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THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY
THE PERCEPTION OF THE NRI IN INDIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore and relate the notions of the country and the city as given in the works of Raymond Williams, particularly The Country and the City and Keywords, to the Bollywood film Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (Aditya Chopra, 1995), among a few others. This film marked a turning point in Bollywood on a variety of fronts, but especially in the way the Non-Resident Indian came to be perceived and understood. The ideas elaborated in the twenty-fourth chapter, "The New Metropolis", of The Country and the City resonates in the way the distinctions between the country and the city are expanded on a global scale when the underdeveloped countries— which in this particular case, is restricted to India— are seen as the countryside to the city that is the developed countries.

Keywords: Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, Keywords, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Bollywood, Indian Cinema..

Introduction

Who is the NRI in Bollywood?

The term "Non-resident Indian" or NRI is commonly used to describe people of Indian origin living overseas. In India, the NRI, like the Indian film industry, has made a marked transition in the past two decades from "being configured as an errant native seduced by the wealth and glamour of the West, at the expense of Indian values, to being an icon of the desirable cosmopolitan Indian citizen straddling the globe". "The term "non-resident" therefore, appears to be a useful one for outlining a series of discourses on diaspora that make claims upon Indian cinema and its offshore audiences" (Athique 282).

It has been observed that prior to the mid-1990s, "foreign" Indians were typically villains in films, with their Western lives granting them riches and prestige but leaving them corrupted morally and finding them lacking in the intrinsically "Indian Values" of humility and integrity. "Such characterizations of overseas Indians were an extrapolation of the conflicts between tradition and modernity, often implicitly (or even explicitly) played out in Indian cinema as a contest between Indian and Western values" (Athique 282-3).

And it is exactly the way in which India is pitted against the West in the films that will be scrutinized in this paper that lead to a reflection of the country and the city as defined, pondered on and explored by Raymond Williams.

Williams' Perception of the Country and the City

Raymond Williams, in his work *Keywords* (1976), explores the changing meaning of words and how they came to stand for their multiple meanings in varying contexts. The following is what he has to say in his entry under the word "country":

"The widespread specialized use of country as opposed to city began in 1C16¹ with increasing urbanization and especially the growth of the capital, London. It was then that country people and the country house were distinguished. On the other hand country field and country bumpkin were C17² metropolitan slang. Countryside, originally a Scottish term to indicate a specific locality, became in C19³ a general term to describe not only the rural areas but the whole rural life and economy." (1976: 81)

"The city as a really distinctive order of settlement, implying a whole different way of life, is not established, with its modern implications until the early nineteenth-century," says Williams, "though the idea has a very long history, from Renaissance and even Classical thought" (1976: 56).

Other than these almost clinical definitions of these words, we see a lot more of his personal thoughts on the words, separately as well as in relation to each other, in *The Country and the City* (1973). According to Williams, one of the achievements of the human society that stems from the country is the city: "the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization" (1973: 1). He addresses the conventions and stereotypes that are associated with the country and the city: he finds that the country has been associated with "the idea of a natural way of life", of "peace, innocence, and simple virtue". The city, on the other hand, is seen as "the achieved centre" of "learning, communication, light". Certain associations that are hostile and pejorative in nature have also developed: "on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition: on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation". He is aware that the contrast between the country and the city, "as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times" (Williams 1973: 1).

It seems as though even Williams has a very romanticized and whimsical notion of the country, as can be seen in the following lines:

"It is the elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window here I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in the pockets of their khakhi coats; and the women in headscarves, outside their cottages, waiting for the blue bus that will take them, inside school hours, to work in the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light in the small hours, in the pig-farm across the road, in the crisis of a litter; the slow brown van met at the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of the silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing, for a speculative development, at twelve thousand pounds an acre." (Williams 1973: 3)

Williams' idea of the country seems to be tinged with nostalgia and a longing for his perception of the country that is highly subjective. Even the descriptions of work have a sense of idyllic lethargy to them. Although, he is quick to clarify that he does not in any way want the circumstances to revert to the way it was in the pre-Industrial times. As he was a part of such a setting where he got to experience the harsh realities of the countryside, he finds that the radical movement of the Industrialization brought along with it all the developments that were promised to the country while providing a means of escape into the city. His nostalgia of the past is fond remembrance of the past— a past that he definitely does not want to brought back nor repeated. He regarded the romantic idealisation of settlement, as seen particularly in the Romantic movement in literature, as nothing less than privileged indifference to the needs of most people, for they were blind to "dirty water, an earth bucket, a four-mile walk each way to work, headaches, broken women, hunger and monotony of diet" (Williams 1958: 10) that was the norm to the people in the rural areas of England before the Industrial Revolution.

¹ Late sixteenth century

² Seventeenth century

³ Nineteenth century

His idea of the city is again quite romanticized. Whereas his notion of the country is one that is nostalgic, his idea of the city makes it seem dynamic, exciting and vibrant. "... this identifiable and moving quality: the centre, the activity, the light. Like everyone else I have felt also the chaos of the metro and the traffic jam; the monotony of the ranks of houses; the aching press of strange crowds". He further goes on to say, "Indeed this sense of possibility, of meeting and of movement, is a permanent element of my sense of cities" (Williams 1973: 5-6).

It is in the twenty-fourth chapter, "The New Metropolis", of *The Country and the City* that Williams brings forth a few ideas on the relation between the country and the city that parallel the one between India and the West⁴, one of them being, as the title of the chapter suggests, of the metropolis and the rural areas.

Williams devotes this particular chapter to painting England as a metropolitan city, while he shows the rest of the colonized countries as the countryside. "The 'metropolitan' societies of Western Europe and North America are the 'advanced', 'developed', industrialized states; centres of economic, political and cultural power. In sharp contrast with them, though there are many intermediate stages, are other societies which are seen as 'underdeveloped': still mainly agricultural or 'under-industrialised'". Therefore, he creates a "model of the city and country, in economic and political relationships that has gone beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and is seen but also challenged as a model of the world" (1973: 279).

The Representation of India: India as "Home"

In Williams' *Keywords*, it is specified that "Country has two different meanings in modern English: broadly, a native land and the rural or agricultural parts of it" (1976: 81). The representation of India in the Bollywood films with NRI heroes is an amalgamation of both the meanings of country as defined by Williams. It is the "home" that they long for while being the impoverished rural counterpart of the more affluent and urbanized West.

One of the most prominent and central idea of this paper is the idea of India as "home". This is reflected from William's assertion that the colonizers who left from England for opportunities in prosperity to the colonies began to perceive England as "home, in the special sense in which home is a memory and an ideal" (1973: 281).

Williams opines on how the colonizers, while experiencing the discomfort and alienation in the colonies, end up forming a distorted notion of their motherland in their minds. They romanticize their homeland and they begin to view their "home" through rose-tinted glasses. "The country," for them, was now "a place to retire to" (1973: 282).

DDLJ and its Significance

The character of the expatriate Indian which was once exposed to serve the function of a foil to the protagonist and as the antagonist in Bollywood films saw itself evolve into a conventional Bollywood hero in the last twenty years. The turning point that marked this radical change as identified by commentators in the 1990s was the spectacular success of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*⁵ (English: "The Big Hearted Will Take Away the Bride", 1995) directed by Aditya Chopra and produced under the Yash Raj Films banner. This film, and a slew of others which came after it, gave forth a defining symbol of "the Indian achiever, a kind of über Indian able to assert his ethnic and national identity in a globalized world: successful, capitalist, male, family-oriented, technology-savvy and a devout Hindu all at once" (Therwath).

What is remarkable about the success of this film is the attention and fame it garnered from the NRIs. The positioning of the NRI hero as the "next big thing" in Bollywood brought to them a sense of validation and pride, while granting them an acceptance towards their status as a diaspora of Indians separated from their country, yet still Indian at heart.

The protagonists of the film, Raj Malhotra and Simran Singh (played by Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, respectively), are Indians who are brought up in London, a perfect correlation with the ideal spaces of the country and the city. Simran's father Baldev (Amrish Puri) is a caricature of the NRI man who had to leave India

⁴ The West is a generalization used here to describe the affluent countries that many Indians have migrated to. It is to be noted that this is simply a generalization and is hereon used to refer to all the countries other than India.

⁵ Henceforth to be referred to as *DDLJ*.

in search of better job prospects and has now found himself leading a life in the constant longing for the India he knows as “home”. This is a reiteration of the aforementioned notion of “home” that Williams elaborates on in the chapter entitled “The New Metropolis” in *The Country and the City*. He fiercely holds on to certain aspects of the culture that he has imbibed from his elders, such as gathering his family for morning prayers according to the Hindu religious rites; quite similar to the way the colonizers would still try to hold onto the aspects that make them intrinsically British. He yearns to go back to his country, with its traditions, rituals and culture and he wishes to immerse himself in the “Indianness” of it all and re-energize the “Hindustani” in his heart.

Raj, on the other hand, is a character that initially seems to have merged into his London identity, enshrouded in “worldliness and ambition” to the extent that he exhibits no such longing for his country as Baldev does, something that Baldev is deeply reproachful of. Raj sees India as exemplifying the notion of the nation being the country to the city of London, and the people as simple-minded country bumpkins who live in a land of “backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (Williams 1973: 1). Although it is later revealed that he is the ideal son-in-law that Baldev has envisioned for his daughter for Raj turns out to be a true “Hindustani” at heart.

It is interesting to note that although the protagonists live in India and they meet while on a tour around Europe, a majority of the film’s action takes place in India. What is particularly noteworthy here is the side of India that they choose to represent: the farming community in the Punjab that Baldev’s extended family is a part of. Consequentially, both the definitions of “country”: as the “native land’ and as “the rural or agricultural parts of it” (Williams 1976: 81) are illustrated in this move. A question to ponder on is this: Why would the director choose to show the rural landscape as opposed to the quite developed urban India of the mid-1990s? There are a few possible answers to this. Perhaps, owing to the way that NRIs romanticized the country and the predominantly rural backdrop that they grew up in before they left for the West, this was the India that they remembered and yearned for. Another reason could be that, keeping in mind that this one of the first of the many Bollywood films targeted at the expatriate Indian audience, the director consciously wanted to show India as the country to the city of London, thereby evoking the notion of India as the place with the country houses and as the place where they could finally retire to when the time comes, maybe while even convincing them of the idea that they had escaped into the city.

Two of the most iconic scenes in the film show a protagonist or two running— either in a mustard field or after a train. The mustard field is still more fuel to the idea of India as a rural country, while India’s railways, in comparison to the Euro Rail shown in the beginning of the film, projects the image of the less-developed countryside.

A positive aspect of the country that is shown in this film is that of the close-knit community that is seen to be an integral part of belonging to the country. This is seen in way the Singh family seem to be the kind which keeps to itself, but in India, they show deep camaraderie with their extended family, relatives and neighbours in the way they celebrate joys together and everyone seems to know everyone.

Once Raj and Simran are reunited, they it is implied that they return to London while Simran’s parents stay back in India. This could be seen as an extension of Williams’ assertion of how the people who had migrated often lived in the hopes of retiring to the country (1973: 282).

Among the many other films which presented the NRI protagonist include *Pardes* (English: “Foreign Land”, 1997) directed by Subhash Ghai and *Swades* (English: “Homeland”, 2004) directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. *Pardes* follows a similar trajectory of story as *DDLJ*, with the presentation of the conflicting views of the country and the city in the characters, eventually resulting in a resolution which leads to the eventual settlement of the protagonists in India. *Swades*, however is slightly removed from the usual romance tropes and shows the journey of Mohan Bhargava, an Indian who works at NASA who travels to India in search of his caretaker from his childhood. This film shows an attempted to interweave the complimentary qualities associated with the notions of the country and the city. He tries to bring progress in the form of a more open mindset and technological advancements while he partakes in the warmth and the sense of community and belonging that he finds in a small village in India.

Bollywood cinema has come a long way from the way it was before, and the boom of ideas in the mid-1990s has progressed to bigger and better things. What was innovative and scandalizing then, is quite the norm now. The way the idea of the country and the city, as thought of by Raymond Williams and other thinkers, has been perceived and accepted by various artists is truly remarkable and interesting, and is a process that will continue to perpetuate.

Conclusion

Popular cinema, like any other art form, is more than just a reflection of reality. Rather, it is an active response to reality and has a huge role to play in shaping the mindsets of the targeted audience. Popular Hindi cinema has, since the first film was made in India in 1913, played a central role in the formulation of the national identity and in the promotion of normative behaviour (Therwath). "Film is perhaps the single strongest agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 8).

With all the influence that films continue to wield, it is certainly interesting to observe how certain films portray stereotypes and pigeonhole characters. We can find reflections of the country and the city as defined by Williams in the way India and the West are projected in Bollywood cinema, and in the way India is counter projected as the country to the city of the West.

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