Idealized Bodies—Embodied Ideals: Young Female Audiences and Their (Re)Negotiations of the Bollywood Heroine in Trinidad

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ABSTRACT

Film heroines have been an integral part of Hindi cinema's long-standing transnational circuits and, in more recent times, of global Bollywood. Due to current changes in the reception context, young audiences in Trinidad are confronted with the need to make meaning of heroines within disjunctive cultural formations, both in negotiating heroines of newly released films as well as renegotiating established icons. This paper offers a historical overview of Hindi cinema, related notions of idealized Indian womanhood, and marginalized viewing pleasures. Secondly, drawing on interviews conducted in Trinidad between 2010 and 2013, it gives insights into the signifying practices of young women. The focus is on how young women exert discursive and interpretative power to selectively reconfigure heroines and star texts, thereby signifying Indianness as well as a space to express their desires.

KEYWORDS

Young audiences; Bollywood heroine; star text; diaspora; ethnicity; gender negotiations; navigations

Following the liberalization of India's national economy in the 1990s, Hindi film production has undergone fundamental changes, which have primarily been discussed in the context of Bollywood emerging as a cultural industry, its global outreach, and aspirations to tap new markets beyond established cinema circuits. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha suggests, the process he refers to as "Bollywoodization" is primarily related to growing marketing opportunities and options for merchandising on the global market.[1] Propelled by transnational flows of the contemporary global cultural economy and the deep mediatization of almost every aspect of life, Bollywood is now commodified and consumed in manifold ways, including branded communication patterns, fragmented viewing on social media platforms, and transcultural fan art. Thus, audiences worldwide have experienced—and actively negotiated—the changes that have ultimately led to the current predominance of the Bollywood mode in the Hindi film industry.

As research conducted in Trinidad and Guyana indicates,[2] this development has resulted in disjunctive viewing practices for Indian diasporic groups in the Americas, who share a long-standing involvement in transnational Hindi cinema circuits. Diasporic longing for the ancestral homeland, which has been integral to constructions of Caribbean Indianness, plays into the

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[1] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2003): 30.

[2] For a discussion of Guyana see Narmala Halstead, "Belonging and Respect Notions vis-à-vis Modern East Indians: Hindi Movies in the Guyanese East Indian Diaspora," in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), and Atticus Narain, "'Bring Back the Old Films, Our Culture Is in Disrepute': Hindi Film and the Construction of Femininity in Guyana," in *Global Bollywood*, ed. Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

nostalgic feeling for the bygone days of Hindi cinema. Consequently, young audiences today negotiate the meaning of contemporary film production within often ambiguous frames, distinguishing between "old'" and "new" films as well as engaging in highly contested debates on what is deemed as culturally authentic. This article seeks to highlight how young women in Trinidad selectively engage with Bollywood films as symbolic repertoires of meaning and reconfigure images in their navigations of multiple ideals. Based on the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted as part of an ethnographic reception study, the focus lies on how young women establish relations between images and new contexts relevant to them. Thus, their agency—expressed in both interpretative and discursive power—is highlighted. This approach offers insights into how Bollywoodization is negotiated in the local context and shows that the symbolic roles of films have become more selective, indeterminate, and diversified.

In this context, focusing on Bollywood heroines is fruitful, because romantic family films of the 1990s and 2000s relied on femininity and the female body as central signifiers in discourses of national and cultural identity. Consequently, not only have film texts featured female protagonists as idealized bodies representing values constructed as traditional and pure, but the embodiment of such values has also become integral to the star texts of popular actors associated with this period.[3] I argue that in the Trinidadian context, Bollywood heroines have formed an essential part of symbolic repertoires that serve gendered constructions, in particular, an idealized version of "traditional" Indian womanhood. Due to the continuing popularity of these films, they constitute sites of meaning-making that young women draw on to embody ideals relevant in the local context. Based on the (re)negotiations of young women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, it can be shown that the Indianness signified by Bollywood heroines

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[3] Based on Richard Dyer's influential work in star studies, the concept of 'star text' encompasses the artist's performances on screen but also the off-screen persona constituted by newspaper and magazine articles, fan art, advertising posters, rumors, etc. See Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald Stars (London: British Film Institute, 1998)

is relevant beyond diasporic identity formation. Rather than focusing on the use of symbols in performative practices related to Indian womanhood in the local context,[4] the analysis is concerned with the discursive appropriation of the Bollywood heroine and the embodiment of a variety of ideals beyond ethnicity that interview partners seek to embody. Due to the advancement of the Bollywoodization process and the limited contribution of recent film productions to symbolic repertoires constituting the ideal of Indian womanhood, the results indicate an increased necessity to reconfigure the meaning of heroines from romantic family films of the 1990s and 2000s, whereby alternative viewing pleasures and notions of Indianness related to new Bollywood products are marginalized.

Framing Young Audiences: Negotiations and Navigations as Media Practices
The participation of Trinidadian audiences in Hindi cinema circuits is intrinsically connected to the historical experience of displacement through colonial indentured labour regimes. From screening imported Indian films in the 1930s to sharing song-and-dance sequences via YouTube,

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[4] As I have argued elsewhere, images and signifiers are often incorporated in "symbolic womanhood," a concept developed by Gabrielle Hosein to describe gendered notions of ethnic identity assumed by young Indo-Trinidadian women in designated sites, such as cultural and religious functions or family gatherings. For a discussion of embodiment that focuses more closely on ideals of Indian womanhood see Hanna Klien, "Beyond Bollywood: Alternative Female Subject Positions in the Context of Hindi Film Reception in Trinidad," in *Caribbean Issues in the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Kumar Mahabir (New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2013), and Gabrielle J. Hosein, "No Pure Place of Resistance: Reflections on Being Ms Mastana Bahar 2000," in *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*, ed. Rosanne Kanhai (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2011).

forms of engagement are embedded in dynamic negotiations of cultural belonging in a highly diverse, multi-ethnic society. In order to understand Indo-Trinidadian women's position and agency in this situation, Patricia Mohammed proposes to see "gender negotiations"[5] as processual and non-linear forms of compromising, colluding, subverting, and contesting, or bargaining. In her analysis of the post-indentureship reconstruction of ethnic community, this allows her to explain the active participation of women in the reinstatement of patriarchal gender relations, which can be related to identifying with ideals of Indian womanhood.[6] Applying "gender negotiations" to young Indo-Trinidadian women at the turn of the century, Gabrielle Hosein focuses on how a multitude of ideals are navigated in order to find "the balance of identities and practices appropriate to different spaces and situations."[7] Her research gives insights into how the choices—and often self-reflexive justifications—of young women reflect constraints as well as the skills with which to navigate within them. As a conceptual framework for investigating the construction of Caribbean Indianness, these negotiations and navigations are firmly grounded in research that makes the strategies of Indo-Trinidadian women—and their positions at the intersection of multiple and competing patriarchies—visible.

Furthermore, signifiers of Indianness related to Bollywood and, in particular, Indian femininity also assume meaning beyond ethnic identity formation. They have become part of a symbolic repertoire that is used to represent and embody the multi-cultural ideal of being Trinidadian, and, as such, are accessible to members of society who do not identify as Indo-

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[5] Patricia Mohammed, Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917–1947 (New York: Palgrave, 2002),

[6] Mohammed, *Gender Negotiations,* 268.

[7] Gabrielle J. Hosein, "Modern Navigations: Indo-Trinidadian Girlhood and Gender-Differential Creolization," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 6 (2012): 10.

Trinidadian. Although negotiations and navigations concern the experience of a specific social group, can they be understood in a wider context of cultural practices in Trinidadian society? As Rhoda Reddock points out, multiple power relations result in a situation of constant instability as the locus of power is continuously shifting, negotiated and competed over.[8] She argues that this "is especially difficult for women and their sexuality, control over which is one aspect of these negotiated and competed for power relations."[9] Similarly, Brinda Mehta regards the in-betweenness and indeterminacy of identities as characteristic of women in most ethnic and social groups in the local context. Therefore, she argues that it is useful to emphasize commonalities in experiences of displacement within conceptual frameworks to disrupt "neatly aligned, state-determined racial categorizations and hierarchies that institute and sustain various levels of discrimination."[10] The relevance of this approach to understanding young women's navigations is, for example, evident in the frequent contestations of racial constructions and ethnic demarcations by interview partners from diverse religious, ethnic and class backgrounds. Moreover, the pressures and constraints resulting from this situation of indeterminacy is also expressed in the ideal of being able to embody multiple identities.

Finally, insights gained from applying these concepts of negotiation and navigation can be related to global media practices. Currently, rapid developments in digital technology and transnational flows of goods and people are negotiated in using, consuming, and engaging media.

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[8] Rhoda Reddock, "Douglarization and the Politics of Gender Relations in Trinidad and Tobago," in *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings*, ed. Christine Barrow and Rhoda Reddock (Princeton NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001).

[9] Reddock, "Douglarization," 321.

[10] Brinda J. Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)Locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 15.

The multiplicity of identity options and the need to navigate within them is an integral part of social and cultural life for young people, and this situation often results in gender-specific challenges—as well as pleasures—for women. Although standardized forms of engagement (for example, with visual media) have emerged in the course of digitalization, qualitative empirical research shows that meaning-making is embedded in local contexts and social relations, and thus always includes (re)negotiations[11] and reconfigurations.

Applying concepts of negotiation and navigation in this context directs the attention to the multiplicity of power relations and the ways young women actively pursue their own projects and goals in situations characterized by continuous instability and indeterminacy. This is particularly important with regard to the variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds of interview partners. All the interview partners are women between 15 and 28 years old, mostly from middle-class families. Although the age group spans a wide range, all research partners perceived themselves as being in a phase of transition to adulthood at the time of research (2010–2013), since they had moved out of their family home, were finishing their education, or had entered a committed relationship. The interviews were conducted both individually and in groups; the latter provided interesting insights into peer dynamics, while the former allowed investigations into sensitive issues that are discussed hesitantly in the presence of peers. While the latter provided interesting insights into peer dynamics, the former allowed investigations into sensitive issues that are discussed hesitantly in the presence of peers. In both settings, the relationship with the researcher played an integral role, which is incorporated into the analysis in terms of her outsider position, her white European bias, and her status as a differently socialized Bollywood consumer.

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[11] For an extensive discussion see Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan, *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective* (London: University College London Press, 2017).

"Women Also Had the Balls"—The Film Heroine and the Bollywood Disjuncture

Young female audiences in Trinidad engage with Bollywood under the premise of disjuncture. It is, however, necessary to move beyond the assumption that changes in the production of the Hindi film industry determined the transformation of viewing practices. The accommodation with the narrative of moral decline in Bollywood can be seen as part of gender negotiations, in which young women challenge and subvert the underlying patriarchal discourse that assumes Indian womanhood and the representation of the female body to be decisive indicators. Similar to the results of Narmala Halstead's research with audiences in the Indo-Guyanese community,[12] I continuously encountered the opinion that the short skirts worn by film heroines were the primary symptom of Hindi films' increasing failure to represent "Indian" cultural values, and consequently the main reason for the declining interest of Trinidadian audiences. On the other hand, changes in the local context—such as the impact of home technology, the elimination of stand-alone cinemas in Trinidad due to the global triumph of the corporate multiplex, or the impact of growing social inequality on intra-ethnic relations—were hardly perceived as contributing to changes in viewing practices even though they constitute major structural conditions within which social actors negotiate meanings of Bollywood and changes in film production.

With regard to the film heroine, this disjuncture can be approached from another perspective, which maintains that historical continuity in the construction of Indian womanhood as an idealized "Other" has always relied on the marginalization of non-compliant viewing pleasures. Since the introduction of Hindi films to Trinidadian audiences, the heroine character has formed an integral part of the audience's viewing pleasures—cinema-goers become immersed in how their fates unfold on screen, cheering glamorous performances and investing

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[12] Halstead, "Belonging and Respect Notions," 269.

their own emotional experiences in building fan relationships with film stars. This is evident in newspaper announcements from the 1930s featuring prominent displays of female lead actors such as Devika Rani and Sabita Devi (figs. 1–2). This is also evident in oral histories as shown in Primnath Gooptar's substantial research on the the first Indian film screened in Trinidad, *Bala Joban* (1934), Primnath Gooptar documents how women (as contemporary witnesses) remember wearing particular styles of earrings and garments—signifying Indianness—which were named after the movie.[13] In her discussion of this early period, Mohammed identifies themes of the "long-suffering and martyred mother, and the *sari*-clad femininity of the traditional bride,"[14] images which perpetuated and were incorporated into the symbolic repertoire of Indianness, even though variations of this ideal emerged in the following decades. At the same time, she points out that female icons who did not comply with this ideal also enjoyed great popularity. It seems that despite the existence of alternative cinematic pleasures, heroines who adhered to the idealized notion of womanhood serving ethnic identity and demarcation have become crucial signifiers of Indianness.

Hindi film productions in the 1990s and 2000s provided particularly rich imagery to nurture the construction of this idealized Indian femininity. Continuing to remain popular among today's audiences, these films constitute a major symbolic repertoire for young women in their renegotiations of Indianness. In interviews, this period of filmmaking was frequently addressed, also as representative of "old" movies:

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[13] Primnath Gooptar, *The Impact of Indian Movies on East Indian Identity in Trinidad* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2014), 171.

[14] Mohammed, "Gender Negotiations," 164.

I really really really enjoy the older films, rather more than the new ones. [HKT: How old would you say…?] Let's see… I even go old… [HKT: Like 50s?], I watch some black-and-white ones at times. Yes, 50s… preferably the 90s. Probably from 1980s to 1999? I like *Dil Se*, more the traditional songs with palaces and costumes. Do you know *Dil Hai Tumhaara*? With Preity [Zinta] playing a doll and the guy in the turban?[15]

Although the films produced during the early period of Hindi cinema are popular, most young women referred to the same time span as in the statement above, even if not always this decidedly. Similarly, preferred heroines were often associated with traditional values, including those of an imagined past—as in historical films made in the 1990s and 2000s—with costumes and jewellery serving as distinctive markers in the embodiment of Indian womanhood at specific sites, such as weddings (figs. 3–4).

As Rini Mehta observes, popular Indian cinema has constructed feminine ideals that reconcile differing and conflicting cultural values "as the ultimate backup, representative of a cultural state of equilibrium that at times could serve as a signifier for either family, society, or the nation."[16] Since the 1990s, this has increasingly taken the shape of female characters and bodies representing cultural purity as well as the nation-state, complying with Hindu nationalist

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[15] Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 16 October 2013.

[16] Rini B. Mehta, "Bollywood, Nation, Globalization: An Incomplete Introduction," in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, ed. Rini B. Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (New York: Anthem Press, 2010), 11.

discourses.17 At the same time, the dynamic renegotiations of this period opened up possibilities for representations of female desire and agency as well as for mediation between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, and diaspora and home.18 Almost all discussions of this period share the insight that these changes in film production were intrinsically connected to representations of femininity and female sexuality, or what Purna Chowdhury refers to as their "symbiotic relationship" with the Bollywoodization process.19

While Hindu nationalist codes of popular Hindi films are hardly appropriated in political discourses, gender representations have been incorporated into the ideal of Indian womanhood, which reinforces ethnic boundaries and patriarchal ideologies. In particular, family values and cultural purity served the narrative of economic success and upward social mobility experienced by parts of the Indo-Trinidadian community. However, Bollywoodization disrupted this discourse. On the one hand, patriarchal authorities—such as leaders in the religious and ethnic community—rejected depictions of Indian womanhood in Bollywood, on the other hand, young women themselves perceived such images as unauthentic. This is documented by Anusha Ragbir in the context of Indian beauty pageants in Trinidad, where both producers and contestants select

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17 Jenny Sharpe, "Gender, Nation, and Globalization in *Monsoon Wedding* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 6, no. 1 (2005): 58–81.

18 Rajinder K. Dudrah, *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 80.

19 Purna Chowdhury, "Bollywood Babes: Body and Female Desire in the Bombay Films since the Nineties and Darr, Mohra and Aitraaz—A Tropic Discourse," in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, ed. Rini B. Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (New York: Anthem Press, 2010), 51.

"acceptable" facets of Bollywood (fig. 5).[20] Her explanation of this phenomenon draws on Hosein's argument that young women navigate integral notions in their lif—such as honour or metropolitanism—which highlights another important aspect of Indianness in the local context: "Bollywood can wrongly create and convey an India that is too hybrid and modern for Indo-Trinidadian young women whose East Indian or Indo-Trinidadian modernity requires symbols of authenticity that can be taken into creole modernity with them."[21] Part of the repertoire that *can* be taken with them are the symbols of cultural purity and family that contribute to the ideal of Indian womanhood. Therefore, the focus will lie on the renegotiations of this ideal by young women.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that despite their failure to fulfil the purposes mentioned above, new Bollywood products can serve to construct other notions of Indianness which—while they might not be as dominant—are part of marginalized viewing pleasures in the local reception of Hindi films. Consider the following comment of a 28-year-old Indo-Trinidadian woman and devoted fan of Hindi films, who expressed her appreciation for new Bollywood productions based on her pleasure to see action heroines on screen:

> One thing I like about the new movies though, is that before, yes, you had the tradition, *Hum Aapke Hai Koun…!*—I love that movie! (…) But look at the girl, Nisha… she had a degree, her sister too, an MBA, but what did they do with it? They had their degrees, but yet they just wanted to marry someone. But nowadays the women in the movies they

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[20] Anusha Ragbir, "Fictions of the Past: Staging Indianness, Identity and Sexuality among Young Women in Indo-Trinidadian Beauty Pageants," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 6 (2012): 11.

[21] Hosein, "Modern Navigations," 18.

actually have careers, but long ago they were just "Bachaao, bachaao! [Help, help!]" and waiting for the guy. Like in *Don 2*, Priyanka [Chopra] she is kicking them, shooting them (…) women had the balls too! One thing I like about the new films, they don't just stand up there and wait for the guys to do all for them.22

Drawing on Hosein's argument, this indicates that young Indo-Trinidadian women actively engage with hybrid and modern representations of India in Bollywood and related Indian metropolitanism. However, the need for "symbols of authenticity" predominates in signifying Indianness.23 This is evident in the turns often taken by interview partners after expressing their preference for—or delight in—certain heroines as well as stars, such as Priyanka Chopra, who is undoubtedly one of the leading representatives of metropolitan India in the globalized media landscape. The statement above should be read in the context of the interview, in which the interviewee repeatedly emphasized that *Hum Aapke Hai Koun…!* (Barjatya, 1994) was not only one of her favourite movies but also fulfilled her expectations concerning the representation of "Indian" values on screen.24

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22 Interview with the author, San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, 9 April 2013.

23 Hosein, "Modern Navigations," 18.

24 As Patricia Uberoi suggests, "traditional" values such as the family concept represented in romantic films of the 1990s and 2000s are—to a considerable extent—imagined. These romanticized and nostalgic notions appealed to key audiences at the time, in particular, non-resident Indian (NRI) communities in Europe and North America as well as the new middle classes in India. This served to stage a spectacle of consumption that became identified with happy family life. See Patricia Uberoi, "Imagining the Family: An Ethnography of Viewing *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…!*" in *The Bollywood* Reader, ed. Rajinder K. Dudrah and Jigna

Similarly, other interview partners quickly returned to shared symbols signifying Indianness in their discussion of womanhood, such as the chastity of female characters or an inherent trait of innocence in the stars embodying them—an unwavering commitment to traditional family values, for example, or the capacity to wear a sari convincingly. The dynamics of these interviews must also be seen in the context of working with a white European researcher, whose outsider status can (and has) invoked, as will be shown below, assumptions about the expectations of the listener and the perceived necessity to convey cultural authenticity. Thus, the interview dynamics contribute to foregrounding an idealized version of Indian womanhood based on traditional values. While many interview partners showed interest and pleasure in non-compliant film heroines, signifiers of Indianness seem to be intrinsically linked to this ideal.

"They Remind You of Your Values!" – Heroines as Sites for Renegotiation and Agency

Despite the constraints that this idealized version of womanhood imposes on meaning-making, heroines constitute significant sites for agency. The following discussion will focus on how young women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds exert discursive power in their renegotiations of the Bollywood heroine. Rather than superficially understanding the effects of changes in film production as a main reason for the diminished significance of Bollywood in the Trinidadian context, I highlight the symbolic value of idealized bodies (such as heroines and stars) and how they are not only suitable but also desirable for vivid renegotiation processes. The interviews are analysed by taking the situational aspect of meaning-making into account and focusing on how Indianness and ideals of Indian womanhood are reconfigured.

Desai (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008) and Patricia Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Importantly, it becomes clear that interview partners are often aware of idealization and self-reflexively engage with notions of femininity in the construction of Indianness. When I asked two young Indo-Trinidadian in a group interview about the relevance of values that film heroines embody, the following exchange emerged:

A: She used to be conservative, respectful for yourself and for the family's name.

B: That is what we are accustomed to see.

HKT: And that is how you see yourself too?

A: Possibly. Because like I said, our society that we are living in now, that it is okay to have premarital sex or it's okay to be that way. But I think that is where religion takes part in it and traditions and all that, they remind you…

 [B:"They remind you of your values!"], not that you are expected to be, but what the tradition is and you know to be right.25

Reaffirming each other, the two interview partners differentiated between their lived experiences as young women in Trinidadian society and idealized versions of womanhood. The significance of peer relations is not only evident in reproducing shared values and norms, but also in renegotiating and contesting them according to the experiences of the age group. By referring to religion and tradition, the two young women implicitly situated the symbolic value of Bollywood heroines in the diasporic and Indo-Trinidadian context. However, including the voices of young women who watch Bollywood films and identify with other ethnic communities allows an exploration of how these signifiers of Indianness are also used beyond diasporic identity formations, for example, to imagine alternative ways of "being Trini," or to assess beauty ideals

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25 Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 3 March 2011.

constituted by diversity. In the following section, this will be discussed by drawing on (re)negotiations of what I have termed the "strong woman," the "virtuous woman," and the "woman of colour," as well as related ideals which young women seek to embody.

The Strong Woman: Reframing Agency

For young women, it can be challenging to draw on an ideal characterized by virtue, chastity, and purity. In the contemporary context of competing patriarchies, this version of femininity is pitted against discourses, for example, of the "overachieving girl" (characterized by her outstanding performance in education, economic independence, and sexual activity), an ideal which is nurtured by US and European media. Certainly, other strategies to signify Indianness can be employed, however, power lies exactly in a counter-position to Western discourses. In interviews, many young women promoted the ideal of a virtuous and chaste woman as part of what they understood as a clearly demarcated Indian culture. Comments on transgressions in recent Bollywood films included "Indian women are supposed to be well dressed, this is how their culture is,"[26] or "the Indian girl is like way off how she is supposed to (…) well, not how she is supposed to be, but (…)."[27] The latter shows reluctance to fully impose judgmental authority on how Indian women ought to be represented on screen, a position assumed in this context by Indo-Trinidadian women. Thereby, the speaker takes an agentic position when drawing on an ideal of womanhood otherwise associated with substantial constraints and submissiveness. It is possible to reject Western notions of femininity through a positive evaluation of the idealized version of Indian womanhood and at the same time distance the self who is presumably located in Trinidadian or Creole modernity.

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[26] Interview with the author, Barataria, Trinidad and Tobago, 20 October 2012.

[27] Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 3 March 2011.

Thus, renegotiations draw on dichotomization in the construction of cultural entities, but Indianness also appears as a fluid concept. One strategy of young women to deal with the implications of idealized Indian womanhood is to reconfigure it by infusing agency. One of the most prominent representations of this appears in the romantic family film *Dilwale Dulhania La Jayenge* (Chopra, 1995), wherein negotiations of tradition and modernity, diaspora, and homeland—both local and global—are inscribed in the young protagonist Simran's relationships to her family, her desires, and her sexuality. Confronted with a forced arranged marriage and violent assaults on the man she is in love with, the character's agency is severely limited. When Simran is united with her beloved in the film's final scene (which has achieved iconic status in Hindi cinema), the outcome is decided when her father—the locus of patriarchal power—lets go of her hand. In a group interview, two young women spontaneously offered a vivification of the scene, one emphasizing "[e]specially when her father let her go, and he didn't even look at her (…) and she runs, just runs!" followed by the exclamation of her friend, "To me that is really going for what you want (…) like you going for it!"[28] There is a distinct shift in the conversation from the focus on the patriarch and his bulging eyes—a shared image and unforgettable part of the viewing experience—to Simran's active body, staged prominently in the scene as she runs to catch a departing train. The following "thumbs up" sign of the young hero to the father as a signifier of an unspoken (patriarchal) agreement is not part of the interviewees' re-narration. Instead, the emphasis clearly lies on Simran and her active pursuit of her desires. For the two young women, whom I met in the context of a Hindu youth group, the reframing of the female character's agency can be seen as a reconfiguration of the images that Hosein and Outar describe from an Indo-Caribbean feminist perspective as the "Indo-Caribbean woman as Hindu, as

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[28] Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 10 March 2011.

passive, as heterosexual, as conservative, as submissive, as guardian of Indian culture via her body and her morality [that] continue to haunt us."29

Significantly, the heroine is played by Kajol, whose star text lies at the core of idealized Indian womanhood. As the female lead in all-time favourite films such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Johar, 1998) or *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar, 2001), she is primarily associated with the romantic family film genre. Interview partners repeatedly considered her to be representative of idealized Indian womanhood, for example, stating "[y]ou would never see Kajol acting the role that Kareena Kapoor [in *Mujhse Dosti Karoge!*] would act, or Katrina Kaif (…) they are more the modern, Westernized girls"30 or how she could "play an Indian woman authentically."31 No other actor was so decisively categorized as "Indian" by young women, who often emphasized her embodiment of innocence and purity. At the same time, Kajol was also described as a strong and independent woman, frequently underlined by agency-infused aspects of the heroine characters she acted on screen.

Idealized bodies such as the character of Simran and the star Kajol enabled interview partners to renegotiate meaning due to their firm position as signifiers of Indianness in the local context. In the group interviews, young women reciprocally affirmed the cultural authenticity of idealized bodies as well as each other's agency. Reframing them as agentic and strong challenges stereotypical notions of femininity that have hegemonized Indo-Caribbean women. Probably even more important in this context is that it allowed young women to express their own agency in the interview situation. Rather than seeking to comply with the idealized version of traditional

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29 Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar, "Indo-Caribbean Feminisms: Charting Crossings in Geography, Discourse, and Politics," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 6 (2012): 1.

30 Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 10 March 2011.

31 Interview with the author, Grand Bazaar, Trinidad and Tobago, 23 March 2010.

womanhood, idealized bodies are used and reconfigured to embody an ideal drawing on feminist notions in Indo-Trinidadian and Creole modernity, as well as aforementioned Indian cosmopolitanism and Western discourses.

The Virtuous Woman: Reconfiguring the Romantic Narrative

When the Bollywood blockbuster *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (Chopra, 2012) was released in Trinidad, it created an outburst of nostalgia for a bygone era of Hindi cinema, which manifested in unusually high attendance numbers and public attention. Therefore, it is a useful example to investigate what is considered appropriate constructions of Indianness and idealized versions of Indian womanhood. The focus lies on narrative and character elements, although the fame of the late director Yash Chopra as well as the star-studded cast significantly contributed to the popularity of the movie and its perception as representative. The film featured a high density of intertextuality and an abundance of references to romantic family films from the 1990s and 2000s. This encouraged nostalgic reminiscences as well as dynamic negotiations of meaning drawing on idealized notions of womanhood. Moreover, the juxtaposition of two unalike female characters reinforced a dichotomy between notions of "ideal" and "entertainment" which were predominant in the reception context.

Although the actor Katrina Kaif was otherwise not associated with idealized versions of traditional Indian womanhood, her character Meera fulfilled these expectations by embodying virtue in her devotion to her father as well as her faithfulness to the romantic hero. Interestingly, the demarcation of the second female character from the ideal did not lead to a devaluation. Amidst all the praise for Meera's behaviour, criticism by interview partners of Akira's outspoken attitude, adventurous personality, active pursuit of her sexual desires and, not least, her very short pants was limited. In fact, the "bubbly" character was repeatedly mentioned as a major attraction of the film—however, not suitable as the love interest of the romantic hero. As a 26-year-old

woman pointed out when recounting her experience of the romantic plot in *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*: "At some point I thought that is what they are trying to do, that he would take [Akira] (…) we would not buy that!"[32] Despite fondness and excitement expressed over the character Akira, it was thus clear that a different viewing pleasure was assigned to her than to the heroine, whose reunion with the hero constitutes the happy ending of the heteronormative romantic narrative.

This tendency in the interviews can also be related to wider media discourses as, for example, the advertising of the film that clearly foregrounded Meera and Samar, or the sharing of YouTube clips that featured the couple in song-and-dance sequences on social media sites (fig. 6). In regard to the songs, it is also significant that "Heer" became the most popular song on Indo-Trinidadian radio station charts. This particular dance sequence shows the heroine in traditional garb at her father's birthday celebration, where she performs a folk song that Samar taught Meera—the web of patriarchal relations in the narrative context of the heroine's staged performance provides a barely hidden reference to gender representations in romantic family films from the 1990s and 2000s.

On first sight, Meera does not seem convincing as a heroine fulfilling the notion of the ideal "Indian" woman. Throughout the first part of her relationship with the hero she has difficulties identifying as Indian at all; she almost exclusively wears Western clothes, needs Samar to teach her folk songs, curses, smokes, and engages in premarital sex. Despite this initial subversion of established scripts for idealized womanhood, interview partners nevertheless emphasized her self-sacrificing and chaste character. This is mainly because she is faithful until she meets the hero again years later, her secret vow to God remaining the only obstacle for the lovers. This establishes continuity with the heroines of those early romantic family films, who maintained their virtuous character while overcoming familial obligations, social pressures, and, in some

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[32] Interview with the author, Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago, 15 November 2012.

cases, violent assaults. Explaining why she feels that Meera is acting in the right way, an interview partner concludes:

> But what I liked about the movie, she did not get married. Not just because she could not be with the one you wanted to be with, she did not just say, alright, fine, I will go and marry the white guy. And the guy did the same, too.[33]

In a preceding debate with a friend who grew up watching Hindi films and considered it a strong part of her Indo-Trinidadian and Hindu identity, she discussed if and when to approve of explicit sex scenes in Bollywood—one of the primary markers of transgression in more recent productions. As an Afro-Trinidadian who would be considered a "red woman" and Christian herself, she primarily drew on observations made in church communities, where she felt a high degree of pressure on women to abstain from sex before marriage. The heroine of *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* expressed a desire for what she considered values adhering neither to Christian regulations for women nor modern conceptions of sexuality:

> If two of you can make each other's life much better, why not [have premarital sex]? That is what the essence of love is supposed to be. I really like those types of values. I don't think I would ever really want to give them up (…) just to say, oh we modern, let's just live, drink, smoke, sleep together. All these things leave you empty at the end of the day, they feel good for five minutes and they leave you empty.[34]

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[33] Interview with the author, San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, 9 April 2013.

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Following this discussion, she moved on to explain her reasons for rejecting modern lifestyles related to consumerism and a lack of depth in interpersonal relations. Thus, a shift from premarital sex to fidelity as a criterion for a virtuous woman can be observed, with Meera as the prime example—waiting years to be reunited with and marry her lover. On the one hand, the virtue of the heroine as discussed in the interview is firmly grounded in the notion of Indian womanhood as Other, distancing the speaker from the ideal. On the other hand, the idealized body then serves as an alternative to modern notions of womanhood, allowing the interview partner to renegotiate it based on her own values related to personal experiences and local contexts.

Consequently, the example of *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* shows how young women pursue their desires within structural and textual constraints as well as reconfigure the meaning of Bollywood heroines to express Trinidadian identities beyond ethnic identification. Although viewing pleasures related to female characters who do not comply with the dominant notion of Indian womanhood play an important role in the popularity of the film, they are subordinate to the idealized body of the heroine—which is a way of accommodating traditional values but can also serve to challenge aspects of modern life in Trinidad, such as consumerist excess. Virtue in the context of Indianness thus acquires manifold meanings, however, it is intrinsically tied to a heteronormative plot that ends with the reunion of lovers and the consummation of their love in marriage. In contrast to the heroine who is constructed as an "Indian" woman, viewing pleasures related to the outgoing, adventurous, and sexually agentic character Akira are marginalized.

The Woman of Colour: Recentring the Heroine and Contesting Whiteness

In Hindi films, whiteness has served to signify various characteristics of heroines and anti-heroines, some of the most famous examples including the blonde and blue-eyed "Fearless Nadia" as a 1930s action heroine, or Helen as the embodiment of the Western vamp in direct

opposition to the ideal of the chaste woman. As Ajay Gehlawat points out, it is important to differentiate between "*gori*s (white women) and those who are *gori* (light-skinned Indian women),"35 with the former only recently developing from mere signifiers of specific settings to distinguished characters. Furthermore, his discussion indicates that whiteness plays an integral part in representing the new Bollywood heroine, with films that "take place entirely in the West and feature actresses whose sex appeal is directly linked to their increasing *gori*ness."36 In Trinidad, the signifying practices of Indianness continuously negotiate the legacies of a colonial system, imposing a racialized colour hierarchy as well as racialized ethnic differences which position groups in competition with each other.37 These changes in representing whiteness seem to be a significant underlying constituent of the Bollywood disjuncture, although this was not discussed in the interviews as overtly as other markers such as dress or sexual explicitness—particularly not with a white researcher.

Consequently, interview partners' comments on skin tones were usually embedded in general discussions of beauty ideals. The Bollywood actor Kajol often served as a signifier of Indianness and skin colour as an integral part of her star text, due to her darker tone in comparison to most of the other women embodying the heroines on screen during the 1990s and 2000s. On the one hand, some interview partners framed their comments in discourses

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35 Ajay Gehlawat, "The Gori in the Story: The Shifting Dynamics of Whiteness in Bollywood Film," *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 26 (November 2011): 107.

36 Gehlawat, "The Gori in the Story," 106.

37 For an overview on theories of colourism and class system in the Caribbean see Roy McCree, "Race, Colour and Class in Caribbean Society," in *Routledge International Handbook of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Shirley Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

reproducing colourism. After naming Aishwarya Rai and Rani Mukerji as icons of "Indian beauty," a young woman remarked "[Kajol] is not as fair as the others, *but* beautiful."[38] On the other hand, many interview partners emphasized the actor's looks as integral to her representation of Indianness, for example, stating that "she is one of those faces (…) when you look at her you think: India!"[39] A variety of features, such as her characteristic eyebrows, curly hair, and body shape were mentioned. Skin tone was only rarely addressed by young women who singled Kajol out: "She is the prettiest girl I have ever seen, and she has (…) or my perception of typical Indian beauty, probably not the fairest, because I think that is what they like up there."[40] In this statement, the colourist gaze is relegated to a different region and cultural context, presumably continental India, while the speaker's ideal of Indian beauty is situated in an (Indo-)Trinidadian value system. This indicates that distancing the Bollywood heroine from Western beauty ideals and whiteness is an important strategy to demarcate the ideal of Indian womanhood.

An extensive discussion of skin tone and racialization in the local context ensued in an individual interview with a young woman who identified as *dougla*, or of mixed African and Indian descent. Her relationship to Indian films—ranging from contemporary Bollywood to arthouse productions—was tied to experiences of racial discrimination in both personal and public spaces, such as cinema halls in Trinidad, as well as insights into everyday racism and colourism in North India as an exchange student.[41] This significantly influenced her readings and

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[38] Interview with the author, Couva, Trinidad and Tobago, 7 June 2010 (my emphasis).

[39] Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 24 June 2010.

[40] Interview with the author, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 3 March 2011.

[41] Describing a trip to a cinema in San Fernando (South Trinidad), the young woman gave insights into her experiences of being racialized: "I went with my sister (…) I mentioned that we are *dougla*s, right? Half Indian, half negro mix. When she flattens her hair, she kind of…

renegotiations of Bollywood heroines. After emphasizing that "[Kajol] is not terribly fair, when you look at her, she is brown,"[42] she continued to describe what she considers the Trinidadian ideal of "beauty in variety." In this context, "brown" as a feature is positively evaluated and Kajol is reconfigured as a woman of colour. In correspondence with her claims on Indian and Indo-Trinidadian culture through investigating her ancestry, learning Hindi, and joining cultural events, Indianness signified by the star serves to contest "*gori*ness" as an increasingly central element of Bollywood's beauty ideal. Furthermore, her direct address of the issue seemed particularly important to the young woman during her interview with a white researcher who had been introduced to "race" in Trinidadian society as an outsider, and who presumably read heroines

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she looks Indian. So I went with her, and my hair was like this [pointing at her curly hairstyle]. And people just like… it was an Indian film, first of all it was not that many people. So if it had let's say about forty people in the cinema, it was plenty. Of the forty people it only had about two non-Indians! Me and my sister. So you know, of course people… it kind of gets a little… and of course it was San Fernando. And San Fernando tends to be closer to the more Indian populated areas of Trinidad. Right, so I don't want to break it down to a race thing, but it's just too… Sometimes I feel, I just felt more comfortable in India, like, more accepted in India than I do in Trinidad." Interview with the author, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 10 November 2012.

[42] Interview with the author, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 10 November 2012.

within the white gaze of a very recent wave of popularity that Bollywood films have enjoyed with Central European audiences. Reconfiguring the heroine as a woman of colour and recentring her as an idealized body in a Trinidadian context allowed her to embody the ideal of "beauty in variety" in the interview setting.

Conclusion: Idealized Bodies and Embodied Ideals

Bollywood heroines and related star texts continue to serve young women as central sites of meaning-making as well as symbolic repertoires of ideals of Indian womanhood. The disjuncture of viewing practices experienced by Caribbean audiences in the course of the Bollywoodization process results in increasingly selective, indeterminate, and diversified roles in signifying Indianness. When drawing on Hindi films in their navigations of ideals, young women therefore rely on signifying practices that successfully convey idealized Indian womanhood—which complies with patriarchal discourses of cultural and ethnic purity—but at the same time allow for the pursuit of their own goals in social situations. Such negotiations are particularly evident in justifying why a character is suited to be a heroine who fulfils heteronormative romantic film plots. In the case of *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, which features a heroine transgressing many boundaries but also an abundance of intertextual references to romantic family films from the 1990s and 2000s, the example shows how the renegotiation of "virtue" is based on a demarcation of Indian womanhood and sexuality from constructed notions of Western as well as Creole culture. As a result, Indianness—as signified by the idealized bodies of film heroines and stars—serves to express desires of commitment and stability.

Due to the advance of Bollywoodization and the limited contribution of recent film productions to symbolic repertoires, there is an increased necessity to reconfigure the idealized bodies of characters and stars from romantic family films. In interviews, young women took on agentic positions in the renegotiations of idealized bodies, thereby embodying ideals that draw on

a wide variety of cultural flows and are often grounded in their lived experiences in the Trinidadian context. Feminist navigations are evident in the efforts of young women to reframe the agency of female characters in Hindi film classics, while the recentring of the Bollywood heroine as a woman of colour serves to challenge the predominance of whiteness in beauty ideals. This is also reflected in the immediate social relations of the interview situation, for example, by encouraging a friend—who shares experiences of stereotyping as well as prescriptions related to idealized Indian womanhood—to participate in the reconfiguration of a beloved film heroine or the researcher, whose reading of whiteness in star texts does not draw on colourism and racialization in the Caribbean as a frame of reference.

Thus, Bollywood and its signifiers of Indianness remain relevant in the Caribbean, not only in diasporic identity formation but also in the negotiations of womanhood beyond ethnic and religious categories. As the discussion of embodied ideals shows, the symbolic value of Bollywood heroines for young women in Trinidad becomes apparent in manifold expressions of cultural belonging in their diverse and multi-ethnic society. With situations of in-betweenness and indeterminacy becoming more common due to the latest globalization processes, (re)negotiations gain in significance as social actors negotiate disjunctures and navigate between multiple identity options.

BIOGRAPHY

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CAPTIONS [illustrations not reproduced due to copyright restriction]

Figure 1

Advertisement for Achhut Kannya *with Devika Rani in the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 17 January 1937.* Archive of the British Library, accessed on 10 August 2018, London.

Figure 2

Colours, clothes and jewellery as markers of Indian womanhood at Hindu weddings. Photograph by Hanna Klien-Thomas, 3 May 2014, Caroni.

Figure 3

Winner of the Miss Divali Nagar beauty pageant 2012. Photograph by Hanna Klien-Thomas, 11 November 2012, Chaguanas.

Figure 4

Billboard advertisement of *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* on the Sir Solomon Hochoy Highway,

Trinidad. Photograph by Hanna Klien-Thomas, 23 November 2012.