boldly, with heart and humour. But women taking on the worst behaviour of men and/or male-established/dominated society is not what feminism about. You don’t get to attack people because they mistreat you. Of course these jackasses deserved to be punished. Their behaviour was harmful and hurtful and unacceptable. I was totally with Balbir when she yelled at them, and I absolutely do not think females must be quiet and just bear whatever sh*t is dished out at them. But vigilante violence isn’t really the answer here - in my mind, it’s not even an answer (which is one reason I don’t always love the 1970s Angry Young Man archetype). In a story that highlights personal and professional success by playing by the rules and behaving ethically and with concern for others, it doesn’t fit. I’m so disappointed that not only does the movie have the girls engage in this behaviour, it also has this outburst of short tempers and violence serve as the bonding moment, the experience that enables the very existence of the team continue. What’s the message here? The enemy of my enemy is my friend? We will rise when we beat down others? The people who mistreated us behave like this, so we should too? Violence demonstrates our potential for greatness?”

These two very different responses articulate two very different understandings from two equally different women. For Watkins, the scene is unnecessary

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25 I am not suggesting that every Indian woman has been unfortunate enough to experience eve-teasing in the course of her life, however the experience is undoubtedly a hugely common one for Indian women.
violent and portrays a message that violence is a suitable means to an end, yet for Amrita, the moment is a cathartic realisation of a Bollywood feminism. Like Amrita’s page, Watkin’s blog attracts a devoted commentary in the responses section. Of the 33 comments, the vast majority responded positively to the scene. Of these, the majority were Indian women, who could relate to the scene. One such commenter, “Littletortise” wrote:

“I loved this film, and I have to say, that scene did not bother me in the same way. I guess, having gone through this sort of non-stop leering/eve-teasing when I lived in India, and finding that not responding, looking away, putting my belongings as barriers between my body and searching fingers, none of it seemed to stop the men. What did work was loud comments back or pushing back or stamping down on their feet/shins, using a pin to poke their hands...we did what it took. Believe me, when I saw this scene I was exhilarated. I know, in the western culture, this is jaw-dropping, but then you aren’t subjected to the level of denigration that women in India are...”

Another, “Vastala” echoed these sentiments, writing, “Every Indian woman will have some suppressed rage regarding this issue, as you can see in all the comments here.” The reason the scene generated so much discussion was because it was, and remains, the only time in Bollywood were women have physically lashed out at a group of men. *Chak De* was highly unusual as it was a film with Shahrukh Khan where there were no song-dance sequences, no romances, sixteen heroines, and exceptionally unusual because it featured such a scene. Amrita’s review usefully draws attention to the fact that the women use hockey sticks as weapons, thereby rendering the violence masculine. Ultimately, the scene forces audiences to consider issues of gender violence, eve-teasing and sexual harassment in India, and what these two responses do is underscore the importance of understanding Indian feminism within a specific cultural context, which is why it is best viewed *outside* of western lenses of critique. Amrita’s, Vastala’s and Littletortise’s comments clarify the need to view Indian and Bollywood feminism on a spectrum of fluidity, and Watkin’s comments prove the need to read the film and the scene through a specific cultural lens.
Just as Watkins does, critics of *Chak De* have questioned the ease with which the girl’s permit Khan as their coach again. After the fight and without any discussion, the team unanimously decides to permit Khan as their coach again. But the fight acts as a catalyst for the team, who with their newfound unity are able to recognise Khan’s considerable abilities as a coach. In a narrative sense this moment represents a turning point between the first half and the second half of the film (as intermission follows directly after the fight) and marks the moment where the girl’s go from individual states and territories to a unified Indian team. The decision suggests that the initial power struggles with Khan were superfluous in the face of the wider struggles for the young Indian woman. The eve-teasing men stand-in for male oppression across the board.

As this discussion has found, *Chak De* pays close attention to articulating the issues facing the young Indian woman. In an early scene during the film, the sports officials make jibes about how a, “*woman’s place is in the kitchen*” and later during a game, a sympathetic male supporter asks a sceptical official, “*I do not get it- why do you not take women’s hockey seriously?*” to which he replies, “*And I do not get why you take it so seriously. Indian women are born to cook and clean. They cannot run around in short skirts.*” These comments are indicative of the sexism and patriarchal mindset of many parts of the professional sports-world (across the globe), but the film also makes an considered effort to canvas various women’s issues more generally; from Captain Vidya Sharma (Vidya Malvade) struggles to placate her new husband and in-laws demands that she give up hockey and return home to carry out her wifely duties; to Preeti Sabarwal (Sagarika Ghatge), a senior player whose boyfriend, the Vice Captain of the Indian Cricket Team, repeatedly scoffs at her suggestions that hockey is as an important Indian sport as cricket. These character arcs are important in depicting the balancing act (some) Indian women must undertake, but are also significant because they are the only two ‘romances’ featured (and they are exceptionally unromantic relationships). *Chak De* is radical because it is the first time Khan has appeared as a lead in a film without a romantic interest; a decision that ensures the film’s focus remains strictly on the women.
Because *Chak De* enacts a strong alliance of minorities, it is not surprising that it marks the first time Muslim Shahrukh Khan has appeared as a Muslim character in a 25 yearlong career. Up until *Chak De*, Khan had played romantic Hindu heroes who regularly partook in Hindu religious ceremonies and celebrations. In *Chak De* however, he is shown reciting a Muslim prayer: "*Nazrum Min Allahe wa fathun qareeb*" (‘Allah, bring me strength and bring victory closer’) before a team match. Though *Chak De*’s focus is performances of empowered femaleness, I diverge momentarily here, to consider the film’s deployment of Khan’s Indo-Muslim identity because it forms part of the minority-focus the film undertakes and also revives some of the Indo-Muslim tropes discussed in the opening chapter of this study. *Chak De* begins with Khan playing for India against Pakistan in the World Cup Hockey Championship. With just three minutes of the game remaining India are one point down and receive a penalty shot. Khan makes the unusual decision to take the shot himself despite not being a goal-shooter and in the dying seconds of the game misses the shot, much to the team’s (and the Indian supporters) devastation. In a display of sportsmanlike behaviour, a devastated Khan composes himself and shakes the Pakistani Captain’s hand in a gesture of goodwill. The Indian media use the footage of the handshake as evidence of match fixing and accompany it with vicious headlines questioning Khan’s loyalty to India. As the media maelstrom gains momentum, Khan is incited as siding with his ‘own’ and betraying India. The media conduct interviews with sports fans and spectators who accuse Khan as being a traitor and of being disloyal; “these people should have been chucked out when Partition happened” spits one interviewee. Effigy burning and hysteria follows and one day Khan returns home to find his neighbours have written the word “traitor” across the door of the house he shares with his elderly mother. This rhetoric is accompanied by footage of various violent eruptions on the streets which is deliberately evocative of the Hindu/Muslim communal violence that arises in India every so often. When Khan returns from

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26 In the intervening years Shahrukh Khan has gone on to play another dedicated Muslim character in *My Name is Khan*. 
his self-imposed exile after 7 years (as denoted by an inter-title) the rest of the film tracks his ‘comeback’ and his desire to prove himself again to his country. Bhattacharya suggests the film enacts a “metahistorical” mode from here on:

“because its entirely made up story hinges on upon the linked enactment of two historical events: Partition ethnocide in the forties and communal ethnocide in the nineties” (123).

The media footage signifies a recollection of trauma that serves to re-narrativise the events of Partition into the film and reinterprets the trauma. In evoking Partition, the film makes comment on Khan’s position as a minority, thereby proving his worthiness in coaching the often-marginalised women.

In a crucial scene where the team is readying itself to play the men’s hockey team (an important game because Khan has wagered a bet with the Hockey Board that if the girl’s win the board will fund them for the Championships), Khan delivers the following speech:

"Do not think you are playing against 16 boys. You are fighting everyone in this country who thinks girls can never match up to men, cannot hold a job as well as a man, cannot make decisions like men. You are fighting each fool who has forgotten that if a girl has given life to him, she can do anything. Anything."

The speech summarises Chak De’s commitment to representing minorities and the marginalised. As a potent site of study for this thesis, Chak De contains progressive, positive and encouraging performances of empowered femininity.

**The Anti-Feminist Picture?**

“Just because it is big does not necessarily mean that it is sweet” - The Dirty Picture.

In 2011 a small budget film starring two female leads (Vidya Balan and Rani Mukherjee) proved to be an unexpected success. The film, No-One Killed Jessica (dir. Raj Kumar), told the ‘real-life’ story of murdered Delhi model Jessica Lal in 1999. The film’s success suggested a shift in the middle-class, urban cinemagoers tastes and soon after The Dirty Picture (TDP) was released and
took Bollywood by storm. Setting in motion a major and unprecedented discourse in the public sphere about women, feminism and women-centric Bollywood films, TDP was a pop feminist moment for Bollywood. The discourse moved far beyond the merits of the film itself with the media focusing on how the ‘return’ of the empowered heroine signalled a shift in the fabric of modern Bollywood’s gender values and therefore India’s:

“...The Dirty Picture was not groundbreaking cinema or even a competent biopic, and yet critical opinion seems to coalesce around its “significance”, around Balan’s star turn in it, around the legitimacy of the National Award for Balan, and what all this might mean for reviews of gender stereotypes” (FirstPost).

Critics unanimously celebrated the film for its women-centric focus, with popular Bollywood critic Nikhat Kazmi declaring it to be a “seminal work that will be studied in feminist discourses”. The film was loosely based on the life of South Indian dancer/actress Silk Smitha, who appeared in hundreds of saucy song-dance sequences in the Tamil, Telegu and Kannada industries and was renowned for her erotic performances. Usually starring in the song-dance sequences considered too risqué for the heroine (and other item-girls), a ‘Silk-song’ became a selling point for a film. Smitha committed suicide at 36, reportedly unable to deal with the pressure associated with her performative identity. TDP begins in the heady days of the 1980s Southern film industry and follows Silk’s loves and losses alongside her rise and demise in the film industry. While what TDP did for actor Vidya Balan’s career is clear, what it means for this chapter is far less so.

TDP appears to be a radically women-centric film because it set in motion a major nationwide debate on the state of feminism in Bollywood and in India. The film became the poster-film for new-wave women-centric films in Bollywood and actor Balan became the industry’s go-to actor for ‘feminist’ roles. Prior to her breakthrough in Bollywood with No-One Killed Jessica in 2011, Balan had existed somewhere on the periphery of the Bollywood A-List. She had appeared in moderately successful films including Kismat Konnection (‘Fate Connection’, dir. Aziz Mirza, 2008) and Parineeta (dir. Pradeep Sarkar, 2005) but
remained unable to break into the upper echelon of Bollywood. Regarded by the media (unfairly) as “frumpy”, overweight and frequently mocked for sartorial choices in magazines, she was considered middle-aged for Bollywood and had seemingly left her run at stardom too late. In an interview with Amrah Ashraf in the Hindustan Times in 2014, Balan reflected on her rise to stardom. Ashraf writes, “We all remember writing Balan off in the mid 00’s. After all, she was fat, frumpy and quickly fading”. Referring to this low period, Balan says in the interview, “I was just too dowdy to be a Bollywood heroine”. Ashraf writes that after 2009 though, “everything Balan touched turned to gold”. After a successful film in 2010, then the success of No-One Killed Jessica in 2011, Balan’s career began to soar. Soon after came the much-hyped release of TDP which cemented her status as an A-list, much-awarded star and saw her become the champion of women-centric films. The quote below by film reviewer Visvanathan’s is illustrative of the general response to the film in (particularly urban) India:

“The film is brilliant at two levels. It is acute in its portrayal of male hypocrisy, but more so in its portrayal of how sexuality liberates women. The Dirty Picture is the stuff of sociology and the meat of a feminist critique of a male world. Beyond its sociological roots, however, it is a celebration of life, an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. This is a woman who enjoys sex and whose sexuality exudes power and freedom. The woman’s body becomes her way of being herself. When the body takes over and speaks its language, all society stops to watch and listen”.

Balan was lauded and awarded for her bravery in tackling such a sensual performance and won the National Award for Best Actress along with countless other prestigious awards for her efforts. The impacts of her efforts in the film were precise, as the media considered her to be the ‘hero’ of the film. In marking a semantic shift in the way female actors in Bollywood were discussed, the media hailed her as “the fourth Khan”27 (Banan), likening her abilities to the successes of three hugely successful male Bollywood actors.

27 Likening her to the three superstars Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir Khan.
Both media and public discourse on Balan and Smitha and Balan as Smitha intermesh and coalesce around issues of the body, sexuality, feminism and the Bollywood industry. Prior to the release of TDP, the film’s promotional material focused heavily on Balan’s transformation into Smitha. Posters of her seductively biting her lower-lip while clad in a tight red choli with her cleavage spilling over were accompanied with press reports about how Balan had gained 12 kilograms in order to do justice to Smitha’s famously fleshy form. The female body plays a complex role both in the film and outside it, because Balan’s own body and her bodily transformation as Smitha interact in conflicting ways.

Balan’s media interviews reveal a markedly different response to the film’s supposed feminism. Balan was quick to differentiate her own sexuality with Smitha’s during interviews; a separation necessary for Balan to distinguish herself as an actor, from Smitha’s sexual and subaltern deviancy. In an interview with the Hindustan Times, she said:

“I have a bad side too. I enjoy and celebrate my body the way she did...I never understood how Silk never used her head. It was all about her body. But there has to be another layer to a person. There’s more than just the body.”

Balan’s use of the word “bad” is interesting because it instantly imagines the sexual as deviant, by making it clear that Balan is making an educated decision to essay Smitha. With her comments demonstrating that she has little in common with Smitha, Balan’s off-screen transformation during this time also further signified this difference. Enlisting designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee as her stylist, Balan transformed her off-screen appearance by wearing Mukherjee’s rich and luxurious ethnic-wear. The transformation off-screen (Balan previously wore western-wear for functions), accompanied by Balan’s disconnecting of her own self from her performance as Smitha, meant that she separated herself, a petite, fair-skinned Tamil Brahmin actor who wears tailored outfits that retail for thousands of dollars from Smitha, a tall, ‘dark’, lower-caste provocateur from a poor family. Inevitably, in such a (re)casting of Smitha, issues of caste and casting collide. Jenny Rowena usefully argues that the TDP “silences” these important issues of caste and casting:
“Indeed, there is a serious problem in a film attempting a loose bio-pic of a vamp figure like Silk Smitha without talking of the film culture, which systematically and clearly marks all vamps as belonging to non-upper caste communities. By doing this and succeeding in making it look like a feminist issue, the film not only silences the caste issues regarding Silk Smitha’s life, it also allows the fair-skinned Tamil Brahmin, Vidya Balan, located within the Hindi film industry, to make use of the image of a dark-skinned South Indian actress. And by silencing the caste issue involved, it helps her build her upper caste female heroine self over the subaltern vamp hood of Silk Smitha.”

Before we even come to the content the film, there are major problematics regarding the privileging of Balan’s upper-class identity over Smitha’s subaltern one.

TDP is considerably complex to examine because on the one hand, it presents us with a woman who cognitively uses her sexuality as a means to further her career and enjoys her sexuality immensely, yet on the other, presents audiences with a woman who commits suicide because she lacks a man’s love. But whatever Smitha’s enjoyment of her body in the film, the discourse outside the film renders this enjoyment considerably less potent. Popular TV journalist Barkha Dutt was one of Vidya Balan’s biggest proponents after the film’s release declaring Balan to be, “the toast of our times – constantly challenging so many conventional depictions of women and pushing boundaries with The Dirty Picture” in a Women’s Day Special she hosted (where Balan was an invited guest). In it Balan shed some light on her own views on the film:

“In Silk Smitha’s case, it was pure exploitation. While in my case, I allowed the exploitation as an actress in The Dirty Picture. It’s the choice that’s empowering. I promoted (the film) in such a way that people came to the theatres, but once they got to the theatres, they could see beyond what they thought the movie was going to be” (qtd in Banan).

Balan suggests it was she who was empowered with choice and agency here, not Smitha. She argues that Smitha was victim of an exploitative industry, yet her own choice to play Smitha is a decision that forms part of an artistic performance. Therefore, Balan disconnects her own identity from Smitha’s by making clear she is re-enacting a story and permitting the “exploitation”. TDP
presents its narrative as follows: a young Reshma, desperate to escape her small hometown in South India, runs away to Madras to become a star. There she finds work as a back up dancer in a dance that no other woman will perform as it requires the dancer to whip herself seductively. Her erotic performance captures the interest of producer Selva Ganesh (Rajesh Sharma) who rechristens her ‘Silk’ and casts her in her first film opposite superstar Suryakant (Naseeruddin Shah). As she ascends the heights of film stardom and performs in increasingly sexually suggestive roles, she has a torrid affair with the married super-star Suryakant; endures the scorn and derision of society, particularly from Abraham (Emraan Hashmi) a film-director who is against the “smut” that Silk sells; and attracts an admirer in Ramakant (Suryakant’s brother, Tusshar Kapoor). As she becomes increasingly paranoid about the negative societal reaction to her career, and continues to try in vain to make Suryakant love her she descends into alcoholism, eventually committing suicide.

As something this study continues to encounter, the song-dance sequence in Bollywood functions as a third space in which desires unrepresented by the narrative can be visualised. The song-sequence *Ishq Sufiyana* (‘Godly Love’) functions as fantasy/dream sequence in which Abraham fantasises about Silk as the embodiment of his desire. She appears dramatically different, dressed in long, flowing gowns that hide her body and she performs placidly, romantically floating through the sequence (as opposed to her usual raucous and uninhibited style of dancing). In one shot she appears on the beach in a red sari with an accompanying red bindi as the embodiment of the good Hindu wife. Crucially, it is in this avatar that Abraham kisses her tenderly, in evidence of his clear preference for her virtuous appearance. The song is entirely male sung with the lyrics espousing the virtues of a divine, godly love. Sujatha Subramaniam argues that this particular song-dance sequence operates as a “space of containing and disciplining her sexuality, because as she is performing as the fulfilment of Abraham’s fantasy, her sexuality is muted.” Her performance in this sequence is in stark contrast to that of *Ooh La La (Tu Hai Meri Fantasy)* (‘Ooh La La, You are My Fantasy’) where, in a technicolour riot, Silk dances wildly to a montage charting her rise to stardom. She impersonates various avatars of popular
cinema heroines before her, appearing in a wet sari, dancing as an Apsara and playing badminton throughout the sequence. *Ooh La La’s* aesthetic is vivid and spectacularly coloured, whereas *Ishq Sufiyana* is shot beneath a dull and overcast sky. While *Ooh La La* celebrates Silk’s sexuality, showing her winking, biting her bottom lip and giggling as the camera moves in to frame her fleshy form, *Ishq Sufiyana* condemns it by re-presenting her as the object of Abraham’s fantasy. The camera’s gaze on Silk’s body is in *Ooh La La* is so frequent and so heightened that it becomes a commentary, as Subramaniam elaborates:

“One could argue that the song eroticizes the female body in a far more explicit and exaggerated manner than the original songs and films that it draws references from and through this exaggeration, highlighting the norms and ways in which a female body is constructed as a male fantasy. This juxtaposed with newspaper clippings and magazine covers talking of the rise of Silk, show not the rise of Silk as an actor, but as a saleable commodity. The song, thus, can be read as a critique of an industry which sees the female actor as a sexual object meant to be consumed by the audience’s scopophilic gaze. Thus, the film makes use of excesses of representation as a means to display its ideological foundation.”

*Ooh La La’s* energies are devoted to highlighting Silk’s upward career trajectory and to hyperperforming her sexuality. The dramatically different approaches to these two song-dance sequences can be explained by the way in which the film seems to function as two different films – the first film celebrates Silk’s sexuality by suggesting she is in control of it, yet the second (where *Ishq Sufiyana* occurs) reverses its initial stance by condemning Silk for her deviant sexuality and transgression. Rather than performing as her own fantasy in *Ooh La La*, Silk appears as Abraham’s own fantasy in *Ishq Sufiyana*, thereby silencing her own desires.

The differences between the first and second half of the film are pronounced. In the first half, Silk is cast in her first major onscreen role appearing opposite Suryakant. A nervous Silk struggles to perfect the steps for a dance sequence and angers the ageing star. During a filming break the pair chats as Suryakant, holding a packet of cigarettes, tells Silk an item-girl is much like the plastic cover of a cigarette packet, “it makes no different to the cigarette whether it’s there or
not”. He theatrically tosses the plastic wrapper to the ground as Silk interjects, suggesting that if it was to rain, “the plastic cover is all that will protect the cigarette”. An enraged Suryakant calls for the set to pack up, saying, “our heroine says it’s going to rain”. As the director and cinematographer chastise Silk she rushes to Suryakant’s trailer determined to make amends. There, she seductively kneels at his feet and places a hand on his thigh as he loosens his shirt buttons and says to her, “if the gossip papers are to be believed, I’ve tuned 500 girls”. With an eyebrow raised suggestively Silk asks, “but have you ever tuned one girl, 500 times?” The shot dissolves with the pair in each other’s arms and they emerge from his trailer to perform the shot with the director and crew looking on in awe at their sexual chemistry. It seems as if Silk is in control of her destiny and sexuality at this point, equally enjoying her body and her rise to fame. During the first half there is an instance where Suryakant, the ageing superstar, is filming a scene for a film with his onscreen mother. He bounds into the room proudly holding a graduation certificate and then rests his head on his mother’s lap. The actress playing the mother appears to be at least twenty years younger than Suryakant (actor Naseeruddin Shah is in his early-sixties). Suryakant has heavy make-up on his face and his hair has been obviously dyed in a satirical scene that functions as a parody of the ridiculousness of an industry where the hero can be one for nearly as long as he chooses; yet the heroine has a far shorter shelf life. When acerbic gossip columnist Naila (Anju Mahendroo) jokes with Suryakant that the actress playing his mother was playing his love-interest only a year ago he laughs and says, “A heroine is like an elected government. The party lasts five years and then it’s just there for support.” These scenes are largely demonstrative of the first half of the film’s approach to Silk and to women’s sexuality and makes biting commentary on the patriarchal tendencies in Indian cinema industries. But the film becomes hard to fathom in the second half, when it begins to punish Silk for her sexuality despite having mocked those unable to deal with such in the first half.

In the second half of the film Silk becomes a victim of the male-dominated industry, a victim of the men she loves and a victim of herself. Whilst in the first half her body was a tool of personal enjoyment and sexual liberation, in the
second, her torrid affair with Suryakant nullifies any potential to read her sexual liberation as empowerment. Silk falls in desperate love with Suryakant, becoming obsessed and infatuated with him and even fantasises about marrying him. One night the pair is having sex together when Suryakant’s wife unexpectedly returns home. Silk hides in the bathroom, tearfully watching through a keyhole as Suryakant then makes love with his wife. Her devastation sends her into a downward spiral, which sees her becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the industry’s demands of her. Now an outsider, she gains weight, becomes reckless and soon turns into a reclusive alcoholic. Her bodily change reflects her psychological one. She leaves a suicide note that is read out by Abraham at the end of the film which includes a line where Silk laments that there was always a hand to touch her body, yet never one to protect her. She ends her own life “devoid of domestic bliss” (Subramaniam) as the film’s ending robs her of her own choice to live her life on her own terms, by suggesting that all she ever truly desired was the love and acceptance of a man. This ending negates Silk’s sexual agency in the first half of the film by punishing her for a perceived sexual deviancy. Subramaniam concludes:

“This silencing and regulating of her sexuality oversteps the limits of the song [Ishq Sufiyana] and eventually is internalized by the character of Silk herself in the last sequence of the film, which is that of her suicide. While the film is presumably about Silk’s defiance of a society that seeks to tame her and her eventual disillusionment with its hypocrisy, towards the end of the film, her despair is associated less with the society in which she exists and more to her “losing her identity”.”

As a victim of the patriarchy, Silk laments that she was never truly loved despite her many sexual affairs with many men. In suggesting Silk was unable to live with her actions and her inability to find a man to love her, TDP ends up delivering a neo-conservative commentary.

TDP is perhaps, above anything, an interesting contradiction. Despite its reductive, regressive and repressive second-half, the film does contain moments of sheer, erotic pleasure for the viewer. As the camera lingers on Silk’s full hips and seductive lips there is an inherent enjoyment in Silk’s/Balan’s interactions with her body. In performing in a way that the heroine never could,
Silk Smitha functioned as sexual titillation in the films she was in, enabling the hero to enjoy her sexuality before moving on to the more preferable and chaste heroine. As such, her very presence in the film industry made commentary on the often-patriarchal *modus operandi* of Indian cinema (and Bollywood). It is unfortunate that the potentially subversive nature of the film is nullified by its ending. Though TDP’s construction of femininity is fatally flawed, there can be no doubt as to the discourse the film opened up on the place of female sexuality in Bollywood (and in India more generally). Despite its numerous faults the film was a major commercial and critical success, spurring on several women-centric films after it.

Given the real Silk Smitha “thrived in the cinematic space reserved for the licentious, non-upper caste woman as vamp” (Visvanathan), she was a flawed yet radically marginal and subaltern identity. As such, she could have made for a powerful and radical text. However, when the real Silk Smitha was the subject of scorn and derision in the film industry to the point that she committed suicide and the higher-caste actress playing her in a film is able to win a National Film Award for her performance; there is perhaps a greater commentary on feminism being made. TDP’s conflicting layers of meaning are built on Silk Smitha’s story, Vidya Balan’s own journey from struggling actress to star and the rhetoric surrounding the film’s ‘feminist’ merits that all come together to create a contradictory and complicated discourse. I examined *The Dirty Picture* because in light of its visibility and categorisation as a ‘feminist film’ and regardless of its problematic take on female sexuality, it would be remiss to ignore it. Far more than *Paheli* and *Chak De! India*, *The Dirty Picture* sparked in motion a series of conversations about sexism in Bollywood and sexism in India, which makes it important to this chapter.

As I write, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (“Carry the Load”, dir. Sharat Katariya, 2015) has just been released in cinemas. The film, set in small-town, religious Haridwar, takes place in the 1990s and sees a spoiled young man struggle to accept his new “overweight” bride. Despite the synopsis, the film embodies the qualities this chapter has espoused. Though not without flaws, the film presents us with
a spirited and successful heroine who has much more going for her than her underachieving, struggling husband. Though the inevitable happy-ending trope demands the underachieving, petulant husband finally realise that his bride is worth loving despite her weight and intelligence, the way the film deals with sexuality, marriage and body image throughout the film mark it an interesting intervention into representations of the ‘modern female’ in Bollywood. The film represents the subtle shift in the deployment of the romance theme in Bollywood because its approach to romance is refreshing nuanced. In the end, just as the case of Dum Laga Ke Haisha, *The Dirty Picture* in no way dismantled patriarchal Bollywood discourses on sexuality, it did inspire and open up a dialogue that encouraged other filmmakers to undertake women-centric narratives, and that perhaps makes it worthwhile in any case. Throughout this chapter I have conversed with two films that challenge the patriarchy by performing strong and empowered femininities and another film that aspires to. Both *Paheli* and *Chak De! India* construct femininity in a way that gestures to more hopeful future for heroines both on and off the screen. These progressive, modern texts represent a new approach to gender performances for Bollywood and in the following chapter I turn to films that contain subversive female same-sex desire. Just as the multiple heroines studied in this chapter perform a subversive version of womanhood so too is the performance of a queer female identity a radical act.
In keeping with the concept(s) of radical femaleness explored in the previous, this chapter continues the conversation by turning to representations of female same-sex desire. In such a strongly heteronormative and heteropatriarchal form, it figures that instances of female-to-female desire are few. But, by uncovering performances of female queerness this chapter addresses the vast lack on Bollywood screens and in Bollywood scholarship of female same-sex desire. Bollywood academia focuses primarily on performances of male (faux) queerness because these representations are far more prevalent in Bollywood (though even they remain few). From the homosocial bonding films of the classic Bollywood era like Sholay, or the moment in Silsila (‘Affair’, dir. Yash Chopra, 1982) where brothers Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor are showering together and Shashi insists Amitabh pick up the soap bar he has dropped to his ‘comical’ reluctance; there have been fleeting moments of faux male queer-play. This trend re-emerged in the mid 2000s with films such as Dostana and Kal Ho Naa Ho (‘Tomorrow May Never Come’, dir. Nikhil Advani, 2003) that deployed faux-homosexuality and mistakenly presumed gay subplots to serve as comedy amidst the main heterosexual drama. Though these representations are reductive they have garnered scholarly attention unlike the instances of female queerness. In uncovering moments of female queerness, this chapter continues the conversation with those in the margins by finding that performing the Indian Queer female identity is an act ripe with subversive potential.

In Impossible Desires Gopinath theorises best way to read queerness in Bollywood:

“Reading the codes of Bollywood queerly means that we look not so much for characters who are explicitly marked as sexual or gender

28 These films saw moments of male-queerness played out to a point, yet ultimately were subsumed by the narrative that demanded heterosexual romances for the protagonists.
deviants, but rather to those moments emerging at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures that can be transformed into queer imaginings” (103).

Gopinath argues the need to reread Bollywood texts for potential breaks in heteronormativity because of the lack of actual explicitly ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ characters. As a result, this chapter seeks out moments of potential female queerness within the otherwise heteronormative Bollywood film. In uncovering these veiled (and not so veiled) moments of potential female queerness, I return to Devdas to find that the infamous song-dance sequence Dola re Dola contains a glimpse of a probable queer desire between female protagonists Chandramukhi and Paro; and read Utsav, a film starring Rekha to find it contains an equally similar song-dance moment of queer desire also enacted between a tawaif and a wife. As this thesis has repeatedly contended, the song-dance sequence emerges as a space in which alternative desires can be glimpsed, so it becomes an especially relevant tool in uncovering moments of female-to-female desire. Both song-sequences in Utsav and Devdas offer up potentially queer pleasures but Utsav is particularly important because it becomes part of a wider subtext – that of Rekha’s own star text, which is rife with queer potential. Rekha’s performances on and off-screen contribute to a conversation about queerness that spans her repeated roles as a tawaif to her possibly queer relationship with her female secretary. Her text is one filled with such queer-possibility that she is an icon in the gay diasporic community. Her performance in Umrao Jaan has been re-appropriated by queer male fans and re-performed at “gay desi nights” in nightclubs across the world. It becomes uncanny then, to consider these assemblages of queerness that circulate around her and her films, as they transgress the usually heteronormative desire that the Bollywood industry demands both on and off-screen. After considering Rekha, I find Dedh Ishqiya, a recent film that contains by far the most visible and explicit glimpse of female queerness in recent Bollywood history. Ultimately, this chapter finds moments of transgressive female desire in popular Bollywood films and by bringing female queerness into the frame, invests new (queer) meaning in the Bollywood text.
Section 377
Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code considers sex with a person of the same gender punishable by law (with the section outlaying incarceration periods of up to ten years or a fine as suitable admonishment). Enacted in 1860 by the British colonial regime with the express view of punishing “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”, the section considers “unnatural offences” alongside carnal intercourse with any man, woman or animal “against the course of nature”. On July 2, 2009 the Delhi High Court held that the section was unconstitutional (with the specific reference to consenting adults) but the Supreme Court overturned the ruling in early December 2013, deferring to Indian legislators for further research. Then, on February 2 2016, the Court agreed to reconsider that judgement, deferring to a five-member constitutional bench who would consider the issue. The LGBTI community in India is large and undocumented; as a result of the taboo (stemming in part from the legality), but the Supreme Court figures submitted in 2012 place it at 2.5 million (this is very much a conservative estimate however). The swell of gay and lesbian events and engagement is steadily emerging from the shadows across India. But for the purposes of this thesis, I will now consider the Queer field of studies in India, and how that translates onscreen, as opposed to the very real and very fascinating developments for LGBTI people in India.

Queer in the Indian Context
The academic theories of Queer and Marginality are allies as both are fundamentally deconstructive by nature. Though the Queer field remains “in the process of being written” (Cossman 21), it lends itself to studies of marginality because in attempting to “denaturalise the assumed connections between sex, gender and desire” (19), it denies rigid categorisations such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘transgender’ or ‘bisexual’. In resisting these heterogeneous and heteronormative concept(s) of sexuality, Queer illuminates performances of otherness. Queer studies performances of gender, sexuality and desire “that refuses the grid of sexual/non-sexual divisions in conceiving pleasures” (Dasgupta 1). Parented by postmodernism and poststructuralism, Queer rejects traditional identity politics because it resists the very foundations that
constitute ‘identity’. In being loaded with the power to unsettle traditional theories of the sexuality/gender/desire inter-relationship, Queer theory ultimately works to destabilise heteropatriarchal models of thinking, which contextualises its place in study of marginality in Bollywood. A Queer enquiry enables a critique of the ideological discourses that Bollywood perpetuates, which is why this section undertakes queer (re)readings of three films to find radical ruptures containing alternative desires. Dasgupta contends that a Queer reading “is not one that attempts to look at things from a "different" angle, but rather, is one that seeks to demolish those very angles that perpetuate heteropatriarchal visions” (1). Thus, this chapter draws on Queer theory as a means of seeing alternative desires in hetero-narratives (excepting Dedh Ishqiya) and by doing so locates itself squarely in the margins. Where possible I have avoided terms such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “homosexual” and “bisexual”, instead choosing ‘Queer’ as a signifier. These terms are loaded with preconceived meanings that reach far beyond a thesis, but Queer is useful to a study such as this because by nature, it encourages destabilisations. Whilst seeking to disassociate myself from Orientalising discourses, I remain aware that modern Queer theory does stem in great part from the western academy. Without eminent theorists such as Judith Butler, Annmarie Jagose and Eve Sedgewick, Queer studies and indeed this study would be remarkably lesser, but this chapter moves into a fluid space that considers Queer in a specifically Indic context.

Some critics argue that because Queer studies is a Western construct born of Western schools of thought and philosophy it excludes the third-world. As a result, I am mindful of using the theory and cognizant that one must decolonise queerness via a destabilising of Western queer hegemony. In an Intersections essay Ara Wilson proposes the framework used in global Queer analyses tends to be informed by capitalism or by “US-inflected Western modes of sexuality” and emphasises the perceived homophobia of the Third World. In this sense Wilson argues that such studies take on the stance of a saviour, by calling on the West to “liberate” the third world queer. She continues:
Discussions about non-normative sexuality in the global south conflate Western, modern, and globalization. Even when they are critical of Western dominance in the world, as is the case with nationalists and many sexual rights advocates, their interpretation recapitulates Western hegemony, by locating the origin and agency of modern queer life squarely in the West.

Foucaultian and Butlerian ideas of the body and the performance of gender play a large role in conceptualising Queer, but as Wilson suggests, South Asian gender studies has a double-task because it must first deconstruct Eurocentric notions of Queerness and then the heteropatriarchal structures governing most world cultures. India’s rich gender history lends itself to queering, as Dr Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai demonstrate, by painstakingly tracking an “Indian queer history” by rereading ancient historical texts, including Hindu shashtras and Urdu poems to identify queer eroticism in pre-colonial India. Other Indian queer studies examine the numerous references to same-sex sexuality in the *Kama Sutra*, the homoeroticism of tantric rituals and the male-to-male closeness of some Islamic tradition. This useful, if ethnographic line of thinking does however, tend to construct a static notion of Indian sexuality that places it in a largely historical category. Alongside Gopinath, scholars such as Gita Thadani and Suparna Bhaskaran have each contributed to the modern corpus of South Asian Queer theory (along with many others) that work toward encapsulating the vast range of diverse alternative sexualities informed by class, caste, gender, religion and location across India. Further to this, the conflicting legacy of Colonialism and Western models of sexuality has played a role in impacting an already complicated Indian queerness. Despite such a rich history of queer-play, modern India’s relationship to queerness, homosexuality and gayness has been shaky. After all, the Indian Penal Code still retains an archaic law from 1861 that imposes a ten-year jail sentence for “carnal intercourse against the order of nature with a man, woman or animal” (Harris). After much public lobbying, in 2009 the law was ruled unconstitutional by the Delhi High Court in a landmark decision but in 2013, via a technicality was overturned by the Supreme Court. In their judgement, the Supreme Court said only Parliament possessed the power to alter such a law, and recriminalised homosexuality in the process.
Queerness Onscreen

At the 2012 FilmFare Awards stars and hosts Shahrukh Khan and Ranbir Kapoor donned women’s outfits as a salute the heroines in the industry. Dressed in pink lehengha’s with wigs, heavy make-up and stuffed blouses, the men performed to the women’s hit item-numbers by gyrating provocatively alongside actors Madhuri Dixit, Rekha, Vidya Balan, Kareena and Karishma Kapoor who were pulled up onstage from the audience. Performing the seductive Dixit-hit Dhak Dhak, the men shimmied and adjusted their faux-cleavage and as Khan and Kapoor flirted with each other, the crowd went wild. In keeping with India’s pre-colonial history, the Bollywood form lends itself to queer enquiries because it is one that contains a history of performances and themes loaded with queer potential. From the cultural tradition of the hijra; the immense popularity and frequency of the male cross-dressing sequence in Bollywood (Bachchan’s turn is most famous) (and the female-cross dressing sequence a-la Madhuri Dixit’s performance as Salman Khan in Hum Apke Hain Koun?); the rise of the homosocial action films, as seen in recent blockbuster Dabangg where hero Salman Khan and villain Sonu Sood tear off each other’s shirts to reveal oily muscled bodies and perform a homoerotic fight sequence; the classic dosti between friends in buddy films like Sholay; the mistakenly-presumed-gay play in films like Dostana and Kal Ho Naa Ho; and old Parsi theatre traditions where men regularly performed as women due to a lack of female performers; there is a long and rich tradition of gender impersonation, play and performativity in Bollywood that has been potentially queer since its beginnings. Whilst all gender impersonation in Bollywood is not necessarily queer, Niladri R. Chatterjee contends:

“Female impersonation underlines the performativity of gender by raising the pitch of the performance, rendering it hyper. By this same process it underlines the formative and therefore fictive nature of gender per se.”

In this sense, gender impersonations lend themselves to queer readings because they are able to deconstruct gender archetypes. But it still stands that
just as in performances of queerness, the vast, vast majority of gender impersonation is restricted to the male performing as female.

Bollywood has for the most-part avoided queer representation altogether. In recent years a modest number of films in the parallel streams of Hindi cinema have focused sensitively on queer characters and/or themes. *Tamanna (‘Desire’)*, (dir. Mahesh Bhatt, 1997) was considered Bollywood’s first significant transgender film; *My Brother...Nikhil* (dir. Onir, 2005) promoted with AIDS awareness via a homosexual character; *I Am* (dir. Onir, 2010) featured a story about gay rights; *68 Pages* (dir. Sridhar Rangayan, 2007) focused on a transsexual, a gay couple and a sex-worker; *Page 3* (dir. Madhur Bhandarkar, 2005) had a woman find out her boyfriend was gay; and, of course, *Fire* (dir. Deepa Mehta, 1996) saw two sister-in-laws develop a sexual/emotional relationship with each other. Controversial and landmark, *Fire* retains an iconic place in terms of queer representations in Indian Cinema. Of this small list though, each film belongs more to the parallel Hindi Cinema stream, meaning that Bollywood proper’s negotiations with queerness are exceptionally slight. *Fire* is a diasporic film, made by Mehta who resides abroad and was funded by Canadian film organisations. In terms of commercial Bollywood cinema, *Dostana* saw another gay-play in the vein of *Kal Ho Naa Ho* where two men pretend to be gay in order to win a girl. Though the faux-homosexuality track was hardly ground-breaking, it did briefly open up queer discourses in Bollywood particularly because in *Dostana* the mother easily comes to terms with her sons (perceived) homosexuality, even performing a Hindu ritual for his (faux) beau. Though the queerness was inauthentic, her sincere acceptance of her son was not. The film *Bombay Talkies* (dir. Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, Karan Johar, 2013) recently featured an anthology of four films by creative Bollywood directors Kashyap, Akhtar, Banerjee and stalwart Johar. The short films were a cinematic contribution to the nationwide celebration of 100 years of Indian cinema and saw Johar create a film in which

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29 In 1998, activist members of the Shiv Sena (a Right-wing Hindu organisation) stormed cinema screenings of *Fire*. The activists opposed the film vehemently, arguing that it sought to corrupt Indian values and staged vocal protests, even burning effigies of director Mehta in the streets.
an ‘out’ young gay man has a dalliance with a married man. The film featured a first for Bollywood with an onscreen kiss between the two male protagonists played by Randeep Hooda and Saqib Saleem. Though there has been progress in the last decade when it comes to queer representations, it is clearly evident that these few examples are still vastly weighted in favour of male homosexual representations.

Subash Chandra suggests that the concept of female-to-female desire is so silenced in India that there is “virtually no lesbian theorising. The word 'lesbian' is not used in public space, and there is hardly any discussion of lesbianism in any public forum”. If the issue is so silenced in the public sphere, it follows that it would be avoided almost entirely by Bollywood. Bollywood representations of female queerness are largely limited; the 1983 films Mandi (‘Bazaar’, dir. Shyam Benegal) and Razia Sultan (‘Queen Razia’, dir. Kamal Amrohi) both hinted at lesbian coupling, as did Subhah/Umbartha (‘Dawn/ Threshold’, dir. Jabbar Patel, 1981) before them. But modern, commercial Bollywood representations of female queerness are limited to dismal and dire films such as Girlfriend (2004, dir. Karan Razdan), with its outlandish lesbian-turned-murderer plot which imagined ‘lesbianism’ as a mental illness in need of treating, and No Men Allowed (2006, dir. Srey Srivastava) which was little more than a gratuitous and thinly-veiled male fantasy fulfilment. So while films such as Bombay Talkies represent progress when it comes to Bollywood’s engagement with queer-narratives, the focus still remains mostly male. Gopinath suggests that Bollywood films are “saturated” with imagery of classic female-bonding spaces – including, “brothels, women’s prisons, girls’ schools, the middle-class home, and the zenana” (Impossible Desires 103) – and it is these spaces that permit “numerous possibilities for female friendship to slip into queer desire” (103). These factors make the lack of female queer theorising in Bollywood all the more confounding. As Mandi, Razia Sultan and Subhah have been well covered because they remain the only Bollywood examples of potential queerness I
have deliberately sought out moments and films that have not been discussed\(^{30}\).

Given the absence of female queerness in Bollywood, most moments to be discussed require a *rereading* for potential queerness. It is by necessity then, that this study rereads *Devdas* and *Utsav* for queerness. In dealing with these moments of *potential* queer desire, this chapter finds films, actors and moments that are for the most part, not explicitly coded ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, but rather permit the possibility of queer female desire. These veiled moments, Gopinath argues, are not necessarily superior to categorical representations but they do permit a glimpse into a location “where hyper-gender conformity encodes female homoeroticism” because:

“...they gesture to a model of what we can term a queer South Asian femininity, where gender and conformity and indeed hyper-femininity do not necessarily imply heterosexuality” (*Queering Bollywood* 289).

This chapter finds moments in *Utsav* and *Devdas* of female-to-female desire enacted within the usually heteronormative space of the marital home. In using such a rigidly heterosexual backdrop that is the site of the traditional, heterosexual unit, these queer moments become all the more subversive. These moments of potential and veiled queerness also provide countenance to the (relatively) explicit and visible representation of female queerness in *Dedh Ishqiya*.

Perhaps partly as a response to the prevalence of The West in Queer theory, Indian queer studies tend to focus on transnational queer desire. Diasporic studies and Queer studies have become inextricably linked, with theorists examining the hybridity of alternative sexual identities by locating the queer subject in transnational locations, challenging the “import-export image of southern queer identities as mimicry of the West” (Wilson). In theorising the queer desires of the outsider *inside* The West, diasporic queer studies imagine the diaspora and queerness as complementary states – both possessing the

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\(^{30}\) I do discuss *Utsav*, which has been examined by Gopinath in *Impossible Desires*, because it contains a queer performance by Rekha who is the subject of a section of this chapter.
ability to unsettle Western hegemony and heteronormativity. By default however, such a line of thinking instantly exiles the homeland queer’s experience in favour of a transnational one. Gopinath’s seminal works on the subject imagine that Bollywood permits the queer diasporic viewer an opportunity to “reimagine and reterritorialise the “homeland” by making it the locus of queer desire and pleasure” (Queering Bollywood 284). Gopinath’s works read queerness in diasporic-Bollywood-crossover texts (in films by Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Hanif Kureishi) thereby priviledging the queer diasporic spectator. Similarly, Ajay Gehlawat reads the faux-homosexuality in the NRI films, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Dostana* thusly:

“While Bollywood has explicitly signalled that ‘it’s okay to be gay’ (even if you actually are not), one could argue that such acceptance comes with a trade-off (no, they did not actually kiss; no, they are not actually gay) and that equally if not more homoerotic instances of male bonding were already on display even before they became so (openly) acceptable” (Reframing Bollywood 111).

Gehlawat draws attention to the way in which these faux-homosexuality plots are resolved by an inevitable heterosexual ending and highlights the limitations of such representation. In films like *Dostana* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* the characters are hastily paired off in heterosexual couples at the end. But both these films are set abroad, one in New York and the other Miami, which still seems to suggest that Bollywood remains uncomfortable with setting queerness in India (with the exception of *Dedh Ishqiya*, which this thesis will come to). Rajinder Dudrah interestingly reads gay Indian nightclub events in the United Kingdom and the ways in which they appropriate Bollywood texts to recreate queer video clips; and Thomas Waugh’s theories on queerness in Bollywood are male-focused as he argues the dominance of the male in daily Indian life makes a study of male queerness “appropriate both intellectually and strategically” (202). Similarly, scholars such as Rao, Kavi and Desai each focus on male performances of queerness, meaning Gopinath is one of the only to theorise female same-sex desire. In this section I undertake a similar imagining to these theorists but deliberately privilege the homeland queer viewer with the opportunity to re-queer Bollywood texts. Born of the scholarship that privileges
diasporic queerness yet neglects the homeland queer audience, I seek out the spaces where Bollywood permits the homeland queer audience a place to situate their desires. Further, by seeking moments of female queerness in homeland narratives, this study finds two of the most marginalised identities in Bollywood (women and the queer-viewer).

The Third Space: *Utsav and Devdas*

*Utsav* is based on a sixth-century Sanskrit play and generically the film falls somewhere between the boundary lines of Bollywood and parallel Hindi cinema. Rekha plays fourth-century courtesan Vasantsena, who falls in love with the married Brahmin merchant Charudutt (Shekhar Suman). Late one evening she takes refuge in his home and the pair embarks on a sexual and emotional affair. But where the film becomes transgressive is in its intimate portrayal of the unusual and blossoming friendship between Charudutt’s wife, Aditi (Anuradha Patel), and Vasantsena. The song sequence, *Man Kyun Bekha* (‘Why the Mind Strayed’) permits the women a subversive space in which to perform their transgressive desires and after reading this slippage, I find Rekha’s own queer performances both on and off the screen.

Midway through *Utsav*, under the pretext of Aditi having left to visit her Father’s place in another village, Vasantsena and Charudutt spend the night together at his house and awake eagerly to the Basanti Festival. Charudutt excitedly insists the pair spend the day together but Vasantsena is reluctant, explaining that as a courtesan of such notoriety, she is expected to join the celebration on the streets with the rest of her kotha. Charudutt refuses to listen and rushes off to buy a cart to conceal Vasantsena out of the city in so the lovers can spend the day in the woods. As a content Vasantsena lies wrapped in a sheet Charudutt’s wife Aditi walks into the room. Vasantsena gasps, attempting to cover herself, and asks, “*Who are you? Charudutt’s maid?*” to which Aditi calmly replies, “*No, I’m his wife*”. Vasantsena shrieks and Aditi explains she has some sandalwood paste for Vasantsena’s bath, telling her it was all she had worthy of the great courtesan. Aditi says she returned early because she thought it was her only chance to meet the “*famous Vasantsena*”. 
She says, “once I was away, I knew you would come!” at which point both women dissolve into laughter.

The song (broken into two parts) begins with a mid-shot of Vasantsena seated on a chair in the living area. Bejewelled in her usual lavish accoutrements with Aditi standing behind her fixing her hairpins, Vasantsena and Aditi take turns in singing the lyrics to each other when Aditi and Charudutt’s son Rohit interrupts them. The small boy asks if he is allowed to go outside and play before Aditi pushes him towards Vasantsena telling him to greet her. She says to Rohit, “she is your mother too”, but Rohit is reluctant, softly asking Aditi why Vasantsena wears so much gold. A dejected Vasantsena slumps in her chair as Aditi kneels at her feet, gently explaining that Rohit has never seen his own mother wear so much gold. Vasantsena breaks into an excited smile and exclaims, “Never? So then you must put these on for a while!” The scene then moves inside Aditi and Charudutt’s bedroom lit only by a small diya. In a reversal of the scene prior, Aditi now sits as Vasantsena stands behind her fixing her hair. Now adorned in the gold jewellery, Aditi gazes upon her reflection in the hand mirror with sheer delight as Vasantsena caresses her shoulder and places more jewellery around Aditi’s neck. Vasantsena kisses Aditi on the cheek as she sings to her, resting her face momentarily on Aditi’s shoulder as she applies sindoor to Aditi’s hairline. Rohit knocks at the door, calling out for his mother and a seemingly concerned Aditi asks Vasantsena to answer the door. Vasantsena tends to the child as the housemaid tells her Rohit is upset because the other children won’t play with him on account of his toy cart being made of clay and theirs of gold. Vasantsena takes the jewellery in her hand and decorates the cart and says to Rohit, “there, aren’t I like your mother now?” to which he nods and embraces her. The women move outside, now dressed alike in cotton floral saris, gardening and smiling at each other. The music fades as Vasantsena asks Aditi:

Vasantsena: “Why don’t you resent me?”
Aditi: “There are several reasons. Firstly, rich men should have courtesans. A courtesan like you makes me feel rich”
Vasantsena: “and, what else?”
Aditi: giggling, “and...nothing”
Vasantsena: “tell me!”
Aditi: “Well, we have been married seven years and he was alright, nothing exciting. It was getting quite boring. But after he spent that night with you, he was like, like.”

As Aditi becomes increasingly more breathless, her excitement reaches a crescendo as drums erupt nearby and we see her mouth a word, unable to discern it. She then yells over the drums, “Like that! Like Boom!” and the women giggle as the scene fades out.

Chakravarty argues that the moment forms the fulfilment of an ultimate male fantasy – a naturalising of adultery by having the wife and mistress accept each other. She argues:

“The female bonding shown between the good, understanding wife and the courtesan plays out the ultimate male fantasy: the freedom of a man to move without guilt between a nurturing wife and a glamorous mistress” (qtd in Pauwels 122).

Indeed, Aditi has little qualms about her husband’s relationship with Vasantsena and implies she is pleased with her husband’s improved libido. But such a reading misses the subtle, “more nuanced eroticism between the two women”, particularly as:

“The act of making oneself desirable, of dressing and undressing, donning and discarding saris and jewelry in particular, is a sexually loaded trope in popular Indian cinema, having connotations of wedding nights and signifying a prelude to heterosexual sex” (Gopinath Queering Bollywood 288).

The sexually loaded tropes Gopinath imagines posit the scene as inherently more homoerotic than Chakravarty’s reading permits. Earlier in the film, when Vasantsena and Charudutt first make love, there is an extended erotic moment when Vasantsena slowly removes her jewellery piece by piece. In this scene we see the moment re-performed by Vasantsena and Aditi, evoking that same eroticism. Utsav also avoids the typical Bollywood love triangle formation in that it eliminates Charudutt from the women’s growing friendship. Charudutt remains “sidelined while the two women play erotically together” (Gopinath Impossible Desires 105). The moment of play enables both women to play at
being the other – the good wife turns courtesan and the courtesan transforms into wife/mother. Both women perform a version of “hyperbolic femininity” (Impossible Desires 105) as their transformations are so exaggerated that their act of dressing up becomes homosocial. That is, their performance “encodes female same-sex eroticism within sites of extreme heteronormativity” (Impossible Desires 105). The camera confirms the transgression by lingering on the handle of the bedroom door as Vasantsena closes it. She makes sure the door is closed in evidence of her recognition that such a relationship must be hidden. When her son knocks at the door she is visibly concerned and as the camera frames the small boy from the sunny outside into the small, dimly lit room, there is deliberately stark contrast between a public/outside and a private/indoor world. Aditi is astutely aware that she must keep her transformation and her transgressive desires hidden from view. Gopinath contends that the scene allows for a reading of a desire that, “does not fit solidly into “lesbian” or “heterosexual”, but rather opens up a third space where both hetero- and homoerotic relations coexist simultaneously” (Impossible Desires 105).

Just as Utsav does, Devdas also contains a song-dance sequence that visualises a transgressive female-to-female desire. The sequence, Dola re Dola, possesses a queer potential that once again occurs under the pretext of a wife and courtesan bonding over their mutual love for the same man. It too sees both women enacting a potentially transgressive female desire via their unconventional friendship. In yet another similarity, both sequences occur within the heteronormative site of the marital home and occur under the context of religious festivals. The Dola re Dola number remains exceptionally popular with Bollywood fans the world-over and is regularly performed at celebrations to this day. Lauded for its intricate choreography, the sequence is easily one of the most popular Bollywood dance numbers of all time and won choreographer Saroj Khan numerous industry awards. The dance, a combination of Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Bollywood steps, is a visual spectacular. This, when coupled with the performances of two of the leading actresses of the time, Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit, makes the sequence an
easy-stand out as it is one of the very few numbers where two women dance in a public setting together. In keeping with Bhansali’s aesthetic, the sequence begins in an ornate sitting room in Paro’s marital home. After having visited Chandramukhi and invited her to celebrate the occasion with her, Paro stages a performance for her party guests.

The sequence begins with a chorus of women performing *ululation* and a close-up of thousands of red diya lamps before a shot of the Goddess Durga herself. As the vocal strains begin Paro emerges in a cloud of red powder, urging a reluctant Chandramukhi onto the dance floor by gently pulling her wrist.

Chandramukhi relents, and steps into the centre of the dance floor as the pair begins to dance. Both women appear mirror images of the other – both dressed in glittery white saris with red borders, adorned in heavy gold jewellery and both styled with identical hairstyles, make-up and both with vermillion stained fingertips. The lyrics of the song express both women’s love for Devdas: as Paro sings, “*he is the bindi on my forehead*, Chandramukhi replies, “*he is the sleep of my eyelashes*”. The call and response song continues in much the same way until the climax of the sequence when, circled by dancers who lay upon the floor, Chandramukhi sings to Paro, “*You have given me the world, you gave me so much happiness*”, as Chandramukhi dances away from Paro and then slowly spins back toward her. Once standing next to Paro again, she takes Paro’s arms and spins her around playfully. Paro places her hand on Chandramukhi’s shoulder and the pair dances in alternating turns, until Chandramukhi extends her right arm outwards and Paro takes her hand in hers. The mid-shot, framed from the side, shows both women’s bodies in profile as Paro then runs her hand through Chandramukhi’s hairline (mimicking the act of applying wedding *sindoor*) and sings to her “*yes, marry him*” and as she reaches the word *sindoor*, she takes her own hand and runs it through her hairline (just as Chandramukhi places her hand on Paro’s shoulder this time) and circles behind her in a reversal of the position previous. She then sings as she runs her fingertips down Paro’s upper arm and when her hand reaches Paro’s wrist she takes her hand and holds it. The camera zooms in on Paro’s face, her eyes welling with tears, and then cuts to Chandramukhi dancing out of the frame, until she returns.
again, holding Paro by the shoulders. The scene draws to a close as a sea of dancers encircle the two women.

The physical similarity between the pair is unmistakable and it is one that Sangita Shresthova argues collapses the social customs preventing a courtesan and a wife from dancing in-public, much less being friends. In this sense, the costuming acts as a leveller, bringing wife and courtesan together on the same level (just as it did in *Utsav*). Bhansali’s decision to include the sequence, which is not in any other *Devdas* adaptations is testament to the transgressive nature of the number, as the female protagonists are able to perform in a space that would have otherwise been unavailable to them in their reel (and real) worlds. Using Madhava Prasad’s initial formulations, Shresthova suggests the song-dance sequence performs “the important function of creating a temporary permissive, even transgressive, expressive realm” (251). This is a notion that has echoed throughout this thesis, and in acting as a third space, *Dola re Dola* enables the women to enact their transgressive desires via dance. Sangita Gopal explains further:

“From erotic adversaries Paro and Chandramukhi become devotees of the Goddess Durga, and the pleasure the women take in dancing together contributes to the scene’s visual charge. That this spectacular glimpse of a female space undisturbed by a hetero-patriarchal gaze happens in the diegetic context of a religious festivals speaks to the paradox of the performance sequence in Bollywood cinema, which is simultaneously a site of commodity pleasure and political critique” (179).

The potent erotic interplay between the women and the immense pleasure they gain from their performance is evident throughout the sequence. But unlike in *Utsav* where this pleasure occurs in the private space of the bedroom, Chandramukhi and Paro’s pleasure is performed publically for an audience (though still within the space of the home). Paradoxically, despite this, (as the camera rarely lingers on the audience) the public performance *feels* inherently private. The camera routinely moves in for close-ups on their hands when the women touch each other, or close-ups on their eye-lines when they look at each other and thus, the focus remains so tightly on the women that the onscreen
audience is almost eliminated from the performance. However, the performance is not entirely undisturbed by a hetero-patriarchal gaze, as Gopal argues. The camera makes brief, sporadic return throughout the number to the ominous Kalibabu (who is a frequenter of Chandramukhi’s kotha unbeknownst to Paro) who appears simultaneously gripped by both a perverse pleasure and rage at the women’s performance. Given that he possesses the ability to reveal Chandramukhi’s real identity at any moment, Gopal concedes that, “his presence imbues the entire performance with a temporal fragility” (Gopal 255). Perhaps then, the sequence is not entirely undisturbed by a heteronormative patriarchal gaze, but rather in considering the oppressive patriarchal gaze of Kalibabu, it becomes all the more transgressive. The sequence blatantly exhibits “libidinal energies proscribed by the heteronormative patriarchy” (Gopal 255) in clear view of the patriarchy (Kalibabu).

Kaur and Sinha propose that the hybridity of the Bollywood film “has led to the proliferation and fragmentation of its fantasy space, as its narrative and spectacle beget diverse fantasies for diasporic communities and others” (15). Dola re Dola enacts a fantasy for the numerous audiences by offering up numerous pleasures. These pleasures include watching two popular Bollywood stars dancing an intricate and impressive choreography; and witnessing the enjoyment of a growing friendship between two characters that social decorum would otherwise never permit. In emphasising the joy and closeness of the women, the sequence is critical of the (patriarchal) social structures that separate Paro and Chandramukhi. But just as in Utsav, the potential female desire between the pair is expressed through lingering touches and glances and through suggestion. Ultimately, neither Utsav not Devdas are ‘queer texts’, nor do they explicitly represent queer, or “lesbian” desires; but they do however, lend themselves to be reread as containing moments of queer potential. These fleeting moments represent a major transgression in the often heteronormative and heteropatriarchal Bollywood form. These performances of subversion and marginality within the song-dance sequence contribute to a discussion on female-to-female desire in popular, mainstream Bollywood narratives that has
otherwise been muted. The moment(s) of homoeroticism in *Utsav* also forms part of a wider queer subtext – one that circulates around the figure of Rekha.

**The Reclusive (Queer) Goddess of Hindi Cinema: Rekha**

In *Temples of Desire*, Vijay Mishra applies Dyer’s and Ellis’ models for reading classic Hollywood star-texts to Bollywood, by examining Amitabh Bachchan’s inimitable place in the industry. Using the model, Mishra argues that the subtext of the Bollywood star intersects the Bollywood narrative in interesting ways and contributes to a wider conversation on the actor’s roles and the role of an actor. Rekha, an actor of the same era as Bachchan, has had a career that has at times mimicked and intersected her film roles to varying and coincidental degrees. These meta-textual intersections lend themselves to making queer readings of both her films and her off-screen appearances. Born Banurekha Ganesan in 1954 in Chennai to unmarried parents, Rekha’s life seemed predestined to be unconventional. Her father refused to acknowledge his paternity throughout her childhood and as a result her family struggled financially. Pushed into an acting career as a thirteen year old, mother and daughter moved from Chennai to Bombay where Rekha began her acting career. Once she learnt Hindi, she made her Bollywood film debut in the 1970 film *Sawan Bhadon* (‘5th and 6th Month’, dir. Mohan Segal) but critics blasted the young actor for being too dark, too plump, poorly groomed and for having a heavily accented style of speaking Hindi. But by 1976, when she appeared in *Do Anjaane* (‘Two Strangers’, dir. Dulal Guha) opposite Amitabh Bachchan, Rekha had lost weight, perfected her Hindi and transformed into a classic movie star. This transformation, Anjali Ram argues, “invokes the proverbial “ugly duckling” scenario” (19), as her transformation to ravishing and beautiful film star means that her star-text is engendered with an “accessibility and potentiality” (Ram 44) to the female audience. Ram continues, suggesting that this appeal is because her transformation evokes the tropes of the ‘before and after’ beauty advertisement (44). This notion was further enhanced by Rekha’s 1983 book

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31 Both Richard Dyer and John Ellis study Hollywood stars from the golden era’s of 1950s and 1960s in order to create parallel texts that consists of the star’s roles, persona, private and public lives, media coverage and so on, and the subsequent intersection of each of these elements on and offscreen by using semiotic analysis.
release, *Rekha’s Mind and Body Temple*, which enabled women to follow her yoga and diet principles, or the ‘Rekha regime’. Meanwhile, her performances off-screen were increasingly becoming as carefully choreographed as her performances onscreen. Of her appearance, Ram explains:

“She is carefully coded with appropriate signs such as thick, lustrous, flowing black hair, full red lips, sultry eyes and rich adornments to signify her location within the fantasy world of popular cinema” (20).

Rekha’s performance of femininity is at times hyperbolic – her appearance was vastly at odds with other ‘earthier’ Bollywood female stars of the 1970s and 80s and she was widely regarded in the media as a mysterious femme fatale and as a sex symbol. This engendered her star-text with a conflicting blend of unattainable beauty yet relatable accessibility.

Neepa Majumdar’s *Wanted: Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom In India, 1930s -1950s* expands Dyer and Ellis’ methodologies and argues that early female Indian stars (namely Fearless Nadia and Nargis) were constituted by classic Hollywood notions of stardom, yet contained by ‘traditional’ Indian cultural gender expectations. Interestingly, Majumdar considers the divergent careers of sister-singers Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle. She argues that just as with female stars, the women were split according to the “main conventional feminine dichotomy of virgin and vamp” (190). While Mangeshkar, with her classically high ‘feminine’ voice was considered pure of voice and moral character; Asha, with her lower, more modern voice was used for disco and cabaret numbers, therefore constituting her seductive and modern. It is interesting then, to consider how Rekha moved from virgin to vamp in a relatively short space of time. Rekha’s fractured family life, poor childhood and South Indian heritage placed her at instantly odds with other actors who hailed from Bollywood dynasties32, seemingly born with a claim to Bollywood. As a result of this, even at the dizzying heights of her successful career, Rekha remained an outsider of sorts. She starred in numerous hit films including *Do

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32 A hugely nepotistic industry, many of the most famous Bollywood actors hail from acting dynasties like the Kapoor (including actors Prithviraj Kapoor, Raj Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor, Rishi Kapoor, Ranbir Kapoor, Kareena Kapoor and Karishma Kapoor) family.
Anjaane, which was the first to pair her opposite Amitabh Bachchan. The Bachchan/Rekha pairing would prove so successful that they would star opposite each other a further nine times in blockbuster films such as Silsila and Muqaddar Ka Sikander. In 1981 Rekha’s appearance as Umrao Jaan won her the National Award for Best Actress. But throughout this period of success there remained constant media speculation about the nature of her relationship with Bachchan. The gossip regarding their chemistry onscreen and close relationship off it, culminated in the release of Silsila. Upon release, Silsila, Yash Chopra’s self-proclaimed favourite film garnered much media and industry attention for both its subject matter and its casting. In casting Bachchan and his wife Jaya as onscreen husband and wife and Rekha, his alleged mistress as his onscreen mistress, Chopra pulled off a controversial casting coup. As a result, the reel and the real subtexts consistently clash in the film, as Sumita Chakravarty argues:

“One might add that this continuity of recognition and response hinges on the notion of authenticity on how filmic transformations metonymically evoke the actor’s ‘real’ personality and conduct. Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha’s off-screen romance, for instance, affects our reading of their on-screen performance, creating textual gaps or openings through extra-textual awareness” (201).

These gaps also allow the audience to indulge their voyeurism, as the Rekha-Amitabh scandal dominated media and industry gossip during the early 1980s (and is still referenced in media stories today). In an interview with Filmfare magazine in 1984, Rekha addressed the speculation regarding Bachchan’s denial of his relationship with her:

“Why should he have not done it? He did it to protect his image, his family, his children. I think it’s beautiful. I don’t care what the public thinks of it. Why should the public know of my love for him or his love for me? I love him and he loves me – that’s it! If he’d reacted that way towards me in private, I would have been disappointed…Mr Bachchan is old-fashioned. He still doesn’t want to hurt his wife” (FilmFare 13).

Rekha’s comments are deliberately sensational and are indicative of the way she managed her career during the late 1970s and 1980s. Despite being poorly received, upon release, Silsila was still seen by many who were eager to watch
the Rekha/Amitabh/Rekha love triangle come alive and went on to become a
cult hit in the years since its release. The episode solidified Rekha’s stardom as
seductive, vampish, dangerous and non-normative. Her rejection of the good
and pure role of the star placed her at odds with those around her (Neetu
Singh, for instance) and her roles began to reflect the shift.

There is a strong sense in the media that Rekha has been *unlucky* in love. *Silsila*
and the rumours regarding the supposed Rekha and Bachchan affair
contributed to the film’s success but also became so unrelenting that they
remain widely regarded as fact by the industry today. Her alleged affair with the
biggest Bollywood superstar of the time (and all time) and her personal
appearance at that time rendered Rekha’s star-text as significantly erotic. The
mysterious eroticism is an image she herself at times contributed to,
particularly when she appeared at a Bollywood event in the late 1970s wearing
sindoor in her hair (which she still does sometimes). Then in 1982, when she
arrived at Neetu and Rishi Kapoor’s wedding wearing mangalsutra she caused a
media frenzy with the press speculating that she and Bachchan had a
clandestine marriage. Soon thereafter, Bachchan and Rekha were never seen
onscreen (or off) ever again. Much to the media’s delight, the pair famously
evades each other at public outings. Last year when Rekha was admitted to the
Rajya Sabha (where Jaya Bachchan also sits) media coverage showed repeated
shots of Jaya’s subdued expression as Rekha was taking her oath. But in January
of 2014, at the Screen Awards, for the first time since the 1970s Jaya, Amitabh
and Rekha all greeted each other cordially and the event was met with a flurry
of photographs and headlines. The Bachchan episode aside though, Rekha’s
love life remained shrouded in mystery – in 1990 she married industrialist
Mukesh Aggarwal and just a few months later he tragically committed suicide
(vicious media reports suggested he hung himself with her dupatta). But
between Aggarwal’s suicide, another supposed secret marriage to actor Vinod
Mehra, an alleged relationship with the married Shatrugan Sinha and the never-
ending Bachchan affair; Rekha’s story became engendered with the notion that
‘true love’ had evaded her all her life, an idea I suggest that was furthered by
her countless roles onscreen as the tragic tawaif.
In the later years of her career, Rekha’s regular appearances on the red carpet with her long-time hairdresser-turned-secretary of twenty-years Farzana developed into persistent industry rumours that Rekha was “bisexual”. Media reports focused on Farzana’s personal appearance – she has short hair, wears little make-up or jewellery and favours boxy suits in grey or black – arguing that she resembled a “lesbian”. A popular Bollywood gossip website reviews an unauthorised biography by Mohan Deep on Rekha:

“The reclusive sex goddess of Hindi cinema, Rekha, has always stayed away from journalists but she can't stop somebody writing her “unauthorized” biography...he book reveals the fact Rekha was allegedly physically abused by her longtime beau super star Amitabh Bachchan and husband, the late Mukesh Aggarwal. There is another fact, which may shock fans of this sex-goddess, that she is allegedly a bisexual and has had a relationship with her long time secretary Farzana”.

Rekha herself has been famously reticent and ambiguous in defining her relationship with Farzana in official interviews. The pair has been living together for years now and when asked in an interview with The Times of India about the nature of their relationship, Rekha replied:

“What are labels? What do they mean? Can friendship be defined? Can relationships be contained in empty words? If anybody interprets this relationship any other way than it really is – it’s their problem, not mine.”

Ultimately through much of her own doing, Rekha’s complex star-text reads as mysterious, sensual, sexually enticing, enigmatic, elusive and dangerous. But it is the hint of queer possibility that surrounds her, that proves particularly interesting to this chapter.

Of all of Rekha’s films, it is Umrao Jaan where her own personal story intermeshes most with the narrative. There is a strange synchronicity between Umrao Jaan’s and Rekha’s lives – both begin their lives as plain, small-town girls and both transform into beauties revered for their performative talents (Ram). Significantly, both possess a similar aesthetic sense of mystery and both operate
just outside the margins of ordinary society; Umrao Jaan as a tawaif is an outsider and Rekha is an outsider of sorts in the Bollywood industry. Ram argues that Rekha, along with classic Bollywood actress Nargis function “as parallel texts, thereby destabilising, if not actually subverting the phallogocentric address of the Indian cinematic world” (19). Rekha’s function as a parallel text, coupled with the “contests and collusions” (Ram 22) that surround her, serve to position her in a liminal space that sees her neither “completely outside nor inside the phallogocentric, patriarchal order” (22) and therefore, I suggest, firmly within the margins. Her liminality makes it easier to read queerness into her star text because she functions as anti-patriarchal by actively subverting heterosexual traditions. Rekha wore marital sindoor long before and after she was married, and her relationship with Farzana, regardless of its nature, still enacts a denial of the traditional Hindu heteronormative family unit. Ram’s works theorise Rekha’s appeal in the diasporic female Bollywood audience, suggesting they see something in her that resonates with their own experiences (that of being located outside the dominant experience, perhaps). It is possible therefore, to suggest that in this instance the diasporic female viewer may engage in a similar identificatory process to the queer audience when watching Rekha on and off-screen.

According to sources to follow, Rekha and the tawaif film hold a certain appeal for parts of the male gay diasporic community. Rekha’s many roles as the tawaif, in Muqqadar Ka Sikander, Umrao Jaan and Utsav, and her liminal position in Bollywood, have engendered her star text with a mystique that makes her a site of potent queer possibility. In explaining the appeal of the tawaif film in the gay diaspora, Kavi argues that Pakeezah is a ‘gay icon’ because it possessess a “high-camp gay subtext” that “took India’s subterranean gay world by storm” (310). He also posits that the mujra from Umrao Jaan, Dil Cheez Kya Hai (‘What is my Heart Worth?’), is a “gay theme song played-out and acted-upon by gay men” (311). Similarly, in an online parody video titled “S**t Gay Desi Boys Say”33, Chicago-based South Asian performance artist Kareem

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33 An online video produced in the style of the popular YouTube American spoof video series that began with “S***t Girls Say”.
Khubchandani satirises and pokes fun at gay Indian male stereotypes. In different avatars, he jokes about gay marriage leading to “gay sati”; about how “fantastic” Indian Vogue magazine is; who the hairiest men in India are: “Mallus, Punjabis or Sindhis?”; the perils of being a Hindu gay male: “building muscle is SO hard when you’re a vegetarian”; and is Bollywood-centric: “My drag name would be Aishwarya!”, “Vidya Balan was so good in the Dirty Picture!”, “No, just no. Aishwarya is not a better dancer than Madhuri!”. The piece concludes with a two-minute re-enactment of the mujra, In Ankhon Ki Masti from Umrao Jaan. Seated in a living room Khubchandani performs the mujra with the requisite hand and eye movements while lip-synching the lyrics. In a similar vein, the 2003 San-Francisco Queer Filmistan film festival’s promotion for parallel Indian film Gulabi Aina (‘The Pink Mirror’) (dir. Sridhar Rangayan, 2002) reads:

“This film gives us a vibrant glimpse of what happens when activists take to the screen. This ground-breaking film made by a group of friends with deep history in the queer organizing scene in Mumbai is the fun fantasy of every South Asian drag queen. From reenacting Umrao Jaan mujras to dealing with real life issues of HIV, this film shows the sharp witted (read bitchy) pleasures of queer family support and asks questions like: What’s the difference between kothis (a colloquial slang for gendered MSMs) and gays? Does liberating gay men invariably lead to sidelining transgender women? Can there be an all male and transgender female space without misogyny? And what is it that big bulge behind the choli (blouse)?”

These sources represent the appeal of the tawaif film (and subsequently Rekha because each source directly references Umrao Jaan) for the queer male, as does an article in popular Indian magazine Mid-Day that refers to how Lata Mangeshkar songs form the “soundtrack” for gay Indian men. Vikram Phukam writes:

“The self-sacrificing persona of Meena Kumari had created a whole new sub-culture in the gay desi ghettos all over the world. Her mask-like face in the classic Pakeezah was a mirror for the gay man as eternal victim. Even self-pity needed cultural trappings.”

Phukam’s argument that Pakeezah’s appeal for the queer audience lay in its projection of the tawaif as “eternal victim” may push the envelope a little far,
but his evocative words do gesture toward the way the tawaif and the queer male could be allies, as both have been marginalised from mainstream society at times, holds merit. Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla’s novel *Ode to Lata*, which also posits Lata Mangeshkar songs as a recurring motif for the desi male-queer, tells the story of a Kenyan-born gay protagonist raised on a diet of Bollywood by his mother. The protagonist frequently likens his life experiences to Bollywood scenes, films and actors. In tackling themes of cultural displacement, diasporic identity, belonging and sexuality, the protagonist Ali frequently imagines himself as a martyred heroine (much like the tawaif):

“I’ve known, much to my dismay, that in situations both turbulent and trivial, I’ve always played the role of the victim, the heroine in plight...I’ve avidly watched the melodrama unfold in Hindi cinema through my youth...And now my life has become just that....Images from those Hindi films often flashed through my mind. As a waited for Richard to satisfy himself with yet another trick and return to me, spent but just a little more tender, I became Jaya Bachchan in *Silsila*, lamenting in song until tall and handsome Amitabh comes back to her from carousing with his mistress...Faces of actresses whose names I knew so well. Scenes from movies, the titles of which are long forgotten...And those songs. Yes, those filmi songs with the poignant lyrics that epitomize the suffering of love and that only Lata can sing.”

Dhalla’s words reiterate how Mangeshkar’s songs can, as Phukam suggested, become a “soundtrack” for (some) Indian gay men. My intent on listing these numerous examples of queer engagement with Rekha and her films is ultimately to highlight the queer potentiality of her stardom. Though it is lamentable that there are no resources on queer female engagement with Rekha, by delving into the queer male engagement, I have posited that her stardom and roles as a tawaif definitely hold queer appeal. Rekha and her queer appeal are scarcely researched, though Bollywood has often touched on the potential appeal. In a 2004 interview for the Times of India, *FilmFare* editor Jitesh Pillai interviewed Rekha and put it to her that she was “the number one gay icon among actors”. Rekha replied:

*Is that right? I take that as a compliment. I think gay men have a heightened sense of beauty and aesthetics. Perhaps that’s why they like women like Madonna, Cher and now you say me.*
Pillai asked her, “Is it true that you are attracted to women?” to which she replied:

“For sure, I’m mostly attracted to women. I have always loved and admired women. Look at Rajmata Gayatri Devi, my mother, Sophia Loren, Ingrid Bergman, Katherine Hepburn and Indira Gandhi - all such beautiful, spiritual and evolved women. Show me any man who matches up to them in terms of beauty, emotional strength and resilience.”

The performance of Rekha is a deliberately provocative one and her image is one that often permits her audience gaps in which to read a potential queerness. In defying convention and the expected, Rekha has carved out an inimitable persona for herself in an often conservative industry. Given the vastness of this subject, it is surprising that very few detailed critical or ethnographic works have emerged on female queer desire in Bollywood. By analysing Rekha’s appeal and her roles in *Utsav* and *Umrao Jaan*, there emerges a distinct queer subtext within her performances on and off-screen that is potentially transgressive. By linking her dual performances (on and off-screen) with two moments of female queerness in *Utsav* and *Devdas*, I have found potentially radical instances of same sex female desire.

**Female Queerness Version 1.5: Dedh Ishqiya and Lihaaf**

*Dedh Ishqiya* draws heavily on Ismat Chughtai’s landmark text *Lihaaf* (‘The Quilt’) to weave together instances of same-sex desire in homosocial settings. Both texts demand a consideration of female sexuality that falls outside Euro-American gender/sexuality conflations. Though *Lihaaf* is not necessarily a ‘lesbian’ text, it contains a radical depiction of same-sex female desire that is rewoven and reworked in *Dedh Ishqiya* (hereafter ‘DI’). Until now both this chapter and the Bollywood industry have seen moments of brief, fleeting and potential female queerness usually contained to the song-dance sequence. DI presents us with a relatively explicit representation of female same-sex desire. In *Impossible Desires* Gopinath studies *Lihaaf*, writing:

“The Quilt puts forth a particular conceptualization of female homoerotic pleasure that challenges colonial constructions of “oppressed Indian women”, and exceeds and escapes existing
theorizations of “lesbian” subjectivity. As such, it converges with the moments of queer incursion in the absence of “lesbians” that are apparent in Bollywood cinema” – Gayatri Gopinath (*Impossible Desires* 144).

This section finds that *Dedh Ishqiya* works to resist rigid confluations of ‘gender’ and ‘queerness’ by reworking *Lihaaf*’s approach to same-sex desire. DI returns us to the Islamicate world of the Muslim Social – the sets are ornate, the costumes are intricate and the Urdu is so rigorous that even screenings India were accompanied with subtitles. The film modernises the classic Muslim Social, by taking the tropes of suffering seen in *Umrao Jaan* or *Pakeezah* and shattering them; having its female protagonists drive happily into the sunset at the film’s end. The collusions between *Lihaaf* and DI are many and reach a climax when in a pivotal scene; one of the characters in the film directly references the text. In merging two queer texts, DI operates on numerous meta-textual levels to depict a glimpse of explicit female same-sex desire.

*Dedh Ishqiya* (‘One and a Half Love’) is the sequel to the 2010 film *Ishqiya* (Love), (dir. Abhishek Chaubey). *Ishqiya* was one of the earlier films of the New Bollywood wave (to be discussed at length in the following chapter) and was a surprise critical success. Telling the story of two loveable rogues, an uncle-nephew crime duo, Khalujan (Naseeruddin Shah) and Babban (Arshad Warsi), *Ishqiya* was a black comedy that showcased a rural, rustic and radical story that celebrated its sexually aware temptress, Krishna (Vidya Balan), the gang-widowed seductress who cons the criminals. Part of the women-centric push in the mid-2000s, the character of Krishna signalled a shift in the performance of empowered femaleness – she was conniving, crafty and cunning in her deceit, yet the narrative showed no judgment of her seductions or sexuality. Thus, the *Ishqiya* franchise is one concerned with transgressive representations. DI moves from grimy Gorakhpur to the decadent yet decaying Mahmudabad where it opens with Babban and Khalujan posing as a nawab and his help in a jewellery store. The pair orchestrates the theft of a priceless necklace but Khalujan disappears in the ensuing police chase. Babban tracks him down in Mahmudabad where he is impersonating a poet and trying to win a *mushaira* in
which the prize is a marriage to the beautiful widow Begum Para (Madhuri Dixit). Babban is incensed with Khalujan’s disappearing-act but is placated when Khalujan lets him on his plan to become the Begum’s husband, thereby ensuring both their financial futures. As fast as Khalujan falls for the Begum, Babban falls for the Begum’s handmaid Muniya (Huma Qureshi). The pair hatches a cunning plan to abduct the Begum in order to collect a ransom, but is outwitted by Muniya and Begum Para, whose close relationship they have vastly underestimated. The film’s promotional material largely consisted of trailers and taglines featuring the “Seven Stages of Love”, a line Khalujan tells Babban, suggesting these stages are, “attraction, infatuation, love, trust, worship, madness and death”. Initially, this is Khalujan’s yardstick for measuring his relationship with Begum Para, (and Babban’s for his relationship with Muniya) however later, when the two men drunkenly laugh in their room both agreeing heartily that sex must come with each of the stages, we see Begum Para and Muniya laying on Muniya’s bed giggling and tickling each other. It soon becomes radically evident that it is the female union that subscribes to these seven stages. Later during the film when the women become intimate with each other, Khalujan and Babban watch as the women prance around the room, giggling, and say to each other “junoon! (madness). Love, DI suggests, in any form, is madness.

The story of Lihaaf was and remains so controversial that in 1942 Chughtai was summoned to stand trial for obscenity. Lihaaf tells the tale of the curious goings-on between the child-narrator’s Aunty, Begum Jaan and her Aunt’s maidservant, Rabbo. Told from a child’s perspective, Lihaaf explains the sexual activities between Begum Jaan and Rabbo with a wide-eyed innocence, as the women’s close relationship both captivates and concerns the young narrator. Likening the nightly contortions to an excitable elephant, the child explains the strange sounds and smells that escape from the quilt. The story concludes as follows:

“Quietly creeping to the other side of the bed I swung my legs over and sat up. In the dark I groped for the switch. The elephant somersaulted beneath the quilt and dug in. During the somersault, its corner was lifted
one foot above the bed. Allah! I dove headlong into my sheets! What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give me a lakh of rupees”.

Chughtai was able to successfully argue during her trial that the story made no explicit reference to queer sexual activity, “even though the story remains one of the most suggestive depictions of homoeroticism in modern Indian fiction” (Waheed 26). Sarah Waheed writes that *Lihaaf* was the product of a time when the north Indian Muslim milieu was experiencing much social change:

“Lihaaf heralded a new generation of educated middle- and upper-class Muslim women in colonial north India adjusting to the changes brought about by the Quit India movement, Second World War and the Great Depression. At a time when all sorts of social hierarchies were being questioned and overturned amid the Indian nationalist movement, women became more visible in public: in political forums, in art, music and literature” (26).

Though fundamentally radical in its depictions of female-to-female desire, *Lihaaf* was a product of its time insomuch that it envisioned the sexual relationship between the women more as a product of the loneliness and neglect by Begum Jaan’s husband than of actual queer desire. According to the text, when Begum Jaan falls ill (lonely) it is Rabbo who can cure her. Thus, the relationship provided a substitute and foil to her inescapably lonely predicament. Despite this, *Lihaaf* still “destabilizes conceptions of the domestic as a site of compulsory heterosexuality” (Gopinath, *Impossible Desires* 144) because it resists heteronormativity.

*Dedh Ishqiya* begins by showing scenes of homosocial bonding between Begum Para and Muniya, but then builds to a climax where it demonstrates clear evidence of female same-sex desire. There is the potential to read the early interactions between the women (including Muniya massaging Begum Para’s arms) as possibly queer, but their interactions remain chaste and largely appropriate of their circumstances in the first half of the film. It is only in retrospect that these homosocial activities become homoerotic precursors. Midway through the film when Begum Para and Muniya have enacted their cunning plan that includes staging Begum Para’s kidnap in order to flee with the
ransom money, they have Babban and Khalujan tied up in a rundown decrepit house. There, on the second floor of the house (which has no wall, thereby providing the men with a clear view from where they are tied up) the women celebrate their success. The men look on bemused as the women hug, hop, skip and run into each other’s arms giggling. Begum Para outstretches her arms and Muniya runs into them, and then the camera moves away from the mid-shot of the women. On the white-wall the camera shows their shadows in a projection. There, we see the women embrace each other as the shadows slowly merge into one as they fall to the floor in an intimate scene. We see Khalujan smirking as he ironically remarks “shall we ask for a quilt?” (“Lihaaf maang le?”), to which Babban knowingly smiles. Khalujan’s line silences any potential doubts about the women’s desire for each other because he deliberately evokes Lihaaf.

It is possible that for some audiences that the shadow play comes as a plot-twist, because for the viewer unaware of Lihaaf, the women’s desire may be surprising (particularly as up until now Begum Para has been flirting with Khalujan and Muniya has been sexually intimate with Babban). In this sense, DI caters to a niche audience because it demands an implicit knowledge of Lihaaf in order to understand the nuanced queerness. In keeping with Lihaaf, Begum Para’s personal story echoes Begum Jaan’s and adds another layer of queerness. In Lihaaf, the narrator explains that Begum Jaan’s husband was inattentive and had a predilection for young boys:

“Nawab Sahib had a strange hobby. People are known to have irksome interests like breeding pigeons and arranging cockfights. Nawab Sahib kept himself aloof from these disgusting sports; all he liked to do was keep an open house for students; young, fair and slim-waisted boys, whose expenses were born entirely by him.”

There is a scene in DI in which a distressed Begum Para decimates her wedding photos one by one. The photos repeatedly show her sat away from her husband who is surrounded by men, inferring that he too preferred the company of the opposite sex in more ways than one. But DI updates and radicalises Lihaaf, because instead of having the queer relationship as a product of loneliness, the film imagines the queer relationship as preferable to the heterosexual
relationships on offer by Khalujan and Babban (who are both particularly bumbling). Where *Lihaaf* imagined the queerness as a result of Begum Jaan’s illness and as a substitute for a preferred heteronormative relationship, DI does the very opposite. Waheed explains further:

“*Lihaaf* is a cultural artifact, embedded within the larger narrative of *Dedh Ishqiya*; it is certainly not a film whose principal subject matter is same-sex love, such as Deepa Mehta’s controversial English film *Fire* (1996). Nor does *Dedh Ishqiya* describe the two women’s relationship in terms of lack, as in *Fire*, ie, “there is no word in our language for us”, but inscribes the relationship in terms of fulfilment” (26).

The very fact that DI represents the relationship as one of fulfilment is what makes it so transgressive. DI draws on *Lihaaf*, where the queer union is the result of a lack, but subverts that lack. Unlike in *Lihaaf*, Begum Para has a potential suitor in Khalujan who, by her own admission, could meet her needs, yet she chooses Muniya. When Khalujan expresses his desire for her, Begum Para instead tells him about her love for Muniya, “She’s my companion, my sympathizer, my darling and my life too”. Her intense love for Muniya serves to eliminate the idea that Muniya is a proxy for a heterosexual relationship, as does the presence of Khalujan.

*Dedh Ishqiya* privileges the women’s romance as inherently stronger than the brief heterosexual dalliances in the film. But Khalujan and Begum Para’s chaste courtship is contrasted with Muniya and Babban’s sexual relationship. Babban’s erotic desire for Muniya is evident when he first meets her and pursues her vehemently. She acquiesces to his requests and spends the night with him. Babban awakes wrapped in a blanket to share a cigarette with her and rests his head on her lap. Muniya asks him how much he would be willing to do for her and he enthusiastically replies, “*I’ll do whatever you want darling!*” As they laugh, he remarks to her, “*It’s the first time I’m not sure, who’s been used and who has done the using.*” This inversion of sexual attitudes recurs when Babban corners Muniya in the rundown house, presenting her with travel brochures and eagerly telling her about his plans for them to travel the world. He tries to kiss her but she pushes him away, lamenting that he, “*like so many men*”, has
confused “sex for love”. With his pride wounded, he reacts by beating Muniya across the head in a frightening eruption of gendered violence. Begum Para intervenes by hitting him across the head with a nearby frying pan and rendering him unconscious (enabling the women to tie him up as well). This explosion of base masculine violence instantly situates Babban as the weaker of the pair as he must resort to physical violence as a means of asserting his will. This moment demonstrates Babban’s intellectual inferiority to Muniya because he uses violence in the absence of a more sophisticated means of expressing his feelings. The fact that Begum Para is then able to violently defeat him further reaffirms the women as implicitly stronger than the men, thereby reversing classic Bollywood gender representations.

DI plays the Muslim Social tropes to the extreme; there is a shayari showdown; courtly culture so prevalent that even a gun-battle is peppered with poetry; nawabs; fake nawabs; nawabs pretending to be gangsters; begums; ghazals and all the hallmarks of classical high Urdu Indo-Muslim culture. The premise of the surrealist mushaira cum swayamvara (itself a kind of cultural mash-up) heightens the sense of fantasy in the film – though this world once existed, it is now allegory. DI simultaneously modernises Lihaaf by bringing it into the present-day, yet allegorises female queerness by placing it in a world that still seems very far from modern Bombay or Delhi. As a setting, Mahmudabad functions as a kind of modern-past, one where the characters are bound by ancient custom yet one where Babban casually tells Muniya when she is taking a photo that she needs an iPhone because it has “higher megapixels”. The mise-en-scene of the film is luxurious like the classic Muslim Social with an emphasis on dress, luxury and courtly custom, yet just like the world of the Muslim Social, the wealth is slowly beginning to crumble. In an early scene in the film we see Khalujan spying on Begum Para, peering through a dusty cracked glass window as she dances. The dusty, decaying framing contrasts with the beauty of her movement. The film is a contrast – showing a clash between an old beauty and a modern aesthetic. The characters exist in a world paradoxically filled with fading, crumbling cultural relics of the past yet all the technological trappings of a modern society.
The casting of Madhuri Dixit as Begum Para is important to Dedh Ishqiya. Reigning supreme in the 1980s and 1990s in countless blockbuster films, Dixit is regularly cited as one of the best Bollywood actresses of all time. Her dancing skills are considered unmatched and her beauty is often referred to. DI was widely considered by the media as her ‘comeback role’, as after a ten-year absence during which she moved to the USA to marry an Indian-American doctor and raise two children, she returned to live in India and to act in Bollywood films. Last seen in a major role in 2007, Dedh Ishqiya was the first time she re-appeared on-screen as a lead. The films plays up this fact, with her first appearance in the film shot from behind. As a ghazal by Begum Akhtar plays the camera takes in her ornate anarkali, dupatta and long brown hair from behind. When she first appears in full, it is the opening evening of the mushaira when her maidservant Muniya introduces her. Standing on a small balcony above the male suitors, Muniya informs the contestants of the rules of conduct for the evening: they must under no circumstances make physical contact with Begum Para, nor are they to look anywhere other than in her eyes. She tells them “She is a delicate creature, and your cold stare might break her”. After a lengthy introduction, when she finally does appear Begum Para/Dixit is near ornamental – her hair, make-up and lavish costuming all so exquisite she barely appears real. But while Begum Para appears ornamental at times, the narrative grants her considerable individual agency. Dixit’s character’s name, Begum Para, is important, as Begum Para was a famous Bollywood actress in the ‘40s and ‘50s. The ironic name draws attention to the numerous performances Begum Para undertakes in the film: one of these performances is deceiving Khalujan by pretending to be someone she is not, and another is her performance as a wife seeking a husband for her potential suitors, when she has another plan entirely. Midway through the film Khalujan (who we learn via flashback once fell in love watching Begum Para dance as a young man) encourages Begum Para to rediscover her passion for dance. When she begins to dance, the pleasure for the audience is dual as there is joy in watching both

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34 Though she had made a cameo in the song-dance sequence Ghagra in Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani (‘The Youth are Crazy’) (dir. Ayan Mukerji, 2013) inbetween.
Dixit, a renowned classical dancer, and Begum Para rekindle their passion. The film undertakes a kind of triple play; in featuring Madhuri Dixit, formerly popular and beautiful Bollywood star and dancer playing the character of a formerly popular and beautiful dancer named Begum Para, who recollects the Begum Para who was formerly popular and beautiful Bollywood star. In another metatextual link, Naseeruddin Shah is famous for his keen appreciation of Ismat Chughtai, having directed and starred in a stage adaptation of her stories, so when he makes reference to Lihaaf, there are numerous ‘layers’ of meaning being constituted. These numerous meta-textual meanings make the film a cultural commentary on queerness, as it interpolates the actors and the texts into the dialogue.

In recent years, the Bollywood industry has been steadily turning away from the Urdu language, instead favouring a ‘modern’ Hindi-English fusion or colloquial Hindi. DI functions as both an elegy to an Islamicate world and language nearly lost. Parsi theatre, as the predecessor to Bollywood, used Urdu as its language of choice. Bollywood soon followed suit because Urdu “was the only language at the time which had any sort of pan-national appeal.” (Shoaib Daniyal). Daniyal points out in his review of Dedh Ishqiya that in the Golden Age of Bollywood (roughly from the 40s to 60s) the industry widely recruited Urdu writers and poets from North India to create Urdu songs and dialogues for Bollywood. Kaifi Azmi, Javed Akhtar, Gulzar, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Saadat Hasan and others wrote dialogues befitting of the High-Urdu the Muslim Social is particularly synonymous with, and also wrote for numerous hit films across the Bollywood spectrum. In further evidence of Urdu’s slow demise in Bollywood, up until around the mid-1990s most Bollywood films displayed their title in Hindi, English and Urdu. Nowadays there has been a considered and noticeable lessening on the showing Urdu titles. Of DI’s return to the Urdu language, director Abhishek Chaubey suggests the world he has created is an “alternate reality”. Within this alternate Urdu-world the female same-sex desire can come to fruition. In this way, Chaubey is able to experiment with queer-play perhaps more than he would have been able to in a ‘straight’ Bollywood film. Sarah Waheed contends:
“Dedh Ishqiya is an inter-textual narrative, as its characters and plots stand in metonymically for a whole history of Urdu cultural realms in Bombay. As Ranjani Mazumdar has argued, film can be read as the “archive of a city” – that in the traffic between the “real” city and the represented cinematic city, Bombay’s cinema provides access to a range of urban subjectivities. The female voices that emerged during the Independence movement – whether they were asserted in controversial fiction, mass commercialised through radio and cinema, or presented in courtrooms – are narrated anew within Dedh Ishqiya. That such a multilayered story appears on screens amid recent politicisation in India over the issues of same-sex love as well as women’s autonomy, mobility, and freedom from sexual violence, makes Dedh Ishqiya all the more relevant” (27).

By bringing a lost Urdu past into the present, Dedh Ishqiya uses and plays with the generic conventions of the Muslim Social and then subverts them. The heroines of the film do not end as Umrao Jaan did, dejected and alone; nor do they end as Pakeezah did, married and reinserted into social society; rather they drive into the sunset together with a priceless necklace in their loot and leave two dimwitted men in their dust. DI is a thoroughly modern film in that it carefully reconstructs the Muslim Social yet by modernising and appropriating Lihaaf, creates a new and subversive queer story.

A point this chapter has argued, Gopinath explains that Lihaaf is best viewed outside of Euro-Americancentric academic notions of gender, sexuality and identity:

“The quilt, then, represents a textured and layered form of sexuality that resists solidifying into structures of identity. Same-sex desires and practices in this text produce quilted effects, rather than identity effects, as Chughtai maps out multiple, uneven erotic relations that are simultaneously stitched into and undermine dominant circuits of pleasure and commerce” (152).

This section has dealt with moments, suggestions and representations that are transgressive within the apparent-heteronormativity of the Bollywood film. Gopinath continues:

“Fire, like “The Quilt”, refuses to subscribe to the notion that the proper manifestation of same-sex eroticism is within a politics of visibility and
identity. Rather, it suggests that in a South Asian context, what constitutes “lesbian” desire may both look and function differently than it does within Euro-American modes of masculinity and femininity” (Impossible Desires 155).

It is this very point of difference that this chapter has emphasised. By envisioning queer possibilities within a specifically Indian context, this chapter has found moments of alternative radicalism hidden within popular Bollywood narratives (and an entire film in the case of Dedh Ishqiya). For too long Western studies of Queer have marginalised the Other, which is why I advocate a far more fluid approach when it comes to studying non-normative sexualities in the ‘East’ (or indeed, anywhere other than the ‘West’). In denying Western hegemony in Queer studies, there opens up a space in which radical ruptures in the dominant form can be glimpsed. In breaking down binaries, this chapter has found queer possibility in otherwise heteronormative texts (Utsav and Devdas) and has interrogated a key visibly queer Bollywood text with Dedh Ishqiya. As Dedh Ishqiya falls firmly within the ‘New Bollywood’ genre, the following and final chapter finds a collective of films that point to a radical future for Bollywood by shining a light on marginalised identities.
"Every f****r's got his own movie playing inside his head. Every f****r is trying to become the hero of his imaginary film. I swear, as long as there are f*****g movies in this country people will continue to be fooled" – Ramadhir Singh in Gangs of Wasseypur.

This chapter concludes this study by examining three Bollywood films that form part of a collective I term *New Bollywood Films* (and hereafter ‘NB Films’). This postmodern collective comprises contemporary releases that challenge and confront the masala conventions of classic Bollywood. In *Bombay Cinema*, Ranjani Mazumdar argues:

“If postmodernism or postmodern culture is defined as the pursuit of pure form, where style and performance mimic other representations, where the sense of the original is not easily retrievable, where representation is self-conscious and the desire is to highlight the form of duplicity (Hutcheon), then *Company* displays the characteristic codes of postmodern text...” (190).

The same can be said of the NB Film. Showcasing an entirely different aesthetic to their predecessors; the NB film features antiheroes, empowered heroines, taboo subject matter, experimental form and subversive cinema techniques. These films are self-conscious, self-referential and simultaneously mimic and distort the original source text(s) they draw inspiration from. Experimental and extreme, the NB film takes up issues exiled by the Bollywood narrative and contains an element of play that disrupts the heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, and conventional Bollywood norm. Directors Vishal Bhardwaj, Anurag Kashyap, Tigmanshu Dhulia and Dibakar Banerjee initially set the NB wave of films in motion in the early 2000s. Representative of a major shift in the subject and tonality of the Bollywood film; the modern NB film is deliberately unconventional. In the recent *Delhi Belly* (dir. Abhinay Deo, 2011) a young male pauses from orally pleasuring his girlfriend to answer his ringing mobile phone; in *Luv Shuv Tey Chicken Khurana* (‘Love and Chicken Curry’) (dir. Sameer Sharma, 2012) the very-secret ingredient in a family’s famous chicken curry turns out to be marijuana; and in *Go Goa Gone* (dir. Raj Nidimoru and
Krishna D.K, 2013) three men find that the only way to stop blood-thirsty zombies in their tracks is to shower them in cocaine powder. Before continuing though, it is necessary to identify and isolate the traits required to constitute a NB film. The NB Film typically steers clear of foreign locales and is usually set in Indian cities alternative to Bollywood’s Bombay. It deals with themes such as sexuality, modernity and gender in an innovative fashion and is usually focused on portraying performances of minority. Whilst the NB Film destabilises the dominant Bollywood norm it still retains a strong sense of its Bollywood heritage, often referencing scenes, moments or characters from classic films before it. This self-consciousness locates it as a postmodern form and its experiments with marginality position it as integral to this study.

**Between the Country and the City**

From the 1950s nationalist cinema-projects that imagined idealised rural Indian villages where dhoti-clad men calmly discussed the state of the nation; to the mid 60s streetscapes which saw a suited and booted Shammi Kapoor shimmying through an artificial, glimmering city; to the Muslim Social’s beloved Lucknow, the city a stage for beautiful courtesans; place has always been intrinsic to the Bollywood narrative. This chapter deals with three NB films that contain alternative performances of gender distinctive to their alternative settings. One film is set in rural Jharkhand, the other in a town just outside New Delhi and the final in Kolkata, a city rarely used in modern Bollywood. Each film possesses a performance of gender and marginality that is tethered to their respective alternative locations. Whilst the first two films contain performances of masculinity-in-crisis in rural and urban locations, the final is a women-centric film set in an alternative city rarely used in modern Bollywood. Within each of these performances of location there is a tension between the urban(e) and the rural that is played out. Significant in evoking the traditional India, the rural location is at odds with the modernity of the urban city. The city, site of technological, economic and social advancement clashes with the rural, as the home of ancient tradition and a purer, more ‘Indian’ way of life. It is experimental performances of gender and sexuality that frame this chapter, as does this tension between the urban and the rural.
Anurag Kashyap’s 2012 epic *Gangs of Wasseypur* (hereafter GOW) is set across an impoverished stretch of land that runs between the coal belts of Dhanbad and Wasseypur in Jharkhand (a state in East India that was until 2000 a part of Bihar). A sweeping saga, the story follows three generations of coalminers through a particularly tumultuous period of Indian history. In tracking these generations of men, whose biggest inheritance is an ongoing communal war; GOW is a study of a generational masculinity-in-crisis. The film’s rustic and rural setting is indispensible to the narrative as the dramatic action unfolds in organic settings: from gunfights in winding lanes that disrupt chicken carts and perforate village water tanks; to crumbling, dilapidated old family haveli’s collapsing under heavy bullet-fire; GOW’s ‘rural’ is far more gritty than the usual Bollywood representation of the rural. Given the symbolic purpose of the village in Bollywood, the actualities of daily life are often emptied from the narrative so as to depict a heavily idealised and traditional life. In interviews, director Kashyap argued that Bollywood’s obsession with "hygienic clean spaces, even though the country is not so clean" was unnatural, saying Bollywood films are "either shot in the studios, or London, American, Switzerland. Clean places. Anywhere, everywhere except India" (qtd in Rose). Kashyap’s films are always set in India but GOW is one of the first Bollywood films ever to be set in Jharkhand. Dibakar Banerjee’s film *Love Sex aur Dhokha*, (hereafter LSD) is set in town on the outskirts of New Delhi and is an anthology of three loosely related stories shot on mobile phones, spy cameras and security cameras. The first Bollywood film to be shot entirely using the found footage technique, LSD is also highly experimental. Chronicling a youth-in-crisis, the story is a searing study into the sleaze, smut and sex-obsession of the modern Indian media (and society itself). Its setting is as important to the film as it is unimportant – that is, it could ostensibly be located in any town near any city in India, one positioned just outside of both the rural and the urban experience proper. *Kahaani*, a women-centric thriller filmed in Kolkata, uses the alternative city as a host in which to play out its alternative performance of gender. A huge critical success, the film was remarkably subversive for a number of reasons. What is most crucial about these three films is that each are set in opposing locations; GOW is
Bollywood has negotiated with the rural/urban, village/city divide in cinema in various ways over the years. Given the importance of place in the NB film, it is important to briefly essay these negotiations because such dichotomy is one that frames the conflict in the films. Bollywood has a long and rich history of romanticising and idealising the rural-village way of life. Mehboob’s opus *Mother India*, where the peasant woman fought to overcome crippling debt, cemented Bollywood’s fixation with village life. This fixation was partly due to Nehruvian nationalist policies that manifested themselves in “feudal village dramas” (Sharpe 71) which meant that the 1950s and early 60s films imagined the city as the site of decay – images of poverty, alcoholism and the sex-trade all dominated representations of the city from this period. The city, as opposed to the ‘traditional’ Indian way of life (which by these film’s reckoning was only to be had in a rural village) was the site of loose morals and debauchery, a place where traditional ‘Indian values’ were decimated. This ideology faded out during the mid to late 60s when films began to imagine the city as a stand in for modernity, especially foreign cities. This representation gave rise to the NRI films of the 1990s that saw the foreign city as the site of capital and commercial success. This city was imagined as a location where the characters were free to drink, dance and party all the while making money in high-powered jobs before an obligatory return to the motherland in the second-half of the film. These trends continued into the 2000s and today, where Bollywood films regularly dispense glossy picturisations of New York, London, Hong Kong and Venice. The second-half return is usually to the Punjab, complete with images of yellow mustard-flower fields filled with colourful maidens (see DDLJ for example). Kitschy and stereotypical, the representation of the rural in these films is complete with colourful tractors, crazy Uncles and naïve village girls. This rural setting works to symbolise the homeland and reposition its subjects as inherently ‘Indian’ once they arrive. Despite this, these films devote the
majority of their energies to the exciting urban experience abroad; a phenomenon that Jenny Sharpe argues is a trend toward the “vanishing rural” in Bollywood. Suggesting this is a direct result of “a turn in Indian films towards catering to urban and overseas markets, where the profit margin is greater than that of rural areas,” (74) Sharpe contends that this move to the city is symbolic of a society accruing upward mobility via consumerism. This move was not without anxiety, because the NRI film emphasised new capital, with its slavish devotion to showcasing luxury lifestyles that included alcohol, parties, promiscuity, and provocative clothing. With this imagery came fears about the potential deformation of Indian values. As these traits become synonymous with a certain representation of ‘The West’, the rural became (despite its diminishing status) even more representative of the traditional homeland.

In the intervening years since Sharpe’s valuable observations there has been a renewed resurgence in representations of the rural. 2010 masala blockbuster Dabangg transported audiences to rural Uttar Pradesh and did so to staggering success. The film holds the record for the highest grossing opening weekend and is the third highest grossing Bollywood film of all time. In keeping with the genre’s marginal proclivities, there has also been a strong New Bollywood contingent of films set in rural Indian locations including (but not limited to): Ishqiya, Omkara, Tanu Weds Manu (dir. Anand Rai, 2011), Luv, Shuv Tey Chicken Khurana and Peepli Live (dir. Anusha Rizvi and Mohammed Farooqui, 2010).

Akshaya Kumar observes that this return to the rural forms part of an “economic strategy” that addresses the urban migrant multiplex viewer’s desires for hometown nostalgia and belonging. Kumar argues that it also functions:

“As a response to the creative ceiling hit by Hindi cinema that could be broken only by tapping into the alternative creative temper of filmmakers hailing from smaller towns and willing to take a plunge into their own archived selves, indeed aided by the experimental temper the multiplex has supported with its smaller theatres and de-risked business.”

Kumar continues:
“Situating a small-town as a state of exception also means imagining it as a fragment detached from its relationalities to adjacent fragments; it becomes a disaggregated chunk which would produce its identity in its performance. That is why the small-town re-presents the hidden archive of a performative belonging, a curious blend of arrogance and excess that uses the distance between the space and the place to further rhetoricate it.”

A film set in rural Jharkhand, GOW makes commentary on the rest of India. The “arrogance and excess” Kumar flags is especially relevant to such an ambitious film as GOW, which features easily one of the most arrogant characters in Bollywood history: a 14 year old gangster-in-training who calls himself Perpendicular and lazily flicks a razorblade on his tongue for entertainment. GOW produces a distinct identity via hyper-masculine performance and setting. The characters are dogged by a disaffectedness, lawlessness and ruthlessness that worsens with each new generation. In light of the radically unquantifiable alterations in the Indian political (and literal) landscapes (abetted by the sprawl of the urban into the city into slum into small-town into rural) it is impossible to ever fully imagine a ‘real’ rural India. However, this chapter imagines GOW as symbolic of the NB Film’s postmodern approach to staging a return to the rural because the film violently shatters any nostalgic notions of the small rural town within the first thirty seconds. This is a world far from DDLJ’s mystical Punjab where Baldev feeds his beloved pigeons in misty morning-lit mustard-fields, this is a world where a severed head is stuffed into a plastic bag and tied to a lamppost outside a family home to signify that a new gang takeover has occurred.

The NB Film also showcases alternate representations of the urban. Films such as Kaminey (‘Scoundrels’, dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2009), Dhobi Ghat (dir. Kiran Rao, 2011) Delhi Belly, Shanghai (dir. Dibakar Banerjee, 2012), Band, Baaja, Bharat (‘Band, Horns, Revelry’, dir. Maneesh Sharma, 2010) and Vicky Donor (dir. Shoojit Sircar, 2012) each deal with stories set in Indian cities. The NB film’s approach to the urban is significant because the vast majority are set in Indian cities, thereby eschewing the common overseas metropolis. In Vicky Donor the focus is on the Punjabi milieu living in Lajpat Nagar (an suburb just outside of
the city proper of Delhi) and in this sense, hosts an “urban-provincial, a performative counterpoint which finds resonances within the urban” (Kumar). *Talaash* (‘Search’, dir. Reema Kagti, 2013) is set in Bombay but uses alternative city locations such as the crumbling mills of Lower Parel, Charni Road and the red-light district of Kamathipura to host its murder-mystery noir. 2011’s *Dhobi Ghat* was also set in Bombay, but was seen through the eyes of migrants from Uttar Pradesh so took an outsider-view of the city. In the classic Bollywood era, Bombay-set films were often filmed in interior sets in famous studios such as Mehboob Studios and took in brief Bombay landmarks (such as Marine Drive) to articulate a sense of place. The NB film stages a departure from the cleanliness of the studio; both *Dhobi Ghat* and *Talaash* show (a version of) the ‘real’ Bombay; from the slums, to the dhobi district, brothels, old cafes and so on. These films are also predominantly shot on location so they host a more authentic version of the urban. *Kahaani* stages its story in Kolkata, a city rarely seen on Bollywood screens today, despite once being a popular setting for Bollywood in the 50s and 60s. The alternative city here becomes the backdrop to an alternative performance of femininity. As a city, Kolkata becomes a character in the film – with her by-lanes and bustling marketplaces allowing the thrilling narrative action to unfold. Conversely, LSD hosts an urban-provincial story where the young characters are exiled from the full urban experience of the city but not fully part of the rural experience either. Ultimately, the NB film deals in settings that are located *elsewhere* whether rural or urban, which is “central to the appetite of multiplex audience” because, as Kumar suggests:

> “An overwhelming percentage of them come from elsewhere, and contain within themselves alternative cultural and spatial imaginaries. These imaginaries can be consolidated even in an unstable moving-image document because the affective journeys they undertake are fuelled by an escape from their respective locations. The logic of dislocation that bridges the self and the symbolic thus builds up an extraordinary appetite for distortion, even as cycles of re-production and re-presentation disorient the self”.

In a country as vast as India, the divide between the rural and urban is rapidly blurring. Along with the rapid migration of North Indians into technological centres like Bangalore, Delhi or Bombay, cities have begun to sprawl further
into the rural. The mythologised rural North Indian town has nearly become a fiction as the city encroaches rapidly on the village. As a postmodern form, the NB responds to these spatial alterations in dramatic ways. Ultimately this chapter finds that location is implicitly tied to performances of gender and marginality in the NB film. Each of the three films selected for study here perform the urban (*Kahaani*), the rural (GOW) and the in-between (LSD) in different ways with each telling a different story of those located in different margins.

**Gangs of Wasseypur: New Masculinities-in-Crisis**

The films *Gangs of Wasseypur – Part One* and *Gangs of Wasseypur – Part Two* chronicle a revenge saga spanning seventy years, over five hours of screen-time and a body count of hundreds. Set between the small villages of Wasseypur and Dhanbad in Jharkhand, GOW tracks a coalmining family across three generations. The British established the village of Wasseypur prior to Independence as a colony of coalmine labourers. Renamed in the 1950s after Wassey Saheb, a local caretaker, the town was soon overrun by notorious coal mafia gangs, with bloody battles escalating in the 1980s, when it became infamous across India for its violence. Since then, Wasseypur and twenty other districts in Jharkhand have received funds care of the “Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme” which places it within the nation’s 250 “most backward districts”. In interviews Kashyap said he was inspired by the infamous lawlessness in the region.

As a film GOW is emblematic of the NB genre: it is subversive, arrogant, unusual, excessive and has a strong aesthetic that is self-conscious and self-reflexive to the extreme. The film (and Kashyap’s directorial style in general) has drawn comparisons in the media (Indian and otherwise) to Martin Scorcese and Quentin Tarantino, but what makes GOW integral to this discussion is that it articulates a cinematic sensibility that is decidedly Bollywood, yet is still worlds

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35 For ease of understanding and given the directors aims, I will refer to both films as ‘GOW’ in order to analyse the works as a whole. I will specifically refer to ‘GOW 1’ or ‘GOW 2’ when referring to the respective films.
apart from the vast majority of recent releases. GOW simultaneously contradicts, confronts and compliments the conventions typical of masala Bollywood. Its antiheroes are gun-toting, knife-wielding Muslims and its leading ladies wear cotton market-brought saris and actively encourage their sons to be more *besharam* (shameless); there are no song or dance sequences yet the soundtrack sings of the delights of rough sex; it is set in a poverty-stricken rural town and its characters are as devoted to violent revenge as they are to voracious sex. Despite these seemingly ‘anti-Bollywood’ traits, Bollywood is one of the main characters in the film. It pervades almost every moment of the film: a classic Bollywood gang film theme song plays as a gangster’s ring-tone during a crucial gun-fight; a gang boss laments that his son was too busy watching *Diwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* when he ought to have been fighting for his family’s honour; and two arch-nemeses style themselves as Amitabh Bachchan from *Trishul* (‘Trident’, dir. Yash Chopra, 1978) and Salman Khan from *Maine Pyar Kiya* (‘Have I Loved’, dir. Sooraj R. Barjatya, 1989) respectively. Bollywood is an inescapable force throughout the film, as the many performances of masculinity-in-crisis are deeply informed by famous Bollywood characters.

GOW director Anurag Kashyap’s first film *Paanch* (‘Five’, 1991) was banned by the Indian Censorship Board because of its risqué subject matter (namely sex, drugs and violence) and since then his films; including *Black Friday* (2004), an award-winning film which dealt with the 1993 Mumbai bombings; *Dev D* (2009), a modern adaptation of *Devdas*; and *Gulaal* (‘Red’, 2009) which told the story of a corrupted set of aspiring Rajput politicians; have tended to address the Indian realities often ignored by Bollywood blockbusters. Eschewing studios or exotic foreign locations, Kashyap’s aesthetic is best described as gritty, raw and darkly comedic. His films feature Indian locations that are intrinsically real and by using actual villages, streets, slums and railways to articulate his vision, GOW is unmistakably set in rural India. Set deep in the coal belt of the east, the film begins in the dying days of Colonial India. It opens in Wasseypur where Shahid Khan (Jaideep Ahlawat) is impersonating feared dacoit Sultana Daku (in a deliberate act of vengeance for the British’s taking over of native farmland for coal-mining purposes) to successfully loot British supply trains. Khan is caught
and reluctantly forced to take up work at a local coalmine in Dhanbad under Ramadhir Singh’s (Tigmanshu Dhulia) control. After his mining bosses forbid him from attending the birth of his first wife, Khan develops a hatred for Singh that runs so deep it echoes through two generations. Becoming increasingly vengeful, Khan plots a takeover of the mine but is thwarted by Singh, who sends him on a mission to Varanasi where he is swiftly executed. Meanwhile, Khan’s son, Sardar Khan (Manoj Bajpai) grows up in the village Singh controls and marries Nagma (Richa Chaddha) while still reluctantly working for JP Singh (Ramadhir’s son). On the sly, he loots and sells the company petrol on the black-market (in a ode to his Father’s memory), but eventually has a violent scuffle with JP Singh and is jailed. He and his friend escape jail and flee into hiding. In hiding, Khan meets Durga (Reema Sen) and takes her to be his second wife. As Khan returns and begins to rebuild his empire, he and Ramadhir Singh clash over coal ownership and control of the town. Khan moves his business interests to a larger scale, by stealing iron ore and after a series of cataclysmic events is murdered, marking the end of GOW 1. GOW 2 opens with Danish Khan (Sardar and Nagma’s eldest son) killed for exacting revenge on his father’s killers (at his mother’s insistence) thereby leaving the family business to fall to Faizal Khan (Nawazuddin Siddiqui) (also Sardar and Nagma’s son), a chillum-smoker who rather lethargically steps into his father’s shoes. Definite Khan (son of Sardar and Durga, and Faizal’s half brother) seeks to kill Faizal as revenge for feeling that he was never part of the real Khan family and so begins an all out war between the half-brothers. In the end, Faizal is double-crossed by Durga and Definite and shot dead.

As chapter two briefly contended, Bollywood and the underworld share a “symbiotic relationship” (Mazumdar 150) that binds cinema and black money together. This relationship is paradoxically, one both well known and well hidden in Bombay. It remains difficult to this day to quantify the stronghold the underworld (has) had on the industry (in terms of illicit film-financing for one). It is well known in Bollywood that real-life mobster Haji Mastan inspired Deewar and countless Bollywood films have used gangsters as their inspiration. For audiences the world over the gangster film has always been fascinating as it
permits a voyeuristic glimpse into a world most average audiences have not experienced; one of crime, violence and lawlessness. Mazumdar quotes Tripathi:

“There is a curious symbiosis between the underworld and the movies. The Hindi filmmakers are fascinated by the lives of the gangsters, and draw upon them for material. The gangsters, from the shooter on the ground to the don-in-exile at the top, watch Hindi movies keenly, and model themselves – their dialogue, the way they carry themselves – on their screen equivalents” (150).

Mazumdar continues, observing that the gangster film is:

“of particular interest in the context of the urban, because gangster films present us with an alternative topography, an alternative community, and an alternative urban consciousness” (151).

Mazumdar’s seminal works on the urban in Bollywood argue that the city street hosts the gangster film “because it symbolises freedom from home and it enables constant movement and liberation from the claustrophobia of power when gangs control it” (152). The gangster genre in Bollywood has been relatively successful, with films such as Parinda (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989), Satya (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 1989) and Company (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 2002) using Bombay as their city of choice. Mazumdar contends that the “visual codes” (152) of the gangster film are easily identifiable:

“Despite differences and variations, the core configuration of the gangster genre is easy to see – an urban backdrop, the play of criminality within a community of men, a performative masculinity, the impossibility of romance, the crisis of the family, and the experience of everyday fear and terror” (152).

It is highly notable that GOW, a film about a family of gangsters, subverts almost each of these codes. Though it is set against a rural backdrop, and performs a play of criminality within a community of men, romance is far from impossible as the film features in excess of four marriages, several romantic interests; and rather than employing fear or terror, it uses satire and black comedy as its weapon of choice. Therefore, in both intent and presentation, GOW runs counter to any other genre in Bollywood.
Referring to the role of place in recent Bollywood films, Kumar argues:

“The small-town may have gradually become more form than content, it might have also become the anchor of a cinema located elsewhere – which would mean a body of films that shun the label ‘Bombay Cinema’.

GOW shuns Bombay as a location because it derives ample content from its Jharkhand setting; its streets are instead winding village lanes, its buildings old ancestral havelis rather than high-rises and its wars fought at petrol pumps and paan-stands. Significantly though, whilst it shuns the urban Bombay label, its performance of the provincial deviates far from the imagined and idealised rural of Bollywood – the stretch from Dhanbad to Wasseypur the film takes place in is replete with open drains, crumbling houses and urine-stained walls. As Sultan says at the beginning of the film, “This is Wasseypur, here even the pigeons fly with one wing because they need the other to cover their arse.” The scenes of physical violence also run counter to classic gangster film conventions. In GOW 1, Shahid Khan, the proud, fearless protagonist and main character is killed not in an epic and bloody final showdown, but in a quiet assassination by an even quieter killer. The unexpected assassin, an older man clad in a crisp white dhoti with a lilting voice, is softly-spoken and middle-aged, and conducts his swift execution with melancholic look on his face. The physical differences between Khan and his killer are deliberate; Khan is beefier, younger and fitter than his assassin, who is leaner, slighter and older. Despite these differences it is *he* who brings down the head of an empire with the shot of his gun. This moment is indicative of the subversion GOW undertakes, where the violence functions either as entirely unexpected surprise (as in this case) or is unexpectedly comedic. Ultimately, by subverting each of the conventions of the gangster film, GOW reads as a film unlike any other.

Bollywood and media references are central to GOW. The opening scene sees a family huddled around a small TV screen watching the opening credits to famous soap *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because a Mother-in-law was once a Daughter). As the camera zooms in on a close-up of TV showing lead character Tulsi Veerani’s sweet smiling face bullets ring out and a battle begins.
The irony in juxtaposing the popular family-friendly show and Tulsi (famous for her keen sense of devotion to her adopted family) with a gratuitous, brutal violence instantly signals the ironic tone and direction of the film. GOW toys with satire by spraying bullets and blood as often as it does Bollywood references. The gangsters in GOW are so obsessed with Bollywood that they appropriate filmi moments into almost every aspect of their lives. Mazumdar writes that the real-life Bombay gangster often styled himself according to Bollywood, which is especially true for the reel gangsters Faizal and Definite in GOW, who style themselves as Amitabh Bachchan and Salman Khan respectively. The tropes of Bachchan seem to congregate around Faizal, who styles himself on Bachchan as he appeared in *Trishul* (dir. Yash Chopra, 1978) (wearing flare jeans, a button-up shirt and a small coloured scarf around his neck), but whose trajectory mirrors Bachchan’s iconic performance of antiheroism as Vijay in *Deewar*.

Like Vijay, Faizal was born into a life in which he inherited little more than a desire to avenge his Father’s death (or mistreatment in Vijay’s case). Both antiheroes are compelled to violence via a combination of inheritance and indifference and their missions in life come to them through bloodlines and blood spill. Unpredictable, brooding and suffering intense abandonment issues, Faizal’s drug-use often renders him with a disaffected and vacant coolness. He rallies against familial control yet ends up becoming a gang lord (just as Vijay does) and both men, as a result of their father’s absences, end up idealising their mothers to the extreme. Faizal is utterly disgusted when he suspects his Mother is having an ‘affair’ (despite his father’s death long ago) with a family friend who lives with them, yet simultaneously seeks her approval at every turn. The tropes of the angry young man converge around the three generations of Khan men, but especially around Faizal. Faizal performs a conflicted performance of masculinity: he meets none of the generic requirements for the romantic hero – he is slight, short in stature, a drug addict, unable to control his emotional outbursts and is a Muslim. GOW deliberately depicts father and son Sardar and Faizal as contrasting generational versions of masculinity. Sardar, with his stoic, sturdy-build, strong and deadly way and Faizal with his slight,
small frame and his emotional weaknesses are worlds (generations) apart. While Sardar is hyper masculine, even visiting prostitutes when his pregnant wife denies him sex, Faizal is coded in a more ‘feminine’ (for Bollywood) manner – dreaming of his lover and crying when he disappoints her. These vastly different performances are also explained by the time periods in which they operate. Sardar hails from a far earlier chapter of history (one which emphasises duty, purpose and action) whereas Faizal is born into a period characterised by indifference, technology and commercialism and an unmooring from the classic tropes of masculinity. It is through both Sardar and Faizal that Kashyap is able to articulate the age-old notion of the generation gap by offering up two different performances of equally conflicted and marginalised performances of masculinity.

The other characters in GOW are equally filmy as their actions, desires and dialogues reference Bollywood films, songs and actors at almost every turn. When the ageing and slowly declining Ramadhir Singh (who comes from the Sardar Khan age of vengeance) discovers his son was absent for an important violent battle in GOW 2, he chastises him thus:

Ramadhir: “Shove your emotions up you ass you idiot. You sit here playing small politics. Go to your constituency and give motivation to your people. Where were you last night?
JP: The cinema
Ramadhir: What were you seeing?
JP: Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge
Ramadhir: (Pauses and then shakes his head) Son, you are bloody useless.”

It is crucial that it is the only character not madly obsessed with Hindi films, Ramadhir Singh, who survives the longest in GOW. Kashyap’s joke here is that living out a Bollywood dream ultimately ends in death. DDLJ, as the most popular film of its time (the 1990s) was exceptionally romantic and idealistic. Featuring a hero in Raj (Shahrukh Khan) who was worlds apart from the Wasseypur gang, GOW’s constant referencing of DDLJ functions dually to highlight the Indian dependence on Bollywood and as a satirical comment on the nature of violence and cinema. When a gangster leader calls the man he is
attempting to kill (by having his hired goons fire endless rounds of bullets into his haveli) his ringtone is *Nayak Nahi Khalnayak Hoon Mein* (‘You are not a Hero, You are a Villain’), a popular song from the gangster movie *Khalnayak* (‘Villain’, 1993 dir. Subhash Ghai). The layering of filmic references is entirely self-reflexive, with the male gangsters both affected and affecting of their chosen on-screen personae. But the Bollywood film references also serve another purpose in GOW. As a film with a vast historical sweep, Kashyap uses the films as a device to chronologise the events of the film. When Faizal is watching *Maine Pyar Kiya* we know it must be the late 1980s; when Mohsina sighs that she has seen *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* four times (& when Ramadhir finds out his son watched it the night previous) its is the mid-1990s; and when Perpendicular exits the cinema hall demanding he now be referred to as Munnabhai it is a reference to the 2003 film *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani) and therefore the early-2000s. The Bollywood references here serve as cultural markers (Mumbai Boss) and Kashyap is able to make use of them by knowing his audience is fluent in the language of Bollywood. Bollywood functions as a governing force that informs each of the characters trajectories (as even Singh, who vehemently rejects it, is still fluent in it).

Bollywood references are central to the construction of the film’s primary romances. Faizal first spies Mohsina in GOW 1 at a wedding and instantly identifies her as the object of his affections because she is wearing aviator-style Ray-Ban sunglasses inside like he is. When Faizal and Mohsina embark on their courtship (in GOW 2) it is particularly filmi. He pursues her, tirelessly asking her out on dates, which she routinely refuses and in one memorable scene, he rattles off a long list of current film releases to her in the hope she will see one with him. “*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge?*” he asks, to which she replies that she’s seen it four times, “*Hum Apke Hain Kaun?*” he asks, and she falls silent. Realising he has found one she hasn’t seen he repeats it again, excitedly. The irony of asking “*Hum Apke Hain Kaun? (Who Am I To You?)* to one’s love interest is implicit, and when Mohsina finally responds she asks if he will try to hold her hand, to which he swears on his mother’s life he will not. She then asks if he will try to steal a kiss and he replies the same. She finally asks if he will spill
popcorn in her lap to try and touch her and he replies the same again. Exasperated, she exclaims “then why not go to the movies with your mother?!” to a defeated Faizal. When she does finally permit the persistent Faizal a date he takes hold of her hand and she shouts at him “how dare you touch me without asking for permission!” accusing him of taking advantage of her. To her great surprise Faizal responds by bursting into tears. Midway through their courtship an erotically charged Faizal climbs into Mohsina’s room (via the balcony) late one-night to find her transfixed by the TV screen, watching Bharo Maang Meri Bharo (‘Fulfil Me’), a sensual song-dance sequence starring Mamta Kulkarni and Akshay Kumar from the 1995 film Sabse Bada Khiladi (‘The Biggest Player’, dir. Umesh Mehra, 1995). Faizal sits beside her, craning his neck to catch a glimpse down her kurta, as the camera line switches between Mohsina’s eye line, where we see the sensual Kulkarni is clad in a seductive red-dress taunting the camera and Faizal’s eyes glued firmly to Mohsina’s chest. Faizal confesses that he has come to ask Mohsina to “have sex” with him and she feigns outrage, throwing him out. The juxtaposition between her obvious delight at the erotic performance on-screen of sexuality and her mock fury renders her outrage a comedic performance itself. When she pretends (as a chaste Hindi film heroine ought to) that she is wildly offended and banishes him out back onto her balcony, Faizal’s face is imprinted with sheer bewilderment. Mohsina’s performance is just that, as minutes after he is gone she smiles to herself and resumes watching the film. In this sense GOW reverses the classic courtship, because it is the man who is constantly left guessing as to his beloved’s feelings. She toys with Faizal’s delicate emotions, seeming to garner genuine pleasure in taunting him. Much later, when the pair has been dating for some time Faizal comes to ask for Mohsina’s hand in marriage. He pulls up to the family home in his black jeep and Mohsina’s sister excitedly ushers Mohsina onto the balcony. In slow-motion the camera shows an excited Mohsina running toward the balcony and then cuts to Faizal, now standing beside his jeep, nonchalantly tossing a cigarette into the air and catching it casually in his mouth (recalling a 1980s Rajnikanth move). He flicks his hair in an exaggerated gesture and throws on his dark sunglasses as Mohsina watches him from the balcony. When Faizal speaks with Mohsina’s father downstairs (and asks for her hand)
she jumps up and down excitedly in her bedroom, dreamily pirouetting as she throws her hands above her head in joyous abandon. The entire moment is sheer Bollywood whimsy and her self-styled Madhuri Dixit act complements Faizal’s Bachchan persona perfectly. Their courtship works as a nod to the famous Bollywood romances of yesteryear and also works as a countenance to the intense violence throughout the film. Theirs is ultimately a romance defined and directed by Bollywood.

The violence in GOW is both prolific and potent – blood bathes the screen, bombs are thrown, bullets are fired and dead bodies are pumped with rounds of bullets just to be sure; body parts are sent to the local butcher to eliminate evidence; and fingers are hacked off as warnings. But this graphic violence serves several purposes, as Visvanathan explains:

“Kashyap understands the language of violence, its body, its technology. A knife for all its brutality is an extension of the hand. As one graduates to a gun or a bomb, violence becomes more impersonal. By the time the automatic machine gun arrives, death is industrial.”

Visvanathan’s arguments gesture to the industrialisation of death. Kashyap places the audience front and centre of the brutality to such an extent that it often becomes disaffecting (particularly by the second film) so death becomes oddly impersonal. The nature of this ‘new violence’ means the characters themselves are disaffected in GOW 2, becoming even more crazed and unmoored from any sense of moral sensibility. As the violence becomes normalised, so too does the film’s attitudes to sex and sexuality. One song features the lyrics: “You’ll know my name when I f*** you dry, ain’t I nice, I just f***** you twice”. But contrary to appearances, GOW’s approaches violence, language and sexuality are not merely gratuitous; they work in deliberate opposition to seemingly chaste, polite and proper world of Bollywood that they reference. Kashyap toys with the fantasy of Bollywood, challenging the cleanliness and moral correctness of classic Bollywood. Kashyap’s characters are so distinct that they could not belong to any other film – these are characters who have little need for a moral compass because they have celluloid. Despite the key family being Muslim rarely is anyone shown engaging in Islamic religious
practices (save for the many, many funerals which occur) or other Indian cultural practices, because it is Bollywood that governs their lives – it defines the gangster’s actions, desires, romances and styling choices. GOW perfectly represents a NB Film because it is set in rural Jharkhand, features non-Hindu, non-North Indian characters as protagonists and subverts the generic conventions of the Bollywood gangster film. These factors come together to render GOW an important and landmark contribution to the recent wave of NB Films. Blisteringly brutal and then soft and sensual, GOW is the ultimate New Bollywood contradiction.

The Young and the Desperate: *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha*

"... this film could be based anywhere. I think there are so many small towns within Mumbai or Delhi or Bangalore. What my camera is doing is recording a story that is changing in front of the camera" - Dibakar Banerjee (qtd in Jamkhandikar).

*Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (LSD) begins with footage of a news program promising three stories about love, sex and deceit (*dhokha*). The film plays out these three loosely connected vignettes, titled *Superhit Pyaar (Love)* (‘Blockbuster Love’), *Paap Ki Dukaan (Sex)* (‘Sin in the Shop’) and *Badnaam Shohorat (Dhokha)* (‘Infamy’) respectively, with each addressing an issue important to modern Indian society, namely, “honour killings, sexual exploitation and media voyeurism” (Caravan Media). LSD is an exceptionally dark and daring portrait of a young and growing society. A searing commentary on the nature of modern Indian society, LSD is significant because it is the first film in India to use the found footage method of filming with each story employing a way of seeing other than the conventional camera. Representing a modern aspect of technology, these techniques consist of a mobile phone video camera, a store surveillance camera and a hidden video camera. Director Dibakar Banerjee suggests the film “could be based anywhere” in India and the film’s location (somewhere on the fringes of New Delhi), means the characters exist just outside both the urban experience of the city and the rural experience of the country. LSD could indeed be located in any of the towns across India that are
exiled from both the economic/technological gains of the modern urban lifestyle and the agricultural lifestyles of the rural. This setting, somewhere (or nowhere) in India is integral to the film’s exploration of its key themes; namely isolation, voyeurism, boredom, sexual expression and exploitation and generational clashes. If GOW was at times difficult to watch, LSD is intensely unpalatable in painting and exceptionally dark portrait of young India.

The first story, *Superhit Pyaar*, deals with Rahul, a twenty something whose infatuation with movies sees him directing his first small-budget film in the hopes of winning a contest to meet famous Bollywood director Aditya Chopra (whom he affectionately calls “Adi Sir”). He falls for his leading-lady Shruti (who belongs to a rich Delhi family) and she soon falls for him too. When Shruti’s overprotective brother overhears her flirting on the phone to Rahul he vows to find out the identity of the man on the other end of the phone and in the meantime, Shruti and Rahul elope and marry. They phone Shruti’s family in the hope they will accept the union and Shruti’s father tells the pair he approves and will send a car to collect them from the hotel. During the trip Shruti’s brother and friends stop unexpectedly off the road and bludgeon the newlyweds to death, brutally hacking their bodies into pieces and finally burying the pair under a nearby railway culvert. The second story, *Paap Ki Dukaan*, begins with Shruti’s friend Rashmi, who works night shifts at a local supermarket. Adarsh, the supermarket supervisor (who has obtained the job due to familial connections) is suffering massive debt and makes a pact with one of his friends to make a sex-tape with one of the employees to sell it for a large sum of money. Adarsh sets his sights on Rashmi, who is devastated when she hears of her friends Shruti and Rahul’s shocking murders. Despite developing actual feelings for her, Adarsh still takes advantage of Rashmi by consoling her and ultimately having sex with her and recording it on the shop security camera. The final story, *Badnaam Shohorat*, sees Prabhat, an investigative reporter who uses spy cameras to conduct sting operations, in desperate need of a big story to save his job. After saving aspiring dancer Naina from committing suicide, Prabhat discovers that music icon Loki Local pressured
Naina to sleep with him in exchange for the position of lead dancer in his upcoming music video. The pair secretly film Loki as he again tries to encourage Naina to have sex with him and take the initial sting footage to Prabhat’s boss. The boss encourages them to film another sting where Naina will blackmail Loki by threatening to reveal the initial footage in an attempt to catch him bribing her. The operation (which takes place in the supermarket where Rashmi works) goes awry when Loki tries to steal the camera and shoots Prabhat. Naina visits Prabhat at the hospital and pressures him not to hand the footage to his boss and he does as she wishes. In the end it is revealed that Naina had in fact betrayed him by already accepting the role of lead-dancer in Loki Local’s new video titled “Love, Sex Aur Dhokha”.

Given that LSD comprises mostly of found footage including CCTV spy-camera footage, mobile phone footage and digital, hand-held cameras, the filming style is often unattractive. As the first digital Bollywood film and India’s first major digital film, the filming techniques lend the film an eerie sense of authenticity (particularly given the subjects of the stories) and engender the entire production with a raw, gritty and unfinished feel. The first story includes shots from the video diary of amateur filmmaker Rahul and the shots are poorly framed, badly lit and often slightly shaky, just as a student film might be. The second, from the supermarket, uses high-angled wide shots, (given the security camera is located high above the store) and lends the story both a voyeuristic and disengaged from the narrative-action quality. This imbues the episode with a kind of sad disaffectedness. The final story hinges on a concealed camera (the shots are captured from a camera concealed in Naina’s jacket at one point and from her handbag at another) so they are often obscured, grainy, fuzzy and jerky. These experimental features work to remind audiences they are watching something that appears unedited and hence more real. This cinema-verite appearance lends the entire film a sense of painful reality. They also render the actual film as difficult to physically watch, as the films themes are to digest.
The first story in the film titled *Superhit Pyaar (Blockbuster Love)* centres on young Rahul’s student film, *Mehndhi Laga Ke Rakhna* (‘Apply the Mehndhi’) (taken from the song in DDLJ), and his romance with his leading actress Shruti. Rahul is devoted to romantic film director Aditya Chopra and makes a short film that is essentially a carbon copy of Chopra’s super hit film DDLJ. The story opens with shots from Rahul’s audition tapes, where he sees Shruti for the first time calling her “*my Simran*” (as in Simran, Raj’s love in DDLJ). The shots that follow are filmed by Rahul and include shots of his *actual* film and the off-screen events in Rahul and Shruti’s courtship. His project, complete with over-exaggerated longing looks and slow-motion running sequences ends up a near parody of DDLJ. Banerjee deliberately evokes Shahrukh Khan’s many roles as ‘Rahul’ in the 1990s NRI films with his protagonist and has Rahul repeatedly refer to Shruti as *Simran* by mistake. When Shruti’s overbearing father becomes involved in the film’s production (as Shruti often has to be home early, thus hampering filming efforts) he is just like the overbearing and rigid Baldev Singh from DDLJ (played by Amrish Puri), a reference that Rahul makes when he says to him excitedly, “*Sir, you sound just like Amrish Puri!*” These overlaps are vaguely comedic, particularly when the father takes Rahul on a tour of the house, pointing out the various items of “luxury” he owns, “*see, chandelier Mughal-E-Azam style*”, he says at one point as he shows off the house’s furnishings (which also serves to further remind Rahul of his low-economic-status). Meanwhile Shruti and Rahul continue to work together and fall in love. But Shruti’s father fixes her marriage to an NRI and demands she give up filming. One day when Shruti’s brother overhears her talking to someone on the phone lovingly (it is Rahul) he vows to find the man seeing his sister and bring him to justice. Under increasing pressure, the young lovers hatch a plan where Shruti visits her friend at the hospital (Prabhat, the journalist) and then runs off with Rahul. They visit a temple and are married and elope to a nearby hotel room. Once there, Shruti finds 43 missed calls from her father and calls her father to begrudgingly tell him what she has done. Her father says he wishes she would have told him and then says, “*Come, let’s have a celebration then!*” to which she asks, “*But Papa, aren’t you angry?*” He tells Shruti, “*It’s done now, what’s the use of being angry, let me send a car.*” The lovers canoodle and dress
for the celebration joking about how Rahul will need to beg for Shruti’s father’s forgiveness a thousand times. The car arrives and the scene cuts to the pair sitting in the back seat of the car, as they turn off the overhead light to share a kiss. In the dark, we hear Rahul say, “why are we stopping here?”, at which point (in grainy night-vision) we see men’s faces appear at the car-doors, demanding the pair get out of the car.

As they step out of the car, the pair is accosted by a group of men, including Shruti’s brother who hisses at Rahul, “We let you into our home and you forgot what you are. Just a piece of roadside scum!” The camera solemnly watches on as Rahul is punched in the face and dragged from the side of the car. As Rahul is dragged towards the culvert he drops the camera and it remains there recording the ordeal from about a metre away in night vision on a slight angle. The men grab Shruti and begin to bludgeon the lover’s bodies using an axe, hacking time and time again into the bodies in an utterly horrendous scene. The screams and then the muffled sounds of the axe striking body are exceptionally graphic. The sequence, filmed in night-vision on the discarded camera also lends the scene a snuff-film-like appearance, which makes it all the more terrifying. The scene runs for a full five minutes with the camera solemnly observing the horrendous events and finally ends with a flashback, as the camera is kicked by one of the murderers (who initiates the camera’s rewind setting) to earlier footage of Shruti and Rahul celebrating their marriage in the hotel room, where Rahul finishes his declaration of love by saying, “Shruti and I will be together forever. Always”

The episode’s devotion to a film in which the lovers encounter opposition to their union, yet end the film aboard a train to spend the rest of their lives together, makes Shruti and Rahul’s demise all the more striking. Instead of the teary goodbyes Raj and Simran bade their families, Shruti and Rahul are hacked to pieces and buried under a railway culvert (with the bride’s father watching on, instructing the murderers). Banerjee doesn’t just take the Bollywood dream and break it in LSD, he murders it. Rahul and Shruti’s murderers (including her
brother) are cool, calm and casual in their execution(s) and exercise a ruthless and callous masculinity. Rahul’s character is much like that of the Shahrukh Khan roles before him – he is caring, sensitive and softly spoken (to the point that his voice reaches comical heights when he is trying to convince Shruti’s father to permit her to keep acting in his film). He is mindful of his marginalised position in society (as he says to Shruti he is only studying because of the ‘special case’ rule (referring to the rule which sets aside positions exclusively for lower-caste Indians to receive education) and when he touches Shruti’s car he enthusiastically remarks, “I’ve never touched something so expensive!” Their love story – rich girl, poor boy, is a classic Bollywood story except this time, perhaps for the first time, romance does not win. For Shruti, Rahul is her saviour, helping her break free from her overbearing patriarchal father and violent brother, but in the end even he is unable to save her. Banerjee also makes comment on the disturbing incidences of ‘honour-killing’ in India, by referencing the pervasiveness and the pretence of Bollywood. For these young lovers, the Bollywood dream ends up a brutal Bollywood nightmare.

The second episode follows Adarsh, a young supermarket supervisor who dupes a female employee into having sex with him because he plans to sell the video to the media for profit. The story is shot alternately between the four security cameras in the store (one located behind the cash register, one overseeing the general store, one in the canteen and one in the back-room). Adarsh sets his plan in motion after he is threatened and assaulted by a gang of local goons he owes money to, when his friend tells him, motioning to the security camera, “There! That’s your fortune – the camera. A hug and a kiss are worth up to 1000. But a sex scandal? That could fetch 70,000 easy. The real stuff, without telling the girl”. He suggests Rashmi, the night-shift worker who Adarsh has begun to bond with but Adarsh is reluctant, “Forget it, she’s too dark” he says, to which his friend replies, “Dark, fair, they’re all the same naked. “Look” (he says, gesturing to other real-time security camera showing Rashmi working at the register); “she’s easy meat.” After a man is shot (Prabhat, the journalist from the third story) late one night in the store, Adarsh and Rashmi begin to bond. Adarsh showers Rashmi with compliments about how she ought to be a
model and how pretty she is but Rashmi is reluctant, telling him, “I know I’m not pretty. I’m too dark”. Adarsh persists and when she emotionally breaks down the night she hears Shruti and Rahul have been murdered, he makes his move. Adarsh and Rashmi have sex in the office, where Adarsh lies, telling Rashmi he has turned the security camera off. After the encounter, he sells the footage to the media and a shot of an Internet page showing the encounter flashes on screen. The supermarket boss is then shown in the back room talking to journalist Prabhat. Reflecting on the incident the boss says, “I called Rashmi’s mother, and asked to speak to Rashmi about getting her to come in and pick up her pay cheque but she said she didn’t know any Rashmi”. Prabhat asks him what happened to the boy, to which the boss replies, “Boys will be boys. I hear he’s getting married.” He finally says to Prabhat, as the story concludes, “But since you got shot and the sex tape got sold, sales here have really gone through the roof.”

Throughout Adarsh and Rashmi’s courtship Adarsh becomes increasingly jealous of her interactions with a regular customer, continually warning her about how men are not to be trusted. He routinely tells her that men lie and suggests she be careful about who she chooses to trust. So when it is he who stages the ultimate betrayal by using her at her weakest moment and publicising an intimate act, it is all the more disappointing. There is a moment when it seems as if Adarsh will relent on his callous plan but the visions of money and fame prove enough to make him go through with it. For Adarsh sex is a tool he can wield to leverage him out of financial debt. Both this story and the final one address the use of sex as currency in the youth and also draw attention to the double standards of patriarchal societies. Adarsh’s decision is one that ruins Rashmi’s life yet makes scarcely little impact on his. Banerjee deals with this reflection on the unfair truths of a patriarchal society expertly because his comments are understated and restrained. The overwhelming sense of masculinity in the second story is entirely predatory, from the regular customer who flirts with Rashmi and about whom Adarsh says only wants her for sex; to Adarsh actually only wanting her for sex. In fact, the overall sense of masculinity
in the entire film, with the exception of Rahul and Prabhat is predatory, brutal and exploitative.

The final episode comments on the ‘casting couch’ phenomenon in Bollywood. It sees Prabhat, a journalist at a local media agency that prides itself on conducting sting operations, under immense pressure from his boss and wife to succeed (so much so that he attempts suicide in the beginning of the story). After his own suicide attempt, one day he spies a woman jumping off a local bridge and jumps in after her. He saves her (much to her dismay, as she reprimands him, “I was trying to die! Why did you interfere?”) and after speaking to her, finds out that the reason she attempted suicide was because she was pressured into having sex with local music star Loki Local in exchange for a dancing role in his film-clip (that she never got). She explains that instead of her, some “Russian slut” got the role she was vying for. Sensing the opportunity for a sting, Prabhat makes a deal with Naina to expose Local’s sleazy ways. Local himself is a deliberately absurd caricature, who appears at his front door in a black curly-haired wig as he welcomes Naina into “Loki Local’s International Temple of Love” (where his Russian girlfriend Irina is present). The sting progresses and another meeting is made where Loki and Naina will meet at the supermarket canteen (the same as where Rashmi and Adarsh work) where Loki ends up shooting Prabhat. In the final scene, Naina visits Prabhat in hospital and begs him not to hand the footage to his boss. When his boss visits, excited at the prospect of such a coup, Prabhat reluctantly lies telling her his camera jammed in the scuffle. The scene flashes back to Prabhat’s friends (Shruti, Rahul and Adarsh and Rashmi) visiting him in hospital when one says excitedly, “look Loki Local’s new video-clip is on!” and as video-clip plays (the song is titled “Love Sex Aur Dhokha”) the lead-dancer none other than Naina.

In responding to a question regarding Bollywood’s responses to sex and sexuality, director Dibakar Banerjee observes:

“I don’t think Bollywood has any attitude towards sex, I think it reflects our attitude towards sex. The urban society is waking up and it is a Western-led frankness to sex. I don’t think the peasant in the village who
is working from sun up to sundown has time to think about sex. He just
goes ahead and does it – or doesn’t do it and that’s the end of that. In an
urban environment, consumerism is using sexual signals to sell and here
by sexual I mean when you show the lips or the eyes of woman at its core
that is a sexual signal. Sex as a selling tool is all pervasive and all around
us” (Reuters – India).

LSD’s commentary on the nature of young India in regards to gender and
sexuality are troubling and confronting. Most of the men, except Prabhat and
Rahul are sexual predators, feeding off women’s insecurities for their own gains,
or they callous, cold-blooded murderers. Conversely, each of the women are
victimised; Rashmi is a victim of Adarsh’s manipulation; Shruti is a victim of her
cruel patriarchal family and Naina is a victim of an industry that demands sexual
favours from her. Each character in LSD suffers an innate desperation – Rahul is
desperate to win the film competition and escape the difficulties of being
lower-caste (and be with his love) and Shruti is equally desperate to escape her
cruel family and be with Rahul; Adarsh is desperate to relieve himself of debt
and be ‘successful’ somehow; Rashmi is desperate to be loved and Naina and
Prabhat are both desperate to succeed in their careers. Each of the characters
then, is trapped in someway or another, products of an increasingly
consumerist, commodified and commercialised society. In an interview
Banerjee said the actors were all sourced from small towns and are all new
faces. By using a cast of ‘unknowns’, Banerjee is able to create a world in which
the actors are entirely unfamiliar to audiences (a virtual impossibility for a
commercial Bollywood nowadays) which renders the performances more
believable and ‘authentic’. In featuring both unknown actors and socially taboo
scenarios, LSD functions as a NB Film by subverting, challenging and
experimenting with the generic conventions of Bollywood (challenging the
conventions of the ‘found-footage’ technique, because the technique typically
belongs to the horror genre). The camera is itself a character in the audacious
LSD, documenting, reinventing and ultimately dismantling classic Bollywood
ideals of love, friendship and hope. By far the most experimental NB film in
terms of form, LSD confronts major social issues such as caste discrimination,
honour killing, MMS scandals and an increasing media-obsession with sex.
Smutty, sleazy and viciously violent, LSD challenges the chastity of the
Bollywood stories it references (such as DDLJ) by contrasting it with the ‘realities’ of a hyper-sexualised and hyper-violent society. Its performances of marginality are many and its location, torn between the rural and urban India’s, chronicles the crises of a young society located in-between these two opposing experiences:

“The small-town engenders curiosity as it opens up an underexplored potentiality – a way of life somewhere in the middle of the metropolis and the village – that cannot occupy either of the idealized extremes” (Kumar).

LSD delves into a region unexplored by Bollywood and interrogates the disturbing phenomena of the interconnectedness of public media and private sexualities. In the end, the film pushes the envelope further than it has been before and therefore makes fascinating commentary on the nature of men, women, sex and violence in a young, displaced India.

**Kahaani: Feminism and the City**

*Kahaani* is a NB women-centric film that was made on a small budget and grossed far greater than was expected. Set in Kolkata and exploring themes of *shakti*, womanhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society, *Kahaani* is concerned with dualities; that of the city, of the woman, of the sexes and that of the self. The film tells the story of Mrs Vidya Bagchi (Vidya Balan), a 7-months-pregnant woman who arrives in Kolkata from London in search of her missing husband Arnad (Arbir Chatterjee) who was on assignment at the National Data Centre (NDC). Staying at a local guesthouse, Vidya enlists the help of local policeman Satyoki ‘Rana’ Sinha (Parambrata Chatterjee) to find her husband. As the mystery deepens and the pair encounters dead ends, dead bodies and a villainous assassin, the climax sees Vidya, at the festival of Durga Puja pull off her prosthetic stomach, shoot her enemy dead and disappear altogether. Just before the film ends, it is revealed that Vidya’s husband was in fact an Intelligence Bureau official named Arup Basu who was killed in the gas attack that occurs at the beginning of the film, and Vidya was seeking revenge against a character called Milan Damji (Indraneil Sengupta), the man who killed her husband. The character of Bagchi is sheer antiheroine – the recipient of
audience sympathies even when in the cataclysmic finale, she reveals she was never even pregnant and shoots her enemy in cold blood. *Kahaani* brings together both the tropes of the antihero discussed in chapter two, and the heroine-oriented performances explored in chapter three. As a feminist antiheroine, Vidya’s character conforms to the NB milieu by challenging the Bollywood conventions of old. *Kahaani* features a radical performance of feminism, and creatively transgresses the detective and thriller genres that were popular in Bollywood in the 50s’ and 60s’.

The city of Kolkata imprints itself on every scene in the film. Calcutta (as it was known then) was a popular setting for Bollywood films in the 50s and 60s playing host to films such as *Pyaasa* ('Thirsty' dir. Guru Dutt, 1957), *China Town* (dir. Shakti Samanta, 1967) and the ultimate of the genre, *Howrah Bridge* (dir. Shakti Samanta, 1958). But the setting faded out in Bollywood and from the 1970s onward, was rarely seen. The character of the city echoes through *Kahaani*; with images of crumbling by-lanes, dilapidated mansions, musty government offices, leafy-lined Park Street Restaurants, Victoria Memorial and Kalighat Temple; the film is ode to the City of Joy. Throughout her quest Vidya explores the narrow, winding streets filled with factories carving Hindu deities, through morgues and deep into the metro (which, quite literally, pulls the film underground) to find what she seeks. One her first night in Kolkata Vidya tries to fall asleep in her street-facing guestroom. As car headlights dance across the wall, and the sounds of horns, passing trams and street-workers fill the room, the city seeps into the scene. Director Ghosh reported in interviews that in *Kahaani* he made use of guerrilla-filmmaking techniques (as it was filmed on location), so the camera is often hand-held as it tracks Vidya and Rana past iconic Kolkata sights and into the old back lanes to illuminate the colourful city. Like GOW, the narrative action here unfolds *in* the actual city rather than in interior sets. Ghosh explains more on the interrelationship between the city and the film:

“Kolkata has two sides. That’s what I tried to establish even while using clichés and then juxtaposing them with grim realities. For me, Kolkata wasn’t supposed to be an object. Kolkata is a person and had an
emotional index. When Parambrata drives down Vidya to the guesthouse for the first time, I deliberately show how the evening is slowly setting in. That’s how my Kolkata enters every frame and finally becomes a central character of my film. Balancing out romance and grit to create an image of Kolkata is a matter of instinct. To extract romance out of grit requires a visual representation. You build enough grit visually so that when romance or anything else seeps in, one can easily see it” (Times of India).

Ghosh’s observations illuminate his direction for the film in terms of his use of the city as a character. The vignettes of the city, from the very minute Vidya arrives at the airport and is accosted by cheerful taxi drivers, envelope her. Rather than merely a series of ‘sights’ Kahaani’s urban experience is one of confusion – just as Vidya’s journey is unclear, so too are the winding lanes of the city often mystifying. The shots of the city, from the sights to the Puja scenes, filled with warrior-like women, are at times ominous and omnipotent and at others warm and welcoming. Kolkata, like the characters in Kahaani has two sides.

Kahaani is a film in which nothing can be believed. The narrative toys with the sometimes static notion of identity – suggesting instead that is constantly shifting and that people, in one way or another, are often not who they say they are. Numerous instances throughout the film toy with initial perceptions of characters and events, causing the audience to constantly question what is real and what is not. The film begins with a busy train compartment in the Kolkata Metro where a young mother drops a glass feeding bottle that evaporates into a poisonous gas that kills all the commuters. The fact that a young mother is an apparent terrorist subverts Bollywood tropes at the outset (as the terrorist is always male and usually Muslim in Bollywood), as does the character of Bob Biswas (Saswata Chatterjee). Like Faizal in GOW, Biswas is a villain that subverts the prevailing Bollywood tropes of evil. A meek insurance clerk by day and a cold-blooded killer by night, Biswas’ true identity belies his appearance. Similarly, when NDC Human Resources Director Agnes D’Mello (Coleen Blanche) first appears onscreen she has a full head of hair. But when Biswas arrives at her home preparing to kill her, she is without her wig, dramatically altering her appearance. The wig is her own element of disguise and yet another example of
Kahaani’s commitment to suggesting everyone performs an impersonation of sorts. Ghosh says that “every individual in this city has two names – the good name and the pet name” (Times of India), which underscores the film’s obsession with the duality of identity. In one of the opening scenes where Vidya meets Rana she asks as he drives her through busy Kolkata at dusk why he has two names. He explains to her that everyone in Bengal has a ‘good name’ and a ‘pet name’, thus his good name is Satyaki and his pet name Rana. Satyaki, Vidya keenly observes, is Arjun’s and Krishna’s charioteer, which makes an obvious allusion to the fact that Rana will be steadfast at Vidya’s side, guiding her through his city, before she exclaims, “How fascinating! One person yet two names, two identities!” The irony here is that audiences do not yet know that Vidya herself is concealing two identities. Kahaani is filled with numerous subversions that remind the audience that everyone is deceiving someone in some way. In fact, almost every significant character engages in some kind of deception and these destabilisations work to suggest to the audience that they cannot trust what they are seeing, particularly as the film repeatedly depicts ‘flashbacks’ that in fact, never happened. These flashbacks of Vidya’s life with her husband ‘Arnab’ constructs false memories onscreen thereby undermining the traditional relationship between film and viewer. The word Kahaani itself, meaning ‘story’ or ‘tale’ is an indicator of the film’s deception. At the very end of the film Rana, who has realised that Vidya had actually attended Durga Puja to find Damji and kill him and was never pregnant, tries to explain to a baffled Inspector Khan what has happened by telling him that Bagchi had been telling them “a story”.

The promotional poster for Kahaani features an image of Balan as Bagchi portraying the multi-armed Goddess Durga. Framed by Kolkata’s iconic Howrah Bridge, the divine imagery is integral to the film as Kahaani repeatedly conflates the idea of the mother with the divine. Goddess Durga, known affectionately as the Divine Mother, or Ma Durga, represents one of the many forms of shakti (female divine energy) and is responsible for protecting mankind and destroying evil powers. Referred to often as the Mother of the Universe, Durga is depicted in Hindu imagery with ten arms holding ten items each representative of her
various powers. These items, including a sword, a snake, a conch shell, a discus, 
a rosary, a bell, a wine-cup, a shield, a bow, an arrow and a spear are indicative 
of her divine power to both create and destroy. The discus, or sudarshana 
chakra, is reflective of the entire world spinning on her finger and therefore 
places her in control of it. The famous festival of Durga Puja, which celebrates 
the victory of Goddess Durga over the evil buffalo demon Mahishasura, 
provides deep structure to *Kahaani*’s narrative (and to Kolkata as a city).

Celebrated widely across India, the festival is particularly popular in the Eastern 
states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odessa and West Bengal. Durga Puja is most 
significant however, in Bengali Hindu society where it is celebrated over ten 
days and is one of the most important festivals of the year. In celebrating the 
Goddess’ victory, devotees adorn icons of her with weapons and her ritual 
slaying of the demon is followed by her immersion in a river on the tenth day.

As a fierce warrior, Durga’s defeat of her opponent is an obvious metaphor for 
Vidya’s desire to avenge her husband’s death. In that climatic moment, when 
she rips off her prosthetic stomach and shoots Damji, pumping a further five 
bullets into his lifeless body as it lay on the ground, she is pure woman-warrior.

There are numerous examples of woman as warrior imagery in the film. When 
Rana and Vidya visit an icon carver, who is responsible for bringing Goddesses 
to life, the camera tracks across the lifeless deities who are waiting to have their 
eyes brought to life. This imagery reaches a climax on the penultimate night of 
Durga Puja on the busy Bengali streets, where we see thousands of women 
dressed the same, surging toward Kalighat Temple. Using the festival as a device 
works twofold for the final scene; it permits Vidya to kill Damji quietly (given 
how loud the drumming and hollering from the festival is) and then allows her 
to disappear into a sea of women on the street.

*Kahaani* deploys a representation of the mother as warrior with Vidya’s 
pregnant avatar. Her appearance instantly evokes the tropes of motherhood as 
she is keen to protect her child and also encourages audience sympathies 
because, as Shastri and Bhoraskar argue, it desexualises her. Her long, modest 
dresses and cardigans that cover her swelling belly ensure she is seen always as 
*mother*, not as a sexual-being. *Kahaani* is unusual in that it features the body of
the pregnant woman so fully. It is still relatively rare for Bollywood to depict the body of the pregnant women, despite depending so heavily the family-unit for its narratives. Vidya’s interactions with other characters in the film are often maternal, particularly in her friendship with Rana whose devotion and affection for her is almost childlike. As the pair ride a tram one afternoon she playfully kicks his foot as she would a child, recollecting her previous interactions with Bishnu, the little boy at the guesthouse who is responsible for the ‘running hot-water’ (literally running hot kettles up the stairs to guests). She plays with Bishnu, buying him chocolates and teasing his affection for a small radio he always carries. These kinds of interactions, which ensure she is seen as motherly serve in a way, to enable her deceit and permit her to undertake her covert mission more easily. As Khan says to her, when he informs her that intends to ‘use’ her as a means of getting to Damji, “No one will ever suspect a pregnant woman.” But then Kahaani subverts the Bollywood trope of the mother as self-sacrificing by showing us a woman who is faking her pregnancy in order to undertake a very personal mission. The very fact that she is able to outwit every single male in the film (even Rana who she is affectionate of) is proof of her divine feminine power or shakti. In the final scene of the film the celebrations for the festival of Durga Puja reach a climax. As Vidya and thousands of women, all dressed alike in red and white saris, merge into a powerful sea; the film makes comment on feminine power en-masse. As the film draws to a close, the voiceover says:

“Sometimes Gods too make mistakes. The Gods made Asuras (demons), gave them power; but when they began to misuse these powers, the Gods created Mother Durga to destroy the demons. It is said that the power of all mothers was combined to create Mother Durga. Every year, she comes, destroys all evil, and returns; all so that we can live without fear and in peace.”

This voiceover explicitly imagines Vidya as Durga. She has come to defeat the demon (Milan Damji – who is evil as he inadvertently killed hundreds of innocent commuters) and then disappears into a sea of women, just as Durga herself is immersed in the ocean. The likening of heroine Vidya to Goddess Durga is a means by which the film softens the cinematic impact of the actuality
of her actions, particularly as one could read that the film appears to suggest murder and vengeance are appropriate under certain circumstances. But, by imagining Vidya as Durga, *Kahaani* justifies her actions. Throughout the film Vidya performs a matriarchal power that easily dominates and defeats the masculine, ensuring her performance is sheer antiheroine.

Just as in GOW and in keeping with the NB genre, *Kahaani* performs numerous character subversions. Along with Vidya’s performance as antiheroine, the villainous character of Bob Biswas marks a major departure from the classic Bollywood villain. In the yesteryear of Bollywood the villain was typified by actors like Pran or Prem Chopra who blew smoke-rings, were strong, ruthless, mysteriously aggressive and often sought to steal the heroine from the hero. Biswas is the antithesis of the classic villain precisely because he is so extraordinarily ordinary. The plain, average and unassuming murderer became something of a national obsession after the film’s release.

Middle-aged Biswas is baby-faced, bespectacled, potbellied, balding and rides hand-drawn rickshaws. As a point of comparison, the recent remake of *Agneepath* (“Path of Fire”, Karan Malhotra, 2012) saw Sanjay Dutt’s villainous turn as Kancha bring back the beefy, violent villain back to Bollywood. With his pumped-up muscles and ruthlessly violent turn Kancha could pick a man and swing him over his head with great ease. Conversely, Biswas is so unfit that during a footrace through the street with the police he very nearly collapses, clutching his heart and panting. Biswas first appears on screen where he works as an Insurance clerk and is constantly chastised by his boss. The boss complains that Biswas never has any clients and is constantly underwhelming. Biswas takes these lengthy lectures with a silent subservience, however when he makes his first on-screen killing, the other side of his personality is revealed. When Agnes D’Mello answers her doorbell to find Biswas standing there, he asks her if she is Agnes D’Mello, and she replies with a soft “yes?”. Biswas says, “Hello, I am Bob Biswas, one minute please” to which she politely nods, as he reaches into his bag pulls

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36 So much so that Biswas has been used in a popular TV advertisements on Indian television, has hundreds of ‘memes’ and countless fan-pages of considerable number of Facebook and social networking websites dedicated to him.
out a gun and shoots her twice in the chest. She collapses to the floor bleeding, as Biswas makes a sign of the cross and calmly leaves the scene. Saurav Majumder argues that “what is striking about the man is the duality of is nature \( \text{an ordinary face in the crowd by day and a menacing, ruthless hit man when darkness falls.} \) (Bright Lights Film Journal). In a sense Biswas is sheer fantasy, a mouse by day, and a deadly killer by night, but undoubtedly what makes him so successful is the sheer unexpectedness of his character. Biswas’ character works, like the film does, on duality. He is a lowly Insurance worker by day and a cold-blooded killer by night, but he is also a testament to the ability of any ordinary person to become a killer (just as Vidya herself is).

There is a major dichotomy between the cities of Kolkata and Delhi in Kahaani. Kolkata works as a setting because as the ‘city of the common man’, it functions as “a deliberate concession made to the empowered individual over the state” (Shastri & Bhoraskar). The Marxist Kolkata, long revered as an intellectual and creative city that celebrates the individual is contrasted with the representation of Delhi as masculine and aggressively devoted to civil service and regimented power. The brief shots of Delhi are decidedly imposing – from the images of the sweeping and majestic Sansad Marg (“Parliament Street”) to those of shiny offices filled with men in suits. The Delhi Intelligence Bureau (IB) offices are shown as the epicentre of masculine power, filled with men in suits and ringing phones, while the shots of Kolkata’s police station are of small cramped offices filled with casual-wear, cups of chai and pleasantries. The Delhi IB come to be involved in the investigation when Vidya’s attempts to obtain a Milan Damji’s records at the NDC raises suspicions. Chief Bhaskaran K (Dhritiman Chatterjee) sends his deputy Inspector Khan (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), who reveals to Vidya that Milan Damji was a rogue IB agent responsible for the poison gas-attack. From the moment he appears, Khan’s presence in Kolkata is authoritative, confronting, controlling and aggressively masculine. His imposing nature instantly places him at odds with the more casual and placid Kolkata police, who he undermines at every turn. This aggressive persona also contrasts with Vidya’s soft-spoken sensibility and nurturing manner. It appears in their first few meetings that Khan has the upper hand, but as the film ends it is revealed that
Vidya has been expertly playing him to achieve her aim. The ending can partly be read as Kolkata’s defeat of Delhi, as the IB ends up looking amateurish because Vidya outwits them. Given the conflation of the masculine and city of Delhi it can also be read as a defeat of the masculine itself, implicit of Goddess Durga’s own feminine victory.

The tropes canvassed in chapters two and three come together with *Kahaani* because much discussion and critical review of the film touted Vidya as a ‘hero’. In fact, Vidya performs far more like Vijay, Devdas and Faizal – performing as an antihero-ine. Driven by a compulsive desire for revenge against Milan Damji (who killed her husband), she will stop at nothing to achieve her goal. Just as Vijay in *Deewar* had to fight against the State, so too does Vidya have to fight against the patriarchal State (New Delhi, in this case) who block her at every turn. Her presence as a pregnant female is made all the more arresting by the fact that she is dealing in such male-dominated environs (there are no women at the Kolkata Police Station, and only a few India ludi at the NDC).

Indeed, the ease with which she traverses the streets un-chaperoned and stays alone in a cheap hotel are largely unthinkable for the classic Hindi heroine. She undertakes an exceptionally violent act when she murders Damji and undertakes a major act of deception when she finally pulls off her prosthetic stomach yet still (arguably) retains audience sympathies. *Kahaani*’s women centric narrative recollects the films discussed in chapter three, as it subverts the Bollywood norm by deploying a powerfully violent female protagonist. Vidya, just as the women in *Chak De! India* and *Paheli* did, must battle against and ultimately defeat inherently patriarchal systems (in this case the police and investigative systems). In the end, regardless of whether her image is more pervasive as ‘mother’, ‘antiheroine’, ‘goddess’ or ‘female protagonist’ it is her character complexity and innate skill that makes her a fascinating centrepiece for the film and one unlike any we have seen before. *Kahaani* travels new ground by deploying a genre, an antiheroine, a theme and a city that have as yet been unexplored in Bollywood.
The NB film is an experiment in marginality. In bringing together antiheroes, taboo subjects, subversive techniques, experimental form and theme, these films subvert the prevailing tropes of Bollywood and rewrite them anew. I signal the NB film with the considered acknowledgement that as Bollywood evolves it becomes increasingly less clear what constitutes masala, women-centric, mainstream, parallel and/or New Bollywood films. But the blurring of these boundaries is heartening because it is evidence of the increasing experimentalism in postmodern Bollywood. In selecting three films that articulate three very different India's – the urban India, the rural India and the India in-between, this chapter has told a story of the New Bollywood and of the nation. As postmodern texts, these films destabilise and disrupt classic Bollywood codes and conventions to tell alternative tales. They prove that New Bollywood is a cinema for the exile – a mode simultaneously indebted to the Bollywood of the past as it forges the radical New Bollywood of the future.
“It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect the world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” – Salman Rushdie (10-11).

This thesis has gestured to the way Bollywood is increasingly offering up a (contested) space for marginal identities. In making sense of Bollywood’s performances of marginality, I have found that Bollywood has often been and is becoming even more so, a cinema of subversion. It has been my intention to definitively demonstrate that contrary to the prevailing scholarship on the matter, Bollywood does represent minorities. I sought to reject the idea that Bollywood merely performs a hegemonic version of the Nation by illuminating Bollywood’s increasing experiments with the Other.

As the largest cinema in the world and the most substantial part of the Indian film industry, Bollywood is rapidly gaining global currency. This study is situated within the rise of South Asia, and within that rise, the global turn to Bollywood. As academics and popular culture focuses on the subject, the field is rapidly emerging. In the introduction I explained that theorists such as Madhava Prasad and Sumita Chakravarty laid the groundwork in early Bollywood academia by suggesting that Bollywood functions as a mirror for the nation, reflecting changing trends, values and ideologies. In emphasising the role of the nation in Bollywood, these theorists contend that Bollywood deploys a strongly North Indian, Hindu-centric, patriarchal and heterosexual representation of ‘India’. Virdi echoes these sentiments, writing in her preface to The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History, that Bollywood “enjoys popular mass investment in the hegemonic ideal while claiming to resist acculturation” (x). She continues, suggesting that in Bollywood “the nation appears not as a melting pot of cultures but rather as a dominant generic North Indian culture prevalent in the Hindi-speaking belt” (9). Virdi’s comments surmise the vast majority of Bollywood academia that argues Bollywood is an exceptionally exclusive cinema that performs a hegemonic version of the nation by denying any possibility of an alternative other.
In the course of my research it became radically apparent that there was a chasm when it came to thinking through Bollywood’s representation of the other – primarily because the vast majority of scholarship denies even the possibility of such. In *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie, who this study has encountered numerously, discusses the complexities of inventing India from afar by suggesting “the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one that is supposedly flawed” (11). But Prasad writes in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*:

> “These texts are works of ideology, not mirrors of reality. The changing realities are, no doubt, one of the conditions that make these films possible and necessary, not in order to reflect these conditions, but to construct ideological resolutions for the contradictions that accompany these changes” (237).

Perhaps the mirror both reflects and reinvents the nation in its distortion. This study has moved beyond Prasad’s initial formulations that Bollywood is an ideological weapon for the nation, by arguing that Bollywood possesses the ability to perform, deform and reform the nation. Whilst Bollywood has undoubtedly often deployed a hegemonic view of the nation, it is far more interesting to locate and test the breaks in this theory. As a result, I have uncovered several popular Bollywood films that contradict and challenge the monolithic idea of the homogenous ‘ideal’ to reflect a more polyglot and diverse nation.

My agenda throughout this thesis has been to explore the other and by rescuing those at the margins, rather than resorting to an easy condemnation of the cinema, I have demonstrated that Bollywood does and is increasingly addressing those outside the main body. By considering marginality within a culturally sensitive context, I set out to uncover alternative performances of gender and sexuality in Bollywood and in doing so conversed with the themes, issues and representations that Bollywood cinema marginalises most. In addressing these narratives of exile, this thesis has found popular films that each in some way subvert the prevailing Hinducentric and heteropatriarchal
tropes of Bollywood. By taking up twelve popular post-independence releases, this study has explained how *Pakeezah, Umrao Jaan, Deewar, Devdas, Paheli, Chak De! India, The Dirty Picture, Utsav, Dedh Ishqiya, Gangs of Wasseypur, Love Sex aur Dhokha* and *Kahaani* each contain destabilisations of the Bollywood stereotype.

In Chapter One I explored the figure of the tragic tawaif in the classic Muslim Socials *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* to find her pathos to function as an allegory for the fractured Indo-Muslim identity in post-Partition India. In detailing the historical events leading to Partition, it was my intention to reflect how integral the disruptive socio-political circumstances of the time were to the formation of the classic Muslim Social genre. Partition had (and continues to have) major ramifications for the Muslim identity in India and so reflected in *Pakeezah*’s optimistic ending (where the tawaif is married and restored to respectability) is an optimism regarding the state(s) of Indo-Muslim identity. Yet encoded in *Umrao Jaan*’s ending, ten years later, is a grave pessimism with the tawaif left alone staring into her split reflection in a cracked mirror. The fractured mirror reflects a fragmented identity.

The second chapter explored two performances of masculinity-in-crisis via the antihero. In examining a cult-classic in *Deewar* and then a modern classic in *Devdas*, I found the antihero provides striking contrast to the classic Bollywood hero. It is perhaps paradoxical that this chapter considers two of the most commercially popular films this thesis deals with, because both contain such alternative performances of rogue masculinity. In *Deewar*, warring brothers Vijay and Ravi encapsulate two opposing views on the contentious National Emergency of 1975; Ravi reflects the dreams of the state-sponsored Emergency, while Vijay reflects the struggles of the collective masses. In *Devdas*, the title antihero struggles with a masculinity-in-crisis that is a result of a colonial Bengal and wages psychic violence on his two love-interests. Just as the Muslim Socials were, both films studied in this chapter are tethered to the changing socio-political circumstances of the nation. Despite being such apparently different films, this chapter found that both antiheroes assert their masculinity-in-crisis in
striking and similarly troubling ways, thereby marking a stark departure to the classic, romantic hero of classic Bollywood cinema. Both Chapter One and Chapter Two chronicle narratives of loss alongside the socio-political circumstances of the nation.

In a patriarchal tradition of cinema that so often celebrates the hero, women and Bollywood share an uneasy relationship. Chapter Three analysed a collective of modern women-centric or heroine-oriented performances contained in *Paheli*, *Chak De! India* and *The Dirty Picture*, in relation to modern Indian womanhood. In light of the frequent insertion of western feminism into Indic contexts, I contended that interrogations into Indian feminisms are troubled. Though certainly not without their flaws, each of these positive performances of femaleness point to a promising and positive future for (empowered) female protagonists. Though it often appears that Bollywood representations of female same-sex desire are a virtual impossibility, Chapter Four reread Bollywood films for female queerness in order to argue that the song-dance sequence houses potentially queer desires. In hosting alternative desires, *Utsav* and *Devdas* contain moments of radical, possible female-to-female desire. As I explored these moments in greater depth it became apparent that there was an uncanny assemblage of queer tropes (both male and female) that circulated around the actor Rekha. In regularly performing as a tawaif (in *Umrao Jaan*, for example) Rekha represents marginal identity onscreen and her personal life has defied typical ‘female’ convention off-screen (as she remains unmarried and childless). Finally, I found *Dedh Ishqiya* to be the most visible example of female-queerness Bollywood has ever explored, as irrefutable evidence that Bollywood is experimenting in radical alternates.

The fifth and final chapter looked at the New Bollywood genre and found three films in which many of the threads from the earlier chapters coalesce. New Bollywood, a cinema for the marginalised, contains radical representations of empowered females, Muslim identities, angry young men and antiheroes. The new Bollywood genre gestures to a future of radical experimentalism for Bollywood, as *Gangs of Wasseypur*, *Love Sex Aur Dhoka* and *Kahaani* each
contain original and exciting contributions to the genre. In forging the Bollywood of the future, these films constantly reference the Bollywood of the past; making it an intrinsically self-reflexive and radical form that provides the perfect conclusion to this study.

This thesis has avoided the areas of Bollywood academia that have been well covered. The tropes of the ubiquitous NRI film are potent and plenty and for this reason have been avoided almost entirely. Similarly, I have steered a course clear of films like *Mother India*, which have been numerously and successfully analysed. Instead of retracing old ground, this study travelled into new territory with subversive performances that fill the chasm in the existing scholarship. Bollywood academia for decades now has focused on iconic figures such as the self-sacrificing mother, the NRI hero and so on, and as a result has largely ignored representations of Islam, rogue masculinities, empowered femininities and especially representations of queerness. But as my final chapter argued, New Bollywood has emerged as a form that celebrates those in the margins proudly producing films that challenge and confront classic Bollywood.

Though there may be a multiplicity of meanings generated by the popular Bollywood film, there is definitive proof of an increased experimentalism emerging in the industry. It is my contention that the way forward for Bollywood studies is to maintain a fluid approach that accepts the cross-relationship between nation and cinema yet maintains an optimistic and inclusive approach. I have advocated for an Indiacentric, culturally sensitive lens of analysis that denies Eurocentric methods and contends Bollywood cinema is unique. This thesis predominantly focused on religious representations of Islam as the Other but there is also increasing representations of other Others (including Catholic, Jain and Parsi identities) in Bollywood, which would be useful to cover in greater depth. Similarly, studies of male and female queerness (aside from the faux-homosexuality tropes) in India-set films are few and certainly warrant further investigation. Essentially, each performance of marginality contained in this study could be a thesis of its own – proof that studies that break with the national-ideology model are far too few. In such a
monolithic subject as ‘Bollywood’ there is always going to be an array of readings, meanings and pleasures on offer but by resisting and re-reading the texts for radical meanings, it becomes evident that there are fascinating ruptures in the ‘Bollywood’ stereotype. It is becoming increasingly impossible to make all-encompassing statements in regards to Bollywood, which is proof that the hegemonic Bollywood stereotype is finally crumbling.

As I write this conclusion, the late 2014 release of Aamir Khan starrer PK is still causing furore in India. The film, a family-friendly satire on the business of religion in India, attracted a boycott campaign on social media; vigorous opposition from the All India Human Rights and Social Justice Front who filed at writ with the Supreme Court alleging that the film “promoted vulgarity” and offended the Hindu religion; yet despite this has become the highest-grossing Bollywood film in India and overseas, and therefore of all time. The Chief Justice said in his deliberation when he dismissed the writ against PK, “If you don’t like it, don’t watch it. If your prayer is accepted, we’re taking away someone’s right to watch movies” (qtd in Sen S). What PK’s success indicates is precisely what this thesis is so concerned with – successful experiments in marginality. PK features a Hindu girl falling in love with a Pakistani boy, playfully mocks icon-worship in all religions and satirises Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. PK challenges the key ideology of the classic Hindi film in Hindu religiosity, yet somehow still managed to become the highest grossing Bollywood film of all time, proving definitively that audiences are receptive and ready for alternative narratives.

There is a moment in the late 2014 release, Haider (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj), an interpretation of Hamlet, when Haider (Shahid Kapoor) stands bereft in the charred ruins of his childhood home with his mother, Ghazala (Tabu), who is staring into a cracked mirror; her face doubled. Haider (as Hamlet) takes Ghazala’s (as Gertrude) jaw in his hands and hisses, “My two-faced Mother, such innocence in one face; such deceit in the other”. In Haider the mirror is held up to India and to Pakistan – as the film critiques both nations for their role in the protracted battle for the possession of Kashmir. Set in the contested land of
Kashmir, the film attracted a vitriolic protest from Hindu Nationalist activists who led a social-media campaign calling for a boycott of the film and encouraged Indian viewers to rally against the (perceived) sympathetic portrayal of Muslim militants. Aided by a committee of displaced Kashmiri pandits, there were numerous calls for an outright ban on the film. A land two countries call their own, Kashmir remains ever-plagued by military violence, displacement and curfews imposed by both sides. A pawn in a political battle, Kashmir’s protracted conflict has seen massive bloodshed, dispossession and loss. The setting lends itself easily to the tragedy of *Hamlet*, because its own (hi)story is equally tragic. Set in a land with a history of exile and marginalisation, *Haider* is as an experiment in extremism, considering the place of the *other* in an often-exiled chapter of Indian (and Pakistani) history. Though not as successful as *PK*, *Haider* was still a commercial and critical success and, in reworking a classic text into a marginal setting, is a perfect example of the New Bollywood genre.

Bollywood is at times a mirror to the nation, just as the nation is at times a mirror to Bollywood. The films studied here project and reflect an alternative India: one that affirms the radical power of those located in the margins. In reclaiming a space for those at the margins, this thesis examined five key marginalised themes, locations, genres and performances in twelve popular, post-Independence Bollywood films: performances of Indo-Muslim identity in the Muslim Social; antiheroism or rogue masculinities in two classic films; women-centric or heroine-oriented films; female-to-female queer desire; and the New Bollywood genre. In innovating a different lens through which to read Bollywood cinema, I denied both Bollywood scholarship that situates the Bollywood film within a rigid nationalist-ideological network and Hollywood scholarship that subordinates Bollywood from the outset. Instead, I situated this study within an optimistic space – one that contests the idea that globalisation is destroying the nation (and cinema). In denying the idea that Bollywood merely deploys nationalism via a dominant Hindu, North Indian, heteropatriarchal subject, this thesis has explored new territory. By interrogating films that feature performances of marginality, this thesis has
engaged in a conversation with the largest cinema in the world and with those rapidly travelling from the margins, through contested spaces and into the open.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adab: An Islamic gesture, where one utters the word adab (meaning peace, or respect) and raises one’s right palm towards one’s forehead. Used typically as a mark of respect for Muslims toward non-Muslims.

Baarat: The bridegroom’s wedding procession.

Bauji: A Hindi word for Father.

Bhang Lassi: A lassi (a yoghurt drink) containing bhang (a derivative of the Cannabis plant) that is popular at Holi.

Chakkar: Originating from Kathak dance, chakkar is a dance-move in which one pirouettes rapidly on the heel.

Choli: A short-sleeved and cropped blouse worn under a sari or as part of a lehenga.

Devadasi: A Hindu temple-dancer during the Vedic period.

Diya: A small lamp lit for religious and auspicious occasions.

Dosti: A Hindu word meaning ‘friend’ or ‘buddy’.

Dupatta: A scarf that accompanies a traditional Indian outfit (usually a lehenga).

Durga Puja: An annual Hindu festival (particularly popular in Kolkata) devoted to worshipping Goddess Durga. In celebrating Durga’s victory over the evil buffalo Mahishasura, the festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil. Devotees used to collect a handful of soil from a courtesan’s doorstep to make an offering to Durga on the required day of worship. While the reasons are somewhat contentious, it is generally accepted that this practice originated is because it was thought that a courtesan too was a woman so the Goddess must reside in her, as she does all women.

Filmi: A term referring to something to do with Bollywood films – usually employed to imply dramatic or exaggerate gesture, or referring to a style of dance, song or acting that emulates any particular Bollywood film or style.

Ganika: A secular courtesan in the Vedic period.

Ghazal: A song that expresses the exquisite pain of love and longing.

Godh-bharai: A Hindu childbearing ceremony.

Hatke: A Hindi term implying ‘something different’.
**Hijra:** A community of people across South Asia usually identifying as transsexual or transgender. In India, the hijra, or eunuch, exist in the margins of society, but once were considered auspicious presences at childbirths and weddings.

**Izaat:** A term referring to the notion of honour that applies to Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs but is especially evoked by Bollywood as an expressly female thing, by likening it to a young woman’s ‘purity’ or virginity.

**Jadoo:** The Hindi word for ‘magic’.

**Kshatriya:** a Hindu caste denoting the Ruling or Military class.

**Kismet:** An Urdu word for ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’.

**Kotha:** The dwelling in which tawaifs would live and hold performances for male audiences.

**Lehenga:** A woman’s outfit that consists of a short, fitted blouse (choli), a full skirt and a scarf (dupatta). Most popular in the North of India, these outfits are usually embroidered, beaded and heavily decorated.

**Mangalsutra:** A necklace worn by married Hindu women.

**Mehendhi:** Also known as henna, it is a paste made from the henna plant used to stain the hands and feet in decorative patterns for celebrations.

**Mujra:** A performance of song and dance by the tawaif that originated during the Mughal era and incorporated elements of kathak dance that was most commonly set to ghazals.

**Mushaira:** An Urdu word referring to a poetic symposium or event where poets gather to share their works. Popular in Pakistan and Northern India, the event has particularly Islamic connotations.

**Natya Sangeet:** A form of classical and semi-classical music that was part of dramatic performances in the Marathi language in Maharashtra in the early 1800s.

**Nawab:** An honorific title bestowed by a reigning Mughal Emperor on other Muslim rulers of princely states in India.

**Puja:** A Hindu prayer ritual performed at various times throughout the year for various religious reasons.
**Purdah:** The Islamic female act of veiling oneself so as to prevent men from seeing oneself.

**Qawaali:** A style of Sufi devotional song.

**Salwar Kameez:** An outfit popular in South and Central Asia consisting of a salwar (loose pyjama-like pants that are tapered at the ankle) and a kameez (a long shirt or tunic). Worn by both men and women regardless of religion, class or caste.

**Shakti:** The Hindi word translating to ‘power’ or ‘empowerment’ and refers to the exclusively female divine energy in Hinduism.

**Shayari:** An Arabic word for Poetry.

**Sindoor:** Red powder worn by Hindu women in the hairline to denote marriage.

**Suta:** A Hindu caste denoting a child of ‘mixed-caste’, particularly one with a Kshatriya father and Brahmin mother.

**Swayamvara:** A Sanskrit word referring to the practice in ancient India where a father would select a suitable suitor from a list of men for his daughter at an auspicious time and venue in public, on her reaching of marriageable age.

**Tamasha:** A Persian word meaning ‘show’ or ‘entertainment’ that was appropriated by the Marathi, Hindu and Urdu languages in the 1800s to mean ‘drama’ or ‘play’. In Maharashtra *tamasha* refers to a dedicated tradition of theatre troupes (where all roles were traditionally performed by males).

**Tawaif:** An unmarried woman (usually located in the Northern areas of South Asia) skilled in Arabic arts such as Urdu poetry, dance and music. Also skilled in *kathak*, the tawaif entertained Indian noblemen and elites. Though not necessarily Muslim, the tawaif’s art excelled during the Mughal dynasty, which is why she was commonly associated with Islamic cultural practices.

**Thumri:** A style of song popular in Uttar Pradesh which is usually romantic and devotional, and tends to feature a woman’s love for Krishna as its key theme.

**Ululation:** A sound women in Bengal often make at weddings and other auspicious occasions that sounds similar to a howl or trill made with the tongue.

**Zindalash:** A living corpse (a way of expressing that one feels as if they are already dead).
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