

NEGOTIATING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

Postcolonial Indian cinema has been changing rapidly and this change can be seen from early days to present era. Worth noting is the fact that the major changes are taking place in every decade. Be it science and technology or changing images of women from subjugated to empowered self of them, the effect of rapid transformation is evident in postcolonial cinema. Diaspora has always been a prime area of concern for Indian film makers and therefore this subject lures them to create the movies based on the same subject. After colonial era when Indian cinema particularly Hindi cinema was flourishing and used to portray the subjects like diaspora in celluloid, the area of study was limited, however after 90s the second generation diaspora came into the existence in large number and eventually Hindi movies based on diaspora hit the celluloid and became prime area of interest for film makers. The issues which are emphasized in these movies are feeling of nostalgia and the loss of homelands, cultural conflicts and assimilation, sense of belongingness and longing for actual home. Postcolonial Indian cinema based on diaspora, portrays a relentless negotiation to form an identity in new found lands and struggle of immigrants to assimilate in new culture with a new perspective.

Keywords: Diaspora, belongingness, identity, postcolonial Indian cinema

The term "Diaspora" is derived from a Greek word, meaning dispersion. It was used by the Jewish people, pointing towards their global scattering outside their homeland, the Land of Israel. Jews survived due to migration, adaptation to the new countries and clung to their faith and traditions. Migration also extended the boundaries of the Jewish Diaspora. The model of Jewish Diaspora was followed by the Armenian, Chinese, African (slavery) and Indian communities. The difference with the Jewish Diaspora is that Indian communities have been dispersed owing to their chosen countries of migration.

The term Diaspora refers to the dispersion of religious or ethnic groups from their established homeland either forced or voluntary. Initially this word was used for the

dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. However, today it has come to mean any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding(Mythili:526).

The origin of the Indian Diaspora has always been the regional social structures of the emigrants and migrants. On the basis of regional cultures and languages in Europe, Indians create their Bengali, Punjabi and Telugu Diasporas. However, when there is a question of the Indian Diaspora, they always feel a part of it. It is the shared cultural heritage of Indians which lays the foundation for the Indian Diaspora. Globalization of the Indian diaspora had already started during the emigration period to the plantation colonies. The discourse pertains to diaspora takes us to Jewish context, where the persecution and expulsion led to the dispersal of Jews away from the homeland carrying with them the fond hope of returning to the motherland one day. Indian diaspora may be divided into three parts. The first type of diaspora is ancient diaspora where in order to spread the trade and religious contacts people emigrated from India to various parts of the world. The second type is diaspora of colonial period where Indians emigrated during colonial phase just after the ban on slavery which caused severe deficiency of labour for British and European colonies and consequently the birth of indentured labour took place. Unemployment was the major reason of becoming indentured labour and a large number of Indians were taken as indentured labour to other countries. Indentured labour was also a "new system of slavery." The third type of diaspora is postcolonial diaspora which is completely different from ancient and colonial diaspora. This migration can be called professional migration where migrants are skilled and educated and saw opportunities in abroad especially in developed countries.

Themes based on diasporic subject entice Indian film makers a lot and this is the key motivation to them to make such films exploring the issues associated with immigrants. After the colonial period Hindi cinema gained strength and popularity internationally but during the era of 90s and after 2000 a major trend changing period came into existence in regard to Indian cinema where film makers started doing experiments with themes and the subject of diaspora was also one of the popular and prominent areas for them. Second generation diaspora came into the existence prominently and thereafter Hindi movies based on diaspora hit the celluloid and the issues which are emphasized in these movies are feeling of nostalgia, cultural conflicts, sense of belongingness, longing for actual home, identity crisis and assimilation. The negotiation between new found lands and forsaken homelands is represented in these movies well.

Postcolonial Indian cinema is changing swiftly and this change is visible in the cinema of early days to present era. In every decade the changes are taking place. Be it science and technology or changing images of women from subjugated to empowered self or diaspora of first generation and second generation, the effect of rapid change is visible in postcolonial cinema. Indian cinema has been one of the most dominant and distinguishing features of the

subcontinent's culture for the past sixty years. And, as Indians continue to seek out jobs and educational opportunities worldwide, they are bringing these cultural artefacts with them. Bollywood films try to create a space where the traditions of India can be portrayed. Though the images of diaspora portrayed in these movies are not completely true yet it fascinates the audience.

In reality "the real India continues to grow as a culture beyond the imagined traditional and colonial paradigms assigned to it." (<http://www.browngirlmagazine.com/2016/06/the-indian-diaspora-through-the-eyes-of-bollywood/>). However, the blending of nostalgia and tradition is portrayed in such a way, that audience is compelled to watch the imagined portrayals. The issues of constructing and maintaining the cultural identity among second generation Indian immigrants is well depicted by these films. The Namesake, Bride and Prejudice, Mistress of spices, Queen, English Vinglish, etc. are some of the films which showed diaspora differently.

Mira Nair's film The Namesake, which is based on the novel of same name by Jhumpa Lahiri, transcends the previous standard of immigrants' story portraying the perspective of first generation and second generation Diasporas, their rebellion and cultural conflicts. Based on the Indian American diaspora, the story of The Namesake reveals the trauma and experiences of a Bengali immigrant family in America. Ashoke Ganguli who represents first generation of diaspora has been studying in America for the past two years. In order to marry with Bengali Girl, he goes back to his hometown, Calcutta, India, and marries a Bengali girl, Ashima. They start their new journey in USA where they become parent of two children a son Gogol and a daughter Sonia. However this good going story confronts turmoil when first generation wants to practise their tradition while the second generation considers themselves American-Indians by discarding old tradition of their parents and forsaken countries and eventually conflicted by identity crisis. Ashima who represents first generation, seems to defy the new culture and follows her old traditions initially. Whether clothes or food she rarely seems to be compromising her culture yet progressively evolving and learning the essentials from the new setting.

The first generation representatives had their marriage arranged in India, consummated and continued in the US while second generation is rebellious. Gogol Ganguli is the example of second generation diaspora who is an American-Indian boy and confronts the awkward situation where he has to situate himself with present American culture but has to carry the identity of an Indian as well. Eventually he is carrying a hyphenated identity. In this film it portrayed that the first generation of immigrants does not want to abandon their traditions easily whereas the second generation is ready to accept the new culture in which they are born and brought up. The predicament concerning to Gogol's identity is complex in the plot as he possesses a Russian name of his father's choice, which soon becomes a matter of scoffs to him and later he changes his name to Nikhil. Changing name also symbolises the change in relationship between son and parents. However, this changed name is also not pronounced

correctly and analysing this, there emerges the issue of “denial of difference and the denial of sameness” (Shohat and Stam, p.24). With the passage of time and after his father’s death Nikhil realises that following his culture is an indispensable part of his life and “finally able to culturally situate himself” on the other hand Ashima also changes her frame of mind and becomes permissive about her daughter marrying a non-Indian boy. By the end it is revealed that immigrants are negotiating their identity in foreign land. In the movie *The Namesake* it is exhibited that the combination of two cultures becomes your identity and cultural identity for an immigrant becomes a negotiation in a multicultural society.

The Mistress of spices is also a movie which is based on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s book *The Mistress of spices*, one of the most famous books of diaspora. In this movie we can find the combination of both cultures adapted by Indian immigrants. The aspects dealing with diaspora can easily be seen in the movie where first of all the changing names of characters remind us the western culture as Tilotama becomes Tilo, Jagjit becomes Jaggi . After that multiculturalism shown in the movie also gives the glimpse of diaspora as we encounter the lives of Geeta, Jagjit and Mrs. Ahuja or Lalita. In this movie Indian tradition, culture and magical realism are portrayed magnificently that the global audience can easily be familiar with the richness of the spices in India as well as how magic is also part of their lives to resolve their daily problems. Besides these issues the movie also reveals the problems faced by immigrants in new found lands. The problem of Rootlessness, loss of cultural values and marginalization are also portrayed well in this movie. Immigrant characters show racial attacks and their consequences, marrying outside Indian community and as an outcome non acceptance of the person in family, conflicts between first and second generation diaspora and feeling of isolation in alien land. A continuous struggle for identity by immigrants is visible in the movie and the protagonist also supports the notion of balancing a fine combination of Indian and American way of living. Hyphenation and isolation are the features of the lives of diaspora. The diasporic people face isolation and hyphenation from the mainstream due to the unsuitable and unreceptive atmosphere faced by them and their identities fall into and seek for their cultural spaces and “these cultural spaces are generally occupied by the Diasporas who hyphenated from their culture attempt to assimilate in other dominant culture with their ‘hybrid experience’ of diaspora” (Bijalwan 1).

Postcolonial Indian cinema has become very popular among international audience as well for which the praise goes to the evolution of communication technology and media. In addition a synthesis of Hollywood and Bollywood cinema made movies fascinating to international audience. The best example of such blending is the movie *Bride and Prejudice* which came in 2004, made by British Indian director Gurinder Chadha. This movie is based on Jane Austen’s classic novel *Pride and Prejudice*. This movie bridges the gap between two cultures. *Bride and Prejudice* is the best example of diaspora. The film revolves around an Indian girl Laita and an American businessman Darcy. The intercultural conflicts and characters’ prejudices about each other’s culture become obstruction for both of them to

come together. As soon as Darcy overcomes his prejudices he marries Lalita. The film points out the “otherness”. This movie is an example of hybrid cinema like diasporic people outside their homelands and best example of diasporic movie. The issues of hybrid culture and transnational identity emerges through such creations.

Asian immigrants’ experiences are filled with identity crisis, cultural conflicts, feeling of isolation and nostalgia. The films based on such subjects take our attention towards the significance of these issues and ultimately we see that the resolution in most of the movies is assimilation in the new land and becoming accustomed to an identity of hybrid culture. The cinema of diaspora expresses these sensitive issues time to time and we as an audience come across the turmoil and dilemma faced by the immigrants which also creates a concord to people who watch them as an audience. Nevertheless, it also comes into the light that exile is not always punishment but rewarding as well, especially when it is self chosen and unforced. Postcolonial Indian cinema plays a pivotal role in negotiating diasporic identities in which expatriate Indians demonstrate their assimilation in unreceptive culture.

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