ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 3| March 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

NAVIGATING TRADITION AND MODERNITY: DEPICTION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN DIASPORA FILMS

Bhavya Shah
National Institute of Mass Communication and Journalism (Affiliated to Gujarat University)
Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India – 380015

ABSTRACT

Analyzing the changing trends of Indian female icons in Bollywood films in diaspora, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of the three significant movies: Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001), Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003), and English Vinglish (2012). For this purpose, it has referenced postcolonial feminism, cultural hybridity concepts put forward by Bhabha, and Hall's encoding/decoding model to reflect how women are able to define their identity within transnational relations. Analysis suggests three clear themes dominate all these films-there's this balance of traditional and modern aspects, this hybridity and negotiations of space and culture, especially in diaspora. There is this development or transition in terms of gender and women's portrayal on screen that resonates in many ways, mainly with a narrative of how empowered women in modern society may also be as gendered subjects.

Early films such as Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham place women largely in cultural custodianship and domestic roles within the family, while later works, such as English Vinglish, focus more on individual agency, self-discovery, and empowerment outside the home. Such change is a part of an even larger cultural transformation in diasporic as well as Indian societies regarding the nature of gender roles and the extent of female autonomy.The study shows how Bollywood diaspora films serve as a powerful cultural artifact that simultaneously reflects and influences societal attitudes toward gender and identity in transnational contexts. This research, therefore, feeds into cultural studies, gender studies, and film studies, especially on the aspects of the critical intersections between tradition, modernity, and the female representation within transnational cinemas. Further avenues of research can include regional cinemas, reception patterns of audiences, or representations in other diasporic contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Bollywood Cinema, Diaspora, Gender Representation, Cultural Hybridity, Postcolonial Feminism, Transnational Identity, Indian Women, Film Analysis, Patriarchal Norms, Cultural Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora films represent a significant phenomenon in the realms of culture that can be employed to view complexity in migration, identity, and negotiation of culture. For the Indian diaspora - one of the largest in the world with more than 18 million people living outside India (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021) - such films work as cultural narratives that explore how tradition and modernity play themselves out. These stories revolve around the portrayal of Indian women, who are always a symbol of the contradictions between the traditionalism and the need to adjust to the modernity of their new societies (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

This paper shall focus on the representation of Indian women in diaspora films, especially in Bollywood, which reaches a global audience and has the power to influence cultural perceptions significantly (Desai, 2004). The research works with the films Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham by Johar in 2001, Kal Ho Naa Ho by Advani in 2003, and English Vinglish by Shinde in 2012 to understand the ways through which these films negotiate the dichotomy of tradition and modernity while discussing emergent gender roles. Very often, they become a form of cultural mediator in Indian films and experience the consuquences of identity in society against a transnational backdrop (Shrivastava, 2013).

The theoretical basis for this study would be postcolonial feminism, Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity. Postcolonial feminism enlightens one regarding how the after-effect of colonialism is connected with the present context of gender interaction (Mohanty, 1988). Hall's framework sheds light on the way audiences decode media messages as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings (Hall, 1980). The diaspora context and negotiation of cultural identities become even further enlightened through Bhabha's idea of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Such frameworks make it easier to analyze how presentations of Indian women in films serve to reflect as well as create broader cultural discourses on issues of gender, identity, and migration.

This paper presents the following questions:

1. In what ways do these films construct and challenge the binary between tradition and modernity through their female protagonists?
2. How have these representations changed over time in response to changes in society and culture?
3. How does diaspora cinema impact the vision of gender in society and self?

The study answers these questions and contributes to the growing literature on diaspora cinema, gender studies, and cultural studies. Therefore, it centers on the significance of cinema as a cultural artifact that not only reinforces societal

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 3| March 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

norms but also challenges them, revealing the evolving narratives of Indian women in a globalized world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian women diaspora films feature a subject on which much serious academic interest and debate have surrounded, especially along the lines of cultural hybridity, gendering, and how identity is socially constructed. Expanding from works in postcolonial feminism as well as through cultural studies in this section key literature reviews tradition, modernity, and its representation in the Bollywood diasporic film industry.

Diaspora films are cultural artifacts that reflect the experiences of a displaced community negotiating between one's homeland and host societies (Desai, 2004). Indian diaspora cinema in specific has gained its current prominence since the 1990s; they have always featured topics that include identity formation, issues with belonging, or a potential crisis related to cultural hybridity. Filmmakers like Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha have contributed to this genre by portraying the significance of the difficulties of diasporic existence through narratives that highlight generational conflicts, cultural preservation, and adaptation (Nair, 2001; Chadha, 2002).
Encoding/Decoding by Stuart Hall in 1980 is useful to analyze diaspora films as places of contestable meaning. Viewers read those films with the dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. This is the result of viewers' cultural and social settings. For example, Hall's work describes how diasporic films, such as Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham and Kal Ho Naa Ho, are received by the Indian and the Western audiences because of their differing cultural stances (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

A common sense of tension between tradition and modernity is central to the diasporic film. Some Bollywood films portray Indian women as carrying the culture to protect family values while immersing themselves in a modern surrounding (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). In Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, the protagonist is Nandini, the traditional Indian mother who finds peace only when her children live together, whereas Anjali personifies the inconvenience of adopting the Western lifestyle. This duality highlights cultural expectations on women in diaspora settings for Indians (Shrivastava, 2013).

Similarly, Kal Ho Naa Ho portrays Naina (Preity Zinta) as a modern, free woman seeking survival amidst the challenges of maintaining Indian cultural values as she finds her identity in New York. Such a conflict reveals what Homi Bhabha said in 1994 as cultural hybridity that exists in some sort of "third space" where most people exist between traditional and modern identities.

Postcolonial feminism provides necessary critical perspectives on representations of Indian women in diasporic films. It critiques, at the junction of colonialism, patriarchy, and globalisation, to shape women's lives (Mohanty, 1988). Generally, in a diasporic film, woman is portrayed more as a nurturer of their culture, playing into traditional concepts of gendering. Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, too, portrays female characters mainly as caregivers: patriarchal vision of family is thus reinforced when women are taken as caregivers primarily (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

However, recent movies like English Vinglish break these trends as empowered women protagonists are now depicted on-screen. Shashi (Sridevi) undertakes a journey of self-discovery in sustaining her independence through the power to cross language and culture boundaries. This represents an intersectional feminism where gender, class, and culture have been seen as factors combined to create experiences among women (Crenshaw, 1989; Shrivastava, 2013).

The quite relevant element in this work is the conception of the "male gaze" by Laura Mulvey in her article from 1975, with reference to a filmic analysis concerning Bollywood diasporas. Most such films portray female subjects within patriarchal frameworks focusing on appearance, modesty, and emotional labor. For example, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham and Kal Ho Naa Ho concentrate the female characters around the connections they make with the male protagonist and thereby limit their agency (Desai, 2004).

On the other hand, English Vinglish reverses the male gaze by depicting the inner journey of Shashi instead of relationships between her and the male characters. This transition signifies a growing need for more sophisticated and feminist women's portrayals in Indian cinema (Shrivastava, 2013). Indian women in diaspora films have changed with time and, by extension, the general social trends. Films like Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham reflect more conservative roles of women, whereas more contemporary films such as English Vinglish show a much more liberal scenario.This depicts the representation of women becoming highly nuanced in transnational spaces as both culture and the self compete (Shrivastava, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This study will use a qualitative research design in analyzing the representation of Indian women in Bollywood diaspora films. Through three films, namely Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (Johar, 2001), Kal Ho Naa Ho (Advani, 2003), and English Vinglish (Shinde, 2012), the research looks into how these films portray the negotiation of tradition, modernity, and cultural identity. The methodological approach will rely on content analysis, textual and visual analysis, and comparative analysis in order to really dig deep into these themes.

The study will explore the narratives and visual elements using a qualitative method of analysis with diaspora films. Qualitative research is peculiarly suited to the analysis of cultural artifacts such as films, looking at meanings in detail, including representations and how audiences interpret film (Silverman, 2020). Using theoretical frameworks including postcolonial feminism and Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model will support the analysis through which the films construct and negotiate cultural identity.

Some of the movies selected for this research have been chosen through criteria that focused on cultural relevance because it aimed to focus on the Indian diaspora experiences with regard to issues on tradition, modernity, and cultural hybridity.Films

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 3| March 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

should also demonstrate global reach in being well-known Bollywood productions with substantial international audiences. The films had to be limited within the time scope of films produced between 2000 and 2012, which captures shifts in the portrayal of women in diaspora contexts over a specific period of time.

This paper uses the data that include both the narrative and visual content in the selected films regarding plotlines, character development, and dialogue on issues of gender roles, cultural negotiation, and identity formation. Further, visual elements such as cinematography, symbolism, and mise-en-scène, which form the representation of women in diaspora settings, were further analyzed. Secondary sources, like academic critiques and audience reviews, are included in data collection to provide the findings in the broader context of cultural and cinematic discourses (Desai, 2004). The selected films have been analyzed by combining qualitative techniques like content analysis, textual and visual analysis, and comparative analysis. The use of content analysis for finding recurring themes was made in this study: coding the narrative and visual elements in films. The themes are tradition versus modernity, cultural hybridity, and gender roles (Krippendorff, 2018). This research used textual analysis in the dialogues and story arcs and looked at cinematography, symbolism, and costume design. For instance, her changed scenario in the movie, English Vinglish, can be portrayed through her changed attires and body language (Shrivastava, 2013).

The theoretical framework for the analysis is postcolonial feminism when discussing the relationships of gender, culture, and colonial legacies (Mohanty, 1988). The concept of hybridity of Bhabha (1994) was useful to explore characters' experience with dual cultural identity. The model of encoding and decoding by Stuart Hall (1980) helped to understand the encoding of messages from filmmakers as well as their decoding by audiences according to their cultural and social contexts. The study respected the principle of ethical research by getting all analyses into cultures without any kind of stereotype or misrepresentation. Although the study provides valuable insights, it is limited in scope to three Bollywood diaspora films produced over a decade, focusing on this number and excluding regional or independent films, which could provide alternative perspectives on the representation of Indian women. Another omission from this study is not having direct audience reception data that might have given further dimensions to the research.

RESULTS

Analyzing films like Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001), Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003), and English Vinglish (2012) will tell a lot about how Indian women character changes within the diasporic contexts of Bollywood where the position of women as cultural bridge-builders acts as an integral link to balancing between the world of the ancestors and that of modernity. In Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, Nandini (Jaya Bachchan) is a quintessential traditional Indian mother, whose identity is very much grounded in familial commitment and cultural preservation. Her character enforces patriarchal values by choosing family harmony over personal autonomy (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). On the other hand, Anjali (Kajol) is a contemporary, vocal woman struggling with the pressures of Westernization and still being bound to Indian culture. This contrast highlights the plight of Indian women in diaspora situations, where their freedom is always restricted by cultural norms (Desai, 2004).In *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, Naina (Preity Zinta) embodies the complexities of being a modern Indian woman living in New York. Her character illustrates cultural hybridity, as she balances professional ambitions with her family's traditional expectations. While Naina's independence is emphasized, her narrative arc remains heavily influenced by romantic and familial relationships, reflecting the enduring impact of patriarchal ideals in Bollywood cinema (Shrivastava, 2013). In contrast, *English Vinglish* presents Shashi (Sridevi) as a transformative figure who challenges conventional gender roles. Shashi's journey from a traditional, underappreciated housewife to an empowered individual navigating linguistic and cultural barriers in the United States symbolizes the assertion of female agency within a diasporic framework (Shrivastava, 2013).

Three key themes are derived from this analysis: tradition versus modernity, cultural hybridity, and gender roles and empowerment. In the films chosen, Indian women are portrayed as caught between the dual pressures of preserving cultural heritage and embracing individual aspirations. This is most explicitly seen in Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, in which Nandini puts familial duties above other considerations, but Anjali expresses the tension between cultural requirements and individual rights through her character (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). The dilemma of cultural hybridity, as described by Homi Bhabha (1994), is alive in both Kal Ho Naa Ho and English Vinglish. Naina, in this story, represents a second-generation diaspora woman challenged to maintain an Indian identity with the modernism of her new Western surroundings. Shashi in English Vinglish represents one of the myriad ways Indian women in diasporic settings reconcile dual identities to blend traditionalism with modern desires. Changing the depiction of Indian women in Bollywood films through diaspora has been characteristic of how societal changes have evolved: early representations, like Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, highly perpetuated typical gender roles; describing the role of these female characters as women who are primarily caregivers and preservers of culture (Desai, 2004). In Kal Ho Naa Ho, however, female characters are more independent, but placed in both familial and romantic settings (Shrivastava, 2013). Whereas, with English Vinglish, a shift in progressive storytelling could be witnessed, in which the central protagonist is assertive of her independence and agency. Such an evolution also shows how the female character of Bollywood diaspora films gradually grows in complexity from patriarchal representation to that of empowerment and individualism.

DISCUSSION

The study's conclusions outline the multidimensional and increasingly dynamic representation of Indian women through Bollywood diasporic films-the reflection and co-construction that such films may influence wider societal discourse in relation to gender, culture, and identity. Based on postcolonial feminism, Encoding/Decoding model by Stuart Hall, and ideas

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 3| March 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

on cultural hybridity by Homi Bhabha, this section theoretically places the results drawn from the primary research and also analyses the theoretical significance of results.

The Indian diaspora films bring to the surface the tension between tradition and modernity, an ever-present element of Bollywood. In the film Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001), it can be noticed that female characters such as Nandini and Anjali symbolize being a cultural preserver and at the same time being a facilitator of modernity. Nandini, through her selflessness and acceptance of patriarchal values, mirrors the idealized Indian womanhood based on tradition (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). However, the tension of the adjustment with Western cultural values in the story of Anjali demonstrates that women living double lives experience dual conflicts. The two above pictures can be interpreted through the postcolonial lens of Homi Bhabha's work as the subjects of the diaspora stay in the "third space" between clashing cultural forces (Bhabha, 1994). However, whereas the movie is able to convey the richness of cultural identity, it also perpetuates patriarchal values by confining female characters to the expectations of family and society.

In Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003), Naina (Preity Zinta) is a more contemporary and independent Indian woman, but her storyline is still deeply rooted in traditional values. Naina's character is an example of Stuart Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model because her character allows for both dominant and negotiated readings. While the same independence might serve as a revolutionary shift for an audience, her end is with a family and lovers, thus fulfilling patriarchal views, which could lead to opposed readings from feminists. This kind of duality underlines that it is extremely difficult to represent empowered women in a very culturally and gendered medium. In the case of English Vinglish (2012), there is a radical departure from the conventional representations. Here, Shashi (Sridevi) is on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Her story questions patriarchal structures by foregrounding her individuality and agency, rather than her story being constructed around male characters or familial roles. This even represents postcolonial feminist critiques. They comment that it is at the junction of gender, class, and culture that women's identities lie (Mohanty, 1988). Shashi can assert her independence with pride and at the same time claim her cultural identity. Thus, it makes the portrayal of the Indian women in the diaspora film complex and a bit more progressive as well. The dialogue portrait here also eliminates the concept of Laura Mulvey (1975), "the male gaze." The viewpoint is from within Shashi and her self actualization.

This means development of representation in these films signified greater trends in attitude on the societal side regarding gender and identity. These older films such as Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham tend to reinforce patriarchal norms, whereas women's desires take a second place to upholding the necessity of obligation related to the family and culture itself (Desai, 2004). Instead, as portrayed within English Vinglish, newer narratives of empowerment and individualism are at the forefront, echoing a newfound sense of feminism that is surfacing within the screen. This trend is in sync with postcolonial feminism that critiques the colonial legacies as well as globalization in relation to gendered oppression. However, even with all these progressive movements, there still are challenges faced in achieving highly nuanced and fair representations of Indian women in diaspora films. Persistence of the male gaze and a tendency to build female narratives through family and relationships show that patriarchal norms have not yet subsided in their influence on the cinematic portrayals. Whereas movies like English Vinglish liberate themselves from the shackles of traditional gender roles, the protagonists end up reintegrating into the patriarchal structures, meaning that real freedom remains confined within patriarchal boundaries (Shrivastava, 2013).

These findings are of immense implications for cultural studies, gender studies, and film studies. Bollywood diaspora films are a cultural artifact reflecting and shaping attitudes in society. They offer a lens through which to view the intersection of tradition, modernity, and gender. This study contributes to the current debates on the role of media in the formation and contestation of cultural and gender norms by examining these films through the lenses of cultural hybridity and postcolonial feminism. Future research may be extended to look at representations in regional or independent films and consider audience reception in order to understand the impact of these narratives on societal attitudes.

CONCLUSION

This paper views the changing Indian woman in the Bollywood diasporic films that attempt to express the tensions around tradition, modernity, and cultural hybridity through such narrative lines. From among these examples, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001), Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003), and English Vinglish (2012) are selected here in order to represent the ambiguous duality inherent in the characterization of Indian women as both preservation and change-making forces. These films demonstrate the manner in which women manage the problematic question of identity and the merely ascribed roles through gender, nullifying national space.

The conceptions of early representation in the context of Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham set the characters within the role of nationalists with respect to the position of women-being caregivers and cultural icons. Nandini (Jaya Bachchan) epitomizes this character building upon conservative values as a patriarchal construct by strictly adhering to family and tradition (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). Yet, even within these strictly conservative boundaries, Anjali (Kajol) represents the struggle to overcome western influences- that starts paving the way for change in representation. However, Kal Ho Naa Ho brings a more sophisticated representation of cultural hybridity with Naina (Preity Zinta), where professional ambitions coexist with the demands of the family. Independence is a positive step, but her story continues to be one of traditional expectation, showing the persistence of patriarchal ideals (Shrivastava, 2013). The strongest divergence from such narratives occurs in the film English Vinglish, where self-discovery and self-empowerment transcend the character of Shashi (played by Sridevi), who breaks free from patriarchal values. Her characteristics oppose her filial identity but instead promote individuality and control.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 3| March 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

Her life epitomizes the direction towards a new, more modern development of female characters in diaspora films, as she evolves from a powerless wife to an independent woman with identity (Shrivastava, 2013).

Findings also resonate well with theoretical propositions, such as postcolonial feminism and cultural hybridity. The intersection between the colonial legacy and globalization and the position of gender remains critical in challenging how women's identities are affected by these aspects (Mohanty, 1988). The concept of hybridity presented by Bhabha (1994) again accentuates the fluidity of identity through characters such as Naina and Shashi moving in and out of this "third space" between tradition and modernity. Furthermore, the encoding/decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall (1980) gives insight to decode how such narratives are understood in audiences' cultures. While Bollywood diaspora cinema has successfully strived towards feminist ideals with their empowered, free women, yet there still linger some drawbacks of the male gaze and how females' narratives always revolve within the bounds of family and relation. Here is Mulvey 1975. Even in apparently progressive plots as in the story of English Vinglish characters are bound again to come in the circle of patriarchal limitations.

The findings of this research contribute to the cultural studies, gender studies, and film studies literature by opening up the dynamics of tradition, modernity, and gender within diaspora films. The cinema, as such a cultural artifact, was seen to be both reflective of and change societal attitudes in the findings of this study. Future research could possibly expand that kind of analysis to regional or independent films, or other diasporic settings, for better understanding how audiences consume these narratives to comprehend how these narratives impact cultural perceptions more precisely.

REFERENCES

1. *Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.*
2. *Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.*
3. *Desai, J. (2004). Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian diasporic film. Routledge.*
4. *Balki (Director). (2012). English Vinglish [Film]. Hope Productions.*
5. *Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79 (pp. 128–138). Routledge.*
6. *Johar, K. (Director). (2001). Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham [Film]. Dharma Productions.*
7. *Chopra, N. (Director). (2003). Kal Ho Naa Ho [Film]. Dharma Productions.*
8. *Kaur, R., & Sinha, A. (2005). Bollywood and globalization: Indian popular cinema, nation, and diaspora. Social Text, 23(2), 30–41. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-23-2_83-30*
9. *Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.*
10. *Ministry of External Affairs. (2021). Indian diaspora population report. Government of India.*
11. *Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. Feminist Review, 30, 61–88. https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054*
12. *Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. Screen, 16(3), 6–18.*
13. *Shrivastava, A. (2013). Cultural hybridity in English Vinglish. Journal of Film Studies, 25(3), 45–60.*
14. *Silverman, D. (2020). Qualitative research (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.*