Cinema as a mirror: Exploring migration and displacement trauma in indian films

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Abstract

The current paper examines the representation of trauma and suffering caused by displacement and migration in the Indian cinema and the value of these portrayals in solving the issues faced by society. The paper will concentrate on the historical background of migration and displacement including Partition of India and present problems caused by migration (both internal and international). The Indian cinema has often been regarded as a means of representing the multidimensional Indian social landscape. Among the current themes include rural-urban migration, natural disaster effects, Indian diaspora, and the situation of the refugees and the undocumented. The paper attempts to study how the Indian films have attempted to generate greater understanding and empathy of those going through migration and displacement by examining various films that observe these issues (for example, Garm Hava, Refugee, Swades, Kedarnath, Sankat City, etc.). The paper also evaluates the possibility that films can trigger a discourse about these topics, their influence on the society and the policy, and how films can aid us in understanding the psychological and emotional consequences of migration and displacement. The paper ends with a statement about the importance of understanding trauma in Indian cinema as a method of facing and illuminating social issues as well as defining future requirements of study within the field.

Keywords: Displacement, diaspora, Indian cinema, migration, trauma

Introduction

Trauma caused by migration and displacement in Indian cinema, has become a powerful and viable tool in handling significant issues in the society. "Conflict-induced forced migration is a global phenomenon" (Shultz *et al*., 2014) [18]. Indian history is full of migration and displacement scenarios, and the Partition of the country came as one of the most tragic moments. These deeply important occurrences have left an impression on the memory of the nation, ineradicable in the minds of the people of the country.

Indian film, which is frequently viewed as a mirror reflecting society (Ahmed, 1992; Oza, 2019) [1, 13], has played a crucial part in illuminating the complex web of social structures and cultural variety that define the nation. Even Indian diasporic films can reach a large number of people, no matter what their level of education, income, or language skills are (Sharma, 2011) [17]. Exploring the complex representations of trauma and misfortune brought on by migration and displacement as presented in Indian cinema is essential if one wants to properly understand, relate to, and tackle the serious issues that hold society.

Trauma occurs when individuals or groups encounter a horrific experience that leads to enduring imprints on their consciousness and memory, and results in a crucial alteration in how they perceive their identity, social surrounding, and even their future. The concept of trauma is firmly connected to war, conflict, and forced migration. Refugees face catastrophic life events when everything breaks apart. (Dibo, 2022, p.120) [4].

Filmmakers can now skillfully weave stories that depict the deep emotional, psychological, and physical upheaval experienced by people and communities who are forced to move or who have been uprooted from their homes thanks to the art of cinematic storytelling. "Trauma presented in the media spills over national boundaries and can be found in images across divergent cultures in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and America" (Kaplan & Wang, 2004) [6]. Indian cinema has been able to capture the complex nature of these traumas through evocative visual imagery, fascinating character development, and moving storytelling approaches. Through the perspective of protagonists who suffer from loss, longing, alienation, and the fight to adjust to unfamiliar situations, the devastating consequences of migration and displacement are frequently portrayed. These portraits explore human resilience, vulnerability, and the willpower to overcome hardship in exquisite detail. Also, the relationship between cultural integration, belonging, and identity, in the process of displacement, is regularly addressed in Indian cinema. Additionally, the Indian film industry facilitates a broader debate on the themes that attract many viewers to cinema by illuminating these all too embedded issues in society.

It serves as a medium of making the viewers empathize and appreciate their lives, with the virtual experience of the challenges and emotional instability, which accompanies the trauma of migration. This, in turn, contributes to a feeling of mutual awareness and deeper sense of what the socio-cultural forces are all about. Indian film is therefore, in a way, a very effective medium through which a lot of educating and enlightenment is done in addition to the entertainment part.

The key purpose of this paper is to explore the different representations of the pain of migration and displacement presented in the context of Indian films and also to compare the different depictions presented with the few ways that Indian films have captured how migration can have grave psychological and emotional impacts on individuals and the societies they live in. It will emphasize the multiple ways in which film can serve as a recording device of the life experiences of migrants and displaced individuals through a critical reflection of some of the chosen films, such as, Garm Hava (1973), Refugee (2000), Swades (2004), Kedarnath (2018) and Sankat City (2009) to name a few.

The paper will ultimately explore the possible impacts that such cinematic representations might have in shaping perception in society, formulation of policies and the discourse around this, noting the potential value that Indian cinema may have in alleviating the challenges that have been triggered by the effects of migration-related trauma.

Historical Context of Migration and Displacement in Indian Cinema
a. The Partition of India and its Cinematic Representation

The Partition of India (1947) went with such turmoil, violence, and mass migration that it remains as a significant period in Indian history. It "led to a social cataclysm in which roughly one million people died and ten to twelve million were displaced" (Sarkar, 2009) [16]. The significance of this incident has long been acknowledged in Indian cinema, which has depicted its effects on people as individuals, families, and communities. "The cinematic mediation of this trauma appears symptomatic of the vicissitudes of larger discourses at work" (Mubarki, 2017) [11]. Films like "Train to Pakistan" (1998) and "1947: Earth," (1999, India release year) which depict the emotional toll of being forcibly displaced, grieving, and seeking a new identity, have effectively conveyed the atrocities and human stories of the Partition. These fictionalised depictions act as powerful memories of the anguish faced at the time.

b. Other Historical Events Influencing Migration in Indian Cinema

The tapestry of Indian cinema is richly embroidered with narratives that connect with historical events of various hues, each tinged with the hues of migration and displacement, beyond the cataclysmic split. The celluloid canvas unfolds a multicoloured panorama of human experiences, charting the arcs of change, resiliency, and adaptability that have left their marks on the pages of history.

Think about the gripping story of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, a tragedy that has left an indelible mark on India. With its depiction of the frenzied evacuation of citizens from the dangerous metropolis, the movie "Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain" (2014) brings us into the heart of the disaster. This cinematic testament reveals the poignant story of survivors forced to make a perilous journey to safer shores, highlighting the human spirit's ability to persevere in the face of hardship. The movie Bheed (2023) shows the plight of migrant labourers in 2020 India under the Covid-19-caused nationwide lockdown (Row over 'bheed'..., 2023). East Indian employees attack a checkpoint during a COVID-19 shutdown that restricts travel, causing chaos, violence, and panic. The film examines discrimination and inequality in India while attempting to highlight the untold stories of migrant labourers (Mashable News Staff, 2023) [8]. India's caste, class, economic, and religious division is starkly depicted in Bheed (Mona, 2023) [10].

Indian cinema has consistently shown a dedication to conveying the subtleties of migration and displacement within its historical setting. By delving into these representations, the film industry not only records important historical events but also advances knowledge of the complicated forces that shape migration and the anguish and suffering it causes.

Current Issues of Migration and Displacement in Indian Cinema
a. Internal Migration: Rural-Urban Dynamics

Internal migration has taken on a dominant storyline in modern India, reflecting the significant socioeconomic changes and possibilities pushing people from rural to urban areas. Indian film has aptly captured this paradigm with films such as Swades (2004) about an NRI who returns to his roots and takes part in rural development. These narrations clarify a problem of the urbanisation, integration of culture, anxieties that the internal movement imposes on kinship and community bonds.

b. International Migration: The Indian Diaspora

Another key element of migration and displacement is the world-wide Indian diaspora. "Bollywood movies have immense importance in the Indian diaspora's identity construction" (Bandyopadhyay, 2008) [2]. Narratives of diaspora life have been beautifully intertwined in Indian films and have been exploring the issues of identity, belonging, and cultural amalgamation. Films like "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge" (1995) and "Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna" (2006) portray the struggles and ambitions of diasporic populations while simultaneously fostering intercultural discourse and advancing cross-cultural engagement.

c. Refugees and Undocumented Immigrants: Cinematic Portrayal

Indian cinema has been gradually taking note of the woes of refugees and undocumented immigrants, and has been exhibiting their struggles of survival, adaptability and human dignity. Movies such as Kedarnath (2018) or Manto (2018) address the issue of the refugee and marginalised community and demonstrate the risks, these people face, and how they should be treated and understood.

Besides the portrayal of the actual world of changing demographics, Indian cinema also facilitates powerful discussion on what the changes are implying on the society through tackling these present-day migration and displacement issues. The investigations of these issues in films increase awareness, understanding, and the ability to find a resolution to the issues they are dealing with by hearing the opinions and concerns of those who are affected by migration and displacement most directly.

Portrayal of Trauma and Suffering in Indian Cinema
a. Depiction of Psychological and Emotional Effects

Indian cinema has excellently presented the psychological and emotional impact of trauma caused by migration and displacement. "Due to the events that determined their migration, refugees are particularly at risk for psychotraumatological pathologies, and migration can have a retraumatizing effect" (Mubarki, 2008) [11]. The emotional trauma of human beings who are thrown out of their comfortable situations and the internal conflict they experience can be well illustrated by filmmakers through subtle character development and plot twists. This description is very touching to the listener as he or she accepts the dire impact of dislocation on the psychological and emotional health of the main characters.

In the movie "Piku" (2015), for example, Irrfan Khan's character Rana, who is relocated from his hometown to

work in Delhi experiences a sense of displacement and emotional upheaval. The movie follows his journey as he adjusts to a new place, struggles with identity, and makes new friends. The audience is given insight into the emotional struggles that refugees confront through Rana's experiences.

b. Cinematic Techniques for Evoking Empathy and Understanding

To evoke sympathy and understanding from viewers regarding the suffering of migrants and displaced people, filmmakers use a variety of cinematic techniques (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar, 2022) [3]. As an obvious effect of these approaches, the audience is able to fully immerse themselves in the characters' hardships on a sensory and emotional level. A few such techniques are discussed below:

Visual Symbolism: The 2010 film "Udaan" (2010) employs visual metaphors, such as the use of flying birds, to depict the protagonist's journey from living in a stifling home to achieving his objectives freely. This allusion to symbolism expresses his desire for independence and alludes to the mental turmoil that migrants go through in their quest for a better life.

Immersive Soundscapes: The haunting musical score in "Lootera" (2013) heightens the emotional relevance of the movie's themes, such as loss, displacement, and heartache. The soundtrack is what allows the audience to touch emotional upheavals of characters.

Emotional Set Design: In the 2004 film Swades, one sees how the visual elements in the character's journey of getting back to his origin is executed by the use of contrast. Vivid colours and detailed backgrounds of rural settings are contrasted with urban settings and reflect the emotional change and renewal that the character experiences.

Non-linear Storytelling: Movie Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna (2006) encompasses the intricacies of relationships and individual struggles based on the non-linear storytelling strategy. This device of storytelling further helps us realise the suffering and inner troubles of the characters.

Subjective Camera Angles: The effect is used in 1998 movie Dil Se to make viewers sense what the protagonist sees on his journey to conflict-ridden locations. Using this strategy, the audience may see how he reacts emotionally and psychologically to the difficulties he faces.

Effective Dialogue and Conversation: The emotional anguish that a dyslexic youngster has been going through is shown in the moving interaction between a teacher and the child in the 2007 film "Taare Zameen Par." The audience is impacted by the discourse, which promotes empathy and understanding.

Thus, the Indian filmmakers successfully depict the complex psychological and emotional impacts of trauma brought on by migration and relocation through the use of various cinematic techniques. Cinema transforms into an effective tool for fostering knowledge, empathy, and ultimately, societal change by submerging the audience in the experiences of the characters.

V. Films as Catalysts for Conversation and Change
a. Role of Indian Cinema in Initiating Societal Dialogue

"Hindi cinema has been in dialogue with processes of globalization since at least the 1950s" (Hayward, 2012) [5]. Important societal conversations can be sparked by Indian

cinema in a special way. Films give audiences a platform to discuss the suffering associated with migration and displacement through their immersive storytelling and wide audience appeal. Filmic portrayals of refugees and those who have been displaced arouse empathy, promote introspection, and ignite debates about the many difficulties they encounter. Conversation-provocating films like "Garm Hava" (1973), and "Swades" (2004) etc. have prompted viewers to address challenging dialogues and have introspective discussions about societal duty, identity crisis, and the human cost of migration.

b. Impact on Public Opinion and Policy

Indian film has an impact that goes beyond simple entertainment (Karande and Sharma, 2022) [7, 17]; it also has an impact on public opinion (Ruchi & Manju, 2013) [15] and even on policy. Films that represent migration-related pain can change public perceptions and promote a more sympathetic and knowledgeable understanding of the experiences of migrants and displaced people. Audiences that emotionally connect with characters are more likely to support calling for legislation to solve the problems portrayed on screen. This connection between fictional stories and practical effects could lead to significant policy changes, more efficient resource allocation, and inclusive approaches to dealing with migration and displacement challenges.

Therefore, the Indian cinema can have the role of a direct stimulator of creating dialogue and triggering positive change in how the society reacts to the agony of migration leveraging the power to inform, educate, and inspire the community. The movies facilitate the induction of a more compassionate and active attitude towards addressing the nuances of the challenges faced by the individuals who are on the move by shaping views, attitudes, and legislation.

Case Studies: Cinematic Exploration of Migration and Displacement
a. Analysis of Selected Films
1. "Garm Hava" (1973)

Theme: The effects of Partition and a family's emotional hardships as they adjust after being displaced.

Narrative: Garm Hava is a post-Partition film and a story of plight a Muslim family is going through trying to rebuild their life amid the social revolution. It is about the emotional struggle, dilemma and loss of the people, their clash between old values and the natures of modernity.

Cinematic Approach: The film is realistic in style and effectively dramatizes the inner landscapes on a character facing the broader socio-political scenario of post-Partition India. To provide an understanding of the displacement psychological outcomes, it emphasizes interpersonal communications, self-analyses, and the nuances of human feelings.

"Refugee" (2000)

Theme: The plights and expectations of the migrants who need to find safety and a new life in a different country.

Narrative: The film Refugee captures the stories of young lovers on two sides of the India-Pakistan border in their attempts to survive and resolve their relationships within the confines of love and identity placed against the political upheavals. The plot of the film throws some light into some of the challenges that refugees face in the process of attempting to find a home and acceptance in a new state.

Cinematic Approach: "Refugee" humanises the refugee experience by portraying a personal story against a background of more significant geopolitical challenges. It does this by fusing romance with social commentary. The film's strategy immerses spectators in the emotional challenges of the characters, encouraging empathy and comprehension.

2. "Swades" (2004)

Theme: rural development and ties between the Indian diaspora and their country of origin.

Narrative: The film "Swades" centres on an NRI who relocates to his Indian hometown and gets active in rural development initiatives. The movie follows him on his quest for self-discovery as he makes connections with his past and works to improve his neighbourhood.

Cinematic Approach: "Swades" successfully captures the emotional reconnection of a person with his homeland by using a personal journey to discuss larger themes. The film's strategy of fusing individual change with societal advancement and shedding light on the intricate dynamics of rural-urban migration and civic duty connects with audiences.

3. "Kedarnath" (2018)

Theme: The impact of natural disasters on displacement and relationships.

Narrative: "Kedarnath" depicts a love story between a visitor and a local guide set against the horrific 2013 Uttarakhand floods. The difficulties brought on by the disastrous natural catastrophe are contrasted with characters' internal conflicts and a budding romance.

Cinematic Approach: "Kedarnath" successfully depicts how people may overcome misfortune by fusing personal experiences with more significant environmental concerns. The moving visual storytelling in the movie engrosses viewers in the experiences of the protagonists while exposing the significant psychological impact of dislocation brought on by natural disasters.

4. "Sankat City" (2009)

Theme: The impact of migration and interwoven lives on the chaotic urban environment.

Narrative: Sankat City covers the diverse lives of urban migrants through the illustration of a day of several individuals in Mumbai. The plot of a small-time criminal is not an isolated story but one of many interdependent tales that the film weaves together to provide the spectator with a sample of the hardships people in the city have to go through.

Cinematic Approach: The theme of overcrowding and the often-hectic nature of the urban lifestyle is ascribed in "Sankat City" via the use of dark humour and intersecting narratives. The film throws some light into the life hardships and visions of individuals of diverse origins and gives the ideas about the psychological and emotional experience of migration in an urban context.

All of the abovementioned films bring a unique perspective to the debate and shed interesting light on numerous aspects of trauma related to migration and displacement. In Garm Hava, where the factor of emotional agony overrides a historical framework, the unstable phase of life after the Partition is vividly described. Blending intelligence with the struggle of a refugee, the story, or rather a romance,

Refugee is created to bring into focus the plight of those who cross the boundaries in search of safety. Whereas Kedarnath eloquently mixes romantic love with the cataclysmic nature of the natural disasters, Swades takes a personal story to bring out the grandeur of issues like diaspora and rural development. Coupled with dark humour and intertwining narratives, Sankat City throws light on the subtle emotion of the migrant in the city.

In sum, all these films employ a range of filmic techniques like delicate narration, the realism of characters, and analysis of resilience and identity, to elicit sympathy and compassion. The movies encourage viewers to interact with and consider the difficulties experienced by migrants and those who have been displaced by migration by demonstrating the psychological and emotional toll of trauma associated with migration. The subtle cinematic techniques strengthen the viewers' bond with the characters and provide a more thorough comprehension of the difficult problems at hand. As a result, these movies serve as prime examples of how effective film can be in fostering empathy, introspection, and societal discussion around migration and displacement.

Future Directions and Implications

"More than ever before, there have been records of migration and displacements in many parts of the world both in developed and developing nations, leading to economic, social, religious and even political problems" (Obasi, 2022) [12]. Cinema shows great promise as an effective instrument for tackling difficult societal issues like the pain associated with migration. Indian cinema may play a bigger part in promoting awareness, empathy, and discourse as technology develops and there is greater contact between people throughout the world. Collaborations between activists, policymakers, and filmmakers can use cinematic storylines to highlight important topics, shape public opinion, and promote social change. Indian cinema may continue to act as a catalyst for influencing public opinion, encouraging inclusivity, and fighting for the rights and welfare of migrants and internally displaced people by carefully leveraging the emotive power of storytelling.

Conclusion

This study has embarked on a comprehensive exploration of how Indian cinema represents the anguish and suffering associated with migration, exposing the complex layers of human experiences during displacement. A close look at such a limited number of movies as possible has revealed that cinema is a powerful tool in the exploration of psychological, emotional, and sociological aspects of trauma in relation to migration. The case studies provided convincing evidence as to how the art of cinematic story-telling can help people develop empathy, prompts a sense of contemplation and imparts a desire to talk about grave subjects in life. Cinema establishes a bond between characters and characters with the audience by arranging nuances of trauma and the strength of human spirit, which creates a surplus of understanding the immense power of immigration and displacement.

One cannot overestimate the relevance of the representation of trauma in the Indian cinema. Cinema, in its role of the mirror of diversity in society, can unite people, remove prejudice, and create changes in the society. The bold

description of the trauma associated with migration creates an extraordinary opportunity to bring some light to the emotional realms of individuals who feel displaced. Such film versions can change the mind of the populace, affect the passing of laws, and create social change besides raising awareness. Indian cinema can foster empathy and challenge the biases and can assist to make society more compassionate and accepting by giving voice to refugees and other people who have been displaced.

In a nutshell, the combination of story, emotional appeal, and visual creativity displayed by Indian cinema can be used to analyse the migration-related pains in a scientific manner. Film representation of displaced persons not only shows their plight and the strength to survive, but also serves to introduce innovative views and critical action. Proceeding into the future, it is definite that film will continue to be a very important instrument into understanding, dealing, and eventually overcoming the challenges that are posed by migration-related trauma within an increasingly dynamic global scene.

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