

BOLLYWOOD: EMBODIMENT OF INDIANNESS IN THE DIASPORA

SURABHI K

Ph. D Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora,
University of Hyderabad, India

ABSTRACT

Commercial Hindi cinema plays a central role in the negotiation of national identity. With the rise of Hindu nationalism, the Non Resident Indian (NRI) became the epitome of *Indianness* and inculcated Hindu traditionalism, patriarchy and modernity. Popular Hindi Cinema was first made in India in 1913 and portrayed a central role in the formulation of national identity. It thus becomes the strongest agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure and sociality (Therwath 2010). A few films like *DilwaleDulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)*, Aditya Chopra 1995), *Pardes* (SubhashGhai 1997), *KuchKuchHota Hai* (Karan Johar 1998), *KabhiKhushiKabhieGham (K3G)*, Karan Johar 2001) are some of the examples. Therwath in his “‘Shining Indians’: Diaspora and Exemplarity in Bollywood” quotes Yash Chopra during his address at the 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 2003).

KEYWORDS: Indianness, Shining Indians, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas

INTRODUCTION

In *PurabAurPaschim*, the young hero played by Manoj Kumar is called Bharat [India] who embodies nation in himself. He visits London to meet the Sharmas, friends of his father. Mrs. Sharma brought up in England, drinks, smokes and calls her husband ‘Darling’. According to the Hindu norms, the wife should not use her husband’s first name and always treat him as *god*. Their daughter Preeti too like her mother smokes and drinks wears mini-skirts and, has dyed her hair blond. Manoj Kumar, who is also the film’s director, tries to screen a metropolis which is obsessed by consumerism and sex. In these conditions, emigration can only be shown as a negative phenomenon where one loses his/her traditional values (Therwath 2010). The film in this way suggests that women should preserve the three virtues such as *sharm, lihaz, izzat* [shame, modesty, honour] within them. In addition, the emigrant is never accused of forgetting his roots and values; it is the host country and the Western culture that are for it. Ideal Indians thus becomes deterritorialized models of national identity. Punathambekar in his article “Bollywood in the Indian –American Diaspora” tries a thematic reading of K3G where he says K3G tries to position the diaspora in to the fold of a “great Indian family” – this shows the everyday struggles over being Indian in US. The migrant tries to re-craft a sense of community and cultural identity in new contexts. Also, the expatriate don’t want the movies to show the real India, they don’t want to see the ¹*gandhagi* all the time. The Indian land is always shown to be pure with beautiful landscape.

In the Popular cinema the fact that the protagonist belongs to the nation is constantly underlined through the use of the possessive pronoun before the words ‘country’, ‘India’ or ‘Hindustan’ and, despite going through all types of

¹gandhagi is dirt and uncleanliness

ordeals, his *Indianness* is always reaffirmed at the end of the film. For instance, the rich American of Indian origin played by AmrishPuri in SubhashGai's *Pardes* sings 'I Love My India' and recites 'KaramMera India, DharamMera India, VatanMera India, SajanMera India' [India is my destiny, India is my religion, India is my motherland, India is my beloved]. As for the expatriates in *DDLJ*, they talk with great emotion of 'apnadesh' [my country], 'meri hi mitti' [my soil], 'hamaredeshkimitti' [our country's soil]. Long tracking landscape shots and quickly alternating views from India and abroad testify to this desire to recreate a new geography. The first scene in *DDLJ* is a perfect illustration of this technique. As the viewer discovers BaldevSingh (AmrishPuri), in the introductory monologue saying 'apnadesh', 'apna Punjab' [my country, my Punjab] while he feeds the doves in England and the camera moves from an easily identifiable Square to an unidentified Punjabi mustard field with young ²*shalwarqamiz*-clad girls running all over the fields singing 'GharAajaPardesi' [Come back home, outsider] (Therwath 2010).

HrithikRoshan in *K3G* is depicted to be a "super hero." When he steps into London, India's national song, *VandeMataram*, can be heard in the background. Young girls run in orange, white and green *shalwarqamiz* which represent the color of the Indian national flag. Some girls in the background perform a few Bharatnatyam moves too. In *DDLJ* after the two young and unmarried Raj and Simran have a drunken night in Switzerland and Raj lets her believe that they have slept together, she bursts into tears of rage and covers her face in shame. At that moment Raj reassures her telling:

"....Main ek Hindustani hunaur main jantahunkiek Hindustani larkikiizzatkyahotihai. Main sapnemeinbhitumharesathaisiharkatnahikarsaktaSimran..." [I am an Indian and I know what her honour means to an Indian girl. Even in my dreams I could not do something like that to you]. The hero portrayed as the one who even in a foreign land sticks to the *Indianness* by upholding his patriarchal values. Also in *Pardes*, the family of Baldev Singh inculcates Indian values and traditions even when settled abroad. All these examples relate the typical NRI portrayed in the Bollywood with the so called *Indianness* inculcated within him.

In Indian cinema, the idea of NRI households maintaining a certain level of Indian tradition is usually personified in the role of women. Cinema has restricted feminine sexuality within the confines of a nation state. For instance, in SubhasGai's *Pardes* (1997) the heroine's name "Ganga" itself depicts the purity and cultured behavior attributed upon her. They are expected to be traditional and cultured who could bring back the spoilt NRI husbands in the right track. The movie has created the 'synecdoche relationship between purity/ sanctity of women and the purity/ sanctity of the nation' (Ram 2002). In *K3G*, Kajol in her foreign house is shown holding a worship platter in her hands, singing 'SareJahan Se Accha' [The best country in the world]. She bows down before a very large portrait of her parents-in-law, does ³*puja* in the dawn and is the only character who wears traditional attire. Patriarchy is clearly visible in the film when Simran is engaged to an Indian man of her father's choice whom she has never met. Moreover the family is strictly under the patriarchal rule of the father figure enacted by AmrishPuri. Simran and her sister dance in western music till the father figure arrives and they hurry up to recite the ⁴*bajans*. Also, Simran is the one who desires to elope with Raj indicating that when a woman's sexual impulses when let free runs wild and requires a male to control it. This demonstrates a severe lack of autonomy in her character. It is Simran's father and her lover Raj who guard her sexuality to protect the culture and tradition of homeland within the West. Similarly in Karan Johar's *K3G*, the character of Kareena Kapoor as Pooja first appears is in her

² a traditional suit for women

³ A religious ritual worshipped by Hindus as an offering to various deities.

⁴ prayers offered to god

miniskirt dancing. Later when she falls for Rohan, he immediately begins pulling her towards his cultural space, having her sing morning prayers and encouraging her to wear *salwaarkameez*. Here male becomes the protector of female sexuality who carries traditional values of the homeland and imposes that upon the females. The South-Asian femininity portrays ideal women adorned in a sari, her forehead dotted with a red ⁵*bindi*, representing *Mother India*. The heroines are always beautiful but sexually constrained and controlled by male. Their voice is ultimately suppressed to establish male patriarchy and the national culture. They are made or expected to retain all the cultural values and traditions as she represents the *Mother India*. “Threats to the Indian woman are threats to the nation itself; Indian womanhood represents the nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family”(Sanjena 2013).

In Mani Rathnam’s *Roja* (1992), the heroine does not move to States but moves to city from a traditional village. The movement is not just a physical movement but there is a movement within her. The heroine who was a vibrant, talkative girl becomes a calm traditional wife always in sari according to the traditional Hindu wife who is matured and caring. This also adds to the norms that are attributed upon females, who become matured when it’s her part to play the role of a wife.

In most of these films discussed here, there is objectification of women’s body as a sex object and often only deal with female subject through the lens of relationship rather than as an independent subject. For the NRI male, the woman in Bollywood cinema is a space onto which they rediscover tradition. Mythological conception of the woman informs Bollywood representation of “ideal” women figure like ⁶*Sita*, Ram’s docile, obedient wife or the pure *BharathMatha*.

Punathambekar in “Bollywood in the Indian-American Diaspora” talks about two key shifts in the manner in which *Indianness* is being imagined and acted upon. First relates to Paratha Chatterjee’s notion of interior space of the “home” or the “separation of social space” into *ghar*(home/ inner) and *bahir*(outer/world). Chatterjee argues that the “home/inner” came to signify a domain that resisted “western” influences, maintained the “inner core of national culture”, the very essence of “national identity.” This works well with Indian Diaspora.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the influence of Hindi cinema in shaping the politics of identity. It demonstrates how Hindi film narratives, viewing practices and patterns of socialization create a notion of *Indianness*. It shows how cinema becomes a cultural unifier. 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). It is noteworthy that the motivations of the Indian media system in relation to NRIs become increasingly complex as the latter contributes more and more to the nationalistic, traditional and patriarchal view of India.

REFERENCES

1. Therwath, Ingrid. 2010. “‘Shining Indians’: Diaspora and Exemplarity in Bollywood”. *South Asia Mutidisciplinary Academic Journal*. 4 (2010), 1-10.

⁵ a bright dot worn on the forehead especially by Indian woman

⁶wife of lord Ram in the Hindu epic Ramayana. *Sita* is considered to be the epitome of wifely and womanly virtues.

2. Punathambekar, Aswin. 2005. "Bollywood in the Indian- American Diaspora: Mediating a transitive logic of cultural citizenship." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 8(2). 151-173.
3. Sathian, Sanjena. 2013. *Gender and Nation in the South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Cultural Spaces in Bollywood Cinema*. Available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cujzas/SATHIAN.pdf>, [Accessed on 13.11.2015]
4. Niranjana, Tejaswini. 1994. "Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in *Roja*." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(3), 79-82.