

2020

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Citation Details

Viswamohan, A. I., & Wilkinson-Weber, C. M. (Clare M. (Eds.). (2020). Stardom in contemporary Hindi cinema : celebrity and fame in globalized times. Springer.

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Chapter 3

Shah Rukh Khan: Journey from Charisma to Celebrity



Priya Kapoor

Abstract This essay studies the particular brand of Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) as he achieves superstardom in the Hindi film industry and as a thought leader, earning him the moniker Badshah (king). By transcending ossifying gender roles and ethnic-religious divisions might SRK be the quintessential Indian man who stands for the nation (Cayla in *Advertising Soc Rev* 9(2), 2008)? Or is he a modern metrosexual whose identity is hybrid? This accounts for the dialectical tension that arises from the ‘celebrity’ of SRK as global businesses boldly recruit cinephile audiences as consumer-patriots of neoliberal India transforming dated identities of citizen-patriots in postcolonial India. What follows then is the provocation that the study of celebrity is a very particular cultural formation that Graeme Turner believes, “is a productive location for the analysis of cultural shifts around gender, race or nationality” (*Celebr Stud* 1(1), p.13, 2010). Lastly, the essay explores how SRK recoups his image as charismatic actor and leader, not just as a brand ambassador of multinational commodities. Through ethnographic insight I propose that in SRK-defined films such as *My Name is Khan* global Muslim audiences find a way to talk about and understand their own experience of being Muslim during the Global War on Terror.

Keywords Celebrity · Globalization · Brand · Metrosexual masculinity · Ethnography · Textual analysis · Discourse analysis

The study of celebrity is a very particular cultural formation that Graeme Turner believes, “is a productive location for the analysis of cultural shifts around gender, race or nationality”. Twitter accounts and Facebook pages keep celebrities alive in the public imagination even during their time off-screen, when they are with family, on vacation, or commenting on state politics. Shah Rukh’s middle-class New Delhi background has bearing on the type of celebrity he is known to be. He is educated, has a graduate Mass Communication degree from Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, and after abandoning television stardom for the big screen, Khan (popularly called SRK in India) attempts, philosophically, to carefully study [his own] fame and

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success through his risky filmic venture, *Fan* (Sharma 2016, Yash Raj Films) and *Zero* (Sharma 2018, Yash Raj Films). Both films portray him as a flawed human (not typically hero material), although introspection and self-critique help him emerge as triumphant. He can be framed and analysed in multiple ways. One can study Khan as a successful Muslim actor in post-colonial India, in an intercultural marriage, or as a versatile metrosexual who stands for the rapid urbanization of rural areas with the ability, as a celebrity, to bridge insurmountable divides such as rural/urban, rich/poor, Hindu/Muslim with great aplomb and self-confidence. Julien Cayla believes that SRKs “fluidity and hybridity become his most potent assets. He is able to reconcile tradition and modernity, masculinity and femininity, emotion and ambition. SRK’s ability to evolve all at once in different spheres of Indian life, to transcend gender roles, and ethnic religious divisions, helps craft his story as the Indian man. **SRK stands for the Indian nation (emphasis mine)**” (Cayla 2008, n.p.). Additionally, Walter J. Thompson, a leading advertising agency, and the *Times of India* recently launched a campaign “Lead India” with SRK exhorting Indians to quit daydreaming about a pristine past or a glorious future, but to “do” something, to “dominate”. Clearly, SRK is anointed to become the leader of a global neoliberal India and a leading icon for consumer urban lifestyles. In this chapter, I am especially interested in examining the above-cited quote in the context of the over two dozen brand endorsements and blockbuster films by Shah Rukh Khan. Has the citizen-patriotism of the 1970s given way to the consumer-patriot of neoliberal India (Cayla 2008)? What is the role of celebrity culture, especially Shah Rukh’s role, in this transition from citizen to consumer? Can a Muslim actor be entrusted with, or be effective at the task of nation-building during a time of the global war on terror, GWOT, where the Muslim body has been transformed by the nation-state to bear the scars of modernity and not be an equal partner in India’s march forward as a global and regional economic power?

Shah Rukh Khan as a Symbol of Global India: A Mix of Charisma and Celebrity

In the Fall of 2010, an academic conference charting SRK’s trajectory as a global phenomenon was held at the University of Vienna, Austria. Vienna became the most likely venue because in the German-speaking world, SRK enjoys a large fan community. Titled *Shah Rukh Khan and Global Bollywood* this conference attracted over 45 scholars, among them Rajendra Dudrah, Rachel Dwyer, Rosie Thomas and Sudha Rajagopalan, spoke on topics based upon their ongoing research. Judging from the plethora of workshops offered at the conference, one was able to see the diversity of topic areas, ranging from reception, fandom and gender to religion, film and globalization. The coming together of scholars from the North and South propelled SRK as

a synthesizing icon able to bridge divides between “Indian identity and cosmopolitanism, tradition and modernity or contradictory differences between religions or between projections of male and female” (Press, University of Vienna 2010, n.p.).

From the time he first featured on state-run television (Doordarshan) in a successful drama series *Fauji* (Kapoor 1988), to Davos in Switzerland, Khan has grown and matured into a well-respected philanthropist in the public glare. For example, he was recently awarded the prestigious Crystal Award at Davos, Switzerland, on 22 January 2018 for the social justice agenda of his charitable foundation¹. Davos, the hub for the World Economic forum, is a mecca of global trade talks. It is a forum for sharing new ideas, innovations and discussing possible exigencies among government functionaries and elected national leaders. Top politicians, from Donald Trump to Narendra Modi, delivered speeches, which were regarded carefully by global audiences and journalists for the next new word on economic strategy and state policy. Given his august company at Davos, other celebrities, even media-savvy Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s daily broadcast *Man Ki Baat* (‘Speaking from the Heart’) has not found the dedicated audience that we associate with SRK’s media productions such as expat dance shows, TED talks, interviews on TV and regular filmfare. This is where the importance of SRK’s humanitarian efforts come in. Khan’s philanthropic *Mir Foundation* is named after his father, for assisting and rehabilitating acid-burn victims. In an interview with Tania Bryer (2018), Khan articulates his philosophy of life, along with his vision for a just world. He talks about the work he had done in Mumbai with burn victims, most of whom were children who suffered due to political strife in Kashmir. Several children’s hospitals have benefitted from his largesse and commitment.

In this paper, I argue that SRK, more than any other actor has moved through the different stages (youth, to married man, father, actor, hero, visionary) of his life, in full dazzle of media lights—as a struggling newly graduated young man who trained under Delhi’s theatre personality, Barry John, until this glorious Davos moment of global recognition as celebrity and thinker. Audiences identify with him in different ways as he comes on-screen in *Raees* (Dholakia 2017) and *My Name is Khan* (Johar 2010) where he grows into a moral and ethical Muslim leader, even if that leadership involves being a purveyor of nefarious activities (as in *Raees*) or providing a counterpoint to leadership despite disability. Although Khan’s character peddles contraband liquor at a time of prohibition, and is a merchant of death in *Raees*, we get to see that there is room for morality and ethical leadership in the underworld that is easily identifiable in a society in transition—in *Raees’* case, modernizing Gujarat. In both these films, he distinguishes himself as Muslim unlike previous films where he is mostly portrayed as a Hindu, easily categorized by his Hindu screen name and modern secular² fashion-labelled clothing.

¹ A single-entry, by-invitation-only ticket to the World Economic Forum, in Davos 2018 cost 19,000 dollars. The others who received the Crystal Award were Cate Blanchett and Elton John.

² Secular clothing is tacitly allowed only to the Hindu named character in Hindi language cinema. Muslim clothing (caps, scarves, *achkan*, *salwar-kurta* and *burqa*), prayers or visits to the Mosque

Shah Rukh: A Charismatic Actor

Shah Rukh Khan came to the screen as a swashbuckling hero who by his own admission was not “chocolatey” enough (Bryer 2018). Khan means that he did not qualify as having the classic good looks that previous Hindi film heroes Dharmendra or Sunil Dutt were known for. But then Hindi cinema has never had a typical leading man for their popular films as the successful screen presence of Om Puri, Rajkummar Rao and Irrfan Khan demonstrate. Amitabh Bachchan, Jeetendra, Anil Kapoor and Aamir Khan never started out as likely star material but rose quickly to the top fulfilling “heroes” roles in romances, working-class plot lines, science fiction and murder mysteries. Shah Rukh Khan’s ascendency in Bollywood is curious because it follows a very successful stint in the 1988 television series—*Fauji* [soldier]. Popularity in television does not always determine a successful film career as we have seen other actors such as Chutki (Loveleen Mishra) and Badhki³ (Seema Bhargav) of all-time television hit *Hum Log* fame do poorly in the film industry. In the TV series *Fauji*, Khan’s rise to fame, ultimately becoming its “scene-stealer [where the actor]...was cast by default” (Pal 2015, n.p.). This golden period of televisual history is often considered “cinema’s tackiest era [marked by Govinda’s reign]...[and] television’s finest” (Pal 2015, n.p.).

The transference of stardom from television to cinema was not easy for all television actors like it was for SRK. Not only was he able to fare well betwixt media stardoms but he was also able to bridge the digital divide by handling his social media presence online, on TED Talks, Twitter and YouTube. Importantly, SRK’s depiction of sensitive, evolving masculinities on-screen bore him well. Today, SRK can easily be identified as the king of post-liberalization India, not just Bollywood (where he is also anointed as *Badshah*). SRK wills for himself, an avatar that draws the audience towards his popular persona of a “feeling being”. His famous unction “I am a feeling you can’t resist” (Shah Rukh Khan, Filmfare 2012 cited in Gopinath 2018, p. 307) leads to a chief argument by Gopinath (2018, p. 308) that different performative masculinities or new ways of “doing” masculinity define Khan. Adding another dimension to his fluid masculine performativity, Gopinath (2018) asserts that “the camera and his performance collude to emphasize his vulnerability and his sensuality, constituting him as a feeling, sensitive man, both subject and object of affect”. Furthermore, Gopinath (2018) believes that SRK repurposes heterosexual masculinity via his emotional and sexual vulnerabilities on-screen to produce a borderline queerness.

(or a muslim cemetery, *pir/sufi dargah*), festival celebrations are usually performative and semiotic markers used to create a distinction between a Muslim and a Hindu film actor.

³Chutki and Badhki are contemporaries of Shah Rukh Khan and Buniyaad was far more popular than even Fauji.

Luxury Product Endorsements: Commerce and Citizenship

Scholarly deliberations on celebrities endorsing consumer products surmise that our recognition of the *national* and *transnational* emerges from the associations celebrities make for the consuming publics.

Celebrity mobilities also mediate and shape our very sense of national and transnational cultures and possibilities as well as being themselves ‘subject to’ or shaped by it: they are part of a larger process by which we can make sense of what the national, the international and the transnational means, or might mean. (Littler 2011, p. 2; Turner 2010)

Endorsing global fashion labels by a celebrity positions the audiences and the celebrity as global consumers. Consuming a global fashion brand allows one to join an elite group of consumers who recognize global fashion standards, thereby inculcating a unique consumption-driven cosmopolitanism. Littler (2011) is of the view that the creation of “celebrities” are an industry ploy to push greater number of commodities onto the public to promote a specific conception of what might comprise the *cosmopolitan*. *Cosmopolitan consumption* emerges as a focal point of identity formation at the same time as audience identification with global labels deepens.

Not surprisingly, top actors in Indian cinema have become successful endorsers of commercial products and processes (Venkatesakumar et al. 2012). All other genre of non-film celebrities—fashion models, sports stars, etc. follow in this wholesale investment in film personalities. No industry has benefited more from the success of actors as symbols of commercial products than the advertising industry. By the year 2012, leading actors like Shah Rukh Khan has endorsed 42 retail brands, Hritik Roshan endorsed 20 retail brands, Juhi Chawla 17 retail brands and Amir Khan 10 retail brands, while cricket stars such as Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid endorsed 15 retail brands each (Venkatesakumar et al. 2012, citing Patra and Dutta’s 2010 study). These figures may need adjustment after the 11 December 2017 star marriage (Kaur 2018) of actor Anushka Sharma and cricketer Virat Kohli known by fans as *Virushka*⁴. The union of the head of the cricket team (Virat) and the leading Mumbai actress (Anushka) has left the audiences and fans hankering for more access to them. As with SRK, this access comes from advertising that features individual actors or celebrities talking directly to their fan constituencies. In this way, advertising is able to milk a certain collective audience mood that wants to see their celebrities don expensive retail products thereby imparting a certain familiarity to products that are more foreign than local. Subsequently, purchasing familiar high-priced products feels less risky (since many others are doing the same) and the right thing to do as a citizen of global India.

The celebrity-advertising-neoliberal complex, reminiscent of Angela Davis’⁵ prison–industrial complex (Davis 2000), benefits from contrapuntal institutions such

⁴Another star marriage, in November 2018, of Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone, a former fashion model, has been a boom for marketers, especially of *haute couture* clothing.

⁵Imprisonment has become first resort of society to contain persons of colour. Recent movements like Black Lives Matter demonstrate that the Justice System has been differential in meting out justice to African Americans who are sent to prison in disproportionate numbers. The prison industry leases its

as celebrity-making industries and consumer-advertising industries are able to capitalize on government loosening of tariff controls and support of neoliberal policies to create a profitable system. To clarify, the creation of *celebrity* in Indian cinema and the overlapping interests and parallel success of non-essential consumer goods (and the advertising industry) creates a perfect marketing milieu possible only because both industries—film and consumer markets for luxury cars, watches and clothes—have benefitted from the shift of a socialist to neoliberal Indian economy. The sale of star images and the imagination(s) that are brought to bear on audiences and fans feel embodied once endorsed by stars and their fervent appeals to buy more (see Khan's Tag Heur watch advertisement). SRK in his own words is “a commercial poet” combining his ambitions as a hyperconsuming material boy and a sensitive emotional artist (Tehelka 2012 cited in Gopinath 2018, p. 310).

Shah Rukh Khan's transition from hero to hero + brand was a first for Indian cinema (Gehlawat 2015). Biographer and film critic Anupama Chopra says, “Shah Rukh rarely met a product he could not endorse” (2007, p. 14). Shah Rukh's rise to celebrity goes hand in hand with India's transition from socialist to neoliberal “free trade” economy. Consumer markets sold non-essential goods to Indians around the same time that SRK made it in films. Television evolved from black and white to colour in 1982 to broadcast the Asian Games, giving TV sales a fillip (the potential of television as a mode of sale of commodities is actualized), and post-1991 films unabashedly placed Coke and Pepsi in the hands of its actors. Television sets sold like hot cakes. Working-class families, barely scraping by, gave their new purchase, pride of place in their living rooms. The liberalizing national economy in India was forced to accept Bretton Woods' recommendations (Desai 2016) of Free Trade, which meant opening its shores to Western consumer branded items that already had humbler looking Indian counterparts. Despite their gloss and sophistication, these overpriced (compared to the modestly priced Indian goods) Western products were superfluous in the lives of Indian households, which often lacked basic amenities such as running potable water, fuel and indoor toilets. With a wave of change in the economic policies of the state, a desire for an upwardly mobile English-speaking public wanting to live an urban lifestyle, market protectionism became a bad word. An avalanche of local and Western luxury goods hitting the Indian market jostled to be known instantly by the purchasing public. The best route for instant recognition of a new brand was to hire a known media celebrity, a well-known entity for youth and older folk alike.

Endorsing products has not hurt Khan's performance in film, they have enhanced his profile and recognizability among Indian and Diasporic youth. Youth are the primary film-viewing cohort and seem to crave viewing “upward mobility” (zero-to-hero scripts) on-screen (hero travels the world, ends up with a partner of his choice, simply being himself and oftentimes singing, dancing and playing the fool/jester). It

prisoners of colour to commercial industry who take advantage of the abysmally low pay for prison inmates. The exploitation of their labour by commercial industry, the prison system and society's rank racism in a cruel triad is often known as the prison–industrial complex. Additionally, the prison–industrial complex closely mirrors the military industry that is supported by the government and the arms industries to form a close nexus known as the military–industrial complex.

is hard not to notice how this *mobility* (“foreign” travel is beyond the average Indian’s reach) and tomfoolery is rewarded instantly on-screen. Film critics often call realist films “escapist” because all the goods and services featured in the film—the cars, clothing, entertainment venues and travel itineraries seem to surpass the reach of the primarily youthful working-class and middle-class viewers who get overawed by the easily acquired grandeur of the screen celebrities.

Charisma and Celebrity Theory

Shah Rukh Khan has been able to bridge the gaps between otherwise intersecting theoretical concepts such as celebrity, charisma and leadership—all defined differently by disparate researchers without privileging one concept as subservient to the other. The concept of charismatic authority is attributed to Max Weber wherein those who are deserving of that designation are known to the public as great generals, scientists, and political movers and shakers (Hendriks 2017). Interestingly, Weber does not see *charisma* and *celebrity* as part of the same spectrum nor does he use the terms interchangeably. Furthermore, Hendriks (2017) points out that Weber never theorized media or film since mediated communication did not enjoy prominence in his lifetime as it does in contemporary times.

Today, media is ubiquitous and an essential part of our daily diet. Therefore, charismatic figures (namely religious personalities, yoga gurus and doctors who announce great cures and weight-loss remedies) receive prominence in mass or social media. Oftentimes gossip-centred media benefits economically when celebrities create or court controversy as in the case of President of the USA, Donald Trump, or the romance and untimely death of Princess Diana in August 1997. Celebrities, on the other hand, “can gain authority on a certain issue, sometimes to the extent that they are consulted by policymakers” (Hendriks 2017, p. 351). To that end, Shah Rukh Khan uses his 50th birthday (also marking the launch of TED talks in India) as a turning point in his life; not unlike Aamir Khan (who believes ardently in a unique version of celebrity civic and political engagement as demonstrated in this TV series *Satyameva Jayate* or (“Only truth shall prevail”) (Bhatkal 2012–2014), wants to achieve something that goes beyond his professional expertise and fame in Bollywood can take him. During the global talks at Davos in Switzerland (21–25 January 2018), social media broadcast SRK hobnobbing with other Western celebrities at socials and galas. SRK’s easy movement between national and transnational borders serves as an indication that the very notion of celebrity-ism is porous and provides global mobility to celebrities known primarily by their national background. This must lead to a kind of standardization of celebrity-ism. Ted Talks India, and Star Television, provide him just that opportunity. The process of *charismatization* and *celebritization* is constantly evolving (Hendriks 2017) and we are still trying to understand its variation and nuance with respect to different cultures and the vast number of industry contexts. Hendrik’s examples of celebrity range from gangsta rappers and dating coaches to current political demagogues. Celebrity-ism must be studied

long-term and in continuation because the phenomenon gathers new resonances with every new socio-political development in specific social contexts.

Nayi Soch, a New Way of Thinking, TED Talks India: The Medium Is the Message

TED talks bandwagoned on yet another social media innovation, YouTube, culling for audiences a wealth of wisdom and lived experience at their fingertips. Resulting from the popularity of TED talks, multiple audiences employ them to convey useful ideas and diverse lived experience. This form of democratization of information has heightened the recognition TED talks are receiving for K-12 classroom pedagogy (Rubenstein 2012; Romanelli et al. 2014).

With great alacrity, Shah Rukh Khan calls TED Talks his “platform”, a term that has gained greater traction in a world marked by information technology. After making a bold statement about how filled with hate-speech the world is, he also makes a gentler, disarmingly unambiguous statement declaring “I am love” (Khan TED Talks 2017). He differentiates between the lover he plays in films, and whom he really is. As a personification of love, he conjures up an image larger than life, and of omnipresence. This invocation is reminiscent of the poet proponents of the Bhakti movement (eighth century in the South and tenth–fifteenth century of the Common Era in the North), a movement of rebellion against Hindu ritualism and rigid caste designation thereby leading to a devotional transformation in medieval society (Schomer and McLeod 1987). Rebel singers invoked a personal god filled with love and compassion, going against the religious rituals at the time (Kishwar 1989). To further the symbolism of Khan’s engagement with love as a strategy of compassion: the sound track in *My Name is Khan* is inspired by Sufi/Bhakti music and serves as backdrop to Mandira (Kajol) and Rizwan’s (SRK) romance.

Given this new social medium (TED Talks), Khan urges us to see him in a different light. In this new medium and “platform”, he mocks his filmy lover boy image, denies using botox, [a reference to the industry’s cosmetic surgery fixation that played a role in fuelling the doubts hanging over female star Sridevi’s⁶ untimely death], uses evolutionary terms [“We (his family) struggled to survive, very much like the original homo sapiens”] to present himself as *everyman*. Yet again, Shah Rukh has risen above the antics of other male stars in the film industry, and advanced by nuancing his acting, focusing on his family, and carefully choosing involvement in select public affairs through philanthropy, to become a visionary. Shah Rukh’s growth as a young professional and an older mid-life star has taken place before a benevolent audience applauding his choice of media and programming.

⁶It has been conjectured in the media that Sridevi’s multiple cosmetic surgeries were the cause of her untimely death.

Shah Rukh in Film: Local Fame and Transnational Mobility

Madhava Prasad (2013) has remarked that the naturalization of the term *Bollywood* for popular Hindi language cinema is because it marks the “consciousness” of the transnational presence of Indian cinema. Other scholars of film have asserted that “Bollywood” is shorthand for India itself. If so, Shah Rukh’s long reign as “hero” in the film industry, coinciding with the dominant position of the *hero* in Indian film, compels us to label him as leader or to mark his prominence, by the tongue-in-cheek title of *King* in English and *Badshah* in Hindi or Urdu. Sarah Dickey’s ethnography on low-income audiences in urban locations in Madurai, Tamil Nadu and S. India shows how film has created the phenomenon of the Political Celebrity (Dickey 1993). Dickey observes that cinema and politics “have a long history of mutual involvement in South India” (1993, p. 340). She concedes that state electoral politics has been able to produce movie star politicians across India, in Tamil as well as other language cinemas. This is best exemplified by the elections of MG Ramachandran (popularly called as MGR, he came to power in Tamil Nadu in 1976) and NT Rama Rao (also called as NTR, he was elected as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1983). Later in the 70s and 80s, Hindi cinema stars, Vyjayanthimala contested elections in Tamil Nadu for the National Congress Party, Sunil Dutt for Congress (I), Jaya Prada for Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shatrughan Sinha for the BJP, and Amitabh Bachchan for the Congress (I). Stars from the television epics *Mahabharat* (1988–1990) and *Ramayana* (1987–1988) also tried their luck, laden with charisma, at national politics. In this manner, Shah Rukh Khan and the other Khans—Aamir and Salman have their unique brand of charisma that they deploy to build their own film industry businesses and create political capital with the public to build a fanbase that, by virtue of their⁷ age, cherish the values of honesty, service, political accountability with superhero and star power delivery.

Shah Rukh Khan’s TED Talks, *Nayi Soch* (2017), Aamir Khan’s *Satyamev Jayate* (2012–2014), and Salman Khan’s brief foray into television in 2008 and now extensive work in rural areas in Maharashtra is definitely an extension or an external manifestation of their heroic on-screen work and personae. Another globally circulating attribute that impacts the three Khans and Shah Rukh specifically is that of masculinity. The young, bouncy and likeable character of *Fauji* and the spunky youth of *DDLJ* are no longer enough to pass off as a hero. The increasing muscularity which scholars recognize as “metrosexual masculinity”, “in which a new focus on the male physique can be seen in tandem with the growing popularity of physical fitness, gym culture and more broadly, what has been labelled the ‘liberalization’ of urban Indian masculinity” (Deckha 2007 cited in Gehlawat 2015, p. 7). The increasing impetus of gym culture has impacted the masculinity and muscularity of the Indian protagonist which amounts to a reworking of the paradigmatic *metrosexual* that Shah Rukh is credited to have led in film, followed by actors Hrithik Roshan (*Kaho Naa...Pyaar Hai*), (Roshan 2000, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, (Akhtar 2011)), Saif Ali Khan (*Dil Chahta Hai*, (Akhtar 2001), *Kal Ho Na Ho*, (Advani 2003)) and

⁷India has a majority youth population, under 30 years of age.

John Abraham (*Dostana*, (Mansukhani 2008)) who have further developed the trope in films of the late 90s and early 2000s. This reflects an affinity towards a “neoliberal aestheticization of masculinity”, driven by “individual enterprise, sexual decadence and sculpted physiques” (Gehlawat 2015, p. 7; Cieko 2001). These sculpted bodies portray an aesthetic buttressed by consumer products, emergent in the neoliberal economy, especially marketed for men, to enhance their looks. The chiselled bodies do not need to prove themselves by fighting malcontents. Metrosexual masculinity does not sponsor depiction of army men and pilots (among other masculinized screen professions) but also what might be considered “creative” professions. For example, SRK in *MNIK* sells beauty products for a living while Saif Ali Khan in *Kal Ho Na Ho* is an architect who turns chef in Australia.

Film Audiences and Shah Rukh Khan

If the theory of charisma and celebrity lacks an analytical dimension, it is finding a way to honor audience voices. Typically, film criticism has focused more on textual or discourse analysis and paid scant attention to the circulation of meanings that come from global cosmopolitan audience voices among viewers of Indian cinema. In an audience ethnography of *My Name is Khan* (*MNIK*) (Johar 2010) among Muslims and Arab viewers, I undertook more than two years’ worth of interviews among close to 50+ travellers, immigrants, students and city dwellers to understand Muslim identity in film and the ways in which Muslim audiences identify with a Muslim actor on-screen. I chose to focus on *MNIK* as it falls within an emergent post-9/11 filmic genre or the *War on Terror* film in Hindi cinema. It is one of the first films in which SRK enacts the persona of a practicing Muslim (2017’s *Raees* is the only other film). The audiences of the ethnographic study present bold and clear narratives that counter received understandings of audience or identity.

I screened *My Name is Khan* in venues that were often open to the public at a large urban state university in the Pacific Northwest, on multiple occasions. I interviewed more than 50 persons, over two years about their memories of 9/11, their response and connection to the film, their beliefs about religion, democracy, media and life. Over 35 interviewees are from the Arab world (Dubai, Bahrain, Yemen, Kuwait, Palestine and a majority from Saudi Arabia). Other participants are from the USA, North Mariana Islands, China, Chile and India.

I offer three representative quotations from my audience-based research on Shah Rukh’s 2010 blockbuster *My Name is Khan*:

Quote 1...“But it [the film] was so moving...the part when he was in prison...You know what if that was—that could be so easily me.” [Saudi Arabian male audience member, *MNIK*]

Quote 2 “We have a saying in Islam that who’s terrorist? There’s no religion for him.... So those people [terrorists] are not Muslims and this thing [their actions] is not Jihad.” [Saudi Arabian male audience member, *MNIK*]

Quote 3 My interviewing narrator named ‘N’ comes back to the issue of the hijab in the context of respecting religions, she says, “people around the world have religions and their

religions have rules and regulations and I don't know what they call them but they practice them...freely...and no one tells them anything...why Muslims why our Hijab, they keep saying Hijab is limiting their rights or taking their rights" [End Quotation, Arab female audience member].

MNIK is a tale of an autistic person who grows up in a communally divided Mumbai but through life's vicissitudes, especially his loving mother's death, relocates to the USA. An entrepreneur, Khan's younger brother lives in the Bay Area with his wife, and SRK (as Rizwan) fends for himself as a seller of wholesale beauty products to spa owners. In the course of his work-beat, Khan happens to meet his wife-to-be, Mandira. The beauty of this film lies in the instance of actors falling in love to maintain deep caring structures despite communal violence, first in the Mumbai of his childhood, during telling filmic scenes reminiscent of Hindu–Muslim rioting of December 1992 and January 1993, and then again during the wave of Islamophobia sweeping through the US post-11 September 2001. The film is charged with the affective feeling of hate in a primarily White US neighbourhood during a candlelight vigil around the time the twin towers fell. This even leads to Samir's (Mandira's son) brutal hacking to death by juvenile white schoolmates and the journey of redemption ending in meeting the President who absolves Rizwan of being a terrorist. The in-between journey prior to reaching Washington DC is eventful as Rizwan gathers support by helping the African-American-community in Alabama during a flood of biblical proportion, almost like Hurricane Katrina. Scholars have termed the journey a certain form of redemption. The *MNIK* storyline is rendered unique because it inserts a variety of cosmopolitan multiculturalism, Indian style, into the global narrative of the Global War on Terror. The locus of this story rests upon the life of an Indian Muslim man and how he overcomes the terror in his life and externalizes it through service, civic engagement and love.

I have researched, from 2011 to 2014, how this Bollywood text, with its notable glitz and marketing, haunting *qawwali*-style melodies, is able to speak to a global transcultural Muslim audience living in the shadow of a world changed by 9/11 without being allowed a way to articulate their own personal and collective experience of terror. For example, one of the responses I received from an audience member during my fieldwork was the following:

We have a saying in Islam that who's terrorist? There's no religion for him.... So those people [terrorists] are not Muslims and this thing [their actions] is not Jihad.

Secondly, I look at how audiences have wrought their identity vis-à-vis their own social, religious and geographical positioning (Audience member: "people around the world have religions and their religions have rules and regulations...but they practice them...freely...and no one tells them anything...why Muslims why our Hijab, they keep saying Hijab is limiting their rights or taking their rights").

MNIK, for its multistar cast and expat-adored movie hero Shah Rukh Khan, who coincidentally, was held up by airport immigration right before the US release of *MNIK* because of his Muslim name, seemed the most compelling cultural artefact for a global audience whose experience transcends South Asia and South Asian understandings of the film. *MNIK* weaves a tough political climate of hate into a

story of hope, racial unity and healing. Audiences question multicultural philosophies, express empathy with religious “others” and try to transcend and recreate the legacy of 9/11 handed down to them through modern national politics. Several of my interviewees were young kids at the time 9/11 occurred yet remember their family members’ affective responses of utter horror.

As the conversations excerpted above demonstrate, the MNIK audiences find, in their own small way, to meaningfully express their affective responses towards matters in global politics that are larger than their sphere of existence. The ability to narrate, interrogate and interpret scenes that speak to them, changes standard centrist interpretations that one might find, of discourses of war and terror, in national press or on TV. Audiences are able to seize their own meanings of religion and religiosity, while critiquing multicultural society, as active participants, not as passive victims of the time. Unlike other heroes, the Arab and Muslim audiences of the study identify with Shah Rukh Khan as a moderate Muslim world citizen. Additionally, they extrapolate articulate definitions of Islam using scenarios from the film. By seizing the agency to layer their opinion and meaning of the filmic text based upon their own cultural context, the audiences of *My Name is Khan* gain a voice at a time (post 9/11 and during a global war on terror) when they are not heard in a public forum such as media and media representation. Since the locus of the research project is a University in the Northwest region of the USA, the Arab and Muslim audiences are cosmopolitan travellers connected through an Indian film with a potent story that resonates with the viewing public in South Asia.

And So It Goes On...

Celebrity, critics assert, are the necessary creation of a neoliberal economy where consumption becomes the key to individual happiness and success (Littler 2011; Cayla 2008). By bringing socio-cultural-economic contexts into sharp relief, textual studies of film lay bare the core tropes of a filmic text through methodologies ranging from critical discourse analysis to semiotics. An audience-based study, such as the one described in this chapter, allows us to plumb the realities not allowed in a textual study, that is, the researcher gets to listen to the lived experience of an audience. This expands the meanings of a film-worthy text. The usually untouchable heroes of the film become coterminous with the lives of their audiences through the audience dialogue that ensues. A one-way mode of communication develops multiple prongs.

Shah Rukh Khan is established as a celebrity, an endorser of expensive merchandise. His early-career charisma came from acting in theatre and in successful television series whereby his audiences felt the intimacy of his character portrayals as in *Fauji* or soldier. An audience-based study of *My Name is Khan* brings Shah Rukh closer to the audiences (Audience member: “the part when he was in prison... You know what if that was-**that could be so easily me**” [emphasis mine]) who have not spoken prior about intimate matters such as their Muslim and Arab identity. I argue that by virtue of a multiperspectival look at film, we are able to render Shah Rukh

Khan as charismatic and celebrity, as someone who has not forsaken the bond he holds with a wider global audience for aiding the sale of expensive brand-named products.

Acknowledgements A grant from the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2017S1A6A3A02079749) has supported the research for this essay. Research for this essay is also supported by Portland State University's Faculty Development Fund.

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