

**Nationalism, Film and Music:  
A reading of the early films of Raj Kapoor**

Abstract

This paper examines the early films of the influential Indian actor / director, Raj Kapoor. Through a close reading of key songs in those films, it offers a critical vision for the role of cinema in the project of nationalism.

Key words: Bollywood, Music, Nationalism, Raj Kapoor

## Nationalism, Film and Music: A reading of the early films of Raj Kapoor<sup>i</sup>

Bollywood, the Hollywood inspired name for Bombay's film industry occasionally surfaces in the constantly brewing pot of American popular culture: A Hip-Hop video, fashion styles inspired by an Indian/Bollywood chic, and stand-alone texts like the musical, *Bombay Dreams*. This spreading recognition has begun to be reflected in the academy with a stream of scholarly books and essays engaging with Bollywood as an important site of cultural production. With the development of a (recent) canon, an argument can be made for the (emerging) field of "Bollywood Studies."

### Nationalism and Bollywood

Panniker (2002) in an important essay centers the role of culture in the project of Indian Nationalism.<sup>ii</sup> He argues that "culture is of crucial importance in defining the nation and in the making of national sentiment...the relationship between culture and nationalism is complex, implicated in the entire process of realizing the nation" (533). Nationalism as a discourse is marked by some common elements: a narrative account of self-identification characterized by a set of symbols (flags, totems, languages), rituals (anthems), and historical circumstances (from 1940's to the 1960's). Nationalism arises from (and in the process of) the removal of direct colonial control of European powers to a post-colonial era marked by the "birth" of nation-states. Since nationalism emerges out of the same discursive space as colonialism (rather than functioning in some prior indigenous essence) the kinds of cultural practice that it gives birth to reflects the tensions in the process of this political-cultural-social transfer. This transfer is marked fundamentally by a process of cultural (and mediated) reconstruction, or what can be called the national imagination.

I want to focus on the national imagination of Bollywood cinema. As Mishra puts it “Bombay cinema is self-consciously about representing, in the context of a multicultural and multiethnic India, the various disaggregated strands of the nation-state, the political, social and the cultural (Mishra, 2002, 65). In doing so, “an average normal Bombay film has to be to the extent possible everything to everyone. It has to cut across the myriad ethnicities and lifestyles of India and even of the world that impinges on India. The popular film is lowbrow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity. Studying popular film is studying Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare” (Nandy, 1998, 6). In sum, a beginning point (and assumption) in the analysis to follow is that “Hindi cinema is a virtual teleprompter for reading the script called the nation” (Viridi, 2003, 7).

I will discuss an early “star-text” (Viridi, 2003, 61) of Indian cinema, Raj Kapoor, focusing on songs from two of his films, *Aawara* (The Vagabond, 1951) and *Shree 420* (The Cheat, 1955) as they reflect ideas/anxieties about national identity in the immediacy of the post-independence period.

### Framing Bollywood

Perhaps the most common elements of a Bollywood film are those of a hybrid genre—usually termed Masala. In the broadest sense then, a Masala film is potpourri of elements—music, romance, action, drama designed to appeal to the broadest possible public (Ganti, 2004, 139). In this sense, the Masala film is structurally amorphous drawing inspiration from local, regional, national and transnational spaces/texts as it works through its two main elements—melodrama and musicals.

Melodrama in the case of Bollywood is predicated around “a narrative form characterized by the sharp delineation of good and evil, the use of coincidence, an excess of emotion, and the privileging of moral conflicts over psychological ones... Hindi films present a

moral universe, the disruption of which initiates narrative action” (Ganti, 2004, 138). The narrative is framed through the motives, actions and backgrounds of the films “heroes,” “heroines” and “villains” (rather than specific occupational or character driven bases for the actors). Gopalan (2002) argues that the Bollywood film has “certain conventions unique to Indian cinema, a constellation of interruptions (which) allows us to consider national styles of film-making (3, original emphasis). The narrative of the story is often temporally interrupted with flashbacks; the film itself is longer than the western standard of 165 minutes, the narrative interrupted with elaborate song (and dances), that have no regard for spatial continuity (in one song, the scene may move between a Bavarian village, the Eiffel tower Paris, Times square in New York and various locales in India). Older Bollywood films have an “interval” in the middle of the film, where the audience takes a break for tea, samosas and pakodas (typical Indian snacks). “The interval is a crucial punctuatory device, producing two opening and closing sequences and structuring narrative expectation, development and resolution” (Ganti, 2004, 139).

The musicals (song and dance number) are an important part of the industry, with their own star system—the playback singers, music directors, composers, lyricists and recordists (Pendakur, 2003, 124). Unlike Hollywood, the music from a film is often released before the film and on the giant cinema hoardings that dominate urban public space in India the music director is often given equal importance to the director of the film (ibid, 126).<sup>iii</sup> The actors never sing their songs allowing the playback singers to reflect the narrative premise of the moment—usually the expression of emotion. The film song ranges across the emotive spectrum often in tandem with the playback singer. Each playback singer has an auteurial signature. The important playback singers in Raj Kapoor era were Mukesh, whose sonic construct was ruminative and melancholy; R.D. Burman on the boisterous; Lata Mangeshkar

emphasizing the poetic and philosophical and her sister, Asha Bhosle the up-tempo and “modern.”

Hindi films songs draw on a number of influences—folk, classical, regional, national and transnational. “Music directors rearrange motifs from across India and elsewhere—1940’s swing, African drumming, Algerian Rai, wailing, Latin salsa. Indian traditional instruments such as tabla, dholak, harmonium, tambura, sitar, sarod and sarangi are employed alongside clarinets, violins, electric guitar, xylophones and congas” (Pendakur, 2003, 126).

Hindi film songs are also crucial in that they speak directly to the role of emotion in the assembling of identity, along a range of “national” emotions. Pendukar suggests that it “may not be an exaggeration to state that the central government failed to establish Hindi as the national link language, but the Bombay film industry succeeded in that effort by popularizing Urdu-Hindi film songs all over the country” (2003, 139). Sarrazin (2008) suggest that songs are a critical element of the “message” of a film. As she puts it, “song lyrics (are a) logical and rich source for cultural and emotional analysis (and) few expressive mediums convey more information than that of sound, where centuries of historical and cultural resonance can be embedded in a single pitch, melody or rhythmic cycle, and most specifically, vocal and instrumental timbres. Film songs, therefore, are in unique positions to aurally illustrate cultural concepts such as emotion and heart to their audiences, relying on pre-composed concepts of emotional sentiment and common codes of musical understanding” (2008, 1).

Elements of melodrama and musicals blend together in a distinct way to define the Masala film. “Melodrama foregrounds language, as it makes all feelings exterior, with the characters verbalizing their feelings and creating discourses on their emotions. One of the key places for an outpouring of feeling is the song lyric, where visuals and language are simultaneously fore grounded. This also applies to the dialogues... which are a major pleasure

for movie fans who relish their grandiloquent statements frequently by learning chunks by heart” (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, 29).

This blend of elements creates what Vasudevan has called “a cinema of attractions” (quoted in Dwyer and Patel, 2002, 30), a kind of “exhibitionist cinema which include the sets and costumes, the song and dance sequences, comedic interludes and action sequences, grand dialogue and special effects—the cumulative effect being akin to a cinema which popular traditions such as the fairground and the carnival meet an avant-garde subversion” (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, 30). Gopalan uses the idea of “pleasure” as a key component in her theory of Bollywood as a “cinema of interruptions.” She uses the analogy of sexual performance, specifically coitus interruptus, to evoke the experience of watching a Bollywood film, a site where state film policy and the post-colonial audience intersects. She concludes “just as continuity in classical Hollywood narrative offers us both pleasure and anger, in this cinema too, we find pleasures in these interruptions and not despite them. Indian cinema is marked by interrupted pleasures (Gopalan, 2002, 21; original emphasis).

In sum, what Bollywood configures is a specific set of cultural predicates: Populism, fantasy, melodrama and a relentless inter-textuality. I now turn to an examination of what Virdi (2003) calls “Hindi cinema’s own agenda—imagining a unified India” focusing on one major “hero “in Indian cinema—Raj Kapoor.

Raj Kapoor<sup>iv</sup>

Time Magazine, called Raj Kapoor, “the primal star of Indian cinema...to most of the planet, Raj Kapoor was India in all its vitality, humanity and poignancy.” An actor, director, producer, nicknamed “the showman of Hindi cinema” by film magazines and the celebrity media industry in India “was young and bursting with creative energies at the time when the

Indian nation-state was born on 15 August 1947. In some ways the enterprise of Kapoor and the Indian project ran parallel. The first decade of his work, intense and hopeful culminated in *Jis Desh Me Ganga Behti Hai* (This country, where the Ganges flows). Twenty-five years later, fatigued and jaded, he made another film using the same metaphor and called it *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Ram, your Ganges is soiled). During the same period, the new Indian nation had also journeyed from Nehru to Indira Gandhi's assassination and growing political and social violence" (Bakshi, 1998, 94).

While Raj Kapoor can be evaluated as a stand-alone director, I want to focus on his early work as an actor, where his identity as a tramp (a re-working of the Charlie Chaplin project<sup>v</sup>) is key to understanding Bollywood's imagination of the early Indian nation. I focus on two pivotal texts (the films *Aawara* and *Shree 420*),

#### *Aawara* (The Vagabond, 1951)

The narrative topology of Raj Kapoor's films can be read as a "successful" mediation/meditation of the tradition/modernity dichotomy, through its elaboration of a nationalist aesthetic that was simultaneously western and Indian—his work is marked fundamentally by a reflexivity common to modernity. This is manifest symbolically in the character of the "tramp" intimately tied in western cinema with Charlie Chaplin and in the Indian imagination with Raj Kapoor.

In its thematic, *Aawara* was more than a nature and nurture story. India became independent in 1947, and *Aawara* celebrated/critiqued the enormous hope and ambivalence of the liminality of the post-colonial moment where both the immediacy of self-discovery and the germination of a new national definition was in-progress. Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, often celebrated as a masterly rendition of this collective national

moment, is of course a facsimile, a contemporary (and post-modern) rendition of the moment of independence. The films *Aawara* and *Shree 420* on the other hand, made shortly after independence, resonate with the immediacy of the moment. The themes of the film *Aawara* resemble those of a culture-in-transition and a nation-in-formation. *Aawara*, the vagabond is literally, a story about the possibility of reinvention. As Nagaraj puts it, “Kapoor was an enthusiastic modernist who endorsed the revolt of the young against stifling traditions; for him, the best creative space was in the values created by modernity. He celebrated the arrival of the new and nurtured a profound fear of the old (2006, 91). The narrative vehicle that he chose to make this transition from tradition to modernity was “love”—defined in broad, humanistic terms (but also profoundly restrictive in its overall paternalism). Love is the key to the relationship between Raju and Rita, working against the matrix of family and communal expectations and embracing the idea of a new “free” (another meaning of the word *Aawara*) nation. *Aawara* has a very direct cinematic message about national identity: “The traditionalists, those opposed to love, are washed away in the magical flood of song and dance; it is the vibrant lyricality of the victor. Kapoor had confidence in history, the forces of modernity over other life-styles (Nagaraj, 2006, 96).

At the heart of the film is a song, *Aawara Hoon* (literally, “I am a vagabond” but can be also translated as “I am free”). The song/film became an enormous hit in the Indian subcontinent, the U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe, China (Chairman Mao singled it out as his favorite film/song), the Middle East and Africa (Ganti, 2004, 99). *Aawara Hoon* is that rarest of cultural texts, an early example of a contra-flow, its impact all the more remarkable given a (just born) post-colonial world of dominance by colonial (western) media and the paucity (or in many nations, the complete lack of) of a media infrastructure. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that India entered into the consciousness of many parts of the post-colonial world



through people watching, singing and dancing to the songs of Raj Kapoor, the Indian Charlie Chaplin.

Aawara Hoon is a complex, multilayered and rich text held together by simple visual progression, that of Raj Kapoor walking (skipping, running) jauntily through a number of paradigmatic settings—a street scene, riding a truck and finally a (poor) urban settlement or basti. The sequence begins with an (unusually long) musical introduction to the refrain of the song (Aawara Hoon) setting the mood, which is simultaneously soothing and intoxicating where Kapoor is seen as the merry vagabond, swinging and lightly dancing through the upscale street as he picks the pockets of two establishment figures—an Indian Seth (businessman/moneylender) wearing the diacritical signs of nativism (he is attired in a topi and dhoti) and a nattily attired Indian gentleman (mimicking the style of the British gentleman). Kapoor himself is dressed in Chaplinesque attire, pants riding high, jacket too tight, cap askew and frequently doffed. Shot composition and mis-en-scene in the song speak directly to a literal/historical intersection—that of tradition and modernity; autonomy and dependence; a can-do spirit versus an acceptance of fate. I tracked the semantic/visual progression of the song/story focusing on four scenes.

The opening scene of the song is a study in subtlety—a close up of mulling feet, rapidly fading in and out of focus; working through a set of double exposures and then finally settling on the shuffling, jouissance of Kapoor as he moves humming through the upscale neighborhood; he bumps into an old Seth, relieves him of a gold chain (with a large watch attached to it). He swings the watch merrily and sees that an Indian gentleman in a three-piece suit and bowler hat (quintessentially British) is watching him with a fatuous, foolish expression, clearly enjoying/admiring the attitude of the vagabond. Kapoor catches his eye and sidles up. Seeing him advance, the gentleman panics and runs away, but not before

Kapoor has relieved him of his wallet. The camera cuts to the old Seth, returning to the scene having discovered that his gold watch has disappeared. Kapoor runs away with Chaplinesque urgency. This opening scene is rhetorically direct—the vagabond is marked neither by his vagrancy or his outsider status as by a sense of quiet certainty, a sense of well-being and a persistent mocking of the establishment figures, who are presented through a comedic/critical representation of their status. The long musical introduction and the refrain of the song, Aawara Hoon repeatedly sung is an incantation, a key to the mythic role of this film. Additionally, the voice of the singer, Mukesh is intimately tied to the textual presence of Kapoor. Unmatched by any other singer after him, Mukesh’s voice is a perfect mix of the pleasurable and the profound, a weighty awareness of the changing world, yet effervescent. It is a voice that speaks intimately to the post-colonial condition—an understanding of a world coming undone, yet containing within it an ability for re-birth. If ever there was a voice that spoke to both certitude and loss; tradition and imagination, it is the voice of Mukesh. The lyrics of the song’s refrain (sung in this section of the song) “aware hon., aware hon.” (I am a vagabond) followed by “garish mien hon., adman ka Tara hon.” (I am out of luck and a star in the sky) reflects this thematic—by being simultaneously without luck and a star in the sky. In sum, the opening scene speaks to the condition of the tramp’s personal fate and that of a nation—struggling in the aftermath of a brutal, violent partition of India (into the nations of India and Pakistan) while engaging with the broad opportunity and promise of a new nation.

In the second scene Kapoor runs away from the Seth who is chasing him. He runs into a man on a bicycle, grabs the cycle from him and pushes it and runs alongside it, finally jumping onto it. The pacing is a series of fast-forwarded edits. The man runs after him as he cycles away. The street itself is a contrast to the first scene—a middle class neighborhood without any cars or pedestrians. Kapoor cycles alongside a truck carrying three young women, dressed as casual

day laborers (from a rural background), and hangs onto the side of truck (this is a common practice in India, where speeds are slow and holding onto a passing truck is an easy way to get somewhere without the hard work!). He then proceeds to leap into the truck. The three women alternately flirt and rebuff him while dancing to the tune of the song. Kapoor sings of “having no home, no family life and no community,” continuing with “he has nobody’s love but belongs to the unknown.” He falls/is pushed off the truck onto the road. He gets up, holding his hurt back, but keeps smiling, bowing and doffing his hat to the three women as the truck disappears. Reading this scene, there are two immediate referents that speak to the moment’s liminality, its gendered and class structure—women made up (and still make up) the bulk of India’s construction laborers, carrying heavy loads of rock, sand and cement, literally building the “temples of new India” (then prime minister’s Jawaharlal Nehru’s expression for modern India’s dams and factories). Kapoor hitches a ride on this journey, traveling with these laborers as they (presumably) ride to the next construction site. His falling off/being thrown off this real/rhetorical journey of national reconstruction displays both the ambivalence of this journey for the new urban migrants and a sense of opportunity presented/lost/ critiqued by the vagabond. While the scene refers to the role of labor in the enterprise of nationhood, the reference to love at the end of the verse, signals an important direction in Kapoor’s vision for the hero (and nation’s) journey, the possibility of “love” as an agent of personal/national reconstruction. It is a theme as I have suggested that is at the heart of a broader, humanistic vision in all of Kapoor’s early films.

In the third scene Kapoor walks away from the truck and enters a street scene/urban neighborhood or basti. He walks through a jostling crowd of children, vendors and men milling around singing, “I sing songs of happiness even though my heart is full of wounds.” He walks up to half a dozen women squatting cleaning plates by a public tap as they smile and nod in

assent to the song. This scene is a continuation of the discourses of labor, urban migration and the dramatically (changing) landscape of post-independence India marked by partition, migration and changing religious/ethnic/gender dynamics. This scene is a direct ethnographic statement of this moment of modernity—the pain of leaving the old, and the danger of the new. It is a moment, enumerated throughout all of Kapoor’s early films—the weight of cultural disjunction, the idea of exile and reinvention, in an earlier era, marked not by transnational movement but by wide-spread rural-urban migration as agrarian societies deal with the realities of industrialization and modernity in the post-colonial context.

In the fourth scene, he picks up a naked (male) child and simultaneously sings the first word of the last verse— “dunia” (or world). The symbolic reference is clearly over determined (child/world/nation) with the nakedness itself a diacritical sign—representing invention (providing clothing), and a critique of the existing social formation (nakedness and the poverty of the nation). He picks up a second, smaller child, (also naked and male) and sings of the brutal nakedness of the (collective) national moment— “I am pierced by the arrow of fate (destiny).” He swings the children joyfully, signaling not the desperation of dislocation but joy in the (possibility) of creation. The song continues with an extended repetition of Aawara Hoon as he puts his hat on the older child, transferring presumably that same jouissance, and sense of pleasure/dislocation to him. The child runs after him, as he walks away skipping lightly and fading into the narrow, empty street. As Mukesh’s voice fades out, the music that introduced the song bookends the narrative—opening up a space for Kapoor’s personal journey and the migrants/exiles that he represents. An important detail to note is the last scene’s mis-en-scene—three separate sets/settings are used here. Behind the wall in front of which Kapoor holds the two boys is an electric line for Bombay’s trains, a symbol of the new modernity the nation is entering into; followed by a run-down basti and finally a clean and well-constructed

settlement that he walks out of at the end of the song. In his travel through these different settings, a literal journey of renewal is taking place in the nation—from its paternalistic certainties (the male children) to its placement of the working class (women washing plates, vendors selling goods; men going to work) as key elements of nation building.

Shree 420 (The Cheat, 1955)

The discursive journey begun by Aawara is extended/completed by the film Shree 420 with the latter perhaps a more important text in its role as an agent of how Bollywood constructed the imagined community of India in the immediacy of independence. The premise of Aawara—an acute awareness of cultural dislocation that comes with modernity and the presumptive power of love is brought to its fulfillment in Shree 420. Specifically, the film presents an unabashed vision of Indian modernity—a reassembling of tradition; a repudiation of capitalism; a privileging of socialism and a subtly modulated formulation of gender politics—especially around the key construct of Margi's (the actress) as a model of Indian femininity and of Kapoor as the common man. Like Aawara, the film is anchored in the history of Indian cinema by its music—in this case a fabulous trilogy of songs (Mera joota hai japani, Pyaar hua hai, Mud mud ke na dekh), which have been subsequently reworked in a number of films.

Mera joota hai japani, uses the refrain: My shoes are from Japan, my pants are English, I wear a red Russian cap, but oh! still my heart is Indian! is by most accounts one of the most influential lines in all of Bollywood's films music. Re-used in a number of films (including a film with the title, Mera Joota Hai Japani), the song has entered the Hindi language and the collective Indian psyche as a shorthand for a certain lost innocence; a catch phrase for Indian essentialism; and in recent years—in the wake of market liberalization and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism (as seen in the decade long rule of the BJP) for a regressive nationalism. The

song is in this sense, a master text (akin perhaps to songs from the Wizard of Oz, with their rendering of agrarian essentialism and American identity) working through the contradictions of the post-colonial moment, articulated in Aawara.

I focused on three main scenes, focused on Raju, the main character. In the first scene, after Raju is revealed as a “420” and left on the road, he looks down at his shoes and speaks to it, saying “Chal re Japani” (“Let’s go Japanese”) and starts to walk down a winding, deserted road, as the song’s lilting musical introduction starts, segueing into the refrain, Mera Joota Hai Japani. Raju plays a flute as he struts Chaplin style, his (English) pants hitched up, his Russian cap askew and his Indian heart unabashedly singing with joy. As he turns around, he sees that a snake has followed him, entranced with his flute playing. He is startled, runs away, the camera recording his zip-zagging across the empty road in high-speed, a direct re-enactment of Charlie Chaplin’s numerous mad dashes. Coincidentally, running away from the snake is a direct repudiation of an Orientalist trope about Identity—snakes and snake charmers. Raj slows down, and four young rural women carrying loads on their heads, smile and pout as they pass him singing the opening refrain of the song, a number of times. The repeated rendition of the song’s refrain, a mantra if you will, is the defining statement of the song. It is a statement filled with the pleasure of a quietly stated essentialism—the song can (in the language of postmodernism) be read as a celebration of hybridity; of the value of reflexivity, but I would suggest that this does not do the song justice. It is certainly hybrid, but it is primarily a song about the process of cultural assembling along lines of the newly imagined nation-state. It draws on the specificities of the historical moment. Japan, an ally of the revolutionary end of the Indian independence movement, literally moves Kapoor’s (by his wearing Japanese shoes) along the road of his (national) destiny; his pants, draw sustenance from the colonial context in which they are manufactured in both an economic sense (the textile mills of Birmingham

using the cotton of India) and a political sense (especially the role of clothes/cotton in Gandhi's Swadeshi movement, where he encouraged people to wear only local clothes and not imported ones); his cap, references Russia, both by its unproblematic rendering of socialism (red) and its reference to national direction—the socialism of the Prime Minister of the time, Jawaharlal Nehru. It is in this last task that the emphatic, joyous ending of the refrain does the most important work of cultural assembling—Raju touches his heart, throws his arms out, and skips with a gay abandon that is so self-consciously theatrical, that it can be read as a statement about an emotive certainty in the future of the Indian nation-state. By being Indian in the heart, the song evokes/configures what is to follow (in the next song)—the central, constitutive element of national identity—love. The rest of the song, while important in its development of other themes (which I detail below) pale in comparison with this, first and primordial rendering of self—Indian at heart; the rest is fluff, mere accoutrements of history and politics.

In the second scene Raju comes across a caravan of travelers, tracking across the desert, their camels, undulating across the landscape. He joins them perched high on a camel, next to an old man, with luxuriant mustaches and turban. The scene (presumably shot in the desert state of Rajasthan) evokes a nomadic aesthetic, where the idea of traveling and community commingle. He sings of “leaving for the open road, with a destination known only to God. I just know I have to travel, like a storm, without knowing... just with my hat on my head.” It is possible to see this scene as continuous with the first scene, the hero mingling the foreign (his hat, pants etc.) with the local (the nomads) but I would like to suggest that something more critical is taking place. The nomads track a scene of not just separation but of being rootless and exile—they are presented without the joyous accompaniment that one might expect of a happy band of nomads. Instead their expressions are blank, almost grim, but more than anything else, determined. It is a landscape, I suggest of the Indian Partition—

scenes like these were not the stuff of history when this film was released, but of immediate memory—it is impossible not to read into this scene, a reworking of the partition as it begins to take its searing place in this still-born (no pun intended) nation. Kapoor’s evoking of God and the final destination in the lyrics of the song suggests such a reading. The Partition is not just a master text in the construct of Indian national identity, it is at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise that makes up the Indian nation. Much like the Civil War in the United States, it is continually revisited; a veritable litmus test for the assertion of national identity reworked in the decades to come through fiction, journalism and later, television. But in this primordial moment, it is film that works to create the first reflexive account of this bloody birth of the Indian nation.<sup>vi</sup>

In the final scene, the song is marked by two crucial edits—the first is of an elephant carrying a king through a city (most likely a coronation procession) which is followed by Raju astride an elephant, being escorted by two sadhus (saints) and the second is at the end of the song where images of Raju on an elephant are superimposed on those of a crowded Bombay street. These scenes are underscored by the song where Raju sings of “Life’s up’s and downs. Life flows like a stream. Don’t ask about the nation, while standing on the shore. Moving (movement) is the purpose of life, Standing still is death.” These two edits and the lyrics offer a reflexive account of tradition and feudalism, simultaneously empowering and distancing and a visual cross-stitch of a recurrent motif in early Kapoor films—the pastoral/urban disjunction, with the hero traveling from the rural to the urban; from tradition to modernity. In the first scene, the elephant functions as the diacritical sign of feudal authority—once again, the specificities of the historical moment are critical in reading this text. The birth of the Indian nation-state was coterminous with the removal of Indian aristocracy—the legal and political structure of centuries of feudal authority, divinely ordained. This was restructuring of an entire



social and political order, very real power taken away by the stroke of the secular pen. References in the song's lyrics about being part of the current of national life can be read along with the obvious counter-current that still animated public life (and personal identity) in India—allegiance to king, god and religion.<sup>vii</sup> It is Raju, the orphan-penniless-rural-drifter who sits astride the elephant, replacing (literally and visually since the edits follow each other) the king with the commoner. This continuity in narrative movement signals ambivalence about this transfer—an ambivalence reiterated in the escorts of Raju's elephant, sadhus, standard-bearers of Hindu essentialism that march with/escort him (presumably) into that preeminent space of modernity, the urban city-scape. Watching this scene today, there is considerable discomfort in this vision of the nation—religion and masculinity; power and theology mixing unproblematically—prefiguring the rise of the BJP many decades later with its ideology of Hindutva and a revivalist Hindu nationalism.

The second song in *Shree 420* came to define an entire genre of romance songs in Bollywood films—the song *Pyaar Hua Hai* is a peerless performance—simultaneously theatrical and understated, its erotic charge is undiminished by the passage of time. It still remains arguably the greatest romantic song in the history of Bollywood. The song tells the story of an encounter between Raju and Vidya and the declaration of their love for each other. Within the narrative of the film (and nationalist modernity), the song functions with one clear, unambiguous message—the centrality of love, as a force for both identity formation in the new nation-state and as a matrix for thinking through issues of gender politics. The song's lyric's question the “promise” evoked in the song's title (love arises, a promise is made) by asking “Why does the heart fear love?” and then answering, “the heart says the road is hard and the destination unknown.” The verses that follow, reiterate the endpoint of love, the collapse of personal boundaries of self (“if our love breaks, we, together break”); the raising

of children (“One day I will not be alive, nor will you. But our signatures/children will”) but more than anything else, the love spoken of here is (through repeated enumeration of the songs refrain) is self-referential. Love is seen as fundamentally elemental in nature (marked in one of the songs lines thus: “the night will speak/spread word of our love everywhere”), suffused with a paradox—its evanescence.

For Kapoor, the construct of love is central to his construct of the nation, where narrow concerns of individuals and communities are to be replaced by a broader, humanistic sense of collective identity. Love in a sense has its own agency, that pushes the performance by the lovers into the realm beyond the romantic to the social.

The performance by Kapoor and Nargis in this song are for a lack of a better word, post-modern. They are acutely aware of their own referentiality, and of the role they are playing as agents of a new kind of national identity. This identity shot through with the idea of representation; of visuality—a very specific kind of modernist practice that is given a name by/through this song. Shot entirely on sets, with lightening, rain and wisps of clouds ranging around the singing lovers, the song overlays visual intimacy (Nargis’s famous kiss-me look) with longing (close-ups of faces; long shots of the couple walking), and disengagement (the repeated separation and coming together of the lovers). There is a sense of agency and control in the bodies of both the actors—they move in small, deliberate steps, each motion representing an entire universe of emotion. It is in some primordial sense, love-making.<sup>viii</sup>

The last song, that I want to examine is *Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh* (Don’t keep looking back) which is perhaps the paradigmatic text in this film (and arguably in all of Kapoor’s early films), and one that completes the narrative premise begun by *Mera Joota Hai Japani*, offers a modulated critique of the humanistic topos of *Pyaar Hua*, *Ikrar Kiya* and firmly centers the concerns of the nation—around a negotiation/

indigenization of capitalist modernity. The issues the song takes (apart) are weighty but the tone it takes is light—this is a beautiful, lilting, sweeping serenade of a song; it grasps the listener, it pulls at her feet to get up and dance, it is a song, about participation, about creating the new world—a song inevitably about citizenship.

The refrain of the song, “don’t look back,” is repeated over and over again, the chanting speeding up as the song progresses and is dizzying in its rendition at the end. This repetition is not tautological, but seeks to address what I believe is at the heart of this song—a shared willingness to move/dance the nation into the heady promise of modernity, without looking back. The song does not need a more contextual reading—this is Kapoor’s unabashed hope in the possibilities of the post-colonial moment. I will focus on three important scenes

The song begins with an important break in the film’s story line. Vidya is upset, disoriented with the nightclub that Raju has brought her to. In the frame immediately preceding the song, she walks out of the club, a close-up shows her wiping away a tear, wrapping the pallu (the top half) of her sari closely around her shoulders—this is a key diacritical sign for the Indian audience, indicating a closing up of tradition, a tight covering of the (female) body, functioning as a stand-in for the fencing in of culture, of the maintenance of a traditional femininity removing itself from the site of what is about to happen—a brazen assertion of sexuality, the presentation of a western/colonial identity politics; presuming a new kind of communication between the nation and tradition.

Maya (which translates as “illusion” played by the sumptuous Nadira) begins the song center stage, a long shot, framed by a circle of ballet dancers. The music begins and the ballet dancers proceed to create a series of circles, around Maya; the editing is a careful mix of slow-motion; close-ups and (what became a) common motif of the cinematography of Kapoor’s films—shots of the sexualized female body, focused on the waist, the feet, the bosom, the

close-up of the tilted face, the rapid-cut away, signaling the nearness of male desire, the ability of feminine power to resist it (just yet). Raju is dressed impeccably in a bowtie and suit, his face cast in shadows, aloof and distraught with Vidya's departure. Maya first gesture is shot from above, Raju's eye-view. She reaches out and takes his hand—the song begins. Her message is achingly clear— “don't look back, don't think of the past.” This is not a plaintive call or a beseeching message; rather it is an assertion and an invitation. It is not merely sexual, focused on the mobilization of feminine charms, but something else—something that can be approximated by a new kind of intimacy—a call to (her) arms and an invitation to the imagination of what Raju (and the nation) might become should they both go down this path (to modernity). Maya makes it clear that this is a journey they will take together (“I will be your companion, you will not be alone in life's journey”), a journey marked by the pleasure of the moment and the certainty of the destination (“our destination is clearly before us, the clouds are like waves rolling past us. The caravan of life never stops”). The camera lingers lavishly on Maya during this entire scene, especially a critical tracking shot, where the ballet dancers move behind her, presented in half-focus, creating a sense of visual disorientation and vertigo; all the time, her hand is outstretched, reaching out to Raju, willing him to join the dance. The use of the ballet dancers, referencing a classical western modernity does not just bring a western aesthetic to this song, it brings an entire vocabulary around the mobilization of sexuality and identity politics—a vocabulary engaged with by Raju in the next scene.

The second scene that I identified as important begins with a key transition. Raju is first amused, interested, engaged with Maya, but still distant. As the first verse of the song ends, a long musical break starts and the camera focuses on Raju, who smiles, absently at first, then in full recognition of the decision he is about to make. He nods his head, squares his shoulder and his transformation begins. The screen/night club goes black for a second, the blinking neon

lights are the only thing breaking the silence, and a trumpet medley starts as the lights come on, the camera focusing on the players. Raju stands up (presumably from the floor) and plays a trumpet solo, signaling his acceptance of Maya's invitation. The dancers have changed from ballet to Spanish folk dancers, their long skirts swirling as Raju walks between them. His trumpet has disappeared but he sings the second stanza of the song, "smile with each passing season, the world belongs to the one who looks ahead, let us keep our eyes, out and on each other." The lyrics signal the rhetorical force of Raju's answer to Maya. He collapses the personal with the sociological, the sexual with the political and the camera does the rest of the talking—cutting rapidly between Raju, Maya and the dancers, it speeds up the narrative of progression/progress in the repeated rendition of the song, "don't look back, don't look back."

The last scene in the film is an extension of the second, but with one important progression—the song is sung with the gradual incorporation of Seth Sonachand (the businessman who represents capitalism) and his business cronies being steadily incorporated into the dance, and by the end of the song, the entire night club is on its feet, dancing in a mad swirl of celebration of looking ahead, of building the (national) future. The lyrics are stunning declarations of a new sensibility— "the world belongs to the person who adapts; the world belongs to the person who fits the mold; the world belongs to the person who forges ahead." Seth Sonachand stands out for his visual intensity in this scene (and in cutaways in the other scenes)—he is not the deceptively meek moneylender of rural lore, the tradition-bound exploiter of caste rules, but a fully developed man of modernity—corpulent, bug-eyed, with a luxurious moustache, he is fully clothed in the manner of a western businessman. He joins in the song, at the invitation of Raju, who extends his hand out to him to pull him into the crowd, and as the song enters its last dizzying stage, is seen dancing with control and nuance with

Raju and Maya, the trio making an unabashed statement about what constitutes success in the new imagined nation. Later in the film's narrative, Raju offers a critique of capitalism and through his final coupling with Vidya rather than Maya, an embrace of socialist humanism, but within the space of this song, what is made abundantly clear is the importance of understanding the range of national possibilities in this, India's post-colonial moment.

#### Conclusions/ Directions: Nationalism, Songs and Bollywood

I want to address the question of national unity and nationalism that I began with, suggesting that the texts of Bollywood cinema are active agents in the cultural formation that came to be known as the Indian nation. Asthana (2003) in an analysis of songs/music in the project of Indian patriotism argues that "after Indian independence in 1947, patriotism also meant participating in the tasks of nation-building, development and modernization, the three rhetoric's of the post-colonial nation-state. The articulation of patriotism during the 1950's-1960's (is) a period marked by the nationalization of the private...this modernist developmental aesthetic was the lens through which patriotism got refracted. The portrayal in media and cultural production... (particularly film songs and national songs) ... drew on a wide variety of symbols depicting patriotic acts, feeling and sentiments" (339-340).

In the above analysis I have suggested how songs in the early films of Raj Kapoor take their shape, narrative and cultural agency in the immediacy of the post-colonial period suggesting that these songs are important for their willing participation in the act of national imagination and their inextricable relationship to the project of Indian modernity. In sum, I am suggesting not only that these early songs articulate both change and continuity in the unfolding of Indian history but create an emotive space within which the manufacturing of an Indian "national" identity takes place. By capturing the range, complexity and form of Indian feelings around/about the new nation-state, it creates a readily constituted engagement with

the contemporary moment of national self-realization. It is I realize a very post-modern claim about the emergence of modernity, but a claim sustained by both the textual agency of the songs; the intertextual construct of Raj Kapoor and Nargis in that historical moment and perhaps most critically, the historical weight that these texts have accrued in the decades to come—lending substance and credibility to a state of “national unity” in texts that were aimed at creating a nation. To put it another way these songs are simultaneously acts of creation and creative acts—or what Panniker calls “instruments of nationalist mobilization” (2002, 533).

A concluding thought: While I have attempted to show in the textual analysis, the specificities of the emotive and discursive imprint that texts, like film music and songs powerfully deploy in doing the work of “national unity,” this “production of the national” is needless to add, complex and contradictory (attempting as it does to bring together the disaggregates that make up a nation) and almost always incomplete. It is that sense of incompleteness, of a desire expressed but not (yet) fulfilled that points to other questions, which for reasons for space cannot be the focus of this essay. These include the questions of the discursive mutability of the national/modernist construct in the songs of Kapoor’s early films over time—in other words, the temporal rather than the discursive question. I can, however, offer some initial thoughts on this important question. Kapoor’s vision of the nation as I have suggested is focused on the construct of “love,” simultaneously personal and sociological. How is this relationship articulated over time as the discursive construct of the nation reaches outside the frame of the modern into the post-modern and outside the national to the global? In other words, the emotive imprint of cinema needs to be examined in tracking the national.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> An early version of this paper was first published in XYZ (2009).

<sup>ii</sup> Two general accounts of India's post-independence history that I have relied on are Guha (2008) and Sen (2005).

<sup>iii</sup> The most well-known music directors and their key films include S.D. Burman (Baazi, 1951; Pyaasa, 1957; Chalti Ka Naam Gadi, 1958; Guide, 1965; Aradhana, 1969 and Abhimaan, 1973), Naushad (Andaz, 1949; Mother India, 1957; Pakeezah, 1971), Shankar-Jaikishen (Aawara, 1951; Shree 420, 1955; Sangam, 1964 and Mera Naam Joker, 1970), R.D. Burman (Teesri Manzil, 1966; Kati Patang, 1970; Amar Prem, 1971; Yadon ki barat, 1973 and A love story, 1994) and A.R. Rehman (Roja, 1992; Taal, 1999 and Lagaan, 2001).

<sup>iv</sup> For studies of Raj Kapoor's life and work see, Dissanayake & Sahai's (1987), Raj Kapoor's Films: Harmony of Discourses and Reuben's (1988), Raj Kapoor, The Fabulous Showman: An Intimate Biography.

<sup>v</sup> See Sahai, M., "Raj Kapoor and the Indianization of Charlie Chaplin," in East-West Film Journal (Honolulu), vol. 2, no. 1, December 1987.

<sup>vi</sup> Some of the richest narratives about India's partition are in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali—outside the scope of this essay to detail. The key novels include A Bend in the Ganges; Kingdom's End; Train to Pakistan; Cracking India and Tamas (also made into a TV series). Important films include Komal Gandhar (1961), Garam Hawa (1975), Earth (1998) and Gadar (2001). The well-known novels A Fine Balance (Rohinton Mistry) and Sacred Games (Vikram Chandra) have themes focused on the partition.

<sup>vii</sup> For a succinct account of difficulties mediating the issue of royalty in the making of post-independence India see Guha (2007).

<sup>viii</sup> Nagaraj (2006) offers a critical analysis here: "Lovers, for Raj Kapoor, have a surreal intensity about them" (97). "The narrative viewpoint of Raj Kapoor's films was a product of the director's identification with the young male lover, which could also accommodate the heroine who is created by the adoring gaze of the male public. Raj Kapoor sought to create a magical world of love with enchanting songs and dances. Indeed, efforts have been made by Raj Kapoor's biographers to bring in an element of personal authenticity by creating almost one to one relationship between the love stories in his films and the women in his private life" (91).

<sup>ix</sup> In the case of Raj Kapoor, his film Mera Naam Joker (I am a Joker, 1970) provides some insight into the nature of this (changing) relationship. The film, a box-office failure when it was first released (but now characterized as a misunderstood "classic") is a long, reflexive, often maudlin narrative about a clown and the many women that he has loved and lost, and who are connected to him by virtue of this fact. The clown and his persona



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are central to a reading of the question of nationalism and emotion as seen in Kapoor's work.

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