

What about Them? The (Un)Realized American Dream of the Family in Prashant Nair's *Umrika*

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Abstract: American dream of Indians usually speaks of the realized or unrealized aspirations in the land of opportunities, how the characters try to cope with their conflicted lives, and the struggles associated with settling in their dreamland. What about their family members? What about those who are never able to even reach that land to get an opportunity to realize their dreams or see them fail unpleasantly? Prashant Nair's *Umrika* gives us a glimpse into such lives; it lends an eye to the struggle of the family members left-behind, waiting endlessly for their migrated family members. The winner of the Audience Award at Sundance Film Festival 2015, *Umrika* is a film that explores America as the ultimate Land of opportunities, a place where working-class people of the 1980s yearned to go and earn a living. The film portrays the plight of family members of migrants through the settings of an old isolated village in India, the grim city of Mumbai, and the imagined city of America, the land of opportunities. The paper would focus on the value of this film as a cinema of the people dedicated to the working class attempting to create a better life for themselves in bigger brighter cities and the price that the family members pay.

Keywords: left-behind family, American Dream, migration, Prashant Nair, *Umrika*, Bollywood

INTRODUCTION

Migration Studies has taken over academia in the last few decades. Scholars and theorists have long brainstormed on the ideas of home (Safran 1991, 83), displacement, the pull between the home and the foreign land, or the 'in-between space' (Bhabha 1994, 18), alienation and identity crisis, sense of belongingness in a globalized world (Harper 2002, 142), and other socio-political and economic changes due to such movements. Ideas related to the aspirations of migrants and the consequences of the resultant displacement have been

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explored. The concerns— what happens after migration, how migrants settle down, their struggles, prejudices, and discriminations they face— are all greatly discussed. The struggle to maintain a balance between the lost world and the acquired world, the conflicted self between the past and the present, and the “politics of identification over politics of identity” (Brah 1996, 93) have all been matters of interest. What has been sidelined is the migration process i.e., what are the reasons why people migrate? What happens to their families? This paper intends to point out this gap and further delve into these questions and various other important factors associated with migration; it moves beyond the preoccupation with the migrants and their struggles and deals with what they leave behind.

FAMILIES LEFT-BEHIND

According to Ahsan Ullah (2017, 62), “remained-behind family members are those who are directly dependent on the migrants financially and emotionally and had a subsidiary role in the family.” Studies on migration usually aim at exploring what relocation means for the individual, and what it means both for the home country and host country. For migrants, there is a different life awaiting— one that is filled with several dreams, some struggles, and many possible opportunities. For the two nations, migration offers sustainable development, interaction, and dynamic cultural and economic flow. Benson and Reilly (2009) talk about the reasons for migration being defined by the circumstances of people before they migrate to place their decision within a context. The study of this context may turn out to be quite useful. However, there is another human factor involved in this great exchange— the families of the migrants. What happens to the people migrants leave behind? What is in store for them? It is seldom discussed what it means for the family, the ones who do not accompany the relocation but are left-behind. There have been few studies and fewer representations in the media to talk about this section of people. Amrita Datta and Sanjay Mishra (2011, 459) point to this gap discussing the after-effects on women after male migration:

...here is sparse literature on the impact of this migration on people, especially women who are left behind in the village. Many research questions remain unanswered. How are institutions such as caste and patriarchy in the village affected by male migration? How does male migration influence women’s well-being and agency? Does migration have an effect on women’s mobility? Does it empower or disempower the women left behind?

Many social and emotional problems come to the fore when the family members of the immigrants are studied. Let us take each case to understand where the family members are placed after their loved one migrates. If parents migrate, usually kids are kept under the responsibility of grandparents or any other guardian. It leaves the kids with no parents to fend for them in any situation which may mean psychological stress and feelings of abandonment in the kids. It also may put the guardians under pressure to support the kid. In another situation, if children migrate it leaves parents alone, and the elderly are left without any support and love. If a spouse migrates, it leaves the other with all the responsibility. Though there have been several discussions around the empowerment of women in the absence of male members of the family (Desai and Banerji 2008, 340), it may also result in disempowering or burdening them further (Hughes 2011; Demurger 2015). If a sibling migrates, the household chores increase for the rest of the family and added responsibility of the house and the family comes on other siblings. The structure of the family changes, responsibilities increase, and the onus falls on the family members who stay behind (Hugo 2002; Rigg 2007). There aren't many statistics available to account for these families and "it remains unknown how many left-behind family members are there, globally. Though there are estimates of total international migrants, what is unknown is how many are accompanied by family members and how many are not" (Ullah 2017, 60). Generally, remittances received become a point of discussion while talking about the families, but what about the social and emotional support? What about the disrupted family life?

Migration can either give happiness and joy or can add to the misery and anxiety of the family members. Remittances give them immense joy, better prospects, and having a family member settled in a better place. It can cause catalytic consequences due to the pangs of separation, loneliness, lesser remittance than expected, lack of support, etc. Due to the unavailability of a proper social care system in India, the family members also suffer while adjusting to their new living conditions. Hence, the difficult time may not be just for the migrants trying to assimilate into the new environment but also for the family members with an equally uncertain future; so, a study into the social and emotional factors for the left-behind family needs to be considered. Therefore, this paper brings into discussion *Umrika*, a 2015 film that gives us a glimpse into the lives of the family members

of one such young man who leaves to migrate to the United States (colloquially spoken as Umrika in Hindi). This paper thus, through this film analyzes the depiction of the family and what they go through.

CINEMA AND DIASPORA

Media, particularly Cinema, has been considered a significant lens to understand people, their concerns, and their problems in a globalized world (Appadurai 1996, 41; Anderson 2006, 14). Cinema has been acknowledged to mirror the social realities of its times, dexterously portraying what is happening in our society. Parallely, there is a ubiquitous impact of media on the lives of people in today's globalized world (Appadurai 1996, 45). Vertovec (2013) describes diaspora as “a mode of cultural production”. Owing to the global outreach of Indian Cinema, especially Bollywood which is seen as the “floating signifier” of Indian sensibility, it has produced its fair share of films covering various aspects of the lives of migrants (Mishra 2005, 439). Also due to the increasing Indian diaspora, the consumer of these films is not limited to the cinemagoers in India but also people situated in other countries across the globe. Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, is an “ideological field” (Kozinets 2008, 865), hence, the narrative and the depiction in these movies also take into account the demand for these films abroad. Moreover, the stories of these “highly self-reflexive” experiences are often told by diasporic individuals themselves and foreign nationals who cater to Indian audiences both at home and abroad (Takhar 2012, 276). Movies like *ABCD* (American Born Confused Desi, 2013), *Meet the Patels* (2014), *The Other End of the Line* (2008), *Flavors* (2003), *The Guru* (2002), *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), etc. are based on youth living in the diaspora and how they juggle the two worlds— one that is imposed on them by their parents and the other that is acquired by them. None of these movies are made in India yet they have somehow not failed to strike a chord with Indian audiences, of course in addition to the Indian diaspora. These films typically depict what is known as Lifestyle Migration where major concerns are towards a search for a better life, freedom from the restrictions of the home society, and allow for a renegotiation of life choices (Benson and Reilly 2009, 609).

Then there are films on diasporic experiences which are made in India— *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Namaste London* (2007), *Hyderabad Blues* (1998), *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaenge* (1995), *Pardes* (1997), etc.— that have put forth a certain image of “Indian

imaginary” and their “Indianness” (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 32). This representation is further discussed in this paper and how the focus in all these mentioned films has always been the perils of relocation and the migrants going through it. There is a constant desire to return in these films which sharpens the dilemma of existing in the two worlds simultaneously. Other aspects related to migration like the families back in the homeland have been discounted, ignored, and disregarded. As mentioned earlier, the aspirations of these migrants are oversimplified and generalized; the unrealized dreams are seldom talked about; the consequences of migration for the left-behind family members failed to reach the active discussion table. This paper then takes into account this gap and draws attention to a one-of-a-kind movie produced by India, *Umrika* (2015), a film that attempts to cater to these issues. Directed by Prashant Nair, *Umrika*, a dramedy does not focus on the struggles of an immigrant but talks about— the migration process, internal migration from the countryside to the city and international migration towards fulfilling the American dream, illegal migration, and most importantly the left-behind families. It is different from a typical diaspora film as America is only imagined by the characters. No character even till the end of the film reaches America.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION IN HINDI FILMS OF THE 1950s-80s

Hindi films of this time period depict the working-class migration (internal migration within the country) usually to highlight the country-city divide and the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the big cities which Broiss (2007, 358) also talks about. Films like *Do Beegha Zameen* (1953), *Awara* (1951), *Shree 420* (1956), and *Gaman* (1978) shows the main character migrating from various parts of the country to the metropolitan cities of Mumbai (then Bombay) and Kolkata (then Calcutta). All these films focus on the migrant, usually a young male, and his experiences in the big dreamy cities. Interestingly, a large number of these films portrayed protagonists failing in making it big in these cities and consequently getting entangled with a don or a gang and becoming a criminal himself. Kalu (*Aar Paar* 1954), Raj (*Awara* 1951), Raj (*Shree 420* 1956), and Vijay (*Deewar* 1975) are all migrants turned criminals in the forsaken city of their dreams. These films present the rural-urban binary and concerns of the working class in big cities, but even they have missed talking about any of the family members of these characters. The family members are usually absent

from the main plot and exist somewhere in the background. The films during these times portrayed internal migration whereas international migration did not find much space. Characters living abroad, those visiting India, or returning to India were shown as stereotypically high-headed, lacking morality, and “a bit of a sell-out” (Malhotra and Alagh 2010, 26). These were mostly women characters or the antagonists of these films which are easily recognizable through their insensitive behavior towards others and deliberate shunning of Indian traditions and forgetfulness of Indian values. These people from affluent families with a flamboyant fashion sense show the impact of modernity on them (dissecting gender representation in these films, however, is not the aim of this paper). It is the hero championing the traditions of India who is placed as the moral center of the universe reminding everyone else how great India and its traditions are.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION IN HINDI FILMS FROM THE 90s ONWARD

Supriya Singh (2006, 390) posits that narratives of migrants in the United States and the United Kingdom have dominated Indian films. From the 1990s onward, films based on diasporic individuals, especially NRIs, have covered international migration and the issues associated with it (Brosius 2007, 357). Characters portrayed are either first-generation migrants, now in their 40s-50s, nostalgic for their homeland, or they are second-generation migrants dealing with the conflicted selves of who they are. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaenge* (DDLJ 1995), *Pardes* (1997), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Ghum* (2001), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Namaste London* (2007) uphold Indianness and the emphasis is on promoting strong familial ties. These are posture movies for how Indian values are to be perceived. DDLJ, for instance, explores “maintaining an Indian identity and community in a Western environment” (Mishra 2005, 145). Not only this, but these films also criticize the western world for being “morally poor” (Brosius 2007, 370), they portray a “conservative construction of family values which is also a reflection of the anxieties regarding national identity that have been provoked by the Indian middle-class diaspora of the last two or three decades” (Uberoi 1998, 334). Further, there are characters who migrate for better career opportunities and freedom from the restrictions of family and society to have a slice of living in a developed nation. Films like *Salaam Namaste* (2005), *Love Aajkal* (2009), *Cocktail* (2012), and *Jawani Jaaneman* (2020) show

lives in these foreign lands to be hectic, busy, and selfish; it stands as a metaphor for the west capitalistic world which takes everything for granted and resents commitment or any ties. The major shift from the earlier discussed era is the focus on international migration. The characters belong to an upper middle to the rich class whose struggle in the foreign land lies with balancing the cultures of the two nations, coming to terms with their place in the world, and most importantly final realization of the importance of Indian traditions and value system (Malhotra and Alagh 2010, 26-27). They are leading a comfortable life having achieved their American dream while constructing Indianness which is always based on the “relation to difference” instead of a natural or “autochthonous process” (Kaur and Sinha 2006, 12).

These films primarily attempt to cater to the NRIs settled abroad who feel nostalgic for their home country and who share somewhat the same issues faced by the characters in these films (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 27). The films also appeal to the youth who wish to settle abroad and experience life in a developed world. These “facilitate and mobilize the transnational imagination and help to create new ways for consumers to think of themselves as Asian” (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008, 216). In these films— identity, traditions, and customs are performed; emotion, love, commitment, responsibility, and family are marketed as markers of Indian sensibility. The Indian joint family system is endorsed as the “social institution that quintessentially defines being ‘Indian’” (Uberoi 1998, 308). The Indianness lies in the performativity of its clothes, cuisine, and festivals; the image strays away from the cliched images of poverty, corruption, harsh weather conditions, and a place where individual freedom is not accounted for. These films are also used by first-generation immigrants to teach their subsequent generations about India and its legacy, and to place traditions over modernity. Films of this era attempted to renegotiate “the modernity-tradition impasse” (Brosius 2007, 369) and it is only in this light that the family members of these characters are represented, if at all.

BRIDGING THE GAP THROUGH *UMRIKA*

Umrika, an independent cinema by Prashant Nair, attempts to look at migrants and migration from a different lens. In his interview, Nair proclaims he wanted to create a film that gave a different perspective on migration,

I had seen a lot of great films about how difficult the immigrant journey is or how hard it is once they reach their destination. I wanted to make a film about everything up until the decision to immigrate is made – to really give a glimpse behind statistics and tell a personal and unique story, (one that leaves the audience hoping that our protagonist reaches where he is heading (Nair 2015).

Being in America is an obsession even in this film, dreams of reaching the faraway land take over the film from the first dialogue; yet you never see any real shot of America. America as in many others is idealized, but this idealization is unknown and unfamiliar. No one in the film has ever been to America and interestingly enough no one reaches there till the end. Virat Nehru, in his 2015 review calls it a “cautionary tale about the dangers of such mythmaking and the adverse impact it can have on the lives of people”. The film takes the perspective of the people of Jitvapur and what Umrika is— a land of innumerable opportunities— and a ticket to this country is like a fortune cookie because for them “in Umrika, anything is possible” (*Umrika*, 09:20 to 09:58).

A mythical image of America is created through the photographs in Udai’s letters and the treasure chest given to Rama by his older brother. The American ideal has been “fabricated through the various letters that arrive and their own personal fantasies, hopes, and dreams” (Nair 2015). As Datta and Mishra (2011, 463) point out, “migrants from the city bring back with them not just goods and goodies, but also new ideas and attitudes to a stagnant rural society”. Though the migrant never comes back in this film, through the letters and photographs, an exotic image of America is created. It is perceived as an “*atrangi*¹” (*Umrika*, 49:45 to 49:50) place where— people use sit-up toilets, women wrestle, and everyone eats a special bird (turkey on Thanksgiving Day) on one day. It is amusing to see people of Jitvapur learn about piggy banks and grill carrots emulating sausages to make the “Umrikan sandwich” (*Umrika*, 16:35 to 17:30). For them, these photographs and letters become a medium to learn the ways of being American. An enchanting cultural exchange happens in the film through these letters and pictures which introduce American ways to the villagers. Furthermore, watching American films and shouting

¹ *Atrangi* is a Hindi word which literally means colorful. It can also mean unusual and fascinating. America in the film is seen as a strange and unusual place with different ways of doing things. In this context, America is called *atrangi* by Rama’s love interest, Radhika.

slogans against the British while watching King Kong are some examples of how baffled and amused everyone is with the foreign ways.

Unlike other films, this film does not have any camera shots of America; rather it is only these photographs that construct an imaginary idea of America. Moreover, these photographs are not taken by any of the characters within the film (though the pictures are genuine, authentic photos taken in the real world). Thus, the point of view on America is not coming from a place of knowledge or experience of that place. The meanings are constructed and the world is imagined collectively through these pictures of America, it becomes “the medium for the transmission of material reality” (Morss 2011, 219-220). Though an imagined setting throughout the film, America stays central to the people of Jitvapur and hence to the film. The film begins with some beautiful wide-angle shots, panning across the entire area and presenting an idyllic picture of the village— huts, hills, rivers, and traditional ways of the people. Though the tough lives that they lead can be gauged from the first few minutes of the film, yet one never resents the countryside life. However, the lack of opportunities and facilities (the village does not even have electricity at the beginning) is contrasted with what America stands for. It is important to emphasize that none of the characters, not even the narrator, has ever been to America. And the audience is left wondering if Rama ever manages to reach there. To say, though it is a personal story of Rama and his family, this film makes the unrealized American Dream a relatable factor for Rama, his family, and the audience of the film.

PEOPLE LEFT-BEHIND IN *UMRIKA*

Umrika, a film that “dramatizes the myth of America” remarkably depicts the left-behind people in this process (Byrne 2015). Though it is Udai who is believed to have migrated to America, the narrative does not center around him. Though he is always talked about, waited for, and loved by everyone, his struggles and problems are not discussed at length because what happens after Udai leaves for America is more important to the narrative. The experiences and emotions of his mother, father, and younger brother are much accounted for; from the moment Udai leaves, the impact on their lives is seen— the mother is hopeful yet teary-eyed, the father too is optimistic, and Rama the younger sibling goes completely quiet. After several months, when there is still no news from Udai, the distraught

condition of the family is seen. In the following few scenes, the mother is sad and withdrawn, the father is worried for his wife, and witnessing the condition of his mother, Rama is helpless. In his monologue, Rama says,

I had no idea where you had disappeared to...all mother's excitement slowly turned to grief...maybe you had forgotten us all... But then months went by and still no letters from you, we finally allowed ourselves to imagine things no one should ever have to imagine about one of theirs. (*Umrika*, 04:10 to 08:50)

Although the film has comic elements, it registers the pitiable condition of the family. The mother suffers the pain of separation from his son and hearing nothing from him just aggravates that pain. It is not just these three who are desperately waiting for any news from Udai, but the entire village is hoping to hear from him. When letters start arriving, the reading of the letter is not shown as a personal activity. Everyone gathers around the fire, and the letters are read aloud by the mailman “breathing life into our village, filling our hearts with joy, and our bellies with dreams” (*Umrika*, 13:50 to 14:00). Of course, everyone is excited, overjoyed, and mesmerized. While the proud mother becomes a storyteller to all the women of the village, Rama on the other hand, is teased and mocked repeatedly. Other boys call him a loser who unlike his brother is a fool and will always stay in the village. Even the mother compares the two brothers, she calls Rama dull-headed and underlines that “he is not Udai” (*Umrika*, 11:53 to 12:30). He is burdened by the expectations of everyone else to match up to his brother's success and supplements his absence. This happens to the members of the left-behind family who are “inexperienced and unprepared for taking over new roles” (Ullah 2017, 61). This humiliation is a part of Rama's life until he proves otherwise. At this point, the two brothers seem to stand for the two nations— Udai is the symbol of the promised land of America as his migration comes with a hope of better life and improved financial condition of the house, whereas, Rama, the village boy, is charming but without any hope of a thriving future. Nevertheless, the story begins with Rama, the narrator, proclaiming how important America is to him. “I know only one place, a place that I have never seen” (*Umrika*, 03:50 to 04:13), he says. This idea of familiarity with the unfamiliar is pervasive in the film— Rama in the beginning, his family members, other villagers, and later on Radhika— all of whom perceive America through those photographs.

These photographs extend Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined community as these characters consume and amuse themselves with the idea of America in their minds. These photographs and letters are other examples of what Udai's family went through on his departure and no news from him thereafter. The letters are only supplied by the father to calm the distraught mother. Rama is shattered on learning of this lie from his father and hence decides to travel to America to find his brother. Rama thinks he knows Udai but ends up discovering a shocking reality— Udai never went to America, instead, is a barber in Mumbai. "Why couldn't you have been a barber in Chicago or Boston? It's in Umrika?" (*Umrika*, 1:13:52 to 1:13:57) Rama's disappointment, anger and frustration are visible in this scene as he says this to Udai, who he is not happy to finally see.

Relationships, family ties, and responsibility are dominant emotions in Rama's narrative. He is devastated by the betrayal of his brother and he knows his mother would be equally crushed. He knows that "If, back home, they ever found out all this was a lie, their whole family would be ashamed forever" (*Umrika*, 1:16:02 to 01:16:30). Hence, he decides to go to America. "I will have to do it" (*Umrika*, 01:20:40 to 01:21:50) says a lot about his decision which comes from this sense of responsibility, to turn a lie into the truth; the lie that governed and channelized his family's life till now, this needs to be finally realized by Rama. Rama decides "All these letters, the years, all we believed in, all mother's dreams- it can't all be a lie. If you won't make this right, then I will" (*Umrika*, 01:18:34 to 01:18:57). Though saddened by leaving his mother alone, he is also hopeful for a brighter day in America as he imagines America to be his future. But he had to take this step for the sake of his mother and his village who believe their kin to be in America. He is burdened by the absence of his brother till the end of the film. As Ullah opines in his essay, the question of gender within the diaspora has been an important point of debate, seldom it has been discussed about the left-behind women. This film shows the plight of such women who are left to suffer even through the end. Radhika is abandoned by Rama with a promise of letters and photographs from America, which is a reminder of the beginning of the film when Udai leaves her mother with the same promises. The mother, now the only family member in the village, is again left behind by this final act of Rama's migration.

Additionally, the film raises several other important issues like internal migration, illegal migration, the rural-urban divide, and the

socio-political condition during the 70s and 80s. The second half of the film is set in 80s Mumbai— famous songs and tunes from Hindi movies of the time, Amitabh Bachchan’s injury during a film shoot, *Hum Log* playing on TV, and other images of popular culture of the 1980s. Just like some of the movies discussed earlier in the paper, this film also introduces a Don, a criminal who is involved in various unlawful activities including illegal transportation of people abroad, and people like Udai and Rama who migrate to Mumbai from smaller areas get entangled in his business. However, unlike 1970s Hindi films, this narrative does not delve too much into it. But the suspenseful presence along with many dark and dingy scenes of Mumbai streets adds to the murkiness of the city. The first shot of Mumbai is of the desolate bus stop where worried Rama arrives to gather any information on his brother; the shady dim light in several Mumbai night scenes and its crowded markets in the day present a stark contrast to the bright, sunny, and well-lit shots of the village. It is in stark contrast to the hope and dreams that America stands for. Though Udai marries according to his own choice, it does not come across as a joyful life. Mumbai, through Udai’s failure to go to America and Rama’s disappointment with Udai’s reality, stands for the unrealized dreams of the migrants.

CONCLUSION

Takhar (2012, 275) opines that Bollywood films present “an idealized view of Indian national identity, the triumph of romantic love, and a celebration of the joint family system, a system that is increasingly challenged by changing social, cultural, and global processes”. The films on migrants are “a visual grammar that seeks to capture the dislocation, disruption, and ambivalence that characterizes their lives” (Moorti 2003, 359). Prashant Nair’s film brings to the table a story of migration not from the perspective of the migrant, the great cultural divide, or the discriminatory activities of the host country; it highlights the story of kinship and responsibility. Beyond the important socio-political debates of migration and the much-politicized experiences of diasporic individuals, this film renders a unique cinematic depiction of the world of families in the diaspora. Similar films like *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* (1999 film which at least gives a little space to the grief-stricken family and their circumstances), *Ramji Londonwaley* (2005 film which depicts the journey and problems of a working-class man in a foreign land), *Street Dancer 3D* (2020 film which points to the illegal

migrations, refugee problems, and the pain and suffering due to unrealized dreams) need to be appreciated too. Undoubtedly, there is a need for more such films to be made. Therefore, cinema, especially Bollywood because of its global outreach and consumption must try to widen the horizon of their representation and include such depictions of families even in the big banner commercial films.

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