Chapter 7

Farah Khan: Cinephilia, Nostalgia and Melancholia

Sunny Singh

Abstract

Although the first woman directed a film within a year of the invention of cinema, women directors remain a minority in cinema, both in India and abroad. The woman directed, big budget blockbuster film intended for general audiences remain even a rarer beast. As such **Farah Khan** stands out for the four films (so far) ascribed to her direction for being not only creating big budget (for India), big grossing, big star films, but also for a professional trajectory that encompasses choreography, script writing, production and direction spanning nearly three decades. Given her long and varied career trajectory, this paper chooses to focus only on Khan's four feature films, examining her explicit intertextual evocations of a golden age of the big budget, glitzy, multi-starrer that in many ways has come to define "Bollywood."

Close readings of Khan's feature films, the paper examines the roles played by three key elements of her *oeuvre*: cinephilia, nostalgia and a deepening melancholia that underpins her signature style of dizzying, glossy cinema. These three elements cannot be de-linked from Khan's gender or her religiously minoritized identity. Finally, the paper deploys an intersectional understanding of identity, marginalization and power to examine to her oeuvre as not only informed by her **cinephilia** and an individuated nostalgia but also an expression of wider socio-cultural-political anxieties.

Key words: cinephilia, nostalgia, melancholia, women directors, **blockbuster**

Across the world, the woman directed, big budget blockbuster film intended for general audiences remains a rare beast. Of the 46 Hollywood movies that have made at least a billion dollars, only three have been directed by women. Of the top ten of these films, five are animated, three are part of blockbuster franchises and two are women focused (Travis 2020). The blockbuster directed by a woman is even rarer in commercial Hindi which despite a long trajectory of women directors, can claim only two commercially successful women directors (Ganti 2012). Of these, Farah Khan is the first and more commercially successful. Her four feature films (so far) also stand out for being not only big budget (for India), big grossing, big star films, but also actively and explicitly creating filmic narratives that harness narratives, styles, and aesthetics that have long marked the quintessential 'Bollywood' film. Moreover, box office success of her films, with even her least successful venture making more than double its budget, marks her out as an exception amongst blockbuster directors, regardless of gender.

Khan's debut film ***Main Hoon Na*** (2004, hereafter *MHN*) was the second highest grossing film of 2004 and an early success in the coveted overseas market. Her second feature ***Om Shanti Om*** **(**2007, hereafter *OSO*) went head-to-head with for the coveted Diwali release in 2007 with

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's ***Saawariya***, which was co-produced with Sony Pictures Entertainment and the first Hindi film to receive a North American screen release with a Hollywood studio, and came out on top as the highest grossing Hindi film of the year. ***Tees Maar Khan*** (2010, hereafter TMK), her third film is a departure from her established film-making form in multiple ways and also her least commercially successful film. Although it posted one of the highest first weekend profits for the industry and made more than double its budget, ticket sales tapered off quickly and significantly enough for the film to be considered a disappointment. However, her fourth and last (as of now) feature film offering, ***Happy New Year*** (2014, hereafter *HNY*) was not only released simultaneously in dubbed Tamil and Telugu versions but also posted the largest opening box office receipts for a Hindi film till that year and became the second highest grossing film of the year.

While Khan has not made or even announced a feature film in the past seven years, she continues to be a ubiquitous presence in Indian cinema and popular entertainment with choreography, acting and production credits in films. Her professional trajectory encompasses dance, choreography, script writing, acting, production and direction, and spans four decades with her first credited screen appearances as a club dancer in **M.S.Sathyu**'s low budget feature ***Kahan Se Guzar Gaye*** (1981).[i] She has built a significant presence on television judging talent competitions including ***Indian Idol*** and *India's Got Talent*, and hosting chat, cookery and reality TV shows. Finally, although her directorial oeuvre remains limited to four films, Khan has successfully packaged herself as a celebrity director complete with a finely crafted star text of her own that harnesses her feature films as intrinsic to building her public persona and deploys carefully curated biographical elements to construct and strengthen a star text of her own.

Given her long and varied career trajectory which deserves its own extended study, this paper chooses to focus only on Khan's feature films, examining her explicit intertextual evocations of a golden age of the big budget, glitzy, multi-starrer that in many ways has come to define "Bollywood." Furthermore, it considers how the four films reflect her cinephilia and a strategic deployment of nostalgia that seems key to her filmmaking, helping create a signature style – veering from homage to pastiche to kitsch – and how these interact with wider cinematic, cultural, and sociopolitical *zeitgeist*. Close readings of Khan's feature films delineate the roles played by three key elements of her *oeuvre*: cinephilia that underpins Khan's directorial sensibilities, filmic – and indeed extra-filmic — nostalgia that she chooses to evoke in her features films, and finally a deepening melancholia underpinning her dizzying, glossy cinema that ranges from homage, **pastiche** and parody.

These three elements cannot be de-linked from Khan's own personal location as a woman and a religiously and ethnically minoritized one in the film industry and India. As such a cursory look at some of the key events that bookend this period is required to understand how Khan's cinephilia informs her films not only is reflective of an individuated cinematic nostalgia but also a deepening, wider socio-cultural-political anxiety, alienation, and fear. As per press reports, *MHN* was planned in 1999, the year India and Pakistan faced off in a nearly three-month long border conflict in Kargil, and in the immediate aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests by India which were followed by Pakistan's. The filming initially began in 2001 but was delayed due to its lead star Shah Rukh Khan's (hereafter SRK) injuries and it was only released in 2004.

After 2014, Khan has made no movies although her visibility in Indian mediascape remains undiminished, albeit clearly and seemingly deliberately depoliticised. She has repackaged

herself as a celebrity director whose appearance is highly mediated to maintain an illusion of hypervisibility while distancing her from any real engagement with making movies.

Cinephilia of an industry insider, the cinephile as director:

From her debut film, Khan has asserted her cinephilia onscreen, paying homage to earlier filmmakers, mostly notably Manmohan Desai and Nassir Hussain, and evoking a host of films including as metatextual foundational narratives for her scripts including ***Masoom*** (1983) for *MHN*, ***Karz*** (1980) for *OSO*, and most curiously **Vittorio Di Sica**'s ***Caccia alla volpe*** (1966) for *TMK*. She has also spoken about her love for popular Hindi cinema of the 1970s and 1980s as well as her commitment to making commercially successful films in numerous fora (Chopra 2017; Rao & Khan 2017; Kumar 2019). While the "filmmaker as practicing cinephile" is not a new phenomenon in cinema in general or even in popular Hindi cinema, Khan's explicit avowal of cinephilia as intrinsic to her filmmaking is unusual in not only her passion for cinema that informs all four of her feature films but also for the Bombay film industry in all its aspects, technological, organizational, personal, and spectatorial. This is reflected in the way she layers dizzying intertextual references to filmic narratives, characters, aesthetics and elements of style, including popularly known dialogues, costumes, settings, music and song sequences as well as recognizable star mannerisms. She further adds to this mix an entire range of extra-filmic elements including star texts and well-known gossip circulated in and by film press, offering the knowledgeable viewer an opportunity to view her films not only as spectators but as a collective of fellow cinephiles.

To this already enormous bank of references, Khan also brings personal as well as familial knowledge of the industry. When **Bharadwaj Rangan** notes, "Farah knows her Bollywood," (Rangan 2007, n.p.), this knowledge extends to Khan's familial network: her father was a stuntman turned filmmaker, albeit not particularly commercially successful; her mother is sister of child actors Daisy and Honey Irani, the latter also the former spouse of lyricist Javed Akhtar and mother of directors Farhan and Zoya Akhtar. She is married to **Shirish Kunder**, who not only edited her first three films but also co-produced, scripted, composed soundtrack for, and edited TMK.[ii] Further extended family ties link her an enviably extensive network of members of the film industry. This gives Khan, unparalleled understanding of the film industry and its many unwritten, unseen histories. It is this knowledge – known and unknown, recorded and unrecorded, public and personal – that not only informs Khan's cinephilia but is actively leveraged on and off -screen in her work.[iii]

Khan's directorial ventures function explicitly as an assertion of a particularly non-Western cinephilia that expands **Susan Sontag**'s definition of 'a certain taste' to the commercial Hindi film canon as well as an explicit and continuous investment in this particular 'cinema's glorious past' (1996). While Iyer's (2016) analysis of this sequence through the lens of parody and pastiche is rich and textured, perhaps Khan's deliberate citation of the three chosen texts may be seen as closer to homage, informed more by cinephilia in its 1960s French version which is "simultaneously democratic since it takes a popular cultural form very seriously while also being snobbishly aristocratic about it because it replaces traditional hierarchies (in which film was found at the lower end of the continuum)…" (de Valck & Hagener 2005, pp. 11-12).

It is this specific cinephilia, focused confidently on Hindi films and the industry she's known all her life, that Khan extends and expands in her debut film, *MHN*. Although the film is replete

with references and intertextual citations of western, specially Hollywood, cinema, Khan's 'certain tastes' remain firmly focused on narratives, histories, and concerns of commercial Hindi cinema and familiar to its habitual audiences.

The rapid pace of *MHN*'s opening sequence exemplifies this best with the first fifteen minutes constructing a narrative, political, emotional rollercoaster at par with **Manmohan Desai** at his best: a TV presenter sets up a contentious debate on India's relationship with Pakistan; a senior Indian army officer makes the case for peace; the show is interrupted by the dramatic entry of the antagonist who refuses any peace attempt; the protagonist make an even more dramatic entry followed by an extensive, slick action sequence; a father makes a death-bed speech, another father is threatened with his estranged daughter's safety by the terrorists; a family secret is revealed; tearful promises are made; a funeral complete with a flag draped casket and full military honours is held heavy rain. The pacing recalls the exposition style perfected by Desai in ***Amar Akbar Anthony*** (1977) and ***Naseeb*** (1981). The film settles into a slightly slower pacing but never loses its rollercoaster quality, relentlessly guiding the viewer from one emotional experience to another, piling rapid fire sequences that move from action to humour to surprisingly chaste romances, and are punctuated with elaborate song sequences.

Khan layers on the filmic references: riffs from songs familiar from an campus film ***Jawani Deewani*** (1972); fashion and songs evocative of ***Hum Kisise Kum Nahin*** (1977); peril signalled by a poster of ***Sholay*** (1975) reflected in the windshield of vehicle full of terrorists and SRK commandeering a rickshaw with Dhanno – the famous tonga-pulling mare - imprinted on the back; protagonists named Ram and Lakshman, both of whom – instead of just one – employed fake identities in yet another school film ***Do Aur Do Paanch*** (1980); and a final nod to the helicopter sequence from ***Suhaag*** **(**1979). While *MHN* can be read as pastiche or even parody, Khan is an adept acolyte of Desai so the story is "told on two levels at once – in dead earnest and with tongue-in-cheek" (Haham 2006, p. xix). Like Desai, Khan's constructs a polyphonic film text that functions simultaneously on multiple levels and offers multiple hermeneutical entry points to the viewer.

Khan's cinephilia also guides the film's aesthetics that echo the big budget Hindi films of earlier decades but also refuse the parameters of what has been described as 'Bollywood,' a specific form of post-liberalisation popular cinema in Hindi that deliberately and clearly addresses diasporic audiences, features locales and characters in the global north, and includes conspicuous markers of wealth and consumption (Prasad 2003; Rajadhyaksha 2003). Khan locates her film firmly in India, and even then once removed from the country's metropolitan centres. Instead, *MHN*'s setting is deliberately familiar, specially to the non-metropolitan middle classes: the ultra-modern Delhi television studio, familiar primarily due to the private news channel boom of the 1990s; carefully curated middle-class domesticity of bungalows in Himalayan hill stations and cantonments; and the familiar architecture and environments of St Paul's School in Darjeeling, this last instantly recognizable from a number of earlier films including ***Mera Naam Joker*** (1970). The characters too are located in an ostensibly middle-class Indian *milieu*[iv] as part of the salaried classes as army officers, teachers, and journalists, even when clad in extravagant designer outfits (SRK's camel coat and Burberry scarf stands out as particularly egregious). They also recall earlier films including ***Masoom*** (1983), in particular rewriting **Shabana Azmi's** role as Indu, the betrayed wife, who eventually accepts her husband's illegitimate son into **Kirron Kher's** obdurately furious Madhu who refuses any marital reconciliation, leaves her husband and raises their son alone. Naseeruddin Shah's turn as the husband and father, Prashant in the earlier film and Shekhar in *MHN*, is part of the film's

cinephilic pleasures, requiring knowledge and memory of the earlier text to savour this alternative narrative possibility.

Moreover, Khan explicitly positions the *Ramāyaṇa* as the ur-text for *MHN* and harnesses SRK's star text that has been built in the prior decade on an 'aesthetic of stabilization' and with repeated references to various aspects of Rāma. MHN joined his two other releases in 2004, ***Veer-Zaara*** and ***Swades***, in almost entirely eliding his parallel text with the hero of the *Ramāyaṇa*, conflating star persona, cinematic narrative and audience's prefilmic knowledge of the epic (Singh 2010). Not only is SRK's character in the film named Ram but it also draws on his earlier 'elder brother' persona as protective, caring, courageous and self-sacrificing. In contrast, his estranged brother Lakshman (**Zayed Khan**) is written as care-free, irresponsible, and, until the appearance of his older brother, lacking a male role model. Unsurprising then that the villain Raghavan (**Sunil Shetty**) is not only depicted as violent, vindictive and immoral.

For an audience brought up on a diet of enacted, recited and retold Rāma myth, the struggle and eventual confrontation between Ram and Raghavan provides a familiar pleasure with contemporary twists, with the final scene heightening the sense of simultaneously experiencing a well-choreographed action sequence, an imaginary exchange between the hero and villain of the epic, and an assurance that good will (again) triumph. The dialogue between the two opponents emphasizes this referentiality, with Ram responding to Raghavan's repeated shouts of his name with "Dil se bulaa rahe ho to Ram mil hi jayenge" (If you seek Rāma with a true heart, you will find him). The identification is reinforced again at the end with Raghavan asserting "Is Ramkathā mein maut Ram ki hogi" (in this version of the story, Ram will die) and Ram's rejoinder "Afsos tum apni Ramāyaṇa bhool gaye" (it's sad that you've forgotten your Ramayana).

MHN's layered **intertextuality** also provides a rare pleasure to the spectator who knowledgeable in this extra-filmic cultural knowledge, one that the original literary text cannot provide: the spectacle of the queen enraged by the competition to her son and threat to her husband's affections. Yet it is a spectacle that can be enjoyed safely as SRK's star text provides an ongoing extra-textual reassurance to the audience that the hero will not only win against the villain but also win over his embittered family, thus restoring the stability and unity of the familial unit. That this complex, mediated, culturally informed spectacle is enacted on screen by three identifiably Muslim actors – Shah as father, SRK and Zayed as sons – adds a subversive element to the evolving cultures narratives of the period.

Given the socio-political conditions in India, the political events that preceded and occurred during the making of *MHN*, as well as minoritized identities of the director and male stars, the filmic and extra-filmic citations must also considered as not just nostalgia for the multi-star, big budget blockbuster of the 1970s and 1980s but rather a plea for the politico-philosophical cultural ethos that underpinned them. It is this particular political impulse in the film that maintains the text, despite seemingly parodic moments, on the side of homage not pastiche, woven together with a cinephilia that evokes not simply aesthetic and stylistic elements of the older cinema but its social, political, cultural values. Released midway through the 2004 parliamentary elections, in retrospect, *MHN*'s seemingly frivolous array of familiar narrative, stylistic and aesthetic attractions appear shot with an immense melancholy, and a nostalgia not so much for a glorious or even a more comfortably imagined past but rather a lament for a safer time.

Many nostalgias, citations and refusals

Any discussion of cinephilia inevitably requires us to consider nostalgia because of the libidinal, emotional, affective nature of this elusive, individuated attachment to images, sounds and narratives. After all, cinephilia "has always been a gesture towards cinema framed by nostalgia and other retroactive temporalities, pleasures tinged with regret even as they register as pleasures" (Elsaesser 2005, p. 27). Moreover the nostalgia that informs cinephilia is itself arbitrary, idiosyncratic, individual, with passions for particular films as – if not more — dependent on the extra-filmic conditions of encountering the text rather than any notion of innate filmic quality.[v] Thus while cinephilia is not only a nostalgic love of cinema but also a nostalgic love for a memorialized past that no longer exists but is preserved in memory (Willemen 1994), it is also crucial to recognize that nostalgia "inevitably appears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (Boym 2001, p. xiv). Boym considers mainstream cinema of Hollywood as representative of the most conservative form of nostalgia, one that does not activate 'disquieting ambivalence and paradoxical dialectic of past, present, and future' and instead 'provides a total restoration' of a constructed past and 'a conflict resolution' (2001, p. 33). Given the commercial and cultural dominance of popular Hindi cinema in India, the industry seems analogous to Boym's consideration of Hollywood, as it the "the vessel for national myths" (2001, p. 33), that India exports abroad, and Khan's own self-professed dedication to producing commercial cinema, her own invocations of nostalgia appear at the first glance to be of this restorative kind.

Nowhere is this more obvious in the ways Khan engages with gender. Here it is necessary to note that gender ration is grossly unbalanced not only in India as a country but in Khan's industry: despite a record number of women working behind the scenes in cinema, the gender ration in India's film industry is 6.2 men to every woman (Rangachari Shah & Kapur 2018). As noted earlier, Khan is not only one of the industry's most successful **women directors**, she also one of two engaged in making popular cinema. Yet no film by either director would pass the lowest bar of the Bechdel Test which requires that a film must have at least two women in it, who talk to each other, and about something other than about a man. Khan has previously refuted this point by couching her filmic decision in a naïve formulation of choice: "Why should women directors be pigeonholed into one thing? I want to make a movie with five male characters, what is everyone's problem?" (Chatterjee 2014, n.p.).

Her films however go beyond a lack of women characters with little role beyond ornamental. Over her four features and the decade, women's roles in Khan's films have grown more limited, stilted, and derogatory. Sanju and Chandni of *MHN* are given some semblance of independence and attributes beyond their physical desirability although it is this final quality that is foregrounded. Sanju is initially framed in terms familiar from Hollywood's manic pixie dream-girl whose personal quirks make her stand out from other young women students at the college. Khan repeats this trope in *OSO* with Sandy, who is the physical facsimile of the dead Shanti. Both women, played by extraordinarily, and conventionally, beautiful actresses are given a ***Pretty Woman*** style glow-up. This is primarily a change of outfit – a bright pink salwar and *kurta* for Sanju and a *sari* for Sandy — and their style of make-up to more traditional rather than any transformation of emotional, psychological, social states. *MHN'*s Chandni stands out as an exception for some degree of sexual autonomy and some emotional depth although this latter is limited to emotionally mothering a man-child. *OSO* has little use beyond the decorative for either part played by Deepika Padukone. Sandy's most important attraction is to ventriloquise the off-screen fan and confirm her willingness, indeed determination, to suspend disbelief not only for the star's onscreen performance but also off-screen actions (*TMK* expands

on this naively committed viewer in strangely desultory and mean-spirited ways); Shanti's role is to incite affective responses to film history referenced by her glamorous appearances. History and film history referents of her tragic story arc that destabilise the film's nostalgic invocations are quickly resolved by a restorative resolution (yet this resolution is ambivalent, as Sandy is more a facsimile instead of a reincarnation, hinting at a parallel deployment of reflexive nostalgia discussed below).

Khan's representations of women deteriorate rapidly with *TMK*, her one film without SRK. The film's protagonist, played by **Akshay Kumar**, parodies his own star persona of an action star with an explicit dose of misogyny. The actor's brief appearance in *OSO* had parodied the absurdities of action sequences in popular Hindi film as well as Kumar's hyper-macho screen image. It had also included a disturbing sequence of the star – playing himself – losing a film award and attacking a young woman seated near him, apparently in anger at his loss. The sequence wasn't particularly humorous in OSO so to construct an entire film around the same penchant for sexism seems an odd decision. **Misogyny** and barely controlled gendered violence, played for ever diminishing laughs, informs the character of Tabrez, not only in his catch phrase about the rape of a sex worker being impossible but also in his controlling and coercive behaviour to his wife Anya, played by **Katrina Kaif**.

This toxic masculinity is repeated in *HNY*, Khan's final venture, albeit without an explicit threat of physical violence, by Charlie (SRK again) whose sexist diatribes about Mohini's (**Deepika Padukone** again) supposed lack of honour/chastity are played for laughs. While Khan uses *HNY* to replay *OSO*'s romance between Om and Sandy, the effect is more disturbing than romantic. The female protagonist's name and profession as dancer references Madhuri Dixit's role as young woman forced to dance in bars under threat of acid attack in ***Tezaab*** (1988). Charlie's slurs against Mohini thus land differently, reminding the viewer of the brutal violence of the earlier film, undermining any credibility of romance between the two.

Khan's regression into toxic on and off-screen gender roles films starts with relatively subtle and seemingly benign expression in *MHN* but spirals into increasing toxicity and verbal, in not always, physical violence. This onscreen regression also depends on activating filmic nostalgia which, over the course of the four films, grows darker in tone and content. These increasingly explicit evocations of a violent history and film history prevents a reading of her films as solely restorative nostalgia and indicates a more ambivalent, even critical, view of the past.

Boym provocatively proposes that nostalgia "reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement, or critical reflection" (2001, p. 50). This concept of "reflective" nostalgia offers a potentially powerful framework to consider works by minoritized – by gender and other aspects of identity - ***auteurs*** as their visions of displaced, disavowed, and reconstituted past may not simply activate a longing for a different time but rather construct a dialogue with the present and future. A more complicated view of the past – informed in part by filmic history of economic precarity and political instability of the 1970s and 1980s and Khan's own statements (Chopra 2017) – lies under Khan's seemingly glossy pastiche. It forces the viewer, even if momentarily, to acknowledge a grimmer real history that accompanies the reel histories of the time. There are reinforced through the film: a film star's mansion is surrounded by impoverished film fans with confident knowledge of cinema; a famous film star may be humane enough to bring a dying man to the hospital but his assistant can also grease enough palms to make the body disappear after death; and a junior artist may seem to dream of stardom even with the knowledge that he has few possibilities of success. This constant onscreen

assertion and subversion of history provides fertile grounds for the film to activate both restorative and reflective nostalgias that form the basis of Khan's **cinephilia**, and demand that her oeuvre be considered not only in aesthetic and stylistic terms but for the location, urgency and implications of her nostalgia: what is this memorialized past she evokes in her films and why does it matter? How do her citation preferences in her intertextually dense films operate, not only as aesthetic and stylistic choices but also semiotically to signal concerns about the present and even more so the future? Any meaningful analysis of Khan's oeuvre, and *OSO* in particular, requires us to parse through the ways in which these two nostalgias – restorative and reflexive - are in constant productive struggle.

Thomas Elsaesser differentiates between cinephilia as the "love that never lies" of the first generation and "the love that never dies" of the post 1980 generation of cinephiles which feeds on nostalgia and repetition (2005). *OSO* is a loving crafted expression of this second kind, of Elsaesser's 'cinephilia 2,' through a continuum of registers ranging from homage to pastiche to parody. These changes in register complicate any description of the film as solely homage, moving fluidly to pastiche, parody and back. Narratively, the film employs a structure familiar to popular Hindi film audiences with two clear halves, the first set in the 1970s and the second in new millennium. SRK, the country's biggest star, plays Om Makhija, a junior film artist in the first half and Om Kapoor, a major film star in the second. The double role is also a familiar pleasure for the audience, recalling earlier cinema, and not in the least with that era's biggest star Amitabh Bachchan in films such as ***Don*** (1978), ***The Great Gambler*** (1979) and ***Satte pe Satta*** (1982) culminating with inimitable excess with a triple role in ***Mahaa****n* (1983).[vi] This doubling is mirrored by Padukone who plays the film star Shantipriya in the first half of *OSO* and Sandy, a wanna-be film actress and Om's fan in the second. The film positions Shanti as analogous to the earlier star Hema Malini, not only by choice of costume and mannerisms but also film paraphernalia. She is first seen in a poster for 'Dreamy Girl', a play on the Malini star vehicle ***Dream Girl*** (1977). This referencing does not appear incidental as Malini was not only one of the few female stars of the decade to be able to carry a film on her own but also known for her double roles in films focussed on reincarnation including ***Mehbooba*** **(**1976) and *Kudrat* (1977). Towards the climax, Khan adds another citational twist with introducing a vengeful ghost drawn from an even earlier film, ***Madhumat****i* (1958). This final citation resonates further as that film also features a rare triple role by its female star **Vyajanthimala**, once again one of the few female stars with the ability to deliver box office success based solely on her star power.

For the cinephile for whom "the love never dies," *OSO* is an 'intertextual extravaganza' (Iyer 2016, p. 214) with each shot abounding in filmic references. In the first half, these activate an affective nostalgic response through an intensified mise-en-scène. The second half self-referentially harnesses this invoked filmic and extra-filmic nostalgia to provoke an intense emotional response that is at once earnest and sceptic as the film simultaneously recognises and distances itself from filmic narrative and history, reveals and conceals the mechanism of filmic storytelling, provokes and disavows the very cinephilic affections at its core. In her discussion of the Dhoom Tana song sequence, Iyer questions the choice of the four films cited as 'curious' as they are neither the 'most popular or canonized' although the question could also be aimed at the entire film. She adds that the choice suggests 'a cultural amnesia towards other attributes that a broader spectrum of popular cinema from the past would afford.' (2016, pp. 216-7). However, given that Khan's citation choices, not only in that song but right through the film, appear very deliberate, perhaps these are neither incidental nor an indication of cultural amnesia but rather a deliberate "re-mastering, re-purposing, and re-framing" (Elsaesser 2005, p. 36) of popular Hindi cinema by a series of technological, narrative, and aesthetic choices for reconstituting an imagined rather than historically accurate filmic and real past.

Moreover, as de Valck and Hagener note 'cinephilia in the new media age not only celebrates discoveries and classic masterpieces, but also engages in popular reworking of what may be called "the film-historical imaginary"' (2005, p. 15). Perhaps the more pertinent questions are about the motivation, nature and purpose of this nostalgia which remains, in different forms, the central preoccupation of all four of Khan's feature films and how filmic citations are marshalled in her work, and for what purpose.

Sperb notes that nostalgia "is less about a reclaiming a vanishing past than about paradoxically resisting a potential threatening future" (Sperb 2015, p. 2). If so, *OSO*'s representation of the industry in the 1970s – an era that is often viewed as 'better' in terms of inclusivity and tolerance is less about real or reel history and more reflective of anxieties about the future. In contrast, the contemporary industry is shown to have greater diversity although this is entirely through two scenes: first, a parade of well-known stars on the red carpet at the *Filmfare* awards night, and then in the extravagant song sequence for the title track set at a party celebrating Om's win which features over thirty stars of the past half century. The selection of images, narratives, information and sounds help activate nostalgic pleasures of a memorialised past while also constituting a melancholic warning about possible futures through its selected citations.

Yet this citation also complicates the sequence as straightforward nostalgic evocation. Khan's title track cites her film's opening sequence as well as the popular *Karz* song. Yet it is distinct enough to remain an homage. Similarly, with its unprecedented parade of film stars, the sequence visually references the John Jani Janardhan song sequence from *Naseeb* featuring multiple film stars gathered to celebrate the 'golden jubilee of director Desai's earlier film ***Dharam-Veer***. Khan's citation is further complicated by the Desai's sequence functioning primarily as a spectacle to emphasise Amitabh Bachchan's dominant star status while diegetically locating him as a film fan with passing fancies of film acting. Bachchan's character in the film is a waiter, moonlights as a cage fighter, and is closer to SRK's aspiring Om Makhija in his economic precarity. In turn Om Makhija references not only Bachchan's character from *Naseeb* with his secular values but also with his pendants of multiple religions that recall those worn by Bachchan in Desai's ***Coolie*** (1983). It is worth bearing in mind that this half of Khan's film is approximately set in 1979-80 by its citation of *Karz*, the year when Bachchan was declared 'the one-man industry' (Chakravarty 1993). Thus Khan's citational choices also reinforce SRK's star text. However, unlike Om Makhija's starstruck fan who deals with stars at a distance and in fantasy – with the exception of Shanti – in *OSO*, Desai's sequence is entirely dominated by Bachchan's character who interacts playfully with the stars despite the differences in economic and social class. The sequence does not hide the extra-filmic camaraderie, between the stars and Bachchan, especially in interactions with **Dharmendr**a, evoking the two stars' onscreen friendship from *Sholay* (1975), one that Khan's junior artist cannot access. Conversely, Khan's star-studded party is no longer accessible to a character like Bachchan's hotel waiter as the sequence invisibilises any serving staff, creating a nearly impenetrable class bubble of wealth and class, countering any attempt to demystify film stars or the industry. As such, the sequence works to create an illusion of access to an exclusive party while paradoxically enhancing the distanced mystique conferred by stardom.

Moreover, Khan's historicising and self-theorising of popular Hindi cinema is evident from the opening sequence which recalls studio films of the 1950s. Unlike the meticulous reconstruction of a period by a film like ***Mughal-e-Azam***, cited in dialogue later in the film, this construction of the past is constituted by the production of "media images saturated with memories of pastness evocative enough" to give a sense of the era (de Valck & Hagener 2005, p. 17). The

bombastic quote and sculpture of a fictive studio logo gives way to a digitally reconstructed song sequence that forms the title of Khan's film and is diegetically located on the sets of *Karz* (1980). Clips of **Rishi Kapoor** dancing in the original song sequence are placed alongside shots of SRK as a junior artist playing an audience member on the set as well as a fantasy sequence where he imagines himself as the elder star. Multiple reel times and narratives of memory, diegetic reality and fantasy are amalgamated into a single cinephilic whole. A guest appearance of the earlier film's director, an eerily un-aged **Subhash Ghai,** functions not only as a visual bridge the two eras but collapses filmic, interfilmic and extra-filmic realities. The sequence activates multiple pleasures: the thrill of being on the set of *Karz* and becoming part of film history, of witnessing the anachronistic proximity of multiple generations of stars in the same contiguous space, and of seeing the current superstar as an extra, in the audience, as just another fan (Sarkar 2013). In a single sequence, history has been congealed into history as presented on screen while film and film history are inseparably intertwined with history (de Valck & Hagener 2005).

Furthermore, Khan herself appears in cameo as one of the purported extras dancing alongside SRK, collapsing filmic histories and times, and further complicating *OSO*'s activation of nostalgia. This self-insertion of the director into the filmic text is a longstanding technique and functions not only as a 'deep archiving impulse' (Sarkar 2013, p. 217). Khan's choice of placing herself in filmic past and diegesis signals a wilful anachronism, one that challenges usual conceptions of anachronisms as a slight or a mistake in the practice of historical representation. As demonstrated throughout OSO, instead of mistakes or slights, Khan's uses of anachronisms 'hinge on sly misuses and creative revisions of historical and film historical referents' (Gorfinkel 2005, p. 156) recreates a lost moment of popular Hindi cinema, one that is not only rendered obsolete by neo-liberal capitalist process and technological advances but also concurrent socio-political changes.

This wilful anachronism is also evident in the hyper-intense artificiality of mise-en-scène (in itself a familiar cinematic convention of popular Hindi cinema) not only in *OSO* but all of Khan's work, which renders them as cinematic artefacts that appear 'out of time and out of place,' simultaneously evoking, reimagining and reconstructing a time and place while also rendering it impossible. Although *OSO,* like all films under discussion here, operates in filmic and cultural contexts entirely different from Hollywood that Gorfinkel analyses, Khan's choices similarly incite "an earnestly emotional response, from an audience that recognises the limits and myopias of the cultural past as seen through the fractured mirror of film history" (2005, p 160).[vii] Given this wilful anachronism, Khan's evocations of filmic past cannot be read as simplistic restorative nostalgia as she neither parodies the past, nor evokes it with any degree of historical accuracy, nor indeed celebrates it in pastiche.

These anachronisms are also coded in creative refusal of familiar, almost inevitable, narratives as Khan privileges affective impact over predictable plot choices. Each of her onscreen choices is also a deliberate misuse, inversion or revision of earlier film history reference, indicating that her anachronism is a creative strategy. The clearest example of this refusal is her inversion of viewer expectations that Om and Shanti would fall in love after he saves her from a burning film set, not only because of conventions of romance but also because the sequence references the well-known story of **Nargis** and **Sunil Dutt** falling in love. While Om obviously expects such a result, Shanti is not only married but also is erotically disinterested in him. The same refusal of romance is echoed in the second half where Sandy's obvious sexual interest in Om, reincarnated now as a major star, is met with nothing more than fraternal care. Khan's refusal of romantic happy ever-afters merits a separate study but her creative revisions of film

historical referents are not limited to this trope alone. Despite a relentlessly albeit superficially upbeat tones – asserted through hyper saturated colours, bright light, extravagant locations and costumes, and fast paced music – Khan's films end on ambiguous, indeed melancholic, notes. Moreover, this melancholia appears to grow with each film, manifesting finally in an unusually affectively unsatisfying finale to *HNY*.

Perhaps Khan's oeuvre is better considered in light of Elsaesser questioning of not cinema but our discipline itself. If Film Studies requires the deconstruction of the very cinephilia the discipline is built upon, popular Hindi cinema in general, and Khan in particular, poses an intriguing dilemma. If we as film scholars have politicized pleasure and psychoanalyzed desire, is not the task of a committed cinephilic director is to undo both? If so, *OSO* rises to Elsaesser's challenge for a film to "once more become innocent and political" (2005, p. 40), not despite but because of its deployment of nostalgia? Moreover, if nostalgia "depends on where you stand" (Stewart 1988, p. 228) are minoritized creatives, by dint of their socio-cultural precarity more likely to veer towards a critical, challenging, reflective form than a conservative, restorative one? Or perhaps creating commercially successful cinema requires a fine balancing of reflexive and restorative nostalgias, reasserting certain forms of conservatisms while refusing others? And is this balancing act when performed by minoritized auteurs inevitably underpinned by anxieties that find expression in a through thread of melancholia?

Melancholia, Grief and Non-mourning

The pleasures afforded by cinephilia rest on retrospective knowledge – filmic and extra-filmic- that the viewer holds, individually and collectively, as well as a recognition of this moment of history and film history being already lost (Gorfinkel 2005; Elsaesser 2016). The very act of cinephilia requires a kind of mourning of what has already been lost, and thus becomes an act of re-membering, albeit a necrophilic one (Willemen 1994). The cinephile filmmaker may be then conceived of as a graverobber, using "history as a limitless warehouse that can be plundered for tropes, objects, expressions, styles, and images from former works" (de Valck & Hagener 2005, p. 15). Thus the work of a director like Khan becomes not only an archaeological endeavour of rediscovery, retrieval and storage but also a process of dis-membering, membering and re-membering.[viii] At the heart of this process is a crisis of memory, not only of filmic memory but of memory itself, which ironically has become the central psycho-cultural concern of our times. Driven by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, including in case of South Asia, the violent ruptures between colonial and postcolonial periods, formations and reformations of postcolonial states ensures that memory is inextricably intertwined with trauma. This leads to a kind of Janus-headed re-membering where traumas of the past also anticipate future traumas, not only in the failures of the nation-state but also in an ambiguous anxiety of the impending Anthropocene catastrophe (Elsaesser 2005; Roth 2011; Ghosh 2016).[ix]

In face of such dread, any evocation of nostalgia is inextricably interwoven with melancholia, of a repetitive cycle of "non-mourning." Unlike mourning which is a way dealing with loss including the painful withdrawal of investment from the lost object and eventually achieving closure, melancholia is grieving for a loss that is unclear or unidentifiable. While any application of Freudian theories must necessarily be undertaken with caveats, they offer interesting pathways for analysing the melancholia that underpins Khan's feature films, in a latent form in *MHN* and *OSO*, growing explicit in *TMK*, and culminating with *HNY*.[x] Freud describes melancholia as a "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the world,

loss of the capacity to love, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings" (1953, n.p.). Freud adds that this ambiguous loss leads to a process of disenchantment and self-critique.

This is most clear in Khan's third outing, *TMK* which is unusual for its relative lack of success both at the time of its release and afterwards. The film is remembered a decade later only for its 'Sheila ki Jawani' song sequence, in direct contrast to the fandom that has grown around *MHN* and *OSO*. It is also is the film with least involvement by Khan who is credited only as the director, unlike her other films. In contrast, her husband Shirish Kunder is credited multiple times and the style of the film is different enough from Khan's to raise questions about the extent of her involvement in the project. Moreover, the film announces itself as an official remake of de Sica's neo-realist classic, an odd choice in itself as the filmmaker, his style and politics could not be farther removed from Khan's. The choice also disavows Khan's well established and cinematically demonstrated 'certain tastes' which are firmly rooted in the popular Hindi film. Unsurprisingly, *TMK* jettisons any attempt at adhering to its purported origin text and attempts to reclaim its own film history.

Nominally relying on de Sica's plot of a conman using trappings of a film shoot in a rural location for a heist, *TMK*, like Khan's earlier films, is concerned with 'industrial histories' of popular Hindi film industry that could "both highlight and conceal, through respective nostalgic hazes, technological and studio histories past" (Sperb 2015, p. 8). If stardom was a theme of *OSO* (Chakravarty 2013), popular Hindi industry and its place in world cinema are the main concern for *TMK*. However, the film seems unable to decide if it wishes to expose the sleazy underbelly with the production apparatus that frames Sheila ki Jawani song sequence, parody stars who want to win the Oscars, mock the fandom of the rural, impoverished spectators or comment on the chaotic nature of popular Hindi film production. This indecision undermines Khan's usual intertextual citations, which still abound, but demonstrate an entropic disenchantment with the same film history referents that had previously been deployed to great affective satisfaction. This unexpected and - within Khan's oeuvre – anachronistic disavowal of popular Hindi cinema and industry serves as a lowering self-esteem and a resultant loss of confidence in not only Khan's own filmmaking but also in popular Hindi cinema as referents of her unique cinephilia: the onscreen Tabrez pretends to direct an anti-colonial film, the premise of which parodies ***Lagaan*** (2001) and quickly abandons it to the villagers he disdains; the already married protagonists have little love for each other – Tabrez is controlling, Anya is dissatisfied and there is palpable relief when they are shown as going their separate ways in the final sequence; Aatish Kapoor (**Akshay Khanna**) the film star harkens after Hollywood success and has little of *OSO*'s wonder at films he makes or the industry of which he is a part. The reflexivity and nostalgia of the earlier film is replaced by a profound disenchantment: the poorly made Bharat ka Khazana (India's treasure) made by the villagers after Tabrez is arrested – one of the slim plot references to de Sica's film – is enthusiastically watched by the cast and crew involved but met with disdain by the rest of the audience. Yet the shoddily crafted work is declared a 'masterpiece' like 'French cinema' by a critic whose authority is established by his sombre western wear and faux-American accent, and wins Aatish the much-vaunted Oscar.

The heretofore latent melancholia is foregrounded in *TMK* by the stylistic elements – frenetic narrative pace, highly saturated visual style, and an acute reflexivity – that have become identified as Khan's directorial style but redeployed here with intense disenchantment. Khan references much of her own previous work, most explicitly recreating the red carpet scene from *OSO* for *TMK*'s finale but the earlier glamour, excitement and wonder is replaced by chaotic disarray and alienation. The film industry that had rolled up the red carpet to celebrate a new release in the earlier film is missing here and Aatish is not only the sole 'star' but is seated

alongside Anya, the aspiring, possibly porn actress and the rough edged villagers. At one level the sequence appears to lament the democratization of Hindi cinema brought in by technological, material, and cultural changes. At another it echoes Khan's melancholic statement that the shoot of *OSO*'s title track was "the last time they – the Hindi film industry – were big happy family" (Chopra 2017). This profoundly painful dejection is underscored by the end credits song sequence in *TMK* that plaintively pleads "everyone wants a happy ending" and eschews the playful, tongue in cheek approach used for these in the earlier two films (Gehlawat 2020, p. 108). If her earlier works had resisted "falling into an easy caricature mode" (Sarkar 2013, p. 220) in *TMK*, Khan's usual flourishes of homage, pastiche, simulacrum, parody are no longer able to avoid this fall.

In her final (so far) feature film, Khan reclaims much of her usual cinematic flourish, creating another ensemble, big budget spectacle with *HNY*, building in a richly intertextual text that draws on *Tezaab*, not only naming her female protagonist Mohini but initiating her appearance on screen with the familiar sound of male voices chanting her name; *Shalimar* (1978 the big budget international ensemble film about a jewel heist), *Deewaar* (1975, with the protagonist is told that his father is a thief), *Naseeb* (1982, for the cage fighting). She reassembles part of the her *OSO* theme with SRK, Deepika Padukone, Boman Irani and much of her habitual behind the screen team. **Abhishek Bachchan**, son of Amitabh Bachchan, the star whose films from 1970s and 1980s are most frequently cited by Khan, is cast here in a double role. The film parodies the industry but without the affection of *OSO*, often cruelly spoofing various personalities. The most notable of these is Saroj Khan (no relation), an older choreographer and at times Khan's competitor, who had choreographed the song sequences in ***Tezaab*.**

HNY's nostalgic evocations hold a darker edge, recalling history and film history of poverty, deprivation and violence. By the time the film reaches its most critical referent at the finale, it is clear that HNY is an exercise in reflective nostalgia, less a longing for a lost past and more an engagement with the challenges of the present and expressions of anxieties for the future. Charlie's (SRK) entrance on stage for the final song sequence cites a much older film, **Raj Kapoor**'s explicitly political ***Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*** focussing on the post-independence Indian state's attempt to bring rehabilitate dacoits/rebels of the Chambal valley and reintegrate them in the lawful national mainstream. Charlie's next dialogue is densely intertextual: "jahan roz hi danga rehta hai (*Garm Hava* 1973; ***Tamas*** 1988; ***Bombay***, 1995, *Black Friday*, 2004 and more on sectarian violence); Jahan roz akhbaro mein scamo ka panga rehta hai (too many to name as these formed the heart of 1970s and 1980s popular Hindi cinema); Jahan aam admi sadkon pe aadha nanga rehta hai (***Boot Polish*** 1954; ***Jagte Raho*** 1956; poverty remained a dominant theme of popular Hindi cinema right uptil the 1990s). His final assertion "is haal mein bhi, is daur mein bhi, hard dil mein bhi tiranga rehta hai" is less a nationalist slogan and more a *cri de cœur* full of pathos. This reflective nostalgia evoked by this dense citation exposes the audience to the melancholia of the endlessly repetitive cycle of poverty, violence and grief.

Citations of SRK's earlier films and Khan's own films add to this already teetering intertextual pile. If Khan's melancholia was latent (*MHN, OSO*) or instinctive, *HNY* activates what is in postcolonial context is the 'critical agency' of melancholia where the present is not just crippled by the past but they are both involved in the same cycle (Kumar 2010). This critical agency develops as the past remains unresolved and some part of it continues being carried forward (Khanna 2006). If self-critique is a symptom of melancholia, such constant critique – and collective self-critique in the postcolonial context – becomes a powerful form of criticism of the independent national state, not only in the present but also its near seven decades at the

time of *HNY*'s release. In such a framework, Khan's brief insertion of a look-alike of newly elected Indian PM's message is less a function of "the most lavishly mounted propaganda movie yet about India's increasing soft power" (Rangan 2014, n.p.) and more a melancholic recognition that history and film history can "move through history and arrive at the present with similar problems, as they have never been addressed when the time was nascent: the moment of independence" (Kumar 2010, n.p.).

Conclusion

In the run up to the release of *HNY*, Khan said that she had had "been brash and outspoken" but she was going to be fifty and "as a mother I'm more careful as to what I say" (Chatterjee, 2014, n.p.). The statement added to a general distancing of many minoritized members of the Hindi film from explicit politics. An intersectional understanding of identity and power could provide greater insight than simply considering Khan on the axis of gender as her experience and creative work is located on a more complex intersection of power and marginalization. Although any clear answers are beyond the scope of this paper, placing Khan's feature films in this rubric may not only provide insights to her oeuvre as well as to wider creative output by minoritized filmmakers in popular Hindi cinema.

She remains a ubiquitous presence in the Indian mediascape. Yet there has been a marked shift in her public engagements where she seems to channel the manic pixie dream girl that she has often placed onscreen in her films with a relentlessly cheerful demeanour marked with periodic wistfulness. Her lack of directorial output suggests a more troubling self-silencing where the condition of melancholia is exacerbated by actual grief for the loss of people, opportunities, lived realities and ideals. For the cinephilic director of popular Hindi cinema, a form that relies on affective outpouring as an identifier, this creates impossible creative constraints as any cinematic expression runs the risk of affective honesty.

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[i] Particularly interesting in light of Khan’s extravagant ‘item numbers’ as well as for its early reflexive look at casting couch, albeit in the modelling rather than film industry

[ii] While Khan has said little publicly, it is notable that Kunder’s name does not appear in credits for HNY. The choice of stars, storyline, script, and only glimpses of her signature style suggest that TMK may be the least ‘Khan’ of Khan’s films

[iii] Khan expands on *OSO* as a ‘passionate love letter to movies’ to ‘specially Hindi industry, and the quirks of it’. (Chopra 2017)

[iv] Khan engages with a more complex mediation of class here with accents, attitudes, and cultural capital as signifiers instead of simply wealth and material consumption

[v] See Willemen 1994; Sontag 1996; Dika, 2003; Elsaesser 2005, 2015

[vi] While a number of stars performed double roles in films, Bachchan’s big successes seemed intended to hold his oversize star persona which seemingly would not fit a single role in a single film. SRK’s star text draws explicitly on the earlier star’s (Singh 2010), suggesting yet another level of citation

[vii] Gorfinkel’s theorisation as willful anachronism, nostalgia and cinema provides a more meaningful framework than those deployed for example by Wilkinson-Weber who dismisses Khan’s instructions to OSO costume designers as “the nostalgia …tinged with the sense that 1970s and 1980s Bollywood was…ridiculous” (2010, p. 140). Such an extrapolation would rarely be applied to study of an auteur of the Global North.

[viii] See also Elsaesser 2004

[ix]

[x] This essay employs Freud's ideas through a postcolonial lens, Khanna's 2006 conceptualisation as its primary reference