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## Indian Culture as an Inherent Essence of Diaspora films

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### Abstract

Culture is the best expression of a nation's soul and every nation has its own unique expression. There is, however, no question of superiority or inferiority in such variations. Culture and Diaspora together produces a common term that is 'diasporic culture'. It might be the mixture of two or more than two different cultures. But if it is growing outside of its home it may termed as 'diasporic culture'.

A number of tools have been adopted to represent the psyche of Indian Diaspora. In discussing such human migrations; Diaspora becomes a tool in film presentation among the different fields that opens up new subjects like identity, trans-nationality, migration and nationalism. Film is a very popular art form of India. Indian cinema screens its films in over 90 countries where it found big market. These big Indian cinema screens not only have foreign audiences but also Indian audiences who reside in these 90 countries and more.

Multi-cultural and multi-ethnic artists and concepts increasingly influence the world of cinema. Diasporic cinema focuses on the meaning of home, belonging and nationality and the very same time conversely brings the centrality of the national and transnational theorization of cinema. Rather than alliance to ethnicity, and nationality, films allow for an expression of complex identities based on uncertainty. In the era of globalization, societies become compact and complex yet multi-ethnic constructs would seem as though identities would benefit from formation by exposure to new concepts.

**Key words:** Diaspora, Films, Indian culture, Indian cinema, Identity, Migration, etc.

Culture cannot be defined as all the definitions of the term leave us with a feeling that it is something more. The expression of culture varies in different countries and although the conceptual basis is the same, the outward expressions vary widely. Culture is the best expression of a nation's soul and every nation has its own unique expression. It is essential to have such differences; without such variety life would be dowdy and monotonous. There is, however, no question of superiority or inferiority in such variations. (Srinivasan, 1999, p. 239) Culture is like fashion, which keeps on changing over the years; it has been changing from the beginning. Culture and Diaspora together produces a common term that is 'diasporic culture'. It might be the mixture of two or more than two different cultures. But if it is growing outside of its home it may termed as 'diasporic culture'.

Life of Diaspora has always been an issue of concern and a matter of study for Indian academics. A number of tools have been adopted to represent the psyche of Indian Diaspora. Literature, art, folk music and films are some of the tools which serve as the merits of Diasporic things. The word ‘Diaspora’ established itself as an important term in the study of geopolitics. In discussing such human migrations; Diaspora becomes a tool in film presentation among the different fields that opens up new subjects like identity, trans-nationality, migration and nationalism.

Indian film industry is one of the largest film productions in the world. According to Dr. 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, p. 505). Film is a very popular art form of India. Indian cinema screens its films in over 90 countries where it found big market. These big Indian cinema screens not only have foreign audiences but also Indian audiences who reside in these 90 countries and more.

Multi-cultural and multi-ethnic artists and concepts increasingly influence the world of cinema. Yash Chopra, a well-known Indian film director addressed during first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) that, “our moral responsibility is to depict India at its best. We’re the historians of India [...]. The Indian Diaspora must maintain its identity, its roots.” (Chopra, Address, 2003). The film in accordance with Diaspora is a multidisciplinary concept as the films are major part to understand Diaspora as well as the new genre of Diaspora cinema. The constant remembrance of migrants about their “*Sanskritik Gathri*” (Cultural Baggage) is gradually moving from the margins to the prominence as the Diasporic identities are achieving the greater renown in cinema. Thus films play a pivotal role in connection of Indian Diaspora with their home land. In a way they feel connected with their own surroundings by watching Indian films. Second and third generation expatriates can know the place of their origin through the genuine media called films. However, it is a matter of discussion that what kind of India they would know through films.

In the postcolonial era, the idea of India and the “East” as a land of traditions (inferior in terms of technology but superior in terms of morals and values) versus America and the “West” as a land of progressive (in some views morally inferior) values is not new and has been disseminated over and over again in various forms. On the other hand, when Bollywood films create a space where India is only portrayed as traditional and conventional, it creates a fake image in the diaspora- a nostalgic fantasy of purity and tradition amidst a land that is constantly portrayed as sexualized and decadent, while the real India continues to grow as a culture beyond the imagined traditional and colonial concepts assigned to it. In this way, the glimpse back into the lost Indian homeland of the diaspora that Bollywood provides is largely imagined. Women as the protector and carrier of the culture have more impact of the issue than men. Thus this split between diasporic, “Westernized” Indians and “Traditional” homeland Indians is harmful to both women in India and women in the diaspora. It treats women in India as only traditional and women in the diaspora as only Westernized and ignores the reality of their experiences. There is no space for tinge or multi-dimensionality in their identities. It also sets impossible expectations

upon Indian women in the diaspora, who, in steering their hyphenated identities, are being told that to be desirable, one must swing one way or the other- be overly “Westernized” and sexualized or be “truly Indian” are traditional.

Diasporic cinema concentrates on the meaning of home, belonging and nationality and the very same time conversely brings the centrality of the national and transnational theorization of cinema. Diaspora cinema is not an aforementioned creation. Indian sensibility gradually paved the way for the development of Diasporic cinema. Diasporic films are defined as the films made by the film makers who settles away from their homeland. The bearings and social identity of the filmmaker is recognized as significant to the aesthetic and narrative of the films.

Bollywood films, in order to be popular among Indians have an “Indian touch” even while presenting global influences. Audience responses to the use of English, western music and dressing and setting from anxiety to pleasure and vary from subject to subject, but audience members expressed an almost universal expectation that Bollywood films contain traditional clothing and music, that they retain the emphasis on familial emotions and that they reinforce “Indian” values. According to Rajadhyaksha, the “Bollywoodization” of Mumbai cinema must be understood as a “diffused cultural conglomeration involving range of distribution and consumption activities” signified by the complex and contradictory forces of globalization, privatization, and liberalization which has changed the production and consumption of Mumbai films. (Rajadhyaksha, 2003, p. 25)

Indian Diaspora film directors like Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, Deepa Mehta, Rohit Gupta, Param Gill have established their own mark in a foreign environment. Their films intended at global audiences are frequently corded with predicaments of new generation expatriates. There are some Indian filmmakers who settled overseas and yet have not cut their creative umbilical cord with India. The Diaspora and its representations has become a growing signifier in Bollywood. The projection of culture, Diaspora and border crossing in Indian cinema is centred on the urban metropolises. “How does Bollywood cinema produce an idea of diaspora culture, and what kind of relationship/s can we track and decipher about Diasporic culture as the cinema creates new itineraries through its films, popular cultures and cultural industries?” (Dudrah, 2012, p. 9)

Films portray culture at different levels and in different ways. The study of it would explore the nature of representation, location of the directors, and relationship of the directors with the narratives chosen, sensuality and sexuality, crossing of barriers, space, cinematic techniques, reflection of history, echoes of folk narratives and extending the films’ contemporariness. One significant aspect of diasporic films is their ability to overlap and negotiate multiple film cultures. Films like *Monsoon Wedding*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Namesake*, *Bend it like Beckham*, *Bride and Prejudice* are the examples which consumed audiences throughout the world with their in-betweenness which enables its transnationalism.

J.C. Sharma, a previous 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 and inter connectivity is facilitated by Bollywood. Showing of an Indian film became a focal point of connectivity'. (Sharma, 2010)

Expanding the term Bollywood to refer to Indian Cinema in general, Makarand R. Paranjape in 'Cultural Flows, Travelling Shows: Bombay Talkies, Global Times', relocates Bollywood's trans-nationalization in a form of 'internationalism' structuring the Hindi film's borrowings since the Phalke era. (Kaur, 2005). Pointing out that contemporary global flows are not from Hollywood to Bollywood but also from Bollywood to Hollywood, Paranjape demystifies the theory of the uni-directional flow of globalization and cites *Slumdog Millionaire* to make a strong case for the intensification of its reverse or 'contra' flow. He suggests that the difference between Hollywood and Bollywood is not cosmetic but structural, and even civilizational, which is expressed as an aesthetic alterity.

Vijay Mishra in his *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* indicates that formal study of Bollywood films, extending the imagined community of the nation beyond the borders of the nation state by throwing light on the meditation of the myths of the homeland by the Indian Diaspora in Fiji using the visual medium of the film through which the diasporic community was inserted in the nation (Mishra, 2002). Bollywood has not only opened with the challenges of globalization but taken benefits of the new situation by expanding its landscape. It has achieved this by creating a spectatorship aware of the specific requirements of the Diasporas, as well as those living in India. A globalizing world of communication and capital flow, instead of imposing a hegemonic cultural world order, has triggered a politics of space whereby the diasporas of a particular community dispersed over the world are networked to the homeland culture to such an extent that the traditional divide of outside/inside loses much of its analytical purchase. In contemporary Bollywood, it is interesting to see how the inscription of the citizen consumer, its ideal contemporary spectator, has offered spaces for assertion of identity for Bollywood's diaspora (Ray, 2012, p. 231).

The world is going mad about Bollywood. Indian films are turning out to be as internationally recognized as those from Hollywood. At the same time, Hollywood producers are turning to Bollywood to experiment with financial investments and co-productions. Even Hollywood movies have started serving the content which is targeted towards the Indian audiences across the globe. The main aim of them is not only to attract the Indian audience but to show something which is acceptable, appealing to the spectator irrespective of their nation, region, religion and culture. Hollywood films like *Life of Pi*, *Lion*, *Man who Knew Infinity*, *Gandhi*, *American Gandhi*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, have very much Indian touch in their content. In particular, "what is the relationship between indigenous (India-focused) and exogenous (globally focused) content for attracting huge audiences? And how might this relationship have shifted between the 'Golden Era' of Indian cinema, defined as the period from 1947 through the 1950s, and the 'Global Era', the period of increased liberalization and Bollywoodization from the 1990s through the present?" (Schaefer, 2012, p. 241)

By producing the culture on screen, the films represent issues of crossing borders, of diaspora, and of gender and sexuality in possibly dynamic ways.

Furthermore, how these recent films and Bollywood popular culture might be read and used by audiences enables us to think more about the relationship of Bollywood cinema in and beyond diaspora in new ways. The trans-culturality of Bollywood has been increasingly visible and obvious over the last two decades. With the concern of films, India has been a very active participant in overseas cultural products. Film connects people through time and space, and it redefines intellectuals to set a new discourse of cultural identity. Rather than alliance to ethnicity, and nationality, films allow for an expression of complex identities based on uncertainty. In the era of globalization, societies become compact and complex yet multi-ethnic constructs would seem as though identities would benefit from formation by exposure to new concepts. The advancement of global media has widened the accessibility to personal expression. Now one's silent voices be articulate and be heard by the digital communities over the world. This has accelerated the process of cultural integration and further dissolving natural borders.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed popular Indian Cinema in Hindi constitutes a particularly interesting area of study as much because of its history as because of its key role in the creation of the national identity and its place in the collective imagination. As Ashis Nandy noted, 'the popular film *is* low-brow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity. Studying popular film *is* studying Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare by the fate of traditions in contemporary life and arts. Above all, it is studying caricatures of ourselves' (Nandy, 1998, p. 7). One may concern with these distorted reflections not only exaggerate features but also paradoxically dictate patterns of normality. In this sense, they shape and impose exemplarity by broadcasting role models, figures of idealization and identification at once. Popular cinema is thus a major actor of social engineering.

During 1920s ethnic nationalism gained currency as the country's economy was being opened up after the first liberalization measures in 1991. This benefited most the middle classes and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The slogan of the party is 'India Shining', a peon to urban, capitalist growth embodied by the IT sector, symbolized this period. Hence it is not surprising that the Non Resident Indian (NRI), who is imagined to be essentially rich and westernized but who is also known to contribute financially to the *Sangh Parivar*, became a role model for a fast growing middle class facing the challenges of globalization and its own torment or feeling of guilt due to a possible acculturation (Therwath, n.d.). Predictably, the recognition of themes related to the diaspora and the nationalist ethnic and cultural discourse aimed at people of Indian origin living abroad reached a peak during the period corresponding to the BJP-led governments (1998-2004). Indian Culture presented as family-oriented, Hindu, the preserve of women within the home and yet 'portable' (Uberoi, 1998, p. 306). Thus, possibly transnational Cinema, more than other media like television, mobile phones or the Internet comprises a medium for the enacting, teaching and dissemination of this nationalist discourse indication the combined virtues of consumerism and devotion and of cosmopolitanism and roots. Chopra confirms this when he confides that 'Indian films teach in a subtle way, they teach the social conventions, a sense of duty' (Chopra, Interview, 2002).

As Shabana Azmi, Actress and Rajya Sabha MP addressed during first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas that a great fear often harboured in India is how technology and western influence are undermining the Indian culture. Our culture and heritage is not so vulnerable that it can be trampled upon easily. In this digital age where communication is no longer an ordeal, an overarching pan-global Indianness is emerging, from food to fashion, films to literature. There is a distinct Indianness developing. This artistic expression may often seem superficially nationalistic or even totemic in its Indianness, but at least there is a conscious attempt that India as a culture can hold its own anywhere in the world. (Azmi, 2003). In contemporary popular culture, the diaspora expands the landscape of India beyond the curves of the nation state. As an important cultural indicator and a persistent cultural entity, Bollywood has a large impact on all of its viewers, especially in the diaspora. If Bollywood can recognize the commonness of the stereotypes within its films, it can break down the binaries that separate India from the diaspora. Film represents the encounter of cultures and the dynamics of the Diaspora Space.

Cinema brings the cultural differences and producing a homogeneous mass culture for an undifferentiated audience. Bollywood representation establishes 'India' community as a national but global community. Every existing life has a story, it is all up to individual that how to deal, how to face how to project and how to represent. Same as the vast Indian Diaspora has their struggle and success stories. Film is a medium to reach to the mass and directors who put efforts to make the best out of those stories to reach positively to the mass. Mass media has been used as a useful communication tool for cultural identity construction and maintenance among first generation immigrants and their children. Second generation children resisted the Indian traditions and customs shown in Indian films. But most of the parents have used Indian films to cultivate certain traditional, cultural values, attitudes and belief system in their children apart from teaching the Indian language.

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