

Ethnocentrism in Hindi Cinema: Has depiction of superiority of Indian culture changed since Post-independence to Post Liberalization Period?

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Indian cinema reflected the social and economic conditions of the country. During the pre-independence period, several films were produced by Indian filmmakers to create nationalist fervour in the country. Ever since the first Indian film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), many films have been created which are based on Indian mythology and traditions. The portrayal of films were such that, it projected superiority of Indian culture in the spiritual domain as opposed to the Western culture. Hindi cinema particularly played a pivotal role in shaping national identity amongst the citizens of the country during the 1900s. With the rise of Swadeshi movement during the pre-independence period, the British Empire was threatened by an increasing number of nationalist films produced by the Indian filmmakers. As a result, the British Raj established Indian Cinematograph committee to exercise its power and control the kind of films that were being broadcasted in the Indian subcontinent. Yet several Indian filmmakers during the pre-independence period, produced films which highlighted the superiority of Indian cultural and traditional values.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, Culture, Social Values, Morality

As India gained independence, socio-economic situation in the country changed and Indian filmmakers based their films on nationalist themes. The Indian film industry flourished during this period and became a key contributor to the national income of the country. Political parties identified the impact of cinema on the population and began to use cinema as a medium to voice their opinions and demands to the citizens and the Government. In 1949, DravidaMunnetraKazhagam (DMK), a political party in Tamil Nadu, expressed their regional demands in Tamil films. Subsequently, with large number of uprisings from different regions of the country, the Central Government established Centre Board of Film Certification in the year 1951 to sanction films before they were released in cinema halls in order to curb the situation in the country. Parallely, many Hindi films were created

during the post-independence period (1960s-1980s) which played an integral role in creating national identity amongst the citizens of the country. These films were created to educate citizens about the sacrifices made by nationalist leaders in the past. Furthermore, the films emphasised on superiority of Indian culture and traditions and role of an ideal Indian citizen. The films also portrayed Western culture to be inferior and expatriate Indians who followed western culture were represented to be uncultured and polluted whereas, Indians who followed Indian culture and traditions in the West were celebrated role models. Indians or Anglo-Indians who were portrayed as westernised were characterised as demonic figures. On the other hand, Indian women who were portrayed to follow Indian traditions and cultures were accepted by the society. This paper will analyse the portrayal of Western culture and NRIs during the post-independence period through studying *Purab Aur Paschim*. It is one of the earliest films which portrays Western culture in negative light. The film depicts that westerners are obsessed by sex and consumerism whilst promoting superiority of Indian culture in the spiritual domain.

The change in perception towards NRIs was reflected in Hindi cinema during the post-liberalisation period. With technological and economic progress in the country, NRIs were seen as one of the key contributors of the growing economy. Expatriate Indians were now represented under different light and were an exemplar for growing number of middle class families in India. However, portrayal of superiority of Indian traditions was still prevalent in Hindi cinema. Many filmmakers emphasised on the importance of traditional society such as unity of family and belief in God. This paper will study the representation of Indian culture and NRIs post-liberalisation period through analysing the movie *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. This film narrates the story of an elite family who are westernized yet follow traditional values.

Post-independence period

During the late 1960s and in the beginning of the 1970s, a large number of Indians migrated to the West. The UK issued British citizenship to migrants who were a part of the Commonwealth nations. In preceding years, laws were tightened by the UK government in order to control the immigration. Eventually, this led to an increase in influx of migrants to the other parts of the world such as the US and Canada. Migration of Indians to Western countries was also on rise due to educational opportunities provided by the European developmental programme to citizens of the third world countries. Scholars were required to return by the end of their course, however, a lot of them stayed back and found job opportunities. During the early years of post-Independence period, a large number of Indians migrated to the West and adopted the Western culture, thus the perception towards expatriates was such that they were perceived to be uncultured and polluted. NRIs were looked down upon as they left behind their country and its culture in order to fulfil their materialistic desires.

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The perception towards expatriates Indians and the Western culture being inferior became a dominant ideology in the country during the 1960s and it gained presence in Indian films during the post-independence period. *Purab Aur Paschim*, (dir. Manoj Kumar) is one of the earliest films produced during this period whose premise is based on the dichotomy between East and West. The story revolves around Bharat (Manoj Kumar), the protagonist, who is a patriot hailing from Allahabad city in India. In the opening scenes of the film, the audience witnesses the story of Bharat's father Om, an Indian freedom fighter, who was shot dead by a group of British soldiers during the Indian freedom struggle movement. While Om is on a hideout, his neighbour Harnam betrays him by helping British soldiers to find him in return for some monetary award. Om is oblivious to the Indian freedom struggle and with the help of the amount received by the Britishers, he flies out of India abandoning his wife Kaushalya and taking along his son Omkar, to educate and up bring him like the Westerners. Meanwhile, Bharat who is born on the same day when his father was killed, grows up hearing about Kaushalya's state however, he does not know about his father's betrayal. The film progresses to several years later when Bharat reluctantly leaves India to pursue his higher education from England.

This film played a key role in promoting the idea of nationalism amongst the citizens when the country was in its early stages after the independence. Throughout the film, the filmmaker has supported the dominant ideology of the society that the Western culture is inferior in comparison to the Indian culture. This has been achieved through characterization, mise-en-scene, dialogues, songs and motifs. In the opening scene, the film employs 'Vande Mataram' song in the background while the credits are rolling. The use of national song in the beginning of the film stirs patriotism amongst the citizens of the country. As the film progresses and the characters are introduced, as the name of the protagonist suggests, Bharat represents 'India' in the western land. He is a young patriot who holds on to his Indian culture and values in the Western country and influences NRIs and Westerners to understand the superiority of Indian culture in the spiritual domain opposed to materialistic desires of the Westerners. The use of strong mise-en-scene also contributes towards making this film patriotic. From the moment when Bharat lands in England, the audience witness series of sequences which represents Western culture to be consumeristic and obsessed with sex. In one of the sequences, which takes place when Bharat lands in England, the scene is followed by montage, a series of images of billboards, Western fashion, high raised buildings, pubs, woman dancing and singing wearing western clothes. The shot is accompanied by dramatic background score and bright lighting which creates an unpleasant atmosphere in audience's mind. The film also employs strong and provocative dialogues to instigate sense of nationalism in viewer's mind. In several sequences, many references have been made to Indian mythological scriptures such as Ramayana and Mahabharat. Here, the characters

portraying Westernised Indians are shown to have no knowledge about the sacred scriptures thereby representing them as uncultured.

The portrayal of Western and Westernised women also plays a key role in understanding how Indian culture was depicted in comparison to the western culture in Hindi films. In the film *Purab and Paschim*, Preeti (Saira Banu), Mr. Sharma's daughter, plays a role of an Indian westernised woman living in England. Preeti is seen smoking, consuming alcohol, attending parties and wearing western clothes. She has never visited India and is oblivious to Indian traditions and culture. After watching Preeti interacting with her friends, Bharat perceives their habits to be uncultured and un-Indian. On various occasions, the filmmaker represents Preeti as a loose character as she lacks knowledge about Indian culture and traditions. As the film progresses, Preeti falls in love with Bharat which leads to her transformation. Bharat acts as a catalyst in Preeti's transformation, as it is his presence in her life which leads her into accepting her Indian cultural identity. Bharat's presence also plays a key role in transforming Preeti's brother as he begins to worship Lord Ram and Krishna. Towards the end of the film, as Bharat finishes his education, he expresses his desire to return to India in order to contribute towards India's development. Bharat convinces Preeti and her family to return to India and as they do, Preeti realises that she does not want to go back to England. In the end, Preeti is shown in a temple wearing an Indian sari bowing in front of Lord Krishna. Towards the end of the film, Bharat's mission is accomplished as he has reawakened patriotism in expatriate Indians.

It can be observed that the film follows the dominant ideology that Indian culture is superior in the spiritual domain while the West promotes materialistic desires and lacks in the spiritual domain. The westerners and westernised Indians are portrayed in negative light in comparison to Indians who follow their culture and traditions. This film also establishes the dichotomy between traditional and modern society through emphasising on the role of a family, gender and sexuality. This is evident from the narrative as Bharat promotes cultural values that are prevalent in a traditional society as opposed to a modern society.

Literature review

In "*The Consumable Hero of Globalised India*" (2005) Sudhanva Deshpande discusses the impact of economic liberalisation in India during the 1990s. He explores various genres that emerged since post-independence period, such as the Angry Young man movement. In one of the sections, Deshpande focuses his study on the consumable hero in Hindi cinema. He notes that characters of the film, especially the hero is from a higher upper class from a Punjabi family who upholds Indian traditions and values. He also emphasises that Hindi cinema focused largely on family drama, during the late 1990s. According to him, most of the Hindi films portrayed family consisting of expatriate Indians. The author also discusses the shift in depiction of Muslims after the construction of a Hindu

temple and demolishment of a mosque in late 1980s. Political developments in the country had negative impact on portrayal of Muslim community in Hindi cinema. Furthermore, the author goes on to explore various other themes which emerge during the late 1970s and 1980s. Deshpande notes that the rise of consumable hero emerged with globalisation

In *"Is there no place like home? Contesting Cinematographic Constructions of Indian Diasporic Experiences"* (2007) Christiane Brosius and Nicolas Yazgi explore the meaning of 'home' and 'homeland' portrayed in Indian films during the period of 1970s to 2000s. They discuss the films based on NRIs which emerged during the 1990s linking it to economic and technological developments along with change in political ideologies in India. These changes had a significant shift in representation of NRIs in Hindi cinema as the Indian diaspora was portrayed as model Indian post-liberalisation period. The Indian filmmakers constructed their stories based on Indian traditions and value. They portrayed expatriate Indians as model Indians, who despite having stayed in capitalist countries held on to their Indian traditions and culture. The authors note that these films emphasised on protagonists convincing Westernised Indians and Westerners that India is superior in the spiritual domain in comparison to the capitalistic and consumeristic values of the Westerners

Robina Mohammed studies the relationship between the Indian diaspora and their imagined 'homeland' in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani (Yet The Heart Remains Indian): Bollywood, the 'homeland' nation-state, and the diaspora* (2007). Her research focuses at understanding the change in Bollywood's visibility due to a result of political, economic, technological and cultural developments in India. She also discusses about the various opportunities that Indian film industry opened up for the 'homeland' and the diaspora due to new technological developments in terms of economic investments and skills transfer. Furthermore, she discusses representation of the 'glossy homeland' to the Indian diaspora and the new diasporic space as 'consumer's paradise' portrayed to the middle class families in India.

Ingrid Therwath in his paper, *"Shining Indian Diaspora and exemplarity in Bollywood"* (2010) studies the role of Hindi cinema serving as a medium to create nationalist identity in the country. He studies the social, cultural, political and economic factors which impact portrayal of Indian diaspora in Hindi cinema. Furthermore, he examines the transition of representation of NRIs in Hindi cinema since independence. He makes a very important note that, Indian expatriates have become a role model for fast-growing middle class families who face challenges of acculturation stemming from economic liberalisation in India. With a shift in perception about NRIs, Indian filmmakers began to represent the Indian diaspora on a different light from the 1990s.

Anirudh Deshpande, discusses various factors influencing representation of Indian culture in Hindi cinema in his paper, *"Indian Cinema and the Bourgeois Nation State"* (2007). He argues that,

rise of Hindu nationalism played a key role in Hindi cinema during the early days of post-independence period. He notes that Indian cinema popularised the Hindutva ideology after 1945. Furthermore, he studies how Indian cinema promotes patriarchy through emphasising on Indian culture, values and traditions. He also explores films which were based on the protagonist returning to India and contributing to the nation-building process. He notes that, most of these films, asserted importance to institution of Indian family.

Rosie Thomas in her paper, '*Sanctity and Scandal*' (1989) examines the role of mother in Indian cinema, particularly in Hindi cinema. She argues that in India, a woman upholds the cultural and traditional values of the country. She examines how Indians assert superiority in the spiritual domain through representing women as chaste in Indian films. In her paper, Thomas studies representation of Nargis as an actress and her role as a mother in the film *Mother India* (1957). Furthermore, the author also explores Freudian theory of Oedipus complex. She examines the relationship of mother and son in the movie *Mother India* and draws comparisons to Freudian's assumption of Oedipus complex. Thomas also studies the role of a stardom and its influence on representation of a woman's character in Hindi cinema. The author argues that in Hindi cinema, mother is a representation of sanctity. Through representation of mother, Indian filmmakers try to argue that Indian culture is superior in spiritual domain as compared to the West.

Sangeeta Datta discusses representation of women in Indian cinema in her paper "*Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema*" (2000). She studies the portrayal of women, particularly in Hindi cinema, and seeks to examine works by women filmmakers hailing from other Asian countries. She traces back to the history of Indian cinema and discusses the role of Indian women in earlier films based on mythology and contemporary films influenced by westernisation. She discusses the impact of globalisation and other social, economic and political influences which impacted the representation of women in Indian cinema. She studies the transition of representation of women from pre-independence to post-globalisation period in Indian cinema.

Geetanjali Gangoli examines representation of expatriate Indians and western women in Hindi cinema since post-independence period in "*Sexuality, Sensuality and belonging: representation of the 'Anglo-Indian' and the 'Western' Woman in Hindi cinema*" (2005). She argues that, during the early years of post-independence period, films positioned West and East at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, after globalisation, she notes that, there has been a transition in portrayal of the two cultures, although the dominant idea of Indian culture being superior in the is still prevalent in contemporary films. She also discusses the portrayal of westernised women as demonic. Furthermore, Gangoli studies the role of Anglo-Indian women in Hindi cinema, who are portrayed as prostitutes and characters with immoral values. The author further explores representation of Indian diaspora

during the post-independence period. Filmmakers of Hindi cinema depicted them as role models for middle-class citizens in India. She studies the role of a NRI woman during the late 1990s in comparison to contemporary films. Gangoli notes that majority of the films produced during this period were family centric upholding traditional and cultural values of India.

"In search of the Diasporic Self: Bollywood in South Africa" (2007) Thomas Blom Hansen studies the impact of Bollywood films in South Africa during the late 1990s. He analyses the reception of Bollywood film *KuchKuchHota Hai* (1998) amongst the diasporic community in South Africa. In this paper, Hansen discusses the style and themes of Bollywood films, their construction of stories which invokes emotions reminding the diaspora of their homeland. He discusses the plot of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, and notes that the film is completely westernised in terms of dressing, body culture, pop music, sports, etc. He says that the Western culture has been highlighted in Indian films, which creates a fantasy space for Indians. The author also explores the role of a woman, their relation to the family and portrayal of women characters in the movie *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. Furthermore, Hansen examines the increasing interest amongst the Indian diaspora to represent their Indian community in South Africa. He traces back to the history of Indian working class in Durban and connects it to their current need for recognition and acceptance from the dominant 'white culture'. At the end, the author makes a note that, films like *KuchKuchHota Hai* project 'Indianness' and modernity for local Indians and the diaspora.

In *"The Scattered Homelands of the Migrant: Bollywood through the diasporic lens"* (2007) Christian Brosuis analyses the impact of Bollywood on South Asian diaspora in Frankfurt, Germany. These South Asian migrants largely comprises of people from India and Pakistan. Brosuis analyses how Bollywood influences South Asian diaspora. He discusses the role of Bollywood as a representative of traditions, cultures and homeland, amongst the South Asian diasporic community, which acts as a tool to invoke cultural and authentic identity. He notes that screening of Bollywood films create a contact zone and a space for diaspora to identify with their homeland cultures and traditions. Bollywood films create a sense of returning back to their homelands, and this is as the author notes, is prevalent amongst the first generation. He notes that most of the Bollywood films emphasis on recognition of 'homeland' and 'Indianness' which was seen as a commodity to be consumed by the international community.

Post-liberalization period

During the 1980s, due to huge balance of payment deficit, the Indian economy faced severe economic crisis which led to restructuring of the economy. While the economic liberalisation took place in the 1990s, several economic reforms were introduced during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure while he was the Prime Minister of the country. In 1990, The World Bank and International Monetary Fund

pressurised the Indian economy to pave way for foreign investments. Consequently, under Congress government, liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) took place and as a result, the country saw influx of foreign investments. It was recognised that NRIs were key contributors to economic growth of the country. The manufacturing and service sector grew at a higher rate in comparison to the agricultural sector. The growth of these sectors was a symbol of modernisation and many political parties benefitted from it. Many of the NRIs funded Hindu nationalist organisations (Sangh Parivar) saw increase support from these political parties. From uncultured to role models, perception towards NRIs changed significantly during BJP's tenure from 1998-2004. The Indian Diaspora was now being perceived as role models since they were westernised, rich and at the same time rooted to their Indian traditions.

The representation of Indian culture as superior to Western culture has remained the same over the years, however, with economic liberalisation, the perception towards portrayal of NRIs have changed significantly in Hindi cinema. Economic liberalisation in the 1990s plays a key role in emergence of NRI-centric films in Hindi film industry. One of the pioneer filmmakers from the Hindi film industry, Yash Chopra, expressed that 'It is our moral responsibility to depict India at its best. We are historians of India... The Indian diaspora must maintain its identity, its roots' (Chopra 2003). During the early 1990s, Hindi films, such as *Dil wale Duhaniya Le Jayenge (DDLJ)*, *KuchKuchHota Hai (KKHH)*, *Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham (KKKG)* and many others showed NRIs to be westernised yet holding on to their Indian cultural and traditions. Due to liberalisation, many communities in India faced the challenge of cultural acculturation thus, NRIs were seen as role models as they were rooted to their Indian culture and traditions despite living in a Western country. The films were based on traditional values prevalent in the Indian society which emphasised on family and belief in God.

Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham (dir. Karan Johar) is one such film which revolves around an elite family. As the film begins, the audience witnesses grandeur structure of the mansion where Yash Raichand's (Amitabh Bachchan) family resides. Raichand's elder son Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) reunites with his family after completing his higher education from London. As the narrative progresses, the family separates with Rahul for marrying Anjali (KajolDevgan) who hails from a lower class family. Raichand disapproves of Rahul's marriage with Anjali as he wants to uphold his family's tradition and lineage and marry him into an elite family. Eventually, Rahul leaves India to start a new life with Anjali and his sister-in-law Pooja (Kareena Kapoor Khan) in the United Kingdom.

The film *Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham* is based on the dichotomy between tradition and modern society. However, it does not portray the western culture or westernised Indians in a negative light.

The representation of a foreign land and westernised Indians in the film reflects the change in perception amongst the Indians post-liberalisation period. However, the film maintains the portrayal of superiority of the Indian culture. The filmmaker emphasises on portraying the importance of a family and upholding Indian traditions in a globalised world. Similar to *Purab Aur Paschim*, the filmmaker has employed various motifs, dialogues, mise-en-scene and other filmic elements to represent superiority of Indian culture and values. From the beginning of the film, the characterization of Raichand creates an impression about him being traditional yet westernised and modern. Through his character, the filmmaker places importance on unity of a family. The filmmaker also portrays other characters, such as Rahul and Rohan (Hrithik Roshan) to be modern yet rooted to their traditions in the globalised world. For instance, after listening to his grandmother Rohan seeks to bring back his elder brother to India and reunite his family. Similar to Bharat's character in *Purab Aur Paschim*, Rohan acts as a catalyst towards transformation of Anjali's sister, Pooja's character. From the moment Rohan steps on the foreign land, he is portrayed to be westernised. On the other hand, Pooja who has been living in the UK is also shown to be westernised, wearing revealing clothes and attending parties. Once Rohan starts living with her family, Pooja undergoes transformation as she is seen performing morning prayers and wearing Indian traditional clothes. It can be observed that Yash and Rohan are portrayed as modern, westernised men who like to own a Ferrari or dance with westernised girl. At the same time these men are shown to be aware of their traditions and culture, thus they are accepted by the society. On the other hand, Pooja who is westernised undergoes changes before she returns to India. The film follows the dominant ideology prevalent in the Indian society that woman should be cultured in order to be a part of the Indian family. Thus, the representation of Indian woman in Hindi cinema has remained the same over the years.

The filmmaker has incorporated various other elements of a traditional society throughout the film. It places importance on religious activities which act as a symbol for uniting the family. From the beginning of the film, the filmmaker presents various instances where the entire family unites while performing rituals. Even in the UK, Rahul and his family are seen performing rituals and celebrating Indian festivals on a grand scale. While emphasising on traditional society, the filmmaker also attempts to question the significance of it. This is achieved in one such sequences when Raichand and Nandini are seen engaging in a conversation and Nandini expresses her views on the changing perception towards arranged marriages. Raichand refuses to acknowledge love marriages as it places greater importance on an individual's opinion over a family's collective decision which is not prevalent in a traditional society. However, towards the end of the film, Nandini challenges the dominant ideology of the society, i.e. the dominance of arranged marriage over love marriage. In a modern society, Nandini questions the significance of an arranged marriage.

The film also plays a role in evoking patriotism amongst expatriate Indians. The filmmaker highlights the presence of 'India' in a foreign land on various occasions. The moment Rohan steps on a foreign land, a montage of London's famous sights are shown which is accompanied by soundtrack of Vandemataram. Similarly, in one of the sequences, Rahul's son Krrish sings Indian national anthem during his annual day performance along with the children's choir group at his school in London. These two scenes evoke a sense of nationalism amongst the expatriate Indians and reminds them of their belonging to their homeland. In both the instances, Indian values and traditions are represented along with the existence of Western culture and people. The portrayal of the Western land in *Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham* is not shown in a negative light as it was in *Purab Aur Paschim*. This reflects the changing attitude towards the Western land and expatriate Indians.

Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham exemplifies the superiority of the Indian culture in the spiritual domain. It represents the co-existence of tradition and modern society and portrayal of the Western culture in a positive light. However, at the end as the family reunites, the film supports the dominant ideology of a traditional society thereby showcasing Indian culture to be at a superior level in comparison to the Western culture.

Conclusion

It can be observed that the social economic conditions during the two time periods have had a huge impact on representation of Indian and Western cultures in Hindi cinema. *Purab Aur Paschim* which was shot during the early years of post-independence period has represented the Western culture and expatriate Indians in a different limelight in comparison to *Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham* which was shot during the post-liberalisation period. However, both the films emphasise on superiority of the Indian culture in spiritual domain through various filmic element. *Purab Aur Paschim* uses strong symbols and motifs to evoke nationalism and portray superiority of the Indian culture in a foreign land. While *Kabhi Khushi KabhiGham* displays superiority of Indian culture through emphasising on significance of traditional values in a modern society. Therefore, both the films incorporate the idea of nationalism and supremacy of Indian culture in spiritual domain even if they have been shot in two different time periods. Similarly, the portrayal of Indian westernised woman remains the same in both the films. The westernised female characters in both the films undergo transformation in presence of an Indian male character. Thus this reflects that the perception towards westernised woman has not changed over time. In both the films, the male characters are presented as modern and accepted by the society, while the westernised woman are portrayed as demonic or uncultured. This dominant ideology towards woman is still prevalent in the society therefore as a result, it is reflected in films which have been shot during two different time periods.

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