



Bollywood Nights

Shobhaa Dé , Gautam Rajadhyaksha (Author photograph) , Claudio Marinesco (Cover photograph) , Patrick Kang (Cover design)

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Bollywood is no place for a vulnerable, small-town girl like Aasha Rani. But that doesn't stop her mother from pushing her into a world of exploitation and bedroom casting calls. Aasha has no choice but to thrive-despite the vicious circles of starlets, pimps, and celebrities who want to see her meet her end.

But the day she meets Bollywood's leading man, everything she's worked so hard for is jeopardized. Because she may be falling for Akshay Arora-and there's no room for love in a business where it's the stranger under your sheets holding the key to your success. With her innocence stolen and nowhere else to turn, Aasha knows her downfall could come as quickly as her rise to fame. And letting herself love might just be the most fatal career move of her life...

Bollywood Nights Details

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Author : Shobhaa Dé , Gautam Rajadhyaksha (Author photograph) , Claudio Marinesco (Cover photograph) , Patrick Kang (Cover design)

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From Reader Review *Bollywood Nights* for online ebook

Anuja says

Its like reading one of those magazines. Flip pages and you have managed to kill the waiting time.

Eileen says

Published in 1991, *Bollywood Nights* (also known as *Starry Nights*) was one of Shobhaa Dé's first novels, inspired by real-life love affairs among the heroes and leading ladies of the Indian silver screen. It tells the story of Aasha Rani, a starlet pushed into the industry by her ruthlessly ambitious mother, the mistress of a ruined producer who willfully exploits her daughter to pornographers and lecherous producers. Amma's tactics pay off, however, and Aasha Rani eventually reaches A-list status. She falls in love with reigning heartthrob Akshay Arora only to incur the wrath of his wife Malini. The ensuing scandal, combined with her traumatic past, results in a nervous breakdown that drives Aasha Rani to a new life in New Zealand, where she marries and has a daughter. But, as the Eagles once famously said of Hollywood, "You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave."

Bollywood Nights starts off in media res, immediately pushing ahead at a breakneck speed that echoes the perpetual firestorm surrounding showbiz and its biggest players. The flashbacks that reveal Aasha Rani's painful history blend seamlessly with the present, emphasizing the subordinate role of even the most successful women. Obviously damaged by her mother's actions, Aasha Rani throws herself at producers, directors, other stars, and even underworld dons. I do not mean to deny her sexual agency, but Dé makes it clear that a woman's worth in Bollywood is, above all, her appeal to men, whether it's male audiences or male peers with power over fame and obscurity. Patriarchal oppression is also seen in the way women interact with one another. Malini viciously attacks and slut-shames Aasha Rani instead of directing her anger at the misogyny that celebrates her husband's philandering and pressures women like Aasha Rani to essentially prostitute themselves. Bollywood as portrayed by Dé is a bright, gaudy carnival of alternating riches and horror, a jagged jewel box. "We are all just prisoners here of our own device."

Dé also touches on Western Orientalism with Jamie Phillips, Aasha Rani's white New Zealander husband. He is a fan of Bollywood films and all things Indian who refers to Aasha Rani's kinks as "oriental love games" (181) and bemoans the loss of his "exotic, oriental beauty" (187) after Sasha's birth and Aasha Rani's subsequent shift from a siren to a down-to-earth mother who's put on weight. It's racial fetishization, defined as valuing stereotyped features (whether physical traits such as skin color or perceived cultural traits such as "submissive Asian women") over the individual human. When actually confronted with India, Jamie is clearly repulsed by its grubbiness and foreignness, apparently preferring the prepackaged Bollywood version. Fetishization is also another form of exploitation. Despite her considerable resources, Aasha Rani when she met Jamie was an emotionally vulnerable woman who had been conditioned to trading her body for favors.

Again, I realize I'm probably erasing Aasha Rani's agency and portraying her as constantly dragged from one bed to another by various external forces. The problem is a serious flaw in Dé's writing. Her characterizations are vague and inconsistent. Akshay Arora, for instance, is both a tender, considerate lover and a sexual sadist who gets off on hardcore porn and at one point rapes and beats Aasha Rani. Yes, people can be two-sided but Akshay's brutality comes out of nowhere. There's nothing to tie the two halves together.

It doesn't even have any influence on Aasha Rani's love for him which makes me wonder why Dé included it in the first place. The narration is very shallow, focusing a lot on Aasha Rani's actions and very little on her internal self. Often it's completely impossible to understand why she does the things she does. She makes numerous decisions, particularly in London towards the end, that are just mind-bogglingly stupid considering what she's been through and what she knows of the world. Other times the story gets ahead of itself, choosing to skip to Aasha Rani's next big event rather than showing us the character development that leads to it. She meets Jamie and marries him two pages later. The effect is that of an extended gossip column: various lurid reports of a star's dysfunctional life strung together episodically over 300 pages.

Bollywood Nights is also relentlessly sex-negative. You can't even complain about the book's sole LGBT character, the lesbian journalist Linda, being a sexual predator who uses Aasha Rani for the inside scoop because every single last man, all of them straight, is depicted similarly. Even the most fulfilling consensual sex always turns out to have some kind of ulterior motive. It isn't so much that rape and exploitation are bad as sex itself is intrinsically harmful.

I ended up wondering that Shobhaa Dé's point was. *Bollywood Nights* certainly has the makings of a good protest novel with regards to the ugly underside of Bollywood but Dé sabotages her own arguments through needless sensationalism and the book's very ending, which has Aasha Rani dreaming of Sasha's future in the industry. *headdesk* This after 332 pages of Bollywood depicted as just about the worst place on earth. Obviously, it's meant to be redemptive but actually demonstrates very little personal growth on Aasha Rani's part, especially given the near-destruction of her sister Sudha, who had replaced Aasha Rani during her stay in New Zealand. Does the nightmare never end?

Trigger warning for graphic sexual violence.

Original Review

Pauline says

I enjoyed this book. If Bollywood really does run this way I am shocked or maybe just too naive. The author of this book is also the creator of the Bollywood movie magazine Stardust.

The main character of the book is Aasha Rani (sound familiar to anyone?) and she is forced into films by her desperate mother. At the age of 15 she is forced into one producer's bed after another until you are so confused you can't recall who she has slept with and who she has not. She does become famous for a time then jaded and throws it all away. She comes to terms with her parents' various abuses of her and her own sister's betrayals. I didn't care too much for the ending as it didn't seem plausible.

Pallavi says

It brings out what the movie world is all about. Most of us are very happy at seeing the packaging and forget that beneath the packaging there might be a truth which we have been running away from.

R says

This was a raunchy novel about a Bollywood starlet nymphomaniac named Asha Rani who uncreatively bears a striking resemblance to a mixture of Rekha and Hema Malini. It makes sense that this book rings so close to the real life stories of the bollywood industry because De was a model and editor of several bollywood tabloid mags. De's "fictional" portrayal of the bollywood industry describes a woman who is used as a pawn for the ambition of her mother. The shock value of reading about Asha Rani's (sexual) exploits, including a brief liason with a female tabloid writer, wears off after a while and I found myself just wanting it to end as soon as possible. I wouldn't recommend this book unless you have massive quantities of time on your hands and you've read every Stardust magazine your mummy brought home from the local Indian grocery store.

MAPS - Booktube says

Hey boboy....quel mauvais livre. Je comprend que ce livre se veut une critique sociale de l'industrie du cinéma de l'Inde...mais c'est la seule raison pourquoi ça mérite 2 étoiles et pas une seule. C'est rough, cru et perturbant. On pourrait croire qu'Asha évoluerait au travers des épreuves et du livre, mais non, on continue à lui faire tourner la roue du cercle vicieux de devenir populaire et faire de l'argent avec ses enfants. C'est tout simplement dégueulasse -loin de moi l'idée de croire que cela n'existe pas- mais je n'étais pas prête à le lire aussi durement et avec une absence d'espoir. J'ai eu beaucoup de difficulté à tourner les pages. 'Lire ce livre a été un supplice.

Melissa says

What a joyless book. Prepared for the glamour of Bollywood, instead, this novel shows you its trash.

Aasha Rani is a Bollywood heroine. Brought to the film world by her mother, she quickly discovers that to survive in Bollywood you must trade your body, if not your soul. While she does well as an actress and appears in many films it is not a very happy life.

The man she loves is married and while she is his mistress she can have no more than that. Others she sleeps with offer the same lack of emotional ties and give her nothing more than a fleeting memory of feeling good. Or they give her something she needs to advance her career or make her Amma (mother) happy. Her life is not really her own.

Finally breaking down when her lover Akshay no longer wants her and shuns her, she escapes to New Zealand. There she meets her husband and has a beautiful daughter, Sasha, before that life goes wrong as well. She drifts aimlessly to London, back to India, never really having true happiness or not being on the wrong side of the bed with most men.

I expected a great deal more from this book, but it seems the author is just bitter towards the whole idea of Bollywood. While it was mostly well written (I had some issues with grammar and having speaking from multiple characters in one paragraph) there was nothing of hope in this novel. De invites plenty of innovation to her writing, mixing Indian dialect slang with English, but fails to make her characters people you care about.

Indeed, I couldn't stand the main character at first, and just when she was getting marginally better, the book took a turn back to being horrible again. I understand that there is plenty of scandal in Bollywood, but with my preconceived notions of Indian women and the fact that I just wanted some happiness in the novel, this book was a huge let down. And its attitude towards men is very bitter. There was not one "good" man in the whole book. In fact, most of them screw over the main character at least once if not many times.

Overall not something I would read again. In fact, based on this novel, I will probably steer clear of the rest of De's novels.

Bollywood Nights
Copyright 1992
332 pages and Q&A Section

G. K. Malathi says

I know I sound amateur. But honestly, this is the worst book I've ever read. It could readily kill the life out of anything. That's putting it lightly though.

Dreadymorticia says

This book was really dark and cynical - I almost stopped reading it a few times in the first 100 pages. But somehow I got hooked and think it's a really good - and tough - read.

Fareesa says

I hope my English Lit teacher never comes across this review, BUT its another junk food for the mind. To make it in Hollywood is difficult. To make it in Bollywood (if you arent coming from a film family OR winning a pageant)..its disgusting. This book tells the story of a rising starlet and her downfall - apparently based on real stories. Very interesting and scandalous for such a censored society.

Sejal says

The latest book I read was a random pick up from another flight attendant (we have our own library of sorts in our employee lounge). Shobhaa De's Bollywood Nights was a nice, light, fun read—it appropriately reminded me of a Bollywood movie (turn your brain off and enjoy the distraction). Focused on one young girl's entry, growth and journey into Bollywood as well as the scandals and games you need to play along the way, this book was like reading the trashy Bollywood magazines I loved, but longer. As a first generation Indian-Canadian, it absolutely opened up my eyes to the not-so-virtuous side of Bollywood that the movies don't show you. It was a good timepass book but don't go out of your way to read it.

Radhika Bhangolai says

Shobhaa De unveils the truth about Bollywood film industry in this novel. The truth that we often get to see in bits and pieces in films.

The story is narrated well with each character having their own views about the reigning star Aasha Rani - Sweetheart of Millions. Thrown into the dirty world of cinema by her mother, the story is about her rise and fall in the film industry. Being a nobody to a top movie star, I guess everyone knows the price she had to pay to reach that stardom. One is bound to pity the state she was thrown in at each stage of her life.

The story starts off well but fails to hold that grip towards the end. There are some instances which makes the audience guessing about what is going on like the episodes with the director Jojo and Gopalkrishna. The same questions that Aasha Rani asks herself left me guessing the same too.

In one chapter, Aasha Rani is portrayed as the caring daughter who leaves behind her husband and daughter in New Zealand to take care of her ailing parents. And in the next chapter, the same Aasha Rani goes to London only to work as a highly-paid prostitute. For what? And Why?

A few missing links at the end made me feel that Shobhaa De didn't do justice to a promising book. Nevertheless, it's a book I would recommend if you want to know the dirty inside scoop of awe-inspiring film industry.

Debbie says

Bollywood Nights is a tell all type of book involving the Bollywood film industry but since it's a work of fiction the names and dates have been changed and the surroundings melded together to protect the innocent or the way this book tells it, to hide the actions of the guilty. I do like Bollywood films and spent a good part of my reading of this book, an extended gossip column, wracking my brain wondering who was really who? Who is Ms Shobhaa De talking on? I'm sure only the author, and the press I'm sure, only know the real deal. Juicy is most definitely a word that comes to mind.

In classic Bollywood form this story is written in two halves. There is part one which seems like a whole story unto itself and then an intermission and then part two, which seems totally different as well.

The first part tells the story of our protagonist and heroine Viji, whose name is changed to Aasha Rani when she moves from the seedy world of 'Blue light' films as a young girl to the big business world of Bollywood and its never ending nonstop casting couch. Poor Aasha Rani's mother is overwhelmed with delusions of grandeur for her daughter and from very young ages pushes her into sexual situations with older, lecherous, dirty men all in the name of fame. Aasha Rani in turn is used and abused and seems to identify herself and her career with this demented "sex sells" type of persona. She grows up in the industry trying to sleep herself into her own identity. She has no scruples about whom she beds, not women, not married men, nor old, nor young. They all willingly use her for their own purposes. Wives try to stop her, she is threatened by gangsters hired by the wives. This woman is a train wreck disillusioned that she must spend life 'laying down' so to speak.

The second half of the book we follow her to New Zealand where after another threat from a married man's family, she decides to stay there away from the dramatic and fake film business and her old life and try to make a new one. She marries a New Zealand farmer who is very well off. She starts to make her life again with him. She feels he's saved her life. He knows the star she is and marries her out of fascination. They have a daughter and a happy life for a few years until he recommends a trip to London, Bombay and Madras where Aasha Rani is from. Needless to say.. This trip slowly but surely throws her right back into the thick of the world she thought she was escaping. This is when the story completely went off the cliff for me. There are a series of trips back and forth from Bombay to Madras. Her husband and her daughter go home to New Zealand. Suddenly her younger sister is an actress living a similar life. A tug of war for who is better. Some drama with more sex and the casting couch. Some gangster drama. A chase to London, Bombay and then Madras, again. Then back to New Zealand. Supposedly at the end there's a new future with Aasha Rani, the sister and the daughter. Whatever, skim, skim to the end of the book.

Personal thoughts: To be honest, the fact that every time you turn around Aasha was jumping into bed with someone made me want to go into the book and slap some sense into her and sew her up into some type of jumpsuit so she can't get her clothes off! I am completely annoyed by people who think the answer to all situations is giving up their body! Yes, abuse as a child does explain a lot, however, when does one stop blaming others and take responsibility for their own actions? When does one stop the madness? There were times when she thought she was in love but if you don't love and respect yourself how do you imagine you're possibly loving someone else? I guess from a so called tell all type of book, Ok, story told but it's sad. All the glitz and glamour and peoples lives are so empty and the business is dirty. I think I was quite disappointed with the characters and wanted to slap them all and get them told.

Do I recommend it? As an intellectual read, no. If you read the classics and most other books I normally read, no. Please skip it so you won't get angry with me. BUT, if you enjoy things like 'The Coldest Winter' or maybe the Shopaholic books or just gossipy tell all 'girl sleeps her way to the top' type of books this ones for you. The author is not bad, I just don't read those gossip rags you find at the check out of the grocery store and this was like a big 332 page one but if that's your thing, have a ball.

Betty says

I am a Bollywood fan so I jumped at the chance to read this book. I wanted to like it, and was very disappointed. Although I expected this to be a "behind the scenes" and to see some things which are not so nice about the industry, I was not prepared for the (what to me) seemed a very biased story and a flat out attack on the Bollywood industry. The author didn't seem to have anything nice to say about it. She made it seem like for everyone in the industry it was a complete nightmare and drain on their lives. This was the first thing that seemed extremely unrealistic to me, because there was nothing about the people who pour their heart and soul into making beautiful movies. Nothing about the artistry behind it. Nothing good whatsoever, only extreme cynicism.

It also made all Bollywood female actresses out to be whores, sleeping with anyone who could get them a role and relying completely on sex appeal to be famous. While I can see how some of this certainly could be happening, it was so extreme in the book that it also felt unrealistic. The main character's mother is a former Bollywood star who's lost her youth, and so she pimps out her daughter to the industry. This is the story we are greeted with upon the very first page of the book, and never is any other viewpoint presented.

The main character complies meekly and without thought for most of the book. We get glimpses of the author's apparent feelings based on how things are described, but rarely does the main character ever have any emotion or thought for herself. She goes through all kinds of horrible things, and not until later in the

book does she ever start to act like she has a mind of her own. By then it's too late. When she gets upset about how she was treated, you find it hard to believe her because it's like she wasn't mentally present for any of it. She later recants her anger, but you can't understand why because she never explains her feelings. She is very unlikable and immature and by the end I actually despised her.

Overall this book had almost no appeal to me and I hardly made it through to the end. I kept thinking "maybe it will get better" but when I finished it I realized I was wrong. I didn't connect with any of the characters and I actually really disliked the main character. And what I assume was supposed to be a look at the gritty underbelly of the Bollywood industry felt more like a piece of propaganda calling for the end of Bollywood entirely. The only reasons I give it two stars is because I did finish the book, and I believe this was translated from Hindi so I'm willing to allow that a lot of the original feeling of the book may be lost in translation.

?????? ?????? says

Curiosity killed the cat, and curiosity killed my three hours. I repent the decision to even start the book, the initial pages were filled with enough stupidity that should have deterred me from reading more pages. I kept an optimistic attitude and ventured further into the book, only to find more and more disappointment.

The main character is a woman who is more than okay to use her body to gain a foothold in the movie industry of India. While that might be true, that is one horrendously bad choice for a protagonist and entirely devoid of redeemable qualities that would make a reader pine for her. The character doesn't improve in any sense throughout the book. The book revolves from one man to another man/woman, who are primarily interested in trysting with her and we the readers are presented with details of their amorous rendezvous. Phew- even writing about it makes me conscious of wasting digital ink.

Do not, I plead you, do not start this book if you want a good story worth your time.
