



Indian Diaspora through Bollywood Lens: A Case Study of ‘Pardes’

*¹Dr. Naveena V

*¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Government First Grade Women’s College, Shivamogga, Karnataka, India.

Abstract

Films have always been the most sought after medium of entertainment in India. The film stars enjoy not only the status of stardom but that of Gods as they successfully transport viewer’s imagination to a world of fantasy. For the first few decades after independence, movies were rejected as mere works of nonsensical imagination. But, of late movies have begun to be treated as subjects of serious study. Bollywood, the so called ‘national’ cinema of India has also acquired new status in the recent years. Hindi cinema’s treatment of Indian diaspora in a few movies has also been a topic for study for researchers. The present paper tries to study aspects of nation and gender in the movie ‘Pardes’ (dir, Subhash Ghai, 1997).

Keywords: Diaspora, nation, gender, culture, tradition, NRI, globalization.

Introduction

The concept of Diaspora, indicating transnational movement, has gained immense importance in Humanities and Social Sciences in the recent years. Such a study occupies a vital space in the era of globalization as the aforesaid transnational movement of people has increased manifold with more and more job opportunities and chances to settle down in other countries. Such discourses deal with issues like hybridity of culture, ethnicity, nation and nationality, gender, identity, among many. Cinema, the most influential cultural medium in India has also experimented with this concept of diaspora. Themes surrounding Indian diaspora have acquired a vital space in the Hindi cinema industry popularly known as Bollywood for long.

The first major movie in this genre to be identified is *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970). In the movie the NRI characters are shown in extremely unfavorable light. Living abroad has been shown in the movie as losing one’s own identity and falling prey to evil habits like drinking and smoking in an alien country that is obsessed with consumerism and sex. The trend continued even in the 80s. Later not many movies are seen on the theme.

Bollywood’s journey with Indian Diaspora gained momentum with the movie ‘*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ - 1995).’ Many critics consider DDLJ as the first major diasporic film after the theme/genre has its re-birth. After two years *Pardes* was released in 1997. However, there was a shift in the themes presented in these movies. These films departed from the earlier classifications of the NRIs as either longing for the homeland or morally depraved. The significant shift was there not without reason. As it is already mentioned globalization was the chief reason for this change.

In the changed environment, Bollywood ideologies began to be shaped by economic liberalization, rising Hindutva sentiments as well as the impact of the NRI community. Once considered morally corrupt and thus unloved, the NRIs became an embodiment of the national ethos and a triumphant capitalism. The Indian culture they portrayed was chiefly family oriented, Hindu, the preserve of women within the home and yet ‘portable’ (Uberoi 1998:306) thus possibly transnational.

The present paper tries to throw some light on the issues of nation-nationality and gender as portrayed in the movie *Pardes* (1997). 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. Bollywood has always been trying to build a powerfully imagined nation and Hindi films with diasporic themes have succeeded to some extent to build such a nation. This nation they construct is close to utopia. It is a nation filled with only love, age old traditions, customs and everything that is good and can be guiding principles for the rest or the West.

Pardes is the story of one Kishorilal who is a very successful businessman in the USA. In spite of living in America for 25 years, he has never been able to love it. He adores Indian values so much that he wishes to marry Ganga, daughter of his friend from India to his son Rajeev who has never seen India. Rajeev meets Ganga with the help of his friend and relative Arjun. In the end Ganga marries Arjun for his love and compassion rejecting Rajeev as he turns out to be a spoilt

son of a great father Kishorilal.

India, in the eyes of this Kishorilal is flawless. It is mythical. It is a land of selfless sacrifices and love. Standing before Taj Mahal, a symbol of eternal love, he explains to his American friends that in India love means only to give, to give, and to give whereas in the West it has its own limitations. It is a relationship of calculations, of giving and taking and nothing more.

Even after spending more than two decades in America, Kishorilal's heart always lies in India. Singing the glory of India, he says that he has seen London, Paris and even Japan but he has never seen a country as great as India. If the whole world is like a bride, India is the *bindi* that aesthetically adorns her forehead. For Hindus a woman's forehead would look beautiful only if there is a *bindi* in it. It is the symbol of one's happiness, one's blessed marriage life. If a woman loses her husband she does not wear *bindi*. Kishorilal compares India to such an adorable and auspicious symbol. For him India is his *watan* (country), *karam* (duty, fate) *dharam* (religion) and everything.

According to Kishorilal, even after acquiring so much of material prosperity, there is always a fear of failure. It is because the West lacks the culture that can uplift them from this moral agony. He feels only Indian culture has that strength to keep them happy. Hence, he wishes to bring Ganga from India to ward off his strange fears. However, he fails miserably in his attempt.

The family members of Kishorilal can be compared with India and America. Members who are tolerant and compassionate are Indians whereas those residing in America for long have the negative shade of characters and these are equated with the West. At one point of time, Rajeev gets ready to attack Arjun, his friend, as feels Arjun and Ganga have cheated him. When he discusses this with his NRI friend Paul, he says that it is not good as they are 'good Indians.' But, Rajeev who never wishes to identify himself with India says he would like to go on with his plan as he is bad. Very wisely the movie tries to imply that India is always good whereas the West is always bad. This portrayal is stereotypical.

Pardes's reconstruction of India is only utopian as it is already mentioned. It does not want to show the dark spots that this great country has. The problems of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, communalism, terrorism and many others go unmentioned in the movie. India of the movie appears as if it is the imagined construction of NRIs.

Hope Marie Childers in her essay "You Go Girl!" *Nationalism and Women's Empowerment in the Bollywood Film Kya Kehna!* quotes Sagarika Ghose from an interview published in Indian Express that NRIs are the next colonizing threat to India. In a scathing review of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), labeled a "ghastly film," she complains that, after watching it, "it's impossible to avoid the conclusion that contemporary India is nothing but a figment of the NRI imagination." Ghose proceeds to describe how the flow of NRI capital has Bollywood "bound in chains to the dictates of overseas audiences," and is thus re-shaping the Indian cultural landscape, creating "an ersatz tradition" to "appeal to an emigre audience that has no patience for Indian realities other than those peddled by a sensationalist media." She voices a concern that is increasingly common among resident Indians, namely that "in the sphere of culture, the NRI's vision of India is drastically and sometimes irrevocably in conflict from the vision of those who actually live there." So, the construction of India, in *Pardes* is questionable.

The question of gender has acquired as much importance as that of the nation in Bollywood from the beginning. It is said that Indian womanhood represents nation, religion, God, spirit of India, culture, tradition and family. Mehboob Khan's *Aan* (1952) and *Mother India* (1957), Bimal Roy's *Madhumathi* (1958) and N. Chandra's *Pratighat* (1987) are a few films of the past where the woman signifies the nation in not only sharp but also contradictory ways to portray dilemmas that plagued the nation's post-colonial life. The usually weak and meek women are turned to be saviors when it comes to the question of saving the pride of their community which signifies nation. Radha, the lead female character of *Mother India* (The very title of the movie equates mother with the nation) does not hesitate to kill her son mercilessly to save the sanctity of her village. Even, *Pardes* portrays Ganga as such a powerful character. She resists and reciprocates strongly when Rajeev tries to belittle India and its citizens.

It can also be observed that most of the times female characters of Bollywood represent explicit patriarchal values. They are usually subordinate to their male counterparts but an embodiment of values and virtues. *Pardes* is not an exception to it.

Women voices are not heard or even if they are heard they are suppressed in the movie. At the beginning of the movie, when Kishorilal expresses his wish to take Ganga to America as a bride to his son Rajeev, Suraj Dev, father of Ganga agrees to the proposal and even promises him to 'give away' Ganga as his daughter-in-law. While taking this decision, Suraj Dev does not consult any of the female members of the family, not even Ganga. When he raises this topic with his mother, wife and sister, they all oppose it saying Ganga cannot be sent to an unseen distant land. But their voice of dissent gets drowned in the loud shriek of Suraj Dev when he thrusts that Ganga would be married to Kishorilal's son and that is his final decision. Women are left not with any option but to submit to it! A male member heads the family and women have usually nothing to say about his decisions.

A similar situation arises at a later stage in the movie, when there is a clash of interest about the would-be bridegroom of Ganga. Suraj Dev's neighbor and relative Amirchand, who is also an NRI wants Ganga as a bride for his son. But, Suraj Dev has no interest in this proposal and he has already promised Kishorilal in this regard. Hence, a game of *Kabaddi* is chosen by male members to arrive at a decision. The loser will ultimately lose Ganga. It is strange that even Rajeev who might not have heard about *Kabaddi* agrees to play it. But, it is to be noted that this vital decision is taken in the absence of all the important women of the family including Ganga. She remains a mute spectator hoping for the best while the game goes on. She has nothing to say about her own marriage! The whole episode appears to have some resemblance to the great epic *Mahabharatha* where Yudhistira offers Draupadi as a bet in the game of chess without her consent or even knowledge.

After her engagement, Ganga goes to America only to be disgraced time and again by many over there. She is there on a mission of purging the evil influence of the West on the family members of Kishorilal and hence has to undergo various trials and tribulations. Ganga is even ready for such bitter experiences because her mother has taught the same! Resistance to such a sacrifice comes only at the end when the grandmother of Ganga opposes marriage between Rajeev and Ganga as it would prove a disaster. But, this voice is heard only at the end.

The relationship shared by the father of Ganga with her is also debatable. The father is seen adoring his daughter at the

beginning of the movie. He is a well-wisher of the daughter and like any duty bound father he readily agrees to his friends Kishorilal's proposal to marry her to his son. However, all his love gets evaporated when he presumes that Ganga has defiled the family tradition by entering into a relationship with Arjun, a distant relative of Kishorilal negating the engaged relationship with Rajeev, the son of Kishorilal. Misunderstanding his daughter and Arjun, in a fit of rage, he gets ready to kill both of them. How come such a nice, loving father develops misconceptions about his beloved daughter remains unanswered.

It is not that women are not important in the movie. They are important but only in names! Three important women characters of the movie are named after three very important rivers of India. There is Ganga, the lead female character, Narmada is the name given to her mother and Kishorilal's sister is named after the river Krishna. If Ganga and Narmada are the rivers of North India, Krishna is of South India. These three vital rivers are the life blood of the whole of India. The whole of India is brought before spectators through these names.

Conclusion

Pardes brings out vital issues of nation and gender in its own fashion. Its reconstruction of nation and treatment of gender issues leave many questions in the minds of spectators. It would have been a better experience if *Pardes* had answers to those questions.

References

1. Uberoi P. The diaspora comes home: Disciplining desire in *DDLJ*. *Contrib Indian Sociol.* 1998;32(2):305-36.
2. Kavoori AP. *Global Bollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.
3. Virdi J. *The Cinematic Imagination*. New Delhi: Permanent Black; 2011.
4. Jain J. *Films, Literature and Culture*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications; 2007.
5. Dudrah RK. *Vilayati Bollywood: Popular Hindi cinema-going and diasporic South Asian identity in Birmingham (UK)*.
6. Therwath I. 'Shining Indians': Diaspora and exemplarity in Bollywood.
7. Sathian S. Gender and nation in the South Asian diaspora: Transnational cultural spaces in Bollywood cinema. pp. 22-41. Available from: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cujas/SATHIAN.pdf>