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**Representation of Indo-Canadian Diaspora: Cultural Identity,
Bollywood, and the Canadian Context with reference to the Movie
*‘Bollywood/Hollywood’***

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Abstract

Not all constructions of home in the diaspora result in overtly nationalistic sentiments. Visual culture provides diasporic communities a medium to connect with their homeland through shared affiliations and emotional ties. This study highlights the role of Bollywood as a cultural anchor, offering a shared framework for identity construction within the Indo-Canadian diaspora. By examining Rahul's journey in *Bollywood/Hollywood*, the paper demonstrates how media representation fosters a sense of belonging while navigating the complexities of diasporic identity. Visual culture provides diasporic communities a medium to connect with their homeland through shared affiliations and emotional ties. Drawing from both Western and non-Western popular culture, diasporic imagination creates a transnational community bonded by kinship and sentiment.

This paper explores the concept of the “diasporic optic,” a term that refers to a perspective enabling individuals to engage with multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. It provides a lens to examine how media representation creates opportunities for negotiating identities across cultural differences.

Keywords: Bollywood, Hollywood, Indo-Canadian films, media, diaspora

This study examines the factors shaping the identity of the second-generation Indian diaspora in Canada, using the characters in the movie *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002) as a case study, particularly Rahul Seth's journey to reconcile his Indo-Canadian identity. The paper explores the existential and cultural dilemmas faced by Rahul and his family, offering a deeper understanding of how diaspora individuals construct their identities in multicultural environments.

Cultural Identity and Diasporic Dilemmas

In *Bollywood/Hollywood*, Rahul Seth, a wealthy young man of Indian descent living in Canada, grapples with the expectations of his family to marry an Indian girl. This reflects a broader tension within the Indo-Canadian community, caught between preserving traditional values and adapting to the realities of multiculturalism. Rahul's dilemma highlights the challenges faced by second-generation immigrants as they navigate familial and societal pressures while forging their own unique cultural identities.



"Mom, Dad, I know you want me to marry an Indian girl, but I live in Canada. Things are different here." (Deepa Mehta, Bollywood/Hollywood)

This quote by Rahul encapsulates the central conflict of the film. He acknowledges his parents' desire for him to uphold traditional values, but he also asserts his agency in shaping his own life within the context of his Canadian identity.

Brought up in a traditional Indian household, Rahul and his siblings adapt to the multicultural environment of Toronto, but this adaptation comes with a price. They experience a clash between the "Indian" values instilled in them by their parents and the more liberal Canadian lifestyle they encounter. This tension is evident in the scene where Rahul's sister, Kamla, confronts their mother about her expectations:

"You want me to be a good Indian girl, but you also want me to be successful in this country. How can I do both when your rules are so different from everyone else's?" (Deepa Mehta, Bollywood/Hollywood)

The film cleverly highlights the Indianization of the English language within the Seth family, showcasing a hybrid language that reflects their diasporic identity. Their frequent use of Hindi phrases and Bollywood references within their English conversations creates a unique linguistic blend that marks their cultural in-betweenness.

"Are you going to be a 'deewana' and throw away your whole life for this girl?" (Deepa Mehta, Bollywood/Hollywood)

This quote, where Rahul's mother uses the Hindi word "deewana" (meaning crazy) within an English sentence, exemplifies this linguistic hybridity. Furthermore, the film portrays the family's reliance on Bollywood as a cultural touchstone. They frequently watch Bollywood films, quote dialogues, and even imagine their lives as Bollywood narratives. This reflects a broader trend within Indian diasporic communities, where Bollywood serves as a means of maintaining cultural continuity and connection to the homeland. However, the film also subtly critiques this reliance, suggesting that Bollywood often presents a romanticized and idealized version of Indian culture.

"Bollywood is all fantasy, Mom. It's not real life." (Deepa Mehta, Bollywood/Hollywood)



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Rahul's statement challenges the notion of Bollywood as an authentic representation of Indian culture, highlighting its constructed nature. Ultimately, Rahul's decision to embrace Sue, an Indian-origin woman with a "controversial" past, as his life partner signifies a redefinition of his identity. He chooses love and personal connection over strict adherence to traditional expectations, merging his Indian heritage with his Canadian reality.

"I love Sue, Mom. She's the one for me, even if she doesn't fit your perfect picture." (Deepa Mehta, *Bollywood/Hollywood*)

This choice underscores the film's message of valuing genuine human connections over rigid adherence to cultural norms. It suggests that diasporic identity is not about conforming to a fixed set of traditions but about negotiating and creating a sense of self that reflects individual experiences and choices.

In *Bollywood/Hollywood*, Rahul Seth, a wealthy young man of Indian descent in Canada, struggles to meet his family's expectations to marry an Indian girl, reflecting the broader tension within the Indo-Canadian community between preserving traditional values and adapting to the realities of multiculturalism. His dilemma underscores the challenges of negotiating familial and societal pressures while forming a unique cultural identity. Brought up in a traditional Indian household, Rahul and his siblings adapt to the multicultural environment of Toronto but face a conflict between "Indian" values and Canadian lifestyles. The film highlights the Indianization of the English language within the Seth family and their reliance on Bollywood as a cultural touchstone to navigate their diasporic identity. This reflects the broader trend of Indian diasporic communities turning to Bollywood to maintain cultural continuity, even though Bollywood itself is a performative construct.

By the end of the film, Rahul accepts Sue, an Indian-origin woman with a controversial past, as his life partner, redefining his identity in a way that merges his Indian heritage with Canadian realities. This choice underscores the film's message of valuing genuine human connections over rigid adherence to traditional customs.



Depicting the Indo-Canadian Experience through *Bollywood/Hollywood*

Directed by Deepa Mehta, *Bollywood/Hollywood* achieved significant acclaim in Canada and globally. The film portrays the Seth family's efforts to preserve their Indian culture while living in Toronto. Despite their attempts, the children grapple with understanding "Indian" values as depicted in popular media. Rahul's initial desire to marry a Caucasian woman clashes with his family's expectations, exacerbated by the sudden death of his white fiancée.

The film uses irony to depict the cultural confusion within the family. For example, Rahul's grandmother frequently quotes Shakespeare to assert her opinions, blending Indian English with Western literary references. Her eventual acceptance of Sue, despite her traditional views, marks a significant shift, suggesting a progressive reinterpretation of Indian identity within the diaspora.

Bollywood as a Cultural Anchor

Bollywood serves as both a unifying force and a source of identity construction for the Indian diaspora in Canada, particularly influencing the younger generation by offering a shared cultural framework that bridges generational gaps. Through its vibrant storytelling, music, and dramatized traditions, Bollywood provides younger members of the diaspora with a medium to explore and connect with their heritage while simultaneously shaping their perceptions of Indian culture in a diasporic context. As Rahul tells Sue, "If you know Bollywood, you would be as good as an Indian." The film critiques this dependency, showing how Bollywood's idealized portrayals of India can create a distorted image of "home." Classic Bollywood songs and rituals depicted in the Seth household evoke nostalgia and provide a cultural anchor for the family, but they also highlight the performative nature of diasporic identity.

As noted in Shodhganga's review chapter, "Bollywood Dreams Hand-in-Hand with the Canadian Movie Business," the visual medium is both cultural and economic. Indo-Canadian parents encourage their children to watch Bollywood films, believing this will help them connect with their roots. However, these films often commodify culture, presenting an idealized and simplified version of Indian traditions.



Identity Crisis and Generational Conflict

Rahul's struggles mirror the broader existential dilemmas faced by the diaspora. Raised in a patriarchal household, he feels bound by his late father's wish for him to marry a traditional Indian girl. This clashes with his personal desires and the realities of living in a multicultural society. Rahul's younger siblings face their own challenges—his brother struggles with bullying and alienation at school, while his sister's pre-marital pregnancy highlights generational shifts in values.

Sue's character adds another layer to this exploration. Her past as a prostitute confronts Rahul's conservative upbringing, forcing him to redefine his understanding of Indian values and identity. Sue's own existential angst is evident when she tells Rahul, "I can be whoever you want me to be," reflecting the fluid and performative nature of diasporic identities.

The Toronto Context

Toronto, as depicted in *Bollywood/Hollywood*, represents an urban space where multiple cultures intersect. This multicultural environment profoundly shapes the characters' experiences and identities. For instance, Rahul navigates a social landscape where traditional Indian expectations coexist with Toronto's progressive values, as seen in his family's insistence on cultural traditions while living in a city celebrated for its diversity. Specific scenes, such as the Seth family attending fusion cultural events or Rahul's encounters in Toronto's multicultural neighborhoods, underscore how the city's environment influences their interactions and identity negotiations.

George Melnyk's analysis in *Film and the City: The Urban Imaginary in Canadian Cinema* highlights Toronto as a "transnational" space. He notes that the film's focus is neither on Mumbai nor Los Angeles but on the unique interstitial space of diasporic urban communities in North America.

This multiplicity of cultures complicates the integration process for characters like Rahul, who must navigate not just Indian and Canadian values but also other cultural influences within Toronto's diverse society. By the film's end, Rahul achieves a cosmopolitan identity, blending traditional and modern values. However, real-life diasporic experiences suggest that such reconciliations are ongoing and complex.



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Conclusion

Bollywood/Hollywood offers a nuanced portrayal of the Indo-Canadian diaspora's identity struggles. By employing the 'diasporic optic,' the film reveals the complexities of living between worlds and negotiating cultural identities. It presents Rahul's journey as an intersection of Indian and Canadian values, showing how diasporic individuals balance tradition and modernity. While the film's resolution is optimistic, it underscores the ongoing challenges of maintaining a multifaceted identity in a globalized world. While it presents an optimistic resolution for Rahul, the film's hyperbolic elements and simplified character arcs raise questions about its realism. The reliance on Bollywood as a cultural anchor underscores the challenges of constructing a diasporic identity in a globalized world. Ultimately, the film reflects the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity within the Indo-Canadian diaspora, highlighting both the opportunities and the conflicts inherent in living between cultures.



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