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# Migrant Anxieties and the Diaspora element in Bollywood Films

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**ABSTRACT**

It is truly said that films reflect the society. Whatever we see around us socially and culturally are depicted in our films. Ever since its inception Bollywood has shown an exquisite concurrence between India's political history, social history and its cinema. To quote the words of D. Bhoopaty, 'cinema is widely considered a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation. It is the contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected' (Bhoopaty 2003: 505). The researcher has divided the paper broadly into two parts. The first part will be about the spatial dislocation at national level, covering migrant anxieties portrayed in Bollywood movies, whereas the second part will deal with the elements of diaspora in Bollywood films.

**Keywords**: *Films, Society, Identity, Belongingness, Nostalgia*

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Witnessing the seemingly endless procession of the dispossessed stretching along a country road to reach their hometown, brings to mind the terrible plight of migrant workers, over the last few weeks. This unhappy caravan brings to memories, the reverse journey of small town people to metropolis, which has been the theme of several Bollywood movies. It is important to study Bollywood films because it is the world's largest film industry – in terms of production and viewership. Several films showcase the messages of belongingness and nostalgia, which have increasingly spread through films over the last few decades. Popular Hindi cinema has, since the first film was made in India in 1913, played a central role in the formulation of the national identity and in the promotion of normative behaviour.

So much so that 'film is perhaps the single strongest agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality' (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1996: 8)

If we look into the movies of yesteryears, starting from *Shree 420* (1955), we see Raj Kapoor singing *Mera Joota Hai Japani* as he moves from Prayagraj, then Allahabad and then finally to Mumbai. He has left home in search of a job but finds that honest work is hard to come by. While his migrant identity isn't stressed upon, it's notable that his redemption starts with *Ramaiya Vastavaiya*. Released in 1953, Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* is also about the migrant farmer forced to move to Kolkata and operate a hand-pulled rickshaw to pay off his debt back home. From 1951's *Awaara*, and the strident young Vijay in *Deewar* (1975), a transplant from town to metropolis, these Bollywood movies have showed migration as a background to the film's main theme. There were four streams of migration as rural to urban, rural to rural, urban to rural and urban to urban. But the trend of migration was in favour of rural to urban as more than 20 million people of the total 97.5 million inter-state migrants in India were moved from rural areas to the urbans. The metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Ludhiana were the alluring centers for migrants having rural background (Rath et al 2008:1).Most of the films depicted this rural to urban form of migration in the Hindi films.

Saeed Mirza's *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai* (1980) is about the life of a family living in Mumbai. One extraordinary scene pays tribute to the migrants' contribution to the city's workforce. When Albert (Naseeruddin Shah) approaches a group of mill workers on strike and asks one of them his name and where he's from, his companions reply that they are from Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Bihar. Each one is regarded separately, in close-up, as if to remind the viewer that this isn't a faceless mass but individuals with hopes and dreams.

Uberoi points out that films have provided 'an idealised moral univese'which reflects the values, beliefs and ideas that go into the making of a nation. (Uberoi: 1998) Even the movies of the 21st century have depicted themes of spatial diffusion and migrant anxieties. *CityLights* (2014) turned this into tragedy as a Rajasthan couple is duped—as so many migrants are—into sinking all their savings into a house, only to find that it's a scam. It kicks off a series of events which leads to Rajkummar Rao's character taking part in a heist and his wife becoming a bar dancer—a grim commentary on the choices available to unlucky migrants. *Udta Punjab* (2016) painted a similarly bleak picture, putting Alia Bhatt's Bihari labourer through hell before allowing her a measure of revenge. Different forms of victimisation through crime, lack of money, inadequate resources, non-availability of basic needs and several other forms of deprivation leads to a very anxious frame of mind of these migrants as shown in Bollywood films. There has been urban-to-rural migration in *Swades* (2004), Rancho/Phunsukh in *3 Idiots* (2009)—but the anxieties in these films are limited to self-actualization. Even village-to-city stories are infrequent nowadays: The working class is seldom seen on the big screen as it is, and migrant stories are a small subsection of these.

A time came when in order to compete with Hollywood, producers and directors thought about adapting themes and story lines to the cinematographic outlook of expatriate Hindi cinema goers. Filmmakers eagerly took up the challenge of reaching out to the Indian diaspora in the west. This is also clear when we look at the con-tent of Hindi films from that period, which was adapted considerably to match diasporic tastes. In fact, Mehta (2005) writes that "the desires of the diaspora appear to have been inscribed within the texts of 'Bollywood' films" (p. 143). Both privileged Indians at home and the diaspora abroad who had grown tired of routine stories of callous deaths, mishaps, drought, or famine in India as reported in the international media had now become keen to devour a sociological and cultural fiesta which would be more realistic than fantastic.

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Thussu writes: Hindi films are shown in more than 70 countries and are popular in the Arab world, in central and Southeast Asia and among many African countries. This has made it imperative for producers to invest in subtitling to widen the reach of films, as well as privileging scripts which interest the overseas audience (p. 26). Whenever media is spoken of in the diaspora there is usually the assumption that transnational media indirectly reconnects diasporic communities to their home countries by giving these homesick migrants doses of movies which directly or indirectly soothe their conscience and shape the personalities of their children. Diasporic audiences in the west turned out to be a small but lucra-tive market for Hindi cinema. In Europe and America, a ticket to the movie theatre was priced higher than in India, and was paid in desir-able foreign valuta (Dwyer 2002: 178-179).

Today a huge population of Indians lives in foreign countries, thereby creating a potential audience. The film makers have started to cater to the expectant viewership of these expatriates. One common trait of immigrants which has been observed over the years is that notwithstanding their nationalities there is a desire to reconnect with their motherland. These spatially displaced and diffused populations are disconnected from their families and their culture as well and hence find some sort of solace in viewing their country and culture onscreen. But the expatriate Indian did not gain currency on the big screen until 1967 with *An Evening in Paris* (Shakti Samanta). A few years later came *Sangam* in 1965, which shows foreign locations and Indians moving freely around the world for leisure.

Mishra is cited by Kao and Rozario (2008) saying that "while the diaspora utilizes Bollywood in constructing its identity, the diaspora likewise informs Bollywood's imagined spaces" (p. 315). Sundar (2007) investigated how music constructs gender, sexuality, and nation. The researcher observes that "ignoring Hindi film music, or treating it as the sentimental excess designed for the 'masses' entails dismissing one of the most potent and familiar aspects of Indian culture" (p. ix). Relating this to Indians in the diaspora, Sundar

explains that Hindi film songs can be a way of connecting with their culture. This help Indians in the diaspora to "cultivate a sense of Indianness" (p. ix).

A plethora of studies have examined how Indian immigrants engage and interpret meaning in the Bollywood cinema. In fact, Mehta (2005) writes that "the desires of the diaspora appear to have been inscribed within the texts of 'Bollywood' films" (p. 143). While noting that the consumption of Indian cinema is "pervasive", Ram (2002) investigated the ways in which Indian immigrant women interpret the gendered representations in Indian cinema. Ram's objective was to "locate how Indian cinema mediates the constitution of gendered identities in the diaspora" (p. 265). In interpreting the texts, Ram says the "notions of gender, home, and nation are reconstituted, re-imagined and interpreted within transnational contexts" (p. 48).

Kaur (2002) examined the "renewed" interest of the Indian Diaspora towards Bollywood films. The researcher further explains that Bollywood films have "caught the fancy of not only the original immigrants, but also second-generation and even third generation Indians" (p. 200). A landmark film that did not ridicule the diaspora, and instead tried to appeal to it, was Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (1995). The film very well depicted the desire of the Indian diaspora to rediscover their homeland, and treated their feelings of nostalgia and longing very effectively. Other international box office hits with a diaspora dimension were Pardes (1997) Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998), Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001), Mujhse Dosti Karoge (2002) and Hum Tum (2004). Like DDLJ, they show characters living in the west, or returning to India after a long stay abroad. These cosmopolitan characters are rich and young, consume themselves to death, are searching for romantic love, but are at the same time very inclined to maintaining Indian family values and Indian traditions.

A relation was observed between the size of the Indian diaspora in the reception countries and the number of distributed Bollywood movies. Strong associations of cultural

products, especially of Indian cinema and the shaping of national identity among the Indian diaspora, have already been proven by N. Kumar & J.-B. E. M. Steenkamp (2013), S. Rao (2010) and R. Bandyopadhyay (2008). South Africa's ban on distributing Indian cinema in response to India's objection to apartheid lasted for over half a century. Authorities in Australia, which was a lead shooting location for Bollywood movies, used them to present the country as tolerant and open towards foreign tourists and students (Hassam 2012). The Soviet Union actively supported the popularisation of Indian cinema as a result of long-lasting relations with India, while at the same time promoting traditional models that were alternative to those propagated by American or European cinema (Igorevna Doroshenko 2012; YanderSteene 2012). According to YanderSteene (2012), in Senegal and Nigeria the peoples using the Wolof, Fulani, or Hausa language watched movies produced in Hindi due to their short and relatively infrequent dialogue and an alleged similarity in the sounds of these languages.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a growing number of Indians moved to Western countries, and so the ex-port of Hindi films moved to Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia (Mishra 2002: 239-340). The character of the expatriate Indian perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. Once exposed as a counter-model, it became in the past twenty years the symbol of the Indian achiever, a kind of *über* Indian able to assert his ethnic and national identity in a globalized world: successful, capitalist, male, family-oriented, technology-savvy and a devout Hindu all at once (Hariharan 2002).

J. C. Sharma, a former Indian diplomat and member of the government-appointed High Committee on the Indian diaspora, remarked that 'Bollywood was selected long back for the purpose of connecting the Indian people residing across the world. Hence both intra & inter connectivity is facilitated by Bollywood. Showing of an Indian film became a focal point of connectivity' (Sharma 2010). In addition to fostering a sense of community going beyond the national borders (Deprez 2010: 145, Gowricharn 2009), most of the recent films

with expatriate characters show that being a part of the national ethos is no longer determined by nationality or place of residence but by blood ties and morality. Punathambekar noted that 'in positioning and drawing the diaspora into the fold of a 'great Indian family', *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam* articulates everyday struggles over being Indian in the diaspora to a larger project of cultural citizenship that has emerged in relation to India's tentative entry into a transnational economy and the centrality of the NRI (non-resident Indian) figure to India's navigation of this space' (Punathambekar 2005: 152).

Indians are endowed with exemplary values such as morality, legitimacy, and piety. The diaspora, on the other hand, was portrayed as rich and free and comparatively self-centred. These migrants can do everything that is forbidden in India, but still they long for their long-lost homeland and often make sacrifices to re-connect with it. The diasporic characters are shown to be true to the authentic Indian morals represented in the films. Whether they live in London, in Sydney or in Paris, they will ultimately keep the Indian culture alive. The diaspora also represents a category of characters in films whose protagonists are a definition or reaffirmation of the Indian identity transformed by globalization. Thus, whether we talk of Migrant anxieties or diasporic elements, our Bollywood films are replete with examples of both alike.

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