

Rethinking Diasporic, Cultural and Religious Identity through the Eyes of Celluloid

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Abstract

The word Diaspora was first used to describe the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel. This has since changed, and today there is no set definition of the term because its modern meaning has evolved over time. But as a general term it is a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographic locale. As found in a search in Google it is the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland. As per Oxford Advanced Dictionary it is defined as the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries and the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country. So we have a clear definition of the word Diaspora. Diasporas work on a transnational premise and the term best alludes to 'complex multidirectional streams of individuals, thoughts, items - social and physical, and to types of collaboration, arrangement and trade.' The suggestion at that point is that not all ostracizes are Diasporeans, the term being restricted to the individuals who are proactively occupied with transnational action. Since Diaspora and the baggage associated with the term is very subjective, it also takes a great toll in shaping an individual's socio-cultural and religious identity as well. Cultural Identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. This process involves accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture. Normally, people internalize the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify themselves with that culture. The culture becomes a part of their self-concept. This paper tries to explore the problems that get depicted on the celluloid, especially in Indian cinema. The paper tries to find out the difficulties that individuals undergo in order to come to terms with the spatial and mental exile through films like *Swades* and *My Name is Khan*.

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It also tries to uphold the liberating force of exile and migration that works on human's psyche in order to make them free from societal bondage through films like *English Vinglish*. The two different approaches that the films employ to manifest the impact of migration on human life will help in proving that Diasporas have consistently been something beyond forever settled than ordinarily expected yet today they are more dynamic than they have ever been.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Swades, My Name is Khan, English Vinglish, Religion



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The Dilemma of being Half-Indian and Half-American: In 2019, as indicated by the United Nations with 17.5 million Indian diaspora is world's biggest diaspora, trailed by 11.8 million Mexican diaspora and 10.7 million of Chinese diaspora. The young milieu of India and other Asian countries blinded by their long nurtured 'American Dream' flock towards the Western countries in search of a better life and financial security. However, they often go through a split in their desire and emotion which results in an everlasting dilemma regarding their cultural identity.

1960 onwards, a great deal of Indians moved to the UK and USA for schooling and work. Albeit the vast majority of them have gotten comfortable in these nations, they actually keep in touch with their family members in India and visit India at stretches. They mingle generally with the Indian diaspora in those nations and talk in their primary language or mother tongue along with English. To them, India is still their nation despite the fact that they have disavowed their citizenship. The Indian diaspora would associate with Indians as they speak comparable language and are still attached to the Indian culture. Although some of them long to return, they cannot due to several reasons like the next generation who have been born and brought up there are not ready to come back to India and settle down.

There are a few Indians like the two NRIs Aravinda Pillalamarri and Ravi Kuchimanchi who left their lives in the US and moved back to India, to work for the cause of rural development and people's movement, to work for the reason for provincial turn of events and individuals' development. They have been recognized as one of the motivations behind Ashutosh Gowariker's *Swades*. Aravinda Pillalamarri and Ravi Kuchimanchi's excursion from the US to the Adivasi heartland of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has been reflected in the film, where NASA engineer Mohan Bhargav, played by Shahrukh Khan, returns to the insides of country India.

Mohan Bhargav (Shah Rukh Khan) is an Indian who works as a Project Manager on the Global Precipitation Measurement (GPM) program at NASA in the United States. He was living a happy life but was constantly worrying about someone back in India, Kaveri Amma, played by Kishori Ballal, a nanny at his home in Uttar Pradesh who looked after him during his childhood days. She was more his mother and he missed her dearly. After his folks' demise, Kaveri Amma went to live in an old age home in Delhi and lost contact with Mohan. Mohan wished to go to India and bring Kaveri Amma back with him to the US. He takes half a month off and goes to India. This again proves the fact that bonds or family is not always formed by blood but also love.

Mohan goes to his friend and then upon visiting the old age home learns that Kaveri Amma no longer lives there and went to a town named Charanpur a year back. Mohan then chooses to head out to Charanpur, in Uttar Pradesh, to find her. Mohan decides to rent a recreational vehicle (RV) to reach the village fearing that he might not get the required facilities there, which is quite true. Not only him, even we would not be able to survive without certain things such as a washroom. We would not be able to go and urinate or defecate in a field or drink water from unknown places. That is something depending on how we grow up and although it might sound bad, he has settled in the US, it would not be a welcome experience to him, even to us. He meets Kaveri Amma, and learns how his childhood friend Gita, played by Gayatri Joshi, after her parents died, brought Kaveri Amma to stay with her. Gita runs a school in the village, trying to improve the condition of the village. We see that the village is vastly divided by religion and caste system. Gita's goal in life is to educate all children together, from Brahmans to Sudhras, the untouchables.

Mohan's arrival is not taken in a good eye by Gita as she thinks he will take Kaveri Amma back with him to the US, leaving her and her younger brother Chikku alone and obviously she did not want that. Kaveri Amma on the other hand tells Mohan that she could not leave without getting Gita hitched, as that was her duty, to give her a family, again a norm. Gita again is portrayed as a free woman, but somehow she has a prerogative to embody a stereotypical Indian woman who can do no wrong. She is the good girl who looks after everyone and never forgets her religion and cultural boundaries. She has always been portrayed as draped in Indian attire possessing all sorts of feminine qualities and plays her part in making Mohan fall in love with her. She is a character who is always there apart from her few roles of improving the village conditions, as someone who is there for someone to fall in love with and be the stereotypical bollywood heroine. This would be seen better as we proceed.

Slowly, the inevitable happens and they fall in love. While Mohan expresses it in the manly way giving signals and getting jealous of a courtesan, Gita does not and acts oblivious. We see Mohan slowly adapting to the people around, getting accustomed, but still drinking packaged water. This plays a huge part in the movie.

Embracing the identity that the Heart Desires: A paradigm shift takes place in Mohan's outlook to his own country when Kaveri Amma asks Mohan to visit a nearby village named Kodi, and gather money from a man named Haridas who owes it to Gita. He starts his journey in a local train, disappointed of course that he could not take his RV. After he reaches the family though, his thoughts change. The story gives an excursion to Mohan fundamentally the same as what befell Mahatma Gandhi after he returned from South Africa.

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Mohan visits Kodi and has sympathy seeing Haridas' helpless condition, which is such that he is unable to provide his family with meals every day. Haridas reveals to Mohan that since his rank calling of a weaver wasn't bringing in him any cash, he moved to inhabitant cultivating. In any case, this adjustment in calling prompted his exclusion from the town and the townspeople even denied him water for his yields. Instead of their terrible conditions, they gave Mohan and his partner for travel, food, what they ate but they did not allow them to leave. They said it's their culture and that shows what a huge heart they had. This struck Mohan and he returned without cash, rather he gave the family some money himself. While on the train back, we see he is silent and that a small boy was selling water for 25 paisa and Mohan buys it for 1 rupee. He drinks water which was not packaged and from then we see a changed Mohan. He understands the pathetic situation and realizes that many villages in India are still like Kodi. He returns to Charanpur with a heavy heart and decides to do something for the welfare of Charanpur. This journey seemed like a journey of self-exploration for Mohan and this time he realized that in the process of being an American, his soul and cultural identity is on the verge of collapse. He is neither an American nor an Indian. Mohan in Swades realizes that in order to become an American, he is contributing his best to an already prosperous civilization and his own people are living in darkness. He discovers that one of the biggest problems in the village is electricity not being provided adequately and frequent power cuts. He decides to set up a small hydroelectric power generation facility from a nearby water source. Here we find Mohan embracing the socio-cultural identity that his heart craves for, he succeeds in understanding his need for his native place; that if you fail to build your home properly, you cannot make a palace for others. Mohan purchases all the equipment needed from his own funds and oversees the building of the power generation unit. The unit works and the village gets sufficient, consistent power from it. He gives Charanpur a happiness well deserved and had managed to banish some norms of caste discrimination. Witnessing the need of a well-

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nourished brain which can free society from age-long superstitions, Mohan returns to his motherland, to his beloved Gita who serves as an epitome of the femininity which our country reflects. At the end of his pilgrimage, he understands that if you cannot become a son of your own soil, you cannot cultivate fruits in others' land. This is how Mohan Americanized self reincarnates as a true Indian self with a homogenous Indian identity.

Religion shaping an Individual's Identity: There are many films in Indian cinema which manifest religion as a sole component in constructing someone's cultural and national identity. But very few are there which deals with the problems of an Indian Muslim, struggling hard in the Western countries. One such movie is *My Name is Khan* which demonstrates the anguished Muslim souls in a land where being Muslim has become a crime. *My Name is Khan*, a love story set in pre and post-9/11 U.S., is an attempt to dissipate stereotypes about Muslims for a Western, primarily North American, audience. It is an equally important message for the Indian audience of national unity, interreligious harmony and cooperation, in the wake of the Mumbai bombings of 26/11 (Nov. 26, 2008), while at the same time celebrating distinctive Muslim, as well as Hindu, religious identities. *My Name is Khan*, while navigating a minefield of problematic representations and cultural stereotypes, presents an identity that is at once both Muslim and Indian, while at the same time promoting a vision of universal humanity. The movie starts with the scene where Rizwan Khan is on the way to board his flight to Washington DC, minding his own business. He suffered from Asperger Syndrome, so he was feeling sick and disturbed in the presence of so many people, so he started chanting his prayers or dua to Allah along with distracting himself with the two pebbles he used. This chanting of his prayers first scared the girl standing in front of him and then we saw two Officers asking him to step out and go with them. He was then taken to the interrogation room and heavily searched and interrogated.

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Finding nothing on him, he was declared free to go, but it did not matter as he said he missed his flight and he did not have enough money to take another one. Now the sad part is that all this happened only because he was chanting his “*dua*” and not praying to Jesus, just because his name had Khan in it and not some non-Muslim name. Not because he was doing something disturbing, scary or suspicious, not because he was carrying something he should not. He was a decent man being harassed because of his Cultural Identity. After Rizwan says that he missed the flight, we see one of the officer ask him in a sarcastic tone why it was so important for him to visit DC, to which he replied for the first time in the movie duration saying he would meet the President to tell him - **“MY NAME IS KHAN AND I AM NOT A TERRORIST”** and this line continues to play as a background score or like a refrain in a hymn throughout the movie in order to harp on the fact that, my surname or my religious affiliation does not tag me or designate me. This film also shows us the burden of a surname which resulted in the pathetic death of a child and a father’s life-long guilt for being the reason for his son’s death.

Rizwan, Mandira and their son Sam, a beautiful world of these three souls got devastated when Sam became a target of tremendous hatred towards Muslims after a terrorist attack in Afghanistan which eventually takes the life of Sam’s American best friend. Sam was beaten to death as his surname was ‘Khan’. This event makes Mandira realize that it was a racialized assault; a heartbroken and angry Mandira accuses Rizwan of killing Sam. She says her baby would have been alive if his surname would not have been Khan. Sad but true. She tells Rizwan she is leaving him; she cannot bear the sight of him because he reminds her of Sam’s death. Rizwan tells her he will leave, as their house belongs to her. He asks when he should come back, and in a fit of rage she sarcastically tells him to return after he can tell the president that he is not a terrorist, despite his Muslim name:

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Tell everyone in America, “I’m not a terrorist” . . . Can you do that? Can you? No, you can’t. Why don’t you tell the president of the United States? Mr. President, my name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist. Then he can tell all those people that my Sam was not the terrorist son of a terrorist father. He was just a baby. My baby. When you do that, come back.

After this confrontation, we see a Rizwan, bent on doing what Mandira has asked him to do. He leaves no stone unturned in order to attain his salvation. During his quest, he encounters a variety of ethnic others including brown-skinned Muslims, Hindus, and African Americans who experience the consequences of the war on terror within American society in different ways. On the quest of finding his identity, we do not see Rizwan, but the soul of a true Muslim with full of piety and devotion to the almighty. He also faces the wrath of his own men who actually stain humanity and Islam as a religion by playing the role of the *Shaitan* (Satan). This instance is actually used to balance the point of view that the entire world has towards this religion in particular. It generalizes the fact that in all religions, there is an angel and a Satan, but it’s up to us, whom do we choose?

He gets arrested, he escapes death by an inch. He faces a lot of media trials in order to prove his genuinity towards the country he is residing in. Where in *Swades*, we see a torn self who is half-American and half-Indian, but in this film, we see an autistic Rizwan, completely aware of the fact that he is a citizen of America, but an Indian and a Muslim from soul. He finally meets his goal of reaching to the President of America and declare to the entire world that **“MY NAME IS KHAN AND I AM NOT A TERRORIST”**.

With this context in mind, it is important that Rizwan's salvation from prison ultimately rests on his decrying the "bad" Muslim, rather than the American security apparatus conceding there was little to no reason to believe he was a terrorist. This fortifies, instead of difficulties, bigoted portrayals of Muslims in mainstream society. The "bad" Muslim that Rizwan reports to the FBI clearly fits the role of the demonized terrorist- the Other. Taken in this political setting, MNIK can be perused as a hazardous yet significant degenerate instance of Bollywood tending to the major issue of Islamaphobia, however in fact, doing as such in the United States, a long way from saying something regarding the flows of homegrown legislative issues in India.

Migration working as a Source of Liberation: While films like *My Name is Khan* and *Swades* deal with a dilemma of choosing and asserting someone's cultural and religious identity, there is one film named *English Vinglish* which needs to be mentioned here. This particular film throws a very positive light on the concept of migration. Although Sashi's migration in the film was a temporary one; but it played an instrumental role in shaping her identity as an individual and ultimately as a woman.

The story revolves around an Indian homemaker from Pune, Sashi Godboole played by Sridevi, who makes and sells laddoos as a home-run business. We see the age old dogma of being looked down upon for not knowing English perfectly. Here we see that she is being mocked by her husband Satishh, played by Adil Hussain, and her daughter Sapna due to her poor English Language skills; "She is born to make *laddoos*", her husband remarked about his wife in front of guests. The constant taunt by her husband and daughter created a vacuum in Sashi's mind which resulted in lack of self-esteem and self-identity.

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At a juncture of life, when she is struggling with her identity, she is not loved by her own daughter, Sashi finds an escapade to a city of dreams-New York for her niece's wedding. This journey turns out to be her journey of self-exploration and a stepping stone for acquiring freedom from self-consciousness. We see her struggling with her broken English since her first step into the international airport.

We see her mugging up what to say at every point in the airport, in English of course and more so for the Immigration Counter. We see that the Immigration Officer has an open mind and helps her out. But we also see that one English official makes fun of her not knowing English by saying,

“How are you going to manage in our country if you don’t know English?” to which another Official replies,

“Like you are managing in our country without knowing Hindi.”

These two lines replicate the fact that we Indians adapt to everything which comes in our way, be it adapting to foreign cultures in foreign countries and within our own country as well. And this conformity towards white supremacy has created the vacuum in the Indian self. We are no longer happy with our Colonial identity, we want to imitate the masters all the time, and people like Sashi, who is a true Indian, both culturally and spatially becomes a butt of ridicule for the rest of us.

Then we find her in New York City in her sister’s house. She is welcomed there with love and warmth and they do not judge her on her English speaking skills. They are actually Non Residential Indians, but they have not forgotten their own language and their heritage. As we know and see here, they respect their Cultural Identity extremely and try to keep it.

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She is respected and loved for who she really is! The kind of love which Sashi didn't get from her own daughter, born and brought up in India, she gets it from her niece Radha. This shows that spatiality may play a major role in shaping your identity but culturally imbibed identity is heavy on it. Here we see a hint at the concept of 'nature and nurture'.

Sashi, who is desperate to win respect from her husband and daughter, joins a Spoken English class with other non-native speakers from around the world. This class in the film becomes very symbolic as we see a confluence of people from different cultures struggling with the same insecurity of self-identity. The urge of being 'accepted' by the society has made them crave for learning English. They want to become English by unbecoming what they actually are..

Sashi finds excuses and attends the classes regularly and becomes a promising student and earns everyone's love and respect. She even brings food made by her to everyone, which is loved by all and appreciated as well. She gains self-confidence and learns about herself bit by bit. But she does not realize that her classmate Laurent is falling for her. He declares that in front of the whole class. Sashi had even run away from him when he tried to kiss her but could not explain that she was married. We see a Sashi blushing with excitement. The first time she run off from Laurent, she told him,

“Bahut dino baad kisi ne meri tareef kari... thoda sa chaunk gayi thi bas.”

But when she is questioned by Radha regarding her feelings for Laurent, she clearly remarks that she wants Respect, not Love. This remark by Sashi shows how vulnerable she is to be respected by others, to be socially accepted. Sashi becomes successful at last. She could speak English now, a big deal for her. She could articulate herself before people; she ultimately finds herself through a journey to a foreign place. Now she got respect from both her husband and daughter which she wanted for long. The last scene becomes a perfect conclusion to Sashi's journey. The last scene depicts her in the flight when Satish takes an English newspaper but Sashi doesn't when she is told they do not have Hindi newspapers. This just explains that Sashi did not learn anything to show off, she did so to prove herself, to feel self confident and to gain love for herself back. She got all of this not in her home with her family, but with her nieces born and brought up in the US and with a group of completely unknown people. This shows the way people can find themselves when they return to their homeland as depicted in Swades, they can do so even moving to another one.

Conclusion

Thus we discovered Diasporic, Cultural and Religious Identities through the Eyes of Celluloid namely Swades, My Name is Khan and English Vinglish. We discovered how Identities are important and how one can even discover themselves and their identity through different Diasporas. We learnt to even embrace Cultural, Religious and even Diasporic Identities to reach the world we are aiming for.

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