# Negotiating identities in the Diasporic Space: Transnational Tamil Cinema and Malaysian Indians

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**Abstract**

One of the significant transformations brought about by globalization is the transnationalization of diasporic cinemas. A case in point is the growth of diasporic cinemas catering to the varied diasporas of Indian origin. One of the most important diasporas cinema is Tamil cinema. Negotiations of identities in the Tamil diasporic space are mediated by a variety of sources ranging from Tamil films, Tamil internet, Tamil satellite television/radio and Tamil newspapers/magazines, beside interpersonal sources. Even though, studies have not been done on the relative influence of the above sources, it is apparent that in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, Tamils films are having a perceptible influence among different sections of the Indian population. This paper aims to examine the role of transnational Tamil cinema in Malaysia with a focus on Malaysian Tamil cinema audience's negotiations of cultural identities in the diasporic space

**Introduction**

The notion of film spectators is bridled with as many adequacies as there are inadequacies. The plight of the notion of film audience is no different. Notwithstanding the seemingly simple similarity between the two, there are divergent views of their locations (Meers,2001; Fuller-Seeley,2001) While the film spectator is positioned as the dreaming and individualistic psychological material before the screen (Rascaroli,2002), members of film audience are seen as belonging to collectives that are constituted by socio-cultural conditions. Such collectives are also recognizable, empirically and otherwise; in contrast to the dreaming film spectators. The notions of film spectator and film audience become more problematic as one moves from the planes of film studies and communication to transdisciplinary planes like diasporic studies. Diasporic studies that investigate the relationships between films and their audience, on the one hand, and films and film spectators, on the other, ought to pursue different trajectories. The psychoanalytical path of conventional film spectatorship studies would be unsuitable for the more communication-centered audience studies.

The problematic of the same only becomes more obvious when the topic at hand is concerned with the process of negotiation of cultural identity, cultural otherness and cultural belonging. Such a process may at once be labeled as psychological by those who pursue the tradition of psychoanalytical film studies (Rascaroli,2002), but would be dismissed as inappropriate by those who are wedded to audience studies tradition (Meers,2001).

The present paper is conscious of the limitations of both perspectives and yet wishes to align itself with the audience studies tradition. Such an approach would be more appropriate in exploring the sociological and cultural dimensions of the Malaysian Indians' interactions with films from the cultural homeland of the Tamil diaspora (Tamil Nadu, India).

Films from the cultural homeland have been studied in diverse diasporic settings for their socio-cultural implications. In our context, Tamil films have been the subject of intense media debates in Malaysia on topics ranging from their ability to provide a source of cultural knowledge and identity to their alleged negative influences on younger generation. The alleged negative influences of homeland films are a cause for concern among Indians in Malaysia and Singapore even though there is no empirical evidence to prove the negative linkage between homeland films and violence. In fact, Chinniah (2001), who was one of the few scholars in the region to focus on the role of Tamil films in the lives of south Indians in south east Asia, concluded categorically in her study that "Tamil movies cannot be indiscriminately

blamed to be the negative force hindering the growth of local South Indian teens."

Moreover, the perceived linkages between the violence on screen and the violence on streets require a broader and in depth examination of many more interconnected variables than film mediated ones. In the case of Malaysian Indians, the socio-economic and political conditions of marginalisation are being cited by some as responsible for the growing incidence of crimes among Malaysian Indians. Nadarajah (2000) says that "the assignment of Tamil cinema and/or Tamil schools as main causes of Tamil Malaysians community problems is not only limited and careless but also dilutes the focus on more serious preventive measures addressing the community's socio-economic and political marginalisation."

Notwithstanding the sticky image of current crop of homeland Tamil films, Tamil cinema is also regarded as an important purveyor of information about the cultural practices of the homeland (Chinniah, 2001). Along with diasporic Tamil television and local Tamil newspapers, Tamil cinema provides an important plane for Malaysian Indians to relate to the socio-cultural existence of their counterparts in other Tamil diasporic locations and the crises of displacement that have been haunting Tamils of the migratory kind.

The present paper is a small step forward in exploring the hitherto unexplored area of diasporic communication in the context of Malaysian Tamil film audience's negotiations of cultural identity, cultural otherness and cultural belonging. An introductory review on rethinking the notions of diasporas, cinematic diasporas and the cultural praxis of negotiations through Tamil cinema is what follows.

**Diasporas, Cinematic Diasporas and the Praxis of Negotiations of Cultural Identities Through Tamil Cinema: A Review**

There are many ways to begin this review but nothing would be more useful and appropriate than making the journey in the company of scholars who are determined to relocate and rethink the locales of diasporas in the age of globalisation. This seems more crucial if one is interested in laying a good foundation upon which meaningful layers of understanding concerning the linkages between human diasporas and cinematic diasporas could be developed. Diasporic studies can seldom operate within the confines of disciplinary boundaries as they must belong everywhere. The theoretical frameworks they employ must also be reflective of this eclectic nature of transdisciplinary existence. In other words, what holds good for disciplines like communication also holds good for emerging fields like diasporic studies. They flourish well when they seek to profit from what does not belong to them, in any central sense, and what belongs to all the disciplines.

In a study like this, what is central is the decentered locale of a theoretical framework. Ideally, such a framework is where the conventional parameters of theoretical conceptualisation and problematisation should give way to the emergence of parameters that can not stand the seemingly exclusive character of any discipline-centered framework. For instance, what passes off as conventional as a parameter could be anything from the singularity of focus to the unitary nature of inquiries. These are, in other words, what contributes to the erasure of eclectic and transdisciplinary locales of studies that otherwise would have happily straddled, in a more fruitful manner, in a borderless research terrain. Hence, the present study will be locating itself on a terrain where concepts of Giddens (1992) coexist in a fruitful manner with those of Appadurai (1998).

In fact, the need to rethink the notions of diasporas and their parameters seems more a compulsion borne of the globalisation of the communication and cultural kinds. The need to rethink the notions of diasporas is accentuated by the looming crisis of the nation-state and the prospects of the 'post national'. It is not without reason that Appadurai says, "we need to think ourselves beyond the nation." (1998, p.158). It is a world of crisis for what is seen as the bedrock of nationalism, the nation-state. It is also pictured as a world of prospects for the post national and its accompanying formations.

While much has been written about the crisis of the nation-state in the age of globalisation, the prospects of the post national formations are only beginning to be applied in contexts outside the crisis of the nation-state. One interesting context of application is the world of displacements, migrations, exiles and flows of people across cultures and countries. Constructing today's world not only in terms of the post national formations of the political and economic kind but also in terms of the diasporic kind must be seen as fillip in the arms for scholars of diasporic studies and the members of the diasporic world. This enables diasporic studies to be more relevant than before even as they turn the spotlight on globalisation on themselves in more ways than one.

To weld the prospects of today's world of diasporas with those of the post national calls for an understanding of modernity in the age of globalisation. The post national's prospects are no different from the prospects of Gidden's (1992) notion of modernity as 'post traditional'. They are both constrained and advantaged by the shifting contours of globalisation. The shifting contours of globalisation are as much a product of the tensions between the forces of globalisation and the forces of localisation. They are as much a product of the entanglement of the prospects of the post national and the nation-state. More than

anything, they are the result of a continuing process of what Giddens calls 'time-space distanciation' (1992, p.10-34). If one agrees with the 'mutability' of diasporas in the age of globalisation one must also agree with the 'mutability' of modernity in the age of globalisation and globalisation's shifting contours as a result of the factor of 'time-space distanciation'. Giddens' words amplify better the clarity of such an understanding. "…the concept of globalisation is best understood as expressing fundamental aspects of time-space distanciation. Globalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities. We should grasp the global spread of modernity in terms of an ongoing relation between distanciation and the chronic mutability of local circumstances and local engagements" (Giddens, 1992).

As with many other human phenomena and the associated concepts, the phenomenon of diaspora has also been attracting attempts to reconceptualise its constituents. While some question the validity of parameters like ethnicity and displacement and want to stress on "...connectivity or on the complex nexus of linkages that contemporary transnational dynamics make possible and sustain" (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.52), others like Ang (2003, p.3) point out "…that there is something deeply problematic about such celebrations of diaspora. …the transnationalism of diaspora is actually proto-nationalist in its outlook, because no matter how global its reach, the content of a diaspora, who can and cannot belong to it – is ultimately limited by a pre-given boundedness (defined in terms of race, ethnicity or religion) which is deemed intrinsic to it." Ang (2003, p.9) further points to the manner in which hybridity as a concept works to "problematises the concept of *ethnicity* which underlines the dominant discourses of diaspora."

But many are still wedded to the conventional parameters of displacement, ethnicity, original homeland and settled homeland in relating to the myriad aspects of diasporas in their communication and social contexts. In particular, such an understanding is rather pervasive in diasporic film studies where scholars seek to connect diasporas and the diasporic cinemas essentially through the praxis of displacement of various kinds. The categories of 'exilic cinema' (Naficy, 2001) and 'third cinema' (Rajagopal, 2003, p.39-66) are the notable examples in this regard.

But the nature of displacement works differently with regard to human diasporas and cinematic diasporas. As Venkatasamy (1996) says: "the act of displacement – in many ways the essential and defining characteristic of diasporas – should *not* be seen as the physical "exodus" of any form of filmmaking from an original cinematic homeland towards other cinematic apparatuses. Displacement in this context happens filmically, onto (and outside) the screen: the act should be conceived of in purely *metaphoric* terms rather than in the physical terms inherent in ethnic diasporas."

But such a notion of cinematic diaspora is increasingly becoming untenable as the shifts in human migrations and their displacement are only too quickly followed by the rise of displaced locales of film production, thanks again to globalisation and its attendant effects on the spread of satellite centres of production to cater to ethnic audiences. No longer, diasporic film narratives emerge only from the cultural homeland. They are also the mainstay of independent productions in countries like UK and Canada. In fact, the tags 'diasporic' and 'exilic' cinemas are more appropriate for what emerges from outside the homeland than from the dominant centres of productions in the homeland. This is true of the so called cross over films of the Indian filmmakers in   UK and the films of Iranian filmmakers in exile. Films like *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) are the better representatives of the diasporic cinema than films which deal with the issues of the diaspora from outside (homeland). In a way, Gidden's (1992) 'time-space distanciation' is certainly proving to be the challenge for homeland films in competing with films made by members of the diasporas themselves.

However, there are exceptions to the above in the major film markets of the transnational Tamil cinema such as Singapore and Malaysia. In these countries, alternatives to homeland films can not emerge easily as they do not have production bases locally. Hence, whether Tamil films from the homeland contain diasporic narratives or not, they turn out be a huge draw among the local Indians, particularly the younger generation. The impact of the Tamil film culture is all pervasive on local television programmes, religious festivals like *Thaipoosam*,[1] film star nights, film festivals and film awards functions. Tamil cinema and television are also seen as the major source of cultural identification by the Indians in the region. "Tamil films and sitcoms on TV channels are their reference for cultural identification and these uphold obsolete feudal systems," says Elangovan, a Singapore playwright, commenting on the pervasive influence of these media on Singapore Indians (Santhanam, 2003). As mentioned earlier, Tamil films are also being increasingly cited as the major cause of moral depravity and crime among Indian youth. Not surprisingly, the perceived negative influence of homeland Tamil films among the younger generation attracts strong reactions in local newspaper columns; along side full page advertisements of film releases, film songs-based ring tones and film gossip.

Despite the divergent notions and concerns regarding diasporas and cinematic diasporas, there is a certain validity about the conventional notions of diasporas which root for dispersed and dislocated ethnic populations living outside their places of origins, otherwise called original homeland. Moreover, there is a general agreement about the causes and characteristics of the major constituents of Indian diaspora. It is almost taken for granted that diasporas were/are caused by forced migration (due to ethnic conflicts *i.e* Sri

Lankan Tamil diaspora), indentured labour flows (due to colonial policies, *i.e* Malaysian, Singapore, Mauritius, Reunion Tamil diasporas) and migration by design (due to reasons of employment and education, *i.e* Indian diaspora in USA, Europe and Middle East). Diasporic identities are seen as floating and hybrid because of the duality of cultural affiliations. Identities are borne of the negotiations between lived cultural practices of the settled homeland and the imagined and borrowed cultural practices of the original homeland. The compulsions of globalisation are made evident in the cultural practices diasporic narratives in films and other cultural products embody and reflect. Diasporic identities depend to a large extent on the recounting of narratives through the negotiated interactions on the planes of self, media and community.

The key mediator of the cultural practices and our identities in diasporic spaces are films (films that originate from the home/settled homeland and films that originate from the original homeland/distant place of origin). In our case, as there is no Malaysian Tamil film industry, we would be studying the influences of Tamil films from the original homeland.

As cultural narratives, films are reflective of national aspirations as well as transnational and diasporic aspirations. In the case of Tamil cinema, diasporic cultural narratives have been structuring the discourse on the issues confronted by Tamils in the diasporic space for well over five decades. For instance, in *Parasakthi* (1952), one of the path-breaking films in Tamil cinema's history, the plight of Tamils dislocated by the turn of events in Burma (Myanmar), at the height of Second World War, was seen as emblematic of the centrality of dislocation and its cyclical continuance. In this film, the war-torn economies of the settlers (Tamils) were seen as responsible for their dislocation from their settled homeland. Such concerns are articulated differently in the present day films due to the winds of globalisation. In Maniratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002), the desperate attempts of a Sri Lankan Tamil child (who was adopted by Indian parents) to find her biological mother are enacted mostly to reflect on the pangs of dislocation suffered by Sri Lankan Tamils in the wake of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

In the past diasporic narratives did not aim solely at diasporic film markets but now diasporic films cater to multiple audiences. They aim at the local market (Tamil Nadu), the diasporic markets within India (for example, Bangalore, where there is a sizeable Tamil population) and outside India (Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Mauritius, USA and Europe). Occasionally, non-diasporic markets are also exploited by the transnational Tamil cinema. An emerging market for Tamil cinema is Japan, where for reasons not

convincingly made clear, the films of the Tamil super star, Rajinikanth have been drawing good crowds. One of his Japanese fans, a monk says: ''He's a fantastic hero. He sweeps us all off our feet. What if I'm a monk, I enjoy his films, and I am willing to go to the other end of the world to watch them...And so are my friends here with me...''(From Faraway...) Even though, the films of other Tamil stars are yet test the Japanese market, the success of Rajinikanth's films and the fan culture his films could promote in Japan are seen as pointers to the untapped potential the transnational Tamil cinema is faced with in non-diasporic markets. On the eve of the world premiere of *Chandramuki* (2005), a much awaited Rajinikanth film during 2005, it was projected that out of the 400 film prints to be made, 80 film prints would be earmarked for the overseas markets and 33 prints for Japan.

Another pointer to the inroads made by the transnationalisation project of Tamil cinema is provided by the scale and nature of publicity drives that accompany the release of Tamil films in markets like Malaysia. Malaysian Tamil newspapers closely resemble their counterparts in Tamil Nadu in the volume of film advertisements they carry everyday. And it is common for theatres to go in for a complete revamp of projection and sound systems, as it was done in Malaysia for the release of *Chandramuki* (2005). Such attempts certainly attest to the heightened expectations of overseas distributors of homeland films.

The growing cultural flow across borders is certainly fueling the growth of Tamil film industry. Hence, it becomes imperative for the Tamil film industry to locate the operationalisation of diasporic narratives in films like *Nala Damayanthi* (2003), *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002), *Kadhal Sadugudu* (2003) and *Junior Senior* (2002); in places far removed from their places of origin. For instance, *Junior Senior* (2002) was shot entirely in Malaysia and nearly 80% of *Nala Damayanthi* (2003) was shot in Australia.

The films we consume in terms of the readings we source from them and the meanings we negotiate in such readings are as much depended on our cultural practices as on the cultural practices the characters in the films are made to perform. This is more true of diasporic Tamil film audience as the factors of identity, otherness and belonging play well in the processes of negotiations concerning the same. But what goes unstated is the role of homeland audience and the institutionalised processes they indirectly structure in determining the cultural world of Tamil cinema characters on a unique plane. It is unique because of the opportunities it affords for the diasporic audience in relating to binaries such as relevance/irrelevance, sameness/difference and appropriate/inappropriate.

What goes unstated is also the complexity of the negotiations as employed by the Tamil cinema characters beneath the seemingly simplistic and albeit much derided commercial demeanour of the narratives employed to express cultural practices and identities. Moreover, Tamil cinema's cultural praxis should not be seen as different from the cultural praxis of Tamils' daily lives. Tamil cinema, like any other source of cultural product, must be located along side other mirrors of cultural practices available to Tamils. They are as much expressive of their cultural identities as being sources. Moreover, as the defining parameters of culture have come a long way from their anthropological moorings to their present locations in the realms of everyday culture, popular culture and mass mediated culture (Mathews,2000), such an understanding must also be influenced by the ordinariness of the cultural practices and identities Tamil films engender rather than the esoteric remoteness of identities and practices the anthropological approach employs. In cinema or outside, cultural practices must be seen as our daily taken for granted utterings, negotiations and expressions of our individual and collective cultural values and beliefs. They may border on the ways in which we deal with dress, food, worship, marriage, family, and society in the immediate environs of our domesticated space of settled homeland and the distant original homeland. Cultural practices in the diasporic space are believed to be influenced greatly by the cultural flows mediated by films that originate from the imagined worlds of original homeland and the domesticated space of home. Related to cultural practices are our identities and how they are formed. Identity formation is a much talked about but little understood process, more so in contexts where individuals are located in diasporic cultural contexts. As in other contexts, identities in the diasporic space are also twofold: self-identities and collective identities. They must be seen as interdependent and overlapping. Identities are multiple in their formation and expressions (Woodward, 2000). Keeping in view the above, the negotiations of diasporic cultural identities, cultural otherness and cultural belonging by the Malaysian Indians will be explored in this paper.

**Method**

In this study, the conventional focus group format was modified to locate the discussions in the contexts of the films shown at the beginning of every session. Ten participants were chosen for each of the three focus group sessions. Care was taken to ensure the inclusion of only those who were avid watchers of Tamil films.   Majority of the participants were youngsters. The duration of the sessions was kept flexible to allow unhindered flow of discussions even while providing adequate time for the screening and briefing parts of the sessions. The average duration of the three sessions was two hours. The focus group members were informed about the presence of audio and video recording equipment. For the benefit of locating the discussions on expected planes, the three focus groups were adequately briefed about the objectives and the themes. They were shown relevant segments from four Tamil films. Of the four films, *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002) and *Nala Damayanthi* (2003) were chosen to represent the typicality of

diasporic narratives in Tamil cinema. *Kadhal* (2004) and *Vasool Raja* (2004) were chosen to represent the typicality of non-diasporic narratives in Tamil cinema.

The first session was a free flowing unmoderated session, barring clarifications of the topics and their contexts by the researcher and the research assistants. The second session was a loosely moderated session where the participants were not constrained by the ideas or words of the moderator. The third session was a moderated discussion, wherein the questions and the flow of discussion were determined by the moderator. All the sessions were guided by three topics: i.cultural identity and Tamil cinema ii.diasporic space and Tamil film narratives and iii.Malaysian Indians' negotiations of cultural identity, cultural otherness and cultural belonging through Tamil cinema. In general, the participants were asked to address the following questions in a random manner. i. How to define one's cultural identity *vis-à-vis* the cultural identities of Tamils as represented in the Tamil films? ii.What are the roles of collectively shared values of cultural practices expressed in the daily lives in Malaysia and in Tamil films? iii)In what ways our negotiations in seeking a    cultural identity are taking place through what we experience in watching Tamil films? iv)How would Malaysian Tamil film audience define cultural otherness? v)How do we see the role of Tamil cinema in promoting or minimizing cultural otherness from the cultural praxis of the homeland? vi.In what ways our negotiations in gaining a sense of cultural otherness are taking place through what we experience in watching Tamil films? vii. Related to cultural otherness is the concept of cultural belonging, which may be seen as its opposite. Films can be seen as cultural narratives and, consequently, as the promoters of cultural belonging among people sharing the same language and cultural values but dispersed across countries. In what ways our negotiations in gaining a sense of cultural belonging are taking place through what we experience in watching Tamil films? The concepts of cultural identity, cultural otherness, cultural belonging and the process of negotiation were explained to the participants using the defining parameters of the same in the following manner. Cultural identity of the Malaysian Tamil cinema audience was defined in terms of their identifications of the self through the prism of collectively shared cultural values, practices and expressions of Malaysian Tamils as well as Tamils elsewhere. Cultural otherness was defined as the alienation experienced by members of the Tamil diaspora *vis-a-vis* the cultural values, practices and expressions of the homeland. Whereas cultural belonging was defined as the extent of distance/proximity between cultures of the Tamil diaspora and the homeland.   Negotiation was defined as the most crucial of the stages in the identity process and it was defined as the stage borne of the interactions with the self, media and members of the primary, secondary and tertiary groups.

**Malaysian Tamil Cinema Audience's Negotiations of Cultural Identity, Cultural Otherness and Cultural Belonging**

This section seeks to put in perspective the Malaysian Tamil cinema audience's negotiations in the diasporic space on the basis of their discussions in the two focus groups. The discussions in sessions I and III are chosen for examination here in view of their substantive focus on the theme of the study.

**Divisive Narratives and 'Time-Space Distanciation'**

Giddens (1992) argues that modern social life is dynamic because of the 'separation of time and space'. Diasporic socio-cultural life is modern because it is dynamic and because it involves the delinking of time and space from place. The place related associations (of the homeland) are made more significant because of their separation from what is lived (space) and how long it is lived (time). The crisis of modernity has its roots in what it displaces and separates and how the displacement and separation of time and space from place gets reflected in the crisis of identity. This becomes evident in the following responses of the focus group participants in session I.

R[1] Tamil films show us our identity in terms of language and area.

R[5] Our identities are dependent on how we are named. Tamil films are responsible for the popularity of culturally alien names among Tamils. Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names. What is being done by Tamil films is having an impact in this regard in Malaysia also.

R[10] India is a big country with a big population. What Tamil films show are unlikely in Malaysia.

R[5] In India, the social divide is shown to begin with birth, at least as shown in Tamil films. Caste and communal associations are also shown to be active in India. Many believe it is not so in Malaysia but they are also coming up here among Indians. This is a negative contribution of Tamil films.

R[6] In Tamil films, social divisions are brought to the fore strongly. Viewers only identify with the social group to which they belong. In the beginning, we do not know anything about our culture. We learn our cultural clues only from our parents. But when we are exposed to the social divisions such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians on Tamil films, we are likely to be divided be as well. When we move in our families, we only know our parents; but when we are exposed to the social reality, as shown by the films, our minds are poisoned about social relations.

R[5] Our ancestors who came from India to Malaysia were the oppressed people. We were united then. They had a sense of belonging as Indians. In Tamil films such as *Devar Magan* (1992) and *Tirupaachi*

(2005), the characters are shown as belonging to    places. When we identify with those places of origin as shown in Tamil films, we are once again likely to be divided in terms of our places of origin. One might say, we came from Madurai (a temple city in south Tamil Nadu). The other might say, we came from *Tirupaachi*    (a small town in Tamil Nadu).

R[10]   Even though Tamil films show the divides among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. But they always make a turnabout and have happy endings. Why we do not relate to the moral of the story at the end?

R[5]   The moral endings are only motivated by commercial considerations.

R[10]   What Tamil films show in terms of social and communal divisions may be true of that place (India) but not our place (Malaysia).

R[6]   Language and culture are the basis our identities. Once upon a time, the India that was shown was our role model. But what is now being shown in Tamil films about Indian culture is a wrong one. For instance, in *Kadhal* (2004), 'thali', the symbol of marriage, is thrown away. Why the symbol of our culture should be shown in this manner?

R[10]   That could not have been avoided as the film is about a true story.

R[5]   Even if the story of *Kadhal* (2004) is supposedly true. They could have shown that incident differently. Tamil films are seen by others as well, particularly by people in countries like Japan. Why we should denigrate our cultural identities then? In the film, *7G Rainbow Colony* (2004), the lead characters fall in love and have sexual relations. Is it right? Do you think it is right? Love can be shown differently, it can be shown to transcend sexual relations. Many of our youngsters' ways of life are more like what Tamil films portray.

R[3] Tamil films do not erode our culture. They in fact promote our culture. For instance, we get to know about how to dress, particularly during wedding ceremonies, only from Tamil films.

R[5]   I am wearing Punjabi dress. It is not reflective of my identity. The way characters dress in scenes only exposed their bodies not their culture. How such scenes contribute to the promotion of our culture?

R[5]   Likewise, we may also judge the issue of language based identities differently though Tamil films. For instance, in the film *Autograph* (2004), one of the lead characters, who is shown as a Malayalee, is wearing a saree printed with letters from Tamil alphabet. This may be read differently by our youngsters. It may be seen as fun stuff. But we must realise that even though the two characters come from different cultural backgrounds, they are willing to accept the cultural identities of the other. This shows how we should be negotiating our identities.

R[6] People displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on

language.

R$^3$   What films like *Tiruppachi* (2005) show are cultural identities which can not be trusted.

R$^9$   In *Bombay* (1995), a Hindu is shown as marrying a Muslim. This may be acceptable there but not here. They show their culture.

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It is apparent from the above that Malaysian Indians seek to negotiate their identities primarily in the context defined by Gidden's (1992) 'time-space distanciation'. They are equally divided in their longing for inputs from the cultural homeland and in their dismissal of what comes to them through homeland films. There is a clear division in time and space in their negotiations of identities borne of the two important locations, the settled homeland and the cultural homeland. However, there exists a dynamic plane of negotiations too in the diasporic space of Malaysian Indians, thanks to the discursive character of the transnational Tamil cinema. The discursive character is made more obvious in the readings of Malaysian Tamil cinema audience than in the diasporic or non-diasporic characters/narratives of transnational Tamil cinema. It is fairly obvious that with or without diasporic narratives, the Tamil cinematic diaspora can exist as long as Tamil films evoke discursive readings by the Malaysian Indians or other groups in the Tamil diasporic space. Similar views only gain strength when one subjects to closer scrutiny the responses of participants in session III.

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**R$^1$**  We imbibe only the negatives from films like *Baasha* (1995).

**R$^4$** We should be seeing the films not as good or bad films but depending on our process of identifications.

**R$^9$** Our Tamil community is different from others. Instead of showing the downside of the society, the story lines should be changed to enable us to look at the Tamil community differently, not just from the side of political and police corruption.

**R$^2$**  Our films must move away from fight scenes which are culturally alien and must go back in time to use only culturally relevant martial arts so that our identities can be better related.

**R$^4$**  If we expect the film industry to change, we may not get the clues to solve our problems. They have to show the negatives so that we can learn from them. We should see the films by identifying with the films and their contexts.

**R$^6$**   In *Ayutha Ezuthu* (2004), the selfishness of the individuals is brought alive and there is a lesson for us in our lives. We are also selfish and we only care about our future and not the society or community.

**R³**  We only like only those films which concern our cultural identities. For instance, *Boys* (2003) failed because we could not accept the identities the film was trying to promote. Whatever be the level of our modernisation, we want to be culturally Indians in terms of our identities.

**R⁴** In *Vasool Raja* (2004), we may like the character, 'Seena Thana'², who is vampy and hybrid but we identify only with Sneha, who is homely and culturally acceptable. So we want to accept only culturally ideal/acceptable identities.

**M**  How would you relate to the cultural identity of the Sri Lankan girl in Australia in the Tamil film *Nala Damayanthi* (2003)?

**R⁴**  It is an ideal identity, even though the character is shown as hybrid she lives by her original culture and language.

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Once again, it becomes apparent that the divides and bridges between the settled homeland and cultural homeland are the alternating factors in the negotiations of cultural identity, cultural otherness and cultural belonging. There is also a strident confidence among the focus group participants that despite good or bad Tamil films, the sourcing of identities would go on on the basis of self-mediated processes of identification. This echoes strongly in what one participant said:"We should be seeing the films not as good or bad films but depending on our process of identifications."

In the responses of focus group participants, Gidden's  (1992) concept of 'time-space distanciation' proves itself loud and clear. It is apparent that    the conventional notions of negotiations of cultural identity, cultural  otherness and cultural belonging are not out of place, at least in the context of whatever is happening at the crossroads of the cultural practices of daily life routines of diasporic members and the cultural practices Tamil films embody. The responses of the participants were incisive in so far as their reasons for taking Tamil films seriously or indifferently in their negotiations of the praxis of identity, otherness and belonging. They also brought out clearly the patterns of negotiations concerning the same. For instance, whenever the question of cultural identity in the diasporic space cropped up, the brunt was borne by the narratives, characters and the directors of Tamil cinema even as some argued that their negotiations of cultural identity would not be rewarding without the cultural capital provided by Tamil films. It is apparent from the above that the praxis of identity, otherness and belonging is mostly defined by the factors of 'time-space distanciation'. The negotiations are also governed by the rooting for the traditional and avoidance of the post-traditional, whenever the primary sources of cultural identities such as language, dress and religion are threatened or eroded. The praxis of identity, otherness and belonging appears to be a unitary one as many participants vouch for otherness even as they seek to

belong to what the Tamil films show as the culture of original homeland. There lies the inextricable linkage between the factors of otherness and belonging and how both of them are channelised in the negotiations concerning identity formation.The participants appear to know their diasporic location well as they see the difference between space and place and how time has been displaced from their place of negotiations.The predominant view that  cultural identities are better sourced through informed negotiations rather than blind acceptance of the cultural knowledge disseminated by Tamil films proves that Malaysian Tamil film audience's negotiations are more driven by the pragmatic approach of film viewers as audience and less by the psychological and subjective approach of the film spectator.

**Conclusion**

The present paper amply proves that the cultural praxis of negotiations by the Malaysian Tamil film audience is faced with challenges to escape from the factor of 'time-space distanciation' and the general crisis in which traditional diasporas find themselves in the age of modernity. Not surprisingly, Tamil films evoke extremely strong reactions concerning how they are seen as denigrating/promoting the basis of Tamil cultural identity and the circulation of cultural capital.

**Notes**

1. *Thaipoosam* is the single most important event in the religious and social calendar of Malaysian Hindus. It attracts   millions of people from all over Malaysia and abroad. It falls during the Tamil month of *Thai* (January-February). The event celebrates the Tamil God, Lord Murugan, and attracts members of the ethnic Chinese community and foreign tourists.

2. In its literal meaning, the name 'Seena Thana' is an empty signifier. But we know for sure that negotiations through films do not depend on empty signifiers or literal meanings. In recent times, Tamil films have transformed the potential of empty signifiers as the key drivers of audience imagination. Vampy characters like 'Seena Thana' in Tamil films are prolific by their occurences and have a strong historical tradition. They serve the narrative function of anchoring the 'ideal Tamil woman' (the heroine) by their disruptive and yet seductive co-locations in the narratives. They also provide commercially suitable contexts for the transnational Tamil cinema to test the moral   fabric of the male (hero) psyche and its vulnerabilities. The eventual glorification of the hero rests squarely on females who are shown as either 'disruptive' (by being vamps) or 'ideal Tamil women' (by their co-location with vamps).

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