



Cultural Identities and Diasporic Sensibilities: Representations in Indian Cinemas

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Abstract

Indian cinema has undergone significant transformations over the years. The study of Indian Cinema and the shifting perspectives in diasporic sensibilities is essential owing to the cultural diversities and linguistic complexities in the Indian sub-continent. The current paper explores the influence of the Indian diaspora on the Indian cinema and the industry's adaptation to these changes. It highlights the emergence of new markets, the exploration of diasporic themes, and the theories of cultural hybridity and globalization as relevant frameworks in the analysis of select movies from the Indian cinemas. The paper discusses the resilience of Indian cinema in overcoming challenges and the portrayal of diaspora and female resilience in Indian films. The works of renowned filmmakers Mira Nair, Kamal, and Gauri Shinde are analysed to examine their contributions to diasporic narratives and the portrayal of strong female characters in Indian Cinema. The paper also explores the relevance of cultural, spatial and linguistic concerns of the diasporic community and the resilient strategies addressed in Indian diasporic cinemas.

Keywords: cinema, diaspora, identity, resilience, culture.

1. Introduction

The concept of diaspora is complex and multifaceted, and it has been explored in various works of literature and cinema. "Diaspora" means the separation of inhabitants far away from their native land to various regions across the world. This separation results in a process of colliding with one's own identity and, as a result, a significant sense of both grief and dislocation. In recent years, films such as *Gaddama*, *The Namesake*, and *English Vinglish* have shed light on the diasporic experiences of individuals negotiating their identities in new and unfamiliar contexts. The displacement in space affects their identities because of the differences in culture. However, the nature in which they retain the native culture also matters when it comes to the extent of this feeling of displacement.

To understand the diasporic experiences of the characters in the films, it is essential to understand the theoretical framework of diaspora. Scholars such as Robin Cohen, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall have significantly contributed to the theorization of diaspora. Diaspora refers to "the dispersal, migration, or exile of people from their homelands" (Cohen 12). "The hybrid and creolized cultural identities that result from the diaspora" are noticeable in the selected texts (Gilroy 15). The trend, however, with respect to diasporic identities "are

continually evolving and changing” (Hall 3). The theories of diaspora developed by these scholars provide a critical lens to analyse the films.

Gaddama is a 2011 Indian film directed by Kamal that tells the story of a Keralite woman, Aswathi, who is forced to leave her home and family to work as a domestic servant in Saudi Arabia. The film highlights the exploitation and mistreatment of domestic workers, as well as the challenges of navigating cultural differences and adjusting to a new environment.

Gulf is a destination which pulls Keralites since dreams began to be marketed. In Kerala, it can be challenging to locate a household without any Gulf emigrants. A better standard of living has been attained by many struggling families thanks to these migrations. However, there are numerous instances of migrant workers being mistreated in the oil kingdom. *Gaddama* reveals to us the terrible suffering endured by our loved ones in the country from which Kerala draws its energy.

India has not been colonised by the Gulf nations. However, they treat foreign migrant workers in the same manner as colonial masters treated their subjects. Their knowledge and culture are viewed as inferior. They are acknowledged as "the opposite beyond scapegoating and belittlement, othering is a process. It adamantly denies the "other" those qualities that make them distinctive for the same reason, including dignity, love, and pride, as well as ultimately any claim to human rights. The Arab employers of the expatriates who travel to the Gulf states to perform bonded labour treat them like slaves. Despite being outlawed, slavery still exists and is covered up by the title "indentured labour." In *Gaddama*, the miserable conditions and uncertainty faced by migrant workers are vividly depicted:

Razak: Praise the Lord. You are here early, Mr Hamsa.

Hamsa: What happened, dear? I'm going to the embassy today. Soon your problem will be solved.

Razak: That Arab sponsor betrayed him.

Hamsa: He won't cheat anybody.

Razak: We know that, but the law doesn't. (*Gaddama* 15:46 - 16:00)

In Gulf nations, female household labourers are the community most susceptible to exploitation. They experience two forms of marginalisation: first as migrant workers, and then as women. *Gaddama* also discusses immigrant struggles. *Gaddama* is the Arabic term for domestic workers who travel to Arab homes to perform menial tasks. Most frequently, these gaddamas are thought to be living comfortably in the Gulf by their family members. But the secret cries that lie behind this name only surface every once in a while. The diasporic author K. U. Iqbal, screenwriter K. Gireesh Kumar, and director Kamal transport the audience on a long journey through the heartbreaking tale of one such gaddama in the film *Gaddama*. It represents the countless miserable lives of women who are compelled to hide their identities behind a black veil. The film aims to highlight the sacrifices made by women that history has overlooked. The news article "Subaida Vilikkunnu" by K. U. Iqbal, which was published in "Malayalam News" eight years ago, served as the inspiration for this film.

Aswathi's experience reflects the diasporic struggle of negotiating cultural differences and maintaining a sense of self. She faces discrimination and exploitation from her employers, who view her as inferior due to her nationality and job. Aswathi also experiences a sense of displacement and loss, as she is separated from her family and culture:

You cannot roam around in this outfit in Saudi once you go out of the airport. You must cover your head even if you're not a Muslim. It's a law in this country. Here, cover your head with this stole. And wipe off that bindi from your forehead. (*Gaddama* 05:55 - 06:08)

However, Aswathi's resilience and determination to maintain her cultural identity and sense of self are evident in her refusal to change her name to a more "Arabic" sounding name. This is a powerful statement against the erasure of cultural identities that often occurs in the diaspora. Aswathi's decision to maintain her identity reflects Gilroy's theory of hybrid and creolised cultural identities that emerge from the diaspora.

The Namesake is a 2006 Indian-American film directed by Mira Nair that tells the story of Gogol, the son of Indian immigrants to the United States. The film explores the struggle of second-generation immigrants to negotiate their identities in a culture that is different from that of their parents.

In this context, Nair's *The Namesake* asserts home and host as polar opposite concepts. Additionally, it turns to nation-statist associations that link the homeland with true identity, portraying diasporic life as being driven by homecoming longing. Similar to Lahiri, Nair uses rituals to represent the diaspora. Nair pays close attention to what some refer to as motherland rituals, in which diasporic persons are kept apart from their adopted places, in her quest for identity. Gogol's experience reflects the tension between his Indian heritage and American identity. He is given an Indian name, which he struggles to embrace, preferring to be called "Nick," a more American name:

- Is he going to be called Gogol in school? No. We have decided on a good name.

(woman): Finally. What is it? Nikhil, the all-encompassing one. Of course, they will turn it into Nick (*The Namesake* 26:00 - 27:13).

However, as he grows older, Gogol begins to explore and embrace his cultural heritage, leading to a greater understanding of his parent's experiences and a sense of pride in his identity.

When it comes to cinematography, Nair puts a lot of emphasis on weddings on screen, and her own movie *Monsoon Wedding* has contributed to making it a recognisable Indian symbol. It uses "America" as a humorous example of cultural separation, as in the case of a hotel manager who forbids the construction of an indoor wedding fire in his organisation. Additionally, Nair dwells on Ashok's memorial service and the ceremony that followed, during which his ashes were scattered in a river in Calcutta, creating a narrative of recompense in which the wandering Indian is once more accepted by and integrated into the natural domestic landscape. At least the majority of these rituals must take place completely in India, and the funeral that does occur in the Ganguli's home in the United States establishes a dichotomy between this society and the nation-state that it inhabits. By having Maxine, Gogol's American girlfriend, arrive at a Hindu funeral where the grieving families are wearing white, Nair uses her as a visual representation of the fundamental differences between India and America. She misinterprets the proper tone of the proceedings when she attempts to touch Gogol's face, contrasts her bare arms with the shawls wrapped tightly around other mourners' shoulders, and addresses the main character of the movie as Nick while everyone else calls him Gogol.

The Taj Mahal is used as a symbol of home in one of Nair's most overt references to India. The Taj Mahal, an instantly identifiable image that evokes a generalised India, was used to symbolise this idea of the native land in the promotional materials used to advertise the movie even before it was actually released:

Ashima: Just imagine how much Shah Jahan must have loved Mumtaz to make this for her.

Ashoke: Other husbands also love their wives, Ashima.

Ashima: Only we cannot afford to build Taj Mahal.

Ashoke: Guess what. I think I'm gonna major in architecture.

Ashima: What about engineering?

Ashoke: Come on, baba. Architecture has everything. It's got engineering, drawing, aesthetics.

Ashima: Our family Shah Jahan. (*The Namesake* 48:34 - 49:08)

The tagline of the movie, "The greatest journeys are the ones that bring you home," appears in the official trailer, which cuts between shots of the Taj Mahal in India and scenes of the main characters in the United States. The DVD cover notably displays this same tagline and places Gogol (Kal Penn) between the Taj Mahal and the New York skyline, emphasising the more clichéd interpretation.

The movie makes it clear that Maxine cannot be a member of Gogol's family because, in addition to not fitting in, she is Gogol's visual, conceptual, and cultural opposite. Nair thus depicts the interaction or conflict between ideologically antagonistic India and America as inevitably defining the Gangulis' immigrant experience. The Indian diaspora may be noticeable in this country, but India is the true home.

The film highlights the idea of "double consciousness" as described by W.E.B. Du Bois. Gogol's struggle to negotiate his Indian and American identities is a manifestation of this concept, as he is constantly navigating between two cultural worlds. The film also reflects Hall's theory of continually evolving and changing diasporic identities, as Gogol's understanding of his cultural identity evolves throughout the film.

Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* deals with the story of Shashi, who suffered insult and degradation from her own family only because of her ignorance of the English language. Shashi decides to take English classes in New York to gain confidence and independence, leading to a journey of self-discovery.

Transnational movement within specific diaspora networks aids in closing the divide between theories of international relations and international migration. These theories specify what it means to have power over something. Because of migration, more people now subscribe to and adopt Western philosophies and practices. But settling in a foreign country, engaging in non-traditional practices, and lamenting the loss of one's home country introduces something of a paradox of American power. Almost the entire world has been seduced by this ideology of soft power into thinking that what is projected must be accepted. The dilemma in the choice between English and Hindi shows people's displacement due to diasporic tradition:

Father Vincent: Sapna's performance continues to be excellent...

Shashi: Sir... sorry... father... my English not good. If you don't mind, can we talk in Hindi?

Father Vincent: Of course Mrs Godbole...Hindi is our national language. We should all speak in it, but my Hindi not very good; is that okay? (*English Vinglish* 13:50 - 14:16)

Shashi's experience reflects the diasporic struggle of negotiating language and cultural differences. She faces discrimination and humiliation from her family due to her inability to speak English, which is seen as a marker of success and modernity. However, her journey to New York and her interactions with people from different cultures lead to a greater understanding of herself and her own worth. Shashi portrays a very patient and caring mother in the film who, like all mothers, sends her children off to school each day with an eye towards good health and hygiene. She makes their morning meals, packs their lunches, and asks about their daily activities and college. It is evident that the daughter treats her mother less kindly than she does her father. She discredits her mother for not speaking English::

- Don't be dramatic, mom.
- Do you even know what PTA means?
- No. I may not know the meaning of PTA, but I certainly know the meaning of a parent. (*English Vinglish* 11:53 - 12:04)

When we look at the movie's direction, we can see how the director has presented New York's high-end brands throughout the whole song. High-end brands not only convey the main ideas of a Western ideology, but we can also observe how capitalism intrudes on people's thoughts. No Gandhian or Marxist ideals can stop the spread of Western ideology. Not only do migrants fall into it, but they also start moving in its direction.

The film highlights the power dynamics and cultural biases that exist within diasporic communities, as well as the intersection of gender and language in the diaspora. Shashi's journey also reflects the idea of "mimicry," as described by Homi Bhabha, where colonised people adopt the language and culture of the colonisers in an attempt to assimilate and gain power. Shashi's journey to learn English is a manifestation of this concept, but ultimately, she uses her newfound confidence to assert her own cultural identity and challenge the cultural biases of her family:

- She's gone to Cafe Coffee Day with her friends... she's having cold coffee.
- Aren't you gotten angry?
- Not 'gotten'...getting...
- I am not getting angry... (*English Vinglish* 08:14 - 08:26)

She intensely misses her kids and can't stop thinking about them when she's in New York. Shashi experiences a sense of diaspora because of the close connection and yearns for a reunion. She is seen to be unable to acclimatise to her unfamiliar surroundings. Later joining her, her daughter adjusts more easily and is more optimistic about the land. Her daughter is seen making fun of her mother's failure to comprehend English even while they are in New York. Therefore, it doesn't appear that the characters' depictions of separation have a caring nature.

All of Shashi's family members – her husband, her children, even – are apparently drawn to everything around them in the outside world. Whether it be the buildings, the systems, or the people and their language, they have a tendency to view it as something majestic rather than something foreign. It has been observed that her sister and her daughters, who have made their homes there, find everything to be ideal; this is how the doctrines have established it.

In comparison to Shashi's family and her sister's family, the mother-daughter relationship is very divergent. Although her sister's daughters, a bit older than Shashi's, have a unique and more mature relationship with their mother, they have lived in New York for a while and have assimilated its customs and culture. They are aware of the differences and act more idealistically towards everyone. When we are at home, we assume that everyone will respect our standards and customs. But it is obvious that this conception is completely incorrect. We could also view it in a way that illustrates a loss of familiarity and the irrational, unconscious, and unconscious actions taken to recreate those lost principles and practices.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the films *Gaddama*, *The Namesake*, and *English Vinglish* explore the diasporic experiences of individuals negotiating their identities in new and unfamiliar contexts. Through the theoretical framework of diaspora, the films highlight the challenges of negotiating cultural and linguistic differences, the power dynamics and cultural biases that exist within diasporic communities, and the continually evolving and changing nature of diasporic identities. These films provide a powerful representation of the diasporic experience and offer insights into the complex negotiation of identities that occurs in the diaspora.

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