

Forum Article

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: international retirement migration on film

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ABSTRACT

The two movies about *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012 and 2015) were directed by John Madden. Starring a cast of famous British older actors, the narratives are set in a faded hotel in India. These are individuals who have relocated because their retirement dreams cannot be realised in their home country. They reflect the growing phenomenon of international retirement migration (IRM): the quickly growing upsurge of financially independent individuals seeking an affordable old age. In India they can claim a position of relative comfort and privilege. For a generation that grew up in a consumerist culture, upward mobility in the senior life stage has become a purchasable commodity through exodus to a developing country. This generation of retirees is generally in better health compared with prior seniors, with a longer life expectancy. Many have a background of travel experience, and an ethos that places their own pleasures in life as pivotal. While global numbers are unavailable, it is estimated that there are millions of retirees relocating to less-developed countries for an affordable retirement. At retirement locations such as the Marigold Hotel, the discrepancies that continue between nations, and local poverty, enable this practice. The events in these movies might be read as a recapitulation of imperialism expressed through retirement migration.

KEY WORDS—retirement, migration, movies, Marigold Hotel.

Introduction

Everything will be all right in the end. If it's not all right then it's not yet the end.
(Sonny, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*)

Two recent popular movies are discussed in this paper as sites to explore a significant phenomenon of our times: elder migration to a cheaper location for a comfortable old age. While there are many academic studies of

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international retirement migration (IRM; cited below), these commercial films offer dimensions not possible in scholarly analysis: the development of individual characters to tell important social stories; and the ability to *watch* the enactment of a feature of current social life.

The movies *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012) followed by *The Second Best Marigold Hotel* (2015) address a current western dilemma: the retirement aspirations of the Western middle class, thwarted by lack of finance. In times of economic uncertainty, even a lifetime's savings may be inadequate to manage their needs (Pruchno 2012). Ill health and loneliness may further diminish personal wellbeing. In a world where global mobility is readily accessible, relocation to a more affordable environment such as India may be the best option. This practice, as shown in these films, lets us *see* post-coloniality 'performed' in a visual media event shared by millions. These movies are an expedient site to consider IRM from a critical perspective.

IRM, from First World to Third World countries, is growing rapidly. It is consumption-led migration (Williams and Hall 2002); not a search for employment, but for enjoyable long-term leisure, akin to tourism. This article explores IRM as the foundational concept in John Madden's movies. Shot in Rajasthan, India, they are tales about elderly British people required to adapt to a new socio-cultural context. By relocating to India, the characters are trying to maximise personal resources to enjoy the best retirement possible.

International retirement migration has become a multi-disciplinary arena of research. Unlike Western expatriates who may be in India for work purposes, these residents are far more similar in their daily activities to tourists rather than to workers; indeed, they are often referred to as 'residential tourists' (Hayes 2014; McWatters 2009; Noorloos 2011). They want a leisurely lifestyle, with ready access to services and pleasures. There are diverse other academic terms for the process and its manifestations: 'retirement migration' (Bozic 2006; Gustafson 2001; Rodriguez 2001; Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo 2004; Truly 2002), 'sunshine migration', 'later life migration', 'long-stay tourists' and 'geronto-migration' (Haas 2012); 'lifestyle migration' (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014; Huete, Mantecón, Estévez 2013); 'expatriate retirees' (Green 2014); 'privileged migration' (Hayes 2014: 1954); 'economic retirees' and 'amenity retirement migration' (Zeltzer 2008). Whichever moniker is used, the characters in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* movies have no intention of 'going native'. This is not about 'cultural tourism' so much as joining an established small distinctive sub-culture of tourists (Bell 2014a); relishing an 'expatriate bubble' (Croucher 2012) in paradise.

As the global population ages, IRM is significant. More than a billion people worldwide will be 65 or older by the year 2030. Migration to a

developing country is just one illustration of the transformation in ideas about ageing Westerners (Gambold 2013). This new form of transnational agency has been referred to as ‘geographic arbitrage’: people devote their livelihoods to selling their labour power in high-cost labour countries, then at retirement look for labour power, goods and services in low-cost labour countries (Hayes 2014). This major shift is compelled by the structural forces that thwart their retirement opportunities in their home country.

Two films about *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*

In the films, a group of British retirees – played by an ensemble of pre-eminent British actors – embark on a new life in Jaipur, India. The film is derived from Deborah Maggock’s novel *These Foolish Things* (2004). Despite the enormous cultural differences from the way of life they are used to, for these characters India is a logical choice. India after all was a British colony, experiencing almost a century as the British Raj (1858–1947). India offers a geo-political legacy of colonial influence and structural privilege (Botterill 2016). Their personal resources may be modest, but surely significant licence derives from their citizenship of a powerful nation-state: a country well-placed economically and politically in the global hierarchy (Benson 2014). This must mean that in their new home some deference will apply to them.

There is an assumed continuation of the colonising process. Assimilation is not the goal; this is about forging a future in an enclave of compatible fellow exiles. In the first movie, engagement with local people is largely limited to a guest–servant relationship. This is enlarged a little in the second film. In both, the cinematography successfully conveys the India of the western imagination: vibrant, colourful, cheerfully chaotic, with no sign of dirt, extreme overcrowding or poverty anywhere.

The first movie opens by showing the characters’ problems which require them to relocate. The big name multiple award-winning actors – Dame Judi Dench, Dame Maggie Smith, Tom Wilkinson, Bill Nighy and others – are familiar to movie goers, and assure quality. The central character Evelyn (Dench) is recently bereaved, vulnerable and facing unexpected debts. Like Madge (Celia Imrie), rather than rely on grown children to support her, a cheap hotel in India might be her best option. A lawyer has just retired and wants to return to the country where he grew up (we learn later that he also has a fatal health problem, and another agenda). Muriel (Smith) needs a cheap and immediate hip replacement, rather than months on a British hospital waiting list. She is advised that the National Health Service is outsourcing this surgery, and will fund her fares and

expenses in India. Her character represents the racist reluctant visitor whose 'journey' in the films includes addressing her own xenophobia. Just two people arrive as a couple, Jean (Penelope Wilton) and Douglas (Bill Nighy). Financial disaster at retirement is the impetus for their dislocation. Jean's bitterness is played out in her disdainful superiority to local people.

That most are single is a fair reflection of the demographic reality of this cohort (Lin and Brown 2012). It also expresses liberty to make significant life changes without negotiating with a partner. A community is quickly formed as the Brits travel together and occupy the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel for the Elderly and Beautiful. That community is a crucial element of their wellbeing. For any of them, facing India alone would be too daunting. Each character chose the hotel from a website. Once they arrive, it turns out not to be the luxurious resort they had expected. Rather, it is a dilapidated edifice with dodgy electricity, erratic water supplies and unfamiliar food. The new residents are dismayed. Commitment to a new life in this hotel will clearly include some struggles. They must relinquish First World expectations and grasp this new adventure. Along with the prior indignities that required them to migrate in the first place, the limited facilities illustrate a 'supposed descent' (Jain 2014: 95).

The eager hotel manager, Sonny (Dev Patel), sees that he can make a living through the Western world's farming out of elder-care. The hotel, like any form of hospitality, is a route into the 'pressing social, cultural and political questions of our time' (Lynch *et al.* 2011: 4). Sonny's grand plan: to restore the hotel and use it to for ageing guests, starting with English residents, then expanding ('other countries don't like old people, either'). Despite the deficiencies in its amenities, the hotel becomes a place of retreat for the inhabitants. Its large cool rooms, shabby but pretty architectural features and courtyard gardens provide respite from the teeming life and debilitating heat outside. Here even a financially stressed Westerner may find genteel living amidst India's poverty. A small group of fellow expats assures company and acceptance. The hotel may become a pleasant new 'elderscape' (Haas 2012), a haven for a new life.

The second movie finds the retirees very busy in their new lives. Evelyn now sources textiles for an exporter, the Nighy character has become a comical knowledge-less tour guide, two characters bartend at an expats club and Muriel co-manages the now-successful hotel. Various characters seek, and find, late-life love. The anticipated idle retirement has been postponed, it seems, as life in India has re-invigorated them. In a 2015 interview, actor Judi Dench attributes the movies' success to 'the fact that the characters who had swapped life in England for bustling Jaipur were grabbing life and living it to the full rather than shuffling resignedly into their dotage' (Applebaum 2015). Her role is not one of social analyst, but as well-respected

actor. Her upbeat commentary does not address anything to do with British social policy and service delivery for and to elderly citizens, and why so many of them now need (choose?) to vote with their feet – and suitcases.

Theirs are what are now referred to as ‘First World problems’. Compared with local people, this group is experiencing privileged mobility in the age of globalisation. Licence is derived from their race, class and nationality (Croucher 2012). The film’s characters demonstrate the enactment of agency in making decisions about their own futures; this is neither a passive nor an inevitable process. These are individuals forced to take an independent role in forging their own futures. In India they can refashion their ‘lifestyles, activities, roles and patterns of social participation’ (Warnes and Williams 2006: 1261).

In contrast with most popular mainstream movies, it can be maintained that the ‘older adult presence is integrated into the wholeness of the filmic stor(ies)’; their age is central to the plot (Bosch 2015). The films demonstrate a philosophy for optimistic ageing viewers: the later stage of life might in fact be a new beginning. The second film extends the narrative, featuring the same characters and actors. Website reviews ranged from enthusiastic to mildly complimentary: ‘Like its predecessor, the film is a charming example of what great actors can do with mediocre material’ (www.metacritic.com/movie). But critics were not always impressed. One disparaged it as ‘exotic-Asian-travel porn alongside faint English condescension’; another: ‘the whole movie is caught somewhere between apology and entitlement’ (www.rottentomatoes.com). Nevertheless, the two movies between them made over US \$225 million at the worldwide box office (www.theguardian.com/film/).

India: site for genteel expat poverty

The India of these movies matches the tourist brochures: brilliantly colourful, vociferously chaotic, shabby streets and markets dense with effervescent crowds – and scrubbed very clean. This is profoundly photogenic India: it satisfies the need for an exotic pulsating backdrop. It corresponds with the concept ‘image theory’, which maintains that ‘the world is a psychological or distorted representation of objective reality residing and existing in the mind of the individual ... that image is a mental representation of an object or place’ (Schlehe 2013: 499). Images foster depiction of a place into the potential retiree’s mind, creating a particular aesthetic expectation. In these films, the vision is of ‘a traditional India, a mystic India, and a regressive India’, unmodernised, downplaying or ignoring any other features, including economic development. As Jain (2015: 91) notes, there is a

‘troublesome disparity between what India is and what audiences perceive it to be’. Poverty is cast as innocent, picturesque and cheerful. The emphasis is on India as a place of inferior technologies which reinforces the colonialist values of these new settlers, and of the film overall.

The marginalisation of the locals in relation to the new arrivals is barely explored. It is local poverty in Third World locations that enables this surge of western retiree settlers. The films are fiction, after all; not a gritty docudrama. The migrants’ entitlement to status and privilege in the new environment, despite their financial precarity, is an assumption (Botterill 2016). Movie goers addressed by these films are not after a treatise on the continuing efforts at domination by colonising powers. In the films, India is cast as a convenient affordable getaway for financially struggling Westerners.

Globally, retirement migration as a growing practice is also attributed to the increasing good health and expected longevity of the recently retired. Allied to this are changing social expectations about ageing; the elder years are now often perceived as a time for new activities and experiences. The global dispersion of families and friends may mean fewer obligations at home. The internet allows the easy maintenance of connections. Residential tourists form new associations in exotic places, which coalesce around a touristic lifestyle of leisure and consumption (McWatters 2009: 13). Unlike traditional migration by workers seeking economic salvation, IRM is about seeking ‘the good life’ (Hayes 2014; Legido-Quigley and McKee 2012).

The wealth differential between the new settlers and the local people provides a service sector for ageing expatriate residents. A review of publications on IRM ‘identifies how a postcolonial imaginary circulates’, reflecting ‘an essentialist binary and hierarchical opposition: Occident/Orient’ (Maher and Laffety 2014: 444). In the case of India, its history as a British colony is impossible to ignore. A collective imperial imagination appears intrinsic to the ethos of these settlers. Hence these films, while superficially light heartened, are inherently political. We are reminded that films of all genres are always inherently political (Abbatescianni 2015). Madden’s *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* films are strongly neo-colonialist.

Agentic empowerment

The residents at the Marigold Hotel match pensioners in the academic literature (above) on retirement migration. They constitute a concrete group; they are mobile; they demonstrate motivations similar to tourists: their pleasure is in enjoying free time, alongside making economic impacts on their destination; and ‘they create territorial effects’ (Rodriguez 2001). The latter may include new housing and villages created specifically for

residential retirees; the Marigold Hotel has been converted to a home specifically for ageing Westerners as an economic plan. The key motivation for the film's immigrant characters derives from the high cost of living in United Kingdom, problematic on a lower income at retirement. Moving to an inexpensive location may be a very rational economic decision for this life stage. There is no formula to calculate perfectly money available divided into the years of old age, because the latter is indeterminate, and outgoings across the years unpredictable.

In the world of late capitalism which markets consumption, individual identity can be achieved through consumer choices. For many individuals, retirement has become about individualisation and consumerism (Haas 2012). In *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, for the women protagonists especially, relocating is an expression of agentic empowerment, a proactive alternative to being pushed into a marginalisation back home. Emancipation had been achieved through mobility. Their individual characteristics and diverse adaptations to their new lives in India form the basis of the story. Each retiree deals with adjustment, growth and empowerment: Muriel confronts her own racist prejudices and redeems herself; Evelyn delights in finding herself employable in a call centre; Madge actively seeks opportunities to express her sexual potential; Carol (Diana Hardcastle) joyfully embraces a senior romance. This new life phase has the potential to be an exciting one.

The attainment of a desirable quality of life at retirement is a consumable for a generation experienced at making choices about their own consumer performance. There is a powerful sense that these settlers will do their best to take care of themselves, while looking out for one another: a consolidation of the notion of 'individual responsibility for retirement' (Hayes 2014: 1953). This view coincides with awareness of the middle-class 'third age' individuals not as needy people requiring extra supervision and care. Nor are they inevitably entirely dependent on the state. Rather, they may be placed as 'consumers whose rights are determined by their power in the market by their wealth, or lack of it' – a highly familiar feature of neoliberalism (Polivka 2011: 175).

Agentic empowerment also pertains to Sonny. Played by, and as, a charismatic and handsome young man with enormous charm, one reviewer described 'the squirminess of Dev Patel "Indianing up" his speech for white viewers' (www.rottentomatoes.com). In Hochschild's well-established terms, this is an example of 'emotional labour', a key behaviour in professional hosting, made comedic for Western viewers by Sonny's heavily accented energetic passion for his business.

Sonny's hotel enterprise is an example of a micro-economy, where a local small-time entrepreneur does his best to gain some income from the visitors

from outside. This matches my research findings on household businesses in Bali (Bell 2014b); and the global pattern. Small tourist enterprises constitute the bulk of tourism entrepreneurship (Thomas, Shaw and Page 2011). Sonny is using his efforts at everyday services (hospitality) and facilities (a crumbling old hotel with terraces and gardens) for economic empowerment. Through capitalising on his own increased burden of responsibility (Tucker and Boonabaana 2012), he may earn a decent income from long-stay residents. His labour and premises are transformed into both respected expertise (with the help of the Muriel character) and marketable commodities.

Grey pound, grey dollar

Current film-makers appear eager to tackle issues relating to ageing in mainstream films. The commercial and critical success of these movies indicates that mature audiences will buy tickets for a product that addresses their own concerns. Various recent films have successfully targeted this age group (*e.g.* *Amour*, 2012; *Quartet*, 2012; *Hope Springs*, 2012; *Nebraska*, 2013; *St Vincent*, 2014; *Hop Hop-eration*, 2014; *Ricki and the Flash*, 2015). The terms ‘grey pound’ or ‘grey dollar’ refer to the buying power of older consumers, especially discretionary purchases such as entertainment and travel. The value of grey pound/dollar spending is expected to increase over the next decade. For audiences of these films, this is not just about entertainment, but opportunity to reflect on the dilemmas and decisions confronting people as they age, as played out in the movies. There is also identification with and inspiration in the age of the actors themselves: Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, for example, are both over 80 years old.

This film’s attention to international retirement migration is timely. Current demographics in the Western world show an extensively growing cohort in the senior age range: the proportion of the population aged 60+ will increase to 33 per cent in 2050. A decline is unlikely until the baby-boomer generation becomes the oldest senior cohort, *i.e.* very old age (Hossain, Bailey and Lubulwa 2007). How, and where, will they live? This dilemma is driven by structural forces that limit their retirement options in their home country. In common with tourism, this form of migration impacts on the economies and communities of chosen destinations, both financially and culturally.

In actuality, most people do not migrate to another country at retirement. They stay in their accustomed pre-retirement communities (Banks 2004), anchored by family commitments, property ownership and/or with sufficient community engagement. These elements may weave sufficiently

together to form a secure mooring. In the case of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Sonny desperately tries to offer the expats a mooring, to ensure his own family's security.

IRM illustrates outsourcing retirement as a capitalist strategy is congruent with development economists. The two have different starting points, the first with the flaws of consumption, the latter with the recognition that culture can be exploited in a similar manner to other resources. The key equation is one of cost *versus* benefit. This point is implicit to both Sonny's and his guests' understanding of the transactional nature of their mutual situation.

Conclusion

The two *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* films provide an original route into an academic analysis of IRM. 'Movies offer a commanding means of engaging subjects ... [speaking] volumes about race, class and gender issues within society' (Karasik *et al.* 2014: 88). There on the screen, in the intimacy manipulated by lowered lights, we can absorb the unfolding of events for individual fictional characters, reiterating real-life experiences. This filmic world, whilst primarily aimed at entertainment, has the capacity to 'realise' in a manner not possible in any objective quantitative data-gathering exercise or subsequent report.

The story of financially stressed Britons outsourcing their retirement to India may seem novel in Madden's movies, but this practice is now widespread across many developing countries. 'Broadly speaking, "lifestyle migrants" are relatively affluent individuals, moving to places that, for various reasons, signify something loosely defined as a quality of life' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 609). Precise figures are unavailable, but it is estimated that there are millions of retirees engaged internationally in migration for retirement.

Not only has human ageing itself changed, with better health and increased longevity, but also altered perceptions of how – and where – an older person may choose to live. The Marigold Hotel inmates found their home country too much of a struggle; had they been more affluent by British standards, they would have stayed at home. For some retirees, social and cultural contexts have become increasingly negotiable. I suggest that the popularity of these films may further cement IRM as a plausible option for retirees.

The films are engaging case studies of a significant topic. They address the phenomenon of residential tourists, illustrating how 'the mobilities paradigm and lifestyle intersect' (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2013: 1). The mobilities hypothesis (Hannam 2009) embraces bodily motion, including

global travel and resettlement by individuals seeking quality of life (Bell 2014a). In the Western world, there has been a weakening of established and traditional values based on conventional work, family and community mores. 'If the human race is to enjoy longevity in the millenniums to come, we need to reorganize the ways we manage our societies to enable people to enjoy their long lives', suggests Ochiai (2014: 345). In the meantime, mobility is often a realistic option. India is one of many Third World countries offering an affordable final residential location. Hence it is reasonable to predict a proliferation of establishments such as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

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