



Construction of Nation for Diaspora: A Study of *Namastey London*

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Abstract

It is said that a nation is constructed in the minds of people. Several factors operate exclusively for this construction, the activity which is political as well as cultural. The construction of a nation is not always a naive exercise by the agencies who are in charge of such a vital enterprise, especially, when the target group is away from its homeland.

Cinema is one of the major entertainment media in India as in many other countries worldwide. Post globalization, there came a slew of Hindi movies that had Non Resident Indians in the lead characters. The movies tried to construct an India that could reconnect the Indian diaspora with it emotionally. They somehow tried to win back the lost love of the 'imagined community' of expatriates, especially belonging to second and third generations for their country. The movies tried to feed the staple diet of cultural nationalism to their viewers, not only from outside India, but even within.

The present paper tries to study the Hindi mainstream cinema '*Namastey London*' in an attempt to explore how the movie constructs India for the Indian diaspora living in different parts of the globe. It attempts to prove that such a holy-construction of an all-good nation is not out of patriotism or not even out of jingoism. Several other issues are involved in this exercise which cannot be called innocent and the author wishes to unravel those aspects in the paper.

Keywords: Nation, construction, culture, diaspora, patriotism.

Introduction

Benedict Anderson in his celebrated book "*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*" defines nation as an 'imagined political community.' It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

Noted scholar Sadanand Menon argues in the book *On Nationalism*, that the national consciousness or nationalism of a nation-in-the-making is constructed upon using two forces, political and cultural. If the political force deals with questions of independence, sovereignty and self-reliance, the cultural force engages with problematic issues of historical past of the nation, artistic heritage and a moral self (110). Not only national consciousness, even the construction of nation is done by political and cultural agencies, cinema being one of them.

Cinemas in India have always played a pivotal role in instilling the national consciousness among people. The genesis of cinema in India go hand in hand with the genesis of India as a nation. As the noted historian Ramachandra Guha points out, the history of Indian cinema is as colourful as the history of India itself. And if history can be called a chronicle of past events, Indian cinema is a chronicle of the nation, its struggles, its hopes, its genesis and its rise from a pre-colonial

and pre-modern society to a post-colonial and post-modern society.

During the initial years of silent era, Indian cinema tried to contribute in its own way to the cause of freedom struggle. A film like *Bhakta Vidur* (1921) had to face the wrath of British and was banned by them as it discreetly tried to arise the feeling of patriotism among people in the pre-Independent India. The character of Vidur, it was alleged that, had shades of Gandhiji and the censor board did not allow it to be screened in theatres in many parts of the country. There were a few other movies which tried to portray Indians in bright light who had achieved success in different arenas thereby instilling a sense of pride among Indians before India got its Independence.

Indian cinema's emblematic role in the construction of nation is well appreciated by many film scholars. Jyothika Virdi points out in her phenomenal book *Cinematic ImagiNation* that 'Cinema is a cultural apparatus very much embroiled in the process of nation-building, which it does by imagining the nation with the bourgeois hegemony in mind' (9-10).

Similar views are also expressed by the author Vamsee Juluri in his book *Bollywood Nation*. He observes that, From their earliest years, the films of India have served not merely as entertainment or an escape, but also as a source of idealism for its audiences in the encounter with post-colonial modernity. In some ways, our films have welcomed the

modern, celebrating the breakdown of old feudal barriers to communal mobility. In other ways, they have resisted it, if nothing else, at least by positing family ties and values like sacrifice over modern notions of individualism and self-interest.' (Juluri 7)

Cinema's role as a record keeper of its time is explained here. Hence, there is no denying the fact that cinemas in India have always played a vital role even in a serious enterprise of nation building apart from entertaining and educating the people. In India, Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, has always been trying to build a powerfully imagined nation since its inception. The nation they construct is close to utopia. It is a nation filled with love, age old traditions, customs and everything that is good and can be guiding principles for the rest or the West.

The objective of studying the movie '*Namastey London*' (2007) in this paper is to show how the above mentioned characteristics of Hindi cinema or, for that matter, Indian cinema are found in the movie. The movie is studied under NRI genre of Hindi cinema and the study is vital because the plot revolves around Non Resident Indians and this movie tries to construct a nation for the Indian diaspora living far away from India in different places across the world. The paper probes whether such a construction is innocent or are there any benign intentions behind such an effort.

It is to be noted that the movie was released in the year 2007, a decade after the onset of globalization. It was also the time when many Hindi movies were released with themes revolving around Non Resident Indians, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Pardes* (1997), *Aa Ab Laut Chale* (1999) etc. These movies tried to construct an India that is basically agrarian, flawless, mythical with characters who were chiefly Hindus. It was also the time when Bharatiya Janatha Party was assuming importance in political arena with its soft core Hindutva agenda. The movies produced at this point of time tried to showcase Indian culture as superior to the Western or European culture. They simply had one agenda, everything associated with Indian was pristine pure and whatever Western was not so chaste.

Plot of *Namastey London* is simple. Manmohan Malhotra resides in London with his wife Bebo and daughter Jasmeet. Even though he is in London, he cannot forget India and he expects his daughter to behave like an Indian. However, Jasmeet calls herself Jazz, a British, as she has never been to India and she is born and brought up in London. She wears whatever she wishes, parties with men and does not hesitate to intoxicate herself. She wishes to marry her boss who is a divorcee. Unable to understand her daughter's way of life, the father takes her to India and gets her married to Arjun Singh discreetly. The newly-wed couple comes back to London where Jazz disowns the marriage saying it does not have legal sanctity in England. Showering lots of love on Jazz, Arjun wins her back and they come back to India at the end.

The roles played by both Akshay Kumar and Katrina Kaif are very important in the movie. In fact, the female role has an edge over the male, which is something rare to see in Indian cinema especially Bollywood, known for its patriarchal themes. In the commercial mainstream Hindi cinema, women are offered roles that are not so important. They are given limited, secondary and marginal roles. The so called heroines have mere glamour-doll roles and there is nothing special about them. They are used only as objects of male gaze. They become the bearers, and not the makers of meaning as said by the famous feminist film critic Laura Mulvey. Even though women are inevitable in commercial movies, they are 'used'

for supplementary and stereotypical roles; that of hero's paramour, villain's moll, ill-fated mother, wise grandma, heroine's friend, bubbly sister etc.

But, it is quite interesting to observe that things are not so in the NRI genre. Women roles are very vibrant here because they are portrayed as the torch bearers of Indian culture and tradition. Well known writer Jyothika Virdi analyses this trend in Bollywood. Quoting Partha Chatterji's essay *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* she says that in the nineteenth century a popular version of womanhood was created by the nationalists in response to colonial rule (65). The fight for freedom was termed by the nationalists as the struggle between insiders and the outsiders, between the material and the spiritual, between the 'us' and 'them.' It was argued that when men fought with the material aspects of the West, it was the women's duty to keep the spiritual aspects of the home intact, thereby serving the interest of the nation. It was always believed that if the West was at its best in terms of arts, science and technology, it was never anywhere near in the spiritual qualities of India which resided in the inner sanctum of homes. The traditional woman kept these qualities intact and this role of women was perpetuated in the minds of people not only by literature but different media as well, cinema not being an exception.

Therefore, the women of these movies, even though are well educated and independent are made to be traditional and dependent in nature. Such depiction has always been there in Bollywood. The first Hindi movie that deals with Indian diaspora *Purab aur Pachhim* (1970) did portray such a woman character. Preeti of that movie who resides abroad, does wear mini-skirts, drinks alcohol and smokes cigarettes. But, Bharat, the male protagonist from India, transforms her going there and she is seen wearing sari at the end, quitting all her 'ill' habits of drinking, smoking, partying, etc., which are the symbols of Western civilization.

Jazz of *Namastey London* calls herself a British because she feels that she is born and brought up in London. She has grown singing the national anthem of England (whereas her father's phone ring tone is *Saare Jahaan Se Accha*). However, she is so conscious of her Indianness that she cannot accept a kiss before her marriage. Like most chaste Indian women, she is not ready for it. On another occasion, when she is disgraced for being a person of Indian origin, when India is called a land of snake charmers, she feels very bad. But, when Arjun narrates the greatness of India before those English guests, she is very happy and feels very proud to be an Indian.

Then, the burden of carrying the tradition and culture not only lies with women, even men are given this responsibility in the movie. When Jazz disowns her marriage with Arjun without any remorse, Arjun is heart-broken. Being a 'free-man,' he does not choose to marry some other woman. Instead, he waits for Jazz to change and accept him as her life partner. He says that as he is married once, he cannot marry again as his Indian tradition does not accept it. He will wait or he will never marry again. (How many Indian male choose to do so is a question left to be mused!) Jazz is moved emotionally when she listens those words. The Indian womanhood within her gets awoken and she develops remorse for having married Arjun for no reason.

All said and done, when we look for reasons behind such depictions, we can see that, of late, there is a steady growth in NRI audience across the world. Those people who are living thousands of miles away from their homeland find these movies a mode to connect themselves with it. The first generation parents do find these movies an easy vehicle to

teach their children, who probably have never been to India, their rich culture and heritage that are portrayed in these movies. Quite a few times, when NRIs are not accepted wholeheartedly by the natives, when they are disowned by them, these movies provide an emotional solace to them.

Apart from these emotional reasons, huge revenue that flows from NRIs is also a reason why these movies are made the way they are made. With increase in NRI population across the globe, there has been increase in revenue also as NRIs pay in terms of dollars and pounds. It is also alleged that several Bollywood movies are shot outside Indian locales to attract those audiences. Films like *Kaho Na Pyar Hai* (2000), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobaara* (2011) and *Dhoom 3* (2013) etc., are completely shot outside India so that they could attract more NRI viewers. There have also been instances where movies are made to suit the taste of NRIs, than the native Indians. Films like *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006) was commercially successful in the US whereas it was a big flop in India. Hence, movies like *Namastey London* under the NRI genre, which, at the outset seem to uphold the national ethos, are made with commercial reasons and not merely out of patriotism or nationalism. It is only unfortunate that even emotions connected to nation are on sale!

Conclusion

Namastey London constructs an India for diaspora which is infallible. Arjun is the prototype Indian here with all goodness and chastity. Even though, Jasmeet is seen as a British at the beginning of the movie, she transforms herself to be a true Indian before the end of the movie. With several cultural symbols and ideas like that of strong marriage, values, traditions, joint family, honesty, festivals etc., the movie constructs an all utopian nation for the diaspora. It is only to be observed that such narration/depiction does have commercial interest rather than patriotism or even jingoism.

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