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CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS: ANGLO-INDIANS IN HINDI FILMS

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ABSTRACT

The Anglo Indian community in India has played a significant and diverse role in shaping India's social, cultural, and artistic landscape. The people belonging to this community have a distinctive blend of British and Indian heritage, and have contributed meaningfully across various sectors of society including education, governance, arts and entertainment. Their lifestyle, most often marked by western sensibilities, fluent English communication, and vibrant cultural expressions, has left a lasting imprint on popular Indian culture.

One of the most visible reflections of this influence can be seen in the Indian film industry. Bollywood and regional cinemas have frequently drawn inspiration from Anglo Indian traditions, portraying their unique identity through characters, settings, language, and music. Whether through depictions of colonial era narratives, urban subcultures, or cosmopolitan milieus, the Anglo Indian ethos has often served as a creative lens for filmmakers exploring themes of hybridity, modernity, and cultural transition. However, the portrayal often has been a typical stereotype.

This research paper aims to critically examine how the Anglo Indians have been represented in Indian cinema over the decades. It seeks to analyse the accuracy, depth, and evolution of these portrayals, exploring whether they reinforce typecasts or offer refined insights into the community's experiences. By doing so, the study hopes to shed light on the broader dynamics of identity, representation, and cultural assimilation within the cinematic imagination of India.

Keywords-Anglo Indians, films, identity, stereotype, acculturation.

Object of Study: Analysing the portrayal of Anglo Indians in Indian cinema, focusing on stereotypes and cultural hybridity.

Identity formation normatively has its negative side which throughout life can remain an unruly part of the total identity. The negative identity is the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or by which atypical individuals and marked minorities are made to feel 'different'. In the event of aggravated crises, an individual (or, indeed, a group) may despair of the ability to contain these negative elements in a positive identity'. -Andrews 114 . However, when people encounter new cultures, their sense of identity and acculturation evolve together. Identity formation shapes who they are, while acculturation helps them navigate and adapt to new cultural norms and values. This study here in meanders through the lanes of Indian cinema with special focus on Anglo Indians depicting their portrayal and cultural assimilation in the Indian society.

The Anglo Indian community, emerged from unions between European men and Indian women over the ages. They came to symbolize the intricate dynamics of the British Empire and the racial hierarchies that defined colonial India. With an ambiguous legal status in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were often classified as both 'European' and 'native' reflecting the British Government's pragmatic approach towards them. *Mixed race Anglo Indians categorised themselves as 'Europeans' in the census to attain a higher status in British society based on racial politics.*¹ In doing so they sought to gain opportunities of which they would otherwise be deprived of had they identified themselves as 'mixed-race,' that is, as 'Eurasians' or 'Anglo-Indians.'

The Anglo Indian community, holds the recognition of being one of the earliest mixed race populations in the Indian subcontinent, tracing its origins to the period of European colonial rule in India. Born out of complex and layered interactions between European settlers and local Indian populations, the community stands as a living testament to the cultural, racial, and historical entanglements of colonialism formed primarily through an alliance between European men and Indian women, this group developed a distinct identity marked by endogamy and complex social perceptions. Historically labelled with various terms like 'half-castes', 'Eurasians', and 'country-borns', they faced stigma, especially as colonial attitudes shifted in the 19th century. Notably, the term 'Anglo Indian' initially referred to British expatriates in India who maintained their British identity, whereas the mixed race community was often termed 'Eurasian'. The term Anglo Indian was officially adopted in 1911, a term which was used by Lord Hardinge in the Indian Census of that year (Moore 1996, pp. 1-2) as referring to 'those of either racially unmixed or mixed heritage' (McMenamin 2001, pp. 1). Anglo Indians, who exist in a condition of relentless ambivalence between two worlds – India and her historical colonial master, are as Sylvia Staub argues, 'the prevalent, most interesting experiment in genetics between East and West'² (quoted in Chhibber, 2012).

Historically tracing, the discovery of a maritime route to South Asia in the final decade of the fifteenth century marked a transformative moment in global history, unveiling a vast and resource rich region to European powers, ushering in an era of unprecedented trade, exploration, and cultural exchange. This breakthrough not only intensified commercial ties between Europe and the Far East but also laid the foundation for centuries of colonial expansion, economic exploitation, and geopolitical rivalry across the Indian subcontinent. Since the Indian Census of 1911, the term 'Anglo-Indian' has referred to a domiciled community of mixed descent.

The Constitution of India, under Article 366 (2) defines: "*an Anglo Indian means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only.*"³ Satoshi Mizutani estimates that by 1911 there were 'roughly 93,000 non-domiciled Europeans, 47,000 Domiciled Europeans and 160,000 Eurasians.'⁴ Anglo Indians form one of the largest and oldest communities of mixed descent in the world, and continue to live in India as well as across a wider diaspora, particularly in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States.⁵ By the Government of India Act 1935, an Anglo Indian was formally identified as "*a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is a native of India.*"⁶ The key points of that definition were retained when Anglo-Indians were listed as an official minority group in India's constitution in 1950 as quoted above. With the diaspora of the community since that time, however, it has become ever more difficult to identify Anglo Indians, much less to estimate the size of their population. One of the major problems the Anglo Indian community faced throughout history is the question of identity and 'who am I?' The community faced considerable challenges in forging a distinct identity, caught between two worlds. To the Europeans, they were viewed as Indians with traces of European ancestry, while to Indians, they appeared as Europeans with a touch of Indian heritage. This dual perception often left them marginalized, struggling to find acceptance and recognition within either

group. Many Anglo Indians feared being unwelcome in independent India, prompting thousands to migrate to Britain, despite the Indian Constitution's recognition of them as a distinct minority community.

'We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere... ..

We have a country of words. Speak speak so I can put my road on the stone of a stone.

*We have a country of words. Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel.'*⁷

(Mahmood Darwish, cited in Bowman 1994, pp. 138) Bowman cites Darwish's poem in reference to the exiled Palestinians after the loss of their homeland in 1948, which rings a thought about the Anglo Indian dilemma after independence. The Anglo Indian community's experience is comparable to that of the Palestinians in terms of displacement. However, the Anglo Indians did not have a nationalist movement. Instead, they were marginalized in post colonial India, leading to their migration to countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. This diasporic movement reflects their search for identity and belonging. Nevertheless, having assimilated with time the members of the community have contributed significantly in politics of pre and post independence periods, both in India and abroad. A definite beginning was made in early 19th century in Bengal by some English educated men including Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, an English professor at Hindu college, who was a Portuguese on his father's side, while his maternal line was Indian. Completely identifying himself with India, this 'Renaissance icon of Bengal' happened to be perhaps the first Indian educationist to disseminate western learning and science among the youth of Bengal. Many members of the community have had an amazing story to tell but the most outstanding of them were Gidney and Frank Anthony. *Lt. Col. Sir Henry Gidney was the leader of the Anglo-Indian Community for 20 years before his death in May 1942.*⁸ Gidney, born in 1873 in Igatpuri, Western Ghats, excelled academically and joined the Indian Medical Service. He served in the army, notably during the Boxer Rebellion in China, earning recognition for bravery in 1901. Gidney's distinguished career led to a knighthood in 1931 and a nomination to the Central Legislative Assembly by the Viceroy. Frank Anthony and Gidney are epitomised as the leaders of the Anglo Indian community. Frank Anthony succeeded Gidney as the chief of the Anglo Indian Association and followed up the good work done by him both in India and England for the community. Not only men but women to carve out a place for themselves in this field notably among these being Beatrix D'Souza, Mrs Ellen West and Alice Suares.⁹

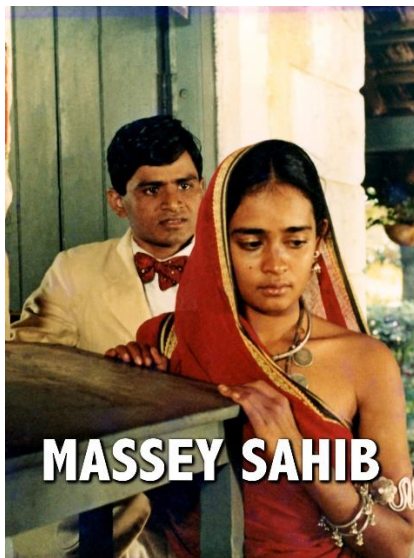
The Anglo Indian community in India has been contributing towards all sections of the society, touching all aspects of life. Their English ways of living, spoken English and vivid culture have been generally adapted by the Indian film industry. The research herein aims to analyse the depiction of the community as shown by the film industry of India.

Few Indian films have explored the Anglo Indian identity either through character or through theme. Shyam Benegal's **Junoon** (1979), historicised the vulnerability of a community forever divided about its Indian origins and its British proximity; something that also becomes a personal crisis of belonging in Pradip Kishen's **Massey Sahib** (1985). Less accomplished, both as film and as a cultural trope, is Anjan Dutt's **Bada Din** (1998), and **Bow Barracks Forever** (2004). They films are perfunctory attempts to empathetically indulge in the eccentricities apparently inherent in the community, Calcutta being the forbearing centre stage of many of these creations. In a similar vein, Anglo Indianness serves merely as a tactic for aesthetic exaggeration in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film **Black** (2005), a biographical portrayal inspired by Helen Keller that extensively drew from **The Miracle Worker** (1962). Both *Junoon* and *Massey Sahib* are highly accomplished as works of cinema, and handle the cultural intonations with sensitivity. In fact, by focussing on minorities comparatively invisibilised in popular cinema, both these films (along with Vijaya Mehta's *Pestonjee*, 1988) seemed to be living up to one of the founding principles of the New Wave, which was to look for cinematic subject in uncharted spaces.

"Junoon" explores the complexities of the Anglo Indian identity through the story of Ruth Labadoor (Nafisa Ali) and her family. The film explores the complex dynamics of self and other against the tumultuous backdrop of the Revolt of 1857 in India. Based on Ruskin Bond's novel 'A Flight of Pigeons', the narrative revolves around Ruth Labadoor, a young Anglo-Indian girl, and her family, who are taken captive by Javed Khan (Shashi Kapoor) , a local Rohilla Pathan, amidst the chaos. Javed's obsession with Ruth leads him to offer protection and propose marriage to her which her mother, Miriam (Jennifer Kendal), vehemently opposes. As the story unfolds, the conflict between Javed and Miriam intensifies, mirroring the progression of the events of 1857. This clash represents a deeper identity crisis, with Javed embodying indigenous culture and Miriam symbolizing the colonial community. The tension stems from the insecurity and ambiguity surrounding the

Anglo Indian identity, particularly Miriam's anxiety about her community's status in relation to their colonial counterparts. Through Miriam's character, the film probes questions of belonging, cultural allegiance, and the complexities of identity in a colonial context. Quoting Alexius Pereira, Robyn Andrews remarks in his essay "Is the Anglo Indian 'Identity Crisis' a Myth?" (in the book *Anglo-Indian Identity: Past and Present, in India and the Diaspora*): '*Anglo Indian Eurasians in India in the 18th and 19th centuries were heavily discriminated against both by the British and the Indians because their hybridity was perceived to be a 'moral flaw' or 'dilution of the strong blood' (Gist and Wright 1973) by both the parent groups. As a result, the Anglo-Indians were forced to become self-reliant, and eventually formed a tight-knit social group of their own.*'

Miriam's resistance to Javed Khan's proposal for her daughter Ruth stems from her desire to preserve their Anglo Indian identity, which she associates with colonial superiority. For Miriam, integration with the indigenous culture, represented by Javed, threatens to taint their European heritage. She seeks to maintain a strict divide, aspiring for Ruth to embody the ideals of a white European woman, disconnected from any perceived 'Asianness'. This reflects her internalized colonial mindset, where Western identity is privileged over indigenous culture. Miriam's stance underscores the complexities of identity, cultural allegiance, and the legacy of colonialism.



<https://surl.li/babyjn>

<https://surl.li/xmgvzw>

Basu Chatterjee's 1979 film **Baaton Baaton Mein** presents a thoughtfully crafted depiction of middle-class Anglo Indian life, marked by a distinctive narrative tone that balances warmth with restraint. The film's engaging performances and musical elements contribute to its artistic value. The film is an appropriate portrayal of an Anglo Indian family's grounded sweetness and simplicity. It depicted the loves, adventures and problems of a middle class Anglo Indian family with a down-to-earth sweetness characteristic of the Basu Chatterjee stamp—neither cloying nor annoying. The dressing, the language and the entire impression provides a peep into the community's lifestyle in a very suitable manner. Lovely songs and lively performances by the late Pearl Padamsee, Amol Palekar, Ranjit Choudhry and the rest of the caste made the film an enjoyable experience.

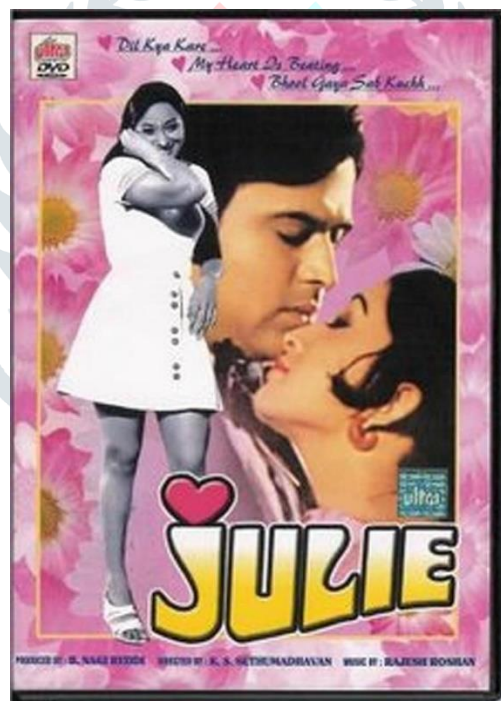
Massey Sahib (1986) by Pradip Krishen, set in the 1930s, follows Francis Massey (Raghubir Yadav), an Indian Christian clerk who aspires to emulate his British masters, leading to his downfall. Massey dresses up like his Colonial bosses and does everything to please them however, his means finally spell bane for him. In his wish to help the rulers in particular, his immediate superior, District Collector Charles Adam (Barry John) – Massey adopts methods that are irregular, secure in the self created belief that his Adam Sahib will help him out, leading to the tragic denouement.



36 Chowrangee Lane

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070701/spectrum/main7.htm>

36 Chowringhee Lane (1981) portrays Miss Violet Stoneham (Jennifer Kendal), an Anglo Indian teacher struggling with the replacement of Anglo-Indians by Indians in missionary schools post Independence. The depiction of Miss Stoneham as the English teacher is typical of any missionary school teacher and is aptly played by the actor. The depiction of pre marital sex in the film was ahead of its time though. Scholar Wimal Dissanayake sees the film as a portrayal of the patriarchal social system. 'The film portrays the plight of a lonely woman in a society that cares little for questions of female subjectivity and self fulfillment.'



<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/mixed-feelings-the-anglo-indian-identity-and-its-portrayal-in-film/article69030318.ece>

The film **Julie** employs familiar cinematic tropes, using visual cues and character archetypes to convey meaning. This includes stereotypical representations based on appearance, accent, and cultural background. By relying on these conventions, the film both reflects and reinforces societal perceptions of minority groups, highlighting the complexities of representation in media. The film's portrayal of Julie, played by the actress Lakshmi, sparks interesting discussions about societal biases. Julie's characterization, including her fashion choices and family background, seems to perpetuate certain stereotypes associated with the community. Her father's alcoholism and the family's celebratory drinking are also notable aspects of her character. The way men interact with her, coupled with her Anglo Indian identity, adds another layer to her portrayal, highlighting potential prejudices and societal expectations. This film was an expression about an Anglo Indian family's alienation in a society steeped in tradition. It would not be wrong to say that this film is a stereotype as far as

the depiction of the Anglo Indian community is concerned. Girls in short dresses, with a family into singing ,dancing and alcoholism.

Bow Barracks Forever (2004) is about Anglo Indians and their difficulties in retaining their identity since the end of British rule India. It is a drama film that explores the lives of the community in Kolkata's Bow Barracks, a historic military turned residential area. The film's plot centres around the abuse of tenants by the greedy and violent landlord Mukherjee, who deliberately keeps Bow Barracks in a state of disrepair.

The film portrays the joys and apprehensions of Anglo Indians living in Bow Barracks in central Kolkata, which had been constructed to house American soldiers in the city after World War II. The film captures their struggles with identity and adaptation amidst a shifting cultural landscape, revealing their aspirations, dreams, and challenges. The barracks, located in a lane off Chittaranjan Avenue in central Kolkata, is home to many families including Anglo Indians, Chinese, Goans, Gujaratis, Biharis and Bengalis. The film however, was under criticism for its portrayal of this community and objections were raised regarding their depiction in a dark light. The representation of the characters while providing a glimpse into the lives of the Anglo Indians raises questions about perpetuation of stereotypes in its representation. Despite some attempts to render understanding and sympathy for the community, 'Bow Barracks Forever' ultimately perpetuates the Anglo Indian caricatures that have long haunted both the literature and scholarship of the British Raj, from both British and Indian perspectives; as Megan Mills puts it: "In the Anglo Indian may well be found India's answer to the Stage Irishman"¹⁰



Bow Barracks Forever

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070701/spectrum/main7.htm>

Another stereotypes in the case of Anglo Indians is that they are often pigeonholed as preferring the more "serious" pursuits such as military service. (one that appears in 'Bow Barracks Forever'). The portrayal of Anglo Indians in "Bow Barracks Forever" as resistant to change overlooks the complex historical and cultural context that has shaped their experiences. A more nuanced exploration would consider the legacy of colonialism, exploitation, and postcolonial challenges that have influenced the community's trajectory. By neglecting to contextualize the Anglo Indian experience within these broader frameworks, the narrative misses an opportunity to provide a deeper understanding of the community's dynamics and struggles. The narrative presented in '**Bow Barracks Forever**' lacks a comprehensive contextual analysis of the historical and cultural framework within which the Anglo Indian community has operated. This includes an examination of the power dynamics associated with colonialism, a prolonged history of exploitation and oppression, the political challenges faced during the postcolonial period, and the systemic constraints that have relegated Anglo Indians to a limited set of options. In '**Bow Barracks Forever**', the portrayal of characters is dominated by conventional representations derived from the tradition of Anglo Indian distortions. While it is a fact that a significant number of Anglo Indians left India post 1947, the film reinforces the perception that those who remained are fixated on unrealistic aspirations of achieving an idealized existence within a westernized framework. As the film commences, the narrative introduces the Dawson family, tenants of the building who are prepared to relocate to Australia—a move that a neighbouring character suggests will alleviate their

troubles. Concurrently, the film follows the character Emily Lobo, portrayed by Lilette Dubey, who is a cake baker and wine dealer preoccupied with the desire to live with her son Kenny, who has emigrated to London.

Emily persistently attempts to contact Kenny, leaving numerous messages on his unanswered voicemail. In these voicemails, she urgently implores him to reach out as soon as his new residence is prepared for the rest of the family. However, it becomes evident from the outset, that she is just making desperate solitary monologues and that Kenny has no intention of responding to her calls, indicating a profound disconnect. This portrayal of Kenny's disregard for his family after he moves out aligns with a recurring stereotype in diasporic narratives. He represents the archetype of the Anglo Indian individual who, in his new environment, chooses to assimilate and effectively severs ties with his familial roots in India.

This again underlines the fact that the community has also adapted to the culture of the Indian society leading to acculturation, which is the process of adapting to a new culture while navigating one's own cultural identity. The Anglo Indians interacted, exchanged cultural practices, values, and behaviours of different Indian communities, adapted with each other an aspect well portrayed by Indian cinema. This again led to the depiction of the new customs and blending of traditions on celluloid.

However, mainstream Indian cinema frequently maintains stereotypes when depicting Anglo Indian Christian characters, homogenizing the diverse community into frivolous and inaccurate representations. These portrayals often rely on 'explicit codes' such as church settings, priests, and Christian festivals. Common stereotypes include depicting Anglo Indians/Christians as fun loving and carefree, drug-addicted people, or as a villains' henchmen. Such portrayals neglect the complexity and diversity within India's Christian population, encompassing various ethnic groups like Indian Christians, Roman Catholics, East Indians, Anglo Indians, and Syrian Christians. The film makers, script writers, and producers must move beyond this stereotyping and engage with Anglo Indian narratives authentically. This implies consulting community voices and exploring real life stories. This further includes not just representation but portraying of these characters with dignity and diversity.

The Anglo Indian community represents a vibrant thread in the rich tapestry of India's cultural heritage. Despite being a small population, their impact has been significantly consequential in the field of education, music, literature, governance, and especially the arts in India. Their unique identity, forged at the confluence of the of East and West, has endowed them with a rare adaptability and a cosmopolitan outlook that continues to resonate in modern India.

Post independence, the community faced existential questions about belonging and identity. Yet, through perseverance and optimism, Anglo Indians have not only preserved their traditions but also evolved with the times, integrating seamlessly into India's diverse social fabric. Their schools, churches, culinary traditions, and festivals remain long lasting symbols of their legacy, while their contributions in public service, entertainment, and academia continue to inspire.

Today, as India embraces its multicultural ethos more fully, the Anglo Indian community stands as a reminder of the beauty that emerges from cultural fusion. Their story is one of resilience, creativity, and quiet strength, a community that deserves a greater recognition, consequent documentation, and celebration. Honouring their legacy is not just about acknowledging the past; it is about enriching the future with the values of inclusivity, diversity, and shared history.

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4. Junoon (1992)
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