



Problematizing Smith's Indianness in the Movie Growing Up Smith (2015)

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Abstract

The focus of this qualitative research is to analyze Smith's dynamic characters in Frank Lotito's *Growing Up Smith* (2015). Biologically born as an Indian boy who is staying in the States with his family, Smith is really mesmerized by American culture. Additionally, he is also obsessed to be an American by trying so hard to imitate some aspects of the culture. By applying Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity, textual analysis, as well as Cultural Studies approach, this paper aims at analyzing how Smith as an Indian diaspora living in the American neighborhood intentionally quotes American cultures as well as negotiates his Indianness.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity; Indian Diaspora; Main Character; Pop Culture; Subjectivity*

Introduction

The issue of cultural identity has been mostly encoded through many forms of pop culture such as novels and films. Some novelists brought the theme of cultural identity in their works such as Hanief Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1996), Lawrence Wright's *Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and Road to 9/11* (2007) to name a few. Referring to the aforementioned works, the problematic aspects of cultural identity in the novels were represented through the intrinsic elements such as characters, setting, plot, and themes. For instance, in Kureishi's *The Black Album*, the Muslim characters of Pakistani descent living in Britain were caught between various ideologies and identities. Since these characters were spatially as well as culturally separated from their 'original homeland', they were caught in such a dilemmatic situation. The first-generation subjects negotiated their identities by being open to the British culture, while the second-generation dreamt of essentially constructing their Pakistanness by revisiting Pakistani's cultures and ideologies even though they were not born in Pakistan (Setyowati, 2018).

The critical questions regarding cultural identity have also been academically discussed by many scholars and theorists. In Stuart Hall's perspective, cultural identity is understood as a way of how we perceive about the self. In addition, identity is also problematic as it is constantly in the process of 'being' and 'becoming' as well as constructed through the form of representation. In other words, Hall rejects the concept of identity as an essential entity that is a consequence of a collective culture. On the contrary, in his article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall argued that:

“Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter to of “becoming” as well as of “being”. It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past, (Hall, 1990)”

He also argued that cultural identity is a never-ending process which is not always determined by culture but rather depending on the position in which it is located.

“...every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists in specificity, on conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armor-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not defined by exclusion. (Hall, 1993)

In addition, Hall would say that cultural identity is always related to representation. In other words, the critical question that arises is how an individual and group of people are represented within a discourse. Hall, then, offered two integral concepts of representation, in one side, it is used as a way of describing the ‘reality’ while in the other side it presents other types of representation which contradicts ‘reality’. In line with Hall, Edward Said suggests that representation is a constructed ‘reality’ which is derived from representation. Therefore, it is important for us to see representation as a collective ‘game’ within tradition, history, and ideology.

In cultural studies perspective, representations are constitutive of the meaning of that which they purport to stand in for. Moreover, it does not only involve correspondence between signs and objects but also creates the representational effect of realism. Intrinsically, the representation is inseparable from questions of power as it has got the potential to provide some kinds of knowledge to exist and exclude other ways of seeing (Barker, 2004).

The issue of cultural identity and how it is represented can be found in Frank Lotito’s *Growing Up Smith* (2015). In his movie, cultural identity issue can be seen in the main character, Smith. This movie tells a story about Smith Bhatnagar, a ten-year-old Indian boy living in America. The time setting was in 1979. Smith is trying so hard to convince everyone that he is originally from India, but like many other immigrants, he is also living in two different worlds. Smith is obsessed to be an all-American boy and mesmerized by the Old West values and lifestyles. In the other side, his father, Bhaaskar really protects his family from adopting Western cultures and so desperately clinging to his Indian values.

This analysis will focus on Smith’s cultural identity as an Indian boy living in the States. Another objective of this paper is to critically elaborate the dynamics of Smith’s character as an immigrant living two different worlds, India and the United States.

Research Methodology

Through textual analysis, this study examines Smith as the dynamic character, originally born as an Indian who is living in the United States. Additionally, some cinematic elements such as the dialog, characterization, as well as the contextual setting will also be the focus of this analysis to see how Smith struggles in the process of cultural assimilation.

This analysis also uses cultural studies approach to reveal how cultural identity cannot be separated from cultural hegemony which constitutes it. Barker (2004) states that cultural studies as a perspective or approach will examine the cultural phenomenon and its relation to power. In addition, it also examines power and culture to see how the representation cannot be politically separated from the cultural hegemony that is being maintained by certain social force.

The concepts of diaspora, hybridity, and subjectivity will also be used to contextualize the problem of cultural identity of the main character. Diaspora is concerned with ideas of travel, migration, scattering displacement, homes and borders. In other words, diasporas are formed as networks comprised of transnational identifications that encompass 'imagined' communities and as such are often engaged in the politics and social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration. As suggested by Gilroy, diaspora refers to involving routes rather than roots; a 'changing same' of the diaspora that involves hybridized cultural forms.

Meanwhile, the concept of hybridity refers to the mixing together of previously discrete cultural elements to create new meanings and identities. In a critical discussion, the concept of hybridity has played a significant role to destabilize the very notion of unchanging culture that has secure locations since hybrids destabilize and blur established cultural boundaries in a process of fusion and creolization (Barker, 2004).

The last concept that will be used in this research is subjectivity. By quoting Michel Foucault, subjectivity is understood as the condition of being a person and/or the process by which we become persons and how we are constituted as subjects and we experience ourselves (Barker, 2004). This means that as a dependent subject, as Foucault argued, we are as an 'effect' of discourse as we are constituted by the subject positions that discourse obliges us to take up.

Discussion

Indian Immigrants in the United States

It is important to contextualize the immigration of Indian to the United States to discuss the cultural assimilation and constructions of Indianness by the subjects. Kurien (2001) stated that immigration from India to the United States occurred during two different historical periods. The first wave occurred between 1899 and 1914 when around 6,800 Indians arrived in California. Most of the Indians were peasants from Punjab province and they took up farming in rural California. The second wave of immigration began due to the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act where immigration was largely family based. People from all over India and from various cultural as well as religious backgrounds. The first Indian immigrants came to the States under the special skills provision of the Act and were thus mostly educated. Most of them were fluent in English and coming from urban backgrounds so that they could have either professional or managerial careers. In addition, this also explains why Indian living in the United States are among the wealthiest and most educated foreign-born groups in the country.

By looking at the time setting of the movie, it is obvious that the family can be said as the Indian immigrants from the second wave as all of the family members can speak English. Beside that, Smith and his older sister, Asha, also have good education.

The Complexities of the Main Character's Cultural Identity: Constructing and Negotiating His Indianness

As an Indian boy living in the United States, Smith has always been interested in Old Western values. He seems to be obsessed to become a 'real' American boy, and he feels thankful of being named Smith by his father, as seen in the following excerpt:

I just wanted to be a good old American boy. And yes, my name is Smith. [indistinct chatter]

You see, my father believed, to pursue the American Dream, you had to have an all-American name. But what my father didn't know, was that "Smith" was a very common American...last name.

He is trying so hard to imitate American cultures, he got all those ideas both from his observation as well as his father;

How doing, Mr. Wilson? (Smith)

My father told me, if you want to get along with Americans,

You should always ask them, "How doing?"

How doing, Swanson family?

(Smith) As for me,

I just wanted to be a good old American boy.

And yes, my name is Smith.

I studied hard to be American. Every Thursday, I watched "Happy Days" "My favorite movie was "Saturday Night Fever." And...I longed to eat all-American food. So, it was time to be a man. Time to take a bite of the American Dream.

The above-mentioned excerpts are in line with what Hall suggests about cultural identity. To become an American boy, Smith has to imitate American habits such as watching American movies, greeting local people with "how doing" phrase, and eating all-American food. Beside that, Smith also doubts himself if he is truly Indian as he openly states that he is not that kind of Indian that is expected by his parents. He also eats chicken which is considered as violation to his belief, Hindu. Consequently, he is punished by his father of doing that. Surprisingly he does not take it as a violent punishment, but rather as a humiliating one.

Smith also does not care about his betrothed, Sharmila, and falls in love with Amy, an American girl. Born as an Indian, Smith was betrothed to Sharmila, an Indian girl by his father. When he is 22, he has to marry her whether or not he likes her. On the contrary, Smith does not seem to care about his engagement with Sharmila and falls in love with Amy.

Another Indianness that Smith fails to construct is when he is hunting to kill animals. Butch, his American neighbor and Amy's father, asks him go hunting animals in the woods. Because he and his Indian family are vegetarians, Smith is strictly not allowed to kill and eat animals. Even though he fails to kill a squirrel, he intentionally wants to do it and this can be said a violation, as seen in the following excerpt:

I am looking outside. You look at the map, please.

Wow, Smith. That's some shootin'.

It's alive. Maybe we can take the bullet out.

No, the bullet went clear through. This guy's a goner.

What have I done? Can we do the prayer? Yeah, we can, uh, we can do the prayer.

Uh...great spirit, mother Earth, father sky, uh... sister tree, brother leaves.

Before you all, we wanna thank this squirrel, this generous squirrel for giving his life so that we may live and learn.

To discuss the construction of Smith's Indianness, the focus of analysis will be on Bhaaskar, Smith's father. In Indian's culture the figure of a father plays an integral role as the head of the family who has an obligation to strictly preserve Indian traditions and heritages. In this case, Smith as the last child of the family, along with his older sister, Asha, have no freedom to be what they want to in life. Smith has to always obey what his father and mother say. He will be granted physical punishments for breaking the rules. As seen in the following excerpt:

In India you take whatever you get.

No questions.

And don't forget your shoes.

Yes, papa.

Just because we live in this country

does not mean we have to become heathens.

I'm sorry I ate animal. I'll never do it again.

One.

(Smith) It was the dreaded Uthak-baithak.

I'm sorry I ate animal. I'll never do it again.

Two.

Punishment reserved for the worst of transgressions.

I'm sorry I ate animal. I'll never do it again.

As the head of the family, Bhaaskar is strictly clinging to his Indian values and belief as a *Hindu*. He punishes Smith to hold his ears and stand by his one foot and bend his body for eating chicken as it is prohibited in his belief. In other words, it seems that giving physical punishment to Smith is a way of preserving Indian values to his son. This can also be understood that cultural hegemony that is represented through Bhaaskar implies what Foucault suggests about subjectivity. In this case, Smith's subjectivity as an Indian boy cannot be free from Indian tradition as he was born and grows up in an Indian family so that he has limited choice to be what he wants as his father plays an important role in controlling his *self*.

In other words, this also resonates what Hall suggests that cultural identity is always in the process of *'being'* and *'becoming'* as Bhaaskar keeps on disciplining Smith to never forget his cultural root, which is India. At the end of the movie, Bhaaskar and his wife feels really angry and disappointed with Smith because he lies to his parents and escapes from home without telling them to cycle miles away to see Amy who moves to her grandma's house. As a consequence, Bhaaskar is very angry with him:

And as for you...

Go ahead, mami, show him the picture.

Patel, this is your daddy and baba.

You remember my parents?

He was three when we moved to Pune, papa.

I know that. You are going to live with them...in Lucknow.

But-but...that's in India.

Yes. Best thing for you, Patel.

Why? Why?

Because he needs to go back and remember the things that you so easily forgot.

Respect, honor, virtue.

It can be inferred from the excerpt that Bhaaskar feels very disappointed about his children. He feels that he has failed as a father to protect his children to respect Indian values. Consequently, he sends Smith to India to live with his parents and study there. He does this all to teach Smith about being an Indian and to shape up his Indianness and reminds what Smith has easily forgotten as an Indian, that is respect honor, and virtue. From this analysis it can be seen that Bhaaskar plays an integral part of constructing Smith's Indianness.

Conclusion

From the analysis, it can be inferred that Smith's Indianness is culturally problematic. Born as an Indian living in the United States, Smith is actually living in two worlds (India and the United States). In one side, Smith is obsessed to be an all American boy, and that is why he is trying so hard to adopt as well as imitate American values such as watching American movies, greeting the local people with *"how doing"* phrase, eating all-American food, and even falling in love with an American girl, Amy. In Hall's perspective about cultural identity, Smith's constructions of American values can be interpreted as the dynamics of his cultural identity which is always in the process of *'being'* and *'becoming'*.

In the other side, Smith's father, Bhaaskar plays an important role in disciplining him to maintain his Indian identity through punishments. Holding a culturally powerful position as a father, Bhaaskar has a privilege to do anything he wants to shape up Smith's Indianness. To keep Smith from keeping adopting American cultures, and to teach to construct his Indianness, he does not even forgive Smith for lying to him and sends him back to Lucknow (a city in India) to learn how to be a 'real' Indian.

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