



# Imagined Communities In Migration: Exploring The Construction Of Collective Identities Through Contemporary Cinematic Narratives

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**Abstract:** This study explores the construction of collective identities among migrant communities through the lens of Benedict Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities*. Initially formulated to explain the emergence of national identities, Anderson's theory provides a compelling framework for analysing how migrants create and sustain shared identities in host societies. Using a qualitative approach, the research examines cinematic portrayals of migrant experiences, focusing on recent feature films such as *The Farewell* (2019), *Minari* (2020), *Lion* (2016), and *In the Heights* (2021). These films are analysed to uncover key themes, including shared narratives, cultural rituals, transnationalism, exclusion, and hybrid identities.

The findings demonstrate that films serve as cultural texts that visualize the complexities of migrant identity formation. Shared narratives and cultural memory act as unifying forces, while rituals and symbols anchor migrants' sense of belonging. Transnational connections reveal the fluidity of imagined communities, transcending geographic boundaries. Simultaneously, experiences of exclusion and internal tensions within migrant communities challenge the cohesion of these identities. The research highlights how hybrid identities emerge through generational negotiations, blending cultural heritage with adaptation to host societies.

By integrating Anderson's theoretical insights with film analysis, this study contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of migration, identity, and cultural adaptation. It underscores the value of cinema as a medium for examining the lived realities of migrants and the dynamic processes through which they imagine and negotiate collective belonging in an increasingly globalized world.

**Index Terms** - Imagined Communities and Migration, Cinematic Narratives of Migration, Diasporic Identity Formation, Cultural Memory in Migrant Communities, Transnational Migration and Identity, Hybrid Cultural Identities, Migration and Exclusion, Rituals and Symbols in Diaspora, Migration and Collective Belonging, Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, Film Studies and Migration, Cultural Adaptation in Host Societies, Representation of Migrant Experiences, Globalization and Migrant Communities and Migration and Intergenerational Negotiations.

## Introduction

The movement of people across borders, whether voluntary or forced, has been a defining feature of the modern world. Migration reshapes societies, fosters intercultural interactions, and challenges conventional understandings of identity and belonging. For migrants, the process of relocating to a new environment often involves the construction of collective identities that help them navigate the cultural, social, and political landscapes of host societies. Benedict Anderson's seminal concept of **Imagined Communities**, initially developed to explain the formation of national identities, offers a compelling theoretical framework for

understanding how migrants create and sustain shared identities in contexts of displacement and diasporic living.

Anderson's theory posits that nations are imagined political communities, formed through shared narratives, symbols, and practices that bind individuals who may never meet. While Anderson's original application was to the rise of nationalism, its principles have been widely adopted in migration studies to explore how diasporic populations construct similar imagined communities in host societies. For migrants, the shared experience of displacement, common cultural practices, and collective memory often serve as the foundation for constructing a sense of belonging. These imagined identities are not static; rather, they are fluid and shaped by factors such as generational shifts, hybrid cultural practices, and interactions with the host society.

Cinema, as a powerful medium of storytelling, has long served as a lens to explore the complexities of migration. Feature films encapsulate and reflect the emotional, social, and cultural dynamics of migrant experiences. Through visual narratives, films reveal how migrants construct collective identities by drawing on shared histories, cultural symbols, and transnational ties. They also highlight the challenges of exclusion, marginalization, and internal tensions within migrant communities. As such, films provide a rich cultural text for analysing the processes of identity construction within the framework of imagined communities.

This study seeks to bridge the fields of migration studies, cultural theory, and film studies by examining how recent feature films depict the construction of migrant identities. Applying Anderson's concept of imagined communities, the article investigates key themes such as shared narratives, cultural rituals, transnationalism, and the role of exclusion in shaping migrant solidarity. The study also addresses the evolving nature of imagined communities in the context of globalization, digital media, and hybrid cultural identities.

Through a thematic analysis of films such as *The Farewell* (2019), *Minari* (2020), *In the Heights* (2021), and others, this research highlights how cinematic representations illuminate the lived realities of migrants and their efforts to create a sense of belonging in host societies. By exploring the interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation, as well as the tensions and solidarities within migrant communities, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of migration and identity in a globalized world. Furthermore, this interdisciplinary approach underscores the value of using cultural texts, particularly films, as a means of enriching theoretical and empirical inquiries into the dynamics of migration.

## Theoretical Framework

Benedict Anderson's concept of **Imagined Communities**, first introduced in his 1983 work of the same name, provides a foundational lens for understanding how collective identities are constructed and sustained. Anderson argued that nations are "imagined" because the vast majority of their members will never meet one another, yet they perceive themselves as part of a cohesive entity. This shared sense of belonging is cultivated through common narratives, symbols, and rituals, often mediated by cultural tools such as print media, language, and collective memory. While Anderson's framework was originally applied to the emergence of nationalism, its adaptability to migration studies has enabled scholars to explore how displaced and diasporic communities similarly construct imagined identities in host societies.

Central to Anderson's theory is the role of cultural production and dissemination in fostering collective imagination. Media—whether newspapers in Anderson's era or contemporary digital platforms—serves as a conduit for shared narratives and symbols that bind individuals into a perceived community. This theoretical perspective is especially relevant in migration studies, where media and cultural artefacts play a crucial role in sustaining connections to the homeland and reinforcing solidarity within diasporic populations. For migrants, the shared experience of displacement and the need to negotiate belonging in unfamiliar environments create fertile ground for the emergence of imagined communities.

In the context of migration, imagined communities are shaped by several key factors:

1. **Shared Narratives and Collective Memory:** Migrants often draw on common historical experiences and cultural narratives to forge a sense of community. These narratives may centre on shared struggles, such as displacement or discrimination, or on the preservation of traditions and customs from the homeland.

2. **Symbols and Rituals:** Cultural symbols, such as food, festivals, and language, serve as anchors for migrant identities. Rituals, whether familial or communal, act as practices through which imagined communities are performed and reaffirmed.
3. **Transnational Ties:** Advances in communication and transportation technologies have enabled migrants to maintain strong ties to their countries of origin. These transnational connections blur the boundaries of imagined communities, allowing them to span across geographic locations.
4. **Exclusion and Marginalization:** Experiences of discrimination and systemic exclusion in host societies often strengthen solidarity within migrant communities. Such adversity fosters a shared identity based on resilience and mutual support.
5. **Hybrid and Evolving Identities:** Migrant identities are not fixed but are continuously reshaped by interactions with the host culture, generational shifts, and globalization. The hybridity of these identities reflects the dynamic nature of imagined communities.

This theoretical framework will serve as the foundation for analysing cinematic portrayals of migration in this study. Films, as cultural texts, are particularly effective in visualizing the abstract processes of identity construction and collective imagination. By depicting migrant experiences through shared memory, rituals, symbols, and transnational connections, films offer a rich medium for exploring the complexities of imagined communities. Furthermore, cinematic narratives allow for the interrogation of tensions within these communities, such as generational divides, class disparities, and the interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation.

By applying Anderson's concept to the analysis of feature films, this research seeks to illuminate the ways in which migrants construct and negotiate collective identities in host societies. The theoretical framework provides a lens through which to understand not only the cohesion of migrant communities but also the challenges and contradictions they face in the context of globalization and cultural hybridity.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the construction of collective identities among migrant communities as depicted in feature films. By utilizing Benedict Anderson's concept of **Imagined Communities** as the guiding theoretical framework, the research aims to explore how films, as cultural artefacts, reflect and shape the experiences of migrants. This section outlines the selection criteria for films, the analytical approach adopted, and the rationale for employing a film-based methodology.

## Selection Criteria for Films

The study focuses on contemporary feature films that provide nuanced portrayals of migration and the formation of collective identities in host societies. The following criteria guided the selection:

1. **Relevance to Migration Narratives:** Films that centre on the experiences of migrants, diasporic communities, and cultural hybridity.
2. **Global Representation:** A diverse set of films from different regions, including American, European, Asian, and African contexts, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics.
3. **Temporal Scope:** Films released within the last two decades, reflecting contemporary migration experiences in a globalized world.
4. **Critical Acclaim and Cultural Impact:** Films that have garnered critical attention or achieved cultural significance, suggesting their relevance as societal reflections.

Examples of selected films include *Minari* (2020), *In the Heights* (2021), *The Farewell* (2019), *Blinded by the Light* (2019), and *Lion* (2016). These films represent a range of migration experiences, from economic and political displacement to generational negotiations of identity.

## Analytical Approach

The study adopts a thematic analysis to explore the depiction of imagined communities within selected films. This approach involves:

1. **Identifying Key Themes:** Through close viewing of the films, recurring motifs related to collective identity, cultural rituals, transnational connections, and exclusion are identified.
2. **Scene and Dialogue Analysis:** Specific scenes and dialogues are analysed to uncover how the films visualize and articulate the processes of community construction and negotiation.
3. **Symbolic and Narrative Examination:** Attention is given to the use of symbols, cultural rituals, and narrative structures that reinforce or challenge the notion of imagined communities.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** A cross-film comparison highlights variations and commonalities in the representation of migrant identities across different cultural and geographic contexts.

## Rationale for Film-Based Methodology

Feature films serve as a valuable resource for migration studies for several reasons:

1. **Cultural Reflection:** Films often act as mirrors of societal issues, offering insights into the collective imagination and public discourse surrounding migration.
2. **Visual Storytelling:** The medium's ability to combine visuals, dialogue, and sound enables a rich portrayal of the emotional and cultural dimensions of migration.
3. **Accessibility and Impact:** Films reach wide audiences and shape cultural narratives, making them influential in constructing and disseminating imagined communities.
4. **Interdisciplinary Relevance:** Film analysis bridges the disciplines of cultural studies, sociology, and migration studies, offering a holistic perspective on identity formation.

## Limitations and Ethical Considerations

While this methodology offers significant insights, it also comes with limitations:

1. **Subjectivity of Interpretation:** Film analysis is inherently subjective, and interpretations may vary based on the researcher's perspective.
2. **Exclusion of Non-Mainstream Narratives:** The focus on feature films with significant cultural or critical impact may overlook less visible, independent, or regional films.

To address these limitations, the study incorporates a transparent and systematic approach to film selection and analysis, ensuring that findings are grounded in the theoretical framework and supported by textual evidence.

By combining Anderson's theoretical lens with a rigorous analysis of selected films, this methodology aims to illuminate the intricate ways in which migrants imagine and construct collective identities within the context of host societies. The next section will delve into the analysis and discussion of the selected films, highlighting key themes and insights derived from the study.

## Analysis and Discussion

This section examines how recent feature films represent the construction of collective identities among migrant communities through the lens of Benedict Anderson's concept of **Imagined Communities**. By analysing the selected films, key themes such as shared narratives, cultural rituals, transnationalism, exclusion, and hybrid identities are explored to uncover the ways in which migrants navigate their sense of belonging and solidarity in host societies.

## Shared Narratives and Cultural Memory

Shared narratives and cultural memory are central to sustaining collective identity among migrant communities. These elements enable migrants to imagine themselves as part of a cohesive group, despite physical displacement and diverse individual experiences.

### Films: *The Farewell* (2019) and *Minari* (2020)

- In *The Farewell*, directed by Lulu Wang, the central narrative revolves around Billi, a Chinese-American woman, and her family's decision to keep their grandmother's terminal illness a secret from her. The family's journey to China for a staged wedding acts as a collective ritual that reinforces their shared identity and cultural heritage. The film poignantly explores how the migrant experience is often defined by balancing dual identities, with Billi caught between her American upbringing and her Chinese roots. The shared act of protecting the grandmother—a culturally grounded practice—highlights the reliance on familial narratives to sustain community ties across generations.
- *Minari*, directed by Lee Isaac Chung, portrays a Korean-American family's efforts to establish a farm in rural Arkansas. The film delves deeply into the intergenerational dynamics of cultural preservation and adaptation. The grandmother, Soonja, serves as a custodian of Korean traditions, introducing the family to "minari," a resilient Korean herb that symbolizes their heritage and adaptability. The narrative reveals how cultural memory and shared experiences of hardship bind the family, enabling them to navigate the challenges of assimilation and identity.

The films *The Farewell* and *Minari* demonstrate how shared narratives and cultural memory act as cohesive forces within migrant communities. These stories, passed down through familial interactions or traditions, serve as repositories of identity. For example, in *The Farewell*, the act of withholding the grandmother's diagnosis reflects a shared cultural practice deeply rooted in collective values of care and respect. Such narratives provide continuity, connecting migrants to their origins while adapting to new contexts. In *Minari*, the symbolism of the resilient herb reflects the family's perseverance, making their collective journey emblematic of migrant survival and adaptation. These examples highlight that shared narratives are not static—they evolve and are reinterpreted across generations to address contemporary challenges.

### Cultural Symbols and Rituals

Cultural symbols and rituals serve as performative acts that reinforce collective identity. Migrants often use these elements to maintain connections to their heritage and to communicate their identity in host societies.

### Films: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Blinded by the Light* (2019)

- *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by Jon M. Chu, uses extravagant cultural rituals to emphasize the significance of tradition in Asian communities. The film's depiction of the wedding ceremony, replete with traditional Chinese symbolism, underscores the ways in which rituals reinforce collective identity. Rachel Chu, the protagonist, grapples with the cultural expectations imposed by her boyfriend's family, highlighting the tension between individual identity and communal belonging.
- *Blinded by the Light*, directed by Gurinder Chadha, tells the story of Javed, a British-Pakistani teenager who finds solace and inspiration in the music of Bruce Springsteen. The film uses music as a cultural symbol that bridges Javed's dual identities. While navigating systemic racism and familial expectations, Javed's adoption of Springsteen's music becomes a personal and communal act of resistance and self-expression.

Cultural symbols and rituals, as shown in *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Blinded by the Light*, are integral to sustaining community bonds among migrants. Rituals, such as the wedding in *Crazy Rich Asians*, serve as a performative reaffirmation of heritage, offering a sense of familiarity and pride. In *Blinded by the Light*, music transcends its role as entertainment, becoming a cultural bridge for Javed. Both films underscore the idea that rituals and symbols are not just personal; they are collective acts that reinforce belonging and solidarity. Furthermore, these depictions illustrate the importance of performative culture in migrant communities, where practices can be simultaneously traditional and innovative.

## Transnationalism and Global Ties

In the context of globalization, migrant communities often maintain strong connections to their homelands while forging new identities in host societies. Transnationalism challenges the traditional notion of fixed communities by enabling fluid and multi-local identities.

### Films: *Lion* (2016) and *In the Heights* (2021)

- *Lion*, directed by Garth Davis, follows Saroo, an Indian boy separated from his family and adopted by an Australian couple. As an adult, Saroo embarks on a journey to reconnect with his biological family using Google Earth. The film vividly portrays the emotional and physical dimensions of transnational ties, emphasizing how technology facilitates the maintenance of imagined communities across borders. Saroo's search for his roots symbolizes the longing for cultural and familial connection that defines many migrant experiences.
- *In the Heights*, directed by Jon M. Chu, celebrates the vibrancy of a Latinx community in Washington Heights, New York. Through music and dance, the film captures the collective dreams, struggles, and resilience of the community. Transnational ties are evident in the characters' expressions of pride in their cultural heritage, as well as their aspirations to achieve success in the United States without losing their roots.

Transnational connections challenge traditional notions of fixed communities by emphasizing fluid and multi-local identities. These films illustrate how technology and cultural pride sustain ties to both the homeland and the host society.

### Exclusion and Marginalization

Migrants often face systemic exclusion and marginalization in host societies, which paradoxically strengthens their internal solidarity and collective identity.

### Films: *The Good Lie* (2014) and *The Hate U Give* (2018)

- *The Good Lie*, directed by Philippe Falardeau, chronicles the journey of Sudanese refugees resettling in the United States. The film highlights their resilience and solidarity in the face of systemic exclusion and cultural dislocation. Shared adversity, depicted through their collective struggles to adapt to American life, strengthens their bond and reinforces their imagined community.
- *The Hate U Give*, directed by George Tillman Jr., centres on Starr, an African-American teenager navigating racial tensions and police brutality. The film explores how systemic marginalization fosters solidarity within African-American communities, using shared experiences of discrimination to strengthen collective identity.

Experiences of exclusion often lead to strengthened solidarity and mutual support within migrant communities. These films reflect the dual role of adversity in shaping resilience and collective imagination.

### Hybrid Identities and Generational Negotiations

Migrants, especially those in diasporic communities, often develop hybrid identities that reflect a blend of cultural influences. Generational negotiations further complicate these dynamics, as younger generations may challenge or reinterpret traditional values.

### Films: *The Big Sick* (2017) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001)

- *The Big Sick*, directed by Michael Showalter, depicts the romantic and cultural conflicts faced by Kumail, a Pakistani-American comedian. The film explores the tension between his family's traditional values and his modern relationship, illustrating the negotiation of hybrid identities. Kumail's journey reflects the complexity of balancing cultural heritage with individual aspirations.

- *Monsoon Wedding*, directed by Mira Nair, delves into the cultural and generational divides within an Indian family preparing for a wedding. The film portrays the blending of traditional rituals with modern influences, emphasizing the evolving nature of migrant identities as they navigate cultural expectations.

Hybrid identities reveal the dynamic and evolving nature of imagined communities. These films portray how migrants navigate multiple cultural influences, balancing adaptation with preservation.

### Internal Tensions and Fractured Communities

Despite their cohesion, migrant communities often face internal tensions related to class, generation, or cultural adaptation, which can challenge their unity.

#### Films: *Parasite* (2019) and *Minari* (2020)

- *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, uses the metaphor of class divides to explore internal fractures within communities. Although not a migration film in the traditional sense, it provides a critique of societal hierarchies that can parallel divisions within migrant communities.
- In *Minari*, intergenerational conflicts and differing priorities within the Yi family highlight the complexities of maintaining a cohesive identity amid cultural and economic challenges.

Internal tensions, whether rooted in class, generation, or cultural adaptation, reveal the challenges of sustaining unified imagined communities. These films highlight the intricate negotiations required to maintain collective solidarity.

The analysis demonstrates that films are a powerful medium for exploring the construction and negotiation of imagined communities among migrants. By visualizing shared narratives, rituals, transnational ties, and hybrid identities, films provide a nuanced understanding of how migrants create a sense of belonging in host societies. The next section will synthesize these insights and discuss their implications for migration studies and cultural theory.

### Conclusion

Migration is an enduring and transformative phenomenon that reshapes societies, identities, and cultural landscapes. Through the lens of Benedict Anderson's concept of **Imagined Communities**, this study has illuminated the intricate ways in which migrants construct and negotiate collective identities in host societies. By analysing a selection of contemporary feature films, key themes such as shared narratives, cultural rituals, transnational connections, exclusion, and hybrid identities have been explored to reveal the dynamics of belonging and solidarity within migrant communities.

The cinematic depictions analysed in this study highlight the multifaceted nature of migrant identities. Shared narratives and cultural memory emerge as foundational elements, providing migrants with a sense of continuity and rootedness in the face of displacement. Films such as *The Farewell* and *Minari* underscore the importance of familial bonds and intergenerational stories in sustaining these imagined communities. Similarly, cultural symbols and rituals, as depicted in *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Blinded by the Light*, function as performative acts that reinforce collective belonging.

Transnationalism and global ties, a hallmark of contemporary migration, are vividly illustrated in films like *Lion* and *In the Heights*. These narratives demonstrate how migrants maintain connections across borders, creating communities that transcend geographic limitations. At the same time, the challenges of exclusion and marginalization, portrayed in *The Good Lie* and *The Hate U Give*, reveal the resilience of migrant communities in the face of systemic barriers. These films emphasize that adversity often strengthens solidarity and fosters a shared sense of identity.

Hybrid identities and generational negotiations, as seen in *The Big Sick* and *Monsoon Wedding*, highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of imagined communities. Migrants must constantly balance adaptation to the host society with the preservation of cultural heritage, navigating tensions that arise within and beyond their

communities. Moreover, internal fractures and tensions, such as those depicted in *Parasite* and *Minari*, underscore the complexities of sustaining cohesive identities amid class, generational, and cultural differences.

This study underscores the value of using films as cultural texts to explore the lived realities of migration. Cinema not only reflects the socio-cultural dynamics of migration but also shapes public understanding of migrant experiences. By visualizing the processes of identity construction, films contribute to a deeper appreciation of the challenges and possibilities inherent in the formation of imagined communities.

### Implications for Migration Studies and Cultural Theory

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both migration studies and cultural theory. First, the application of Anderson's concept of imagined communities to the cinematic medium demonstrates its versatility and relevance in contemporary contexts. By extending this framework to migration, the study enriches theoretical discussions on identity, belonging, and transnationalism. Second, the interdisciplinary approach of combining film analysis with migration studies highlights the potential of cultural artifacts to offer nuanced insights into complex social phenomena.

### Future Directions

Future research could expand on this study by exploring non-mainstream or independent films that offer alternative perspectives on migration. Additionally, incorporating digital media and virtual spaces into the analysis of imagined communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how migrants navigate identity in the digital age. Finally, comparative studies across different cultural and regional contexts could further illuminate the diverse ways in which imagined communities are constructed and sustained.

In conclusion, the exploration of imagined communities through cinema reveals the resilience, creativity, and complexity of migrant identities. As migration continues to shape the global landscape, understanding the processes of collective identity formation becomes increasingly vital, offering pathways for fostering inclusivity and mutual understanding in multicultural societies.

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