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Orientalism and Hollywood Movies: A Content Analysis of the Portrayal of India

Abstract

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Much of the critical discussion about the emerging genre of stereotyping India, incidentally, goes beyond the roles that Hollywood continues to write for actors. This study attempts to analyze the content of randomly selected Hollywood movies about India produced from 2010 to 2020 to examine the social structure of Indian-ness. There were major inter-group differences in representation of Indian versus non-Indian scenes and Indian versus non-Indian characters across numerous socio-cultural variables such as character position, occupation, poverty, religious practices, and pollution. India was constantly shown as backward, crude savage, and traditional. These models of stereotypical portrayals of India across films are discussed in the context of schema theory, social identity theory and cultural colonization.
Keywords: Hollywood, India, content analysis, stereotyping, representation, portrayal.

Introduction

It would not be perhaps wrong or exaggeration to say that Hollywood movies are criticized by many Indians for its prejudiced stereotyping of India and Indians, and not portraying its 'real image'. It is true that movies play a significant role in making an understanding about other cultures and nations around the world and an impression of these places is often received through interceded visual information (Mitra, 1999).

It has been seen that many inter-related social forces contribute to individual's perception of others and mass media portrayals undoubtedly play a very pivotal role in influencing individual's attitudes towards others, especially when offered in a very pragmatic ways in media such as films. Films play a major role in determining cultural and national identities, particularly in the absence of much face-to-face connections with these groups. They help to create and enable national stereotypes. For example, many Americans learn about Africans through Tarzan films, about Arabs from movies such as The Mummy, about China in films such as The Last Emperor, and about nations such as Russia and North Korea from James Bond pictures.

As for India, films such as The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, Viceroy's House, Eat Pray Love, Jobs, The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, The Hundred-Foot Journey, Million Dollar Arm and Lion have an impact on how moviegoers in the West recognize India.

Through repeated exposure to the same or similar stereotypical representation across films and across narratives in different media sites, audience accidentally and often instinctively start collecting these bits and pieces of information about the social group in such a way that they develop a "schema" or a speedy short-cut reference for the social group. Not astonishingly, when asked to recall the attributes of the social group, people might recall scenes, characters, lines, settings, and actors from various films in an attempt to grasp whatever little information they can get to make quick judgments in interpersonal situations. Thus, it is crucial to study what types of portrayals of various marginalized groups are presented within this medium.

In this context, the present study attempts to examine the nature of portrayals about India and its people characterized in Hollywood films. Such an evaluation not only helps draw the trend that such portrayals have followed with time but also serves as a first step in establishing the chain of events between exposure to media stereotypes and their effects on viewers' attitudes and behaviors in inter-group interactions with members of stigmatized group.

The first study that probably examined the social-psychological effects of media exposure on racial-ethnic attitudes looked at film content (Peterson et al, 1933), more recent research on racial stereotypical content has been conducted on various other media sources such as news stories, television programs, music videos, and magazine advertisements (Brown & Campbell, 1986; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000;

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Entman, 1992; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mok, 1998; Oliver, 1994; C. R. Taylor & Lee, 1994; Thomas & Treiber, 2000).

With regard to representation of racial minorities in American television, for instance, groups such as Native Americans and Asian Americans remain rather invisible (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Stern, 2003). Apart from such gross under-representation of racial minorities, another major concern is that members of these racial groups are often shown in naïve, stereotypical ways.

To illustrate, obvious stereotypical depictions of African Americans as dangerous, lazy, poor, and clownish and of Asian Americans as cunning, docile and as 'model Minorities' (Mok, 1998) continue to control media narratives (C. R. Taylor & Lee, 1994). Thus, prior research examining North American media suggests that prescribed depictions of racial minorities such as African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans continue to persist in contexts such as print and television even in contemporary media channels without much change over time.

In trying to contextualize the study of film vis-a`-vis these other types of media where racial depictions have been studied, one can make the argument that just as racial stereotypes in print and television media have been known to influence racial attitudes and ethnic identities, film also plays a very important role in attitude formation. Because of its ability to create a realistic presentation of real world experiences by combining both audio and visual modes, cinema has emerged as a powerful medium in shaping the imagination of its viewers through vivid audio-visual aesthetic experiences. Moreover, technological innovations have made films available not just in cinema halls but also on network television, videocassettes, pay-per-view channels, and on the Internet (Oliver & Kalyanaraman, 2002). Such innovations make repeated viewing of films effortlessly possible for interested audiences, even if the films are classics produced many years ago.

In sum, the unrelenting influence of film as a medium makes it an important source of information in shaping perceptions about other cultures, especially because many films are set in foreign locales.

Portrayal of India in Hollywood

Portrayal of India and Indians in the Hollywood movies can be examined from the broader framework of representations of third world countries in Western media. As a starting point, it is important to examine how the historical and political contexts of power associations between the first and third World countries control media content. Gallagher (1989) noted that it is usually third world countries that have to deal with marginalization problems with respect to information flow. There is a greater flow of information from the first to third world countries but very little account of the third world in the first world (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990). This inequity in information flow, the lack of precise and various sources of information and the deficiency of racial minorities in the Western media workforce have been cited as some of the possible sources for the problem of misrepresentation of these peoples in the West (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Such marginalization is not just apparent in the lack of third world-related information in the Western news media but it can also be noted in the absence of characters and plots from third world countries within entertainment media. Westerners are almost always at the center of the story and the third world people are given only unimportant roles (Kaplan, 1997). Even when media content sporadically feature third world characters, they are very often portrayed in condescending, negative, and stereotypical ways. For instance, past research on representations of African people in Western films reveal that they are often portrayed as savage cannibals or innocent primitive people (Cameron, 1990; Ukadike, 1990). Whereas the role of the Western characters is complex in these narratives, those of third world Characters are naive and almost unsurprising. The latter are usually present only as accompaniments that help describe the daring nature of the Western characters.

Moreover, Shohat (1991) pointed out that even when Hollywood films include third world locations in their plots, typically such locations act as the backdrop for the main narrative such that the focus is on exaggerating socio-religious practices in spectacular ways to act as symbols to signify the place. Although one inspiration for use of such cultural symbols was to orient the audience to the scene setting, such imagery also served to justify the need to "civilize" third world regions such as India and Africa by European military rulers and Christian missionaries (Ukadike, 1990).

Past research on portrayal of India divulges similar patterns of subordination and domination discussed in the larger context of Third World countries in general. The history of stereotypical illustration of India mainly dates back to British rule in India when the story accounts and photographic designs by missionaries, anthropologists,

and government officials focused on showing Indians as savage and uncivil simple folks (Merchant, 1998; Narayan, 1997). Historically, Europeans showed themselves as representing liberty, equality, progress, change, and vitality in such accounts. In contrast, India was depicted as unhistorical, caught up with traditions—still, inert, or in a process of decline. Indian nationalists did not confront such stereotypical depictions but used them instead as an anchor to justify their fight for freedom from European control. That is, they argued that Western settlers were disruption to the traditions and values of the magnificent ancient Indian past. However, even after more than 75 years of independence of India from Britishers, post-colonial narratives of India created not just in Europe but also in North America continue to use similar themes of White, Caucasian, Western supremacy (Mitra, 1999; Shome, 1996). Given that the present content analyses of cinematic portrayals of India is seen as a step in understanding the concept of Orientalism, wherein beliefs, feelings, and behaviors toward Indians are shaped.

Effects of Media Stereotypes on Orientalism

According to social-cognitive theory, the recurrence of uni-dimensional stereotypical media portrayals is a cause of concern because viewers often absorb such information into long term memory. Past research informs us that exposure to stereotypical media content is absorbed into a generalized belief about all members of the group that is being portrayed. Such information is stored as schemas that act as quick short-cut references (heuristics) for the social group (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hansen & Krygowski, 1994; S. E. Taylor & Crocker, 1981; Wicks, 1992).

In other words, the schematic information itself might greatly influence attention, perception, and memory for newly encountered information about the target group. Apart from storing and retrieving such schematic information, it is also possible that vivid, spectacular, concrete, and emotionally charged media exemplars (especially anecdotes and personalized information) are especially likely to be coded more effectively in viewers' minds. Such portrayals, even if they are from imaginary entertainment content, are often retrieved subconsciously when viewers make assessment of the stereotyped population (Busselle & Shrum, 2003; Gibson & Zillmann, 2000; Macrae et al., 1998; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

As per media cultivation theory, continued exposure to such mechanical portrayals across various media outlets is likely to influence viewers' attitudes about out-groups by creating an artificial notion that portrayals in the media are close to the real world (Fujioka, 1999; Gerbner, 1998; Shapiro & Lang, 1991). Therefore, media such as television and films that are able to create a realistic appearance using both audio and visual modes seem to be especially likely to create vicarious experiences for viewers, leading to powerful effects on viewer's perceptions of social reality. In particular, research studies have documented the ways in which viewers' racial attitudes are affected by long-term exposure to television programming (Armstrong et al., 1992; Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Matabane, 1988).

Studies on inter-group communication have also revealed that such effects are especially more discrete when there is very little direct contact between groups (Armstrong et al., 1992; Fujioka, 1999). That is, the media will play powerful role in determining opinions and beliefs about out-groups especially when one has very little chance to interrelate in meaningful ways with members of such groups. In the context of the films that were produced about India, it is highly possible that most of the audience did not have much direct contact with people living in India. Therefore, the study of mediated portrayals is even more critical, given their more powerful role in influencing perceptions of India in the West. (Crocker & Major, 1989; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Objective of the Study

The aim of the present paper is to examine how India and its people are represented in the Hollywood movies. This paper attempts to study different parameters on which India is portrayed in Hollywood movies.

Given that the primary purpose of this project was to examine when, where, and how India and its people are portrayed within the Hollywood films, besides how it influences the Orientation of the audience towards India, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: At the scene level, is there a relationship between the country depicted in a scene (India or outside India), and, the portrayals of climate, pollution, locales, transportation, religious practices, leisure activities, status of women and children, and poverty?

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RQ2: At the character level, is there a relationship between ethnicity/nationality of a character (Indian and non-Indian), and the role, gender, occupation, class, place of residence, and language of the characters?

Method

Content analysis was used to examine 39 scenes and 22 characters from eight randomly selected movies

Sample

The selected sample consisted of feature films produced in the Hollywood that involved India as one of the chief locales and or have Indian characters in their plots. A database of such films was formed using secondary sources of information such as previous literature on Indian films, video rental charts in Billboard magazine, extensive film reviews in The Internet Movie Database archives, and filmographies about third world films such as Mitra (1999). Films released from 2010 to 2020 have been included for analysis.

Units of Analysis

Keeping the research questions in consideration, the films were examined at two levels (units of analysis)—scene and character. The scene analysis compared representation of India and Western countries. A scene was defined as a separation of the feature film that presented continuous action in one place or a single unit of dialogue taking place in India or/and within which Indians appear in the narrative. Overall, there were 39 scenes of which 27 were set in India and 12 were set outside. Similarly, dialogue-speaking characters were observed for the entire film. In total there were 22 characters of which 9 were identified as Indian and 13 as non-Indian.

Coding Categories

Scene-Level Coding Categories

Scene-level variables consisted of environmental and socio-cultural variables. The environmental variables included climate, pollution, scene locales, transportation, and birds and animals. Type of climate group included absence or presence of depictions of and discussions about the climate as being hot and sunny. Pollution was defined as the absence or presence of representation of and/or discussions about dirty streets, unclean waters, spoiled food, noisy locales, or overcrowded places. Scene locales were inferred based on visual depictions. Stereotypical locales were defined based on previous research (Mitra, 1999) as places such as natural environments/jungles, huts, temples, caves, palaces, bazaars, and trains/railway stations. Non-stereotypical places included all other locales such as office, street, houses, apartments, shops, hotel/restaurants, barracks/garrison, prison, courts, and schools.

Similarly, scenes were coded for the absence or presence of representation of and/or discussions about stereotypical modes of transportation such as hand-rickshaws, palanquins, animal carts, and steam engine trains, whereas the presence of all other modes of transportation such as cars, buses, and motor vehicles were coded as non-stereotypical. Scenes were also coded for absence or presence of depictions of and/or discussions about birds and animals. Socio-cultural variables at the scene level included religion, leisure activities, status of women, and poverty.

In terms of religious practices, scenes were observed for the absence or presence of depictions of and/or discussions about religious practices including magic, witchcraft, and nature worship. Leisure activities were coded as the presence or absence of discussions about and/or depictions of art, crafts, and sports. Stereotypical leisure activities included rope-walking, scorpion-eating, sword-swallowing, fortunetelling, snake-charming, henna painting, pot painting, playing sports such as tiger-hunting, polo, and cricket, and depictions of traditional architecture such as minarets and Hindu temples. Status of women and children was determined by the absence or presence of depictions and/or discussions about sati, arranged marriage, child marriage, dowry, slavery, child sacrifice, child labor, harassment, and rape within the scene. Poverty was defined as the absence or presence of depictions of and/or discussions about beggars, famine-stricken people, homeless, tramps, slaves, servants, manual laborers, subsistence farmers, petty vendors, and fisher folk.

Character-Level Coding Categories

Characters were coded for role, gender, race, occupation, class, place of residence, and language. Based on past research (Mitra, 1999), stereotypical occupations were defined as unemployed, homemakers, hunters/gatherers, farmers, skilled and unskilled laborers (servant, cleaner, fanner, water bearer, servers, cart-driver, petty

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vendors, tourist guides, tailor and secretary, mahout, snake-charmer), thief/gangster, magician, priest, and prostitute/pimp. Non-stereotypical occupations were defined as managers, professionals (such as lawyers and doctors), land-owners, businesspersons, academicians, tourists, military/police personnel, judges, nurses, entertainers/artists, politicians, missionaries, and students. The class of the characters was categorized as rich, middle class, or poor based on the character's attire and place of residence. Characters were also coded for whether or not they lived in stereotypical places such as in jungles, on the streets, in huts, temporary dwellings, palaces, temples, and caves. As part of the analysis, the researcher made additional notes of any relevant images and dialogues that appeared in the films that would further enrich the descriptive account of the portrayals.

Coding Reliability

To ascertain reliability, the researchers coded the data. The Potter and Levine-Donnerstein's (1999) modification of Scott's pi (Scott, 1955) was used as the basis of calculating inter-coder reliability. Overall scene reliability was 93%. Overall character reliability was 89%.

Results

Scene-level Analysis

The first research question addressed in this study revolved around a scene level comparison of scenes located in India and in the West. The results related to this research question are presented as following:

Climate

Generally climatic conditions are shown more harsh and unruly in India than in the West. Movies represented India in yellow shade, while the scenes that were shot in western countries seem to be the normal shade. Yellow shade signifies extreme weather, especially heat or warm climate but on the other side it makes the surroundings look unhealthy and uglier. Mostly, in contemporary times, yellow shade or filter is used to depict countries as war zones, impoverished, or polluted.

Pollution

Without any exception, all the Hollywood movies associated pollution with India more than to the West. It was common to find dirty roads, dusty streets, overflowing sewers, marshy streets, and spoilt foods apart from the presence of garbage, depictions of noisy locales or overcrowded places in scenes depicting India. Apart from such visual depicters of pollution, there were also several characters that made verbal references to pollution. For example in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, Maggie Smith visits house of the servant, wherein she complaints "why she's been taken through unusual routes, especially crowded streets." And at another time Maggie is shown reluctantly taking food with difficulty, considering it unhygienic, as it was served by poor Indian lady.

Scene Locales

Traditional stereotypical locales were much more likely to be set in India rather than in the West. The bazaar forms a inimitable and fascinating location for Western film-makers as an "urban jungle" that is crowded with people, shops and animals. Rural areas were much more likely to be depicted in scenes in India rather than in the West. Also, towns/villages in India were much more likely than Western locations to remain unidentified and unnamed. For instance, Janta Colony Kachi Basti is the setting for The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. Moreover, India is shown to be filled with people referring to its population. India is shown with trash on the roads, men bathing in the same pond where animals are being washed. The western representation of the Indian subcontinent only shows mountains of garbage, crowded streets, poverty, ruined buildings, cows in the middle of traffic, crime among other negative aspects of life.

Transportation

Traditional modes of transportation were much more likely to be presented in scenes portraying India than scenes depicting the West. For example in movie Lion, Indian roads are shown filled with rickshaws, filthy trains, auto-rickshaws etc. Similarly in Eat Pray Love, bicycle is shown as the key transport.

Birds And Animals	Larger part of scenes that were dedicated to birds and animals were set in India as compared to Western countries. Images of actual animals often appear as part of the natural jungle, as urban beasts of draught, and as modes of transportation. Verbal discussions of birds and animals often revolved around hunting, sport, food, and diet. Animals commonly sighted in films about India were elephants, dogs, snakes, tigers, horses, scorpions, panthers, cheetahs, buffalos, cows, monkeys, camels, rats, pigs, bears, lizards, goats, monitor lizards, jackals, vultures, vampire bats, insects, and alligators.
Religious Practices	Religious rituals, superstitious beliefs, magic, and sorcery were more likely to be presented in Indian settings as compared to scenes in the West. For example, in movie eat pray love, actress asks "When will this grieving time pass," on this male actor responds saying "you need to meditate, as it cultivates power in you and helps you to control your actions." The spiritual journey in India has shown in the movie Eat, Pray, Love. The western painted India as an exotic land filled with superstitious beliefs and mysticism.
	This aspect is also mired with stereotypical image of Indians by westerns once again, wherein Indians are equated to being Hindus. Certainly, Hinduism is a major religion in India despite the fact that India has a multi-religious identity. Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and other faiths are living here. Hence, showing all Indians as worshippers of the idols of Hindu gods and goddesses, complete with Hindu-style offerings and incense sticks is just generalizing all religion under one category. Even with the Hindus, not all of them are devout believers. Not all Indians are blind worshippers of bearded mystics and gurus. Many Indians are atheists and some consider themselves to be rationalists in spite of holding onto their religious identity. India is a diverse land of its own, rather than an archaic, exotic and divine fantasy-world of sorts.
Leisure Activities	There was significantly greater number of scenes of stereotypical leisure activities depicted in India than in the West. For example, Lion showed Indians engaged into snake-charming, fire-walking, rope-walking etc. Million Dollar Arm and Lion both depicted western characters turning the fates of Indians. Both films are based on true stories and do justice to their source material to an extent. Indians have been shown as drivers, shop keepers, villains, or any other supporting character. The film Lion has tried to show social inequality and poverty of India in empathetic light. Hollywood films often romanticize poverty or portray the entirety of India as an undeveloped or backward nation with no modern infrastructure. Films like Million Dollar Arm, The Darjeeling Limited, and many others paint and generalize Indian cities as having nothing but ruined buildings and half-naked children.
Status of Women and Children	The number of scenes in which women and children were portrayed as victims of abuse was much greater in scenes set in India that those set in the West. Women and children in India were often shown as being victims of a socio-religious-cultural system. For Example in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, Ruhi an Indian helper is shown in distress and in the film Eat Pray Love, Tulsi is a 17-year-old Indian girl who gets married at the age of 18. She is truly an Indian woman who submits herself to the decisions of her parents who decide ample age and partner for her to marry. Although she got dreams and hopes, they are sacrificed at the hands of her parents reflecting the lack of control Indians have in their own lives.
Poverty	Among scenes that portrayed poverty in these films, a significantly greater proportion was likely to be in Indian scenes rather than in the Western scenes. Scenes with poor people were usually depicted as a backdrop as part of the crowd in Indian streets and as helpers in British colonial quarters in India. For example, in Lion, Best Exotic Marigold Hotel and Viceroy's House, Indians are shown as poor and deprived of basic amenities.

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Conclusion

In summarizing the results, it emerges that portrayal of hot, polluted, mostly rural in nature locales and traditional modes of transport are much more often represented in scenes located in India rather than in the West. Portrayal of religious practices, abuse of women and children, and people engaged in stereotypical leisure activities were also more likely to be featured in Indian settings rather than non-Indian settings in these feature films. Characters shown as poor, having traditional occupations, living in stereotypical places, and speaking embellished accented English were more likely to be Indian as compared to non-Indian. In short, the above findings suggest that a definitive pattern of stereotypical portrayals of India appears in films made in the West.

Overall, the picture of India seems to be created to make clear-cut distinctions to forcefully categorize it as an out-group. Such biased portrayals are not limited to specific movies but repeat themselves across narrative. Therefore, these stereotypical portrayals are not indicators of the distinctive preferences of individual creators of media content but seem to be a part of the larger societal meanings and myths existing in the West about "Indian-ness."

Continuation of such shared cultural stereotypes as contrasting to individual stereotypical beliefs makes it easier for people in power to distinguish against out-groups in ways that are legalized by social institutions and eventually leading to institutional prejudice.

Therefore mediated cultural stereotypes may shape the collective awareness of negative prejudicial attitudes of Western audiences towards India as a whole. Also, it is possible that negative stereotypes in media serve as a means of downward social comparisons in order to boost the self-image of Western audiences. Such assessments have implications for social justifications that could be provided for cultural imperialism of the West by establishing Indian peoples as inferior and incompetent.

Therefore, given that mediated experiences often paint one's perceptions and feelings about a stereotyped group, an increased awareness and critical media viewing skills may be useful. Such imagined identities then influence what is the suitable social norm for behaviors, dress, and other cultural symbols for the minority group. Obedience by minority group members to these stereotypical roles further strengthens the belief that the stereotypes are accurate. Perhaps one effective way for people who belong to the marginalized stereotyped groups to retrieve and renovate their own histories is to directly participate in media production by making their voices heard in the process of creations of media narratives about their group. That is, racial and ethnic diversity in the media workplace may be crucial to insertion of less stereotypical and more varied portrayals of minority groups.

Meanwhile, the only existence of people from diverse nations and racial backgrounds in a workplace in itself may not be as effective as allowing such individuals to express themselves freely and participate in conversations such that their inputs are listened to respectfully.

Traditionally, stereotypes have been explained narrowly in terms of character traits associated with members of a group. In contrast, a broader conceptualization of stereotypes has been used for this study, surrounding not just personality traits but also socio-cultural characteristics such as poverty, calamities, and so on. In addition, cultural stereotypes of Indians revealed in the current study encompass several negative as well as seemingly positive beliefs. For instance, Indians were seen as having many riches. However, past research studies have shown that even positive stereotypes could lead to stereotypical attitudes and even discrimination because they do not acknowledge the differences amongst a group of people and lead to unrealistic associations of certain traits with certain groups of people (Lee, 1996; Wu, 2002).

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