

# New Kings of the World | Part One

SEASON 2  
episode three

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Nicholas Lemann

This is Nicholas Lemann. Welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. Today I'm here with Fatima Bhutto, author of *New Kings of the World: Dispatches from Bollywood, Dizi, and K-Pop*. Fatima Bhutto is the author of five previous books of fiction and nonfiction. Her debut novel, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, was longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, and her memoir about her father's life and assassination, *Songs of Blood and Sword* was published to acclaim. Thank you for joining us today, Fatima.

Fatima Bhutto

Hi.

Nicholas Lemann

Many Americans, at least, have absorbed the idea that our popular culture is also the world's popular culture. From Buenos Aires to Jakarta to Moscow, people are drinking Coke, watching Marvel movies, listening to Beyonce, and wearing Nike sneakers. In *New Kings of the World*, Bhutto brings the news that this standard view is badly out of date.

In popular culture, as in politics, we now live in a multipolar world. The United States is no longer the acknowledged leader. The global soft power that popular culture embodies emanates from places like Mumbai, Istanbul, and Seoul, not just Hollywood. It isn't just globalization as a broad concept that has generated the radical changes in popular culture. The new popular culture meets a strong need that American popular culture has ignored for years.

All over the world, hundreds of millions of people are moving from a traditional village life, where extended family and religion are paramount, to megacities, where the culture is jarringly different. Hollywood just doesn't address this vast, overwhelming experience. Bollywood does.

The new global popular culture is a benign version of the challenge on multiple fronts – economic, political, military, diplomatic – to the ideas and norms that the West has tried to impose on the rest of the world. Bhutto's book is an important dispatch from a new order that is taking form before our eyes.

This is a sort of ambush question. Okay. I just saw a movie that I was really glad that we weren't watching together, because they would have had to call a cardiologist to take you away, I think, Called Blinded by the Light. Do you know about this movie?

Fatima Bhutto

No.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay. Well, it's a British film. Big surprise hit.

Fatima Bhutto

Okay.

Nicholas Lemann

It's about Pakistani immigrants living in a blue-collar neighborhood in London. And the father is very traditional, the mother is a little less traditional. The father is very domineering. The kids have to do whatever the parents say. And then suddenly the son, who is a teenager, discovers Bruce Springsteen and his whole life turns around because American rock music is the key to escaping his terrible, oppressive culture and really finding himself.

Fatima Bhutto

Is this film set in the present day?

Nicholas Lemann

Well, no. It's actually set in the 1980s.

Fatima Bhutto

Okay.

Nicholas Lemann

But the implication is not only is American culture the world's culture, American popular culture, but American culture is the salvation of the world.

Fatima Bhutto

Right.

Nicholas Lemann

What's wrong with this picture?

Fatima Bhutto

Well, I think if you had said that the film was set today in 2019, you would have had to call a cardiologist because it would have made no sense and it would have been kind of tone deaf. I think, for it to have been set in eighties or the nineties is fairly, that's accurate. That's probably true.

Nicholas Lemann

Although in the film, everybody keeps coming up to this boy and saying, "Don't you know, it's the eighties and Bruce Springsteen is incredibly old and over?" And you know.

Fatima Bhutto

Well I think at the time you know the same was true for a Pakistani family, maybe an elite family, rather than a middle-class family. In Pakistan, you might have had an English-speaking international world traveling Pakistani who did find salvation in American music or MTV or the global outlook of those platforms. But I don't think you'd find so many young Pakistanis reacting that way today. I think today's picture looks very different, and the salvation is coming much closer to home.

Partly where Hollywood has failed, I think in today's world, is that they've come too late to the conversation of representation. So it's not enough anymore to just put one Asian-American in a show when we now have access to libraries of films written by Asians, by Asian-Americans, and starring Asians, scripted by Asians. Our options are just so much wider today than they've ever been before.

Nicholas Lemann

When you were growing up, did you imbibe American pop culture?

Fatima Bhutto

Completely. I grew up in Damascus, Syria, and used to watch episodes of Cheers. We

had on television, I think there was only one channel of Syrian TV, and there was a sort of Russian cartoon that would come on at 7 p.m. and that was kind of it. It was a very strange cartoon, actually. It was non-verbal.

But so we would go to the video shop and get Eddie Murphy films and found all our entertainment really, from America, even though you couldn't get American goods easily. But today, when I open Netflix, I'm not sure that I'm watching that much American stuff. I think my options are so much wider. Not just Netflix, even Amazon Prime or at home.

Nicholas Lemann

So how much of this change is about the extent to which people around the world find the US admirable and cool and so on. And how much is about just the availability of content that wasn't there before?

Fatima Bhutto

Well, I think American culture has always been pretty widely available and it continues to be widely available. I think the cool factor has declined and I think that soft power, as we know, in order to work, we have to see the source of that power to be credible. So when a country is making films about freedom and its great values and goals, we have to see those goals and values practiced.

And I think that even when American power has been brutal, it's always had a sophistication to it. That's how Michelle Obama could present essentially a film about torture, an Oscar, live from White House telecast. And it's still to be acceptable because there was a nuance and a sheen there that we all believed in. I really find it hard to imagine Melania Trump doing the same today, and for it to come off in the same way.

Nicholas Lemann

When was the change? I mean, we're going to get to the pop culture products in a minute. But in terms of the reputation of the US, was it the Iraq War? Was it the financial crisis?

Fatima Bhutto

I think it starts to decline after the Iraq War. I think it starts to go down. But it's less the case that America does something wrong with pop culture, and more the case that other people start doing it very right.

So you have, for example, dizi, they've been making dramas in Turkey since the seventies. But they start to be very high value, very high production only in the last 15 years, really. And then they start to travel. And when they hit one place, that kind of mushrooms and expands and just goes on and on and on and on. So it's more a case of them being better at it than the Americans failing.

Nicholas Lemann

We have a lot of different pop culture venues to cover that you cover in your book. You're an indefatigable reporter. Let's start with Bollywood. And just for those who are not well versed, if you could just give us, I know it's a huge subject, but just give us a sort of overview. What is Bollywood? Where did it come from? How extensive is it? And so on.

Fatima Bhutto

So Bollywood is essentially the largest film industry in the world, and it has been for a while. It makes more movies than any other industry in the world. It sells more tickets than Hollywood. And it grows faster than any other cinematic industry anywhere. It beats China, it beats America, it beats everyone. And Bollywood films have a very syncretic beginning. They are filmed usually in Bombay. That's partly where the "b" comes from.

And they have always reflected India's political sensibilities. So right after independence and one of the bloodiest partitions in human history, Bollywood films reflect the path of the newly independent country as envisioned by Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister. And that was one of a very romantic nationalism, social justice, brotherhood – the heroes of the 1950s Bollywood films are idealists, they're utopians, and they may be struggling, poor, disenfranchised men, but they believe in something, and that belief is what carries them through.

And then that changes by the 1970s, when corruption and inequality really reaches a fever pitch. The hero then is not a utopian. He's still socialist, but he is defined by what is known as the angry young man played by Amitabh Bachchan. And he's no longer an idealist in the sense that he has suffered the ills of the system. He has been humiliated and crushed by the weight of the powerful, but has started to fight back. And these are films where you still have a lot of sympathy directed towards the poor and dispossessed of the country.

And of course, by the 1990s and the neoliberal turn in the country as India's protectionist economy liberalizes, and multinationals who have been kept out all this

time are really flooding into the country, the hero changes, too. And now the hero doesn't live in a slum in Bombay. He's not a utopian idealist. He lives in London, he drives a Ferrari, and he is part of this global consumerist world.

What does stay the same in Bollywood is the idea of patriotism. I mean, this has really changed recently. Bollywood films now are kind of indigestible because the patriotism has taken over everything and they are little more than political films defending the government, defending the government's projects. And they are not films that deal with the poor anymore.

The heroes of Bollywood films today are not Dalits. They are not members of the minority, they are still upper class, I would say, still quite global hero. But if you watch the most recent films that have come out, they're kind of at war with the world around them, and defending the idea of the hero as a singular individual, an exceptional individual. In that sense, they're kind of like Hollywood films.

Nicholas Lemann

First of all, we should just establish for our listeners, you may not know the exact number, but can you guess at how many Bollywood films you have seen in your life?

Fatima Bhutto

You know, I have to say, I wasn't a great fan of Bollywood. I had seen them growing up, but they weren't my go-to film. I did have to watch quite a few for this book. I don't know, 50? 60?

Nicholas Lemann

Oh I would have thought a lot more.

Fatima Bhutto

No, they're not my favorite. I mean, I was watching one on the plane coming over here. That's the other thing, you know, you take an international flight today, you've got 20 Bollywood films to choose from.

Nicholas Lemann

So in American films, at least a certain kind of American film, and I'm dabbling in cliché here, and I apologize for that. In the last scene, the hero pulls out an AK-47 and kills 30 or 40 people and then gets the girl and puts her on the back of his motorcycle and roars away. But that's not the ethic of Bollywood, right?

Fatima Bhutto

No, not always. The hero can have a terrible end and can die miserable, alone, without the girl. I think in that sense it reflects life. There isn't always a clean ending, there is an uncomfortable ending, and the hero can be just, and courageous, and still fail.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, in the book, you've written about the biggest star in Bollywood. So tell us about him.

Fatima Bhutto

So Shah Rukh Khan, who's now in his fifties, is still, I think one of the legends of the industry, continues to be. And he comes up just in that period when India's liberalizing its economy and the face of the industry is changing.

And for his first three films, Shah Rukh Khan takes an untraditional role. He doesn't play the romantic hero. He plays, you know, stalkers, deranged psychopaths and bad guys, essentially.

And yet he still breaks through, and he becomes a kind of everyman for Bollywood. He is just the perfect son, brother, romantic figure. He encapsulates this crossover between modern and traditional. He respects his elders and all the traditions, but is at home in the world, wherever that may be, whether it's New York or Europe. He sings, he dances, he jumps off trains, in fact, sometimes he dances on trains. And he's just beloved, not only in India and Asia, but far, far beyond.

Nicholas Lemann

Can you figure out what it is that distinguishes him from everybody else and makes him so popular?

Fatima Bhutto

I kept trying to. It's hard to say. He gives sustenance to so many people who are struggling in the world, and that's not necessarily because his films are positive. In many films, his character dies at the end terribly, suffers, doesn't get the girl, doesn't make it through.

But, you know, when I was in Peru, of all places, where people weren't able to speak to me in English, but they could recite Hindi dialog from Shah Rukh Khan films.

Nicholas Lemann

And Peru has a very small South Asian population.

Fatima Bhutto

I mean, negligible. Tiny, really. So there's not like great trade or great cultural crossovers. I think something like 400 families, Indian families, might live in Peru today, but that's about it.

What everyone said to me there was that Shahrukh Khan made them feel proud of their culture. It made them feel that they could belong to the modern world while still retaining certain values that might be seen as conservative or traditional.

And I think that's what he speaks to, wherever he goes. He allows you to be part of the global, globalized world while not being ashamed of where you come from.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, you spent time with him for this book. How did you get to spend time with him?

Fatima Bhutto

Well, I was able to reach him and was offered a few options. He was filming for an Egyptian prank show that was going to air on a Middle Eastern channel in Dubai. And then he was also doing a TED Talk in Canada.

And I was asked, which one of these do you want to come to? And the prank show was just perfect. It was tailor-made for the book because it involved these disparate worlds coming together, really for Sharrock.

So I went to Dubai. I met him before the shoot and then joined him and his team on the shoot and got to trail behind this very strange show for the day.

Nicholas Lemann

I guess what struck me in reading this, it's really amazing to read because, you know, most reporters don't get to get that close to a real megastar. And I was struck by a weird combination of on the one hand, he has zero connection to life as the rest of us lead it. He lives in a completely, hermetically sealed environment, in a completely hermetically sealed city. And on the other hand, he's really smart in understanding what it is that appeals to people about him. How does he do that?



Fatima Bhutto

You know, he told me that he has this troop, essentially, of elderly German ladies who follow him everywhere he goes in the world. And he doesn't really know how they get his schedule, it's not like he gives it to them. And they will be there, whether it's Lisbon or New York, on the sidelines just watching him.

And I asked him, how do you explain that? Why would this group of German ladies be following you? And they're very private. You know, I tried to reach out to them. I couldn't get through to any of them. They're harder to get than Shahrukh Khan, actually.

And he said that the first time he went to Germany, he was stunned to see these crowds of people there to meet him at a film festival. And somebody explained to him that as a society they felt quite zipped up and they felt that they weren't allowed to express themselves in any real ways except for his films. That his films gave them a sort of button, as he described it, that they could press, and that would allow them to feel and to cry and to laugh and to love.

And I think that's basically it. I think he understands that. He understands that he's a portal to something else. It may not necessarily be about him, but it's about what his characters represent. And he's quite good at connecting to that wherever he is in the world.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, what's counterintuitive about him to the uninitiated, is the biggest star in India is Muslim.

Fatima Bhutto

Yes.

Nicholas Lemann

And how does that work?

Fatima Bhutto

It's very strange, actually. The three biggest stars in Bollywood are all Muslim and they're all the same age, they all came up around the same time, they're all from urban environments, they're all educated, middle-class boys, they all share the same last name, even though they're not related. And they all happen to be Muslims. And they remain today as popular and as powerful in the industry as they were in the

1990s when they started. I don't know how to explain that. I think attempts to build up stars to face off against the three Khans must have been carried out over the decades. No one has succeeded. I mean, just nobody.

And they're all very different. They represent quite different things. So Shah Rukh is this inclusive idea, I think, of what the country is or was. Aamir Khan is seen as a very artistic figure. In fact, he's enormous in China, where he's known popularly as "uncle Aamir." His films are huge there. And he's seen as a very avant-garde sort of figure in Indian cinema.

And then Salman Khan is your action star comparable to, I guess, what Sylvester Stallone must have been at a time or – I'm struggling now to think of other action stars who aren't cringe-worthy. But he does these big blockbuster movies, you know, again, jumping out of planes and things like that, and continues to be an enormous force in the industry. No one else comes close to those three stars.

Nicholas Lemann

I guess I get brainwashed about this because I have a lot of Muslim students from South Asia and they paint a picture for me, since the BJP came to power, that life is very difficult for them.

Fatima Bhutto

Yes.

Nicholas Lemann

Do these guys, the three Khans, do they get a free pass on that?

Fatima Bhutto

I think your students are right. I think the face of India has changed dramatically in the last five years. I think the idea of India, even so much as the outside world understands it, has changed hugely.

Just before we met, just two days ago, you had Modi and Trump on stage together. Which was a pretty chilling sight, actually. To see these two figures who are seen as really divisive, dangerous men standing in front of a large auditorium was pretty frightening.

I don't know that the three Khans get a pass. What is clear is that they don't talk about politics at all. They don't comment on politics at all, and they are not

dissenting voices at all. They're very quiet voices when it comes to the topic of politics.

Nicholas Lemann

We're not done yet. Be sure to tune in for part two of our discussion with Fatima Bhutto right here on the feed. Her new book, *New Kings of the World: Dispatches from Bollywood, Dizi, and K-Pop* is out now in the US and will be available everywhere soon. You'll find all of our social profiles as well as our books, blog, events and more at [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). That's [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). I'm Nick Lemann, thanks for listening.