

Showing Off Skin: Interrogating Gendered Whiteness In Bollywood

In this paper I address the growing presence of white women in Bollywood as junior artists as well as moving into lead roles in contrast to the continued presence of Indian men in both these spaces. This has been made possible by India's growth as an emerging market, its colonial past which rendered fair as beautiful, extremely sexist underpinnings of the film industry as well as the lack of a strong union for women. The white women surrounding the brown hero is a construction of colonized male fantasy (Fanon) as well as a means of representing a certain economic power which the brown man did not have access to earlier. I explore what these representations mean as well as the economic conditions that make this white presence possible. Without falling into the trap of hating the immigrant can we start to address this almost ubiquitous white presence in media through the notion of precarity? (Butler) Whose lives do these representations and fantasies make precarious and under what conditions? What does the performance of this whiteness do to my understanding of my own body as it redefines it as one with a lack and constitutes a desire that is based on a racist construction of gender as well as a sexist construction of race? And what might some of the possibilities be to resist such representations?

Over the past few years there has been an increasing presence of white women in the fields of modeling, advertising and now in the film industry. With the opening of the market in India in the early 90's and the break up of USSR forming what is now referred to as Eastern Europe as well as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the past two decades have witnessed an increase in immigration into India, some coming in as tourists but a lot coming in to fulfill roles that only people of a certain race can fulfill. The representations I am interested in exploring owe themselves to a capitalist method of production – the film industry functioning as an industry and undergoing a transformation into a corporate one with the arrival of big studios, entertainment chains, media owners and banks which are currently moulded by international understandings of the corporate, of the global and financial. This need to address is rendered all the more urgent because of the collapsing markets of the Developed world and the emerging markets in the Majority World which are now being plundered by international corporations.

The need to address this stems from my need to respond to the erasure of brown women being read as a gesture of what is to come in terms of citizenship and what that might translate into in terms of living and working conditions.

Fashion advertising has been working with the white female body for a while now whereas Bollywood has in the recent past played host to the white body in the form of background dancers to item numbers. The slow erasure of the female brown body, a particular female body that belongs to a certain class, addresses the conditions under which my brown female body exists within the idea of nation-state and labour. I think it is important to address this because of the implications it has not just for representative practices but what these representative practices point to in terms of my own existence. Representative practices are not just a reflection of what exists they also reiterate and support existing frameworks that support structural inequalities whether they be gender, race or class. A reading like this is based in life as it is lived where there is a real loss of livelihood, which threatens the basics of food, shelter and safety that make a life livable and human and on the other hand a real statistic of crimes against white women and the implications of the white woman in constructing womanhood for Indian women which will reiterate already existing ideas that underpin our gendered lives.

“Cinematic spectatorship, interestingly, offers a privileged space for the examination of these processes of identification and symbolic affiliation (or disaffiliation). Indeed, it is a

commonplace to say that the media in the postmodern era play a fundamental role in shaping one's identifications and affiliations. By experiencing their bond to people never actually seen, consumers of electronic media can be affected by traditions to which they have no ancestral connection. Thus the media can play a role not only in exoticising other cultures but also in normalizing them." (Shohat 168) As someone who lives within a world that is increasingly seems to be mediated via images, the erasure of dark skin also in some senses heralds the erasure of my own body and this erasure deprives me and my body of a visibility that will translate into a political disempowerment.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores the construction of blackness through the experience of colonization and I find this a useful place to start from as he addresses the sexual politics of what it means to be in an inter-racial encounter. Fanon traces the desire of the colonized to reclaim space that he has been displaced from, a space that casts him as inferior and emasculated. "Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white." (63) Exploring this desire he speaks about how the black man achieves a moving beyond blackness through the body of a white woman. "By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man." (63) The white woman becomes a symbol of that which needs to be possessed to reclaim the loss that ensues from the construction of blackness as lesser than, or as a lack.

I would here like to refer to the title song from the film '*Desi Boyz*'. The film revolves around two men identified as Indian but based in London which is an interesting pointer to racial constructions of citizenship in a country like the UK. The lead actors, constructed as male objects of sexual desire, are surrounded by desirable white women who desire them. The images ask you the viewer to identify with the men specifically when they wear cricket t-shirts with India inscribed on to it. The Indian identity gets constructed as male, as male with access to capital although using imagery that harks back to industrial times as well as to pornographic constructions of the desirable male body.

How do we start to read whiteness today via the use of it in popular media? When seen in popular culture it points to the existence or the need to create the existence of this desire for whiteness in the larger population it seeks as an audience. This has long been done in the field of advertising wherein a woman is seen to gain access to capital earlier through a good marriage and now through getting a job/modeling contract/confidence as is seen in something like the fair and lovely ads. Whiteness has come to be seen as a marker of access to global capital and especially the act of possessing white women's bodies sexually. One of the reasons that is floated by directors and producers is the need to produce for an international audience. This coupled with storylines set abroad amidst an opulence of wealth that is even impossible to comprehend establishes a framework for the construction of the spectator as consumer. It creates the desire for capital. "As she 'who could be sex object', the image of the white woman has operated as a sexual conscript in the structuring of desires. She is seen in advertisements and other popular media all over India which associate her with consumer wealth and Western lifestyles." (Dark 127) Representations that reiterate whiteness as desirable support the running of a huge cosmetic industry. It also sets up the impossibility of the fulfillment of that desire which keeps production alive.

The movement of whiteness into Bollywood heralds an extreme of sexual objectification which cannot be executed on brown women's bodies because of the cultural burden of representing the Indian woman as traditional and as one who resists modernity. Her access to modernity, to the fruits of globalisation is controlled and is accessible only via men's bodies in order to protect traditional ideas about family and kinship. The brown woman gets pitted against the white woman in a framework that has not been made by either. This ability to create a certain form of representation also hinges on the kind of control over

the processes of production that make precarious the lives of women, women who cannot command a voice because of the sexist structuring of the industry. To quote Jagmohan Mundhra, a director in Bollywood "The reason producers pick white girls is because a lot of them have better figures and are willing to expose them," he said. "If you need a bikini shot, not many Indian girls are willing to turn up in a string bikini. But most white girls will not have an issue with that. Titillation has been an important part of Bollywood." (Nelson *telegraph.co.uk*)

Implicit in his defending the right for white women to work is the understanding of women as sexual objects in Bollywood for the spectator. Brown women fulfilled those roles as sexual objects till the arrival of the white women who are now asked to take the idea of titillation further. The spectatorship for such representations gets defined as male with the way women's bodies are constructed for celluloid. While the female body is constructed on screen the body of the spectator is defined simultaneously. Here the spectator is seen to be male and the female spectator is moulded by capitalist desire through the construction of lack and produces the female consumer, the woman who will desire a body that she can never get, a colour of skin that will not be hers, a colour of eyes that will only ever be a performance of her desire. The presence of advertising in film making points to the belief that consumers can be created from film spectators.

How does the implicit need to disrobe the woman junior artiste expose normative constructions of womanhood especially in terms of women and labour and the film industry? The need to look at the economic constructions is also an attempt to address the invisibilities of labour with regard to women and with regard to class within the film industry which is increasingly established as one where work is inherited via family. The women who play lead roles and come from a film background are much more able to negotiate how they will be represented and this is ensured through the access they have to real capital. Junior artists without names, presence and representation as workers are constructed for easy erasure. The space for white women who occupy the space as background dancers is no different. They occupy the same space within the structure of production that the brown woman did.

It would be unwise to follow the only narrative that has turned up addressing the loss of jobs for Indian women which has been put forth by Raj Thackeray's MNS. (Nelson *telegraph.co.uk*) The argument reminds one of racist constructions that underpin anti-immigration rhetoric in the Developed world. The rise of groups like the MNS point to the son of the soil narrative, a construction of the insider with rights over employment and the construction of the outsider as the one who comes in and makes the insider's life precarious. The narrative also uses the terror narrative and Islamophobia to implicate itself in an idea of nationhood that does not allow for space for the 'other'. ("MNS diktat" *indiatimes.com*) It is interesting to note that none of these narratives have looked at the implications of gender within them or the issue of class. White women who are non-citizens are also present in the higher rungs of the film industry and yet are never threatened with the unleashing of the police.

With this narrative the MNS sets into play notions of legality that surround work, the threat of the police and of deportation – a narrative that has worked very well in the global north. It ends up making the white woman's life and work precarious. Being cast as someone who has no issue with being a sexual object she is also made vulnerable to sexual violence outside of the space of representation. This allows for the suppression of any voice that might want to speak about conditions that are potentially violent and one has to then work with the constant threat of deportation hanging in one's life.

The narratives on both sides of the debate, the film industry as well as the MNS, do not address the role not just of representative practices but also working conditions in the creation and reiteration of women's vulnerabilities. These practices are produced by an

industry owned primarily by men and worked in primarily by men. With the influx of corporate money as well as global capital in the form of studios there is the movement towards a casualisation of labour that keeps workers aware of their dispensability.

Judith Butler in her book, *Precarious Lives*, talks about precariousness and how one is made precarious so that when one is erased there is no loss. “There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others.” (xii) One of the ways in which this is seen as working is through namelessness. There are no names we recollect of junior artists. We don’t know of the women who now don’t feature in item numbers. Simultaneously we do not know the names of the white women who feature in these songs. We are not told where they are from. We do not hear their voices. We hear that they are mostly tourists accessed at tourist hotspots by touts. (Sharma *wsj.com*)

Making conditions of production precarious allows for replaceability, the inability to form unions, return of free labour, unaccountability with regards to wages, inability to protect against sexual harassment etc. The debate it then leads us to is not the Indian woman versus the White woman which is not an opposition in itself but is set up to be performed that way. What is useful to address are the conditions that create precariousness around the space of the woman junior artist as opposed to the male junior artist right now who is seen to be still viable while selling to international audiences and still seen to have good bodies unlike brown women.

When we start to address the precariousness of a certain population there is the space created for a solidarity that would enable a coming together of people irrespective of race or gender to address this. It also creates a political space that can then seek to demand working conditions that enable lives to live without the threat of precarity. Addressing the need to have a space that empowers will start to open up spaces for the negotiation of representative practices and we might be able to actually one day see popular cinema that does not reiterate but questions gendered structures.

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