

“CHITTHI AAYI HAI”: DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES, MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

Shilpa Daithota Bhat
Ahmedabad University (India)

ABSTRACT

Nostalgia has been a popular concept deployed to examine diasporic narratives. This paper is an examination of the song “Chitthi aayi hai” (“the letter has come from the homeland”) from the popular film *Naam* (1986) looking at how nostalgia is constructed and recreated. The song is about ‘a letter from the homeland’ gesturing at pain, memory, what has been lost and what is being achieved in the hostland. Through scholarly references to nostalgia, Bollywood music and diasporic theory, this study focuses on the role and function of nostalgia in Indian diasporic narrative practices.

KEYWORDS: Indian Diaspora, Nostalgia, Memory, Bollywood Music.

«CHITTHI AAYI HAI» («LA CARTA QUE HA VENIDO DESDE NUESTRA PATRIA»):
SENSIBILIDADES DIASPÓRICAS, MEMORIA Y NOSTALGIA

RESUMEN

El tema de la nostalgia es una constante a la hora de examinar narrativas de diáspora. Este artículo estudia la canción «Chitthi aayi hai» («La carta que ha venido desde nuestra patria») que aparece en la película *Naam* (1986), analizando cómo se construye y recrea en torno a la nostalgia. La canción trata el tema de una misiva recibida desde un territorio donde se albergan los orígenes para articular el dolor, la memoria y lo que se ha conseguido y perdido en el nuevo lugar que ahora se ocupa. El ensayo pretende estudiar la importancia y la función de la nostalgia en las prácticas narrativas de la diáspora india a través de referencias teóricas sobre nostalgia, música de Bollywood y teoría de la diáspora.

PALABRAS CLAVE: diáspora india, nostalgia, memoria, música de Bollywood.



INTRODUCTION

A significant aspect of people that have migrated and settled abroad is a tendency to reminisce the cultural experiences of the homeland. This can be extremely troublesome and overwhelming in the wake of *cultural shocks* in the hostland. While acquainting with an alien culture, the members of the diasporic community are constantly engaged in acculturation processes and meaningful integration practices that are central that prepare them for employment and social purposes in the new society. Notwithstanding, the diasporic members do not wish to sever connections with the motherland, the umbilical cord connection being resilient. New experiences in a foreign country do not wipe out the remembrances of the homeland. Memories remain strongly entrenched in the mind and nostalgia becomes crucial in defining the identity of the individuals. Textual practices and discourses like written narratives, songs, music, Bollywood films demonstrate key features that help comprehend the homeland-hostland quandary, negotiation of memories and what has been lost during the migratory processes. The narratives of diaspora are manifold and there is a frequent attempt to analyze the layers within the broad understanding of *nostalgia*. It is noteworthy that the idea of nostalgia is frequently used as a concept to study the different kinds of texts and in the exploration of diaspora, nostalgia has often been seen as vantage point in terms of examination of the textual practices.

This study centres on the discourse of nostalgia, memory and diaspora, specifically the Indian diaspora, as represented in the Bollywood song “Chitthi aayi hai”, meaning “here comes the letter from the homeland”. The song is from the film *Naam* (1986) and was sung by Pankaj Udhas. This song became extremely popular due to the manner in which it encapsulates the feelings of the members of the diaspora community. It evokes the lost relationships, lost culture, the feeling of alienation in a foreign land.

While those who settle abroad do not necessarily or actually wish to return to their ancestral home, they do reconnect through culture. Bollywood has always been seen as a vantage point when it comes to cultural revisiting. In this study, through the concepts of memory and nostalgia, and the diaspora theory, I look at how the ‘letter’ in the song becomes pivotal in determining one’s emotions, specifically, nostalgia in the context of migration, diaspora and homeland remembering. Two specific questions that this chapter will investigate are: (i) the relationship between nostalgia and diaspora (ii) music and remembrance in the diasporic context. The interrelationship between nostalgia, music, Bollywood music and the members of the diasporic community will help establish the interpretation of ‘longing for the past’ and its perception within the framework of the Indian diaspora.



NOSTALGIA AND DIASPORA

Quayson and Daswani (2013) suggest that “the term nostalgia, which is derived from the Greek *nostos* (‘to return home’) and *algos* (‘pain’), was originally intended to refer to a medical condition and physical ailment Coined in the seventeenth century by a Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, nostalgia was used to describe the pathological homesickness of Swiss soldiers serving outside the fatherland who were pining for their mountain landscapes” (16). This definition of nostalgia is important because comparing it with how diaspora scholars explore it and contextualize allows an understanding of specific cultural, historical and social processes.¹ From using the term ‘nostalgia’ in a pathological context to borrowing and applying it to societies and cultures, the term has been deeply explored and expanded. Scholars have tried to study if nostalgia is ‘homesickness’ or goes beyond this definition with reference to society.

A recurrent idea in the narrative of the diaspora is the sense of loss and how this can be negotiated through various means concerning culture, religion, rituals, customs, music and heritage. In such a context, being able to contact the past with the help of cultural artefacts, narratives, cultural signs and so on, assume importance. Scholars have attempted to examine the nature of nostalgia in different contexts and have endeavored to look at how this affects people situated in different cultures. In his essay, Hage (2010) tries to underline “that diasporic nostalgia as a memory of ‘back home’ should not be always treated as a form of sickness. Homesickness is, as it suggests, a sickness: a state where one’s memory of back home plays a debilitating function and produces a state of passivity, where the subject is unable to ‘deploy’ himself or herself in the environment in which he or she is operating” (416). This perception shows how nostalgia can be meaningfully problematized to unearth its implications for the members of the diasporic community. If nostalgia is not ‘homesickness,’ how else can it be contextualized in the framework of migration? It is interesting to note that, as Hage suggests, looking at diasporic nostalgia as a form of ‘sickness’ can exert a ‘debilitating function’ in the host society for the diasporic individual. In this scenario, if nostalgia is ‘sickness’ it should inhibit the personal progress of the person, divert him from his goals and ambitions, disallow any sort of movement into the future and completely become regressive in terms of aspirations. However, this does not or need not happen. On the contrary, the individual works efficiently, is able to control the emotion of nostalgia and consistently aims to achieve personal goals.

So nostalgia, in this framework, ceases to be a negative feature but the fact that there is ‘remembrance’ is undeniable (and undefinable too). It is not regressive. The individual learns to overcome the ‘pulling back’ effect and probably even derives energy from the memory (that is, the feeling if I have struggled to reach this place,

¹ Consider the use of the word “fatherland” in the definition. It is interesting to compare this with the frequent use of the word ‘motherland’, umbilical cord connection and so on.



I might as well work hard and do well for myself!). As Desai (2003) points out “not all transnational structures of feelings are nostalgia or longings for homelands” (19) and that “[n]ostalgia is not simply a reaching toward the definite past from a definite present, but a subjective state that seeks to express itself in pictures imbued with particular memories of a certain pastness” (199). The gesturing at how diaspora is not all about nostalgia alone and how it is a complex framework where nostalgia is an intriguing feature but not one that collapses beings within it is meaningful and necessary to explore.

Nostalgia allows the members of the diaspora to refer to their own culture, that is, their past that is in a different territory now. It can only be a reference point, not a present and certainly not a perpetual reality. To borrow an idea from Tsagarousianou, “[t]hey increasingly overcome ethnic, linguistic, and national barriers and contest traditional and inherited identifications, and they develop spatial imaginations that do not necessarily involve nostalgia for a physical homeland but instead the yearning for a symbolic space” (93). The performance of nostalgia within a ‘symbolic space’ is a useful and productive signalling. So if the individuals remember or enact a specific cultural format (like music or dance), it happens within the ‘symbolic space’. Imagination has a prominent role in this process because both memory and the capacity to imagine helps in stabilizing the cultural aspects of the individual.

Howard suggests “a more plausible time comparison account holds that nostalgia must be motivated by the felt deprivation of the older self: in some respect, nostalgia involves a judgement that the past was better. I will call this the *poverty of the present requirement*. On this view, the intentional object of nostalgia is necessarily a past regarded as preferable to the present” (2012: 643). Comparing the idea of the “poverty of the present requirement” (Howard 2012: 643) with the notion of the *symbolic space* can generate dynamic significations in terms of what has been lost and how complicated it is to grapple with it. The past cannot be retrieved, yet there is a felt need to reach the unreachable. Nonetheless, the individual realizes that what is lost is a permanent phenomenon and can be accessed only via memory or by reliving the experience vicariously.

Notably, the feeling that *what* has been lost is difficult to retrieve deepens the longing for the past. When this is expressed in cultural narratives and disseminated, there is the reliving of the experience among all those who partake of the narrative. In the case of the diaspora, there is a feeling of how the sense of longing for the past is ‘universal’ for the members of the diaspora. While referring to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas,² Mani and Varadarajan (2005) state that in a conference, the

² Sinha (2015) records, “a hundred years ago, on January 9, 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to Indian after approximately two decades of living and working in South Africa. In 2003, the Government of India designated the day of Gandhi’s return as official Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or Overseas Indian Day” (821). The Overseas Indian Day allows the reconnection of the members of the diaspora community with the homeland. The emphasis is on cultural, economic and commercial ties. It also gestures at homeland nostalgia since those that become a part of the



“delegates emphasized the ‘ultural ties’ that bring together diasporic subjects and Indians in India, ties of sentiment, affection, and nostalgia that overlook the political errors of the Indian state” (58). While the economic and commercial nature of the event in India is undeniable, the delegates to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas happened to suggest nostalgia as a significant aspect in their sense of strong connection with the country. So powerful is this sense of longing that it helped them to ignore the *political errors*. This is such an emphatic idea with reference to the concept of nostalgia where emotion can override the so-called sensibilities and rationale; so that connecting with the homeland becomes more important in comparison with diplomatic relations. To accord nostalgia, a supreme position in the framework of homeland or ancestral land ties, is critically significant as it allows the Indian diaspora, possibilities of travel, cultural exchanges, trade and commerce.

MUSIC AND REMEMBRANCE IN THE DIASPORIC CONTEXT

Matusitz and Payano (2011) state, “[g]enerally speaking, Bollywood movies tend to be musicals” (66). The suggestion is that music happens significantly define Bollywood’s identity among the masses and how it reflects Indian culture and ethos. Even if the individual shifts to a different country, the songs continue to exist in memory, so that the person can relive and recollect the moments and meaning associated with the song. It is not just the music but the semantics too that allow the association between the song, the situation, the connection between the song and the cultural context. Bhattacharjya (2009) observes, “[m]usic and the song sequence’s ability to refer to all those traditions associated with the inner domain mark their potency to denote Indian culture and identity, as well as play a significant role in establishing the Indian cultural identity of their diasporic characters” (54).

In the film *Naam* (1986), the character Vicky travels to Dubai to make money for his family in India. What triggers this idea is his belief that those who travel to Dubai become wealthy and lead affluent lives. His desire to salvage his family from penury compels him to take this decision. He faces dire challenges in Dubai since he had got his visa through unfair means. To come out of the travail, he has to work for a smuggler. In the meanwhile, he doesn’t send a word or connect with his family in India. It is in this framework that the song “Chitthi aayi hai” in the film gestures at the emotional trauma that he faces in the hostland. The ‘chitthi’ (‘letter’) is not an ordinary object here. It brings a plethora of emotions and a reconnection with ideas that were forgotten such as family, Indian values and culture, nostalgia, memories of the homeland. The forgetfulness has to necessarily be temporary because the letter evokes everything that is lost and obliterated. Forgetting the homeland is

programmes have some sort of ancestral connection with India. Mahatma Gandhi’s return to India on January 9, 1915, in this context is historical and iconic; and is emblematic of the umbilical cord connection with India.



strange and the letter it comes from 'watan' ('the homeland') and so the nostalgia with which it arrives is a supreme emotion. Further, it is not just a chitthi, a mere message because it has also brought with it the mitti, the 'soil' from the motherland.

The insinuation is symbolic but the connection with the *mitti*, the soil is inextricable. It cannot, should not be severed. It is this emotion of nostalgia within the song that evokes the familial and the emotional. There is no escape from these ties and if these ties have become weak, they need to be strengthened because Indian culture and values cannot be forgotten just because the individual has travelled or settled abroad. The letter in the song, with its multilayered perspectives and gestures, thus becomes a motif to strengthen the emotional bonds between the individual and the family, also the country.

There is no communication between Vicky and his family because he is cheated in the foreign land and the problems overwhelm him but as suggested, no problem should be allowed to weaken family bonds. The connection with the country is an emotional and strong one, as the *mitti*, soil and one's connection with it is necessarily a resilient one. The song symbolizes the psychological pain of the members of the diaspora community since they are reminded of their homeland and how the distance between the hostland and their home is too long to be bridged either emotionally or physically. As Allesandrini notes, diaspora implies the need to talk about loss (loss of homeland, of language, of culture) due to migration. The corollary of this loss would be a form of nostalgia that seeks to heal the wounds of dislocation through acts of memory and imagination" (2001: 315-316). So, while it is certainly *memory* that plays a preponderant role, *imagination* makes it practical and feasible to produce those memories. The dislocation, however, cannot be completely bridged. Songs have this capacity to *play* in the mind, that is, the tunes happen to 'catch the tongue' and replay them. This 'replaying' emphasizes the memories, increasing the feeling of nostalgia and not being able to forget. In "Chitthi aayi hai" song, the idea of the letter evokes memories of the homeland while gesturing at the displacement from India which is difficult to reach physically, immediately. However, the song becomes the means to emotionally revisit the homeland.

The lack of forgetfulness makes the act of memory most telling. Sarrazin (2008) makes an interesting observation with reference to Bollywood songs by suggesting that "songs differentiate Indian cinema from others not only by their inclusion, but also as an aural illustration of the perception that India and Indians have an abundance of 'heart'. 'Heart' is symbolised by selflessness and displays of emotional subjectivity particularly exemplified through singing" (395). In addition to the idea of *heart* and intense emotions, themes selected in the songs gesture at how Indian culture can be perceived and what it means for people going through different experiences and stages in life.

For instance, the chosen song palpably shows the geographical displacement that has happened to the character Vicky but the letter with the emotion of nostalgia shows that something is wrong with the situation for him. He is not interacting with his family and this is against Indian values and culture. Whatever be the problems for Vicky, connecting with his family and consequently with his 'home' is a judicious thing. So the song becomes a text in edification, letting Vicky realize what he has lost



in terms of values and culture, family relationships being of paramount significance. Whatever be the problems in life, family connections are of great significance. Ignoring one's family is unpardonable and the letter has the function of reminding Vicky his duty towards his family. Upholding family values is of utmost need. The film was produced in 1986 when the internet/email/messaging did not exist for the Indian diaspora. The letter therefore was the object that facilitated the connection between people and reestablishing relations with the loved ones, influencing each others' emotions and feelings.

Pankaj Udhas is a popular *ghazhab*³ singer in India and in the film he sings for an audience in Dubai. In the film, people shed tears since the song makes them nostalgic. It is a universal experience for the people in the audience. Through the scene where all of them weep, nostalgia for the lost homeland and people is highlighted. Also, listening to an Indian song and form (the *ghazal*) underscores the desire of the Indian diaspora to reconnect with the homeland. It is crucial for them since it reinforces that the Indian ethos⁴ resides in their memories. It is not possible to sever that aspect of culture, at least for the first generation migrants. For the second generation migrants, Indian culture is learnt via narration. Their elders transmit their memories, experiences, stories and culture (cuisine, music, dance, religion). It is palpably learnt and rehearsed at home or in community/ Indian associations in the hostland. Martin and Yaquinto suggest, "[a]s the factors of identity (ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, and class) are complicated and revisioned by the experience of exile and diaspora, such cinema suggests a counterpoint to the deterritorializing and dislocating experience of global migrations, using journey narratives to interrogate the 'homeless subject'" (22). Here, the trope of journey gestures at how difficult it is to go back to the home country, India.

Penning down one's feelings, emotions and thoughts are easier in comparison with travelling to the homeland. In the film *Naam*, the character Vicky is unable to do even that. Listening to Pankaj Udhas's song trigger memories and evoke tremendous psychological pain, emphasizes the emotional trauma of not being able to meet one's kin. To quote a few lines from the song (translated into English):

"The letter has come from the homeland,
After several days,
We displaced citizens remember,
After several days,
We displaced citizens remember,
The soil of the land".⁵ (02:00:47-02:01:36)

³ For an understanding of the 'ghazal' form, see Faruqi and Pritchett's "Lyric poetry in Urdu: Ghazal and Nazm" (1984).

⁴ It is interesting to note that the film doesn't specifically highlight any particular Indian state (like Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat etc). It is a Hindi film that represents the whole country.

⁵ Here are the original lines from the film:

Chitthi hai vatan se chitthi aayi hai,
Bade dino ke baad,



The word ‘bevatán’ or ‘displaced citizen’ or ‘those who have *lost* the country’ implies those who are out of the homeland and the letter reminds the individual of the *soil from the motherland*. The imagery of the soil is an emotional one, highlighting a personal and permanent connection. It cannot be changed, altered, destroyed. The letter has the power to call to mind the numerous associations that the members of the diaspora community have with their point of origin. It is interesting to observe that cultural revisiting and remembrance happens across the diasporic communities settled in different parts of the world and this comparison is essential because it throws light on how there are similar patterns in different cultural discourses. For instance, the example that Verstappen and Rutten note in the context of the Netherlands⁶ offers a crucial point of recurring patterns regarding cultural longing. In their article, they state, “[h]industani dance parties are also organised every weekend, sometimes in huge party halls on the outskirts of the city; teenagers and tweens come here to enjoy live performances and remixes of **Bollywood** songs, performed by local artists. A dozen movie dance schools teach young girls how to dance to this music; clothing shops in the Hindustani neighbourhood of Transvaal sell the matching outfits” (219). The possibility of recreating the homeland experience in a new geographical and cultural territory is exciting because it lessens the foreignness that seems immediate and permanent. Yet, this could be completely illusory because it is not possible to completely displace an alien culture. What is possible is only a temporary respite and seemingly authentic homeland culture.

These dilemmas can be very real for the members of the diasporic community, yet there is an effort to recreate homeland cultural signs because they are strong psychological means to feel better and as suggested at the beginning of this study, be able to negotiate the “poverty of the present requirement” (Howard 2012: 643). When the audience listens to the song, they realize what they have always known: the experience of their culture, the connections with their family and friends and how these are not immediately accessible. The vacuum of the present moment’ can be handled only through shared emotions of the diaspora which the song happens to express through addressing members of the diaspora.

Ham bevatano ko yaad,
Bade dino ke baad,
Ham bevatano ko yaad,
Vatan ki mitti aayi hai (*Naam*: 2:0047 to 2:01:36: 1986).

⁶ Interestingly enough, the subject of Bollywood music and diaspora has been frequently discussed by scholars. A comparative analysis of the cultural reception, revisiting and re-creation in different countries can provide a fascinating understanding of the layers that exist within music and diaspora. See Matusitz and Payano: “The Bollywood in Indian and American Perceptions: A Comparative Analysis” (2011) for a study of how Bollywood is seen and understood in North America.



CONCLUSION

The notion of nostalgia for the members of the diasporic community is certainly beyond the basic perception of homesickness or a mere *longing for the past* as suggested in the song “Chitthi aayi hai.” As Kim (2007) observes, “[d]iasporic consciousness forms out of the ‘foreignness’ of the multiple worlds that one has inherited, such that the world that the diasporic subject inhabits is perpetually haunted by the absence of another, distant world” (349). The lack of immediate contact with the home country in the film *Naam*, but the possibility of recreation of cultural signs through the analysed song, for instance, allows reconnection with the homeland and helps bridge, albeit temporarily, the need for the homeland connection between the character Vicky and the members of his family, back home in India. In the song, it is not just Vicky but also an entire audience that weeps while listening to the song that highlights how much they miss home and are trying to deal with the loss. Through the song, memory and culture become the means to tap the emotional necessity of remembering home and also grapple with contemporary realities of the hostland.

Review sent to author: 09/06/2021

Revised version accepted for publication: 23/07/2021



WORKS CITED

- ALESSANDRINI, Anthony C. "My Heart's Indian for All That: Bollywood Film between Home and Diaspora." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10/3 (2001): 315-340. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2011.0009>.
- BHATTACHARJYA, Nilanjana. "Popular Hindi Film Song Sequences Set in the Indian Diaspora and the Negotiating of Indian Identity." *Asian Music* 40/1 (2009): 53-82. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501601>. Accessed 3 April 2021.
- DESAI, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ahduniin/detail.action?docID=200847>.
- HAGE, Ghassan. "Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building." *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. Eds. Susannah Radstone & Bill Schwarz. Fordham University Press, 2010. 416-427. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.32>.
- HOWARD, Scott Alexander. "Nostalgia." *Analysis* 72/4 (2012): 641-650. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23359115>. Accessed 12 May 2021.
- FARUQI, S.R. & F.W. PRITCHETT. "Lyric Poetry in Urdu: Ghazal and Nazm." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 19/2 (1984): 111-127. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40872697>.
- MANI, Bakirathi & Latha VARADARAJAN. "The Largest Gathering of the Global Indian Family: Neoliberalism, Nationalism, and Diaspora at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 14/1 (2005): 45-74. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.0.0006>.
- MARTIN, Michael T. & Marilyn YAQUINTO. "Framing Diaspora in Diasporic Cinema: Concepts and Thematic Concerns." *Black Camera* 22/1 (2007): 22-24. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27761689>.
- MATUSITZ, Jonathan & Pam PAYANO. "The Bollywood in Indian and American Perceptions: A Comparative Analysis." *India Quarterly* 67/1 (2011): 65-77. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45073039>.
- Naam* (1986). Starred Nutan, Sanjay Dutt, Kumar Gaurav, Amrita Singh, Poonam Dhillon, Kumar Rajendra, Mahesh Bhatt & Salim Khan. Mumbai, India: Bombino Video Ltd, 2005.
- QUAYSON, Ato & Girish DASWANI. "Introduction-Diaspora and Transnationalism: Scapes, Scales and Scopes." *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. Ed. Ato Quayson & Girish Daswani. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013.1-26. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ahduniin/detail.action?docID=1273605>.
- SARRAZIN, Natalie. "Celluloid Love Songs: Musical 'Modus Operandi' and the Dramatic Aesthetics of Romantic Hindi Film." *Popular Music* 27/3 (2008): 393-411. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40212399>.
- SINHA, Mrinalini. "Premonitions of the Past." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74/4 (2015): 821-841, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24738558>.
- TSAGAROUSIANOU, Roza. "Beyond the Concept of Diaspora? Revaluating our Theoretical Toolkit Through the Study of Muslim Transnationalism." *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*. Eds. Jessica Retis & Roza Tsagarousianou. John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2019. 77-95. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ahduniin/detail.action?docID=5731876>.



VERSTAPPEN, Sanderien & Mario RUTTEN. "Bollywood and the Indian Diaspora: Reception of Indian Cinema among Hindustani Youth in the Netherlands." *Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory*. Ed. Gijsbert Oonk. Amsterdam University Press, 2007. 211-234. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n1bq.12>.



