

# A study of Postcolonial perspectives in select Bollywood films: 'Hindi Medium' and 'English Vinglish.'

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**ABSTRACT:** Bollywood transitional mechanism fosters an unconventional approach to comprehend the postcolonial impact on the subcontinent. Persistently Bollywood has observed films obsessed with western culture and is almost always under scrutiny with Western civilization as the parallel. If we evaluate the movie above, we realize that the main characters are obsessed with English's oppressors' language. Bollywood films 'Hindi Medium' and 'English Vinglish' are the epitome of the Eurocentric impact on oriental people. These films are seminal for postcolonial studies. While reading these audio/visual texts, the films can be situated in a postcolonial framework; however, it is difficult to trace the text's specific perspectives through the characters of Rani and Shashi. Therefore, I have selected this concept as a research topic. The Postcolonial impact on the protagonist of Bollywood films "Hindi Medium" and "English Vinglish" formulate the core tenets of their Eurocentric perception of the world.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theory has struggled to cement its position as an essential archetype in film studies. The postcolonial theory initially transpired from the comparative literature and communication department. Despite the numerous intersections, postcolonial theory is yet to be explicitly foregrounded as a primary concern for film production. However, there are multiple intersections between the postcolonial theory and film studies compared to previous contributions. Both theories were introduced at the end of 1970, after the advent of semiotic theory and poststructuralist school of thought. Both the departments advocate the representation of cultures and social ethos of a topic selected. These representations imply how a language, be it cinematic or otherwise, depicts reality as discursive and mediated and thus influenced by the power relation. An instance could be the phenomenon of the gendered gaze by Laura Mulvey and her notion of being ogled. Moreover, it also applies to the screening and representation of marginalized bodies on-screen. Despite their various genealogies,

it is imperative to combine postcolonial theory and film to comprehend the visual medium's function. To inherently hegemonize, the need for critical appraisal and a deconstructive approach towards postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory has critically attributed to reiterating the Other's depiction, adhering to the enduring stereotypes regarding living, ambivalence in society, and cultural differences. It implies updated interventions on how visual portrayals are created under the subjugate boundaries between East and West, Europe, and the rest of the world. Select films for this paper are accommodating in revealing how a visual medium conveys expertise essential to be deciphered. For instance, modern postcolonial theorist Homi. K Bhabha contributed heavily in updating our perception towards the production of a film. His ambivalence theory and mimicry theory help us understand how films represent the legitimization of colonial powers' Occident's domination. In contemporary times, we have moved far away from imperialization. However, Western countries' neo-colonial impact and culture, lifestyle, and language are omnipresent. A film's characters are often unconsciously depicted as vehicles of ideological connotations that cement imperial racial taxonomies and colonial epistemologies. Such primitive representation of oriental citizens trying to mimic Occident culture and being fixated with their language reinforced colonial presence in Oriental countries like India. This paper attempts to study the postcolonial presence and Eurocentric perception of the world through the protagonist's medium in select Bollywood films. Both the films have a female lead protagonist obsessed with the colonial language English and its stature associated with the English language.

## Colonial hangover for English in 'Hindi Medium'

The film portrays Saba Qamar and Irfan Khan as a young couple that tussles to settle in a societal framework whereby the yardstick for a

citizen's knowledge is based on their English language command. In one of his monologues in the film, Irfan Khan says, "My life is Hindi, but my wife is English." He attempts to keep up with his wife's fanatic fixation with English medium education and her tussle to admit their daughter to a modern-day private school. The film is a subtle jibe at the current hi-fi educational institutions and eminent and didactic message. The social distinction is also embroidered in the film as the middle-class family thrives on establishing themselves amid the high-class society. The issue related to admission to a private school is the core tenet of the plot. It transparently depicted the Indian struggle and dependency on the English language for prosperous existence in today's society—the class struggle among the Indian community. English language over the years has become the foremost factor that resolves middle-class aspirations in India. Since British rule, English has enjoyed a privileged position in the country. People who were fluent in the language were deployed in the British government. That has laid the foundation for Indian ideology whereby the monopolistic path to glory is through the mediums of colonized language. When the Britons vacated India, there was a movement to instigate Hindi as the national language. However, with significant opposition from the South, including the horrifying sight of people setting themselves ablaze in Tamil Nadu, the plan was dropped, essentially divided by language, unwilling to compromise on Hindi, the requirement for a common language for the country, and English. Since the government's official work was done in English, and until privatization and globalization in the 90s, the people's primary employer was the government, knowing English had a huge incentive.

After the advent of globalization, Indians became an extremely bankable commodity in the job market. Most multinational companies work with English as their official language and once again. English as the medium of instruction has never seen a decline since then, given the crucial role in getting a job. Therefore, English medium and speaking good English have been a very defining aspect of India's middle class. It is viewed as something that bifurcates the middle class, white collars that separates them from the blue collars. The foundation for this division was laid by Lord Macaulay. He paved the foundation stone of the Western System of Education on the Indian terrain. He opened the door of Western education and the English language as a precursor for wisdom. According to Macaulay, the only sensible way towards civilized living was through English and

European learning systems. By demolishing gurukuls and revamping the Indian way of learning, Macaulay successfully captured Indian minds. To date, his vision is concrete and, in fact, solidified unconsciously. In the film, we observe Saba's frantic quest for an English model of education. She was clearly of the opinion that, if her daughter missed out on English education, it would imply a lifetime of misery and social ostracization. She will not fit in Indian society and will have to face the direst of existential crisis recursions.

### **The linguistic dilemma in 'English Vinglish.'**

In another Bollywood "English Vinglish," the problem of ambivalence in the Indian mindset is explored. It is a film that narrates a story about a woman named Sashi. She struggles throughout to establish her identity. The problem again is her toil with the English language. The film's setup is such that the protagonist is forced to feel underwhelmed in her own culture and fails to master English. Sashi has a nuclear family with a husband, son, and daughter. All the family members humiliate her from different walks of life for being unable to speak English. Sashi herself doubts her identity and felt inferior most of the time. This social duality regarding a foreign language shaped as the greatest nightmare for Sashi's life. Without dilating upon the historical causes responsible for this current state of affairs, the film nevertheless clarifies that, within the 21st century, English is inextricably knotted with the world of commerce. Dynamic catering business run out of her home and patronized by fellow Hindi speakers—is deemed illegitimate by her husband. The duality of cultures and languages is explicitly portrayed when the family visits America. The domestic tension is imminent on the husband's face when Sashi attempts to address an audience in a marriage ceremony. Being well aware of the fact that Sashi's English is haphazard, the husband feels ashamed. These scenes in the film distinctly reinforce the domestic tension, social expectations, and cultural inferiority based on a language. If one observes the scene from a different spectacle, it can be concluded that instead of Sashi, the pressure could have been absorbed by the audiences that they are not apparent with Hindi. Nevertheless, that is never the case, primarily because nations from the orient have tried to mimic the cultures from Occident for a very long time. The process has been internalized to the extent that most colonized countries refrain from celebrating their language and culture and instead rely upon foreign rituals and languages.

The film depicts how Indians have succinctly molded themselves in elitist shoes based

on command over a language. Ambivalence in culture and linguistic prejudice lead to Sashi's internalization of Eurocentric perception of society. Gradually she begins taking English language classes in America amid attending her sister's wedding ceremony. Her passion for the language was not out of her fondness for the English language but a coping mechanism for social status. Sashi found herself mimicking people who were influenced by the western cultures so much so that they start looking down upon their own. The protagonist kept figuring out ambivalence as a result of her unresolved identity.

### Comparison

Both the select films' English Vinglish' and 'Hindi Medium' protagonists struggle with the English language and provide a pedestal position. The role of a foreign language gains immense essence in their lives. Their perception evolves as the films progressed, but their desire to instill the English language and English learning mode is overtly evident. Mina and Sashi comprehend that learning English in complete isolation and running away from one's own culture and language is not wise. The national dependence on a colonial language can not be justified by any means. English today has become the language for the masses, but I see it as the residue of a horrifying oppressive past. English is a colonial souvenir that people have failed to decompose. Although English enjoys its fair share of global prowess, a prosperous existence in the absence of the colonial language is a possibility which Indian has undoubtedly refused. To ensure quality education and secure a stable job, English is the foremost precursor, and I do not condone the elite status given to India's English language. However, I believe the system of education needs a revamp. One should not feel inferior in one's own culture. This duality and ambivalence of identity should be eradicated. English language should be an addition to a person's skill set instead of basing someone's knowledge based on the tongue. Mimicry can be unintentionally subversive, and colonized citizens hardly realize that he is undermining robust systems. The structure of values that accords English an eminent status within a multilingual world is an effect of global capitalism.

India's local languages are essentially fungible, an implication that underscores how English Vinglish is predominantly concerned with English's function within the nation's sociolinguistic landscape. 'English Vinglish' and 'Hindi Medium' capture the ubiquitous but unevenly distributed English presence in India.

Crystallizing the tensions produced by globalization depicts an uneasy co-existence between English and Hindi in middle-class, urban homes in Pune and Delhi. From the start, the film foregrounds the personal difficulties that arise due to difficulty in speaking, illustrating how English education has historically been the masses' language.

### Contextualizing Eurocentrism in India

Unthinking Eurocentrism focuses on Eurocentrism and multiculturalism in popular culture. It is written in the passionate belief that an awareness of the intellectually debilitating effects of the Eurocentric legacy is indispensable for comprehending not only contemporary media representations but even contemporary subjectivities.

Courses in universities stress the history of "Western" civilization, with the more liberal universities insisting on the token study of "other" civilizations. Furthermore, even "Western" civilization is usually taught without reference to the central role of European colonialism within capitalist modernity. So embedded is Eurocentrism in everyday life, so pervasive that it often goes unnoticed. The residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the media, engendering a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples.

Eurocentrism has sanitized Western history, meanwhile patronizing and even demonizing the non-West to a large extent; the perception for Western nations is that they are carrying out the noblest achievements - science, progress, humanism. This white man syndrome, however, suggests its deficiencies, real or imagined. Since all political struggle in the postmodern era necessarily passes through the simulacra realm of mass culture, the media are central to any discussion of multiculturalism. The contemporary media shape identity; indeed, many argue that they now exist close to the very core of identity production. In a transnational world typified by the global circulation of images and sounds, goods, and peoples, media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity and communal belonging. By facilitating an engagement with distant peoples, the media "deterritorialize" the process of imagining communities. Previously The National Commission on Education referred to English as 'a library language' and a language essentially required for higher education. Over six decades, this library language has cemented its position as the language

of popular demand in school education and the language required for higher education over the past six decades. The changing role of English in the Indian context is reflected in the education system and its mockery in the select films of Bollywood. The curriculum planning and implementation of the English language, which was destined to become the third language, took the primitive center stage. It is now being done from grade one in almost all the states (NCERT, 2006a; Meganathan, 2011). It has become the general second language across the country. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) – 2005 (NCERT, 2005) observed in its position paper on Teaching of English in the new socio-political situation that 'the introduction of English is no longer an academic question, it is a political response to people's demand.' (NCERT, 2006a, p.1).

#### **Roots of English obsession**

'The Story of English in India' (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2006) travels across India's English language journey and its divergent dimensions. Growth and development of English in India, to redefine the aims and goals of English teaching in post-independent India and the various phases of development and spread of English in India, reflects how the English language has been the divider for masses into categories of elite and non-elite. The language has become a precursor for all commerce as well as the service sector. The dissemination phase of English has been through emotional and conflicted Indians' journey for AngrezHatao (Remove Britons) to concede English as a status symbol. English Next India (Graddol, 2010) unveils how a country with its borrowed framework of education has paved a platform for English language education and English as a precursor for learning. The considerable demand, actual or overstated, could not be catered to with its diverse contexts and categories in terms of resources for schooling and school systems. How English language education needs to be planned for complementing and supplementing Indian languages in a multilingual country and meeting the social demand for upward mobility is seen as a significant challenge given the diversity in curriculum planning and schooling. Typology of schooling and the quality of English language teaching could be seen from the determinants of English language environment in schools, the English language teacher and her proficiency and pedagogical processes (Kurien, 1997; Nag-Arulmani, 2000, 2005; NCERT 2006b). It creates hierarchies in the way the schools' deliver' English language education. Indian

obsession with English and the massive divide between the masses can be traced back to the dimension of India's caste hierarchy. Historically, access to the English language has been exclusive for elite casts, which Ramanathan (1999, 2005) finds through institutional education practices. Students who belong to the lower section of society (SC ST and OBC) have been socialized in Grades K-12 and contend with English at the tertiary level. Illaiah (2013, p.6) emphasizes that the English language for S.C. is a right, "Within 200 years of its introduction in India it (English) has now become the language for roughly about a hundred million people. Eventually, expansion in upcoming years will be several folds faster in comparison to earlier times. It has become a language for mundane use for several million upper-middle classes and rich. The poor and the productive masses have a right to learn the language of administration and global communication. However, the distribution of resources and the imbalanced equity in the education system have eluded a significant section of Indian society from English education. People are still chasing the language as a means of learning and bridge the gap between the two distinguished classes in India.

The demand for the language is revealed in attitudes and loyalties. Hohenthal (1998; 2003), in domain analysis and attitudes towards the English language, found that English is the language of formal communication, and it is becoming a language for information and communication for certain sections of the society. Though there is a strong tendency to see one's language as an instrument for regional identity with the regional language and national identity with Hindi, English is considered the language essential for knowledge, scientific advancement, and development. In his understanding of English language education and Indian nationalism, Dash (2009) argues that the vernacular in India is a site for the production of power and privilege as English. Nationalist characterization of the vernacular is as problematic as the democratic other of English in the contexts of caste and class and the complexity of both the vernacular and English in cultivating elitism in India. Learners at the secondary stage express the preferences for English as a language and as a medium for instrumental reasons. English as an international tool for expression is felt in the mundane use of English in academic and social settings upper-middle1; Hussain, 2012).

Social attitudes towards the English language in the context of Bihar indicates that the demand, both overstated and real one, for the

language is very positive for it is assumed to be instrumental for personal progress and national economic development, for the workforce, social life, identity, and social status and higher education (British Council, 2016). Attitudes towards the English language in any other part of India would have shown similar findings. The economic value of the English language and the returns to the English language as a skill for employability and a life skill have been felt during the last two decades. "The complementarity (i.e., mutual benefits) between English skills and education appears to have strengthened over time." The more educated young workers earn a premium for English skills, whereas older workers across all education groups earn a premium with or without English (Azam, Chin & Pradesh, 2010).

Although left to the school systems in the states, the introduction of English as a language felt to be posing a threat to the tribal, minor, and minority languages (Mohanty, 2006; 2008; 2010a & 2010b). Learning through one's language as a linguistic right and harmonious language learning has been stressed for sound pedagogical practices (Mallikarjun, 2004). Implications of English introduction without facilities are felt on acquiring the languages (Mukund, 2009). However, the preference for the language could not be made to wait till a qualitatively sound practice is introduced. While taking stock of the present situation of English language teaching in the country, Meganathan (2013) found the problems and constraints that the English language teaching-learning faces in curriculum design, materials development, the English language teacher, and the hegemonic role English over the Indian languages. National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 makes a case for ensuring resources for teaching English as a language during the formative years to provide quality language learning. Language remains a severe academic, pedagogic, and policy concern (in terms of the number of languages to be learned, medium of instruction in school education (Kidwai, 2016).

'Uncritical promotion' of the English language in the belief that the language is in demand is undesirable for cooperative language learning and cognitive development. Researchers (e.g., Mohanty, 2010; Phillipson, 2006, 2008; Kangas, 2000) believe that the English language acts as 'a killer language' in these situations. While the demand for English language and English medium education from every quarter makes the language a 'neutral language' in terms of ethnicity, religion, linguistic groups, region, and 'the language that unifies India, it has become a

medium to maintain inequalities in society' (Baik & Shim, 1995, pp.123-124). As Anderson (2012) asserts, "the language remains inaccessible to those who are disadvantaged because of their economic situation, their caste, or both" (p28). This is supported by conclusions such as 'English teaching in school is built around establishing the intimidating power of English' and 'English is a language that allows a certain social and economic mobility; an access to an entire culture that one may aspire to' in an analysis of textbook from a gender perspective (Bhog, Mullick, Bharadwaj & Sharma, 2009 p.48).

## II. CONCLUSION

English remains ingrained in India and popularly used by India's elite, bureaucrats, and urban spheres. It is particularly essential in its written form since official versions of almost all documents are considered authentic when drafted in English. However, in the spoken dimension, English is relatively less prevalent than other official languages. At the same time, Hindi serves as a dialect for most of the country except its northeast and the deep South. It should be noted that Hindi is not the official language for India, and English, on the other hand, is merely spoken and understood by 10% of India's total population. English with the elite and its prowess agency has led to a frenzy for English-medium education across India. Scholars of the English language in the country argue that the language will serve as the foundation for economic growth and will guide the empowerment of millions of Indian citizens. India's frantic fixation with English holds restrains its economic development and quality of education. It is statistically impossible for people to learn and master English at home in a country where most citizens do not speak English and rarely engage in conversation in English. Thus, English will go on being the province of a minority for India's society. While most Indians will continue to engage in conversations in their native languages in every facet of life, most written work in the country is still ventured in English. As a corollary, elite Indians who have had access to the language historically create a massive gap between the masses. The language is alien to most of the countrymen, yet English is on zenith. Indians are foreseen aspiring for an English model of education and western style of living in the postcolonial era. As a corollary, most Indians who use their native language are cut off from modern discourse and social standing.

The shortcoming of intellectual discourse in India's language diaspora has resulted in their

underdevelopment and underutilization of human resources. India's obsession with a foreign language is so umteen that it denies the average fellow Indian the knowledge that non-English speakers worldwide have the same caliber as those compatible with the language. The premeditated divide also affects the upcoming generation Z. The Internet has hardly managed reached 1/10th of India's population due to the lack of Indian language content. Complete isolation from native languages is a mistake. Since mastering a new language is a difficult task not easily accomplished by everyone, using that new language as the medium of instruction at the outset encourages emphasis on rote memory and can lead to intellectual sterility. Although the Sadler Commission believed that English in India was indispensable, it still considered the native language's primary importance. The educational policy has shown some signs of improvement shortly by introducing native language to students. Learners now have the facility to learn concepts in their select subjects in their native tongue or English. It is a positive step towards a decolonized modern society.

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