



Received: 29.02.2025; Revised: 13.03.2025, Accepted: 26.03.2025, Published Online: 02.04.2025

TRANSNATIONALISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY FILM LITERATURE: ASSIMILATION AND CULTURE CRISIS IN THE MOVIE MRS. CHATTERJEE VS. NORWAY.

Ms. Nissi Mary Thomas, Dr. Vennila, V.

Research Scholar, Department of English, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Faculty of
Science and Humanities, Kattankulathur.

Assistant professor, Department of English, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Faculty of
Science and Humanities, Kattankulathur.

**Corresponding author*

E-mail address: vennilav@srmist.edu.in (Vennila V)

ABSTRACT

The modern art of cinema brings forward the stories and struggles of many of many lives through visual art and characters on frames. Indian people living in different countries face different challenges apart from identity crisis and cultural hybridity. The movie talks about an Indian couple who migrates to Norway on account of a job and better living standards. The Norwegian government has a system of child services, where they monitor the children in the household and their upbringing under their parents. As the storyline develops, the Indian parents are deemed unfit to take care of the children and are placed in foster care under the Norwegian government. The movie talks about the ordeals the mother goes through with the Norwegian foster care system and the child services and her fight with the legal houses of both Norway and India to win her children back.

In this research, the paper discusses about various factors of diaspora that expatriates go through in a foreign land, where the rules, routines and governance is completely different as of that in their homeland. The paper also talks about factors like cultural identity, assimilation and displacement faced by the expatriate community. The foreign hegemony that prevails in immigrant life plays a huge role in being accepted in the host country. The research also focuses on how diplomatic relationship between countries help in aiding people that reside abroad.

Keywords: Diaspora, Expatriation, Alienation, Identity loss, Culture shock, Emotional trauma.

INTRODUCTION

India is a country known for its wide variety of culture and traditions. There are a number of

people who keep them alive to whichever ends of the globe they go and make them a daily routine of their lives. But these practices and traditions tend to become their biggest challenge when in a foreign nation, living amongst people who neither accept nor understand the culture behind these habits and observances. This is where diaspora plays its major role where the immigrant majority goes through identity and adaptation struggles. They get caught up in a continuous dilemma between their native and host country identification, not knowing which one to hold on to as their living standards and the current situation demands to align themselves with the community they are in while deep inside their self is still attached to their roots in the native. It also becomes a major issue of concern when the host country and its government refuses to recognize or accept the immigrant routines and household and pressures them to come to terms with their rules and regulations in the most unethical ways possible.

The movie *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* is a typical example for the above-mentioned scenario as the main protagonist Debika Chatterjee moves to Norway in the hope for occupation and financial stability as well as better living standards for her family. She takes care of her husband and raises her children in the new 'European environment' of Norway, but finds herself struggling as she juggles between her household chores, a non-cooperative husband and her children who are toddlers. Her husband is inconsiderate about her struggles as a homemaker and a mother of two young ones, leave alone the fact being in completely new country and surroundings. She lacks communication skills as she has no knowledge of the Norwegian languages and her English is broken. Her husband Anirudh's only concern at the moment becomes only his job and gaining a permanent residence in Norway. He fails to understand that Debika is sustaining the family and her existence with great difficulty in Norway. She becomes so held up and confused that she begins forgetting basic necessities of her children. She also finds it difficult to follow the teaching processes and teacher's instructions at her son Shubh's school. The teachers also show particular disappointment at the way his schooling is being considered by his parents and term Debika's struggle as 'neglect towards her child'.

The plot of the movie takes an ugly turn when the Child Protection Services of the Norway government visits them on a weekly basis to evaluate Debika's 'mothering techniques' and to make sure the children are safe and taken care of in a safe and hassle-free environment. Their weekly visits turn into daily visits as the evaluators feel that Debika is overburdened with a lot of work and the children are being neglected due to Debika's inexperience and lack of knowledge in certain things. They also come to a conclusion that the Chatterjee family had poor family planning as the two kids were planned too early and close by for Debika and the mother is forced to give more importance to one when both the kids are in a stage of their life where they need equal amount of attention from their mother. Finally, the senior evaluator and the child psychologist arrive on their final day of evaluation and declare Debika as 'an unfit and mentally unstable mother' who has no idea of time management, less home management skills and is very clumsy with the minutest of things. The children are taken away from her and are placed in foster care, with Norwegian foster parents, under the surveillance of the Norwegian government.

Even through the procedures of taking away the children to foster care, there was no proper

consent taken from the parents- neither verbal nor any documentation. They were simply grabbed from Debika's hands forcefully and taken away and the movie clearly depicts the mother running behind the government vehicle through the streets of the avenue, crying for her children as her husband tries to stop her initially and then stares at her clueless.

Debika starts a legal battle against the Child Protection services, indirectly against the government, demanding the custody of her children back. She claims that the evaluations done were problematic and the reports false, that the evaluators are not to be trusted and are corrupt.

ASSIMILATION

The movie clearly explores various angles of cultural clashes between the Indian and Norwegian origins as the host country refuses to accept or understand the value behind the cultures and adamantly shuts their doors, deeming them as highly regressive and patriarchal. Debika is an Indian citizen living in Norway, the reason being a better position in life. She is a staunch Bengali woman who adheres to her traditional and religious practices piously and also makes her family do the same as part of a disciplined upbringing, like most of them from Indian origin. This is exactly where the cultural differences and discrepancies start getting highlighted as Norwegians are neither used to these traditions nor do they have a similar background.

The first and foremost difference arises with the language barrier that Debika faces in Norway. She struggles to communicate with the authorities due to her lack of knowledge in the language. She fails to advocate for herself and the kids in the Norwegian court, display her feelings and emotional complexities or even understand what exactly her Norwegian advocate is presenting before the court.

Another factor that the film portrays is the clash of cultural values between Debika and the Norwegian authorities. One of the typical examples for this is the parenting style of Debika that the Child Services deem regressive and against their laws. It has been a practice throughout the Indian culture to physically punish the child by beating or inducing any physical pain. It is acceptable to an extent so that the child learns certain life lessons through the pain. But the Norwegian authorities see these as child abuse and deem her son as going through 'child neglect'. They also raise their concerns about Debika feeding the kids with her hands, without the European styled fork and a spoon, which they consider unhygienic. They also do not approve of the parents sleeping with the kids as they believe this would make the kids more dependant and stop them from growing into able individuals. During the case proceedings, the prosecution places these as the evidence before the court to frame Debika as an 'unfit and inappropriate mother'.

DISPLACEMENT AND FOREIGN HEGEMONY

The movie depicts many instances where the Norwegian government exerts pressure on Debika to place the kids in foster care, convincing her indirectly that she is unfit to take care of them in her then present environment. The mental pressure that she faces is overlooked by her husband as he is primarily concerned only about his job and his permanent residency. In this movie, on a subjective note, the

control of foreign hegemony and its effects can be seen in these different ways:

- i. **Power Dynamics:** In this factor the Norwegian child welfare system represents foreign hegemony at its peak, exercising power into deciding the living status and current residence of her own kids. Being an immigrant Debika is subjected to the authority of a system that may not fully respect or even understand her cultural background and familial dynamics.
- ii. **Cultural Assimilation:** Foreign powers can sometimes exert pressure on expatriates to adapt assimilate to the dominant culture of the host land. In the movie Debika feels compelled to conform to Norwegian cultural norms and systems in order to navigate the child welfare system and regain custody of her children.
- iii. **Legal and Institutional barriers:** Foreign hegemony within the Norwegian legal and institutional framework leads to biases against immigrants like Debika here. She faces discrimination and unfair treatment based on her immigrant status and cultural background. This further complicates her legal battle as she is unaware of the Norwegian constitution as well as judiciary.
- iv. **Psychological Impact:** The psychological impacts that the welfare system causes here on Debika goes beyond the legal and institutional barriers. It encompasses psychological as well as emotional consequences that Debika goes through in failing through legalities to regain her custody. She feels helpless, frustrated and alienated as she confronts the system that is totally biased and constitutionally against her.
- v. **Loss of Agency:** Any foreign dominance can strip an individual of their agency and autonomy, particularly In legal battles against influential authorities and their administration. Here, as Debika struggles with the child welfare system, it also highlights the challenges faced by immigrant communities in propounding their basic rights and reclaiming control over their families and lives.
- vi. **Cultural Conflicts and Misconceptions:** Institutional and legal battles in a foreign country can exacerbate cultural conflicts and misconceptions between immigrant communities and the dominant culture. Debika's initial battle with the welfare system eventually turns into a legal war with the entire Norwegian government. It accentuates the challenges of narrowing the cultural differences and promoting mutual understanding in a diverse society.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Through theory, the ideology of cultural relativism is the ideology that a person's beliefs, values and practices should be understood based on that person's own cultural perspective, rather than be judged against the criteria of another culture that might be considered normal or acceptable in one culture might not be acceptable in another culture. However, some experts and researchers argue that the concept of human rights is rooted in Western culture and may not be applicable or relevant to non-

Western cultures. One of the main arguments against the universality of human rights is the idea of cultural relativism.

In the movie, cultural relativism plays a significant role in the portrayal of the clash between Debika's Indian cultural backgrounds to the Norwegian societal norms.

It is important to realize that human rights are the products of historical, political and cultural circumstances.

i. Custody Battle

The central conflict of the movie arises when the Norwegian Child Welfare services intervene into the personal life of Debika Chatterjee, trying to take away her children. From Debika's perspectives, her parenting practices hold their root in her Indian cultural values and practices. However, the Norwegian authorities saw some of these practices as potentially harmful to her children based on their cultural standards. The movie depicts a clash between the cultural relativism of Debika's Indian backgrounds and the cultural norms and expectations of the Norwegian society.

ii. Parenting Practices

Throughout the movie, there are instances where Debika's parenting practices, rooted in her Indian cultural background, are questioned or misunderstood by the Norwegian authorities. For example, her decision to discipline her children in the Indian way of corporal punishment were looked upon in a different context, as physical violence and child abuse, by the Norwegian government. This reflects the tension between different cultural perspectives on child rearing practices and underscores the importance of understanding cultural relativism when assessing parenting approaches.

iii. Legal Proceedings

The legal battle that unfolds in the movie highlights the complexities of applying universal standards of justice and child welfare across culturally diverse contexts. Debika's defense revolves around explaining her actions within the framework of her own cultural background, emphasizing the importance of cultural relativism in understanding the behaviour and decisions.

CONCLUSION

"Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway" provides a nuanced exploration of cultural relativism through its portrayal of the clash between Debika's Indian culture and the child welfare's government policies. The film underscores the importance of cultural context and relativism when navigating issues of identity, parenting and legal proceedings in multicultural settings.

The major root of the problems depicted in the movie is due to the cultural differences between the Norwegian and the Indian systems. The family structure and parenting style in India where living in a joint family, sleeping along with the parents and feeding with hands are all considered a form of emotional bonding and physical closeness whereas in the European culture all of these are the wrong practices of child rearing and dependency. Also, the Child Welfare Practices and government

policies are entirely different in India and Norway.

In Norway, the CWS prioritizes child safety and rights and would intervene at the slightest clue of the child being in physical or emotional abuse. Whereas, in India parenting is considered a deeply personal matter and the state interferes only if there are gruesome allegations and resorting proofs to prove abuse and then the government would take further measures. The movie majorly highlights the cultural relativism and the resulting instances that form the major plotline of the movie, emphasising on the traditional and legal boundaries that immigrants undergo under a foreign domination and the lack of support in such circumstances.

References

1. *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*. Directed by Ashima Chibber, Zee Studios and Emmay Entertainment, 2023.
2. Sharma, Vidyasagar. (2023). *Mrs Chatterjee vs Norway: An Epistemological Challenge to Childcare Norms*. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 58. 65-66.
3. Karmakar, G., and P. Pal. "Epistemologies of an Indian Mother and Media: Review of *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*." *Media Asia*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2023, pp. 675–681.
4. Ramanathan, Raja. "Immigration, Diversity, Cultural Clash, and – Hopefully – Cultural Melding? A Review of *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* (2023)." *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2023, article 5.
5. Sarkar, Subhradipta. "Mrs Chatterjee Vs Norway: A Curious Case of Cultural Relativism." *Times of India Blog*, 3 Apr. 2023, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/sarkari-thoughts/mrs-chatterjee-vs-norway-a-curious-case-of-cultural-relativism.