

Dancing the diasporic dream? Embodied desires and the changing audiences for Bollywood film dance

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Abstract

Focusing on the migration of Bollywood dance out of the film screen, this article investigates the relationship of the dance form to film viewers and to amateur dancers who attend Bollywood classes. It questions the notion of desire in the act of watching Bollywood film and seeks to discover whether this is translated into participation in dance classes and performance at social events. Is dancing the 'Bollywood dream' part of the imagined fantasies of viewers and dancers? How are those dreams enacted? Does it create a fantasy, nostalgic space for those in the Indian diaspora and a web of dreams for the non-Asian participants? Tracing the changing status of Bollywood as a dance genre, the article maps the dance's increasing codification through newly created exams and syllabi, as well as its marketing through fitness and health. Interviews with Bollywood teachers and their dance students assist in drawing out the nuances of meaning in this contested arena where global cultural processes are at play.

Keywords: Bollywood dance, Bollywood films, Hindi film dance, popular dance, dance in films, popular culture, film audiences, diaspora, cultural politics

Introduction

To the strains of 'Zoobi Doobi' from the Bollywood film the *3 Idiots*, several women and a couple of teenagers are dancing together at their local London arts centre. They are learning moves choreographed by the Bollywood dance teacher to this lively film song which they will then perform the following month on stage at the group's biannual showcase. Sequences are

repeated several times before a break for a breather and a discussion of some of the moves. It's clear they are having fun with the funky, upbeat music, despite the fact that some students in the class do not understand the Hindi words of the song. The mixed group of dancers (British Asian and non-Asians) all confide at the end of the class that they are avid Hindi film watchers.

This short description begins to indicate some of the complex meanings at play in the circulation and audience appreciation of Bollywood dance in the UK (and beyond), which this article seeks to unpack. 'Bollywood' or 'Hindi film dance' is a genre that has emerged from the celluloid screen to become a globalised social/popular style existing in its own right, creating what Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti have called 'vernacular modernities' (2008:43). This term draws our attention to the particularity of the culture of Bollywood film dance in the various parts of the globe where it has become established. For example, Bollywood is framed differently in Los Angeles where it is seen more as a fitness form that can help to develop a new, lean body, than in Prague, where to dance Bollywood is to perform 'the exotic'. Such production of locality, as Arjun Appadurai has argued, by both brown (Asian) and white bodies, is perhaps part of global 'social techniques for inscription of locality onto bodies' (1996:179). Vernacular embodiment of the dance form as described in these examples is emphasised by Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha when they state that 'the circulation of India's commercial cinema through the globe has led to the proliferation and fragmentation of its fantasy space, as its narrative and spectacle beget diverse fantasies for diasporic communities and others' (2005:15).

It is this 'fantasy space' that I would like to investigate, using current ethnographic fieldwork in London amongst Bollywood film goers and those participating in Bollywood dance classes. I seek also to understand how the global audiences for Hindi films project a multi-layered and multi-valent gaze upon the dancing body, producing a complex mix of poignant longing, myriad identities, imagined fantasies, and diasporic dreams and memories. Thus in this article I examine firstly the emergence of the dance out of its filmic context, its transformation and change in cultural status; and secondly I investigate the participatory and performative relationship established through the repeated and regular viewings of Bollywood films that creates for many viewers the longing to participate at a more embodied level [1]. This is evidenced through attendance at Bollywood dance classes, or participation in 'filmi' dance at weddings and other social events, or for some, the dream to become a 'Bollywood star'. Furthermore, I will attempt to tease out the intricate nuances of the notion of desire and longing seen through the watching of and/or participation in Bollywood film dance for British Asian and non-Asian audiences. Here it is pertinent to draw again from Appadurai's theorisation of global cultural processes, using his notion of 'imagination as a social practice', whereby imagination becomes 'a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals)

and globally defined fields of possibility' (1996: 31). The imagined worlds of aspiring Bollywood dancers are fuelled, for example, by glamorous images of the film world and its stars that are media-controlled (Appadurai's 'mediascapes') and supported by agencies such as Honey's Dance Academy, which I go on to discuss.

Diasporic desires

Although at many Bollywood dance classes and performances in the UK there is a mix of participants of different backgrounds and nationalities, this paper focuses primarily on the second and third generation Indian diaspora who choose to attend such events, although I do allude to non-Asian participants as well [2]. Migration patterns are quite particular, and the settlement of British Asians (now well documented; see Ballard 1994, Knott 2000, Vertovec 2000) and the subsequent 'Britishness' of the later generation has taken a very different trajectory to those migrating to the USA, South Africa or elsewhere. Yet they are part of a complex diasporic and global network, and as Rehan Hyder points out, have access 'to a diasporic consciousness that has spread throughout the world' (2004: 24). One of the main traits of such diasporic awareness is the need to refresh and recast a sense of Indian identity through cultural (re)production, 'in the face of its absence in everyday life' (Hansen 2008: 259). I argue that the reproduction of Bollywood dance outside the celluloid screen enacts a complex mix of desire and longing, often fuelled by the act of film watching itself. My analysis of audience response reveals three layers of such enacted dreams, the first two general amongst film audiences, the third one especially related to diasporic longing and therefore to audiences of Asian ethnicity. The first layer, as I later go on to elaborate, is the longing for glamour and fame (and finance) in lives that are seen as mundane and unexciting. This aspect of fantasy longing and notion of an imagined glamorous identity is also found in non-Asian participants of classes, amateur dancers who also indulge in the watching of Bollywood film. The dreams of fame and glitz are inspired by many 'reality' TV programmes, as I go on to discuss later. Here we see revealed a mesh of motivation that has to do with the popularity of urban culture, to notions of and interest in multiculturalism in the host community, and perhaps also links to issues of the 'exotic other'. Secondly, again not limited to British Asian audiences of Bollywood, there is an expression of desire and fantasised longing directed towards the film stars, whose bodies become objects of consumption. If we take a look for a moment at the portrayal of global film star Shah Rukh Khan in the film *Om Shanti Om* (2007), the spotlight on the performer's body as a locus for cinematic gaze and desire is accentuated in the song 'Dard. E-Disco', where Khan's naked oiled, upper body is on full display. Not only is he surrounded by half-clad dancing Western women who touch his body adoringly, but the camera lingers in close-up over rippling arm and chest muscles, emphasising his physicality and sexuality. Even at 42 years old (when this film was made) Khan shows a body that is fit

and very toned, and leaner than in previous films. Just like the heroines in Bollywood films twenty years ago, Khan appears slowly, apparently naked, from water, and it is only when he fully emerges that we see he is wearing jeans, quite low on his hips, enough so that that the pelvic bones are visible. One of my respondents spoke of the effect on the audience who emitted loud gasps and cheers in Feltham's (west London) Bollywood multiplex cinema when this scene was shown. The whole sequence is drenched with sexuality and desire, clearly played to obtain maximum effect. As in many of his numerous films, in *Om Shanti Om*, Khan plays as a consumable hero, his body an object of desire. Although he has a huge female fan base (both Asian and non-Asian), Khan is also attractive to male viewers, as Charlie Henniker (2010) and Rajinder Dudrah (2008) both confirm in their writing. Henniker notes that Khan's appearance in the film described above, as 'a muscled, bare-chested dancer' and with 'a new "item-boy" look...projects Shah Rukh as an object of desire, subject to the voyeuristic and male gaze' (2010: 30) and reinforces his appropriation as a gay icon. Dudrah (2008: 298) writes of how Khan's famous 'Chaiyya, Chaiyya' song and dance from *Dil Se* (1998) is reclaimed as a 'queer anthem' at a queer desi club in Birmingham, UK.

The third of these complex layers of desire is located very specifically amongst the Asian film spectators and participants in Bollywood dance classes – where Hindi song and dance form part of the cultural memory and nostalgia for an 'Indian-ness' perhaps absent in diasporic lives. Yet, concurrently, younger generations of British-born Asians are forging new and syncretic modes of cultural identity, that are, as Hyder puts it, 'more dynamic and productive' (2004: 26) and that include performance of and participation in contemporary styles of music (Asian dub, New Asian underground, etc) and dance (Bollywood Bhangra, creation of new choreographies, for example). Bollywood films in the last decade often portray (accentuated through the medium of the song and dance numbers) glamorous middle-class Indians, living either as NRIs (non-resident Indians) in global urban centres, or if depicted located in India, as wealthy global citizens. This new configuration of 'diaspora', although it is also embedded in a base of 'traditional' cultural mores and practices in the films (such as respect for parents, scenes of religious practice, marriage to a fellow Asian and such like), is certainly admired and desired by the second and third generations of British Asians. As Gopal and Moorti note, 'Bollywood song and dance provides a repertoire of images, visualities, and performance idioms that articulate with local concerns at different reception sites' (2008:45). Thus we see a layered construction of diasporic desire and longing in Bollywood film audiences and attendance at Bollywood classes through the craving for glamour and dreams of fame, the fantasies directed towards the global stars and the mix of nostalgia and cultural memory alongside new cultural identities.

The changing status of the dance form

Those wishing to make a transition from watching the dance on film to dancing themselves find an array of classes on offer in the UK. These classes are a relatively recent phenomenon, appearing in the last decade and attracting non-Asians as well as British Asian students, perhaps fuelled by the huge growth in global interest in Hindi films. The classes are framed predominantly by a discourse of health, fitness, sport and pleasure, are sold to potential customers as a 'modern Indian dance style' and offer access to Hindi film dance without the long-term investment needed to learn a classical dance form. Of the 40 or so publically-funded national and regional UK Dance Agencies [3], at least eight are currently (in 2010) running Bollywood classes, mainly in urban centres such as Leeds, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle and Lancaster. In London, the two main commercial dance centres, Pineapple Dance Studios and Dance Attic [4], run weekly classes and additionally there is a plethora of private studios offering lessons. In some venues, Bollywood dance is classified under 'World Dance', whilst at Pineapple Dance Studios it sits rather oddly with a group of styles under the term 'Eastern' that includes Egyptian dance and classical Indian. Labelled variously in other dance schools and Dance Agencies as 'Bollylicious', 'Bollywood Bhangra', 'Bollyrobics', 'Classical Bollywood' and 'Modern Bollywood', these hybrid dance styles are marketed by promising not only fitness and flexibility, but also fun, glamour, sociability and energy, using descriptors such as 'sassy', 'fast-moving', 'funky', 'inspirational' and 'magic'. It is noticeable here that these terms could equally be applied to urban and street dance classes, and none are marketed through a focus on an Indian/Asian identity [5]. Classes are sold on a drop-in basis, or by the term, leaving students free to come and go as they wish, suggesting a casual approach to learning, yet there have been recent developments to codify and formalise the way Bollywood dance is marketed and taught. Honey Kalaria's Dance Academy is now offering a formal dance syllabus and Bollywood exams. As Kalaria has stated:

It's very exciting to see the syllabus being used. The aim of it is really to establish, maintain and monitor standards within Bollywood and Indian Performing Arts, offering central guidelines to institutions for classes and giving students goals to work towards. We also hope to help students build their confidence, self-esteem and career prospects with the international entertainment industry. (Press release on www.londondance.com [accessed 29.9.09])

Along the same lines, the City Academy Performing Arts School in London is advertising (in 2010) a 12-week course that will teach the 'technique, discipline and emotion behind Bollywood dance' emphasising its development of dance skills, and clearly moving towards a more formal syllabus. 2010 also saw the accreditation of Just Jhoom's [6] professional Fitness Certification Course for Bollywood instructors that places such dance instruction once

again into the fitness market, offering 'increasing cardiovascular fitness with lively routines set to fast-paced Indian music' by accredited teachers (www.justjhoom.co.uk).

These contemporary changes being made to a social, casual, non-classical dance form reveal sophisticated strategies at work. Some are perhaps driven by private commercial interests, others by stake-holders determined to change the balance of power between practices seen as high art (and therefore attracting public funding) and those categorised as 'popular culture'. Cultural politics are at stake as perceived boundaries between popular culture and high art shift, here reflected in the codification of a dance genre as it accumulates a syllabus and exams. This re-conceptualisation of a popular cultural activity can also be found in the changing status of other social/popular forms of dance such as Breakdance and Hip Hop. Popular culture has often been seen as 'other' in relation to expressions of high art (Hall 1985, Hebdige 1979, Strinati 1995). From this view, popular culture and its dance forms are conceived as non-mainstream, not institutionalised, not codified into a system with exams or syllabi and therefore they are not perceived as technically complex or of a professional standard. It is dance 'by the people', and 'for the people' – offering styles that anyone can learn. The changing status and move to institutionalise Bollywood dance (that happened in the Asian diaspora before it moved to India) carries a discourse of authenticity, power, control and respectability. By offering the fundamentals of the style, the acquisition of a full dance vocabulary, the learning of rhythm, co-ordination and an understanding of body posture and spatial awareness, alongside the training in particular routines for performance, Bollywood is placed on a par with other classical techniques taught in this way (for example ballet, contemporary dance, and Indian dance classical styles such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak).

Control over aesthetic values is at the centre of such developments as well as powerful economic factors and political manoeuvring that brings a certain cultural capital to a dance form viewed as popular culture. This is seen in the work of organisations such as Akademi (the Academy of Indian Dance) set up originally, in 1979, to promote and support the teaching and performance of Indian classical dance in the UK, and that I discuss later. As Honey Kalaria states, her exams and syllabus have been set up, to 'establish, maintain and monitor standards', a way of exerting influence, control and adding what is seen as an 'authenticity'. Additionally, a British academic accreditation is a powerful symbol of such authenticity. Sujata Banerjee writes of an Indian Kathak teacher in Bombay who has found the ISTD Indian classical dance syllabus [\[7\]](#) entirely appropriate for her Indian dance students, remarking on its strengths and adding that 'Indians love examinations and foreign qualifications. The idea of having another piece of paper from a recognised organisation in England is always exciting!' (Mehta, in Banerjee 2002: 55). It is significant to note here that Kalaria who has developed the Bollywood syllabus and accredited exams (mentioned above) is not only a highly successful business woman, but has also recently been awarded an

honorary doctorate in dance by the University of East London, conferring on her a kind of custodianship and authoritative status (as she seems to see it) of Indian film dance [8]. In establishing these modes of authentication for Bollywood dance at her dance school, the form is transferred from a hybrid, glamorised showdance into a valued and respected art form which has cultural presence and cultural capital.

Bollywood at the Proms: between high art and popular culture

Bollywood dance's status in the UK as a genre of dance outside of the film screen was given an extra boost when last summer's BBC Proms programme included a day of Bollywood music (August 16th 2009). Substantial media hype surrounded the dance performances including articles about Kalaria's amateur dancers who were scheduled to perform. Once again the tensions between classical and popular styles of music and dance reared their head. Kalaria appeared on Woman's Hour [9] three days before the concert (along with me as the token academic) and rather hilariously taught dance moves over the radio waves. However, the evening's prom performance did not meet the high expectations set up in the media, and the BBC Proms' blog recorded comments from the audience as follows: 'I was extremely disappointed by the dancers. I understand it must be hard to dance alongside a live singer but they seemed like a bunch of amateurs thrown on stage in Indian outfits and told to move their arms and look co-ordinated'. Another spectator stated, 'We went, and left in the interval...Sound quality was poor, and the dancers under-rehearsed'. Others agreed it was amateurish (www.bbc.co.uk/proms/2009/). Here again we are seeing a disjuncture between the image and fantasy of the film screen and the reality of the 'normal', non-professional bodies in the dance performances, as well as the recurrent tension between 'amateur' and 'professional', and through the exposure of Bollywood music and dance at the Proms, a blurring of the high/low boundaries [10].

It is appropriate here to note Stuart Hall's comment on the changing nature of cultural forms: that it is not the fact that they move up and down the 'cultural escalator' between 'low' and 'high' that is significant. What is noteworthy is to examine 'the forces and relations which sustain the distinction, the difference' in status (Hall 1985:461). Over twenty years ago, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1988) coined the term 'public culture' to move away from such dichotomies and debates around the problematical concepts of 'high' and 'low' (or popular) culture. But this is not to say that the notion of a more *public culture* is without contestation, as there remain tensions 'of class and other interests, often articulated through the production of differences in terms of power relations' (Desai 2004:9) despite a post-colonial climate and the notions of multiculturalism.

Unusually, increased status has been accorded recently to film dance through the work of Akademi, the Academy of Indian Dance in London. Established for over 30 years, this highly respected institution is renowned for its support of the classical forms of Indian dance through its investment in professional dancers, outreach work in schools and in the community, conferences, performances and many other initiatives. In 2009, Akademi hosted a prestigious event titled *Frame by Frame: a Symposium on the Dance of Indian Cinema and its Transition into Bollywood Dancing* (see report, David 2009). Held in a space known for the valuing of high art and culture, London's Royal Opera House, the day celebrated the place of dance in Indian film, drawing celebrities from the media, film and dance worlds and the public, in an interactive, performative presentation. But this was not Akademi's first foray into Bollywood dance. 2003 had seen the production of a huge, site-specific work on London's South Bank called *Escapade* [11] that honoured pop culture and Bollywood dance. Additionally, Akademi has been (quietly) using Bollywood dance in dance workshops for young people for many years. It is only now, ten years into the new millennium and after 30 years of established work, that Akademi sees itself as sufficiently established amongst the funding agencies and respected for its furthering of classical dance to the degree where it can reveal its own commitment to teaching popular cultural forms and popular entertainment.

Teaching Bollywood: tensions and complexities

Whilst there has been some movement towards syllabi and accreditation most local UK Bollywood dance classes, such as the one I currently attend in west London, are fairly casual events. Although several of the participants (the majority non-Asian) have been coming for several years and perform in the biannual showcase, there is no pressure for exams or qualifications, and the hour's class consists entirely (after a few minutes warm-up) of learning a routine to a Bollywood song. After a six month period, there is a performance of the songs and dances in a professional theatre. The dance patterns learned are repeated many times, and a new section added each week. Students are expected to have practised at home, and most do. No technique is taught, and most say that they attend as they love the songs and find the dance fun. In fact it is often the songs that drive the attendance and the majority of the class watch Hindi films. One Asian woman attends another class in her own area, but has decided to come to this class as well specifically to learn 'Zoobi Doobi', her favourite song from the film *the 3 Idiots* (2009). Another non-Asian class member, whose partner is Mauritian Indian, spends time watching Hindi films with him and his family, both in the UK and in Mauritius. As Gopal and Moorti state in their discussion on Indian film music, 'Far from being an additional element to the entertainment on offer, music is the central axis along which desire and identification are calibrated. While integral to the narrative, these sequences circulate autonomously – objects of aesthetic pleasure and promiscuous

reproduction' (Gopal & Moorti, 2008:5). These comments address the concepts of pleasure and desire that are interwoven with identification and reproduction – all elements embedded in both the viewing of the films and the reproduction in the dancing bodies. A couple of students in the class practise their movements to the song on YouTube, underlining how accessible the music, film and dance is. Many young Asians post video clips of themselves dancing to Bollywood songs, alone at home and in group performances. These choreographies include amateur reproductions of film choreographies as well as creative versions of songs in films. Interestingly, the choreography set to the song 'Chaliya' from the 2008 film *Tashan* that is taught in my class is very different to the sexualised movements danced to the song in the film, reflecting the fact that the classes cater to both adults and children, and the teacher's own classical dance background and upper caste family ties. Perhaps these highly fantasised moves do not work on amateur, 'normal', real world bodies nor in the environment of a general class where there are young people as well as adults? [\[12\]](#) Despite the mix of disco, jazz, contemporary and hip-hop elements in her Bollywood style, this teacher retains a base of classical dance movements that, as she sees it, brings more 'elegance and grace' to the genre, as she clarifies below. Here we see adaptive strategies at work that reposition the more 'vulgar' and provocative moves, replacing them with choreographies that provide a more acceptable face of Indian culture for the diasporic audiences.

Despite assertions informed by post-modern theory (Gilroy 1987, Hall 1985, Hebdige 1979) that distinctions between high and popular culture are no longer recognised, the tensions between popular entertainment and classical forms do remain. In an interview with the teacher of this local weekend class, she confides that her background is strictly classical – she trained and performed professionally in the classical Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam – and her academic family showed disdain for popular forms of music and dance. But as she told me, 'The reality is that there is no real demand for classical. I have more offers than I have time for Bollywood. Bollywood markets me; I don't have to market it!' Yet, she added, 'A small part of me doesn't see myself as a Bollywood teacher. It's a border that I keep crossing and uncrossing' (interview February 2010). When first asked to teach Bollywood, she worked on the steps at home, behind closed doors and allowed no-one to see her [\[13\]](#). She is still reluctant to have photos taken of her teaching Bollywood in class. But, she also added that, 'It's so freeing, so fabulous' as she loves the beat and the energy of the music. Her choreography is based on classical moves which she makes looser and more 'funky' (her word), as well as additions from salsa, belly dancing and Bhangra [\[14\]](#). She creates the moves to the words and the emotion of the song. 'Bollywood works better when you draw on classical and you use it as a core. Then you can add hip hop and more fun things' she stated. She is also an avid consumer of Bollywood films and wryly added that she was making up for lost time, after years when she was not allowed to watch them.

Her comments echo those of other classical teachers I have interviewed who regret the lack of interest in the classical dance forms of Bharatanatyam and Kathak and feel they have to compromise by teaching filmi dance. One Bharatanatyam teacher described having to change her style, 'not completely but to a certain extent because of more interest in Bollywood style' (interview June 2003). An advert on the Facebook site of Professional Dancers in London flagged the need for a teacher for an 'Indian/Bollywood dance workshop', adding in brackets to potential teachers, 'Please note, this is a fun session so you don't need to be an expert at the style' (posted 8.3.10). Another dance teacher ruefully commented to me, 'Even the dinner ladies in one school are teaching dance' (interview February 2002). These comments emphasise the tension between the classical and the popular dance genres, where hard work and commitment of time and energy is expected for training in a classical style. This contrasts with the notion that anyone can learn or teach filmi dance styles (see David, 2007 for further discussion), reinforcing common misconceptions about high and low culture, where in a practice considered popular or of low status, anyone can teach without any training. Amateur classes catering to the general untrained public and diasporic body are perhaps some way behind the more marked transformation of dance on screen in Indian film, where the main thrust is now on pure entertainment and overtly sexualised bodies. These classes focus on story-telling through gestures in the dance, which until recently has dominated film song and dance, but is no longer such a key feature, as the dance moves themselves lead the way. Choreographer Farah Khan has stated that it is 'so boring and old-fashioned' (talk by Nasreen Munni Kabir at Akademi's Bollywood conference, 2009) to match the movements to the words. Yet expression of the words of a song using explicit bodily gestures (primarily hands and facial articulation) remains a characteristic of classical Indian dance, such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak. The tension between the classical styles and the hybrid Bollywood form is articulated by dancer and film-maker Sangita Shresthova, who talks about her exploration into what she calls, 'Bolly-natyam':

Today, I have a dialogue with both bharatanyam and Bollywood dance. On some days, I believe a direct comparison between the two forms is impossible. Bollywood titillates and entertains. It is the language of parties and seduction... Sometimes, however, I can see how these disparate styles collide in unexpected, and yet illuminating, ways. These moments of collision define my current work. (Shresthova, 2010:8)

Comments from teachers and dancers quoted above emphasise the gap between the amateur Bollywood dancer and the professional choreographies and performers in film, as well as indicating the perceived disparity between classical and popular forms of dance. The views of these classically trained teachers and those wishing to market Bollywood classes move along different trajectories, each wishing to invest cultural capital in their own dance

genres, and using notions of authenticity, respectability and control of aesthetics (as discussed earlier) to argue their points.

Performing Bollywood: desire and fantasy

There is certainly a distinct bifurcation between the bodies and the movements on professional display – glamorised, lean, beautiful and excessively groomed - to those ‘more normal’ bodies in the dance centres, dance clubs and fitness spaces. But what else is offered by these Bollywood classes that bridges the cultural and global gap between glittering screen and weekly keep-fit events, especially to those ardent viewers of Bollywood films? Honey’s Dance Academy runs, in tandem with the dance classes, a casting agency offering auditions for films, TV work and other glamorous dancing jobs, and asking potential students on its website, ‘Do *you* have the Bollywood factor? Lists of films and shows that employ ex-students from Honey’s Academy adorn the site. Advertised also on the London Asian E-Guide, the headline runs, ‘Honey’s dance Academy launches search for new Bollywood stars. X-factor style audition process’ (12th January 2010) [15]. Other UK Bollywood dance schools also market themselves as potential agents for media work, although when scrutinised, most performances are at weddings, celebrations and corporate events, even hen parties, hardly the glamorised world or finance of Bollywood film. On stages at Leicester’s Asian Mela festival, young girls perform their own choreographies of Bollywood songs. With specially braided hair, make-up and colourful upbeat costumes, they were filmed as they danced by a crew from the local TV company. For a short while and on a small scale they enjoyed playing the part of Leicester celebrities – the local face of a global phenomenon. When I talked to them, all the girls were regular and enthusiastic consumers of Bollywood DVDs (particularly those featuring male star Shah Rukh Khan, for example), and their dance moves came directly from the films they had watched. This appears to be more the desi or diasporic dream, fuelled by the global hegemony of glamorised popular film culture, which is found also in the dominant culture of the UK.

In the professional dance world of Bollywood, pale skins, athletic prowess, and MTV experience are now the order of the day. Many young Asians in the UK see the learning of Hindi film dance as a possible entry into the glamorous world of the Bollywood film star – ambitions fuelled by TV programmes such as *Bollywood Star* (2004), *The X Factor* (2004-10) and *Britain’s Got Talent* (2007-10) [16]– but which are of course, rarely achieved. Casting adverts and news updates on film parts on Honey Kalaria’s Bollywood dance website (referred to earlier) allow such diasporic dreams to be maintained. For Asian youth raised on a visual diet of Bollywood films, the dance and song numbers offer expressive, fun, glamorous, modern and cosmopolitan images that contrast sharply with their local, and in

many cases, perhaps more traditional and mundane existences in working and middle class environments. Ashley Dawson describes how:

It is the moments of melodic fantasy embedded in Hindi film, the song and dance routines which offer these condensed images of reconciliation, that predominantly working class youths in Britain are appropriating in order to express the conflicting hopes and fear that characterize their own cosmopolitan identities. (Dawson, 2005:163)

One teenage Asian Bollywood dance performer that I filmed during my research at the Leicester Mela [17] was confident that her dance ability would give her entry into the Bollywood dance film world, a world echoed in a British national newspaper feature with the news that a sixteen- year old British Asian London school girl had been offered a main part in the Bollywood film *Zaroorat*. The journalists described her story as a 'fairytale good luck story that thousands of British Asians dream of but which none has managed to achieve' (Meo & Malvern, 2004: 3). At the Mela, the girl's dance moves were self-taught, emerging out of years of avid film watching, illustrating again the direct relationship between the visual consumption of Bollywood films and the easy performativity of Hindi dance. For a select few (such as the girl cited in the newspaper above and those, for example, flagged on Honey Kalaria's website), professional careers will beckon, removing them from the world of film dance spectator and amateur performer to glamorous careers on stage or on celluloid.

Yet this imagined and fantasised dancing body is not necessarily just an Asian diasporic phenomenon. As has been noted by several commentators, dance in Bollywood films is a site of 'temporary permission' (Prasad 1998, Shresthova 2008) which provides for the viewer or dancer (diasporic Asian or non-Asian) a hidden private space where transgression, expression and permissiveness are located. Dudrah in particular examines the notion that the song and dance film sequences 'open up a space for other desires and fantasies' (Gopal & Moorti 2008: 45) in his research in UK gay and lesbian Asian nightclubs. In London, one non-Asian amateur Bollywood dancer (aged 40) talking about her class participation and performance at the class show stated, 'I love it because when I dance, it's like having a dream of me dancing, in my head. I couldn't watch myself in a mirror or on film, as it would shatter that dream. I have no grace or rhythm' (interview, July 2010). In her imagination, as she dances she is as glamorous, as sexy and as beautiful as the Asian female film stars, despite her white ethnicity and lack of dance training. Each weekend, she watches Bollywood films at the local Indian multiplex with mainly Indian friends, as well as viewing some classics repeatedly at home. I am reminded here of Appadurai's notion of the 'pleasure of agency' (1996:111) where bodily pleasure is gained not only through physical participation but also through viewing, as nostalgia and fantasy are drawn together in the imaginative

process. Appadurai cites the example of Indian men and the game of cricket, stating, 'the pleasure of viewing cricket for the Indian male, as with virtually no other sport, is rooted in the bodily pleasure of playing, or imagining playing, cricket' (ibid). In the case of the dance student/ film viewer mentioned above, there is pleasure in the imagined (and real) dancing, as well as the appeal of the pure visual spectacle of film watching. Her engagement with the films, she informs me, is not only with the song and dance sequences, but also with the humour, the fun and the sheer escapist entertainment. The interviewee's participation in the dance class, which she has attended for 5-6 years, is part of her fascination, her own fantasy, and her love of the entertainment genre. Additionally, she speaks of her fascination with the complicities of the audiences and the film actors and directors:

Everyone knows it's not real – actors know it, directors know it and the audience knows it. So you do suspend belief and then it has a reality. There is sense of complete escapism – nothing makes sense but it all works out in the end. (Interview, July 2010)

This point is also stressed by Lalitha Gopalan, writing that 'film-makers and viewers share complicity' and noting that Bollywood is 'a cinema that can confidently parody its own conditions of production' (2002:2), using ironic posturing.

Engaged spectatorship

Watching a Bollywood film in the UK (as in India or elsewhere) is not usually a quiet or passive affair, as the audience's active engagement with the dialogue, the characters, the jokes, the songs and dances is an essential aspect of the whole experience, creating for most viewers a rich social, nostalgic and entertaining event. The films address both resident and diasporic Indians who are habituated to the elements of the film, as cultural insiders of the world of commercial Hindi cinema. In showings in the UK, we can find a certain cultural competence at play here, where the layered filmic references are appreciated by the diasporic audience – references that allude to past hit films, to previous titles of songs, to behavioural codes, to religious practices and to Hollywood films (for example to *Grease* (1978) and *Matrix* (1999)) in *Main Hoon Na* (2004). Many of my interviews show that British white spectators of Bollywood films are familiar with general filmic and Asian cultural references, despite their lack of Hindi. Raminder Kaur notes that production of meaning is not only dependant on the film story but also the 'relationship with the spectator and his/her personal histories and experiences of film viewing' (2005: 321).

In the West the participative audience is the rarity with cinema, a prominent example being the *Rocky Horror Show* (1975) that has become known for this exceptionalism through its ritual, cult-like performative responses from the audiences [18]. By contrast this performative mode of viewing is more common in audiences for Bollywood films, with the custom of multiple viewings only increasing such an embodied, active engagement with the film. Audiences will call out key lines in advance, will accompany the songs, as well as talking and discussing the film throughout its showing time. In this way, the audience collaborates with events and the narrative on the screen, creating an almost ritual-like, performance dimension (Turner, 2006 [1988]). Lakshmi Srinivas (2002) describes this performative relationship with the film with particular reference to repeated viewings by audiences in India:

Repeat viewing facilitates the participatory and interactive style which Indian audiences adopt in their engagement with popular cinema. Repeaters have had time to form a relationship with the characters and talk back at the screen, sing along with the soundtrack. They loudly 'predict' what will happen next or carry on a conversation with a character responding to each line of dialogue with their own improvised dialogue. Repeaters applaud and cheer seconds before the occurrence of an event on-screen and provide sound effects which preview the scene for other viewers and make sense to first-timers only after the scene has shifted. A community atmosphere emerges in the theatre. (Srinivas, 2002:168)

Srinivas draws a sharp distinction between the social, engaged and often noisy responses of an Indian audience watching Hindi popular films and the quieter, concentrated listening expected in film showings to western audiences, noting that for Indian audiences in Bangalore, 'movie-going was never constructed as a solitary act' (ibid:161). The main focus is on the socialising between family and friends and the overt appreciation (or not) of the film. Shakuntala Banaji in her work on audience reception of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) questions whether anthropological notions of insider/outsider are relevant in this context, asking, 'Are some re/viewers more likely to judge the visual and other cinematic pleasures offered by the film positively because of the particular configurations of knowledge and identity?' (Banaji 2010:online), concluding that there is a range of ways of being an insider or an outsider that creates complex nuances of responses as we have seen in the various British Asian and non-Asian participants of the dance classes and in the film-going audiences.

Concluding remarks

I would like to return here to the discussion of fantasy space, the dancing body and the notion

of pleasure that has been presented here as belonging to the domain of viewership of Bollywood films. We have seen how the engagement in film dance can be polysemic - on one level, the very act of viewing is an engaged one – it is often pleasurable and can also be performative; on another level, viewers may enact that pleasure/fantasy through the physical enactment of dancing, at home or in a class. As Dudrah notes [\[19\]](#),

Bollywood song and dance is a central node of pleasure...pleasure inheres in the audience's ability to use its cultural capital to read, partake, and identify with particular forms of popular culture. The audience's familiarity with the text's codes and conventions contributes to an aesthetic, emotional, and in the case of dance, a physical enjoyment of the form. (Dudrah, 2008:300)

There is no doubt that the gap between the professional, glamourised world of Bollywood dance on screen and its re-enactment in classes, homes and social events provides a space for diasporic (and non-Asian) desires and for imagined longings – desires that are inscribed onto the bodies in varying ways and that appear in different forms across the global Bollywood networks and longings that speak of glamour, glitz and dreams of fame. The appearance of Bollywood dance classes in the UK before their emergence in India reflects the presence of a substantial UK Asian diasporic community, as well as the growing interest in Bollywood by non-Asian Britains. The changing status of the dance form itself is allowing those dreams to be created and fulfilled for a lucky few (that is, those who are well-connected and those who have outstanding talent) [\[20\]](#) as financial investment and clever marketing attract wider audiences and the Bollywood global machine moves on at ever-increasing speed. In both India and in the diaspora, new sets of meanings particular to every location are being found in the song and dance sequences in films and in their reproduction off-screen – sets of meanings that articulate identity, longing and pure enjoyment for viewers and dancers alike.

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Notes

[1] Compare Laura U. Marks' work on the phenomenological notion of embodied spectatorship of film audiences (Marks, 2002).

[2] As both the watching of Bollywood films and participation in Bollywood dance classes are now part of a global phenomenon, it is not only those of Asian ethnicity who are of interest in this research. However, due to limitations of space and time, the question of non-Asian involvement is only partially addressed here and is certainly an area warranting further future research.

[3] There are 10 National Dance Agencies and over 30 Regional Dance Agencies funded by the Arts Council, although this system is currently under review. (Burns, S. & S. Harrison, *Dance Mapping Report*, 2009).

[4] These two London public dance studios offer a wide range of classes and dance genres for all abilities and all ages. See their websites at: www.pineapple.uk.com and www.danceattic.com

[5] Dance Exchange in Birmingham describes their Bollywood Bhangra class as 'An energetic Indian contemporary dance class set to the latest pop, classical and Bhangra music'; at Dance Base, the National Centre for Dance in Scotland, their 'Bollylicious' class is offered as 'something new and different...add a sassy, sexy edge with a bit of hip hop thrown in'. The classes at Dance City, in Newcastle are about 'storytelling, fantasy and glamour' and in Leeds, at Yorkshire Dance, the Bollywood session offers 'a glamorous mix of Eastern and Western dance styles with added Indian spice...Escape from reality into the dream world of Bollywood and learn to dance like the movie stars'.

[6] Launched in May 2010, *Just Jhoom!* offers Bollywood dance classes for all levels of dance experience all over the UK. Dancer Shalini Bhalla, the director, in conjunction with a yoga teacher and a fitness instructor, has developed an accredited course for training Bollywood teachers, the first of its kind in the UK. The course was submitted to the Sector Skills Council for Active Leisure, Fitness and Wellbeing and is now registered with the Register for Exercise Professionals.

[7] The Kathak and Bharatanatyam ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing) dance syllabi were initiated in 1998 after several years of consultation with South Asian dance institutions. Although successful, it is not the only exam system used in the UK for Indian dance. See Gorringer 2003 for more details.

[8] Kalaria has also been a choreographer on *Britain's Got Talent*.

[9] BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour, August 13th 2009. See details at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/01/2009_32_thu.shtml

[10] The title of the Sunday Proms special was 'Indian Voices' and featured a classical concert in the morning and a Bollywood concert in the evening. The Independent's reviewer, Arifa Akbar did not enjoy the dancing, stating, 'But the motley dance troupe, the Honey Dance academy, some of who looked like buxom Bond girls, did little to improve the show's overall polish. Many moved out of synch and threatened, at a few comical junctures, to turn the performance into a campy Peter Seller's sketch.' (Akbar, 2009).

[11] A description of Akademi's *Escapade* from their website: 'Showcasing the often 'invisible' community and education work that has earned Akademi its respected reputation, *Escapade* was an exuberant tribute to the democratic resilience of pop culture in the UK. Urban, British, South Asian cool: for two nights, Bollywood kitsch went art-house on London's South Bank with a triumphant, bootylicious bang'. It was directed by Keith Khan and conceived of by Mira Kaushik. (www.akademi.co.uk/productions/escapade.php)

[12] It is significant to note here that the dancing body as it appears on screen is often a highly constructed one (see Dodds, 2001). It can be shown as versatile and virtuosic through cutting and editing. Using close-ups, views of muscles, facial expressions and nuances of movement that cannot normally be seen are displayed and mistakes can be edited out. Images can be speeded up, slowed down and moves can be created that transcend the limits of the physical body. Additionally, make-up and costumes can be adjusted and sweat mopped up.

[13] Another Asian interviewee also spoke of dancing at home using steps she had learnt from the films, with her 13 year old daughter 'but only when no-one else is around' (interview August 2010). Her daughter watches films with her at home and they go as a family to the local multiplex to watch. Her daughter attends Bollywood classes.

[14] Bhangra is a term referring to folk music and dance from the Punjab, and more specifically a lively male dance celebrating the harvest, characterised 'by a distinctive percussive rhythm usually played on traditional drums such as tumbi or dholak' (Hyder 2004:70).

[15] Auditions were held at a London hotel in two stages: first a chance to compete in the UK Bollywood Dance Championship, and then the possibility to win a place in a 'major Bollywood film'. See <http://www.londonasianguide.co.uk/703/>

[16] The Bollywood dance group 'Threebee' managed to get through to the semi-finals of the Series 4 run of Channel 4's *Britain's Got Talent* (2010).

[17] Part of a three-year research project examining dance and identity in selected British South Asian groups.

[18] Turner (2006: 130) describes how audience members watching the cult movie *The Rocky Horror Show* (1975) dress up, sing along, dance and participate in the dialogue. They know the film through repeated viewings and collaborate in its showing, as they have no need to wait for the narrative to develop. It is performance event - in conjunction with the screening of the film.

[19] Dudrah is currently working on a notion of 'haptic urban ethnoscares' (2010) where he uses theoretical film approaches by Gilles Deleuze (2005) and Laura U. Marks (2002) to analyse the phenomenological response to viewing film. He notes how in the looking at a film, we are in fact, enacting a kind of touching. We are seeing, but not through the eyes – a type of multi-sensory visuality.

[20] The young girl featured in the Times article (4.2.04) lived in the wealthy area of Knightsbridge, London and her mother was a former Bollywood actress-turned-scriptwriter. Others have won dance competitions organised by casting agents or have gone through London stage schools such as Sylvia Young.

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