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BIS 339
3/6/2017
Final Essay Prompt 1

Bollywood cinema is often dismissed globally as a silly form of mindless entertainment, though it has stood the test of time since its inception. Especially when referring to musicals, people often see Bollywood films as ridiculous, overacted, and unrealistic. If these films are so ridiculous, then why are they so popular, and do they have deeper meaning than just a couple fun hours of entertainment? Using examples from the films *Diwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Dabangg* (2010), I will explain why Bollywood is not just mindless cinema, but a release for the people of India and around the world. It is not just generic entertainment, as there is more to Bollywood than just a quick glance can provide. There are strong messages, even in musical comedy and romance films that show issues of gender relations, traditional versus contemporary values, and other major concepts. Bollywood is both a way for people to enjoy the ridiculous in an otherwise serious world as well as provide lessons and complex concepts in the form of fun entertainment since melodrama itself is simply an amplified way to show how people really do feel.

To start with the older film, *Diwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (we'll abbreviate as *DDLJ*) is a classic Bollywood romantic comedy and drama, fully equipped with multiple musical numbers, both funny and emotional. The film is one of the most beloved in Indian cinema to date, as it holds the same standing as romantic films like *Pretty Woman*, *When Harry Met Sally*, or *The Princess Bride* do in Hollywood. It is a film that has stuck with Indian culture for many years, but what makes it such a popular and renowned film despite being just a simple love story? The

key lies with the nature of the love story. As the characters in *DDLJ* are well-off, their story is compelling to a wide audience, regardless of their social or economic standing. Just as in America, India loves watching the wealthy drama, as it brings an element of fantasy not seen in the past with films like *Mother India* which focuses on a small village. As Jenny Sharp described:

Instead of featuring India's underclasses as did earlier generations of films, the 1990s melodrama centers on wealthy Indian families with traditional values. These big-budget films, often shot on location in Europe and the United States, present “endless rounds of parties, beach dances, wedding celebrations, festive occasions, and an all-round feeling of well-being” (Kripalani 2001,45). (Sharpe 2005, 60).

This is not to say that films set in small villages like *Dabangg*, which we'll discuss later, do not hold the same sense of fantasy and wonder with its audience, more so showing that the natural human obsession of watching the stories of those who are well-off, living in luxury, or royalty is a major contributor to the reason a film like *DDLJ* is considered a classic in the eyes of Bollywood cinema as people are fascinated with the the lives of the rich and famous. Films in the 90s developed to fit their audience at this time, so films like *DDLJ* “were expunged of the prevalent themes of social injustice and youthful rebellion” (Kurian 2016, 12). This is especially true considering that most of the viewers of Bollywood cinema are in India, seeing people who travel to far away places is a way to vicariously live through the characters, similar to abroad movies in Hollywood such as *Lost in Translation*, *Out of Africa*, and *Under the Tuscan Sun*. These films, as well as those in Bollywood cinema of the same genre of “romance abroad” give

viewers a sense of traveling themselves through the lives of the characters on screen, allowing them to, in a way, enjoy time abroad on a budget. It is an escape from the day to day world.

Secondly, *DDLJ* shares a very strong message in a quite simple love story, the epitomes “love conquers all” trope. In *DDLJ* the female lead Simran, played by Kujol, is torn between the idea of true love or traditional family values, finding her true love but forced into an arranged marriage to please her father. Her love, Raj, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is obnoxious and charming, and warms his way into her father’s heart in order to attempt to marry her instead, due to his commitment to being an honorable man despite his faults and idiosyncrasies. This is a story cinema has been heard time and time again of the strapping, street-smart lad whisking away the beautiful girl despite betrothal to another in films like *Titanic*, *The Notebook*, and *Gone with the Wind*. The “forbidden love” trope harkens back to the dawn of dramatic fiction with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and is a common theme in Bollywood with roots in folklore and legend, with films like *Mughal-e-Azam*, based off of the historical tale of forbidden love between a slave girl and a crown prince (BFI Film Forever). What does the modern “forbidden love” trope mean in terms of a justification of Bollywood cinema? The answer is that they cause the audience to feel something, with a conflict that has a happy ending rather than a sad one that is shown in all those western or old Bollywood films listed above. The post-1990s Bollywood saw an influx positivity and sweet stories with happy endings after so many years of intense dramas with sad conclusions. With its idea that “love conquers all,” and the triumph of otherwise “forbidden love,” *DDLJ* provided a break in depressing films to bring a drama that was as humorous and uplifting as it was melodramatic and tradition-challenging as a true example a “masala” film . As a quintessential Bollywood film, *DDLJ* that made people feel and fall in love

with the characters who fell in love with each other. While a “silly” film with a happy ending, it provides an example of how Bollywood films have shaped a positive look on marriage for the sake of love, while still holding true to traditional values.

Dabangg holds a very different message than *DDLJ*, but it can also be used to defend the seeming ridiculousness of Bollywood. While *DDLJ* showed viewers that Bollywood films can be used to challenge traditional ideals (like arranged marriages) while still holding true to traditional values (such as chastity and the father’s blessing of the marriage), *Dabangg* amped this idea of combating the traditional in its ridiculousness as a way to tease at Bollywood itself. Featuring one of the other famous Khan’s in Bollywood, Salman Khan. This film focuses on his character Chulbul Pandey, a police officer in a small town that is overrun by corruption. While *DDLJ* was a “masala” film with something for everyone, “*Dabangg* destabilizes the codes of masculinity that underpin the action film, and re-creates it as the *masti* film” which pokes fun at Bollywood standards (Shandilya 2014, 112). This film adds aspects of overdramatic flamboyance, ridiculous fight scenes, and twisted gender roles that play into the idea that melodrama can be both a tool for emotion, as well as one for laughter and change in stereotypical tropes. Just as *DDLJ* challenged the traditional arranged marriage through a story of love stumbled upon, *Dabangg* challenges the traditional masculinity of classic Bollywood films with a character who is ridiculous (see opening fight scene), unafraid to be feminine (respectful of mothers, and very eager to dance femininely), and has a hyper masculine quality that one can’t help to laugh at (see final fight scene where his shirt rips off). Even the female characters in the film are unconventional, as his wife, for example is not a “pure woman” but is still desirable as a match, and holds her own against men. All in all, *Dabangg* is not your average action film, whether

Bollywood, or international. The film is less like a Jason Bourne flick and seems to take more influence from British dark action comedies like *Hot Fuzz* or *Snatch*, where genre tropes are over-exaggerated and thrown on their heads rather than explored in the usual way. In this light, *Dabangg* is an opportunity to show that Bollywood film is not just mindless cinema, but clever entertainment with counterculture messages of gender equality, the scale of femininity and masculinity, and how melodrama can be used as comedy as much as emotional response.

Bollywood films are often disregarded by the outside world of Hollywood despite their merit as strong narratives with complex characters. Unfortunately, much of this has to do with the fact that it is not the mainstream international film industry, as Hollywood has taken over that title. Thankfully, with diaspora of Non-Resident Indians, Bollywood has crossed barriers, and received more attention in recent years. As for the arguments against Bollywood as a viable form of cinema, one must remember that Bollywood's melodrama, musical numbers, and bright colors appear to the masses in the same way as superhero, fantasy, and Broadway-based films appear to Americans. They are an escape from the daily life, as an inexpensive form of entertainment that bring people together. The fact that Hollywood blockbuster melodramatic musicals like *Les Miserables* or *Moulin Rouge* receive awards and critical acclimation, but Bollywood films are largely ignored by Hollywood is an unfair generalization of an industry of film that's true purpose is to make people happy as well as make them think. It is just as valid as any other film industry, as its main goal is to create an entertaining spectacle for people of all economic backgrounds.

Works Cited

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