



SRK and global Bollywood

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BOOK REVIEW

SRK and global Bollywood, edited by Rajinder Dudrah, Elke Mader, and Bernhard Fuchs, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2015, 355 pp., \$25 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-199-46047-2

If you Google ‘most popular actor in the world,’ the name that invariably appears at or near the top of the list is neither Tom Cruise nor Brad Pitt but Shah Rukh Khan (SRK). The new edited collection, *SRK and Global Bollywood*, attempts to explore the ‘global cultural phenomenon’ of SRK and Bollywood cinema, in many ways equating the two, given ‘the leading part that SRK has been playing in global Bollywood’ (Dudrah et al., xii). This collection, comprised of an introduction by the editors and 14 essays, covers a wide range of themes related to both SRK and the cinema that has made him a superstar. Divided into two sections, the essays come from an equally broad range of scholars, including established critics of Hindi cinema and newcomers to the field.

In the first section, entitled ‘Stardom and Globalized India’, scholars, including Dudrah, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Rachel Dwyer provide ways of ‘unthinking’ SRK (Dudrah, 3) as well as the ensuing discourses of stardom, global cinema and transnationalism. Though SRK has made over 80 films in his quarter-century career, this collection is essentially concerned with a dozen or so films made during the mid-1990s and 2000s, a period in which Indian cinema underwent significant changes associated with liberalization and globalization. Accordingly, a primary interest in the first section are those films in which SRK plays a non-resident Indian, such as the films of Karan Johar. However, several of the scholars in this first section also examine films set in India which are more concerned with ‘SRK’s stardom and how it is achieved and constructed’ (Dudrah, 20), such as *Billu* (Priyadarshan, 2009) and *RA. One* (Anubhav Sinha, 2011). Indeed, a key theme throughout this collection is that of synergy and how SRK has effectively tapped into multiple media platforms as a way of promoting both himself and his films. In one of the more interesting contributions to this first section, Rachel Dwyer examines the diasporic films of SRK and how the star, despite playing characters who travel around the world, remains essentially ‘marked as Indian rather than as diasporic’ (50). In deciphering ‘the meaning of SRK’ in these films, Dwyer argues that SRK is simultaneously cosmopolitan – ‘truly the global citizen’ (63) – and maintains an ‘uncompromising Indianness’ (ibid).

Another key theme running throughout this book is that of the assemblage. While Jaspreet Gill, in her contribution, examines how SRK reinvents the Muslim hero on the global stage through *My Name is Khan* (Karan Johar, 2010), Amy Villarejo, in her chapter, entitled ‘Intermedia, Assemblage, SRK,’ considers the various components comprising the SRK figure in *Chak De! India* (Shimit Amin, 2007), including his star image and, building on Gill’s chapter, his Muslim identity (146), which can absorb ‘disparate, even contradictory, elements’ (153) and which, in turn, reflect the ‘complicated, contradictory mix ... said to be global Bollywood’ (154–55).

These themes are taken up through a series of case studies in the second part of this book, entitled 'Fandom: Local Receptions and Digital Culture,' in which numerous scholars provide readings of SRK in diverse cultural contexts. Hanna Klien examines SRK's star text in Trinidad, as well as how his films and star persona allow for renegotiations of male Indo-Trinidadian gender roles. Petra Hirzer looks at the transcultural reception of SRK in Peru as part of 'the dynamics of media flows and mediascapes in the global cultural economy' (183), while Elke Mader considers the role of online participatory audiences in mediating SRK's star image through 'interactive contact zone[s]' such as Twitter (207). One of the most interesting pieces in this section is Bernhard Fuchs' contribution, 'Dollywood,' about the creation of Bollywood dolls, particularly the SRK doll, known as 'Mini Khan,' and the pleasures that many of his fans take in playing with this miniaturized avatar of the superstar. Fuchs focuses exclusively on the reception of the SRK doll in Western contexts, examining how middle-aged female fans in the US and Europe use the SRK doll to enact their own fantasies, which include haptic experiences such as feeling the doll's (mini) six-pack abs (238) and using the doll to reenact scenes from their favorite SRK films, which are then posted online (241). The final chapter in this section, by Gyorgyi Vajdovich, is concerned with SRK's manifold economic activities through his film company, Red Chillies, including the marketing and distribution of his films, as well as his investment in visual effects. In such enterprises, Vajdovich argues, SRK is 'receptive to Western techniques' (316) which, in turn, the star has employed to 'ope[n] up new perspectives of marketing in the Indian film industry' (317).

The multiple perspectives provided by this timely collection make it a welcome addition to the fields of Indian film studies and star studies, yet while Dudrah asks early on, 'what kinds of pleasures, possibilities, and problems does the study of SRK and global Bollywood pose,' (22) the latter category remains somewhat elided here. One problem particularly worth exploring is whether SRK's recent tendency towards self-parody suggests a limit to his star text. Even as this latter text is arguably being deconstructed in the process (David, 294), the question that arises is whether or not SRK and, in turn, Bollywood, can move beyond self-parody. While the essays in this collection amply attest to the transnational nature of SRK's stardom, and to his status as 'brand ambassador' for Bollywood, the man himself, as on the book's cover, remains hidden behind his moniker.

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