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Representation of India in Hollywood: An analysis of Indian women

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Abstract

Films are believed to be versatile ideological apparatus because of its solicitous nature and its steady fame. Informed by the doctrine of Critical Race Theory and Orientalism, this paper examines the representation of Indian women in Hollywood movies by undertaking a Critical Discourse Analysis of five Hollywood films. This study took an important stand in its analysis and questioned how the plot, dialog, and characterization within the dataset collectively constructed Indian women. Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyze the dataset because it helped elucidate how mediated dialogue originate from and are shaped by the organized power dynamics of society. Findings of the study revealed that Indian women were re-presented as ethnicexotic and hypersexual but that they also existed in a state of virginal purity – pure by sexual information or experience – until they are initiated into sexuality.

Introduction

The current period is believed to be an age of media explosion, where most of what we know, learn, and take is dependent upon media exposure (Hall, 2003; Kellner, 2003; Ono & Pham, 2008) [8, 10, 13]. It has been conceived that while education and media were chief influences of social trends and habits, people are more and more turning to mass media to gain an understanding not only of things close to them but also about all that is new (Spencer, 2006) [16]. Among the various functions of the media, the communication of issues pertaining to race and stereotypes is particularly critical (Croteau & Hoynes, 2002). In a study about mass media and racism, Hartmann and Husband (1974) [9] found that children as well as adults based their opinions about ethnic minorities on what they observed in the media. The mass media are also being increasingly recognized as realms where the struggle for identity is played out by challenging notions of race, class, and gender (Louw, 2001) [11]. Since the mass media depend on leading groups of society for resources, they are situated among the broader condition of social, economic, and political power (Carragee & Roefs, 2004) [2]. Within the mass media, therefore, messages about individuals or groups that favor the powerful and advantaged are usually given precedence over unusual discourse that might defend the causes of marginalized communities. The perception that the mass media are independent and unbiased is therefore flawed and necessitates the examination of the manner in which the media portray what people perceive to be objective and precise reality. In keeping with this need to critically evaluate mediated 'realities', this study explores how Indian women are represented in Hollywood movies.

Methodology

For the purpose of examining how Hollywood mainstream cinema depicts Indian women and womanhood, this study used movies produced as cultural and rhetorical artifacts. The researcher embarked on a Critical Discourse Analysis of images, narratives, dialogs, and description as presented in the movies under consideration. Critical Discourse Analysis was especially suitable for answering the questions raised in this study given its critical approach toward discovering the process through which meaning is created and ideology is propagated through words and images. The dataset for this study was arrived at through case study logic and was comprised of the following five films produced between 2006 and 2016: Outsourced (2006), Darjeeling Limited (2007), Slumdog Millionaire (2008), The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011) and Lion (2016).

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Literature review

Since gender, sexuality, and race are interconnected concepts their illustration on screen are also steady. This intersecting system of representation serves a vital ideological function: it defines who has power and who does not. In order to do this, some groups are shown to be overbearing while others are shown as weak and helpless so that the power dynamics are confirmed and culturally achieved. Understanding these strategies of representation is therefore a way of understanding how power manifests itself through the agencies of ideology such as media. Rosenblum & Travis, (2007) [14] argue that in the United States, Whites are the definers of cultural 'Others' – "the unmarked marker of others' differentness", which means that Whiteness becomes the understood social norm that gets power from defining others, while remaining undefined itself. In the context of mediations therefore, it may be disputed that Whiteness derives its power and meaning in relation to the representation of other races. Similarly, masculinity may be said to derive their power and meaning in relation to the representation of what it means to be female. Media representations indicate the leading assumptions of a society's culture. They are hence commenting that audiences use to measure their social position vis-à-vis others and hence it is necessary to be aware of the media as one of the significant position, where culture and ideology are purposively constructed and assigned meaning.

Said (1978) [15] argued that the West's re-imagination of the East as an enigmatic and distant zone of the world was a result of the merger of charm and anxiety about a land inhabited by 'strange-looking' people and their rituals. Orientalist or post-colonial discourse, according to Bhaba (2004) [1] is a mechanism or a rhetorical device that allows the West to appropriate the East as a bizarre place characterized all at once by barbarism, exotica, spirituality, sensuality, transcendentalism, and chaos. In keeping with this, the creation of the 'East' by Euro-American cinema is the focus of analysis here. The fact that Orientalism in cinema exists in contemporary times has been demonstrated by Nadel (1997) [12] who argued that Disney's Aladdin (1992) is replete with clichéd images about the Middle-East (the chaotic marketplace, the beautiful princess, the magic carpet) and that the movie seeks to disguise this by appearing to be a standard Western romance. Nadel also argues that almost all characters in the movie are dualistic in nature and use the trope of 'disguise' at least once in the narrative. Such ambiguity, according to Nadel, is analytic of Orientalist discourse, which is also in keeping with Said's (1978) [15] original assertion that dichotomizing and obfuscating the Oriental people is one of the primary ways in which they are rendered fearsome, deceitful, as well as exotic.

Feng (2002) [6] contends that Asian Americans in the US are "perceived as eternally foreign", a perception that is fuelled by mass media. Ono & Pham (2008) [13] argue that the Yellow Peril discourse that has been historically used by the media to discuss Asians in the US is far from being a thing of the past. While Asians are seen as a model minority in the US today (also a problematic stereotype), the media still construct the Asian community as powerful and threatening while juxtaposing Whites as vulnerable. The Yellow Peril discourse is therefore structurally embedded in the cultural fabric of the US and is hence difficult to remedy.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that women of color have either been stereotyped by omission in Euro-American media or they have been represented through the binaries or dichotomized extremes such as that of the prostitute-virgin. Stereotyping women of color by polarizing their representations is therefore likely to be one of the ways in which these minority populations are subjugated and limited by the media. The overall media trend pertaining to the representation of women of color can be summed up in the words of Cynthia Enloe (1990) [5] who argues that "there exists an American sexual gaze towards the exotic, malleable third-world female – specifically, the colonial gaze displaced upon the female "other" as hyper-sexualized, embodying female masochism, and one dimensional willingness to seduce and please."

Research Questions

In view of the above discussion about representational politics pertaining to the representation of women in Hollywood movies, two research questions were explored in this study:

RQ1: What cinematic stereotypes or conventions are used to represent Indian women in Hollywood movies?

RQ2: How has the 'ideal' Indian woman been constructed by Hollywood movies?

Overview of the films

This study analyzes five contemporary films in its attempt to examine how Indian women and womanhood are portrayed in Hollywood films. The selected movies are: Outsourced (2006), Darjeeling Limited (2007), Slumdog Millionaire (2008), The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011) and Lion (2016).

Outsourced: Directed by John Jeffcoat, written by George Wing, and produced by Shadow Catcher Entertainment, Outsourced (2006) is distributed by Truly Indie Films. The plot of the movie revolves around that character of Todd Anderson (played by Josh Hamilton) whose job and entire department in a Seattle-based customer service firm is outsourced to India. Initially resentful, Todd eventually agrees to go to India to meet and train his replacement – an Indian man named Puro (played by Asif Basra).

The Darjeeling Limited: Directed by Wes Anderson and produced by Scott Rudin, Roman Coppola and Lydia Dean Pilcher, The Darjeeling Limited (2007) revolves around a businessman in India, who fails to catch his train—called "The Darjeeling Limited"—as it pulls out of a station; he is beaten to it by a younger man, Peter Whitman. Peter reunites with brothers Francis and Jack on board, the three having not seen each other since their father's funeral a year earlier.

Slumdog Millionaire: The winner of eight Academy Awards and extensive critical acclaim, Danny Boyle's Slumdog Millionaire (2008) is written by Simon Beaufoy, produced by the UK based Celador Films, and distributed mainly by Fox Searchlight Pictures and Warner Brothers Pictures. The plot of Slumdog Millionaire revolves around the character of Jamal Malik (played by Dev Patel) who is on the verge of winning Rs. 20,000,000 ($400,000) on the Indian version of the American quiz show, Who Wants to be a Millionaire.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: Directed by John Madden, written by Ol Parker and produced by Graham Broadbent and Peter Czernin, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011) movie around several British retirees decide to move to Jaipur, India, to stay in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, advertised as an exotic retirement home. Evelyn Greenslade, a widowed housewife, must sell her house to pay off her husband's debts; Graham Dashwood, a High Court judge who lived in Jaipur as a child, abruptly retires to return there; Jean and Douglas Ainslie hope to have an affordable retirement, after investing in their daughter's internet business; Muriel Donnelly, a former housekeeper, decides to have a cheaper hip operation in India; Madge Hardcastle, after several unsuccessful marriages, searches for new romance overseas; and Norman Cousins, an aging lothario, attempts to relive his youth.

Lion: Directed by Garth Davis, Screenplay by Luke Davies and produced by Emile Sherman, Iain Canning, Angie Fielder, Lion (2016) revolves around Saroo, a five-year-old boy, lives with his elder brother Guddu, his mother and his younger baby sister in Khandwa, India. Guddu and Saroo steal coal from freight trains to trade for milk and food. One night Saroo pesters his brother who is going to work overnight to let him come too. Guddu refuses at first yet finally relents, and they arrive at a nearby train station where Saroo is too tired to stay awake. Guddu places Saroo on a bench and tells him to wait for his return. Saroo promptly falls asleep and when he wakes up Guddu is not there. Saroo searches the station for Guddu and gets on an empty train looking for him. There he falls asleep again in one of the compartments, only to awake sometime later to find the train in motion and the doors locked. After several days the train arrives in faraway Calcutta where 5-year-old Saroo does not understand the local Bengali language.

Major thematic categories
Based on the dataset for this study, each of the following macro-level were identified as the most common screen principle utilized by Hollywood filmmakers to (re)present and communicate what it means to be an Indian woman. It is pertinent to mention here that these thematic categories are not to be understood as resistant compartments into which the representations of Indian women can be flawlessly ordered. Instead, these categories are meant to serve as leading designs that emerged during the process of analysis. These screen conventions, far from being mutually exclusive, are conflated and work in tandem to essentialize what the Western world today understands about Indian women based on mediated representations. What follows now is a detailed description of each of the thematic categories, corroborated by illustrative examples from the dataset.
Marriage and domesticity. The most central and recurring theme that appears from an analysis of each narrative was its emphasis on marriage, reproduction, and the search for the indefinable 'Mr. Right'. The themes of marriage and marital prospects were resonated continually throughout the dataset. All the female protagonists, with the exception of Latika in Slumdog Millionaire, are under immense pressure from their families to get married and "settle down". Emphasis in these movies is not merely on marriage but on arranged marriages where the female protagonists are expected to marry the man their parents have chosen for

them.
For instance, in Outsourced, Asha has been engaged since she was four years old to a man named Ashok because their families had "known each other for generations." According to Asha, Ashok had a good job and was "very polite" – qualities that according to her are enough for her to fall in love with him after their wedding.
Entertainment and servility. Several scholars such as Ono & Pham (2008) [13] and Lee (1999) have asserted that traditionally, Asian women have been shown in Hollywood films as entertainers, who exist for the sole purpose of providing entertainment and pleasure to men. Vestiges of this practice seem to be prevalent in movies such as Outsourced, the Darjeeling Limited and Slumdog Millionaire. Although it may be argued this practice was necessitated by requirements of plot, story development, or comic relief, it must be more than coincidence that the third theme – that of the exotic entertainer who provides visual-erotic pleasure, is prevalent even in contemporary Western films, albeit in mutated forms that are hard to detect or problematize. Latika in Slumdog Millionaire is also depicted as an exotic entertainer. After Jamal and Salim escape from Maman's begging racket, the audience learns that Maman has "other plans" for Latika. The audience learns later that these plans including grooming Latika to become a sex slave or an entertainer-prostitute. When we first see Latika being trained in an Indian dance form by her tutor, she is wearing an ornate, midriff-baring outfit and abundant jewelry on her head, waist, feet, and arms. She sways seductively to Indian music and we see her in what is suggested to be a red-light district in Mumbai where she is known as 'Cherry'. When Jamal and Salim find Cherry/Latika, Salim remarks: "She's sexy!" and Maman later refers to her as his "prize" and rhetorically asks:
Virginal purity. The theme of sexual purity or innocence underlying a secret sexuality is the fourth significant pattern that recurred in the dataset. As per this treatment, the Indian women in these films were depicted as clean and tidy, virtuous, and untouched by sexual desire.
Hypersexuality. The noteworthy phenomenon observed within the dataset is that every movie outlined the Indian female protagonist as an attractive and sexual being whom men find alluring, inexplicable, and desirable.
Unambitiousness. The thematic category that appeared from the Critical Discourse Analysis of the films is the way in which the Indian women in these movies have been depicted in terms of their careers or job prospects. Among the selected films, Asha has a source of income from her job at the call center.

Discussion
This study discovered the representation of Indian women in Hollywood movies and determining whether or not such representations were stereotypical as is the case with most mediated representations of minority populations. The study was based on three premises – a) Orientalist ideologies seek to dominate and define the East through discourse (Said, 1978) [15]; b) the media are ideological devices that constructs believable realities for audiences (Gandy, 2001; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003) [7, 17]; and c) racism is structurally embedded in the status quo in order to normalize White (male) privilege (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) [4] at the expense of minorities. In keeping with these theoretical assumptions and principles, two research

questions were addressed:

RQ1: What cinematic stereotypes or conventions are used to represent Indian women in Hollywood movies?

RQ2: How has the 'ideal' Indian woman been constructed by Hollywood movies?

Based on a Critical Discourse Analysis and qualitative textual analysis of five recent films produced in Hollywood, this study found thematic categories upon which the representations of Indian characters were based. These categories were: a) arranged marriages, b) exotic entertainer, c) virginal purity, d) hypersexuality and e) lack of career prospects or ambition.

These five cinematic conventions were thus identified as the main stereotypes used to show Indian women within the five movies that were analyzed. The 'ideal' Indian woman, then, was built by these films as tremendously compliant, family-oriented, selfless, and un-ambitious. At the same time, these films indicated that the ideal Indian women is also necessarily exotic and hypersexual but that they also exist in a state of virginal cleanliness – uncontaminated by sexual knowledge or experience until they are initiated into the sphere of sexuality by White masculine character.

As with all stereotypes, the depiction of Indian women as preoccupied with marriage, domesticated, hypersexual, virginal, and sacrificial blurs the real lives of these women and the actual issues they face in India as well as abroad. Even if these mediated representations are seen prima facie as cheerful entertainers that are not supposed to be seen as serious cinema, they go a long way in valorizing the 'nature' of Indian women in the popular imagination. Not only is such representation harmful in terms of external perceptions about Indian women, it also has the ability of affecting the self-image of Indian women by disregarding the fact that they are increasingly liberated, well-educated, well-earning, and productive members of society.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that Indian women were shown in keeping with Orientalist imageries and stereotypes within the five movies chosen for consideration. Specifically, a collection of thematic categories– arranged marriages, family and sacrifice, exotic entertainer, hypersexuality, lack of career prospects or ambition and virginal purity were identified as predominant themes based on which Indian women were characterized. Illustrations were offered in the form of widespread dialogs and plot exercises in order to validate the cinematic commonplaces and stereotypes used to show Indian women. The insinuations of these findings vis-à-vis the impact of media on the insight about real Indian women were discussed within the framework of Orientalism, Critical Race Theory, and the social construction of reality. Subsequently, media literacy was recommended as a strong tool that could facilitate audiences to question mediated messages and images before consuming them. Finally, based on the findings of this study, it was argued that the problematic conflation of nationality, race, and sexuality is personified in the portrayal of Indian women in Hollywood in that the connotations of being female, Asian, and of color were found to be transfused, overlapping, and adjacent.

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