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DESH/VIDESH: NAMASTE LONDON AND THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL IMAGINARY

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ABSTRACT

Cinema has been widely acclaimed as one of the most popular agencies through which culture has been transmitted and transported to various parts of the world. It has been instrumental in creating and maintaining an 'imaginary' culture that which promoted a oneness among the diasporic communities as well as in the homeland. This highly relatable culture has enabled even the second and third generation people in the host county to get in touch with their roots and ethnicity. Namaste London has been successful in satiating this unique hunger in a tremendous way. This article is an in-depth examination of the nuances and modalities that are involved in the creation and maintenance of an imagined culture.

KEYWORDS: Cinema; transnational cinema; Bollywood; imaginary culture; diaspora; cultural studies

The term culture bespeaks the wide extent of experiences, ways of thinking and feeling and about the values, traditions and customs of the group that one thinks he belongs to. In Avtar Brah's opinion, no single definition can define the term 'culture'. It can be explained simply as the symbolic creation of the extensive arrangement of a particular social group's life experience. It records the group history and embodies the essence of it. Brah also identifies certain common features that various group cultures share among themselves which is the result of certain economic and socio-political factors. Class, caste and gender too play a prominent role in the cultural production. With religion as a base, history interconnects various groups of the society into one, forming similar cultural patterns common for all.

Cultural difference is the outcome of various social processes that can never be considered as unproblematic. This differentiation is the result of a variety of factors working in the crevices of economic and socio-political relations. One can notice the emergence of the highly valued culture from that group that has a better access to power, wealth and privilege. But that does not mean that the culture belonging to the subordinate groups are subjugated or they are not part of the cultural transactions. These subordinate groups find ways through which they can express and communicate their feelings. John Clarke and his co-workers points out that in such a situation, all the other subordinate cultures will try to question, change, argue or even to over

throw its hegemonic status. "The dominant culture of a complex society is never a homogenous structure. It is layered, reflecting different interests within the dominant class (e.g., an aristocratic versus a bourgeois outlook), containing different traces from the past (e.g., religious ideas within a largely secular culture) as well as emergent elements in the present." (Clarke, J. 12). So, cultural discourse should be understood in relation with the power politics among various groups.

The concept of identity, just like culture, is equally a slippery one with a constant transformation happening to its dimension day by day. The notion of identity differentiates 'us from them' and it is not the same in every situation. According to Brah (1996), so far only E. H. Erickson (1968) and P. L. Berger and T. Luckman (1971) has come out with some success while defining the term 'identity'. Erickson calls it a procedure 'located' in the vital region of the individual and a feeling that initiates similarity and progression. He further adds up that identity formation as a process is unconscious most of the times in which both the inner and outer factors combine together to create an aching or exhilarated 'identity consciousness'. Keeping in mind these findings, Berger and Luckman (1971) stated that actuality is a social construction and even though an individual faces multiple realities every day, one single factor is always taken as the acceptable reality. This accepted reality consisting of a group of meanings, is shared among others.

Stuart Hall in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" defines identity as something which is not translucent or uncomplicated. Apart from considering identity as an already attained entity, Hall insists on considering identity as a creation which is never absolute, always in action and always composed within and not outside representation. To make the notion clearer, he proposes two methods to analyse and understand the concept of cultural identity. The first method is to consider cultural identity as part of a shared culture which individuals with a shared history and ancestry have in common. Such cultural identities mirror our common experiences and shared cultural signifiers that unify those who share the same and thereby providing them with fixed, unchanging and free flowing codes of meaning. This oneness must be the thing that diaspora should unearth, locate and highlight through cinematic representation. This aspect of cultural identity, according to Hall, is the differences that comprise 'what we really are', or in a better aspect 'what we have become'. "Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225).

Rather than stuck in the essentialized interpretation, cultural identities are subjected to the nuances of history, power and culture. Hall insists that these identities are not concerned only about the unearthing of the past but rather, cultural identities are the attributes we provide to the variety of methods in which we are placed within the narratives of the past. This realization will help to analyse and assimilate the real traumatic and painful colonial experience while representing it

cinematically. This regime of power in connection with the 'West' in South Asian Diasporic discourse belongs to the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge couplet and this particular kind of knowledge is internal and not external. "It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the 'Other' of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge' not only as a matter of imposed will and domination by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226).

Displacement marks diaspora into a specific category with its members linked to a mobile culture or a culture that has journeyed to somewhere new and developing an identity that is an amalgamation of the past and the present. Diaspora includes the fusion of migrancy and pursued cultural bonding that specify certain racial, national and ethnic groups that are disbanded all over the world, due to the after effects of modern imperialism. One of the prominent features of the diasporic experience is the premonition of being trapped between two worlds. As Salman Rushdie says in "Imaginary Homelands": "[S]ometimes we feel that we fall between two stools" (431). Contrarily, diasporic subjects have only an 'imaginary homeland' that subsists in narratives and repressed snippets of memory and the other emigrants will always be considered, concomitantly, as 'insiders and outsiders'. The feeling of being neither here nor there leads to a sense of alienation in the diasporic subject and results in a strong bonding between the members of the community.

The sense of shared history is often prevalent among them and also an imaginary link to a fantasised homeland which, according to Vijay Mishra in "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorising the Indian Diaspora", and is usually described in terms of 'ethnic homogeneity' (448). According to him, "Diasporas very often construct racist fictions of purity as a kind of … pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the reality of the homelands themselves." (449). These narratives help the diasporic subjects to surpass the painful despair of estrangement and intense nationalism helps them to ward off the damages done by exile by allocating to them an ideological elixir for their almost lost heritage.

According to Mishra, these fantasy homelands compensate for the loss happened due to the traumatic displacement. It is the notions of national and cultural identity that serves to bind the diasporic communities together. According to Avtar Brah, "…all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common we" ("Thinking Through" 444). Brah insists upon the prevalence of the connections between numerous diasporic communities and she points out a 'common we' that which has to be taken into consideration. Further, Brah proposes the existence of shared cultural practices, shared narratives and shared power selections. Brah proposes further a convergence of narratives that provide for the creation of an 'imagined community' out of a particular diaspora. She points out certain narratives that are distinctive to a specific Diaspora which are endlessly "...

lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory" ("Thinking Through" 444).

The diasporic narratives and the communities they signify are accidental, flexible and reliant on social practices that are ceaselessly amended and in motion. Even though these communities make use of these improvisational methods to get along and adjust with the host society, there are many works confirming and authenticating the fact that diasporic narratives are improvised narratives. Here, it is worth quoting the exact words of Brah that "... the identity of a diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given" and that the identity is always "constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life (and) in the everyday stories that we tell each other individually and collectively" ("Thinking Through" 444). But Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors argue that the term diaspora can be defined in a better way as a "traveling culture' as it means a culture that changes, develops and transforms itself according to the various influences it encounters in different places" (Ashcroft 427).

According to Edward Said (2006) and Vijay Mishra (2006), diasporas are frequently positioned on the idea that dispersed cultures are prone to conceptualize 'imaginary homelands' into narratives that are disputably excluded and periodically racist. Thus, a diaspora is something of an extemporization itself, constructed from narratives and movements that share segments of lack of prediction and a powerful adaptive element.

Bollywood cinema, with its glorious history, has played a prominent role in the creation of a national identity as well as a collective cultural imaginary among the diasporic subjects. According to Appadurai, "... film is perhaps the simple strongest agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality…" ("Public Modernity‖ 8). As Ashis Nandy points out, "… 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." ("The Secret" 7).

Beginning as a counter-model, the NRI (Non Resident Indian) became the symbol of the Indian achiever asserting his ethnic identity in the global arena and who is a successful, male, wealthy, family-based, techno-savvy and above all a Hindu, all at once. Bollywood movies began providing the diasporic subjects their long- awaited prominence and position in the Indian society through new practices or by rejuvenating the old ones. The movies that came after 1991 dealt with themes dealing with the diaspora and their nationalist, ethnic and cultural discourses and they glorified the NRI as the emergent middle class with the best intentions of his homeland in mind. In one way or the other, cinema acts a medium for the endorsement, instruction and dispersal of the nationalist discourse that proclaims the righteousness of consumerism and constancy of cosmopolitanism. There validations and qualifications are transmitted to the diasporic communities

through cinema and using these movies as a base, the South Asian diasporic communities create a cultural imaginary that helps them to reconnect with their homeland and in bringing a sense of 'self' in the host society.

As far as Bollywood is concerned, these culturally transmitted ideals and ethics play a decisive factor in the character determination and identity formation of the second and third generation diasporic subjects all over the globe. The 'ideal' South Asian identity got crystallized in the Bollywood movies and it projected and transmitted the same into the living rooms of the NRI's in a tremendous way that led to the production of an imaginary homeland concept in their minds. As Dwyer and Patel point out: "part of its habit and speech, dress and manners, back ground and foreground" ("Cinema India"8). The prominent theme dealt by the Bollywood cinema has been the diasporic imaginary and the hopeless struggles faced by the frustrated first-generation South Asians in their attempt to retain the South Asian moral principles within societies which include second generation diasporic subjects, who have little or no affinity and attachment with the sub- continent and its ideologies. Repeatedly these movies pictured the transnational South Asian as "more traditional and culturally authentic than their counterparts in India" (Ganti, "Bollywood" 43). This led to the production of a particular type of cultural imaginary in both the diasporic communities as well as those in the sub-continent. Bollywood movies, dealing with diasporic themes and subjects, created a unique kind of imaginary culture amongst

the diasporic subjects about the concept of homeland and its qualities.

Diasporic consciousness is a composite mixture of myriad forces like ethnic, cultural, national entities and some of the psychological issues that came into existence because of the displacement. According to Appadurai's 'theory of rupture', media and migration acts as two poles of influence on how modern subjectivities are imagined. He argues that the electronic media such as the cinema, provides new material "for self- imagining as an everyday social project" and thus producing "communities of sentiment" ("Modernity at Large" 8). This is somewhat identical to Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' which claim that it is possible to distinguish "by the style in which they are imagined" ("Imagined Communities" 6).

Like Appadurai, Anderson's work also accentuates the historical part played by the media in validating communities to come up to the fact that they are related to themselves as well as to others "in profoundly new ways" ("Imagined Communities" 37). Steven Vertovec elaborated these views by describing the 'diasporic consciousness' as a feeling of relationship across disseminated domains that provide members of a particular diasporic community with numerous allusion points through which they recognize both a homeland and their country of settlement ("Three Meanings of Diaspora" 147). In short, Bollywood movie consumption "facilitates and mobilizes the transnational imagination and helps to create new ways for consumers to think of themselves as

Asian" (Cayla 216). An imaginary cultural ethnicity and identity too is imbibed in the community minds and affects the diaspora in very individual and local ways, depending upon their individual explicative frame works. Therefore, these movies help the subjects in identifying their homelands as well as their land of settlement or what Clifford in his work Diasporas describes as 'discrepant cosmopolitanism', in which subjects encounter existential presence and involvement in South Asia as well as in the host societies. Hence, Bollywood helps them in understanding the homeland and incorporate it into their identity projects and also to ensure that the traditional value of the sub-continent is always present in the process of self- monitorization.

An obligation to adhere to the homeland values is portrayed in the Bollywood movies by representing the sub-continent as the 'exotic Other' which is in opposition to the values of the western society. It helps the diasporic subjects to keep in touch with their culture and imbibe the adequate behaviour and role enactments that their South Asian culture demands them. All these point towards what Vertovec describes as "diaspora as a mode of cultural production" ("Three Meanings"153) through which a type of diasporic consciousness transpires in the oncoming generation members of the diasporic communities. The world envisaged by the Bollywood as a social and cultural entity helps its audience to connect with the subcontinent of their collective imagination and acts as a link that replaces the actuality living in the continent. Thus, Bollywood communicates to an imagined community that is restricted and sovereign at the same time.

The Bollywood movie Namaste London (2007) directed by Vipul Amruthlal Shah, coalesces 'Namaste' that suggests a South Asian welcoming part with that of 'London', suggesting a diasporic interference. The first impression of this movie will be the portrayal of the East/West dichotomy but a deeper probe leads to the artistic and splendid representation of the cultural imaginary that Bollywood constructs in the national as well as in the diasporic scapes. What makes Namaste London unique is the change in the role-play; it is the male character who is moving from the Indian sub-continent to the United Kingdom, London. Usually, gender migration happens as a result of marriage, and women, in particular, are forced to leave behind their homeland and accompany their consecutive spouses to the various parts of the world.

The director of this movie, Shah, took the gargantuan risk of a male lead leaving the homeland, accompanying his wife, anticipating a beautiful and bountiful life in London. In a nutshell, Namaste London is about a girl who was brought up in London and who has almost severed her Indian roots and her father taking her to the homeland and making her marry a person out of her choice. East colliding with the West is the peripheral understanding of this movie but a further reading showcases the imaginary cultural traits embedded in its narrative, that helps the diasporic as well as the audience at home, spun out the dream like tales from which one derives pleasure and satisfaction. Bollywood has seen many a number of movies that deals with the glorification and hailing of the sanctity of the homeland. This entire movie is about

the task undertaken by the hero bringing the woman, back into her ethnicity and understanding and appreciating her roots.

As the nationalist narrative's adherence to the male protagonist taking all hardships in inculcating the purity and morality of the subcontinent in the way-ward female protagonist, Namaste London too revolves around Arjun's (Akshay Kumar) pain and hardship in bringing back Jazz (Katrina Kaif) back to her core kinship and national identityThe whole movie is shot in London, portraying the glaring contrasts it exhibits with the sub-continent. It is a celebration of the ultimate 'man' or the 'mard'(in Hindi) who inculcates all the essential essences of his nation and his strict adherence to its values and spreading it where ever he migrates to. Through the various characters, what the director has done is the fabrication of an illusory culture of the West which appeals and rises up to the imaginary standards of the audience back in the sub-continent. On the other hand, Arjun is the ideal hero, who represents the homeland to its fullest with his aura and heroism. The female protagonist is the representative of the second or third generation diasporic subjects who are in a dilemma about what to choose and what to follow. Sometimes they are ashamed of their cultural belonging and in order to gain the inclusion into the western society, they change their identity and attitude. There are instances where some characters having second thoughts about choosing exile over their home land. The clichéd patriotism evoking scenes makes the movie a blockbuster among the diasporic communities because of the imagined reality that it creates for the communities

back here in the sub-continent as well abroad.

Namaste London is one of the finest examples for standardising the role played by Bollywood in the maintenance of an imagined identity and culture in the diasporic communities. Bollywood provides an ample space for these communities in negotiating and reconciling various issues faced by the diasporic subjects both collectively as well as individually. It offers the diasporic subjects a particular imaginary reality that helps them to reconcile with their Eastern and Western relationship ideals and oppositional cultural discourses. Through reaffirming the pride in their homeland's heritage, evoking longing and romance and reinforcing family values and a sense of kinship, Bollywood feeds the creative and imaginative escapist mentality of the audience at home and those settled abroad. It clearly acts as a reference point for young third generation diasporic individuals while seeking an understanding and assimilation of their roots and South Asianess even though they maintain an aloofness about the part played by these movies in their identity construction. Bollywood has become an internationally recognised obsession for the South Asian Diasporic people since they attain both pleasure and instruction/ideology while watching movies belong to this category.

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