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Migrant Experiences in *Madras Café* and *Piku*

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Abstract

The cinematic narratives of modern migrants offer a profound lens through which to explore the complexities of displacement, identity, and belonging in a globalized world. The objective of this paper is to examine how contemporary films, such as Madras Café and Piku, depict the migrant experience, displacement, clashes, cultural hybridity, trauma, and resilience. By analysing a selection of influential films from diverse geographical and cultural contexts, the study highlights the role of cinema in shaping public perceptions of migration while giving voice to marginalized communities. The research employs a multimodal approach, combining narrative analysis, visual aesthetics, and socio-political critique to unravel the layered representations of migrants in the selected films for the study. Furthermore, it investigates how these narratives challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and contribute to discourses on transnationalism and diaspora. The paper also considers the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers in portraying migrant stories without exploitation. Ultimately, this study underscores cinema's power as both an artistic medium and a tool for social commentary, bridging the gap between personal migrant experiences and broader geopolitical realities.
Keywords: *Migration, Cinema, Identity, Displacement, Cultural Identity.*

In the contemporary era, migration is a global "phenomenon that touches on a multiplicity of economic, social and security aspects all around the world" (Mcauliffe). It is characterized by profound complexities pertaining to displacement, identity, and the quest for belonging in a globalized world. It is a complex experience that is deeply personal yet universally shared, shaped by a range of influences like political instability, economic inequality, and climate change, that is causing the highest levels of global movement ever witnessed. Understanding migration's complexities needs several perspectives, and as a powerful form of art and an important form of social commentary, cinema provides an appropriate and powerful perspective to understand these complexities. The film has the power to shape public perceptions and challenge pre-existing stereotypes, create empathy and represent disenfranchised communities, all of which place it squarely alongside other discourses in both transnationalism and diaspora studies.

Contemporary Indian cinema, besides providing entertainment, exposes the struggles of migrants by blending storytelling with social commentary, depicting the harsh realities faced by displaced communities. The directors employ stark visuals, raw narratives, and unflinching portrayals of systematic oppression, to show how migrants face exploitation, cultural alienation, and economic despair. A few filmmakers adopt a more political lens, directly linking migrant suffering to state negligence and policy failures. They implicitly explore the loneliness and cultural dissonance faced by the migrants in big cities, where they grapple with identity and belonging. *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), *Ship of Theseus* (2012), *Madras Café* (2013), *Piku* (2015), *Masaan* (2015), *Newton* (2017), *Sudani from Nigeria* (2018), *Axone* (2019), *The Disciple* (2020), *Sherni* (2021), *Pagglait* (2021), *Invisible Demons* (2021), *Jai Bhim* (2021), *Sardar Udham* (2021), *Kaala Paani* (2023), are some of the

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films that document and interpret the migrant experiences, offering narratives that range from harrowing tales of survival to stories of resilience and cultural fusion.

The present paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the migrant experience, external and internal, as depicted in two influential contemporary Indian films namely *Madras Café* (2013) and *Piku* (2015). Though they are distinct in their narrative styles and thematic contexts – Madras Cafe delves into the harrowing realities of forced displacement and geopolitical conflict, and *Piku* explores the subtle nuances of internal migration and generational identity – both films collectively illuminate the profound societal and psychological suffering inherent in displacement. They portray the complex negotiation of identity and cultural hybridity, and the underlying currents of human resilience. Furthermore, this analysis critically assesses the ethical responsibilities inherent in cinematic portrayals of such sensitive narratives, emphasizing the imperative to avoid exploitation and ensure authenticity. Through a multimodal approach combining narrative analysis, visual aesthetics, and socio-political critique, this study aims to unravel the layered representations of migrants and their experiences within these selected films.

Shoojit Sircar's Madras Café, "a political thriller set against the tumultuous backdrop, explores the problems faced by migrants" (Rizvi), particularly the Indian diaspora in Sri Lanka, during the country's brutal civil war between 1983 and 2009 and its impact on the Tamil community, including themes of violence, displacement, struggle for identity and survival, cultural tensions, and the challenges of balancing heritage and assimilation.

The film opens in Jaffna with the appearance of a few armed men. They stop a bus which is full of passengers and massacre everyone. The action then shifts to Kasauli, where Vikram Singh (John Abraham), is seen watching the news report about the assassination of the Sri Lankan President by a suicide bomber on a TV screen. Later, he goes to a nearby Church, meets the priest, and starts narrating his story. The scene shifts to the past when the conflict between the Sri Lankan Military and the Tamil Militant organizations had reached a critical point. The Tamil youth had armed themselves and joined hands with Anna Bhaskaran (a character based on the real-life LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran), the leader of the Liberation Tamil Front (LTF), a stand-in for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Sanjay Gurubaxani, the Prime Minister of India, decided to sign a peace treaty with the Sri Lankan Government. But Anna refused to sign the treaty as a result the Indian Peace Keeping Forces were forced to withdraw from the island. In this situation, Vikram, a skilled R&AW agent, is sent to Sri Lanka to neutralize the rebels.

Vikram travels to Sri Lanka and reports to his senior Balakrishnan (based on real-life person K.V. Unnikrishnan). He then meets Jaya Sahni (Nargis Fakhri), a war reporter, and collaborates with an informant, Narayanan, to contact Shri, a potential rival to Anna. He promises Shri that he will help him in resisting Anna by providing him with weapons. But the deal fails when LTF attacks, kills one of the associates and steals the weapons. Balakrishnan, furious, instructs Vikram to go to the Colombo Safehouse.

Vikram is kidnapped by LTF but rescued by Indian forces. He, posing as a war correspondent, convinces Mallayya (based on the actual LTTE member Gopalaswamy Mahendraraja), Anna's second-in-command, to meet R&AW chief RD, who encourages Mallayya to split the LTF. He, with Indian forces, launches a massive attack on the LTF base camp, where Anna survives and kills Mallayya and Shri. In the light of the resurfaced violence, the Indian Prime Minister

resigns. Some months later, Vikram discovers that Balakrishnan is an informer who stealthily leaks the information and their movements. Balakrishnan knows that he has been honey-trapped and commits suicide. Vikram then learns that the LTF planned a plot to assassinate the ex-Prime Minister using plastic explosives. He rushes to the place where the ex-PM is taking part in the rally. He reaches there nearly on time, but a suicide bomber manages to pull the trigger and kills the ex-Prime Minister. Devasted, Vikram submits his report, retires, and moves to Kasauli.

The film culminates, shifting to the present, with Vikram's poignant reflection on the priest, encapsulating his personal dejection and the broader societal suffering. He tells the priest that both nations suffered greatly – "Indians lost their Prime Minister and the Sri Lankans lost their future". He walks away, reciting the lines of Rabindranath Tagore, "Where the mind is without fear." He then sends a final report to Jaya in London and leaves Kasauli. An epilogue tells that the 26-year civil war killed more than 40 thousand Sri Lankan subjects, 30 thousand Tamil militants, 21 thousand Sri Lankan forces, and 1200 Indian forces, and still thousands of Lankan Tamils are homeless. In 2009, Sri Lankan forces launch an aerial and land attack, finishing the rebels along with their leader.

The film, though fictionalised, draws heavily on real events and references. It vigorously depicts militant groups (the LTF,), the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), and the pervasive chaos of the conflict. It also describes refugee camps located in the 'Little Jaffna' district where displaced Tamil migrants reside in horrific conditions like starvation, and no proper medication. The refugees strongly feel that they are treated as suspects rather than victims both by the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Jaya Sahni (Nargis Fakhri), a journalist in the movie, describes the pathetic condition of the refugees "These people have nowhere to go. The army burns their homes, the Tigers take their children. What choice do they have?" (Translated from Hindi). These words of a journalist encapsulate the impossible situation of refugees who are caught between state violence and militant extremism. The LTTE claims that whoever lives in Sri Lanka should fight for Tamil rights. Because of that, they force all the civilians, including children, to become soldiers. They do not hesitate even to kill Tamils who oppose them. Bala (Siddharth Basu), an LTTE leader, always promotes that "Every war needs sacrifice. If a few must die for our Eelam, so be it." This chilling justification mirrors real-life LTTE tactics where civilians were often caught in the crossfire of their armed struggle. The film subtly critiques global indifference to the Tamil crisis. The UN doesn't intervene despite ethnic cleansing allegations, no media blackouts the global powers which ignored the war. Rohin Dutt (Piyush Pandey), a RAW officer remarks that "the world doesn't care about a small island's war. Only we have to clean up this mess." This clearly mirrors how Sri Lanka's war remained underreported until its bloody end in 2009.

The movie primarily focuses on Vikram Singh (John Abraham), the hero, an Indian intelligence officer who witnesses the horrors of forced migration such as massacres, refugee camps, and the desperate struggle for survival. He is introduced as a war veteran haunted by the past, frequently plagued by nightmares. His struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alcoholism is explicitly depicted, as he recounts his story to a priest, seeking to alleviate the immense guilt stemming from 'multiple deaths he was unable to prevent'. His dejected and defeated demeanour after the assassination of the former Indian Prime Minister underscores the depth of his psychological suffering.

Vikram is deployed on a covert mission to dismantle the LTF. He visits the camp and is shocked looking at the situation there. He sees a Tamil mother, clutching her malnourished child, staring blankly at the army for help. He speaks to a local aid worker who responds to Vikram that "they don't trust anyone anymore – not the army, not the rebels, not even us. They just want to live." This reflects the real-life despair of Tamil refugees who, even after escaping war, face ill-treatment and suspicion in camps. In the end, he says "We came as peacekeepers, but now we're just another army in their war." These words of Vikram reflect the historical reality where India's intervention, instead of helping, deepened Tamilians suffering.

The role of Vikram foreshadows the social and psychological stressors that are unique to state actors who have to act in the zone of extended conflict. By so characterizing the film is an intentional attempt to avoid the existing cliché of an invincible intelligence officer and to paint him as a regular person living within the normal social life. This personalized image is focused on vulnerability, moral ambiguity, and emotional burnout, thus representing the fact that such characters usually have much more failures, compromises, and losses than victories. By depriving the intelligence officer of the heroic surplus, the story provokes a more critical approach to what the state-sponsored violence may cost.

This feeling of alienation and sacrifice is also enhanced by the personal life of the character. The wife of Vikram, Ruby Singh (Raashi Khanna), is not aware of his secretive activities, and the story is a plot device to highlight the affective distance and loneliness of secrets. This imposed silence is another victim of his work which intensifies the idea that geopolitical conflicts trickle down and destroy intimate moments of individuals. Not only does the covering of his real identity serve to safeguard the national interests, but it also serves as an emotional wrenching whose effect makes him ever more distant to the very life he is supposed to be protecting.

Markedly, the words of Vikram in his last speech do not stop at their immediate narrative value and qualify as a sad statement about the futility of war as such. Instead of being a heroic assertion, they are a low level, but devastating acknowledgement of the long-term consequences of geopolitical interventions-consequences that persist even after violence stops. These lines represent the profound feeling of unresolved loss, which implies that the triumph in these battles is the greyest, at best, and illusionary, at worst. The film ends up hinting at the war by the way Vikram flies, but it focuses on its ability to destroy the lives of individuals and leave behind wounds that cannot be repaired.

The portrayal of Vikram's suffering extends the understanding of the migrant experience to include the psychological burden on individuals, even state agents, who are forced to engage with and witness extreme conflict and displacement. The film's emphasis on his ordinary humanity and his defeated state, despite his efforts, illustrates that the trauma of war is not confined to direct civilian victims but can profoundly impact the lives of those involved in its machinery, leading to significant long-term psychological consequences and a pervasive sense of collective failure.

Sircar's *Piku* (2015) is yet another deeply insightful film that explores the nuances of internal migration through the lens of a Bengali family settled in Delhi. Though the film is primarily a comedy-drama centred around Bhashkor Banerjee (Amitabh Bachchan), the hypochondriac father, and *Piku* (Deepika Padukone), his exasperated daughter, it subtly records the struggles of Bengalis who migrate to Delhi for work. The film captures the generational divide, the

clash between tradition and modernity, and the unspoken loneliness of living as cultural outsiders in one's own country. Its core message is 'migration doesn't just change the place you live in; it changes you.' *Piku* "significantly broadens the understanding of the migrant experience to include internal, cultural, and generational shifts" (Times of India).

A word about the story. *Piku* Banerjee is a 30-year-old Bengali architect. She lives in Chittaranjan Park, a prominent Bengali enclave in Delhi, with Bhashkor Banerjee, her father, who "suffers from chronic constipation and traces the root of every problem to his bowel movements" (*Piku*, Wikipedia). She cares for him but is frustrated by his eccentricities, like firing maids and opposing her marriage. When Bhashkor refuses to sell their ancestral home in Kolkata, they embark on a road trip with Rana Chaudhary (Irrfan Khan), a taxi owner, who faces his own family issues. The journey is tense, with Bhashkor's demands clashing with Rana's patience.

In Kolkata, *Piku* bonds with Rana and decides to keep the family home. Bhashkor, inspired to cycle, briefly disappears but returns claiming his constipation is cured. Tragically, he dies in his sleep the next day. Pike returns to Delhi, holds his funeral, ends her relationship with her colleague Sayyed, and renames their home 'Bhashkor Villa' in her father's memory. She grows closer to Rana, hinting at a new connection.

The movie highlights the migrant experience of Bengalis who have settled outside Kolkata, maintaining their cultural identity through language, food, and community while navigating the cosmopolitan life of Delhi. It depicts the duality of belonging – *Piku* and Bhashkor are rooted in their Bengali heritage but shaped by the urban, multicultural environment of Delhi, reflecting the tension many migrants face between their ancestral origins and adopted homes. Cinemakhorr observes thus:

It is a poignant study of displacement identity and the unspoken grief of migrants who are neither here nor there. Through humour and warmth, it exposes the loneliness of preserving culture in a foreign city, the generational guilt of 'not being Bengali enough', and the inescapable truth that you can't go home again.

The Banerjee family embodies the classic migrant dilemma – physically present in Delhi, but mentally and emotionally anchored in Kolkata. Their neighbours consider them outsiders, eccentric, and habits 'too Bengali', and the house is filled with Bengali artefacts, creating a microcosm of Bengal in an alien city. Bhashkor yearning for Kolkata remarks that, "Delhi is just a workplace. Kolkata is home. But what is home? Just a memory now." These words reflect the existential crisis of many migrants – unable to fully let go of their roots, yet unable to return. Bhashkor's constant insistence on visiting Kolkata (even if just to sell their ancestral house) symbolizes the migrant's illusion that returning will resolve their cultural dislocation. However, when they finally visit, *Piku* witnesses a lot of change even in Kolkata and states that "Baba, even Kolkata has moved on. We're the ones stuck in the past." These utterances of *Piku* highlight the painful truth that migration is irreversible – the homeland they remember no longer exists as they idealized it. In response, Bhashkor too softly responds, "Everything has changed. … Even the air smells different."

Piku represents the second-generation migrant. She lives comfortably in Delhi but is still bound by Bengali traditions. She embodies the struggles of an independent modern woman whose life is significantly shaped by her career and the demanding care of her ageing father.

Her frustration erupts when she says, "I'm tired of being the 'good Bengali girl! I don't even know what that means". These words encapsulate the conflict of being torn between two worlds – neither fully 'Bangali' nor fully 'Dilliwaali'. As an architect, she navigates a male-dominated Delhi work culture. Her Bengali surname invites subtle biases, as seen when a client says, "Banerjee? Oh, you're one of those emotional Bengalis, huh?" This microaggression reflects the workplace challenges faced by regional migrants. She struggles to reconcile her modern, independent identity with traditional expectations and ancestral roots.

The road trip from Delhi to Kolkata with Rana Chaudhary serves as a metaphorical journey through the migrant experience, bridging the past and present. For *Piku*, the trip is initially practical. She accompanies her father because he refuses to sell their ancestral home in Champakunj. As a migrant's daughter, she embodies the second-generation experience, balancing her modern, independent life with her father's traditional values and fixation on their Kolkata roots. The journey exposes her to the physical and emotional landscapes of her heritage, specifically in Kolkata, where she is confronted with the city's disappearing landmarks, such as a missing theatre, which symbolizes the disappearance of cultural landmarks for immigrants. This experience compels Pike to re-examine the idea of selling the ancestral family home. She decides to preserve it by renting it out, an action which demonstrates a conflicted fusion of her immigrant identity and her family's heritage.

Rana, a non-Bengali with a migrant background, provides another layer to the narrative. As a return civil engineer who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia before coming back to India to take over his late father's taxi business, Rana represents the shared migrant experience of dislocation and adaptation. His encounter with *Piku* and Bhashkor highlights cultural differences, as he views their Bengali quirks from the perspective of an outsider. He finds points of convergence through shared human experiences, such as filial responsibilities. His returnee migrant's perspective provokes the effort to reinsert oneself into a society that is both familiar and alien, a challenge similar to *Piku*'s effort to reinsert herself into Kolkata. The understated romance between *Piku* and Rana suggests a blending of identities, where migrant experiences meet to form new affiliations without erasing individual cultural origins.

Language becomes a key marker of identity in *Piku*. Bhashkor's switching between Bengali and Hindi, and his insistence on Bengali at home reflects cultural resistance. For instance, when Rana mocks Bhashkor's dramatic Bengali mannerisms, Bhashkor snaps him and yells, "You Delhiwalas have no culture. Just traffic and noise." This mirrors real-life migrant experiences where linguistic pride becomes a shield against assimilation.

The film's portrayal of migrant existence is complemented by its sensitivity towards intergenerational ties and cultural heritage. Bhashkor's concern for his health and ancestral residence embody the elder generation's longing for their homeland, a common trait among migrants fearing they will lose themselves in a distant land. *Piku*'s contrast brings forth the pragmatic thinking of the younger generation, wanting to live separate lives but honouring her father's heritage.

The film silently criticises the emotional price of migration, as *Piku*'s lives are bound to her responsibility towards her father. Yet, it also lauds the adaptation of migrant families through their humour eccentricities, and unspoken love. Finally, *Piku*'s insistence on holding on to

Kolkata while living in Delhi symbolizes the migrant's ability to create a hybrid identity. She becomes a poignant study of belonging, heritage, and adaptation in a globalized world.

Thus, Shoojit Sircar's two films, *Madras Café* and *Piku*, project how migration is not just a physical journey but an emotional and ideological one. The former is a political thriller that indirectly addresses the forced migration of Sri Lankan Tamils during the civil war and the consequences of war-induced displacement while the latter subtly explores internal migration through the lens of a Bengali family settled in Delhi besides capturing the cultural dissonance between generations.

Together, these movies repeat the twofold role of cinema: as an artistic means, and a social one as well. Their combination of personal, character-focused stories into bigger political, economic and cultural frames enables them to reconcile the conflict between personal migrant narratives and the wider geopolitical flows that enclose them. Cinema therefore goes beyond mere representation and turns into a dialectical point where power, identity and mobility are interrogated.

Moreover, these artistic objects demonstrate the unique ability of cinema to create empathy: these artifacts make viewers share the emotional and psychological environment of migrants, without reducing it to statistics or even the language of policy. They challenge dominant oversimplifications of migration by avoiding monolithic representations, and by anticipated complexity, ambivalence, and resilience, instead, by showing how complexity, ambivalence, and resilience interrelate. It is this high-tech mediation that asks the audience to consider displacement, belonging and cultural hybridity as negotiable and fluid to foster a better informed and more humane understanding of migration as part of contemporary global discourse.

Considering such points, movies with a solid grounding in careful research and having a moral code have the necessary ability to transcend shallow representations of victimhood. Such film works can enhance an informed compassion and can involve the audience in a more meaningful discussion on the complexity of transnational relations and diasporic experience. Given the fact that global migration continues to influence the modern societies, it is imperative that filmmakers continue this way of discussion with integrity and sensitivity. A subtle and realistic portrayal of the migrant life not only gives to the art of film narrative a positive payback, but it delivers a positive contribution to a larger cultural and scholarly discussion on the topic of mobility, identity, and belonging.

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