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The *White Bollywood*: Portrayal of the Caucasian in *Bollywood* Films

Nirmalya Biswas

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English
Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

From *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) to *The Good Road* (2013), the cinema of India, an extremely important part of our cultural identity celebrating its centenary this year, has been working as an ambassador of India to a global audience since the day of its inception. In India, it is often seen that films made in Hindi targeted at a larger audience, commonly known as mainstream movies or *Bollywood* films, employ a different grammar of filmmaking than that is used in so-called sensible or parallel cinema while representing or portraying different aspects and sections of society, race, culture, gender and class. In this paper, I try to focus on the representations of Caucasian characters, or the *white*, in popular Hindi cinema, or *Bollywood* films, and try to assess how they are introduced, perceived and represented, how they are important to the narrative, whether or how tenets of cultural hegemony applies to them and how they are received by the audience.

With a rich cultural heritage, borne and developed, probably, out of a slow but steady process of acculturation through millennia, India is truly a global melting pot with a million stories to tell, and *Bollywood* films, one of our most fervent, if not the most accurate, storytellers. Gaston Roberge, on the impact of films on society, says:

You cannot transform the world by means of filmmaking, but you certainly can transform the representations of the world through film (Roberge 3).

A long colonial past and a mixed socio-economic existence of people nurture the legacy of multilingualism and multiculturalism in our country. If films are to be taken as dioramas of the society in a larger sense, the frequent and prominent appearance of Western characters (to be precise, characters belonging to the Caucasian race or the “white”) in films made in India should surprise no one at all because of the sheer social inclusivity.

However, studying *Bollywood* films could be an exclusive affair altogether because of its stark differences from the Hollywood, the Cinema of Europe and the World cinema in various aspects. Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy remark:

Yet, while commercial cinema remains a window to popular India’s English-speaking, globalized intelligentsia, a certain ambivalence persists. It is a cinema that appears terribly flawed by the canons of global film theory and almost entirely disjunctive with the globally dominant aesthetics and concept of good cinema... The carnivalesque atmosphere, the centrifugal story-line, the larger-than-life characters, and stilted dialogue – also mark it out as flawed art and a curious intrusion into the world of modern art forms (Lal and Nandy xiii).

They, in a mocking tone, question further:

How can one, if brought up on a steady diet of Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, or Jean-Luc Godard, gulp such meaningless digressions from the core narrative, maudlin melodrama, an embarrassingly juvenile conception of the comic as well as the romantic, and ahistoric, inconsistent sequencing? (Lal and Nandy xiii-xiv)

The term *Bollywood* itself has been under much criticism and scrutiny from various quarters. Citing the term as a cheap derivation of Hollywood, many believe this belittles the uniqueness that the cinema of Bombay film industry has or the impact they have on the masses. Many prefer the terms *Popular Hindi cinema* or *Mainstream cinema in the Hindi language*, none of which can, unfortunately, capture the essence of what these films are entirely. Rachel Dwyer says:

I do not think the term (*Bollywood*) is an insult. Hindi cinema is a unique form, with its own structures of production and distribution, its own audiences and its own narratives and style. It is a form of cinema that has always had an international audience but is becoming truly global... It is better that in *Bollywood* it has a brand name that is internationally recognized rather than continuing to struggle for recognition but missing the mark (Dwyer 6-7).

On why *Bollywood* films need to be approached from a different perspective, another critic says:

Typically, Hindi film refuses to play by Western norms of realism. If Hollywood has techniques that permit its fictional world to appear internally coherent and invisibly put together, Indian films are orchestrated by another sensibility of coherence and reality (Jaikumar 25).

This “another” sense of coherence and reality often plays a vital role in the portrayal of characters belonging to different ethnic backgrounds in the mainstream *Bollywood* flicks. The reason why non-Indian characters from the subcontinent, i.e. the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Afghans or Sri Lankans are not being considered in this discussion is that the socio-cultural gap between India and her neighbouring countries are relatively less and how they are portrayed in *Bollywood* films demands a new discussion altogether due to extremely convoluted bilateral or multilateral political, social and historical relationships between India and any of these countries.

Unlike the Hollywood, where in the 1930s, white actors had to play Asian roles by putting on extra make-up, Hindi films had white actors playing white characters. Among the Hollywood films, we see Douglass Dumbrille playing Mohammed Khan and Noble Johnson playing Ram Singh in the famous Gary Cooper film *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (dir. Henry Hathaway/ 1935), C. Henry Gordon as Surat Khan, J. Carroll Naish as Subedar Major Puran Singh and Scotty Beckett as Prema Singh in the Errol Flynn starrer, an historically inaccurate *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (dir. Michael Curtiz/ 1936) and Abner Biberman as Chota, Eduardo Ciannelli as Guru, and Sam Jaffe in the titular role in *Gunga Din* (dir. George Stevens/ 1939), featuring Cary Grant, to name a few. At about the same time, Fearless Nadia (Mary Evans), an Australia-born actress, created sensation in India by her daredevil stunts as Princess Madhuri in *Hunterwali* (dir. Homi Wadia/ 1935). The film was one of the first *Bollywood* films to have a woman in a leading role and representing the protagonist as a female version of Robin Hood not only made Fearless Nadia a craze and a symbol of women’s empowerment among the viewers and critics, it also saw, in coming times, a series of similar successful stunt-films with

Nadia in the lead – *Pahadi Kanya* (1936), *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Bambaiwali* (1941), *Hunterwali Ki Beti* (1943), *Toofan Queen* (1946), *Himmatwali* (1947) and *11 O'Clock* (1948).

Post-independence, portrayal of white characters, or the *Firangs* in *Bollywood* films changed a lot to cater to the process of glorifying the nation more to the masses than to the West. Jyotika Viridi says:

Popular Indian cinema is a national cinema proper not only because it is produced and consumed predominantly within national boundaries, but also because of other factors that identify a national film industry: inheriting and circulating notions of national identity, negotiating conflicts experienced by the imagined community, producing new representations of the nation, and constructing a collective consciousness of nationhood through special cultural referents (Viridi 7).

Bollywood films in the 1960s and the 1970s often have tried to create this sense of nation by making its audience emotionally register the use of family or community bonding to negotiate caste, community and gender divisions. The anti-West or the anti-Firang, to be precise, the anti-British sentiment often plays a pivotal role in extracting the nationalist sentiments and to do so, white characters have often been shown in a negative light and for decades, this has created and nurtured a *Bollywood* stereotype.

Discussing the paradigm shifts in studying Indian films, Sumita Chakravarty says:

Let me briefly touch upon three stages or shifts in the paradigms governing the study and teaching of Indian cinema over the past two decades. The first stage, that of "third world" or "third cinema" characterized the 1980s; the second was the rubric of "national cinemas" that held sway during the 1990s; and the third stage, marking the current period from 2000 on, deals with *Bollywood* in the context of globalization. (I simplify, of course, and do not mean to suggest a strict chronology, since all three rubrics can coexist in the same course.) (Chakravarty 106)

This shows that this very trend of popular culture, which started as early as the 1960s, continued for decades and gave birth to a few clichés. Apart from a stray film or two, actors with a light skin tone had a very insignificant, or worse, a denigrating role to play in most of the *Bollywood* projects during this time. The rise of Helen, a dancer-actress of Anglo-Burmese descent herself, in *Bollywood* films in the mid-1950s as a suave, confident seductress without inhibitions regarding open expressions of sensuality and the advent of the Hippie culture in India prompted many directors in the coming decades to portray Caucasian women as “available” and “open” objects of desire and devoid of “morality” (which was embodied by the Indian female characters) in the dance sequences whereas the Caucasian male, portrayed usually by veteran actors Bob Christo, Gavin Packard or Tom Alter, was shown as criminals, henchmen or smugglers. Films like *Dharma* (dir. Chand/ 1973), *International Crook* (dir. Pachhi/ 1974), *Charas* (dir. Ramanand Sagar/ 1976) *Dil Aur Deewar* (dir. K. Bapaiah/ 1978), *The Great Gambler* (dir. Shakti Samanta/ 1979) and *Qurbani* (dir. Feroz Khan/ 1980) and many more essentially had scenes where the hero, the paragon of virtue, on a mission to save his country from foreign hostilities, visits a bar or a joint of drug peddlers, which is essentially full of *Firangs*, men and women, all immoral, all drug addicts and a few Indians who have embraced the “evil Western culture”, and there he

either nabs a few goons or rescue the heroine from molesters or even preach a few lines of “Eastern” philosophy. Films like *Purab Aur Pachhim* (dir. Manoj Kumar/ 1970) and *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (dir. Dev Anand/ 1971) strongly portrayed the East/West divide and showed the ultimate “moral victory” of the Indian culture over the West. In the first film, one of the first to deal with the issue of Diaspora in the Indian context, the leading lady Preeti’s (played by Saira Banu) transformation from a confused *Desi* to the quintessential *Bharatiya naari* puts her in a victorious position (getting married to the hero in the end) than Christina (played by Barbara Lindley) who is shown as a westerner, falling prey to moral “decadence”. In the second film,

The hero's sexually liberated, bell bottom-sporting sister (Zeenat Aman) becomes the center of a hippie cult, advocating drugs and free love. She meets an untimely death while her brother's supportive, sari-wearing girlfriend (Mumtaz) is rewarded with a married life (Jaikumar 27).

We should not forget two important films were made in the ‘70s, which, unlike many of its contemporaries, had a prominent Caucasian “involvement” in the screenplay. The first of which was *Mera Naam Joker* (dir. Raj Kapoor/ 1970) in which an Indian circus clown’s (Raju played by Kapoor) unfulfilled and unrequited love for a Russian trapeze artist (Marina played by Kseniya Ryabinkina) is gently and emotionally dealt with and Marina is shown as a compassionate and caring woman, thus synchronizing her character with the notions of “Indian” femininity. The second film *Shalimaar* (dir. Krishna Shah/ 1978) could well be labeled as one of the first transcontinental film projects of *Bollywood*. The film was jointly released in the USA and its title was *Raiders of the Sacred Stone*. British actor Sir Rex Harrison (as Sir John Locksley) and American actors John Saxon (as Colonel Columbus) and Sylvia Miles (Countess Rasmussen) not only shared screen with *Bolly* icons Dharmendra, Zeenat Aman and Shammi Kapoor, they played key characters in the film.

Post-2000, *Bollywood* is seen gradually trying to break free from the stereotypical representation of the Caucasian characters in the films that are being made. Some of the films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (dir. Karan Johar/ 2001), *Salaam Namaste* (dir. Siddharth Anand/ 2005), *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (dir. Karan Johar/ 2006), *Namastey London* (dir. Vipul Amrutlal Shah/ 2007), *Heyy Babyy* (dir. Sajid Khan/ 2007) and *Love Aaj Kal* (dir. Imtiaz Ali/ 2009) et cetera are maintaining the “status quo” of *Bollywood* representation of the West, either by a strong nationalist sentiment or depicting moral lacunae of the West. Ajay Gehlawat says:

In a recent *Bollywood* blockbuster, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sorrow, dir. Karan Johar, 2001), a musical interlude entitled “Vande Mataram” (Hail Mother India) introduces the viewer to London via the arrival of one of the Indian protagonists (Hrithik Roshan) in this new land... Following this sequence and thematically furthering it, Hrithik is seen dancing with Indian-garbed women in classical Indian style in the middle of London... we see Hrithik walking towards the camera with the troupe of previously seen Western/ white women, now wearing tight, short orange and green dresses... jumbling the concepts of autonomous/ distinct cultures via the blending of colours (Indian tricolour) and bodies (white)... The ‘idea’ of London here is one a “cultural mishmash”, in which there no longer exists a ‘real’, but rather a site which foreign elements have supplanted/ co-opted (Gehlawat 119-120).

However, films like *Lagaan* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker/ 2001), which was nominated for an Academy Award, *Kisna: The Warrior Poet* (dir. Subhash Ghai/ 2005), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (dir. Ketan Mehta/ 2005), *Rang De Basanti* (dir. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra/ 2006) *Salaam-e-Ishq: A Tribute to Love* (dir. Nikhil Advani/ 2007), *Kites* (dir. Anurag Basu/ 2010) to name a few, should be mentioned for their effort to include a less stereotypical, and more meaningful and realistic non-Indian, white cast to the making of the films. While Rachel Shelley's Elizabeth in *Lagaan* and Alice Patten's Sue in *Rang De Basanti* have already achieved cult-status among the masses, and both the films, having been written about umpteen times, need a separate forum of discussion itself, we can shift our attention to the other films in the list. *Kisna: The Warrior Poet* and *Kites*, though box office 'failures' upon their release, deserve a special mention because both these films have 'dared' to cast a non-Indian actress in leading roles after the 1991 film *Shikari: The Hunter* (dir. Umesh Mehra and Latif Faiziyev) with the Russian actress Irina Kushnareva (alongside Mithun Chakraborty and Varsha Usgaonkar) and *Henna*, (dir. Randhir Kapoor) also released in 1991, with the Pakistani actress Zeba Bakhtiar (alongside Rishi Kapoor and Aswini Bhawe). Both Antonia Bernath's Katherine in *Kisna: The Warrior Poet*, a British woman enamored by the mystique of Indian culture, and Barbara Mori's Natasha in *Kites*, a Mexican in suicidal and passionate love with an Indian man, find substantial existence in the plot and acceptance beyond a mere screen presence. Toby Stephens's Captain William Gordon in *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* is not just a mute spectator to the spiritual and moral Armageddon his friend Mangal Pandey is going through (Aamir Khan), rather he makes a mark of his own by his valorous acts of rescuing Jwala, a suttee, and standing by his actions, and defending Pandey at the trial, risking his own career. In *Salaam-e-Ishq: A Tribute to Love*, which is an unofficial remake of the 2003 British comedy *Love Actually* (dir. Richard Curtis), The love story between an Indian taxi driver Raju (Govinda) and an American tourist to India Stephanie (South African actress Shannon Esra) is refreshingly new because we see a white woman coming all the way from the United States to India in search of her Indian boyfriend (Kushal Punjabi) to get married to, and eventually after a heartbreak, finds 'real' love in an alien land and takes the initiative to break the ice between her and her parents-in-law (the parents of the poor Indian taxi driver) by learning and speaking Hindi by the aid of a 'for Dummies' book.

Thus, we see in the end, that in matters of portraying non-Indian, white characters in *Bollywood* films, clichés have prevailed for long, but not without the glimmer of hope for something new, something empowering – for the texts, and for the readers.

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