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## Diasporic Identities and their Representation through Cinema: An Analysis of Diasporic Film through South Asian Cinemas

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### Abstract

Diaspora signifies process of diffusion set of a person who migrated to a different region or country apart from their native which because of employment, industrialization, modern lifestyle and choice of self for high standard living. Foreign Migrations (popularly termed as ‘*diasporas*’ get shaped through intercontinental exodus immigrating approach and it can happen voluntary or by forced. To address these issues of migrating cultures, their struggle for self-identity; the medium of ‘Cinema’ is well versed and very monolithic in representation. The present study adopts the ‘Social identity theory’, which is certainly defined in predicting the norms of the audiences how they perceived the notion of values depicted in cinema. Social identity theory in this paper will propose that an event or occurrences can alter the perception as a metaphorical approach. The present study will analyse these films like *The Namesake* (Indian Film), *East is East* (UK), *West is West* (UK), *New York* (Indian film), *My Name is Khan* (Indian film) by evaluation method. The particularistic form of case study method will also use to construct the metaphor with semiology. Cinema is unique and it is the only one medium which is self-explanatory; this present study will try to understand the struggle of diasporic identity, clashes of culture, battle of individualism which is narrated and depicted in south Asian cinema. This study has mainly focused about the Cinema in India and Pakistan as a key parameter in defining the attributes of self-struggle and battle of identity.

**Keywords:** diaspora, representation, cinema, migration, metaphor, identity, particularistic form, South Asia.

### 1. Introduction

Word diaspora is associated with displacement of Jewish community from their homeland. History says that Jewish people were dispersed from their “homeland” due to attack from Babylonian king and Assyrian King. The term “*diaspora*” is a Greek word means scattered or dispersed. This term become most popularly used during 17<sup>th</sup> century in English language to indicate Jewish displacement. Soon “*diaspora*” is significantly used to indicate displaced population of any community living outside their homeland ([Diaspora..., 2021](#)).

What are transnational movies?

Movies that transcend boundary of any particular and exhibit multicultural aesthetic and narrative strategies in making the plot. The idea alludes people to create linkage between people and nations and its institution thereby creating an environment of collaboration in monetary,

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information, commodity on cross boundary basis. It is considered that transnational movies are part of broader collaborative projects of nations along with Hollywood domination in world film market, the objective is to create surge in film circulation on basis of available technological platform (Transnational..., 2021).

In their issue "Transnational Cinemas" (Higbee, Lim, 2010) used the term "critical transnationalism" as an opposition to traditional terminology without any definition to it. It has been general trend to associate the term "transnationalism" with diasporic cinema or postcolonial cinema in the Western countries while theorizing transnationalism. The Western scholars consider this concept in connection of relationship that film and filmmaker to mainstream cinema and with host country.

#### *Objective of the study*

Following are the broad objectives of the study:

- To study and understand the essence of South Asian diasporic cinema and its attributes,
- To evaluate the genre, theory (social identity) in respect of diasporic attribution.

## **2. Materials and methods**

Recent research is done on *Desi films: Articulating images of South Asian identity in a global communication environment*. In this paper researcher wants to examine how Indian diasporic film acts as vehicle of cultural articulation and debate. Researcher provides theoretical foundation for hegemony or resistance to the notion of immigrant's identity and ethnicity articulation by them in interstitial zone. She also discussed the source of hegemony from Indian and Western Media. Finally, researcher discussed the creation of hybrid genre and how it is popularly reflected in Indian diasporic film thereby exploring a new genre (Sharma, 2011).

Recent research is done by M.G. Durham in 2007 on *Constructing the new ethnicities: media, sexuality, and diaspora identity in the lives of South Asian immigrant girls* on 2007. Researcher shows how adolescent stages of immigrant girls are affected by issues of race, culture and nation that intersect with analysis on gender and sex. In this paper researcher tried to analyze the role of media in their sexual identity construction. Intensive interview method was used for focused group (Durham, 2007).

*Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies* is the recent research work done by (Higbee, Lim 2010). Researcher focuses on mapping the various concepts of transnational films in last ten years to fifteen years. Also tried to understand the state of deployment, related issues and problems with it. The study was done to identify critically transnationalism in film studies and understand clearly the difference between local and global, national and transnational. Researcher identified that "transnational cinema" should not be "descriptive" or "prescriptive" as cross-border issues are resolved with power. Researcher proposes critical and discursive stance to the concept of transnational film. Case study method was used to analyse transnational film by studying cases of diasporic film, exilic films and post-colonial films of East Asia and China (Higbee, Lim, 2010).

In 2001 H. Naficy in his research *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* tried to focus on filmmaking of post colonial, third world and other displaced individual in the west. The study was done to find out how the personal experience of diasporic people is translated to cinema. Case study is done on diasporic, postcolonial, exiled movie. Comparative study is done with Hollywood movie to identify line of difference. Experience of displacement or expatriation differs from person to person but their film exhibit similarity in style, aesthetic, memory driven narratives and also emphasizes political agency for their concern with their identity. This particular genre of movie is named *Accented Movie* by the researcher when compared with Hollywood movie (Naficy, 2001).

C. Klein in 2004 published his research work titled *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Diasporic Reading*, where he tried to study how Ang Lee in his movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* created aesthetic form which is shaped by his relation and ties with Chinese homeland and same is the situation for Chinese diasporic people. Study was done to analyse a diasporic film in the light of film makers perspective to create an artistic form which is influenced by his diasporic identity in American hostland. Case study was done with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* directed by Ang Lee where he represented diasporic identity of Tiwan in USA. Study revealed that Ang Lee's attempt to create old china appeal by using Mandarin language in the movie makes younger diasporic audience less interested who are not used to that language (Klein, 2004).

J. Desai, published in 2004 his research work as book titled *Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian diasporic film*. Researcher tried to study the south Asian diasporic scenario in cultural sphere. It entails on how trans-nationalism affect diasporic cultural product. Researcher tried to analyse Bollywood movie specially on diasporic life to analysis its influence on western as well as diasporic audience. Case study of few successful diasporic Hindi language film of 1990s decade was taken to understand diasporic cultural impact on audience. Study revealed that Indian movies in Hindi language dominated largely South Asian diasporic audience (Desai, 2004).

P. Werbner, in 2004 published a research article titled *Theorising complex diasporas: purity and hybridity in the South Asian public sphere in Britain*. Researcher examines the creation of South Asian diasporic public sphere in England through films. Researcher also focuses on “cultural hybridity, inter-generational conflict, family politics, excess of consumption” etc. On other hand there is diasporic public sphere of Muslim population dominated by Muslim leaders in Britain. These are the two prominent diaspora (Werbner, 2004).

Research Gap-It is evident that research is done on diasporic identity of mainly Hindi movies of Bollywood. There is also research work on influence of these movies on diasporic immigrant audience. But there is hardly any research work on representation of diasporic identity through South Asian films with special focus on Indian and Pakistani diasporic movies.

None of the previous research describe much how transnational cinema can practically be possible when English is mostly used as preferred language for these movies. Researchers did not address this area much. Also funding of these films is big question mark if language is not-English.

Theoretical Framework-The present study adopts the ‘*Social identity theory*’ which is certainly defined in predicting the definite intergroup behaviors on the basis of perceived group status differences, the perceived legitimacy and stability of those status differences, and the perceived ability to move from one group to another (Islam, 2013).

Social identity theory in this paper will propose that an event or occurrences can alter individual behaviors if it can modify their self-identity or part of their self-concept that derives from the knowledge of, and emotional attachment to the group (Islam, 2013).

This contrast with junctures where the term “*social identity theory*” is generally refers to theorizing about human social selves.

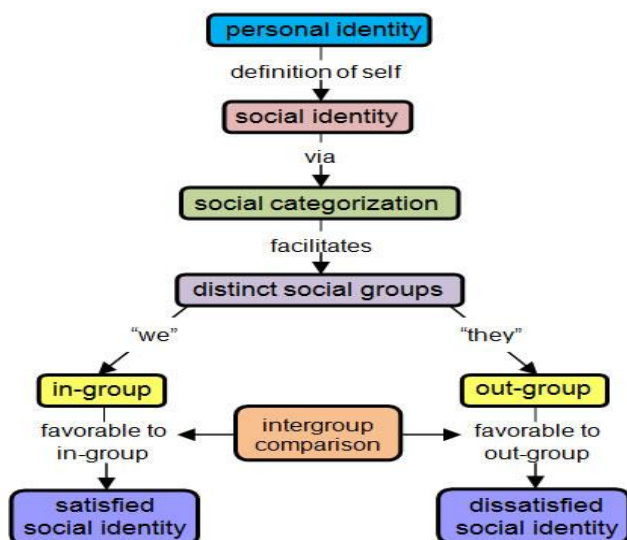


Fig. 1. Social Identity Structure (source: Redmond, Alderton, 2016)

Conceptual Framework – *Accented Movie* genre theory is first developed by H. Naficy in 2001 where this genre is categorized a film genre based on their diasporic identity in Western country. People who were displaced in post colonial period, diasporic or maybe in exile has different perspective to the concept of diaspora and their way of viewing cultural identity differ from person to person. Even the generations differ in their idea of diaspora. Language plays an important role in this diasporic film, which is mostly in English to reach to diasporic audience of modern generation. It has thin line of difference from Hollywood production (Naficy, 2001).

Theory of *Transnationalism in film studies* is mostly debated by researchers like (Higbee, Lim, 2010) in their research work. The theory identifies the line of difference between regional,

national and global film. The idea of transnationalism in film is categorized further into diasporic, post colonial, exile movie based on theme and storyline (Higbee, Lim, 2010).

#### Research Questions

Based on the review of related literature, the research has formed the following research questions:

RQ 1. How the South Asian Cinema has treated the concept of diasporic cinema and its core essence?

RQ 2. How diasporic film deal with different genre/particular genre?

RQ 3. What are the elements and attributes taken up by the diasporic cinema to embedded the segregated audience?

RQ 4. How social identity theory junctures with South Asian diasporic cinema?

#### Research Methodology

The present study has been analyzed these films:

- *The Namesake* (Indian Film), *East is East* (UK),
- *West is West* (UK), *New York* (Indian film),
- *My Name is Khan* (Indian film)
- *Children of War* (Indian film) by evaluation method.

The Evaluation Methodology is a tool to help one better understand the steps needed to do a quality evaluation (Baehr, 2004).

The particularistic form of case study method will be used to construct the metaphor with semiology.

### 3. Discussion

Even though diasporic movies are now considered as an international genre it fails to address the fact that cultural exchange is ‘*never a politically neutral exchange*’, instead it implies ‘*a dynamic relationship between a dominant host*’ culture and a minority culture.’ Despite a lack of a singular theme, diasporic movies continue to be an important part of film culture and are also a strong political tool. For a deeper understanding of the current turmoil among British Muslims, or even just some sense of what lies behind Pakistan's current troubles, will leave disappointed. This, no doubt, is deliberate: a corrective to the poisonous atmosphere of witch-hunt and Islamophobia that dominates some sections of British society.

The taken cases of the Diasporic cinema (in this present research) focuses more on cultural aspects rather than ‘*nation*’ due to this, there no linguistic and cultural boundaries. However, there are similarities in terms of genres, themes, execution and targeted audience. *Ethnicity, race, culture, identity, colonialism and capitalism* are some of the themes associated with it.

J. Desai has published another important research article on 2006 titled *Bollywood abroad: South Asian diasporic cosmopolitanism and Indian cinema*. Here he examines appeal of diasporic cosmopolitan culture on Bollywood and diasporic movie. Transnational migration took place during 1960s and 70s in USA from South Asia. This created a cosmopolitan environment in their host country. Thus, creating cosmopolitan ambience for diasporic audience. The study aimed at understanding South Asian Cosmopolitanism through analysis of films. The study analyses the way film is used to “*produce and articulate transnational cosmopolitan subjects*”. Content analysis of Bollywood movies and diasporic movies is done from perspective of cultural cosmopolitanism appeal. The researcher concluded that South Asian American has particular pattern of consumption of Bollywood movies and cosmopolitan diasporic film (Desai, 2006).

In 2005, R. Kaur published a book on *Cruising on the Vilayeti bandwagon: diasporic representations and reception of popular Indian movies Bollyworld*. After 1990s globalization has changed the gesture of transnational Indian films. Researcher tried to investigate current scenario of Bollywood movies with special reference to diasporic representation in such films and how it is received by diasporic audience in 1990s. Researcher has critically examined the types of narrative and characters represented in Bollywood diasporic movie. She also examined a sample transnational audience in London for reception and review of Bollywood movie. Researcher could conclude that in overall there was “*qualitatively different level of engagement*”. Researcher further concluded that there is presence of “*reflexive spectatorship*” which has “*triple orientation*” of reception: a) they have relation with Hindi films, b) reception in relation to being Indian/Asian in West where Hindi films signify “*cultural repository of alterity*”. c) “*in relation to larger repertoire of filmic reference*” that made Hindi films comparable to other movies traditionally (Kaur, 2005).

C.P. Shimizu in his study argued that there is a transition shift as a compartmentalize from for NGO (Non-Government Organisations to independent media industry (university also been included) for 'Asia American cinema' which has begun in 1980 till date (Shimizu, 2017). They further suggested that to make the term 'Asian American Cinema' pertinent in today's context, attempts should be made to take all minor groups not limited or specific to one but to entails a larger group in a broader sense (Shimizu, 2017).

T.M. Bordun in his study of *the end of extreme cinema studies* has defined thrilling cinema in an international level with a less focussed narrative in order to practice and usage the term "unforeseen (story) disagreements" can be the reason of highlighted "ruthless vehemence" and "graphic erotic metaphors" (Bordun, 2017). Determination of audiences are at the key point in order to consume and access the unyielding exposure to graphic dismay which is vital area to ponder upon (Bordun, 2017).

On their study of understanding the critical trends in transnational cinema, the author states that the terms like 'remake, coproduction, cross contamination of genres' for the disposition of cinemas across China, India, Korea and United Arab Emirates (Yang et al., 2020).

On his research *Impossible Homecoming: Cinematic Returns of Korean Diaspora in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Kim, 2019) how contemporary Korean diaspora films remain presented and combined to integrated with South Korean cinema with the narrative discourse flows to convey the construction of national culture in aspects of motherland and in turn, hand also signifies that the order of discover new-fangled procedures of transcontinental practices through cinematic thoughts and to have a wider array of spectatorial involvement.

On his study on *Exploring Armenian Diasporic Cinema from the Third Space*, the author focusses on examining diverse filmic depictions of Armenian diasporic topics of Armenian "homeland" (Paalman, 2019). The concept of filmic depictions has appeared owing to the postcolonial and poststructuralist considerations of distinctiveness and diasporas which have then commanded to comparable conceptualizations within Armenian diasporic erudite discourse (Paalman, 2019).

S.T. Flanigan has published a review article on *Crowdfunding and Diaspora Philanthropy: An integration of literature and major concepts* in 2017. The researcher has tried to review different relevant literature on crowdfunding and diaspora philanthropy and thereby analysed different "overlapping characteristics", limitations and strength of these practises. Thus, focused on potential or ability of crowdfunding towards diaspora philanthropy with special focus on challenges faced in particular context of global South (Flanigan, 2017).

B. Ellerson has published a research article on *African Women of the Screen as Cultural Producers: An Overview by Country* in 2018. The researcher tried to show the experience of African woman as cultural producer during the age of screen culture, moving image and audio-visual media. The researcher has done survey country-wise to find how African woman acted as cultural worker and strive for the cause or out of sense of responsibility in a dangerous situation so that African stories are told and images are seen. For this purpose, to achieve African woman has acted their role as producer, distributor, exhibited, discussed, became film critique, archived and documented it, also preserved it (Ellerson, 2018).

W.-S. Hee has published a research article on *Accented Style: On Namewee's Sinophone Malaysian Film and Rap Songs* in 2019. The researcher tried to analyse representation of sino-Malay relationship in different works of Name wee. It was found that these works of Namewee refused to stick to traditional ethnic framework. Researcher found that accented style of Namewee's work give rise to multi-mediated, multicultural aspects of sinophone theory. The sinofication of theory of authenticity is criticised by researcher and he identified the national identity playing important role to resist racist aspects and highlight Malay version of mythology of indigeneity (Hee, 2019).

D. Valančiūnas published a research article on "Haunting memories: Sri Lankan civil war, trauma and diaspora in literature and film" in 2021. The researcher tried to analyse the literary and cinematographic representation of Sri Lankan civil war. The literary work of American author V.V. Ganeshanathan's novel *Love marriage* was analysed and French filmmakers screen work *Dheepan* is also analysed. The researcher tried to find how different form of cultural production like novel and film developed by two different cultured people on same event expressed the traumatic incident of civil war of Sri Lankan in diasporic space. The result revealed that their work's highlighting of trauma narratives which focus on "haunting memories" of civil war, which

further reflect transnational and transhistorical aspect of trauma possessed by diasporic people even though they are born in different time at different place (Valančiūnas, 2021).

A. Yue published research article on *the diaspora advantage of Pauline Chan-1956* from multicultural filmmaker to cultural broker in 2018. The researcher tried to analyse screen career of Australia's highest profile Chinese film maker Pauline Chan in the light of new approach of "diaspora advantage". The theory is marked by mobility than culturalism thereby benefit brought by diaspora group's skills that has allowed transnational actor to flourish beyond limit and accelerating growth path of country of origin and settlement. The researcher further documented the transition of Chan from "multicultural film maker to cultural intermediary" therefore increasing her diasporic advantage in film market in Australia and China and opened up new business route outside the limit of policy (Yue, 2018).

They portray the cultural and social conditions of the people and often interact with the culture and society of the country where they live. They address issues of the paradoxes of exile, belonging to different cultures and communities which often face xenophobic hate, the clash of identities, etc. In academia, diasporic cinema had become an important part of film studies.

#### 4. Results

##### *East is East*

This is a comedy genre and a British film of 1971 by D. O'Donnell. The family faces a constant battle to inculcate in his six children traditional Pakistani Muslim values as they have migrated with acculturation with new social milieu. This movie depicts on the hesitance to carry of their birth place identity which the children of protagonists are unwilling to live with. They just want to discard the style of appearance (apparels and customs related to their native country) which satirically subjugates the change of adoption of cultural practices by the younger generation of today.

##### *West is West*

*West Is West* being a 2010 British comedy-drama film directed by A. DeEmmony. A sequel to the 1999 comedy film *East Is East*, it was written by A. Khan-Din and produced by L. Udwin for Assassin Films and BBC Films. It managed to combine an effervescent cheerfulness with simple but effective points about how ethnic identity changes across successive generations of immigrants. No doubt with one eye on current political debate, this belated sequel looks to develop the theme and provide context to the arguments about immigration.

##### *The Namesake*

Mira Nair directed this movie on 2006 which falls in drama genre of English language. The story portrays the skirmishes of the immigrants of India (from the story plot revolves around the 'Bengali' cultural identity and scuffles been shifted as a first-generation settler in foreign country. The story is quite fascinating to see the shift of cultural practices with mother tongue usages in family quite difficult and moronic for American born kids especially after the main protagonist's death. It later on appreciates the ritual practices of 'Bengali' and gives a world view of 'Indian Kolkata' submerged ethnocultural identities as a whole.

##### *Children of War*

*Children of War*, also known as *The Bastard Child*, is a 2014 Hindi drama film directed by M. Devrat. The film released on 16 May 2014 in India. Based on real events in Bangladesh, 1971. The film is about how rape and religion were used as war weaponry. The film deals with the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, focusing on the genocide and when 400,000 women were raped and 3 million people were killed. As the film progresses towards its climax, the three stories begin to intertwine with one another.

##### *My Name is Khan*

*My Name Is Khan* is a 2010 Indian Hindi-language drama film directed by K. Johar. The film generated a great deal of publicity for itself due to three main reasons: first, the multiple political controversies surrounding the film and its lead actor; second, Khan's presence in the film and third, the reunion of the "golden pair" of Khan and Kajol. The story of an Indian Muslim man who suffers from the Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism that impacts social interaction abilities. He is arrested mistakenly as a suspected terrorist in post-9/11 Los Angeles.

**Table 1.** Diasporic identities and their representation through cinema

Films	Social Categorization	Social Identification	Social Comparison	In-group Favoritism	Out-group Derogation
<i>The Namesake</i>	The film captures the journey of two generations of the Bengali family in America.	India is a style of upbringing and attitude that transcends territory.	Despite of Americanisms, long journey self-discovery still beckoning them.	India is an idea that lives in the heart and the mind, rather than a land-locked territory.	Ostensibly are thoroughbred Americans
<i>East is East</i>	<i>East is East</i> is a tragi-comedy in an Anglo-Pak setting.	The immigrant's identity crisis.	Racism and violence in a light-hearted yet sensitive way.	A father who wants his children brought up in a conservative Muslim way	He faces a constant battle to inculcate in his six children traditional Pakistani Muslim values.
<i>Children of War</i>	Depiction of endless suffering, helplessness, genocide and language hatred, at heart	To recount Bangladesh's painful journey to freedom.	Story of separation, survival, longing and utmost resilience, with the backdrop of war.	The film is tense and atmospheric.	A war, which lasted for nine months, led to innumerable brutal killings, rape, loss of hope and innocence.
<i>West is West</i>	Culture-clash comedy drama set in the period shown in 1976	The film that focused on the travails of a Pakistani-British family trying to cope with the cultural divide.	The man who struggles between his twin identities: Pakistani Brit and Pakistani farmer	East may be East, West may be West, but people are the same, despite their superficial differences.	Manage to communicate despite their language barriers.
<i>My Name is Khan</i>	Lead golden pair of actors	Truly fictional but the true	As people face real hard racism and called over as terrorists just because they are Muslims.	Multiple political controversies	Story of every Muslims living in non-Islamic countries.

## 5. Conclusion

The Indian Diaspora finally finds its voice: elegant, articulate and very real with true reflection of contemporary society. Here, the sample movies taken for this present research, there is no hysterical clash-of-culture cacophony about how the Patels, Ganguli's and the Punjabis leave India, only to create Little India's all over the world. The researcher has found that there is no

hullabaloo about the *Angrezi-born-confused-desi* dilemmas that the second generation *NRI* kids succumb to: an overdose of drugs, sex and the dark side of the moon. Instead, there is a gentle probing, a mild introspection on cross cultural conflicts coupled with a quiet celebration of the idea of India, minus all chauvinism.

Dysphoric movies exist in all nations. Even though diasporic movies are now considered as an international genre it fails to address the fact that cultural exchange is 'never a politically neutral exchange', instead it implies 'a dynamic relationship between a dominant 'host' culture and a minority culture.' Despite a lack of a singular theme, diasporic movies continue to be an important part of film culture and are also a strong political tool.

The future study prospects may emphasize the cross-cultural barriers, communication decipher factors etc. The present research has taken selected films with purposive sampling technique, the result would have differed if it would have adopted other sampling techniques. The present research is a qualitative study in nature. Five selected films were taken into consideration more search can be done for other language film.

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