

# Reflexive Global Bollywood and Metacinematic Gender Politics in *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Luck By Chance* (2008), and *Dhobi Ghat* (2010)

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**Abstract**

This essay examines reflexive strategies in three contemporary Hindi-language feature films directed by women, *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Luck By Chance* (2008), and *Dhobi Ghat/Mumbai Diaries* (2010). These Mumbai-set films, directed and written by Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar, and Kiran Rao, respectively, offer insider industry perspectives and a variety of outlooks on Bollywood and Indian society more generally. I introduce the concepts of “selective reflection” to critically examine self-conscious representations of the excessively star-driven world of Bollywood filmmaking in an age of globalization (and the dominant figure of the male hero), directing styles and strategies of image-making, and the blurred boundaries between reality and artifice. This article presents a close analysis of narrative tropes (especially “breaking in” to Bollywood), *filmi* references, casting, spectator dynamics, and gendered agency in films that represent a taxonomic range from commercial blockbuster to art cinema.

The medium of cinema has demonstrated self-awareness since its earliest days, and reflexive films have the ability to serve various functions. According to Robert Stam, they can “explore the film-making milieu; ... expose the actual processes of film production, whether directly or by analogy; and[/or] ... flaunt their artifice through calling attention to film technique” (Stam, 1992: 77). Bollywood, the dominant film industry in the nation that produces the most films in the world, has become increasingly reflexive, transmediated, and transnational/global in terms of narrative strategies, song and dance, modes of production, exhibition and distribution practices, and reception – as asserted by a growing number of scholarly studies with “global Bollywood” in the title (Kavoori and Punathambekar, 2008; Gopal and Moorti, 2008; Shresthova, 2008). Bollywood masala films are always already hybrid and inherently stylistically excessive (Dudrah, 2006: 137–140, cited in Shresthova, 2008: 301), and have of late participated in a worldwide cinematic trend toward hyper-reflexivity and postmodern style (Sarkar, 2013: 206). In particular, a number of contemporary

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Hindi-language films by women directors address the dynamics of the popular film industry through a kind of meta-masala. They integrate components of parody, satire, intertextuality, and pastiche through diegetic and extradiegetic graftings, verbal and audiovisual puns and allusions, quotation, dramatic irony, linguistic hybridity, and camp excess. In these films, the narrative device of “breaking in” to Bollywood is centralized and laid open for critique, even while the film industry ultimately remains idealized, and highest-currency star power remains decidedly male. This essay presents a close analysis of narrative strategies, Bollywood aspirations, *filmi* references, casting, spectatorial dynamics, and gendered agency in several feature films helmed by women: *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007), and *Luck by Chance* (Zoya Akhtar, 2009). I conclude with a consideration of *Dhobi Ghat/Mumbai Stories* (Kiran Rao, 2011), positioned as an alternative to conventional Bollywood fare. These films, and their reflexive gestures that blur reality and myth, offer a prismatic view of Bollywood.

Each of these films acknowledges the power imbalances in Bollywood through what I call, borrowing from the field of optics and spectroscopy, “selective reflection.” Drawing from the principle that light waves of multiple lengths and intensities may be absorbed, transmitted, or reflected by an object, the interplay of stardom and directorial authorship variously shines through or is reflected from the surfaces of the Bollywood film. *Om Shanti Om* primarily uses direction to reflect the glow of the male star. *Luck By Chance* appears to absorb the frustrations of directorial and actorly desire in a rendering of Bollywood’s opacity. *Dhobi Ghat* suggests transparency from a position of authorial privilege, transmitting a candid representation of Mumbai social realities and Bollywood stardom as an impossible dream for members of the lower echelons of society.

The films discussed in this essay display different commercial trajectories of reflexive cinema, based on audience expectations and response, and star power. *Om Shanti Om* was a verifiable blockbuster in India and worldwide, breaking box-office records, galvanized by its star Shah Rukh Khan. Recognizing the global diasporic audience hungry for star-powered Bollywood films, *Om Shanti Om* premiered at Empire Cinema Leicester Square in London. *Luck By Chance* was generally critically well-received but a disappointment in domestic and international markets because of its unexpected slower pace and minimal use of A-list stars.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Hrithik Roshan was featured prominently in publicity but is barely present in the film, as his character quickly abandons the *mise en abyme* production. *Dhobi Ghat*, classified in the “Art Film” or “Parallel Cinema” categories (the latter a socially critical alternative to mainstream cinema), premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. The combination of its scaled-down budget coupled with the visibility of star/producer Aamir Khan, and lower box-office expectations due to its categorically darker tone and more realistic style, yielded positive critical reception and modest-but-favorable collections.

## Reflective bonhomie: *Om Shanti Om*

*Om Shanti Om* portrays directorial authorship as a collaborative, choreographic exercise, with the star as an accessible and good-humored vehicle for aspirational engagement. The final credits of the film feature a simulated red carpet event, making visible under-recognized industry contributors. This sequence provides a light-handed commentary on the imbalance of power and recognition in star-obsessed Bollywood, still centered around the capital-generating male hero, onscreen and off. Down-to-earth megastar Shah Rukh Khan, as well as other members of the primary cast and crew, including new discovery Deepika Padukone, greet an enthusiastic audience and paparazzi. They are followed by an array of other contributors including junior artist coordinators, spot boys, the grip department, and producer Gauri Khan (the star’s real-life wife and cofounder of their production company, Red Chillies Entertainment<sup>2</sup>). The sequence concludes with the multi-credited female screenwriter, choreographer, and director, Farah Khan, arriving in an unglamorous

auto-rickshaw. Received by no one (the audience already dispersed), she mock-disappointedly leaves the scene just as the red carpet is being rolled up.

*Om Shanti Om*, the second film directed by Farah Khan, and her second directorial vehicle for Shah Rukh Khan, spans 30 years of Bollywood and includes footage of, and intertextual references to, actual Bollywood films and personalities, as well as multiple dimensions of fictional *mise en abyme*. Shah Rukh Khan plays two intertwined characters: Om Prakash, a film-loving junior artist and aspiring star in the first half of the film, reincarnated in the second half of the film as the screen star also called Om (Kapoor). Entitled son of a Bollywood magnate, Kapoor decides to complete the aborted film from the first half; and both the framing film and the key film-within-the film are called *Om Shanti Om*.

Like *Luck by Chance* and *Dhobi Ghat*, *Om Shanti Om* is directed by a woman filmmaker who is an insider, well-connected within the dynastic model of Bollywood. Each of these directors has also worked in other *filmi* capacities. Farah Khan, daughter of an actor-producer, is a veteran choreographer of scores of Bollywood films, and spoofs her own work in *Om Shanti Om* as cheeky puppet mastery. Her younger cousin Zoya Akhtar, who has also worked as a casting director, is the daughter of screenwriters Javed Akhtar and Honey Irani, and sister of filmmaker Farhan Akhtar (her star in *Luck By Chance*). Kiran Rao, who started her career in the Assistant Director ranks (including work with diasporic woman filmmaker Mira Nair), is married to Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan and has produced several of his films.

*Om Shanti Om*'s direction engages directly with the dance of authorship in Bollywood films, asserting the pleasures of an amalgamation of standardized narrative tropes and conventions, character types, and performance styles.<sup>3</sup> The film aims to work on multiple polysemic levels, winking at viewers with encyclopedic knowledge of Bollywood film history (both official and gossip) and nudging neophytes with engagingly broad comic gestures and mugging and over-the-top *mise en scène*.

In the "Making of" documentary that accompanies Eros International's deluxe DVD set, Farah Khan chronicles the inspiration of this film and scripting process dating back to her work on Andrew Lloyd Webber's Broadway production, *Bombay Dreams* in 2004, which she choreographed in collaboration with Anthony Van Laast. The same year saw the release of her genre-blending directorial debut, *Main Hoon Na (I Am Here Now)*, the inaugural outing for Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment banner, in which Shah Rukh Khan plays an Indian army officer. *Main Hoon Na* was 2004's second-highest grossing Bollywood film, fusing action and comedy in a masala-mix formula. In the *Om Shanti Om* "Making of" documentary, Shah Rukh Khan asserts, "I think she [Farah Khan] is the only woman director in the world who makes such commercially viable films."

With Shah Rukh Khan, a rare Bollywood star of non-*filmi* origins, on board in *Om Shanti Om*, Farah Khan playfully confronts the conundrum of cracking the Bollywood insider code. She gives her film the title of the popular song "Om Shanti Om" picturized on Rishi Kapoor in the 1980 reincarnation-themed classic *Karz* (directed by Subhash Ghai, given the first "thank you" credit that appears on the screen), and sampled and CGI-altered in the film *Om Shanti Om*. Shah Rukh Khan's Om Prakash is, in the opening of the film, an active member of the diegetically-inscribed audience who imagines himself onstage as a part of the silver-lamé clad spectacle. The actor/character physically grapples with Farah Khan, playing another 70s-era spectator/fan/extra, over a silver jacket thrown into the audience, provoking this exchange:

FK: Hey Sidekick! What do you think you are doing? You are not the hero of the film.

SRK: What is it to you? Are you the director of the film?

FK: If I was, I would kick you out first!

Deepika Padukone, a model-turned-newcomer screen actress looks the polished part of her star character/heroine, the love interest Shantipriya (although her voice was reportedly dubbed throughout). In the first part of the film set in the 1970s, she is the established heroine whom Shah Rukh Khan's Om Prakash adores, starring in a (fictional) film that invites the viewer to see her as the romanticized and ultra-feminine archetypal Bollywood ideal woman, *Dreamy Girl*. Om moons over her image on a billboard near his home, and longs to catch a glimpse of her at the studio, imagining her as his future bride. As Om Prakash watches the film's premiere (having sneaked in with best friend/sidekick/promoter Pappu, masquerading as industry insiders after snatching tickets while getting an autograph), he imagines himself on the screen, dancing with her with the requisite "style, hair style, grace, face, talent" of a Bollywood hero. This reflexive number spans different decades and styles of Bollywood cinema, similar to the "Woh Ladki Hai Kahan" number Farah Khan choreographed in *Dil Chahta Hai* (directed by Farhan Akhtar, 2011), except that in this case, clips from actual original Bollywood films are used and modified. After Om Prakash and Pappu start dancing in the aisle, overwhelmed by the infectious energy of the screen images and identification, chaos ensues and they are ejected from the theater. An exiting Om blows kisses to Shantipriya in the balcony, catching her eye; just as he previously had accidentally latched onto her dress at the red carpet, the would-be hero activates both the diegetically-inscribed and extra-diegetic spectatorial gaze.

In turn, the women characters in *Om Shanti Om* (as in *Luck By Chance* and, arguably, *Dhobi Ghat* and most Bollywood-associated films) are largely foils and supports for the male heroes. Shantipriya becomes a casualty in her relationship with a mercenary and murderous movie producer, as the tenor of the masala film shifts to melodrama. In the second half of *Om Shanti Om*, a Madeleine/Judy dynamic from Hitchcock's classic thriller *Vertigo* (1958) is invoked, as the second Om (born a Kapoor into a *filmi* family) realizes that he is the reincarnation of the junior artist who witnessed the murder of Shantipriya and tried unsuccessfully to save her at his own peril. With the assistance of Om Prakash's mother (herself a former junior artist) and still-loyal Pappu, he casts a young woman, Sandhya or "Sandy."<sup>4</sup> She looks uncannily like Shantipriya (also played by Deepika Padukone, echoing Kim Novak's dual role), and is groomed into looking and acting like a convincing film heroine, mainly to shock the film producer into confession of his past crime.

Inviting resistance to narrative closure, the refrain, "The film is not over yet," is repeated throughout *Om Shanti Om*, even at its very end. One seeming subversion of the classic fixed gendered paradigm of spectatorship director Farah Khan offers in *Om Shanti Om* is the inclusion of an "item number" featuring Shah Rukh Khan as the fetishized object of the gaze. However, the film resists relinquishing male star authority to the woman director behind the camera. I have argued elsewhere that the male star is the focus and mobilizer of contemporary Bollywood (Ciecko, 2001), and this paradigm has endured and intensified. The lingering camera in the campy "Dard-e-Disco" number (with the refrain "My heart is filled with the Pain of Disco") renders the female dancers virtually indistinguishable. Meanwhile, Shah Rukh Khan's character in the film-within-the-film is the controller of the "look," an exhibitionist performer and a charismatic (albeit benign) narcissist. The number is a brainstorm by Om Kapoor to allow a diegetic framing for a dream sequence for his wheelchair-bound character in the film he's making; it is also a vehicle for Shah Rukh Khan to exhibit an ultra-fit pin-up iteration of his star body. The interchangeable and deracinated dancing girls gyrate in cut-out spandex costumes among set-pieces that reference the elements (air, earth, fire, and water), donning Afros and animal-print leotards; ornamented long straight tresses, harem-girl veils, and silver lamé bikinis; exaggerated ponytails, aqua-colored rubberized swimwear, and thigh-high boots. Shah Rukh Khan/Om Kapoor remains the chief spectacle, and is in on the joke and on the manipulation of the erotics of the gaze. Emerging from the water, his soaked and splashed torso is strategically shown in close-up fragments, and his gaze meets the camera and

spectator directly. He is also oiled up in the fetishized kit of an indeterminate blue-collar worker (miner, construction worker, firefighter) with helmet, utility pants, glistening naked torso, and a thick rope slung around his shoulder. The playback voice (Sukhwinder Singh) lipsynced and picturized by Shah Rukh Khan, Bollywood's most global superstar, passionately sings of wandering "London, Paris, New York, L.A., or San Francisco/In my heart, there is a pain of Disco." The refrain of the film's most star-studded song and dance number, "Deewangi Deewangi" invites audience participation, at least partially in English, and a singularly secular take on a Sanskrit Vedic mantra for peace: "All hot girls put your hands up and say, 'Om Shanti Om'." All cool boys come on make some noise and say, 'Om Shanti Om'." Further the title reminds us that the character of Shanti, a bit of a cipher as a desired image and ghostly memory, takes on meaning when embedded between two characters named Om – both played by Shah Rukh Khan of course.

In addition to the attraction of Shah Rukh Khan as star and producer, one main marketing draw of *Om Shanti Om* was its extraordinary number of guest appearances by Bollywood stars, sprinkled throughout, with a concentration of thirty of them in the item number "Deewangi Deewangi" alone. (The song includes Hindi lyrics that translate to "Today so many stars have come down to the Earth.") Framed as an after-party after Om Kapoor wins a Filmfare award (channeling the late star-aspirant Om Prakash in his acceptance speech), the song and dance number delights in revealing the surprise appearances of a succession of stars.

The award scene is preceded by mock carpet interviews about who is going to win best actor award with famous stars. Shabana Azmi, acclaimed actress and activist, mentions social causes. Rakish veteran filmmaker/actor Feroz Khan quips, "What OK [Om Kapoor]? There's only FK!" A bevy of Shah Rukh Khan's female co-stars deny any romantic connections, repeatedly asserting, "We're just good friends." Venerable film producer Yash Chopra who launched Shah Rukh Khan's career in the 1990s, says he thinks the award should go to his character, Om Kapoor. Actor Amitabh Bachchan, one of Bollywood's most loved stars and the most famous of the previous generation, asks, "Om Kapoor? Who?" His own son, Abhishek Bachchan, is nominated for the fictional *Dhoom 5* with the tagline, "This time he's not a cop – because this time he's not in the film!" (In real life, the first film in the *Dhoom* franchise made Abhishek Bachchan a star in 2004, followed by its 2006 sequel, and most recently a third film in 2013.) Fellow nominee Akshay Kumar appears in a fictional actioner *Khiladi Returns* (including a phallic gun held in his crotch region), a cheeky allusion to his 1992 breakthrough film *Khiladi (Player)*, directed by Abbas Mustan), which has spawned seven other *Khiladi* films to date. Om Kapoor is himself nominated for multiple films including *Phir Bhi Dil Hai NRI*, a pun on the title of a previous Shah Rukh Khan starrer *Phir Bi Dil Hai Hindustani (The Heart is Still Indian)*, 2000, directed by Aziz Mirza), itself taking its title from the refrain of a famous song from the 1955 Bollywood film *Shree 420*, directed by and starring Raj Kapoor, "Mera Joota Hai Japani." The NRI (Non-Resident Indian) substitution speaks to the global audience for *Om Shanti Om*, and the diasporic narratives that pervade contemporary Bollywood. Om Kapoor is also nominated for *Main Bhi Noon Na (I Am Here Now Too)*, spoofing the name of Farah Khan's directorial debut, also starring Shah Rukh Khan, *Main Hoon Na (I Am Here Now)*, 2004), and repeated patterns in Bollywood films more generally. Each of the clips from the nominated Om Kapoor films include a snippet of the song from one of Shah Rukh Khan's biggest hits, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998, directed by Karan Johar), as well as the same outfit, gestures, location, and line, "Rahul? My name sounds familiar," a reference to the name of Shah Rukh Khan's characters in multiple films. Film director Subhash Ghai (who directed Shah Rukh Khan in the NRI-themed 1997 film *Pardes*) and actor Rishi Kapoor (who appeared with Shah Rukh Khan in his 1992 debut *Deewana* directed by Raj Kanwar) present the Filmfare acting award to Om Kapoor played by Shah Rukh Khan.

The Bollywood women (Rani Mukerji, Vidya Balan, Priyanka Chopra, Shilpa Shetty, Urmila Matondkar, Karisma Kapoor, Malaika Arora Khan, Amrita Arora, Juhi Chawla, Tabu, Kajol, Preity Zinta, Rekha, and Lara Dutta) are generally introduced in glamour queen mode: slow-turn reveal with wind machine, crowds parting, body pans. Choreographed looks and gestures invoke previous appearances, pairings, and personae, as in the enhanced chemistry of the Bollywood dream screen-couple, Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol who appeared in six films together. The interactions between the males demonstrate camaraderie and bonding, as in the “scratch your back, scratch my back” moves of Govinda and Shah Rukh Khan. Govinda appears previously in the film in a small role as an actor named Govind Ahuja (the actor’s real-life, full name) in an early scene set at a movie studio in the 1970s, in which Om Prakash Makhija is advised to truncate his name to become a star/hero. Three fellow top Bollywood heroes, Salman Khan, Saif Ali Khan, and Sanjay Dutt, join Shah Rukh Khan in particularly showstopping moves, including leaping on the bar for a mock-striptease where they throw off their jackets.

The ingratiatingly charming dance movement patterns feel both freshly energized and familiar as Farah Khan’s award-winning work as choreographer has been seen in over a hundred Bollywood films since the early 1990s. (She first worked with Shah Rukh Khan on *Kabhi Naan Kabhi Naa*, directed by Kundan Shah, in 1993.) Repetition with variation and affectionate homage occur throughout the film, even in the overt product placement and star endorsements. When the film shifts from the 1970s to a more contemporary period, the *Dream Girl* billboard starring Deepika Padukone as Shantipriya is replaced by a luxury watch advertisement starring Shah Rukh Khan/Om Kapoor.<sup>5</sup> This aspect of the *mise en scène* blurs diegetic and extradiegetic realities, as Shah Rukh Khan (along with Chinese actor Chen Daoming and Hollywood’s Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz, together with an elite selection of world-class celebrity racecar drivers, sailors, tennis players, and soccer players) is actually a brand ambassador for the company Tag Heuer. When Sandy is transformed in *Om Shanti Om*, the team of onscreen female make-up artists wear cropped Maybelline tee-shirts and the close-up on the branded products looks like a television commercial. Model-turned-actress Deepika Padukone was an international brand ambassador for Maybelline. While Om Kapoor uses and comments on Nokia products in *Om Shanti Om*, the brand offered mobile phone tie-ins to the film including movie clips, behind the scenes videos, ring tones, wallpapers, short videos, or “mobisodes” starring an animated Shah Rukh Khan voiced by the actor himself, and a Nokia consumer drawing for a meet-and-greet with the star.<sup>6</sup> These aggregations illustrate the contemporary global Bollywood trend toward media event or “assemblage” (Rai, 2009).

*Om Shanti Om* deflects critique of Bollywood’s branded global ambitions to vilification of the fictional figure of the mercenary and murderous film producer Mukesh Mehra played by Arjun Rampal, who changes his name to Mike when he leaves India to work in Hollywood. The stories of struggling actors like Om Prakash and Pappu, sustained by the love of Om’s adoring and supportive mother, are mildly picaresque, in the film’s romantic view of the nation and the primacy of the Bollywood film industry. In one hilarious scene, Om Prakash pretends to be an actor in a silly regional (South Indian) action film to impress Shantipriya.

The movie’s central tragedy is triggered when Mukesh Mehra refuses to publically recognize his secret marriage to Shanipriya and her “inconvenient” pregnancy. (“No one will invest a penny in a married heroine’s film!”) While *Om Shanti Om* represents the slain Bollywood heroine as a victim of emotional cruelty, manipulation, and violence, the reincarnated male played by Shah Rukh Khan is the catalyst for tender feelings toward her, as an unrequited love interest and a ghost who deserves peace and justice. While depictions of heroines in Bollywood have shifted “in ways that mirror[ed] India’s own transition from a newly independent socialist state to a fully globalized, cosmopolitan capitalist society” (Anujan, Schaefer, and Karan, 2013: 115), central myths

of Mother India are reiterated and appropriated in contemporary Bollywood cinema.<sup>7</sup> Om Prakash teases his mother (played by Kirron Kher) for her melodramatic excesses and failings as an actress, and this same devoted mother recognizes her reincarnated son and is later recruited to overact in a key performance leading to Mehra's downfall. Aside from Shantipriya/Sandy and assorted women as mere extras, *Om Shanti Om* posits the gendered figure of the mother as a central way out of the victim/pawn, passive-object-of-the-gaze paradigm.

The director herself is rendered as an optimistic and self-deprecating den-mother who revels in the success of her star "son." Two other Bollywood-rooted films directed by women, *Luck by Chance* and *Dhobi Ghat*, present progressively darker, less nostalgic, and more realistic views of corruption, class divisions, and economic opportunities in the film industry, and India more generally.

### Absorptive desire: *Luck By Chance*

*Luck By Chance* fixates on the difficulties of breaking into Bollywood for outsiders, compared with the entitled ease of those from *filmi* families, underscoring aspects of "occlusion and ambivalence" in Bollywood as/within cultural text(s).<sup>8</sup> Film director Karan Johar, in a cameo at a party at the home of third generation Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor (granddaughter of Raj Kapoor) near the end of the film, delineates the ways outsiders enter the industry: Someone writes an unconventional role; a major star refuses the part, and a newcomer (specifically a male actor) gets a big break. Johar (son of producer Yash Johar, and heir to his company Dharma Productions) cites as evidence specific villainous or anti-hero roles including *Darr* (*Fear*, Yash Chopra 1993) and *Baazigar* (*Gambler*, Abbas Mustain 1993) that provided Shah Rukh Khan's breakthrough, and casting of then-struggling actor, Amitabh Bachchan in *Zanjeer* (*Chains*, Prakash Mehra 1973). Johar's insights are particularly valuable as he is a recognizable multi-platform media personality, and a key figure in bolstering Bollywood star power and launching it globally.<sup>9</sup> Shah Rukh Khan himself, in a cameo at the end of the film, describes fame as a dangerously intoxicating cocktail, counseling a newcomer to "never forget the one who was with you when you were nobody."

*Luck by Chance* begins with words in Hinglish uttered by an unseen man: "Screentest? What is a screentest? The filmmaker's eye is a camera." In the opening scene, Satish Chaudhary (played by Alykhan Shetty), a sleazy small-time film producer, propositions an aspiring actress newly arrived to Mumbai from Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, explaining that she will need to spend time with him to embody her character, to realize "destiny." The young woman never speaks during his monologue but her face and gestures register a confused spectrum of pleasure, surprise, confusion, suspicion, determination, and complicity. The title sequence then unfolds to display an array of direct-camera gazes by "invisible" personalities behind the scenes, and above- and below-line talent including prop makers and masters, costume manufacturers and fitters, makeup artists, stunt performers and extras, security guards, projectionists, billboard erectors, hair stylists, sound technicians, catering staff, playback singers, and camera crew members and grips on the job. In contrast to *Om Shanti Om*'s red carpet carnival of talents in its final credits, this stylized slow-motion sequence picturized to a song about romantic yearning has a more ethnographic feel. The titles end with a fictional film title, *Kismet Talkies*, on the marquee of Galaxy cinema-house (with a "House Full" sign in front), a reference to the first film Zoya Akhtar wanted to make.<sup>10</sup> The vernacularized English title of her debut feature, *Luck By Chance*, likewise foregrounds *kismet*, specifically the dynamics between fate and seized opportunities. As would-be Bollywood star Vikram Jaisingh (played by Zoya Akhtar's real-life brother, Bollywood director, and sometime actor Farhan Akhtar) asserts, "Destiny is a concept for those who don't have the courage to shape their own lives."

An ellipsis reveals that the actress, Sona Mishra (played by Konkona Sen Sharma, daughter of actress and Parallel Cinema director Aparna Sen, one of India's most acclaimed women filmmakers<sup>11</sup>), succumbed to the casting couch three years before, and is now doing small roles in Bollywood and larger parts in more obscure regional films. She is still failing to get the big Bollywood break she yearns for, and feels it is her due after her long affair with the producer. In the beginning of the film, Sona interacts with a Bollywood superstar in bit-part scene in a period-film *mise en abyme*; Aamir Khan plays the star of the film-within-the-film as an ultra-perfectionist (a quality of his offscreen persona as related by the media), in his first-ever cameo. Meanwhile, in an acting class, aspiring Bollywood players learn that "Mainstream cinema calls for 'overprojection-energy'." Demonstrating the skewed focus on the male star in Bollywood, the instructor counsels the class (addressing the mix gendered group as "my brothers") that unlike the "ease" of Hollywood, it is difficult to become a Hindi film hero who not only has to act but also dance, sing, and do action and comedy. When challenged by a young woman in the class, the teacher reluctantly concedes that to become a screen heroine, "that too takes some ... effort." A montage features different types of training of the male acting student from Delhi, Vikram: horse-riding, weight-lifting, various dancing styles, martial arts, and posing. These images transition seamlessly into a lipsynced song and dance number with the refrain, "Watch out, O lovely ladies, here I come!"

The film treats the notion of luck and chance (being "at the right time and at the right place") ironically, as it juxtaposes aspiring actors Vikram and Sona from middle class families (Sona is estranged from her parents because of career goals and resistance to an arranged marriage), to mediocre talent from *filmi* families who are always at the right time and place. While Vikram finds a window for Bollywood stardom, coupled with the right combination of personality attributes, Sona never really has a chance. A failed actor becomes an uninspired director of hackneyed films, and a spoiled (and not-very-intelligent) new heroine is launched, to Sona's chagrin, as a successor to her seventies superstar mother, Neena Walia (played by seventies superstar Dimple Kapadia). As *Luck By Chance* director Zoya Akhtar asserts in the "Making of" extras accompanying the BIG Home Entertainment DVD of the film, the drama is set in the film industry because "that's the world I know." This access is further demonstrated by the film's complexly layered casting, with Bollywood's top stars in bit roles sprinkled throughout the film. As mentioned previously, Aamir Khan has an opening *mise en abyme* cameo. Hrithik Roshan plays a big star who leaves the film-within-the-film production, and near the end of *Luck By Chance*, Shah Rukh Khan makes a fleeting appearance to dispense sobering advice to Vikram.

Director Ranjit Rolly is played by failed actor turned director/producer Sanjay Kapoor, son of Bollywood producer Surinder Kapoor and brother to Bollywood star Anil Kapoor. His character is the son of producer Rommy Rolly, a composite of over-the-top Bollywood personalities played by actor/director/producer Rishi Kapoor, son of legendary actor/producer Raj Kapoor. Rommy retains a veneer of hubris ("Everyone wants to work in Rollywood"), even though he realizes that the younger generation of Bollywood actors does not respect him and his studio. His superstitious wife Minty (played against type by Juhi Chawla, wholesome top actress of the 1980s and 90s, and sometime co-star and business partner of Shah Rukh Khan) enjoys a posh lifestyle, as well as her stealth ability to influence productions. Son Ranjit Rolly's entitlement and failure of imagination is conveyed through his appropriative signifiers and tropes: wearing a ubiquitous trademark cowboy hat (that he refers to as his "thinking cap"), and promoting the idea of a film with a negative/anti-hero lead role. His office décor includes posters of films with titles like *The Good, The Bad and the Worst* and *A Fistful of Rupees*, (fictional) knock-off spaghetti westerns starring Ranjit. A snippet of Ennio Morricone's iconic score to *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1967) is used for comic emphasis.



Genial-but-ambitious superstar Zaffar Khan (played by genial-but-ambitious superstar Hrithik Roshan), takes the role in the Ranjit Rolly film out of obligation to the producer who launched his career. However, Zaffar questions the logic of the script, and clashes with the director. Finally, he embraces a serendipitous occasion to appear in a Karan Johar film, when a role opens up after an actor is injured on set. Zaffar (and Hrithik Roshan) is not represented as a diva, and is distanced from some of the worst aspects of the industry, although he too is prone to vanity and deception. He is frustrated by the ongoing studio dynamic that encourages prolonged indebtedness (underpayment and roles in inferior films), as servitude. In one scene, street kids recognize Zaffar in a car, and he engages playfully and soulfully with them through the window-glass. He compellingly explains to the producer that a negative role will disappoint his fans; yet his star image also sells commodity products like frost-free refrigerators. As in *Om Shanti Om*, *Luck By Chance* provides a lavish film-within-the-film item number with a hero at the center of the spectacle, with the extravagant “Baawre.” The frenetically-edited, visually eclectic carnivalesque number includes performances by members of a real-life circus in vibrant hybridized Rajasthani costumes. Hrithik wears a ringmaster-cum-Mad Hatter-style top hat, and dances in an array of spangled torso-exposing vests, bolero jackets, and balloon pants. The number even includes a few seconds of vérité aerial acrobatics by Nikki Walia (played by dancer-turned-actress Isha Sharvani, who had previously danced with Hrithik Roshan in a television commercial for Hide & Seek cookies).

*Luck By Chance* underscores the functions of social connections and romantic manipulations in gaining or declining roles and control in Bollywood. Vikram is granted entry to a fancy studio party after doing a favor in providing a key prop for a film. There he views a panoply of glamorous Bollywood stars and hears interview sound-bites from Akshaye Khanna (son of Bollywood actor/politician Vinod Khanna) talking about working with Rani Mukherji in a fictional film *Pyar Hum Tumse*,<sup>12</sup> and vice versa, and witnesses Shabana Azmi (the director’s real-life stepmother) flanked by her real-life husband Javed Akhtar (the director’s real-life father) and Rishi Kapoor in character as Rommy Rolly. By charming and flattering her mother Neena, Vikram successfully conspires to be introduced to new star Nikki Walia. Later, after Hrithik Roshan flees the production, Bollywood A-list heroes Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham, Ranbir Kapoor, Vivek Oberoi, and Akshaye Khanna – all playing themselves – make excuses for why they can’t sign on to the project. (Abhishek adds a “Dad [Amitabh Bachchan] said to say ‘Hi’.”) The international financiers talk about how the “property” (their Hollywoodized parlance for a script) should be paramount, but are hesitant to fund a Bollywood project that is not star-driven. When they back out, Neena draws in an old romantic connection, a shipping magnate who agrees to finance the project *Dil ki Aag (Heart’s Fire)*, a suspense thriller/musical love story, with the condition that “Neena is the boss.” Insisting that Bollywood be called the “Hindi film industry,” rather than a derivation of Hollywood, Neena essentially orchestrates the casting and the public/private lives of her daughter and Vikram: “Every girl should want you for her boyfriend and every boy should want you as his girlfriend.” She also relates to her pampered daughter (not as a cautionary tale but as a matter of fact) that sexual exploitation and hypocrisy is endemic to the film industry, revealing that she was pimped out to producers when she began her own career.

*Luck By Chance* rather skeptically counterposes two other cultural arenas to Bollywood films: theater and television as sites for acting skill development and steady work. Vikram’s theatrically-inclined friend Abhi, who mocks Vikram’s cheesy portfolio photos, insists that you don’t become a good actor by posing (although his stage work looks exaggeratedly angst, and he himself later entertains the idea of submitting his own headshots). Vikram, however, is only interested in films, borrowing money from friends and family to support his single-minded quest, including an aunt who vocalizes the doubter’s question about film industry access: “Who gives work to outsiders?” A chain of events involving deceptions results in his screen test and casting: His role opens up

when it is rejected by established stars (although this circumstance is reframed as a search for fresh talent). Producer Satish Chaudhary's wife Pinky unwittingly discovers Vikram's pictures, passed along by Sona as a makeshift excuse for a meeting at the end of their affair. He is singled out from the short-listed contenders because of the impact he makes with his flattery and false humility, and the impact of the deliberate misadvice he gives to his muscular and self-assured main competitor. Once cast, Vikram is willing to pursue an opportunistic fling with to-the-manor-born actress Nikki, instead of a more substantial relationship with his most loyal supporter.

Sona's best friends, an aspiring female choreographer and a male Bollywood tabloid writer (coded as gay), move up in the ranks of their respective professions but remain devoted comrades, informing her of Vikram's indiscretions and exposing them in the celebrity magazine, *Glitter*. While she does not become a Bollywood star like Vikram, Sona actually benefits from the any-press-is-good-press dictum, generating renewed interest in her as property; as Sona unconvincingly asserts in an interview, she has found her place in television, doing something that makes her happy: decent work as an actor, making a good living. However, the television production, as glimpsed in *Luck By Chance*, reaffirms gendered stereotypes of female subservience. *Luck By Chance* finally denies the possibility of a romantic union between Vikram and Sona; she does not take him back at the end of the film, and calls him out on his selfishness. Instead of triumphant empowerment, there is a tinge of consolation-prize melancholy and resignation as Sona wins the Zaffar-endorsed frost-free refrigerator in a raffle, and rides to the TV studio in a cab, passing a billboard ad emblazoned with Vikram's face. The song lyrics, as the credits appear, speak to the loneliness of the traveller: "No one seems to know ... where do you want to go."

In *Luck By Chance*'s ultimately bleak view of the foibles of the film industry and gender imbalances, Vikram succeeds in becoming a star not primarily because of talent, but because he is a man who learns to manipulate effectively. Zoya Akhtar, directing her own filmmaker/brother in a movie with extensive creative input from her extended *filmi* family, is deeply immersed and versed in Bollywood mythology and production modes. *Luck By Chance* cannot break free from the incestuously closed system that offers little hope of entry for the uninitiated, within its Bollywood narrative world.

## **Aesthetics of self-awareness: *Dhobi Ghat***

In contrast with *Om Shanti Om* and *Luck By Chance*, *Dhobi Ghat* taps into an international arthouse trend of multistrand narration with intertwined characters, and the realist, mediated "ontological turn" in world cinema "based on the (new) conditions of visibility and presence" that challenge authenticity and authority (Elsaesser, 2009: 19). Integrating film, video, and photography (from black and white photographic stills to color portrait shots), *Dhobi Ghat* also seeks to extricate the city of Bombay/Mumbai from the fantasies of Bollywood. Bollywood in *Dhobi Ghat*, is relegated to four central discursive locations: extradiegetic dimensions of casting (and the resultant light cast on onscreen personae); a thematic thread concerning character motivation and aspiration; the trope of consciously performing for the camera; and a contradistinctive positioning of this film as separate from, but closely attached to, Bollywood. Superstar actor/producer Aamir Khan, the director's husband, plays talented but reclusive painter Arun. Newcomer Prateik Babbar, son of the late Parallel Cinema icon Smita Patil and actor-politician Raj Babbar becomes Munna, the lower caste street-worker from Bihar who aspires to become a Bollywood star. Shot mainly on hand-held documentary-style Super 16 format (with some mini DV camcorder and hidden cameras used as well), and filmed completely in "real" locations, the *Dhobi Ghat* of the title is the open air laundromat in Mumbai near Mahalaxmi railway station where Munna labors and lives in a makeshift shanty.<sup>13</sup> The interwoven narrative strands also include female characters Shai (played

by American-born singer and first-time actress Monica Dogra), a well-to-do NRI investment consultant who takes a sabbatical to photo-document small and marginal businesses and shifts in local occupations in Mumbai, and Yasmin Noor (played by Kriti Malhotra, a non-actress and costume assistant discovered via social media<sup>14</sup>), the deceased young housewife whose unsent video letters to her brother are discovered by Arun in his new apartment in the old city, and become the inspiration for a new painting.

Aamir Khan's Arun is a city-wanderer or *flâneur* in the way the actor cannot be in real life because of his fame, and the film was shot, directed, and acted guerrilla and method style to credibly embed Khan in particular public and residential locations. His brooding and complex character, self-declared loner Arun, has a rather mysterious romantic past, and engages in a one night stand with Shai after a gallery opening that catalyzes a set of connections; the encounter is cross-cut with images of Munna's night-time supplemental (and less socially acceptable) job of killing rats in the streets of Mumbai. Both Arun and Shai's family employ Munna as a *dhobi*, and he becomes a way for her to entertain the possibility of connection. Munna serves as the guide to assist Shai in navigating the local terrain, especially Mumbai's underclasses, while neglected wife Yasmin's video diaries enable Arun to access the mind and experiences of an increasingly despondent and isolated migrant housewife. He attempts to reconstruct her life, and finds in her absence/presence a muse for his artistic creations.

In distinguishing itself from Bollywood masala movies, *Dhobi Ghat* strips away song and dance numbers, to minimal use of music in the haunting guitar scoring by Argentine composer Gustavo Santaolalla (perhaps best known for his work with Alejandro González Iñárritu on films like *Babel*, 2006); this choice suggests an audiovisual dialogue with international art films with multistrand narratives. The first images of the film, after the Aamir Khan Productions imprint and acknowledgements, are non-professional-looking rain-smeared video glimpses of the sea from the inside of a taxi-cab, the boulevard of Marine Drive, adjacent Chowpatty Beach with the hazy skyline in the distance, and a voiceover of the woman (diegetically) behind the camera narrating her experiences. A young girl approaches the car asking for rupees for food, and when she discovers that the camera is being trained on her, she and other street children ask that their picture be taken and dance for the camera mock-Bollywood style.

After the opening home video style images, the look of *Dhobi Ghat* shifts to a montage of crisper morning views of the sprawling city from elevated heights and a more omniscient perspective, with occasional workers in frame; then to the inside of a building in the old city where Arun is being shown an apartment by a real estate agent; then to an image on a screen of a raucous Bollywood physical comedy starring Johnny Lever being viewed by two adult brothers in cramped living quarters. "What an actor!" the young man who will later be identified as Munna exclaims, and his petty criminal brother Salim boasts that he can introduce him to the star and a film producer, chiding him for working so hard at undesirable jobs (that the film viewer will soon learn include laundry and rat-killing). In a moment of dramatic irony and foreshadowing of future encounters, a car transporting Shai, an American of Indian descent, and her local cosmopolitan Parsi friend Pesi, nearly hits Munna as he crosses through the road on his way to work. At the glitzy opening of Arun's show called "Building" (in a fancy but apparently rat-infested environment), he dedicates the show to the people "who built this city hoping to find a rightful place in it ... to Bombay my muse, my whore, my beloved." With this edited sequence of dramatis personae, with four seemingly random lives and planes of existence (and Yasmin still an unseen, unidentified agency), *Dhobi Ghat* sets the stage for further convergence. Yasmin's videos, interspersed throughout, reveal her changing approach to the medium, as she increasingly discloses more about her life and feelings, slowly stripping away her optimistic façade. The integration of the video diaries or letters in *Dhobi Ghat*'s larger framing narrative is most often diegetically motivated by Arun's

viewing, although not always explicitly so, as in the disarming opening sequence of the film. The viewer is repeatedly invited to see the world as Yasmin does, and Arun becomes fixated on and invested in Yasmin's story told through the narrative progression of her tapes. In a climactic point of view shot, he projects the unseeable, Yasmin's abject final act, a vision of her hanging body in the apartment in which he now resides. Through the videos, Arun covets her life and her death, as a way of making connection with the world.

Films, videos, and photographs are potential points of linkage and currency between the characters, although their meanings and values are shifting, and not simultaneously shared. Gender and class are vectors of identity that complicate filmic relationships and power dynamics. These mediated images are false illusions or escapist distractions from work; entertainment that crosses sectors of society; vehicles for research, communication, and inspiration. In one of Yasmin's videos, her maid Lata complains how her teenage daughter's grades have suffered because she watches TV all day, dancing and singing with Bollywood songs; and one of Munna's laundry clients, who expects sexual favors from him, lazes about watching Bollywood videos all day. Munna doggedly pursues his dream of Bollywood stardom, transforming his body through callisthenic exercises and weight-lifting amid the cut-outs and pasted pictures of Bollywood heroes decorating his hovel. He accidentally encounters Shai at a movie theater where he is watching a film with his brother, a favorite pastime. (She claims it's her first time viewing a Bollywood film.) They later watch a different film together after a day in the city.<sup>15</sup> As their friendship blossoms, Munna discovers that Shai is a photographer and persuades her to take portfolio shots of him (ones that increasingly reveal his body); she in turn requests that he show her Mumbai for her photo documentation project. At the end of *Dhobi Ghat*, after the tragic loss of his brother slain by gang members, and desperate for extra income to support his family, Munna finally shows his portfolio to a small-time producer with dubious connections. As Ranjani Mazumdar has asserted in a study of the city of Mumbai on film, "Few people have direct access to the space of the underworld, but folklore circulating within the city of Bombay, the events, the killings, and the extortion rackets are all part of the everyday knowledge system that seems to have been captured *only* in cinema" (Mazumdar, 2007: 212). Munna finally accepts the frustrating incommensurability of a cross-class relationship with the woman he desires, and opens up the possibility of (at least geographic) reconnection between Shai and Arun in a conciliatory act of status quo sacrifice. The film's final montage sequence has him disappearing into the city-scape.

Throughout the course of film, Shai embraces Indian culture as removable stains and curated traces of spilled wine, monsoon rain, sweat, and guided street interactions, remaining fixated on the seemingly emotionally unavailable artist Arun. She even spies on him through her camera equipment in a neighboring property owned by her father. Shai redirects the viewer's gaze to Arun – and Aamir Khan – as object of spectatorial desire, one possessing cultural capital and social mobility. *Dhobi Ghat's* position on filmmaking, and image-making more generally, is that status enables panoptic observation and appropriation of quotidian facets of others' lives; meanwhile, human insight and meaningful synthesis is much more painful and elusive.

## Final reflections

A film with Bollywood pedigree and international arthouse alignment, *Dhobi Ghat* thus cultivates modes of character identification and film viewership that critically access street-level realities through transparently self-aware positions of privilege. While *Dhobi Ghat* distinguishes itself from Bollywood masala, it is informed by and incorporates dimensions of insider filmic reflexivity. Together with the more lavishly metacinematic *Om Shanti Om* and *Luck By Chance*, it presents fascinating gendered perspectives on the star-driven world of filmmaking, processes of media

production and image-making, spectatorship, and the blurred boundaries between reality and artifice.

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## Notes

1. Reports on the box office collections of *Luck by Chance* can be found at <http://www.indicine.com/movies/bollywood/luck-by-chance-box-office-collections/> and <http://entertainment.oneindia.in/bollywood/box-office/2009/luck-victory-ice-cold-040209.html>
2. Gauri Khan has also partnered with another Bollywood wife, Suzanne Khan (as of this writing soon-to-be ex-wife of superstar Hrithik Roshan) for interior design and real estate development endeavors.
3. *Om Shanti Om* encountered multiple allegations of plagiarism for unacknowledged borrowing of scenes and script elements, and a lawsuit by veteran actor Manoj Kumar for imitation of his trademark face-covering gesture and patriotism.
4. The name Sandy also is reminiscent of the transformations of Olivia Newton John's character in the Hollywood musical *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978). In this case, though, Sandy morphs (at least in term of look and demeanor) from clumsy bubblegum-blowing bumpkin to groomed, sophisticated, but still-innocent beauty.
5. Shah Rukh Khan's brand page on the Tag Heuer website, <http://www.tagheuer.com/int-en/shah-rukh-khan>, describes him as "The King of Bollywood" and "one of the world's most beloved movie stars."
6. See "Nokia ties up with Om Shanti Om," <http://www.bollywood.com/nokia-ties-om-shanti-om>.
7. *Mother India* (1957, directed by Mehboob Khan and starring Nargis) offers the classic image of the devoted mother, raising her sons alone, becoming what critic J. Hoberman in *The Village Voice* called a "divine avatar": see <http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-08-20/film/artificially-preserved/>
8. Examining representations of Indian historical and mythic figure Phoolan Devi, cultural theorist Madhavi Murty discusses opacity and ambivalence in terms of cultural texts that are composed of contradictions. She also invokes feminist scholar of postcolonial literature Kumkum Sangari's cautions against the unqualified celebration of these elements.
9. Johar first worked as assistant director and actor in a supporting role in the NRI-themed "All-Time Blockbuster" and Shah Rukh Khan starrer, *Dilwane Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), where he played SRK's friend. His directorial debut was another "All-Time Blockbuster" *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (2008), which he also scripted, reuniting Shah Rukh Khan with his co-star Kajol from *DDLJ*. Both SRK characters are named Rahul, hence the joke in *Om Shanti Om*. In addition to directing five films to date, including his contribution to the cinephilic *Bombay Talkies* omnibus, Johar has seven wardrobe department and costume design credits on Yash Raj, Dharma Productions, and Red Chillies Entertainment films, dressing Shah Rukh Khan's characters (including a costume design credit for *Om Shanti Om*). His television work includes the celebrity talk-show "Koffee with Karan" (2004 to present); "Lift Kara De" (2010), introducing Bollywood stars to fans; and reality TV talent competition shows, "Jhalak Dikha Jaa 5" (2012) and "India's Got Talent" (2012), along with fellow judges including Farah Khan.
10. While *Luck by Chance* is Zoya Akhtar's directorial debut feature, she contributed a short titled "Sheila Ki Jawaani" about a 12-year-old cross-dressing boy who aspires to become a Bollywood dancer to the 2013 omnibus *Bombay Talkies* celebrating the centennial of Bollywood cinema, also including contributions by three of her male filmmaking peers Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, and Karan Johar. Akhtar's short takes its title from the item number performed by Katrina Kaif in the 2010 film *Tees Maar Khan* directed by fellow woman filmmaker (and her cousin) Farah Khan. See the interview with Akhtar in *The India Express*, in which reflexivity is framed as cinephilia: <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/entertainment-others/the-zoya-factor-2/>
11. Konkarna Sen Sharma replaced Bollywood actress Tabu in the lead role, after the latter wanted to make some changes to the script of *Luck By Chance*, as reported in *The Times of India*: <http://timesofindia>.

- indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news-interviews/hard-luck-tabu/articleshow/2620439.cms
12. While the two stars have never been paired romantically in a movie, they were previously cast in the same film, the epic multi-starred, *LOC Kargil* (J.P. Dutta, 2003).
  13. The alternate English title of the film, *Mumbai Diaries*, suggests a larger emphasis on the city of Mumbai as a whole and its various denizens, including a female character, a housewife who exists solely through her video diaries. For a discussion of the cinematography by Tushar Kanti Ray, see this March 6, 2011 article, “Picture Perfect” in *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, India): [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110306/jsp/graphiti/story\\_13667559.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110306/jsp/graphiti/story_13667559.jsp)
  14. In the “Making of” features on the Excel Home Entertainment “Special Edition” DVD, director Kiran Rao discusses finding Kriti Malhotra, a costume designer, via Facebook, and indie musician Monica Dogra on the front cover of *Time Out India*. Kriti’s casting/discovery is also addressed in this interview: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news-interviews/I-never-thought-of-acting-Kriti-Malhotra/articleshow/7425544.cms>
  15. The film both parties view is *Yuvvraaj* (Subhash Ghai, 2008). Later Shai and Munna watch *Hello Brother* (Sohail Khan, 1999) together. *Dhobi Ghat* also includes a diegetically-framed clip of *Dostana* (Tarun Marsukhani, 2008).

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