



ENGLISH-VINGLISH: A READING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

According to The Encyclopedia Britannica, “Globalization is the Process by which the experience of everyday life, marked by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, is becoming standardized around the world. Factors that have contributed to globalization include increasingly sophisticated communications and transportation technologies and services, mass migration and the movement of peoples, a level of economic activity that has outgrown national markets through industrial combinations and commercial groupings that cross national frontiers, and international agreements that reduce the cost of doing business in foreign countries. Globalization offers huge potential profits to companies and nations but has been complicated by widely differing expectations, standards of living, cultures and values, and legal systems as well as unexpected global cause-and-effect linkages”.

English-Vinglish is a Hindi film, released in 2012. It is written and directed by Gauri Shinde. This paper examines This paper focuses on two issues- cosmopolitanism and migration which are two direct result of Globalization. In this study an effort has been made to bring out the features of cosmopolitanism and globalization and migration studies through an analysis of plots and characters of the film.

Keywords: Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, Migration Studies, Culture Studies

Introduction

Living in the 21st century, we are already acquainted with the term Globalization. We go to the shopping mall or order at Flipkart, give ‘Like’ or ‘Love’ react on Facebook. We search Google for information. Also we transact money online and reach so distant places in just a few hours that our ancestors would only believe it to be magic, if they were alive. All these things clearly shows that we are already in the midst of a complex phenomenon known as Globalization, but to begin, we must ask what is it?

Shalmali Guttal defined ‘Globalization’ as “a variety of economic, cultural, social, and political changes that have shaped the world over the past 50-odd years, from the much celebrated revolution in information technology to the diminishing of national and geo-political boundaries in an ever-expanding, transnational movement of goods, services, and capital. The increasing homogenisation of consumer tastes, the consolidation and expansion of corporate power, sharp increases in wealth and poverty, the ‘McDonaldisation’ of food and culture, and the growing ubiquity of liberal democratic ideas are all, in one way or another attributed to globalization”. (Guttal, 2007)

English-Vinglish is a Hindi film, released in 2012. It is written and directed by Gauri Shinde. The story centers on Shashi. She felt insecure as she did not know English. Her family and society at large, was the reason behind her insecurity. The film portrays the journey that transformed Shashi. She overcame the insecurity due to her determination. She mastered the language. In the process of learning the language, she also taught the lesson of becoming a self-assured and confident woman.

Globalization

According to Robert.J. Holton, Globalization is “an intensified movement of goods, money, technology, information, people, ideas and cultural practices across political and cultural boundaries. According to him, it implicates the interests and activities of merchants and bankers, migrants and religious processes across the globe made all social activity profoundly interconnected rather than separated off into different national and cultural spaces. As a result, inter-dependence arises out of human activity and involves particular agents, whether global entrepreneurs or regulators, medical professionals or lawyers, social movement activists or world musicians. Globalization in these ways, as Holton states, creates a profound impact on our Consciousness of and identification with the world as a single place, as in forms of cosmopolitanism, religion or earth-focused environmentalism”. (Holton, 2005)

Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009) suggests that globalization can be analysed through fields that are interrelated: “the economic, the political, the technological and the cultural”, causing the growth of interdependency of world society. We can see various examples regarding this. For example, trade today, has been transformed into a global or transnational phenomenon; politically, governmental problems have become more global. New technologies (such as the T.V, phone, the internet and air travel) enable us to connect places all over the world. The new connections, in turn, cause either cultural imperialism or cultural homogeneity. According to Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009), cosmopolitanism arises out of this context and may be understood as ‘the positive face of globalization’.

Globalization, Language and Cultural Homogenization

The film shows us the growing importance of English language in the era of Globalization. The central theme revolves around the learning of English language by Shashi, a woman from India, who feels humiliated as she does not know how to speak English language.

Norton (Evans, 2016) connects language practice to symbolic and cultural capital which have its significant impact on identity. Through language, one can have access to symbolic resources along with socio-economic power and knowledge. Symbolic and cultural capital are other forms of capital similar to economic capital. They share some important features with that of economic capital:

1. Symbolic and cultural capital are valuable to their holders.
2. Accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital is possible just like economic capital.
3. Symbolic and cultural capital are important to produce other social advantages.

Symbolic and cultural capital have its impact on socio-economic and educational attainment, political participation etc. They take important part in the production of the power relations and material inequalities. Because of symbolic capital, relationships of power and privilege seem natural. The transmission of cultural capital produces competencies in such areas as education, occupation, marriage etc. Cultural capital creates hierarchy where some languages are thought to be more valuable than others. The reason that English, French and Spanish are regarded as world languages lies in the fact of colonialism and economic possibilities. English among these languages are particularly important as it is the language of power. Blackledge argues that language choice depends on language ideology, power relations and political influence. A high-status language operates much like a highly valued monetary currency. The main reason behind its high demand is due to its assumed high prospect for professional, socio-economic and sociocultural return. Language like an internal semiotic system, is connected to the user through the social system and mediated by relations of prestige and power. Hasan (Evans, 2016) sees language as a ‘social practice, inscribed with social relations, social divisions and hierarchies’. Domination is therefore an integral part of the standard language.

In the movie, Shashi did not know English language very well. This created problem within her family. She was not regarded capable enough to attend the parent-teacher meeting in the school. Her daughter, in fact, was ashamed of Shashi as she spoke in Hindi, and not English. Capability to speak English, therefore, becomes the primary if not the only criterion against which one must be judged. She, somehow felt that her identity as a homemaker, entrepreneur and cook all were at stake because of her incapability to speak English. She also felt humiliated at a cafeteria in Manhattan. She was treated badly as she faced problem to understand English and communicate accordingly. Shashi felt inferior (just like a person who did not have much money) in respect of those who had successfully acquired to learn and speak English. English language, then, is not just another language, but the language of prestige and power. Acquisition of English language, therefore, empowered people to have control and dominion over others through the creation of a hierarchical system as in the case of the daughter of Shashi or the black woman at the cafeteria in respect of Shashi.

This would lead us to the concept of Cultural Homogenization. Cultural Homogenization points us to the close relation between the spreading of global culture and the loss of cultural diversity due to globalization. Globalization promotes the dominance of a singular, global culture which George Ritzer termed as the “McDonaldization” (Kerubo, 2024). Ritzer points to the promotion of a uniform culture, heavily influenced by western cultural norms. Due to this homogenization process, standardized global products and lifestyles replace the local cultures and traditions. Globalization, in this way, undermine cultural diversity and uniqueness which inevitably leads to the loss of cultural heritage and identity. It shows the tensions existing between global cultural influences and local cultural preservation. Communities face challenges in maintaining their cultural identities in the context of pervasive global cultural norms.

We can see in the movie, pictures of the globalized metro cities, multinational brands, and glimpses of the lifestyle that the globalization wants to be adopted by each and every people in order to be a global citizen. Acquisition of English language is, therefore, an important instrument in adopting this culture. Noam Chomsky (2009) points out that language and the ability to form new statements and thoughts, appropriate to new situations are ‘the essential difference between humans and animals’. Language, therefore, encompasses a generic human identity.

On the other hand, Derrida views spoken language as the only authentic language, capable of revealing true human identity. Spoken language, according to Heidegger, is a spiritual identity. It invokes the presence of ‘being’. Language, then, carries individual identity within.

The growing importance of English language in today's world has to be studied and analysed in this context. It continually emphasizes the acquisition of not just a language, but rather the adoption of a dominant, standardized and 'global' culture on the verge of losing languages, local cultures, traditions and identities. The English language, therefore, is the hegemonic language that inevitably has impact, whether directly or indirectly, over our life.

Cosmopolitanism

According to The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the word 'cosmopolitan' derives from the Greek word 'kosmopolitēs' ('citizen of the world'). Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009) commented that the word captures 'a receptive and open attitude towards the other'. It states, most importantly, that all human beings are citizens of a single community. It is, then, Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009) points out, "an ethical stance, in which the individual tries to go beyond the strong psychological and evolutionary pressures to privilege those nearest to him or her (family, tribe or nation, depending on the scale of the example under examination), and endeavours to see the value of the other, and to work towards the possibility of connection and dialogue with the other". To a cosmopolitan, differences are an opportunity to connect rather than to separate.

There were people of various ethnicities as well as nations in the English class. In the course of learning language, they started to see each other as friends and enjoy their company despite of their differences. They started to understand each other accordingly. Salman and Ramamurthy, despite their hostile relation of their countries, became friends. Pakistani taxi-driver Salman started to love Chinese girl. French Laurent despite the differences of language, culture and nationality, fell in love with Shashi. They all enjoyed Paratha (Indian cuisine). Also the wedding of Shashi's niece to the American boy is another example of cosmopolitanism.

David Held (2005) mentioned eight (8) principles of cosmopolitanism. These are:

"equal worth and dignity, active agency, Personal responsibility, accountability, consent, collective decision-making about public matters through voting procedures, inclusiveness, and subsidiary avoidance of serious harm sustainability"

Here we shall only discuss about principles that can be found in the film *English-Vinglish*

(1) Equal worth and dignity: The ultimate units of moral concern is the individual human being. Each person must be given equal respect and consideration. The journey of Shashi in the film, is a journey to earn herself worthy of respect and consideration. She decides to learn English in order to earn respect. She believes every person to be worthy of respect and consideration whether the person is a gay or a woman.

(2) Active agency: It stresses the ability of human beings to be reasonable, self-conscious, self-reflective and self-determining. This trait is most clearly visible when Shashi started to attend English classes in New York. There were various difficulties but she was determined to learn English language and eventually succeeded. Also she accepts Homosexuality going against the tradition and takes active role to convince others.

(3) Personal responsibility and accountability: It stresses the need to recognize differences. People develop different skills and talents as a result of their different abilities and competencies. This principle stresses that the voluntary choice of individual is the reason behind differences. It also stresses the need to welcomed and accept such differences. Shashi is clearly delighted when she learns that her job has a different identity. She was only a 'laddoo maker' previously, but the term 'Entrepreneur' instilled in her a sense of pride and importance along with personal responsibility and accountability. She took the responsibility to make 'Laddoo' for the guests at the wedding.

(4) Inclusiveness and subsidiary: It connotes that the people who gets affected by public decisions, should get equal opportunity. It may be directly or indirectly, through elected representatives or other ways. Well, we don't have much example of election or voting procedure in the film but there is an important example of treating the Homosexual as being the same as any other human being. Shashi stood for the homosexual and felt their pain and did not treat them as 'other' or different. This is clearly an example of inclusiveness.

Migration and globalization

In the film, there is another hint of the effect of globalization. Though it was not explored quite well, I think it to be worthy of discussion. Various characters in the film (especially students in the English class and Shashi's sister) are from different countries. They work in New York. This means that they migrated from their home countries and got settled in another country. This is important as this is a case of migration and needs a brief discussion.

Brickner (2013), in his essay, mentions that Globalization is the central cause of both international and internal migration. According to the Global Commission on International Migration report (2005), "the world has been transformed by the process of globalization". The report points to the integration and interdependency that are increasing among different states, societies, economies, and cultures. It also reveals that capital along with goods, services, information and ideas are transferred all over the world rapidly because of new technologies. As a result, the expanding global economy provides people with better opportunities. But the report also denotes the uneven impact of globalization.

The GCIM report points out the relation of migration and globalization in details. Labour markets today are heavily dependent on migrant labour, especially "in countries with aging populations and declining birth rates, and those experiencing rapid

economic growth”. So, the lack of migrant labour may result in the collapse of certain industries. The migrant labour, in this way, has become an essential part of the global economy.

Also, due to Globalization the global communication and transport has improved a lot. As a result, potential migrants discover opportunities and move between home and host communities.

The existence of Diasporas is also important. The existence of Diasporas help to ‘settle new migrants into the host society’. Migration, therefore, should be seen as a “positive-sum phenomenon insofar as it offers migrants new opportunities”. It creates an “influx of essential workers and new sociocultural agents, and home communities income through remittances”. It also mentions a global economic system where the movement of goods, services, capital, and information across the borders are easier than the movement of the people.

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