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BHASKAR SARKAR

Hetero-nation

Toward a “New and Improved” Global Public Image

THE CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL PUBLIC sphere presents us with a remarkable conundrum: as novel transnational configurations call into question the primacy (even legitimacy) of the nation form, new and resurgent nationalisms keep surfacing all over the world. In the South Asian context, we have witnessed the rapid “opening up” of the Indian economy. Steps toward economic liberalization, adopted since 1991, included the removal of four decades-old licensing policies and financial regulations, the dismantling of barriers to foreign investment and trade, and the widespread privatization of important sectors such as energy and heavy industries. There has also been a restructuring of India’s national media (the official recognition of cinema as a legitimate industry, the advent of cable and satellite television, a massive overhaul of the telecommunications networks, and tremendous growth in print media, radio, and marketing). Culturally, large segments of the Indian citizenry have been exposed to and influenced by globally emergent lifestyles and worldviews; yet, at the same time, the disorienting winds of change have precipitated a strong conservatism, congealing most notably

around a resurgent fundamentalist Hindu nationalism. This chapter begins with this confounding duality, which calls for imaginative modes of apprehending the vertiginous encounters between the global and the local, a necessity that has generated glib neologisms such as the *glocal*.

How does popular Indian cinema—particularly the Mumbai-based Hindi film industry and its ancillary sectors,¹ now widely referred to as “Bollywood”—negotiate this ambiguity at the heart of contemporary national agendas? In particular, what cinematic fabulations become necessary with the rapid jettisoning of the cornerstones of postcolonial official policies, and the sea changes in sociocultural structures? How does the Indian nation-state regenerate itself through popular cinema? Consider the following example from the 1999 film *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*. Whenever Swapna, the female protagonist, faces an important moral choice (Should she drink beer in a public bar? Should she marry someone against her family’s wishes?), Raja, her boyfriend, asks her questions striking for their recursive banality: “Are you French? Are you Russian? Are you German? Are you Italian?” Every time, the queries reduce Swapna to an infantile and simpering girl who replies she is an Indian who, therefore, knows exactly what to do: evidently a real Indian woman always stays true to a national ethos, neither drinking in public nor acting against her elders’ wishes. The strategy adopted here centers on a specific trope of negotiation common to Indian epistemic and aesthetic traditions: I am referring to the *sawal/jawab* (that is, question/answer) structure of Indian rhetorical systems, a structure with which all connoisseurs of Indian classical music will be particularly familiar. Indeed, the improvisational mode of Indian classical music builds around imaginative detours from anchoring melodic and rhythmic patterns, and establishes a creative dialogue between various musicians to settle all tensions in a final harmonious resolution—a point of stasis referred to as *sama* (equivalence, unity). If the performance stages stimulating musical development, the end point (a tonic-rhythmic *home*) is already known: the pleasure derives from knowing this predetermined goal, in diverging from it, and eventually in reaching it. The obsessively iterative questions about national identity, which maneuver Swapna toward a fixed and self-evident “realization” about the correct mode of behavior, form precisely such a discursive structure.

The recurring point of narrative stasis in the film is the anchoring ideological institution of the family. Stepping out of this particular text, we encounter numerous Hindi films in the 1990s that engage questions of sociocultural transformation within the genre-scape of the romantic melodrama, returning us time and again to the traditional family fold—now bearing the unmistakable trappings of affluence and confidence that have

become emblematic of a post-liberalization Indian upper-middle class. *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (a.k.a. *HAHK*, 1994) and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (a.k.a. *DDLJ*, 1995), which remain the most paradigmatic of this new breed of family films, are celebrated as wholesome entertainment, as well as for upholding immutable family values. Commentators have observed that these “clean” films focusing on family life and kinship loyalties coincided with several other trends. During the decade, a drive began to “clean up” the industry through its corporatization and professionalization. Simultaneously, the industry recognized the development of extensive diasporic audiences with a specific need for cultural and identitarian moorings (not to mention recognizing non-resident Indians as potential investors). Meanwhile, a Hindu chauvinist nationalism emerged at the center of India’s political mainstream (Mehta; Uberoi, 138–216). In Monika Mehta’s astute summation, through these strategies, the nation-state “reproduce[s] itself in the context of globalization” (136).

Intriguingly, while such efforts to reproduce national identity forge family-oriented tales upholding heteronormativity, they perform deep anxieties about what constitutes an essential Indian-ness in the face of a rapidly mutating world. Indeed, their insistence on an immutably Indian way of being intimates something like a “national panic.” A closer look at these overwrought films reveals strategies of doublespeak and surreptitious accommodation complicating the process of ideological reproduction. Drawing broadly on the 1990s’ cinematic field marked by morally righteous tales promoting heteronormative family values and gender roles and focusing primarily on the aesthetically unremarkable but discursively fascinating film *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*, this chapter demonstrates that: (1) the eventual narrative resolutions, which seem to shore up traditional heterosexual family structures, paradoxically help to consolidate an emergent middle-class consensus about the need to globalize; (2) the initial vacillation and the process of cultural arbitration precisely render the disorienting changes acceptable; (3) the conservative resolutions can neither fully shut down a heterogeneous space that the narratives now routinely present nor eradicate its radical promises; and (4) if the reproduction of the hetero-nation is crucially dependent on the marginalization of unorthodox modes of being as “deviant,”² then the same deviances are now being marshaled to signal a new openness (that is to say, the entanglements of the hetero-nation and its “dangerous supplements” become the sites for negotiations between continuity and change). At issue are a deliberate, if cautious, reinscription of the national in relation to the global and a repositioning of the heteronormative within a potentially diverse range of identities.

National Identity in a Global Frame

Lavish weddings—complete with huge congregations of kith and kin, party and games (typically, ritualistic exchanges that bring the bride's and the groom's families closer through playful competition, and the game of *antakshari* in which participants exhibit their knowledge of popular film songs), music and dancing, elaborate rituals and feasts—emerged as a *de rigueur* component of the 1990s family films. *HAHK*, a 206-minute opus, appears to be one endless if entertaining process of anticipation, deliberation, engagement, planning, and staging two weddings over several years; they bookend an intervening period of family transactions and ceremonies, vacations, and visits, through the course of which the plot's core romance blossoms. The young lovers now negotiate the mores of courtship and nuptials within the socially sanctioned extended family, all along attending to their familial loyalties and responsibilities. Widely hailed for its eschewal of violence and vulgarity, *HAHK* broke all previous box office records and ushered in a new era for Hindi films. *DDLJ*, which was released the following year (1995), fared even better by staging the complications of romance in a transnational setting. Raj and Simran, the young protagonists, are diaporic Indians traveling across Europe and India: they have to work out the nature of their courtship in relation to familial expectations while being away from home, and they eventually overcome parental opposition to their union by embracing conventional values. *Pardes* (1997) offers interesting variations in a tale about the protracted process of arranging a marriage between an “urbane” NRI (non-resident Indian) guy from the United States and a “traditional” young woman from a village in North India. The unwilling but obedient groom comes to India at his father's insistence; when he falls for his prospective bride, she travels to the United States to meet his extended family and to get a sense of his life. But the young man's best friend turns out to be the “authentic” Indian, capable of respecting and preserving Indian social institutions and customs, thereby emerging as the rightful inheritor of patrimonial privileges; needless to say, he also wins over the bride.

In contrast to the defiant macho figures of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s epitomized by the proletarian “angry young man” persona of Amitabh Bachchan (for example, in *Deewar* [1975]) and the even more violent “one man army” of Sunny Deol (for example, in *Narasimha* [1991]), the family-oriented heroes of the post-liberalization era are kinder, gentler characters. They usually start out being fun-loving, happy-go-lucky innocents from affluent families, enjoying great spatial and social mobility, appearing in tune with—and at ease in—a cosmopolitan habitus. As time

goes on, they learn to cherish their familial and social duties, evolving into responsible national subjects. The heroines are also mobile subjects capable of expressing and pursuing their hopes and desires; but their agency outside the domestic fold is largely ornamental and performative, relegated to the realms of consumption and spectacle (hanging out in trendy cafes and discotheques, shopping in metropolitan boutiques). Even when they are college students, their lives seem like an endless party. Parallel to the evolution of the male protagonists, these young women come to appreciate the value of personal sacrifice and step into the regulated and highly symbolized roles (wife, mother, and custodian of continuity) a heteropatriarchal society assigns to them. In sum, the family-films of the 1990s provide the *mise-en-scène* for intense cultural transactions in the face of changes wrought by globalization: they position the legitimacy and sanctity of heteronormative structures as cornerstones that will (and must) uphold the nation-state (Mankekar).

Ultimately, the young transnational Indian subjects must get in touch with their inner national self. The eventual triumph of an essential (that is, traditionally heterosexual) Indian way of life cushions the onslaught of global transformations, providing desperately needed cultural anchoring in uncharted waters. Yet, this argument about identitarian transactions indexes an economy of competing demands on contemporary national subjects, involving intricate trade-offs. The balance in the 1990s blockbuster Hindi films usually favors entrenched norms, but not before making a substantial case for adjustment and accommodation. With the “opening up” of Indian economy and society to global trends, a certain measure of recalibration becomes inescapable and imperative. Therefore the films register individualist aspirations and recognize a semblance of autonomous subjectivity before absorbing these impulses into a matrix of “the collective good.” Thus these popular mediations of a transitional era help manage social anxieties, allaying fears of the unknown and rendering the impending changes attractive. After all, on the evidence of these cinematic fabulations, Indian middle-class life is a plush and privileged domain—and is only getting better. In other words, the films help secure a broad consensus among the ruling elites on the need to embrace globalization as a strategy for national growth.

Not surprisingly, even as the Indian state adopted the mantra of liberalization, a range of measures was necessary to bring the interests of the Bollywood culture industry into synergy with its own programs. After decades of suspicion, indifference, and official policy centering on censorship and regulation, the state recognized popular cinema as a significant partner in a national hegemony. As the state capitulated to the forces of global capital, it sought to deflect attention from the resultant

loss of economic and cultural sovereignty through a neurotic insistence on the preservation of an imputed national ethos (whether in the form of *hindutva*, an essential Hindu identity, or its more secular versions). While flexing its nuclear and information technology muscles, the Indian state came to depend on popular cinema to shore up support at home and to act as its cultural ambassador abroad. The genius of the new Hindi cinema is evident in its creative response to these expectations: presenting a picture of plentitude on the metonymic home-nation front, engaging global (especially Western) stereotypes about arranged marriages and turning traditional weddings into dazzling national spectacles for a transnational market. But this trope, which Mira Nair acknowledged and capitalized on in her globally fêted film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), cannot be reduced simply to a process of orthodox reification. Rather, this new cinematic “wedding complex,” which extends the idea of arranged marriages to “romance sanctioned by the family leading to matrimony,” performs a dual ideological function: enabling change tempered by conformism and continuity, and reframing the national in relation to the global. When the elders propose the *rishta* or matrimonial alliance, the prospective couple is allowed a space of courtship, which the norms of social interaction between the sexes incribes. While proxy guardians often oversee this period of getting to know each other, they prove to be comically inept chaperones, presenting at least the possibility of transgression. If, on the other hand, the two meet and fall in love on their own and have to contend with initial opposition from their families, the youth eventually win the elders over with their responsible conduct and respect for authority. Both scenarios thus present a new horizon of freedom in matters of the heart, invoking a bourgeois-liberal rhetoric of individualist choice and a universalized paradigm of romance and conjugality; they also qualify this freedom in terms of an unassailable vernacular deference to the family and the community.

Consumption becomes a principal conduit for the mutual rearticulation of the national and the global in the films of the liberalization era. Two tropes of consumption, shopping and tourism, take on particular significance because of their ability to conjoin disparate spaces and signal new modes of being. As the heroine of *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997) waits to find “true love,” she nevertheless gives in to the seductive promises of Valentine’s Day and goes shopping to buy herself a gift. This act of self-indulgence is important in two respects: it marks the arrival of a global-popular ritual on the Indian scene (soon to become the site of a pitched cultural war—with conservative groups unleashing their ire against public displays of romantic affection and the commodification of *amor*); it also stresses a romance with self-absorbed individualism and its

actualization through consumption. The films of the 1990s are replete with explicit shopping activities: shopping for contemporary fashion in Europe or the United States, shopping for wedding trousseaux, shopping for identities—frequently marked in terms of semiotically loaded consumption goods such as alcohol or mini skirts. At other times, consumption activities remain embedded in the details of characterization, set design, and performance—for example, in youngsters adopting the gestures and paraphernalia of globalized youth cultures (posters, T-shirts with identifiable logos and quips, music, and in a memorable scene from *Pardes*, an iconic guitar invoking not only a youthful passion for rebellion and change, but also commercial incorporation of the kind epitomized by the globally popular Hard Rock Café franchise). The dual invocations of the arcade and the arcadia serve to capture the interpenetrations of the national and the global.³ With tourism, another leisure activity in vogue in 1990s Hindi films, cinematic spectacles of exotic foreign locations are harnessed to conjure up deterritorialized subjectivities. Characters “find” or reinvent themselves as they move through the *terra infirma* of transnational space: the young protagonists of *DDLJ* and *Pardes* romp through Switzerland and Austria, Las Vegas and California; the NRI patriarchs “return home” to pose at Indian tourist hotspots. For instance, in *Pardes*, North American industrialist Kishorilal travels from Rishikesh to Agra, his nostalgic patriotism expressed largely through a tourist gaze: the verdant northern plains, bucolic farmsteads, shots of the Ganges, holy men on a boat chanting “Shoham,” and the legendary locales of the Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri rendered in the style of picture postcards.

My point is that the 1990s family-oriented films self-consciously thematize the global-local dialectic. Indeed, this dialectic is typically harnessed as the central dilemma driving the narrative, and thus turned into a marketable commodity. The strategy works at the box office because it resonates with audiences’ experiences and expectations. The negotiation in these films is not so much between tradition and modernity (a polarity that preoccupied Hindi popular cinema of the 1950s and 1960s) as between *parallel modernities*. At stake is the articulation and consolidation of local versions of the modern that subsume a refigured traditional. The persistence of archaic social institutions does not imply a failure to modernize or to become cosmopolitan; rather, accommodating both the time-honored *and* the contemporaneous points to a *local* modernity, a *vernacular* cosmopolitanism. It is useful to remember here that tradition, as the necessary and defining other of modernity, was always a modern category. Only from a modern perspective can “tradition” be construed as such. In our current conjuncture, a homologous reframing is under way: a resurgent core national identity is now posited as the necessary

foil to transnational affinities. In other words, contemporary nationalism has to both assert and negate itself in relation to a transnational imagination, each category functioning as the other's condition of possibility. This equivocal logic allows for the gradual recalibration of the national in the context of globalization.

Let us return to the moments in *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge* that stage a crisis of identity in terms of the rhetorical questions, "Are you French? Are you Italian? Are you British? Are you German?" The implication of this iterative structure (note the precise series of nationalities invoked shifts ever so slightly) is loud and clear: as long as Indian youth agree to return to the family fold, they can venture into uncharted terrain; as long as they remember *who they really are*, they are allowed some behavioral latitude. The volley of redundant questions, always propelling one toward a self-evident truth, continues a long cinematic tradition of reassertions of an immutable national identity: from *Shri 420* (1955), in which the Chaplinesque tramp played by Raj Kapoor sings, "My shoes are Japanese, my trousers are English, and my hat is from Russia, yet my heart remains Indian"; through *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970), in which Manoj Kumar's hyper-patriotic character asserts his Indian-ness in the face of diasporic deracination (most notably in a London restaurant sequence); to the more recent *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (2000), whose title and eponymous song, a quote of the *Shri 420* number, proclaims, "And yet my heart remains Indian."

Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge may strike many as an odd choice on which to hinge one's arguments. After all, it is a lesser known work by David Dhawan, successful auteur of heavy-handed, low-brow comedies; its box-office performance is considered "average"; its title ("We shall take the bride home") brazenly echoes the blockbuster from four years ago, *DDLJ* ("The brave-hearted shall take the bride home"); its plot, an amalgam of formulaic elements from other films, often veers toward the incoherent, settling for highly contrived resolutions. Yet, it brilliantly engages the shifts and negotiations this chapter has been charting. Take, for instance, the film's use of the wedding trope. It begins with a discussion about Raja's marriage, necessary for the continuation of the family line: the housekeeper tells his parents of an excellent bridal prospect—Swapna, a beautiful and smart young woman raised by her three uncles. Raja pursues Swapna across Europe at his parents' behest; of course, he is allowed a peek at her photograph to establish his own willingness. The ensuing romance is then interwoven with misunderstandings between the two families and Raja's good-natured, if devious, attempts to win over Swapna's intransigent uncles. The film ends with the customary group photo at Raja and Swapna's wedding. As if this diegetic arc were not

enough, the film reflexively alludes to the generic significance of the wedding in contemporary Indian cinema: hearing band music at a wedding, the uncles forget their immediate mission and begin dancing on cue—not unlike audiences who might be drawn to wedding films largely because of the sheer spectacle of celebration and a merry, old time. But there is more to the film that complicates its overall heteropatriarchal conservatism (a conservatism that incredulously requires Swapna's grandfather to come out of narrative oblivion and set things right—the grand patriarch figure still has ultimate authority, social and narrative). As the rest of the chapter shows, compared to the more well-known and written-about family values films such as *HAHK*, *DDLJ*, and *Pardes*, this one may be more crass, but it is also more radical. Feminist readings of the genre have assembled a certain canon over the last decade—a canon that provides evidence about the new cinematic conservatism (and strengthens critiques linking cultural mediations to a resurgent sectarian nationalism), but also excludes the more disruptive moments in popular cinema. A class dimension is at work in such exclusions, in critics' unwillingness to engage with the inane and vulgar. But in its crass, over-the-top elements, thematic and formal, *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge* produces a queering, as it were, of the heteronormative national pitch.

Family Loyalties, Individualist Aspirations

Such a queer impulse is evident in the film's focus on a most unusual family. Swapna's family life is anything but heteronormative: after her parents die in an accident, her three uncles raise her. Fearing that their own conjugal aspirations might get in the way, the uncles remain bachelors, dedicating themselves to bringing up the baby. With three father figures, the family is so excessively and redundantly "patriarchal" that the structure devolves into its own surreal parody. The basic idea is from the French film *3 Hommes et un Couffin* (1985) and its Hollywood remake *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), except Bollywood reimagines the trio in terms of local stereotypes. The eldest uncle, Bhola Nath, is a *pakwan* or bodybuilder: he extols the virtues of a high-protein, carnivorous diet, imposes a strict workout regimen on Swapna, and chases away every Romeo who dares to ogle at her. The youngest uncle, Prabhu Nath, is a *pujari*, a devout Hindu spending his days in meditation and worship, eating a strictly vegetarian diet, and expounding on the importance of spirituality. The two brothers appear to stand in for the two pillars of a militant Hindu nationalism associated with organizations such as the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS): the film acknowledges the centrality of these tendencies in 1990s

Indian society and simultaneously lampoons them. The middle brother, Vicky (most likely an Anglicized diminutive for Vikram) Nath, is literally the odd man out: flamboyantly effeminate, he is a fashion designer by profession, eats only “continental food—no oil, no masala, no calories,” and prefers a cosmopolitan lifestyle. The film introduces the characters in telling ways: Bhola lifting weights, Prabhu singing a devotional *bhajan*, and Vicky making a grand appearance on the ornate staircase, prancing to the Ricky Martin dance ditty, “Livin’ la Vida Loca.”

As the object of her uncles’ obsessive affections and their competing demands, Swapna feels stifled. She complains to Mary, the sympathetic housekeeper, that she cannot do anything of her own *marzi* or volition: all her desires have to be secondary to her doting uncles’ wishes. Even with something as basic and essential as meals, she is scared of offending the divergent tastes of the carnivore, the vegetarian, and the health conscious. When the uncles gather in her room to coax her into eating, the situation quickly devolves into a quarrel among the three. Unable to get a word in, Swapna finally screams in desperation: evoking the trick films of the early twentieth century, a simple edit makes the bickering brothers disappear in thin air. The implication of this scene is quite unambiguous: if Swapna is to come into her own as an autonomous subject, she must make the overprotective uncles “disappear” from her life for a while—that is, she must run away from them and live her own life on her own terms. In this struggle between patriarchal expectations on a young woman and her embodied existence, Swapna finds an ally in her Uncle Vicky, clearly coded as gay and presumably more in tune with her desires than the other two uncles (more on this later). Unbeknownst to Bhola and Prabhu, Vicky arranges for her to join a group tour of Europe. Swapna has a chance to break out of the family cocoon and to live life without having to accede to her uncles (or to her future husband).

Of course, the terms in which the film presents Swapna’s temporary “liberation” remain circumscribed within patriarchal structures and conventional cultural polarizations. Thus she goes to Europe in traditional *salwar kameez*, and changes into trendy mini skirts and slinky dresses; as one character retorts, she leaves as Seeta (the mythic ideal of Hindu-Indian womanhood), and returns as Suzie. The reference to Seeta is significant in the light of contemporary conservative campaigns often, although not exclusively, spearheaded by *hindutva* brigades against young women wearing Western clothing (skirts, jeans, T-shirts) on college campuses and in small towns. The idea here is that a woman’s dress code signifies her purity or her corruption (see “Obscenity? It’s in Your Jeans”). No wonder, then, that Swapna soon gets into trouble with drunken revelers in a bar. Raja blames her for drinking beer and cavort-

ing with strangers, ignoring her honest if bewildered plea that she was “only dancing.” Apparently in this film’s moral universe, women as wily seductresses are ultimately responsible for men’s carnal transgressions. Therefore Raja gets to slap Swapna, his punitive outburst legitimized by the narrative’s regulatory paternalism vis-à-vis women. This chapter will later argue that the film reveals a far more complicated attitude toward gender relations and the tension between individualism and conformism; for now, let us note the slight reprieve for the young woman before she is returned to her pedagogical role. Swapna manages to turn the iterative question/answer structure back on Raja to make her point that a real Indian man would beat up her assailants to protect her honor. When Raja complies gruffly, she turns into a quivering girl, signaling her capitulation to the hero’s macho charms. Still smarting from Raja’s accusation, she follows a long line of hyper-romantic and whimpering Hindi film heroines to lie down on nearby train tracks. This compound gesture of hurt indignation/abject submission seals her fate. From now on, she will be Raja’s loving and all-forgiving consort. The scene ends with Raja literally carrying her in his arms back to the hotel: as the film’s title suggests, we (that is, male national subjects) shall sweep the bride off her feet and carry her away.

Interestingly, it is Swapna who experiences trouble in being integrated within a heteropatriarchal regime, as she negotiates the tussle between her desires and what is expected of her. In contrast, Raja is the effortless social subject—his life is a seamless fit with the normative



Figure 9. Swapna (Kajol) and her uncle Vicky Nath (Anupam Kher) in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995).

order, and he has no problem being the perfectly obedient son at all times. Indeed, when the uncles spurn the wedding proposal from Raja's parents a second time, Swapna gets fed up with their unreasonable and obdurate attitude and is ready to leave; but Raja, evoking the film's litmus test of Indian-ness, maintains that because they are neither Russian nor German, they cannot marry without their loving guardians' consent. Raja's parents do not have to struggle like Swapna's uncles in dealing with their ward, although their ease may be construed as evidence for the social efficacy (thus, desirability) of the heteronormative family. Raja's family comes across as a model of heteropatriarchal stability (although with an update—Raja and his father act like buddies) when compared to the heroine's decidedly queer family with three daddy figures. This contrast puts a further twist on the continuing "feminization" (and subservience—in the end, the three uncles have to kneel in front of and plead with Raja's parents) of the bride's side in typical Indian wedding scenarios. After all, the groom's family *is* the scene of heteronormativity, the "home" where the bride will live from now on, carry out her wifely duties, and breed. Swapna's grandfather, who finally makes their union possible, enjoys his authority because he is the eldest of the two families. He is an iconic figure straight out of old oil paintings of forbears towering over present generations: his gravelly voice, his firm bearing, and his moustache speak volumes about his patrician authority, masking the abruptness and improbability of his appearance as the living vestige of an archaic social order.

In spite of these blatant and strained narrative maneuvers aimed at securing ideological reproduction, the film ultimately communicates marked ambivalence about its own ostensible project. From the moment when Mary, the loving housekeeper, advises Swapna to run away (advice that costs Mary her job), we realize that the narrative is in deep empathy with the young woman's dilemmas. The fact that Mary is Christian, and thus part of a religious minority, brings a marginalized critical gaze to bear on mainstream Indian society, revealing its entrenched Hindu unconscious: we are forced to remember that in the Indian context, women such as Swapna have to live up to the ideals of Hindu womanhood and subject themselves to quasi-religious containment. Mary, a surrogate mother figure, understands a maturing Swapna's emotional and physical needs, and it is she who initiates the matrimonial arrangement. The film is by no means feminist; however, a proto-feminist case can be made for its empathetic and affective truck with real women's hopes and aspirations in the face of the tyrannically prescriptive and proscriptive norms. It allows Swapna her moment of autonomy, all too short-lived, in the European sun. The foreign locale (locations in Switzerland and

Mauritius doing duty as generic Europe) is significant, as it takes the protagonists beyond the territorial bounds national borders impose, and beyond the possibilities familiar social institutions circumscribe. There is a long literary and cinematic history of European subjects “finding themselves” on a trip to India: E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (with its real and imagined sexual transgressions) may be the paradigmatic text in this respect. Now, more than ever before, globalized Indians turn the traffic of self-realization around, traveling to Europe to find themselves. On the evidence of the 1990s conformist films, they actually discover their innate national identity while traveling through Europe (and in some cases, in the United States or Australia). However, such self-realization cannot fully contain, nor quite erase, the preceding and substantial confusions. Just as a Christian gaze shakes up—queers—the immanent naturalness of Hindu-Indian behavioral strictures, so does the territorial displacement present new opportunities, extending—queering—the realm of potentialities for Indian identities and lifeworlds; thus certain queer portals open in the midst of the cinematic hetero-nation. The following presents a queer reading of *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge* in terms of its themes, characterizations, iconographies, and formal predilections.

Queer Windows

The two family habitats are a mish-mash of design elements, with ornamental flourishes in garish colors and ostentatious materials. Even as the decor spells “affluence,” it brings to mind architecture critic Gautam Bhatia’s acerbic appellations “Punjabi pop” and “*baniya* [mercantile] baroque” with their connotations of excess and brassiness. It also reminds one of camp aesthetics, although that term designates a consciously ironic intentionality that may not be operative in the set designs here. (And this lack of irony seems to be a part of Bhatia’s point.) A camp tonality is more in evidence in the deliberate camera movements, in the flashy costumes, the larger-than-life performances, and in the embellished sound cues that elicit mirth with all the subtlety of the laugh track that punctuates television sitcoms. These overblown formal elements are all essential components of filmmaker David Dhawan’s stylistic repertoire; in this film, they parody and thus trouble the very upper-class privileges and heteropatriarchal sanguinities that they seemingly represent. Thus, as Swapna dances with two men in a Swiss bar as Raja looks on irately, the camera repeatedly dollies in on him in a suggestive swoop to the accompaniment of a metallic swoosh. Watching the film twice with very different audiences in Kolkata and in Jackson Heights, New York, I noticed both times that viewers gleefully anticipate the macho

hero's impending outburst. What is not obvious is whether they expect him to direct his ire toward the two lotharios or toward Swapna. Many viewers might find it entirely credible that our hero gets infuriated with his love interest for her "wayward" behavior; thus they might accept his public slapping of Swapna as entirely justified. Indeed, the inane formalist flourishes could be bolstering an archaic masculinity that thrives on subjugating women as objects of protection and control. And yet the unabashedly corny camera and the soundtrack could, just as well, insinuate something else for viewers: that Raja's anger is misdirected and ridiculous and that his masculinist mindset is utterly outmoded. That Raja physically reprimands the heroine and beats up her molesters is a measure of the film's ideological doublespeak. It wants to disparage patriarchal norms even as it supports them.

The performances are all canted to a high pitch: Bhola's exaggerated machismo, Prabhu's projected other-worldliness, Vicky's swishy affectations, Swapna's naivety, Raja's beefcake postures, the tour manager's relentless hamming—all register both affection and incredulity about the characters and their lifeworlds. The comedian Johnny Lever dons many garbs: first as manager of the European tour group, then as a waiter in a restaurant, then as a fake wrestler, and finally as Raja's trusted sidekick. If he is the most explicit drag performer (especially in the superhero-style tights and cape he wears as the wrestler Chirkunda), the film features a bevy of impersonators. The fiendish "diamond smugglers" who shadow Swapna are actually Raja's cousin, and the man he fights on the road to "protect" (and impress) Swapna turns out to be his close friend.

The most prominent camp performance here is that of actor Anupam Kher⁴ in the role of Vicky Nath. Kher has taken on roles of ambiguous sexualities on multiple occasions. One of his most memorable screen turns is as Pinkoo, the swishy villain of *Mast Kalandar* (1989) who openly comes onto other men and winks at the audience from behind the bars of his prison cell, letting them in on his amorous/carnal designs on his cellmate. In this, Kher joins other revered "character actors" (an epithet reserved for versatile actors who, in spite of their supporting roles, often walk away with the films) tackling popular queer roles throughout the 1990s: thespians such as Paresch Rawal (seen as the spiritual uncle in *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*) in the role of the *bijra* or hermaphrodite Tikoo who serves as surrogate mother to the female protagonist of *Tamanna* (1996), and Sadashiv Amrapurkar who brings to life the villainous *bijra* pimp Maharani in *Sadak* (1991). In his landmark essay on "the profuse and richly ambiguous indigenous male-male sexual iconographies" in popular Hindi films of the 1990s, Thomas Waugh notes the cinematic ubiquity of the "highly visible intersex persona" of the *bijra* icon essentialized

alike by Northern (or Western) anthropologists and gay rights advocates (282). In particular, he observes that the *bijra* figures are promoted from the status of the “epicene sidekicks” and “low comic diversion[s]” to the “complementary narrative functions of supermenace or supermother,” instantiated by Maharani and Tikoo, respectively (286).⁵ He also argues that Kher’s characterization of the male-identified Pinkoo is more of an exception for 1990s commercial Hindi films. More than the third gender,⁶ Pinkoo embodies emergent explicit “queer cravings in terms . . . of middle-class metropolitan movements and identities” or MMMIs (284).

Pinkoo predates *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*’s Vicky Nath by a decade with one significant difference. Although Pinkoo’s flashy villain is allowed the expression of his homosexual desires, the more respectable Vicky Nath has to sublimate his yearnings into an avuncular aspiration to see his beloved niece get her beau (except for one passing moment in a restaurant scene when Vicky seems smitten with the flamboyant Chirkunda). Like his two brothers, Vicky eschews any possibility of conjugal happiness, conventional or otherwise, to devote himself to raising his orphaned niece. In sharp contrast to his brothers, however, Vicky understands and empathizes with Swapna’s plight. In a displaced articulation of his own (as yet impossible) desires, he wants her to live her life—if only briefly—on her own terms and to find fulfillment in heterosexual romance. He not only sees himself as Swapna’s father *and* mother, but also seems most capable of fulfilling both roles. Note that Raja’s father, Seth Oberoi, openly expresses *his* desire for a beautiful daughter-in-law, Heteropatriarchal family ties permit, even encourage, such social pleasantries about intergenerational, quasi-incestuous dynamics. In contrast, Vicky only hopes that his niece will marry a swanky and up-to-date young man without personalizing this hope in terms of his own needs. Normative kinship structures do not allow a more direct bond between men brought together through the institution of marriage.

If Vicky’s desires remain inscribed within a regime of heteronormativity, in what sense does he personify the “queer cravings” of “middle-class metropolitan movements and identities?” The fact that he is an internationally successful fashion designer is not an inconsequential narrative bleep, nor simply a stereotypical professional choice for an imputedly queer character. Worldly and cosmopolitan, he is projected as being savvy to the ways of contemporary life. No doubt, such a notion of contemporaneity remains problematically glib. To be contemporary, for example, typically implies to be individualistic with a narrow insistence on one’s “freedom of choice.” Again, freedom now is realized largely within the realm of consumption (how many kinds of cereals or detergents do we get to choose from?)—a realm to which fashion belongs. In a rapidly

globalizing India, the middle class has overcome the stoic austerity of an earlier, more insular project of nationalist development with its obsessive stress on self-reliance. Transnational lifestyles, grooming standards, and modes of self-presentation infiltrate and “queer” prior nationalist standards. Most striking are the transformations in male attitudes and deportment—Waugh’s MMMIs—not all of which are skin-deep. Note the shift away from rigid gender roles with a rise in the number of educated female professionals and in the willingness of younger urban men to share the responsibilities of domestic work and child care. Note also the primed self-consciousness among men about their looks and their fascination with global grooming norms, indexed by proliferating men’s lifestyle magazines, exclusive health clubs and beauty salons, and new products such as Fair and Handsome cream.⁷ Male supermodels-turned-actors such as Arjun Rampal and John Abraham are the new national role models, inspiring young men to become fashion conscious and earnestly vain; Bollywood superstars such as Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan play with and around queer yearnings both on-screen (most famously in the hit film *Kaal Ho Na Ho* [2003]) and off-screen (Indian gossip columns have been rife with rumors about Shah Rukh’s alleged bisexuality; Saif has expressed his deep appreciation of his gay fans). If consumption and the body are the foci of a new cultural-political imagination, then the transfigured, queered male identity has emerged as the condensed node of a host of less inhibited, norm-bending desires (covering a range far beyond homosexual yearnings).

The term “metrosexual,” coined by the British journalist Mark Simpson in the mid-1990s, is the much-hyped global signifier for the new male. The Indian popular media has enthusiastically embraced the term not simply because it makes for “good copy,” but also because of its strong resonance with social trends. In October 2005, Mumbai hosted the first Met-Fest, “a 10-day exploration-cum-celebration of this new urban phenomenon” (Rao). Mangesh Kulkarni quotes Simpson to point out the latter’s astute linking of this “male makeover” phenomenon to forces of global political economy:

For quite some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturised heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism. The stoic, self-denying, modest straight male didn’t shop enough (his role was to earn money for his wife to spend), and so he had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image—that’s to say, one who was much more interested in being looked

at. . . . A man, in other words, who is an advertiser's walking wet dream. (quoted in Kulkarni)

Kulkarni argues the transformations in gender roles and sexuality cannot be understood in isolation from the New Economy with its stress on "the knowledge-driven service sector" and the "non-traditional, varied patterns of consumption" (Kulkarni).

A far more disjunctive domain comes to view when one surveys transformations in social outlooks and mores regarding gender and sexuality. The national child sex ratio (number of girls per thousand boys from birth to age 6) has dropped since the 1990s, dipping below 800 in many districts of the wealthiest states of Punjab and Haryana ("No Girls. Please, We're Indian"): higher income levels, expected to improve reproductive health, may actually encourage pre-natal infanticide by allowing access to ultrasound imaging technologies. A Bangalore study on youth sexualities finds continuing differences and inequities across gender lines. Young women are more prone to talk about their reproductive responsibilities, generally skirting the issue of sexual pleasures. Young men, on the other hand, freely discuss their sexual proclivities. They read "sex books" with graphic illustrations and language that frame male organs as "weapons" and female genitals as "passive receptacles"; they even recount "[s]tripping, masturbating and passing crude comments" as part of their enjoyment.⁸ Alongside these deeply entrenched beliefs and practices, the past two decades have witnessed gains in the legal rights of women, the establishment of pro-feminist men's groups, and the institutionalization of gay rights—including the appearance of the newsletter *Bombay Dost* in 1991 (the very year the Union Budget officially triggered economic liberalization), establishment of the Humsafar Trust in 1994, and perseverant attempts to repeal anti-sodomy laws dating back to colonial India. The HIV/AIDS crisis and strong anti-prostitution blocs (covering the entire range of the political spectrum) have forced the national establishment to engage and address heretofore marginalized, even taboo, forms of sexualities. One might mention the AIDS awareness campaign in Bengal, featuring the adorable ragdoll Buladi (a familiar, caring elder sister figure), and hard-hitting photography exhibits and documentaries on sex workers (including Shohini Ghosh's film, *Tales of the Night Fairies* [2002]). The visibility of queer subjects in mass media has recently reached a new apotheosis with a spate of films centering on queer characters (including *Sancharram* [2004] and *My Brother Nikhil* [2005]), and the runaway success of the television talk show *Koffee with Karan*, which the openly gay filmmaker Karan Johar hosts on the Star Network channels.

The contemporary queer subject embodies, in more ways than one, the nation's highly disjunctive and plastic participation in the movements toward globalization. The recent shift from the *bijra* to the MMMI persona in commercial films constitutes a semiotic passage from the realm of the subaltern to that of the global-popular. The transitional figure of Vicky Nath signals this class dynamic: transitional because he retains the reified mannerisms of the earlier stereotypes of marginal sexualities, yet he projects a new social mobility, a worldly confidence. Still, one significant commonality remains between such transitional icons and the playfully queer cosmopolitans the most popular stars project. Within the domain of popular cinema, they all articulate and flirt with the forbidden, but ultimately return us to the safety of conformism (Vicky Nath cannot articulate his sexual desires, and the younger heroes tap dance around a queer sensibility but eventually confirm their heterosexuality).

The contradictions faced by a globalizing national social space produce these cinematic interdictions—screen mediations whose enunciations simultaneously defer to the limits of the permissible and transgress those very boundaries. Such ambivalent maneuvers require a supple analytical lens unencumbered by the value-laden, obscuringly polarizing categories of “progressive” and “regressive.” Borrowing from the terminologies associated with computer operating systems, contemporary Hindi popular cinema's frequent but highly circumscribed invocations of queer subjectivities⁹ function as windows on our computer screens. We open multiple windows to work out subsidiary problems, and then we subsume the results into the main task. These “queer windows” of cinematic doublespeak allow us to romance the unconventional, even the subversive, before we settle back into the heteronormative fold; and the (necessarily temporary and controlled) invocations of these transgressive impulses harness a certain “progressive” chic, securing for the nation a “new, improved” cosmopolitan public image. Interestingly, traces of these partial transgressions linger in our imaginations and our material life-worlds: these traces coax us, ever so slightly, into a novel and open sensual field. As Mahesh Kulkarni notes, this is “the vast grey zone between the media-bolstered façade of metrosexuality and the deep-rooted structures of heteropatriarchy. This is the space to watch for those seeking to understand and shape gender dynamics in the country” (Kulkarni).

This chapter demonstrates that the heteropatriarchal family, which has been a metonymic bulwark of the modern nation, has become one such “grey zone” in its encounter with contemporary conundrums. Drawing on my analysis of an unabashedly mainstream Hindi film, I have explored the following questions: What happens to the ideologically linked and painstakingly delineated and reified categories (for example, male privilege,

patrilineal inheritance, normative sexuality, social reproduction) that shore up and naturalize the entire complex of social relations comprising the hetero-nation? If the current conjuncture unhinges many of these terms from their imputed verities, what fuzzy zones of individual and collective being become available to us? At stake is the apprehension and realization of these new possibilities for a (trans)national publicity, where the radically heterogeneous potential always, already inherent in the hetero-nation is made explicit, concrete, and, perhaps, even more normal.

Notes

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1. These include cinema-related radio and television programming, magazines, posters, coffee-table books, music and music videos, as well as “new media” products such as videogames, Web sites, downloadable screensavers, and cell phone jingles.

2. To take one salient example, the marginalization of homosexuality within modern national imaginations have a long and pervasive history: for instance, Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code outlawed homosexuality at the inception of the modern German nation-state in 1871. In India, the British Raj instituted antisodomy laws in Section 377 of its Criminal Code in 1861; after independence (1947), the post-colonial nation-state inherited these laws.

3. For an interesting discussion of utopianism and commercialism in recent Hindi films, see *Inden*.

4. Global audiences will remember him as Jesminder’s strict but sympathetic father in Gurinder Chadda’s film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002).

5. One might add that practically all the major male stars of the period donned drag in at least one film, including Akshay Kumar in *Khiladi* (1992), Sanjay Dutt in *Khalnayak* (1993), Amir Khan in *Baazi* (1995), and Shah Rukh Khan in *Duplicate* (1998). However, their drag performance is either an instrumentalist ploy in the story (often to hoodwink the villains, or to get the girl, or both), or a comic diversion that spectacularizes the star’s capacity for hamming: never is the queering indicative of the characters’ sexual confusion. On the other hand, a handful of “offbeat” or “alternative” films such as *Daayraa* (1996) and *Darmiyan* (1997) focus on intersex or transgender subjectivities.

6. As Waugh suggests, industry insiders and mainstream audiences do not really bother to distinguish between the categories of sex and gender: the stereotypical *bijra* is a composite icon of sexual indeterminacy, gender trouble, and forbidden yearnings—all in all, a radically marginalized subaltern figure that is still a potent threat to social normativity.

7. Realizing that nearly one-third of the customers of their best-selling Fair and Lovely complexion-lightening cream were men, the cosmetics manufacturer Emami decided to bring out its “exclusively for men” version.

8. Vasan reports findings of the study, which the Foundation for Research in Health Systems conducted with funding from the Department of Health Education, NIMHANS, Bangalore.

9. This strategy involving part-time queer subjectivities—a kind of queer impersonation or “queer drag”—is also characteristic of other cinemas (for example, Hong Kong, Mexican) originating from social contexts in flux.