



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 6. Issue.4. 2019 (Oct-Dec)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

RE-ESTABLISHING WOMEN'S IDENTITY WITH INDIAN DIASPORIC FILM; A STUDY ON
SELECTED FILM "MISSISSIPI MASALA" (NAIR, 1991) AND "HEAVEN ON EARTH"
(MEHTA, 2008)

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doi: [10.33329/ijelr.64.130](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.64.130)



ABSTRACT

Diaspora films have questioned the mindset of Indian Women. The Indian Diaspora Film makers have problematized patriarchal norms followed by women. The films have re-visualized females' psyche with regard to their acceptance of minor role in decision making. Diaspora films have critically framed the narratives of family and society living in stereotypical customary patterns of male dominated rules and regulation.

This present research paper aims to show the transformation of the image of women as an independent individuality. This paper also tries to bring in light the modernization of society with regard to the performance and role of women both in family and outside world. Indian diaspora films have tried to re-measure the path adopted by Indian women as a confident and leading character. It is to explore how Bollywood and Diasporic films are re-establishing the personal identity of women and their role in re-authenticating the position of women in Indian society, so I have taken two movies "Mississippi Masala" directed by USA based Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta's "Heaven on Earth". The choice of the movie is based on the fact that both filmmakers belong to Indian diaspora and have emphasized on reconfiguring the women identity. The approach is qualitative and I have the form of narrative method to analyse the movies. Systematic analyses have allowed me to portray the influence of these movies on viewers, especially concerning gender.

Keywords: Diasporic movies, Bollywood, Women identity, Indian tradition

Introduction

Gender refers to the process of dividing people and their practices and emphasizes the construction of masculinity and femininity (Brown, 46). Roles are assigned in the society based on the genders; people perceive and expect that the others should behave with them according to the categorization of gender as per societal norms. For years Indian women are living in a patriarchal society (Kimuna, 774). Only males play a dominant role in decision making. Women are forced to spend their life inside the four walls. Their critical role

in developing the family and Society remain unmapped. The centrality of their gender concerning their states of victimization or as passive agent sensitizes struggle and challenges.

Movies are the great source of entertainment and excitement; Films have a power of influencing not only individual mindset, but also culture of a society as a whole. The global success of Indian Bollywood is not questionable. Infact Bollywood can be coined as a "Soft power" of Indian growing strength (Nye, 155). The term soft power was given by American political scientist Joseph Nye, which means a state, can power over another states through some attraction.

Indian Bollywood represents a kind of stereotype, enabling audience to distinguish between the binaries like good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable to the society. Indian commercial cinema sometimes uses this stereotype in enhancing its soft power. Moreover, either females are portrayed in subordinate roles and symbolized as the carrier of traditional values, or as a "subject of look" dominantly evident in the form of songs, dance, costumes, item songs etc. The similar idea is also shared by Komal Nahata (Trade Analyst) in an interview given to India Today:

"The audience expects certain stereotypes and over the years it has become an easy option for filmmakers to establish characters. In a typical film, the filmmaker relies on outfit, mannerism and dialogues to characterize and distinguish a good mother from a bad mother," said trade analyst Komal Nahata.

However as a result of globalization, cinematic representations contradict the dominate rule, and gradually by 1970's Indian cinema starts representing the assertive, challenging transformed image of women. The women in contemporary Indian cinema is been now projected as independent, confident and a leading character. This transformational contour of Indian women would remain incomplete if we do not discuss the role of women of Indian diaspora who reel the culture and preserve the women Identity through diasporic cinema (Moodley, 1970). Particularly the South Asian women diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chadha etc. have played a great role in this direction (Rajgopal, 50). This research article therefore takes into account both Indian Bollywood and South Asian Diasporic Cinema into consideration and then tries to figure out the role played by them in reframing the Indian women's identity It aims at understanding how Indian Bollywood and diasporic Filmmakers delve into re-establishing the women's identity and how Diaspora films interpretate and integrate agency of women's life, while preserving their personality in terms of social milieu and community practices.

"Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at." (Chamola, 2)

The above quote well explains the privileged position that men used to enjoy in the world of cinema, and the passive and submissive role that women play. If I recall the entry of Rani Mukharjee in the movie "Kuch Kuch Hota hai", The camera project her entry in slow motion, her clothes, her body curves, all representing her as a sexual manifestation. All done keeping in mind to give importance to male gaze, In fact the entry scene of woman in movies where the male first sees the women is generally accentured through the use of some dialogue, action or background music etc similar to our example quoted above.

However some contemporary movies [As we are referring here as contemporary cinema we would be considering movies post 2000. Movies like," Chameli "in 2003, " Zism" in 2003, "Salaam Namaste" in 2005, "No 1 killed Jessica" in 2011, "Dirty Picture" in 2011, "Befikre" in 2017 etc], portray women as a central character to the story. An attempt was done by these movie makers to highlight some of the taboo or impermissible aspect like divorce, sexuality, live – in- relationships etc. They portray different shades of Indian women not only as independent but also as being respected for cultural values. Similar kind of thoughts are shared by kakkar in an interview given to India Today, he said that:

"This is a perfect example of diminishing stereotypes. It's a welcome sign that the films are trying to outgrow the set pattern of demarcating the characters. Films such as "Mary Kom", "Kahaani" or "Haider" - where Tabu is depicted as an atypical filmi mother - have been appreciated by the audience.

This is a clear proof that the audience wants our films to break away from stereotypes” (Srivastava, 2014).

Sometimes Bollywood realistic cinema takes inspiration from real life situations and tries to highlight issues and events from the society. Finest examples of such movies are the “Black Friday in 2004”, “Once Upon A Time in Mumbai in 2010”, “Aakrosh in 2010” and “Bunty ki dulhania in 2008” .

One of the famous brands under such category is Bhandarkar films (Banaji, 178). When it comes to portraying of women their characters are shown as bold and empowered. The woman in his movies are portrayed as character who want to live there life on their own terms, often assertive, they do not confined to social norms and are shown highly career oriented. Madhur Bhandarkar attempts to bring strong female character but gradually in his story he ends up choosing women to remain as it is in the larger societal framework.

Strongly oppose to this, is the work of women diasporia filmmakers who discard Indian women as guardians of Indian values. Women in their film indeed are the protagonist, but they boldly confirm their dissention to confront challenges posed by fanatic norms. These women filmmakers follow a de-centering approach for female identity in which relation of Indian women and their adaptation to Indian values and cultural norms are modified whenever and wherever necessary.

Diasporic filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Nisha Pahuja and Mira Nair challenge this idealized image of women living the stereotype life to impress others and the society. Rather they focus on latent feelings, self-identity and the agency personality that prevent them from living a pretentious life, just to impress the family and the Society.

In order to exemplifies the aforesaid statements, the two movies Mira Nair’s “Mississippi Masala”, Deepa Mehta’s “Heaven on Earth”, are discussed in particular. Diasporic cinema is some time referred as cinema that emerges from personal experience as a result of dislocation or displacement. These two film makers not only share their diasporic experience but in their film also they try to project female character not as the bearer of ideological culture rather they have portrayed female as an independent identity construct (Rajgopal, 49). They strongly subvert the definition of Indian women hood and as a result sometimes they also have to face a strong criticism in Indian society.

First consider “Mississippi Masala”, in this movie the family was forced to leave Uganda because of some political reasons. Mina is the youngest and the protagonist in the movie. She falls in love with Demetrius, who was an African American. As a barrel of Indian tradition she was forced for arranged marriage but speak out in resistance. She eloped with Demetrius and decided to become the subject of her own life. Mira Nair boldly portrays her as a sexual eyes woman, strongly opposing the traditional image of women as a symbol of culture. Mira Nair very beautifully took the theme as the character that fights with her own battle with her own feelings and emerges as an independent identity. Mina was portrayed a willful female.

If I compare the entry of female protagonist (Mina) in the movie with that of Rani Mukharjee “Kuch Kuch hota hae”, Mina, was a dark pigment skinned woman, with long hair, a simple but confident character. In the first scene, she is pushing a trolley with desire. When her aunt gets attracted by a sale on toilet paper she reminds her, the purpose of shopping, this shows her rational approach. Further she is shown driving her cousin’s car and her aunt chooses to sit on back seat, as she does not believe in her driving. These two scenes speaks much about Mina’s personality, she is confident, she is mobile, a mature women and represent an independent identity. Even when the accident occurs, she does not panic but remains calm and compose, she does not forget to take Demetrius’ address and insurance details. Mina thus has shown a street savvy and self-assured woman.

I think Nair has given us a perfect example of a personal identity of a new generation women. She does not typically match to an Indian young woman, who likes to spend time in shopping, prefer to sit next to the driving seat, and gets panic in the mishaps situations.

To symbolize the character of Mina as adaptable and flexible, Nair has shown her equally comfortable in Sari, a pair of jeans and a beautiful mirrored wrap on her first date with Dermeritus. As appear in the quote of one of the woman of Indian community at Mina's cousin's wedding -

Gossiping woman: You can be dark and have money, or you can be fair and have no

Money, but you can't be dark and have no money and expect to get Harry Patel. (Nair, 1992)

In spite of the fact that she is considered unfit for a desirable marriage in her own community, she is defined as an explorer to understand people and world around her, she becomes irresistibly attracted when Harry Patel (the white man) takes her out to a nightclub where she joins him, on the dance floor, and she is quite comfortable. I think through Mina's character, Mira Nair has very successfully questioned the people's mindset, who used to correlate the physical traits of women to the binary of her fortunate or unfortunate destiny.

Unlike her father, who is still living in the memories of Uganda, and even dissimilar to her Mother who still believed in following Indian Culture (as metaphorically shown by Mehta, that she always appears in Indian attire wearing Saari and putting a big bindi on her forehead) she is given a character with searching and curious spirit to explore the world.

On the one hand she was expected to be an icon of Indian tradition and on the other hand she wants to run away from the oppressive rules of her parents, finally she took a volunteer exile and abandon Greenwood and attempt a new life. Thus we could see how Mississippi Masala brings about cultural conflict through the characters. Mina's character evidently contradict culture icon of following the family instructions and decision to go back to the original land shows cultural shift between generations. Her rebellious and willful character is reflected in the movie quote-

"Meena: What about me? What about me? I've never asked you for anything! Never expected anything! I'm 24 years old, and I'm still here! Stuck here! You think I'm happy? I love him. That's not a crime. Is it.?"

"Kinnu: You call this love? When all you have done is bring such shame upon our heads?" (Nair, 1992).

Mira Nair brilliantly point out that how unlike the traditional Indian women, Mina disobeys her parents and define her points through the language of body and through her decision of eloping with her own choice, thereby trying to construct her own identity as subjects.

This romantic comedy film conveys a serious message to the stereotype society which considers their wives, daughters and sister etc as a bearer of their traditional norms and culture to forget that women are a separate entity and are independent identity, who weaves their own norms for their own life.

In the second movie "Heaven on Earth" the protagonist is Chand, an Indian Punjabi women who fly to Canada to marry her prince. While she was about to fly to Canada, Subverting the Indian tradition, her mother told her not to accept any negations and always give back what she receives. Apparently she becomes victim of her husband and domestic violence. Due to financial constant she has to work in a factory. Chand does not receive the salaries and it is directly given to her husband. In spite of the fact that she is working but she is not treated as an independent.

Relationship between Rocky (her Husband) and Chand are tensed and full of domestic violence for Chand. Chand initially is portrayed as a very submissive and timid woman, who is emotionally, physically and mentally tortured. Yet contrary to Indian tradition where a woman is expected to remain obedient and remain a metaphor of sufferer-physically, mentally, psychologically and emotionally but contrary to this representation, Chand is shown as a person with lot of optimism and bravery. And she does not accept the situation as her ill fate like many Indian women do, rather she always anticipate and look for a solution to overcome the suffering.

Fantasies of the alien world help her in fighting with her destiny. She believes that world is a better place and she should not accept the victim hood. The heaven for Chand was a desire to go back to her parents. In the end Chand decided to go back to India leaving her husband, discarding the hegemonic ideology of traditional Indian women. Thus Deepa Mehta shows the bold step in rejecting the current entrapment of traditional Indian

women identities and takes bold step to recreate and construct their own identity. Chand has taken a decision and does not aligned to the patriarchal Indian society norms, she subvert the norms and hence reestablish the Indian woman identity.

Apparently the movie may not be successful in terms of commercial film market. Yet it conveys a powerful message to all women who are living a miserable and silent sufferer life, it gives them a direction to overcome through it.

In all the two movies transposition of Indianness into another culture was themed as tension and confusion creating environment but finally redefine the Indian women as independent subject.

Indian diaspora has played a dominant role in exploring the complexities involve in human nature. Their finest work was in exploring the change and contemporary feelings and identity that form the present society. Through this research article I have tried to identify the locus of such de-centering approach which was used by diasporic filmmaker.

Indian diaspora are spreaded all over the world and are glorifying the Indian culture to every corner of the globe. Indian diasporic filmmakers have done a brilliant task of drawing on Indian culture and the complexities involved in dislocation and displacement on the global map Indeed this is the time when in this globalised world the socio-cultural boundaries should disappear and gender disparity should be discouraged. Societal change in terms of inter religious marriages, homosexuality, women as an independent subject, respect of identities and the complex dynamics of gender equality should be encouraged on the global level. In the time when we are talking about gender equality, diasporic cinema may pave a way for the society in bringing strong and balanced improvement in transforming women identity.

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