

THE DESI IN PARDES: DIASPORA AND IDENTITY IN BOLLYWOOD'S PRODUCTIONS

Ankita Sharma

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Rajasthan, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

Films in India are not just a source of entertainment, but a religion. Bollywood has such a hold on our lives that almost every little thing that goes on in our lives is inspired by it. When the girls dream of love, they want their love story to be a Raj-Simran love tale. When the boys dream of a life, they dream of Dil Chahta Hai or Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara. These films influence our lives. The reason behind this influence is the sheer association we share with these movies. The directors pick up our dreams, our aspirations, our problems, our confusions, and put it in on the silver screen making them concrete. There is one such confusion, which a part of our society is struggling with; the immigrant status and the identity crisis that comes with it. In the past twenty years, Bollywood has come up with some fabulous movies which had focused on this crisis.

This paper seeks to look into two such movies, *Namastey London* and *English Vinglish*. The paper focuses on the central characters and compares their struggle to carve their identities in a foreign land. The paper further analyses the confusion of cultural identities experienced by the characters of the film in a critical framework.

"Mera Jootahai Japani, Yeh Patloon Englishtani SarPe Laal Topi Roosi Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani" (Shree 420, 1955)

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INTRODUCTION

History of mankind tells us that travelling and moving to different places of the world was a survival technique. Individuals wandered the forests in search of hunt initially. Later on, when man learnt the art of agriculture, groups of people settled in one place forming small villages and communities. When the land lost fecundity or natural calamities struck, the communities moved on in search of another land. In this way civilisations developed. In the twentieth century, this act of travelling and moving, in order to look for better living conditions, came to be called the act of 'migration'. People left their homelands and settled down in foreign lands for better economic conditions and made homes in these countries. These people came to be known as 'emigrants' or 'Diaspora'. Diaspora is defined as a group of people who share heritage or homelands but have since moved out to places all over the world.

People belonging to different diasporas carried along with them their culture, their ways, and their identities which differed from the cultures and lifestyles of those lands to which they were moving. In some lands, this difference was accepted and given a place, in others, this difference was termed as invasion resulting in an alienation for the emigrants. Mostly, the emigrants were looked upon as invaders and were forced to stick to their own

communities giving rise to groups like African Diaspora, Latin American Diaspora, South Asian Diaspora, Greek Diaspora, Indian Diaspora, etc. These groups of people face a tremendous confusion. They have been trying to preserve their culture and heritage in a land which forces them to change. The quote cited at the beginning of the paper aptly describes this confusion which an Indian residing in a foreign country faces. S/he wears western clothes, speaks English, receives western education, but the nature remains Indian, the way of thinking remains Indian. Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, describes this confusion aptly,

"Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools." (1981–1991).

This identity crisis and the dilemma faced by the people of Diaspora has been one of the most discussed subjects in literature. Cinema, which constantly draws subjects from literature, has been instrumental in bringing this issue to the forefront. India, as a country, is known for its rich culture, history, and heritage. Indians are proud of their ancestry and the ancient culture which shapes their identity in a huge manner. This becomes a major reason for the identity crisis that they face when they become a part of Indian Diaspora. Bollywood, or the Indian cinema, majorly draws all its stories from the emotional and mental strains that Indians face. Over the last fifty years, several productions have highlighted the issues of Indian Diaspora or have been made with stories with undertone of the same issue. *Purabaur Paschim* (Manoj Kumar, 1970) was the earliest of the films to broach this subject. Afterwards films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Pardes* (SubhashGhai, 1997), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2003) introduced the issue wrapped under the covers of romance and love stories. The one quality of these movies which is interesting is the struggle of the central characters to find a solution to the confusion which life poses in front of them.

Opposing these, there are movies which depict the identity crisis being faced by those who are very much living in India and for them the crisis is solved when they move to a different country and realise their self worth. Movies like *Bend it like Beckham* (Gurinder Chaddha, 2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (Gurinder Chaddha, 2004), *Salaam Namaste* (Siddharth Anand, 2005) have their lead characters leaving India and creating a space for themselves in western countries.

In this paper we deal with *Namastey London* (Vipul Amrutlal Shah, 2007) and *English Vinglish* (Gauri Shinde, 2012); two movies which present us with two different sides of Diaspora and the associated living.

Namastey London (2007)

The highest grossing movie of 2007, *Namastey London* follows the lives of Jasmeet (Jazz) and Arjun. Jasmeet is an Indian girl born and brought up in London. Her father Manmohan relocates to London for better prospects even before he is married.. After establishing himself, Manmohan marries Bebo, who is a simple village girl. He takes her to London, but feels ashamed because of her Indian ways of life, or as he puts it, her '*desi*' ways. Trying to protect her daughter from all the embarrassment that she had to face, Bebo makes sure that Jasmeet is raised in British ways. Jasmeet, styles herself Jazz and believes herself to be British since she has never known Indian ways. She dreams of having a rich and handsome British husband and leading the rest of her life in pretty countryside mansions. She finds the man of her dreams in Charles Brown, a rich heir with a notorious reputation of a womanizer. The clink in Jasmeet's glass house comes when her father takes her to India and forcefully marries her off to Arjun, a simple boy from a small village in Punjab. Jasmeet plays along with her father, and tricks him and Arjun to leave for London on the night of the wedding itself. Once they reach London, she refuses to accept their marriage as there is no legal proof of it. Instead, she agrees to marry Charles Brown. Arjun, who genuinely loves Jasmeet, tries to win her back, at the same time mending relationships of the entire family.

Throughout the movie, the characters struggle with their identities and are plagued by the dilemma of choosing between what their society offers and what their culture has taught them. The fact that Manmohan, despite of having lived a larger part of his life in London, does not trust the English society. This brings forth the confusion he is living in. He wants his standard of living to be on par with the British. So, his daughter receives British education, has British friends, lives the British lifestyle, yet when it comes to marriage, British boys are not suitable for her. The movie shows instances where Manmohan regrets his decision to migrate to London, since now his daughter doesn't have the essential values which Indian kids grow up with. Parties, alcohol, casual affairs are an everyday part of her life. She does not show signs of having those necessary *sanskaar*¹ an Indian girl is expected to have. Manmohan hopes that her marriage to an Indian *sanskaari* boy will help her develop those skills.

Jasmeet recognises her Indian identity when she is subjected to racial abuse by Charles and his family. They describe India as "*land of snake charmers, rope tricks, and chicken tandoori*." Going so far as to using Winston Churchill's quote "*If we ever leave India, it will be run by goons*". The abuse and being talked down upon makes her realise the values she has always had. She rejects Charles advances towards her when he tries to kiss her realising that she is still married to Arjun. She eventually chooses Arjun over Charles who is the quintessential *Indian Damad*² for Manmohan.

The characters of Manmohan and Jasmeet bring out the real confusion in the minds of relocated Indians. The dilemma of adapting to the culture of the foreign land and holding on to one's roots. This brings us back to Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie stresses that people of the diaspora such as himself, remember their country as it was before they migrated. The idea that they bear in mind of their country is like "shards of broken mirror, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." (1309). This is the problem of the characters. Manmohan has painted a picture of India in front of Jasmeet which depicts Indians as illiterate, impolite, and unmannered. The idea of getting married to such a "*desi*³ farmer" horrifies her. She is not able to grasp the idea that Indians are no longer like that. She assumes that since Arjun has grown up in a village, he is neither educated nor would he understand her lifestyle. Her prejudices about Indians break when in the urbane space of London city, Arjun comes out as a confident, handsome man, who is able to speak up against racial abuse, play rugby and is actually better at it than the British, and can speak in fluent English.

Rushdie believes that the people belonging to the Indian diaspora carry the idea of an extremely different India in their minds. They have left their homelands and spent a considerable length of time in foreign lands hence they are incapable of "total recall" (11) of home. In the process of recall, much is lost, altered, and fragmented. But since, they are fragments, they become all the more precious. This is the precarious position of the people belonging to diaspora. The movie beautifully brings out this position. Arjun explains this to Manmohan in a dialogue from the movie,

"*Shareer foreign mein padahaile kine kangootha Gateway of India mein de rakh hai. Saaf suthre London mein rehnachateho, pounds mein paisa kamanachateho, bacchon ko angrez itaaleendenachateho, lekin damad, jidamad hindustani honachahiye.*" (Your entire self is in foreign but one thumb is stuck in Gateway of India. You want to live in clean London, earn pounds, want to give western education to your children, yet when it comes to son-in-law, you want him to be Indian) (Namaste London).

¹A set of values that every human being is expected to have such as respect for traditions and customs.

²Son-in-law

³Term used for a man/woman who follows Indian way of life. Usually derogatory in tone.

English Vinglish (2012)

Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* presents us with the other side of the coin. It follows the life of Shashi, a housewife who doesn't understand English. Shashi's life revolves around her husband, two kids, and her mother-in-law. She loves cooking and runs a small catering business where she makes *laddoos*⁴ which are quite a delicacy among her clients. But in spite of her talents, Shashi is constantly mocked by her husband and daughter for not knowing English. Her daughter is embarrassed of her and refrains from introducing Shashi in her social circle. Similarly, her husband takes her for granted and never encourages her in her endeavours. Change comes when they are all invited to Shashi's niece's wedding in New York. Shashi has to go earlier than everyone else since she has to help her sister Manu in the preparations of the wedding. With the help of strangers and generous fellow passengers, Shashi manages the journey to New York. Once in New York, Shashi is constantly helped by Manu and her two daughters Meera and Radha. They make her feel at home as much as they can but she doesn't seem to fit in. While roaming on the streets of New York, Shashi tries to buy food at a cafe and ends up humiliating herself due to her inability to speak and understand English. The incident pushes her to learn the language and she joins an English class. She is supported by her niece Radha in this venture. Eventually Shashi learns the language and starts speaking English fluently proving her acumen as an able housewife and an equally able entrepreneur.

The character of Shashi brings out the identity crisis that people face residing in their homelands. The loss of confidence and self worth in your own society is a huge reason for confusion, especially in the women of India. A typical Indian *sanskaarinari*⁵ is supposed to be an epitome of devotion and sacrifice. Her life should revolve around her family and she should give up on her dreams and aspirations for the sake of her husband and children. She is supposed to be the pillar of the family, always supporting, and never taking the forefront. In the process, losing herself completely. Shashi's talents are not recognised by her family instead she is constantly mocked at for her one limitation. The movie highlights the Indian mentality of believing that English is a status symbol and anyone who doesn't understand the language is a *desi* or *gawar*⁶.

The interesting quality of the movie is the fact that what Shashi could not gain from her homeland, she finds that in a city which is an altogether different universe. Away from the mockery of her husband and daughter, she finds the encouragement and motivation to learn the language from a group of people who are total strangers to her. She carves a niche for herself in a city like New York by asserting her Indian identity. She wears silk *sarees*⁷, plaits her hair, helps out her sister with all the wedding preparations, dances on Marathi⁸ folk songs, makes laddoos, and learns to take pride in being who she is.

In an instance from the movie, her husband tells their kids that it is important to clear their exams if they don't want to end up making *laddoos* for the rest of their lives mocking Shashi's educational background. When Shashi mentions making laddoos as her profession in her English class, she is lauded for being an entrepreneur. This new definition of her work makes Shashi feel good about herself, a feeling she hasn't experienced in a long time. The English class not only helps her learn the language but also becomes instrumental in developing self worth. The fact that she is loved for who she is and not mocked at helps her recognise the identity she had lost in a place she called home.

⁴An Indian sweet made up of milk and flour and is round in shape.

⁵Hindi term for a perfect lady.

⁶An illiterate villager. The word is meant to be derogatory.

⁷The traditional Indian dress worn by women. It's six meters long and is wrapped around in a way which covers almost the entire body of the woman.

⁸The regional language of people belonging to states of Maharashtra and Goa.

In the climax of the movie, Shashi gives a speech in English where she says,

"Sometimes, in a marriage, the other person does not even know how you are feeling. At such times, you have to help yourself and return feeling equal. Family never laughs at your weaknesses, they love you for who you are." (English Vinglish).

Here, she stresses on the importance of asserting your own identity. She emphasises the importance of family and the kind of support a person needs from them. A family is the one who helps you in discovering yourself, and not the one who makes a joke of your weaknesses.

CONCLUSIONS

Two different movies, both located in two different cities, give us the vantage points of characters who share the same homeland. 'Abroad' works differently for both the central characters, Jasmeet and Shashi. For one, it helps her in realising her Indian self, for the other, it helps her reasserting her Indian self. The former is treated as an invader in the society she believes to be her own, the latter is accepted in a society she believes to be alien. Through Jasmeet and Shashi, we also see the picture of an Indian society who looks different from the periphery and feels different in the centre. Jasmeet, standing on the outskirts, finds love and acceptance in the society. The same society alienates Shashi who is an integral part of it. Therefore, the comparative of these two films bring forth a picture which, when viewed through two different vantage points, makes us reach a conclusion that a society can be accepting as well as alienating to two people who both have roots in the same society.

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