Exploring ‘Indianness’ in Bollywood Cinema: Diaspora and the New Indian Modernity

Mainstream Bollywood cinema does not usually receive much sociological scholarship in spite of being embedded in the Indian nationalist discourse and a major cultural influence in the subcontinent. My paper seeks to argue in favour of reading mainstream bollywood cinema as a crucial popular culture text which has not only been in dialogue with the on-going socio-economic and political changes in Indian society but indeed strategically plays a reflexive role in producing a sense of what ‘Indianness’ should be. By tracing the genealogy of bollywood cinema’s investment in the Indian nation-building project and its negotiations in casting out an ‘Indian’ identity, stable in its present yet shifting temporally, I demonstrate the shifting portrayal of the Indian diaspora in bollywood, from post-second world war migrants to the new migrants since the 1990s. Using Partha Chatterjee’s work on postcolonial nationalism, I explore how mainstream bollywood cinema post 1990 has strategically employed the figure of the non-resident Indian (NRI) for mapping what I call the ‘new Indian modernity’ in post-liberalisation India and the manner in which this is predicated upon India’s own image of its changing geo-political status in the contemporary world order.