

“Having made Italy, now we must make Italians,” went a famous phrase from the mid-nineteenth century commonly attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio. It reminds us that the modern state, far from being the expression of an already extant or imagined community, is often a precursor to and the instrument of the violent effort to pulverize multiple and recalcitrant identities into that of the modern national citizen, usually along the vector of majoritarian principles. Partition created India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh), and the postcolonial history of the subcontinent has been the effort to get the reality on the ground to live up to the ideal of the map. For all the force of the ideas of secular nationhood in the immediate aftermath of independence, majoritarian nationalism made strong headway first in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and now threatens to engulf India. Minorities have been made to feel like lesser beings, as people out of place and time, in each of these three countries. Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, despite one economic and political debacle after another, continues to win elections and is now making inroads in areas where its Hindutva-based pitch had never found much purchase before: the northeast and the south. A one-time Nehruvian and secularist like Shashi Tharoor now finds it necessary or expedient to write a book titled *Why I Am a Hindu*, signaling the rightward shift in India’s political spectrum: accepting a soft majoritarian ethos is an entrance requirement to be a credible (i.e., one capable of winning elections) politician.<sup>4</sup>

In 1947, it may still have been plausible to argue that national citizenship ought to be unrelated to religious belief, that one should be able to be Indian or Pakistani in the fullest sense while being a Muslim or a Christian or a Hindu or an atheist in one’s private life. Seven decades later, it seems as if partition more likely inaugurated the inexorable process of dividing the subcontinent into nation-states populated by majoritarian citizens and lesser beings. It is a history that is still unfolding, and both events on the ground and the works reviewed in this essay give us much reason to be cautious and fearful, rather than optimistic.

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### *The Past and Present of Hindi Cinema*

*Dream Machine: Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema.* By SAMIR DAYAL. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015. xi, 304 pp. ISBN: 9781439910641 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book).

*Twenty-First Century Bollywood.* By AJAY GEHLAWAT. London: Routledge, 2015. xiv, 156 pp. ISBN: 9781138793606 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911818001249

Of all the popular regional cinemas of India, Hindi or Bollywood film continues to dominate in India and beyond, as Samir Dayal’s *Dream Machine* and Ajay Gehlawat’s *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* illustrate. Since the late twentieth century, analyses of Hindi cinema have been the focus of numerous fine academic books by Madhava Prasad, Ravi

<sup>4</sup>Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).

Vasudevan, Vijay Mishra, Sumita Chakravarty, Jyotika Viridi, Lalitha Gopalan, and Tejaswani Ganti, among others. The majority of such works explore the world(s) of Bollywood film by examining individual films within larger thematic and theoretical contexts, including hegemonic narrativity, genre construction, gender representation, nationalism, postcolonialism, and globalization. Both books utilize this previous scholarship and extend such models of inquiry. Where the two authors primarily diverge in their analyses is found with Dayal's focus on excavating the fruitful tensions between realism and fantasy in Hindi cinema and Gehlawat's surveying of the trajectories and representations emerging in twenty-first-century Bollywood film. Dayal's text is fairly dense and wide-ranging in its theoretical orientations, including Deleuze, Zizek, Freud, Lacan, Jameson, and Appadurai, while Gehlawat's work, firmly grounded in the theoretical terrain of the Indian film scholars Vasudevan, Rajadhyaksha, and Prasad, is pithy (half the length of Dayal's book) and perhaps more accessible to some readers, particularly undergraduate students, in its prose.

Key to Dayal's analysis is historicizing Indian nationalism and understanding it "as dynamically changing with the increasingly globalized flows of culture, people, goods, and capital" (p. 4). For him, a critical goal of his text is to recognize "the contradictory play of realism and fantasy ... as *productive*, and on tracing the increasing disaggregation of 'Indianness' in response to the forces of globalization and economic liberalization" (p. 5). Significantly, the "dream machine" of Dayal's title refers to a stroboscopic (from the Greek, *strobos* meaning "whirlpool" and *skopein* meaning "to look at") apparatus originating in the nineteenth century that uses "flickering light to induce hypnagogic effects on a subject" (p. 17) when the subject's eyes are closed. Once the eyes are opened, the effects cease. As Dayal states, "This suspension between the actual and the hypnagogic is a suggestive image for Hindi cinema's 'suspension' between realism and fantasy" (p. 17).

Through the lens of citizenship, the state, and the law, Dayal devotes the first three chapters of *Dream Machine* to revisiting and disassembling the visual and aural social realist and fantastical details that structure Bollywood classics like Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951) and Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) from the immediate post-partition period of the 1950s, to the "Angry Man" and "Avenging Woman" films of the 1970s Emergency era of Indira Gandhi, and the 1980s phase of initial neoliberal economic reforms under Rajiv Gandhi. In *Awaara*, Dayal's focus is on the dichotomy of the main character, Raj (played by Raj Kapoor), as both ambitious, Westernized, civilized gentleman and downtrodden *awaara*, *jungle*, and thief, constituting the dilemma of the postcolonial male Indian subject. He sees Raj "as a figure of a collective fantasy" who "embodies the aspirations for the new Indian male; the fantasy of potential plenitude is the more poignant here because it threatens constantly to reveal itself as impotence" (p. 47). In *Mother India*, Dayal discerns a certain representational continuity with *Awaara* in displaying "a somewhat jaded view of the state of the new nation-state, pointing up the gap between the reality of village life or the life of the urban poor—and a prosperous modernity figured as Westernized, an elite fantasy or mythology propagated by the Nehruvian state" (p. 53). The central maternal figure of Radha (played by Nargis) reaffirms "the mother nation over even biological family" (p. 55) and is therefore "caught between two roles: representative citizen and virtuous Indian mother/faithful wife" (p. 56). Finally, in "Angry Man" films, such as Yash Chopra's *Deewaar* (1975) and Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975), both starring Amitabh Bachchan, and a variety of "Avenging Woman" films from the 1980s through the 1990s, Dayal investigates the complicated role and construction of gender. As he critically notes, "*Sholay*, like *Deewaar*, reflects and condenses the 'anger' defining the 1970s, producing two interlinked manifestations: the obvious one is a crisis of *citizenship*, but it is imbricated with a crisis of Indian *masculinity* encoded in the cryptotext of homoerotic 'bromance' *avant la lettre*" (p. 74). Additionally,

helpful here to both scholars and students is the breakdown of what thematically and structurally comprises an “Avenging Woman” film and its promulgation of revenge fantasies in the context of the reality of India’s rape culture.

Chapter 4, in a section titled “Reimagining the Secular State,” is effective in dissecting several so-called “Terrorist” films of the 1990s and 2000s, including non-Islamist terrorism in films like Santosh Sivan’s *The Terrorist* (1998), as well as Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* (1992, part of a trilogy), Gulzar’s *Macchis* (1996), Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and Karan Johar’s *My Name is Khan* (2010), to name just a few of the works discussed. Dayal’s historicizing of these films in the environment of India’s late twentieth-century rise of a reinvigorated Hindutva through the violent, anti-secular machinations of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Vishva Hindu Parishad, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and his explication of “the four dimensions of Hindi terrorism cinema” are beneficial. He suggestively observes how “the terrorist imag(in)ed on-screen is demonized and romanticized as object of desire and a *totem*, a parasite invading the national body from outside or infecting it from within” (p. 102).

In the same section, chapter 5 focuses on the trope of a “revisionist patriotism” in “the constructedness—‘inventedness’—of the national” (p. 120) in Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (2001), where the film’s “‘realist’ mise-en-scène presents a reinvention of a fantasmatic ‘originary’ India, whose objective correlative is the reinvention of cricket as an ‘Indian’ game” (p. 134).

The final section of the text examines the realistic and fantastical in the arena of Hindi diasporic cinema, including an evaluation of the space for same-sex sexuality, principally in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996), and the evolution of a “new cosmopolitanism” in diasporic South Asian (DSA) cinema with its challenges of “recasting Indianness” on the site of the nonresident Indian subject (p. 165). Dayal critically underscores that “DSA narratives featuring new cosmopolitan attitudes tend to be fissured by ‘roots’ nostalgia, the sting of racism, and class-based exclusion” (p. 173), and through his analysis of multiple films he demonstrates the productive potentiality of DSA. Also in this section, he neatly unpacks the slippery, multifaceted role in Hindi cinema of “poverty porn” films like Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). In his conclusion, “Transnational Translations, Mobile Indianness,” Dayal reasserts and rightly argues for “a bifocal postcolonial transnational analytic to recognize not only the quandaries of early postcolonial Hindi cinema but also the contradictions of films made in the contemporary conjecture” (pp. 219–20).

Gehlawat’s concisely presented *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* stands alone or could serve as a substantive companion to Dayal’s text. His book moves the evaluation of the content and context of Hindi film firmly forward into analyzing it in the age of digital reproduction; the brief introduction gives a succinct overview of the recent history of various Bollywood films’ digital visual and sonic manipulations and effects.

As previously indicated, Gehlawat shares a similar theoretical legacy with Dayal, drawing from the popular Hindi cinema writings of Vasudevan, Rajadhyaksha, and Prasad to set up his first chapter, “Disassembling Bollywood,” which wrestles with early twenty-first-century forms, styles, and categorizations, like “Bollylite.” Here he scrutinizes the remaking and reconfiguring of Hindi cinematic classics like Bimal Roy’s *Devdas* (1955), through Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s 2002 version, to Anurag Kashyap’s *Dev D* (2009). Revealingly, Gehlawat addresses how and why “certain Indian filmmakers are moving towards a Western-styled aesthetic (excluding songs, reducing the overall length, etc.),” and simultaneously how and why “we see Hollywood attempting to reformulate the Bollywood film” (p. 30), with the oft-used *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) serving as an example of this particular process of globalized artistic commodification.

In the second chapter, “Reconstructing Femininity,” the arc of what constitutes “the feminine” in Hindi film is traced from the construction of “the vamp” to the “new Bollywood woman,” concentrating on the place of actresses like Zeenat Aman and Helen, as well as the instrumental position of the voice of the female playback singer—from the legendary and prolific higher-pitched vocalizations of Lata Mangeshkar to the more recent lower-registered performances of Sunidhi Chauhan—and the increasingly pronounced use of female direct address to camera and audience.

Chapter 3 extends this investigation of evolving femininity in Bollywood cinema by looking at the articulation and function of race, of whiteness, in the representation of *goris* (white women) and *gori* (light-skinned Indian women)—from the iconic actresses “Fearless Nadia” of the 1930s–40s, through Helen of the 1950s–70s, to the beginning of transforming iterations of *goriness* in films like *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), *Lagaan* (2001), *Rang de Basanti* (2006), and *Marigold* (2007), to tackling the creation of the “rebound *gori*” and the Anglo-Indian women found in several recent films. The third chapter further complements the previous two with its timely concentration on “metrosexual masculinity” in current Bollywood cinema, which emerged in India in the 1990s with the decided imprint of consumerist neoliberalism, forging a profitable space for “the advent of the care of the physical self” (p. 91). The difficulty in reading the bulking up of Hindi film actors—“the (in)ability to distinguish between a particular form and its caricature” (p. 106), which is a consistent thread throughout Gehlawat’s text—is outlined by literally gazing at the bodies of Hrithik Roshan, Saif Ali Khan, John Abraham, Ricky Bahl, and Shah Rukh Khan (the black-and-white DVD image grabs are accommodating here), who routinely display meticulously chiseled (and most often shaved) bare chests, arms, and backs in their song-and-dance numbers.

The final, brief two chapters of the book are obligatory reading for anyone presently teaching a Bollywood cinema or, more generally, an Indian film course, or employing Bollywood films in other classes, particularly if at universities in the United States or Europe. In chapter 5, “Bollywood 101: Teaching Hindi Cinema in the West,” Gehlawat offers cogent advice and strategies on how to thoughtfully take on and convey such a complex, diverse “niche” subject matter, which frequently shares the “dual burden” of having to operate as a film and area studies course (pp. 112–13), to undergraduate and graduate students. He poses core questions that require consistent contemplation when teaching Hindi film abroad: “How is Bollywood being framed? And what is it potentially giving up in the process of being assimilated into the Western academic canon?” (p. 125). The concluding chapter muses over changing cinematic elements in and scholarly implications of two recent trends in twenty-first-century Bollywood that encompass “on the one hand, Bollywood stars moving westward, into the world of Hollywood and, on the other, contemporary popular Hindi cinema increasingly reflecting cultural shifts that tend to be associated with a process of Westernization” (p. 127).

In summary, both *Dream Machine* and *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* provide nuanced, well-organized, and abundantly detailed analyses of the intricate past and present of the historically important and wonderfully compelling world of Hindi cinema, and are welcome additions to the body of scholarly literature on the subject. These works can be most effectively utilized in undergraduate and graduate university courses on Bollywood film and digital media, Indian cinema, and South Asian culture or area studies. Both books include select black-and-white images from the major films under discussion, and both provide deep bibliographies. Gehlawat also supplies a valuable filmography and fertile footnotes. The availability of both in e-book formats makes them quite appealing as affordable college text options. Finally, both Dayal

and Gehlawat demonstrate how and why Hindi film is far from obvious or transparent and requires diligent, rigorous academic attention, specifically transitioning into and through the twenty-first century with the unrelenting manifestations of cosmopolitanism and globalization and their ramifications for the form, content, and future of Hindi cinema.

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*Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World.* By ROBERT DESJARLAIS.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xii, 295 pp. ISBN: 9780226355733  
(cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).  
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Robert Desjarlais's *Subject to Death* is a deeply haunting and evocative book about the mourning rituals within Hyolmo society in Nepal. The text uncovers a collective process of witnessing and responding to death that answers a set of questions posed in its penultimate chapter. Why do Hyolmo rites invoke so many varied images of the deceased, only to dissolve them in subsequent ritual moments? Why do the rituals proceed from tangibility and graphicness to abstraction, anonymity, and emptiness? And how do these rituals transform or assuage the grief of those who mourn?

By placing these framing questions at the end rather than the beginning of the book, Desjarlais asks the reader to proceed through the text in a state of relative unknowing that is overwhelmed by the rich complexity of sensory details, characters, and narrative fragments of loss. The effect is one in which the reader experiences death as a rich source of unknowing or overwhelming dissolution, as well as a creative exercise in remaking and transforming that enables a kind of “remembering to forget” (p. 222). On the one hand, the rites seem directed at the living, who are given an object lesson in the deep Buddhist truths of impermanence, emptiness, and no-self, as well as the distant possibility of transcending an endless cycle of rebirths that all sentient beings are subject to until enlightenment. On the other hand, the rites are a guide for the deceased, who are given instructions to depart as well as assistance in gaining a good rebirth through the merit generated by their relatives. Further, the rites imply a ritual play or mastery over the uncontrollable trauma of death that suddenly and inexplicably disrupts the predictable and mundane flow of life. Rituals of mourning offer a “template of grieving” (p. 221) that allows relatives to move from the sharp, raw pain of early grief to more manageable and subtle forms of sorrow that reestablish a more predictable flow of time through ritual repetition and a periodic structure of linked rites. The reader learns how Hyolmo mourning rituals digest and manage the pain of death while fashioning new images and effigies of the deceased that move away from discrete tangible life towards more abstract notions of impermanence and emptiness.

Desjarlais describes the rites of mourning using the Greek term *poesis* to indicate the humble process of transformation that tries to influence the broader laws of karma that will determine the fate and rebirth of the deceased consciousness. While this term is evocative, the use of Western theorists—Freud, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, and Blanchot—seems out of place at times and not as cohesive as the tentative