

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture43

Lecture 43: Culture Shock in Gauri Shinde's English Vinglish

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we are going to begin with a new module that focuses on cinema and how the Indian diaspora has been shown, has been portrayed through cinema. So, as early as the 1900s, cinema has indulged in the portrayal of life in the diaspora and migration. And this actually begins with some of the films that were made in the early 20th century, as early as 1902.



Films such as *Sir Wrangler*, *Mr. R.P. Paranjpye*, which was made in 1902, and then we had a film called *England Returned* made in 1921. From there on, we have films like *Purab or Paschim* made in 1970 and one of the most popular films from Bollywood, Yash Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, which was made in 1995. So, all these films depict the

Indian diaspora, the diasporic experience, the experience of migration, the baggage that migration entails, that migration involves. It includes both advantages as well as some very dark experiences and then experimentation with one's identity, how identity is constantly changing, transforming, the question of nostalgia and looking back to one's

memories from the homeland. So, all these things together comprise the diasporic or the diasporian experience and also the sense of unbelonging where a person who frequently has a fragmented identity feels inadequate to adjust to the current diasporic environment or milieu.

So, this is something we see in the film that we are going to discuss today. It is Gauri Shinde's Hindi film *English Vinglish*, and here we see how the protagonist Shashi is constantly struggling to, you know, find herself in the American milieu, in a diasporic space, how she struggles to gather the shards of herself and kind of asserts her unique Indian identity, her identity as an Indian housewife who does not work, rather who does not earn for her work, right.

So, this is something we find being very distinctly reflected and portrayed in *English Vinglish*. So, most of the Indian diasporic films have, you know, created a very vivid image and imagination of Indian experiences in the diaspora. Indians, you know, the Indians interface with anything that is foreign, anything that is unfamiliar to them and how the Indians compare these unfamiliar, you know, things with their own culture back at home, how the Indians deal with the Western culture, the Western ideas,



it could be clothing. it could be food habits, it could be how one dresses and lives and how one thinks and believes. Films that are, you know, based on the Indian diaspora are based mainly on this juxtaposition, sometimes a sense of unbelonging, sometimes a sense of reclaiming one's identity, sometimes it is unclaiming one's identity, And so we see that identity, home, dreams of, you know,

what America, for example, or London is, so that romanticization, certain stereotypes are always a part of these filmic texts, these filmic narratives. Right. Some more films that

we can think of in the recent time. that actually vividly portrays the Indian diaspora, one being Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham and then we have Kal Hona Ho. So we have Subhash Ghai's film Pardes even before Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham and Kal Ho Na Ho.

So either these films discuss about the difference between the East and the West, the stark difference that they want to prop up or they show, as in the case of Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, how a family has moved abroad because of the dispute with their parents, right? and how the family is reconciled in the end. Kal Ho Na Ho is once again a sense, you know, kind of dealing with the question of belonging and unbelonging simultaneously, where an Indian family sans... any, you know, older male figure is earning its life and living, trying to, you know, piece its life together, a rather difficult life.

It's trying to gather and piece its life together in New York, where their business is going down and nothing is going in the right direction, but still the family is hopeful. The family is run by a single mother. So we see the strengths of female folks becoming a point of focus in Kal Ho Na Ho. So, all these different discussions find an important place in the larger overarching topic of Indian diaspora reflected through films.

So, Jigna Desai in her work *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, which was published in 2004, highlights that although the academicians and the authors helped to grow disciplines such as post-colonial studies and Asian American studies, it is the genre of cinema that actually reaches a larger number of audiences—millions of viewers at the same time, right. And it is somehow... the filmic genre actually stays in the memory of a diverse audience for a longer time because of its definitely... So, because of its audio-visual effect, the film is understood as leaving a greater impact on the audience, a more long-lasting impact on the audiences compared to other mediums.

So, as compared to books, the medium of film is supposed to leave a greater impact on a larger audience by virtue of its audio-visual effect. So, people carry the message of a film longer in their minds. So, in this module, we are discussing some major motion pictures from our time to understand some of the important critical diasporic terms vis-à-vis their cinematic representations. One term we need to understand—and which, you know, comes back again and again in the depiction of the Indian diaspora in films—is culture shock. Culture shock has been defined by scholar and critic

INTRODUCTION

- As early as the 1900s, cinema has indulged in the portrayal of life in the diaspora and migration. From *Sir Wrangler Mr R P Paranjpye* (1902) or *England Returned* (1921) to *Purab aur Paschim* (1970) to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Indian film has been interested in diaspora.
- Jigna Desai in her work *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (2004) highlights that although the academicians and authors help to grow disciplines such as postcolonial studies and Asian American studies, it is **cinema that reaches tens of millions of viewers** (vi).
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Kalervo Oberg. So, Kalervo Oberg defines culture shock as, you know, something that is precipitated by the anxiety which results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. So, a person is the most comfortable and, like we say, in one's own element when he or she is surrounded by familiar people, familiar surroundings, and familiar culture and language. When that goes, when someone is transposed to new surroundings, a sense of unbelonging, a sense of unfamiliarity, bizarreness, and, you know, an anxiety generated from that, you know, sense of unbelonging sets in.

And this precisely is culture shock—something that I have not seen before, something that I have never encountered before, a situation to which I don't really know how to react and respond. Right. So, cultural anthropologist Cora DuBois first coined the term 'culture shock.' And Kalervo Oberg is credited with developing and expanding this concept in his studies of adjustment to a different culture, right? Its later exponents are cultural psychology scholars, including John Gullahorn, Jean Gullahorn, Adrian Furnham, and Stephen Bochner.

So, these are the scholars who have mainly advanced the study or scholarship on the idea of culture shock. Culture shock is commonly identified as a four-stage process, namely the honeymoon stage, crisis stage, recovery stage, and finally, the adjustment stage. So, coming to the text that we are going to discuss in our lecture today, Gauri Shinde's film *English Vinglish* is helpful in understanding several aspects of migration, which include cultural, psychosocial, and linguistic aspects. The film provides us with an accurate example of the life and psychology of an immigrant. It can also be seen as a microcosm of the journey of a migrant to the host nation, right?

The entire journey from shock to familiarization and finally adjustment is depicted through this film, *English Vinglish*. The film is therefore a useful example in the

discussion of psychological concepts and the different stages of culture shock through the events that happen in the life of the protagonist named Shashi, who is played by actress Sridevi, and it reflects all four stages during her four-week stay in the United States of America. So, at the beginning of the film, just as a way of very quickly summarizing what English Vinglish is about, we see the life of Shashi before she travels to the U.S. She is a housewife who can cook very well.

She's a beautiful woman in her middle age. She has two children, and all of them love her. They identify her in terms of very traditional values. Sometimes time-worn and anachronistic, or outdated values that she depicts. For example, she is constantly preparing laddus, or sweets at home, that she delivers to people's homes on different occasions during festivals.

So while her family really savors what she cooks because she has culinary talent, However, there is a belittling tone that she faces from both her husband and her children. We see that her daughter is particularly ashamed of taking her to school to meet her teacher, just because she does not have proficiency in English. And she prefers to talk to the teacher in Hindi, which embarrasses her daughter, right? And we see that she is struggling to protect her dignity after a point because her service or her contribution to the family sometimes goes completely unacknowledged.

And that's when she gets a chance to travel to the US. This entire four-week stay in the US, the bitter experiences, the shock, the new expectations from a completely different society—all these things tend to transform Shashi's life. So, in the book *The Psychology of Culture Shock*, scholars Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham talk about the different stages of culture shock. The first stage of culture shock is described as a stimulating and rewarding adventure experienced by migrants when they arrive in a new land for the first time. They are captivated by the new culture, the new lifestyle, and the surroundings.

Excitement Stage or Honeymoon Stage

- In *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (2020) by Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham, the first stage of culture shock is described as a **stimulating and rewarding adventure** experienced by immigrants, when they are captivated by the new culture, lifestyle, and surroundings.
- Shashi, for example, is mesmerized by the different and new culture after her arrival in the US. She is **excited and amazed to see the skyscrapers of Manhattan**, luxury showrooms and lifestyle of the United States. She is also moved by the **working and independent life of her sister Manu**, who raised her two daughters alone in a foreign country.
- While her niece, Radha, goes to college Shashi also accompanies her to explore the parks in the city. These early scenes of Shashi in the new country are perfect examples of how a tourist or an immigrant feels excited about a new culture during the **honeymoon stage**.



So, in the case of English Vinglish, the protagonist Shashi, for example, is mesmerized by the different and new culture after her arrival in the US. She is really excited and amazed to see the skyscrapers of Manhattan, the luxury showrooms, and the lifestyle of the United States. And then she is also moved by the independent and working life of her sister Manu. So, her sister Manu is shown as raising her two daughters alone in a foreign country. She is a working woman.

She is fiercely independent, and she doesn't need a man in her life to earn for her or make her decisions. So, when her niece Radha goes to college, we see Shashi also accompanying Radha, and on their way, she explores the parks in New York. This is actually the honeymoon stage. It is stimulating.

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- While her niece, Radha, goes to college Shashi also accompanies her to explore the parks in the city. These early scenes of Shashi in the new country are perfect examples of how a tourist or an immigrant feels excited about a new culture during the **honeymoon stage**.



It is rewarding. So, the first stage is the excitement stage or honeymoon stage, right? This is the name that scholars Ward, Bochner, and Furnham have given to the first stage of culture shock. So, she is really taken aback; she is excited, she explores the parks in New York, and these early scenes of Shashi in the new country are perfect examples of how a

tourist or an immigrant feels excited about a new culture during the honeymoon stage. So, here are some pictures from English Vinglish.

We see that Shashi encounters new things. She's exposed to things. You know, new setups—the way the shops, the malls, the roads, the people are. We see that even very small things, small encounters, deeply please her. She's elated.



She sees a man, for example—she sees a man and a woman playing violin on the road, and she stands and watches them, right? And her niece Radha is showing her new things. So she is really looking to explore the American culture in New York. She is really excited. So the protagonist Shashi can be seen as thoroughly enjoying and appreciating the new culture, the new American culture.

In the beginning, as an immigrant in the US. This is actually the first stage—an example of the honeymoon stage. And this stage comprises a breakaway from her routine life, her mundane life as a homemaker, which makes this stage or this phase all the more exciting for her. What is she? After all, she is not a woman who goes to the office from 9 to 5.

She stays at home. She brings up her children. She mainly cooks and cleans, and as we see at the beginning of the film, for all her contributions, she is not really appreciated at home. This is a breakaway from that routine life,

and she's enjoying everything new in America. Right. So this comprises the first phase of the first stage, known as the honeymoon stage. Soon after comes the second stage, which is the crisis stage. The crisis stage, or the crisis phase, is realized when the immigrant starts feeling disoriented, helpless, and unable to cope with the new culture.

This phase is accompanied by a sense of inadequacy, frustration, anxiety, and anger. So, in the case of Shashi in English Vinglish, she is taken aback, and feels quite unequipped, quite helpless in terms of her language proficiency and the cultural knowledge she has from India when she realizes that, left alone, she is not even able to order a cup of coffee in a café in New York. So, she has this very rough encounter, a very rough exchange, and a very negative experience in a café, when the behavior of the woman at the counter is quite rude toward her.

This happens when she fails to place her order. There are a list of items given, placed on the menu and she has to very quickly choose an item and tell it at the counter, tell it to the person selling. She is unable to do that. This is, you know, this failure in communication. this gap in communication, it would also be seen as, you know, pace of life that New York expects among the peoples residing there.

So, it has to be something very fast. People understand English, they respond almost in a pre-programmed manner. There is no cogitation in ordering something at a shop because most of the people do it in a routine manner. It's part of their daily life.

Unlike Shashi, she has perhaps never been to a cafe and ordered something for herself. This is her first time. So what she feels is a sense of crisis, an acute sense of crisis, unbelonging, embarrassment, humiliation and so on. Her failing to place an order for a cup of coffee, such a simple act basically, this failure becomes a metaphor for the feeling towards the host culture in the crisis stage. While the lady at the counter, you know, keeps shouting at Shashi, she fumbles, she becomes nervous and finally she runs away from the cafe.

This actually comprises the crisis stage. She's alone and helpless in that situation, not accompanied by family. And Shashi becomes anxious. And, like I said, she decides to run away from the spot because all eyes are on her. She has spilled some food, making things worse.

Crisis stage

- The crisis phase is realized when the immigrant feels **disoriented, helpless** and unable to cope with the new culture – this phase is accompanied by a sense of inadequacy, frustration, anxiety and anger (Ward et al, 2020).
- In Shashi's case, she is taken aback and feels unequipped in terms of language and culture from the realization that she is **unable to order a simple cup of coffee** in a café.
- The behaviour of the woman at the café counter is rude towards her while she is failing to place her order – a **metaphor for the feeling towards the host culture** in the crisis stage. Alone and helpless in that situation, Shashi becomes anxious and runs away from the café without taking her order.



And now she just leaves the shop, leaves the cafe without help. She places an order without taking her order. Basically, she does not collect her cup of coffee. She just leaves, crying. So this is the crisis stage, the second stage of culture shock.

So when her excitement wears off and she has calmed down, she realizes that she is unable to cope with the American culture, food, and lifestyle. It's way too fast for her. And she feels kind of lost. She remembers India. She feels alienated now.

Crisis stage (contd.)

- When her excitement wears off Shashi feels that she is unable to cope with the American culture, food, and lifestyle; she feels alienated now. She is suddenly attracted towards her home culture and desires to return – homesickness, a feeling that every immigrant feels at the **crisis stage** (Fitria, 2021). She calls her home in India to feel connected with the home nation.
- Eventually, Shashi starts to avoid going out alone and enjoying it, as she used to do before the crisis phase, and decides to remain mostly at home.



And suddenly this lacuna, this vacuum that is there, suddenly created in her life, attracts her toward her home culture and her desire—a strong desire to return to India. She is suddenly homesick. There is a feeling of homesickness, you know, setting in her, and this is a very common feeling that every immigrant feels at the crisis stage.

She calls her home in India to feel connected with her home nation. So, eventually, we see that Shashi starts avoiding going out alone and enjoying life on the streets of New York, as she initially did when she had just arrived. And so she has gotten stuck in the crisis phase and decides to remain mostly indoors. She decides to remain mostly at home.

So, these are some snapshots from the incident at the café, where in the first picture, she is trying to explain what kind of coffee she needs, much to her dismay.

She is not able to get across what is in her mind. So, it is a failure—a complete failure of communication, a communication breakdown, and then, because all eyes are on her, she runs away, escaping the situation. And she sits on a bench in the third snapshot. She sits alone, cries—a woman in her middle age, just because she cannot speak English.



Being otherwise so talented, so skilled, cheerful, and charming, she is, you know, made to feel completely lost and completely alienated just because she does not have proficiency in one language, that is English. So we also discuss here the kind of questionable power that English enjoys in Euro-American countries and how a person is left behind, is made to feel left out if he or she is from another country, just visiting the US or visiting London, and not equipped with the knowledge of English. A woman in her middle age, she's lost. She's alone. She's helpless.

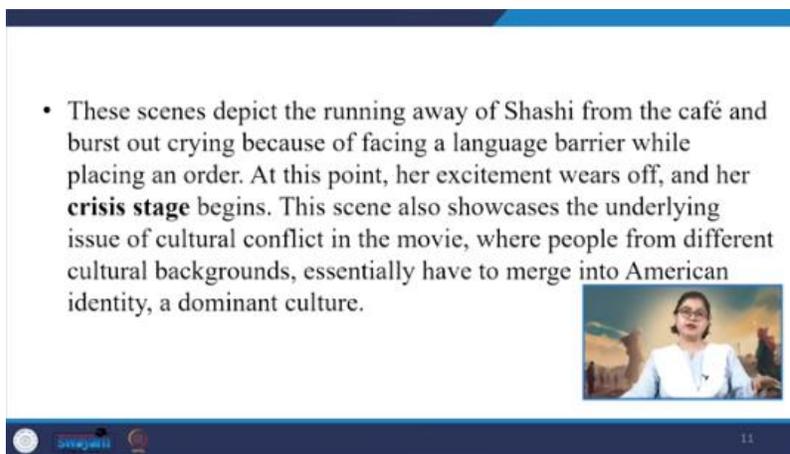
And finally, she kind of breaks down and cries because she cannot, just because she cannot speak in English. The kind of power that English wields over the colored population, over the immigrants. This is also a narrative critiquing. This kind of power that English enjoys, or the kind of power, the kind of superiority that English as a language assumes, and the English-speaking society assumes over the colored people, over the migrants. So there is a point in the film when we see Shashi arrives in New York, and she says,

She is corrected and told that it's not 'US,' it is 'the US,' and we see the inherent pride in Shashi when she says, 'Why should we call it 'the US' when we don't say 'the India'?' So that's where even a simple woman, who is a homemaker, is coming from. She is not very

learned. She does not hold a very high degree, nor does she work in an office. But she immediately has this comparison in her mind.

If I don't call India, why should I call the United States of America? Right. So, these scenes—going back to the scenes from the café—these scenes depict Shashi running away from the café, and she bursts out crying because of facing a language barrier while placing an order. At this point, her excitement has completely, you know, waned. It has gone down, and her crisis stage has begun.

Her crisis stage has begun. So, this scene showcases the underlying issue of cultural conflict that the movie tries to portray, where people from different cultural backgrounds essentially have to merge into the American identity, which becomes the dominant culture and the dominant way of existence in America—in New York, where the film is set. Cultural psychologists such as Kalervo Oberg, Jim Schnell, Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham—all these scholars suggest that the recovery phase, which is the third phase of culture shock, takes place when the immigrant voluntarily attempts to become part of the new culture by learning to adapt to the host culture. Right. So, what happens after the crisis?



- These scenes depict the running away of Shashi from the café and burst out crying because of facing a language barrier while placing an order. At this point, her excitement wears off, and her **crisis stage** begins. This scene also showcases the underlying issue of cultural conflict in the movie, where people from different cultural backgrounds, essentially have to merge into American identity, a dominant culture.



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She has shut herself indoors. She's not going out alone. She's not enjoying herself as much as she used to when she had just arrived. She was traveling to parks, exploring new places, trying to talk to people. All of a sudden, there is a shock.

She completely cocoons up. But how long? For how long? The third stage after the crisis is the recovery. She has to recover from the crisis and start adapting to the host culture.

That's kind of survival that is important for her preservation. So, according to scholar Oberg, this recovery stage helps the migrants in beginning to open the way to a new

cultural environment. So, she is opening up and, you know, she is trying to espouse and find her way through the new cultural meanings and significations. So, Shashi's recovery phase begins when she is found eager to learn English.

This is where she got stuck up. Basically, she cannot speak English and that's why she's feeling so left out. And then one day she decides to, you know, take up English tuition, English tutorials, go to an English language learning center. And so she manages to join the English classes by herself without anyone's help. So, that's the kind of determination we see in a middle-aged homemaker from India, which is commendable.

She figures out that learning English will help her accommodate and adjust to the new cultural setting, and it will also help her gain respect back at home. So now, this comprises the third category, phase, or the third stage, which is the recovery stage. She is now recovering from the crisis. So here, we have some snapshots from the film which depict her tryst with English learning—rather, her journey of learning a new language.

Recovery stage

- Shashi's recovery phase begins, when she is found eager to learn English. She manages to join the English learning class by herself without anyone's help. She figures out that learning English can help her accommodate a new cultural setting and will also help her gain respect back at home. She is now seen recovering from the crisis.



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And finally, you know, she gains proficiency in English. So she sees this advertisement on a bus for the first time: 'Learn to speak English in four weeks.' New York Language Center. And then she starts, you know, going to the class. She takes admission on her own without telling her family,

and she joins the class. She kind of overcomes her inhibition. And the last scene is a scene of celebration. So we see that in the first image, Shashi is actually curious when she comes across the advertisement for English class, and this is the beginning of the recovery stage. In the second image, she is curious about learning the language.

She is in the class. She fumbles. She fails. But she is among other people who do not know the language just as much as she does.

So, they are as much ignorant as Shashi vis-a-vis the English language. So, in the class, she fumbles, but she does not feel inhibited because she is surrounded by candidates, she is surrounded by students who are also not that great in English speaking. And then the third image shows how she is overwhelmed on being called an entrepreneur, and she makes the Michael Jackson move on the street to celebrate her joy. Earlier in the movie, we have seen that she makes this MJ move within her home space to cheer up her son.

So, she is making an MJ move as a mother to cheer up her son. But here she is making an MJ move on the street in front of many people that she does not know in a new environment to celebrate her own achievement and as a reflection of her own joy. The fourth stage and the final stage is the adjustment stage. It can be seen as a complete adjustment to the host culture.

At this stage, the immigrant reflects functional competence in the new environment. The person has started picking up the cultural codes, the codes of behavior expected of someone living in the current society, the host society. This stage is key to the movie English Vinglish, where acquiring knowledge of the English language restores Shashi's confidence, a sense of respect, and also self-respect. She is equipped with communication skills and feels she can handle new things in the host nation and also back at home. So she feels more equipped.

She feels more adequate, both as an immigrant in the new nation and as a family member back at home. When Shashi is asked to give a wedding speech, her husband tries to apologize on her behalf. And why is this so? Because her husband believes she will not be able to speak in English in front of the guests. Most of the guests at the wedding are white people,

Adjustment Stage

- The **adjustment stage** can be seen as the complete adjustment to the host culture. In this stage, the immigrant reflects functional competence in the new environment (Ward, et al., 2020).
- The stage is key to the movie, where acquiring knowledge of the English language restores the confidence, respect and communication skills of the protagonist in the host nation and home as well.
- When Shashi is asked to give a wedding speech her husband tries to apologize on her behalf, believing that she will not be able to speak in English in front of the guests, without knowing that she has acquired proficiency in English.



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and she is required to give a speech in English. Her husband apologizes on her behalf, believing she is inadequate in the current surroundings without knowing she has secretly acquired proficiency in English. It comes as a surprise to everyone when Shashi gives a speech, a fluent, flawless speech in English at the wedding. This is the picture, the snapshot of her speech at the wedding.

Everyone applauds. Everyone is taken aback. It's a very positive surprise. Later, she becomes so comfortable that while returning to India from the United States, she asks the flight attendant for a Hindi-language newspaper in proficient English.

This is a very important statement made by the film. So, she still wants to read her news in the vernacular, but she can communicate her need in English. If required, she can switch to English mode, but she remains the same person she originally was. She is still as homely, but perhaps a little more confident. And perhaps she can now evade the belittling behavior she has been receiving from her family members earlier.

Right. So, the connotation associated with this title is a kind of, one could say, counter-gaze behavior toward the English language, which has been constantly doing to other languages across the world. So, let us put it this way. So, the title English Vinglish is kind

Adjustment stage (Contd.)

- It comes as a surprise to everyone when Shashi gives a speech in English at the wedding (shown in the image below).
- She later becomes so comfortable that while returning to India from the United States she asks the flight attendant for the **Hindi-language newspaper in proficient English.**



Image source: from YouTube

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Of a little dismissive in tone, it is almost like, so much for English. This is the tone that we understand from English Vinglish. So much about English speaking and English learning. Why do we, you know, make it seem more than it is, or why do we give it more importance than it deserves? Just the way English has been looming over the languages from non-Western countries, this is kind of a counter-gaze to that.

Adjustment stage (Contd.)

- It comes as a surprise to everyone when Shashi gives a speech in English at the wedding (shown in the image below).
- She later becomes so comfortable that while returning to India from the United States she asks the flight attendant for the **Hindi-language newspaper in proficient English**.



You know, English is something an Indian homely woman, an Indian homebound woman or homebred woman, can learn in four weeks, and then she can still choose to speak in her vernacular. So, so much for English, English Vinglish. One of the most popular movies of the year 2012, English Vinglish offers a multi-layered critique of various social issues such as feminism, post-colonialism, identity, and belonging. However, it also enables our understanding of the experience of immigrants in foreign cultures through the concept of culture shock, the different stages of culture shock that we discussed. And that is subtly expressed through the various scenes, through the various parts of this filmic plot.

Shashi's initial lack of knowledge and afterward her command over the language and culture of the host nation carves out her journey from difficulties toward adjustment. And finally, it's a victory in its own small way, right? It's a victory, her victory, in a very small, localized way. So, however, before we come to a close of today's lecture, we have to understand that films like English Vinglish also have

You know, drawn their inspiration from certain romanticized ideas, certain stereotypes. For example, the stereotype of the married household woman who is always on the receiving end of this negative immigrant experience. Is this always true in the case of India? Why does it always have to be the household female, the married Indian woman in her middle age, who is always struggling as a migrant in the US? Does this always correspond to India's reality, or does India have to offer some newer realities, some alternative realities that the American society can deal with?



With this, I would like to close our lecture here today, and let us meet for further discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.