Filmed Representations of South Asians in the Diaspora

The relatively recent popularity of several South Asian films outside of South Asia raises questions about depictions of the diaspora and possibly the construction of new stereotypes.

By Monica Ghosh

This year witnessed the success of several South Asian films outside South Asia. Lagaan, a Bombay film starring Amit Khan in a plot set in colonial India, was nominated for an Oscar, even though it did not win. Monsoon Wedding, an engaging film by Mira Nair about an extended family who gathers for a wedding of an arranged marriage, has received rave reviews from critics and audiences alike. While Bombay films, such as Lagaan, and films that rely on South Asian content or themes, such as Monsoon Wedding, may be getting wide viewership, an interesting and important topic that remains to be explored further is how the experiences of South Asians in the diaspora are represented on film. These experiences often reflect the complex negotiations around issues of race, class, religion, and sexual orientation in the ‘host’ countries.

Although the South Asian diaspora extends to almost every continent and country in the world, in order to establish a manageable framework, this analysis relies primarily on representations of South Asians in the diaspora in films made in the US and the UK, by filmmakers who may or may not be ethnic South Asians. The five films that this article explores are three independent films: My Son the Fanatic (based on a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi), East is East (based on a stage play by Ayub Khan-din), and Chutney Popcorn (a first film by Nisha Ganatra); and two Hollywood films: Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan) and Lagaan (M. Night Shyamalan). The plot develops around Rina, a South Asian American. This film is about the family, redefining it, inventing new norms of parenting, and re-creating the extended family. The relationships in this film create an alliance with white America. The race dynamics surrounding Rina’s sister’s choice of a white husband and Rina’s relationship with a white lesbian are not touched upon. An African American presence in the film is heard only through the speech of a young male friend Parvez. This film raises lots of questions that remain unexplored and unanswerable about how South Asians in the USA ally themselves racially. These alliances are represented differently in British films. Nevertheless, this film takes a bold approach in exploring a South Asian American lesbian character that disturbs notions of hetero-normativity among South Asians in the diaspora. M. Night Shyamalan takes a subtle approach in representing South Asians in his films. He usually gives South Asians, including himself, minor roles in his Hollywood films, such as Sixth Sense. His approach appears to be making a deliberate point that South Asians in the USA are just as much a part of America as any other immigrant community. His representation neither ridicules nor does it render exotic. In his films, South Asians in the diaspora are depicted as ordinary and expected. Although Keeping the Faith seems far removed from any reference to the South Asian diaspora, there are two scenes with Paulie Chopra, a bartender played by Brian George, a white man who is made up to carry the external signs of a South Asian—dark skin and a stereotypical Indian accent. Paulie claims to be ‘half-Punjabi Sikh, one-quarter Tamil separatist’ with Jewish in-laws and an Irish Catholic grandmother. In a matter of seconds, Paulie’s genealogy trivializes and makes non-sense of certain people with complex historical relationships with colonization and diaspora, while privileging others with similar experiences, such as the Irish-American Catholic priest and the rabbi, that are the focus of the film.

In the film, the religion is Islam, in reality it could quite easily be any other religion.

Note


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