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Archetypal Patterns of Politics in Third Cinema

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Abstract

Cinema as an art is constantly innovating and over-toppling its own pinnacle of achieved glory. In a century or so since its inception, the age of First Cinema (character and situation oriented) and Second (comparative perspective from an objective viewpoint) have become passé with the arrival of Third Cinema (a term coined by Michael Wayne in his book *Political Cinema: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*) a genre which has a strong literary and cultural grounding but takes one step further by bringing to the art of cinema- the range, depth and concerns of contemporary politics; a conscious political interlinkage between creator and spectator; clear portrayal of subaltern concerns and cultural specificities. Side stepping the avowed objectives of recreation and supreme creation, Third Cinema seeks to help the spectator build clear political ideologies and loyalties, an imperative in a multi perspective, deceptive, constantly fluctuating political environment.

I shall undertake the study of select Third cinema specimen from Bollywood movies and attempt to align them with the prevalent thought and ideology of the day to eke out generalities, predict movements and showcase successful outcomes.

Keywords: Third Cinema, Politics, Parallel cinema, Ideology, Revolt.

Throughout its 100 odd year meandering and yet eventful sojourn, the Indian cinema has received ample of appendages and labels ranging from diverse to denunciatory. Some examples of these appendages are – mainstream cinema, parallel cinema, art cinema, first, second and third cinema, new wave cinema, Bollywood (laudatory as well as tritely), *pratrirodh ka cinema*, independent cinema, middle cinema (movies that are not quite art house and not quite mainstream) and Bambaiya film (blatantly commercial). These labels depict the rich diversity of cinema emerging from the metropolitan city of Mumbai and its surrounding environs and putting the concomitant

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analogy mildly, "to speak about India through Bollywood is akin to speaking about London through Dickens." (Joshi)

For this purpose, I will exclusively be focusing upon the cinematic contribution emerging from the Mumbai film industry in the chosen niche area of Third Cinema while also admiringly acknowledging that the regional output is also humungous, multifaceted and worthy of a separate study. Third Cinema is a coinage specifically referring to Latin American neo-classical cinema but it has an equally important and relevant Indian footprint also.

I will also be focusing on the specifically political facet of third cinema, its growth, manifestations; ideological stance and audience impact though there are many facets including spatiality, character, music, effects, themes and gender which are equal riveting. This researcher will undertake the study of select Third cinema specimens from Bollywood movies and attempt to align them with the prevalent thought and ideology of the day to eke out generalities, predict movements and showcase successful outcomes.

For the purpose of initiating inquiry and analysis, the foremost question is: What is Third Cinema? Above all, the term designates a body of theory and filmmaking practice committed to social and cultural emancipation. This body of filmmaking is small, indeed tiny in terms of world cinema output. "Yet Third Cinema films are amongst the most exciting and challenging films ever to be made, their political and cultural significance amplified by their proximity and intervention into the major historical processes of the epoch." (Wayne)

The term Third Cinema was first used by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in an article/ manifesto entitled "*Towards a Third Cinema*." In rejecting cinema as primarily a recreational and artistic medium, their major concerns were twofold: (1) a rejection of the propositions and concepts of traditional cinema, namely, those of Hollywood; (2) the need to use film to serve an ideological and revolutionary end. (Tehsome 17)

Through its emergence in the Third World countries, Third Cinema heralds the emergence of cinema of decolonization both in ideology and treatment. Frantz Fanon, the inspirational guide for Third Cinema, traces three stages in the development of ideological consciousness in the direction of cultural decolonization in the Third World:

> First, the unqualified assimilation phase where the inspiration comes from without and hence results in an uncritical imitation of the colonialist culture; second, the return to the source or the remembrance phase, a stage which marks the nostalgic lapse to childhood, to the heroic past, where legends and folklore abound; and third, the fighting or combative phase, a stage that signifies maturation and where emancipator self-determination becomes an act of violence. Both second and third grow on indigenous culture. (Tehsome 7)

In the context of Third Cinema, Fanon's three stages can be espied in the phase of imitation, the phase depicting indigenous values and concerns and the phase of liberation respectively.

In the century or so since its inception, the age of First Cinema (character and situation oriented) and Second (cinema working on the interface of recognizable binaries- self/other, Indian/foreign, good/bad, virtue/vice, myth/reality, urban/rural) have become passé with the arrival of Political Cinema, (a term coined by Michael Wayne in his book *Political Cinema: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*) a genre which has a strong literary and cultural grounding but takes one step further by bringing to the art of cinema- the range, depth and concerns of contemporary politics; a conscious political interlinkage between creator and spectator; clear portrayal of subaltern concerns and cultural specificities. Side stepping the avowed objectives of recreation and supreme creation, Third Cinema seeks to help the spectator build clear political ideologies and loyalties, an imperative in a multi perspective, deceptive, constantly fluctuating political environment (252).

Shifting from the general perspective of Third Cinema creation to the particular perspective of Third Cinema specimens in India, the researcher would like to refer to a popular Indian adage which reads- 'Everything in India is for and by politics'. If not for anything else, politics with all its impact, narratives and cast of characters is far too visible to escape the attention of Bollywood's sense of histrionic-laden storytelling and contemporary commentary.

> In the last 70 years since Independence, the Hindi silver screen's encounter with political churning in the country has ranged from fleeting glimpses to intense leitmotif. Sometimes it has given impressions of a dabbling dilettante, sometimes that of an engaged visual chronicler and sometimes that of an involved commentator. (Vardhan)

While Third Cinema has been blunter, the popular masala film too, as many critics have argued, has long mounted trenchant political critiques in its own idiom. Ashish Nandy, for example, has noted that in attempting to address the widest swathe of audience, "the popular cinema is the slum's point of view of Indian politics and society and, for that matter, the world." (Sen & Basu 5) M. Madhav Prasad has also called Indian cinema "a modern cultural institution whose unique features can be related directly or indirectly to the specificity of the socio-political formation of the Indian nation state." (5)

A number of scholars have posited popular Hindi cinema as a site that produces and reinforces the ideology of the state, a point also developed by Madhava Prasad, who regards popular Hindi cinema as "a site for the ideological production or as the (re)production of the state form." (2) A host of films with "nation" (*Deshprem, Mera Gaon Mera Desh*) in their titles or subtitles make similar claims that regard popular cinema as a space consonant with the interests of the state and unproblematically a conduit in its production. (Joshi 24)

I would now gradually trace the growth of political depiction in Indian cinema. Hindi cinema didn't address the immediate political churnings in the new nation state post independence. What it actually did was to use indirect plot techniques to prop up political drama in Hindi films. The first step was to serve the middle class moral porn

on corruption as seen through an orgy of politician-criminal-police nexus (with the media, corporate and the bureaucracy also chipping in sometimes). The second was to embed activist agenda of social and political justice in the narratives by highlighting oppression and skewed nature of power equations. "Thrusting default villainy on the politician, mainstream Hindi cinema was using politician-bashing as the collective moral catharsis of the yawning gap that had already set in between the people and their representatives." (Vardhan)

Even till the turn of the century, slowly and painstakingly, with parallel movements, the idea of the political was still searching a cinematic idiom as Hindi films spun millennial tales.

> The ubiquitous notion of space, dealing with marginal identities, political crisis or treatment of violence through visual foray was gaining more validation. Changing demographics of cities in Asia, the economic boom, and changes in gender prototypes gave rise to new spaces of representation. This form of representation was trying to work away from a traditionalist mode, creating an open-ended discussion on what was considered a taboo or profane topic for cinematic engagement. (Haq)

This brings us to the moot question of what differentiates Third Cinema from mainstream cinema in terms of thematic premise and ideology. According to noted critics and scholars, there are 5 prominent themes in Third Cinema which the researcher would be attempting to elucidate with the help of suitable specimens:

Class

A recurrent theme in Third Cinema is that of class antagonism. Third World countries are divided into classes – the stereotypical bourgeoisie and proletariat where the bourgeoisie will cling to its interests rather than align with national, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiments and, therefore, finds itself inextricably tied up with the forces of oppression.

A case in point is Shyam Benegal's *Samar* (*Conflict*, 1998), which deals with the problems of Dalits (outcasts in the Indian caste system). The film is overtly political, dealing with an issue that mainstream cinema has by and large avoided and which remains unresolved 55 years after Independence. Benegal uses the device of creating a film within a film, giving the viewer a sense of distance and reflectivity.

Another important specimen is Aamir Khan's *Lagaan* (2001) which depicts the struggle between colonizer and colonized via the inter-medium of a competitive cricket match and subtly exposes a number of dogma and practices. *Lagaan* also deftly draws a parallel between colonial rule and class oppression.

Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) is also a case in point where the binary of rich/poor, have/ have not is developed with startling vivacity while pin pointedly depicting the reality of Indian poverty and lives in Indian slums.

In 1985, Prakash Jha's *Damul* also wove a tale of the plight of bonded labour, caste atrocity and political patronage to feudal forces in a village of Gaya district in Bihar. (Vardhan)

Culture

Third World countries have two distinctively parallel cultures. The ruling classes emulate a culture co-opted by colonial and imperialistic values, which is in direct conflict with the indigenous culture of the people. Therefore, the struggle to preserve the cultural make-up of a society also constitutes a major area of concern for Third World filmmakers. An example is the work of Satyajit Ray in India though he has been charged with a 'lack of political commitment' in his cinema; he can be seen as the initiator of a concern with cultural identity in the Third Cinema. Ray started his Apu trilogy as far back as 1956 when he made an impact on world cinema with his *Pather Panchali*. The trilogy depicts the harsh realities of rural life which finally succeed in destroying a family.

Films on slavery, *nautch girls, devdasis* also explore the tug of war between indigenous culture and a dominant culture at crossroads.

Religion

Instead of discarding religion as the "opium of the masses," Third World filmmakers attempt to give religion or spirituality a special significance in their works since it highlights the struggle between good and evil and mythological references underline subtle moral strictures.

"Indian cinema has a long history of locating the transcendental within the everyday, as in early mythological devotionals, and it did so especially by mobilizing a figural mode." (Sen & Basu 1) From the popular *Jai Santoshi Maa* of 1960s to the iconoclastic *Oh my God!* (2012) which showcases a modernized, radicalized deity on a flying motorbike, religion has been a perennial source of brouhaha for the filmmaker and viewer.

Sexism

Third Cinema speaks of the changing nature of women's roles, depending upon their class background and the structure of the society in which they live. Deepa Mehta's *Agni* (1997) treated the taboo subject of love between two women and went on to win international approbation and awards while simultaneously provoking Hindu nationalist riots and Government censure in India. *Aligarh* (2015) chronicles the true story of Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, who was suspended from his job because of his sexual orientation. *Lipstick under my Burka* (2017) set in the crowded by-lanes of small town India chronicles the secret lives of four women in search of a little freedom. Though stifled and trapped in their world, these four women claim their desires through small acts of courage and stealthy rebellion.

Armed Struggle

Finally, the theme of armed struggle against imperialism and class enemies on the home front is repeatedly taken up; the single theme that unites Third World films is that of oppression. In dealing with the issues of class, culture, religion and sexism, these films are making a call to action whether in the form of armed struggle or otherwise. Their concern is with social change and it is in this context that all the themes are taken up.

In a country as diverse as India with multiple perspectives and demands, the on-screen depiction of armed struggle has showcased the travesty of Naxalbari, the Tamil hankering for motherland, the demands for Khalistan and Azad Kashmir, the machinations of identity politics and coalition governments and the ideological calling of jihad.

The gradual shifting of cinematic gaze from one of political allegiance to political emancipation can be seen in the cinema of post Independence India. Hindi Cinema had been known to propagate the national identity of the Indian state since the 1950s. The nationalist discourse and allegiance to the patriotic zeal was of utmost importance in Indian cinema mirroring the hope and ideological supremacy of the Nehruvian vision of the world.

Anand Patwardhan's *Waves of Revolution* (1975) and *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) documented the Bihar movement, the subsequent Emergency, and the political repression that continued after the Emergency was lifted, as well as his fourth film, *Bombay Our City* (1985), which documented the struggle against slum clearances.

> A rupture in the nationalist debate was created in the 1990s and had become visible in *Maatchis* (1996) that showed tensions in the national climate of the country while dealing with issues of terrorism. The film tells the story of a bunch of youth who get initiated into a terrorist organization. (Haq)

With the narrative device of human relationships taking different turns in response to the political externalities of the time, the film strays into cinematic polemics against alleged human rights abuses perpetrated by the state police against militants - real, suspected and framed.

Analogously, the trilogy *Dil Se* (1998), *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995) by Tamil film maker Mani Ratnam broke away from rudimentary commercial story lines. These films had plots that revolved around themes of terrorism and lack of communal harmony, showing real life incidences such as the Bombay bomb blast or inter-religious marriages in India.

Similarly, Onir's film *I am* (2010) deals with the mass exodus of Kashmiri pundits, a theme that has never been touched upon in Indian cinema before. The film signposts the stakes of India's so-called War on Terrorism, and shows the neglect cast on one of its forgotten people.

Govind Nihalani's *Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa* (1998), based on Mahasweta Devi's Bengali novel *Hazar Churasir Maa* drew its political context from the fictional account

of a mother exploring her dead son's Naxal past. *Hazaaron Khwai-shein* (2003) dealt with the Naxalite movement and state conducted insurgency. These films are important in the evaluation of the role of parallel films and its politics which delve unabashedly into sensitive political issues.

Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), based on Mala Sen's biography of dacoit-turned-politician Phoolan Devi proved to be a major breakthrough for Indian cinema in weaving political subtexts while chronicling contemporary lives. The film had a running theme of caste-based political structures, power play and state apathy. (Vardhan)

The convener of the Cinema of Resistance, Sanjay Joshi, talking about the cinema of protest, places it under three thematic fields under the three "J's": *jangal* [forest], *jal* [water], *jameen* [land]. As examples, slogans of azaadi (kashmiri political self-determination), highly emotive images of land-rights protests in Orissa, and the Anti-AFSPA movement in Manipur are connected within the framework of the Cinema of Resistance. (Kramer)

In this steadfast categorization of Third Cinema on the basis of Class, Culture, Religion, Sexism and Armed Struggle, there are some films like Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) which spawn and overarch this strict thematic categorization of Third Cinema. By some, *Bombay* was celebrated for its convincing portrayal of the senselessness of communal hatred, while others accused it of being on the verge of fascism. "These diverse perspectives have earned *Bombay* a reputation for being one of the most controversial films in the history of Indian popular cinema, facilitated by the fact that it was banned in several Indian cities and its release was delayed for three months owing to censorship issues." (Mallhi)

A thumping popular film which explored the entire gamut of Third Cinema themes was *Rang de Basanti* (2006). As Hindi film critic Dr. Chakravorty describes it, *Rang De Basanati* is more than another patriotic film: it is a moral, social and political allegory. "By blending history along with the nationalist struggle, idealism and humanitarianism along with contemporary politics, religious fundamentalism, and the lack of social responsibility, Mehra provides us with a mirror to look inwards and think about the way we live and the choices we make." (2)

A new prototype which has emerged are the Gangster movies with examples like *Satya* and *Gangs of Wasseypur* which examine the intersection of organized crime, capitalism, and civic government in an exacting detail.

An important subgenre in Indian Third Cinema is Partition cinema. While Partition literature of the subcontinent has been immortalized by the works of Amrita Pritam and Saadat Hasan Manto, partition cinema is sporadic and scattered with a few iconic works like Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1988) and potboilers like *Gadar* (2001) and Kamal Hasan's *Hey Ram* (2000) scattered afar.

In the world of cinema, there was only one man, Ritwik Ghatak for whom Partition provided a metaphor for cultural breakup and exile and unified all his works. All his films are peppered with the pain of partition and make references, either directly or indirectly to Partition. His most popular films is the Partition trilogy *Meghe Dhaka*

Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) (1960*), Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962), set in Calcutta - but not the Calcutta of splendour, but the Calcutta of refugee camps where his characters live in the fringes of society and its mind space, eternal refugees to both.

In the context of partition cinema, *Garm Hava* (1973) emerges as a rare and courageous film in the annals of not just Partition or Indian Cinema, but indeed World Cinema. The immediate and most obvious violence is no doubt physical, but on close introspection of almost any conflict in the world, we realize that the greater violence committed against any group of people, is structural violence. It is this structural violence that *Garm Hawa* so succinctly and uniquely depicts. The physical violence in the film is limited, restricted to just one scene of riot.

M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1973) was the cinematic exploration of the personal, social and political experiences of a Muslim family which opts to stay in India following Partition. Coming after 26 years of Partition, the film goes back to years in the immediate aftermath of Independence and Partition in 1947 to trace the journey of Salim Mirza from a sense of belonging to isolation, and then rediscovery of political engagement and common destiny that they share with the people of the country. Based on a story by Ismat Chughtai, the narrative was adopted for the screen by Kaifi Azmi and Abu Siwani.

In the final scene, the protagonist and his son, played with remarkable grace by Balraj Sahni and Farooq Sheikh, respectively, on their way to leave for Pakistan after years of dilemma, "realize the universality of political context as they end their isolation by participating in a march demanding jobs. They seek association with the human condition of material deprivation in a politically structured society, thus forming new contracts of citizenship with millions of people across identities." (Vardhan)

Through a cursory glance at all the cinema mentioned above, we find how a new form of films has slowly emerged that is intelligently negotiating the Parallel Cinema movement, while challenging the hegemony of Bollywood in Indian cinema.

The cinema's encounter with political culture is not new, nor is it moribund. It is, in fact, broadly constitutive of popular Hindi cinema and evident in a variety of ways in earlier and later decades. "What differs across the historical periods is the kind of nation being envisioned in the cinema, the kinds of public fantasies to enhance and contain it, and the degree to which the nation constitutes the core fantasy of the cinema." (Joshi)

Till the 1970s, the India one encountered in popular Hindi cinema was largely preoccupied with problems internal to it such as labor unrest, poverty, urban decay, economic stagnation, and political corruption. By the 1990s, another era dawned with irrational exuberance, initiated by economic liberalization and the return of a muscular Hinduism. Y2K or the twenty first century unleashed an era of diversity with arrival of multiplex culture, film festival circuits, documentaries on YouTube and the individualistic vision via the handheld camera. Today, cinema is more diverse, vocal and critical and

due to advancements in cinematic methods, we are probably experiencing what in future will become Fourth Cinema.

I would like to conclude by finally comparing the two distant and yet proximate entities, "politics and cinema, and note that it is important here to espy that they are different in their ambit and yet concurrent." (Joshi) Popular cinema neither fully represents the state nor the nation. It is a contact zone between the two entities. "It provides a space for engagement, enchantment, and possibly re-enchantment if not with the nation itself then with the stories that undergird all acts of collective fantasy of which the nation is but one example." (Joshi) At best, it is a third space that fabricates and filters the experiences of politics and modernity for its viewers.

Third Cinema aims at destruction and construction at the same time; a destruction of the images of colonial or neo-colonial cinema, and a construction of another cinema that captures the revolutionary impulse of the peoples of the Third World. It is a progressive cinema founded on folk culture whose role it is to intervene on behalf of the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America who must fight equally for political as well as cultural liberation. To this end, the aim of Third Cinema is not to re-aestheticize traditional cinematic codes but to politicize cinema to such an extent that a new cinematic code appropriate to its needs is established. (Tehsome 25)

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