

## Identifying Women's Identity in *Bhaji on the Beach* Film

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### SUBJECT

Film studies

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**Received:** October 1, 2023

**Accepted:** December 15, 2023

**Online version:** December 20, 2023

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**Keywords:** Ethnic Group; Diasporic Identity; Indian Identity; British Identity

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### Abstract

Indian is one of the ethnic groups in Britain. The interesting problem of Britain's ethnic group is Indian women. The source of data in this study is *Bhaji on the Beach* film. It is a British comedy-drama film. This film shows the *Saheli Asian Women* group. That group consists of the old Indian women and the young Indian women who live in Britain. One day, they have a journey in Blackpool, Birmingham. They have different points of view to express their identities. Based on Stuart Hall's point of view, this paper analyzes the diasporic identity of Indian women. The qualitative method is used in this study accordingly. The method of analyzing data uses content analysis. The aims of this study are (1) to reveal the characters' responses to the diasporic identity problem of Indian women and (2) to explain their reasons for their different responses toward the diasporic identity problem of Indian women. The results of this study are (1) the old Indian women show their identities as Indian because they still believe in their values system in India and (2) the young Indian women show their identities as British because they are open-minded to accept British cultural values.

### 1. Introduction

Indian is a member of *British and Minorities Ethnic* in Britain (Sunak & Rajeswaran, 2014, p. 6). They are an immigrant from India. They live in Britain. As a minority group, they must adapt to their new neighbourhood in Britain. The language and culture difference between Indians and the British limits Indians' mobility for adaptation. That difference causes a dilemma to choose their identities. They find it difficult to position themselves either as Indian or British.

Many films show the problems Indians face as immigrants in Britain. One of them is *Bhaji on the Beach Film*. That film is directed by Gurinder Chadha and produced by Nadine Marsh Edwards. Meera Syal made the screenplay for that film. That film was released on September 11th, 2013. That film is a British comedy-drama depicting how Indian women express their identities as Indian or British. The writer is interested in Indian women's problems in *the film Bhaji on the Beach*. That problem is faced by a group, namely *Saheli Asian Women*. That group consists of nine Indian women of different ages. They are categorized into the old Indian women and the young Indian women. They stay

in Birmingham. One day, they have a journey in Blackpool, Birmingham. There is a cross-cultural conflict between the old Indian women and the young Indian women. Their problems are their different ways to express their identities in the public interaction in Blackpool.

More importantly, several valuable studies have chosen *Bhaji on the Beach* film as the source of data (Sasinkova, 2007; Jaya, 2011). Firstly, Sasinkova (2007), "on analyzing both the films and the relevant cultural and social aspects, it has been ascertained that the films reflect the director's filmmaking approach as well as her cultural background." Secondly, Jaya's (2011) study focuses on understanding identity construction through postcolonial and social identity theory using *Bhaji on the Beach* film. His study results are "themes of identity include nation, foreignness, community, and home" in *Bhaji on the Beach* film.

This paper analyzes the diasporic identity problem of Indian women, depicted in the film *Bhaji on the Beach*. There are two aims of this study. Firstly, this study aims to reveal the characters' responses to the diasporic identity problem of Indian women. Secondly, this study explains the reasons for their different responses to the diasporic identity problem of Indian women.

Hence, this study requires Stuart Hall's point of view about *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. According to Stuart Hall, "...we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1989, p. 222). Based on Hall's statement, the individual identity is determined by the environment and society. The meaning of identity is produced and consumed by the society.

Then, someone has different responses to express his or her identity. According to Stuart Hall (in MacDonald, 2011:412), "identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past." That argument shows that identity is how someone manipulates himself or herself. The identity is the individual reflection on positioning himself or herself according to where he or she is.

The term 'diasporic identity' is defined by Stuart Hall. He argues that "the diasporic identity defines it as those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves now, through transformation and difference" (Hall in Bose, 2014:153). *Diaspora* is the term used to mention people who perforce to other countries. That experience produces another cultural development. If it is connected to Hall's argument, the diasporic identity will be how someone expresses their identity based on where they are.

People have many reasons for their different ways of expressing their identities. In line with that fact, Stuart Hall (1989:223-225) explains that there are two ways to understand that:

The first reason for the different ways to express someone's identity:

*"The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous*

*frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history."*

(Hall, 1989:223)

The first reason is that people express their identities to show their life background through their cultures. They still believe in their traditional value based on their cultural system.

The second reason for the different ways to express someone's identity:

*"There is a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. ... Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' and of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past."*

(Hall, 1989:225)

The second reason is that people express their identities by seeing the similarities and differences in their public interactions. They see that identity as a process. They are positioning themselves with 'Who are they?' and 'What do they want to be?'. The identification of identity is a long process which involves people's past life and their future lives.

## **2. Method**

The qualitative method is used in this study accordingly. It is in line with the definition of qualitative method from Berg (2001:3). He argues that "*qualitative research additionally includes such methods as observation of experimental natural setting ... document and textual analysis*" ... (Berg, 2001:3). This study uses content analysis to analyze the data. According to Cohen et al. (Sàndorová, 2014:96), "*content analysis in a broader sense refers to the process of summarizing and interpreting written data, whereas, in a narrower context, ...*" Content analysis is the way to analyze the data based on the content of data. The data are analyzed and interpreted based on the relevant theories. The data focuses on the diasporic identity problem of Indian women in *the film Bhaji on the Beach*.

## **3. Finding and Discussion**

### **3.1 Character in the *Bhaji on the Beach* film**

This study is focused on an Indian women's group, namely *Saheli Asian Women*. That group consists of nine characters. They are divided into two categories based on age. They are the old Indian women and the young Indian women. The old Indian women are Asha, Pushpa and Bina. The young Indian women are Hashida, Ginder, Simi, Ladhu Madhu, and Rekha.

The first character is Asha. She works as a news agent. She has a university education background. She left her home to stay in Britain in 1970. She felt sad because she could not be a good wife and mother. In that film, she is depicted as a judgmental Indian woman. Asha's appearance is using a sari as a traditional Indian costume.

The second character is Pushpa. She is a housewife. She sells many kinds of food. In that film, she is depicted as the oldest woman among *Saheli Asian Women*. She still

believes in the traditional Indian values. Her appearance is wearing a sari. It reflects that she still believes in Indian values. She is also depicted as a judgmental woman, like Asha.

The third character is Bina. She is a shopkeeper. She works in Mark and Spencer's shop. In that film, she is depicted as an old Indian woman who follows traditional Indian values. She also wears a sari, like Asha and Pushpa. She always takes a conversation with Pushpa. It is because both have similar behaviour in criticizing someone.

The fourth character is Hashida. She is a girl who wants to enter medical school. She is beautiful. She gets into a troubled relationship. She has a relationship with an Afro-Caribbean as her boyfriend. In that film, Hashida is depicted as a young Indian woman influenced by Britain's modern lifestyle. It is proved that Hashida's relationship causes Hashida's pregnancy. The Indian value prohibits that condition. Hashida does not wear the traditional Indian costume, like the sari. She wears casual jeans that show her British identity.

The fifth character is Ginder. She is a wife. She has a problem with her husband. She will divorce from her husband. She is trying to make her life happy with her son. In that film, she is depicted as an independent young woman. She is trying to resist India's patriarchal system.

The sixth character is Simi. She is the coordinator of *the Saheli Asian Women* group. In that film, she is depicted as a young Indian woman. She is brave. She always helps her friends to solve their problems. Simi's appearance is not like a woman, but boyish. She is also depicted as an independent woman.

The seventh and the eighth characters are Ladhu and Madhu. They are depicted as the modern Indian woman. They imitate the style of British teenagers. They look like a British woman, although they are Indian.

The last character is Rekha. Rekha comes from Bombay. She is invited to join the journey in Blackpool with *Saheli Indian Women*. In that film, she is depicted as a modern Indian. She wears a miniskirt. She wears the Channel brand. She uses high heels. Her appearance shows that she is a stylish woman.

### **3.2 The old Indian women's responses about the diasporic identity in *Bhaji on the Beach* film**

The first response comes from Asha. In that film, Asha is shocked by her memory of her Indian culture. She always meets the God of Hinduism, Rama. In that film, Asha carries a tray with a bowl of rice, coconut, and flowers. That shows that Asha wants to serve the God of Hinduism, Rama.

The next piece of evidence Asha asked herself:

*Asha said, "But I haven't done anything wrong. I went to college. My life was not meant to be like this: duty, honour, and sacrifice. What about me? I was a good student. I didn't get headaches then. What happened? I wasn't selling bloody newspapers.*

Asha's statement indicates that she defends her identity as Indian. She obeys the slogans duty, honour and sacrifice. Indian women mostly follow that slogan in the patriarchal system. According to the patriarchal system, Asha must be a good wife. She imagines that she stays at home. She also imagines taking care of her husband and her children. Asha cannot separate from the patriarchal system, although she lives in Britain. She still

believes in traditional Indian values. It gives Asha a dilemma when expressing her identity as either Indian or British.

The next piece of evidence is that Asha feels a dilemma as an Indian or British. Her dilemma becomes stronger than before when she meets Ambrose. He is a British man. He is shown as a character in Britain's colonial era. He wears a white costume, jacket, Panama, and tie. He invites Asha to visit the empty theatre in Blackpool. Asha asked Ambrose about his experience of watching Bollywood films. Ambrose answered, "*Seen them? I've been in them! Gunga Din! Bhowani Junction!*" Asha's question to Ambrose causes her memory in India. She remembers the traditional Indian values. Asha's memories about her past life make her express her identity as an Indian woman. She still believes in the God of Hindu Rama. She cannot be separated from the patriarchal system in India, although she stays in Britain.

The next characters' responses come from Pushpa and Bina. In that film, they are introduced as characters who believe in traditional Indian values, although they stay in Britain. In the first situation, Pushpa and Bina buy British fast food. They eat together. They feel that their foods are not spicy. They prepare a bottle of chilli powder from their homes. Therefore, they season their foods with chilli powder. Then, they feel that their food is more delicious than before. That situation shows that Pushpa and Bina still do the same habitual activity while eating according to Indian culture. It indicates that Pushpa and Bina show their identity as Indian women. Although they live in Britain, they cannot follow the eating habits of other British people,

The next evidence from Pushpa and Bina's responses about their identities is shown in one of the cafes in Blackpool. They go there, and they order two cups of tea. They eat the food which they had previously prepared at home.

*The waitress : No manners!*

*Bina : No shame!*

*The waitress : They want to get back from where they come from.*

*Pushpa : We should never have come to this country.*

*The waitress : They breed like rabbits!*

Based on that evidence, Pushpa and Bina do not bother the waitress' utterance. They still eat their food. Their way of eating indicates their Indian culture. Bina responds that she does not feel shame about her actions. It shows that Bina enjoys her way of eating. Pushpa responds that she should never have come to Britain, which reveals that she does not respect their new life. She still believes in traditional Indian values, although she stays in Britain. Both show that they still believe in their Indian culture.

### **3.3 The young Indian women's responses about the diasporic identity in *Bhaji on the Beach* film**

The first response of young Indian women comes from Hashida. Her family has great expectations for Hashida. Her parent said, "*She is the first doctor in our family.*" Hashida is trying to have an abortion during her pregnancy. When she comes to Blackpool, she visits many clinics. She realizes that she cannot do that. Hashida's problem with marriage is big. Her relationship is prohibited by Indian culture.

The next evidence is shown in the café. Hashida enters the café. She does not know that Pushpa and Bina are in there. There is a conversation between Pushpa and Hashida.

*Pushpa: If the baby dies, it will bless everyone. Thank God I never had a daughter. What for? To curse me like this?*

*Hashida: What a fucking sisters!*

That evidence shows that Pushpa insinuates Hashida about Hashida's pregnancy. Pushpa thinks that Hashida's pregnancy with the Afro-Caribbean is a big problem, and she can curse their family. Hashida said, "*What a fucking sisters!*." It shows that she does not honour her aunties. She said terrible words to her aunties. It means that Hashida breaks the traditional Indian values about the slogan "*duty, honour, and sacrifice*". Hashida's action shows that she does not express her identity as an Indian.

The second response of the young Indian women comes from Ginder. Ginder is trying to break the patriarchal system in that film. Ginder wants to separate from her husband. Her husband is abusive. Ginder tries to be an independent woman who wants to be a single parent. Ginder does not think that her choice shows that she does not allow the traditional Indian value that the wife must honour her husband. It also shows that Ginder does not express her identity as Indian but as British. It is because she breaks the patriarchal system of her Indian culture in the past life.

The third response comes from Simi. Simi is the coordinator of *the Saheli Asian Women* group. Simi expresses her identity as British in the public interaction. It is shown when many white boys ridicule the members of *Saheli Asian Women*. Simi is a brave woman. She resists the white boys' statement by saying, "*fucking, you!*" Simi's utterance shows that she breaks the patriarchal rules in her traditional Indian values. She does not honour the man, although the man makes the mistake of ridiculing Simi's friends. Simi's utterance shows that women and men have the same position in public interaction.

The fourth and the fifth responses come from Ladhu and Madhu. They express their identities as British. In Blackpool, they form a relationship with the white boys. One of them is having to kiss each other. It shows that their relationship breaks the traditional Indian values. Ladhu and Madhu show their lifestyle as British. They are introduced as modern British, not Indian.

The last response comes from Rekha. Rekha's perspective shows that she expresses her identity as British. Rekha conversed with Asha in the Blackpool, and the *Saheli Asian women* were there.

*Asha : ... The other day, I told my daughter that the woman makes the family. You know what she did? The next day, she shaved her head.*

*At this time, all the women laugh.*

*Asha : You think it's funny? I was teaching her morals from back home.*

*Rekha : Home? What home? How long has it been since you were 'home'? Look at you, your clothes, the way that you think!*

Rekha criticizes Asha for her style. Rekha not only criticizes Asha but also the old Indian women secretly. Rekha does not understand why they wear the clothes like that. She thinks that they have a journey in the Blackpool. They must have stylish clothes. They must not wear traditional clothes.

### **3.3 Two reasons for characters' different ways of expressing their identities in *Bhaji on the Beach* film**

According to that previous analysis, the writer reveals why there are two characters' responses about the diasporic identity of Indian women. Nine characters of *Saheli Asian Women* have their ways of expressing their identities, either as Indian or British. These differences arise from the belief in the traditional Indian values of the older and younger generations.

The patriarchal system still influences the old Indian women. They cannot break the traditional Indian values in their past life. That situation indicates they cannot adapt to their new life in Birmingham, Britain. That is a fundamental reason they struggle to position themselves as Indian or British. According to many evidences, the old Indian women still believe in the role of women as Indians. Therefore, they show their Indian identities.

On the other hand, young Indian women have a future orientation life. They can adapt to their new life in Birmingham, Britain. They are positioning themselves as British. It is because they are open-minded enough to accept the change of life's value from their past life.

### **4. Conclusion**

This study has two results based on Stuart Hall's point of view. Firstly, the old Indian women show their identities as Indian because they still believe in their values system in India. Secondly, the young Indian women show their identities as British because they are open-minded to accept British cultural values.

As a suggestion, the film *Bhaji on the Beach* is good. It depicts the ethnic group in Britain. There are many problems in that film about ethnic groups. That can be explored in the next studies.

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