


Chapter 13

Bombay Cinema and Postmodernism: Capturing Poverty Through a New Lens

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the inception of the postmodern trends in postmodern cinema in India. It argues that the postmodern cinema in India is a result of multiple factors including foreign investment in Bollywood, the prevalence of the postmodern cinema in the West in the 1970s-1980s, and the experimentation within the cinema industry. This study explores the fact that though there weren't many films to qualify as postmodern cinema, there was a presence of postmodern thoughts in many such films. It tries to locate the representation of poverty in postmodern cinema in Bombay cinema. One of the first movies to portray poverty in the new light with a postmodern approach was Salam Bombay. Similarly, Shwet was another postmodern movie that drew a parallel between a postmodern hero and a poor farmer and tried to show that the tragedies in the modern world unite in death. The chapter sketches a historical trajectory of postmodern movies in Bombay cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The cinema in India underwent a radical change in the 1990s. It was a time when the country was undergoing rapid economic reforms. As the government took up new economic policies, the socio-culture and landscape also changed. With the progression towards a liberal economy, the cinema evolved itself and varied in style and approach. The result of the progressive policies had its effect on the cinema industry in India, especially the Bombay cinema industry. In 1998, the country allowed the Bombay film industry to get foreign funding and investments from abroad (Wright, 2015). As a result of the expenditure, cinema underwent a radical change in theme, direction, and screenwriting. There were also experiments with the genre, techniques and aesthetics which borrowed from the west. From the late 1970s, the west

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underwent a shift in cultural patterns and departed the postmodern era. The era witnessed a change in the functioning of Hollywood, “a new genre that hybridised previous paradigms (fantasy, adventure, comedy), and ushered a new style into picture making” (Casper, 2011).

The Indian Industry is new, and the concerns postcolonial, the themes of such movies were mainly poverty, love, rural lives, and family dramas. The interest around the film was generally local. It based out of very conventional notions of cinema with a fixed set of rules. There were primary genres like the angry man, national policies, war with Pakistan, etc. The themes used to be mainly revolving around daily life. The new dawn of the cinema industry came with foreign investment which brought a fresh impetus to Bombay cinema. The India post-1990s referred to as the ‘New India’ or Global India.’ Movies like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) made for an entirely new generation where the setting transgressed from being local to global.

Starting from the late 1990s, the Bombay cinema realised its global circulations, and there was an exchange of ideas, techniques and forms between Bollywood and Hollywood (Wright, 2015). Karan Johar’s *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) was a melodrama which challenged the old fashion of Bollywood and meant for a newer audience with many non-Indian audiences flocking to the film. Farah Khan’s *Main Hoon Na* (2004) and *Dil Chahta Hai* were other such examples. The traditional hero challenged; the plot wasn’t linear like the earlier movies and narratives progressed with the theme. The period was a departure from the previous genres of cinema and progressed through postmodernism. The era witnessed the inception of postmodernist cinema in India which will be talked later in the chapter.

Scholars call cinema made after the 1990s as the ‘contemporary cinema,’ or the ‘new cinema’ interchangeably used. The last capitalisation, commercialisation and branding mark the new cinema. The article will try to locate how some of the cinemas made during this time had postmodern elements. Though very few cinemas of that time qualify for being called what was ‘postmodern cinema,’ many of the cinema had postmodern concerns.

The article attempts to locate how the ‘new cinema’ made during the 1990s and later dealt with poverty and how did it mark a departure from the earlier image. Though postmodern cinema doesn’t have a relation with debt, the article would look into how debt featured in cinema with a postmodern approach. ‘Salam Bombay’ was one of the first films where represented in urban locale and the ‘anti-hero’ living an alienated life. Similarly, the article would look into another movie, ‘Shwet,’ which shows a different approach towards poverty.

FRAMEWORK OF INVESTIGATION

This chapter attempts to study the available literature on postmodernism and also explores made on the recent Bombay Cinema. One such book which referred to in the section is *Bollywood and Postmodernism* by Neelam Sidhar Wright (2015). The book beautifully captures some of the recent Bollywood films which are postmodern in their treatment. Also, Wright in the book makes categorisation of postmodern films and argues the qualities that make a film postmodern. The available literature on the Bombay cinema and the treatment of urban space also becomes a valuable resource to explore poverty. The chapter also studies the writing on the recently released movies, some examples including *Stanely ka Dabba* and *Om Darbadar*. The chapter attempts to study some of the recent films which qualify for the postmodern cinema. Content analysis of books written in Hollywood is also a valuable source of the study.

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