Interest in multicultural studies, ethnicity, cultural pluralism, and interdisciplinary areas has already become the thrust area in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada where the particularities of individual cultural distinctions owing to race, class, gender, language and religion are amalgamated into the various hyphenated groups. What interests me is the existence of diasporic Indians who contribute a great extent to the ‘browning’ of the population and are debating not whether to adopt multiculturalism, but rather what kind of multiculturalism to adopt. The old Kipling lore that the East is East and the West is West is passé and the twain does meet.

Borrowing the title from a 2003 diasporic feature film called Indian Fish in American Waters directed by Manish Gupta, this paper highlights the myriad voices of the Indian diaspora through films. These range from regular features to short documentaries made either for arts sake or for finishing graduate school projects, or as vehicles for expressing social problems like acculturation, hybridity, and identity politics. Many of them also focus upon the gay/lesbian/bisexual existence of some of the members of this community, a trope that can be approached much more freely in the west than in the originary mother country. Living in a space between two cultures, most of these independent filmmakers focus upon their Indian tradition and how it collides with Western individuality. In spite of the diverse themes and techniques used in their modes of presentation, the one unifying factor of all these films is that they have been able to do away with homogeneous notions and the negative stereotypical images of migrants that are portrayed in the mainstream media. This point serves as a tool, by its very existence, to recognize the heterogeneity within the Indian diasporas, i.e. the recognition of difference within, as opposed to unified ‘imagined communities.’ But again, one has to keep it in mind that diasporic identity problems are inextricably bound up with questions of globalization. Just as the South Asian Women’s Collective and Aunt Lute Books helped in the publication of the diasporic South Asian female writers, similarly, several organizations like “Third World Newsreel”, “Women Make Movies,” “Asian Cine-Vision,” “Mongrel Media,” SAJA (South Asian Journalist’s Association), and NAATA (National Asian American Telecommunication Association) help in the release of these alternative media arts and thus lend a new dimension to cultural studies in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Indian community strives to forge an identity for itself in three Western countries (United States, Britain and Canada) where it is categorized as a minority. In many ways, the diaspora epitomizes the notion of a “minority”: small percentage of the population, usually self-identified with traditionally Eastern religions (Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism), and in “white” nations classified as “non-white.” However, a substantial number of Indians who come/settle in these countries are middle-class and well educated. As such, this group does not confront the economic disadvantages faced by most minorities. So, what kind of media representations do we expect to come out of, or reflect this group? Though some of the diasporic Indian films are primarily family drama rendered as thoroughly entertaining comedies, all of them are the manifestations of the “racial problem” that faces the members of an “ethnic minority” in these countries. Sometimes they are not complete in themselves, what with low budgets,
difficulty in obtaining viewership and moving towards mainstream. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that positive Indian images have also entered the national consciousness through film and television as it has done through fiction. Along with the task of entertaining an audience of millions, these productions have a huge responsibility as they are defining perceptions of Indians living in Britain, the United States and Canada. Primarily produced by independent filmmakers, most of these films explore the process of how communities and identities are constructed in the South Asian diaspora, where the dynamics of class structure and racial formation contribute in specific ways to the evolving self-definitions of being “minority”, and also the rendering of stereotypical roles.

The films of the Indian diaspora can be roughly divided into three categories. In the first group falls the films that are made “from” the diaspora, films that look back to the ‘home’ culture with a sense of nostalgia. The second category can be films that are made “of” the diaspora – located within and talking about it. The third category is those films “about” the diaspora – made by outsiders who talk about it. It has to be also mentioned that though there are diverse groups within the Indian diaspora, we often take recourse to a kind of generalization of all their experiences, preoccupations and ‘cultures’ which often pertain to usually middle-class, often English trained, and otherwise elite individuals in Britain, Canada, or in the United States. Maybe the existence of Bollywood in India as the world’s largest commercial film industry has also some bearing upon this situation.

Speaking about the cult of diaspora films, it is seen all too often that it is not so much home-based talent but Non-Resident Indian (NRI) directors or foreign-based directors of Indian origin who carry aloft the flag of Indian cinema overseas – Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, Shekhar Kapur, to name a few. When few of the internationally popular directors making “Indian cinema” live in India, there is invariably a problem of parallax – not that it is necessarily a bad thing but diaspora films are a growing and inevitable genre. Most of the time mentioned as ‘crossover films’, it is interesting to see how the diaspora genre has evolved. For instance, in his Indian film Bandit Queen, Shekhar Kapur took a vow of chastity, without a song or dance. Yet, he used song and dance and melodrama in his very British film, Elizabeth, and had that frosty monarch and her lover reveal their passion by dancing the Volta together in public for the first time. In Monsoon Wedding, Mira Nair took the popular “Bollywood wedding video” formula of the nineties and gave it an international spin with a blend of art and commerce. This emphasis on borrowing from mainstream Bollywood and presenting situations with all its mutations is gradually gaining prominence apart from the earlier diasporic films that primarily focused upon culture-clashes.

But the diaspora films that go beyond the clichés, and tackle issues of race, identity, hypocrisy and racial and sexual politics, that delve into individual dilemmas, contradictions, vulnerabilities and triumphs, often touch a universal chord – such as, My Beautiful Laundrette, Brothers in Trouble, My Son the Fanatic, East is East, Bhaji on the Beach, Anita and Me. Some of the most heartbreaking moments in these films have been, for instance, when Om Puri, who befriends a prostitute in My Son the Fanatic, loses the respect of his son, who turns to fundamentalist Islam. To Meena, in Metin Huseyin’s Anita and Me, discovering that her best friend and idol, the white-skinned Anita, has a Paki-bashing boyfriend is a kind of betrayal. These are strong characters that transcend mere diaspora labels and leave their signatures on our hearts. Here it has to be mentioned that in our discussion of Indian diasporic films, apart from diasporic Indian directors, we have to take into consideration
films that also are made by directors hailing from the Indian sub-continent, i.e. from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka.

A study of the Indian diaspora in film reveals certain area-specific problems as well. For instance, though sharing the same predicament of all expatriate communities, films made in Great Britain often differ from those made in Canada or the United States. Since most of the filmmakers are voluntary diasporics, they bring with them differentiating histories, narratives and collective memories. Often films made by these people tend to remain restricted to experimental shorts, film school projects etc. There aren’t many Mira Nairs to focus on the real problem of assimilation as she did in say, *Mississippi Masala*, or Nagesh Kukunoor in *Hyderabad Blues*. Again problems arise when Indian diasporic directors decide to move out of their immigrant status and venture into mainstream commercial productions of the Hollywood or the Bollywood kind. Manoj Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* or Signs are such cases in point.

**A: The Canadian Context**

People from the Indian subcontinent started coming to Canada in the late sixties. For the first generation of immigrants, problems of adjustment included not just the encounters with prejudice, but their own emotional responses to a new land, its climate and culture, as well as its moral and social systems. Above all there was the issue of how they retained their cultural identity. Since nearly twenty million Indians live abroad, Bollywood productions are increasingly catering to the global market. Within Canada, there is an increasing domestic demand for television and film productions from South Asia. Currently there are Canadian movie theatres that regularly screen Bollywood and other Indian films, and Canadian films with a substantial link to India have done well in Canada and, increasingly, in India as well – as is demonstrated by the commercial success of Deepa Mehta’s film *Bollywood/Hollywood*, whose audience in Canada has been a broad cross-section of Canadian society. Now that the South Asian immigrants feel that they have made a niche for themselves and have no reservation about being Canadians, Canada is also the site of several other “crossover films.”

**B: The American Context**

Shaping the culture of a nation is the providence of its people. For over a hundred years, Asian Americans have been a presence in the United States, coloring American life with their many and diverse cultural contributions. Since the 1960’s onwards, when probably for the first time, a non-European ethnic America re-announced itself, Asian American voices have been heard more frequently in the cultural context, along with a continued surge of imaginative self-expression. The bulk of Asian American films have been those of the Far East communities – the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Filipinos. Just as in the case of literature, the South Asian voice was late in emerging on the American cultural scenario, as did the immigrants who primarily came in greater numbers only after the changes in the Immigration Act of 1965. Unlike in England, it has taken slightly longer for a first and second generation of American born Indian to express himself in film. Now, however, there has been an explosion of independent films exploring the lives of young Americans of Indian descent. There is a plethora of short films and documentaries, but features lead the pack. Though there are no specific definitions of Indian cinema in the United States today – their political or aesthetic sense hardly taken into consideration – like all immigrant communities, the films hover around variations of the issues of hybridity, acculturation, identity politics,
memory (both personal and cultural), and sociological issues pertaining to the concept and definition of ‘model minorities’ on the one hand, and ‘alien Others’ on the other.

Thus, though an emerging canon plagued with series of questions as to who the target viewers are, or whether individual or personal concerns speak for the community as a whole, Indian diasporic cinema has gained greater popularity and acceptance as a specific genre from the time Mira Nair ventured with her *Mississippi Masala* way back in 1992. Though the film industry has generally been open to the recent influx of minority works, the pressures of producers and market audiences to create generalizations and perpetuate stereotypes in order to sell their works often force filmmakers to do otherwise. So, very often, in some films, we fail to get the true representation of the social and political identity of communities. Some of the movies that are cultural coming-of-age stories of one kind or another have done quite well, they have found commercial distribution throughout the country, and several of them have also been honored with awards at film festivals around the world. One thing becomes clear that with time, the young filmmakers are gearing up to move into larger arenas.

C: The British Context

This is different from the American and the Canadian one in the sense that in Britain we find a larger component of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian directors. The United Kingdom is the one place outside India with an exceptional concentration of 1.3 million Britishers of Indian origin on a small island, engendering a relatively more mutually nurturing relationship between audience and film talent. In Britain, apart from the migration of people from the South Asian area, migration from other ex-colonies has also occurred, which has resulted in the migration of those originating in India but from countries such as East Africa, Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. Moreover there are several generations of South Asians residing there who share a colonial heritage and their identities are formed by once, twice or even thrice migrations. From first generation settlers from India and Pakistan in the 1960’s, and the Bangladeshis from the 1970’s, it is now time for the second generation British Asians to define their histories and melting pot cultures. The question naturally arises, how does this definition of identity get carved out in films? Films made by Brit-Asians explore stories from their communities and interface with their mainstream culture. Films have looked back at the chapters of the 1970’s and 1980’s when settlers tried to fit in against the pressures of racism and intolerance (*My Beautiful Laundrette, Brothers in Trouble*). Films have examined changing values in traditional families with self- reflexive humor (*East is East*). Other filmmakers have turned a serious eye at the rapid spread of religious fundamentalism amongst youth in ethnic communities (*My Son the Fanatic*). With more recent films like *Anita and Me*, a young girl’s memory of growing up in an English village stands sharply juxtaposed with the relentlessly grim and powerful story of Shakeela Tarannum Mann’s *A Quiet Desperation* (2001) which looks at the dark underbelly of the migrant’s success story. As Meera Syal succinctly puts it in an interview:

"Britain is inevitably and will always be from now on a multicultural society and that will always upset a small minority of the indigenous Brits. But it is precisely Britain’s multicultural mix that has made the country so vibrant, so challenging and productive. Satire is one of the best ways to win over the Brits because they do have the best sense of humor in the world and truly appreciate wit and playfulness. As I write, far right groups are winning local elections in the north of England, yet alongside them, *Bombay Dreams* plays to packed..."
Thus through these different kinds of interesting films made by British Asians to define themselves, their sense of belonging to an alien culture, we get a clearer picture of the difference of the British and the American or Canadian scenario vis-à-vis diasporic films. There are films that tackle the difficult issues of racism, sexuality, violence and politics. From feel-good comedy to razor sharp incisive drama, from personal story telling to experimentation with form and content, all these find reflection in both features and shorts. We get to see a fair representation of happy integration stories as well as those that raise complex questions about minority identity and social space. But that is not the entire story. As Gurinder Chadha stated after making *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), times are also changing:

One of the most exciting possibilities for Asian filmmakers is that we aren’t only making films for the UK but we’re making international films that communities from all over the world identify with. We’re presenting a new vision of what Britain looks like today and our audience is global.

A common tone that binds most South Asian diasporic films is their searing honesty that we would scarcely find in Indian cinema today. No Indian producer would back a film like Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, which discusses lesbianism, even though it is prevalent in India. The way religious fundamentalists prevented Mehta to shoot the third film of her sequence, *Water* as they felt exposing the plight of the widows of Benaras to the western audience would be selling poverty chic, speaks a lot about this lack of honesty. *Monsoon Wedding* tackled paedophilia – which is seriously underreported in India – but few Indian producers would have the courage to back it. A film like Dev Benegal’s *Split Wide Open*, which did tackle the subject, is fairly exceptional in the circumstances, but aims at least as much at an overseas market, as home turf. But we also have exceptionally good films from the Indian subcontinent, like Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Laagan*, that remains in the end, a story of unrequited love between the two cultures – and perhaps there is a larger moral in it struggling to get out.

It would be apt here to explore the relationship between diasporic film and the phenomenon of globalization. First and foremost, the Indian diaspora, and by extension diasporic literature and film themselves, are a consequence of globalization, defined here as the global flow of humanity, capital and culture. Both emigration, and immigration point to the inadequacy of the physical parameters of the nation as a frame of reference. With the beginning of the Indian diaspora, literature, film and culture, which had hitherto been classified and studied in primarily national terms no longer fit that narrow interpretative grid. In a new global era, the imagination of national and cultural identities spilled over officially demarcated national boundaries, often with the location of the author outside the space of the nation, or in-between cultural traditions as a consequence of migration elsewhere. This phenomenon can therefore be held responsible for films of globalization, leading to the globalization of films. England has changed. India and the Indians have made their impact by being themselves and letting the British find out. In some measure, an Indianness has changed them. Nowhere is this phenomenon more discernible than in films.

A last point to be kept in mind while going through the numerous feature films and documentaries on the Indian diaspora is that not all the films discussed or mentioned are
technical masterpieces or brilliant in their production methods. But, they are relevant because of their content matter and with the sincerity with which they are made. Also, while we can celebrate the arrival of diasporic filmmakers offering as they do a much-needed perspective on the complex lives of the South Asians in the western world, and for challenging the constrictive boundaries of patriarchy which some of their films offer, we have to be careful not to be seduced by a nostalgic and undifferentiated representation of a dynamic and complex society. However, transgressions within one context can become unproblematized celebrations of difference within another. Cultural productions never occupy an absolute, static space, but when they undergo transnational crossings, we have to be particularly aware of the interplay of longing and nostalgia, nation and diaspora, fundamentalism and liberation, democracy and difference; in the end, these texts have to be interrogated with particular attention to the disjunctures and shifts that take place as culture moves from one site to another within a process of uneven geographical development.

II

For convenience of discussion of the multifarious types of films being made, I have classified Indian diasporic cinema roughly into three broad groups, namely feature films, short narratives and documentaries or non-fiction films and videos. Within each category there are various sub groups, according to the multiplicity of themes and techniques, and according to the ways they approach the issues of acculturation and hybridity.

I) FEATURE FILMS

A) The Bicultural Predicament Seen From Within

The most engrossing subject that a large number of diasporic Indian films deal with is of course related to culture clash and hybridity issues. Borrowing the theme from a shot in Nisha Ganatra’s film Chutney Popcorn, this section can be aptly subtitled, “Walking in a Sari and Combat Boots.” In his essay “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference” (1991), Stuart Hall reconceptualizes identity as “something that happens over time, …that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference.” Thus identity, instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. These discourses of the self – sexual, racial, historical, regional, ethnic, cultural, national, and familial – intersect in the lives of the diasporic people and form a net of language that they share with the community. This “collective memory,” like individual memory, is a function, not an entity. They ‘remember’ events, language, actions, attitudes, and values that are aspects of their membership in groups. Thus they want to preserve them or recover them when they venture into the film medium.

The Indian diasporic filmmaker therefore often employs his or her storytelling to redefine history and culture and to legitimize personal and collective memory. Like all immigrant communities, the major issue that plagues the mind of the Indian diaspora settled in the western hemisphere is the problem of their bi-cultural status. They can neither adapt themselves fully into the alien culture, nor can they forget their roots. Again, a new group of immigrants has been entering the United States and Britain over recent years: older Indians coming to the west for the purpose of being closer to their American or British settled children. They come to these countries primarily striving to sustain the long-term bonds of intergenerational reciprocity and affection that many view as central to an “Asian” and
good’ family and old age. But life in the west can never be the same as an envisioned life in India or Pakistan. They take some values, practices and images from the ‘home’ country and some from the ‘new’ one, creating new complex forms of family and a gaping divide between generations and nations. The films resulting out of this kind of situation can be broadly divided into three categories, namely, i) comedies where the characters and the directors laugh at themselves ii) where the directors assess the predicament much more seriously and try to give a true ‘slice of life’ presentation, and iii) where the approach is less avant garde, but deal with a blend of both the earlier categories, resulting in a new breed called “crossover films.”

i) Laughing at Themselves: The Diaspora of Hope

A considerable number of films of the South Asian diaspora use the generational paradigm to narrate their stories. Thus, when dealing with issues of migration, shifting national identities, cultural hybridity, and fluid and fractured relationship with home, the inevitable clash between the first and the subsequent generations become apparent. A class of people who immigrated to fulfill British labor needs in the face of imperial demise primarily constitutes the first generation South Asian community in Britain. Home, under the pressures of migratory dislocation, becomes transformed into what Rushdie calls an ‘imaginative space,’ which the first generation migrant characters are unable to fashion into an empowering project of creative articulation. Excluded from a racialized British national imaginary, which constructed Britishness as being exclusively white, the first generation South Asian immigrants identify India or Pakistan as ‘home’. This generation is forced to forge a sense of identity within a politico-cultural scenario that used the presence of the ‘alien other’ within Britain to reinforce British nationalism. On the other hand, dissociated from the nostalgic, constant backward glance at India or Pakistan of the previous generation, the second generation of South Asians is depicted as having no need for the salvation doled out by sundry gurus who come to spread divine message to the rootless Asians in the west.

If we examine the cultural formations of Indians in the United States, we realize that they in fact become in some sense more “Indian” than the Indians in their home country. In America, there are apparently two kinds of Indians: those who have settled in and become part of the moving American tapestry and the FOBs – short for ‘Fresh Off the Boat’ – the newly arrived who come with their baggage customs and prejudices. As their ideas of ‘home’ become more and more remote, they find many means of keeping them alive. Thus we see that for all kinds of South Asian immigrants, ‘home’ represents a mythic ideal of cultural authenticity, and fixedness for the first generation of migrants. National identities are stabilized and de-stabilized in repeated negotiations of the self with this site of emplacement. Geographical displacement is accompanied by a desperate clinging to relics of this increasingly imaginary home, and by the unquestioned perpetuation of certain external forms of “Indianness.”

The title of some of the productions are self-explanatory – Piyush Pandya’s American Desi, Krutin Patel’s ABCD, Anurag Mehta’s American Chai, Nisha Ganatra’s Chutney Popcorn, Srinivas Krishna’s Masala, Shani S. Grewal’s Guru in Seven. Though all these films thematically deal with growing up and acculturating in the New World where traditional and new ideas clash, many of them deal with the idea in a light and flippant way, without any sort of intellectual pretension. For most of the time, the directors try to laugh at the hybrid situation of the diasporic Indian and end in comic tones.
When asked by the interviewer about the nature of response so far from the Indian American community to her film *Chutney Popcorn*, Nisha Ganatra’s response is positive:

It’s been very supportive and really great. I was told that we were the first film to represent the Indian-American experience. A film about the generation that was born and raised here that’s not about missing India and about missing the UK, but about what’s going on here and how our identities have been formed…I’m glad the community is being so supportive. I was worried about the gay theme but it’s given me a lot of faith in our community that it hasn’t been an issue.

Ganatra concludes the interview by stressing upon the different reasons why it is important for Indians to see the film:

The only way we as a community are going to get any representation in Hollywood is by a strong show of economic force. If South Asians don’t turn up to see this film it sends the message back to Hollywood that there is no audience for a film with South Asians. It’s unfair that that is how decisions are made, but it’s true…It took so long for African Americans and Latinos to get representations in Hollywood, but it’s finally happening. Until we do the same and show the same support for our community, there won’t be any big South Asian Hollywood stars, there won’t be a big Hollywood film with South Asian actors……

A good example of transnational space and the construction of a new imagination for immigrant communities who are forced to migrate is Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach* which touches on many aspects of gender identity formation and negotiation for women of Indian descent.

**ii) ‘Crying for themselves: The Diaspora of despair**

As against the series of films discussed above that could be termed as representing a “diaspora of hope,” we also have several films that deal with issues more seriously and hence can be labeled as “diaspora of despair.” In most of these films, the directors are careful in depicting Indians and Indianness in the diasporic spaces as part of the continuum of displacement and alienation. They realize that although Indians were taken to many parts of the world as indentured laborers and had to live in abject poverty and face racism, through hard work, finding sustenance and strength in their own cultures (one is reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s ideas of strategic essentialism as noted by some post colonial critics), they have somehow managed to sustain themselves while giving their children a better future. Mira Nair’s thought-provoking film *Mississippi Masala* did a path-breaking job as it dealt with both romance and drama in depicting interracial issues. Her narrative suggests that “cultural difference” between African Americans and Asian Americans as represented by the protagonists Demetrius and Mina is no longer integrating into the mainstream’s definition of diversity. A very frightening sense of reality and acculturation problem takes place in Alex Pillai’s *Flight*, set in the Bengali community of Accrington and Manchester in the UK. Unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence, facets of cultural crisis for the Eastenders in London is explored with great compassion in Ruhul Amin’s *A Kind of English*. Udayan Prasad’s *Brothers in Trouble* and *My Son the Fanatic* deal with inter-generational strife and religious fundamentalism. Manoj Night Shyamalan’s search-for-roots film *Praying With Anger* explores Indian culture and tradition and examines how the protagonist must adjust to live in what for him is a strange world. Vishal Bhandari’s *A Pocketful of Dreams* and Robin Poddar’s *Storm in the Afternoon* explore the other side of the American success story.
Films are usually considered as cultural texts that travel within the context of uneven development. For some years now, a handful of UK and US-born Indians have been attempting to make films that talk a universal language and share concerns of young South Asians hyphenated between Western and desi cultures. Neither being able to make really avant garde statements, nor being able to totally resist the cultural imperialism of Hollywood and Bollywood, these members of a globalized generation are churning out a kind of hybrid narratives popularly known as the “crossover” films. The popularity of crossover films could be largely attributed to the growing number of Indian immigrants in various countries and the increasing demand for films that are closer to reality and stimulate the brain, according to crossover filmmakers.

The protagonists of the new diasporic Indian cinema are trying to locate their place in a multi-ethnic American society but at the same time they also have their ties to their parents’ and grandparents’ cultures. They can’t seem to get enough of Bollywood, the highly popular film culture of India. It should come as no surprise that the new American Indian films both celebrate and satirize the movies the filmmakers watch at home with their families. The formula-driven Hindi musical might be cultural heritage the young filmmakers would like to lose, but it is also something unique that they have to offer. The largest film industry in the world, which once drew its inspiration from the golden age of Hollywood musicals, is more than ready to return the compliment. Bollywood’s brand of extravagant Bushy Berkley routines was introduced to wide audiences through 20th Century Fox’s Moulin Rouge. The current popular fascination with Bollywood coincides with the rise of the new breed of South Asian diasporic filmmakers and this is where the ‘crossover films’ come in. The popularity of films like Hyderabad Blues, Bend it Like Beckham, Bollywood/Hollywood, West is West, Bollywood Calling, Leela, and Monsoon Wedding shows that the audience are welcoming comedies based on real life situations and these films have been able to fill up the void for an Indian audience that has grown up in a cosmopolitan culture.

B: HYBRIDITY ISSUES SEEN FROM OUTSIDE

In the sub-genre of diasporic feature films about the immigrant experience and the meeting of cultures, we also find several offerings made by outsiders – people not of South-Asian origin or descent. Obviously, the South Asian presence in England, Canada and the United States must be significant enough for filmmakers who are not from the subcontinent to make films about Indians and Pakistanis abroad. Peter Smith’s A Private Enterprise, Ronald Neame’s Foreign Body, Damien O’Donnell’s East is East, Stephen Frears’ My Beautiful Laundrette, Hunt Hoe’s Seducing Maarya, Barry Alexander Brown’s Lonely in America and Domenco Albonette’s Once We Were Strangers are some of the memorable films that revolve around the Indian diasporic situation and characters.

C: ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM

Film and music are particularly potent texts in the context of a transnational analysis, for they are consumed and circulated more widely than, say, literary texts; moreover, the high financial stakes that usually accompany popular film productions ensure that this medium is deeply imbricated in the circuits of global culture and capital. In order to demonstrate the necessity and force of a reinvigorated transnational mode of analysis, this section examines
the work of many Indian diasporic filmmakers who have ventured into the mainstream, exemplifying a changing relationship between diaspora and the homeland nation-state that is part of contemporary, global, economic, cultural and political processes. Sujit Saraf’s Asphyxiating Uma and Bugaboo, Asif Kapadia’s The Warrior, Ahmed A. Jamal’s Mad Dogs have nothing to do with the diasporic sensibility at all. Even Kamasutra by Mira Nair and Fire by Deepa Mehta fall into this category. Manish Gupta’s romantic comedy, Indian Fish in American Waters is about the first and second generation Indians living in the United States. As Gupta tells his interviewer Peta Cooper, the film “is a comedy of errors – there is everyday truth of our Desi lives that none of us can deny – it pinches us sometimes but often makes us laugh. There are no parents wanting to make their children doctors nor do we have naïve FOBs. So expect something fresh!” With the lead actress from New York City, lead actor from San Francisco, an Albanian actress and an Argentinian actor along with the Americans and Indians, making the film according to the director was “a roller coaster – but fun.” It explores the romantic connection between Naveen and Megha despite dissimilarities in their cultural, social and emotional perspectives. The film utilizes the opposites attract formula and portrays the immigrant experience with some humorous story telling. Both protagonists represent valuable life lessons in each other's lives. Asked how he thought the audience would react to the film, Manish Gupta replied:

The reason to make Indian Fish is to entertain, to make them laugh and relate to it. All age groups will find themselves in the movie and will be able to relate to the story line. If you are born here or you have come from India you’ll be able to relate.

Gupta is also very proud of his Indian heritage, “a proud Desi” and feels that desis should have a better presence in mainstream America, such as movies, music or anything else. “With lots of South Asians coming into non-traditional arena is good news for everyone in the community. Personally, I found hugely capable South Asian talent helping me with the movie. It was probably not possible if new South Asian talent didn’t hit the mark.”

An interesting phenomenon to note is that most of these directors who began to make films about exploring differences and finding connections within their hybrid existence detested the idea of being labeled as diasporic film makers and sooner or later attempted to move into mainstream Hollywood productions. Manoj Night Shyamalan’s The Sixth Sense and Signs are very good examples of such a shift. Though he began his filmmaking career with a typically diasporic film called Praying With Anger, Manoj is one of the new second generation Indians to quickly move away from the issues of hybridity, diaspora, acculturation and merge with the mainstream. As in the United States and Canada, there are several Indian directors in Britain who have made films that have nothing to do with issues of acculturation or hybridity or multiculturalism. Mira Nair’s Monsoon Wedding shows the director moving away from the movies about culture she’s firmly rooted in, into making blockbusters, given the opportunity. Asked whether Hollywood is inaccessible to people of colour, she tells Lavina Melwani:

It’s not so much who you are, it’s what you’re choosing to di….the representations of our own color, or own reality in the international screen is the most important task we set ourselves. No one is going to hand me this opportunity – I create the opportunity to make such films. No one is going to hand it to me. (3)

From the analyses of all these films one thing becomes clear. Whether they have been technical or commercial success or not, thematically speaking, the diasporic films have been
able to do away with the typical South Asian stereotypes projected in the western media. In other words, these films have been able project South Asians in other ‘incarnations’ than taxi drivers and 7-11 storeowners. The depiction of Apu, the 7-11 store owner in the Simpsons; Babu, the Pakistani restaurant owner in Seinfeld; the taxi owner on the Sprint commercials; the taxi driver in Jungle 2 Jungle, and Sirajul and Mujibar from the Late Show with David Letterman, though not passé can be surely sidelined by such true representations. But what is disturbing is that these images give privileged normality to scenes of fragmented South Asian American identities. They are implicitly being fed new knowledge of themselves: exotic on the one hand, powerless on the other.

II) BETWEEN THE LINES : SHORT NARRATIVES

The second category of films is the short narratives that have a lot of experimentation too. The short film format is popular with young filmmakers because they cost less money and can still be shown at film festivals to create a buzz. Neither falling into the full-length feature category, nor into the documentary slot directly, the subjects of such short films are getting more and more innovative. Thematically they deal with similar issues found in mainstream features and have been made by filmmakers who have also made full-length films. We can classify them under five sub-headings or types:

a) Narrating Reality

With directors keen on expressing the angst of acculturation and expatriation, but with minimum resources, the best way to express themselves is through short films that narrate reality. Mira Nair’s So Far From India tells the story of Ashok Seth, an Indian immigrant who has come to New York to seek a better life for his family, but once there, he postpones sending for them. Jason Dasilva’s Olivia’s Puzzle explores a day in the life of two seven-year old Goan girls, one in India and the other in Canada where they talk about their lives, their hopes, dreams and aspirations, Nisha Ganatra’s Drown Soda is an eleven minute exploration into the life of a young girl whose parents are of mixed heritage. Michelle Mohabeer’s Coconut/Cane and Cutlass is overlaid with stories of indentured Indian labourers brought to the Caribbean generations ago. Again, Nilita Vachani’s When Mother Comes Home for Christmas, Sharat Raju’s American Made all talk about the clash of cultures and the theme of nostalgia and identity. According to Raju, he would be often pondering upon the question, ‘Who am I making my films for?’ It was an acutely lonely moment and really reminded him of the disease, the affliction he has to feel to continue to be an independent filmmaker.

b) A Touch of Humor

Comic representations of the problem of acculturation abound in this category. The problems facing the Indian (especially Punjabi) community in Britain has been Gurinder Chadha’s forte. Her short film A Nice Arrangement focuses on arranged marriages, a theme that plagues most Indian communities abroad. Nisha Ganatra says that her motivation for making films came from being both lesbian and South Asian. “The inspiration for making Junky Punky Girlz was the isolation that I was feeling being in a space between two cultures,” she adds. In her third feature film Cosmopolitan, Ganatra states that being Indian is organic. That is, the characters are Indian and this informs their choices but being desi is not the story. Shiraz Jafri’s Jungli Fever reiterates the hybridity myth in a new vein. Raj Nidimoru and D.K. Krishna’s Shaadi.com was the director duo’s first ‘almost’ full-length film. It revolved around current first generation Indians and more specifically the ‘desi’ singles. The film deals with the concept of arranged marriage and what it means to the youngsters who come
to the United States. “It’s set in the Indo-American scenario, but is not about the differences between the two cultures,” says DK, “it in fact examines the desi concept of ‘marriage first, love next!’

c) Docu-narratives

Documentary style narratives, often called mockumentaries, feature in this section. Rehana Mirza’s Filum Star is a zany mock documentary about a desi actor in the days before his first Hollywood movie premieres. However absurd, Bollywood’s all-singing, all-dancing version of India has a profound effect on the children of South Asian immigrants, who feel caught between the more immediate culture of pasty-faced friends and the idealized images of their ancestral ‘home’. In the multicultural context of Canada, the already complex questions about cultural identity faced by young Indo-Canadians get a lot murkier. Nisha Pahuja’s Bollywood Bound is one of those short films that mixes the documentary style with fictional narrative form. It provides a snapshot of the ways Bollywood images provide inspiration for aspiring Indian actors living abroad.

d) Ingredients from ‘Home’

There is another group of directors who by virtue of living as a diasporic entity in the west, still make films about issues back in their home country. They do not juxtapose the two different cultures, neither do they comment on their hybrid identity. A lovely, lyrical short film like Heeraz Marfatia’s Birju (14 minutes) is a case in point. Rajshree Ojha’s Badger (2002) is a good example of how a well-known short story by author and columnist Jug Suraiya has inspired a film by a young and talented director. The story has been a part of high school text books in India for quite some time. A middle-aged schoolteacher disciplines a refractory prankster, hitting him during class. The act leads the teacher to an examination of his life, values, and his place in the changing world. It ultimately challenges him to uphold or compromise his principles. Rajshree Ojha, who grew up in India, went to America, became a film director, took this modern Everyman tale and turned it into this delectable short film, Badger as part of her master’s thesis project at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. Speaking to Lea Terhune in Delhi, Ojha said:

When I pitched this story I never pitched it as an Indian story, I pitched it as universal. Every human in the world sometimes has to compromise. I knew this character so well. I was taught this in high school. And I see it, everyday in my life, when I come to Calcutta. The older generation is like that. You see how they are struggling. The story is so relevant now, just as when he wrote it.(7)

e) At par with the world

This last section refers to films that have universal themes and locales and have no thematic connection with the Indian diaspora at all. Wading deeper into ever-widening worlds, these diasporic filmmakers find all subject matter suitable for them, be it ‘home’ or the ‘world.’ They are discussed here solely because the directors belong to the immigrant group and because they have made films with mainstream stories and ideas. Amisha Upadhyay’s Imperfections tells the story of a couple who are in a dilemma when their unborn child is diagnosed with a potentially terminal birth defect. In Jaya Jayaraja’s Deeper Mark four middle-aged buddies scheme out a long-term punishment against a naïve young girl whom
they suspect is cheating with all of them. Abhay Chopra’s Reflections makes his viewers aware that life is all about growing and changing.

III: DOCUMENTARIES/NON-FICTION FILMS AND VIDEOS

This section forms the third and most multifarious category and include documentaries and videos of all kinds, some ranging from mere four minutes in length to those more than an hour long. Within the spate of documentaries focusing on transnationality, globalization and diaspora there are several films that largely bypass considerations of how transnational and diasporic forces play out and instead focus on experiences in the everyday lives of actual people. These micro-narratives speak also of the processes by which anthropologists convey lived worlds through using the personal stories people give us as ‘gifts.’ Considered as life-stories, some of them show how tradition is being refashioned outside of ‘traditional societies’ in the deterritorialized spaces created by the movement of peoples, ideas and images. These documentaries try to situate the Indian diasporic entity by negotiating its hyphenated identities. Some are more theoretical, others try to explain the situation through examples, but whatever their form, the basic considerations remain confined to their immigrant status, their straddling of two cultures, juggling identities and carrying labels. Though overlapping at times, for convenience of discussion, documentaries can be classified under seven sub-groups.

a) Acculturation Reiterated: Exploring Difference, Finding Connections

Documentaries that explore the cultural differences and try to find connections between the old world and the new are an important sub-category to be discussed. Stuart Hall talks about the contrary position occupied by the young black British and states that black identity is organized around its own sense of frontlines and backyards. On the one hand there was racial deprivation and victimization. On the other, eroticisation and stylization of the black body had conferred upon it the status of an object of desire (129). Public visibility at the frontlines of representation did not ensure much clout in the backrooms of real power. The Indian diasporic filmmaker also probably understands the token status he or she enjoys within the industry. They are able to score brownie points only by adopting an exploitative relationship to their own culture, by enthusiastically embracing the role of a culture vulture. They have to use in the interest of the center the skills that they have inherited and learnt at the margins. This is partly what prompts them to make documentaries of their ‘Indianness’ – which, while it does constitute a counter-narrative to the exoticism is also a betrayal at the personal and political level. Even when they are reconstructing images on their own terms, they do not really empower the community in any way. Some again lose their radical edge due to the speed with which they are embraced by the mainstream. Ali Kaizimi’s Some Kind of Arrangement deals with the issue of arranged marriages; Indu Krishnan’s Knowing Her Place is a moving investigation of the cultural schizophrenia experienced by an Indian woman who has spent most of her life in the US. The title of Balvider D. Mudan’s What Are Our Women Like in America? is self-explanatory, as is Vasthi Anderson’s Looking At Ourselves. Gurinder Chadha’s What Do You Call an Indian Woman Who’s Funny? Looks at four Indian women cabaret dancers to explore who sets the agenda for comedy.

There are several documentaries that also seek to find the fusion of the east and the west through music and needless to say Bhangra, the folk music of Punjab, has come to acquire such political and cultural resonance for the Indian diaspora abroad that several
documentaries are made on the subject. Gurinder Chadha’s I'm British but... uncovers a defiant popular culture; Pratibha Parmar’s Bhangra Jig, Nandini Sikhand’s Bhangra Wrap; Tejaswini Ganti’s Gimme Somethin’ to Dance To; and Balvinder D. Mudan’s Desi Remix Chicago Style all emphasize that this new bhangra is more self-consciously crossover, combining with hip-hop, jungle, reggae and rock 'n roll.

b) Recreating History and Facts
Third world filmmakers in Britain and the United States are increasingly confronting the need to construct alternative histories to those of the dominant culture in order to combat the appropriation and oppression of marginalized cultures. They are creating narratives that actively confront the dominant culture’s attempt to destroy and / or neutralize these marginalized cultures through the destruction or appropriation of the collective history. As Barbara Harlow writes in her book Resistance Literature, “an important consequence of the First World’s military, economic and political intervention in the Third World…has been the catastrophic disruption of Third World people’s cultural and literary traditions….”(33) which would generally be essential in the preservation of authentic history. This assault on history underscores its power, especially in terms of a dialectic of individual and collective remembering, to give a people a common understanding of beginnings and processes in the act of becoming or resisting. Until recently, history has presented itself as an objective science, against which the intuitive challenged of marginalized memories remained virtually powerless. The role of the documentaries focusing upon different facets of the reality of the Indian diaspora becomes therefore more significant. Documentaries such as Premika Patnam’s Burning Bridges, Gurinder Chadha’s Acting Our Age, Pratibha Parmar’s The Colour of Britain and A Brimful of Asia, Ruhul Amin’s New Eastenders, Ali Kaizimi’s Continuous Journey are a few examples of this rich category.

c) Personal Expressions: Memory, Narrative & Identity Politics
Within the spate of documentaries focusing on transnationality, globalization and diaspora there are several films that largely bypass considerations of how transnational and diasporic forces play out and instead focus on experiences in the everyday lives of actual people. These micro-narratives speak also of the processes by which anthropologists convey lived worlds through using the personal stories people give us as ‘gifts.’ Considered as life-stories, some of them show how tradition is being refashioned outside of ‘traditional societies’ in the deterritorialized spaces created by the movement of peoples, ideas and images. These documentaries try to situate the Indian diasporic entity by negotiating its hyphenated identities. Some are more theoretical, others try to explain the situation through examples, but whatever their form, the basic considerations remain confined to their immigrant status, their straddling of two cultures, juggling identities and carrying labels.

Produced by a company called Mistaken Identity Productions, Vivek Ranjen Bald’s Taxi Vala/Auto-Biography is a perceptive documentary that gives a probing look at a recent addition to the diverse mosaic of the South Asian community in the United States: Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi cab drivers in New York. Nisma Zaman’s Beyond Black and White is a personal exploration of the filmmaker’s bicultural heritage (Caucasian and Asian/Bengali) in which she relates her experiences to those of five other women from various biracial backgrounds. When Shanti Thakur had to make a film for her master’s thesis, she chose to focus on her roots and family background. The result was a sensitive documentary, a nine-minute film called Seven Hours to Burn. Focusing on a young woman’s
mixed heritage, the foundation and inspiration for the film is the story of her Danish mother and Indian father’s experiences. Unlike the ‘dotbusters’ that made life miserable for South Asian women in the Eastern states of the U.S., Mitra Sen’s *Just A Little Red Dot* is an award-winning video that tells us about the value of cultural diversity and the importance of eliminating discrimination.

d) Reality Bites: Queer Issues
Along with the usual fare of acculturation problems, one is surprised to find a large number of Indian films related to gay, lesbian and queer issues. The term ‘queer’ is controversial even within the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community, but has been reclaimed as a positive term by the community, encompassing its diversity at large. In recent times, queer theory has promised to move beyond a focus on sexual identity per se, but sustained analyses that bring the insights of queer theory to bear on literary and cultural representations of race and racialization vis-a-vis the South Asian diaspora are only now emerging. Thus along with the usual fare of acculturation and identity crisis, one is surprised at the large number of South Asian films related to gay/lesbian/bisexual issues. Apart from the frank treatment of lesbianism in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, there are innumerable documentaries and short films that focus on the various cultural and national contexts – exploring relationships among transracial, transgender and/or transnational narratives. Some of these productions are queer because of their content matter, other for their directors, who themselves belong to such groups. Vismita Gupta Smith’s *For Straights Only* tells the story of an almost invisible minority of Indian gay and lesbians Pratibha Parmar, who has made several documentaries on gay and lesbian issues is aware that identity, which is not a fixed construct for all diasporic people, is even more complicated for queer people. She says:

The question is about the multiplicity of the identities we inhabit as lesbian and gay people of color, who are involved both politically and culturally with anti-racist movements and then involved in the actual lesbian and gay movement too….Culture isn’t static…I don’t want to go wholesale back to the culture that we ‘come from’, because I think there are problems too within our own cultures. As lesbians and gays within the South Asian communities we are often contradictorily positioned vis-à-vis our families and our communities but at the same time we are having to experience the racism of the predominantly white lesbian and gay movements and so we are marginalized amongst that community.

The large number of entries each year from diasporic Indian filmmakers for the Queer South Asian Festival endorses the fact that once in the western world, directors find it much easier to celebrate, reclaim, explain and entertain their notions of what constitutes the queer Indian sensibility and experience.

e) Towards Artistic Expressions
The debate between form and content and the balance of both has been an issue that is discussed over and over again relating to documentary films. Though documentaries about the South Asian diaspora are primarily issue-based, usually the thematic content becomes more significant. Nevertheless, there are some filmmakers who still try to present their views as artistically as possible. Though negligible in number as compared to the other sub-groups, these artistic expressions prove that diasporic Indian filmmaking is gradually coming of age. Ruhul Amin’s dialogue-less film *Frozen Moments*, Pratibha Parmar’s *Memsahib Rita*, Manish Acharya’s no music, no dialogue, no colour film *The Driver*, Balvinder D. Mudan’s
The Pyre, Kavita Bali’s Birth of a Butterfly conveys universal subjects for anyone brought up in two cultures.

f) Breaking Diasporic Stereotypes

As in full-length feature films, there are also several documentaries that are not thematically connected to the South Asian diaspora. They are the effort of the directors to venture into ordinary and mainstream issues. It helps them to do away with labels. Mira Nair, for example, made an excellent documentary way back in 1986 exposing diametric codes of conduct imposed upon women by looking at the lives of nightclub strippers in Bombay through the women’s eyes in Indian Cabaret. Salaam Bombay her full-length feature film and Kamasutra had nothing to do with the diaspora. Pratibha Parmar has made several documentaries relating to the plight of women, about female genital mutilation in Africa (Warrior Marks), about a disabled midwife who has pioneered facilities for pregnant disabled women in Liverpool (One More Push), about feminism in popular culture (The Righteous Babes), current affairs item about gay parenting (Fostering and Adoption), the role of African American women in the civil rights movement (A Place of Rage) and about religious attitudes towards disabled people (Taboo).

g) The Outsider’s Point of View

This last subgroup comprises of those productions that have Indian themes but are made by people that do not belong to the diasporic category. The problem of assimilation of the South Asian diasporic community and its challenges has often plagued the outsider to investigate into its causes and effects resulting in documentaries of several kinds. In America: The Asian Indian Story by Marc and Chesney Doyle is a dramatic and compelling story of a hundred years of Asian Indian immigration in the United States. Two homes one heart: Sacramento Sikh women and their songs & dances by producer/director/writer, Joyce Middlebrook shows us how Sikh women who have emigrated to Sacramento, California from India perform several traditional dances and songs and discuss their lives in their new country. Mr. Ahmed by Terrence Grace is a poignant drama about an Indian expatriate living in a small American town, struggling to re-invent himself. Coming to more cultural concerns, Daniel Friedman & Sharon Grimberg’s Miss India, Georgia is a video documentary about four teenage girls of Indian origin facing life in the nineties in the American South, especially as they prepare to compete in the Miss India Georgia competition. Held every summer in Atlanta, this pageant presents a colorful juxtaposition of cultural heritages. All these documentaries express the interest that the western society is taking in Indian cultures as it has done in its cuisine.

III

Before concluding I must admit that though I had to take recourse to a great deal of cataloging of different genres of films made by Indian diasporic filmmakers, there was no other means to draw attention to the multifarious ways in which they speak out and claim their identities. As Lavina Melwani states:

Nowadays, there are just so many young filmmakers, writers and actors on both coasts that you can hardly keep the names straight. Filmmakers are popping up just about everywhere, be it Chicago or North Carolina or Texas. From full time professionals to weekend freelancers they are all looking to gain attention on the festival circuit, and if their luck holds, land a
distributor…..Yes, everyone wants to be in the movies, in front or behind the camera! They come from different backgrounds, different lifestyles and so surely the films they make run the full gamut.

In conclusion it can be said that the confidence and creativity of these artists are testimonies to those who strive to link the rich, ancient heritage of their home culture with the modernity of living either in the United States, Britain or Canada. Showing the paradox in their lives, which they constantly emphasize in various ways through their films, we can reconstruct the concept of cultural hybridity both as a constraining as well as a liberating experience in their life and work. Also, it is interesting to note how far as cultural icons themselves, they are helping shape the Indian diasporic psyche. They are immigrants, straddling cultures, juggling identities and carrying labels. Thus, in spite of several other problematic issues, the study of Indian diasporic cinema not only explores intercontinental affinities in the problems of race, ethnicity, identity, etc but also fills the existing lacunae in cultural studies in general. The films are thought-provoking and entertaining and show the Indian diaspora body riddled with complex differences instead of existing as a homogeneous form. As a spokesperson of the diasporic Indian community, we can all wish as Mira Nair does:

It’s not enough for us to be expressing ourselves. We have to make cinema which is excellent and painstaking and not just casual and just fun, and make it commensurate with standards of excellence and not weep and apologize for being from the third world anymore…Let’s bring to the world a cinema that reveals all our worlds in its multiplicity, in its strength and in its passion.

---------------------------

Notes:


Cooper, Peta. “Indian Fish’s Manish Gupta.” www.desiclub.com/bollywood_features


Melwani, Lavina. “Everyone’s a Star,” Little India. www.littleindia.com

-------------


This article was published in The Expatriate Indian Writing in English, Volume I eds. T. Vinoda & P. Shailaja. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2006: 263-291. Copyright held by the author.