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Remixed Practice: Bollywood Dance and the Global Indian*

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY

India is going through tumultuous change. In a world where borders are no longer possible, classical Indian and popular film dances coalesce to foreground postmodern hybridity. This essay engages with the intersection of embodiment, practice, dance, film, and cultural identity. The focus is on the popular dance form from Bollywood. Though the term “Bollywood” is new, Bombay films have been around from the 1930s. In recent years, Bollywood’s role in shaping the “national-popular” domain of Indian culture has come under increasing scholarly scrutiny. Scholars such as Ashis Nandy (1998), Madhav Prasad (1998), Mukul Kesavan (1994), Sumita Chakravarty (1993), Ravi Vasudevan (2000), and many others have shown that Hindi films are vital for forging a unified national identity. However, despite the ubiquity of song and dance sequences in Hindi films, there has been little scholarly attention on their cultural importance. Like the films themselves, the song and dance sequences have been important for creating notions of Indian cultural identity or “Indianness” in postcolonial India. This repertory has been an exhaustive mix of Indian dances from classical to folk, with a multitude of forms borrowed from all over the world. In this essay, I argue that the narratives and sensibilities of “Indianness” once circulated through Hindi film song and dance sequences have undergone a significant shift in recent times.

I begin from the premise that the past Indian national identity was created through a particular narrative of tradition that drew on aesthetic emotion (*bhava-rasa* structures of feeling), deep subjectivity, and a long civilizational lineage. Various dances were selectively deployed to construct this modern national identity (Chakravorty 1998, 2004). These dances were based on a model of durable and reproducible

practice (inculcated through terms such as *guru*, *riyaz*, *parampara*), that created a sense of place or a habitus. However, this habitus that was achieved through a grounded experiential and emotional patterning has come unmoored due to economic globalization and the explosion of consumer culture in India. I look at how a particular narrative of tradition that once formed the habitus of Indian dances is now transformed into what is popularly termed “remix.”¹

The larger argument in this essay is that the habitus that connected identities to territorial locations has been reconstituted and deterritorialized. I unpack the terms “habitus” and “practice” (Bourdieu 1977) as they pertain to my exploration of Indian dances, and the terms “embodiment” and “identity,” and explore their meaning in three sections. In the first section, I look at the relationship between Bombay film dance and national identity. In the second section, I look at the changing aesthetic codes and practices associated with Indian dances. Since film dance has drawn on the existing performance traditions, I analyze the changing perceptions of affect (associated with traditional Indian aesthetics) and its changing context in relation to the dancing body in Indian films. In the last section, I focus on a song and dance sequence from *Dhoom 2* as a quintessential example of the cultural phenomenon of “remix.” Overall, I argue that Bollywood dance and the practice of “remix” are possibly the most important sites for analyzing the aesthetic and cultural transformations that are redefining the narratives of national identity in India.

“Practice” is an important analytical node in dance scholarship. Practice refers to both social theory and the corporeal actions of the body. Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of “habitus,” drawn from a phenomenological understanding of practice, has been important in movement scholarship (Fraleigh 1996; Bender 2005). It enabled bodily meaning to be located outside discourses of representation, in the realm of experience and emotion. It connected meaning to memory that was not nostalgia, but was lived in a more immediate way. Interestingly, at the same time, habitus arising from durable and embedded systems of bodily comportments grounded particular bodies in particular places which evoked specific aesthetic sensibilities and emotional patterns (see Chakravorty 2004). In the context of classical Indian dance and music, the cultural rootedness of practice (however reconstructed, re-invented, transnational, and hybrid) is embodied through the practice of a particular student–teacher relationship de-ri-ved from *guru–shishya parampara* and the aesthetics of *bhava* and *rasa* (Vatsyayan 1968). Indian dances and their embeddedness in

traditional systems of knowledge were reformulated to construct the authentic Indian identity of post-independence India (Meduri 1996; Chakravorty 2008, among others).

However, I argue that this particular embedded notion of practice produced through a sense of place and a long civilizational lineage is changing as a new form of dance practice is re-articulating and transforming the aesthetics and politics of Indian dances. This new practice is represented through the term “remix,” where the notion of authentic, stable, or durable practice is replaced by a fluid, changeable, and ephemeral one. In this new form of practice (originally created by DJs mixing various musical tracks to create new hybrid forms), high and low, classical and folk, Indian and western cultural forms absorb, influence, co-opt, plagiarize and cannibalize one another. I argue that remix is evidence of the postmodern notion of consumption of pastiche where the lines between culture and commodity are blurred (Jameson 1991, 1998; Harvey 1989). The song and dance sequences in Bollywood capture this new global Indian modernity, perceptible through a new mediatized, technicized, and commercialized habitus. It is marked by the indeterminacy of the body in postmodernity as it exists in a flux between the experiential-subjective and the objective continuum. I will analyze this new deterritorialized habitus, where cultural and individual memory is unsettled due to media and migration (as Appadurai [1997] states), in relation to dance practice. I will chart this trajectory as it has evolved from traditional notions about practice associated with riyaz and the embodiment of affect (derived from bhava-rasa structures of feeling) to consumption of images. My foci here are both ethnographic engagement and analysis of a song and dance sequence of the high-tech thriller *Dhoom 2*. The song and dance number I discuss in the last section is titled “Dil Lagaa Na Dil Jala Se Dil Jala Jaayegaa.” By drawing on my fieldwork among dancers in Bombay dance halls and analyzing “Dil Lagaa,” I explore the changing relationship between dancing bodies and cultural identity that is reshaping the landscape of affect and habitus in contemporary India.

Mixing Film Dance to the Narratives of Nation

Indian dances have been an important feature of Bombay cinema from its inception. Both have been integral to the project of nation-building and fostering a sense of collective national identity (Chakravarty 1993). I refrain from giving an account of the vast range of dance scholarship or Indian film scholarship that in recent years has argued this point.

However, what is interesting is that both cinema and dance have used similar cultural and aesthetic codes for meaning-making, affect, and identity construction. Both genres have drawn on mytho-poetic narratives and traditional aesthetic forms for establishing a deep sense of cultural identity. Classical and folk dances ranging from Kathak and Bharatnatyam, to Nautanki and Raslila have been the staple of Bombay films. Sangita Shrestova (2003) has analyzed the peculiar cyclical migration of film dance from a medium that was influenced by existing performance traditions of classical and folk dance to a legitimate form of staged concert dance called Bollywood.

Many famous dancers and choreographers have appeared on the silver screen; the list includes names such as Gopi Kishan, Waheeda Rahman, Vyjayanthimala, Kamal Haasan to Hema Malini and Madhuri Dixit. Born out of Parsi theater (which blended local idiom with received colonial aesthetic forms), Bombay cinema has been the fulcrum of creative hybridity (Mishra 2002: 1–33). It has always grappled with two competing modes of representation: melodrama and realism. This negotiation has reflected the larger cultural discourse surrounding tradition and modernity in India as both continue to shape the narrative of democracy and citizenship (see Prasad 1998).

If Bombay cinema (and its recent reconstitution as Bollywood) is the sole model of national unity in India (Chakravarty 1993: 310), then, I argue, the song and dance sequences are its throbbing, pulsating, techni-colored national soul. The song and dance sequences recently re-invented as “item numbers” offer myriad possibilities of heightened pleasure through emotional and visual drama. They function as a bridge between past aesthetic codes associated with classical dances and new ones from MTV, Broadway musicals, music videos, and Euro-American structures of choreography. Simply put, Bollywood dances are the quintessential locus of the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity. They function as engines of change for ushering in new understandings of culture, power, and democracy. Booth traces the changing conventions of song and dance representations in Bombay cinema in these words (2000: 128).

The visual images in these scenes have filled Indian theaters with a stylized vocabulary of dance and gesture ranging from maidenly brushes of the 1940's Lila Chitnis to the brazen bump and grind of the 1990's Madhuri Dixit. Thus, when a song and dance scene appears in a film (of course, its very appearance is a narrative convention) the conventions inform not only the musical, visual and kinesthetic content, but also types of meaning

one can expect and the coded elements that will be used to construct that meaning.

In the past two decades a paradigm shift has taken place in the musical, visual, and kinesthetic content of the song and dance sequences that have challenged the established norms, codes, and meanings. The earlier codes were predominantly drawn from the mytho-poetic semi-otic world of Bhakti and Sufi based on love mysticism. In Hindi films such as *Devdas*, *Guide*, *Pyaasa*, *Kinara*, and many others, the soul's longing for union with the divine was reimagined in song and dance sequences that expressed the lover's desire for his beloved. But these representations of erotic emotions in romantic cinematic spectacles have been replaced by gyrating figures endlessly on display. These latter roles once only reserved for the "vamps" (played by Helen or Nadira in the past) are now coveted by lead heroines. As the song and dance sequences have taken on a new format and movement idiom, they have increasingly dissociated from the plot. Consequently, more value has been added to their commodity status. They now create the repeat value of a film and circulate as music videos and item numbers on television channels, iTunes, and YouTube. They function like franchise productions, transforming the notion of cultural production into the notion of a rhizome, where one product leads to other kinds of merchandise (connected to this is the rise of the multiplex theater as production houses). The song and dances of the earlier times evoked a cultural habitus that was consistent with the embodied aesthetics of the classical and folk forms that connected to a sense of tradition in nation. These dance numbers resonated with the ideology of dance practice derived from a particular kind of social organization and a method of knowledge transmission. Many films directly incorporated this special training and relationship (*guru-shishya parampara*) in their plot. Films such as *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Sursangam*, *Shankaravarnam*, and *Umrao Jaan* show this specific practice-oriented disciplining of the body in narrating the story of a dancer or a musician.

Locating through Ethnography

To locate these ideological and perceptual shifts of the dancing body in a grounded cultural context I began my ethnographic research in the dance and film studios in Bombay. The dance studios are called dance halls. In these studios (such as Satyam in Juhu) dancers and

choreographers gather to choreograph and practice item numbers. The cultural landscape of dance halls in Bombay reflects the new style of dance practice. The dance halls are impersonal, commercial spaces much like the neutral cubic studios in the western world. Although they are not new in Bombay, many have sprung up in recent years due to the demands of a new breed of dancers and choreographers. The *tabla* player or the musicians and the teacher or guru of a typical dance context have been replaced by DJs, big stereo systems, the choreographer and her assistant, and a schedule to keep track of the renters.

The erosion of cultural and aesthetic codes connected to traditional methods of imparting knowledge of the body was echoed by many dancers and choreographers in Bollywood. Geeta Kapoor, who has some Bharatnatyam training, and is now assistant to the eminent choreographer Farah Khan, talked about the emergence of “item numbers”:

In college people asked me to do fashion shows. I got partnered with dancer Javed Jafar. I worked with Ken Ghosh (the music video director of the hit music video “ishk vishk pyar vyar”). I have done forty or so videos with him. I have been working with Farah Khan as her assistant from 1994. I have choreographed *Arman*, *Ashoka*, *Pyar Me Kabhi Kabhi*. I also do a lot of film shows and events. This is the time of the item numbers. Dancers have specific looks, glamour, they are professionals. We know that dancing is all about having a good frame of mind and creating a good look. (Fieldwork, Bombay 2006)

The dancing girls of Bollywood films (previously known as film extras) are now a well-paid professional group with their own union. However, as I roamed the dance halls and film studios in Bombay from Satyam to Film City, it became apparent that none of the choreographers and dancers mentioned being taught by gurus/dance teachers as it is customary among classically trained dancers (although that is also changing as classical training merges with workshops and dancercise, a topic for another essay). The younger dancers could not give me any specifics about their training. Many said they learned from television and were not familiar with classical dancers or Bombay film choreographers who were also classical gurus such as Lachchu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Gopi Kishan, or Sohanalal. Classical forms to them were exotic and a relic of the past. The training and dance practice were tailored to the item number at hand. Most successful choreographers

were themselves dancers in the past and began as an assistant to an established choreographer or a dance master (in a semiformal apprentice system). They and the dancers spent as much as twelve hours a day in the studios (rehearsing and putting the choreography together). They also spent hours on the set giving shot after shot till the director was satisfied. Geeta Kapoor explains:

We don't have formal dance training schools for Bollywood dances except for so-called Shiamak Davar. Earlier, people got training in Bharatnatyam, Kathak, folk styles etc. But you have to remember that earlier, dancers were fillers in Bombay films. Choreographers have given the dancers a presence in Bombay films. They make Rs 2,500–3,000 a day. We have a union. Now young people learn their moves in fashion shows. They also learn from music videos. Often their first encounter is Bollywood dance numbers on television. They imitate them.

One dance context where classes seemed personal in the old-fashioned way was Begum Habiba's school. This was despite the presence of the DJ, the mirrored studio, and the tank tops and tights I saw all around me. Here I found Kathak classes tucked away with other classes such as western, Bollywood, etc. I was told by a Bombay film person that Begum Habiba is not commercially successful and is not on par with "real" choreographers. But, these reputations were also attached to notions of trends, which changed very often following the discourse of fashion. The director of Dance Directors Association (established in 1975), an umbrella organization that represents the main choreographers in Bollywood, confided in me that when a classical dance instructor who belonged to his association died recently, no one even came to ask about his absence in classes.

The Bombay cultural habitus, much like the larger dance habitus in India, is in tremendous flux. In Bollywood, the changes are not only encoded in the nature of dance practice once associated with traditional embodied aesthetic, but in its negotiations with new editing techniques, computer graphics, and a new impetus to represent bodies that are inspired by commodity images. These sculpted dancing figures very often merge with fashion models, as fashion shows and film dance numbers unite for a common platform to showcase commodities.

The emerging embodied aesthetics of Bollywood dance, dancers, and choreographers is an intertextual field that represents decontextualized bodies in music videos, fashion shows, and films. These bodies

are not embedded in any particular cultural aesthetics. They represent bodies that are floating signifiers of a montage of images. They reflect the commodity-oriented consumption practices of a global Indian modernity. But the cultural products coming out of Bollywood are not homogenous. Directors such as Suraj Barjatya are interested in creating Bollywood films that harken back to past notions of culture and tradition in an auto-exoticizing mode. On the sets of *Vivah* (a film about arranged marriage), in Film City, the award-winning choreographer, Ajai Borade, shared with me his thoughts:

I don't like the present situation. Choreographers don't concentrate on lyrics at all. They just imitate MTV moves. No concept, no situation, just dance for the heck of doing a song number? No one has discipline. Everyone is after money. I avoid working with such groups. I look at the script and then I see the situation. I care about the camera angles. I learned from working fourteen years as an assistant. Now they shoot a music video in one day. I have say in designing the sets, costumes, screenplay and the execution of the song through movements. (Fieldwork 2006)

Borade, who still cares about context in choreographing for item numbers, was stating an interesting fact about the new practice and representation of bodies in dance today. I often found during my fieldwork that choreographers and dancers were working on a song unaware of the title of the film, the script, or the story line. They were given the song by the director of the film and the choreographer put the moves to the song while a DJ played, stopped, and replayed the music. The dancing bodies were instruments on which movements were crafted like cut-and-paste techniques. Therefore, various movements were uprooted from specific contexts and remixed. The next step involved editing the film that was produced after intense rehearsing with the choreographer and his or her assistant. The ultimate product was polished in the hands of the director in collaboration with the choreographer. The rapid and jerky editing techniques reinforced the compressed and fragmentary time and space narratives of postmodernity. The obvious disjuncture that we experience as an audience between film narrative and the song and dance sequences in many Bollywood films is a product of this practice.

This realm of practice creates a habitus where the script or the lyrics seem unimportant; content and context are immaterial; the spectacle of the dance sequence is complete in itself. Many choreographers and dancers I spoke to stressed the importance of the visual: the sets, the

costumes, the lights, and the camera angles. These they say have to work with the choreography to produce a good visual. Sunita, Ajay Borade's assistant expressed her difficulties, "it was easy to choreograph big groups in huge scenes as the dancers are all professionals, but the difficulty is when they have close-ups. It is difficult because you have to express feelings. In Indian dance you can express feelings, but nowadays it is not so important."

Hence music and dance numbers are visual images and fleeting sensations. It further reinforces the idea that the meaning or affect connected to any kind of cultural memory is a mere sensation. This aesthetic sensibility reflects another kind of disjuncture within the habitus of Bollywood—the one between bodily action and embodied subjectivity. Thus habitus as durable systems of bodily comportments that once embedded particular bodies in particular places, connecting them to a specific cultural identity, are unmoored from such cultural specificity. Jameson (1991) and others have noted this absence of overarching narrative in postmodern culture as an end of the coherent self-centered subject based on feelings and emotions. This is summed up by Mazzarella in these words:

The more "culture" itself becomes commodified (the argument goes) the more total is the abstracting rule of exchange value. Signifiers that used to be anchored in particular socio-historical locations increasingly float free of such local referents; instead, they function as tokens in a more or less self-referential, electronically mediated global. (2003:39)

This argument is further extended to exemplify the lack of embodied experiences and deep subjectivity under global capitalism. On a more fundamental level it is connected to the "crisis of the quotidian" (Wolputte 2004: 260). Accordingly, the former habituations and daily routines that gave structure and continuity to experience are constantly interrupted through travel, violence, or multitasking patterns of behavior.

Postmodernists call it the crisis of memory. Embodied practices such as riyaz in dance training created such connections to the past as I have noted elsewhere (Chakravorty 2004). Therefore, as cultural borders become more porous, destabilizing or uprooting bodies from places, a counter narrative emerges of inflamed borders, ancestral homeland, and the preservation of sacred places and environment from the hand of capitalist development.

***Dhoom 2* and Aesthetics of Aspiration**

In the last two decades, due to globalization of media, new technology, and democratization of consumption, a decontextualized visual field of images has replaced an earlier embodied cultural identity. Rather, embodiment has changed from an earlier kind of *rasa* associated primarily with erotic desire in dance (such as *sringara rasa*, encapsulated in *cherchar* in the song and dance) to a desire to consume. Bollywood choreographers have created some of the most stunning images of dance through new digital technology, costumes, sets, and dance techniques. Bollywood song and dance sequences have pushed commodification of images to new aesthetic heights. I will focus on the film *Dhoom 2* to further explore this new symbolic field in constructing a new Indian global modernity. Remix as a conceptual node connects actual dance practice to its representation in Bollywood films.

Remix as cultural practice ultimately represents a particular desire to consume. A desire represented through hyper-visualization of commodity images, also called “commodity aesthetics” (Haug 1986). Bollywood dance, I argue, is a potent desire for producing this particular kind of desire. Bollywood dance enables the dancer and the viewer alike to produce themselves as individual consumers disconnected from their social class, family, or community. I have discussed elsewhere how the recent film *Devdas* creates a pleasure of seduction through a visual overload of commodity aesthetics. In this new consumerist phase of Indian modernity I show how erotic desire that was part of the *bhava/rasa* aesthetics of Indian music and dance is transformed into desire for commodity in the song and dance sequences (Chakravorty 2008). In *Dhoom 2*, we find a further crystallization of commodity images through the creation of yet another kind of “aesthetics of distinction.” In *Dhoom 2*, this aesthetic is that of the global, cosmopolitan Indian who has no citizenship, nor any familial ties. The commodity images inspired by the film are akin to “aspirational images” that create the impulse to consume or buy a product. This concept can also extend to valuing a certain lifestyle or geographical area. Mazzarella explains:

The statement that objects or images may be “aspirational” implies that an orientation toward such objects or images indicates a desire for personal transformation, in line with a widely diffused and thus generally recognized index of advancement. Aspirational qualities appear, on the face of it, to

be inherent properties. Thus marketing theorist Davis Aaker writes: “The brand [Nike] is very aspirational in the sense that wearing Nike represents what the users aspire to be like rather than their current self-image” (Aaker 1995: 514–50). Aspirational qualities are, moreover, associated not only with particular brands but also with whole quasi-geographical imaginaries. (2003:102)

This form of aspirational desire of a new generation of Indians, I argue, is writ large on the canvas of *Dhoom 2*. This high-tech thriller is a sequel to the mega hit *Dhoom*. *Dhoom 2* is an extraordinary visual extravaganza even by Bollywood standards. This cop and thief film starred Hrithik Roshan, Aishwarya Rai, Abhishek Bachchan, and Bipasha Basu. The story spans several continents from Africa to India to South America. Hrithik Roshan is an international thief who plans to steal a priceless artifact in Bombay. Aishwarya Rai is a wanna be master thief who falls for Hrithik. This is the basic story line, with cop Abhishek Bachchan always being outwitted by the thief Hrithik. Both Hrithik and Aishwarya exude the cosmopolitan aura of western fashion models with their perfect bodies, stylish accessories, tanned looks and golden hair highlights. Hrithik sports Pepe jeans, drives Suzuki bikes, and is the quintessential American hero, whereas Ash, as she is popularly known, wears leather boots, micro mini skirts, and bikini tops, reminding us of MTV queen Britney Spears.

The song and dance sequence “Dil Lagaa Na Dil Jala Se Dil Jal Jaayegaa” opens with a Samba festival in Brazil. After a few stunning Capoeira moves, the audience is confronted with the dazzling moves, sculpted body, youthful exuberance of Hrithik. Displaying his narcissistic musculature, Hrithik glides, grinds, jumps, and sways. Aishwarya in a white mini skirt and a bikini top exhibits her slender body and bare legs more fearlessly than her male counterpart. The digital effects in the sequence are spliced with elaborate costumes of the carnival creating a colorful montage. The shots keep moving from one image to another creating a dizzying array of images. It creates a techno-Indo-American aesthetic that is neither bound by geographical boundaries nor by any ethnic identity. Note that the lyrics of the song itself are in Hinglish (a mixture of English and Hindi). With its bold images (leather, metal, acrobatic bodies) and international brand endorsement such as Suzuki bikes and Pepe jeans, *Dhoom 2* delivers the promise of liberation from geographical boundaries and bounded aesthetics by creating “aspirational commodity aesthetics” of social distinction. A distinction created through the value of looking

Euro-American, maintaining a Euro-American lifestyle by driving Suzukis, and sporting Pepe jeans and micro minis. *Dhoom 2* signifies a new Indian membership in the transnational and transcendental world of commodity images that is both global and Indian.

Conclusion

The essay focuses on Bollywood dance to explore the concept of “remix” as a particular kind of dance practice that is impacting on contemporary Indian culture. I have argued that Bollywood dance and the dancing body is a potent lens to analyze the changing perceptions that shape cultural identity and subjectivity. Embodiment as a conceptual node, which incorporates aesthetics, needs to be juxtaposed with post-colonial and postmodern cultural theory to analyze deep perceptual changes in identity construction. I have used the concepts of habitus and practice as they relate to embodiment and experience of *rasa* and remix to analyze contemporary dance aesthetics. I have elaborated remix as a dance/cultural practice that ultimately represents a desire to consume. I have used ethnographic fieldwork in Bombay dance halls and film studios to show how dance practice in Bombay dance halls connects to narratives of desire and social distinction represented in films such as *Dhoom 2*.



Notes

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1. Wikipedia describes “remix” as a hybridizing process combining fragments of various works. Although associated with music, it can be applied to visual or video arts, and even things further afield.

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