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Book section

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Shakuntala Banaji[1]

> **Tarang:** I've watched Hindi films all my life. My mom and nani made me when I was little, to learn Hindi. I saw all the old films with the Kapoors and Mr. Bachchan, and all Shah-Rukh Kajol, Aamir-Juhi love stories, but I never watched the ones on India-Pakistan. I mean I liked them very much for the songs, but that is all.
> **Shaku:** The songs? Are there any in particular?
> **Tarang**: So many! [pause] Every song in the film *Main Hoon Na* is just great! But that isn't truly one of 'those' films. Few years back we watched *Gadar* – maybe a movie not many people here would see. I cried in front of my mom when they are driving in the truck you know? He is taking her to the border. It was so sad, like when my mom takes my nani to the airport and we all feel we may not see her again. The songs were sad, colourful and er full of passion. But the film was bad. It really made me angry. Stirring up bad feelings on all sides like Fox news! Just ridiculous.
> **Shaku:** Where are your parents from, actually?
> **Tarang:** They were from Pune, you know. But before that my mom came from Lucknow and that's where my nani lives. [22, Hindu assistant pharmacist, London, 2005]

> The most disturbing fragments are those that resist the hegemony of any clearly articulated text. (Bharucha, 2001: 130)

Introduction

In relation to the line running between India and Pakistan, Hindi films have for decades been dipping first their toes and more recently entire limbs into imaginary waters on the other side of the border. That many of these films appear to do this explicitly to bolster and encourage a sense of (fictional) patriotic Indian identity in opposition to that which is Pakistani and 'other', and that they do so in the service of a xenophobic ruling ideology that serves the interest of a corrupt and highly authoritarian political elite, has long been the complaint of Hindi films critics (cf. Prasad 1998, Vitali 2000). However, do such critiques – however powerful and legitimately aimed – actually reflect the ways in which all viewers 'read' and respond to the invitations of these films? What kinds of satisfactions and anxieties might the films speak to that are not articulated in day-to-day life? And, equally significantly, if there are some viewers who are more prone to

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respond to certain filmic invitations more powerfully than to others because of their experiences and backgrounds, how do these responses tie in with existing politics and political situations in South Asia and the diaspora? Using a case-study approach, via young people's comments as well as through existing critical literature, this chapter articulates some of the controversies surrounding the films *Gadar* and *Veer-Zaara* which take as their subject matter cross-religious or cross-border romances set against the back-drop of a fragmented and fictionalized history of the relationship between India and Pakistan. It looks especially at the way in which issues of social class, national identity, diaspora and religious affiliation in the films resonate differently with viewers from different backgrounds and locations in India and the diaspora.

Hindi film studies: questioning theoretical borders

Concern with the possible negative 'effects' of Hindi films on audiences is not new: in fact it continues to haunt those writing on the subject (cf. Dasgupta 1993, Mathur 2002, Chatterji 2003). In one example, Srividya Ramasubramaniam and Mary Beth Oliver argue that 'the idea that heroes would be shown engaging in sexual violence is cause for concern, as social learning perspectives suggest that when likable attractive characters such as heroes perpetrate sexual violence on screen they are more likely to be imitated by viewers' (2003: 334). In another instance, Arti Shukla (2005) discussing films that invoke images of the Indian nation in contrast to Pakistan refers continually to what the populace might be making of these films, insisting that '[t]hese films… provide not only entertainment, they also satisfy the audience's moral and political desires by providing a tool to make sense of what is going on and understand the actions of the governments of the two countries'. Fareed Kazmi's Gramscian conclusions quite moderately sum up a number of anxieties about the 'dangers' of Hindi films:

> Conventional films do not simply reflect the social world, but actually construct a
> coherent version of social reality within which ideological tensions can be contained
> and resolved … [i]n other words, through highly complex and devious means, it

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privileges 'preferred' meanings over 'excluded' meanings, thereby reinforcing the 'given' of the system, and absorbing or referencing out all potentially oppositional connotations. (Kazmi 1999: 215-216)

In all these examples, connections between viewers' actions and film narratives are drawn hypothetically, based not on actual instances or accounts but on perspectives from social psychology and textual analysis. Despite a few studies of Hindi film audiences (Derné 2000, Dudrah 2002, Bhattacharya 2004), there are a number of reasons why the view of Hindi films as a closed and coherent system of representation and reception has remained prevalent. Quite particularly, growing unease about the increase in religious fascism and xenophobic nationalism in India (Bharucha 1998, Mankekar 2000, Bhatt 2001) and its witting (or unwitting) support from the diaspora (Rajagopal 2000, Mishra 2001, Bahri 2001) and horror at the social practices of religious, gender and sexual violence (Pushkarna 1999, Sarkar 2002) appear to emphasise the need for an understanding of links between viewers' national, gender and ethnic identities and their spectatorship. This is all the more the case as, in the opinion of numerous critics (Valicha 1988, Kazmi 1998, Vishwanath 2002), viewers uncritically watch films that seem at best to ignore and at worst to encourage authoritarian beliefs and circumstances such as the xenophobic hatred between India and Pakistan. Of course, some textual theorists discussing Hindi films have summarized their assumptions about audiences in relation the pleasures of spectacle and emotional excess, an avowed 'need' for tradition in a threateningly modern world or the potential of films to shore up a sense of personal and group identity. As with all primarily theoretical accounts of film, this picture tells, however, far from the whole story.

While superficially each of the textual accounts of Hindi films appear accurately to encompass some aspects of the films, the nature of the assumptions about *audiences* raise a series of problematic questions. Are all the narratives, romantic sequences, music, costumes, dialogues, lyrics and other aspects of Hindi films equally ideologically 'suspect' and the pleasures they bring to viewers morally 'dubious' by virtue of their connection to an authoritarian ideology and an oppressive society? What of viewers such

as Tarang, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, who find pleasure in films, aspects of whose narratives they clearly despise? Just how *do* young viewers interpret the visual and verbal discourses of gender, nation and ethnicity in commercial Hindi films in the light of their perceptions of their own national, ethnic, gender and sexual identities? And, equally significantly, if a viewer's identity may be shaped by intersecting, and contingent, aspects of history and experience (Ghosh 2002, Staiger 2003), then to what extent do varying class, religious, geographic, national, community, and home environments alter, influence and/or counterbalance conceptions of gender and national identity read into Hindi films?

Methodology

My field-work comprised mixed methods and a wide variety of data which was analysed both individually and comparatively. I carried out much of the fieldwork on which this chapter is based in London and Bombay over a period of two and a half years between 2000 and 2003 during which I took extensive notes on the home lives, cinema environment and popular film consumption of young Hindi film viewers. The bulk of the data in this chapter is based on extended in-depth interviews with forty 16-25 year olds, constructed in a semi-structured manner and lasting between one and four hours which were then analysed thematically in the light of forms of discourse analysis stemming from social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1988, Hollway 1989). Thus, although aspects of viewer identity such as class, gender and religion are seen as being significant in shaping experiences of life and film, interviewees' accounts are presented as part of a snapshot of Hindi film viewing rather than as being representative of entire communities' viewing positions.

A participant observer at over eighty Hindi film showings, I kept a field-diary and took dozens of photographs of cinema halls and viewers; I visited some of my interviewees at home or college, went shopping with others, or to the cinema, and discussed Hindi films extensively: all activities which I recorded in a field-diary. In addition, I examined

articles about Hindi films and stars, sexuality, ethnicity, gender and race from popular film magazines, newspapers and the internet and watched Hindi films on DVD and VHS, which formed part of the context for film appreciation and consumption amongst my sample. An additional two months of interviewing in 2005 in both cities for a related project enabled me to revisit some of the issues raised by interviewees in my initial sample with a new set of viewers and some more recent films, of which *Veer-Zaara* was one. Rather than coming from a selected list, all the films discussed either happened to be showing when I undertook the research or were specifically chosen for consideration by the young people I interviewed.

Forced crossings and techno-memories?: *Gadar* and its mixed reception

In this section, through a case-study of responses to the film *Gadar*: *ek Prem Katha* (Anil Sharma 2001) I examine the notion, put forward by Sumita Chakravarty (2000: 224) that 'the institution of narrative cinema in its mainstream forms may actually be resistant to nationalist imaginings, given that the nation is always mediated by its fragments, that is by individuals whose particularities of dress, speech and life-style locate them within specific regional, social and cultural configurations'. Of course, this notion does not exist in isolation or simply in relation to the 'imagined communities' of cinema and fiction put forward by Benedict Anderson (1983). Its context is, in fact far more mundane and can be summed up in the twin concerns of critics that, a) the images of Hindi cinema articulate and encourage widespread jingoism amongst the Indian populace and in the diaspora, and b) that such film propaganda has actual psychic and social consequences, from the masking of opportunist anti-Pakistani stances taken by the government when they wish to start a war and encouraging ethnic and religious violence to the promotion of smug self-satisfaction on the part of the Indian viewer and government and ultimately the deepening of divisions in South Asia, which have long-lasting effects on the life of the region[1].

Opening to an extended and brutal sequence of post partition violence by Muslims against Sikhs in India, *Gadar* purportedly tells the story of a Sikh truck driver who saves a middle-class Muslim girl from gang-rape and death after her family flee to Pakistan. He waits until she has fallen in love with him to marry and start a family with her, only to have his idyllic life thrown into a maelstrom of angst when she visits her family in Pakistan and is held prisoner by them. The hero's trip with his little boy to Paksitan to 'recover' his wife takes up the second half of the film and depicts Pakistan as highly repressive, fundamentalist and hating of India and most Pakistanis as pawns of their evil leaders, ready to be unleashed or sacrificed against India. The brief happy ending, in which all are reconciled, only follows an extended sequence in which the hero single-handedly destroys swathes of the Pakistani army.

At the time I was carrying out initial interviews, *Gadar* was sweeping across belts of India, to all intents and purposes a 'super-hit', but struggling and failing to emulate *Lagaan*'s success in other countries. Both were, avowedly, 'fictions' of history; but in the press, much was made of the fact that one harked back to a utopian pre-independence arena in which a nationalist message had the power to unify across class, gender, caste and religion, while the other was causing actual fracas between sections of the populace (cf. 'Sena terms Muslim protestors of *Gadar* anti-national' 2001 and 'Storm over partition love story' 2001). Young people I interviewed outside cinemas were fiercely divided in their assessment of the film; some thought it was a splendid romance or reminder of history; others asserted that they simply didn't care what the film was about, it was a must-see because it 'looked big'; yet others asserted categorically that they had no wish to see a film that 'caused religious divisions'. During private in-depth interviews, however, a number of more detailed and clear-cut viewing positions were clarified.

Bhiku was one of the first viewers I spoke to who consciously constructed himself not as a fan of Hindi films but as a 'thinking viewer', someone who wanted to know more about the world. In this sense, his commentary on *Gadar* is crucial, because it shows just

how far the *blurred boundaries* between fiction and history appeal to those who most wish to distance themselves from what they see as the romanticism or escapism of Hindi films.

Bhiku: In *Gadar* they are showing people's anger towards Pakistan. After many years all the anger is in the people's mind and there are some of the dialogues which pinch Pakistan so people – audience – gets happy.

Shaku: So in the theatre where you saw it, people liked those anti-Pakistan speeches?

Bhiku: Yes. Because people feel helpless to do anything against Pakistan but when this dialogue is delivered they are showing what is there inside.

Shaku: Do you think similar things are shown in Pakistan?

Bhiku: Yes, why not? On both the sides the media has put lot of anger in people's minds. Common people should have common sense.

Shaku: But do they? [both laugh].[long pause]

Bhiku: One thing I like in *Gadar* is that it has at least shown the pain that people face when leaving their roots, the trouble they would have faced in leaving that place. The cruelty which both the sides were committed, they had tried to show the pain…I couldn't even imagine the pain, that of people who lose their relatives at that time. Their Muslim priests are publishing it more as Muslims versus other communities, some of the acts of some Muslims that has made the majority [pause] and the government's acts also – the government has tried to be neutral, to show themselves neutral, they have made injustice to the other – the Hindu community.   [23 year old Hindu shop assistant, Bombay]

In analyzing a piece of talk such as this and the ones which follow, it is important to chart the shifts and movements, the withdrawals, emphases and patterns in the context of other information about the intersecting identifications and experiences of the speakers (Potter and Wetherell 1988, Barker and Galasinski 2002). In the first section of this segment, clearly, Bhiku speaks first of the film as a text, albeit one with a popular edge, showing this awareness in his mention of 'dialogues' that self-consciously 'pinch' Pakistan. Later he moves to his sense of the film as a political vehicle for supposedly

'authentic' frustrations about 'political/religious favouritism'[2], which to him explain the popularity of the film with Hindu audiences in India and of films similar to this with Muslim audiences in Pakistan. Bhiku's expression of his enjoyment of the film as turning on a need to be *informed* about the brutal realities of partition and of finding such information in the film, confirm worryingly that such films do get used as replacements for 'real' histories of partition in some viewer's minds. As psychoanalytic theorist Sudhir Kakar explains, '[c]ultural psychology in India must necessarily include the study of the psychic representations of collective pasts, the ways the past is used as a receptacle for projections from the present' (1996: 12-13). Elsewhere (Banaji 2006) I have argued that read in the light of a trend towards the *erasure* of secular histories of India in the past decade and their *replacement* by fictions of Hindu fascist provenance (Butalia 1995: 58-81, Sarkar 2001: 268-288, Bhatt 2001: 92-94, 206-207) Bhiku's move from speaking of his enjoyment of the film *Gadar*, and that of others in the theatre where he viewed it and the brutality and violence of partition to the inflammatory speeches of 'their' 'Muslim' priests (on both sides of the border) strikes me as extremely political and far from disinterested.

Yet a range of different existential and political frameworks do exist amongst viewers, and these appear to alter the reading of meaning radically, intriguingly suggesting, perhaps, that where Hindi films attempt to be most didactic they may fail most consistently with a whole range of viewers who do not already share their primary ideological outlook. Ismail, a young working-class Muslim in Bombay and Jatin, a middle-class Hindu in London, both exemplify this notion, while Neetu and Neha engage with other aspects of the film suggesting strongly that even strongly nationalist films leave room for multiple readings. I quote at length to give a sense of these viewers' differing contexts and concerns.

> **Ismail:** [unclear sentence] You know the disturbing things, like that the Shiv Sena Chief, Bal Thakaray, [**Shaku:** Yes?] So many of his statements are against Muslims. But the government can do nothing to him. Why can't they? He should be in jail. This is what you have to ask. He has had case after case made against him, but nothing

touches him. And with such anti-Muslim sentiments around, how do people expect the Muslims in this country to feel that India is our country? …And then, the dissatisfaction being expressed by the gesture of supporting the Pakistan cricket team is interpreted by most Hindus as a signal of allegiance to Pakistan. […] You have all sorts of communications technologies at your command, like internet and computer and phone. But if you had *nothing* then the films would be the best way for you to find out what is going on in the city next to yours. It may be a one-sided picture, but who says you have to accept only that picture? At least it is some sort of news. People have to think for themselves whether something is right or wrong [….**]** And films like *Gadar*, *Border* – the film producer is just trying to make money so in India he will praise India and elsewhere – well [pause] have you seen the VCD version? They've cut out many of the anti-Pakistani dialogues because they want to be financially successful overseas, even in Pakistan. So they'll do that. Again, take the movie *Sarfarosh*, they showed the whole of it on *Zee* but on the VCD they simply cut out the bits that made sense in the plot. So as not to offend certain groups. [Pause] [19 year old Muslim sales-rep, Bombay]

Ismail, an ardent Hindi film fan uses the films *Gadar*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Border* which he has been describing to me prior to this point to springboard into a discussion of his feelings about being a working-class Muslim in India. His comments detail and challenge the supposedly commonsense insistence – amongst the middle-class Hindu public and implicit in films such as *Sarfarosh* – that all those *within* the nation must prove their loyalty to India in overt ways in order to retain the right to remain on national soil. In doing so, Ismail constructs national identity both on and off-screen as far more a matter of justice and dialogic loyalty than birth or ethnicity – the Indian nation must include, acknowledge and protect Muslims, both psychologically and legally, if it is to receive the 'love' demanded. Towards the end of the discussion, however, he returns to the issue of the films as a means of 'information', but with a twist. Rather than seeing them as wholly retrograde *fictions of history* that inflame anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistani feelings, he explains that for viewers like himself, particularly those unlike me (*you have all sorts of communications technologies at your*

command…), such films are necessary interventions, a means of tracking changes in the public sphere, or finding out about a 'neighbouring city'.

As if exemplifying Ismail's point that having access to a range of communication technologies allows one the luxury to view such films as *fiction rather than as information*, Jatin a highly educated fan draws on his knowledge of history and of film to critique *Gadar*:

> **Jatin:** …I actually got irritated with *Gadar*. That Sunny Deol Film.
> **Shaku:** Why was that?
> **Jatin:** Well, he's Sikh, but he calls himself a Hindu all the time. And I thought – 'He says, 'We Hindus, We don't buckle down to you Muslim people', and it's just basically him destroying Pakistan on his own. [laughs]. And it's like a Sikh marrying a Muslim, but it's like she becomes virtually a Hindu! So you can see the BJP funda values coming out there. [laughs]. It's set in 1947 and they've got these Apache Helicopters coming down on this train and Sunny Deol just get his gun out and shoots it down. It's very over the top….
> **Shaku:** If you had a choice, where would you live?
> **Jatin:** I wouldn't go back to India – I wouldn't fit in there...I think of myself as Asian, not completely British, maybe, British Asian. [24 year old Hindu trainee professional, London]

Obviously, the fact that some people do not have access to trustworthy information about history and politics, should not excuse directors who deliberately misrepresent swathes of history in the service of fascist ideologies and militaristic policies. However, for those interested in the cultural aspects of media viewing, one has to ask what censorship of such films would actually achieve. Regardless of the intentions plausibly attributed to their directors (Prasad 1998, Gahlot 2001, Chatterjee 2003), it is obviously not the case that all viewers come away from the films spouting jingoistic rhetoric. Could it not be the case that debate and critique may, in fact, be opened up by the most apparently 'closed' films? For instance, focusing on the romance that twines itself

around politics throughout *Gadar*, Neetu, a school girl discusses her belief in the 'power of love' to bring forth the humanity in people who are otherwise divided by their religious or national affiliations:

> **Neetu:** The main thing I don't like in India and in Pakistan is that they are very religious and they say you have to follow this religion only ….Here there are many people who are very closed-minded…Now Hindi films are pushing towards an open-minded point of view….[…] And *Gadar*, even though that is an action movie it is very touching how she comes into his religion and all like how she follows it and how she sacrifices and how Sunny Deol he is going to sacrifice and even he is ready to take over the Islam religion. That is a good thing that even he is willing to take on her religion. I think such relationships can work across religions. That was very touching to me.
>
> **Shaku:** Oh Yes?
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> **Neetu:** Yes. Because nowadays there are many Hindus marrying Muslims and Muslims marrying to Christians and all. It can work. [Very vehement]. I agree with those things. I believe in those things because I believe in love. Even we have to sacrifice and even they have to sacrifice. [16 year old Sikh, Bombay]

Ignoring completely many of the sequences in the film that appear to denigrate Pakistan and Pakistanis, Neetu emphasises the importance of the scenes of the heroine 'becoming' a Sikhni in India and hero agreeing to become a Muslim, if this will allow him to live peacefully with his wife and child in Pakistan. From an immensely restrictive family, and engaged in a clandestine relationship with a man from another community, Neetu herself interprets the film as encouraging gender equity in terms of the construction of cross-religious relationships. While this is hardly the most apparent reading of the film, it is obviously significant for some viewers and should not be dismissed out of hand or undermined.

One of the only viewers I spoke to in London to mention *Gadar* in a positive light, Kalpesh echoes both Bhiku's sense of the film as a reminder of 'history' and Neetu's pleasure in it as a romance that challenges religious prejudices.

> **Kalpesh:** I like those sort of [realistic] stories where there's a Hindu and a Muslim and they fall in love, you know? Because that's what's actually happening in our real life. The communities are mixing. And erm, the thing is that I don't understand yeah, is that our parents love these movies, and yet they don't let us do it. [emphatic.] When it comes to the crunch they wouldn't let us do anything like that. No way. [18 year old Hindu, London]

Like Jatin, Neha critiques the modality of the violence depicted in *Gadar* refusing the film's framing of the Indian hero versus the Pakistanis on these grounds, but like Kalpesh and Neetu, she accepts the romance as psychologically compelling:

> **Neha:** …In this [pause] *Gadar*, there is this hero who can kill so many people at a time [laughs] This is not possible. After watching this we say 'let Bobby Deol, Dharmendra and Sunny Deol go to the border and border forces come home. [laughs]. These three could protect the whole border!' [**Shaku:** Yes, I see what you're getting at.] At least in English movies, with Arnold and all, we can see their muscles and at least we can see the reality in it… [laughs]
> **Shaku:** So which do you prefer?
> **Neha:** Fights, violence in Hollywood films.
> **Shaku:** But?
> **Neha:** The romance, in Hindi films. Without doubt. [23-year-old Jain housewife, Bombay]

Clearly, even if one accedes to a view of a film as something that contains 'messages', rather than as an multilayered audiovisual representation medium with all kinds of possibilities for pleasure and communication, film 'messages' are not as straightforward as some textual accounts (cf. Valicha 1988, Nandy 1996) might suggest. While the

young people in this section overtly invoke understandings of modality and experiences of ethnicity as their grounds for rejecting some of the xenophobic politics they read into *Gadar* and other films like it, their comments imply that they see these films as playing a range of social and economic roles on both sides of the border that are not always coherently linked to their ideological frameworks. The same film that for Bhiku and Jatin is primarily about the – in one case imaginary – wrongs done to the Hindu populace and the nature of Pakistani/Indian nationalism, can also be read as providing the spur for debate in an information deprived populace, affirming a belief in love and friendship between communities or asserting the need for men and women who marry into a different community or nation to make equal sacrifices in terms of their identity. It is interesting that the very textual accounts that most poignantly show films such as *Gadar* 'othering' Muslims or Pakistanis, are systematically 'othering' the people who watch these films, constructing them as absolutely different, unsecular, xenophobic and vulnerable to the films' supposed effects thus decreasing the potential for constructing bridges across various divides. However, could it be possible that, as Ismail explains, when it comes to films, just as with news programmes, viewers who do not already arrogantly believe that they know the 'truth' have to be given a chance to make up their own minds, to sort right from wrong?[3] The following section examines the narratives of viewers who have watched a number of cross-border romances and explore their changing feelings for Pakistan and India based on their reponses to some of these films, notably *Veer-Zaara*, which tells the story of an Indian man and a Pakistani woman who fall in love when she is on a trip to India and when denied a chance to marry by the girl's politician father, they first agree to sacrifice their love and then, betrayed by the 'villain', they endure decades of personal suffering, exile and loss of identity in order to remain true to each other and themselves.

Veer-Zaara: Bollywood sentiments or political change of heart?

Engaging with the convoluted interstices of communal subjectivity in the Indian subcontinent (Kakar 1996, Sarkar 2002), and with the increasingly opaque and

fragmentary responses these have engendered across theatre and popular culture in India, Rustom Bharucha asks whether 'the construction of somebody's other [can] be dismantled through a blurring, if not dissolution, of its polarities' (2001: 131). With precisely the question of such a 'dismantling' and 'blurring' of oppositions in mind, this section investigates the possibility that Hindi films dealing with cross-border romances contribute not to a static and fixed nationalist ideology but to a range of meanings with regard to borders and belonging, the national self and the 'other'. Much of the press coverage of Yash Chopra's latest hit *Veer-Zaara* on its release centred both on the love story between the protagonists and on the fact that half of it was set across the border in Pakistan. Generally this film was viewed as representing Pakistanis in a slightly more balanced light than a number of other recent films (cf. Deshmukh 2004, Hoffheimer 2005). Discussions with viewers in Bombay and London aimed to assess the actual ways in which the film was perceived.

Kumkum, a 19 year old UP-born Hindu check-out assistant in Bombay gives an account that segues into this discussion of *Veer-Zaara* because it suggests answers to a number of questions about the connections between audience politics and film discourses:

> **Kumkum**: I love Priety in *Veer-Zaara*, how she does care about the honour of her family but she puts her honesty and love above religion and above her country, Pakistan. Shah-Rukh also puts his love above India…They have sacrificed for each other and they have been like heroes for others to see this is what matters, not the land in the border. You know I listen to the songs and I feel 'haan, woh bhi hamara des hain, yahan bhi unka des hain'.
> **Shaku:** Do you know many people who believe this, the way you think?
> **Kumkum:** Why not? All my friends. Even my brothers and my parents. Only media and governments create divisions in India-Pakistan. *Veer-Zaara* is only speaking what is in many people's hearts.
> **Shaku:** Earlier you told me you enjoyed watching *Sarfarosh* and also *Gadar*. Aren't those films strengthening the divisions you dislike?

Kumkum: So? You must have also enjoyed those movies – the songs are very good, the story is surprising, the acting is nice…I did not watch them and think 'Haan, woh log Pakistani hain, hum log Indian hain'; I thought about the choices that humans come face to face with in our life. *Gadar* is only just one film. But it has many different messages for many different people. If another *Gadar* is made, I will still go to watch. Yes. [2005, Bombay, Hindi]

Kumkum eschews patriotism in favour of romantic and personal loyalty. She praises *Veer-Zaara* for its egalitarian gender relationships and emphasises her liking for its (didactic and sentimental but humane) penultimate message, which is one that encourages the breakdown of cross-border suspicion and acceptance of the 'other' as akin to the 'self'. Most saliently, Kumkum's response to my question about the politics of *Sarfarosh* and *Gadar*, two films she mentioned liking, confirms the notion outlined in the previous section that even films with apparently tightly closed ideological frameworks, do hold a – albeit limited – number of *alternative* viewing positions that are not rejected by all viewers.

Openly anti-xenophobic Kumkum's insistence that she will continue to watch apparently propagandist Indian films precisely because these are media *texts* with pleasurable storylines, actors and songs serves as a corrective to the view that such films are *enjoyed or act* merely as vehicles for particular partisan messages. Kumkum clearly resents the notion that she can't make up her own mind. But what of viewers who do appear to accept the politics of such films as a basis for their view of Pakistan?

Neela, a 17 year old, lower middle-class Hindu schoolgirl befriended me outside a cinema hall in Bombay at the showing of another movie and was eager to discuss her interest in romantic films that also had a political edge.

Neela: When I was little my feelings was all against Pakistan. No doubt. [pause] Mummy-papa felt very strong on the terrorism issue. They felt Pakistan was a place where it is one way only, the Koran and all that is being put forward. You must be

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knowing this? [Pause] Even in last few years I had seen many of the Hindi movies that show Pakistan as such a place where you do not dare to say anything against your father or your country or your religion; even love is not accepted.

Shaku: Really? [Pause] Such as?

Neela: *Pukar*, *Sarfarosh*, you must be knowing….In *Gadar* it ends with a happy story. After all villains [unclear; **S:** who?] Pakistani villains get killed by the hero, even India is happy and even Pakistan. I mean the families. Other films, I remember the stories and sometimes not the names. But in last two years my feeling has started to change towards Pakistan. [long pause]

Shaku: You changed your mind after…?

Neela: […]Just a few months back I watched *Veer-Zaara* in the theatre with my friends and I was crying so much. Boman Irani was a strong character. Priety was a strong character. Shah-Rukh was a strong character. Watching them I understood that India-Pakistan are like two friends who have quarrelled for so many years. Both will not bow the head. But the children have decided, 'dosti karenge, pyaar karenge'. This war must end. When Shah-Rukh was speaking in the court, everyone in my group clapped. If mummy-daddy came with me, I could not be clapping! [laughs] [English]

Neela is a viewer who openly discusses her family's politics vis-à-vis Pakistan in relation to her film viewing. Uncued by me – and unaware of my political views – she introduces the films that she has watched over the years and charts her changing feelings on the subject of India's relationship with Pakistan. She speaks of 'war' and cross-border 'terrorism', although *Veer-Zaara* is overtly about no such thing, and her commentary suggests that media products such as films, while also reinforcing some of the beliefs she acquired from her parents, are the means by which she ultimately comes to question those beliefs. As such, sequences in these films provide her with alternative imaginaries to those she might otherwise inhabit. From her testimony it is possible to conjecture that censorship of particular films might be both futile and potentially dangerous in that, on the one hand, it would fail to deal with the context producing the representations and on the other, would provide an authoritarian solution to an authoritarian problem. Having discussed this issue with various respected secular and

gender activists, I am aware that this will not be a popular view. However, based not only on Neela's description of her own and friends' reactions to Shah Rukh's speech at the end of the film but also on her humorous assertion that had her parents' been there she would have had to censor her response – 'I could not be clapping', it is worth recollecting that while we continue to call for it in situations such as violent ethnic conflict, more often than not media censorship serves the interests of those who do not wish to break down barriers, engage in self-critique or blur boundaries.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that assertions about audiences and their meaning making are always contingent and may even prove contradictory. An interview with Sheba, a 20 year old British-Pakistani teaching assistant, whom I met through my work in London, illustrates that even in contexts other than the already ethnically charged and xenophobic atmosphere of urban Indian in the last decade, the rhetorical construction of Pakistan as 'other'/'enemy' can hold damaging and hurtful meanings that don't necessarily result in a rejection of the films per se:

Sheba: Even though we enjoy all Pakistani serials, Hindi films not Lahore films have always been very special for me and my mother and my sisters. But sometimes we did get the feeling that it was like a crime to be Pakistani. [Pause; **S:** Yes?] I mean! You've seen the way they suggest things, I mean, like in that old movie *Border*, the absurd things they tell us, 'it is okay to help a Pakistani'. In *Gadar*, maybe one or two Pakistanis might be friendly but the others are just thick and act like dogs and they get chopped by the hero. Remember that scene with the water pipe?
Shaku: The pump? Yes. [Pause] Have you seen any films that do not make you feel like this?
Sheba: No, not really. *Pinjar,* that was interesting. Maybe a more neutral film. But [pause] it had this atmosphere that most of the Pakistanis are cruel, not having compassion, except maybe one or two. [Pause] *Veer-Zaara* is the only one I can think of that made me feel that actually Pakistanis, Indians, these are the same blood, and in both places you can have bad people and good people. It was simple. But it was

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powerful for us. I enjoyed so many scenes in that film, not just because of the India-Pakistan friendship message [pause]

Shaku: You say it wasn't 'just because of the message'. Why, then?

Sheba: Because it is a beautiful romance. I mean, it shows that passion and love can start in a few days and can last a life time. It shows the strength of women, how they work together, how men should take them more seriously. And it allows you to feel the dignity of people in Pakistan, that is rare. Compare it to the family scenes in *Gadar* and you know what I mean. [English]

Sheba who has grown up in London in a Pakistani family watching Hindi films deliberately uses the language of 'self' and 'other' in her discussion of films about Pakistan and not necessarily as consciously discusses the films as interventions in subcontinental political mindsets. Her memory of the scene in Gadar, where the hero massacres scores of unknown Pakistani 'aggressors' may be in contrast to her use of the word 'neutral' about *Pinjar*, but her sense of the overwhelming narrative construction of Pakistan as a horrible place to be and Pakistanis as generally 'cruel, not having compassion' tie in with many critical readings of these films (Vasudevan 2000, Fazila-Yacoobali 2002, Sethi 2002). Sheba confirms that simple assertions about viewers 'making up their own minds' are inadequate in discussions of media representation. Clearly, viewers may well make up their own minds in the end, but what about the psychological damage that occurs when those being 'othered' watch this process day after day? And equally pertinently, given various concatenations of history and politics, when does textual propaganda, however diversely framed and interpreted, count as incitement to communal hatred?

Sheba articulates her critique of propagandist cross-border films in media terms, comparing sequences of Pakistani family life in *Gadar*, where evil is basically motiveless, with those in *Veer-Zaara*, where even unjust family authority in Pakistan is given emotional and psychological depth and rationale. However, the fact that one major depiction is better than the other should not prevent one from asking questions about other representations in *Veer-Zaara*. As Mohsin, a 15 year old British-Asian student in

London does when he says, 'Why is the Indian family in *Veer-Zaara* so much fun and love and the Pakistani one so strict and unhappy? Who causes all the problems in the film?' So, one is prompted to ask, when will we see a Hindi blockbuster where the secular, modern hero's family is Pakistani and Muslim, and the loyal heroine a devout Hindu girl from this side of the border resisting her authoritarian village?

Here, however, in honour of the melodramatic and sentimental pleasures made possible by these films, I close this section with a brief quote from Firdos, a 21 year old rickshaw driver in Bombay to whom I got chatting as we listened to film music. It is fitting that in his last sentence he conflates the actors and their characters, implying perhaps that by playing characters who blur exclusive nationalist constructions these two stars contribute to changes in off-screen politics:

> **Firdos** It was all about Humanity [Insaaniyat]. For me the best films, like *Veer-Zaara*, they tell something not about men or women, not about money, but about humanity. After I watch such a film, I do not feel inferior that I never went to school. I do not cry everyday because my mother and my father are dead. I feel like any person can make a difference in this world, like Shah Rukh and Priety. [Hindi]

Conclusion

Nations and boundaries dominate the imagination, even the modern, supposedly globalised imagination of the 'transnational' intelligentsia. For some, thinking of themselves as belonging not to a tribe or a territory, a religion or a nation can be destabilizing – even impossible. For others, mention of borders, whether real or symbolic, always conjures an urge to step across and explore. This is as much the case with sexual and ethnic identity as it is with national identity and films may provide a safe yet exciting mechanism for such imaginary journeys. Viewers responding to *Veer-Zaara*, like those speaking of *Gadar* don't simply move backwards and forwards along a spectrum in terms of their thinking about themselves and the 'other', Indians and

Pakistanis, 'back home' and the UK but actually move unexpectedly and tangentially as if in a web of ideas, constructing as well as expressing their identities through talk. Within this context of constant positioning and repositioning vis-à-vis the interviewer and the films, many associations made by viewers do appear, as Chakravarty conjectures, to use the films as imaginary contexts or pretexts in ways that resist, ironise or deconstruct as much as they acknowledge and shore up 'nationalist imaginings'. Awkwardly, however, as usual there appear to be some aspects of these films that do not yield themselves up easily to playful deconstruction.

At a *textual level* it should be noted that, even at their best, *certain sequence*s in a number of Hindi films dealing with India and Pakistan invite some viewers to think of themselves as 'other' in order to keep watching with pleasure; while, at their worst, they have to be understood, among other things, as contributions to authoritarian or ethnic supremacist ideologies which, off-screen, have resulted in violence and death. Nevertheless, all the *viewers* interviewed negotiate meaning from an intersection of identity positions, via myths and experiences, calling on their own knowledge, beliefs, understanding of family or community opinion, and media consumption. Some of them do use Hindi film imaginaries as invitations to nationalist, fascistic or humanitarian sentiment. As such they use them as a means for shoring up pre-existing beliefs and worldviews, confirming or undermining suspicions about 'the other'. Other viewers use these same sequences as a means for critique and challenge to current social norms and contexts, and therein lies much of their enjoyment as fans. Yet others engage pleasurably in multimodal aspects of films such as music, dance and romance, while remaining aloof from narratives that implicitly construct some religions or nations as 'other'. In this context, it is important to ask what calls for censorship or even banning of these films hope to achieve, and whether censorship is indeed the right path to go down.

Finally, then, following the questioning of the theorizing of meaning as transparent, unitary and immanent in cross-border Hindi romances some tentative answers have been offered. Contradicting a view of the cinema-going public as basically apolitical and interested in 'mindless entertainment', frequently *Veer-Zaara* and *Gadar*, and other

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films on terrorism or national security such as *Sarfarosh*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Border*, would be introduced by young viewers *in the context of* discussions of modern politics. Based on evidence gathered through extended conversations and interviews with viewers of these films in two countries, this chapter has argued the need for an understanding of Hindi film spectatorship as being heterogeneous, psychologically contradictory, always emotionally engaged – whether through individual or altruistic fantasies and critiques. Such spectatorship is also always built around the potential of texts to be read as fragmentary and internally divergent, articulating radical positions at odds with their own (frequently socially retrograde) dominant discourses but also inviting complex – and threatening – pleasures through fleeting or more extended participation in compelling 'reactionary' ideological positions and equally compelling 'anti-authoritarian' personal ones. Nevertheless, just because restricted textual representations and discourses do not force or entail psychic closure for audiences does not mean that we should not call for meanings to be more open, for commercial Hindi films to cover a greater range of imaginaries and possibilities or to incorporate the critiques of viewers from a range of perspectives.

Notes:

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1 In *the Hindustan Times* (November 20 2003) Saibal Chatterjee writes, '[i]t is no coincidence that all these films deal…with the perfidies of Pakistan while singing paeans to the courage and commitment of India's brave young soldiers…A pliant mass media is exactly what the purveyors of Hindutva [the then BJP government and their allied organisations] or an intolerant, exclusivist line of thinking – need to propagate their world view and keep hatred and distrust of Pakistan on the boil'.

2 This notion that the government 'favours minorities' is a common complaint made by 'common-sense' sympathisers of the Hindu Right with regard to Muslims and the lower castes in India.

[3] However naïve it may be to imagine that all viewers struggle to find balanced political outlooks and information about society from the films they watch, it is equally absurd and politically reactionary to think that a majority simply acquiesce to propaganda without questioning it. Scepticism may not lead to radical political action, but my research suggests that amongst working-class viewers, as Ismail implies, it is at least as prevalent as jingoistic patriotism.

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