

Portrayal of the Parsi Community in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

From names like Ardeshir Irani to names like Boman Irani and Homi Adajania, Indian cinema is no stranger to the Parsi community. In fact, Raja Harishchandra (1913), India's first full length silent feature) was a filmed version of a Parsi Natak by the same name. There also is a long history of the presence of Parsi's in Hindi cinema. It will be interesting to study how that presence has engaged with the representation of Parsi's in Indian cinema. This paper aims to study the portrayal of the Parsi community in two Hindi fiction films - Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi (2012) and Ferrari Ki Sawaari (2013). An in-depth textual analysis has been done on the basis of plot, metaphors, music analysis, character analysis etc. It traces the patterns of similarity and difference between these films. It also mentions the similarities/differences in the portrayal of Parsi's from the representation of other majority/minority communities within these films itself.

Keywords: *Parsi, Hindi cinema, Minority, Representation*

Introduction

Parsis are followers of the Zoroastrian religion, one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world. The importance and significance

of the community lies the unique way it has influenced Indian cinema, especially Hindi cinema. A hot bed for the culturally and creatively inclined, Parsi theatre in colonial India catapulted many to the world of cinema. Ardeshir Irani created a sensation when he made India's first talkie film *Alam Ara*. Considered a "Mogul" in the industry, he is credited with about 250 productions in his lifetime, including India's first indigenously processed colour film, *Kisan Kanya* (1937). The Wadia brothers were the first to create "stunt films" i.e., action films. They also introduced India's first action film heroine- Fearless Nadia (Thomas, 2016). Aspi Irani, one of India's most well-known cinematographers is credited with cinematographing some of the most legendary Indian films like *Mother India*. In the 1950's, Daisy Irani joined the film industry becoming India's first child actor. Among present day Hindi film stars, Boman Irani is the one of the most accomplished Parsi actor. Farah Khan, Dimple Kapadia, Homi Adajania, Ronnie Screwvalla, Shiamak Davar and Cyrus Broacha are known entities too.

Ferrari Ki Sawari (2012)

Ferrari Ki Sawaari portrays three generations of a middle class Parsi family. It is a story of endearing father-son relationships, reaching for your dreams, and of moral lessons that aren't preachy. The plot is simple - when Kayo is given the opportunity to go to Lords for a prestigious cricket camp, his doting father Rusy takes it upon himself to get hold of the Rs.1.5 lakhs needed to fund him. Thus begins the crazy 'sawaari' of Sachin Tendulkar's Ferrari. Cricket plays one of the main roles in the film. In fact, there is more emphasis on the game than on the Parsi community, with the entire film revolving around Kayo's dream to become the next Sachin Tendulkar. The film did not portray any Parsi conflicts or debates, nor was there much of an opportunity to. The Parsi elements in the film lie in the sets and three central characters. Rusy, Kayo and Mota Papa live in a modest home

in a Parsi Baug, with lower middle class Parsis, who are mostly old people, old cars and scooters, clean lanes and small apartments with wooden doors. Most of the film was shot in Parsi locations that lent it a touch of authenticity. The opening scene shows Rusy lighting a divo on a table with his late wife's picture. The little house was replete with all the Parsi touches one expected- a shambling home, lived-in untidiness, old furniture, an old cable TV, a rocking chair that Mota papa practically lives in and pictures adorning the walls. Rusy wears a *sudreh* and *kusti* with white pajamas and glasses while Mota papa is clad in pajamas, thick glasses and an open button-down shirt over his *sudreh* and *kusti*.

While the film is mostly in Hindi, we do hear the odd "dikra" and other Gujarati phrases and words. While Rusi and Kayo do not speak in the typical Parsi Hindi accent, Boman Irani sprinkles his dialogues with a slight Parsi twang, emphasizing on the 'd's' and 't's'. Rusy is a strait laced, honest to a fault RTO officer who rides an old scooter, and barely manages to make ends meet. Yet he is brutally honest. Testament to this is when he runs a red light without getting caught but finds a cop and insists on paying a fine. Kayo also embodies his father and his values. We see this, for instance, when during a cricket match, when everyone thinks the opposing teams, player was caught out, Kayo disagrees seeing he had caught the ball when his foot was a little outside the boundary and it was actually a six.

Sharman Joshi with his background in Gujarati theater slips into Rusy's role easily. One of the most striking aspects of his character is that he is not portrayed as a loud, eccentric, beer-drinking 'Bawa'. *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* is also perhaps the only film that portrays a middle class Parsi man in Mumbai struggling to live up to his lineage. Little Kayo on the other hand is a bubbly, naughty and willful little Parsi boy. Ritvik Sahore plays the role. Kayo loves his father and grandfather and emulates their values. He is very sincere

and respects his grandfather even though he does not like him at times, emphasizing the Parsi value of respect for elders.

Mota Papa is initially seen as a bitter, old, self-serving man who dissuades Kayo from living his dream and Rusy from driving this pointless, fancier-than-a-Ferrari dream. When he calls the Lord's cricket camp a 'recession scheme' by the west to make money, it to an extent breaks the stereotype of the Parsi-British bond. It is also of course an argument to dissuade Kayo from going there. Boman Irani is in his element as the Parsi grandfather- Mota Papa. With his Parsi nuances, hunchback, slur, and a beautiful play of emotions ranging from despondency to exuberance, delivers a truly authentic performance, drawing out many laughs throughout the film.

Apart from the main cast, there are a number of non-Parsi characters. In fact, it seems like rather than emphasizing the Parsi stereotype, director Rajesh Mapuskar exaggerates the Marathi stereotype of being foolish, over enthusiastic and funny. Seema Pahwa as Babbu Didi, a loud-mouthed wedding planner who is willing to go to any lengths to get a Ferrari for the MLA's son's wedding, is hilarious. The spirit of the film is in the effusive chemistry between Rusy and Kayo, which is entertaining and utterly moving. While we have seen plenty of films that portray a mother-son relationship, we do not have enough cinematic portrayal of the father-son bond. We see this bond strengthen in the course of the film. One of the most heart-warming scenes and testament to this father-son bond is at the end, when Kayo runs away after witnessing a fight between Pakya who attacks Rusy for the Ferrari. The turmoil that Rusy goes through brings tears to the audiences' eyes. He is so shaken up and desperate that he storms the wedding and physically assaults Pakya asking him where his son is. A meek and gentle man suddenly becomes violent in search of his son. When the coach brings him to the wedding venue, both father and son hug and kiss each other. Kayo acts like the adult here, and

wipes Rusy's tears and asks him to stop crying as people are watching. We get to see another father-son bond here. When Mota Papa is unable to get the loan from Dharmadhikari, he lies to Rusy saying it working out, however Rusy knows his father and knows he is downplaying the situation. Rusy and his father team up to convince Dharmadhikari in an endearing scene.

At the end, this socio-comic drama truly embodies the 'all's well that ends well' phrase. Rusy's

'Look at the brighter side of life' motto paid off and Kayo's dream is coming true. The film is truly heart-warming, shuffling between light-hearted moments and tear-jerking emotions. The concept of an honest man turning to dishonest means for a seemingly noble purpose is not new, but Rajkumar Hirani treats the subject in a refreshing way. The way he connects two very unusual elements- cricket and a Ferrari- is unique. The film is not another cricket movie but an underdog story with a common man up against huge odds. The film unfolds beautifully with sheer subtlety and simplicity.

Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi (2012)

Traditionally, we don't see the love story of couples over the age of 40 in Hindi cinema. But debutante director Bela Bhansali Sehgal takes this risk. She does not try to replicate her brother Sanjay Leela Bhansali's grandiose style of filmmaking, even though the script was written by him, instead keeping it sweet and simple, just like the quaint Parsi community she portrays.

Another novel factor is the use of Boman Irani, who plays Farhad and Farah Khan, who plays the role of Shirin as the lead couple. The film uses many Parsi actors like Shammi, Kurush Deboo, Daisy Irani, Dinyar Contractor, Nauheed Cyrusi, Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal and Behroze in key roles. By playing Parsi roles, they are somewhat

playing into a stereotype or caricature. But Farah Khan herself being a half Parsi and not very affected by a Parsi lifestyle, plays herself and minimally picks up the stereotypes of caricatures. This helps to not stereotype at least the Parsi female lead, in an interesting way. Farhad Pastakia, a 45-year-old golden hearted, slightly loony Parsi bachelor working as a lingerie salesman, has never found love. He still lives with his mother Nargis (Daisy Irani), who he very sweetly describes as ‘over-loving’, rather than ‘overbearing’ or ‘over protective’, and his dotting and ever smiling grandmother Siloo (Shammi). Nargis nags him to eat on time, drive carefully and of course get married. In one phone call, there is a brief mention of the diminishing number of the Parsi’s, but only as a joke and an excuse for him to get married soon. While some may see this as emphasizing the ‘mama’s boy’ stereotype that the Parsi’s have especially on the big screen, I feel like this film has broken the stereotype as Farhad overcomes the fear of his mother and fights for his lady love.

Other instances in which Nargis is seen as an ‘over-loving’ mother are plenty in the film. For example, melodrama is infused into the film when Nargis declares “Shirin Farhad ki shaadi nahi ho sakti, nahi ho sakti, nahi ho sakti” with dramatic music playing in the background and the typical three swishes of the head we see in Indian soap operas. She gives Farhad an ultimatum to choose either her or Shirin. She treats him like a child. When she realizes that he is lying to her about his whereabouts and is secretly meeting Shirin, she blames it on Shirin and starts praying fervently for her to dump him.

As a shopkeeper, Farhad is loved by all his customers. He is hardworking, jovial and brutally honest at times but most importantly, proud of his job. Even when his mother lies to the family of a potential Parsi bride saying he works as a businessman and has a lot of property, Farhad quickly calls her out on it and proudly exclaims that he is a lingerie salesman and innocently hands out his

business card to them. It is Farhad's Parsi values of honesty that make for a funny scene when he instructs her on her bra size and makes the feisty 40-year-old singleton Shirin, fall in love with him. There are also some aspects where the filmmaker has tried to go out of her way present the community in a brighter light such as when Nargis and her sister, Farhad's aunt (Behroze), drink beer at a local restaurant after finding out he proposed to Shirin. The film does not set out to caricature the Parsi community too much. For example, right from the onset of the film we see a young modern Parsi couple which offsets the otherwise comical, farcical, senile, clumsy, middle-aged people who are normally portrayed.

This is not to say we don't see major exaggerations of the hot-headedness and 'madcap' Parsi 'bawa' stereotype. For instance, we see a society meeting get violently disrupted when the members get into a major fight due to a small offensive comment made by someone, as well as Kurush Deboo, as a madcap Parsi running around with a gun, willing to shoot anyone who comes his way. We also see an old Parsi neighbor constantly writing love letters to Indira Gandhi, representing their widely stereotyped love for the late Prime Minister, who was married a Parsi. The reason is that because the community is so small, they feel connect with every Parsi, no matter what position they are in. While both Shirin and Farhad's families want them to get married, no one wants to marry a middle-aged man who is a lingerie salesman or a middle-aged woman with a comatose father. Here, the director could have given more of glimpse into the Parsi trend of late marriages and the debate around intermarriage which is currently dividing the community. However, throughout the film, no mention is explicitly made about any of the conflict and issues that plague the community. In fact, there are a couple of interesting dilemmas to explore, but none are taken seriously and are left unaddressed. When the family comes over for dinner to introduce to Farhad and Nargis, his cousin's fiancé, Anahita (Nauheed Cyrusi),

the topic of intermarriage and the liberal vs conservative debate could have been touched upon, but didn't. Almost all the actors except for Farah Khan and Daisy Irani in some places, speak in the typical Parsi-Hindi- stressing on the 'd's' and 't's'. For example, Indira is pronounced as 'inDira' and 'tumhara' as 'toomara'. Even though Indira Gandhi is no more, Farhad diligently writes the letters he is told to and 'sends' them to Indira, i.e. to a drawer in which he has stored all the letters.

The film is shot at a typical Parsi Baug (Cushrow Baug) with its quaint, old houses, tiny lanes, old Parsis' wearing nightdresses and scarves covering their heads, kids playing and old scooters parked outside. The Pastakia home is a typical Parsi home with antique furniture, lots of photo frames and pictures of the Zarathustra, chalk outside the main door and 'torans' adorning the doors. It is an old Bombay house with a few peeling walls, but it all just adds to the charm. The first dialogue that we hear, "Mare re muo" is a famous Gujarati saying. Throughout the film we see a lot of Gujarati words and phrases being used, symbolizing how important and ingrained the language is to the Parsi's. The costumes worn by the characters are one of the most realistic elements of the film. We do not see an overdose of 'gara' sari's (traditional embroidery) and dugli's (white bandhgala type robe). Nargis and Siloo are normally clad in long nightdresses and scarves covering their heads, except for when they attend the two weddings in which they are shown wearing beautiful *gara sarees*.

The Parsi's are known for their humorous and witty jokes. However, in the film, the jokes seem forced and the comic timing is off. We see an excessive amount of blabbering and eccentricity, which is quite exaggerated. There were a number of opportunities where good witty jokes could have been made, instead the comedy becomes slapstick and shrill with random mindless gags throughout the film. For

example, we see Farhad trying to hide his relationship from his mother in what were supposed to be funny ways but fails to. It instead emphasizes the ‘mama’s boy’ stereotype as he doesn’t want to bear the wrath of his mother.

We have a few laughs at how Farhad and Siloo try to divert the topic from the water tank dispute but it is overdone when Shirin starts hitting Nargis on the back thinking she is choking. Another instance where the comedy misses the point is when Farhad tries to propose to Shirin in a restaurant by hiding the ring in the cake but it seems like she has swallowed it. The entire hospital scene where he is shown haggling the nurse to check Shirin’s stool and the Indira Gandhi obsessed neighbor not being able to pass gas is overdone.

The film oversimplifies the issues of infighting and late marriage which is a stark reality for the community today. Placing this film in a rom com genre further re-emphasizes this image of a Parsi- a farcical, comical hero that becomes the image of the community, something the common man thinks is a truthful portrayal at the end of the day. The film has generous doses of lots of ‘Bawa’ madness and Bollywood elements. It moderately portrays the Parsi’s in a simple and unfussy way.

Filmic imagination of Parsi community

While *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi (SFKTNP)* had an almost hundred percentage Parsi cast playing Parsi roles, *Ferrari Ki Sawaari (FKS)* had only Boman Irani as a Parsi playing a Parsi role. All the other actors were non Parsis. What is interesting to see is that even though *SFKTNP* had more of a Parsi cast, it caricatured the community and gave in to the stereotypes more than *FKS*.

“Parsi films are very rare as it is. I can count them on both my hands. And usually, they are entertaining stories that usually don’t talk about

their issues per say,” said Sooni Taraporevala in an interview conducted for this paper. Proving Taraporevala’s statement true, neither film mentioned any of the core conflicts and debates that currently plague the community, instead focusing more on their respective stories and characters.

The films were shot primarily in authentic Parsi locales, particularly in Bombay. The characters lived in Parsi Baugs like Nowruz Baug and Cushrow Baug. We see their quaint lanes, and chipping walls. The homes are very authentically created with antique furniture, lots of photos adorning the walls, a divo etc. When portraying the community, both films mostly showed visuals of old people, possibly signifying the diminishing Parsi population. Talking about the possible metaphor of showcasing old crumbling buildings as the homes of the Parsi’s, Oorvazi Irani says, “Maybe it is a symbol of the old and aging, the past glory. A golden period that is no more, or will be no more. The Parsi’s were also responsible to a large extent in building Bombay and may be this could also point at that coming to an end. They are the silent sentinels standing guard witnessing time and the world go by.” On the other hand, Sooni Taraporevala says, ‘What they (the filmmakers) show in terms of where people live, is a choice. These kinds of buildings exist. Parsi’s do live in these kinds of buildings but they also live in like modern flats.’ The background scores and music of the films suited the narrative but did not represent or talk about the community in any way. In *SFKTNP*, the dance steps are funny, depicting the ‘funny Parsi’s’. In *FKS*, there is a dance sequence, but it represents the Marathi style of dancing. Talking about the portrayal of Parsi characters in fiction films, Taraporevala said, “I get annoyed with Bollywood’s portrayal of Parsi characters which is very crude and kind of lazy. It’s like a stock figure. They’ll be waiting at a bus stop wearing a *dugli* and *pugri* and the women will wear a *gara* saree and all that. That’s their idea of Parsis.”

All the Parsi characters in the fiction films had one main trait in common that was emphasized throughout- honesty. In *SFKTNP*, we see Farhad being honest about his job as a lingerie salesman while in *FKS* Rusy forces the policeman to fine him for crossing the red light. While *SFKTNP* portrays the crazy, foolish, hotheaded yet endearing, kind- and warm-hearted side of the Parsi, *FKS* portrays the gentle, honest, modest Parsi. Coming to the way of speaking, Boman Irani being a full-fledged Bombay Parsi, speaks with a typical Bombay Parsi Hindi twang in all his roles. “When Bollywood portrays Parsi’s, they’re never speaking in their own language (Gujarati), they’re always speaking Hindi which we don’t speak really, and they’re always speaking in some Bollywoo-dized version of Parsi’s,” said Taraporevala. However, we see little Gujrati phrases and words being used in all the films, signifying how important and enmeshed the Parsi mother tongue is, in the lives of the Parsi’s. Due to the underrepresentation of Parsi’s in fiction films, the way the community is portrayed, their traits, actions, what they say, how they speak, how they dress, their rituals, their names, all tends to lead to a generalization and identity trap to the Parsi’s. It tends to limit the plural life approach to the Parsi’s. A film like *SFKTNP* and the way it conforms to many Parsi stereotypes is the perfect example. In *FKS*, we see a different side of the Parsi’s which gives us a new perspective. However, since not a lot of importance and screen time is given to the ‘Parsi-ness’ aspect of the film, it is not enough to create a generalization of the community. An important point to keep in mind here is that we must remember that these films mostly depict Parsi’s in Bombay and places in Gujarat. They do not portray the Parsi’s who live in other parts of the country or The United States of America where a sizable number of Parsi’s live.

Conclusion

While there exist a number of Indian films that portray various religious communities, there are only a handful of films made on the Parsi culture/identity. The Parsi in these films is an exaggerated caricature with typical speech patterns and a superfluous and funny Gujarati- English accent. Rarely do we come across a Parsi character who is there for any reason other than to give the film a comic element. However, there is more to the Parsi community than their accent, long nose, clothes and dhansak. The Parsi's are one of the most successful minority groups in India. Their contribution to Indian cinema is invaluable with their persuasive talent. One major finding was the underrepresentation of the community and its identity in Hindi cinema. There were only two major fiction films that were representative of the community- *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi* directed by Bela Bhansali Sehgal and written by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* which was directed by Rajesh Mapuskar and written by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Rajkumar Hirani, Rajesh Mapuskar and Ranjit Bahadur.

In Hindi films a common pattern was found when Parsi traits, especially their eccentricity was either caricatured or exaggerated within a stereotyped cliché or marginally captured. For example, in *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi* even though majority of the cast were Parsi's, the film exaggerated the Parsi 'mama's boy' stereotype, the dominant Parsi mother, the 'madcap bawa', their obsession with Indira Gandhi etc. On the other hand, *Ferrari Ki Sawaari*, though it portrays three generations of Parsi's, does not showcase the different aspects of the Parsi identity. Focusing more on the story and plot, no issues that plague the community are represented in either of the two films.

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