

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture46

Lecture 46: Culture Conflict and Culture Clash in Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway and Christmas **As Usual**

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the next series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we are going to talk about diaspora and cinema. So, we are understanding the experiences of the Indian diaspora through our reading of different films. When immigrants arrive in a different nation,



they bring their own culture, traditions, and values with them. They are not transparent entities. They carry a baggage of their own values, their own histories, their own cultures, and legacies. And with that arise the chances of potential conflicts when two different cultures, who are from very different understandings, very different trainings and backgrounds, and carrying very different perceptions, very different outlooks; when they come together in contact, it often results in conflicts, in differences, right?

So, while discussing various facets of diaspora and migration, understanding the phenomenon of culture clash, which can also be called a clash of cultures or cultural clash between the immigrants and the host society, becomes crucial. So, we have to understand this phenomenon of culture clash. What happens when two people, two

groups of people who have undergone very different trainings, who have very different cultures, maybe different languages, different religious backgrounds, when two such people come together, Even the dressing habits, the food habits, as we will see in our films today in our discussion, when two people have very different habits, it could be food habits, eating habits, it results in misunderstandings leading to a potential conflict or clash.

It can be defined as the conflicts, misunderstandings, or tension that arise from the interaction between cultures following different cultural cues. So, when two social groups understand very different cultural cues, different signs, different traditions, and understandings, it leads to a clash. Various factors can be responsible for culture clash, such as language barriers, religious differences, social customs, economic disparities, and political ideologies. So, in this regard, in this context, I am reminded of what Roland Barthes says regarding myths and mythologies.

The fact that the myths are all structures. They are a number of significations that exist because of social sanctions. Because a society has sanctioned certain practices, they exist. It could be a football match.

It could be the codes of behavior that we follow inside a church or in a wedding milieu. There is nothing natural about it. These are all man-made. Right. So, Barthes says that every human civilization makes these myths, these mythologies appear as natural, whereas they are a series of significations that have been bestowed with meaning, that have been bestowed with significance through, you know, social consent, through social consensus.



Right. These are all mythologies. If we may call them, these are meta-behaviors. These are meta-codes of behavior that a society follows. And each civilization has its own number of such mythologies, such behaviors that they carry

with them, that they pass down through generations. So, the Indian wedding may not be similar to the African wedding. And that's where the conflicts arise when the white culture, their practices, their habits are not similar to those of people from developing countries. It could be the Indians; it could be the Africans.

There is a kind of barrier, a kind of gap in understanding, which leads to potential conflict. So, the terms 'culture shock' and 'culture clash,' however, are not the same. They have erroneously been used interchangeably. However, there is a key difference between the two. The culture shock on one hand and culture clash on the other.

So, culture shock is something that we see in the case of English Vinglish. Culture shock is the experience that the protagonist Shashi undergoes in English Vinglish. It is felt at the individual level, whereas the other, culture clash, is experienced So, culture clash is experienced at the interpersonal or societal level.

It has a larger impact. Culture shock is a personal experience happening at the individual level, whereas culture clash is experienced at the societal level on a larger scale. So, as I said, Shashi's experience in English Vinglish is at the individual level. Therefore, it is a culture shock.

The first time she arrives in New York, she encounters a new culture and certain new phenomena; whereas the present case study, which we are doing through our reading of *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway*, a film made in 2023, reflects culture clash at the societal level. Right. We also see culture clash at the interpersonal level in the case of another film titled *Christmas as Usual*. So, in today's lecture, we will take up two of these films.

One is *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway*, where we see a culture clash at the societal level, on a much larger scale. Then, at the interpersonal level, we see the same clash happening in the film *Christmas as Usual*. Various noteworthy fictional accounts have discussed the culture clash between South Asian and European or Western countries. These works include *The American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa, It was produced in 1994.

INTRODUCTION

- The terms, **culture shock and culture clash**, have erroneously been used interchangeably but there is a key difference between both. One is experienced at the **individual level**, whereas the other is experienced at the **interpersonal or societal level**. Shashi's experience in *English Vinglish* is at the individual level, therefore, it is culture shock, whereas the present case study reflects on culture clash at the societal level in *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*, and at the interpersonal level in *Christmas As Usual*.
- The term is sometimes also used as culture conflict, but **conflict is one of the outcomes of the broader scene of culture clash, along with adaptation and learning**. **Cultural conflicts intensify when those differences become reflected in politics**, particularly on a macro level. This can be seen in the movies like *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* (2023).



Then, *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. *Interpreter of Maladies* came out in 1999. *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith in 2000. *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali in 2003, and then Mohsin Hamid wrote the famous novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which came out in 2007.

We see that alongside novels and written works, media and popular culture have also contributed to and experimented with the portrayal of culture clashes for a long time now. There are plenty of movies based on the theme of culture clash, such as *The King and I*, directed by Walter Lang, which came out in 1956. *Lost in Translation* by Sofia Coppola in 2003. *Spanglish* by James L. Brooks, which came out in 2004. *Borat* by Larry Charles in 2006.

And *'You People'* by Kenya Barris in 2023. We also have graphic narratives, including *'American Born Chinese'* by Gene Luen Yang, which came out in 2006. And *'Persepolis'* by Marjane Satrapi, which came out in 2008. Movies that focus on the culture clash between Western culture and the South Asian diaspora include *'Bollywood Hollywood'* by Deepa Mehta, which came out in 2002. *'The Hundred-Foot Journey'* by Lasse Hallström in 2014.

'The Big Sick' by Michael Schwalter in 2017, And then the topic at hand, the text we have today, *'Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway'*, which was directed by Ashima Chibber and came out in 2023, as well as *'Christmas as Usual'* by Peter Holmson, which came out in 2023. So these last two works will be part of our discussion today for today's lecture. One is *'Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway'* and then *'Christmas as Usual'*.

Most of these narratives dealing with culture clashes between the East and the West are inspired by real incidents of culture clash, as is common between immigrants and host

societies. In the year 2023, two narratives emerged. 'Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway' and 'Christmas as Usual', depicting the topic of culture clash between Indian and Norwegian cultures, were produced. So we had both these films coming out in 2023. Both personal accounts show the differences between cultures and the treatment of Indian immigrants by the host society.

Culture clash and popular media

- Movies focused on the culture clash **between the Western culture and the South-Asian diaspora** include *Bollywood/Hollywood* by Deepa Mehta (2002), *The Hundred-Foot Journey* by Lasse Hallström (2014), *The Big Sick* by Michael Showalter (2017), *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* by Ashima Chibber (2023), and *Christmas As Usual* by Petter Holmsen (2023)
- Most of these narratives are **inspired by real incidents** of culture clash, as it is common between the immigrants and the host societies
- In the year 2023, two narratives – *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* and *Christmas As Usual* – depicting the topic of culture clash between the Indian and Norwegian cultures were produced.
- Both personal accounts show the **differences between cultures and the treatment of Indian immigrants by the host society**





Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway is a legal drama based on the real-life story of Sagarika Chakraborty. A homemaker in Norway has gone through similar difficulties to those depicted in the film. Her name is Sagarika Chakraborty. In the movie, the protagonist Debika, played by Rani Mukerji, and Anirudh Chatterjee, played by Anirban Bhattacharya, are an Indian immigrant couple living in Stavanger, Norway.

The movie begins in the media spotlight, where during a visit, the local authorities of Barnevernet, the Norwegian child welfare service, are shown whisking away the children of Debika and Anirudh Chatterjee. The plot revolves around the struggles of Mrs. Debika Chatterjee to claim guardianship of her children. The plot revolves around the struggles of Mrs. Debika Chatterjee to claim guardianship of her children. She has two children: a five-year-old son, Shubh, and her daughter, Shuchi, in Norway, and later in India as well. It is the story of a mother, a parent who wants to reclaim her children from whom she has been separated and detached.

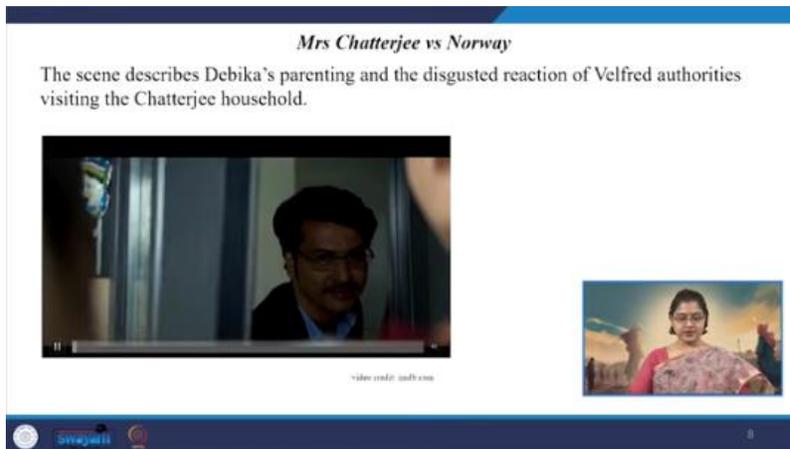
The children have been taken away from Debika Chatterjee, and the entire movie is about her struggle, the challenges she faces, and the legal difficulties in reclaiming her children. The main theme of the movie is the culture clash resulting from differences in parenting styles between the two cultures. The Norwegian culture brings to the table its own values, ideologies, and understanding of good parenting. They impose these onto the Indian family, who have a very different style of raising their children. However, the movie

portrays the host society as viewing the immigrant culture as inferior, which is often the case in East-West clashes.

Western culture always posits its superiority. In the present case study, we see that the child welfare authorities accused Debika's parenting of negligence without even realizing that it is an Indian way of parenting. They also accused Debika of being absent from her son's life. because Anirudh has been the only parent attending the parent-teacher meetings. So we see that in the film, the father is constantly attending the parent-teacher meetings,

and so there is this deduction, this understanding by the Norwegian authorities that Debika Chatterjee is incompetent to parent her children. She is incompetent to bring up her children and adequately take care of them. So they blame her for neglecting her children. So the Norwegian authorities considering this hand-feeding of the children as force-feeding indicates the cultural divide. In India, feeding children by hand is a normal practice and is often seen as a mother's love toward her child.

However, when seen through the Norwegian authorities' lens, this indicates some kind of malpractice, a signifier of force-feeding, which is not approved by them. So, here we have a video showing a short snippet from the movie. The scene describes Debika's parenting, and we see the disgusted reaction of the welfare authorities when they visit the Chatterjee household. I'll just go back to the snippet once again.



We will see how the protagonist, the female protagonist is trying to explain, although there is a language barrier, presumably, She's trying to explain through her gestures that what she's doing to her child is quite normal, like putting a black spot on the forehead, feeding the child with hands; she is trying to explain the rational of her maternal behavior

and the father we see looks on very affectionately even as the mother tends her children. But all these behavior, these set of behavior are, they stand misunderstood by the welfare authorities. They feel that the mother is incapable of, they feel that the mother is inadequate in terms of tending or taking care of her children.

So the local court considered the parenting of the Chatterjee couple as a negligence and they actually set out a rule against them, putting the children in a foster home. In the movie, it also portrays that the immigrant mother does not have any agency. Any woman who is, you know, just limited to her household, who is just a homemaker in a foreign land is further shorn of her, she is deprived of any agential role, even as the whole state machinery of Norway is going against her.

So we will once again take a look at this short video of the two children being taken away forcefully from Debika Chatterjee and she can hardly resist the authority. The state actually steps in to, polices and intervenes the process of parenting just because it's the code of conduct, the behavior within the Indian household is not something that they are familiar with because they see unfamiliar set of practices within the Indian household, they consider these as malpractices, as something that are harming the children, and so they want to snatch the children away from the mother.

So here we see in the opening scene, the children being taken away in a car by the authorities and the mother running, and in the end, she subsequently falls on the road. It is depicted that the Norwegian authorities are whisking away with the children without consent or consultation of the parents and the mother Debika runs after the car, and she subsequently falls on the road. So, on meeting an Indian politician Mrs. Vasudha Kamath, Debika appeals to the Indian government to interfere in this matter. She appeals to an Indian politician, Vasudha Kamath, to intervene in this matter and bring back her children.

She believes that the Norway government officials consider the Indian culture as inferior to their own. To quote, they think they are a rich country and their culture is the best and we are from poor country with no culture, unquote. So, Debika in a way suggests that her domestic affairs are personal and a reflection of her own home country's culture, what she has been trained, the kind of history, the kind of legacy, the kind of, you know, heritage that she comes from. And in turn, she asks what would have happened if the Indian government had confiscated a white child, if the Indian government had snatched away

and taken a white child by force. Her statement reflects in politics, thereby intensifying the conflict between the Chatterjee family and the Norwegian state.



Raja Ramanathan, who is also an immigrant, writes in his review that, the message from the movie is starkly unequivocal. So the message that the movie gives out is starkly unequivocal. Be like us if you want to live here or go back where you came from. This is the message that the movie is, you know, kind of emanating vis-a-vis the white Norwegian culture.

He further asserts that the integration policies of the Western world reflect the white man's burden to civilize non-white immigrants. This movie closely depicts how a culture clash turns into a conflict, leading up to a legal proceeding, which is further politicized. The movie helps in understanding that before having any prejudice about a different culture, one should first get to know it. It would not have turned into a conflict if the local authorities had shown some interest in Indian culture. They had someone from that culture representing their judiciary, their juridical system.

Right. So they did not have Indian representation within their juridical system. And so this misunderstanding, this culture clash, resulted in the utmost suffering of the children as well as the protagonist, Debika Chatterjee. So the filmic narrative of Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway is contrary to another case study that we are going to discuss now. It's a film titled Christmas as Usual.

It also came out in 2023, where the culture clash results in learning and adapting to a new culture. So, Christmas as Usual, also based on real-life events, portrays the learning and adapting of a new culture after a long struggle of misunderstandings from both sides. We have this couple, Jashan, played by Kannan Gill, and Thea, played by Ida Ursin-Holm,

who live together in an apartment in California. Thea brings Jashan, her Indian boyfriend, home to meet her Norwegian family. From the beginning of the movie, we witness a series of scenes of cultural stereotypes being imposed on Jashan, including the fact that Jashan's name is mispronounced.

Someone's name is his or her identity, the way we know, the way we call someone. It's something that one wears in society. So distorting someone's name is like distorting someone's identity and culture. So, Jashan is constantly being called as Shazam in the narrative, in the filmic narrative again and again by his girlfriend's mother and later also by her niece. So, Jashan is constantly being called as Shazam again and again by his girlfriend's mother and then also by her niece.

Thea's mother, Anna-Lise, does not want her daughter to have an Indian boyfriend. So she has this kind of an apathy, could be a hostility towards this Indian boy, Jashan, because of the purported or the apparent cultural differences that they have. The movie begins this difference, this cold behavior and antipathy begins when Anna-Lise gladly hugs the white cab driver in front of Jashan, confusing the driver as Jashan, but she is seen explicitly hesitant after she understands, after she realizes that it's not the white cab driver, but indeed this brown man who happens to be her daughter's boyfriend. She is visibly disturbed when she realizes that her daughter has chosen not a white man,



as though she would have been happier if the white cab driver were the boyfriend and not Jashan. So she hugs the driver instead of Jashan thinking confusing him as her daughter's boyfriend. She also considers Jashan as an outsider and creates obstacles for Jashan while he tries to fit into the Norwegian family's culture. So, in the process of fitting into the Norwegian culture, Jashan even goes for isbading, which is a Norwegian tradition of

swimming in ice. He is almost punishing his body and spirit in order to fit into his girlfriend's white culture.

He is served pork sauce, something that he does not eat. Most of the food on the table he finds unpalatable throughout his day. On the other hand, when he tries to cook, when he prepares some Indian food for the Norwegian family, they find his cooking extremely spicy and all of them tend to fall sick. This is also a way of asserting difference.

It's also a way of exoticizing and otherizing the culture that Jashan comes from. They tend to fall sick, extremely sick, after eating Indian food. So, Jashan later finds out that the Norwegians have offensive names for Indian spice brands. They call Indian spices by names such as Black Boy and Hindu, which are very pejorative. And Jashan finds such spice brand names extremely racist.

Christmas As Usual

- In the process of 'fitting in', **Jashan even goes to 'isbading'** – a Norwegian tradition of swimming in ice. He is also **served fat (pork) sauce** and mostly **food that he finds unpalatable, throughout his stay**. On the other hand, when he prepares Indian food for them, which they find as extremely spicy, and they fall sick
- Jashan later finds out that the Norwegians have **offensive names for the Indian spice brands, such as Black Boy and Hindu**, which Jashan finds racist; in the same scene **Anne-Lise is angry because Thea secretly adds spices to Jashan's pork fat to make it palatable for him** (1:03:08-1:03:40) clearly depicting cultural divide
- Jashan also shows **disrespect towards Norwegian culture by calling the Christmas traditions "weird rituals" and the traditional dresses "crazy uniforms"** and the whole celebration a **"Christmas cult"** in order to hurt Thea (1:04:20-1:04:40). In another scene, he tells his mother (over a phone call) that they do weird things in the name of tradition (52:52-53:45)



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In the same scene, we see that Anna-Lise is angry because Thea secretly adds spices to Jashan's pork fat to make it palatable for him. This clearly depicts the cultural divide. As Jashan's girlfriend, Thea takes care of his different tastes and wants to accommodate his culinary preferences, so she secretly adds some spices to his food. But the mother, Anne-Lise, really wants Jashan to fit into their culture, integrate with and assimilate into their culture.

And this clearly depicts the cultural divide. So, Jashan also shows disrespect toward Norwegian culture by calling the Christmas traditions weird rituals. So, this is a way of returning the gaze, in a way. It is a way of treating the Norwegian people in the same way they have treated him earlier.

So, he calls Christmas traditions weird, their traditional dresses crazy uniforms, and the whole celebration he calls a Christmas cult in order to hurt Thea. So, whatever offense he

is facing is returned by him through such pejorative terms that he is using. So, he is actually judging their practices, their rituals for Christmas. In another scene, he tells his mother over a phone call that they do weird things, they do strange things in the name of tradition.

So, this is like reverse exoticization, I would say. The Indian is regaining, he is reclaiming his agential position in order to render some kind, some form of strangeness to the Norwegian culture. He is just returning the gaze, in a way. So, here in this picture, we see the traditional sweater being used as a metaphor.

In the picture, the entire Norwegian family, Thea's family is wearing the same kind of sweater that they are supposed to wear for Christmas; it is like a uniform, a strange uniform. Everyone is wearing the traditional knitted sweater except Jashan, which describes, which focuses further on the othering and the exclusion of this Indian boy from this Christmas milieu, from this white milieu. So this movie ends, however, on a happy note with Thea's family's acceptance of Jashan and learning and understanding of Indian culture.

Some significant elements that depict the acceptance of Jashan within Thea's family include tying Indian and Norwegian mini flags together. So they are tying the two countries' flags together in the decoration, in the Christmas decoration, and Jashan in the end wears the knitted sweater while celebrating Christmas with everyone. So he is also embracing their Christmas culture just as they embrace his Indian values.

Christmas As Usual

- This movie ends on a happy note with Thea's family's acceptance of Jashan and learning and understanding of Indian culture. Some significant elements that depict the **acceptance of Jashan** include **tying Indian and Norwegian mini-flags together** in the decoration, and **Jashan wearing a knitted sweater while celebrating Christmas with everyone**



Image credit: Netflix

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So, the movie serves as an example for understanding cultural nuances and learning from them about a different culture, rather than fostering prejudices against it. While the dominant Western cultural institutions increasingly accept the visibility and the relevance

of the immigrants in artworks, it is usually only those whose work are considered as universal. A concept which according to Arun Prabha Mukherjee performs a magic trick of eradicating whatever may be troublesomely other. So only coloured culture's depictions are welcome in the Western society only if they are very refined, if they are very streamlined and if they completely expunge the questions of ideology, power, race and class.

So, such selective representation of immigrant artworks where the cultures are shown—the non-Western cultures are shown in a very censored, streamlined, selective fashion, in a very refined, agreeable manner. They push into oblivion either the entire work of certain authors, or they push into oblivion the works of those that are particularly considered politicized. So, any politicized, any ideologically burdened work talking about power relations between the West and non-West would never be considered welcome on Western platforms.

Conclusion

- The movie serves as an example of understanding cultural nuances and learning from them about a different culture rather than fostering prejudices against it
- While the dominant Western cultural institutions increasingly accept the visibility of the immigrant in artworks, it is usually only those whose work are considered as "universal," a concept which, according to Arun Prabha Mukherjee, "performs the magic trick of eradicating whatever maybe troublesomely other," as well as [any work that] "questions of ideology, power, race and class."
- Such selective representation of immigrant artworks push into oblivion either the entire work of certain authors, or the ones particularly considered as politicized.



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So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us continue with another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.