Cultural Cosmopolitanism and the Bollywood: KANK and the Crucible of Culture.

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ABSTRACT

Cosmopolitanism celebrates 'universal community' and 'world citizenship'. It can be considered as something that conditions us to survive in a highly transitional world. Unlike globalisation, cosmopolitanism upholds an extended mentality towards societies that are transmuting themselves. Bollywood cinema has played a prominent part in transporting culture and ideas worldwide and thereby transforming the world boundaries as highly porous. This article is an in-depth analysis of how KANK has become a huge success in heralding and popularising cosmopolitanism in the sub-continent as well as in the diasporic communities.

KEYWORDS

Bollywood; transnational cinema; cosmopolitanism; cinephilia; KANK; exoticism

The nebulous core of cosmopolitanism is the opinion that all human beings, without any concern for their political affiliations, can or are or should be citizens of a single world. Various versions of cosmopolitanism foresee a community in multiple ways, some envisioning on political institutions, some on moral relationships or configurations of shared markets or cultural expressions. This term has recently acted in quilting the interstices between the postcolonial paradigm and the present day political and cultural citizenship. Breckenridge et al brings home the idea that "cosmopolitanism, in its wide and wavering nets,

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catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historical and cultural transition." (Breckendridge 4).

According to Vertovec and Cohen ("Conceiving Cosmoplitanism" 78), there exists six different ways in which one can analyse cosmopolitanism. They are as a socio-cultural condition, as a philosophy or worldview, as an outlook which promotes transnational institutions, as an approach that furnishes for the political subject's multiple construction, as a mind set up accepting and open to otherness and as an ability to be tolerant, retrospective and to move between cultures without staying within any of them. Accepting the epistemological function of cosmopolitanism may help one to avoid understanding the world in terms of binaries like the powerful Self and the subjugated Other and thereby providing a deviation that helps one to accept pluralism and difference.

Rejecting the basic dichotomic foundation of globalization may enhance one's view about the world as a more comprehensive one with multiple belongings and forever expanding affinities. This way, we may be able to overcome the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization‖ (Appadurai, Modernity at Large 3). It promotes an open mentality towards the world through which societies metamorphose themselves. Due to globalization, boundaries of the world are becoming more and more porous resulting in the existence of homogeneous communities, surviving in numerous cultural diversities and revealing new horizons, by signifying the possibility to factually investigate border crossings and other transnational occurrences.

Gita Rajan and Shailaja Sharma is of the opinion that new cosmopolitanism is very much different from the traditional, distinct, fixed and secured diasporic groups and they locate new cosmopolitanisms as a contemporary formation which is the outcome of various globalization coalescences such as culture, media, trade, migration etc. New cosmopolitanism usually insists upon the refusal of the groundedness in either a nation-state or a particular class like that of an intellectual or working. More or less, a new cosmopolitan subject immerses himself in a range of fluid positions that can be trans-national or trans-class or trans-local. Traditional diasporic theorists like Robin Cohen (1997), Safran (1991), Tölölyan (1996) and others posits diaspora as a fixed, stable entity with people consisting of different migration experiences like trade, choice, violence and so on and those who are unified both in space and through their bipolar connections to the homeland.

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According to Rajan and Sharma, "… new cosmopolitans as people who blur the edges of home and abroad by continuously moving physically, culturally, and socially, and by selectively using globalized forms of travel, communication, languages, and technology to position themselves in motion between at least two names, sometimes even through dual forms of citizenship, but always in multiple locations (through travel, or through cultural, social, or linguistic modalities)." (2) These changing preferences and complex relationships make the new cosmopolitanism as 'diasporas in motion', in which the movement can be cultural or physical or ideological and the movement of people or capital or media forms. The term, popularised by Manuel Castells, as 'network' in order to describe the latest form of globalization, is applicable to new cosmopolitanism too. These networks are highly fluidic and are connected to that aspect of globalization that which is situated in between the earlier manifestations of diaspora and traditional cosmopolitanism.

Later cultural critics like Appadurai (1996), Rouse (1991), Bauman (2000) and so on defines this new concept of new cosmopolitanism as a series of practices connected to migration and globalization but different from earlier conceptions of diaspora and its subsequent cultural formations and affinities. It includes both the highly educated, elitist, techno-savvy and politically conservative section of the society who wishes to leave a mark in the homeland as well as in the host country and those with little education, liberal political views and an increased interest in the cultural forms like Bollywood. In case of the South Asian diaspora, they can be located somewhere in between the traditional diasporic and a cosmopolitan class of people who is good at auctioning their skills to the highest bidder in the global market arena. Being a highly problematic term, South Asia is highly diverse with its own political rivalries and politico-religious tensions. But a shared history, culture and language binds them together in the diasporic world. Even though imprecise, these shared and similar cultural traits make these diasporic communities identify themselves as 'South Asian'.

Another admonition in examining the new cosmopolitanism has to do with the class and how this class is dealt in regard to the South Asians worldwide. Post-World War II, the South Asian migration to the West has been described as a highly educated 'middle-class' people that shadows their similarity to other third world elites. Based on class, the new cosmopolitanism can be described as a network of relations between abroad and home, diaspora and native and it permits various classes to participate in the society at different levels. In other words, the term cosmopolitanism doesn't privilege one class over the other, even though the

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word 'Cosmopolitanism' has traditionally evoked an elite transnational connotation (Rajan 5).

Media has always portrayed South Asia as overtly exoticised and benign but a sudden change in the global economies, the future of technology and the occurrence of the shifting of cultural hegemony all contributed to the presence of South Asia and its diaspora to be felt and heard. Traditional diasporic theorists such as Robin Cohen, Safran and Tölölyan placed the prominence uniformly upon the devastating history of dissemination as that of Jews, Armenians etc. Robin Cohen elucidates an alternative kind of diaspora, which he models upon the sojourner one and it deals with the annual migration of Chinese traders to and from South East Asia during the last two centuries. Like this, the South Asians too are aware of their role as south Asians abroad and what differentiates a new cosmopolitan from other is the fact that he/she creates a distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity based on their ultimate return to the homeland that has no significance to the geographical return to the mother land, in order to create and preserve a unique South Asian identity.

Manuel Castell's seminal work, The Rise of the Network Society (1996) deals with the post 1970s that saw the assemblage of time, distance and space in a totally novel way by the global capital. According to him, the modern world which is technology driven, has affected the establishment of state, society, culture and identity in an overwhelming way and considers all these as in a state of constant motion and not as disjunct blocks. In such a 'network-controlled' world, identity plays the supreme role in defining self as well as community and since identity is dependent upon various factors like financial, social, cultural, technological etc, it is always susceptible to change. In Liquid Modernity, Bauman (2006) reflects a similar understanding of the actuality. He quotes, "Power can move with the speed of an electronic signal – and so the time required for the movement of its essential ingredients has been reduced to instantaneity… power has become extraterritorial, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space" (11).

Scholars like Arjun Appadurai (1996) have attempted to define the concept of movable modernity. He has used the term 'optics of globalization' in explaining those who belong to the nation with the citizenship and those groups who get the prominence through older models of regionality in the global studies. It was he who pointed out the requirement for a replica that removes diaspora and absorbent hybridity, to one that incorporates "…floating populations, transnational politics within national borders, and mobile configurations of

technology and expertise" (Modernity at Large 5). This assertion diverts the evident binaries of home/here and abroad/ there and this cyclic employment prompts one to use various investigative tools in the production and dispersal of the 'knowledges of globalization' (Modernity at Large 4).

Lisa Lowe in her work titled, Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences (1991), points out the situatedness of Asian Americans in the United States, with the concise term 'Asia' that recognizes various cultures, nations and histories within it. She quotes: "Asian American discussions contain a wide spectrum of articulations that include, at one end, the desire for an identity represented by a fixed profile of ethnic traits, and at another, challenges to the very notions of identity and singularity which celebrate ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities. The latter efforts attempt to define ethnicity in a manner that accounts not only for cultural inheritance, but for active cultural construction, as well." (27). In matters of citizenship, Aihwa Ong's explanation of cultural citizenship and flexible citizenship helps us in analysing the class/ mobility spectrum that defines new cosmopolitanism. Ong uses the Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality' while discussing the notion of cultural citizenship.

The importance of Bollywood cinema, in the background of the enormous South Asian diaspora, is acknowledged as an important cultural subject for diaspora scholars, as movies have played an influential part in the development of a South Asian diasporic culture. Movies, therefore, is one of the most popular and prominent cultural form and commodity in the transnational south Asian culture and political economy. As Jigna Desai explains: South Asian diasporic identities are centrally configured and contested through cinema, its production and consumption. […] while South Asian media are consumed by many parts of the South Asian Diaspora, the production of South Asian diasporic media is centred in the West, specifically in the United States, Canada and Britain […]. South Asian diasporic cinema is a developing cinema that negotiate the dominant discourses, polities and economies of multiple locations. (South Asian Diaspora 373)

Cinema, especially Bollywood and diasporic films, is key to thinking through pleasure and power and how they influence upon the cosmopolitan production and structuring of South Asian diasporic subjectivity has caught the attention of the contemporary theorists and scholars. According to Jigna Desai in Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film (2004), the centrality of Bollywood to the South Asian diasporic communities affects the

South Asian diasporic film making too. One notable feature of this fact is the direct or indirect reference to the Bollywood film industry thematically in the diasporic films. The Bollywood elements of narrative, theme, plot and aesthetics influence the diasporic films and many diasporic cosmopolitan texts refer to the Bollywood cinema while discussing the cultural influences of the Indian film industry. She quotes, "… Bollywood plays a feature role in not only constructing South Asian and diasporic identities, but also significantly participates in structuring the pleasures and desires of these subjects as well. Additionally, the impact of Bollywood extends beyond the content of films, appearing often in the filmic conventions that are reflected in the aesthetic forms and narrative structures in a variety of films." (Beyond Bollywood118).

The recent times saw the cross over popularity and diasporic appeal to Bollywood films in Britain and North America. The minority presence of the British Asians popularized the Bollywood movies into their diasporic cultures as well as into the multiplexes so that not only the second and third generation diasporic subjects but also white British audiences too started watching the movies from the sub-continent. Recent Bollywood as well as diasporic film relies upon the obedient and benign subject who follows globalism and multiculturalism and who is a good South Asian immigrant with all the qualities of both West and the sub-continent.

The year 2006 saw the release of a not so typical Karan Johar Bollywood movie, Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna, with an enormous star cast and taking place in the New York City, this movie explores the unexplored, unspoken terrain of adultery, infidelity and extra marital relationship. Promoted with a tag-line 'A love… that broke all relationships', this movie was an instant success internationally. Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna, lovingly called as KANK, is all about family, love and the traumas one goes through while leading a love less relationship. This particular commercial Bollywood film has showed the brilliance of treading upon the not so much common path of adultery, divorce, breakage of families, extramarital relationship and so on.

Bollywood has always glorified and accentuated age-old themes like family, tradition, rituals, patriarchy, arranged come love marriages and loving happy endings. KANK may be the initial commercial Bollywood movie that dared to broach up the taboo and not so comfortable themes and issues to the forefront. This movie can be considered as addressing the anxieties of new South Asian modernity in short. It can be taken as a global cinema in which the geographical confines of national cinema have been streamlined. A sense of global

cosmopolitanism is presented through this movie with its almost successful wealthy Indians who are comfortable in their new surroundings. The undercurrent of this movie is the fact that the concept of home (South Asia) is an idealized paradise and the new cosmopolitanism adopted by the south Asian emigrants in this film highlights the ease and comfort with which these diasporic subjects has found success and popularity in global environments.

During a chance encounter, Dev (Khan) and Maya (Rani Mukherji) meets each other and a friendship leads to an affair which they keep aside, partly due to the guilt and partly for the family. The movie ends with both of them getting legal separation from their respective partners. Adultery is not something alien to the Bollywood film industry but what makes KANK different is the depiction of it on screen as a liberation of that which is considered and framed as repressed. So far, the typical Bollywood commercial movies have dealt such taboo matters outside the camera's preview but very much inside the filmic plot. KANK is all about the couple's transgression as it advocates the acceptance of modern desires. This movie has tried to rectify the mismatch of desire outside the institution of marriage and thereby becoming a trial in relocating it firmly back within the confines of family and marriage which has been established and approved by the patriarch. But being a loving patriarch, he proposes and gives his permission for the woman to leave the loveless relationship and go ahead and pursue her life and happiness.

In Bollywood cinema, it is a common feature of the hetero-patriarchy's permission of love and marriage, measuring the social economy of gender and sexuality and Madhava Prasad's 'feudal family romance' (1998) and Patricia Uberoi's 'arranged love marriage' (1998) all exemplifies Bollywood's inclination towards the sanctioning of love and marriage by the loving patriarchal head. In this aspect, KANK goes another step ahead by permitting 'divorce and remarriage' for the female protagonist So, this movie makes it possible for adultery, divorce and remarriage permissible in the diaspora.

Yet another peculiarity of this movie is that, throughout the movie the lovers are meeting up each other in public places. This somehow leads one to consider the fact that an adulterous relationship and flaunting it, can only happen in a diasporic 'public space'. KANK is definitely one such movie in which the South Asian émigrés' building up a mark of their own in the western metropolises, with successful careers and comfortably new surroundings in which they adapting easily. This movie heralds a different genre of Bollywood cinema in which the geographical confines of the national cinema is stretched.   This movie portrays

the intensified consumption patterns, the visual geographies and moreover, the sense of global cosmopolitanism achieved and followed by the characters.

Deviating from the usual thematic representation of the sub-continent as an idealized paradise, KANK has dealt with the new cosmopolitanism adopted by the South Asian settlers and the ease and comfort in which these settlers have found success in global environments. KANK deals with this cosmopolitan, urban society life leading to its own issues and anxieties and traumas which indirectly upholds the subcontinents morality, ethics and spirituality as superior to that of the West. The global South Asian identity, in reality, is the filmic over representation of the modern sub-continent as an independent, global citizen with a nostalgic gazing back to an idealized, utopian dream of an imagined homeland found in all its individuals. KANK has New York as its location in order to encapsulate the global ascends of the South Asian diaspora and the diasporic locations are always deliberately chosen to illustrate mobility and transience.

According to Kao and Rozario, Bollywood filmic locations are a kind of 'phoney spaces', spaces that subsist 'outside the parameter of realism'. In most of the films made in Bollywood, location plays a decisive role in determining the tone and spectatorship of the movie. Vijay Mishra is of the opinion that these diasporic locations, that are successfully used in the Bollywood movies do not merely indicate a better income but the characters are depicted as real citizens belonging to their decided destination and in every possible way equal to the 'local' citizens and with "no hint of cultural otherness" ("Spectres of Sentimentality" 440).

Yet another feature of this movie is the diasporic individuals leading a wealthy life style and getting the attention and appreciation from the western national authorities. They represent the changes that have occurred in the sub-continent in the 1990's where a perceptible consumption style based upon the extremely materialistic and unsettled urban middle class, frequently powered by the ascending capitalist aspiration and also the new provocations of the global economic patterns. But the latter half of the movie shows the redemption of such characters who return back to their moral grounds and traditional South Asian values. In short, they can be termed as 'the deceived NRI' who got corrupted by his new surroundings.

Generally, in most of the Bollywood movies produced after 2000's, and specifically in KANK, cosmopolitanism is located in the symbols of wealth rather than the explicitness of New York's history as a western metropolis. The palatial houses, the designer western outfit and the prominence of the protagonists among

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western individuals all proves the idealised portrayal of the urban middle classes and the modernized patterns of the commodity culture. Leela Fernandes has opined about this commodity culture as the "production of a national cultural standard associated with the urban middle and upper classes" towards an increased glaring exposure of one's wealth in accordance with the development of the "new symbols of national progress in India" (Fernandes 614). The portrayal of the global and the local, as per Fernandes, does not in any way camouflage the transnational organization of production but creates a 'fetishization of hybridity' – the power of the multinational capital to merge the local and the global within a linear narrative of commodity fetishism.

In KANK, this fetishism happens through the characters of Sam and Rishi and their flamboyant apparels and designer driven life-styles. More or less, the acknowledgement and assumption of cosmopolitan lifestyles by the filmic characters in KANK serves to accentuate the sub-continent's aura as an exquisitely independent, powerful and efficient nation-state and their discarding of the local-themes into something that culminates the global achievements of the South Asian people who are exploiting the nationalistic emotions and feelings entertained by the home-bound as well as the diabolic South Asians.

Using foreign locations and with protagonists dwelling in exile, Bollywood movies has fulfilled the wish of any nation-state, that is, the capability to place one's nation alongside the global nation states in a better or equal way and thereby overcome the post-colonial complex. Through the authoritative representation of the globally-savvy NRI's, these movies prolong nationalistic fervour in the South Asian (mainly Hindi) culture by occupying the moral high grounds. Creating a mark in the national as well as in the global economy, Bollywood movies depict the ascension of South Asia in the global market and thereby challenging the western hegemonic cultural industry.

Yet another peculiar feature of this movie is the transformation of Bombay cinematic techniques into that of the narrative construction identical to that of the Hollywood. The opening sequences of the movie KANK clearly portray the main protagonists unhappy in their marital relationships. So, both of them get into an extra marital relationship without any sort of social or circumstantial constraints and the notion of adultery in this movie is not the outcome of the mistreatment or the return of a past lover. In short, the body language, the facial expressions, the flirtatious word play etc in the beginning scene point towards an idea that love derails almost all the ethics of love and self-control or self-essence can easily be over powered using love.

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