

# Migration and Identity in Dunki, Exploring the Intersection of Cinema and Literature in the Portrayal of Displacement

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## Abstract

Migration stories have been a big part of films and books around the world for a long time. They show the psychological, social, and political problems that come with moving. Rajkumar Hirani's 2023 film, *Dunki*, adds to this tradition by picturing the illegal migration of people from India to the United Kingdom. It also focuses on themes of longing, identity, community, and exile. This paper analyses *Dunki*'s portrayal of migration and identity formation, juxtaposing these depictions with literary texts that explore forced relocation and diasporic identity. Examining textual analysis, critical migration theory, and comparative media studies, the paper sheds light on how *Dunki* engages in a wider cultural discourse regarding how individuals conceptualise home and identity in the context of restricted mobility. This research examines the film in conjunction with authors like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh, emphasising the parallels between cinematic and literary representations of displacement. The feeling of alienation is present in *Dunki*, where characters struggle with broken identities as they seek employment in other countries. The research article concludes by assessing how cinema, like literature, not only mirrors migrant experiences but also influences public perception and understanding of global mobility and its human ramifications.

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Migration remains one of the defining forces of the twenty-first century. Global inequality, labour demands, political instability, and environmental crises have accelerated cross-border movements that generate both opportunities and troubles. Presentation of migration in creative media plays a major role in shaping public perception about the moral, legal, and emotional dimensions of mobility. Films and literary texts reveal the interior lives of migrants, their aspirations, their negotiations with identity, and the losses they endure while traversing borders.

Rajkumar Hirani's *Dunki* sheds light on a group of migrants from rural India who attempt an illegal journey to the United Kingdom through the "donkey route", a colloquial term for risky and illegal transport networks. While the film is grounded in entertainment, it also offers a surfaced representation of how migration reshapes identity. Literary scholarship provides a parallel space to examine similar themes. Amitav Ghosh's anthropological novelistic style, Salman Rushdie's magical realism of fractured identity, and Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic interiority provide valuable frameworks for juxtaposing cinematic representations of alienation and displacement with literary imagination.

This paper sheds light on the intersection of cinema and literature in representing migration and identity formation, using the *Dunki* movie as a case study. It addresses three important questions. First, how does *Dunki* portray the forces that compel migration? Second, in what ways does the film illustrate psychological transformations associated with displacement? Third, how does the film's narrative align with or separate from major literary works that address similar themes? The aim is to demonstrate that cinematic and literary descriptions of migration are balanced and complement each other, which helps deepen our understanding of the migrant experience.

Migration has been an important artistic theme for ages. From early immigrant stories in United States literature to contemporary global cinema, the portrayal of displacement often reflects broader socio-political anxieties. According to Grossman, "Migration stories expose the contradictions of national borders and the fragility of belonging" (Grossman 47). Cinema magnifies these contradictions visually, while literature explores them introspectively. Cinema is an explicit medium, and literature is an implicit one.

Global cinema has repeatedly represented immigration through narratives of aspiration and struggle. Films such as *The Namesake*, *Brooklyn*, *Lagaan's* displaced villagers, and *Gangs of Wasseypur* depict individuals caught between geographical and emotional borders. Scholars note that "cinematic migration is always a negotiation

between realism and spectacle” (Mehta 63). *Dunki* uses this framework by blending humour, drama, and realism to portray irregular migration networks.

Literature allows for deeper psychological analysis. Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* emphasises how dislocation fractures identity and forces the migrant to inhabit “a broken mirror of recollection” (Rushdie 10). Lahiri examines subtle emotional displacements among first- and second-generation immigrants. Ghosh focuses on historical migration and environmental displacement. These authors highlight identity as something continuously changed rather than fixed.

*Dunki* revolves around Hardayal Singh Dhillon, also called Hardy, who dreams of enabling his close friends to migrate to the United Kingdom in search of better opportunities. Failing to secure visas legally, the group chooses illegal ways. Their journey includes dangerous desert crossings, hostile detention centres, and emotional disturbances. These scenes dramatise the risks undertaken by thousands of migrants globally who choose illegal ways due to restrictive immigration systems. Although the film incorporates comic elements, its underlying message is serious. The characters’ motivations reflect structural inequalities that limit mobility. As Bala notes, “Migration is often less about choice and more about constraint” (Bala 89). *Dunki* illustrates these themes through characters who feel socially and economically trapped in their hometowns.

Migration is shaped by both push and pull factors. In *Dunki*, economic stagnation forces characters outward, while dreams of status and upward mobility pull them toward the West. The protagonists of the movie live in a rural area where limited jobs and inadequate social mobility hamper the vertical and horizontal growth of the individuals. Hardy’s friends face unemployment and undervaluation of their skills. Such conditions echo patterns observed in literature related to migration. Ghosh describes similar economic pressures in his *Ibis Trilogy*, where colonial labour markets displace Indian populations (Ghosh 210). Although the contexts differ, the underlying logic remains the same. Poverty and stagnant conditions produce aspirations that seek opportunities in other countries.

*Dunki*’s characters discover that legal migration processes are too difficult due to language requirements, high fees, and rigid visa criteria. This reflects real-world inequalities where those with fewer resources face greater barriers. Mehta notes that “immigration regimes do not regulate movement equally; they privilege the wealthy and restrict the poor” (Mehta 59). Forced into irregular routes, the characters mirror thousands of real migrants. Migration reshapes identity in various ways. The film portrays identity as mixed, broken, and reconstructed as migrants cross physical and cultural borders. Initially, the protagonist’s personality is shaped through community ties, shared dreams, and geographic belonging. Their sense of self is firmly rooted in their hometown. This aligns with sociological theories that identity is socially anchored (Hall 275). The desert crossing sequences and border encounters strip the characters of their previous identities. Detention officers reduce them to fingerprints and numbers. Hardy’s group experiences fear, loss, and humiliation. Lahiri’s observation, “The immigrant must live with the perpetual ache of adjustment” (Lahiri 127), captures the psychological state portrayed on screen.

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, the characters confront cultural alienation. They struggle with language barriers, discrimination, and loneliness. Literature often explores this identity fragmentation. Rushdie writes that migrants exist “in a state of both belonging everywhere and nowhere” (Rushdie 15). *Dunki* mirrors this condition when characters attempt to balance their Indian identity with new expectations in foreign spaces. Cinematic flashbacks in *Dunki* emphasise longing for home. The motif of home recurs throughout migration narratives. As Boym argues, “Nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (Boym 23). The characters’ emotional longing emphasises that migration produces both gains and irreplaceable losses.

Migration experiences differ across gender and class lines. *Dunki*’s protagonists are working-class individuals lacking financial resources. Their helplessness is heightened by exploitation from smugglers. Bala notes, “Illegal migrants often come from economically marginalised communities, which makes them targets for predatory networks” (Bala 92). Class thus shapes both access to mobility and the dangers encountered. Although *Dunki* does not focus primarily on gender, the presence of female migrants highlights additional risks. Women migrants globally face gender-specific challenges, including harassment and trafficking. Ghosh suggests that “women in migration narratives carry compounded vulnerabilities” (Ghosh 119). The film gestures to these challenges through brief but impactful scenes involving female characters.

Lahiri’s characters often struggle with the subtle disagreements between their inherited culture and lived experiences. For example, in *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli experiences a layered identity crisis shaped by migration. Similar tensions appear in *Dunki* as migrants encounter cultural dislocation. Lahiri writes, “Being a foreigner is a lifelong condition” (Lahiri 156). Hardy and his companions demonstrate their status through

persistent alienation even after reaching the United Kingdom. Rushdie's notion that migrants reconstruct identity from fragmented memories echoes strongly with Dunki. Like Rushdie's narrators, Dunki's characters invent stories about home to cope with displacement. Rushdie argues, "The past is a foreign country that we revisit through imagination" (Rushdie 12). The film echoes this theory through its use of flashbacks and emotionally charged recollections. Ghosh's writing on historical forced migrations parallels the forced undertones of Dunki's illegal journey. Economic desperation and border policies force Dunki's migrants to move voluntarily. Ghosh notes, "Freedom of movement is an illusion shaped by power" (Ghosh 305). Dunki's characters learn such lessons as they confront border patrols and restrictive immigration laws. Both cinema and literature emphasise identity as a dynamic construct shaped by movement. Both critique the structural inequalities that compel migration. And both highlight human resilience despite adversity.

The film presents illegal migration empathetically without romanticising it. Hardy's friends are not criminals as defined socially; they are individuals seeking opportunities denied to them. As Mehta suggests, "Illegality is a political category rather than a moral one" (Mehta 71). Cinema carries responsibility when depicting migrant suffering. Hirani avoids graphic sensationalism and focuses instead on emotional truth. Literature similarly must balance authenticity with ethical representation.

Migration produces an emotional map that overlays physical geography. Dunki's characters move through landscapes of hope, fear, longing, and despair. Hope for a better life motivates the journey. The story reflects literary migration narratives where hope sustains migrants through hardships. Fear accompanies illegal crossings, detention, and the possibility of failure. Lahiri's characters often experience "a quiet terror of the unknown" (Lahiri 139). Dunki's scenes of struggle mirror this. Characters grieve the loss of their homeland. Rushdie describes migrant grief as "an emotional amputation" (Rushdie 19). The film visually portrays this through close-ups and symbolic scenes.

Hirani uses flashbacks to reveal character motivations gradually. This reflects literary structures where fragmented memory shapes narrative flow. Deserts symbolise danger and struggle, airports symbolise separation, and home spaces symbolise identity. Cinema communicates migration's emotional dimensions through imagery. Characters speak in Punjabi, Hindi, and English, reflecting linguistic hybridity. Literary works often use code-switching to signify identity fluidity.

While cinema communicates displacement through imagery and collective emotion, literature explores interiority and subjective experience. Yet both forms aim to convey the human truth of migration. Migration stories contribute to collective memory. They remind societies of the human cost of border regimes. As Hirsch writes, "Memory travels and transforms in the hands of migrants" (Hirsch 145). Dunki participates in this transformation by visualising migrant stories for mass audiences.

Though the story is set largely in India and the United Kingdom, its themes reflect global realities. Irregular migration occurs from Africa to Europe, Latin America to the United States, and the Middle East to many regions. Dunki thus becomes a transnational text. Its portrayal of aspiration and suffering resonates with global migrants who confront similar conditions.

Dunki enriches contemporary migration studies by combining emotional storytelling with both literary and cinematic techniques to show how identity transforms through movement, memory, and cultural negotiation. The film situates migration not as a political abstraction but as an intimate human experience shaped by longing, hardship, and the desire to belong. Its narrative aligns with the concerns found in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, and Amitav Ghosh, whose writings explore how migrants reinvent themselves while remaining connected to their origins. Dunki illustrates that identity is fluid and continuously reshaped through displacement, which often produces both possibility and pain. As Lahiri observes, a migrant becomes a storyteller who must explain and re-explain the self, and the characters in Dunki embody this process as they navigate who they are and who they hope to become.

The film deepens this exploration by using literary devices within a cinematic framework. Techniques such as stream of consciousness, nonlinear structure, interior monologues, and memory-based flashbacks reveal the inner emotional landscapes of the characters. Cinematic symbolism and metaphors enhance these literary elements, visually expressing the fractured identities and psychological turmoil that accompany migration. The characters experience homesickness, nostalgia, fear of cultural erasure, and anxiety about belonging in a new environment. Through these emotional tensions, Dunki shows that migration creates an ongoing negotiation between past and present. This reflects Bhabha's view that migrant identity forms in an in-between space, lodged between belonging and alienation. The internal struggles of Dunki's characters illustrate this shifting terrain, demonstrating how displacement challenges migrants to rebuild their sense of self while confronting external pressures from unfamiliar social and cultural settings.

The film also highlights the psychological dimensions of migration. Raj, Amira, and Lila each wrestle with the conflict between holding onto their memories and adapting to the expectations of the host country. Their longing for home contrasts sharply with their attempts to integrate into a new society. Raj's fear of losing his cultural identity and Amira's yearning for her childhood reveal the emotional consequences of leaving one's homeland. These experiences support Erikson's theory that major life transitions can trigger crises of identity and belonging. Dunki shows that such crises are not isolated events but ongoing processes that shape the migrant experience.

By blending literary depth with visual immediacy, Dunki contributes to a richer interdisciplinary understanding of migration. Literature has long explored the personal and psychological aspects of migrant life, while cinema captures the physical journey, the landscapes crossed, and the social realities encountered. Dunki brings these modes together to portray migration as both an internal and external transformation. This integrative approach expands how audiences understand the emotional costs and cultural negotiations involved in migration. The film's portrayal of migration encourages further research on how identity is represented across media. Comparative work between films and migration-themed literature can show how stories change when adapted from one form to another. Dunki demonstrates that examining cinematic and literary narratives together offers a comprehensive perspective on migration that includes memory, identity, and belonging.

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