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In Search of Agency and Self: Mapping Gendered Conjugal Violence in Diasporic Diegesis

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“In some cases, wives are abandoned in India: the man marries her, takes the dowry, and never returns. In others, the woman is taken overseas, abused and deserted... (Jain).”

Owing to globalisation, technological advancements and the digital revolution, marriage as an institution has experienced profound changes over a period of time. Mostly superficial, these changes don't impact the core construct of marriage which still remains in a phallogentric hold that controls and regulates a woman's life and identity without being 'a subject of inquiry' (Singh 55). Even in the diasporic space, where mostly 'transnational marriages' (Charsley 14; Charsley and Shaw 335; Gardner 374) or 'international marriages' (Toyota 1) occur, a conjugal union between the members of a diaspora and of its homeland (Charsley 31) witnesses sham marriages and leave behind a complex site of domestic violence intersecting with other concerns such as forced marriage, economic exploitation, stark cultural dissonance amongst others. This article locates the 'spectrum of arranged marriage in British Asian diaspora' through an intersectional reading of select British/Asian cinematic texts: *Provoked* (2006), *Namastey London* (2007), *Cocktail* (2012), *Queen* (2013). A detailed analysis of these films, essentially about Indians migrating to London as a consequence of marriage, argues that marital relationships in the diasporic space are rife with dialectics of conflict. Caught between the vortex of homeland ethos and foreign aspirations, tradition and modernity, dependence and independence they are unable to break the walls of the socio-cultural conditioning they have been raised with. At the same time, they also mark a paradigmatic shift in the agency of women and their attempt to conjure a space of resistance beyond the institution of marriage, from the limits of domesticated liberation to one of self-identification/realization. Thus, this article also attempts at revisiting these works as totems from the past to address a problem, drastically present in experiences.

In the Indian context, marriage mobility is one of the primary contributors to the British Diaspora. Data reveals that the largest ethnonational group in London with a population of

around 542857 is the British Indians. However, the primary purpose of getting married has witnessed a slow but conspicuous drift from the choice of a partner with the same language, culture and other related practices that go into our day to day “lived experience” (Burch 133; Merleau-Ponty xxvii). The transformation redefines the discourse of marriage as conceived from time immemorial within an Indian context. The agency hardly gets rendered for women as they are kept in the dark concerning the newly emerging semantics of overseas marriages. One of the defining factors concerning conjugal communions abstracts the narrative (in the name of trust and purity) and epitomizes the sanctity of the institution. The inadequacy of the trust factor gets reflected in and mitigated by the issuance of the *Marriages to Overseas Indians a guidance booklet* from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in April 2019. There has been a continued suspicion that has led to the reformation in border controls by the government especially when it comes to arranged marriages. In 2011, the UK government introduced a set of specific questions in their visa application form to ensure the genuineness of these marriages and the ‘free will of both parties involved’ (Pande). The National Commission for Women has reported the escalating growth of episodes related to the overseas abandonment of women between 2017 and 2021 and received around 2846 complaints (Jain).

Based on the life of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, *Provoked* (dir. Jag Mundhra, 2006) is a cinematic adaptation of her autobiography, *The Circle of Light* (1997). The film is significant because it not only focuses on Kiranjit’s (Aishwarya Rai) experience of domestic violence but also her resistance and survival. She remained in an abusive marriage with Deepak Ahluwalia for ten years but unable to bear the severe violence and torture she was subjected to, one day she burns him alive while he was in sleep. Such tolerance or bearing of domestic violence is not driven by economic dependence alone but it is largely impacted by the ‘concept of honour known as *sharam* or shame that underlies the South Asian cultural belief of the female maintaining her *izzat*’ (Peart 32). She is then convicted and imprisoned but in jail which is otherwise a space that binds you, Kiranjit discovers the importance of a life where agency and self-worth are valued and freedom becomes an uncompromising condition of existence. In the film, towards the end Kiranjit says:

“My culture is like my blood, flowing through every vein of my body. It is the culture in

which I was born, which sees the woman as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour, izzat, she stopped to endure many kinds of oppression and pain in silence. A woman is a toy, a play-thing, broken at will, stuck together at will. For ten years I lived a life of beatings and degradation and no-one noticed. I came out of my husband's jail and entered the jail of the law. It is here, at last, that I have found a kind of freedom (*Provoked* 2006).”

The case of Regina vs. Ahluwalia (1992) led to an alteration in British Law redefining ‘provocation’. It was believed that women who faced brutal domestic violence or abuse, physical or mental torture, sexual or psychological violence are prone to suffer from a mental disorder called ‘Battered woman’s syndrome’. Being in this situation women lose the stability to be their noble self and can get triggered or provoked when their tolerance subsides. Following Ahluwalia’s case, the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 abolished the defence of provocation and replaced it with loss of control, which “better reflects women’s reality while not being lenient on men who claim that they lost self-control due to adultery or in anger” (Baksi).

Similarly, in *Namaste London* (*Greetings London*, dir. Vipul Amrutlal Shah, 2007) Manmohan Malhotra (Rishi Kapoor) is embarrassed by his wife, Bebo Malhotra (Nina Vadia). The associated power dynamics within their marriage reflects a clearer tilt towards Manmohan as Bebo is expected to comply, surrender and face the accusations when it comes. Such is the anxiety of that mentally violent space that she educates her daughter well, encourages her to be friends with the British and naturally grow up to be one of them and not face a similar situation like her, loaded with embarrassment and patriarchal domination. This dystopian horror of institutionalised domination gets aggravated even when she is constantly juggling to fit in as she states, “ You brought me to London and told me that this is our new home because you were ashamed to be seen with me in public” (*Namaste London*). Additionally, the film is also a subversive rendition of the woman's position within the sham marriage dynamics and pits the female lead (Katrina Kaif as Jasmeet or Jazz) in search of her identity and ascribes a victim position to Arjun (Akshay Kumar).

One gets a clear reflection of sham marriage in *Cocktail* (dir. Homi Adajania, 2012). In the introductory sequence of the film, Meera Ahuja (Diana Penty), a newly married girl is travelling to London to meet her husband Kunal Ahuja (Randeep Hooda). However, upon arrival she finds

no one waiting for her. By some means, when she finally meets her husband, he abandons her stating that ‘it was a marriage of convenience.’ He married her only for money” (Cocktail 2012) clearly indicating that the dream of a marriage of contentment has the potential to become a nightmare. The other half of that agreement cites Meera’s desire to escape her circumstances in India. This further problematizes the narrative: it questions the notion of convenience which makes the partnership in marriage faulty, constructs the diasporic space as utopian and leaves the position of women as victims drastically compromised.

Of all the cinematic texts mentioned above, *Queen* (dir. Vikas Bahl, 2013) is the most iconoclastic one. *Queen* explicates the idea of the search for self-identity for the female lead within the diasporic space as it emanates her from the shackles of an imminent conjugal bind she fortunately escaped. Vijay Dhingra’s (Rajkumar Rao) initial cultural dislocation makes his wedding plans with Rani Mehra (Kangana Ranaut) fall apart. The impulsive yet nonconformist reaction of Rani helps her find cognition in her very being as it happened for Meera in *Cocktail* as well. *Queen* ends on an extremely liberating and mature note as the film (de & re)constructs the discourse of the ‘happily ever after’, rendering its female protagonist agency.

In these films, it is evident that the British diaspora has been dominated by a conjugal influx or marriage mobility in which women dominate the role of the migrants. In the event of globalization and transnational politics, as the digital media platforms are slowly migrating into the realm of redefining family, reconstructing love, reshaping relationships thus reconfiguring life as we know it, the institution of conjugal communion within the diasporic narrative of ‘transnational’/‘international’ scope still witnesses sham marriages and leaves behind a complex site of domestic violence. The question of agency is crucial in marriage as it promotes the idea of individual autonomy. Women’s narratives of transnational marriage as reflected in the selected films constitute spaces for women negotiating with their identity and agency in the British diaspora where they have travelled on a dependent visa. The selected cinematic works can be coupled into two chronological segments that are from 2006-2007 and 2012-2013. This conscious segregation allows us to identify the diasporic space both as confining and liberating respectively. It’s the revelation of the spatial non-binary that aids us to locate the postmodern subjectivity of a woman as the location of marriage and diaspora intersects. And she, as a

mediated subject as identified by Michel Foucault (Aguilar 41), “chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty” (Beauvoir 643).

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Filmography

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Queen. Directed by Vikas Bahl, Viacom 18 Motion Pictures & Phantom Films, 2013