

The Clash of Indian Cultural Identity in a European Environment in the Film *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*

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ABSTRACT

The film *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* portrays the complexity of cultural clashes experienced by the Indian diaspora when confronted with the European legal system. This study aims at analyzing the representation of Indian and Norwegian cultural identity clashes and the process of self-negotiation experienced by the main character. Using a descriptive qualitative method with Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity theory as a lens of analysis on the concepts of identity as being and identity as becoming, this study dissects the narrative and cinematic elements of the film. The findings show that the character Mrs. Chatterjee initially maintained a strong identity as being through traditional cultural practices, which were later criminalized by Norwegian child welfare standards. This systemic pressure forces the character to transform towards identity as becoming by adopting Western assertiveness and legal logic to fight injustice, affirming that identity in the diaspora is a dynamic construction that is constantly negotiated amid unequal power relations.

Keywords: cultural clash, cultural identity, identity construction, indian diaspora, national identity

INTRODUCTION

Identity plays a pivotal role for individuals within the sphere of social life. Identity serves as a descriptor of an individual through various aspects manifested in physical appearance, such as race, character, lifestyle, norms, values, and other attributes. It is a fundamental necessity for an individual's existence within society. Every individual possesses the agency to interpret how that identity is formed. Stuart Hall, a prominent figure in the field of cultural studies, has made significant contributions to the understanding of identity and culture. Hall emphasizes that identity is not a fixed or static entity, but rather a construction that continuously evolves and transforms over time. In Stuart Hall's theory of identity (1994), identity is described as something imaginary or an imagined concept of wholeness. It is the manifestation of an imagination perceived by specific parties who are interconnected within it and deeply rooted.

This dynamic process of identity construction is inseparable from the encompassing social context, which, on a macro scale, manifests as culture. Consequently, culture constitutes the essence of a nation. Culture can be interpreted as the collective identity or the selfhood of a nation. The term "culture" is often associated with "civilization," implying that a culture will undergo changes in accordance with the times. As a reflection of a nation's soul, culture encompasses various aspects of life, such as values, norms, customs, and traditions inherited from one generation to the next. Culture is not merely a heritage; it is the identity and character of a nation that distinguishes it from others.

Culture serves as a fundamental element in shaping national identity because culture preserved and developed within the environment of every ethnic group contains basic values used

as guiding principles for thinking, behaving, and acting in accordance with the prevailing environment. The cultural aspects that form national identity comprise three elements: intellect, civilization, and knowledge. In life, humans are intrinsically linked to culture, whether it be traditional culture or the culture of attitude applied in daily life. Individuals born in a specific location are hegemonized to follow the culture existing in that place. Generally, these individuals will follow the culture of their region of origin and instinctively possess an obligation to love and understand their native culture before understanding and appreciating others.

One of the most enduring cultures is Indian culture. Indian culture is viewed as one that is replete with reverence for all forms of art and artistic expression. Wherever they are located, regardless of religion, Indian people or those of Indian descent residing outside their country continue to maintain their traditional culture. This includes religious rituals, art, and classical and authentic traditional spirituality adorned with specific colors. As one of the oldest Asian cultures, the distinct characteristics of Indian cultural identity possess a strong influence on other countries, both in terms of spirituality and arts. One form of Indian art and culture is Indian film, which led to the formation of the Indian film industry.

Indian cinema, more popularly known as Bollywood, represents one of the largest film industries in the world (Mishra, 2013). The term "Bollywood" is a portmanteau of Bombay and Hollywood. It was formerly used by journalists and Indian film critics to denote a derivative nature (in relation to Hollywood) of Indian films. However, by the 1990s, Bollywood shed its pejorative connotation and began to be associated with popular Indian cinema (Mehta and Pandharipande, 2010). The term was first utilized in the 1970s when India became the number one producer of feature films. While the earlier usage of the term emphasized Indian cinema's inability to sufficiently distinguish itself from the globally dominant Hollywood, the term Bollywood now emphasizes Indian film not as a derivative, but as an alternative to Hollywood. This is reinforced by the characteristics of Bollywood films, which are popular for their music, songs, dance, and drama (Mehta and Pandharipande, 2010).

The Bollywood film industry has expanded significantly over the last two centuries, possessing a market even larger than that of Europe and America. Classic Bollywood films are characterized by their musical nature, containing elements of music, song, and dance. These elements serve to advance the film's plot. Typically, Bollywood films also have a long duration of approximately three hours because audiences in India demand a significant quantity of time commensurate with what they pay to watch a local film. Other characteristics of classic Bollywood films include a mixed genre (known as *Masala*), predominantly having a close ending with moral lessons embedded in the story, and the use of Hinglish (Hindi-English).

Concurrently with the increasing growth of Bollywood films, *parallel Indian cinema* emerged. This is a movement of intermediate cinema that bridges the gap between art and commerce by creating thoughtful works aimed at the urban middle class in India. In parallel Indian cinema, there is an attachment to realism and an investment in elevating the public taste of the audience (Mehta and Pandharipande, 2010). Parallel Indian cinema seeks to challenge classic or mainstream Bollywood films by creating new changes within the current era of Bollywood. It typically emphasizes realism, complex narratives, and profound depictions of social life.

In addition to the existence of parallel Indian cinema, the growth of Bollywood is also marked by the proliferation of the Indian diaspora and the Indian cinema diaspora. Diaspora is

defined as the dispersion of people from one original country to another (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). According to Niniek (2016), the diaspora consists of those who live abroad voluntarily and independently, who undergo a process to maintain close ties with their country of origin, possess expertise, and function as agents of change, thereby contributing to development in their country of origin to enhance national progress. Many native Indians living in other countries continue to maintain Indian culture. Beyond economic and political factors, culture is also a crucial reason for the diaspora community acting as important agents for the propaganda of cultural values and the ideas of their nation-state. Furthermore, there is also the Indian cinema diaspora, consisting of film practitioners such as Indian directors living in other countries, whether permanently or merely to pursue studies related to their field.

One Bollywood film from the Indian cinema diaspora that also narrates the story of the Indian diaspora is the drama titled *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* (2023). This film is based on true events and was directed by Ashima Chibber, who pursued her film studies in New Delhi and the UK. It stars Rani Mukerji, Anirban Bhattacharya, Jim Sarbh, and several other supporting actors. The film tells the story of Mrs. Chatterjee, a mother from India living in Norway with her husband and two children, who fights against the Norwegian legal system to regain custody of her biological children after they were forcibly taken by the state's child protection authority on the grounds that her parenting style did not meet child welfare standards in Norway. She also does not receive full support from her husband, who is solely concerned with his career success in Norway. Furthermore, she experiences physical violence and gaslighting by her husband. The film had a budget of 290 million rupees and generated 365 million rupees (Hungama, 2023).

The author is compelled to analyze this film further as it is highly complex, containing issues such as differences in cultural identity, justice, the struggle for custody, feminism, and immigrants. However, this research will specifically focus on the issue of cultural identity differences, particularly how the clash of Indian and Norwegian cultural identities is represented in the character of an Indian immigrant mother living in Norway from the perspective of the main character, Mrs. Chatterjee. The author aims to deepen the understanding of the clash of identities between two distinct cultures: India and Norway. The author observes that while *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* is considered successful in terms of plot and cinematic value, it has become a point of contention between the two nations. Instead of the Indian diaspora and Indian cinema diaspora serving as vital elements in enhancing political factors—specifically diplomatic and cultural relations—they have instead incited conflict between the two countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Ashton, identity is the classification or mapping of an individual as part of a society (Jenkins, 2008). Identity classification is multidimensional, encompassing self-reflection, our views of others, and others' views of us. In other words, identity is formed through the various ways an individual positions themselves and how they are positioned by others.

As stated by Stuart Hall, identity is a 'production' that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the authority and authenticity claimed by the term 'cultural identity' (Hall, 1990). Identity, referring to social actors, is a process of meaning construction based on a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. Each individual or social actor

possesses a number of identities that serve as representations of the self and social action. Identity can be distinguished from a collection of roles. Roles—such as being a worker, mother, neighbor, socialist activist, union member, basketball player, religious adherent, and smoker—are simultaneously defined by norms organized by societal institutions and organizations. Identity is a source of meaning for the actors themselves, constructed by them through the process of individualization.

Cultural identity consists of points of identification or unstable sutures made within the discourses of history and culture. It is not an essence, but a positioning (Hall, 1990). It can be posited that the key to identity construction within representation is positioning. Hall describes identity as a structured representation that achieves positivity only through a relationship with the 'other' (social). All our unique characteristics—such as dreams, voice, speech style, gait, and behavior—help in defining the self; however, each self must still interact with the external world, such as religion, work, family, or community, to feel a sense of belonging. According to Hall (1987), in this postmodern era, individuals do not possess a fixed, essential, or permanent identity; rather, identity is always changing, formed, and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented in the cultural systems surrounding us. Modern life offers us many subject positions and potential identities that vary according to our experiences.

Stuart Hall, in his work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990: 393), explains that cultural identity can be viewed from at least two perspectives: identity as being and identity as becoming. In the first perspective, cultural identity is viewed as a oneness shared among people, or a fundamental form of the 'self' that exists within many people who share the same history and ancestry. Consequently, this perspective focuses more on physical or outward traits to identify them as a group. Conversely, identity as becoming is a cultural identity formed by historical experiences and cultural codes; in this instance, there is a continuous chain of transformation marked by both similarities and differences. Cultural identity is shaped not only by the past but also by the future.

Culture is a signifying or symbolic activity; no culture is entirely complete in itself, nor is any culture wholly adequate, not only because other cultures may contradict its authority, but also due to its own symbol-forming activities (Rutherford, 1990). Culture involves power and resistance, serving as the locus where the struggle for identity is formed and maintained (Hall, 1990). Culture is also intrinsically linked to power and ideology, often utilized as a tool to either maintain or challenge existing power structures within society (Oswell, 2006).

Cultural Identity of the Indian Diaspora

In the film *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*, the protagonist, Debika Chatterjee—commonly referred to as Mrs. Chatterjee—manifests her identity through the various roles she embodies. She simultaneously holds multiple roles: an immigrant from India, the wife of a working husband, a mother of two, and a homemaker. She is recognized as an Indian immigrant residing in Norway due to her husband's employment. Furthermore, she is characterized as a wife who is perpetually submissive to her husband, indicating the presence of a patriarchal culture within her domestic life. As a homemaker and mother, these roles represent Mrs. Chatterjee within her residential environment in Norway. Ultimately, Mrs. Chatterjee's identity is constructed through the various ways she positions or views herself, as well as how she is positioned or viewed by others.

Although Mrs. Chatterjee is an immigrant living in Norway, Indian culture remains deeply embedded within her. Several elements of Indian culture demonstrated by her character in the film include the wearing of a *sari* (traditional Indian women's attire), the serving of traditional Indian food to her family, and the use of a *bindi* or *sindoor* (the red dot on the forehead worn by married Hindu women), among others.

Identity as being in Mrs. Chatterjee's character is primarily represented through her physical traits as a woman and an Indian citizen residing in a European environment (Norway), such as skin color, body posture, and other physiological features that differ from native Europeans. Physically and character-wise, this cultural identity is exhibited by Mrs. Chatterjee through her Indian attire, manner of speech, and a mode of thinking that is not "straightforward," differing from the European manner. Beyond highlighting identity differences with those of other cultures—in this instance, Europeans—identity as becoming allows for continuous transformation. This is evident in the film's mid-section scenes. Mrs. Chatterjee, who initially spoke and thought in a manner typical of native Indians, gradually transforms as conflicts arise with Norwegian legal authorities; her identity shifts to resemble that of a native European—assertive and bold in thought and action. This further demonstrates that individual identity is dynamic and ever-changing, involving a re-positioning by external parties who view her, or by her internal view of herself.

Cultural Clash as Indian Diaspora

The film's title, *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*, explicitly indicates that the central conflict involves the main character, Mrs. Chatterjee herself, against the state of Norway. The primary conflict arises when her two children are forcibly removed by the Norwegian child protection authorities on the grounds that her parenting style does not meet Norwegian child welfare standards. The supporting rationale from the authorities is that Mrs. Chatterjee's parenting, which aligns with Indian culture, is viewed as divergent and thus clashing with Norwegian parenting methods. This is compounded by her status as an immigrant, rather than a native Norwegian citizen, which is perceived as lacking full agency in responding to the country's laws. This illustrates that culture involves power and resistance, and identity is maintained, as posited by Hall. Norway, as the host country, possesses full legal authority. Conversely, Mrs. Chatterjee mounts her resistance by fighting the Norwegian legal system for seizing custody of her biological children and separating them from her, particularly given their young age and the fact that her second child is still breastfeeding. In this case, Mrs. Chatterjee defends herself through culture. She maintains her stance and challenges Norwegian legal power in court via the defense statement of her appointed lawyer, who explains her parenting methods and their intrinsic connection to Indian culture.

In *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*, social identification leads the character of Mrs. Chatterjee (the individual) to identify herself as an Indian practicing Indian culture. In the initial debate scene where she meets her lawyer, it is explained that feeding children by hand or applying kohl to a child's face is done because she belongs to an Indian family. The values held by her group as an Indian family are the result of this social identification. This contradicts the Norwegian social services group, which adheres to the European cultural norm that eating involves spoons and forks, and that children are not permitted to wear makeup unless it is a safe cosmetic product. In this phase, social categorization occurs wherein European culture exerts a tendency on the individual to regulate their social environment. This becomes a clash for Mrs. Chatterjee as a minority group member. Her actions to maintain her individual identity as a cultured Indian person are fractured by the Norwegian social environment, which leans towards European culture. Consequently, Mrs.

Chatterjee fails to develop emotions towards the European cultural group; effectively, the affective component of this social identity does not occur.

The process of cultural identity in *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* demonstrates that Indian culture is categorized as unacceptable within the European cultural framework. These cultural values appear in the debate regarding school discipline; specifically, at the 8th minute, there is a scene regarding the negligence of Mrs. Chatterjee's child in bringing homework. There is an assessment of a group's level of discipline compared to the European social group, which prioritizes strict adherence to rules without exception. Furthermore, this is observed in the courtroom scenes in Norway (minute 76) and India (minute 110). In the Norwegian court scene, a culture of discipline and strict legal adherence is palpable throughout the proceedings. However, during the court scene in India, empathy overrides the prevailing law in Mrs. Chatterjee's case. In other words, there is a stark contrast between the cultures within the narrative.

Genre Convention of “Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway”

Regarding genre conventions, *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* features three aspects: iconography, social values, and attitudes. Iconography in the film encompasses the law, elements of Indian culture, and the European environment. Legal iconography is depicted through court conditions in India and Norway, lawyers, and legal documents, as well as the emphasis on logic and legal grounding in Norway versus empathy in India. Regarding elements of Indian culture, particularly feeding children directly by hand, this becomes a point of contention for the Norwegian child welfare services as it is considered unhygienic and impolite, whereas it is a normality in India. Another cultural element is applying kohl to the eyes, shown in the scene where Mrs. Chatterjee takes her first child to school. Her application of kohl to her child's eyes becomes a subject of questioning by the school and Norwegian child welfare services because it is considered unusual. In the film, the Norwegian environment is depicted as highly structured, neat, orderly, clean, and safe. This contrasts sharply with the environment in India, illustrated in a scene where Mrs. Chatterjee, as an Indian, litters and is subsequently reprimanded by her husband.

The next aspect of genre convention is social values. Social values in *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* relate to family habits shown through emotional togetherness and the intense bond between mother and child. This emotional bond is demonstrated by the activities Mrs. Chatterjee, and her children do together at home, representing the value of collectivism and closeness in Indian culture. Additionally, it is shown that Mrs. Chatterjee has not yet taught independence to her children, differing from the lives of children in Norway who are taught a lifestyle of independence and individualism from an early age. Other social values involve the rights of mothers and children. In the film, Mrs. Chatterjee's right to raise and care for her children is forcibly taken by Norwegian law. Similarly, regarding children's rights, her children are depicted as underage and supposedly still in need of parental accompaniment, especially from the mother. However, they are deprived of this if they are forcibly separated from her. From these points, cultural diversity is a highly highlighted social value. Cultural diversity should enrich, but this does not occur in the film. There is no tolerance for the Indian culture represented by Mrs. Chatterjee as an Indian immigrant mother living in Norway. This is further complicated when European culture influences the prevailing laws.

Attitudes in *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* are demonstrated through bravery, the authority of the Norwegian state, the struggle against injustice, as well as empathy and solidarity. Bravery is shown through the transformation of Mrs. Chatterjee's character, who changes from fearful and full

of doubt to courageous, resembling the characteristics of Europeans in general, driven by her fight to regain custody of her children. The authority of the Norwegian state is depicted as highly strict regarding protocols, inflexible, and intolerant of other nations' cultural differences. This is illustrated when Mrs. Chatterjee visits her children at the child welfare institution, which grants her only a brief time to see them. The film portrays the irony of injustice being perpetrated and the law seemingly being manipulated by certain parties. The struggle against injustice is demonstrated by Mrs. Chatterjee fighting against an unfair and discriminatory legal system in Norway; even the lawyer appointed by the Indian embassy to assist the family fails to support her, siding instead with Norway. Other attitudes shown include empathy and solidarity, demonstrated by several communities supporting Mrs. Chatterjee, extending to the politicians of her country who eventually visit Norway to provide special attention after she successfully reports her case, spreading the issue to the wider public.

Cultural Clashes Represented in The Scene

The discussion on the clash of Indian culture within the European cultural environment is supported by the *mise-en-scène* in the film. As explained regarding individual identity as part of cultural identity, make-up is a primary element of *mise-en-scène*. This is visible in the kohl applied to the children's eyes when the Chatterjee family performs certain cultural rituals. In India, there is a culture of applying kohl to the eyes, known as *kajal* or *surma*. According to Indian belief, *kajal* protects against the evil eye. Some believe that it can also protect the eyes from disease. However, in European culture, with its high attention to health, the use of makeup on babies and children is considered dangerous based on health realities and facts. This clash between specific cultural beliefs and modernity remains unresolved without open-mindedness and mutual respect.

Another supporting *mise-en-scène* element is dialogue. Feeding food using hands in Indian culture signifies an Ayurvedic concept; using five fingers to eat means placing the five elements that energize the food and help maintain *prana* balance. This contradicts the 'hygienic' standards of European culture. A dialogue excerpt where Mrs. Chatterjee explains this cultural clash is as follows:

Lawyer: "You have to change your lifestyle. I will handle the cultural difference issues, like feeding by hand, sleeping together, and applying kohl."

Mrs. Chatterjee: "Are they crazy? A mother feeds her own child because her hands are blessed by God. Everyone (in India) knows that."

In the first court scene in Norway, another dialogue reiterates this Indian cultural clash, delivered by the lawyer for Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee:

Lawyer: "Different cultures, different customs. It is a tradition to feed children by hand in India. Mothers like to apply kohl to their children's faces to ward off evil. Please look, this is not a crime, it is merely a cultural difference. Diversity does not divide our society. It enriches it. Let us embrace that."

The dialogs show there are cultural clashes in the film which makes characters come to disagreement and negotiations of actions and meanings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the description and analysis presented above, the author posits that an individual ingrained with a specific culture—which has nurtured them since childhood through physical and external processes—will form a distinct embodiment of identity. This is evident in the case of Mrs. Chatterjee, who possesses a very strong character of cultural identity as an Indian, manifesting as identity as being. When Mrs. Chatterjee relocates to a place with a different culture, a failure in the adaptation process occurs. The cultural clash between the previously ingrained culture and the new one causes the cultural identity as a process—or identity as becoming—to not materialize effectively. Adaptation by the individual as a minority is essential when such cultural clashes arise that may incite internal or external conflicts, as it is exceedingly difficult to alter the culture prevailing within the majority environment. This adaptation process does not imply the erasure of one's own cultural identity, but rather the ability to position oneself more appropriately within conducive opportunities and situations.

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