

**ONCE UPON A TIME IN
BOLLYWOOD: THE GLOBAL
SWING IN HINDI CINEMA**

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Born in Cape Town, South Africa, of an Indian grandmother and an indigenous African grandfather, I was aware growing up that my grandmother did not really belong. She stood out and more closely resembled the grandmothers in the Bollywood films I watched on Sunday nights with my family.

My uncle, generally the only man in the room, was witness to the tears that were shed on our scented cotton handkerchiefs. Every week, the women would tell my uncle what film they wanted to see and he would drive all the way to Rylands, Cape Town's Indian area, to rent and transport the projector and film. As I grew older, I realized that there was a greater purpose to the Sunday evening viewings where the weeks' stored tears were shed: It was how girls like me learned their Indianness.

I also learned that history is never given to you by others, especially not by a regime—it is determined by one's own experience. For example, it is generally assumed that black identity cannot live side-by-side with Indian identity—that people like me should choose. Yet I grew up in a *halal* house—my grandfather's sister was Muslim and her dozen children visited our house on a regular basis. In a nutshell, I am Christian by baptism, Muslim by culture and Hindu by heritage.

These complex identity issues are reflected in *Once Upon a Time in Bollywood: The Global Swing in Hindi Cinema*. In Susan Dewey's essay "Doing Bombay Darshan: The IMF, Structural Adjustment and National Identity in the Hindi Film Industry," she discusses the multi-layered complexity of *darshan* (the gaze) in Bombay films.

"What I've called 'Bombay *darshan*' is about gazing in reverence, but that sense of quasi-religious awe also acknowledges a fear of disorder that culture attempts to contain," Dewey explains.

This gaze has cultural, religious and political ramifications both on and off the screen. The gaze also has a racialized context. For example, black men have been lynched for gazing at white women. But what happens when the subject and the object of the gaze become one? What happens between the space of subject and object?

"The fact that women who lead public lives (and actresses are really the best example of this *darshan*) are both subjects (of admiration

and objects (of moral suspicion) underscores this point beautifully, and highlights what happens in the liminal space where blurring occurs between subject and object," explains Dewey.

Bollywood actresses are simultaneously objects of desire and derision, she says. "While these women are among the highest female income earners in South Asia and renowned throughout the South Asian diaspora for their beauty and elegance, Indian popular culture is redolent with scandalous tales of 'compromise'—a polite word for sexual favours exchanged for something that will benefit the woman—and invented drama supposedly drawn from their lives."

Although I learned my sense of Indianness through Bollywood films, the family structure depicted in the films was completely different than mine. This brings me to Monika Mehta, another contributor to *Once Upon a Time in Bollywood*. Her essay "Globalizing Bombay Cinema: Reproducing the Indian State and Family" explores 1990s post-economic-liberalization families in Bollywood films.

I asked Mehta whether there is a particular image of the Indian woman held up for preservation in the more modern films. "They are products of an industry attempting to re-imagine itself and its potential audiences," she replied. "The state is supportive of these narratives because these narratives come as a commitment to 'Indianness' with globalization."

She adds that "the very production houses which promoted family films now turn to look at premarital sex, live-in relationships, two guys pretending to be gay, extramarital affairs. In these films, we see shifts in women's roles. They are not necessarily the bearers of tradition or the nation."

What then of marriage in modern Bollywood films? In Jenny Sharpe's discussion of Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*

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(2001) in *Once Upon a Time in Bollywood*, she critiques Nair's uncritical view of arranged marriages, determined as much by class, money and family alliances as by a couple's compatibility.

Why would a feminist filmmaker endorse arranged marriages? "Like many Third World feminists, Nair walks a fine line between defending her country's cultural practices while being critical of its patriarchy," suggests Sharpe. "Nair's film responds to the Western perception of arranged marriages as oppressive toward Indian women like this: women do exercise some choice in arranged marriages, while love marriages do not always work out in the woman's best interests."

As *Once Upon a Time in Bollywood* reminds us, identity is something we all grapple with—sometimes with ease, other times with difficulty, yet always with passion. ♦