

Crossover Stars in the Hindi Film Industry Globalizing Pakistani Identity



Dina Khdair

ROUTLEDGE

CROSSOVER STARS IN THE HINDI FILM INDUSTRY

This book explores the cultural politics of Pakistani crossover stardom in the Hindi film industry as a process of both assimilation and “Otherness”. Analysing the career profiles of three crossover performers – Ali Zafar, Fawad Khan, and Mahira Khan – as a relevant case study, it unites critical globalization studies with soft power theory in exploring the potential of popular culture in conflict resolution.

The book studies the representation and reception of these celebrities, while discussing themes such as the meaning of being a Pakistani star in India, and the consequent identity politics that come into play. As the first comprehensive study of Pakistani crossover stardom, it captures intersections between political economy, cultural representation, and nationalist discourse, at the same time reflecting on larger questions of identity and belonging in an age of globalization.

Crossover Stars in the Hindi Film Industry will be indispensable to researchers of film studies, media and cultural studies, popular culture and performance, peace and area studies, and South Asian studies. It will also be of interest to enthusiasts of Indian cinematic history.

Dina Khdair is an independent scholar. She has an MA in Media and Cinema Studies from DePaul University, Illinois, USA. Her research interests include globalization and Hindi cinema, narrative studies, and the convergence of commercial entertainment industries. She has presented original work at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and was a contributor for the online journal *Antenna* through the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. Her work has appeared in the peer-reviewed journals *Studies in South Asian Film and Media* and *SAGAR*. She intends to continue her research pursuits at the doctoral level.



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Globalizing Pakistani Identity

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1

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Pakistani musician and actor Ali Zafar noted how “films and music are one of the greatest tools of bringing in peace and harmony between India and Pakistan. As both countries share a common passion – films and music can bridge the difference between the two” (Press Trust of India, 2010). In a more recent interview from May 2016, Zafar reflects on the unprecedented success of his career in India, celebrating his work in cinema as groundbreaking and forecasting a bright future for Indo-Pak collaborations in entertainment and culture (*Dawn.com*, 2016). His optimism is signaled by a wish to reach an even larger global fan base, as he mentions his dream of working in Hollywood and joining other Indian émigré stars such as Priyanka Chopra.

Fast-forward four months, and Zafar and other Pakistani stars working in India were given a 48-hour ultimatum to evacuate the country following a deadly attack by alleged Pakistani terrorists on an Indian military base in Kashmir (France Press Agency, 2016). Facing threats of violence from communalist groups and an industry ban suspending their current and future film projects, Pakistani stars were abruptly ousted from India’s entertainment scene. Acclaimed producer-director Karan Johar was pressured by key political groups to publicly apologize for employing Pakistani artists, even paying reparatory compensation to the military as a result of the controversy (Anand & Venkataraman, 2016). Meanwhile, the release of films featuring Pakistani actors was promptly stalled and a complete ban on media imports implemented on both sides of the border (Anand & Venkataraman, 2016).

This study is both a response to and an attempt at exploring the complex politics of crossover stardom in India, focusing on the careers of Pakistani stars as a revealing case study. Richard Dyer (1986), in his discussion of African American star Paul Robeson, has previously defined a crossover star as a performer who appeals to multiple audiences; while the term was originally used in the music industry to describe

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artists who gained mainstream popularity beyond a particular genre or subculture, Dyer deploys the term to characterize Robeson's movement across racial barriers in the 1920s and 30s. His interest lies in interrogating how America's "first major black star" (p. 65) achieved unanimous success with both black and white audiences, albeit for different reasons and within a hierarchy of cultural discourses on blackness. Dyer asks "What was the fit between the parameters of what black images the society could tolerate and the particular qualities Robeson could be taken to embody? Where was the give in the ideological system?" (p. 65).

A similar set of questions can readily be applied to Pakistani stars in India, who are "crossover" in any literal and figurative sense of the term. They not only cross a highly contested geographic/military border between India and Pakistan, a construct which figures powerfully in the national imaginary of both countries, but also media industries and platforms, having migrated primarily from Pakistani television screens to Hindi-language cinema, music, and ancillary entertainment products produced in India. Besides these more material passages between borders, Pakistani stars also cross religious, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. This is all the more remarkable considering India's immense diversity, encompassing multiple faiths, languages, and regional and class identities. This fragmentary cultural landscape is evinced by the fact that India boasts at least seven significant regional entertainment industries, each possessing discrete audiences and aesthetic sensibilities. As a result, "crossing over" can imply a host of contradictory and parallel meanings. In the case of Pakistani stars, crossing over connotes a dynamic of assimilation and "Otherness" that is constantly in tension.

Exploring the representation and reception of these crossover stars highlights key trends in the flow of global communication, culture, and power. Besides reflecting the increasingly global orientation of Hindi cinema in the past two decades – as indicated by a variety of co-productions with transnational media industries and an expanding audience base outside India – it also reinforces the Hindi film industry as India's dominant locus of cultural production. Hindi cinema remains a pivotal medium for national and social consciousness and is the most visible representative of Indian soft power. The concept of soft power refers to the "intangible assets" (Nye, 2010, p. 333) of a nation that variably include its "culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority" (Nye, 2010, p. 333). The objective of soft power is to achieve desired outcomes through co-optation rather than coercion (Nye, 2010). While remaining a highly debated concept, soft power is useful in apprehending the symbolic and political potency of culture in a globalized world. In the network society described by Manuel Castells (2010), culture occupies a central aspect of civil society, the global public sphere, and public diplomacy. These intersecting forces "convert" soft power into sociopolitical outcomes, from popular opinion to policy initiatives and governance (Hocking, 2005; Melissen, 2005). Thus, soft power and its political effects are progressively negotiated in a cultural terrain powerfully shaped by consumer media and entertainment (Hayden, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2007; Melissen, 2005; Thussu, 2010).

If soft power is about projecting a global image, in which dominant media cultures are increasingly imbricated, then the necessity of reading such artifacts as political texts is overwhelmingly evident. For example, the crucial link between popular culture and nationalism in the Hindi film context is already well established (Banerjee, 2017; Chakravarty, 1993; Dwyer & Pinney, 2001; Mishra, 2002; Viridi, 2003). However, substantially fewer studies have explored the wider role of popular media in public diplomacy and conflict resolution. Iwabuchi (2007) points in this direction through her discussion of Japanese media as contraflow in East Asia, citing specifically how Japanese and Korean television act as a cultural bridge between societies formerly estranged by imperialism and war. Commenting on the cultural impact of the Korean drama *Winter Sonata* (2002, director Yoon Seok-ho) in Japan, she observes that many viewers,

started to learn Korean, visit Korea and study the history of Japanese colonialism. In this process a significant number of audiences came to the realization that they harboured a prejudice against Korea as a backward country... This may make Japanese people realize that they now inhabit the same temporality and spatiality as people in other Asian regions and that the peoples of Asia, while being subject to common waves of modernization, urbanization and globalization, have experienced these phenomena in similar yet different ways in their own particular contexts.

(p. 76)

Iwabuchi's insights are germane to the concerns of the present study. The recent emergence of Pakistani talent in India engages a historical legacy of national and religious conflict that has had significant cultural consequences – for example, the import of Indian films was banned in Pakistan for 43 years until the lifting of economic sanctions in 1998 (Safi, 2016). The two countries have fought three armed conflicts since World War II, share a tenuous geographical border marked by ongoing confrontation, and have national origins characterized by a violent partition founded on religious difference. As of this writing, both countries are at the brink of a renewed war over political control in the heavily disputed Kashmir region (Masih, 2019). The discursive outcomes of this conflict include long-term processes of religious and cultural “Othering” and static, homogenizing portrayals of each nation across both sides of the border in popular media. An escalating Hindu nationalist movement and rhetoric surrounding the global War on Terror has further exacerbated both real and ideological contention between the two nations. Simultaneously, both countries are also experiencing reciprocal social, political and economic pressures induced by global neoliberalism. In this context, examining the potential of cultural diplomacy in attenuating regional conflict could not be more exigent, making the recent phenomenon of Pakistani crossover stars especially salient and worthy of inquiry.

Considering such historical and contemporary circumstances – and the theoretical questions they raise – how can Pakistani crossover stardom be interpreted?

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This study approaches that question from several analytical angles; first by exploring the industrial, narrative, and cultural forces motivating Pakistani stardom in the Hindi film industry, and second by questioning what it means to be a Pakistani star in India. Which “identity” takes precedence in celebrity discourse on Pakistani stars – national or religious, if any such distinction is made? How does crossover stardom negotiate the representation of national and religious identities through popular media, and how has this representation changed over time? Finally, what do these changes indicate for the prospects and limitations of cultural diplomacy in a rhizomatic, conflict-ridden world?

While in past decades crossover attempts by Pakistani actors have been brief and unsuccessful, the sustained popularity of stars Ali Zafar and Fawad Khan, and the continuing entry of debut talent like Mahira Khan, stand in notable contrast. These stars embody a new global imaginary for Pakistan that challenges its ghettoized depiction as a culturally impoverished “terrorist state” historically prevalent in popular discourse. Their work across media platforms blurs audiovisual boundaries between India, Pakistan, and the West that are mediated by globalization, problematizing questions of identity and belonging on multiple levels. However, the “soft power” embodied in such media flows increasingly confronts the “hard power” of state bureaucracies and national, as exemplified by the recent ban on crossover stars and cultural relations more widely in the wake of recent conflict.

The impetus for crossover stardom in Hindi cinema can be attributed to increasing efforts at globalization, including shifting circumstances for cultural production and reception and new systems of financing, producing and distributing media products on a global scale. The reality of overseas markets as a primary source of profit (Ganti, 2004) and the role of convergence culture in shaping media integration and consumer engagement have been crucial factors in the crossover appeal of Pakistani stars in India. Each of the above stars had existing reputations in satellite industries before being launched in Hindi films, having already achieved commercial success in television and music, in addition to solid cross-border fan bases. This career trajectory points to an evolving model of media and talent franchising in the Hindi film industry that is linked to growing corporatization on the one hand, and a media convergence environment driven by consumer participation on the other.

In terms of celebrity discourse, Pakistani crossover stars are positioned as figures of vicarious identification and fantasy that are tied to the aspirational lifestyle values intrinsic to consumer capitalism. However, rather than occurring *in spite of* these stars’ marked national and religious identities as Muslim/Pakistani, this process is an outcome of transnational shifts in the political economy of culture in India. The alleged “difference” of these stars is frequently framed as the source of their commercial appeal and is consciously inscribed through celebrity marketing techniques influenced by other global industries, including Hollywood. As a result, celebrity discourse evokes their national and religious backgrounds as much as emphasizing their integration into global standards of celebrity. This contradictory representation serves to preserve the brand “mystique” of crossover

stars even as it exposes their celebrity personas to identity transcendence through their performance in popular media on the one hand, and operations of fantasy and desire via global commodity culture on the other.

Finally, the diverse bodies of work these stars produce both directly and indirectly confront homogenizing stereotypes regarding Islamic and Pakistani identity and its association with terrorist violence, while positioning consumer capitalism as an alternative framework for accessing identity where religious, national and social boundaries are often fluid and ambiguous. While a film like *Tere Bin Laden* (2010, director Abhishek Sharma), starring Ali Zafar, boldly attacks Islamophobia with a satirical critique of the War on Terror, *Khoobsurat* (2014, director Shashanka Ghosh) is a romantic comedy that highlights the genteel charisma and sex appeal of its star, Fawad Khan, in a way that reframes the Pakistani/Muslim male body as an object of erotic desire rather than violence. These representations are reinforced by the off-screen personas of crossover stars as consumer brand and lifestyle icons. Popular media thereby becomes an important locus for consuming identity organized around shared values of hedonism, vicarious identification, and aspirational desire that can dispel bounded identity categories.

Nonetheless, the elements of globalization that enable crossover stardom also constitute a struggle to redefine borders and identities in a de-territorialized cultural landscape. The transnational rise of Hindutva and the use of global discourses on terrorism by the Indian state and communalist organizations, adopted to justify the recent ban on Pakistani performers, highlight the paradoxical and contingent effects that globalization can produce. However, the ban's conflicted reception in both India and Pakistan – not to mention globally – reveals that cultural artifacts engage critical subjectivities and resistance within networks of asymmetrical power, salvaging the possibility for a mediatized diplomacy. This process can be seen at work in the hybrid cultures, cosmopolitan imaginaries, and collaborative intelligence of networked communities inherent to contemporary media flows.

While substantial research exists exploring Muslim subjectivities on screen and IndiaPakistan relations through cinema, (Agarwal, 2002; Ansari, 2010; Banerjee, 2017; Bharat & Kumar, 2008; Chadha and Kavoori, 2008; Hirji, 2008; Hussein & Hussein, 2015; Islam, 2007; Khan, 2009; Kumar, 2013; Richter, 2009) few analyses have considered how celebrity discourse shapes the on-screen representation and audience reception of Pakistani and Muslim stars. By using globalization as a guiding framework, this research interrogates how shifting political economies and sites of cultural reception generate opportunities for Pakistani crossover stars that were not available before. Globalization is thereby approached as a commercial agenda and an industrial and cultural practice that can have provisional and dissonant effects, offering a groundbreaking and comprehensive model in studying crossover celebrity as a wider media occurrence. In applying this theoretical lens, I explore an intensifying relationship between industrial infrastructures, audience imaginaries, and media convergence in shaping Pakistani crossover celebrity. The outcome includes new narrative and thematic iterations in Hindi cinema that challenge pre-existing ideas about Pakistani identity and its representation on screen. Such

transitions accommodate the material and imaginative boundary-crossings encountered in the performances and creative authorship of crossover stars, even as they remain subject to the uneven effects of globalization.

By exploring globalization as a mediating force, this research takes a different approach than the contemporary work of scholars who have examined identity politics and representation in popular Hindi cinema. Scholars like Fazia Hirji (2008), Claudia Richter (2009), and Shahnaz Khan (2009) argue that the construction of the Muslim “Other” remains an immutable fixture in Hindi cinema, but fail to consider how the industry’s globalizing imperatives over the past decade have opened new avenues for exploring national and religious identities on screen, a result of vast structural changes and efforts to access transnational markets (Ganti, 2012). Most importantly, scholars like Richter (2009) do not consider how popular film narrative is itself in dynamic flux, being transformed by genre-based storytelling aimed at global audiences that renders the style of melodramatic engagement she describes increasingly obsolescent. This suggests that processes of narrative identification for Hindi film viewers – and their role in subjectivity formation – are more heterogeneous than ever before.

As a consequence, these discussions pay little attention to the reading practices of audiences. Rajinder Dudrah (2008) and Shakuntala Banaji (2008) demonstrate how spectators engage in complex meaning-making practices that can produce both dominant and personalized readings while recognizing that textual identification is scarcely unitary in the complicity or rejection of ideological messages. I draw on these theories of spectator engagement as multifarious and contingent, while applying Purnima Mankekar’s (2015) framework for transnational public cultures as a theoretical tool to interrogate how global media flows intervene in the formation of cultural identities. Mankekar explores how the circulation of transnational media products, including cinema and television but also material commodities, mediates notions of cultural identity and affective belonging/unsettlement for Indians in both domestic and diasporic settings. She evaluates how transnational public cultures “constitute India as an archive of affect and temporality,” (p. 7) but rather than producing static notions of India – and thus totalizing frameworks for cultural identity – media cultures can elicit disjunctive relationships to national and cultural discourses. Most relevant to this study is Mankekar’s elaboration of the nexus between global commodity culture and the imbrication of what she calls “affective/sensorial ecologies” (p. 6). In showing how media products can embody regimes of feeling, for example, by locating Indian culture in the “hearts and bodies” of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) rather than the territorial nation state, Mankekar contends that identity is constantly in flux, “inherently unsettled” (p. 57) and engaged by global processes.

This research similarly reflects on the role of global media artifacts in “unfixing” national, religious and cultural identities. Mankekar’s deployment of affect as a theoretical apparatus is useful in excavating how the aspirational desires of consumer capitalism function as structures of feeling that can exceed identity signifiers – such as the stereotyped “sign” of the Pakistani Muslim male body and its

co-implication with terrorist violence. This invocation of aspirational desire is articulated across the media texts and celebrity personas of Pakistani crossover stars. This work thereby builds on existing scholarship while aiming to illustrate how global conditions for the production and circulation of culture make possible complex material and subjective boundary crossings.

This theoretical grounding is supported by Henry Jenkins' (2006) insights on convergence culture. Jenkins defines convergence as both a technological and cultural process; it entails the integration of media outlets, technologies, and industries as well as the participatory behavior of media consumers in the digital age "who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (p. 2). Jenkins' observations are formative in demonstrating that Pakistani crossover stardom is driven by corporate and technological convergence on the one hand, and interactive consumer culture on the other. The fact that the Hindi film industry produces a multitude of content aimed at global audiences reveals how films are no longer destined primarily for the domestic box office; rather, it is expected that they will earn lucrative profits abroad and have an extended distribution cycle in a media convergence environment. In addition, corporate brand integration and the acquisition of multiple media franchises have catalyzed the exposure of Pakistani music and television in India, making the emergence of crossover stars and their transition to cinema a logical progression based on their prevailing commercial vitality in analogous formats. Combined with the accelerated movement of media products across linked venues – for example, the ability to download a star's television serials and films on the same streaming service – these changes have created crucial conditions for the ascendance of Pakistani stars in India. This new convergence context relies on the sundry consumption habits and pop culture awareness of media consumers, whose interaction with multiple entertainment modes is a powerful stimulus in the cultivation of crossover celebrity brands.

These forces are compounded by the convergence between a star's various media texts and his or her celebrity identity in popular journalism, such that in consuming the media artifact the spectator also consumes the star as a celebrity text that is ongoing and multifaceted. In particular, Dyer's (1986) notion of star images as complex, intertextual, and open to interpretation is a core theoretical praxis in excavating the contradictory discourses surrounding Pakistani crossover stars and their reception. On the one hand, this ideological "slippage" is a function of media convergence, part of the means by which star images are manipulated and branded by industry sources to satisfy diverse audiences; on the other, audiences play a crucial role in interpreting the relationship between a star's media texts and celebrity persona, generating fan discourses while consolidating the social relevance of stars across spectrums of race, class, gender, as well as religious and national contexts.

Approaching Dyer's arguments from a convergence vantage are useful in understanding the political and cultural ambiguities of Pakistani crossover stardom. Dyer (1986, p. 7) argues that stars "articulate aspects of living in contemporary society." As a result, they project social conflicts and act as objects of popular

identification/dis-identification. For Pakistani crossover stars – who transcend borders, industries, and identities – this positions them at the intersection of conflicting cultural, social, and political movements in a globalized world. In the first place, stars idealize the values and experience of transnational consumer capital; as lifestyle icons, they characterize ethics of entrepreneurship, individualism, and success, while also holding the potential to reveal the incongruities of capitalism and its commodification of bodies, labor, and social existence. In this sense they embody tensions regarding the nature of labor and individuality that Dyer has previously identified. However, by exploring what it means to be an individual in a global capitalist society, stars also symbolize reciprocal conflicts over social community and identity – ways of defining ourselves in relation to others through shared origins, beliefs, experiences, and locations. If Hindi cinema and its stars have historically played an iconic role in circumscribing and maintaining national identity, including discourses of cultural dominance and marginality, Pakistani crossover stars make the instability of these constructs visible through an ambiguous sense of place and belonging. By being in between borders and identities, as simultaneously familiar, desirable, yet markedly foreign and “Other,” their ambivalence highlights the disjunctive cultural effects of globalization, which destabilizes national and religious boundaries while throwing political conflicts over identity into stark relief.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) has already posited the diminishing centrality of the nation state in fomenting social change; similar to Mankekar’s (2015) argument regarding global public cultures, he contends that electronic media and migration are the most potent forces shaping everyday life under globalization. By influencing both individual and collective acts of imagination, media enable a “community of sentiment” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 8) that can include, but frequently exceed, the confines of the nation state. This is certainly the case with Hindutva and discourses on global terrorism, for example, but it is also equally true of the shared competencies and emotional pleasures that consumer media cultures elicit. A core argument of this study is that media texts support new ways of imagining identity through common affects and epistemologies of consumer capitalism – a form of global citizenship that entails particular ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting in the world. Daniel Lerner’s (2010, p. 77) concept of “psychic mobility,” or the drive for self-transformation, in conjunction with Appadurai’s (2008, pp. 29–34) future-oriented concept of “aspiration,” embodies the capacity of capitalist imaginaries to fuel cultural change. The twin values of individual destiny and aspirational desire are thus the defining “thought-ways” and “life-ways” of global consumer society, to borrow Lerner’s phraseology (p. 81). As Appadurai (1996) acknowledges, this force is increasingly compelling in a de-territorialized and post-national society. This is not to suggest that consumer capitalism is liberating, homogenous, or democratizing as a global force, nor does this study directly address debates regarding consumer empowerment. What is of interest here is the imaginative potential of media artifacts, images, and systems (what Appadurai calls mediascapes) to produce cultural alliances and heterogeneous subjectivities beyond national or political identity constructs. The physical and textual boundary crossings of Pakistani crossover

stars reflect this imaginative agency while exposing the “fundamental disjuncture between economy, culture, and politics” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33) that Appadurai (1996) identifies in his treatise on global cultural flows.

This emphasis expands a pivotal trend in cultural globalization studies toward receptive media ecologies. Such an approach is central to understanding the intervention of media as soft power. As Castells (2010) and Kraidy (2010) demonstrate, the disproportionate role of culture in the network society indicates that analyses of soft power must shift away from paradigms situated strictly in the top-down, structural agency of nation states. The rise of non-state actors and the overall privatization of the public sphere suggest a shift in the center of cultural gravity – positioning the media consumer/spectator in a newly decisive role. Much of the existing scholarship on soft power in South Asia lands in the former theoretical trap. The seminal reference text on this subject – Daya Kishan Thussu’s *Communicating India’s Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood* (2013) offers a relatively uncritical, expository survey of the “hard” economic and leadership potential of India’s soft power, defined broadly as “civilizational and cultural capital” (p. 7) that includes “India’s secular federal democracy, its pluralist values and institutions, and its civil society, as well as the media, Information Technology (IT) and communications industries” (p. 11). To fully capitalize on this potential the Indian government must leverage strategic “image” branding, engage publicprivate partnerships, and pursue multilateral policy agendas. The effect of this wide-ranging soft power on domestic and foreign publics, however – in both its “passive” and targeted guises – remains implicit yet undefined. Cultural diplomacy thereby continues to be framed as a hierarchical, top-down, and bureaucratic process that sidelines the emerging role of global consumer publics.

As a result, the cultural influence of Indian media as soft power remains an intellectual gap that scholars have more recently attempted to address, and which this study attempts to enlarge (Athique, 2018; Schaefer & Karan, 2013; Wagner, 2010). The most productive studies have collected qualitative and quantitative feedback on how diversely situated audiences interpret cultural meaning through media texts (Athique, 2018). This bottom-up approach to the *reception* of soft power reveals how consumer-oriented participation intercepts targeted public diplomacy while opening a space for a civic sphere that is horizontally engaged and increasingly convergent. These studies reveal the imaginative processes that spectators engage within and between cultural proximities, and across spectrums of race, class, and gender. Adrian Athique’s (2018) pioneering study on the reception of Hindi films in Southeast Asia is a case in point, revealing how audiences in the Philippines and Thailand frame these texts within a “symbolic construction of modernity in everyday life” (p. 17) amidst competing local and global influences. Athique thereby discerns the realistic potential for Indian media artifacts to “engage with common aspirations to freedom and affluence or ... to speak to common frustrations and complaints” (p. 17) in an inter-Asian dialogic framework. These findings contrast starkly with Wagner’s (2010) assertion that Hindi cinema is negligible as a soft power medium as it does “not promote a universal model for political or cultural development” (p. 336) like

Hollywood. Such arguments, as Devasundaram (2016) points out, belie the US-centric bias of soft power theory by endorsing a homogenizing, export-oriented template of cultural agenda setting.

Devasundaram advocates for sites of resistance to this hegemonic narrative of soft power, which enfolds Indian cinema in a concentric hierarchy of what he terms “meta-hegemony” (p. 53). He alludes to ongoing trends in global media convergence as a prospective antidote to this ideological/cultural dominance, noting how the “New Wave of Indian Indies is increasingly de-stabilizing and de-centering Bollywood’s monopoly of Indian cinema” (p. 66) through “crowd-funding, independent film festivals, new media and the Internet” (p. 67). Such avenues of resistance and the imbrication of producer/consumer/citizen in a media convergence ecosystem reveal how soft power increasingly inheres outside the boundary of state apparatuses. I take this transition as a useful departure point to evaluate the utility of popular media as a tool for cultural diplomacy and conflict resolution in the ongoing crisis of IndiaPakistan relations, where traditional measures of public diplomacy have failed historically (Hall, 2012; Kugiel, 2012). The administrative reluctance to foster bi-lateral relationships on behalf of both states has given “grassroots” cultural diplomacy an exaggerated role (Akhter, 2016). Indeed, this soft power deficit is the proverbial elephant in the room when it comes to South Asian relations, obstructing India’s national brand as a benevolent superpower among its neighbors (Kugiel, 2012).

The stakes and consequences of this “zero-sum game” (Moorthy, 2017, p. 302) are indisputably high. Besides intermittent military confrontation, the level of psychological mistrust and disapproval between both nuclear-armed powers is a barometer of the necessity for widespread cultural intervention. At least 79% of Pakistanis view India as “a serious threat to their nation,” (Kugiel, 2012, p. 371) a perception reinforced by ongoing government efforts to block diplomatic channels, implement “hard” barriers in education, travel, and development access, and insulate cross-border communication through censorship (Kugiel, 2012). This “hard power” blockade has led scholars like Akhter (2016) to prioritize culture as the salvaging domain for peace negotiation in the region. This view is even shared by more cautious advocates of soft power, with Kugiel (2012) noting,

Interestingly, there is a huge discrepancy between societies and the ruling elites in their attitudes towards India. The more positive feeling of the public stands in stark contrast to the distrustful and difficult relations at the inter-governmental level. One can argue, however, that this gap should narrow in the future as India continues its soft power approach ... As democracy takes root across the region, national authorities will find it harder to go against the wishes and preferences of their peoples and pursue confrontational policies towards India. This opens up even more space for Indian soft power to attract people in South Asia to the idea of shared prosperity and peace. (p. 374)

Kugiel goes on to elucidate how India, as the region’s natural economic, military, and cultural leader, should advance this charm offensive through conventional outlets of public diplomacy with the objective of “reaching Pakistani civil

society directly and promoting a positive image of India as a reliable partner and amicable neighbor” (p. 374). Nonetheless, there remains little practical or scholarly consensus on how this outcome might best be achieved – and to what extent such cultural transformation can and should reside within the purview of nation states.

Following the lead of Devasundaram (2016) and Kolluri and Lee (2016), I adopt a modified understanding of soft power that acknowledges the burgeoning decentralization of culture within global flows of media, nationalism, and political discourse. While Akhter (2016) occupies the extreme end of this spectrum, arguing that “activism originating from the people’s level and a citizen inspired pursuit of peace, friendship, stability and progress” (p. 211) offer the greatest opportunity for arbitration, it is abundantly clear that “hard” and “soft” power coexist in the symbolic struggle over culture. The bottom-up resistance and optimism that Akhter (2016) outlines and which singer-actor Zafar valorizes at the outset of this chapter must be theorized within the limits of soft power, as the recent ban on Indo-Pak cultural accord suggests. Appadurai’s (1996) conceptual schema is again useful in theorizing this conflict over cultural hegemony, reflecting a collision between the technoscapes/financescapes/mediascapes of global capitalism and the ideoscapes/ethnoscapes of local and global political communities.

My approach thereby unites soft power/conflict resolution theory – currently skewed towards nation states, multilateral governance, and organizational agency – with parallel trends in media globalization studies. The receptive media ecologies and lateral agency of global consumers articulated above structure a compromise in discerning the evolving role of culture in globalized networks of power. This agency, I contend, is both material and symbolic; it occurs within the scaffolds of neoliberal capitalism and its polysemic arrangement of discourses, signs, and affects, the most prominent being aspirational desire (Appadurai, 2008). This cultural enfranchisement and its imaginative potency dovetail nicely with theoretical paradigms that interrogate the nature of hybridity and contraflow in a global media assemblage. In this regard the idea of “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 208) helps justify the creative manipulation of culture by networked communities within and beyond state boundaries. Crossover media are an ideal manifestation of “third spaces,” which “actualize cultural borders and liminal regions where rules and resources are suspended, debated, contested and (re) produced” (Schaefer & Karan, 2013, p. 82). Without abandoning the caveat of “hybridity as hegemony” (Thussu, 2007, p. 27) through the relentless onslaught of neoliberalism, the idea of contraflow is relevant in apprehending the conflicting forces at play in global circulations of culture. As mentioned, significant work has been conducted on how diasporas deploy culture to deconstruct and negotiate identity (Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007; Karim, 2010). However, I argue that this process is not confined to diasporic communities, but rather characterizes the wider totality of cultural relationships in postmodern globalism. The idea of “third space” is relevant wherever authoritative narratives of social, political, and cultural identity are pushed to their discursive limits. The hybrid identities and media texts of crossover stars represent just such a challenge to these parochial frameworks.

Retaining notions of hybridity as “third space” is key to assessing how consumer media can wield soft power beyond state patronage. This soft power is asymmetrical, operating through routes of cultural identification and (dis) identification within hegemonic media flows and the emotional/sensory topographies of consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism as referent displaces the traditional dichotomy between “the country of origin and the country of residence” (Karim, 2010, p. 400) in a nation-based framing of “third space,” constituting its own cultural interstice where identities, desires, and attitudes of belonging are increasingly negotiated alongside formal communities. In this way, spatially bounded origins and destinations of selfhood are mitigated by the ahistorical, affective logics of global consumer capital. As Iwabuchi (2007) has already suggested, this can cause politically alienated societies to experience intellectual and emotional homologies that compel recognition of a shared “temporality and spatiality” (p. 76) – a sentient position rooted in the present rather than the historical past, and which anticipates an aspirational future.

Govil (2007, p. 96) warns,

If Bollywood remains committed to achieving global relevance through the nostalgic project of recovering primordial national sentiment, then it will be drowned out by the plodding, martial strains of majoritarian triumphalism. On the other hand, if Bollywood can move along the frictional trajectories inscribed in its name, well, that’s a beat more of us can dance to.

This prescient statement captures the cultural conflict surrounding Pakistani crossover stars and the stakes of preserving hybridity between flow and contra-flow. Hindi cinema’s aesthetic and cultural flexibility is indeed what makes it a credible soft power resource, possessing the potential to address subaltern locations within a global media system that remains primarily Western-dominated. As my analysis demonstrates, crossover stars and their media texts contribute to this hybrid sensibility in numerous ways – through peripatetic imaginaries that fuse local and global space, by inverting pervasive representations of the Muslim “Other,” and by invoking affective terrains of aspirational desire. Their voices of alterity speak to Beck’s (2008, p. 60) project of “realistic cosmopolitanism,” which seeks to address how “societies handle ‘otherness’ and ‘boundaries’ amid the global interdependency crisis.” Rather than eradicate difference, realistic cosmopolitanism recognizes otherness “both externally and internally; differences are neither ranged in a hierarchy nor dissolved into universality, but accepted” (p. 67). While cosmopolitanism remains colored by a utopian outlook and should not underestimate prevailing sentiments of national solidarity (Guibernau, 2008), the “third spaces” that global media enable provide crucial insight into how hybridization can intercede and destabilize conflict in a globalized world.

In exploring the facets of crossover stardom articulated in the above discussion, this study takes a multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach. Chapter 2 provides a historical perspective on crossover stardom in

the Hindi film industry, situating Pakistani stars within a broader economic and cultural legacy of India–Pakistan relations, and the role of ancillary formats like television and music in influencing trans-industry collaboration. I examine how the incorporation and signification of Muslim identity in Hindi film shifted over time, moving from strong assimilation – exemplified by the early Progressive movement – to qualified practices of religious containment, as Muslim identity became increasingly effaced by majoritarian nationalist politics. In this emerging context Muslim star personas were adapted to secular discourses of nationalism that disavowed Muslim subjectivity as a socially, politically, and culturally legitimate construct. This period, e.g. the “golden age” of Hindi cinema, witnessed the emergence of Islamicate genres that caricatured Muslim civil society as defunct and incompatible with the Indian state’s project of rational modernity. By the 1980s, crossover attempts by Pakistani actors were characterized in popular media through a process of stigmatization and “Othering,” corroborating preponderant nationalist rhetoric about Pakistani and Islamic identity. This analysis sets the stage for a discussion of how globalization is currently transforming the crossover horizon for Pakistani stars.

This discussion is the focus of Chapter 3, which assesses how the political economy of culture in both nations has shifted in response to globalization, creating new commercial and cultural opportunities for crossover stardom. I include a detailed examination of infrastructural trends in the Hindi film industry, notably an ongoing movement towards media corporatization and its consequences for multi-platform convergence – conditions that have enabled Pakistani actors to transcend media genres and borders. An industrial approach also includes looking at new strategies of funding, producing, and distributing media products in the Hindi film industry, as multimedia conglomerates increasingly have the financing and diverse revenue streams necessary to tackle alternative subject matter, introduce new talent, and support “niche” products that are narratively and thematically innovative (Khdair, 2013). These conditions have allowed Pakistani television stars to gain a foothold in the Indian media landscape, circumstances that previously posed considerable fiscal and critical risk. Combined with the fact that intended audiences and markets for Hindi films are increasingly located overseas, including in the home entertainment market, the incentive to promote crossover stardom and reach new viewers in countries across Asia and the Middle East is ever expanding. This evaluation demonstrates that there is in fact room for ideological “slippage” and resistance within the confines of Hindi cinema’s “meta-hegemony” (Devasundaram, 2016), with hybridity serving to attract diverse audiences in the wider space of contraflows of both non-Western and diasporic media.

These industrial and commercial transitions indicate that the way religious and national identities are represented on screen is likewise changing to meet new audience demands fueled by growing media exposure and industry collaboration. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present a close textual reading of select films, music albums, and television serials for three of the most successful Pakistani crossover stars: Ali Zafar, Fawad Khan, and Mahira Khan. Zafar, the first genuinely

successful crossover star, is both a musician and actor and continues to participate in multiple media formats and industries. By looking at his performance in films like *Tere Bin Laden*, *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* (2012, director Ali Abbas Zafar), *London, Paris, New York* (2012, director Anu Menon) and *Total Siyapaa* (2014, director Eshvar Niwas), as well as two of his recent musical albums, *Masty* (2006, performer Ali Zafar) and *Jhoom* (2011, performer Ali Zafar), Chapter 4 investigates how Zafar's projects consistently challenge stereotypes about Pakistani and Muslim identity while engaging the politics of "border crossing" – whether geographical, religious, or cultural. While two of the above films directly confront national and religious prejudice towards Pakistan in their narratives, each emphasizes the potential of transnational mobility, both economic and cultural, to overcome literal and figurative "borders." By integrating Pakistani cultural references, imagery, and musical traditions within this larger globalized framework, Zafar's work in cinema and music imagines India, Pakistan, and the West as a culturally continuous ontology. Zafar is deliberate about viewing his crossover work as a function of cultural diplomacy, utilizing ideals of cultural fusion and cosmopolitanism to promote this agenda. His rise to fame further glamorizes consumer capitalist ethics of hard work, talent, and aspirational desire that support alternative ways of imagining identity.

Chapter 5 broadens this analysis with an in-depth exploration of Fawad Khan's work in television and cinema, including his performance in the popular soap serials *Humsafar* (2011–2012, director Sarmad Sultan Khoosat) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012–2013, director Sultana Siddiqi), both of which emerged as sleeper hits with television audiences in India, acting as precursors to the star's debut in Hindi films. Fawad's dramatic image in these texts as the consummate aristocratic "gentleman" position him as a fetishized object of romantic identification and fantasy that is heavily structured by female desire, an image that is evoked both on screen and off in his association with the Hindi film industry. Fawad's genteel persona counteracts metonymical associations of Pakistani/Muslim masculinity with physical and social violence. In addition to his role as a sophisticated prince in *Khoobsurat*, his performance as a closeted homosexual author in the family drama *Kapoor and Sons* (2016, director Shakun Batra) depicts a cosmopolitan maleness that is both tormented and gentrified. Unlike the regressive and threatening images of the Muslim male historically encountered in Hindi cinema, Fawad's on screen demeanor is vulnerable, sexually restrained, and defined by a melodramatic sensibility of yearning, suffering, and loss. Unlike Zafar, Fawad's stardom offers evidence of the influence that networked fan communities increasingly wield in a media convergence environment. His acclaimed reception in the above serials generated consumer demand among middle class viewers across the border that ultimately led to a nascent career in the Hindi film industry.

Finally, Chapter 6 considers the on screen work of Mahira Khan, whose roles as a television host for MTV Pakistan and her co-starring performance with Fawad in the blockbuster serial *Humsafar* similarly paved the way for her debut in the Hindi film *Raees* (2017, director Rahul Dholakia). Mahira's affiliation with global and local popular culture places Pakistani identity on a visibly