

## Constructing the Diasporic Indian Identity and the Notion of 'Homeland' in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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**Abstract :** The essay offers a socio-cultural perspective into the ways by which the so-called Indian identity is constructed through the representation of diaspora life, with particular focus on *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, a landmark film in the context of diasporic representation in contemporary popular Hindi cinema. With Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity being in constant flux, the essay endeavours to show how the first generation in the film exemplifies the idea of a broken identity, with a volatile, fractured sense of the homeland, while the first generation epitomizes the core, fixed identity, the notion of the one true self, that is frozen in time. The essay takes a brief look at the assertion of the Indian identity through the fragmented sense of the homeland and self, and the hybridity that arises from 'difference'. On the other hand, the imaginary of the homeland creates a de-historicized, yet stable identity for the first generation who had apparently experienced some traumatic loss of the homeland.

**Keywords:** diaspora, popular Hindi cinema, Indian identity, representation, difference, hybridity, homeland, true self, fractured self, *DilwaleDulhania Le Jayenge*

"For millions of Indians overseas, a major part of India derives from its movies." —

Rajadhyaksha, Willemen, 1994, p.10.

Today in a world ridden with fragmented, multicultural existence, diasporic identities are constructed daily through the media, and through the meanings that individuals make of their media representations. Rampant deterritorialisation has, and continues, to erode the very boundaries of what is perceived as 'homeland', so much so that renowned author Homi K. Bhaba argues, "The very concepts of homogenous national cultures....are in a profound process of redefinition." (Bhaba, 2004: 7)

A socio-cultural perspective on the construction of Indian diasporic identity and homeland, through popular film representations, thus emerges to be of utmost importance in the current scenario of cross-cultural experience. And this is endorsed by scholars like Gokulsing and Dissanayake who state that, "when analyzing the latest phase of Indian popular cinema, we need to examine the role of diasporic audiences, which are becoming increasingly important and influential." (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998:3) In my study I shall discuss relevant film representations of certain key concepts in the essay and then endeavour to critically situate them in the light of wider debates.

The term 'diaspora' loosely indicates people who have historically moved from one place to another and who have been living in marginal situations within a dominant culture. The Indian diaspora, as it happens, is one of the fastest growing social collectivities in the world, spread virtually across the globe and still growing. (Mishra, 2002: 235, Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998: 3) Historically, as Vijay Mishra puts it, this particular ethnic diaspora may be said to have formed at two distinct moments. The first is the movement of indentured labour to the European colonies of the Caribbean, South Africa, Fiji, for the purpose of plantation, which Mishra calls 'the old Indian diaspora of plantation labour', and the second is the movement of migrants, presumably seeking better life opportunities, to parts of the so-called New World, Europe and Australia in the post-1960s period. (Mishra, 2002:235). These dispersed groups of people across the world came to constitute, what Appadurai would readily call, 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai, 1990: 297), perpetually placed at a 'hybrid', cross-cultural juncture, and whose identities are constructed within a fragmented cultural space. 'Diaspora' in this essay would largely refer to the first as well as second-generation of diasporic Indian that was created, following the flux of movement that took place during the later period.

Amongst scholars who have looked at the concept of 'hybridity' over the past decade, Ien Ang happens to be one of the foremost. Ang in 'Together-in-difference beyond diaspora, into hybridity', states, "As such hybridity always implies an unsettling of identities. It is precisely our encounters at the border — where self and other, the local and global, Asian and Western meet — that make us realise how riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict these encounters can be." (Ang, 2003:149-50). It is the Bollywood representation of the 'Indian' identity constructed through these encounters that this essay will attempt to look at.

However, before proceeding, it is perhaps worth tracing briefly the historical association of Hindi cinema with the notion of homeland.

During the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, nationalist sentiments were often depicted in Hindi films by underlining the differences between the so-called East and the West, what Ganti calls the 'East-West dichotomy' (Ganti, 2004:42). 'Westernised' and Non-Resident Indians (NRI), when rarely shown, were treated largely as objects of ridicule often verging on eccentricity, for example, *Purab Aur Paschim* (The East and the West, 1970). They had surrendered their 'Indianness' and this reflected poorly against the so-called high 'Indian' morals of the protagonists. Most critics, closely tracing the history of the Hindi cinema, note the recognition of this popular medium as a tool of 'authentic' nation-building in the post-independence period. "Akin to state discourses about "national integration", which sought to unify a vast and diverse population under the category of 'Indian', films from this period emphasised the unity of the Indian nation despite its tremendous religious, linguistic, ethnic and regional diversity." (Ganti, 2004:29).

It was the 1990s that proved to be a watershed year for Hindi cinema, with 'the inter-animation of the global and the local' (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998:3). Post-liberalisation, as Indian cinema opened its doors to the vast overseas market chiefly represented by wealthy NRIs, the East-West dichotomy gradually disappeared and the diasporic Indian community itself became the thematic focus. NRIs now came to be represented with their own crises and dilemmas. At this time the concept of homeland, as far as its representation in Bollywood was concerned, no longer remained confined within the predetermined boundaries of a geographical entity. Ganti points out that anybody residing in London, New York, Canada could identify with the ethnic values, especially the extended families, the conformity to parental authority, ideals of female chastity and elaborate wedding scenes that came to essentially symbolise the traditional 'Indian' identity (Ganti, 2004: 42-43).

It is thus evident that Hindi cinema's valorisation of 'nation' and 'homeland' is not a new phenomenon. While in earlier times, during the Nehruvian nation-building period, the purpose of such construction had indeed a nationalistic fervour legitimising it, post-liberalisation the trend has been more materialistic. With the diaspora having been identified as a major source of viewership and profit, Bollywood directors and producers are now even willing to make films that evidently cater more to diaspora tastes than to the home audiences.

Let us now direct our attention to Bollywood representations of the Indian 'diasporic' identity.

In 1995, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The True-hearted Lover will take the Bride Away, *DDLJ*) essentially marked the beginning of diaspora cinema in Bollywood for many film historians, critics and sociologists. Considered the greatest diaspora film in India by Rachel Dwyer (2005), *DDLJ* went on to become one of the highest grossing, both in India and abroad, and longest running films in Indian cinematic history. The film narrates the story of two British Indian citizens, Raj and Simran. Instead of emphasizing the 'un-Indian' attributes and the 'alienness' of NRIs, in comparison with their native counterparts, this film for the first time focused on the 'Indianness' at various levels, of these people living away from home. The protagonists here are second-generation Indians conscious of their traditional roots, ready to recognize and value them.

It was at this time that India's popularity in the international arena started to soar, and Bollywood film-makers began to reach out beyond India, to Indians abroad.

With the success of *DDLJ*, most of the major Bollywood films that followed were made keeping the Indian diasporas in mind, frequently representing "Indians living abroad as more traditional and culturally authentic than their counterparts in India" (Ganti, 2004:43). According to Mishra, these films played out so-called diaspora fantasies, which, when presented to home audiences took on the curious status of being 'realities' of the diaspora life (Mishra, 2002:250). One of the recurrent themes of several of these films was the testing of 'Indian values' across the borders, with specific emphasis on the transnational 'Indian family' (Dwyer, 2002: 177). Film after film such as *Pardes* ( Foreign Land, 1998), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* ( Sometimes Happiness Sometimes Sorrow, 2001) showed the desperate attempt of the first-generation NRI, usually the family patriarch, to hold on to the 'Indian' value-system, and inculcate the 'Indian' morality within the second-generation. Vijay Mishra's perspective on diasporic imaginary largely centres around the anxieties and frustrations that taint the transnational existence of the first-gen-

eration Indian immigrants (Mishra, 2002:236-237). Mishra focuses on the inability of this generation of diaspora to “present their ‘new’ nation-states to consciousness” (Mishra; 2002:237). This first-generation of diaspora suffers the pangs of identity crises as they find themselves unable to identify with the cultural ethos of the host country, while the cultural aesthetics of the home country, too, elude them. The NRIs of this generation, as Mishra reads them, yearn for a stable cultural space; their sense of isolation “grows out of a sense of being marginalised” (Mishra; 2002:37), in this case both within the ‘home’ and the ‘host’ nation.

Let us look at the opening scene from *DDLJ*, one of the seminal texts on diaspora representation in Indian popular cinema.

The patriarch, a Punjabi migrant named Chaudhary Baldev Singh, feeds pigeons at the Trafalgar Square, while the voice-over conveys the obvious disengagement of this first-generation migrant from the land where he has apparently spent more than twenty years of his life, but which has only served to create for him a sense of social exclusion.

This is London, the world’s largest city. I have lived here these twenty-two years, walked this street everyday and each day the same street asks me my name, asks me: you, Chaudhury Baldev Singh, where have you come from, why have you come here? Half a life has gone by, and yet this land is so strange to me and I to it....But someday, surely I too will return. To my India, to my Punjab. ( as translated from the Hindi in Mishra, 2002:251)

The scene now cuts to the vast mustard fields that characterise the land of Punjab for the popular imagination. Women in traditional Punjabi attire prance around the fields singing “Come home, o wanderer, your land beckons you”, and we realise as Baldev is brought back to his senses by the sound of church bells, that his imagination had merely conjured up for him some deeply embedded fantasies surrounding the imagery of the ‘homeland’.

This imaginary of the homeland can be studied in the light of Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983: 15-16). The core of Anderson’s opus lies in the sense of belonging that is generated from the mental images that one holds of one’s ‘nation’ or ‘community’. We can place this in the context of the above-mentioned scene. The first-generation diaspora is indifferent towards the life he leads on an ‘alien’ land. He may well have refused to look through his veil of ‘ethnocentrism’ and accept the cultural dynamics of the host country, thereby rejecting and being rejected by the latter, or he may have been disillusioned by the dispassionate response of the new country. Anyway, this disconnection has pushed him to the periphery, to a hybrid juncture that, one can perhaps say, is not only defined by the cross-currents of multiculturalism, but of ‘progressive’ and ‘repressive’ (Kim, 2011:134). It is ‘progressive’ because transmobility is often perceived as a matter of celebration, as one is believed to have acquired a better standard of living after having moved from a Third World country to a country of the First World. On the other hand it involves a daily struggle to establish one’s own identity in a culture that one fails to understand, or perhaps does not even try to do so, hence ‘repressive’. And while this struggle for identity continues, there emerges a revitalised urge for belonging, for inhabiting a stable cultural platform that is not fraught with unresolved tensions and cultural dilemmas. Loss of and distantiation from the ‘home’ culture places the migrant on a space of dislocation, and discontinuity between the past and the present (Aksoy, Robins, 2002: 90-91). He now, consciously or unconsciously, resorts to nostalgia, thereby holding on to a mental image of ‘home’ —“the banality of the ‘here and now’ provides the stimulus for nostalgic dreams and fantasies about the ‘there and then’” (Aksoy, Robins, 2002: 95). We therefore come back to ‘nation’ or ‘home’ as it exists in the imagination of the Indian migrant, the ‘imagined communities’ that help reduce the sense of separation even if at an imaginary level. The exaltation over the ‘homeland’ that thus emerges is referred to by Aksoy and Robins as ‘banal transnationalism’. (Aksoy, Robins, 2002: 89-104)

Let us now delve into the representation of the second-generation Indian diaspora in *DDLJ*. It is interesting to note that in *DDLJ*, as in several other films following it, the hero was shown to possess the best of both worlds, a young NRI respecting the homeland. While in *DDLJ* the protagonist Raj’s character started off as a debonair and flirtatious young man, by the end of the film he was portrayed as the ideal typical lover who placed family values above everything else. Some key moments in the film include the scene where the heroine’s mother begs Raj to elope with her daughter so that the girl’s father could not come in between them. Raj replies “If I had to elope I could have done it earlier....I will surely carry my bride away, but only when Bauji (Dad, that is, the girl’s father) gives her away to me of his own accord.” Another scene shows Simran waking up in a hotel room after a drunken episode, and being assured by Raj that her virginity (unmarried woman’s chastity being central to Indian culture) is intact, “I am a Hindustani (Indian), and I am aware of what ‘honour’ means to a Hindustani woman”. The two above-mentioned scenes are the highlights of the film, indicating the ‘Indianness’ of the second-generation diaspora, and thereby emerging as a culmination to the first-generation diaspora’s (represented in this film by the heroine’s authoritarian father) desire to hold on to ‘home’ values.

Now, one major scholarly thesis that becomes relevant here is Stuart Hall's notion of identities created through 'representations'. Hall, in his seminal work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), discusses the formation of the Caribbean identity through "a new cinema of the Caribbean", which he views as a site where identity is continually produced, "identity as a 'production', which is never complete....always constituted within, not outside, representation." (Hall, 1990: 222) He speaks of the emergence of 'cultural identity' from two distinct positions. The first leads to the development of a feeling of 'one true self', reflected in one common past and shared cultural code. The second is one fragmented sense of identity that emerges from the identification of history as a continuous process. Hall questions the validity of the first position in a world where traumatic experiences of colonisation and the continuous flux of events and movement had ruptured the core of the Caribbean identity. Is it through the "imaginative rediscovery", that is, the rediscovery of an essential identity hitherto buried, and unearthing what he calls 'hidden continuities' that had lain suppressed, that identity may be constituted? (Hall, 1990: 224) Or is such formation of identity possible only through acknowledging the continual production of identity, constituted in the 'difference' and discontinuities, of the past, the present and the conceivable future, and that disrupt the so-called threads of shared history? (Hall, 1990:225-227)

For Hall, identity lies not as much in the antiquity as it is constructed through an ever-changing history, "critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become'." (Hall, 1990: 225) Not only does 'difference' here constitute a destabilisation of a shared narrative of the past, but Hall refers to Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism' to convey how 'difference' is used by the Occidental world to represent the sense of the 'Other'. Not only did the Western imagination, derived from the colonial experience, construct the Non-Occidental world on its own terms, but even the latter came to see and experience itself through the eyes of the West. (Hall, 1990:225) It is the 'difference', that leads to the emergence of the 'Other', that is essential to the construction of identity. And for this identity to be constructed it is essential for the 'difference' to be interpreted in its various manifestations, visual or otherwise. Hence Hall states, "So meaning depends on the difference between opposites....white/black, day/night, masculine/feminine, British/alien.... they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning." (Hall, 1997: 235) Thus the diaspora identity in the films is created through the meanings that the characters, especially those of the first-generation diaspora, make of their position in relation to the all-encompassing 'West'. "We know what it is to be 'British', not only because of certain national characteristics, but also because we can mark its 'difference' from its 'others'." (Hall, 1997: 234-235) The first-generation diaspora within the films constructs itself as that 'Other', distinct from the culture and characteristics of the dominant social group. This construction of the self from the perspective of the dominant culture however, according to Hall, leads to identity never becoming stable or fixed, since such an identity would depend solely on what each social group thinks of its 'others' and vice versa. For instance, one would have to know what the British think of Indians and what the Indians make of the British, to construct an image of any one of these ethnicities. And what these ethnicities think of each other will depend on the ever-shifting history of both the groups. This brings us back to Hall's point of departure in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, that history and hence 'identity' is a continuous process.

That history and identity is an on-going process is also acknowledged by Bhabha who states that it is through historical transformations that cultural hybridities emerge. (Bhabha, 2004: 3) "We find ourselves in the moment of transit, where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion." (Bhabha, 2004: 2)

In more recent times, the construction of 'South Asia' as the 'other', as part of the colonial project of the reordering of the world, has been studied by S. Sayyid. Sayyid notes how the colonial gaze, through its Indological and Orientalist discourses, has historically and systematically established South Asian ways of living as aberrations to normative Western practices, and it is these distortions that have come to be identified as essentially 'Indian' for the Western imagination. (Sayyid, 2008: 2-3) Indeed Sayyid states, "...for the colonial gaze the temporality of the object escapes...What we are left with are a series of snapshots; dis-embedded, de-historicized objects frozen in time." (Sayyid; 2008: 3) This observation is reminiscent of the diaspora's imaginary of the 'homeland' (the opening scene mentioned from *DDLJ*) as disjointed images and traditions locked in time and space.

Now, one can perceive contemporary Hindi cinema's representation of diaspora in terms of both of the positions mentioned by Hall. The imaginary of the 'homeland' and the negotiation of a "fractured sense of 'Indianness' and 'Westernness'" (Kaur, Sinha, 2005:209), embodied in the representation of the decentred first-generation diaspora, is indicative of the desire for commonality, as put across in Hall's notion of "'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences". (Hall, 1990: 223) Yet at the same time the characters are shown to be acutely aware of the

discontinuities in the so-called shared experience, and are struggling to locate themselves, ultimately constructing themselves as the 'other'. The second-generation on the other hand personifies that wish-fulfilment of the first-generation, representing a diasporic experience that is "distinctly Indian and modern". (Kaur, Sinha, 2005:259)

However the question arises, would not the second-generation diasporic Indians, understandably, lack the fundamental sense of attachment that their parents may have formed with the home country before having migrated? These people, born and brought up away from their 'homeland', speak a different language, live a different culture, and may move through the world, never making strong contacts with the 'home-culture'. (Ang, 2001: 21-36) It is possible that this particular generation of diaspora, living forever on the margins, imagines 'homeland' in their peculiar fragmented ways; for them 'home' would be where they have lived, though again this identification would never be complete since that is not the history of their ancestors! Thereby their presentation in the films as the embodiment of the Indian value-system might arguably be a mere ploy on the part of filmmakers, particularly "with the circulation of Bollywood in the moment of globalisation". (Dudrah, 2006:86), providing culmination not only to the yearnings of the displaced first-generation, but also a source of escapism to the audience, both home and abroad, that instantly accepts the perfectly packaged product, the global and the local seamlessly blended in one. The layers of hybridity, which remain shrouded in transnational life and the complex forms of nationalism that they may give rise to, remain unexplored.

In *Together-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, Into Hybridity* (2003), Ang discusses the possibilities of developing a sense of togetherness, within the current global scenario of particularistic identities, and transcending fragmentation to live 'together-in-difference'. One can argue that Ang in fact provides an opposition to Hall's advocacy of identity based on 'difference'. Unlike Hall for whom identity is created in 'difference', within the domain of the colonial gaze, and consequently in historical experiences, Ang focuses on the blurring of boundaries between "us and them, the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between "Asian" and "Western"" (Ang, 2003: 2) in contemporary times, without, however, returning to "Eurocentric homogeneity".

The film representations may have attempted to reassert 'Indian' identity across the world through the image of the expatriate Indian, but they have by no means made efforts to blur the boundaries between the Western and the Asian. Rather they have brought the 'Westernised' Asian closer home. On this note we can conclude that while the diaspora has become a major thematic focus, the representation of 'Western' traits as inferior to 'Indian', continues, much in the same way as Western characters were demeaned in earlier films. A British Asian is shown to have subtly reformed when he comes back to his roots (sometimes literally, and almost always metaphorically), and the East-West dichotomy persists. The only discernible change is that the protagonist is now an Indian, not living within the physical parameters of the 'homeland', but whose 'Indianness' transcends all other identities, thereby creating a mental image of diaspora identity for audiences both home and abroad.

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