

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 1, January 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Gender and Sexuality in Diaspora: A Deliberation on 21st Century Bollywood.

Abstract:

Gender and sexuality plays an integral role in Bollywood where the scopophilic pleasures of the spectators are much catered for its wide viewership, creative appeal and transnational marketing. Over the years, there occurred a wide variety of progressive advancements and technological innovations in the Indian film industry. The initial years of the 21st century witnessed a considerable increase in representations of the diasporic Indians and of the West in many movies. Though the depiction of foreign locations and life in exile, such movies provide the diaspora a glimpse back into their homeland which aids them cope with the sense of loss caused by dislocation from the culture and tradition of the homeland. This paper attempts to analyse this trend in Bollywood with the aid of well renowned movies like, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*(1995), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*(2001), *Dostana*(2008), among others, with prime focus on the altering representations of gender and sexuality.

Key Words: bollywood, culture, diaspora, gender, sexuality, woman

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘diaspora’ has become a powerful discourse for producing knowledge about nation, migration, displacement and transnationalism. The diaspora space has become a critical means for understanding global and transnational processes within the post-colonial

nation state. “The concept of diaspora space foregrounds the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put” (Brah 1996: 16)

The genealogy of diasporic filmmaking through specific sites and circuits provides a topographical understanding of national and transnational cinemas. The majority of the films today are multinational co-productions, involve a transnationally mobile crew, and circulate transnationally or globally. According to Andrew Higson, a transnational film is simply a film whose national and cultural provenance is no longer discernable because its creation is shaped by the confluence of many different cultural identities. Transnational cinema is arguably the product of cultural imperialism, Hollywoodization and the hegemonic western cultures. Diasporic cinema, by contrast, “resists the homogenizing forces of globalization and is centrally concerned with issues of identity and identity politics, making the experience of ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups its central concern” (Berghahn,2010).

Diasporic cinema targets primarily the audiences in the film maker’s home and host countries and the far flung diasporic networks to which the film makers belong. It also enjoys a considerable following among cosmopolitan cinephiles with an interest in world cinema and exotic film cultures. While the transnational is often understood to be larger than the national, “diasporic cinema can provide specific mappings of this space which can be unevenly nesting within the local, constituting through the national, roaming across the regional, translating within the transnational and subtending the global.(Desai,20004) Diasporic filmmaking has become a critical mode of articulating and experiencing the diaspora by interrogating and imagining the meaning of home, belonging and citizenship, and inversely bringing forth the centrality of the national and transnational to the theorizations of cinema and media.

One of the largest centres of film production in the world, Bollywood, has influenced the day-to-day life and cultural ethos in India, where it has been the leading entertainment industry. As a global culture industry, Bollywood, has been used as an index of globalization because of its modes of production, circulation and consumption; thematic concerns and content; and its main platforms and technologies. The collective experience of displacement and dispersion inherent in the concept of diaspora has become the most important creative impetus behind a variety of cinemas. Though Bollywood itself is seen to be thematically diaspora centric, not all diasporic films can be located within Bollywood. Films such as *Monsoon Wedding*, *Water and Bride* and *pride* may be cloaked in the banner of Bollywood but others such as *East is East*, *Mississippi Masala* are out of this domain. The Bollywood movies that deals with diaspora, as its major or minor theme, demonstrates how diasporic subjectivities are being produced at proliferating scales of geopolitical space.

A considerable high number of Indian films post 2000s are set in large part or entirely in the West, outside of India. *Salaam Namaste* is entirely set in Australia, *Dostana* is entirely set in Miami, *Kambakkht Ishq* is set in the U.S. and partly in Italy, *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* is set in New York and the evergreen “Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham” is mostly set in London, reflecting a general trend of modern Bollywood films portraying diasporic Indian life. Hence, there seems to be a novel trend in Bollywood with a considerable increase in representations the diasporic Indians and of the West in many movies released post 2000s, creating another avenue by hyphenated identities could be navigate through these films. The paper analyses this trend in Bollywood with the aid of well renowned Bollywood movies like, *Dilwale Dulhaniya*

Le Jayenge (1995) *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*(2001), *Dostana*(2008), among others, with prime focus on the altering representations of gender and sexuality.

DISCUSSION

One of the earlier traces of a distinguished diasporic movie in Bollywood is Yash Raj Productions 's ever celebrated *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*(1995) ,set mainly in Southall, a London suburb, which made the crossover connect, by combining tradition and urban woman in perfect measures. There are constant reminders of the India's great entity and its omnipresent spirit throughout the movie. The very first scene would be a prime example of this, where the strict and stubborn Indian patriarch, Choudhry Baldev Singh, constantly refers to India and Punjab as 'apna desh' and 'apna Punjab' while the scenes flicker between Punjab's yellow mustard fields and London's famous Trafalgar Square, juxtaposing the two places in the film's narrative, and highlighting the contrast between the posh well-known tourist attractions to the nameless new mustard field with a girl running through it wearing a salwaar kameez (Therwath).

Over the years, the lens that Bollywood casts back onto this diaspora has portrayed the Indian society in exile who wish to relink with their Indianness. These films project a sense of Indianness, among the diaspora, there by establishing a sense of commonality that unites them together as strangers in another country. This is moderately accomplished by providing the diaspora a glimpse back into their homeland, which aids them cope with the sense of loss caused by dislocation from the culture and tradition of the homeland. For example, in Dharma Production's star studded movie, *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), during the popular song sequence "Bole Chudiyan", the London settled Raichand family celebrate the festival of Karva

Chauth away from home, which allows the Indian audience, especially the diasporic audience, to revel in their nostalgia for their enduring Indian traditions. The role of traditional women characters is often “considered vital with issues related to the preservation of culture and carrying the values to the next generations.”(Georgy) Furthermore, the religious hymns and National Anthem employed in movie further emphasize the conflation of spaces and strengthen, when performed on screen and inside cinema halls across the world, a sense of belonging to the Indian national fold. The later movies such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) also foregrounds and celebrates diasporic Indian subjects who remain culturally Indian in cities like New York.

Hence, the concept of diasporic Imaginary is effectively made use of in the Bollywood. Decorated in rich colours and extravagant settings, the Bollywood presents an overtly romanticised account of the homeland with immense highlighting of its socio cultural ethos. This is seen in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* where India’s national song ‘Vande Mataram’ plays in the background when Rohan Raichand lands in London ,foreigners walk past the busy streets wearing the Indian ‘salwar kameez’, there are ‘Bharatanatyam’ street performances, Indian women run past Rohan wearing ‘tricolor duppattas’, showing off their Indian clothing style and their national flag. The girls symbolize the flag behind him, as if to say that even in a foreign land, the entire continent of India is behind him every step of the way (Therwath). However, when Bollywood films create a space where India is only portrayed as traditional, it creates a false image in the diaspora – a nostalgic fantasy of purity and tradition amidst a land that is consistently portrayed as sexualized and decadent, while the real India continues to grow as a culture beyond the imagined traditional and colonial paradigms assigned to it. In this way, the glimpse back into the lost Indian homeland of the diaspora that Bollywood provides is largely imagined.

The operation and viability of cinema mostly depend on drawing large audiences. The swift rise in popularity of Bollywood films among Indian women in the diaspora put these movies in a critical position for influencing the identities of this demographic. As these films begin to incorporate more of the West into their stories, they also attempt to make their characters more palatable to the Indian diaspora. Anjili in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* epitomises India to the diasporic audience, with all her ethnic integrity and furious patriotism, which is evident in the way she manages her own household, insisting on sticking to Indian customs of performing daily religious rituals, singing loud Indian patriotic songs early morning, wearing Indian clothes, speaking in Hindi, feeding her family the Indian breakfast of rotis, everyday, and obsessive desire to help out any Indian, even if he is a stranger (Punathambekar).

The Bollywood film industry ultimately reinforces colonial stereotypes that trap diasporic Indian women within fragmenting binaries of Western progressiveness and Eastern backwardness. A distinct dichotomy between the traditional values of India and the liberal values of the West is often presented through socially regressive views on diasporic women. This dichotomy between diasporic, Westernized Indians and traditional homeland Indians is the treatment of the women in India as traditional and women in the diaspora as Westernized, ignoring the reality of their liminal experiences. The multi-dimensionality in their identities is seldom recognised. The differentiation and relative positioning of women and men is an important ordering principle that is seen to shape the dynamics and struggles in the social and cultural norms around gender and sexuality as projected in these diasporic movies. The evolution of Sashi, an ordinary Indian house wife into a bold English speaking lady and her

sense of alienation from her husband and family as presented in *English Vinglish* smashes the preconceived notions of Indianness and Westernness and preconceived notions of women in India versus diasporic Indian women.

The increased setting of Bollywood films completely in the West as a consequence of the amplified sexualisation of Bollywood movies, implies that the sexualisation of these movies is not apt for the traditionalism of India, and consequently, in order to express these new themes of sexuality, the movies that confront these themes must take place outside of the traditional Indian realm. As a consequence, we recurrently see Bollywood movies taking place in the West and highlighting diasporic Indian women who are highly sexualized while their sexuality is put in direct contrast and separation from the traditionalism of homeland India. One of the most explicit examples of this is in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, where the infamous Pooja moves to London and morphs, from a traditional Indian girl into a hypersexualized, midriff-baring Westernized woman, to the extent that she's replaced her Indian identity by shortening her traditional Indian name of Pooja to 'Poo'. The highly glamorous and erogenous appearance of the heroines in movies like *Love Aaj Kal* and *Kambakkht Ishq* in western outfits and swimsuits illustrates the same.

However, Bollywood frequently uses the increasing sexuality of its films as an attempt to relate to Indian women in the diaspora, relying on the assumption that these women will only be able to relate to this hypersexualization. This is based on the erroneous notion that, by leaving India, these women have essentially left their traditional roots, and therefore are now more sexualized, having lost their true Indian virtue by leaving their homeland. The lifestyle of Indian women in the diaspora is assumed too westernized hence presented different from

the pure, chaste, or traditional stereotype of the Indian society Set and mostly taking place in New York City, *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* explores themes of adultery. The extramarital affair between Dev and Maya and their alienation from spouses were not wholeheartedly accepted by a great majority of non diasporic Indians. Here, Maya and Dev becomes a foil to the chaste and traditional happily wedded couple, Rahul and Anjili, in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. Such portrayals in Bollywood movies are a reflection of deeply-held opinions within Indian society, and such films should be legitimised as the norm rather than an exception.

Over the years, themes of sexuality addressed in Bollywood films have altered to a great extent when compared with the previous century cinema. Bollywood became more explicit in the portrayal of western culture which is quite a taboo to the traditional Indian society. The protagonists, Raj and Simran, in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* adorn western clothing and mannerisms, they still hold onto their Indian values and traditions. This is totally different from the idea of cohabitation between unmarried couples, premarital sex, pregnancy and children outside of marriage, pro-choice and pro-life debates surrounding abortion, and contraception in Yash Raj Films's *Salaam Namaste*(2005), a romantic comedy identified as the first Indian movie to be filmed entirely in Australia. The notions of homosexuality, premarital sex and the idea of casual sex including one-night stands are explicitly addressed in movies like Dharma Production's romantic comedy, *Dostana* (2008).

Diasporic filmmaking in Bollywood continues to traverse a variety of scales and further its legibility and intelligibility through the expansion of subgenres such as queer cinema. The Namesake, *Midnight's Children* being notable examples. *Dostana* was the first mainstream Indian film with a gay element and has been credited for exploring a topic largely ignored by

most of the Indian population. The film deals with story of two men who pretend to be gay to share an apartment with a woman and has to its credit an amusing plotline adorned with a prolonged smooch between the gay couple. The treatment of homosexuality is made in a hilarious way and the real gay character in the movie becomes the object of mockery. So is the case with most other alternative sexualities that are, at times, incorporated in Indian cinema, especially the Bollywood.

The heteronormative assumptions and principles have not only shaped the overall framework of the diasporic Bollywood movies but also ridicules and projects the alternative sexualities as farce. Hence, queerness that is constructed to disrupt gender normativity, as globalization and transnational diaspora activities and practices disrupt national sovereignty, often ironically becomes a victim to ludicrous entertainment on the big screen.

CONCLUSION

As a cinema of displacement, diasporic cinema is characterised by a heightened sense of spatial activity, a preponderance of liminal spaces and journeys of quest. The numerous claustrophobic interiors and a predilection for locations on the urban periphery draw attention to the social exclusion or marginalization experienced by the migrant or diasporic subjects in the films.

As a significant cultural marker and a pervasive cultural entity, Bollywood has a large impact on all of its viewers, especially in the diaspora. The trend of portraying the second-generation and diasporic Indians as purely Westernized or perpetually nostalgic for a traditional India must be altered so as to break down the binaries that separate India from the diaspora.

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