WHO IS AFRAID OF SHAH RUKH KHAN?
NEOLIBERAL INDIA'S FEARS SEEN THROUGH A CINEMATIC PRISM

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Abstract.

21st century India constructs itself as a neoliberal and consumerist superpower. In his cinematic career Shah Rukh Khan has become an icon of a rampant middle class, transforming himself from an antihero into a model story of Indian success. Focusing on identity politics, in this article his persona is utilized as a prism through which some representations of fears connected to 20th century India can be observed.
Keywords: Indian cinema – Contemporary Indian history – Identity – Communalism

1. *Bollywood Badshah*

At the beginning of the 21st century India constructs itself as a neoliberal and consumerist superpower. Working with the assumption that visual culture, specifically film, draws on wider hegemonic discourses circulating within the public space to construct its own narrative, and that hegemonic definitions emerge and take shape within 'public culture,' of which film is a part; this article utilizes Shah Rukh Khan [hereafter SRK]'s persona as a prism through which some representations of fears connected to contemporary India can be

observed. In his cinematic career SRK has become an icon of a rampant middle class, transforming himself from antihero into a model story of Indian success. I will use some of SRK's films, from *Darr* to *My Name Is Khan*, in order to uncover a trajectory of some of India's fears over a decade and a half.

Focusing on identity politics, I will address fear as a discourse. Today the transmission of fear relies not only on contact between human beings, but also on rumours and panic attacks orchestrated through the media. Also popular culture shows a plethora of situations and processes connected to fear, ranging from urban myths about psychopaths to apocalyptic cults, the return of the supernatural, and new urban horror genres in cinema, gaming and comics. Connecting and seasoning this all is terrorism and the so-called 'war on terror'; these issues have been extremely effective in generating discourses of anxiety. In the following sections I am going to focus on some aspects connected to identity that have created strong insecurities and fears in the Indian society, particularly masculinity as a metaphor for national power, and Muslim identity, a construction of the citizen that has to be perpetually certified, questioned, interrogated and tortured to ascertain the majority sense of security and identity.

As Dyer has pointed out, even if film 'stars' are a case of appearance, their construction by the media encourages us to think in terms of reality. Stars express the particular notion of individuality, of what it is to be a human being in contemporary society[1]. In the 21st century media

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[1] Richard Dyer – *Star* (1998), Italian transl. by Carla Capetta, Daniela Paggiano, Antonello Verze, Torino, Kaplan, 2003– introduced the idea of the 'star text,' a concept that stretched beyond an artist's performances in films to include fan magazine articles, advertising posters, personal biographies, and rumors about actors, all of which contribute to the experience of modern celebrity. Nowadays, 'stardom' has become a research topic in academic film studies, dealing with the star as historical entity; the star as discursive formation and cultural commodity; the role of audience and fandom in the construction of the star; and the star as the intersection of cinematic language and

world spheres that used to be separated tend to mix and get fuzzy: politics and marketing, star worship and consumerism, civil society struggles and skilful image construction. It is not surprising, then, that there is a peculiar exchange process between the film star system and other domains: as consumer goods become stars and politics create new stars, film stars have become brands and influence the public opinion. Going beyond the borders of the cinematic domain, their allure and ability to move and thrill do apply to any aspect of civil life. Film stars have conquered the power to link their persona to some material and immaterial goods, which symbolically represent the most sensitive challenges of the present world.

As for Indian cinema, academic research on stardom is more recent[2]. Dyer's formulation, though relevant, perhaps does not work entirely in the context of India. In fact if, according to Dyer, private life is the essential staple of star studies, in India the binary opposition between a 'discourse of surfaces' as opposed to the 'inner essence of the performer' was not much relevant to the star system in the colonial period, obviously a result of Indian nationalism's framing of the private[3]. Moreover, in Indian cinema until at least the 1960s, stardom itself

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technique with larger historical dynamics, such as gender, sexuality, youth, politics, and fashion.

[2] In 2010 an International Conference titled 'Shah Rukh Khan and Global Bollywood' was held in University of Vienna. Some recent studies on female stardom in colonial and postcolonial India are: Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2009; Sreya Mitra, *From Heroine to "Brand Shilpa": Reality Television, Transnational Cultural Economics, and the Remaking of the Bollywood Star*, in *Transnational Stardom International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture*, ed. by Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 187-206; Rosie Thomas, *Miss Frontier Mail: The Film that Mistook its Star for a Train*, in *Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers*, ed. by Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi and Ravi Sundaram, Delhi, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2007, pp. 294-309.

[3] Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!*, p. 8.

functioned via a predominantly frontal mode of address[4]. This 'aesthetic of frontality' is inscribed into Indian modes of stardom through the collapsing of the metaphoric foreground and background, the surface and depth, of star identities, which is produced by a reduction of the gap between on-screen and off-screen information about them. Interestingly enough, instead of focusing on private, 'inner' information in keeping with modes of star publicity derived from Hollywood – a dialectic process of authentication by which the existing star image is countered to reveal the 'true' star persona, which produces a new authenticated image, only to have that new image countered by another 'expose', etcetera – there was a tendency to conflate private and professional identity: the gossip that did circulate about stars tended to find visual and emotional confirmation in screen roles, and role and "real" identities produced stars who appeared as the equivalent of 'flat' characters in fiction.

Another way to deploy a frontal mode of address for stardom is a propensity toward types in both melodramatic narrative and star texts. A star's persona is constructed in large part through the external display of legible and recurrent signs such as specific bodily gestures that eventually become associated with that star[5]. SRK is part and parcel of the Indian cinema stardom, yet he challenges stereotypes and the exclusivity of classification. He has been a rule breaker all along his career, and also an able constructor of his persona. With his large nose and ruffled hair, he had not the tall, dark, handsome aspect of the stars of the Seventies, nor a sculpted body. A graduate in communication at Jamia Millia Islamia, he

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[4] Geeta Kapur, *Revelation and Doubt: Sant Tukaram and Devi*, in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. by Tejaswini Niranjana and Vivek Dhareshwar, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 1993, pp. 19-46; Ravi Vasudevan, *Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture*, in «Journal of Arts & Ideas», 1993, Nos. 23-24, pp. 51-79.
[5] Neepa Majumdar, *Doubling Stardom and Melodrama in Indian Cinema: The 'Impossible' Role of Nargis*, in «Postscript», 2003, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 89-103.

started his career in advertisement[6]. It was the instant popularity he gained from the TV series *Fauji* (1988) and *Circus* (1989) that paved way to his foray into filmdom, which is unusual in the 'filmi' world. His performative choices show a willingness to appeal to diverse tastes and sensibilities: he has been Hindu (*Devdas*), Sikh (*Veer Zara*), and Muslim (*Chak De! India*), a Rajasthani folk singer (*Chaahat*) and an urban executive chasing success in the metropolis (*Yes Boss*), a Non-Resident Indian working for a NASA project in the US (*Swades*) and an Indian pilot in love with a Pakistani woman (*Veer Zaara*), and much more.

SRK, popularly known as 'King Khan', is now the 'King of Bollywood'[7] and his star persona creates a parallel text that is intertwined with the rise of post liberalization Indian middle class[8]. SRK's origins set him apart from his superstar colleagues, who may be good actors, but mostly happen to be beneficiaries of the film industry's naked nepotism. In a film culture where alternative sexuality has no place and no honour, SRK's supposedly queer life remains a topic for constant gossip, notwithstanding his fairy tale marriage to his childhood love and his happy family life with two kids: up to date, he remains Lux beauty soap's only male model in India. Finally, being a Muslim in a deeply divided, Hindu majority nation, he has first become the emblem of the

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[6] On the relation between the field of advertisement and the globalization process in India see: William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India,* Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2003.

[7] Anupama Chopra, *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema*, New York, Warner books, 2007. Shakuntala Rao, *Shah Rukh Khan: A Bollywood Superstar and an Icon of the Postcolonial Nation*, in *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, ed. by Robert Clarke, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 173-188.

[8] For an interesting comparison with the epic parallel text celebrating stability on mobilization see Sunny Singh, *From Kurukṣetra to Rāmarājya*, in *Religion in Literature and Film in South Asia*, edited by Diana Dimitrova, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 213-222.

'Cosmopolitan Indian Male'[9], and after that, although he is not the only Muslim superstar of India, the 'Cosmopolitan Muslim', implying that his greatest performance is being a Muslim Indian.

2. *Bollywood Bad Shah: The Negative Hero*

It was only in the second half of the 1990s that SRK began to shift to the romantic hero persona more commonly associated to him. At the beginning of his cinematic career SRK was stereotyped as 'anti-hero'. His first feature film *Deewana* (1992) introduced to Bollywood a new character: the disturbing and non-accommodating lover. In spite of being on the wrong side, SRK shot into stardom almost overnight and gained immense popularity, getting the Filmfare Award for Best Male Debut. Three subsequent consecutive films – *Darr* (1993), *Baazigar* (1993), and *Anjaam* (1994) – took the box-office by storm, adding psychotic shades of grey to what was initially a loveable madness. The audience was fascinated by a male protagonist refusing to belong to any category typical of the conventional Bollywood hero. Whether it was for admiration or rejection, nobody could ignore him, as the very unfamiliarity of such slipperiness made him highly attractive to most viewers. Not only the audience response to him was not well-defined, but also the Hindi film industry was confused in the categorization of his irresistible capacity of doing evil: at the Filmfare Awards, SRK was nominated in the category of the Best Actor in a Negative Role (Villain) for *Darr* and *Anjaam*, but as the Best Actor (Hero) for *Baazigar*.

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[9] Julien Cayla, *Following the Endorser's Shadow: Shah Rukh Khan and the Creation of the Cosmopolitan Indian Male*, in «Advertising & Society Review», 2008, Vol. 9, issue 2, DOI: 10.1353/asr.0.0000.

'Negative' heroes had already appeared in the Hindi stardom since 1970s, but these characters show a mix of good and evil, they are always fighting the establishment from the margins. In the 1990s SRK's murderer (*Baazigar*) and violent rejected lover (*Darr*) are very different from the previous representation of the anti-hero. Amitabh Bachchan, Sunil Dutt, or Dev Anand were products of a cinematic imagination that remained linked to the Nehruvian socialist ideology. The hero, who was often relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within society – being a migrant, dacoit, or *goonda* – fought the establishment in order to restore justice, to help other people who were as much marginalized and oppressed. Nationalism and socialism required over-blown oppositions, and the rich/poor binary remained uncomplicated: corruption, dishonesty and falsehood were associated with the former while the latter represented virtue and morality, no matter how distorted by traumatic events.

SRK's characters are definitely freed from the burden of the socialist crusade. Their world is globalized and their problems are more restricted, obscure, inner: *Darr*'s male protagonist is engrossed in an obsessive stalking of the female protagonist, with no need to introduce childhood traumas in order to justify his being 'evil'. SRK's anti-(or psychotic) hero seems to embody the new globalized *Zeitgeist*: globalization loosens the system, creates mobility and anomies, and makes an anti-hero feasible. SRK's psychotic hero also incarnates the vulnerability and the killer-instincts of his time. SRK rose into stardom in a crucial time for India: in 1992 the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished and communal riots devastated the country. As Bakshi and Sengupta pointed out, in the falling of all moral codes the broad social language of the angry young man simply could not work: the reassuring formula-narrative of Hindi cinema, constructed along a series of binaries – good/bad, moral/immoral, etcetera – could no longer accommodate the desires,

anxieties and fear of the individuals, and the trope of the happy ending had become too utopian to be credible [10].

Parallel to the liberalization of the economy and communalization of the political discourse, other important processes took place in the construction of the Indian identity in the 1990s: the ascendance of the NRI, the erasure of the poor from the media projection of the Indian world and the disappearance of the Indian village from the Bollywood landscape. In 1992, almost simultaneously to the above mentioned films, *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* introduced SRK as a fiercely upwardly mobile hero, who succeeds in climbing up the social ladder thanks to the instruments available to the middle class: talents, innovations, and skills. He reaches Bombay, the dream-city, as a migrant pushed by his ambition to become rich. Nevertheless, he is not yet totally oblivious of the poverty that exists side by side with the glamour of high society nightlife, and all through the film a Bombay *chawl* is a sort of reminder both for the hero and for the audience. This is a transition movie: with the progression of the new economic era the old world values would slide backwards leaving the path open to the one and only ethos of wealth and hedonism. SRK as Raju still aims to become a 'gentleman', embracing an ethos that celebrates hard work as the tool for self-realization. Very soon, though, the great Indian middle class would celebrate only consumption, and also the cinematic ambience would change accordingly. The psychotic hero would soon die to be replaced by a consumerist hero.

3. *The Metrosexual Hero*

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[10] Kaustav Bakshi and Samrat Sengupta, *Waking up to a Dream: Contemporary Bollywood, the Yuppie Shah Rukh Khan and the Great Urban Indian Middle Class*, in «Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences», 2009, No. 6, pp. 1-16.

One of the fears that surface in the globalizing process regards the market's capacity to efface cultural difference by stamping everything with its own universalizing norm. In India, the process of becoming and not-becoming other, of the nation in opposition to globalization, became one of the sources of anxiety as the nation was reconstructed primarily as Hindu[11] and gendered in terms of masculine capability[12] and feminine compassion[13].

The largely city-based burgeoning middle class enjoyed a comparatively easy access to a decent job and associated comfort. Taking full advantage of the newly deregulated field, a younger generation of cyber-*desis* such as Azim Premji and Nandan Nilekani began to make conspicuous inroads on the global stage, quickly followed by corporate types, such as Laxmi Mittal, Mukesh and Anil Ambani, Vijay Mallya, Naresh Goyal. NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and PIOs (People of Indian Origin) through direct investment, remittances, and cultural tourism contributed to India's economic resurgence. At the same time the global political balance was changing, and India abandoned her nonaligned policy developing closer relations to the USA, discovering meanwhile the economic and ideological benefits to be derived from an active engagement with its diaspora. Adopting a predatory and non-sustainable development model, the Indian government and the rampant middle classes have chosen to ignore its enormous social and environmental costs, erasing from the public discourse any reference to the growing gap between rich and poor, the food emergency in the country, the paradox of development without jobs, the parasitic

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[11] David Ludden, *Making India Hindu*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996.

[12] Madhavi Murty, *Representing Hindutva: Nation, Religion and Masculinity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1990 to 2003,* in «Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture», 2009, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 267-281.

[13] Swati Dyahadroy, *Exploring Gender, Hindutva and Seva*, in «Economic and Political Weekly», 2009, Vol. 44, No. 17, pp. 65-73; Alessandra Consolaro, *Scrivere la nazione e la globalizzazione sul corpo femminile: il mediorama indiano*, in *Voci e conflitti*, ed. by Alessandra Consolaro and Alessandro Monti, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2010, pp. 43-59.

character of most capital fluxes into India, the environmental pillaging in the name of tourism and industrialization[14].

The media construction of globalizing India shifts the focus from citizenship to consumerism. Until the 1980s in cinema, advertisement and other fields of popular culture, the masculine hero had been emphasized as citizen; during that decade these representations changed and were substituted by the figure of the Indian man as cosmopolitan, socially upward, and definitely ambitious. In the second half of the 1990s cinematic spaces of poverty retreat out of focus, and only (extremely) rich characters remain, inhabiting a world of plenitude. A 'schizophrenic'[15] hyperbolic dream world is manufactured by the Hindi film industry, catering to the new urban middle class appetites, a middle class that is inebriated by the euphoria of the new money that invaded and conquered the Indian market, holding no unsettling memories of events such as the Babri Masjid riots, and devoid of any sensitivity to squalid common people everyday problems.

With the eclipse of poverty, also the struggling hero evaporated. Fast economic change and liberalization contribute to constructing the new Indian hero as an urban well-travelled professional, globally recognized, wearing western clothes but maintaining his Indian roots: SRK. As the stable actor for Yash Raj Films, Yash Chopra and his son Aditya Chopra created for him a global character, symbol of India's ascent to the global stage and of a new access to luxurious goods in the metropolis. SRK's new roles are incredibly rich characters living in a world of affluence, whether in India or abroad. In *Yes Boss* (1997) the *Raju Ban Gaya*

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[14] C.P. Chandrashekhar and Jayati Ghosh, *The Market that Failed. Neoliberal Economy Reforms in India*, New Delhi, LeftWord Books, 2004; Aseem Shrivastava and Ashish Kothari, *Churning the Earth. The Making of Global India*, Delhi, Penguin India, 2012.
[15] I am using the term with reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's thesis expressed in *Anti-Oedipus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane; preface by Michel Foucault, London: Bloomsbury, 2013 (1972).

Gentleman theme is reiterated once; but the model inaugurated by *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* (1995) introduces the hybridized Indian who can adhere to core Indian values even while embracing what the West has to offer. Becoming Indian by becoming global is the new issue, and the old bourgeoisie values, such as hard work and perseverance, can be shoved aside. This is the first film to popularize a NRI hero living in a posh mansion, driving expensive cars and motorbikes, highly sought-after as a groom without any concern about the source of his money. The financially secured hero, always dressed in fashion clothes, fastidious about his looks, and mostly seen in the vicinity of or inside shopping malls and posh restaurants in the country or abroad, does not have to prove his ability to honestly establish his self-sufficiency: as long as he has money, he is fine. Raj Malhotra, the protagonist of *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge*, is a second generation Indian migrant blissfully settled in London. Financially backed by his father, a peasant-turned-millionaire who sees no value in institutions, such as education, that do not contribute to capital accumulation, he is spoiled, westernized, happily enjoying commodities and comforts of the western lifestyle., nonetheless he is diegetically constructed as the authentic form of Indianess. In the love narrative, he proves it by refusing the scandal of elopement to forestall the arranged marriage of his beloved one: Raj insists on following protocol to the letter by seeking her father's consent, and finally winning it, thus revealing himself as the true guardian of cultural identity. Even if this NRI may publicly not observe social conventions, he is an insider removed, not an outsider to Indian culture. What makes him a 'real Hindustani' is a cultural identity rooted in patriarchal and bounded conceptions of the family, protocol, honour, nation, entertainment, gender roles, and spiritual practices.

The anguish of the poor and downtrodden has been wiped off the map of the glamorous world he inhabits; the new hero has no history,

for he is a product of the liberalized market, a recent phenomenon. He has no need to acquire or preserve his wealth or status through hard work and perseverance; his only goal is to enjoy life, which is equated with indulging in all available consumable luxuries. *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* pioneered a series of films with SRK in the lead – *Pardes* (1997), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), etcetera – that celebrate conformism as value and project a slight variation on the character of Raj elevating it to a cult figure[16]. In the *des/pardes* logic, the NRI becomes the model group for the ascending Indian middle class, and this may explain also the huge popularity that Bollywood started gaining at a transnational level, particularly in the diaspora[17]. Raj/SRK, the global pan-Indian male, had become the prototype of the consumable hero, celebrated by the modern day youth as the character to emulate.

The shift from Amitabh Bachchan to SRK signals the shift from a construction of the Indian male as a citizen fighting for the nation to the celebration of the pan-Indian male as connected to global production and consumption networks, the Indian male as consumer and manager. Interestingly enough, such a shift articulates also a range of possibilities

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[16] For a reading of the NRI character in these films see Sudesh Mishra, *News from the Crypt: India, Modernity, and the West*, in «New Literary History», 2009, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 315-344; Sudhanva Deshpande, *The Consumable Hero of Globalised India*, in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. by Raminder Kaur and Ajay J Sinha, New Delhi - Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage Publications, 2005, pp. 186-203.

[17] Bollywood films have long been exported to popular audiences across Asia, Africa, Europe and North America, and they constitute a transnational public culture in which Indian nationalism is often central. In the past two decades many Hindi films have started being released simultaneously in India and in the USA and the UK, and not only large diasporic Indian communities, but also people not having South Asian origins in America, Europe, and Australia have become key consumers of Bollywood films. As Vijay Mishra argues, «diaspora consciousness is now internal to spectatorial desire within India and essential too to Bombay cinema's new global aesthetics» (*Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 269). Adrian Athique, *Diasporic Audiences and Non-Resident Media: The Case of Indian Films' Participation*, in «Journal of Audience and Reception Studies», 2011, Vol. 8, Issue 2, pp. 1-23.

for masculinity that SRK declines in a peculiar way. This, like Julien Caylah has shown, is very clear in the field of advertising, that at the beginning of the 21st century sees an ubiquitous SRK standing as an icon for the desires and aspirations of the whole Indian nation[18]. Rejecting a macho, aggressive version of masculinity such as the one endorsed by the Hindutva[19] – represented in the advertising field by actors like Salman Khan or Akshay Kumar –, SRK proposes a more nuanced, slippery male model, that was perceived at the same time as confusing and charming. In accordance with the recovery of a national model that, while confirming a solidly patriarchal agenda, showed the world also the soft side of the nation and exalted its soft power, the new Indian man as portrayed by SRK is the metrosexual male, having a soft touch and more at ease displaying his feminine side. In the famous Lux advertisement (2002), SRK plays a hero that is different from the other Bollywood male stars. He is a tender guy, in touch with his emotional side. His fluidity and hybridity is once again one of his most successful traits: he can reconcile masculinity and femininity, emotion and ambition, 'tradition' and 'modernity', exorcizing the fears connected to identity loss while reciting the new mantra: *consumo ergo sum*.

I have pointed out SRK's ability to surprise both the audience and the establishment. When his shifty articulation of Indian masculinity had fuelled gossip about his supposed queerness, in *Om Shanti Om* (2007) the 40+ actor came in a macho avatar, exhibiting the abdominal muscles popularly known as 'six pack abs', amazing the audience. Statuesque male stars are not a rarity in Bollywood, and already in the 1990s Salman Khan had begun mimicking Hollywood peers such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The difference is that they had always been muscular and athletic, while the puny, lean, not-so-good-looking, not-so-

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[18] Julien Cayla, *Following the Endorser's Shadow.*
[19] Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man: Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2005.

young SRK had suddenly metamorphosed into a dashing hero through a well-guided work-out regime. He had proved that willpower can turn the beast into the beauty. As Deleuze and Guattari observe in *Anti-Oedipus*, desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather needs are derived from desire: SRK is the product and the producer, creating desire amongst his viewers, the great urban Indian middle class, who interpret this desire as 'need'. The craving for a 'hot' body is miles away from the rich cultural tradition of Indian wrestling[20]; it is inspired by hedonistic self-indulgence, modelled on a Western aesthetic and on Western notions of strength and fitness, in keeping with other Western images of fast motorcycles, high-tech sound systems, etcetera. In India national well-being is still defined by the stomachs of its people: poverty is measured by minimum standards for daily calorie intake and malnutrition remains a pressing national problem; while once upon a time a pot belly was a sign of healthy well-being, after two decades of 'economic miracle' the Indian middle class is dealing with rising obesity[21]. The consumable hero's message «Yes, I can» is inserted in the grand parade of opulence, abundance and goodness. It creates a need that must be fulfilled, situating his viewers comfortably and unquestioningly within the structures of late capitalism[22]. At the same time, it reassures those who haven't reached there yet that they too can do it, if they strive and endure enough.

Much of the national culture communicated through popular culture at the beginning of the 21st century is expression of an urban middle class supporting a neo-liberal corporate based ideal, envisioning a chiefly

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[20] Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992.

[21] R.B. Singh, et al., *Prevalence of Obesity, Physical Inactivity and Undernutrition, a Triple Burden of Diseases during Transition in a Developing Economy. The Five City Study Group*, in «Acta Cardiologica» 2007, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 119-127.

[22] This theme is also present in *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (2008): see Bakshi and Sengupta, pp. 8-15.

Hindu shining India[23]. The media construe an idiom of Indianness that is at one time globally attractive and culturally conservative. In the burgeoning transnational middle class vision those who have no access to consumes are not entitled to full citizenship. But in the Indian situation, the 'minorities' that remain out of the economic miracle actually constitute the majority of the population. The urban upper middle class is a hegemonic privileged minority élite totally disconnected from the rest of India, which is constructed as the other, amorphous, rural, non-English speaking, non-dollar earning, non-outsourced, non-Hindu, marginalized India. The marginalized and subaltern groups in civil society, erased from the media discourse and excluded from India shining, on one side can use the language of rights to decentre domination, assert selfhood and chart out democratic discourses affecting the politics of everyday social life, but they can also create an upsurge of violent movements which undermine not only the security of the middle classes, but also the edifice of democracy. The Muslim minority – the Rorschach test of India's worst fears and anxieties – will be the focus of the last section of this article.

4. *The Muslim Hero Is Coming out*

The anxiety caused by Muslims and Islam in India is directly connected to 'original sin' of being an emblem of the failure of the national project at its very inception: the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. Even interpreting the condition of Indian Muslims just along the lines of national history, restricting it within the context of Indian history and society, this is not necessarily straightforward, since 'India' in such interpretations can be defined in

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[23] Alessandra Consolaro, *Corporate Democracy: the Times of India 'Lead India' Campaign*, in «Jura Gentium», http://www.juragentium.org/topics/rol/india/it/consolar.htm.

very different ways: sometimes it encompasses much of the geographic region of South Asia, sometimes it even extends up to Central Asia, other times it refers to specific parts of the domain under colonial British influence, or else it designates the area which today falls within the postcolonial/post-Partition State's borders. In any case, wherever the border is laid and wherever 'India' is meant to be, there is some sense that the beginning of the story of Muslims in India is located in the 'arrival' of an Islamic influence from 'over there' to some territorial point understood to be 'here'. If we look closely at Muslim lives in India, it quickly becomes clear that the identities and practices of those called 'Muslim' are extremely varied along lines of region, caste, class, language, and politics, so that it is impossible for them to constitute a coherent social group, let alone a community. Nevertheless, as the Sachar Committee Report proved, disproportional neglect by the State and active discrimination by both State and non-State actors have combined increased deprivation at all levels of life for Muslim people: welfare, security, and identity. In this way, the abstract construction of 'the Muslim' takes on the form of the underdeveloped and the backward – as a kind of negative space to the positive space of the nation-State – precisely through the fact that 'the Muslim' does not exist as a formal category for State recognition while imposing itself relentlessly as an informal category on those deemed 'Muslim'[24]. Muslims have long been sexualized, racialized, and minoritized[25], and even the media tend to construct the Muslim community as 'them', contra posed to 'us'. This explains why a Muslim character/actor/director/star has to repetitively and reassuringly declare her or his patriotic credentials, overcoming the ever-ready label of a separatist, traitor or terrorist.

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[24] *2006 Sachar Committee Report*, http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/sachar.

[25] Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India,* Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001.

In his almost two-decade-long acting career, SRK had taken on a Muslim role in only one film prior to *Chak De! India* (2007). With the increasing and explicit polarization in India since 1990s, the anxiety around Muslimness had become such that it required perpetual masking: the norm for 'secular' public life became increasingly Hindu, and it required a performative Hinduization of Indian society. SRK's iterative performance of Hinduness, secular or otherwise, was endlessly and persistently marked by the specifically filmic variety of Hinduness practiced in Bollywood: doing *pujas* and *aartis* at different Hindu temples, adorning his spouses' hair-parting with *sindhoor* and smearing his own forehead with *tilaks*. Islamicate tropes are present within Urdu-Hindi film industry[26], but they are fetishisticly employed in masking the anxiety caused by Muslims and Islam in South Asia. Since the 1980s, as the right wing Hindu parties (BJP, Shiv Sena) became stronger not only in Mumbai, but also in the film industry, the Hindi film showed a process of increased communalization: from being the hero's friend the Muslim changed into the villain (*Tezaab, Ghatak, Shool, Pukar, Gadar*). In the past two decades any invocation of Muslimness in Bollywood invariably has had a visual foregrounding of gangsters, violence, and terrorism. SRK's (filmic) Hinduness is expected and mandatory, as SRK himself stated: «In my films I have been going to temples and singing *bhajans*; no one has questioned that»[27]. In the Yash Chopra kind of national family romances of the 1990s the traumatic history of partition is imaginarily resolved, and the anxiety caused by the political demands of India's heterogeneous minorities (not only Muslims, but also Dalits and non-upper caste Hindus) is managed by this image of an organic national

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[26] 'Islamicate' is understood to refer to the cultural practices associated with Muslims, as opposed to ideas derived from Islam. Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2009.

[27] *Films Are For Entertainment, Messages Are For The Post Office*, Namrata Joshi Interviews SRK in «Outlook Magazine», Oct 22, 2007, http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?235838.

community, normalized in Hindu domesticity. Yet, when SRK plays a Muslim character in a film the mask slips off, the performance is momentarily paused, and when he dared criticizing the anti-Pakistani politics of Indian Premier League (IPL), Hindutva activists organized massive demonstrations targeting SRK's suburban Bombay home[28].

Hey Ram (2000) shows SRK in a brief cameo role of the 'good' Indian Muslim. He is Amjad Khan, a Pathan (Pashtun), who sacrifices his life to save Hindus on the eve of the Partition of India. Also in *Veer-Zara* (2004) SRK has a close encounter with Islam, Muslims, and Pakistanis. He plays the character of Veer Pratap Singh, a Sikh pilot in the Indian Air Force, who falls in love with Zara, a Muslim Pakistani heiress. Zara's Muslim Pakistani fiancé, on false accusations of espionage, has him imprisoned under the fictitious (patently Hindu) name Rajesh Rathore. To further emphasize an identity beyond communalism, the Muslim SRK, playing the Sikh Veer Pratap Singh framed as the Hindu Rajesh Rathore, is prisoner number 786, a spiritually significant number for Islamic numerology that, particularly in South Asia, functions as a protective talisman, insofar it stands for the «*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*».

SRK's first role as a Muslim protagonist is in *Chak De! India*, where he plays Kabir Khan, an Indian Muslim hockey player with a career ruined by the unfounded suspicion that he had thrown a hockey match against Pakistan. He proves that he is not a traitor only when he coaches the Indian women's hockey team to victory in an international arena, while repeatedly asserting the indivisibility of India. Since the very origin of independent India one of the most urgent goals has been to exorcise the fear of unrest and revolt, as well as secessionist tendencies, by the subaltern and the minorities. But at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century

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[28] *Sena Takes Protest to Shah Rukh's House*, in «The Hindu», Feb 01, 2010, /2010/02/01/stories/2010020166441500.htm.

communalism had become preponderant in the country, Maoist groups activism was causing distress in a large part of the country, people's upsurge against land grabbing in the name of industrial development saw – both local and central – governments violently opposed to the citizens. *Chak De! India* proposes an idea of nation as inclusive of minorities and guarantee of subaltern redemption, promising to them all the access to consume that for the time being is restricted to the wealthy middle class.

Hockey is the Indian national sport, but hockey players are generally excluded by the glamour and advertisement business that is typical instead of cricket. Mostly they have a Dalit, Adivasi, OBC, Muslim or Sikh social background, unlike cricket that was until recently a predominantly Brahman sport[29]. Multinational corporations, media and government institutions are not interested in hockey and in its athletes: incentives, prizes and sponsors are simply not part of the game. Yet, for this very reason, hockey lends itself to being constructed as a space of articulation for an inclusive nation. Moreover, the film adds a universal element of subalternity: gender. In the waste land of minor sports, women occupy a special place, insofar generally female teams enjoy a lower status than peer male teams. Moreover, almost all the female Indian athletes that succeeded in establishing themselves come from

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[29] James H. Mills (ed.), *Subaltern Sports: Sport and Politics in South Asia*, London, Anthem Press, 2005. A monograph on *Sport in South Asia* is in «Contemporary South Asia», 2001, Vol. 10, No. 2. Cricket has been much studied: Arjun Appadurai, *Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket*, in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. by Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pp. 23-48; Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*, London, Picador, 2002; Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and Destiny of Games*, New Delhi, OUP, 1999; Vikram Bedi, *Indian Cricket as Synecdoche for Our Times*, in «*Economic and Political Weekly*», 2006, Vol. 41, No. 25, pp. 2520-2522. On the relation between cricket and advertising field see Rohitasya Chattopadhyay, *Batting and Buying: Cricket as a Visual Metaphor in Indian Advertising*, in «Advertising & Society Review», 2005, Vol. 6, Issue 1, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/advertising_and_society_review/v006/6.1chattopadhyay .html.

poor backgrounds and sport has been for them a way of fighting social and economic prejudices.

While the representation of subalternity and diversity among the athletes is connected to their ethnic, linguistic or class origin, the protagonist of this allegory of the trickle-down effect is a Muslim. Kabir Khan's mission to triumph in the world championship appears impossible not only because of the sexist biases of the government officers that should support and finance the team, but because there is no team: the group is just a heterogeneous bunch of opposing factions, ever ready to clash: simple village girls vs. snob high class girls; forest tribal vs. urban metropolitan, older vs. younger, etcetera. Interestingly enough, national consciousness is discovered in a global setting and the change of an inhomogeneous bunch of individuals into a winning team takes place in a 'cosmopolitan' location. When the coach quits, let down by the athletes who refuse the discipline he is trying to impose them, he invites the girls to a farewell party at McDonald's. Here some bullish local boys harass two of them, and the group reacts unanimously, unleashing hell. This marks the beginning of international recognition: the team eventually leaves for Australia for the playoff and wins the world championship. This eventually entails an access to commodities that was earlier denied: when the team qualifies, sponsors flock in, brand equipment and all the benefits entitled to those who belong to the winning world. Which is like claiming that media and advertisement are crucial in order to get international recognition.

5. *The Transnational Muslim Hero*

My Name Is Khan (2010) marks a stark departure from these earlier roles, where Muslimness is discrete, subtle, understated, and comes inflected through the label of treason. In this film, SRK 'comes out' as a

practicing Muslim[30], de-territorializing the post-9/11 Islamophobic discourse from the Indian/South Asian context to the USA, shifting the focus from the nation to a transnational, globalized backdrop. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, national strategy planning in India and the US has converged on the dominant theme of 'homeland security': in the effort to secure the nation from both internal and external threats India took up a 'frontline role' in the war against terrorism, an action that is more connected to its frank ambition to become a global power, than righteous posturing against Pakistan. Increasing cooperation of counter-insurgency military and intelligence resources between US and India also fostered a newly shared rhetoric constellated around key terms as '*jihadi* terrorism,' the internal Muslim 'threat,' cross-border infiltration, global and Asian balance of power, etcetera.

The construction of the Islamic terrorist as monstrous 'other' in India enables the elaboration of a normative Hindu identity, as the figure of the terrorist has been constructed in a way that demands a certain identification by all citizens with a Hinduized nation[31]. Yet, in the play-

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[30] I owe this expression to Huma Dar's article *The King is Out, His Name is Khan: Long Live the King*, on the political weblog «Pulse», April 16, 2010: http://pulsemedia.org/2010/04/16/the-king-is-out-his-name-is-khan-long-live-the-king-part-i/.

[31] It has been argued that secularism has been maintained by most Indian filmmakers and that Hindi films have «almost no notion of the outsider or the significant 'Other'» (Vinay Lal, *The Impossibility of the Outsider in the Modern Hindi Film*, in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, ed. by Ashis Nandy, London, Zed Books, 1998, pp. 228–259), but the validity of this argument is, in my opinion, restricted to the generic character of the 'villain', and cannot be considered valid when applied to the characterization of 'the Muslim'. In fact, a long trend in Hindi cinema has been the exoticization that reflected the earlier colonially-imposed binaries among different ethnic groups, usually those who were in power vs. those who were not; at the mid of the 20th century there was a shift from this to an overall absence of Muslims on-screen, marginalizing them. In the 1990s, again, there was a shift, leading to the construction of Muslims as the 'demonized Other'(Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori, *Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized: The Muslim "Other" in Indian Cinema*, in *Global Bollywood*, ed by Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, New York, New York University Press, 2008, pp. 131–145); see also Amit Rai, *Patriotism and the Muslim Citizen in Hindi Films*, in «Harvard Asia Quarterly», 2003, Vol. vii, No. 3.

game of minority identities, the equivalence of the adjective 'Muslim' with 'terrorist' must be analysed in the transnational socio-political context, that becomes an auxiliary text demanding to be read in conjunction with the cinematic text. In this discourse, Islam – both as a civilization and as a culture – is at war with the Western civilization, that is identified as secular, liberal, and democratic. No space is left for dialogue, as the civilization clash leaves no escape but the ultimate victory of one side[32]. At the same time, 'other' communities are increasingly stereotyped and suspected[33], and both in Hollywood and Bollywood films (*Sarfarosh*, *Aamir*), often Muslim people are reduced to a binary categorization, which is a gross simplification and fails to consider the dynamism in the politics of identity. Bad Muslims are the practicing Muslims, always depicted as ultra-religious and associated to notions of backwardness, provincialism, and fanaticism. Good Muslims are secular, cosmopolitan, westernized: in this discourse, good Muslims are such insofar they are not Muslim! In this representation of Muslim identity, Muslim individuals are either victims – of other fanatic Muslims – or monsters. It is worth emphasizing that, while the representation of the Muslim as gangster, terrorist or traitor is quite common in Bollywood films, they rarely show secular, 'modern' Muslim characters[34].

In *My Name Is Khan* SRK plays the role of Rizwan Khan, a migrant Muslim from South Asia suffering from Asperger's syndrome. He

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[32] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

[33] This happens within the film itself: Su'ad Abdul Khabeer points out that *My Name Is Khan* reinforces black stereotypes and erases African American Muslims, as if American Islam were a story of recent immigration: *Movie: "My Name is Khan": "Khan" Breaks New Stereotypes (But Reinforces Old Ones)* in http://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2010/03/khan_breaks_new_stereotypes_but_reinforces_old_ones/.

[34] Of course, there are exceptions: already in 1965 the comic actor Mehmood played an unforgettable farcical character as a Hyderabadi Muslim. Other remarkable 'modern' Muslim characters are Ali in *Dhoom* (2004), Farhan Qureshi in *3 Idiots* (2009), Aslam Khan in *Rang De Basanti* (2006), and Iqbal in the namesake film (2005).

marries a Hindu widow – incidentally, it is much more common to have filmic representations of inter-communitarian marriages where a Muslim woman marries a Hindu man – and when her son is killed in an Islamophobic attack he sets out to meet the President of the USA and tell him: «My name is Khan and I'm not a terrorist». For the first time a modern practicing Muslim is represented in a Bollywood film, in a positive role challenging the myth of the disloyal, untrustworthy or intractable Muslim. Throughout the film Rizwan Khan appropriately and correctly recites Islamic prayers and *ayat* such as «*Bismillah*», «*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*» and «*Surah al-fatiha*» and he is depicted while performing Muslim practices, which are not restricted to the more commonly displayed *namaz*[35], but include also the *zakat*. Also the common Arabic invocations «*Masha'Allah*» and «*Insha'Allah*» are uttered in this film without the visually foreground of gangsters, violence, and terrorism that in the past two decades almost invariably accompanied the representation of Muslimness in Bollywood.

How should we interpret the decision of scripting Rizwan Khan as a challenged person? Although among countries with comparable levels of income India has one of the most progressive disability policy frameworks, disability remains a stigma and people with disabilities are affected by significant poverty and social marginalization[36]. Bollywood films are fantasies of perfection about beauty and macho images. For a long time, if a disabled character was introduced in a Bollywood film there were issues of laughter and power: disability, be it a speech impairment or a mental illness, was something to be mocked, either by

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[35] Actually, SRK wanted to insert a *namaz* shot also in *Chak De! India*, but was denied, as he states in the interview *Films Are For Entertainment*.

[36] According to the Census data, people with disabilities comprise between 4 and 8 % of the Indian population (around 40-90 million individuals): *People with Disabilities in India: From Commitments to Outcomes*, Human Development Unit, South Asia Region, World Bank July 2009, http://web.worldbank.org; Jayna Kothari, *The Future of Disability Law in India: A Critical Analysis of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012.

the other characters or else the sniggering audience – and the 2010 *Golmaal 3* controversy proves that this issue is still current. Otherwise, disabled characters could not aspire to love and care and rarely appeared to be happy, as 'integration' into society could only happen when their disability be 'cured': typically, if the star marries a beautiful blind girl, she'll be cured by the end of the story. There is also, of course, the cultural stereotype of the bad guy with the eye-patch. Yet, in the recent past something has changed. Quite a few Hindi-language films starring some of the industry's biggest names have featured differently-abled characters in positive roles, often resulting in box-office hits in India and abroad. They are mostly touching films where the underdog rises above the adverse situation, such as *Sparsh, Black, Koshish, Jagriti, Dosti, Main Aisa Hi Hun, Koi Mil Gaya, Lagaan, Taare Zameen Par, Guzaarish, U Me Aur Hum*. A new trend has also set up in exploring rare diseases, and less known neurobiological disorders such as dyslexia, amnesia, Alzheimer, Progeria and Asperger entered the stardom. Some of these films were thrillers such as *Ghajini*, where the protagonist has anterograde amnesia, and *Bhool Bhulaiya*, which deals with multiple personality disorder.

My Name Is Khan's hero suffers from a disorder characterized by difficulty in social interaction. The person suffering from it has normal intelligence and language development, but exhibits autistic-like behaviors and marked deficiencies in social and communication skills. If this is an allegorical reference to all Muslims – Rizwan Khan being the embodiment of 'the cosmopolitan Muslim'– we might interpret it as a hint to the difficulty that this kind of Islam has in relating to others, or as a reference to the fact that in the post 9/11 era all Muslims are forced to the compulsive repetition «I am not a terrorist». The construction of a positive but challenged Muslim hero might be a strategy to lower down the audience's defences toward and acquire sympathy for the male

Muslim individual that, in his 'able' form, is commonly constructed as disloyal and violent.

SRK's persona has been constructed as representing the '*ganga-jamuna*' culture of India. He has diplomatically interpreted any kind of Indianness, even arriving at embodying Hindu majoritarianism, such as when playing a young Atal Bihari Vajpayee – the then Indian Prime Minister – at the time when the BJP-led Gujarat state government was failing to stop (and even facilitating) the shuddering violence that took place in that state in the spring of 2002[37]. Yet, at the same time, he has progressively outed his Muslimness in a more and more explicit way. In *My Name Is Khan* Rizwan Khan insists in correcting people's mispronunciation of his last name, pointing out that it must be pronounced as «Khan from the epiglottis»: /xɑːn/ is the Urdu pronunciation, not only rejecting the American /ˈkɑn/, but also the Indian pronunciation /kʰɑːn/. The attempt to systematically erase certain sounds from the Indian aural backdrop aiming at the indigenization of 'foreign', 'borrowed' sounds can be traced through the 19th century communalization of the Urdu/Hindi debate and the power struggles between Muslims and Hindus leading to Partition, but is also a result of the postcolonial national State-engineered gradual loss of Urdu in mainstream India. Given the identification of Urdu with the Muslim community in India today, Rizwan Khan's stance is a strong affirmation of Muslimness, a sign of resistance to the racializing twisting of 'ethnic' or 'foreign-sounding' names both in the American and in the Indian milieu.

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[37] See the video of the song *Kya Khoya Kya Paaya*, from the album *Samvedna* (lyrics: Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Javed Akhtar; music and rendered by Jagjit Singh: opening commentary by Amitabh Bachchan, featuring Shahrukh Khan): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Im6b_jFuO4; For a brief analysis of the video see Huma Dar, *Shahrukh Khan and the Pound of Flesh: the Cost of Stardom (The King is Out: Part II)*, http://pulsemedia.org.

In the discourse of permanent war, of global war to terror, the ethics of war produces and naturalizes some people's racialization: people who, like Rizwan Khan, are considered the inherently threatening 'other', and therefore are shown as precarious and dispensable, their sorrows less distressing than 'ours'. Interestingly enough, Rizwan Khan's travails have not remained a mere filmic performance of the progressive dehumanization and of the humiliation of detecting fear and hatred in other people's eyes. On India Independence day 2009, while travelling to US on a trip to promote *My Name Is Khan*, SRK himself was detained and questioned for two hours in «the quintessential site for post-9/11 anxieties», an airport, like the cinematic character in the opening of the film[38].

SRK's outing as a Muslim is a process that has acquired a more and more personal colour, bringing back some filmic diegetic elements of his characters to his private life. In a recent, unusual move, SRK published on a mainstream magazine an article titled *Being a Khan*, bearing the subtitle «What it means to be a Muslim in the post-9/11 world. And what India means for the world as a Muslim power»[39]. With reference to *My Name Is Khan* as well as to the above mentioned episode, he strongly denounces global islamophobia[40], but also communalist politics within India, emphasizing how difficult it is to be a 'normal Muslim' even for a

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[38] *I'm 'angry, humiliated': Shah Rukh*, in «The Times of India» Aug 15, 2009, /2009-08-15/india/28181150_1_shah-rukh-khan-newark-airport-india-and-pakistan.

[39] «Outlook Turning Points: Global Agenda 2013», February 2013, pp. 64-75. This collector's issue by «Outlook Magazine», published in association with «The New York Times», offers an agenda-setting collection of opinion essays, editorial features, international cartoons, photographs and illustrations by internationally recognized business, political and cultural leaders. SRK also features on the cover of the publication.

[40] «I became so sick of being mistaken for some crazed terrorist who coincidentally carries the same last name as mine that I made a film, subtly titled *My Name Is Khan (and I am not a terrorist)* to prove a point. Ironically, I was interrogated at the airport for hours about my last name when I was going to present the film in America for the first time. I wonder, at times, whether the same treatment is given to everyone whose last name just happens to be McVeigh (as in Timothy)?», *ibidem.*

privileged person like him. The protests of stars are individual protests, and remain individualized, partly because the star system is about the promotion of the individual, partly because it speaks in the name of the individual and of the notion of success, not in the name or the individual as part of a collective organization of labour and production. Nevertheless, they acquire a strong resonance, thanks to the identification between star and spectator: SRK's protests could be taken as emblematic of the situation of Muslim people and have been used as such.

Defining himself as a «walking-talking secular example»[41], SRK has explicitly positioned himself on many occasions – both as on-screen and off-screen persona – as the embodiment of a bridge to the communal divide, and a model of a new nationalism emancipated by the trauma of partition. The conflation of public and private identity has been carefully constructed by SRK, and can be well analysed, for example, with reference to two films and a documentary where he performed in 2004.

Main Hoon Na (2004), produced by SRK himself and written and directed by Farah Khan, a Muslim woman director, tried to make Nehruvian secularism fashionable and to de-ethnicize national belonging in an era marked by popular political rhetoric of Indo-Pakistani mutual suspicion and animosity, and the coding of the discourse about terror and violence as Muslim[42]. Resisting the stereotypical discourse about the Muslim criminal and terrorist as the enemy of the Indian state that marks many of its contemporary Hindi films, this film, deploying the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, does not posit the Indian Muslim, the Pakistani, or the Afghani Taliban, as the militant villain or as a threat to the Indian nation,

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[41] *Indians by nature are very secular*, in *Interview/Shah Rukh Khan*, in «The Rediff», April 30, 2004, http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/apr/30inter.htm.
[42] For an analysis see Kavita Daiya, *War and Peace. Pakistan and Ethnic Citizenship in Bollywood Cinema*, in *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2008, pp. 150-184.

but introduces a militant Hindu nationalist villain as antagonist, constructing him as the 'other', who must be routed by the State's institutions towards the triumph of secularism. Twisting the RSS and BJP use of the epic imagery related to the *Ramayana* and the notion of Ram Rajya to foment anti-Muslim violence, the film tries to shape a discursive political space avoiding the binary of bellicose nationalism vs. non-nationalist peace activism, inventing a 'modern' form of nationalism inspired by transnational peace.

In the same year, *Veer Zaara*'s cross-border love story presented for the first time the realization of inter-religious and transnational married life, albeit the 'happily ever after' was allowed only to aged, non-reproductive and desexualized individuals. More commonly, this sort of love stories end in the death of one of the lovers, preferably on the national border. In any case, up to that date, inter-communitarian married life in Hindi films had long been shown only when the female subject was Muslim and the male subject Hindu (or, more generally, majority male, minority female), following a hegemonic deeply gendered and heteronormative nationalism[43].

We find the reversal of this gendering first of all in the autodiegetic performance of a documentary directed by the British-based author and director Nasreen Munni Kabir, significantly titled *The Inner World of Shahrukh Khan* (2005)[44]. SRK is constructed as an ordinary middle-class man who has attained an unimaginable star power and become one the richest Indians ever. The 'normality' of his life and feelings is repeatedly stressed: he is shown as a happily married man with two kids, celebrating Diwali, praying on his parents' (Muslim) tomb and in his old (Christian)

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[43] The few rare exceptions, like *Rani Rupmati* (1957) or *Ghulam-e-Mustafa* (1997), had invariably a tragic end.

[44] The documentary film, shot on the set of *Main Hoon Na*, contrasts SRK's 'inner world' of daily work, health problems, and family life, with the 'outer world' of adulation, glamour, and wealth – but also fatigue.

school church. The diegetic performance emphasizes the hard work, the discipline, the family ties, the health problems, and the core of loneliness that makes this man who he is. This representation conveys also a sense of vulnerability, sadness and isolation, such as when he briefly mentions his unmarried elder sister, who suffers from depression primarily because she was unable to deal with their parents' premature deaths. What hardly finds a space in the hegemonic public sphere, though, is that there is a Muslim hero in such 'normal' roles – moreover in a non-fictional movie –, and that a Muslim man is shown as happily married to his first love, who happens to be a sexy-looking Hindu woman hailing from a Brahmin family[45]. Even while emphasizing his secular attitude – he claims he has no particular religious education and is shown praying after Hindu, Muslim, and Christian fashion – SRK stresses his pride of being a Muslim – an Indian Muslim.

In *My Name Is Khan*, there is an explicit outing of the liberal face of the South Asian Muslim – educated, having a stature and standing. Rejecting the 'feminization' of the Muslim, it introduces a Muslim positive hero, even if his masculinity is not yet fully acceptable, insofar he is disabled and his son is adopted. Nevertheless, the film closes with the inter-religious couple reunited and hopefully bound to a 'happily ever after' life as sexualized individuals in an age that is still reproductive.

6. *Conclusion*

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[45] SRK and Gauri Chhibber are not the only Hindu woman/Muslim man couple in Bollywood: suffice to mention Aamir Khan and Kiran Rao, Imran Khan and Avantika Malik, Irrfan Khan and Sutapa Sikdar, or Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor. But the text of SRK's romance and subsequent marriage with Gauri is like the story in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge*: they met when she was 14 and he was 18 at a students' party; they managed to keep their relationship covert for six long years as they belonged to different communities; Gauri's parents were hard to win over but neither Shah Rukh nor Gauri wanted to elope; at long last her parents came round, and the happy couple were married on October 25, 1991… and lived happily ever after.

I introduced SRK as a man who challenges stereotypes and the exclusivity of classification. He often claimed that the role of cinema is to entertain, and that a filmmaker or an actor is not meant to educate an audience. Nevertheless, in the *Outlook Turning Points* article – half brand-building, half autobiography – he claims that his greatest performance – an act of balancing and transforming, of stunts and acrobatics – is being a Muslim Indian. His text, both in the filmic career and in the star persona, suggests a criticism of the notion of secularism as claimed by the Indian state, not because he does not feel Indian or because he is wrong and unpatriotic, but because society does not let him claim his normalcy, his legacy of being unequivocally both Indian and Muslim[46]. Even if gone are the days when Muhammad Yousuf Khan had to be renamed Dilip Kumar by the Hindi writer Bhagwati Charan Varma, the Muslim identity still has to be masqueraded in order to live in peace. Today the *trimurti* in the Bollywood pantheon – SRK, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan – don't have to change their names in order to be accepted. But SRK declared that he gave his son and daughter «names that could pass for generic (pan-India and pan-religious) ones – Aryan and Suhana»[47]. They can be pronounced with the epiglottis when asked by Muslims, and the Aryan can be thrown «as evidence of their race when non-Muslims enquire» in the hope that this prevent them «from receiving unwarranted eviction orders or random fatwas in the future. The Khan has been bequeathed by me so they can't really escape it». In this name there is the pride and the plight of living in a post 9/11 world being a Muslim. In SRK's star persona and in his cinematic performances there is a recognition that Muslim characters can be multi-faceted, interesting and relevant.

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[46] Gyanendra Pandey, *Can a Muslim Be an Indian?*, in «Comparative Studies in Society and History», 1999, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 608-629.
[47] Aryan = of utmost strength (A); nobile (S); Suhana = a star (A); beautiful (H).

Star personae in India are constructed like melodramatic character types partly because of their repeated association with certain roles. As elsewhere, ideas about star identity in the public mind are closely tied to issues of authenticity: Who really is the star? In the Indian context, the star's authentic persona is constituted through a conflation of on- and off-screen identities: authenticity is achieved through confirmation of the star persona in film roles, rather than through the dialectic of a series of exposes designed to reveal the 'truth' behind a star. A star is «a composite being, sets of expectations, created by the audience»[48]. One of Indian cinema's most basic authenticating devices for reducing the gap between on- and off-screen identities has been its use of the star's name as the character's name, thereby collapsing any distinction between the two. The Indian star system has an inherent taxonomy of roles, that taken to its logical end fixes and limits even the names of the characters played by stars: such a widespread naming practice, far from being due to lack of inventiveness or laziness in constructing characters, is rather a system promoting the integration of star and role in the public mind[49]. An unwritten rule of the Hollywood 007 series is that the hero's opponents tend to personify the perceived threats or preoccupations of the era which spawns them. In Bombay cinema it seems that SRK characters and star persona have provided a reliable snapshot of the differing species of fear and paranoia thriving over the past decades, but also their reassuring opposite. Why be afraid? *Main hoon, na!*[50]. *My name is Khan*. Shahrukh Khan.

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[48] Vijay Mishra, *Decentering History: Some Versions of Bombay Cinema*, in «East-West Film Journal», 1992, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 111-155, p. 141.
[49] Examples abound. Just think of Raj Kapoor's character name being invariably Raj.
[50] Count on me!