



Illegal Migration: the film *Dunki* through Dependency Theory

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Abstract

Rajkumar Hirani's Hindi film *Dunki* [meaning illegal migration] (2023) depicts a story of a group of friends from Punjab, who set out on a perilous journey to emigrate to the United Kingdom via a clandestine route called 'donkey flight', risking their lives in the process. The film strikes a chord with audiences by portraying its protagonist's relentless battle against structural inequalities – situations where one group of people are offered unequal opportunities in relation to the other groups of people – that disproportionately impact underdeveloped countries. The intent of this position paper is to engage in an analysis of the film by employing the lens of Dependency Theory. Accordingly, this analysis aims to delve into the intricate interplay of cultural and economic dependencies, shedding light on the broader narrative of global inequities. The film serves as a poignant reminder of how the underdeveloped world, due to economic and cultural inequalities, is driven to survive in the developed world, even if it is by illegal means.

Keywords: Bollywood, 'donkey flight,' Hindi movies, India, Rajkumar Hirani.

1. Introduction

Dunki (2023) [meaning illegal migration]– the eighth film of Director Rajkumar Hirani – narrates the perilous journey of a group of Punjabi individuals’ attempt to emigrate to the United Kingdom via clandestine methods. The narrative is presented in the Hindi language with English sub-titles. The film features Shah Rukh Khan, Taapsee Pannu, Boman Irani, Anil Grover, Vikram Kochhar and Vicky Kaushal, as Hardy, Mannu, Geetu, Balli and Buggu and Sukhi respectively, in the leading roles. The story runs through a number of twists, and the ultimate climax of the film comes when Mannu, Balli and Buggu return to India after years of their initial attempt to immigrate and ends with a reunion between the lovers of the film, Hardy and Mannu (Hirani, 2023).

The film, while being a comedy, much like Rajkumar Hirani’s other movies, takes upon itself to discuss the issues that are interconnected with migration, poverty, systematic oppression that has been the reality of underprivileged Indians, while promoting themes of nationalism.

The film carries strong messaging that urges citizens of India to perceive life outside of the country as an NRI (Non-Resident Indian) is not what they imagine it to be, while placing emphasis upon the ties that NRI has with their homeland, India (Heath, 2024).

Despite the film’s significance in relation to its reference to complex issues such as migration and nationalism, there is a dearth of research papers on the film, owing to the fact that it was released in 2023 December, few months before this position paper is written. Hence, this paper intends to fill the vacuum by exploring the film – the nuances and insights of illegal migration, what may drive people to migrate illegally, and how it could be read through the lens of Dependency theory.

2. Literature Review

Despite the vacuum of research papers on *Dunki*, there is a wealth of reviews – that are available throughout the internet: few have randomly been selected as a foundation to gauge the audience response to the film and to gain an understanding of the film’s essence and its protagonists. Moreover, there is literature available about the analysis of Bollywood films under Dependency Theory under the general purview of Migration Theory, which will also be incorporated in the literature review.

Upon assessment, the film seems to have gained a 6.8/10 on IMDb (IMDb, 2023), a critics score of 48% on *Rotten Tomatoes*, with the rationale of “*Dunki*’s got good intentions and no shortage of heart, but its uneven tonal blend and shallow treatment of serious themes undermines the intended effect.”, while the audience has redeemed the score with a much higher 76%, stating that “*Dunki* covers all the bases with plenty of comedy, drama, romance, and action, although the story isn’t strong enough to support everything it tries to do” (*Rotten Tomatoes*, 2023). Moreover, *Dunki* has also received 4.0/5 by *Times of India*, which states that

“*Dunki*’s story is an emotional one - rolling in friendship, romance, heart-wrenching and heartwarming moments all into one. And in trademark Hirani style, there are dollops of comedy which is laced with satire to make it an entertaining ride, along with the strong message the film brings forth.” (Sengupta & *Times of India*, 2023).

Hindustan Times has praised the film for its ‘heartwarming tale’ and the humor (Kukreja & *Hindustan Times*, 2023).

The essence

Further examination of reviews has analysed the premise and the essence of the film and its handling of the issue of illegal migration: *The Hindu* has stated that in *Dunki*, “the purpose and social concern is again laudable, but the storytelling feels facile and laboured after a point, largely because Hirani doesn’t want to test newer ways to put his point across. The spontaneity that we associate with his work is sadly missing” (Kumar & *The Hindu*, 2023). The same review emphasizes the point that the issue of illegal migration, which should have more nuance and pignancy with regard to the matter, feels tepid in its handling. International publications such as *IndieWire* is also of a similar opinion, and mentions that the actual journey that takes place in the film has only been limited to mere half an hour of runtime, and the consistent ‘preaching’ of the film’s central message, the film attempting to fit into many genres at the same time, and Shah Rukh Khan’s stardom distracts and undermines the struggle that is behind the film’s actual message (Khosla & *IndieWire*, 2023).

However, many publications and reviewers have called out on the ‘lack of sensitivity’ it conveyed with regard to the messaging of the film (Samant, 2024), while being ‘too generalised’ in terms of portraying its central concern, and thereby lacking the significant emotional impact that is necessary for the film (Ramnath & *Scroll.in*, 2023).

According to Dutta (2024), the film should have begun with the sobering statistics that it conveyed at the end, of the realistic numbers of Indians who were caught at the border or died attempting to illegally migrate. He emphasizes that the topic itself being heavy places an immense amount of responsibility on the Director to accurately portray the conflict, which is at odds with the intricate ‘Bollywoodized’ plot that is planned with Hindi films (Dutta, 2024). Another failure of *Dunki* is that, according to Mukherjee and *The Wire* (2023), Hirani attempts to allude a sense of ‘jovial, heroic and patriotic spin’ to a story of desperation and determination (Mukherjee & *The Wire*, 2023).

The protagonists

The film included four protagonists, who were motivated to take any route possible to escape the oppressive economic conditions of their own country, and to find opportunity abroad, with the notable exception of the ‘hero’ of the narrative, Hardy (Hardayal Singh Dhillon), portrayed by Shah Rukh Khan. While the film grossed INR 409 crore (*The Indian Express*, 2024) within a period of two weeks with his inclusion being one of the major reasons, reviews are of the consensus that Khan fell prey to his own legacy in the film (Samant, 2024).

Other reviewers have also accused Hirani of caricaturism-whereas most of his characters end up being caricatures rather than fill-figured characters themselves (Mukherjee & *The Wire*, 2023), which is evident in the case of Khan, who falls to the trap of being a flat character due to the multiple references to other roles of Khan that Hirani cannot seemingly distance himself from (Desai & *Film Companion*, 2023). The other three characters are a bit more rounded in that regard, and less of caricatures.

However, the four characters and their motivations— Pannu (Manu Randhawa) wanting to buy back her house from a loan shark, Buggu (Vikram Kochhar) wanting his mother to stop wearing trousers for her job at the factory and Balli (Anil Grover), who wants his mother to take a break from working as a tailor all day pale in comparison

to Vicky Kaushal's performance as Sukhi, whose reason to immigrate seems more urgent than all others – ultimately fall prey to self-immolation, one of the worst forms of protest and suicide in the film. Conversely, a lesser developed position, according to a *Reddit* blog post, could be that Mannu, Balli and Buggu are the protagonists of the film, while Hardy merely plays the role of a 'genie' in the film, materializing at significant moments to make the dreams of the other three, a reality (Tripathi, 2024).

All, however, are in distress due to the factors that continue to oppress them and engage in the struggle to change their circumstances throughout the film.

Bollywood and Migration

Bollywood has been defined as one of the leading 'soft power' of India (Hong, 2021), which goes on to promote 'Indian culture, its songs, dances, values and beliefs,' and furthermore, continues on to 'imagine' what society could be, instead of facing rigorous theorization of being representational of reality, in addition to carrying out its tradition of seamlessly blending reality, fantasy and melodrama (Dwyer, 2010).

The same theory is synonymous with Salman Rushdie's conception on *Imaginary Homelands*, in which he mentions "...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind..." (Salman Rushdie, 2010).

Thus, Bollywood continues to serve not only to fabricate a reality for residents of India themselves, but to the diasporic community of India that exists outside its borders as well.

This community that exists outside India – the NRI (Non-Resident Indians) – have been 'imagined' by Bollywood as 'heroic' and 'unadulterated' by films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar, 2001) whose are able to change their lives and their future according to their preference. Such films portray the fantasy of living a prosperous life in the West, while at the same time, maintaining their Indian identity (Desai, 2005). Such films continue to convince Indians to immigrate, convincing them of a better and a more prosperous life abroad.

Aspects of migration, both illegally and legally, have been captured across films, ranging from *Swades* (2004), *Surkhaab* (2012) and *The Namesake* (2006), to name a few. The implications of migration, the desperation and determination that leads to the process and attempting migration due to existing inequalities are some of the many themes that such films address. Hence, *Dunki* also merits analysis.

3. Research Methodology

This position paper employs the concepts of Dependency theorised by Theotonio Dos Santos (1970) to engage in an analysis of the film. Hence, a brief overview of the theoretical concept is presented below as it helps to comprehend the analysis. The paper specifically refers to selection of examples from *Dunki*: it also incorporates the randomly selected reviews and news items of *Dunki* to gain an understanding of the audience's responses to the film, which supports the close analysis of the film.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed for this study will be the ‘New Dependency Theory’ as proposed by Theotonio Dos Santos, which was initially proposed in the paper ‘The Structure of Dependence’ as the “situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected ” (Dos Santos, 1970:231). The theory was proposed to demonstrate the dependence of Latin American countries on other nations, and how it cannot be overcome without qualitative changes within the internal structures of the state and external relations.

Dos Santos expounded further on the theory and its historical dimension as:

“[Dependency is]...an historical condition which shapes a certain structure of the world economy such that it favours some countries to the detriment of others and limits the development possibilities of the subordinate economics...a situation in which the economy of a certain group of countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy, to which their own is subjected” (Dos Santos, 1970:226).

The theory goes on to expound upon the structural inequalities that exist in countries after undergoing colonization, and the structures that force such underdeveloped nations to lean, or depend upon the support extended by more developed, western countries, whether it is in the form of aid, opportunities, or other means.

Other significant authors who have theorised Dependency Theory in the context of Latin America also include Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Andre Gunder Frank, both argued that the underdevelopment in Latin America is the result of the development of capitalism at the world level, which shaped the world initially through mercantile relations, and later through means such as direct investment (Dietz, 1980).

Gunder Frank developed this theory further, by considering that migration, being one of the manifestations of capitalism contributed to underdevelopment, instead of being a cause for development of a nation (Frank, 1967).

4. Discussion

Dunki’s Resonance with the Audience

Audience reception for *Dunki* (2023) has, to a great extent, been positive, while being somewhat divisive. While the film resonated with many Indian and international viewers, garnering praise from for its portrayal of unfulfilled aspirations and the pursuit of dreams, others found its execution uneven.

However, this did not prevent audiences and critics from praising the film for the issues that it managed to tackle. According to news articles, audiences and critics have commended the film for delivering such a tough story through celluloid, and concurrently making it a ‘socially relevant entertainer.’ (Agarwal, 2023). Some audience members, in the same article, refer to the courtroom scene in which Shah Rukh Khan’s character delivers a powerful speech, advocating for a ‘borderless’ world. According to audience members, this monologue ‘proves to be major highlight of the film’(Agarwal, 2023). The same article also carries that many critics were not impressed by the film due to its acting, story, and other reasons.

Dunki has found favour with some viewers who appreciate its ability to create a cinematic experience with a sense of broad optimism. According to Sasikumar (2023), *Dunki*, being a migration drama centred around the biggest star of Bollywood could have been compelling due to its timely nature, and despite its ‘incredible’ plot released during an ‘incredible’ time, he levels some criticism, stating the film feels quite mismatched in nature (Sasikumar, 2023).

The film, nonetheless, has been praised for its skillful blending of wish fulfilment with social commentary, presented in a heartwarming package. Overall, *Dunki* seems to be a film that has sparked conversation owing to the significant subject matter which it tackles, and debate among audiences due to its mixed reception.

The Dependency Theory posits that global capitalism (and migration being one of its manifestations) contributed to the “development of underdevelopment.” According to this view, migration ruins stable developing societies, undermines their economies and uproots their populations (Baran, 1952). According to the theory, migration can be viewed not only as detrimental towards the economy of a nation but can be one of the very causes of underdevelopment itself.

This can be illustrated via the film *Dunki*, which delves into similar themes and conveys a strong message with regard to having a ‘borderless world’ as illustrated by the patriotic speech made by Hardayal ‘Hardy’ Singh’s character during the courtroom scene (Hirani, 2023), which, according to him, would go on to create a more equitable world. The film resonated with audiences, overseas and Indian alike, due to many reasons. The main character of the film being portrayed by Indian superstar Shah Rukh Khan may also have become a contributing factor to the high box office success of the film.

Dunki: a portrayal of economic inequalities

The film goes onto portray economic inequalities that the protagonists face at various instances. Even the main struggle that the protagonists confront becomes the cost of living, which becomes the main motivation for them to attempt to migrate to the West. Their understanding of the ability to earn more money in the West leads Balli, Buggu and Mannu to seek for legal ways to migrate, which leaves them swindled by a man at a migration agency.

Hindered by the barriers to legal migration for Commonwealth citizens, they opt for the perilous ‘donkey route’, an illegal means of reaching their destination. Driven by economic desperation, their resolve remains unyielding despite the numerous hardships encountered throughout their journey. Faced with financial struggles, they are propelled towards unconventional methods in their quest for a better life. Their unwavering determination leads them to risk life and limb, willing to pay steep prices to break free from poverty and seize opportunities abroad. One significant aspect depicted throughout the film is the profound impact of the prevailing capitalist system on the entire village. The families of Manu, Balli, and Buggu each grapple with distinct economic challenges, all with the shared aspiration of migrating to England to address this financial distress and attain stability. Their firm conviction lies in the belief that economic security will pave the way for a better, if not ideal, life; “We were born poor, but we won't die poor” (Hirani, 2023).

This is further reflected in the speech that is given by Hardy in the courtroom, in which he highlights the economic hardships of illegal migrants when the judge frames them as ‘terrorists or criminals’. Hardy retorts that “Dunkers come to live. For two square meals” (Hirani, 2023), emphasizing the desperation and poverty which drives

individuals to migrate to developed countries by whichever means possible. He further enunciates this point by the statement “Borders keep out only the poor” (Hirani, 2023) during the same scene, which is a powerful and a transparent assertion which brings the migration policies of developed countries to the limelight, and how policy formation itself takes place to hinder the oppressed and poor, thus not contributing to the development of any other entity but that of developed nations.

Another notable aspect depicted in the film is the pervasive obsession with and perceived prosperity associated with having family members residing in the UK. This notion is vividly illustrated through scenes where individuals construct makeshift planes atop their rooftops as a symbolic display of their relatives abroad. This action highlights a prevailing belief that the mere presence of a family member in England ensures financial stability and overall well-being, thus perpetuating the dependence upon the West in terms of economic betterment of the underdeveloped East.

Moreover, the film subtly portrays the deep-rooted economic dependency of the Eastern world on the Western world. When Hardy becomes agitated and questions Balli about the images he has been sending back home, Balli reveals that he earns a modest income of six hundred euros per month in the UK. Despite his own financial constraints, he sends a substantial portion, five hundred euros, back to his family in Punjab.

“...Mom thinks I'm the King of London. Now, she takes tea breaks when she sews. She says...‘Relatives listen when I offer my opinion, thanks to you. Because you're in London.’ [How can I] Wreck it all with one photo?...None of us send real photos. If they learn we clean gutters, our money will stink. They won't touch it.” (Hirani, 2023).

In this scene, Balli expresses his concern about maintaining his family's perception of his success, even if it means sacrificing his own financial stability. This scenario exemplifies the broader phenomenon of the underdeveloped East's reliance on the West for economic support, and the supremacy that the West continues to exert upon the East in terms of economy and finance, which limits the social and financial mobility of the lesser privileged Easterners. Balli's decision to prioritize sending money home underscores the pressure individuals from poor regions face to support their families back home, even at the expense of their own wellbeing. It reflects a deeper societal dynamic where the promise of better opportunities in the West compels individuals to bear the burden of monetary responsibility for their families, perpetuating a cycle of dependence on Western economies.

The portrayal of families pinning their hopes on relatives in the UK reflects a broader trend of reliance on Western nations for economic salvation. This dependence underscores a complex dynamic where individuals from economically-disadvantaged regions perceive migration to the West as a cure for their financial struggles, which leads them to migrate to the West by any means possible.

The viewpoint of economical salvation as the end to most of the issues faced by the underprivileged has been illustrated within the film, in addition to how social mobility of the characters coming from the East being impacted by better economic conditions, exemplified by Balli speaking about how other villagers respond to his mother after he starts to send money.

The narrative of being economically dependent upon the West is expressed in many other ways than merely through the main characters; a scammer who claims he can grant them visa to migrate only to embezzle the main characters out of their family savings is still economically dependent on the West to sustain his livelihood, even if it is by swindling people.

Dunki: a portrayal of cultural inequalities

In the climactic courtroom scene of the film, Hardy delivers a speech that sheds light on the prevailing cultural mindset of India. He underscores the perception of inferiority that many Indians hold regarding their own culture, viewing it as secondary in comparison to Western ideals. Hardy expresses the sentiment that India is perceived as progressively underdeveloped, leading to a diminishing sense of pride in its cultural heritage. While such endeavors may seem beneficial on the surface, they ultimately serve to bolster the cultural and economic dominance of the British. This is enunciated in his speech, when he mentions that,

“...Migrants create jobs, not decrease them. To feed 500,000, many eateries are needed here. For their clothes, many tailors are needed. So many barbers for haircuts. Besides, they do jobs you shun. Clean your gutters and trash. Deport these 500,000, and your country will collapse.”
(Hirani, 2023).

This underscores a deeper cultural dependency of the Eastern world on the West, where the pursuit of Western norms and values is prioritized over the preservation and development of other, marginal cultures. In addition, this further illustrates that migration, as a manifestation of means for development for the East, only leads to further underdevelopment of the East, as portrayed by the characters of Balli, Buggu and Mannu, who have not moved above the blue-collar working class, even after a long period of twenty-five years.

Furthermore, this instance mirrors how the current capitalistic system has enforced rigid division of labour among states, thus establishing and increasing the dependence of underdeveloped nations upon dominant nations, as theorised by Andre Gunder Frank in his interpretation of Dependency theory, as follows:

“...contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries. Furthermore, these relations are an essential part of the capitalist system on a world scale as a whole” (Frank, 1966: 18)

The dependence upon the West is further emphasized through the fate of Buggu’s mother; having to wear pants to work as a security officer, akin to having her honour compromised. Buggu’s mother’s fate becomes his driving force to make her retire from her job, despite their livelihood being dependant on cultural norms of the West instead of the East.

Moreover, in the film, Hardy teaches an entire English-speaking class a set monologue for their IELTS exam. In this scene, the students only have to fill in the blanks, making it a humorous and memorable moment. Despite the challenges they face, the characters strive to improve their English language skills in pursuit of their dreams of emigrating to England. This underscores that India's development path mirrors a form of colonialism, wherein the East continues to rely on the West, not only economically but culturally as well.

The cultural dynamics depicted in the film illustrate a deeper narrative of dependency, wherein the allure of Western ideals and practices perpetuates a cycle of cultural subjugation. Despite aspirations for progress, the Eastern world finds itself entrenched in a pattern reminiscent of colonial-era power dynamics, where the West remains the dominant influencer and beneficiary.

5. Conclusion

The resounding success of *Dunki* owes much to the profound empathy it elicited from audiences. When analyzed through the lens of Dependency Theory, the film's impact becomes even more pronounced. Not only does it underscore the intricate relationship between cultural narratives and societal dynamics, but it also sheds light on economic dependencies. By resonating with viewers' emotions, *Dunki* unveils the enduring effects of both cultural and economic reliance.

The film's characters, grappling with their dreams of emigrating to England, mirror the broader aspirations of nations caught in a web of dependency. India, like many other countries, finds itself in a paradoxical situation. While striving for progress, it remains ensnared in patterns reminiscent of colonial-era power dynamics. The West continues to wield influence, benefiting from this intricate dance of cultural and economic ties. The allure of Western ideals perpetuates a cycle of subjugation, perpetually reinforcing the dependency narrative.

Dunki serves as a poignant reminder that storytelling transcends borders. As audiences empathize with the characters' struggles, they confront their own roles within a global context, both within developed, as well as within underdeveloped nations. The film challenges prevailing power structures, inspiring collective change. It conveys the message that true development for India and similar nations lies in breaking free from this cycle—both culturally and economically. Only then can they chart their own course toward prosperity and self-determination, unshackled from the colonial grip of dependency.

Thus, the overarching theme suggests that true development for India and similar nations cannot be achieved until they break free from this cycle of cultural and economic dependency on the West.

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