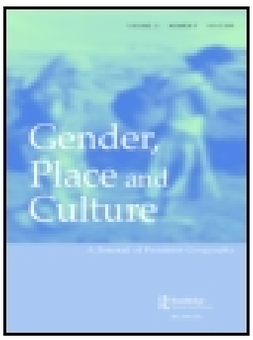

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Sushmita Chatterjee

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'*English Vinglish*' and Bollywood: what is 'new' about the 'new woman'?

Sushmita Chatterjee

Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies Program in the Department of Cultural, Gender and Global Studies, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Bollywood's transnational mechanisms offer a unique space to study gendered subjectivity. My article studies a specific Bollywood movie, *English Vinglish* (2012) to draw out the profile of the 'new woman.' Persistently, I question the 'new-ness' to the construction of women when the 'new' reiterates the values of tradition, nation, and family. The 'new' seems to exist as a particular and unique transaction between local traditions and the global spread of populations that make limiting conceptions of woman, nation, or family, anomalies in a world propelled by expanding market needs and demands. The 'new' while offering possibilities for women, concomitantly carries different exclusions based on class, religion, language, and other identities. Understanding the formation of gender under contemporary conditions of transnationalism requires attentiveness to an insidious partnership of possibilities and exclusions that makes it simplistic to think in terms of progress or regress.

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'*English Vinglish*' y Bollywood: ¿Qué hay de 'nuevo' en la 'nueva mujer'?

RESUMEN

Los mecanismos transnacionales de Bollywood ofrecen un espacio único para estudiar la subjetividad generizada. Mi artículo estudia una película específica de Bollywood, *English Vinglish* (2012) para delinear el perfil de la 'nueva mujer'. Cuestiono sistemáticamente la 'novedad' de la construcción de las mujeres cuando lo 'nuevo' reitera los valores de tradición, nación y familia. Lo 'nuevo' parece existir como una transacción particular y única entre las tradiciones locales y la distribución global de poblaciones que formulan concepciones limitantes de la mujer, la nación o la familia, anomalías en un mundo impulsado por las crecientes necesidades y demandas del mercado. Lo 'nuevo', al tiempo que ofrece posibilidades a las mujeres, conlleva, en forma concomitante, diferentes exclusiones basadas en clase, religión, idioma y otras identidades. Comprender las formas que toma el género bajo las condiciones contemporáneas del transnacionalismo requiere prestar atención a una asociación insidiosa de posibilidades y exclusiones que hacen que sea simplista pensar en términos de progreso o regresión.

PALABRAS CLAVE
Bollywood; transnacionalismo; nueva mujer; India; English Vinglish

关键词
宝莱坞; 跨国主义; 新女性; 印度; 《印式英语》

CONTACT Sushmita Chatterjee chatterjees@appstate.edu

《印式英语》与宝莱坞：'新女性'有何'新颖'之处？

摘要

宝莱坞的跨国机制，提供了研究性别化主体性的特殊空间。我的文章研究一部特定的宝莱坞电影《印式英语》（2012），以取得'新女性'的轮廓。我反覆地质问，当'新颖'重复着传统、国族和家庭价值之时，建构女性的 '新颖'之处何在。此般'新颖'似乎作为存在于地方传统与全球人口扩张之间的特定且特殊的交易，而全球人口扩张使得由扩张的市场需要与要求所驱动的世界中的限制性女性、国族或家庭概念变得反常。此般'新颖'，虽为女性提供了可能性，但却带来了根据阶级、宗教、语言和其他身份的各种排除。理解当代跨国主义境况下的性别构成，需要关注可能性与排除之间暗藏的合作关係，而该关係使得以进步或退步思考之显得简单。

Introduction

Formulation about the 'new woman' has been an intriguing puzzle for different time periods and spaces. The 'new' is often delineated as a harbinger of modernity and progress, also a code for westernization and the eclipse of tradition. Partha Chatterjee in his seminal essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,' draws our attention to the relative marginalization of the 'women's question' in late nineteenth century Bengal (1999, 237). Chatterjee writes that the receding of the 'woman's question' was due to a reconciliation between nationalism and modernity (237, 240). Nationalism's selective appropriation of modernity meant that in its demarcation of the outer and inner space there was a steadfast protection of the inner and spiritual core (239). Women as embodiments of spirituality were allowed to become 'modern,' but without violating spiritual and national boundaries. Thus, as Chatterjee writes, 'The "new" woman defined in this way was subjected to a *new* patriarchy' (244).

Chatterjee's analysis draws our attention to different configurations of patriarchy that move in consonance with selected elements of traditional indigenous society and western influences (244). Formal education was thus necessitated as an indispensable virtue for the 'new women,' but she should never become '*essentially* westernized' (243). It is important to note that the 'new women' were not lower class and belonged to the upper class of society (246). Continuing the conversation on nationalism and modernity's selective appropriations and exclusions, Anna Morcom traces the politics of exclusion in Indian modernity amidst the formation of bourgeoisie nationalist culture as exemplified in the area of dance in contemporary India (2013). Morcom describes the spread of Bollywood culture as 'embourgeoisment, a concretization of middle class place and confidence' at the exclusion of female hereditary exotic performers (207). Questions about 'new women' under contemporary transnational movements of labor and capital provide an interesting and important prism to study gender power relations. Will the new transnational woman differ from a national framing? What is the politics of exclusion in the framing of 'new women'?

In this article, I am centrally concerned with delineating the nuances to the construction of the 'new woman' in Bollywood cinema. I am mindful that Bollywood certainly does not encompass the Indian film industry, simply because there is no singular body called the 'Indian film industry' (Ganti 2012, 13).[1] Moreover, the term 'Bollywood' itself is contentious as many remain disgruntled about the term's imitative parlance and insidious colonization of Hindi cinema's unique style patterns that are very different from Hollywood. However, it can be stated that Bollywood has become a signifier for cultural and economic flows that defy bordered production and distribution, but remain symbolically associated with the Mumbai film industry. Understanding portrayals of the 'new' woman is significant in this context for various reasons. First, Bollywood is a very visible part of the Indian cinema industry and thus it certainly frames the cultural status of women in contemporary India. Ashish Rajadhyaksha draws our attention to the 'cinema-*effect*' and the all-pervasive influence and visibility of 'India's cinematic

culture industry' that spills over, defines, and redefines varied spheres of life and living (2009, 395). As you walk down any street in India's major urban centers or villages, you are almost certain to encounter posters of Bollywood movies, or hear songs from Bollywood movies punctuating the rhythm of daily life. Bollywood movie stars occupy a position that spill far beyond the realms of a particular movie and their influence percolates through multiple levels of society such as the political realm with movie stars as political representatives and the social arena where movie stars are often the front runners in causes for social justice. Secondly, Bollywood is not contained within the Indian political territory with regard to production, distribution, and audience. Its transnational character speaks volumes toward an understanding of the intricate negotiations between the local and the global that re-negotiate gender regimes. Finally, analyzing the image of the 'new' woman within the frame of a culture industry that cuts through networks of the local and global, along with other categories of analysis like the economic sector and the political sector, adds depth and insight into our understanding about the social construction of 'woman' via time and space. What is 'new' about the 'new woman'? And, how does this new-ness construct gender possibilities for some women? In pursuit of an answer to the above questions, I will be analyzing gender play in the figure of the female protagonist of the recently released Bollywood film, *English Vinglish* (Shinde 2012). *English Vinglish* offers provocative insights about gender performances and its ambivalences in a postcolonial scenario.

My article moves through the following trajectory, as mentioned below, all the while struggling with the tension of delimiting categories of analysis when noting that categories incessantly spill over and densely saturate different domains of thinking and living. Bollywood cannot be contained within the 'Indian' territory and nor can our imaging of the 'new' be framed within a categorical time frame, or space. I start my analysis by studying the representation of women in Bollywood cinema, its omissions and gaps. I study the challenges that foreground the analysis of gender in Bollywood and to the phenomenon Sangita Gopal calls 'New Bollywood' and 'Bollywoodization.' After outlining few discernible challenges, I turn next to a specific Bollywood film *English Vinglish* (Shinde 2012) and study the portrayal of the 'new' woman in the figure of Sashi, the female protagonist. Using insights from theorists like Sangita Gopal, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Jigna Desai, Aswin Punathambekar, Elora Halim Chowdhury, Tejaswini Ganti, and others, I analyze the changing nature of Bollywood cinema and the different gendered dynamics in *English Vinglish*. If Sashi is the 'new woman' of Bollywood cinema, does she signal a complete role reversal? And, how does the 'new woman' reflect the needs of a global cinema such as Bollywood with its negotiation between local and transnational audiences? Working through these questions, I conclude by suggesting the imperative to understand 'bollywoodization' and its gender play as containing invaluable insights into cultural constructions of gender that reflect both the needs of the global media industry and local indigenous traditions.

English Vinglish with its female protagonist, spectacular timing of release, and play with ostensibly 'pure' categories of space and language, offers an interesting platform to start our analysis. The specificity of my focus is inspired by the tremendous number of issues that yearn for attention in the single frame of a movie, and also by its strategic time of release. The film was released in 2012, the year that accelerated attention toward gender issues in India following the rape of a woman in New Delhi, December 2012. Protests raged all through the country amidst national and international scrutiny of violence against women in India. The media named the victim *Damini* after a Bollywood movie released in 1993 about a woman struggling against evil and for rights in a violently patriarchal society. This displacement between the 'real' and reel is not de-limited to a specific incident in Indian society. Politics and cinema are inextricably bound together as seen in the presence of numerous film stars who become politicians (Amitabh Bachchan, Govinda, Jayaprada, etc.) and their larger than screen popularity. Here, I am not arguing that *English Vinglish* is 'real.' However, I do note the importance of the 'Cinematic ImaginNation' in structuring gender roles in society via the framing of the good, reasonable, and moral (Virdi 2003). Methodologically, I argue from the perspective of *English Vinglish* not simply because of the political and social presence of Bollywood cinema as a marker of the national imagination, but also because of its transnational presence and economic success through many parts of the world. The film met with amazing success in Japan, Germany, Taiwan, and Hong Kong along with a remarkable early three day

gross collection of 27 crores in India. It was released in India on 900 screens and 250 overseas.[2] Thus, my methodological singularity is targeted toward an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of *English Vinglish*, its widespread resonance. What does *English Vinglish* tell us about the 'new woman' from a transnational perspective?

Here, I work with a conception of the transnational that discerns the multiple loci and networks of power. As Elora Halim Chowdhury puts it, 'The term *transnational*, although mindful of continued significance of national boundaries, is also different from the term *international*, which tends to prioritize discrete national borders' (2011, 7). Transnational analysis enables us to recognize the frames of national borders, its specific nuances and histories, while being mindful about flows, inter-connections, exchanges, and influences that cross border. Working through theories offered by Katharyne Mitchell and others, Alison Blunt offers an intriguing discussion of the 'cultural geographies of transnationality' that takes into account labor migration, trade, material and non-material geographies which intersect and entangle to create different imaginations of transnationalism (2007, 687). Blunt analyzes Mitchell's understanding of transnationalism as 'respatialization' distinct from 'deterritorialization.' (688). Thinking about transnationalism in terms of layering of complexities, multiple geographies, and remappings (rather than unmappings), helps us imagine the relational interactions intrinsic to transnationalism where the local and global interact to create different imaginations. For instance, Shakuntala Rao uses the theoretical repertoire of 'glocalization' to analyze Bollywood's 'global-local nexus' (2010, 2). Her study explicitly details how and why the global and local should not be seen as opposite categories, but in intrinsic partnership. Thus, even when 'exotic' locales like Switzerland or Vancouver are used to shoot a film, the locale is made Indian by characters speaking Hindi with little recognition of the sociopolitical complexion of a place (2010, 10). Rao's study adds to Mitchell's description of transnationalism as an expression of 'respatialization' where we see an extension of the national imagination rather than its obliteration.

Women and Bollywood

Before delving into the specificities of *English Vinglish*, it will be useful to briefly think about the representation of women in Bollywood cinema. It is acknowledged that Bollywood is very much a 'male-dominated industry' and that 'basically heroes are given much more importance than the heroines, important in the sense, because the film runs on them you know' (Ayesha Jhulka in Ganti 2004, 187). In addition to unequal power, privilege, and visibility between male and female actors, directors, producers, and story writers, we do not see a pure trajectory in Bollywood cinema regarding gender representations. Movies with strong female protagonists (*Mother India* 1957, *Damini* 1993), espousing the ideals of nationalism, self-sacrifice, and ideal womanhood has proliferated alongside images of westernized women with excessive sexuality and overflowing needs. Stereotypes are grandiosely perpetuated through melodramatic representations. Many note the changes that have occurred in Bollywood during the past few decades and the increasing presence of female protagonists as more than a dutiful wife or devout mother. However, as Shabana Azmi points out, the changes are simply a 'cosmetic change' (Ganti 2004, 190). In an interview with Tejaswini Ganti, Shabana Azmi emphasizes that oppositions between 'the vamp and the heroine' are getting indistinguishable as the heroine is expected to exhibit multiple characteristics, 'chaste' and 'sexy' (2004, 190). As Azmi says,

> Society accepts that there is a new woman, but does not know how much 'freedom,' this woman should get because she threatens the very fabric of our society. So unless society can come to terms with who this new woman is, our new heroine will continue to be clouded in what is good or what is bad, because a heroine, a heroine or hero is somebody who is a personification of the morality and the aspirations of the society. (Ganti 2004, 190)

Azmi's observations about the opportunistic convergence between the vamp and the heroine and the related confusion about the correct protocol for the 'new woman' are tied to societal political–economic changes. The 'new woman' knows the grammar of modern living. However, she has the 'right' traditional approach to modernity and never eclipses her Indian-ness under a western morale.

Gender is central to the construction of nationalism and gender regimes structure national imaginations (Yuval-Davis 1997; Chatterjee 1999). Representations of 'woman' waltz to the needs of a national community. Much has been written about the one-dimensional representation of woman as either 'modern' or 'traditional' in 'both nineteenth-century orientalist thought and the Independence movement' (Dwyer and Patel 2002, 198). Orientalists constructed idealized images of women based on sacred texts and epics, while nationalists constructed the identity of a good Indian woman based on an authentic past and different from western culture (198). The 'old' serves as support for the 'new' in nationalist and orientalist thought, ostensibly having widely different perspectives. And, interestingly the old and the new are selectively appropriated to frame the image of the 'good' women. For example, Jyotika Virdi in her book *The Cinematic ImagiNation* has reminded us that 'For more than a century now, the invention of the "new woman" has captured the Indian imagination, constantly reinvented according to the exigencies of the times' (2003, 85). As a constantly inventive category the 'new woman' reflects the needs of the present while maintaining a respectful attitude toward the past. Thus, 'new-ness' almost signals a sleigh of hand, a constructed perspective that signals a particular permuted combination of the familiar past and needs of the present. The combinations may vary and seemingly disparate elements often come together in strange alliances, like the old and the new, the 'west' and indigenous traditions. Emphasizing these contradictions, Elora Halim Chowdhury underlines what 'results in an inevitably ambivalent narrative about female subject construction' in her study of the 'new woman' of Bangladesh (2010, 304). Chowdhury's insightful study of the telefim *Ayna* frames the tensions that saturate the construction of gendered subjectivity in continuity and discontinuous from colonial texts, nationalism, and the rhetoric of development (304). Working with these insights, I wonder about the complex framing of the 'new woman' in Bollywood, a transnational media industry that juggles interesting compulsions of market-driven border crossings and a national episteme about the virtuous and traditional good woman.

The term 'Bollywood' itself is an interesting amalgamation of disparate cultural trends. Ajay Gehlawat in *Reframing Bollywood*, notes Bollywood's inherent hybridity when he writes that,

> … Bollywood film is a particularly hybrid art form, blending theatrical and cinematic elements as well as First World and Third World cinema methodologies, plus an assortment of Western and indigenous genres such as the musical, dance drama and melodrama, to name but a few. (2010, xiii)

Bollywood films differ widely based on budget, focus, theme, and numerous other factors. Gehlawat notes other ambivalences as well with the naming of an amorphous terrain called 'Bollywood.' Used by some as a condescending signifier to mock low or popular culture, the term is also used as parody, a 'mimicry,' or even a rebuttal or/and an affirmation of the 'hybrid element' (Gehlawat 2010, xii). Bollywood, whether seen as a subversive antidote to Hollywood, or as a 'low' indigenized copy of the original, complicates itself further when we note its local and global base and reach. Bollywood's intrinsic hybridity refers to its selective appropriation and dismissal of different styles, genres, costumes, locales, and themes. Bollywood's hybridity is intimately linked to its traveling possibilities. Rajinder Dudrah refers to 'Bollywood Travels' as a heuristic device that allows him to explore '… forms of imaginative socio-cultural and actual border crossings in and around the films; not least as this cinema and its popular cultures are produced, distributed and consumed across the globe' (2012, 9).

Today, we hear about the 'month-long "Bollywood" festival of food, furniture and fashion marketing in Selfridges, London' or the fact that Rajnikant is loved by people in Japan, and other Bollywood stars popular in Fiji, Bali, Chile, etc. (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 25–27). The influence of Bollywood is discernible the world over in different domains such as theater, fashion, advertising, and music (2003, 25–26). The term 'Bollywoodization' is used to refer to contemporary Bollywood's global cultural–economic span and expanding networks. Sangita Gopal refers to 'Bollywoodization' as 'the process by which classic Hindi film changes from national cinema to global product' (2011, 190–191).[3] And, in analyzing Bollywood's global scope and varied reach, Ashish Rajadhyaksha uses the term 'culture industry.' Rajadhyaksha's analysis of Bollywood as a 'culture industry' refers to the myriad economic expressions of Bollywood products that exceed the financial profit of Indian cinema per se (2003, 30). Thus, 'Bollywoodization' is

certainly not restricted by the Indian political territory and the global arena is the frame for analysis. Certainly, the more I learn about Bollywood it is intriguing for me to see the workings of capitalism that really have no geographical fidelity. Studying the construction of the 'new woman' in this limitless terrain remains a challenging and urgent endeavor. How does the 'new woman' reflect Bollywoodization? Does the 'new woman' reflect the tensions inherent in Bollywoodization? Without presuming the existence of a homogenous entity called 'Indian woman' or uncritically consuming the wonderful 'new-ness' of any phenomenon, I want to think about gender under contemporary conditions of economic neoliberalism, political fundamentalism, and cultural revivalism when gender reflects social necessities and may re-route itself toward unforeseen destinations.

Interesting challenges foreground the study of gender in Bollywood cinema. First, as Sangita Gopal has emphasized, varied styles jostle for attention in contemporary Bollywood cinema that she terms 'New Bollywood' (2011). As Gopal writes, 'New Bollywood' is eclectic and diverse as exemplified in films of grandiose spectacles made by Karan Johar or Sanjay Leela Bhansali, films with ringing social commentaries like *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) or *Rang De Basanti* (Rakyesh Omprakash Mehra, 2006), or low-budget productions like *Ghosla ka Khosla* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2006) (2011, 3). Moreover, these examples do not exhaust all the offerings of 'New Bollywood' as the dizzying mobility of productions blend and permute different genres and ideologies. Genres play with identities through different modules and thus gender performatives vary through these stylistic divergences. Secondly, along with the impossibility and naivety in pinpointing an 'authentic' representation of Bollywood cinema, thinking about the audience adds multiple layers of complexity. Writing about the different audience calculations intimately involved in production and distribution processes, Tejaswini Ganti writes about how producers calculate the base for a 'super-hit' by endeavoring to target 'shared cultural norms, common to everyone in India' (2012, 314). Ganti notes changes in audience calculations in the last few years and writes, 'It is in the realm of audience imaginaries that the gentrification of the Hindi film industry is most pronounced' (315). Going by the fact that revenue earned from the overseas market grossly exceeds revenue in India per se, filmmakers largely cater to an overseas audience (322). Keeping in mind the varied nuances to 'overseas' and 'diasporic' whether in North America, Britain, or other parts of the world, we do notice shifts in audience calculations amidst other myriad complexities such as catering to a gender, class, and/or religious group. Shakuntala Rao also draws our attention to the class bias in Bollywood cinema, its focus on the urban crowd, attention to diasporic consumers, and exclusion of 'economically and culturally marginalized audiences' (2007, 73).

Third, I personally grapple with the dilemma of trying to make sense or discern a pattern when none exists, or the impetus to intellectualize a product that oftentimes wrestles against meaning-making through its song and dance extravaganzas, exuberant abundance (of joy and/or sorrow), and comic-tragic punctuations. Thus, as Ashis Nandy writes, popular cinema demands thinking along 'less conventional ways' as 'academic correctness, sucks all life from one of the most vigorous expressions of the selfhood of the Indian caught between the old and the new, the inner and the outer, the local and the global' (1998, 16–17). Discerning interesting challenges of variety in genre and audience, and a proclivity against standard meaning-making does not deter against studying 'woman' or other social patterns. Instead, it opens up important spaces of analysis that move along-with or in-between classifications and call for an undoing of categorical thought.

Reading *English Vinglish*

Gauri Shinde, writer and director of *English Vinglish*, was inspired to make the movie as a tribute to her mother. Consequently, Shinde shapes the character of Sashi, the female protagonist, based on the life of her mother who always yearned to learn English so that she could get more respect from those around her. The character of Sashi, a middle-aged woman living in Pune, is played by Sridevi. Sridevi is a renowned actress with a number of successful movies to her credit along with the reputation of being among very few actresses in Bollywood who have been able to make a comeback to the screen after marriage and motherhood. For Sridevi, *English Vinglish* signified a comeback to Hindi films after

a 15-year hiatus. In 2013, a year after the release of *English Vinglish*, Sridevi was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India, a high civilian honor. The film has an international cast in the roles of Satish (Sashi's husband played by Adi Hussain), Laurent (Sashi's French friend played by Mehdi Nebbou), Manu (Sashi's elder sister played by Sujata Kumar), and the other key roles in the movie about an Indian woman learning to speak English in New York.

The first scene of the movie showcases Sashi making breakfast for her family. We see a 'traditional,' Hindu, middle-class woman immersed in daily chores that get her little recognition or respect. We can read the 'traditional' in this context as patriarchy that frames certain protocols for women. She is taunted at the breakfast table by her daughter for pronouncing the word 'jazz' incorrectly and is the subject of laughter and derision. Moreover, her entrepreneurial skills and expertise in making food, though considered necessary for her family, is not recognized as 'real' work or a productive activity. Sashi's daughter does not respect her as she cannot speak in English. We view several tense scenes between Sashi and her daughter sparked by her daughter's feeling of superiority because she has a better command of English as well as Sashi's vulnerability and feeling of failure due to her inability to communicate in English. Sashi's subjectivity is reduced to an inability, eclipsing any appreciation of her other qualities.

We discern the potential for a change in the familial status quo when Sashi leaves to go to New York in order to help her sister (Manu) prepare for her daughter's wedding. However, without knowing English, how will Sashi face the immigration officers? Sashi's husband and daughter tutor her into rehearsing answers to expected questions from the immigration officer. Despite the tutoring, Sashi falters with her answers at the interview. A white immigration officer asks her about how she would manage to navigate America without knowing English. Before, Sashi can answer, an Indian officer interrupts and points out that Sashi would manage in America the same way that his colleague was managing in India without knowing Hindi. Two interesting observations punctuate this scene. Sashi's silence is telling. Her inability to speak in English prevents her from speaking and in a way without knowing English she is devoid of language. Also, the male immigration officers battle over the nationalistic dialog of Hindi and English, while Sashi stands in silence listening to the exchange. Men defend, women need to be defended, and patriotism sparkles forth through gender lines. A similar incident is showcased when Sashi encounters immigration officers upon her arrival in New York. When asked about the purpose of her visit to the US, Sashi muddles up her rehearsed answer in nervousness and consequently hands the officer a pre-written response. Her co-passenger (Amitabh Bachchan in a cameo role) walks up to the officer and in response to the same question, retorts that he was in the US to spend money and help stimulate the American economy. If they did not want his dollars he was willing to go back. Thus, we see Bollywood cinema positioning India on the global map via transnational flows of capital and people. Here cinema almost acts as a cheer-leading squad encouraging Indians to walk fearless, spend money, and remain quintessentially Indian in 'foreign' lands.

Upon arriving in Manhattan, Sashi is amazed by the sky scrapers and the hustle-bustle of the city with its colors, fashions, and people. However, she undergoes an extremely traumatic experience in a coffee shop in New York. The black woman in charge of the café communicates with Sashi in English. Sashi's does not really comprehend the questions about what food she wants to order and in the ensuing confusion Sashi flees from the café in embarrassment. This scene is unusually harsh and presents an interesting encounter between two 'women of color.' Sashi appears vulnerable, embarrassed, and as the victim of uncalled-for severity and reproach. The black woman is portrayed stereotypically as harsh and aggressive. Gender intersects with race to frame role-playings and Bollywood's protective nationalism clearly takes sides in further feminizing the Indian woman and masculinizing the 'other.' This encounter acts as a direct stimulus to Sashi and she consequently enrolls herself for an English learning course at the New York Language Center.

We do need to remember that the British, under the influence of Lord Macaulay, introduced English in India in early nineteenth century to support an administrative structure for their rule of India. Amitava Kumar in his book *Passport Photos* ruminates on English language use among Indians through Salman Rushdie's works and quotes the following from Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

> *To form a class*, Macaulay wrote in the 1835 Minute on Education, … *of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in opinions, in morals, and in intellect*. And, why, pray? O, to be *interpreters between us and millions whom we govern*. How grateful such a class of persons should, and must, be! For, in India the dialects were *poor and rude, and a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature* …. (In Kumar 2000, 24)

Thus, English is very much India's colonial heritage and its influence shadows postcolonial interactions. Sashi's yearning to know and learn English needs to be situated not simply at the level of family and personal tensions, but as a wider tension percolating through postcolonial subjectivities. Salman Rushdie summarizes the tension beautifully when he writes:

> Those of us who do use English do so in spite our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influence at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (In Kumar 2000, 17)

Interestingly, Rushdie's phrasing of the struggle with English as a 'conquer' or conquest which reflects an ongoing 'ambiguity' consonant with other struggles, links the mastery of English to an exclamation of freedom. To be free, maybe, is to emphasize and control the dictates that made us unfree. Sashi's endeavor to gain respect has to work with the master (y) of English.

Thinking about languages in India is a tremendously complicated endeavor as we see varied political entanglements through different time periods. After Independence, Hindi was declared to be the 'official' language and in the face of varied protests about promoting Hindi alone as a national language, a 1968 constitutional amendment made English and Hindi co-official for administrative purposes and individual states could delineate their own language policy (Chand 2011, 10). India has tremendous linguistic diversity with 114 languages recognized in the constitution (10). However, the numerical profusion of linguistic pluralism needs to reckon with the ascendancy of Hindutva (Hindu Nationalist) politics with emphasis on 'pan-Indian Hindi fluency' (13). Many Hindutva politicians extol Hindi virtues and position themselves against westernization and English. It is important to note here that an antipathy toward English in the domestic realm does not foreclose an open-market economic policy.

Thinking about the language of Bollywood is also filled with myriad intricacies and shifts in time. Harish Trivedi analyzes the prevalence of Urdu in Hindi cinema and argues that while earlier films demonstrated Urdu affinity, 'it is perhaps true that (Sanskritic-) Hindi titles have become more numerous and prominent in the decades after Independence and Partition, thus reflecting a general shift in language use' (2006, 57). Trivedi notes though that songs in Hindi films have often an existence separate from the narrative and they have often carried more Urdu in them than the narrative (62).Trivedi discerns various language shifts and writes about the 'hybrid Hindi' popular in films from the 1970's (72). Trivedi agrees with Ranjani Mazumdar's argument

> that the *tapori* language 'embodies a polygot culture that does not fix itself within [the] traditional Hindi-Urdu conflict,' and that this new language serves 'to contest the power of a unitary language' (i.e. 'Urdu-Hindustani'), and to expose 'the vanity of elite linguistic formations'. (72)

It is important to situate this hybrid linguistic formation as often emblematic of low-class outrightness. Trivedi draws our attention to manifold uses of this mode of articulation whether used by 'villain-heroes,' as romantic direct 'macho curtness' exemplified in the song 'Aati kya Khandala?', or even as underworld language exemplified in *Satya* (1998) (73).

Thinking about English amidst these messy linguistic agglomerations adds different nuances. Writing about the status of English in contemporary India, Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy emphasize the use of English as a language of commerce, global communication, and success in transnational trade (2006, xii–xiii). They note, '… David Crystal, who is an authority on the English language, has even predicted that Indian English, "Hinglish," will soon circulate globally and become the most common form of spoken English' (xiii). Trivedi too writes about the turn to 'Hinglish' in Hindi films geared mostly toward western markets. As he writes, 'This reflects an upper-class cosmopolitan Indian mobility which has become a staple subject-matter of Hindi films, much as the villages were half a century ago …' (80). Moreover, languages are not pristine-pure entities. They evolve, transform, and metamorphose through time, space, and bodily identity articulations. While 'Hinglish' may be the new language of global trade, how do we

account for the gendered nature of language as communication? Learning a language has different connotations for men and women and languages use differs through other indices such as region and class as well. While Tapori Hindi has a 'macho curtness,' what is the gender of Hinglish? Languages are situated within power configurations and languages delineate power groups. Thus, Sashi's endeavor to learn English is a yearning for intelligible subjectivity, and much more. It reflects a tension at the very heart of the Indian. English is the language of power and speaking it remains indispensable to clamoring for respectability. However, a 'good' Indian woman has to be traditional as well and keep the purely 'Indian,' however, tenuous the construction, alive.

Sashi's English classroom is multicultural and stereotypically diverse. Her English teacher (David) is a gay man and his sexuality is played upon explicitly and insistently for comedic effect. Sashi's other classmates include a Mexican nanny (Eva) who wants to learn English so that the children she looks after can learn English from her instead of Spanish, a Pakistani taxi driver (Salman) who enrolls in the class so that he can become a 'foreigner' and marry a Pakistani girl as no Pakistani girl wants to marry a man who does not know English, a French cook (Laurent) who wants to learn English so that he can open his own hotel, an Indian engineer (Ramamurthy) who needs to know English in order to answer back to his colleagues who laugh at him for not knowing the language, etc. The class is comprised of individuals from many walks of life who are united in their need to know English. They all soon become good friends and help each other learn the English language. One-dimensional representations are used for comedy, for instance, in the case of the Indian engineer who misses two things: idli (rice cakes) and his mother. However, the one-dimensionality does not always subtract from the whole picture. Instead, it helps to focus our attention and frame issues such as the racism and sexism that proliferate amidst multicultural ignorance. For instance, Salman feels he is flattering a classmate (Yu Son) by calling her a 'spicy dragon' or when he comments on the color of her skin.

Sashi's English classes continue amidst fun and revelry. Sashi's family are not privy to Sashi's English classes and do not share her new friends or environment. Sashi's relationship with her husband (Satish) is showcased as a mere household arrangement as we hear Sashi lamenting on the lack of conversation between them. Sashi and Satish do share a language (i.e. Hindi), however, they do not communicate. Contrarily, we see a friendship growing between Laurent and Sashi even though they do not share a common language of communication. Laurent appreciates Sashi and tries to understand her, leading Sashi to comment that it was 'good to talk without understanding … sometimes better' (Shinde 2012). Laurent tells Sashi that she is an artist because of her culinary expertise. This appreciation is in dire contrast to Satish's disdainful attitude toward her cooking and home business. Despite the differences between the two relationships, the movie does affirm Sangita Gopal's emphasis that 'Heterosexual couple-formation has always been at the heart of all film narrative' (2011, 15). Gopal contrasts Hollywood romances with Bollywood romances and comes to the conclusion that Bollywood romances are different because the couple's 'right to be' was never unquestionable in Bollywood and it had to be validated through the family, community, and often times the nation state (15). Moreover, Gopal discerns a difference between classic Hindi cinema and 'New Bollywood' with its change in the 'conjugal form' (18). Gopal suggests that the 'couple-form' is serving a different function in New Bollywood cinema that reflects the role of the subject in the developing post-liberalization state (18). Importantly, Gopal argues that we will be able to better discern the 'new' through an understanding of 'its mode of interconnectivity with the outside' (20). Using Gopal's analysis to comprehend the heterosexual relationships in *English Vinglish* adds important insights. Changes in the family form and community alignments have changed the nature of privacy and relations between the 'outside' and 'inside.' Obstacles to ideal romantic bliss can emerge from anywhere in the networks within which the 'new' individual is positioned and constantly repositioned. A potential French lover would not be a realizable threat in classic Hindi cinema in ordinary circumstances. Satish and Sashi's relationship thus encounters unforeseen impediments and uncalculated interruptions.

Changes in couple dynamics are not divorced from changes in gender and sexual configurations. Sashi's English classes add to her gender positioning and help her reinscribe her 'traditional' values. Infact, learning English propels her into unchartered territories whether in terms of knowing how

to navigate through New York's subway system or encountering varied lifestyle choices. Sashi starts thinking outside the box. I am not suggesting that learning English inspired a revolutionary change in consciousness for Sashi. Rather, people and attitudes change with any learning process that demands a rethinking of earlier unquestioned assumptions and untested borders. In a telling moment, her niece (Radha), explains the meaning of the word 'judgemental' by illustrating that Sashi in appearance looks traditional and conservative. However, Radha points out, that as soon as one moves beyond a judgmental attitude it soon becomes clear that Sashi is open-minded and free-spirited, and not traditional and conservative as garnered by her looks. Thus, learning English places Sashi among 'new' circuits and networks that results in a shift of her sense of self. These shifts, however, minute and incidental, challenge the norms that frame her in a particular way. She does not shy away from forming a friendship with a Laurent, nor does she admonish 'gay' people as immoral or deviant. Conversely, she recognizes her own deviance and non-normative positioning. In an interesting scene, Sashi chides her classmates for making fun of their teacher who has just broken up with his boyfriend. Sashi points out that all of them would appear equally 'not normal' to their teacher as he does to them. However, she notes, they were united in the fact that they could all feel pain. Recognition that they were all queer in New York adds to the friendships and relationship building. Queer studies, when trying to delineate gay identity in different parts of the work, often imposes its own language of meaning-making in terms of norms of sexual and gender behaviors associated with queer identity. Recent scholarship has emphasized 'disidentifications' and dissonances with a hegemonic understanding of gender and sexuality through a questioning of the 'normative' (Munoz 1999; Desai 2004). There is recognition that 'sexuality is normalized and embodied in citizenship and nationalism, circulated through capitalism, and mobilized in the terrain of postcoloniality' (Desai 2004, 30). Flows of capital generate subjects in a sexual regime geared toward maximum profit whether through the demand–supply nexus of sexual trafficking or gendered hierarchy in economic activity. However, capitalism may sometimes defy its own logic through the unfolding of creative possibilities and spaces of resistance (Gibson-Graham 2006). Possibilities for sexuality and gender do not necessarily fit in with an identity and *English Vinglish* offers a creative perspective in this regard.

The final wedding scene functions like a 'coming out' for Sashi to articulate her English speaking prowess. Her classmates and her teacher attend the wedding and her wedding toast is seen as a testimony to her English language credentials. Initially, Sashi was hesitant to speak and her husband apologized to the guests presuming that Sashi would not be able to make the toast in English. However, Sashi rises to the occasion and delivers a speech about marriage as a special 'friendship' that brings together 'two people who are equal' (Shinde 2012). She urges her niece and her new American partner to help each other remain equal. Her toast at the wedding, underlines the need for self-reliance as dependence may breed contempt and friendships need to be between equal partners. Juxtaposing her emphasis on independence and individualism, Sashi argues for the virtues of family, for the non-judgmental nature of family, and for family as a source of love and respect. Sashi's family is amazed to hear her speak in English as they were not aware of her English classes and feel suitably ashamed of their own 'judgmental' attitude toward her. Replete with song–dance sequences, food, and colorful clothes, an Indian wedding ceremony and 'western' toast, the wedding scene frames a settling of tensions after a climatic coming out disclosure of Sashi's English-speaking ability.

Writing about films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and *Bollywood/Hollywood*, Jigna Desai comments about how 'wedding films, by naturalizing and stabilizing heterosexuality, reassure ethnic audiences of the possibility of cultural tradition and allow viewers to fulfill narratives of desire, belonging, and community' (2004, 221). Desai maintains the wedding scenes function 'performatively and pedagogically' as they inculcate tradition and values as well as 'identification' with a cultural community (221). The wedding scene in *English Vinglish* performs similarly and showcases grandiose Indian traditions and cultural community and continuity. However, by way of a skillful combination of the 'west' and 'east,' 'tradition' and 'modernity,' 'individualism' and 'family-orientedness,' the scene accomplishes more than a performative reiteration of the past. It highlights a blending of tensions, a coming to terms with the 'interconnectivity with the outside' that Sangita Gopal emphasized as the prerequisite for the 'new'

(Gopal 2011, 20). Sashi's 'coming out' speaks exuberantly to a re-emphasis on tradition and a looking forward toward new becomings. This reminds me of Ashis Nandy's coinage of the term 'secret politics' to refer to politics that reflect the exigencies of the present and contain within itself the stimuli for reimaginings and reformulations of the present (Dudrah 2012, 45–46). Nandy's 'secret politics' offers important insights to decipher the 'new-ness' in 'New Bollywood' and its 'New Woman.' The 'new' is a looking forward, an urge to meet the demands of a changing world. However, the 'new' exists only in companionship with the 'old' as configurations that co-constitute each other. Gender politics is a 'secret' mechanism and its implications and underlying meanings often remain covered and unobvious when looked at from one prism or static perspective taking.

It is important to note that the 'new' woman or other forms of new-ness does not necessarily come packaged with revolutionary, anti-status quo politics. For instance, in the last scene of the movie, where Sashi and Satish are returning home to India along with their children, we notice a reversion that does not move from the old to the new, but rather from the new to the old and is 'new' nonetheless because of the change that it showcases. The air hostess asks Sashi and Satish for their choice of newspaper to read on the flight. Satish chooses to read *The New York Times*, while Sashi stops herself from asking for an English newspaper and requests a Hindi one instead. Sashi as the 'new woman' who knows English reverses back to her traditional role as symbolic bearer of nationalism and patriotic womanly virtues. However, this explanation does not completely hold ground as we notice the visual exchange between Satish and Sashi that speaks of a newly established respect. It is not entirely about 'tradition' or 'modernity.' Infact, 'It's all about English-Vinglish,' as the title song of the movie suggests, where both transform each other and serve as a parodic performative of each other's constantly changing construction. The movie is replete with hybrid doubles such a 'learning-verning,' 'trying-vying,' 'liking-viking,' etc. The queer double of English words function more than comedy strategies that elicit laughter at a recognizable 'Hinglish' manner of speaking. It also sparkles with counter-knowledge or counter-aesthetics that unsettle normal modes of perception and meaning-making.[4]

Sashi journeys from India to the United States, and from her 'old' surroundings to 'new' vistas by learning English and gaining respect. She is the 'new' woman of Bollywood who remains essentially Indian, Hindu, traditional, family bound, domestic, and who has now 'conquered' English as the ultimate arbiter of her legitimacy as a wife and mother. So, what is the significance of our protagonist in terms of a transnational understanding of gender? And, what is 'new' about this 'new woman'?

What is 'new' about 'new women'?

It is important to stress that the 'new woman' does not represent 'all' Indian women. Sunera Thobani writes about 'The Gendered Heroic National' with the inscription of a 'position of innocence and victimhood for the Hindu woman' (2014, 497). Interestingly, Thobani's analysis emphasizes a process-oriented understanding of religious politics as noted in Indian cinema and she argues, '… defining the partition as enduring historical *process* – not only historical *event* – reveals that the dynamic of anti-Muslim violence remains foundational to the ongoing re/production of the Indian nation-state in the early 21st century' (486). It is vital to situate Sashi as a Hindu, middle-class women in this discussion of new forms of gender politics. Sashi's religious and class background adds to her legitimacy as the 'new woman.' Whereas, Sashi as a Hindu woman can embrace English Vinglish as a form of possibilities, Sashi framed as Muslim would probably be seen as a traitor to the nation and un-Indian. It is intriguing to see how religion-as-process frames not only the 'Heroic National' as Thobani points out, but also the transnational with its extensions and remappings of families and national communities.

The Indian State gave 'industry' status to Bombay cinema in 1998 and this facilitated the process of intertwining cinema firmly with global industry (Punathambekar 2013, 1). Aswin Punathambekar refuses to describe Bollywood solely as a '*film* industry' (2). As he notes, 'Television and digital media have been central to the circulation of Bollywood content across the world' (2). Therefore, Bollywood's transnational status is complicated with its transmedia status that obfuscates the boundaries between media. Thinking about the emerging, showcased role of women in this context becomes increasingly

important in a world that cannot be contained into tidy categories within national or media borders. *English Vinglish* is reminiscent of an impure world that cannot be cemented off from its hybrid variant. It is imperative to complicate our understanding of the performative reiteration of gender as further mediated through transnational negotiations. With its parodic queering of English, *English Vinglish* offers numerous insights into the 'new' mediations that frame gendered subjectivity.

When thinking about the transnational framing of gender, we have to keep the national in perspective. The national breathes through every pore of the transnational. Whether seen in the importance of the wedding ceremony and the re-emphasis of Indian values, or the incessant harping on the virtues of family as the first loyalty and sense of beingness, *English Vinglish* never forgets its national bases and bias. However, there is an acknowledgment of the unlimited territory of the nation through an understanding of markets, audience needs, and dispersal of diasporas. Imagining the nation has to work with an imagination of markets, as Benedict Anderson showcased in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1983).[5] Moving beyond a 'limited' conception of nationalisms and nationhood, Bollywoodization signals trade and cultural linkages that does not restrict constructions of gender to a delimited territory. Instead, it moves, with the mobility and agility of populations, and imaginations, across differences. This movement, however, remains rooted in a certain symbolism despite its world travels. Sashi is an Indian woman and is portrayed persistently as first and foremost Indian. Her role, desires, and needs, are depicted as specific to a gender-community identity. In order to be respectfully Indian, she 'conquers' English and can now be legitimate in India and in New York. Of course, the fact that she reverts back to Hindi, in the plane when flying back to India with her husband, is her choice. This 'choice' is framed by gendered callings of nation and family; showcasing poignantly the inevitable submersion of a woman's needs to those of her family and nation.

Sashi as the 'new' woman reflects the needs of the present. Elora Halim Chowdhury frames the situation succinctly when she writes, 'contemporary constructions of the new woman are shaped by discourses of development and modernization' (2010, 302). Sashi is very much the protagonist of a model of development and modernization that embraces crossing borders, seeking opportunities and moving beyond the restrictions of the local and traditional. Understanding the construction of the 'new woman' within changing circuits of power remains a complex endeavor. The study of the female protagonist of *English Vinglish* provides valuable insights into the complex contradictions that shape female subjectivity at a time of enlarging markets, transnational flow of goods and services, and the need to maintain 'communities of belonging' cemented by the figure of the sacrificing wife and mother.

Partha Chatterjee reminded us at the beginning of this article about the national framings of 'new women' constructing and constructed by 'new patriarchy.' This present analysis draws our attention to transnational framings of the 'new women' through a particular Bollywood movie. Bollywood seen as a transnational industry involves a remapping of circuits of power that works through the national frame and extends it far beyond toward varied configurations. Patriarchy and other exclusions are certainly not transcended in transnationalism. But, we do notice a unique hybridity that works in-between borders to frame possibilities. This postcolonial hybridity should not be read as completely discontinuous from colonial hybridity. Numerous studies have showcased the 'hybrid' nature of colonial politics. For instance, Ania Loomba notes 'how colonial empires both fear and engender biological as well as intellectual hybridities' (2005, 145). And, as she succinctly writes,

> The task, then, is not simply to pit the themes of migrancy, exile and hybridity against rootedness, nation and authenticity, but to locate and evaluate their ideological, political and emotional valencies, as well as their intersections in the multiple histories of colonialism and postcoloniality. (153)

Indeed, Bollywood attests to the impossibility of a 'pure' moment of analysis, and writes different histories of inclusion and exclusion, of class, gender, religion, and language. Multiple histories and political frames intersect to create possibilities for some, redefinitions that speak to different cartographies. It is important to keep in mind, that we not know the direction of transnational flows, networks, and linkages. Business or audience calculations and effects may exceed or undercut prior assumptions. It is simplistic to read *English Vinglish* as a linear story of progress or regress. Bollywood cinema, deemed

by many to be low or popular cinema, demands an unconventional eye, a contra-disciplining that can uncover the space for interesting new formations and 'secret politics' as invoked by Nandy. Bollywood, through its elaborate dance–song exuberance, feel-good vibrancy, and supposedly untailored good-for-all appeal, speaks both of neocapitalism and new forms of gender politics. It is important to reckon with this mischievous alliance between the 'old' and the 'new' so that we can think creatively of activism and theories that can undo the constant reiteration of the old as new, new as positive, old as good, or other slippery oscillations that fail to recognize the power play intrinsic to each framing.

Notes

1. Tejaswini Ganti draws our attention to the problematic association of the Indian film industry with Bollywood that ignores regional film (2012, 13). Ganti argues that 'there is no such entity as the "Indian film industry" in terms of nationally integrated structures of financing, production, distribution, and exhibition, even if there is some overlap and circulation of personnel between the six main film industries in India' (13).
2. See https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140802213210-208598318-english-vinglish-continues-to-rock-japan-with-spectacular-box-office-proceeds. And, http://www.livemint.com/Consumer/tjPEr3mlniAPiBjQ5Mjz0I/Sridevis-film-earns-27-cr-in-first-3-days.html (Accessed on 30 May 2015).
3. Moving beyond the 'extensive' nature of Bollywood studies that analyze the growing reach of Bollywood through the globe, Sangita Gopal studies the 'intensive' changes in Hindi cinema. Gopal designates these changes as 'New Bollywood' (2011, 191).
4. It is important to think of Anna Morcom's analysis of Hindi film songs in the context of narrative trajectories and meaning sways punctuated by songs. Morcom works with multimedia theory that sees visuals, conversations, and songs involved as composite forces in meaning-making (2007, 16–17). Morcom does note interesting aberrations: 'What could the often symphonic-style score of *Mother India*, set in a rural Indian village, have meant to audiences in 1957?' (17).
5. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson draws out the connections between print technology and capitalism that 'limited' communities to a specific terrain (1983, 44–46). Anderson points out that print capitalism created 'unified fields of exchange and communication' and a 'new fixity to language' which created the foundation for the modern nation (44).

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Notes on contributor

Dr Sushmita Chatterjee is an assistant professor of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies in the Department of Cultural, Gender, and Global Studies at Appalachian State University. She earned a dual-degree PhD in Political Science and Women's Studies from Pennsylvania State University in 2009. Dr Chatterjee's research and teaching interests include feminist–queer theory, democratic theory, transnational studies, postcolonial theory, visual politics, and animal studies.

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