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Drawing Parallels: Bollywood and the Great Indian Epics

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Abstract:

Films are accepted as a form of art which reflects the contemporary society. Like literature and painting, films are emerging as a new platform for representing social milieu. Looking at different functions that a film performs one cannot deny comparing it to mythology. What mythology did at ancient times, films are doing it at modern times. The war between the good and the evil has always been the constant theme in mythologies in the same way films also projects the strife between these two opposite traits. The two great Indian epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have changed the thought process, ideology and imagination of the Hindi film watching audience that is why the early Hindi films drew themes from these epics directly. The first Hindi feature film Raja Harishchandra fell back on the Ramayana for its theme. This was a time when the Hindi film industry was in its infant stage and was learning to crawl and it adopted the themes of motherhood, patrimony, revenge, rivalry etc. directly from these epics. This paper shall attempt to draw parallels between Bollywood films and the great Indian epics. It will try to establish a connection between these two taking into consideration the characters, situations and settings by re-visiting these great Indian epics through the lens of Hindi film industry.

Keywords: films, epics, mythology, themes.

Cinema today is the greatest form of expression ever known, it is capable of giving life and form to all ideas and emotions. It is perhaps the most viewed and most easily accessed form of mass media that is available to us. It fulfills the dual purpose of entertainment and imparting knowledge as it covers varied themes such as transformation, innocence, sacrifice, justice redemption and many more. Films are an unparalleled guide to the thoughts, aspirations and

attitudes of the thousands of the members of the emergent middle class. For example their view of history is promoted by the cinema and not by the books written by academic historians. When it comes to Hindi film industry it takes its central ideas from the values imbibed in Indians such as brotherhood, good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, motherhood etc. Most of the subjects are taken directly from mythology and folktales. Thus one can easily observe that films have come up as a new form of presenting social milieu. Looking at the functions fulfilled by films one cannot stop comparing it to mythologies. Myths reflected customs, beliefs and social behavior of a particular time period, films do the same by presenting to us situations that pertain to the contemporary society. The mythological genre in films is defined largely in terms of its narrative. It presents to us the story of Gods and Goddesses, whose oldest account we have in Sanskrit *Puranas.* These stories from the *Puranas* and the *Epics* have long been presented to us by pre-existing genres and media, ranging across retellings, folktales songs, poems, music, paintings which had already established a combination of visual, musical and dramatic convention before the new nineteenth century forms of urban theatre. However the films have drawn more closely to great Indian epics the *Mahabharta* and the *Ramyana*. While these texts are traditionally the works of single authors (Vyasa and Valmiki respectively), Historical analysis finds them mainly to be the result of oral composition which was passed on from generation to generation. There are many retellings of these epics the filmmakers have been successfully adopting these stories since the inception of Indian cinema. Although some films cover large parts of these stories, most concentrate on a single episode which they narrate in some detail and adapt to suit the narrative convention of cinema. With their tales of passion and power, blood feud and virtue, devotion and deception, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have provided inspiration to filmmakers down the ages. This paper shall take into account Mani Ratnam's *Raavan* and Prakash Jha's *Rajneeti* into account and draw parallels between the plot, character, setting, portrayal of female characters etc. and revisit the great Indian Epics through the lens of these two films.

Mani Ratnam's Raavan casts Abhishek Bachan as Bira , Aishwarya Rai Bachan as Ragini and Vikram as Dev. This movie is a modern day rewrite of the *Ramyana*, against a cops-and-robbers canvas. The story modifies the highly politically pertinent disagreement between the advasis and the state, as represented by its police force into the frame of *Ramyana.* The characters and their dilemmas are re-interpreted making them relevant by situating them in the

contemporary times. Dev is the hero of the story, Ragini is the heroine and Beera is the anti-hero. The plot of the movie moves on the same story line as that of *Ramayana*. We have a hero, a heroine and a villain who abducts the heroine for the sake of revenge. Initially in the movie we see Sanjeevini kumar, a role played by Govinda, whose character resemble the character of Hanuman and who helps Dev throughout the movie finding Ragini. The theme of good vs. evil echoes throughout the movie. But here this theme is subverted and gives a clear message as to- is it evil to safeguard the the interest of the poor and good to defend the rich and the influential. Beera is constantly referred to possessing 10 brains, 10 faces and 10 heads. Bira kidnaps ragini and keeps her captivated in his village. The first half of the movie is just a prolonged chase between Dev and Beera where Dev relentlessly pursues criminal Beera in order to rescue his wife, Ragini. After abducting Ragini Beera gets very much impressed by her will power and her courage even in the face of death, and also by her ability to fight back in adverse conditions. He starts falling in love with Ragini and later in the movie we begin to realize that even she feels drawn towards her kidnapper and started developing a soft corner for him and his people. When Dev comes looking for Ragini he inquires about Beera from the tribals but all of them only talk of his positive traits like calm and genuine nature, fearless, poet and an intelligent man. At the climax of the movie it is revealed that kidnapping of Ragini was a revengeful act because Beera's half sister Jamunia was raped on the day of her marriage by Dev's fellow policeman, a scene similar to Surpankha legend in *Ramayana* where Lakshman cuts the nose of Ravaan's half sister Shurpankha and insults her and Raavan kidnaps Sita out of revenge. Another similar scene drawn from Ramayana is that when Hanuman comes to meet Sita when she was kept in Ashok Vatika and gives her a message that Ram is coming to save her soon, similarly Sanjeev Kumar comes to see Ragini and deliver the message and he is held captive. The last part of the movie is also drawn on the similar lines of the epic where Dev and Ragini re-unite after 14 days and on the way home he asks her whether Beera has "touched" her and asks her to undergo polygraphy test to prove that she is saying the truth, similarly Sita was also asked to pass through agnipariksha demand to prove herself pure and also to chastise her. Thus this movie can be seen as a revisionist tale of a Sita-like heroine flipping for a Raavan like anti-hero, a main character who depicts the darker aspects of human life. It also casts Raavan as the wronged subaltern who has suffered discrimination and oppression at the hands of the state and has deiced to fight back

and Ram as the scheming agent of Imperialism thus giving us a different aspect of the story that has been rooted in our minds since childhood and fulfilling the purpose of calling it a re-telling.

The *Mahabharata* is about family feuds, the struggle of virtue against vice and a dynastic struggle for the throne of Hastinapur. Set in a modern political milieu, *Raajneeti*, by Prakash Jha, too is a yarn about family politics, exploitation of relationships and the political war to attain supreme power. This is a multi starrer film with Ranbir Kapoor (Samarth), Katrina Kaif (Indu) , Nana Ptekar (Brij Gopal), Sooraj(Ajay Devgan) and Arjun Rampal (Prithvi Raj) in the main roles. This movie unfolds as the quintessential Pandvas-Kauravas conflict, with most of the characters tracing their antecedents to the epic and being the accurate representation of present day human clan. One can easily discover a modern-day Yudhistir in Arjun Rampal, an Arjun in Ranbir Kapoor, a Krishna in Nana patekar, a Duryodhana in Manoj Bajpayee and a Karna in Ajay Devgan. Just like the *Mahabharata* was about the politics and the struggle for right to rule so is the central idea of this movie- political rifts between cousins of the Pratap family. The dramatic canvas includes sub plots of relationships that gets rocked and buffeted by electoral imperatives, often resulting in tragic personal consequences. The characters are effectively recreated and the core concept and conflicts are ably re-drafted in the modern milieu. Most of the major events of the movie are drawn in parallel with the story of the epic. Starting from the incident where Bharti bore an illegitimate child and gets it floated in the river and the driver of the family gets hold of the child and names him Sooraj, an incident similar to the Mahabharata where Kunti also gave birth to an illegitimate child and left him floating in the river which was later found by a charioteer who names him Karna, a synonym for Sooraj to the last scene of the movie where we see that Samarth is undergoing a conflict whether to shoot his cousin Virendra or not and Brij Gopal advises him not to think much and go for it, a scene similar to the battlefield of the great Kurukshetra war where Lord Krishna gives lecture to Arjun on the theory of Dharma. Side by side it also shows the plight of Indu, a character analogus to Draupadi. Sheer politics is at play throughout the movie where close brothers are ready to take lives in order to gain power. *Mahabharta* evoked not just a central story of a ruinous war but an array of myths and archetypes that seems to represent universal patterns of human nature. There is a parallel in this movie and the epic in terms of the names of characters as well for example Brij Gopal means Krishna, Samarth stands for battlefield commander just as Arjuna who played the role of the army commander of the Pandvas in the great battle, Sooraj is synonymous with Karna and Indu

means moon which is quite similar with the one of the names of Draupadi herself. Thus this movie can be called as a modern day *Mahabharata* with the story of struggle for the political power set against the backdrop of modern social milieu and is an apt example to discuss the main theme of drawing parallels between the narratives and characters.

Another interesting parallel which can be drawn over here is the similarity between the portrayal of female characters in both these epics and the movies taken into consideration. Women at that times crushed under the system of the most celebrated patriarchial dominance and their situation has not changed over these thousand years as well. Taking the case of Sita in Ramayana and Ragini in Raavan both of them suffered due to deeds of their husbands without any fault of their own. They were abducted by Ravana and Beera out of revenge. Even after coming back questions were raised on their loyalties to their husbands and they were required to prove their fidelity to the society by undergoing agnipariksha and polygraphy test, after passing the tests it was their husbands' choice to accept them or not. Women had suffered and continue to suffer because of the male dominated patriarchal society where they do not have a choice but to submit to their male counterparts. Another set of parallel characters which had to put up with this patriarchy were Surpankha and Beera's sister Jamunia. Laxmana cut off Surpankha's nose and left ear and Jamunia was raped by Dev's fellow police officer and close friend, the climax of the Ramayana is adequately parallel with the contemporary situation of rape, here too the women had no alternative. In the movie Rajneeti the character of Indu has been created in parallel to Draupadi, in both the cases she could not marry the person of her liking. In Mahabharta she was asked to be "shared" among five men and in the movie although she loved Samarth she was married to Prithvi Raj because of the politics at play. Thus be it the storyline of the Great Indian epics, which majority of the Indian population has grown up reading or the plot of Bollywood movies being produced at present times the situation of women remains the same their voices have to remain succumbed by the hands of the society.

Matthew Arnold in the conclusion of one of his famous critical essay *A Study of Poetry* talks of the self preservation of ancient texts where he states that these texts have already withstood the test of time and will continue to guide and instruct the future generation in upcoming times. Arnold says that this is the result of self preserving nature of humanity. Human nature will remain same throughout the ages and those parts of the classics dealing with the

subject will remain relevant at all times thus preserving themselves from being lost in time. Similar is the case with these two great epics being talked here, these works reflect the universal aspect and serve the dual purpose of instructing as well as giving pleasure. Although these movies are re-visions and re-telling set in the modern times but the characters react to situations in the similar manners as the characters of the epics responded and consequences of their actions are also similar. The film-maker did try to come up with a twist by making the character of Ragini, in the movie Raavan falling for Beera, the anti-hero, and showing the character of Beera in both positive and negative light but that is the difference between poetical truth and historical truth as pointed out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Historical truth is what actually happened and poetical trust is what might have happened. Showing the audience what might have happened is the function of imitative art and the movie catered to the purpose.

On the similar lines other Bollywood movies can also be taken into account such as *Hum Saath Saath Hain* which can be seen as the story parallel to *Ramayana* –One family, three brothers, love and hatred, mother conspires against elder son, son goes to expulsion, mother repents, son heads back home, happy ending. Even *Bahubali* can be talked on similar terms where Bahubali can be basically seen as Ram and Yudhistir rolled into one and so on. Thus the role of films as a medium for reflecting contemporary belief systems of society cannot be denied and these two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have structured the thought process and imagination of Hindi film watching audience that is why majority of Bollywood movies look forward to these for inspiration and quality subject matter. Being great literary Epics these works will continue to serve humankind forever.

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