

## Ser Pe Laal Topi Roosi, Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustaani: An Enquiry into the Perception of India Through Western Eyes

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### Abstract

With the changing trends and interpretations of India, owing to the emergence of globalization and the concept of one nation, the more pronounced early British view of India as the land of snake-charmers with elephants hovering around the city has frequently been challenged. In this paper, I would like to view the changing traits in the depiction of India and its citizens and what particularly constitutes this 'Indian-ness', especially in Western Cinema, in movies like *UnIndian*, *Bend it like Beckham*, *Namesake*, and *Bride and Prejudice*. The protagonist Meera in the film "UnIndian" says, "Too Indian to be Australian here and not fit to be Indian anymore in India".

Often, this dichotomy within the self of being and non-being, existing and yet not existing, with the passports, visas and other identifications ready to remind us of our roots, travels and routes that we have treaded on, give us an impression of being at various places simultaneously and not knowing where we really are. The film titled *The Namesake*, based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, carries forward this issue of divided identity when we hear in the lyrics of "The Same Song" expressions such as "How many roads have I wondered?/None, and each my own.. Nowhere to go but the horizon/ Where, then, will I call my home?".

Through an analysis of the above-mentioned films, the paper hopes to problematize diverse dimensions of lives of the diasporic characters from various parts of the world. Some of the questions which are attempted to be researched are how they remember their nation India, how they are perceived by the West and what really constitutes their Indianness and how really, through the lens of the affluent NRIs, India appears.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian-ness, Others, Whites, Diaspora, identities, exotic.

With the changing trends and interpretations of India, owing to the emergence of globalization and the concept of one nation, the more pronounced early British view of India as the land of snake-charmers with elephants hovering around the city has frequently been challenged. In this paper, I would like to view the changing traits in the depiction of India and its citizens and what particularly constitutes this 'Indian-ness', especially in Western Cinema, directed by Indian-born, foreign-based directors like Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair and Anupam Sharma.

The white Americans, the British and the Europeans have always been lured by the exotic, enchanting Indians, where their concept of India has depended largely on either stories heard from their fellows who have returned to their homelands post India's independence or fictions written about them. And now, with the dynamism in media, it is mostly through films that Indian-ness is understood in the West. But who are these people writing about India and what exactly is their own understanding of their motherland when they are coming from an affluent NRI background? What constitutes as the part of their memory so as to depict closely what real India is and what any way is real India through the eyes of the 'other', the West?

I aspire to address these question in this paper through the movies like The Namesake, UnIndian, Bend it like Beckham, and Bride and Prejudice.

Jennifer Dyar in her essay, 'Fatal Attraction: The White Obsession with Indianness', talks about how a "divorce of Indianness from the reality of Indians themselves allowed white society to define Indianness according to white cultural preferences and resulted in both a skewed understanding of Indian identity and a loss of voice for Indians in creating that identity..." (Dyar 2).

In the film UnIndian, directed by Indian origin Australian director Anupam Sharma, we come across this very notion of how the 'Other' views India. They portray the picture of the Indian community and the concept of the Indian Community Network and how the Indian-ness perpetuates itself through these NRIs. Dolce & Gabbana suits, the festival of Holi being celebrated without any religious significance and a Salman Khan movie as the point of attraction for all the Aussie Indians are some of the hackneyed threads that we find in the movie. Dyar writes, "For some, Indianness was a welcome return to simplicity, a reactionary abandonment of an "immoral white world". This response represents primitivism, the "belief in the superiority of seemingly simpler ways of life" in its most pristine form." (Dyar 3).

Thus when Tinku aka. TK describes to his friend Will Hendersen about Meera, the exotic Indian enchantress, he advices, "no sex, no alcohol" if he really wishes to woo her. The repeated emphasis on Indian culture as "moral" and "pristine" depicts how the "Other" views India, and their notion that every Indian family measures their morality-content through the amount of abstinence from sex or alcohol. He says, "You have to see an astrologer who will read your birth chart for you, you will need to refrain from all non-veg food and activities, you know what non-veg activities are? No sex, no girls, [...] Once you're clean, and back to the priest, he will give you his blessings."

We notice how instead of calling Meera "an Indian chick", TK insists on making his friends call her "an Indian woman". When Mich describes her as "a hottie with a dot", he vehemently protests because "The dot has a cultural significance to my people" which TK himself is unaware of.

In this particular scene, we realize how the character of TK, even though a foil in the movie, plays a significant role in revealing before us what we understand as a divided identity, trying his best to vicariously conform to his roots even though he does not quite know where it lies.

The character of Priya, a South-Indian girl in Melbourne, grappling to find a job, portrays how as a girl, she is "Just caught in this maze of new country, new culture, new people, new English" and Meera too, reaffirms this as she says, "We all fall in this crack, not Australian enough for Australia yet, not Indian enough for India anymore."

Dyar writes "Indeed, from the very beginning, most white settlers viewed Indians from a dual perspective, merging the ideas of the Indian as both familiar and Other in a complicated union that both embraced the Indian as relative and distanced him as alien..." (Dyar 10). The "exotic primitivism" (Dyar 10) is at the root of this attraction of the Whites towards the Indians where the Whites would view the 'Other' from a distance as one views a painting and feels enchanted but are mortified when they approach it closely since it is obscure only if viewed from a distance. This idea gets conveyed when Will asks how the concept of dating

works for the Indians, whom Will primarily considers as exotic, TK replies, "Same as here! They even speak English, Will!"

What the film also stereotypes is in viewing the mother-daughter relationship as strained because of Meera's divorce and her being an apparent 'burden' on her parents despite her economic independence and the idea of Oedipal instinct being the normative by showing Meera's father being supportive towards his daughter. Meera's mother hyperventilates exclaiming, "Then we should hurry up! This boy will not be in the market for very long!" as Meera contests her saying "I need to fall in love, Mom."

The concept of homosexuality in the movie is shown through the character of Meera's ex-husband Deepak, who is closeted gay but tries to conform to the idea of a "perfect family" by marrying Meera and having a child with her. Meera explains how, "It's UnIndian to be gay" and thus breaks from her wedlock.

This viewing of the daughters as a burden for the family who needs to be married off soon is also showcased in the English romantic comedy *Bride and Prejudice* directed by Gurinder Chadha. Not only are the real tension of finances that come in the form of dowry in Indian weddings, ignored in the film, but also the transnational touch has beguiled the audience from the real picture of Indian society. The self-conscious effort to portray the Indian tradition through the song sequences mark as a deliberate attempt to appropriate Indian cultural values as viewed by its diasporic subjects. The characters converse primarily in English with only touch of Hindi and Punjabi only to bring in the "Desi" flavour in the film. These subjects are uprooted from their homeland and they try to optimize their lost value by dancing to the tunes of Dhol on a Garba night only to re-appropriate themselves as Indians.

The character of Mr. Kholi as the "American Born Confused Desi" in this film makes the statement of how the Indian girls born in the U.S. have "lost their roots" and are "completely clueless" while some have even "turned into Lesbians" which left him no choice but to come to India to find a "good Indian girl" because after all as "they" say, "no life...without wife."

In the essay, "Mothering Siblings: Diaspora, Desire and Identity in "American Born Confused Desi"', Kay Souter and Ira Raja talks about the identity of these NRIs which is "torn between a "whole" Western formation and a "whole" Indian one." (Souter, Raja 8).

The *Namesake*, based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, directed by Mira Nair, is a watershed text for Indian Diaspora. While we see Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli as NRIs torn between these two "wholeness" of identities, of being a Bengali, an Indian and the 'other' as they voluntarily migrate to the U.S., their children, Gogol aka. Nikhil and Sonia Ganguli, suffer from an identity crisis of being neither "wholly American" nor "wholly Indian."

Naming of a child becomes crucial at a point when Gogol is born and the letter from Calcutta carrying his formal name gets delayed in arriving. Instead of listening to the suggestion of the nurse to name him "Baby Boy Ganguli", Ashoke names him after his favorite author Nikolai Gogol. What we get from this narrative thread is the lack of identity which Gogol feels as he grows up. His Americanized hair-cut does not fetch him the American gang membership.

After the death of Ashoke Ganguli, Gogol voluntarily goes and shaves his head off as a part of the Hindu ritual. Even though Ashima states that there was no need for it, Gogol tries to

reassert himself to his lost identity of being a Hindu, a Bengali and an Indian by saying, "Amar ichha korlo, Ma." ("I felt like doing it, Ma.")

The music in the film conveys the interaction of the 'native' and the 'other' as we hear the tune of the Sarod merging with that of Guitar, Tabla with that of the Drums. The Howrah Bridge is juxtaposed against the Brooklyn Bridge of New York to emphasize not only the physical displacement of these characters but also of their psychic.

The very unIndian way by which Gogol calls his parents, "guys", disturbs Ashima as she exclaims, "Sometimes when I close my eyes and listen to you both, I feel I have given birth to strangers." What surfaces in this particular scene is the "other"-ness that Ashima notices in Gogol which she fails to negotiate with. Gogol therefore becomes twice strange to his surrounding, once as the "brown-skinned" Indian to his American classmates, and then as the strange American-Indian son of the Bengali household.

"The category of the 'black body' can come into being only when the body is perceived as being out of place, either from its natural environment or its national boundaries," (Souter and Raja 8.) Tracing back this idea into the film *UnIndian*, Meera is found to be pestered by her neighbor Aunt saying, "Wipe your face. You look so dark!" during Holi before introducing her to a suitor to which Meera replies, "I am dark." This feeling of being looked at by the West, and in order to impress the so-called superior race is at the core of the native exotic behavior and hence the constant need to reassess oneself to match up to the 'white-skinned'.

All these out-of-place characters, who are at constant negotiation with the self, depicted in these films, can perhaps never find their identity since they are being pushed to adjust with a traditional family. "Indeed, it suggests that the narrative of identity cannot be reconfigured unless the family is re-imagined." (Souter and Raja 9).

Another important aspect by which India is often perceived by the West is through the food we eat, and the exotic delicacies that have found a significant place even in these films. The repeated display of "chutney", "lassi" which Mich calls "Mango smoothie" in the film *UnIndian* along with TK's web series where he cooks Indian food and shares the recipe with the viewers reiterates Indians as the "other" for the West whose taste-buds differs from theirs. The scene where TK's friend cooks 'chicken tikka' that tastes horrible and finally orders pizza for himself make us mull over the fact if there is at all a demarcation between Western and Indian taste. The Foreign-Secretary of Britain, Robin Cook in his address in London said, "Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences." (web). "Aaloo gobhi", round chapattis, "jalebi" are some of the stereotypical cuisines portrayed in *Bend it like Beckham* where Jassi's mother insists on making her daughter learn to cook full-course Punjabi meal before she gets married.

For so long, India has been viewed as the land of spirituality and Yoga and each of these films have portrayed the Indian society not quite at par with the United States. However, what is truly remarkable is the fact that Thomas L. Friedman points out in his book *The World Is Flat*. He writes,

We were sitting on the couch outside of Nilekani's office, [...] Nilekani

uttered a phrase that rang in my ear. He said to me, "Tom, the playing field is being

leveled." He meant that countries like India are now able to compete for global knowledge work as never before-and that America had better get ready for this. America was going to be challenged, but, he insisted, the challenge would be good for America because we are always at our best when we are being challenged. As I left the Infosys campus that evening and bounced along the road back to Bangalore, I kept chewing on that phrase: "The playing field is being leveled." (web).

The downgrading economic view that the West had towards India is now finally being challenged as we find in these films Indian techies performing as good as the West. Thus, from being spiritually charged individuals as perceived by the West, the exotic race deeply philosophical in nature, Indians are now being looked at as the scientific-minded "competitors".

These "accented cinema", as labeled by Naficy, therefore does not result "from 'the accented speech of the diegetic characters' within these films, but from the 'displacement of the filmmakers.'" (Moodley 66). The characters cling onto their pre-conceived notions of native consciousness and tradition and therefore in the process, presents before the West a native picture which is far from the metamorphosed nation that India is at present. The idea of the 'home' and the 'border', quest for identities and constant negotiations of the memory with the changing present intersect and coalesce to present before us what we understand as the quintessential Indian diaspora.

All these films are therefore journeys from the periphery to the centre, where the moment of realization of the centre mars the ecstasy of the realization. It is therefore that place, as Ashoke Ganguli tells Gogol, "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go," and we sense a tone of melancholia, a weariness resultant from his long struggle of dwelling between his past and present.

Therefore, this constant wrangle of being the 'native' and the 'non-native', 'the familiar' and the 'exotic', and the ambivalent relationship which we share with the West as well as within our known territory, can be summed up in Susheela Raman's lyrics "How many roads have I wondered?/ None, and each my own/ [...] Nowhere to go but the horizon/where, then, will I call my home?" (web).

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