



## *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* and the Construction of Normative Indian Femininity

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**Abstract:** Bollywood, India's global film industry, is perhaps the most influential site of constructing identities. *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* is no exception either. The film is essentially a sermon on the greatness of Indian culture. The paper is an exploration of how the typical Indian woman is imagined and projected in this film. The typical Indian Woman-, in spite of falling in love, is dutiful, obedient and dependant on her male counterpart. Such an attitude is perhaps in sync with the absurd patriarchal values which, I believe, are at the heart of all the coercion that women have to face in this country. Using tools of Feminist criticism, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial theory the paper will explore the underlying Patriarchal/Sexual Politics that runs rampant throughout the film.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Culture Industry, Nationality, Patriarchy, Nation-ness, Feminism, Gender

### Introduction:

In the wake of the new critical approaches in the late twentieth century-such as Queer Theory and Masculinity Studies- Feminism has taken a back-seat at least in the Western Countries. However, in a third-world country like India, where women's rights are constantly vilified a discourse on women's right is imminent as well as pertinent. As India is flexing its muscle in their pursuit of becoming one of the global powers on economic and martial front, we need to take a look at how social inequalities mar India's image all across the world. On the Global stage India has gained a notorious reputation of being a country of Rapists. A recent report suggests that an Indian student has been denied admission by a German teacher on the ground of India's troublesome reputation is a mere confirmation of the fact. I completely understand that this is an act of over-generalization and perhaps also an Orientalist assumption. However, such incidents give us the opportunity to self-introspect and perhaps try to understand the way a majority of our men think in this country. A controversial documentary film titled *India's Daughter* by Leslee Udwin reveals the psychology of the rapists, which I believe, is the metonymic representation of many Indian men as well. It is at this juncture that I have decided to look at the way Bollywood and other mass media of India objectify women.

It is an undeniable fact that Bollywood, India's global film industry, is the single biggest cultural denominator of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in this country. However, the Hindi film industry did not always have a global significance. It is in the wake of the first Economic Liberation in 1991 that the film

industry has gone through a sea-change by catering to both local and the global audience. The global audience of the Bollywood films generally consists of NRIs and the immigrants of Indian subcontinent. Keeping in mind the huge Diasporic community that Bollywood caters to, the directors and the producers try to make films in a manner that would be able to synthesize both local and the global issues. Many films during this period have used foreign country, especially America, as its locale where Indian protagonists try to cling onto their Nationalist identity, albeit absurdly sometimes. Hence, it will not be wrong to claim that Bollywood films become a site where transnational identities and the idea of 'nation-ness' (Anderson, 1983) are constructed and reified. However, being a 'Culture Industry' Bollywood produces films which are, by no means, examples of true art; rather, these films, cumulatively, project a society which is traditional at best and coercive and hegemonic at worst. In the Hindi Film Industry there is a strange yet unequivocal polarization between the Art film and the popular film. It is presupposed that the Art films are made for a ubiquitous elite intellectual class; whereas, the popular films are generally made keeping in mind the mass. It is these popular films that unfortunately become a site of perpetuating normative discourses. Keeping this perspective in mind, it seems that these popular Bollywood films feed into the collective unconscious of this inapprehensive mass who would buy into all sorts of cultural nomenclature. If Art is supposed to break new grounds by foreseeing reality, then, popular Bollywood films undoubtedly fail to do so. Perhaps, in order to avoid the wrath of the moral police and the omniscient Censor Board of Film

Certification, the Directors also do not take the risk of pushing the bar. Hence, in most of the Popular Bollywood films we see the celebration of traditional Indian values which, in any liberal society, would be condemned as derogatory.

### Material and Method:

Instead of looking at a recent Bollywood venture, I have decided to go down the memory lane to interrogate one of the most iconic films that has ever been made in Hindi- *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* ((DDLJ)). In fact, one does not have to go down the memory lane as the film is celebrating its twentieth year and one simply cannot miss the buzz. The film has got a special release in some multiplexes and the youth of the country are embarking upon the journey of watching it. Most of them are returning with a happy heart, and perhaps, for obvious reason. I am interested in this film for various reasons: a) it's a film that has set up a yardstick for cheesy romances that grace us almost every Friday; b) it's a film that caters not only to the local audience but also global audience as well; c) Most importantly, I am intrigued in the way women in this film are objectified under the pressure of performing the typical duties assigned to Indian women. Hence, this paper seeks to explore how the idea of 'Indian femininity' finds a coercive voice in popular Bollywood films through a case study of this Sha Rukh Khan and Kajol starrer, Yash Chopra produced and Aditya Chopra directed 'classic'. The case study, I hope, will show how the idea of 'Indianness' takes us to a normative understanding of social processes; and an extremely Puritanical view regarding femininity. While doing so, I hope to unearth the contradictions prevalent in Diasporic characters with the help of the critical tools of Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Postcolonial studies.

### Discussion:

*DDLJ*, which was released in the year 1995, remains, till date, one of the biggest blockbusters in the history of Hindi Cinema. Considered to be a coming-of-age film, it describes the larger-than-life love of Raj (Sha Rukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol). The film opens in the bedroom of Kajol with a song that tells us that the female protagonist is waiting for her dream man to come and take her away. In the next scene we meet Raj, who is projected as nothing but a spoilt brat. Perhaps the director wants to highlight how decadent young people become when they embrace the foreign culture. He enters into a shop run by an Indian man (incidentally Simran's father); and though the shopkeeper says that the shop has closed down he takes away some bottles of beer. (However, such bohemianism cannot be expected of women at all.) Coming back to the story, we now see Simran requesting her overtly Puritanical and normative father, who is narrating the decadence of the young Indian fellow to his submissive wife (the image of *sati-Savitri*), to allow her to go on a European tour

with her friends. After many considerations, her father gives her the permission to go for this trip.

Incidentally, it is on this trip that Simran meets Raj and, though they fight over various issues, they ultimately fall in love. Coming home, Simran confesses to her mother that she has ultimately found out her dream man. However, this conversation is overheard by her father and he instantly decides to go back to his native village in India to fix a marriage for his daughter. Raj, in the meantime, realises that he is in love with Simran. But by the time he comes to meet her they have already left. Raj decides to go India to unite with his beloved by hook or crook. After landing in India, he befriends Simran's would-be husband and cunningly their household. This plan is hatched up to stay in close proximity to Simran. He plans masterfully to win everyone's heart so that they agree upon their marriage. However, Raj's intention is busted open in the penultimate scene and he is utterly humiliated by Simran's father (who already had a disliking for him for that beer incident). However, after many delays and a typical Bollywood style fighting scene we see that famous train scene where Simran is freed by her father to go and unite with Raj.

Any primary reading of this film would reveal that an extremely normative society is projected through the filmic space. Yash Chopra (the producer of the film; his son was the director), a beacon of this typical idea of Indian-ness or 'nation-ness' (Anderson, 1983), took it upon himself to provide as normative an understanding of society as can be imagined. However, in his own view, he was singing the glory of Indian culture. Amresh Puri becomes a typical (perhaps even exaggerated) model of diasporic Indian who, in spite of setting up a lucrative shop at the heart of a foreign country, remains Indian by heart and soul. This contradiction is the revelation of his hypocrisy, to say the least. Though he has left his country to become more financially potent by exploiting the rich economic condition of the western world, he has not made peace with the cultural values of the west. Even his sartorial appearance, while he is at home, reveals his rooted Indian values. Not only he, his wife and children also maintain their sense of Indian-ness with pomp and grandeur. Just like a typical Indian man he wants to be a domineering presence- a typical patriarch. His projection smoothly fits into the ideal of masculinity that ran riot back in India as well. However, it is the demand of Indianness from his daughter Simran which is perhaps the most typically Indian thing that he does. The first scene, where the heroine dances and sings, reminds me of Pope's projection of Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*. The contradiction lies in the fact that in spite of being born and brought up in a foreign culture she neither speaks English nor talks about her studies (though she is apparently a college student). Perhaps her desire to travel Europe is a *tour de*

force before she ultimately gets married off. Simran is like Miranda of *The Tempest*, whose existence is solely dependent upon her father's whims.

The whole discourse on 'Indianness' becomes even more flabbergasting when Raj, the next generation immigrant also starts to lecture about the same values as those of Simran's father regarding womanhood. One incident from the film particularly interests me at this juncture: Both Raj and Simran miss their train while on Europe tour and they have to spend a night by sharing a single bed. Simran, being a typical 'Indian' woman refuses to do so and goes away to spend the night in a stable. Raj, being courteous (and probably chivalrous as well) comes out too. The winter in Europe brings snow with itself and that night is no exception. In order to protect herself from being dead from cold Simran consumes a bit of wine. Consequently, she gets tipsy and after they sing and dance in a typically Bollywood style Raj apparently takes her back to the rented room. In the song and perhaps under the influence of alcohol perhaps Simran expresses her desire to kiss Raj. It might very well be her 'latent repressed desire'. Getting up on the next morning- and much to her horror- she finds herself in Raj's clothes. Thinking about what might have happened to her she starts to scream. At this moment, Raj intervenes and assures her that nothing has happened between them as he knows how important dignity is for Indian women (as if women of other countries do not have any dignity and self-esteem). Two things emerge from this rather melodramatic episode: Indian women don't drink (unless of course they are facing a life threat) and Indian women never imagine about having pre-marital sex. It is expected that Yash Chopra, a sermon-singer of Indian values and ethics, would try to glorify his own culture by vilifying other culture(s).

Protecting the 'dignity' of women seems to be one of the chief aims of the moral police; and the producers of the film seem to be no short of that. The conceptions which develop around Simran are rather derogatory, to say the least. Contrary to popular belief where it is thought that women who travel to foreign land find it easier, *DDLJ* takes us to a place which is nothing but a home away from home. Using Benedict Anderson's phrase one might call this an 'imagined community' where the characters are trying to cling on to their identity in the best possible manner. Quoting from Offner and Pumain, Michael Bruneau writes, "All Diasporas are socio-spatial networks necessarily undergoing territorial expansion because they aggregate both places of memory and places of presence". What further intrigues me is the way in which gender relations are explored within the locus of such 'imagined communities'. Raj, though being an Indian boy, has very few features that we associate with a typical Indian boy. He irks Simran's father (the beer incident) because of his un-Indian values.

It is, then, very ironical to see how he wants to marry Simran in a typically Indian way even when he had the chance of running away with her (which would, of course, be the more credible option if the reel aspect is taken out of context). However, it must be noticed that the pressure of performing as a typical Indian is much more on Simran than on Raj. The whole projection seems to echo the extremist right wing Hindutvabadi political ideology that was running riot in India during this time. In this context we may take a look at what Ingrid Therwath has to say about such filmic space:

In this context, Indian culture is portrayed as family-oriented, Hindu, the preserve of women within the home and yet 'portable' (Uberoi 1998: 306) thus possibly transnational. Cinema, more than other media like television, mobile phones or the Internet, constitutes a medium for the enacting, teaching and dissemination of this nationalist discourse heralding the combined virtues of consumerism and devotion and of cosmopolitanism and roots. Chopra confirms this when he confides that 'Indian films teach in a subtle way, they teach the social conventions, a sense of duty' (Chopra 2002). This paper shall therefore go beyond the synoptic description and focus on the lessons in Indian identity and desirable conduct given in the last fifteen years through one of Yash Chopra's favourite characters: the NRI. Once unloved and portrayed as the epitome of moral corruption, he became in the past fifteen years the embodiment of the national ethos as well as of a triumphant capitalism.

I am of the opinion that Capitalism and Patriarchy walk hand in hand; and just like capitalism, patriarchy thrives on productivity. Women, in a heteropatriarchal social matrix, are considered nothing more than forbearer of the family. In such a social set-up women become a commodity that gets transferred from one man (father) to another (husband). Hence, this dangerous social institution holds such derogatory, narrow and reductionist view about women who are considered nothing but agents of productivity. Though apparently an educated woman, Simran never talks about defying the social institution in order to survive on her own. It seems absurd that she never takes a stance against patriarchy. She, at best, seems hapless to change her destiny. Her freedom also is completely dependent upon Raj. Even when she defies against her father's intention, she cajoles Raj saying: "Mujhe le chalo" (Take me away). In her critique of Henry Miller's *Sexus*, Kate Millet suggests that we get to see is an investment of almost supernatural power to the male protagonist as his male ego is pampered by a 'weak, compliant and unintelligible woman' (Millet, 2000). Though Simran's utter surrender seems to be a gesture of love, we cannot ignore the fact such suggestion reveals her weakness and dependence on men. This situation also reminds of Adrienne Rich's theorization of compulsory heterosexuality where

she scathingly criticises heteropatriarchy as a dangerous socio-political institution as it forces women to depend on men both socially and economically. Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of Folk Tales* argues that Princess (in this case heroine/Simran) is always deserved by the hero (Raj). However, the villain (Simran's father) stops him from taking the heroine away. Ultimately, the hero wins as he takes away the heroine. Propp found this a common feature in almost all the folktales. The whole process reveals an abject objectification of woman and also her treatment as a valuable commodity that would be transferred from one hand to the other. A new documentary titled *India's Daughter* interviews Rape accused of Jyoti, a young medical student. She was raped in a running bus with her male friend being brutally attacked as well. In the documentary we see an interview of the rapist who also talks about the ideals of Indian womanhood. More disturbing are the views expressed the defence counsel ML Sharma who describes women using metaphors such as flower, jewellery and food. Indian men, unfortunately, share more or less the same view regarding a woman. Simran's inability to be the prime mover to gain her love back and her passive acceptance of whatever Raj does is a testimony to that fact itself.

India is not only a huge country but also has a huge number of settlers all across the nation. This local and the global community are bound by a common euphoria of Nationalism. A film like *DDLJ*, with all its cheesy layers of romance feeds this nationalist ego of the Indians. This narrative strategy of the director obviously provides him with a larger market to work upon. In the age of Globalization art is also about consumption. Bollywood is called an industry- a culture industry- where certain ideologies are produced and reified. And what better to mint money than by pampering the collective ego of the Indians by feeding their sense of Nationalism. By repeatedly pampering the 'nation-ness' of both the national and the international audience, this film has opened up an unlimited vista of opportunities as far as mercantile capitalism is concerned. However unfortunate it might seem the projection of stringent Nationalism veils the intensely normative projection of femininity that runs throughout the film.

In the introduction I mentioned how Bollywood films coercively construct a normative understanding of the world. However, from an alternative point of view, it may be argued that the final union between Raj and Simran at least opens

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up a new dynamic of social relationship as the hedonism of patriarchy is defeated by the power of love. The toxic idea of 'arranged marriage' gives away to a more celebrated idea of love-marriage, as the film ends with its now famous tag-line: "come...fall in love". Vehement defenders of this film might argue that *DDLJ* taught India to love; and that point cannot be blatantly discarded either. However, in blindly appreciating the feel good factor that the film brings with itself one cannot miss out on the fact that the suggestion made by Vladimir Propp regarding the transference of women from one patriarchal set up to another stands true for this film. Though we may not question Raj's love for Simran, we should not forget that Raj is nothing but a sexist (and perhaps equally patriarchal) man as well. The grandnarrative '...and they lived happily hereafter' is a dangerous one as we don't get a chance to see what lies ahead for Simran.

Cinema, being the most powerful and influencing art form, should try to be more conscious about the reality. The heroes and heroines of country are treated like demi-god. So when a celebrated actress like Kajol performs in such a normative role, it is bound to keep other women under a sense of nausea. Merriam- Webster online dictionary suggests that Feminism is a belief that men and women are equal in a society. However, Simran's abject dependence on Raj is extremely flustering. The normative social view of this film perhaps reveals that a woman is never able to take her own decision. Her role is confined within the narrow domesticities of social institutions such as Love and Marriage. Through the film Simran tries to become a perfect daughter and then a perfect dutiful beloved (hopefully a wife as well). It's no wrong in celebrating the great values of one's country as long as those values point towards a more dynamic, more vibrant state of being.

#### Conclusion:

My criticism of the film, which is celebrating its twentieth year, reveals its deep resonance on Indian culture. However, I believe that this film was just a continuation of the tradition of Indian films where women are always marginalised. In the recent years, especially in the twentieth century, we have seen more woman-centric films such as *Kahani*, *Mary Kom*, *Mardaani* to name a few. However, India's film industry remains extremely patriarchal by and large. In order to create a more equal, more effusive society Bollywood directors must step ahead and make films that will not be discriminating and objectifying women.

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