BOOK REVIEW

Travelling with Bollywood


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A brief Google search with the phrase ‘Bollywood research’ announced 211,000,000 hits. Admittedly this combination of words simply returns terms used in phrases rather than actual research on Bollywood. Yet, a cursory look at academic titles on Bollywood—*The Magic of Bollywood: At Home and Abroad; Producing Bollywood; Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry; Fashioning Bollywood: The Making and Meaning of Hindi Film Costume; Conjunctions: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*—in the first half of 2012 alone illustrates its proliferation. Judging by net searches, it is safe to make the claim that in the last decade the field of Bollywood research has become an expanding universe.

It is in this universe, or should one say a kind of Bollywood multiverse, that *Bollywood Travels: Culture, diaspora and border crossings in popular Hindi cinema* shines brightly. This book is Rajinder Dudrah’s latest exploration of Bollywood through a James Clifford inspired metaphor of reading Bollywood through its global travels. I say latest, as Dudrah is no novice in the field of Bollywood research. This is his second monograph on the subject. Dudrah deftly deploys concepts, frameworks, and methods from the disciplines of Sociology, Film, Media and Cultural Studies, and South Asian Studies to produce the book’s interdisciplinary and complex arguments in a wonderfully readable style.

Dudrah suggests that an extension of Clifford’s idea of travel for ‘storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world’ might require other ways of thinking about Bollywood (2012, pp. 7-8). Here a key
motivation for Dudrah appears to be a heuristic exploration of routes ‘unworn academically’, allowing us to think ‘eclectically about other kinds of crossings in cultural representations’ (2012, pp. 8-11). In thinking through the borderlands of Bollywood (with a nod to Gloria Anzaldua), Dudrah suggests that while some of the films he probes have been critiqued for their conservative ideologies and discourse, overlooked are the ‘complex possibilities and textual pleasures’ which might account for the ‘contradictory and multi-layered workings of Bollywood films and how they are read by its audiences’ (2012, p. 10).

The argument for reading Bollywood films for these possibilities is reminiscent, for example, of Sujata Moorti’s question—‘Do cultural representations offer an alternative imaginary practice?’ (2003, p. 356). Moorti is concerned with theorising a ‘diasporic optic’, a sideways glance, for the transnational Indian subject (2003, p. 359). Bollywood Travels is concerned with more.

The question of borders is a prominent one in the book. Referencing the last 15 years of A-list Bollywood films, Bollywood Travels argues that these films have had profound effects on diasporic cultures which, in turn, have influenced the visualisation of transnational city spaces and representations of diasporic culture in Bollywood itself. Dudrah veers slightly from critiques of dominant border representations in Bollywood. Borderlands become the lens through which recent Bollywood films are read for their visualization of ‘new imaginative places and spaces where the pleasures of different sides of a socio-cultural border can be safely rehearsed’ (2012, p. 11).

Bollywood Travels criss-crosses its way through India/Pakistan border politics, new significations of borders between the British Indian diaspora and its imagined homeland, pleasurable transgressions regarding queer gender and sexuality, and the kinetic ways in which Bollywood engenders haptic social and cultural shifts in UK urban spaces. Dudrah argues that Bollywood popular culture creates opportunities for new beginnings at these ‘imaginative border spaces’, and for shifting those very conservative discourses or ideologies that it is often accused of disseminating.

This idea, explored in a rigorous and meticulous manner through attention to the textuality of the films, their sites of dissemination and their cultural effects, is striking. It demands the attention of someone who is both a critical researcher as well as a Bollywoodphile, if I may use the term. Dudrah avows this standpoint in the text by paying tribute to Rosie Thomas’ argument for ‘making sense of the value of popular Hindi cinema on its own terms’ rather than judging it through the norms of either Hollywood or Indian art cinema (2012, p. 12). Similar arguments regarding scholarship on Bollywood have been made by other researchers. Yet, it is that ability to cast a critical eye (through an acknowledgement of Bollywood’s conservative aspect) while rigorously probing other possibilities that produces a nuanced reading of Bollywood popular culture. Dudrah’s attention to the materiality of Bollywood (the films and their representations) alongside ‘the circulation of popular cultures in actual cultural geographical settings’ strikes perfectly this balance of a critical eye and a mapping
of Bollywood’s pleasurable possibilities of border travel. This is perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid to a Bollywood scholar. It takes someone who loves watching Bollywood, who is culturally literate in its nuances and is able to travel with Bollywood to its diasporas, as it were, to produce such fine scholarship.

In this respect *Bollywood Travels* is as much about Bollywood as it is about South Asian diasporic cultures in the postcolonial context of the UK. Here Bollywood’s tongue-in-cheek settings and dialogue are described as ‘looking outwards from the diaspora’ rather than evaluating the diasporic subject from a normative homeland (2012, p. 29). In *Jhoom Barabar Jhoom* (2007), for example, this looking outwards produces other South Asian solidarities—the announcement of Indian and Pakistani as ‘same to same’ even as differences are touched upon. As Dudrah argues, the book makes sense of Bollywood’s relationship to the diaspora through ‘non-linear and disjunctive ways that account for a more complex and heterogeneous standpoint’ (2012, pp. 8-9). Indeed the diaspora has become an important consideration for Bollywood. The book’s mapping of the complex relationship between Bollywood and South Asian diasporas is timely in this respect as Bollywood ‘relies on Indian and the wider South Asian diaspora for its momentary growth’ (2012, pp. 98-9). It is for this reason that the book is a significant contribution to research on Indian cinema as well as the wider fields of Postcolonial and South Asian diaspora studies.

If this is a book about travel, where does it arrive? Quite astutely, Dudrah implies that a book on ‘a cinematic medium whose products rarely remain static or are culturally finished’ can never conclude or arrive (2012, p. 98). In this spirit, Dudrah raises some productive and useful questions for further research. Building on the valuable insights regarding Bollywood’s border crossings in the past and the present, Dudrah offers thoughts on how these arguments can inform scholarship on the more recent ways in which Bollywood has begun travelling through new media forms and technologies. Ever mindful of Bollywood’s audiences and fans, Dudrah suggests that a mapping of these travels needs to take account of how new media interactions help produce ‘new aesthetics, representations and ideologies in contemporary Bollywood’ (2012, p. 104). Dudrah’s brilliant use of the theoretical framework of travel as a fruitful way of thinking through Bollywood’s global circulation, its assemblage, allows for attention to the contexts within which it engenders popular cultural forms. In this sense, *Bollywood Travels* is of major significance and will be of value for the research directions that the book helpfully maps in its concluding comments.

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References


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