

Desi Films: Articulating Images of South Asian Identity in a Global Communication Environment

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Abstract:

Although India itself has been an important source of information about the Indian identity for Western audiences, a specialized genre of desi media have also garnered more recognition in recent years. Desi films—movies created by and/or for South Asian immigrants—are capable of reaching large numbers of people regardless of their educational level, economic status, or linguistic proficiency. Most are produced in English or with English subtitles and are easily accessible in most areas, either in theatres, video rental stores, libraries, or via Internet movie sites. This paper examines Indian diasporic films as a vehicle for cultural articulation and debate. First, it provides a theoretical foundation of hegemony and resistance with regard to notions of ethnicity and immigrants' articulations of identity in interstitial zones. Second, it discusses sources of hegemony from Indian and Western media. Third, it explores the creation of a hybrid identity as reflected in Indian diasporic films, pointing out some of the themes and conventions of this emerging genre.

Keywords: Desi Films; Diasporic Communities; Ethnic Identity; Hybrid Identity; Indian Immigrant Films; Media Hegemony; Resistance; South Asian Identity

Résumé:

Bien que le pays de l'Inde lui-même a été une source importante d'information à propos de l'identité indienne pour les spectateurs occidentaux, un genre spécialisé de médias desi a aussi engendré plus de reconnaissance dans les années récentes. Les films desi, les films créés par/pour les immigrants du sud de l'Asie, ont la capacité de rejoindre un grand nombre de personnes peut importe leur niveau d'éducation, leur état économique ou leur compétence linguistique. La plupart sont produits en anglais ou avec des sous-titres en anglais et sont faciles d'accès dans la plupart des endroits, soit au théâtre, soit dans des magasins de location de film, des bibliothèques ou via des sites Internet de films. Cet article examine les films de la Diaspora indienne en tant que moyen d'articulation culturelle et de débat. Premièrement, il offre un cadre théorique d'hégémonie et de résistance en ce qui concerne les notions d'ethnicité ainsi que les articulations de l'identité immigrante dans des zones interstitielles. Deuxièmement, il discute des sources d'hégémonie des médias indiens et occidentaux. Troisièmement, il explore la création d'une identité hybride qui est représentée dans les films de la Diaspora indienne, soulevant certains thèmes et conventions de ce genre émergent.

Mots-clés: Films Desi; Communautés Diasporiques; Identité Ethnique; Identité Hybride; Films d'Immigrants Indiens; Hégémonie des Médias; Résistance; Identité Asiatique du Sud

As scholars examine cultural exchange via processes such as acculturation, assimilation, and isolation, immigrants' communication systems and preferred content types will be important areas of concentration. That is, while the trend toward globalization has allowed people to travel and communicate more easily, it has also resulted in a multiplicity of homelands. Individuals who trace their heritage to a specific region or nation increasingly have had to negotiate a sense of belonging and cultural tenure that takes into account the locations of their ethnic backgrounds as well as their daily lives. The idea of cultural hybridity addresses the dialectical tension of negotiating an identity based on living in or between two cultures (Berghahn, 2006). Immigrants create hybrid identities that reflect individual identity as well as macro-level commonalities that arise from straddling the values and norms of Eastern and Western societies. Therefore, their self-selected representations in media indicate their need to participate in social discourse and make their voices heard in a global dialogue. Some researchers have investigated immigrants' use of media from their homeland to maintain cultural ties (Hur & Jeffres, 1980; Lee, 2004) or from the land in which they have settled to learn about their new environment (Lee & Tse, 1994; Reece & Palmgreen, 2000; Viswanath & Arora, 2000). But scholars are only beginning to understand the ways second- and third-generation immigrants negotiate a permanent interstitial existence.

Although generations of immigrants around the world have had to balance cultural values and manage their representation in media, people of Indian ethnic origin exemplify such issues within a larger rubric of globalization. In the past decade, non-resident Indians (NRIs) have

drawn the attention of businesses and political candidates due to their economic clout, social contributions, and visibility in communities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (Luce, 2007). As a minority group, NRIs have helped to create a sense of “Indianness” outside of India.

The children of those immigrants who elected to make their homes outside of South Asia are referred to as “desis”, an abbreviation of the Hindi word “*pardesi*”, meaning “foreigner”. The term illustrates one of the many labels created to discuss hybridized identity. In a global context, the term “South Asian” differentiates people from the Indian subcontinent from Native American groups as well as unifies people sharing similar practices, beliefs, religions, or languages. Geographically, South Asia includes the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Tibet (Desai, 2004). However, the convenience of the South Asian label belies the diversity of people from these regions.

Although India itself has been a source of information about Indian identity for Western audiences, a specialized genre of desi media has garnered more recognition in recent years. Cinema has been instrumental to the development of a shared South Asian identity and to the communication of desis’ particular cultural issues to the larger world (Desai, 2004). Desi films—movies created by, about, and primarily for South Asian immigrants—are capable of reaching large numbers of people regardless of their education, economic status, or linguistic proficiency. Most are produced in English and are accessible in theatres, video rental stores, libraries, or via the Internet.

This paper examines Indian diasporic films as a vehicle for cultural articulation and debate. These desi films most clearly exemplify resistance to hegemonic messages conveyed by Indian and Western media sources, as they carve out a unique niche of expression that references and challenges notions of what it means to be Indian in a global context. Under this lens, this exploration of desi films addresses such broad questions as “Who determines the images of ‘Indianness’ outside of India, especially in a global communication environment?” as well as “How are Indians being portrayed in this global media environment, and how do those images differ from earlier media portrayals in Indian and Western media?”

To better understand the themes of cultural hybridity in desi films, it is also important to understand cultural identity as it is depicted in media of home and host cultures. Thus, this paper begins with a theoretical foundation of hegemonic discourse and resistance with regard to cultural notions of ethnicity and immigrants’ new articulations of identity in interstitial zones. Second, this paper will provide background regarding sources of hegemony from media in the Indian subcontinent and from Western countries. Third, it will explore the creation of a hybrid or hyphenated identity as reflected in Indian diasporic films, pointing out some of the themes and conventions of this emerging genre. For ease of analysis, the films in this sample relate to people of Indian heritage specifically. Consequently, the term “Indian” will be used unless a more specific term is warranted for accuracy. As this is only an exploration of the topic, the analysis is limited to a small sample of Indian diasporic movies from the years 2001 to 2007 produced in the U.S., U.K., and Canada. This analysis does not contrast the differences across U.S., U.K., and Canadian desi films, mainly because the audience for the desi films discussed here spanned all three countries, and all of the films were accessible there. Instead, this analysis deals primarily with broader East-West distinctions regarding cultural identity issues discussed in the films.

An Overview of Media Hegemony

Scholars have acknowledged that “globalization” is a widely used but vaguely defined term (Edwards, 2007; Hoover & Stokes, 2003; Yue, 2003). Stohl (2005) explained that contemporary globalization theories address the worldwide increase in economic interdependence as well as the rapid communication of ideas, values, and materials due to new technologies. Moreover, globalization impacts the creation of new identities that challenge existing classifications and roles (Stohl, 2005). Appadurai (1990) noted dimensions of global flow that are especially pertinent here. He referred to “ethnoscapes” to describe shifting patterns of migration among groups of people such as immigrants, refugees, and guest workers (1990: 7). He also explained that:

Mediascapes . . . tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places.

(Appadurai, 1990: 9)

Cultural production processes are a subset of globalization research. In contrast to other historical agents of globalization such as imperialism and colonialism, the idea of hegemony is useful for framing a discussion of less unidirectional transfers of people, ideas, and information across national boundaries. Although cultures may be impacted by military occupation, government dictatorship, or corporate expansionism, hegemony captures more subtle aspects of cultural exchange. Hegemony is not a matter of overt domination of the masses from a large authoritarian force, but a continuous struggle to win support for the rule of a dominant class of “organized intellectuals” (Storey, 2006: 50).

One of the seminal theorists of hegemony, Gramsci (1973) described the State not as a political society that controls people through coercion, but as a balance between political and civil society. According to Gramsci (1973), the hegemony of one social group over an entire nation would be exercised through private institutions such as schools, trade unions, or the Church. He also argued that the intellectual strata of administrators, scientists, scholars, philosophers, and other individuals whose professions center on “intellectual elaboration” would serve as functionaries of the State (Gramsci, 1971: 9). The idea of hegemony rests on the notion of consensus, wherein subordinate classes appear to support the cultural and political meanings as well as the values, ideals, and objectives of the prevailing social group. Thereby they are incorporated into the group’s power structures (Storey, 2006).

Extending these ideas of cultural acquiescence, Carragee (1993) described media hegemony as a framework for examining mass media and power, highlighting the relationship of media messages to sociopolitical change. Altheide (1984) summarized a Gramscian explanation of media hegemony as referring to “the dominance of a certain way of life and thought and to the way in which that dominant concept of reality is diffused throughout the public as well as private dimensions of social life” (1984: 477).

Hegemonic Discourse from the East and the West

Edwards (2007) noted that despite the proliferation of new communication venues such as blogs and Internet chatrooms, it is important to study more traditional forms of communication such as cinema as well: “When ‘older’ media are chosen by artists as means of expression, we may see a cultural shift in a variety of ways, both thematically and stylistically, as well as the changed environment within which such traditional media now operate” (Edwards, 2007: 291). Films contextualize globalization and provide a window to view images and experience emotion in meaningful ways; viewers in a home country can watch films to learn about life abroad, and immigrants in other countries can look back at the heritage they wish to preserve (Kao & Rozario, 2008; Srinivas, 2005).

Films have been studied as mediated forms of diasporic discourse across many cultures. For example, literature exists on films about Caribbean migration to London (Guha, 2009), depictions of Italian and Jewish Diaspora communities (Marx & Cohen, 2010), and the work of émigré directors of Algerian (Higbee, 2007) and Martinican descent (Demissie, 2008). Scholars have addressed feelings of alienation and loneliness among Italian immigrants in Australia (Rando, 2007) and of Australasian immigrants’ disenchantment with life in the Diaspora (Smaill, 2008), as well as comedic, melodramatic, and documentary treatments of female immigrants in Spain (Ballesteros, 2005). Contrasting themes of assimilation in immigrant films or of separation in exilic films, Klein (2004) differentiated diasporic discourse in film as that which highlights accommodation processes required to negotiate communities and identities between the home and host lands.

Bollywood Heroes and Heroines

To the more pertinent discussion of cinematic portrayals of Indian culture, Bollywood has become synonymous with the Indian film industry for audiences around the world. In actuality, the Indian film industry contains a great deal of linguistic variation, with five major centers of regional film production reflecting eight primary languages (Chapman, 2003). India has produced an average of 700 commercial films annually (Chapman, 2003; Dasgupta, 1996), and completed five times more full-length feature films than Hollywood in 1990 (Chapman, 2003). The “Bollywood” nickname given to Hindi commercial films is indicative of the industry’s center in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay. The popular Bollywood formula combines family-drama, romance, action, song, and dance (Dasgupta, 1996). At their most basic level, Bollywood movies could be characterized as morality plays pitting good against evil (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). For Indians living in India as well as NRIs living in Diaspora communities, the conflict is often perceived as one between traditional Indian values and Western values (Deprez, 2009).

Bollywood films about the Diaspora often express immigrants’ desire to return to or maintain an affiliation with their home country, often manifesting fear of losing cultural values or nostalgia for a remembered past or mythologized heritage (Deprez, 2009; Kaur, 2002). Nevertheless, Bollywood movies depict the life of NRIs with glamorized images of consumerism that coincide with free market reforms in India and the promise of prosperity through globalization (Kaur, 2002; Srinivas, 2005). In these films, NRIs are portrayed as wealthy urbanites who “use English phrases, cell phones and computers, celebrate Valentine’s Day and frequent exercise clubs and shopping malls” (Srinivas, 2005: 321).

The issue of gender provides an example of some of the hegemonic messages regarding Indian identity in Bollywood movies. Males and females in Bollywood fall into expected patterns of behavior based on their status as heroes or heroines. Frequently, these characterizations are based on Hindu religious archetypes. Although a more complete analysis of Bollywood cinema is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that portrayals of Indian men and women that do not align with the traditional Hindu archetypes are often seen as negative and even threatening to the social stability of the country. The “bad” woman in Bollywood films often equates to individualism, hedonism, and duplicity, concepts often conveyed symbolically by an association with Western decadence: smoking, drinking, dancing in night clubs, and promiscuity (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Feminist critiques of Bollywood movies have illuminated many such stereotypes, but less research has been done on the cinematic standards for male characters.

Representations of India in the West

For decades, the majority of cinematic depictions of India in the movies of the U.S. and Great Britain were told from Christian, Caucasian, and colonialist perspectives. Many such movies conveyed outright racism via stereotypes of Indian culture as exotic and dangerous (Muraleedharan, 1996). The undercurrent of these films centered on imperialist narratives of passivity and power. Vann (2002) argued that colonialism and racism could not be separated, and that in colonialist films, the colonized land is a “passive receptacle that the energy of the colonizer must fill”, just as the colonized person is a mere entity meant to be moulded by the colonizer (2002: 188). The resurgence of British colonialist films about India in the 1980s marked a sort of nostalgia for colonial power borne of uncertainty in a modern England of rising poverty rates and other social instabilities (Eliason, 1984).

Aside from racist and otherwise negative constructions of Indian identity in Western cinema, Indians were simply not represented for many years in films and television of the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Mastro and Robinson (2000) called this a nonrecognition phase in which a minority group is rendered invisible, usually until it is recognized through ridicule. Similarly, Durham (2001) discussed the returned gaze, a dramaturgical concept that allows the object being portrayed to resist hegemonic discourse by forcing observers to examine themselves through their interaction with the media message. Essentially, in viewing the South Asian depiction, the Western audience would become the object of the returned gaze as they became aware of the act of observing in the context of the image being portrayed. Being aware that one has observed the object in the media message allows one to confront beliefs about the portrayal. Yet without significant depictions of South Asian characters or concerns in Western media for so many years, Indians in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. had no ability to return the gaze to the audience, and hence, no way to counter hegemonic influences.

Resistance and Creation of a New Hybrid Identity

While new immigrant groups may establish a community with its own identity, successive generations must maintain a symbolic ethnicity (Rex, 1996). By the 1990s, the diversification of Western societies due to global movements of people, the widespread accessibility of communication tools, and the availability of funding allowed filmmakers from minority groups to begin constructing mediated images and asserting their own identities (Smith, 1996). Desi

films have represented Indian immigrants' creation of a hybridized ethnic identity in a medium that has the potential to reach audiences around the world. Indian diasporic filmmakers have articulated narratives of their experiences, struggles, choices, and values that reflect their existences in interstitial cultural zones. In so doing, they have given South Asian immigrants of several generations a chance to counter the hegemonic media messages of their home countries and their host countries.

Overcoming Stereotypes

Diasporic films draw upon and challenge normative limitations of Indian culture as well as the oversimplifications and stereotypes of Indians in Western media messages. Dasgupta (1996) described the bulk of Hindi commercial films as reinforcing attitudes that "good" Indian women are submissive and self-sacrificing while "bad" women are individualistic and sexually aggressive, despite feminist filmmakers' efforts at resisting patriarchal characterizations. In the media of the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., South Asian people have been discussed according to particular stereotypes or ignored altogether (Durham, 2001). For example, in a study of U.S. magazine advertising, Paek and Shah (2003) found evidence supporting a "model minority" stereotype of Asians as successful workaholics. However, they also noted that Asian-Indians—another term used to differentiate NRIs from the American Indians indigenous to North America—were relatively invisible. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans have come to associate South Asian immigrants with negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Muslim people (Mitra, 2005).

Because immigrants have the experience of being exposed to the cultural values of their home and host countries, though, they are uniquely positioned to process particular hegemonic media messages actively rather than passively consume them. Immigrants are forced to interpret media messages more consciously simply because they must evaluate which ones to accept or reject as expressions of their own interstitial existence. In effect, immigrants create an entirely new culture that references cultural norms of their home and host countries and filters them through a lens of global awareness and direct experience.

Media Use Motives and Patterns

Immigrants use media to accomplish a wide range of culture-production and cultural maintenance functions. Media use motives are often a function of an immigrant's length of stay in the host country. Therefore, they differ widely depending on whether an individual is trying to cope with cultural change for a short time or establish a new sense of self and home. Reece and Palmgreen (2000) studied the cultural adjustment of sojourners, specifically Indians temporarily residing in the United States. The researchers examined need for acculturation among Indian graduate students, comparing respondents' media use in India and in the U.S. Surveillance emerged as a highly important motive for television viewing in both environments, but in the U.S., respondents mainly watched national news. The researchers accounted for this pattern by noting the usefulness of understanding U.S. politics and current events in the cross-cultural adaptation process. Knowing more about the U.S. allowed Indian sojourners to understand their new environment and make comparisons with their homeland.

To better understand the linkages between media use and the adaptation process of second-generation immigrants in Diaspora communities, however, Durham (2004) conducted in-

depth interviews with focus groups of South Asian, adolescent girls. The author found that a common complaint of the daughters of South Asian immigrants had to do with their inability to take part in coming-of-age rituals in American society. Parents were fearful of allowing their daughters to participate in social events such as attending the high school prom because of sensationalized media portrayals of Western dating and sexual practices. Although second-generation females did not believe mass media messages accurately reflected life in the U.S., their NRI parents formed perceptions of social reality based on observations of sexuality and decadence in Western media sources. As a result, they tried to instill traditionally Indian values in their daughters to dissuade them from adopting certain aspects of Western culture.

In addition to studies of the use of media from the host country, communication researchers have also studied immigrants' motives for seeking ethnic media from their home countries. Much of this research hinges on the idea of cultural maintenance. Lee (2004) found that first-generation Korean immigrants believed satellite TV was useful for cultural maintenance because it offered immediate and convenient exposure to both news and entertainment. Shi (2005) argued that individuals often used ethnic media strategically to obtain culture-specific knowledge, perhaps to appear authoritative or to secure inclusion in a particular group. Even the isolation of some members of Diaspora communities may not indicate a rejection of the host culture, so much as a need to preserve a sense of cultural distinctiveness and plurality.

The consumption of media from immigrants' home countries could also ground displaced people. This is especially true for sojourners, who need to clarify their identity in new environments, sometimes without knowing whether their host country will become a permanent place of residence. Sampedro (1998) interviewed international students who read newspapers affiliated with their countries of origin. Students said these newspapers helped them preserve ties to their friends, family, and culture by informing them of events and issues their loved ones would read about at home.

Immigrants as "Global Citizens"

Globalization has required immigrants to take on multiple labels of self-identification. Their identities span discrete categorizations of ethnic origin and place of residence, instead reflecting lives that bridge the intellectually convenient boundaries of nation, race, and religion and defy the simplistic indicators of mother tongue or style of dress. The desi Indian in diasporic cinema is just one example of the immigrant taking on the mantle of the global citizen. For second- and third-generation immigrants, the boundaries between home and host culture blur significantly. This is due to having been brought up in a culture that is considered one's home while trying to retain aspects of one's ethnic heritage. As a result, each person's cultural experience is a unique amalgam of choices, experiences, and values. So desis have had to establish a sense of commonality and community. Sampedro (1998) noted that immigrants' ontological insecurity stimulated them to engage in cognitive and affective rituals, such as seeking certain kinds of media. This is because the development of a shared cultural narrative requires engagement of the individual on emotional and intellectual levels.

Desi films have the potential to cultivate such a narrative, combining the idiosyncrasies of individual cultural adjustments with larger themes about immigration and cultural production processes. South Asian Diaspora filmmakers have illustrated these issues not only for

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immigrants and their children who are negotiating hybrid ethnic identities, but also for viewers in the world at large:

Unlike the work of their western predecessors, their films give priority to class, race, and gender issues, concentrating on the gritty realism of daily existence and focusing on the position of marginalized outsiders, the urban underclass of the western metropolis, much of which is made up by people of color, predominantly from the former colonies of Britain in Asia and Africa. But the new historical project does not occur in a vacuum. It works in combination with a new ethnic assertiveness, arising out of feelings of injustice at being denied access, or worse, being misrepresented in the public sphere.

(Rajgopal, 2003: 51)

Thus, diasporic cinema has become a forum for exchanging ideas about globalization on large and small levels, as well as an important catalyst for dialogue about issues that separate some groups of people and unite others.

Central Themes of Desi Films

Indian diasporic filmmakers have often struggled to get funding from major studios in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. because topics of interest to desis were not considered mainstream enough to guarantee commercial success (Smith, 1996). With no way to reach a widespread audience, diasporic filmmakers were limited in their ability to resist hegemonic discourse regarding the notion of “Indianness” in a global environment. Consequently, many of the most popular desi films were produced independently, marketed largely through word-of-mouth publicity, and circulated in limited release. Nevertheless, desi films have been gaining more attention from media conglomerates and more exposure to audiences beyond Indian Diaspora communities.

The political, economic, and social dimensions of globalization have formed the basis of cinematic discourse in the Indian Diaspora. Desai (2006) noted that postcolonial migration in general and residence in the U.S. after the September 11 attacks in particular have created contradictory positions of power for South Asian minority groups. Thus, the author explained, South Asian filmmakers have tended to examine a need for belonging due to geographic displacement. Additionally, characters in Indian diasporic films have been crafted to highlight the tensions of cosmopolitanism (Desai, 2006).

Contrast Between East and West

Chief among these tensions is the sheer contrast between the everyday lives of people from Eastern and Western cultures. Many desi films address this issue to show that globalization is not only a term used for macro-level trends among societies but also a phenomenon that affects people in minute yet profound ways. For example, the movie *American Desi* (Katdare & Pandya, 2001) opened with a montage of images and sounds meant to contrast the lifestyle of American-born Kris (short for “Krishna”) Reddy from that of his Indian immigrant parents. As Kris, wearing a baseball jersey, prepares to leave for college, the audience sees the American flag and hears his rock ‘n’ roll music in his bedroom. Kris speaks in English to his Caucasian friend, using the slang and casual profanity typical in media depictions of American teens. Meanwhile,

his sandal-clad father prepares *chai* in the traditional way Indians make their tea. His mother, wearing a *sari*, speaks to him in Hindi and asks him to participate in a Hindu religious ceremony before he leaves the house.

The contrasts between Eastern and Western culture depicted through differences in food, clothing, music, social customs, and religion underscore the cultural adaptation processes Indian immigrants and their children must negotiate in their daily lives. Diasporic filmmakers have also highlighted this concept by showing desi characters interacting with people from the dominant Western culture of the host country. In *The Namesake* (2007), director Mira Nair not only used climate, choices of first names, and music to show cultural contrast, but also showed the main character Gogol (also known as Nikhil) being introduced to a Caucasian woman at a dinner party. Although it is only their first meeting, she immediately asks him about how old he was when he emigrated. In *American Chai* (MacCrae & Mehta, 2001), Indian-American college student Sureel flashes back to his childhood, when children on the playground asked him questions such as “Are you Jewish or Christian?” and “What tribe are you from?” These encounters not only reflect experiences many Indians living in Diaspora communities have faced, but also the challenges they have dealt with in articulating their ethnic identity to themselves and to people originally from the host culture.

Director Gurinder Chadha expounded on this theme of contrast in *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) not only by illustrating differences between Indian and British cultures, but by showing commonalities as well. As the main character, Jess (short for “Jesminder”) pursues her dream of playing professional soccer, she must deal with the cultural expectations of femininity. However, just as her Indian parents prefer that their daughter cook well rather than kick well, the other girls on the team must deal with stereotypes about women who play sports. According to the film, athletic females in general have had to handle taunts about their style of dress, their interests, their ability, and even their sexuality. Jess also encounters racism when a rival player mutters a negative epithet at her during a match. In explaining this to her coach, he responds by telling her that as a person of Irish heritage, he has encountered racism, too.

This message is particularly important as globalization forces diverse groups of people together. Although it is important to address ethnic differences between groups, it is also vital that people relate to each other as individuals with a shared sense of humanity. From a media standpoint, messages about commonality make it easier for audiences to relate to the narratives in desi films, thereby increasing their commercial appeal. Yet this also empowers Indian diasporic filmmakers to resist hegemonic discourse and carve out a hybrid identity for people who live in the interstitial zones between East and West. It also brings to light the accuracy of media depictions of Indians living abroad and opens the door for dialogues about immigration, acculturation, and other issues related to globalization.

Multiplicity and Range of Identities

In creating a hybrid identity for Indians living in Diaspora communities, the makers of desi movies have had to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of Indians in Western societies. One way to do this has been to present a range of desi identities that represent a spectrum of balances between Eastern and Western cultures. According to Chacko (2010), “No single identity can sufficiently articulate the concept of self as each individual occupies multiple subject positions or identities simultaneously” (2010: 84).

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In *American Desi* (2001), Kris confronts his own feelings about his Indian heritage when he begins to date a desi girl who embraces her Indian culture and interacts with other Indians even though she has grown up in the U.S. To further exemplify the diversity of the desi experience, Kris' Indian roommates each come from different Indian states and are of different religions, yet behave in stereotypical ways. Jagjit is a Punjabi Sikh, easily identifiable by his beard and turban. He embodies the enthusiasm and awkwardness of the "F.O.B.," or "fresh off the boat" Indian who has recently come to the U.S. Similarly, Salim is an Indian Muslim obsessed with a Bollywood actress and anxious to avoid desi girls, whom he believes to have been corrupted by their time in the United States. Finally, A.J., whose name is actually Ajay, is an American-born desi of Gujarati descent who dresses and talks in ways that align more with the African-American hip-hop subculture.

All of these stereotypes are explained or addressed later in the film. Jagjit wants to pursue a career as an artist rather than as an engineer, as his parents have desired. As a recent immigrant, he encounters the same pressures and expectations that second-generation Indians entrenched in American life have faced. Salim becomes enamoured with a Muslim girl who was raised in the U.S. She informs him that she is not corrupt, and that she has maintained her religious beliefs, her respect for her parents, and even her ability to cook traditional Indian food. A.J. teaches Kris how to perform a *garba*, a style of dance popular in Gujarat, and explains that he feels that Indians and Africans share a common ancestry since the two continents were once geographically united. Essentially, he argues that culture transcends location.

Director Deepa Mehta also addressed the multiplicity of the desi identity in *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002). In this film, the female lead, Sunita, introduces herself to the male lead, Rahul, as "Sue" and quotes lines of Spanish poetry as the two dance together in a bar. Rahul concludes that Sunita is a call girl of Spanish descent and proceeds to educate her about Indian customs when he recruits her to pose as his fiancée. Throughout the film, then, Sunita keeps characters and audience members guessing about whether she is a prostitute or an escort and whether she is Latina or Indian-Canadian. When she recognizes Rahul's chauffeur as a well-known drag queen, she promises to keep his secret identity under wraps by telling him, "I'm kind of partial to multiple identities". This line of dialogue crystallizes the movie's themes about people taking on an array of personas, labels, and modes of behaviour to adapt to situations and achieve goals. A primary motive for this multiplicity is the need to resist societal boundaries and negotiate between cultural expectations and individual desires for personal fulfillment.

Freedom versus Obligation

The spectrum of desi identities and the negotiation of the balance between Eastern and Western cultural values have also been shown in Indian diasporic films as a tension between pursuing one's own objectives and honouring the obligations of one's ancestral culture. As a consequence of this tension, covert rebellion and outright deception have been key plot devices in desi films. In many desi movies, this kind of resistance takes place when Indian parents demand that their children accept arranged marriages or follow certain career paths.

In *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), Rahul hires Sunita to pose as his future wife because his family has rejected his relationship with a New Age pop star and because his mother has threatened to cancel his younger sister's wedding unless he could find a more suitable (Indian) bride. Sunita herself has rebelled against her parents' plans to arrange her marriage to a Punjabi wrestler and the expectation that she will oblige as a docile daughter. In *American Desi* (2001)

and *American Chai* (2001), characters hide the fact that they would prefer to establish a career in the arts because professions such as engineering and medicine are more acceptable to their parents.

But a corollary to the theme of rebellion in these Indian diasporic films is optimism about the power of open communication. In *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), Jess bristles at the idea of keeping her pursuit of a soccer career secret from her parents and eventually reveals her activities to them. Explaining that she was happy when she didn't have to sneak away to practices and lie about her whereabouts, she tells them, "I really want to play, and if I can't tell you what I want now, then I'll never be happy, whatever I do". In *American Chai* (2001), Sureel compares his own need for freedom with his father's motive for emigrating to the United States. In both films, the desi children are able to resolve the tension with their parents by discussing it openly. Moreover, they gain the blessings of their parents to leave home, travel abroad, and pursue their dreams. Although these resolutions might resolve the conflicts rather simplistically, the filmmakers succeed in showing the value of open dialogue on individual and societal levels. The characters achieve a positive balance between their individual needs and their familial and cultural obligations through direct communication. On a societal level, the filmmakers convey the idea that the way to resolve racial, religious, and ethnic tensions is to confront them on a global stage.

Embracing Globalization

Indian diasporic films also carry the theme that globalization is something to be accepted rather than denied. Again, this idea applies to the attitudes of individual characters as well as to audiences' beliefs about interplay between cultures. The departure of characters in *American Chai* (2001) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) sends the message that global travel and the potential for intercultural communication expand intellectual horizons and provide opportunities for betterment. But other desi films convey a similar advocacy of globalization in more subtle ways.

In *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), Sunita's alcoholic father sings songs from old Bollywood movies, and Rahul's grandmother sprinkles quotations from Shakespeare into everyday conversations. These parental figures symbolize an adherence to the past and to perhaps antiquated traditions meant to preserve culture. At one point, Rahul tells Sunita that she must exhibit knowledge of Indian customs to his family because they are "caught in a time warp trying to preserve what [they] can of the home country". When Sunita's father and Rahul's grandmother have a change of heart at the end of the movie, audiences can also interpret the resolution as a positive message about the diasporic blend of Indian tradition and Western adaptation. The movie conveys that if cultural isolation is about excessive dependence on the past, then cultural adaptation is about negotiation in the present and preparation for the future.

In *The Namesake* (2007), Gogol's father tells him of his own time as a young man, when a fellow passenger on a train told him to travel abroad. When Gogol deals with the changes in his life and the dispersal of his family, he remembers his father's words: "See the world. You will never regret it, Gogol". Gogol's mother, Ashima, whose name quite purposefully means "no boundaries", welcomes an interstitial existence between resuming her classical music training and life in India for six months and returning to the U.S. to be with her children for the remainder of the year. The characters embrace their status as global citizens and are able to find a sense of stability and identity that is not tied to a geographic locus.

Conclusion

Globalization highlights the flows of people and information via processes of immigration, technological development, and access to different media. Viewed this way, globalization opens the possibility for challenges to dominant ways of perceiving people and their cultural beliefs. However, to develop meaningful dialogues about differences and commonalities between groups of people, it is necessary to recognize the diversity of the individuals who make up those groups and avoid the temptation to place them into simplistic categories. In the years ahead, it will be interesting to see whether a pan-Indian or South Asian identity will erase regional differences in global discourse, or whether a hybrid desi identity can be established that celebrates common experience while honouring the spectrum of experiences, beliefs, and ideals held by Indians and other cultural minorities living abroad.

This paper was intended to shed light on the messages about cultural articulation and intercultural debate in the films of the Indian Diaspora. By referencing and resisting hegemonic messages in Indian and Western media sources, these desi films have allowed people who have been geographically displaced due to globalization-related forces and events to develop a new sense of self and community. By reflecting the experience of living in interstitial cultural zones, these films give a voice to marginalized groups and communicate revised notions of “Indianness” to audiences around the world.

Future research should expound upon the ideas addressed in this exploratory analysis. For instance, researchers could look for more themes common to films of the Indian Diaspora by expanding the number of countries involved in the analysis or the range of release dates under consideration. Feminist scholars could look at the possibility of a double standard regarding females in Diaspora communities and the amount of rebellion that is considered socially acceptable within the realm of filmic discourse. It would also be intriguing to compare the types of messages about ethnic identity construction and cultural exchange in Bollywood movies and in desi films. Researchers could also examine resistance to hegemony in other types of desi media. Books, songs, television shows, newspapers, magazines, blogs, and Web sites provide a wealth of messages to form a basis for studies of news media, popular culture, and politics.

Communication scholars should also employ a variety of perspectives and methodologies. Critical analyses could provide rich detail crucial to uncovering rhetorical strategies and layers of meaning in polysemic texts. At the same time, quantitative studies employing techniques such as content analyses could reveal patterns across genres or media types as well as data about how messages related to diasporic identity or acculturation processes have changed over time.

Communication researchers would do well to devote attention to immigrant communities and the networks of interpersonal and mass communication they have established to preserve, maintain, and shape their identities. Immigrants and their children in Diaspora communities are uniquely situated to negotiate identities that span sets of values and avoid the intellectual binaries that separate East and West. Understanding how this happens in subcultures could eventually reveal a wealth of information about how societies may cope more successfully with the uncertainties of globalization in large and small ways. Ultimately, achieving this level of comprehension could empower people to direct globalization processes rather than merely respond to them.

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