

Film Analysis: Amrit Rao (MLA Style)

Name, instructor, course number and title, and date on left margin, double-spaced

Title centered

Introductory paragraph provides background and context for the discussion

Reader-based stance connects the story of the writer's parents to the Indian diaspora and "brain drain" of the next paragraph

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The Indian Diaspora in Hindi Cinema

My parents are a testament to the fact that America is the land of opportunity. As schoolchildren in India, my mother and father worked hard on their assignments. My father was admitted to the elite Indian Institute of Technology, where the acceptance rate was less than two percent, while my mother, who had moved to the United States, won a full scholarship to her college. After graduation, my father left India to earn his PhD in America. Within ten years, my parents had bought their first house, and by age fifty my father had been named "Engineer of the Year" by a trade magazine.

My parents, like many Indians, have earned success in the West. Although India's competitive environment gave them their work ethic, the United States and other Western countries continue to reap the benefits of this homegrown diligence. American graduate schools and corporations take many of India's most educated citizens. During the high-tech boom, for example, more U.S. H1B visas were issued to people from India than from any other country in the world (Conway and Stone 36).

In recent years, the "brain drain" of educated workers from India has grown. But the phenomenon has been taking place for decades. In 1980, more than ninety percent of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) graduates left India for the West (Swani 72). And many Indians who amass wealth abroad fail to give back to their motherland. For example, Kanwal Rekhi, an Indian-born

1"

1/2"

Rao 1

Marginal annotations indicate **MLA-style formatting** and **effective writing**.

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008).

multimillionaire now living in the United States, has denounced what he calls “handouts to India” and argued that India must help itself. His way of giving back to the country of his birth has been to contribute to IIT--whose graduates overwhelmingly move abroad--and to a group of Indo-American engineers (Rekhi). Successful Indians like Rekhi thus actively encourage the “brain drain” rather than invest in India’s future.

Not surprisingly, many Indians resent the achievements of their country’s citizens who live abroad. They see the mass emigration of India’s most educated workers as a stain on their country’s reputation and a threat to its future. Many Indians who remain in their homeland feel increasingly suspicious of nonresident Indians, known as NRIs, perhaps because NRIs tend to be far wealthier than Indians at home. Whatever the causes of these suspicions, however, the Indian-NRI divide has percolated up through popular culture, where it is now playing out in Bollywood films.

Bollywood, as the Indian film industry is known, produces “the most-seen movies in the world” and dominates Indian popular culture (Kabir 1). Therefore, the industry’s take on the status of NRIs is significant. One recent Bollywood blockbuster that addresses the NRI question uses Indian-born and American-born characters to suggest that a Western lifestyle will lead to weakened family ties and disgraceful behavior; the filmmakers appear to be trying either to discourage resident Indians from moving to the West or encourage those abroad to return home.

In Subhash Ghai’s film *Pardes* (“Foreign Land”), an NRI named Kishorilal (Amrish Puri) travels to India for the first time in ten years. Penniless when he emigrated to the West, Kishorilal is returning a very rich man. While visiting a childhood friend, he

Header on each page includes last name and page number

Supports “brain drain” claim

Narrows focus to the debate represented in Indian popular culture

Leads into discussion of hit film that deals with the issue

Provides overview of the film’s plot

arranges a marriage between his own son, born and raised in the United States, and his friend's daughter, a sweet and traditionally dressed girl living with her large extended family on a rural Indian estate. "What we NRIs need are girls like yours,"¹ he explains, implying that those who have left India need the stabilizing influence of a resident Indian's morals and traditions--and making an implicit comparison with the immoral women of the West.

While Kishorilal wants to bring Indian values to his Westernized son, the local children beg Kishorilal to take them to America. Concerned, the millionaire changes his Western clothing for a traditional *kurtha* and sings, "I have seen London, Paris, and Japan. . . . After all of this, I still know that India is the best." The verses are in Hindi, but when he reaches the chorus, Kishorilal sings in English, "I love India. I love my India."

The nationalistic overtones of this scene are obvious: many resident Indians dream of going to America and getting rich, and here is a millionaire NRI confessing (in both Hindi and English) that India will always be closest to his heart. Indian landmarks like the Red Fort are shown during the song, adding to the hard-sell atmosphere. The song, which appears as a motif throughout the film, may aim to inspire longing--or guilt--in NRIs as well as patriotism in resident Indians. During *Pardes's* smash theatrical release, this song in particular "had the audience on its feet," notes Madhu Jain (307).

As soon as Kishorilal persuades his friend to consent to an arranged marriage between their children, he calls his American-born son, Rajiv. Here the filmmakers contrast Western rebelliousness with

¹ Translations are taken from subtitles throughout unless otherwise noted.

Includes quotations from the film (which cannot include parenthetical page numbers)

Uses text-based stance to analyze the film's images and symbols of nationalism

Footnote offers additional information

Indian filial piety, a concept repeated throughout *Pardes*. While the daughter, Ganga (Mahima Chaudhary), accepts her father's choice, the arrogant Rajiv (Apoorva Agnihotri) does all he can to prevent age-old Indian tradition from hindering his bachelor lifestyle. In order to persuade Rajiv to marry Ganga, Kishorilal must enlist the help of his "Little Master," his foster son Arjun.

Unlike Rajiv, Arjun was born and raised in India. Brought to America by Kishorilal five years earlier, after the death of his parents, he has proven an able manager of Kishorilal's affairs. Arjun (Shahrukh Khan, one of Bollywood's biggest stars) is also a successful musician and the author of the "I Love India" song. He demonstrates the Indian ideal of filial piety and respect, putting his foster father's interests before his own. In one scene, for example, he walks out on a journalist interviewing him about his musical career simply because Kishorilal pages him. He also plans to return to India after making his fortune so that he can dedicate his life to helping the poor, a stark contrast with those successful NRIs who rarely give back to India.

Arjun takes Rajiv to India to help fulfill Kishorilal's wishes that Rajiv marry Ganga. Arjun recognizes the value of a beautiful girl from an Indian village who trusts her parents and her traditions, and he and Ganga become fast friends. He acts as a translator of Indian culture for Rajiv, who is annoyed and mystified by Ganga's ways. In one scene, he explains to his foster brother that young Indian women do not go out in the fields alone with men for private conversations. Then he translates Western culture for Ganga's parents, telling them (by reciting poetry) that they should allow Rajiv and Ganga enough privacy to allow them to get to know each other. With Arjun as dedicated go-between, the marriage plans

Contrast between
the two young
men elaborated

move forward. In fact, in spite of Rajiv's poor showing when he meets Ganga--his allergies act up, and he insults the bride at their first meeting--Arjun does such a good job of portraying Rajiv as an ideal groom that Ganga is still willing to marry him. Later, when Ganga finds Rajiv's stash of cigarettes and confronts Arjun, asking what else Rajiv may be hiding from her, Arjun admits that Rajiv smokes but insists that his foster brother has no other vices.

Rajiv then insists that Ganga accompany him to America before the wedding, and her family agrees to let her see the country she will be adopting as her own. When she arrives in California, however, the NRI women in Kishorilal's household sneer at her clothing and provincial ways. Rajiv takes his fiancée to rowdy nightclubs and dance parties--and then ignores her in order to concentrate on his ex-girlfriend. Rajiv, the kind of NRI who makes fun of traditional morals and attitudes, seems to expect Ganga to do the same, or at least not to object to his behavior.

Good-natured, India-loving Arjun, by contrast, tries his best to help Ganga enjoy her new land. He sticks by her side and consoles her when Rajiv is mean. Arjun's loyal devotion to Kishorilal, however, means that Arjun's role as Rajiv's advocate must take precedence over his growing friendship with Ganga. Unfortunately, this means that Arjun must conceal Rajiv's drinking and continued relationship with his Westernized lover. Despite Arjun's efforts, though, Ganga discovers Rajiv's dark side.

The relationship between Ganga and Rajiv finally crashes to a halt during a trip to Las Vegas, where Rajiv attends a friend's kitschy, meaningless wedding. Then, drunk, Rajiv tries to get the chaste Ganga to sleep with him. When she refuses, reminding him that he only has to wait a few more days for the wedding, he rants,

“You bloody Indians start whining and crying when someone mentions the word *sex*, yet you manage to have the world’s largest population! Such hypocrisy!” He compares India to a toilet, and Ganga responds that America is “drug-infested.” Rajiv then tries to rape Ganga, the representative of her country’s virtue, but she fights back physically (knocking him unconscious with a liquor bottle) and escapes his lustful wrath.

The conflict between values reaches its climax

This scene can be interpreted in multiple ways. On the surface it is simply about two characters, a repulsive NRI and a virginal Indian heroine, but the scene--and the characters in general--can also be read allegorically. Rajiv goes out of his way to insult his future bride, with whom he has no real connection and for whom he has no respect; he has little interest in her if she is unwilling to throw her traditional ways aside. If Rajiv is a representation of the corrupt West (or of corrupt NRIs), and Ganga represents pure and traditional India, then their struggle suggests that the West is taking advantage of India’s values (a respect for education and hard work) and resources (its workers) for selfish reasons, a situation the film sees as reprehensible.

Introduces various ways of reading or interpreting the film’s key scene

Protagonists in Hindi films typically have luck on their side, and Arjun is no different. Miraculously, he finds Ganga at a train station. Although he wants her to see Kishorilal and explain, she insists that she has taken a vow never to go back. Arjun sees that his duty is to take her back to India to her family. Rajiv pursues his unwanted bride and his foster brother because he is unwilling to let anyone else have Ganga and, as he starkly tells a friend, “because I’m bad.” Kishorilal, enraged at Arjun’s apparent treachery, also travels to India to settle the score.

Eventually, the hero Arjun (after suffering a terrible beating and

confessing that he loves Ganga but will not pursue her out of respect for his foster father and Ganga's parents) delivers a moving oration in which he denounces the acts of Indo-Americans like his foster brother Rajiv. "These sons of India are sons, yes--Indians, no!" he exclaims. His speech and Ganga's convincing demonstration that Rajiv has treated her shabbily convince Kishorilal that Rajiv has been too tainted by Western values to deserve such a gem. Instead, he decides that Arjun, the "good son" who loves India and respects traditions and parents, should marry the pure Ganga.

Arjun's speech practically strips away the cultural citizenship of first-generation NRIs, and the screenplay of *Pardes* implies that they deserve nothing less. The characterization of the American-born Indian throughout the film is that of a spoiled and sinful brat who deserves Arjun's reprimand. The filmmakers, it seems, can imagine no worse insult than to insist that Rajiv is not really Indian. Arjun, on the other hand, has managed to live in the West without being polluted by Western values. His triumph is a victory for India, which wins the metaphorical onscreen battle to demonstrate that its values are purer and finer than those of the West.

While *Pardes* brought Indian audiences to their feet, many NRI teenagers see such characterizations of NRIs as a form of defamation. We all know that India, as seen in *Pardes* and countless other films, is the most spiritual of lands, and when Western children are shown as preoccupied with external sources of pleasure, it reflects badly on our mini-community. It is as if Bollywood writers want to warn resident Indians that their children will end up selfish and "bad" if they leave the moral security of India.

The conflict is resolved in favor of homegrown Indian values

Presents an alternate view of the film

In the end, of course, the deserving Arjun gets his Ganga, and the families--including the NRI Kishorilal and his American-dwelling foster son--are reconciled. The audience understands that Arjun and Ganga plan to remain in India, their true homeland. In light of Bollywood's stress on NRI-India relations, this ending can be viewed as a conciliatory gesture on behalf of India to NRIs who felt that they had to leave for economic reasons. The filmmakers appear to suggest that India will welcome its NRIs back with open arms. This, after all, is the ultimate situation India is working toward--having successful NRIs move back home.

Conclusion focuses on how the film relates to India's attempts to reach out to NRIs and reverse the "Indian diaspora" of the title

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