


ROUNDTABLE

## Of Echoes and Utterances: A Brief Sketch of Arabic Hauntings in Hindi Cinema and Song

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On a Saturday afternoon in January 2017, Shah Rukh Khan—Hindi cinema’s reigning star of the last thirty years—arrived at Bollywood Parks Dubai to promote his latest film release, *Raees* (2017).<sup>1</sup> To the crowd of adoring Arab and South Asian fans and journalists who had flocked to the theme park to catch a glimpse of the “Badshah of Bollywood” and brand ambassador of Dubai, SRK unveiled the much-anticipated Arabic version of “Zaalima” (Cruel One), the film’s breakout hit song. Rendered in Darija by Moroccan pop artists Abdelfettah Grini and Jamila El Badaoui, this version of “Zaalima” proved an awkward copy of the original, its unwieldy Arabic lyrics molded to fit as tightly within the blueprint melody as possible. “*Diri fiya al-thiqa, al-gharām hā howa*” (Put your confidence in me, for love is here) did not have quite the same ring or seamlessness as the Hindi-Urdu “*Main sau mar-taba dīwāna hua*” (I fell in love a hundred times over), with the Arabic line painstakingly crafted to echo the “*hua*” ending of the Hindi-Urdu.

The clumsiness of the Arabic echo was beside the point, however. Arabic versions of Bollywood songs for Middle Eastern audiences had become valuable promotional material starting two years prior, when the song “Gerua” (Ochre), from another film starring Shah Rukh Khan, *Dilwale* (Braveheart, 2015), was transformed into an Emirati Arabic rendition called “Telagina” (We Found Each Other). Enlisted for this iteration was none other than Emirati singer Adel Ebrahim, who, alongside Emirati music producer Jasim and Dubai-based Indian rapper FuRa, created an R&B cover of the chart-topping Bollywood song “Tum Hi Ho” (You Are the One) in 2013. Ebrahim’s Arabic verse in that song became massively popular amongst Bollywood fans in both the subcontinent and Persian Gulf countries, leading Sony Music India to capitalize on the fan-led phenomenon and hire Ebrahim for its first official experiment in producing and marketing Hindi cinema’s most famous and portable paratext—the song-and-dance sequence—in Arabic. Zee Music Company, Yash Raj Films (YRF) International, T-Series, and other Indian music and film production houses have followed suit in the last few years, producing a small but diverse cohort of globally-loved “Arabized” Bollywood songs.

Beyond Bollywood, other Indian cinema industries are also Arabizing their musical output to reflect new transnational priorities and realities, pursuing less the strict translation of lyrics into Arabic than something more flexible and ambiguous: an overall “Arabic mood.” “Arabic Kuthu,” from the Tamil-language Kollywood film *Beast* (2022), broke records as

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<sup>1</sup> Although Hindi cinema and Bollywood are referred to almost interchangeably here, I use Bollywood with Tejaswini Ganti’s definition in mind and Hindi cinema as its pre-formalized, pre-industrial precedent: “Bollywood has become a shorthand reference not only to a specific industry, but also to a specific style of filmmaking within the industry which is aggressively oriented toward box-office success and broad audience appeal.” See Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

the first Indian song to trend on Spotify's Global Top 200 Chart within 48 hours of release, while its lyric video alone amassed over 470 million views on Youtube.<sup>2</sup> In a behind-the-scenes promo video, *Beast* soundtrack composer Anirudh Ravichander explains that the piece is an attempt to fuse Arabic rhythms with *kuthu*, a popular genre of Tamil folk music, into a "Pan World" melody.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to the lyrics, unlike Arabic versions of Bollywood songs, the Arabic used here is deliberately slangified, what Anirudh describes as "the gibberish we speak, what we call Arabic."<sup>4</sup> For instance, the refrain "*halamathi habibo*" (I dreamt of my lover) is an approximation of "*halamt bi habibi*," while the hook "*malama pitha pithaadhe*" is a nonsensical phrase only meant to sound like Arabic to the everyday, non-Arabic-speaking listener. It seems that for Bollywood and Kollywood, the pursuit of this overall "Arabic mood" in songs—by way of musicality, costume and set design, lyrics, and collaboration with foreign record producers and singers—has become the latest formula for achieving virality, arguably the industries' most important tool for local and global audience growth and retention (Fig. 1). Yet, while "Arabic Kuthu" nods at (South) Indian diasporas living in the Persian Gulf through reference to the Arabic "they" speak, Bollywood's Arabized songs are primarily addressed to Arab fans of Bollywood in an acknowledgement of their historic spectatorship of, and robust present-day engagement with, Hindi cinema and song.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Bollywood's distinctly market-driven approach to Arabic transcends the production of song-and-dance numbers to encompass the ever-expanding universe of Hindi-language content, Bollywood-adjacent, and otherwise. Arabic is no longer simply a language of reception but has been elevated to a language of production, one that reveals the changing geographic nature, interpersonal relationships, and priorities of a global film industry looking to root itself immediately West. Hindi films have been subtitled in classical Arabic (if rather inaccurately and irregularly) over the past sixty years at least, for audiences as far as Morocco and Egypt and as close as Oman. Yet, as demonstrated by the launch of dubbing-focused, Persian Gulf-based subsidiaries of leading Indian entertainment channels like Zee TV, B4U, Star Plus, and others beginning in 2008, Arabic and its various dialects have become key to the transnationalization of Hindi-language content.<sup>6</sup> While these companies have necessarily relied on Dubai-based Arabic translators to localize films and television shows into (primarily) Egyptian and Levantine dialects, others—like Eros Now—are utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology such as Microsoft Azure's speech translation engine to speed up "a two week dubbing process that takes millions of dollars into zero cost and on the fly."<sup>7</sup> The race to churn out Arabic-dubbed Hindi entertainment content across various platforms, from over-the-top (OTT) streaming channels to social media, substantiates Monika Mehta's apt analysis that Bollywood distributors are expediently adopting "spreadability" as an industrial strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnomusicological scholarship on Indian music, including Hindi film compositions, has almost always privileged Indo-Persian confluences over other geographic and cultural

<sup>2</sup> Soundarya Athimuthu, "How 'Arabic Kuthu' From Vijay's 'Beast' Went Viral With 100 Million Views," *The Quint World*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/indian-cinema/actor-vijay-arabic-kuthu-from-beast-hits-100-million-views-beats-dhanushs-rowdy-baby#read-more>.

<sup>3</sup> "Arabic Kuthu - Beast First Single Promo | Thalapathy Vijay | Sun Pictures | Nelson | Anirudh," YouTube video, 6:19, Sun TV, 7 February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVdxDDrcTc>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> On racial and linguistic hierarchies between the Gulf and Kerala, see Darshana Sreedhar Mini, "Ethnography and Archives of Gulf-Kerala Diasporic Media: Television Show Publicity Poster and Airport Signage," *Film History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 232–40.

<sup>6</sup> Sreya Mitra, "Beyond the Nation and the Diaspora: Examining Bollywood's Transnational Appeal in the United Arab Emirates," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 14 (2021): 135–57.

<sup>7</sup> Varun Agarwal, "With AI tech, Microsoft bots to dub Bollywood movies for Eros Now," *The Hindu Business Line*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/info-tech/with-ai-tech-microsoft-bots-to-dub-bollywood-movies-for-eros-now/article29467549.ece>.

<sup>8</sup> Monika Mehta, "Fan and its Paratexts," *Framework* 58, no. 1–2 (2017): 128–43.



**Figure 1.** Still from “Halamathi Habibo” video featuring popular Tamil actor Vijay and dancers dressed as shaykhs, belly dancers, and oud players. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUN5Uf9mObQ> (accessed 13 October 2022).

connections when parsing questions of language, poetry, and instrumentation. And while the impact of Amir Khusrau (1253–1325)—the creator of the Sufi devotional song, *qawwali*, and the *khyal* and *tarana* musical styles, renowned for his innovations in Indian classical music genres, Hindi-Urdu popular songs, and Sufi music—cannot be overstated, the contemporary Bollywood-Arabic nexus beckons us to explore different sonic movements into and out of the subcontinent.<sup>9</sup> Recent analyses of recording history in the Indian Ocean reveal that Bombay was a significant center of Arab music production from the late nineteenth century onward, especially for Kuwaiti, Bahraini, Yemeni, and other artists from the Gulf littoral. A central node in maritime trade between India and the Persian Gulf, Bombay proved a more “familiar location” for Khaleeji artists than Aleppo or Baghdad; a place where “Arab musicians from different Arab regions resided and performed their music” in nightclubs, private gatherings, and even on the Delhi radio.<sup>10</sup> The popular genre of *sawt* (lit. sound) in the Gulf, founded according to most sources by Bombay-born Kuwaiti poet ‘Abdullah al-Faraj (1836–1901), is inflected with Indian musical traditions, “some of which were taken directly from Indian song.”<sup>11</sup> Later generations of *sawt* singers, such as ‘Abdullatif al-Kuwaiti (1901/1904–75), produced the first commercial recordings of the genre for private labels that were pressed by the National Gramophone Record Company in Bombay.<sup>12</sup> What propelled these musicians towards India—the drive to reach wider audiences and access advanced technologies and infrastructures for the production and distribution of their work—is also what ostensibly motivates Bollywood and Hindi-language entertainment companies to establish outfits in Gulf media capitals today. A more extensive study of the Indian Ocean aesthetic

<sup>9</sup> Khusrau wrote both in Hindavi, the vernacular of Delhi, and Persian, the courtly language of Muslims of the Sultanate era. Some critical works question Khusrau’s status as the progenitor of certain innovations in Hindustani music, such as Yousuf Saeed, “The Debate on Amir Khusrau’s ‘Inventions’ in Hindustani Music,” *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society* 39 (2008): 220–32.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad AlSalhi, “The Recordings of ‘Abdullatif al-Kuwaiti: 1927–1947,” in *Music in Arabia: Perspectives on Heritage, Mobility, and Nation*, eds. Issa Boulos, Virginia Danielson and Anne K. Rasmussen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021), 107–26.

<sup>11</sup> Laith Ulaby, “On the Decks of Dhows: Musical Traditions of Oman and the Indian Ocean World,” *The World of Music (new series)* 1, no. 2 (2012): 53. On the topic of migration and music in the Gulf, see also Dale Hudson, “Songs from India and Zanzibar: Documenting the Gulf in Migration,” *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 10, no. 2 (2019): 91–112.

<sup>12</sup> AlSalhi, “The Recordings of ‘Abdullatif al-Kuwaiti: 1927–1947.”

space, especially one connecting contemporary media industries to the rich history of musical encounters across this expanse (including maritime music such as sea songs), should give us more detail on how Arabic and other languages play into these push-and-pull factors of transoceanic sonic production.<sup>13</sup>

### Arabic as a “Muslim Language”

Apart from song-and-dance, certain forms of Arabic have been, in one way or another, inherent to the development of Hindi film genres and tropes. Anjali Gera Roy has observed that not only do the “dialogues and lyrics of Hindi cinema...draw on Perso-Arabic loan words and imagery and metaphors of Persian, Arabic and Indian Urdu poetry,” but the “Arabic qissa, Persian *dāstān* and the Urdu *ghazal* have been synthesised with Hindu mythological and religious concepts in almost all genres of Hindi cinema, except perhaps the mythological and devotional.”<sup>14</sup> Writing against the dualistic Hindi-Urdu paradigm that characterizes most academic and popular linguistic analysis of Hindi cinema, Roy’s multilingual, comparative approach charts how Arabic, as well as Persian and Urdu, mix with Sanskritized Hindi to create the rich syncretic language of Hindi films (one that the term “Hindi cinema” itself belies).<sup>15</sup> Many of Hindi cinema’s prominent Urdu scriptwriters and lyricists—from Kaifi Azmi, Shakeel Badayuni, and Majrooh Sultanpuri of the “golden era” of Hindi film music to Irshad Kamil of more contemporary renown—studied Arabic as part of their literary education. Their dialogues and song lyrics are inflected with Arabic lexical borrowings, recently exhibited by Kamil’s reference to the Qur’an in his Sufi anthem “Kun fa Yakun” (Be, and It Is) for the 2018 film *Rockstar*.<sup>16</sup>

Although Arabic has materialized as a language of mysticism and ecstatic love in these Sufi strains of Bollywood music, it has also, much more viscerally, appeared in Hindi cinema’s “majoritarian attempts at imposing linguistic stereotypes on Muslims.”<sup>17</sup> Arabic, alongside Urdu, is the *de facto* screen language of “Islamic terrorism”—perhaps considered even more frightening than the latter for its incomprehensibility to the average Bollywood filmgoer in India. Since the 1980s, the depiction of Muslim film characters markedly transformed from earlier stereotypes of the indolent (but kindly) *nawab* to the violent, cunning jihadi anti-nationalist. Hindi cinema’s “presentation of Pakistan, Islam and Kashmir in a vile nexus of anti-Indian conspirators,” as well as its other preferred depiction of Muslims as thugs of the underworld and/or international terrorists, vilified Urdu and abstracted Arabic as its scarier sister language.<sup>18</sup> Arabic became the secret code that connected Indian Muslims to each other and the pan-Islamic world for which they reserved their true loyalty. Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes how in the Tamil-Hindi film *Roja* (Rose, 1992), even the simple Arabic definite article of “al-” became heavily value-laden when prefixed to the name of a bearded elderly man introduced to us as al-Sami, immediately connoting

<sup>13</sup> For a theorization of the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic space rather than a maritime spatial unit or historical period, see Julia Verne and Markus Verne, “Introduction: The Indian Ocean as Aesthetic Space,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 314–20.

<sup>14</sup> Anjali Gera Roy, *Cinema of Enchantment: Perso-Arabic Genealogies of the Hindi Masala Film* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2015), 26 and 12 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Early theorizations of this language called it “Hindustani,” a term now out of date and connotative of contexts beyond the cinema. See Roy Bar Sadeh’s contribution to this roundtable.

<sup>16</sup> On the widespread co-option of *qawwali* and sufi music in Bollywood films, see Rachana Rao Umashankar, “Sufi Sound, Sufi Space: Indian Cinema and the Mise-en-Scène of Pluralism,” in *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Katherine Pratt Ewing and Rosemary R. Corbett (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 215–26.

<sup>17</sup> Sanjeev Kumar H. M., “Communalizing the Eclectic Spatialities of India’s Public Culture: Deconstructing the Essentialized Imageries of Islam in Bollywood Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2022), 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2022.2054917>

<sup>18</sup> Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “The Kashmiri as Muslim in Bollywood’s ‘New Kashmir films,’” *Contemporary South Asia*, 18, no. 4 (2010): 377.

his pan-Islamic and terrorist associations.<sup>19</sup> Until only very recently, whenever Arabic appeared in films about Kashmir or Islamic terrorism, it was mostly “mouthed” or “accented” rather than voiced in intelligible speech. After greeting each other with “*al-salāmu ‘alaykum*” or other Islamic phrases recognizable to pan-Indian audiences, jihadi characters would devolve into an angry, hushed conversation presumed to be in Arabic (or in Kashmiri or Pashto, depending on the type and geography of the jihadism in question). This was a tried-and-true trope of earlier films like *Roja* and even more recent offerings like the Tamil-Hindi *Vishwaroopam/Vishvaroop* (2013). The obfuscation of Arabic and its collapsibility within a larger family of unfamiliar “Muslim languages” has only served to other the language further.

In terms of film plots, contemporary Bollywood has not shied away from the genre of “Islamic terrorism.” Instead, using new filming locations in Morocco, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Turkey, the industry has expanded its geographical remit to perfect and make more “authentic” its exploration of the theme in the Middle East. *Phantom* (2015), a film that explores the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai against the backdrop of international terrorism, was partially shot in Beirut. Its lead actress, Katrina Kaif, was praised by Indian media outlets for attempting to study Arabic: “Katrina wants to know the language well so that her inflections are correct while dubbing her lines in the language. She will continue practising it to get the pronunciation right.”<sup>20</sup> For *Airlift* (2016), centered on the evacuation of Kuwait-based Indians during the onset of the Gulf War, actor Akshay Kumar also learned Arabic to play the role of an Indian-Arab billionaire. The pursuit of realism has encouraged a level of professionalization in the industry that has, at least for this trend of Bollywood movies, created a space for Arabic to become somewhat more pronounced—less of a muddled whisper and more of a graspable piece of film dialogue.

Bollywood’s most accurate and realistic visual representation of Arabic to date belongs to Salman Khan’s *Tiger Zinda Hai* (Tiger is Alive, 2017). Khan, best known as the industry’s foremost working-class hero and action superstar, collaborated with Abu Dhabi’s media free zone, twofour54, to produce the film. The *Tiger Zinda Hai* set at Khalifa Industrial Zone Abu Dhabi (KIZAD) doubles as Tikrit, Iraq (fictionalized in the film as “Ikrit”), and is the largest and most expensive Bollywood set to ever be constructed outside of Mumbai. Comprised of a dust-covered, sepia-textured cityscape with over 2500 windows and 1000 doors, the set’s remarkable array of signage in classical and Iraqi Arabic depicts a marketplace full of bakeries, textile and garment shops, internet cafes, and even a municipal city council (Fig. 2). Undoubtedly buoyed by the expertise of twofour54’s team of native Arabic speakers, the film puts to shame big-budget Hollywood projects like *Arrival* (2016), a film about language that not only used Arabic script to represent an Urdu headline, but did so erroneously by having it written disjointed and backwards. Still, no matter how good the Arabic has gotten, mainstream Indian imaginaries of the Middle East continue to traffic in tried-and-true Orientalist tropes of Arabs, even as they seek to excavate and entrench India’s place in the modern history of the region.

## A Shared Soundscape

As much as Indian music executives like to bill their YouTube-topping Arabic versions of Bollywood tunes as the first of their kind, to the listener even slightly versed in “world music” such statements ring resoundingly false. Arabic hauntings have reverberated throughout the Bollywood soundscape for decades. My own naïve realization of this well-known phenomenon began with my late discovery of Amr Diab’s mega-hit “Tamally Ma‘ak” (Always with You, 2000), long after having already loved and repeatedly played its Bollywood copy “Kaho Na Kaho” (Whether You Speak or Not, 2004)—what to me was the “original.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>20</sup> “Katrina Kaif Learns Arabic for Phantom,” *Hindustan Times*, 31 January 2014, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/katrina-kaif-learns-arabic-for-phantom/story-eeliS8OE8f9cbJatEy6kO.html>.



**Figure 2.** Stills from a behind-the-scenes video on the making of the *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017) set in Abu Dhabi, exhibiting the film's expansive use of Arabic signage to depict Iraq. YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_DMkXazq7Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_DMkXazq7Y) (accessed 13 October 2022).

There has always been an informal exchange on the level of piracy and remix between India and the Arab world, especially as countless Hindi film songs—themselves hybrids of diverse musical traditions—have lifted melodies from Arab pop hits by singers like Diab, Ragheb Alama, Ehab Tawfik, and many others. The modern mediascapes of South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa have never existed in isolation, always borrowing from or referencing each other, albeit fleetingly or somewhat randomly when it comes to pop music. If the creation of Arabic versions of Bollywood's most marketable songs is becoming an entrenched, formalized strategy in the industry, the reverse is true for Arab pop artists as well. This is attested to by the popularity of musical traditions as varied as Hisham Abbas's iconic Egyptian-Carnatic fusion song of 2000, "Nari Narain" (variously translated as "Two Fires" and "I'm on Fire"), and the newer mash-up/remix cultures of Bollymizwid/Bollyraï. While it is difficult to isolate these sonic connections from their multidirectional, often unplanned paths, it is nearly impossible to determine "Arabic influences" in Hindi cinema and song when Urdu, Hindi, Persian, and their derivatives all draw from classical Arabic roots. Nevertheless, what I hope to have opened in this short survey is the space to discuss potential directions for a study of Arabic in Indian cultural production(s), particularly as contemporary migration, financial, and political flows bring India ever closer to the Gulf and broader Middle East.

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