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Beast of Burden: Depictions of Ideal Beauty and Femininity in Bollywood Cinema

By Aafreen Ahmed

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Abstract

Standards of beauty and femininity have long been, and continue to be, communicated through representations in the media. There is a plethora of messaging surrounding the ideal standards of beauty and femininity that women should aspire to, and films remain a key media text through which these ever-evolving messages are constantly created, communicated and perpetuated. Although recent decades have seen a significant increase in the feminist scholarship and critique of these often-problematic beauty standards, much is left to be researched in this area of study, especially within the South Asian context. Bollywood, India's Hindi film industry, is continuously being shaped through its exposure to global Western socio-economic influences and the postcolonial setting it operates in today. This honours research thesis seeks to analyze the relationship between South Asian notions of ideal beauty and femininity and Bollywood films, as represented in the stylistic, aesthetic and narrative components of three films, namely *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Queen* (2014). In order to accomplish this, this research incorporates theoretical frameworks such as Laura Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze, bell hooks' oppositional gaze as well as Iris Brey's recent exploration of the female gaze. Furthermore, this study adopts a postcolonial lens to study the existing relationship between South Asian standards of ideal beauty and femininity and their representations in Bollywood. Thus, this research discursively establishes how certain South Asian standards of beauty continue to be reinforced in mainstream Bollywood movies through representational techniques unique to the audio-visual media of film.

Land Acknowledgement

As a newcomer and settler to Canada and to the City of Calgary, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the people and the land that has welcomed me to live, work and grow here. I acknowledge that I completed this honours thesis from the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy which are home to the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Siksika, the Piikuni, the Kainai, the Tsuut'ina, and the Stoney Nakoda First Nations, including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations. I would also like to note that the traditional Blackfoot name of the place we now call the City of Calgary is "Mohkinstsis" and that it is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

I would like to acknowledge that the lands I am on now, and the Indigenous People who have inhabited it for centuries, have witnessed alarming rates of systemic and government-funded genocide, ethnic cleansing and harmful representations. I would also like to note that Indigenous Peoples, despite the horrors and injustices they continue to experience, are not a relic of the past and are in fact very much here and thriving and that this deserves to be acknowledged and celebrated.

It is important to me to include this land acknowledgement as part of my thesis as I came to Canada as an unaware international student and have since embarked on a learning journey throughout my degree. Moreover, I believe my research can also be applied to an Indigenous context to study the many (mis)representations that Indigenous communities, especially women, are subjected to by the media.

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Introduction

Films are as much a source of entertainment as they are a ground for academic research on a multitude of topics. The branching out of Film Studies into its own independent yet interdisciplinary area of study is testament to the interconnectedness of films with other related fields. The interdisciplinary nature of films makes the need for more intersectional research most acute when it comes to studies of movie representations.

As a self-proclaimed film buff, I have always been interested in the representations of beauty that movies seem to either directly or implicitly reflect, reinforce and, at times, resist. Having grown up watching Bollywood movies, I was always highly observant of the many messages surrounding beauty that these movies seemed to perpetuate, whether explicitly or in more subtle ways. Hence, when it came to my honours research topic, I decided to explore the relationship between these South Asian beauty and femininity standards and Bollywood movies. I believe this is an increasingly important topic of discussion in academia as it brings to the forefront the many issues with mainstream media's representations of people of colour and the implications they have on marginalized groups like South Asian women.

I chose this research topic because as a South Asian woman who grew up watching these representations in Bollywood movies it was important to me to recognize the ways Bollywood has influenced my perceptions of beauty and femininity as well as how it continues to reinforce certain South Asian beauty standards. Despite the recent growth in scholarship and literature, this remains a relatively under-researched topic, especially when considering the wide-ranging influence it has on generations of South Asian women and culture. This research topic is also significant because it contextualizes South Asian standards of ideal beauty and femininity as a product of and for the male gaze, particularly when seen through the lens of a camera.

Although Bollywood has a plethora of movies that can be used to conduct similar studies where each analysis will provide equally interesting and rich insights into the topic, I limited myself to three movies due to the time constraints on this thesis. Choosing blockbusters from different periods of time helped provide a bigger picture of how, if at all, these notions of ideal beauty and femininity have changed. Moreover, this study can be developed into a larger research project that focuses on the recent surge of contemporary “women-centric” Bollywood films that claim to empower the modern Indian woman and push for new definitions of beauty and femininity that, upon further research, may be found to continue catering to the male gaze.

Thus, it is these considerations that prompted me to arrive at my research topic and narrow down the scope of my study to explore the question: what is the relationship between South Asian notions of ideal beauty and femininity and Bollywood films, as represented in the stylistic, aesthetic and narrative components of three films, namely *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Queen* (2014)? I adopt a postcolonial lens in combination with the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey’s male gaze, bell hooks’ oppositional gaze and Iris Brey’s recent exploration of the female gaze in attempts to answer this question. With this honours research thesis, I aim to contribute to the important ongoing discussion of honest and accurate representations in the hope that one day, in the near future, women like me can see more truthful representations of themselves on the big Bollywood screen that are devoid of the unrealistic beauty standards continuously imposed on our bodies.

Literature Review

The role played by South Asian media in creating, sustaining and reinforcing certain standards of beauty and femininity has been the topic of significant discourse across different disciplines, often drawing on the work of notable scholars Fareed Kazmi and Ajay Gehlawat. However, the influence of Bollywood, India's most prominent and popular film industry, on these standards of beauty and femininity has been a relatively under-researched topic. Recent years have seen a gradual growth in literature within this field of study as scholars begin to research the changing cultural effects of decades of Bollywood films and their promotion of certain ideals of beauty and being (Derné & Jadwin, 2000; Mishra, 2002; Shah & Cory, 2019). As India continues to carve out its identity within the ever-changing global landscape of social, political, and economic influences, and as more Indian women enter the urban workforce, scholars are increasingly turning to Bollywood and its representations to understand what it means to be an Indian woman today (Chatterjee, 2016; Gupta, 2015).

Many of these works, in their study of Bollywood and beauty, apply Laura Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze – as outlined in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) – in their analyses of Bollywood films and the portrayals of ideal beauty and femininity (Ahad & Akgül, 2020; Manzar & Aravind, 2019; Nijhawan, 2009). These studies focus on, and problematize, Bollywood's continued production and perpetuation of female characters that exist to serve no purpose other than that of catering to the male gaze including male fantasies, desires and dreams. I will engage with Mulvey's theory of the male gaze more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Owing to the interdisciplinary lens of such scholarship, these studies work at the intersection of South Asian studies, Feminist Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Postfeminist

Studies (Shah & Cory, 2019). The following literature review situates this thesis within the growing scholarship in these fields of study and provides an appropriate context within which these emerging academic dialogues are taking place. It is important to note that an accurate review of related literature would be incomplete without a mention of film criticism and opinion essays from popular culture websites that support existing academic scholarship on the topic. Thus, this chapter aims to examine the aforementioned literature, including what is being said on the topic in popular culture, through a review based on three themes: the history of and discussion around the contested term “Bollywood”, representations of idealized beauty and femininity in South Asian media, and Bollywood’s construction and portrayal of the “modern” Indian woman in a globalized setting.

Becoming Bollywood: The History and Contestation of “Bollywood”

While the scope of my research is limited to the analysis of specific and quintessential Bollywood movies, it is worthwhile to understand how the discourse on Bollywood itself is contextualized and situated within academic dialogue. Although the word “Bollywood”, a combination of Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995) and Hollywood, is the name popularly used to refer to the Hindi film industry in India, the term, as well as its usage and exact definition, “itself is contentious as many remain disgruntled about the term’s imitative parlance and insidious colonization of Hindi cinema’s unique style patterns that are very different from Hollywood” (Chatterjee, 2016, p. 1180). Despite this contestation, the term continues to be widely used to refer to the Mumbai-based film industry and its transnational character in terms of economic and cultural flows of production, distribution and reception. Scholars are wary of conflating Bollywood to encompass the entire Indian film industry as they argue the lack of a formal entity called the ‘Indian film industry’ (Chatterjee, 2016; Ganti, 2012). Understanding

this contestation around the very naming of Bollywood is crucial to understanding its history as it contextualizes my analysis of movies that are inherently Bollywood in their style, production, distribution and global cultural influences.

The term Bollywood was created by the English-language press in India in the late 1970s and officially entered the English lexicon in 2001 (Ganti, 2012). Although India's position as the largest film-producing country in the world comes from the multitude of films produced by its many regional film industries, Bollywood enjoys special status and recognition as the "national" film industry within Indian cinema due to its wide-reaching cultural, political and economic influence that transcends national boundaries. Bollywood has become the globally dominant word that, albeit erroneously, continues to be used to refer to all the other diverse filmmaking traditions in India. Bollywood's dominant position within India, and abroad, means that it "plays an important role in constructing and defining dichotomies like 'traditional/modern', 'global/local', 'Western/Eastern' and categories such as 'culture', 'nation', and 'Indian'" (Ganti, 2000, as cited in Ganti, 2012, p. 3).

Bollywood movies are known for their distinctive features of song and dance sequences, visual aesthetics, narrative structure and production processes that set them apart from their namesake, and counterpart, Hollywood. Owing to Bollywood's strong influence, other Indian film industries emulate these characteristics of spectacle. This influence, and its resultant imitation, explains why the term Bollywood "has become a shorthand reference not only to a specific industry, but also to a specific style of filmmaking within the industry" (Ganti, 2012, p. 3). Indian films, particularly ones in Hindi, that do not maintain these characteristics are often categorized by the film-viewing media and audiences as art-house and not what is considered "mainstream Bollywood". Additionally, Bollywood's soft power, felt beyond its immediate

surroundings, comprises the new and upcoming field of ‘Bollywood Studies’ that “hegemonizes and sets the agenda of Indian Film Studies” (Kumar, 2011, p. 2). Although the influence of Bollywood and its effects on other Indian cinemas and filmmaking traditions forms an entire topic of study that other scholars may be interested to research, I touch on this briefly for the purpose of providing an appropriate sense of Bollywood as the hegemonic force it is when it comes to Indian films and their very essence. While this is not to say that the same analysis cannot be conducted in other Indian film industries, the scope of this study remains focused on iconic Bollywood films that are widely considered quintessentially “Bollywood”.

When it comes to cultural currency, Bollywood’s influential potential is not confined to the realm of academic research and scholarship. In fact, an area that experiences perhaps the strongest influence of Bollywood cinema is that of everyday life. The nature of Bollywood’s influence is all-pervasive in that it affects not only people from all walks of life but also different aspects of life itself (Chatterjee, 2016, pp. 1180-1181). Bollywood’s sense of style, as reflected in popular clothing and hair trends, is imitated and partaken by its large audience within South Asia and beyond. Moreover, the way of life and being Bollywood portrays forms the very standard against which one’s own life is measured. When Bollywood, a dominant cultural driver in the region with a strong ubiquitous force that is impossible to ignore, reflects and reinforces certain beauty standards, it makes them even more pervasive and influential.

In her analysis of the contemporary Hindi film industry, Ganti (2012) observes that, despite the contestation and controversy, “the wide use of the term Bollywood by Indian media professionals represents an assertion of sovereignty and cultural autonomy in the global media landscape” (p. 14-15). Since the term Bollywood stands in, albeit controversially as we have seen, for all the Indian film industries within the global landscape, it is important to examine the

messages surrounding beauty and femininity as constructed and disseminated within South Asia and beyond by this global cultural driving force.

Beauty, Femininity and its Representations and Idealizations in South Asian Media

The female body has long been regarded, both in Indian society and in cinema, as the primary location for the articulation of cultural meanings and values (Ahad & Akgül, 2020). Not only does South Asian media continue to reflect the socially changing standards of beauty and femininity, it also plays a strong and influential role in constructing and (re)defining them. The standards of beauty shaped by, and reflected in, Bollywood films are increasingly influenced by global discourses surrounding femininity, the beauty industry and the everchanging expectations from the appearance of the female body. Ahad and Akgül's analysis of women's roles in recent Bollywood films (2020) has strongly influenced my engagement with the scholarship. They discuss how "there are the current exigencies of globalization and modernization, of which women's bodies and sexuality are essential manifestations" (p. 17).

In addition to the growing scholarship on the agency (or lack thereof) exercised by female characters in popular Bollywood movies (Manzar & Aravind, 2019; Shah & Cory, 2019), the role of Western notions of femininity as well as how they influence existing traditional Indian values and considerations of what a beautiful woman looks like remain the focus of much work within the field (Ahad & Akgül, 2020; Mehta, 2019; Nijhawan, 2009). These scholars study the ways in which female bodies work, through their construction and function in Bollywood movies, within a globalized Indian landscape to convey certain ideas of femininity and beauty that either continue to uphold or instead dismantle existing notions of South Asian beauty.

The more dominant South Asian beauty and femininity standards, as represented in mainstream media, often form the focus of study in related literary scholarship (Ahad & Akgül, 2020; Gupta, 2015; Nijhawan, 2009). Much of this scholarship focuses on the size and shape of the female body with mentions of what it is clad in, the featured female's skin colour as being too dark or not fair enough, as well as the ways in which "certain femininities are legitimized [and idealized] and others rejected" (Ahad & Akgül, 2020, p. 7). However, when it comes to the reconstruction of femininity in contemporary Bollywood movies, prominent scholars Nijhawan and Gehlawat seem to disagree. Nijhawan (2009) argues that the shift in Bollywood's female characters towards more global standards and ideals of beauty, through the consumption of cosmetics, clothes and adoption of urban lifestyles, "come[s] with associations of individuality and independence" which provide Indian women ways to "assert their sexuality outside of domestic and conjugal parameters" (p. 107-108). Conversely, Gehlawat (2015) observes how "it could be argued that instead of leading to 'possibly freer female body signification', the adoption (or, perhaps, 'consumption') of such ideals may very well lead to *less* individuality and freedom of expression" (p. 57, emphasis in original). By highlighting these contradictory pieces of scholarship, my thesis will acknowledge and further engage with these shifting perspectives.

Today, popular culture websites have increasingly started to discuss the role played by different Indian media, along with the South Asian beauty industry, in dictating what a beautiful Indian woman looks like. Rega Jha, founder and chief editor of the hugely popular BuzzFeed India, discusses Bollywood's beauty standards in an episode of the Netflix series *Follow This* (2018) where she investigates "the extent to which the beauty that we see on big screens and on billboards is unnatural, artificial, paid-for and produced" (Gesing, 2018, 2:56). Jha observes how, to a young Indian girl viewing the constant and unignorable messages of beauty that saturate

Indian media, “beauty was a continual education...a lesson taught by every piece of visual culture” (2018, para. 4).

When it comes to opinion journalism, most popular culture analyses (Marwaha, 2020; Pervaiz, 2020), and critiques of the beauty standards perpetuated by Bollywood films, focus on the explicit colorism films espouse through song lyrics that have a decades-long history of commemorating the *gori*, a term used to refer to fair-skinned females and white foreigners. The discourse surrounding the celebration of fair skin as beautiful and rejection of darker skin as unworthy has become more prominent after the death of George Floyd in 2020, evidenced in the resurgence of opinion articles on websites and social media (Frayner, 2020; Yasir & Gettleman, 2020). The racially motivated killing of Floyd, a Black American, by a white police officer in Minneapolis took place in a geographically detached location far from the South Asian region. Yet the social movement it sparked – Black Lives Matter – can be credited as the reason behind the revival of the conversation on colorism and demonstrates how global events, trends and social influences affect Bollywood. Moreover, the fact that it is Floyd’s killing that led to Unilever’s 46-year-old Fair and Lovely, an extremely popular skin-whitening cream brand, being renamed – even if performatively – to Glow and Lovely speaks to the global landscape that increasingly shapes Indian beauty and femininity.

The “Modern” Indian Woman

Apart from influencing beauty and femininity standards within South Asia, global and transnational cultural and economic flows have also led to the creation of the notion of the modern Indian woman. Although the concept of the modern Indian women is continuously being defined and redefined, it has come to represent the large percentage of female population in India that is increasingly entering the urban workforce and gaining financial independence, sexual

liberation and a stronger spending power. These urban, young and career-minded Indian women of the twenty-first century are progressively contributing to the modern Indian economy and form a large subset of Bollywood's female audience (Gupta, 2015). As the dominant media institution of India, Bollywood frames and reflects the cultural status of women in contemporary India and influences how they are portrayed.

Nationalist imaginations of the ideal Indian woman, as seen in Bollywood's characterization of women, are informed by both colonial representations as well as globalized influences. Ahad and Akgül (2020) describe the characteristics of the new modern Indian woman as "the coming together of dichotomous character attributes, blending of local and traditional with global ideals of "individuality and independence"" (p. 6). Elsewhere, the modern Indian woman is described as someone who "crosses behavioral boundaries all the time... she is confident and can hold her own in any place and at any time" (IMRB 1998, as cited in Munshi, 2001, p. 81). Munshi describes the modern Indian woman as "caught in the globalization process as they swing between their Indian traditions and internalizing a transnational identity more in keeping with global lifestyles" (p. 81).

National identity and fears surrounding the loss of traditional Indianness shape the reception of Bollywood films especially when it comes to their portrayals of the modern Indian woman. Derné and Jadwin (2000), through their ethnographic study, account for how male Hindi filmgoers are ambivalent and uneasy about the departure from Indian traditions, especially when it applies to Indian women. This study confirms that "anxious about their Indianness, many men distinguish between Westernised women whom they see as legitimate objects of the [male] gaze and distinctively Indian woman whom they believe deserve to be protected from it" (p. 258). As the modern Indian woman becomes more Westernized in her appearance and lifestyle,

alternative ethnographic studies examining the same demographic may reveal different concerns surrounding the loss of traditional Indian values that have previously been sustained and maintained over generations through the Indian woman and her body.

In a postcolonial and post-liberalization India, national identity and its fusion with the global landscape play an important role in the formation and reception of the very Indianness of the modern Indian woman. In her discussion on the nationalization of the Indian woman, Reddy (2007) highlights the “implicit paradox in contemporary constructions of Indian female beauty: even as Indian beauties are sought for their ‘Indianness’, they also must be ‘more than’ Indian” (p. 61). This paradoxical representation constructs the beauty and femininity of the modern Indian woman as a globalized subject “outside the territoriality of the nation-state”, her body the “site of geographical contestation” and a “repository of complementary and contradictory place-images” (p. 62). This convoluted representation can be seen manifested in and embodied by beauty pageant titleholder Harnaaz Kaur Sandhu who recently became the third ever entrant from India to have been crowned Miss Universe in 2021.

Much of the scholarship surrounding Bollywood’s representations and portrayals of the modern Indian woman focuses on analyzing its construction in *item numbers*, a term used to refer to song and dance sequences featuring provocatively clad women performing for a predominantly male audience. According to Nijhawan (2009), the advent of the new woman in Bollywood is represented in “the appearance of the “strong” and “assertive” woman in recent song sequences [which] symbolizes a “break” from earlier norms about chastity and suppression of desire as being desirable for [the] Indian woman (as cited in Ahad & Akgül, 2020, p. 6).

Despite increased representations of female characters as assertive and as exercising agency, patriarchal anxieties and narratives continue to manifest and govern Bollywood films.

Ahad and Akgül, in their analysis of two contemporary Bollywood films, demonstrate “how a new Indian femininity, “assertive” and “confident”, is mediated by the dominant male cultural gaze” (2020, p. 3). In an attempt to counter these regressive narrative moves and representations of women in Bollywood films, modern Indian women themselves (Shukla & Rathour, 2021), through opinion journalism on popular and digital feminist discourses, are navigating the multiple definitions, manifestations and representations of what it means to be modern, Indian and a woman in India today.

This literature review contextualizes the existing scholarship on the origins of Bollywood as well as the history of ideal beauty and femininity standards perpetuated by it. Furthermore, it situates my study and focus of research within the related scholarly landscape my thesis will build on and contribute towards. The reviewed literature highlights prominent discourses surrounding the messages of beauty disseminated by Bollywood and demonstrates the different ways these media texts can be analyzed as either empowering women or subduing them. I will conduct my research based on the existing scholarship discussed in the above review and use these scholarly sources of literature to guide my analysis of the three chosen Bollywood movies and their recourse to the male gaze in the construction and depiction of ideal beauty and femininity in South Asia.

Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter briefly discusses the history of psychoanalytic film theory, in attempts of providing an overview of the conceptualization of the gaze, and subsequently the male gaze. The chapter then goes on to outline the intersectional evolution of feminist film theory which emerged primarily through the critique of Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze by prominent scholars including herself and others like bell hooks. The latter part of this chapter employs a postcolonial theoretical perspective to situate my research within a South Asian context and touches on the more recent concept of the female gaze and its application to Bollywood films.

Psychoanalytic Film Theory

Psychoanalytic film theory is the body of thought that engages in the academic study of film as it applies to psychoanalysis, a method established by theorists Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalytic film theory has been applied to interpret and read films in attempts to investigate the unconscious activities of the human mind, especially when it comes to film spectatorship. The theory, a result of the adjacent births of cinema and psychoanalysis, is closely related to Critical Theory, Marxist film theory and Apparatus Theory. According to Allen (Miller & Stam, 2003), psychoanalytic ideas are used to explain cinema because:

Cinema mobilizes the most primitive (and therefore least differentiated and most universal) desires of the spectator by telling stories of everyday romance that take on mythic proportions and by casting the human being, in the figure of the star, as a transcendent, god-like creature. (p. 124)

Psychoanalytic film theory has many branches, one of which focuses its study on spectatorship, particularly the viewer's identification, interaction and engagement with films and its characters, as represented visually and narratively.

Scholars employ different approaches in their application of psychoanalytic film theory. According to Kuhn and Westwell (2012), one such predominant approach is the study of the psychodynamics of filmic engagement as manifested in the relationships “between film texts and spectators, with particular reference to unconscious mental processes (such as fetishism, narcissism, scopophilia, and voyeurism) involved in spectatorial engagement with cinema” (para. 2). Another approach uses psychoanalytic techniques of symptomatic reading to read films by treating them as materials for interpretation. These two approaches have influenced, and have been influenced by, feminist film theory “particularly in debates about sexual difference, visual pleasure, and gendered spectatorship” (para. 2). The most prominent influence is seen in the conceptualizations of the “gaze” in cinema, as explored by Christian Metz, and more specifically, the “male gaze”, as developed by Laura Mulvey.

The Gaze

The gaze is a key tenet of psychoanalytic film theory. The concept and definitions of the gaze draw on psychoanalysis, sociology and critical theory. The gaze, described as a system of power, often uses Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge to illustrate the dynamics of socio-political power relations. Schroeder (1998) discusses how “to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (p. 208). It is this relationship of the gaze with the power of, and in, looking that is extensively studied by scholars of psychoanalytic film theory.

Metz, in his work on the film viewer's identification with the camera's vision, applies the concept of gaze to cinema. According to Metz, "the cinema installs the spectator in a situation in which his gaze is inoculated from reciprocal awareness" (Miller & Stam, 2003, p. 130). This, Metz argues, makes the film spectator a fetishist engaging in spectatorial voyeurism and scopophilia.

The Male Gaze

The male gaze as a concept, although popularized by Laura Mulvey, was first introduced by John Berger in his study of the different "ways of seeing" (also the title of Berger's 1972 television series and adapted book of the same name) and how they are determined by dominant social groups, positions and experiences. Berger, in his study of how men and women view and are viewed in European art, observes that "women are depicted in a quite different way from men...because the "ideal" spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (Berger, as cited by Chandler, 2020, para. 3).

Mulvey takes this concept further in her prominent essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) where she uses psychoanalysis to demonstrate the way "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (p. 14). In her work on the gendering of the gaze, Mulvey argues that man assumes an active role as "the bearer of the look" (p. 19) while the image of, and as an extension the woman herself, become a passive object of the male gaze. This split in the pleasure in looking into active/male and passive/female, according to Mulvey, means that "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure" (p. 19) whose body "stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (p. 23).

Mulvey describes three ways in which cinema's voyeuristic-scopophilic look constructs the woman's to-be-looked-at-ness into the spectacle itself: the look of "the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (p. 26). By identifying with the film's male protagonist, the (presumably white, heterosexual male) spectator possesses ownership of the onscreen female body and, enabled by the camera shots and angles, projects his desires and fantasies onto her person. The female viewer, in what Mulvey terms the "masculinization of the spectator position" (Mulvey, 1981, p. 69), is forced to experience the narrative secondarily and exercise the male gaze by identification with the male protagonist.

In my analysis, I study how Bollywood movies, through narrative and visual representation of their characters, continue to construct women as watched. My analysis of the chosen Bollywood films makes use of Mulvey's work on the sexual politics of the gaze, particularly the fetishistic aspects of the male viewer's gaze as directed towards the onscreen female body. Much like Mulvey, my analysis also focuses on the mainstream, popular and commercial cinema industry, but in a South Asian context. Although close to five decades old, Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze is effective in laying a solid foundation for a study of quintessential Bollywood films and how, as I will argue, they continue to cater to the male gaze within a narrative cinema that focuses on visual pleasure.

Evolution of Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory, a combination of feminist politics and feminist theory, has drastically evolved since its inception in the 1970s due to the ever-changing sociopolitical sphere. Focused on women's representation as spectacle and role as spectator, feminist film theory continues to include salient aspects of psychoanalytic film theory in its feminist critiques

of film. It is characterized by the dualism between “the critical analysis of mainstream texts and a more activist agenda of promoting films by female filmmakers who offer alternate visions of a feminist women’s cinema” (Hollinger, 2012, p. 7). In the context of South Asian cinema, feminist scholars, in their study of Bollywood films, apply feminist film theory in conjunction with race, cultural and postcolonial studies (Ganti, 2012; Nijhawan, 2009).

Feminist film theory has adopted an increasingly intersectional lens as it considers how overlapping identities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and others, influence the creation, representation and reception of female characters in films. Scholars of feminist film theory analyze how film texts continue to instill a white heteropatriarchal ideology in female viewers. Critiques of Mulvey, starting with her own self (1981), as well as other scholars, are at the forefront of the evolution of feminist film theory into a more intersectional theoretical framework.

In *Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by ‘Duel in the Sun’* (1981), Mulvey revises her theorization of the male gaze and builds on her earlier argument on the “masculinization of the spectator position” (p. 69). Discussing women spectatorship, Mulvey argues that while it is possible “that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its “masculinization,” that the spell of fascination is broken” (p. 69-70), she is concerned with the female spectator that finds herself “secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (p. 70). Although my analysis will not be looking into female spectatorship specifically, it is important to consider this development in Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze as I study femininity and beauty in Bollywood, as constructed by the gaze(s) at play. Mulvey’s revision of her theorization of the male gaze is important as it helps us follow the

progression of the academic conversation surrounding the gaze, from Mulvey to hooks and beyond.

Apart from Mulvey herself, another notable voice within this increasingly intersectional feminist film theory is that of bell hooks who problematizes Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze and argues how the gaze of a Black female spectator functions as an oppositional gaze.

Oppositional Gaze

bell hooks, in *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (1992), critiques Mulvey's failure to discuss how race affects the male gaze. hooks actively acknowledges and incorporates race into the equation as she focuses on the study of Black female spectatorship. She defines the oppositional gaze as "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire" (p. 116). When it comes to the power of looking, hooks argues from a position that rejects the female spectator's lack of agency. Instead, hooks postulates that "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). Jane Gaines (1988), in her critique of psychoanalytic film theory's failure to deal with issues of race, argues that "a feminist film theory grounded in psychoanalysis operates ideologically insofar as it perpetuates a white feminist perspective and agenda by failing to address structures of oppression other than patriarchy" (Columpar, 2002, p. 32-33).

Although hooks' discussion of the gaze as a site of resistance is based on the experiences of Black people, it can also be applied to the colonized women of color in South Asia. By refusing their limiting representations in Bollywood films, female characters, and by extension South Asian women, can arguably be seen as not only possessing, but also exercising, the agency to actively resist such portrayals through the adoption of an oppositional gaze.

Postcolonial Interventions

Postcolonial cinema studies, as argued by Romeo (2016), “is not a genre, but rather a ‘lens’ through which films can be analyzed” (p. 238). Increasingly globalized lifestyles have transformed media discourses in a postcolonial India. Adopting a postcolonial lens to the analysis of Bollywood films has become imperative as Bollywood “has now permeated the realms of popular and diasporic culture to such an extent that it can no longer be thought of as outside the discourses of global and postcolonial cinema” (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012, p. 190).

Postcolonial Studies has had a profound impact on the broader study of visual culture, particularly that of films. According to Columpar (2002), “the influence of postcolonial studies on film theory...has allowed for the creation of a series of theoretical concepts that foreground issues of racial and national difference and acknowledge the role that race and ethnicity play in looking relations” (p. 26). An instance where postcolonial studies and cinema interact is in the development of the concepts of the ethnographic and colonial gaze that, in addition to hook’s oppositional gaze, further complicate Mulvey’s monolithic theorization of the male gaze. Columpar explains that the racialized gazes, the ethnographic gaze and the colonial gaze, are like the male gaze “insofar as they accord their bearers a position of mastery and designate their objects as the site/sight of difference” (2002, p. 40). According to Columpar, “the three gazes can be seen as colluding in a single ideological project: the interpellation of the film spectator into a hegemonic viewing position in which the Western, white, male identity is normative” (2002, p. 40).

Female Gaze

The concept of the female gaze first emerged in rejection of Mulvey's male gaze theory as well as out of resistance to the patriarchal scopic regime her theory rests on. The female gaze, broadly speaking, is a feminist theory term that represents women as subjects with agency, particularly when it comes to the gaze of the female spectator, character or director of an artistic work. hooks refers to the concept of the female gaze in her discussion of Black female spectatorship where she raises questions about the possibility of a Black female gaze at play.

Although feminist film scholars have long attempted to agree on a formal definition of the term, Iris Brey's *Le regard féminin: une révolution à l'écran (The Female Gaze: A Revolution on the Screen)* published in 2020 is the first book-length effort to define the female gaze and its tenets. According to Brey (Balsom, 2020), there are six narrative and formal conditions a film must fulfill to be considered as belonging to the category of the female gaze:

At the level of the narrative, it is necessary that

- The main character identifies as a woman;
- The story is told from her point of view;
- Her story calls into question the patriarchal order.

Formally, it is necessary that

- The film is constructed in a manner that allows the spectator to feel the female experience;
- If bodies are eroticized, it must be a conscious gesture (Laura Mulvey reminds us that the male gaze is a matter of the patriarchal unconscious);

- The pleasure of spectators does not stem from the scopic drive (from taking pleasure in objectifying a person through the gaze, like a voyeur). (para. 8)

Based on these conditions, Brey defines the female gaze as “a filmic paradigm no longer governed by voyeurism and objectification, devoted to representing women’s experiences...in ways that foreground their position as subjects of desire” (Balsom, 2020, para. 9).

Theorizing the female gaze allows me to consider the possibility of women characters as desiring subjects and not as the objects of voyeuristic pleasure Mulvey’s male gaze theory makes them out to be. When applied to Bollywood, the recent surge in what are popularly called “women-centric films”, of which *Queen* (2014) is one of the first notable examples, provide grounds to test out the presence of a female gaze in the construction and portrayal of female characters.

In order to study what Columpar calls “the unique predicament of the colonized woman” (2002, p. 40), I use race and postcolonial studies as a theoretical lens in my application of the male gaze, and instances of the oppositional and female gaze, to study notions of ideal beauty and femininity in Bollywood films.

Methodology

Film Analysis

Films are a type of media text that can be subjected to textual analysis for interpretation. Notable film analyst Raymond Bellour, in his book *The Analysis of Film* (1979), argues “that the film is a text, in the sense in which Barthes uses the word, is obvious enough” (p. 21). In this sense, film analysis forms a type of textual analysis that includes audio and visual elements unique to the format of films.

This research primarily takes the form of a film analysis which is a qualitative research method used to study film by analyzing its mise-en-scène (set, props, costume, acting style), cinematography (camera framing and movement), sound (diegetic and non-diegetic) and editing (cuts, fades, etc.). Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, in their book *L'Analyse des films/Analysis of Film* (1988), propose that “there is no correct, universal way to write film analysis” (Long et al., n.d., para. 6). Owing to the visual nature of films, representations of beauty and femininity predominantly manifest in physical as well as externally visible and observable ways. For this reason, I will be engaging in a filmic analysis with a focus on narrative, thematic and stylistic approaches to analyze how notions of South Asian beauty and femininity are constructed and perpetuated by the gaze.

In addition to the stylistic and aesthetic elements, film analysis also includes an analysis of the narrative and thematic elements of a film. According to Long et al., a narrative structure analysis looks at “story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme” (n.d., para. 15). It also includes a focus on characters, characterization and narration which Bordwell et al., describe in their book *Film Art: An Introduction* (2017) as “the moment-by-

moment process that guides viewers in building the story out of the plot” (p. 87). This research will employ a narrative analysis of the three Bollywood films *Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004), and *Queen* (2014), all of which were massive commercial successes at the time of their release and remain hugely popular films to date. The narrative analysis will be accompanied by an aesthetic analysis which includes shot-by-shot analysis of certain key scenes pertaining to the gaze at work. The research will also engage in a thematic analysis of the films as studied through the theoretical lens of the gaze.

Research Design

This research seeks to analyze the relationship between South Asian notions of ideal beauty and femininity and Bollywood films, as represented in the stylistic, aesthetic and narrative components of these films. The research and analysis process used to answer this question took place in multiple stages – the first of which was a scan of popular culture opinion pieces as well as relevant scholarly works to discern which Bollywood films were being written about in a context that fits the purpose of my study. The three Bollywood movies, *Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004), and *Queen* (2014), were chosen based on the non-probability purposive sampling method. As per *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Given, 2008), non-probability purposive sampling is defined as “a process where participants [in this case, media text] are selected because they meet criteria that have been predetermined by the researcher as relevant to addressing the research question” (p. 563).

The selection criteria for the movies were informed by several factors, the most influential of which was personal and prior knowledge of these films from having watched them while growing up. Each of the three chosen films has some narrative, aesthetic or thematic elements, whether in the form of dialogues or song-and-dance sequences characteristic of

Bollywood, that fit the purpose of my research. A purposeful decision was made when selecting films from across a period of time (1998-2014) to study how the standards of ideal beauty and femininity, as portrayed in these films, have changed over time, if at all. Although a small sample size of three films was chosen due to the limited scope of this research, the many Bollywood movies that serve as rich examples of the changing ways we think about gender means that there is ample potential for further research in this area of study.

The analysis process involved a close viewing of the three films, all of which are available on the popular streaming service Netflix in Canada. All three films are accompanied by English subtitles provided by Netflix. However, as a native speaker of the Hindi language, I chose to rely on my own knowledge of both the English and the Hindi language. For some movie scenes, I have independently translated certain dialogues to better capture the essence of, and messaging behind, said sequences. For the most part, all instances of dialogue translations are based on the related Netflix subtitles, unless otherwise stated.

The analysis process of each of the three films included writing down detailed notes, including timestamps of key scenes, while viewing each film. Once all the films had been watched closely, the analysis notes for each of the films were divided into four categories: general observations and the role (if any) of three beauty standards, namely, long black straight hair, fair skin and the characterization of the modern Indian woman respectively.

Close attention was paid to take note of any explicit or implied portrayals of the three specific South Asian beauty and femininity standards that this research focuses on: long black straight hair, fair skin and choice of attire. In South Asian culture, long black straight hair is considered an important element of the beauty, femininity, and subsequently desirability of the female. In many Bollywood films, as I argue, a female character with short hair is viewed as

unfeminine, undesirable and masculinized as a tomboy in need of a transformation. In movie scenes that do visualize a female character with short hair, it is often framed as an act of rebellion, existing to contradict South Asian understandings of femininity and thereby met with reactions of shock, repulsion and snarky comments. Long black straight hair, on the other hand, is eroticized and lustfully described, often by the male protagonist, in songs sung as declarations of love with and attraction to the female character.

South Asian femininity and beauty has historical roots in the region's colonization and its ongoing aftermath. One of the many lasting consequences of colonization is the strong colorism that exists within the South Asian community where white and fairer skin is deemed, and treated, as more beautiful. In Bollywood, the aspiration for fairer skin is presented in a myriad of ways. Song and dance sequences include lyrics that laud the female character's fair skin, eulogize it as the epitome of female beauty and frame it as the reason the male character has fallen in love with the heroine. Since colorism and the preference for fair skin is a popular and recurring theme in Bollywood films, it formed the second standard of ideal beauty and femininity that was analyzed in my research.

South Asia and representations in Bollywood, as outlined in the literature review, have long attempted to carve out the attributes of the "modern Indian woman". Due to colonialism and the influence of the Western way of life, South Asian culture has paradoxically endeavored to produce an Indian woman that embodies the contrasting qualities of both cultures and is independent yet subservient, fierce yet docile, empowered yet controllable. These existing dualities have produced South Asian notions of beauty and femininity that are reflected in a fusion of traditional Indian and Western attires. Therefore, I observed in my analysis how the choice of attire, whether completely Western or Indian or a mix of both, played into the

construction of the female character's femininity and beauty as well as the ways in which it continues to serve the gaze irrespectively.

Ethical Implications, Positionality and Limitations

When conducting any kind of research, it is important for a responsible researcher to declare their positionality and mention any ethical implications that may apply. I chose this research topic because, as a South Asian woman who grew up watching these representations in Bollywood movies, it was important to me to recognize the ways Bollywood has influenced my perceptions of beauty and femininity as well as how it continues to reflect and reinforce certain South Asian beauty standards.

As for the ethical implications of conducting a film analysis, this research engages in the analysis of films that have officially been released and distributed for public viewing. As per Section 52(1)(a)(i) of the Indian Copyright Act of 1957, fair dealing with any work for the purposes of "private or personal use, including research" (Government of India, 1957) is not considered an act of infringement of copyright. I provide a complete list of filmography that gives appropriate and rightful credit to all the individuals involved in the creation of each film. The content of each of these films has been used purely for the purposes of conducting the research. No aspect of the films, in part or in whole, has been reproduced or illegally distributed in this process. Based on these considerations, I do not see any other potential ethical implications of this research.

Lastly, no research is without its limitations. Although Bollywood has a plethora of movies that can be used to conduct similar studies where each analysis may provide rich insights into the topic; I limited myself to three movies due to the time constraints on this thesis. A more

expansive research project could focus on related topics including, but not limited to, the recent surge of women-centric Bollywood films that – while seemingly empowering the modern Indian woman and pushing for new definitions of beauty and femininity – may be found, upon further research, as continuing to cater to the male gaze.

Bollywood, Beauty and Its Beast of Burden: An Analysis

Bollywood is rife with ideas of what constitutes ideal femininity and womanhood and often associates being beautiful with being feminine. The long-standing issue, however, has been that a vast majority of these conceptions are produced and perpetuated by the male gaze and simultaneously work towards serving it. Barring a few recent exceptions brought about by rare and refreshingly different movies, as we will see in *Queen* (2014), there is a dearth of representations when it comes to the construction of femininity from a female perspective. A lot has been said about Bollywood's continued production of female characters that exist to serve male fantasies, agencies and dreams. Despite being increasingly scrutinized and criticized, especially in recent feminist scholarship, the problematic female characters and unrealistic standards of beauty and femininity perpetuated by Bollywood have a bearing on social understandings and subsequently practices of femininity and beauty that extend beyond the big screen and into the everyday lives of South Asian women. Having analyzed three quintessential Bollywood films, in this chapter, I discuss the portrayal of three dominant South Asian beauty standards: long black straight hair, fair skin and the "modern Indian woman".

In each section of this chapter, I discursively analyze the three previously discussed standards of beauty and femininity as portrayed, whether explicitly or not, in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Queen* (2014). First, I examine how the representation of long black straight hair (or its lack thereof) is structured in each of the three films aesthetically, thematically and narratively. Then, I observe the kind of messaging that is communicated in each film when it comes to fair skin, primarily in the form of song lyrics and picturization. Third, I examine each film's construction of the "modern Indian woman", especially focusing on *Queen* (2014) and the globalized context it is situated in. Throughout the analysis, I include certain

scenes of importance that, although not directly related to any of the three beauty standards, play a significant role in shaping our understanding of the film, and the context it is situated in, for the purpose of this thesis.

The Lure of Long Black Straight Hair

Long black straight hair has long been regarded as a standard of ideal beauty and femininity in South Asia. In Bollywood, it is represented, through song lyrics and messaging, to be one of the key physical attributes of a woman that attracts the male's gaze and subsequent affection. References to the beauty of such a feature date back to Sangam poetry from South Asia which is said to have been produced from 300 BC to 300 AD. Gelles (2011), in her study on the standards of beauty and globalization of Indian women, refers to these Sangam poets who describe their idea of beautiful hair as "the darkness of black full tresses" (p. 9). The three Bollywood movies I studied reflect a continuation in and perpetuation of the idea that "long", "black", and "straight" are characteristics that constitute beautiful hair which subsequently make a woman not only beautiful, but also feminine.

The depiction of long black and straight hair as a standard of femininity, and the messaging surrounding it, are pivotal to the character development and story progression in the oldest of the three movies, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). The movie follows a little girl, who upon reading her dead mother Tina's letters, is on a mission to reunite her father, Rahul, with his college best friend, Anjali, in hopes of them falling in love and marrying. The flashback parts of the story that show us Rahul, Anjali and Tina's time in college are depicted in the diegesis through Tina's letters.

From the beginning, Anjali is portrayed as a “tomboy” who exudes masculine energy and lacks feminine charms. Dressed in sporty and boyish clothes (often comprising of denim overalls or a tracksuit with a baseball cap) Anjali has straight black hair that is chopped into a short bob she keeps away from her face with a headband. Tina, on the other hand, is extremely feminine in terms of what she wears and the way she carries herself. She predominantly – and until her marriage to Rahul – dresses in short skirts with matching crop tops, heels and jewelry, and walks with a slight sway of her hips, as is often captured by the slow-motion medium shots focused on her retreating back. Adding to her feminine beauty is her untied shoulder-length black straight hair that Tina is often shown twirling around her finger.

Although the beauty of long black straight hair is not referred to explicitly in the film, it is implied in several instances where Anjali is ridiculed for acting and appearing too boyish, a trait in which her short hair plays a central role. Eight years after the college flashback, when Rahul describes to his daughter how Anjali was “just like the boys” (Johar, 1998, 1:33:46) we get interspersed shots of a feminine Indian woman dressing up. Each time Rahul completes a sentence describing Anjali’s masculine ways, the shot switches to symbols associated with Indian femininity like bangles, kohl and a sari. When the sequence of interspersed shots finally reveals the woman dressing up to be a transformed Anjali, we see her looking extremely feminine and in sharp contrast to how “unfeminine” she used to be. Anjali’s newfound femininity, and therefore beauty, is not just on account of the feminized clothes, makeup and jewelry she wears. The most major contribution towards Anjali’s feminization is the remarkable difference in the length of her hair which, previously a boyish bob, has now grown thick, long, black and straight. As the plot progresses, Rahul is shown falling in love with this feminine long-haired version of Anjali whose femininity and beauty are often represented through her long

black hair blowing in the wind as music swells in the background, a quintessential scene in Bollywood romance movies that, to be successful, requires that the heroine possesses long black tresses. In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), this staple Bollywood scene occurs just as the initial tunes of a slow romantic song fade in and start playing in the background (Johar, 1998, 2:20:14). We see that Anjali, clad in a black lace sari, is standing atop a boat as the camera pans her entire body in a long shot. Her hair is blowing in the wind, and it continues to do so in the series of close-up shots of her face that follow as they show her longingly singing about her love.

The idealization of long black straight hair, whether conveyed directly or implicitly is also present in the second movie I analyzed, *Main Hoon Na* (2004), in which an Indian soldier, Major Ram, adopts the guise of a college student to successfully complete his country's repatriation project. The first female character makes an appearance 16 minutes into the film and is shown with openly flowing black straight hair, the length of which covers her entire back and goes slightly beyond her buttocks. Later in the film, we meet Miss Chandni, the feminine and attractive Chemistry teacher in the college Major Ram is a pseudo-student at. Miss Chandni's introduction scene (Khan, 2004, 1:04:40) is a bottom-to-top tilt shot of her walking towards the camera. The panning medium-shot, which starts from Miss Chandni's walking feet, cuts to Major Ram's reaction and immediately switches back to scanning her body. In true Bollywood style, the wind blows her long black straight hair as music starts playing in the background. The fragmented framing means that Miss Chandni's body is visually broken up in such a way that the shot not only disconnects but also isolates her swaying waist from the rest of her body, thereby drawing special attention to her exposed and swinging waist for the visual pleasure of the male gaze, operating within the film world and outside of it. This scene, then, is an instance in which "the woman displayed", Miss Chandni in this case, functions on two levels "as erotic object for

the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 20).

In another scene (Khan, 2004, 1:16:22), Miss Chandni is teaching a class when she subconsciously starts tying her hair, and much to everyone’s surprise, Major Ram interrupts her mid-lecture only to stop her from doing so. He says that her hair looks better and more beautiful when left untied as it cascades onto her face. This sequence in the film reiterates the emphasis given to beautiful hair when it comes to an Indian woman’s beauty and femininity, especially as viewed from the perspective of the “determining male gaze [which] projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 19). This scene, it can be argued, exemplifies scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and could be described, in Mulvey’s words, as a scene that codes “the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (1975, p. 16). What is significant about this sequence is what follows: Miss Chandni does not give in to Major Ram’s flattery and angrily ties her hair in defiance. It can perhaps be argued that by continuing to tie her hair, Miss Chandni’s character engages in an act of resistance to Major Ram’s, and by extension the audience’s, male gaze. However, in the next shot, she catches a glimpse of her reflection while marching down the hallway and we see her untie and shake her hair down as the wind starts blowing again. This simple act can be read as that of defiance and resistance against the male gaze as Miss Chandni indulges in feeling beautiful in the traditional feminine way that has often been constructed through and associated with the male gaze. However, an attempt at such an initial reading is immediately thwarted as we see Major Ram emerge from the bush he was hiding behind and voyeuristically watch an unaware Miss Chandni. This turn of events can be interpreted in multiple ways: it can be read as the woman perceiving herself through the male gaze, and subsequently becoming her own voyeur, even in the absence of men. It can also be

seen, as hooks puts it, as Miss Chandni's "gestures of resistance, challenges to authority" (1992, p. 115). Given how Bollywood attempts to internalize the male gaze in women, through its constant and subconscious perpetuation, I argue that this scene's preferred reading, and intended meaning, is that of the former interpretation. In this case then, as Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female" (as cited in Gupta, 2015, p. 120).

The movie portrays, through the less feminine female character Sanju, long and straight hair as a standard of beauty the Indian woman should idealize and aspire to. Sanju is a rugged beauty in that she has brown unruly hair and a style that can be described as "emo" and punk rock. Halfway through the film, Sanju undergoes a major physical transformation, under the ultra-feminine Miss Chandni's guidance, in an attempt to attract her crush Lucky's attention and adoration. Sanju's (re)introduction scene (Khan, 2004, 1:38:13) shows that her long hair is now straightened and left untied to the side as she flips it over her shoulder in a slow-motion shot with the camera focused on her backside (see Figure 1). The group of boys that gawk at her and then follow her in awe is an instance that not only represents how an Indian woman's beauty and femininity is performed for the pleasure of the male gaze but also the very standards of beauty a South Asian woman needs to meet to be considered worthy of male attention.



Figure 1. Screenshot from *Main Hoon Na* (2004) in which a feminine Sanju flips her long straight hair over her shoulder as the men gaze at her in awe.

It is important to note that the bottom-to-top slow motion tilt shots, often used in the introductory scenes of the desirable female character (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, 2001; *Dostana*, 2008), are absent in both *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Main Hoon Na* (2004) when it comes to picturizations of tomboyish Anjali in the former film and rugged Sanju in the latter. These bottom-to-top slow motion tilt shots draw the audience's attention and attraction towards different fragmented body parts as the camera's (and spectators') eyes graze over the dissected female body. By choosing to selectively film the more feminine (hence, beautiful and desirable) characters using such shots, Bollywood conveys an explicit message of what constitutes ideal South Asian beauty and femininity, is desirable and worthy of male attention, and should hence form the standard of beauty driving the female aspiration.

Long black straight hair is held in such high regard in South Asia that Bollywood films with a seemingly unconventional and "women-centric" narrative also fall victim to perpetuating and imposing this beauty standard. *Queen* (2014) is a case in point because despite a narrative that subtly shows the empowerment of a small-town naïve Indian girl, the movie fails to

challenge the beauty norms surrounding a South Asian woman's hair. *Queen* (2014) follows the empowering journey of a meek Rani (Hindi for queen) who, dumped by her London-returned fiancé Vijay for being too “simple” and not modern enough, decides to go on her honeymoon trip to Europe alone where she gradually becomes more confident, independent and sure of herself through the various interactions and experiences she has.

For most of the film, Rani wears her hair in its naturally curly state. Her curly hair, however, is always tied into a braid, low ponytail, bun or a half up-do. Rani's tied curly hair, I argue, can be interpreted as a metaphor for how she feels tied down by the societal norms of her small town where she has not had a chance at self-discovery and freedom. Culturally, a woman's tied hair is also associated with qualities like subservience, docility, and timidity. Untied and openly flowing hair, on the other hand, stands to represent a sense of freedom, carefreeness, and a somewhat modern style. Almost an hour into the film, there is a scene that shows Rani's turning point from being a scared girl in a new city to embracing her surroundings (and herself). She is dancing in a club when the shot keeps switching to her flashbacks of her time with Vijay during their courtship and she realizes how his toxic masculinity disempowered her and limited her self-confidence and self-worth (Bahl, 2014, 53:02). Back in the club, what looks like a handheld camera, adds to the significance of the scene, as it films a long take in a close-up shot of Rani letting her hair down, literally and figuratively, as she unties her braid in the middle of the dance floor while a defiant expression of profound understanding dawns on her face and she starts dancing with no inhibitions or restraints (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot from *Queen* (2014) shows Rani shedding her inhibitions and letting her curly hair down.

Towards the end, the film portrays how crucial Rani's physical transformation, an important part of which is her straightened long black hair, is to her newfound sense of empowerment, freedom and independence. Although there are other changes to her physical appearance in terms of style and clothes (which I will discuss later), it is Rani's straightened hair that our attention is drawn to as it elicits compliments from her mother as well as her ex-mother-in-law. They do not necessarily describe her straight hair in adjectives that could be considered compliments, they simply exclaim and state the fact that Rani has straightened her hair (see Figure 3 & 4). The fact that the film considers these factual yet exclamatory reactions, devoid of any compliments, as self-explanatory of Rani's newfound sense of style and beauty indicates how, for a South Asian woman, her hair being "straight" is considered a compliment in and of itself.



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Queen* (2014) showing Rani's mother immediately exclaiming at her straightened hair in marvel upon receiving her at the airport.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Queen* (2014) when Rani visits her ex-mother-in-law who exclaims at her straightened hair in wonder.

Long black straight hair then, as seen in Rani's case, symbolizes a South Asian woman with a more refined and modern sense of beauty and style. It can be argued that the reactions to Rani's straight hair illustrate the way the film associates her naturally curly hair with a more traditional and simpler Rani and her newly straightened long black hair with a more empowered and modern version of her.

In all the films analyzed, long black straight hair is portrayed as the ideal beauty and femininity standard for a South Asian woman. Films tend to use the male gaze to communicate messaging around long black straight hair as attractive and desirable. They do so by portraying long black straight hair on a woman as seen through the eyes of a man by employing filming techniques like bottom-to-top tilt shots, slow-motion sequences and medium shots of hair blowing in the wind, in addition to song lyrics and larger narrative aspects and character arcs. Applying Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze (1975), we see how a South Asian woman's long black straight hair, in Bollywood and beyond, is then "coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they [women] can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (p. 19, emphasis in original). Such messages surrounding the ideal hair for a South Asian woman are amplified when considered alongside the many Indian hair treatments and product commercials that similarly reflect and uphold the same beauty standard and can form their own area of research.

The Brown Community's Obsession with White Skin

Fair skin is a South Asian beauty ideal that has been upheld and reinforced through decades of continued colorism as perpetuated by conditioning, media representations and beauty regimens. Gelles (2011) refers to the pedestal fairness in females is placed on when she states, "fairness is so important to beauty in India that ... just being in possession of this one feature and having no other specific deformities can be enough for a woman to be considered beautiful" (p. 13). For a community of naturally darker-skinned people, South Asia equates a woman's fair, or "white", skin to beauty itself. In India, a fair-skinned woman need not do much to beautify herself because she is regarded as having already achieved the highest form of beauty simply because she possesses a light complexion.

South Asia's idealization of fair skin is further perpetuated by the plethora of skin-lightening creams, the most popular of which is Unilever's 46-year-old Fair & Lovely. Despite much criticism and a recent surge in backlash against the product, it was only in July 2020, following George Floyd's racially motivated murder earlier that year, that Unilever decided to rename the product "Glow & Lovely". However, the product continues to claim its skin-lightening abilities and, I argue, is even more controversial now because of how it connotes being fair, or having a "glow", to being lovely and hence, being beautiful. Gelles, drawing on how India's history of colonization plays into its obsession with and idealization of fair skin, states "since conceptions of beauty are strongly influenced by prestige, it is no surprise that the skin color of the prestige groups, the conquerors and colonizers, would be adopted as the ideal" (2011, p. 31).

In Bollywood, the female's fairness, then, becomes so attractive a feature that there exist ample song lyrics, as well as entire storylines, that laud the fair-skinned female and celebrate her lighter complexion as the sole reason behind her captivating the male protagonist and luring him into not only falling in love with her but also aggressively pursuing her.

Although the two actresses playing Anjali and Tina in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) are relatively darker skinned by Bollywood standards, the film still hints at the idealization of fair skin and equates it to ideal beauty and femininity. Even though there are no direct remarks or instances of explicit messaging about Anjali's comparatively darker skin tone than Tina's, whenever Anjali and Tina are in the same frame, there is a heavy polarization of their skin tones, depicted either through Tina's makeup and Anjali's lack thereof or through the natural shadow that falls on Anjali's face owing to her signature baseball cap. The fact that the filmmakers would go to such lengths to subtly imply the preference of fair skin by imposing the standard on

two darker skinned actresses speaks to the continued pervasiveness of colorism, in Bollywood specifically, as well as in South Asia in general.

In a crucial scene that takes place during their college days (Johar, 1998, 1:15:07), Anjali attempts to dress up like Tina, so she too is considered beautiful, feminine and worthy of Rahul's love. She clumsily walks into college, much to everyone's amusement, wearing a short skirt and blouse ensemble in an overpowering clash of hot pink and bright orange (see Figure 5). Usually "bare-faced", Anjali now has makeup on, including a bright pink lipstick and a foundation that is visibly some shades lighter than her natural skin-tone. Under her skirt, she wears skin-tight white leggings, thereby giving the illusion of fairer legs. Later in the scene, an embarrassed Anjali admits to Tina that she "just wanted to look beautiful like you [Tina]" (Johar, 1998, 1:16:14). This scene establishes how Anjali's desire (and desperation) for male acceptance, approval and love (specifically from Rahul) made her conform to certain beauty and femininity standards that convinced her that she needed to be fairer skinned in order to be deemed beautiful. Bollywood, in this instance, associates a female's fairness with femininity and desirability as framed from the male perspective.



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) showing Anjali's failed attempt at becoming more feminine, fair and thereby beautiful.

Despite the problematic portrayals in terms of fragmentation of the female body and idealization of a certain kind of femininity, *Main Hoon Na* (2004) does not have many instances, whether explicit or implied, of the idealization of fair skin. Like in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), both of the main female characters in *Main Hoon Na* (2004), Miss Chandni and Sanju, are actresses who, according to Bollywood standards, could not be described as possessing fair skin. However, despite the actresses' slightly dusky complexion, the film is found guilty of eulogizing fair skin as well as the females who possess it. Unarguably, and ironically, the most popular and hit song of the film is one titled "Gori Gori". As mentioned earlier, *gori* is a term used to refer to fair skinned women as well as female foreigners who naturally have paler skin. Owing to South Asia's glorification of fair skin as well as how possessing fair skin is celebrated as an achievement, it can be argued that the term *gori*, similar to what we saw earlier with the term "straight hair", has become less of a common noun and more of a compliment in and of itself.

As for the song "Gori Gori", even though the two actresses the song is picturized on are comparatively dark skinned, we see them portrayed as the object of the male protagonists' desire as they sing in praise of the two women and their white skin. The lyrics of the song further the implication that if you are a fair female, you barely have to do anything, except to continue being fair, and the hero will naturally, on account of your light skin, start singing songs that ask you to meet him in secrecy and talk sweet nothings. To provide a better understanding of the specific song lyrics, below is a literal Hindi-to-English word-to-word translation by me, as Netflix often generalizes and sacrifices the nuances of the message in order to maintain the translation's lyricism (Khan, 2004, 2:01:45):

Gori, gori, gori, gori, gori, gori (Hey fair maiden)

Sometime, somewhere, secretly

You should meet me sometime in secrecy

To talk sweet nothings endlessly

But please, oh please

Don't meet others similarly except me

Queen (2014), however, is in sharp contrast to *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Main Hoon Na* (2004) as it lacks any mentions, aspirations, or implicit idealizations of fair skin.

Whether this is a refreshing and much-needed breakthrough for Bollywood or not is up for debate. This is partly because the actress who plays Rani, and thereby the character Rani herself, is naturally fair skinned. Hence the storyline could not, at least logically, fit the idealization of fair skin anywhere into the movie without it not making any sense and seeming too far-fetched.

The only time in the movie that fair skin is brought up is within the first 20 minutes. It is during one of Rani's flashback scenes, and Rani and Vijay are on a dinner date as Rani's younger brother, Chintu, third wheels them. Rani and Vijay are seated at a table across from each other, with Chintu between them, in what looks like a Chinese restaurant with a somewhat romantic aesthetic created by the red interior and dim lighting. A young and unaware Chintu contributes to the already awkward conversation by offering to crack a joke. The joke is that "there was an ant who was white [fair] and her mother asked her why are you so white? The ant said I apply Fair & Lovely and dance to songs as I drink alcohol" (Bahl, 2014, 19:51, translation is mine). While the joke served no other purpose than to add to the existing awkward energy between Rani and Vijay, it is interesting to observe how fairness as an ideal is imposed on female ants too, even if unrealistically and as a joke.

The three chosen Bollywood films may not be the best examples to help illustrate the extreme idealization of fair skin perpetuated by Bollywood due to lack of instances where fair skin is explicitly mentioned or implicitly referred to whether in the narrative, aesthetic or thematic elements of these films. However, there exist ample related studies that research colorism and the perpetuation of fair skin as analyzed in different Bollywood movies and songs (Gelles, 2011). Despite the dearth of material in the three films, I chose to analyze fair skin as one of the three ideal standards of beauty in order to assess if it still makes an appearance in the films' world as well as to observe how it is portrayed in films that do not directly deal with or address colorism and fair skin.

Who is the “Modern Indian Woman”?

The notion of the modern Indian woman has become an increasingly prominent theme in Bollywood with the many recent “women-centric” movies that have attempted to define who the new Indian woman is. Of the three films analyzed, *Queen* (2014) is the only one that falls under this category of Bollywood's “women-centric” movies. However, as I postulate, this notion of the modern Indian woman is somewhat paradoxical as it imposes on the Indian woman's identity and body, expectations of what are, at times, contradictory values. The modern Indian woman, according to Bollywood, is one that strikes and maintains a balance between being somewhat modern yet still rooted in the traditionality that is strongly associated with Indian values and culture. According to Sensharma's work on the male gaze and female spectatorship, “the woman, however emancipated or modern she might be, carries the onus of maintaining traditional values and culture for the family” (2007, p. 24). In Bollywood, the main way the notion of the modern Indian woman is constructed is primarily reflected in the female protagonist's characterization and choice of attire. This representation can be attributed to the strong associations perpetuated

between a South Asian woman's modesty and its subsequent influence on not just her beauty and femininity but also the traditional values her body has come to signify and stand in for.

In a postcolonial India that is trying to maintain and shape its identity through the continuous rejection and acceptance of Western influence, the modern Indian woman becomes symbolic as the ground on, and through, which this constant negotiation and identity-formation takes place. Chatterjee (2016), in her work on Bollywood's new woman, describes this woman as the one who "knows the grammar of modern living" but also "has the 'right' traditional approach to modernity and never eclipses her Indian-ness under a western morale" (p. 1182). Ahad and Akgül (2020), describe Chatterjee's analysis as situating women in "global-local, modern-traditional or transnational-national frames to highlight Bollywood's response to, and reflection on social changes in post-colonial India" (p. 5).

All three films analyzed, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Queen* (2014) construct, in their own ways, as we will see, the new and modern Indian woman of today. Bollywood, being the transnational and globalized entity that it is, influences these "intricate negotiations between the local and global that re-negotiate gender regimes" (Chatterjee, 2016, p. 1181). The influence of globalization and a more Westernized perspective on Indian femininity, aided by capitalist consumption, is a theme most visible, as I demonstrate, within the European setting of *Queen* (2014).

Both *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Main Hoon Na* (2004) place the Indian sari in high regard especially when it comes to the ideal beauty and femininity of the South Asian woman. The sari, then, becomes pivotal as a symbol of Indian modernity and femininity as seen in the case of Anjali's feminization in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). The role of the sari in beautifying the Indian woman is made obvious when Rahul, upon seeing the transformed Anjali for the first

time in eight years (Johar, 1998, 2:09:31), immediately asks her if she is keeping well since she looks so beautiful in the sari. Through this scene, the film constructs both looking beautiful and wearing a sari as causational and unusual occurrences for Anjali that do not escape Rahul's observation. Here, we see how the sari is represented as strongly associated with the beauty and femininity of an Indian woman.

The sari, in the case of Miss Chandni from *Main Hoon Na* (2004), is sexualized to depict how the Indian woman can be viewed as modern, and sexually attractive, even while clad in a dress that is typically associated with Indian tradition and modesty. The film does this by portraying how the sari, a staple signature of Indian femininity, works like a charm when it comes to attracting the sexual attention of the otherwise aloof male protagonist. Close-up shots of the exposed waist of the female character dressed in a sari are a common occurrence in Bollywood movies like *Main Hoon Na* (2004) as they work towards eroticizing the outfit and by extension, the woman wearing it. Miss Chandni is a case in point as the first words Major Ram utters upon seeing her are "sari" as we see her sari's cloth grazing over a kneeling Major Ram's smiling face (Khan, 2004, 1:04:48).

According to Nijhawan, in her analysis of Bollywood's female dancers, the sari is "heavily laden with cultural meanings [in Bollywood] of nostalgia, tradition, womanhood, nationalism and social status, the full range of which are developed in the Hindi movie" (Dwyer & Patel, 2002, as cited by Nijhawan, 2009, p. 102, parenthesis original). In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Main Hoon Na* (2004), the sari is depicted as the ideal choice of attire for the modern Indian woman and in contrast, a Westernized outfit comprising of jeans and short tops is portrayed as immodest and unfeminine, as depicted through the characterization of tomboyish Anjali and rugged Sanju respectively. This construction of the sari as a symbol of ideal

femininity and Western clothes as undesirable by the male perspective further perpetuates Bollywood's "rejection of the totally "westernized" woman – construed as dangerous and misguided" (Ahad & Akgül, 2020, p. 17) and promotion of the modern (yet) Indian woman.

In the case of *Queen* (2014), we see a shift in the construction and subsequent representation of what constitutes the modern Indian woman. Perhaps owing to the highly globalized India the film was made and released in, or to the largely European setting that Rani's character is exposed to, the sari is altogether missing as a symbol of Indian femininity and beauty. This departure from the sari, however, is not in isolation as it is quickly replaced with a different yet still relatively modest set of expectations placed on the modern Indian woman and her attire.

Queen's Rani, prior to her transformation that takes place in the Western – and therefore modern – setting of Europe, predominantly wears an Indian attire consisting of *salwar kameez* sets, which are long kurtas worn with loose, flowy pants. Through the course of the film, and her journey of self-discovery, we begin to see her style gradually evolve from more traditional and conservative Indian-wear to a fusion of Indo-Western clothes mostly comprising of long flowy dresses and kurtas paired with jeans (see Figure 6). This incorporation of Western elements of clothing into Rani's personal style is done in a way that maintains her modesty and does not result in what would be considered an immodest show of skin even for the modern Indian woman.



Figure 6. Screenshot from *Queen* (2014) showing Rani crossing the streets of Paris alone in an attire that is a fusion of Indo-Western styles comprising of an Indian kurta paired with jeans.

As seen in the three films analyzed, Bollywood constantly constructs and represents the modern Indian woman, in terms of who she is and what she can do, in contrast to who she is not and what she cannot do as it transgresses the norms of propriety perpetuated by Indian culture and its conservative traditions. *Queen* (2014) constructs, through Rani, the notion of the modern Indian woman by depicting it against the contrasting characterization of her half-Indian yet completely Westernized female friend VJ who is shown, without judgement, as wearing short clothes and being a sexually active modern Western woman. In the case of *Queen* (2014), this restriction on the independence and empowerment of the modern Indian woman is seen as depicted through Rani's choice of attire upon her return to India. She is shown wearing a "deep-neck" kurta, an observation her ex-mother-in-law is quick to make and comment upon (Bahl, 2014, 2:11:04). Ahad and Akgül (2020) describe the deep-neck-ness of Rani's kurta as a marker of her empowerment and the fact that she chose to wear a kurta itself as a sort of reversal to her Indianness, "two aspects that balance her image in modern globalizing India" (p. 15). Chatterjee (2016) further attributes Rani's clothing in this pivotal scene as her reverting "to her traditional role as symbolic bearer of nationalism and patriotic womanly virtues" (p. 1189).

Based on Brey's (2020) definition of the female gaze, as discussed earlier in the theory section, *Queen* (2014) checks all the boxes listed as conditions a movie needs to meet in order to be considered as employing the female gaze: it has as its main character a woman whose point of view the story is told from as it questions, albeit subtly, the patriarchal order. The only scene in *Queen* (2014) where the presence of an active male gaze is observed is when Rani accidentally sends a slightly risqué trial-room selfie to her ex-fiancé Vijay instead of her female friend VJ. This instance of self-eroticization by Rani, according to Ahad and Akgül (2020), "presents the universal challenge of the lurking male gaze, the "other", that has permeated female bodies" (p. 15). Other than that, by refusing to depict Rani as an erotic object for the male character, or the audience, the movie rejects what Mulvey terms as the male gaze "by omitting Vijay's perspective and presence, and thus allows the audience to concentrate more on the conflict in the female character's life" (Gupta, 2015, p. 119). This is a refreshing break from the other two Bollywood movies that, as we have seen, "position male viewers to gaze at on-screen women by making women the object of both the camera's gaze and the gaze of men within the narrative" (Derné & Jadwin, 2000, p. 249). *Queen* (2014), it can then be argued, is a film that predominantly rejects the male gaze and instead employs the female gaze to narrate the story of a female's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment.

In terms of the song-and-dance sequences typical of Bollywood movies, Shah and Cory (2019) argue how "the male viewers' deepest erotic desires are mediated through the language of symbols such as dance moves and lyrics" (p. 89). However, the absence of the female character, in *Queen* (2014), dancing for the pleasure of the male character and audience is a noteworthy step that breaks away from the eroticized representations of women through the male gaze that have been normalized in Bollywood so far.

This is not to say that *Queen*'s (2014) empowering representation of Rani's struggle against subordinating cultural conventions is without its problems. In spite of the European setting of *Queen* (2014), the movie does not acknowledge what Columpar (2002) identifies as the colonial gaze, which can be seen at play especially in the film's construction of the modern Indian woman. Ahad and Akgül (2020) rightly point out how the film's "use of the European spaces contrast with the concrete gendered walls of India, and emphasize the former as signifying a free "liberal" world" (p. 13-14). Their argument that the "global", "western" and "modern" continue to exist as conflated categories in a postcolonial liberal imagination which then forms a replication of the colonial "characterization of India as being in the infancy of civilizational progress" (Bhambra, 2007, as cited by Ahad & Akgül, 2020, p. 14) and "Europe as a symbol and pioneer of progress" is a topic that can be subjected to further research given its strong influence on the development of the modern Indian woman in today's globalized Bollywood of a postcolonial India.

Prior to conducting the analysis on *Queen* (2014), my previous viewings of the film had led me to assume that upon its analysis I would find that the film completely rejects the male gaze and only depicts the characters and narrative from the female gaze. However, after a closer reading of the film, I argue that while it is largely the female gaze that is depicted in *Queen* (2014), a lot of the messaging and language surrounding the beauty standards the film reflects and reinforces is still very much in service of the (male) gaze. Moreover, the movie does not address the complication posed by the colonial gaze in operation. Further analysis of the growing body of women-centric Bollywood films is likely to reveal that Bollywood still perpetuates an internalized and intersecting male and colonial gaze from a postfeminist and postcolonial perspective.

Conclusion

This thesis has discursively explored the relationship between three South Asian standards of beauty, specifically long black straight hair, fair skin and the notion of the modern Indian woman, in terms of their representations in three mainstream popular Bollywood movies *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Queen* (2014). Through a filmic analysis of these three films, this study has established how the three standards of ideal beauty and femininity continue to be perpetuated in Bollywood movies produced and released across a period of time – standards that both serve and are emphasized by the male gaze. Even as the female gaze becomes more prominent in films from the last decade – exemplified through Rani's journey in *Queen* (2014) – its presence is complicated by an intersecting, persistent, and often-unacknowledged colonial gaze.

Long black straight hair continues to be regarded as comprising an integral part of South Asian beauty and femininity. This thesis analyzed how female characters possessing the physical feature of long black straight hair are depicted as more attractive and desirable by the male protagonists and, by extension, the film-viewing audience. In contrast, all three films subtly push the message that women with short hair are unruly, unfeminine and in dire need of a physical transformation that involves the acquisition of long black straight hair which is constructed as a staple to the South Asian woman's beauty and a marker of her femininity.

In terms of fair skin, the analysis reveals how the South Asian community still views fair or white skin as the ideal complexion for women and that anything else is not worthy of male attention and affection. The song lyrics and narrative structures of the Bollywood films analyzed place fair skin on a pedestal and perpetuate the problematic, yet popular, notion that a woman's fair skin is worth praising, celebrating and eulogizing. This analysis is but a small example of the

colorism that runs rife in South Asia and how it is further reinforced by the wide-ranging influence of Bollywood movies. Examining these films in a postcolonial context allowed me to make visible connections between South Asia's obsession with fair skin and its history of colonialism in combination with the ongoing influence of the West in terms of the strong prevalence of Eurocentric beauty standards.

The analysis of the characteristics of the modern Indian woman, as seen in the three Bollywood films, makes it safe to claim the paradoxical expectations imposed on the Indian woman today. The ideal modern Indian woman is one who is a combination of the Western, and therefore modern, with Indian values at her core. She is someone who is independent yet subservient, fierce yet docile and empowered yet controllable. The analysis demonstrates that while the expectations placed on the clothing of the modern Indian woman have slightly changed, from the sari to a fusion of Indo-Western attire, the high regard for the modesty of a South Asian woman remains intact. The modern Indian woman, then, is constructed as a woman capable of maintaining a perfect balance between being the right blend of Western/modern and Indian without being too much of either. Of the three beauty standards this research focuses on, the modern Indian woman is perhaps the most convoluted one as it is complicated by the dynamic forces that extend beyond the national boundaries of the popular Indian film industry that is Bollywood.

In a more expansive project, allowing for greater time and scope of study, a similar analysis could be conducted on other popular Bollywood movies that either represent or reject these beauty standards. Perhaps, the examination can also be extended to include other dominant South Asian beauty standards that are prevalent in South Asian society and represented in Bollywood movies through their stylistic, narrative and aesthetic elements. A more expansive

project could also examine, in greater detail, the influence of globalization and Westernization in the postcolonial landscape of India that Bollywood and other regional film industries operate in as well as the different gazes at play.

Despite these limitations, this research has been successful in contributing to the relatively under-researched topic of South Asian beauty standards in connection to Bollywood. Furthermore, this research has been able to fill the gap that exists in current scholarship when it comes to examining the presence and impact of the male gaze in a South Asian context. With the aim of analyzing depictions of ideal beauty and femininity in Bollywood cinema, this area of study holds potential for further research that investigates such representations and their wide-ranging implications on the lives and self-perceptions of the thousands of young women of colour who are subjected to such specific messages of beauty daily. If beauty really lies in the eyes of the beholder, and the camera serves as the eye through which film characters and spectators “gaze” at the female body, it is worth investigating what constitutes this beauty in a region and film industry that is constantly reflecting and shaping such standards.

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