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Cinematic Realism: Aesthetic and Philosophical Perspectives in the Bollywood Movies "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live"

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Abstract:

Cinematic realism has been a captivating subject exploring the boundaries between fiction and reality. It is a stylistic and narrative approach in filmmaking, that seeks to represent reality as authentically as possible, blurring the lines between fiction and actuality. This research article delves into the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of cinematic realism, focusing on the iconic films "Do Bigha Zameen" (1953) and "Peepli Live" (2010). These films, separated by decades, not only mark significant milestones in Indian cinema but also offer profound insights into the human condition and societal realities. By examining the aesthetic and philosophical perspectives of these films, this article aims to unravel the nuanced ways in which cinematic realism is employed to depict the struggles of agrarian life and the socio-political complexities of rural India.

Keywords: Cinematic Realism, Aesthetics, Philosophy, Indian Cinema, Do Bigha Zameen, Peepli Live, Narrative Analysis, Societal Commentary, Satire.

Background:

Thomas Elsaesser, a German film historian and a professor of Film and Television Studies at the University Of Amsterdam, writes his views on realism in his book, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through The Senses*, co-authored with Malte Hagener, "The cinema seems poised to leave behind its function as 'medium' (for the representation of reality) to become a 'life form' (and thus a reality in its own right)." (12) Cinematic realism finds its roots in the Lumière Brothers' pioneering works in the late 19th century. Auguste and Louis Lumière, credited with inventing the Cinématographe, focused on capturing slices of everyday life in their short films, such as "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory" (1895).

The aftermath of World War II witnessed the emergence of Italian Neo-realism, a movement that sought to depict the unpleasant realities of post-war Italy. Filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Cesare Zavattini rejected studio sets and glamorous narratives, opting instead to shoot on location with non-professional actors. De Sica's "Bicycle Thieves" (1948) exemplifies the movement, portraying the struggles of a working-class man searching for his stolen bicycle. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, directors like François Truffaut in his "The 400 Blows" (1959) embraced a more spontaneous and realistic style called the French New Wave movement that challenged traditional film-making conventions. In the 1960s and 1970s, U. S. Filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola sought to depict urban life authentically in a shift towards realism with the American New Wave. They explored the themes of crime and social upheaval in their movies. Concurrently, the Cinema Verité movement in documentary film-making, influenced by the likes of D.A. Pennebaker and the Maysles Brothers, prioritized observational and unobtrusive approaches to capture candid moments in real life.

With the advent of digital technology in the late 20th century and 21st century, filmmakers gained unprecedented flexibility with lightweight digital cameras, allowing for more intimate and unscripted moments and making documentaries like "March of the Penguins" (2005). Apart from Western cinema, Iranian cinema, with directors like Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, has gained acclaim for its realistic portrayal of everyday life, as seen in films like "A Separation" (2011). Similarly, the Philipino film director, Lav Diaz, is known for his long, uncut takes that capture the nuances of societal struggles.

Cinematic realism in Indian cinema is rooted in a rich tradition that includes classics like Bimal Roy's "Do Bigha Zameen" (1953), Satyajit Ray's "Pather Panchali" (1955) and Mehboob Khan's "Mother-India" (1957). Indian filmmakers have consistently sought to capture the rawness of human experiences and societal challenges. The narratives often grapple with socioeconomic disparities, rural-urban dynamics, and cultural intricacies. In recent times, films like Anurag Kashyap's "Gangs of Wasseypur" (2012), Tigmanshu Dhulia's "Paan Singh Tomar" (2012), Neeraj Ghaywan's "Masaan" (2015), and Chaitanya Tamhane's "The Disciple" (2020) have continued this tradition, exploring contemporary issues within the framework of cinematic realism. Indian cinematic realism transcends linguistic and regional boundaries, offering a nuanced lens through which filmmakers can engage with the complex tapestry of the nation, reflecting its cultural, economic, and social realities.

Indian cinema, a kaleidoscope of diverse narratives and styles, has produced timeless classics that transcend the boundaries of entertainment and delve into the complexities of the human condition. "Do Bigha Zameen" (1953) and "Peepli Live" (2010) stand as exemplary works within the realm of Indian cinematic realism, each offering a poignant reflection on the socio-economic fabric of rural India. These films, separated by decades, share a commitment to portraying the bitter realities of agrarian life with a keen eye for authenticity, making them cornerstones in the exploration of cinematic realism within the Indian context. The present paper is an endeavor to present the aesthetic and philosophic perspectives of cinematic realism through the study of these two Bollywood movies. The comparative analysis of these two films will illuminate how cinematic realism has evolved over the decades, offering distinct approaches to portraying authenticity.

Overview and Introduction:

"Do Bigha Zameen" (1953)

"Do Bigha Zameen," directed by Bimal Roy, unfolds in post-independence India and follows the protagonist Shambhu Mahato (Balraj Sahni), a rural farmer, facing severe economic hardship to save his two acres of land. The narrative introduces us to his wife Paro (Nirupa Roy), their young son Kanhaiya, and the aged father, stressing the familial implications of Shambhu's troubles. The village landlord is keen on selling his lands to an urban developer who is intent on building a mill, but Shambhu's small piece of land is preventing the landlord and his urban collaborators from fulfilling their plans. He has manipulated his accounts to show Shambhu in much larger debt than he had ever dreamt of. The case goes to court. The protocols of evidence, proof, and testimony operate in a world remote from Shambhu. Shambhu is ordered to pay the landlord a sum of Rs. 235 within three months or else have his land taken over as payment. But how is a huge sum of money to be earned by a poor peasant like Shambhu? He is burdened by debt and has to save his ancestral land from being seized by the landlord. Therefore, he, along with his son, migrates to Kolkata in hopes of earning two acres of land as collateral. Shambhu takes up various laborious jobs, only to face exploitation and hardship in the city. Finally, he has become a rickshaw-puller.

The idea for "Do Bigha Zameen" can be traced back to an evening at the 1952 International Film Festival in Bombay, when Roy became enthralled with Vittorio de Sica's "Bicycle Thieves" (1948), a film considered to be one of the finest examples of Italian Neorealism. Sica released his "Bicycle Thieves" in 1948 based on a 1946 novel by Luigi Bartolini. The film was set in a post-World War II scenario where a poverty-stricken father

searches for his lost bicycle without which he would lose the job taken up to support his starving family. "Bicycle Thieves", though received both positively and negatively by viewers, would become one of the best-known works of Italian neo-realism. On his way home from the festival, whilst on the train with his team, Roy voiced his desire to create something similar, and the rest is history.

"Peepli Live" (2010)

"In her vigorously argued book *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), Patricia White defines World Cinema as a privileged realm for women filmmakers and an antidote to their woeful under-representation in the mainstream." (Nagib, 18) "Peepli Live" a directorial debut by Anusha Rizvi, is a cinematic masterpiece that not only addresses the grim issue of farmer suicides in rural India but also captivates audiences through showcasing a deliberate and thoughtful approach to visual storytelling by its astute aesthetic choices. The film skillfully takes a satirical approach to explore the complex socio-economic rural problems of India. The film also offers an intersection of media sensationalism, political opportunism, and the harsh realities of rural distress in an Indian village. The narrative revolves around Natha (Omkar Das Manikpuri), a debt-ridden farmer, who lives in the small village of Peepli. He has a bedridden mother and a dominant wife (Shalini Vatsa) who thinks he is a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow. Unable to pay back his government loan, Natha and his brother Budhia (Raghubir Yadav) go to a local politician for help, but he tells them that one of them should commit suicide so at least his family would be helped. In a desperate bid to save his family from financial ruin, he contemplates suicide to claim government compensation. The exaggerated portrayal of the media circus surrounding Natha's situation serves as a scathing commentary on the exploitation of rural distress for entertainment and political gains.

However, news of his decision to commit himself spread swiftly. An ambitious TV reporter (Malaika Shenoy) is among the first to arrive in the small village of Peepli to present the situation as a cover story for his channel. Subsequently, a prominent rival television channel entered accompanied by many more. There's going to be an election, so the drama around Natha becomes more public. The ruling party chooses to offer him a brand-new water pump as payment that lies redundant in his house. However, Natha grows more conflicted about his choice to end his life as the media carnival goes on, and more politicians get involved.

Issues Addressed in the Films:

Due to easy accessibility and high entertainment value, films have always been a popular form of art. Ace film director, Shyam Benegal, in his essay “Talkies, Movies, Cinema” (2010) mentions that “film-makers are not necessarily serious thinkers; they are essentially story-tellers. The content for their stories may be drawn from any number of sources: observation of life; their own experience of it; combined with their flights of imagination and the imagining of others.” (12). Both films offer profound commentaries on the interconnected themes of land, labor, and exploitation and deal with the agrarian struggles and socio-economic disparities prevalent in post-colonial India.

In “Do Bigha Zameen”, the agrarian crisis is vividly depicted through the lens of Shambhu's journey – from the idyllic village life to the cruel and dehumanizing conditions of urban labor. “Yet Bimal Roy is equally candid in his representation of the brutality of city life, of the callousness, anonymity, and instrumentality that appear to mark most human relationships in the urban setting.” (Puru) The film also captures the heart-wrenching reality of the rural-to-urban migration driven by economic desperation. The agrarian struggles are not merely a backdrop but integral to the narrative, providing a lens through which the film critiques societal structures and economic inequalities. Shambhu's story becomes a universal metaphor for the challenges faced by the disenfranchised, making the film a timeless exploration of socio-economic disparities and the human cost of progress. The narrative critically analyses the commodification of land and the ruthless economic systems that lead to the dispossession of farmers, amplifying the film's social and political resonance. Thus, Shambhu's struggle to retain his two acres becomes a symbolic battle against the pervasive exploitation by landlords and moneylenders, reflecting broader issues of agrarian injustice.

On the other hand, “Peepli Live”, through a satirical lens, explores the media circus and political machinations surrounding a farmer's decision to end his life to claim government compensation. The narrative unfolds a situation in which Natha unwittingly becomes the center of a media frenzy and political maneuvering. It illuminates the structural problems—such as growing debt, crop failure, and a dearth of government assistance—that push farmers to these extremes. “A satisfying and searing satire on the plight of poor farmers in India, scorned by the rich and powerful who have their plans for national progress.” (Brussat and Ann) The film exposes the sensationalism and insensitivity of the media in reporting such sad incidents, highlighting the gap between metropolitan India and the agrarian crisis. Two of the story's main themes are the competition for breaking news and the use of personal tragedy to draw in more people.

The movie came out at a time when political, media, and academic circles were debating the problem of farmer suicides. The concept is thought to have originated from a wave of farmer suicides in India that occurred during the 1990s. Even though the events depicted in the movie are fictional, the audience did find the filmmaker's attempt to raise awareness of problems that lie at the core of many social institutions and systems to be compelling. "Anusha Rizvi has fashioned a dark comedy about a serious problem in India that enables us to see the clash between the rich and powerful members of the ruling class" (Brussat and Mary) Fundamentally, the film is a social reflection on the gaps in socioeconomic status and the political and bureaucratic establishment's indifference to the plight of rural India. The movie acts as a wake-up call, imploring people to confront the underlying issues that how politicians and reporters use the misery of farmers to further their agendas, turning real suffering into a spectacle.

Cinematic Realism through the Characters:

The exploration of realism within character-depiction is a crucial avenue for analysis in the field of film studies and it can be found in both the movies under consideration. Shambhu Mahato's character in "Do Bigha Zameen" is a moving depiction of the sufferings of the rural poor. His steely commitment to protecting his property, the sorrow of leaving his family behind, and the unwavering pursuit of dignity in the face of hardship make him a realistic and intriguing figure. Balraj Sahni's portrayal of Shambhu adds a dimension of realism to the character, expressing the subtlety of sorrow and resilience. Bhisham Sahni quotes Balraj Sahni in his book, *Balraj: My Brother*, "A basic rule of acting had come my way suddenly, not from any book but from life itself". (Sahni 102)

Shambhu's wife is shown as a strong and caring partner. Despite the challenges of rural poverty, she supports Shambhu and manages the household with elegance. Her persona embodies the quiet fortitude of many women in rural civilizations who face adversity with quiet persistence. Shambhu's father is the link between the past and the present, offering historical context to the family's hardships. The role of Shambhu's son lends a sense of hope to the story, representing the possibility of development and advancement even in the face of tragedy. The city people, who are presented as callous and exploitative, represent the societal obstacles that migrants encounter. Their representation emphasizes a society separated by economic differences, highlighting the callousness that can occur in the quest for advancement.

"Peepli Live" introduces a diverse array of characters, each representing different facets of the societal landscape. Omkar Das Manikpuri's superb portrayal of Natha's internal turmoil portrays the agony and helplessness of countless farmers driven to the brink. His character is sympathetic as well as tragic, serving as a heartbreaking lens through which the audience sees the brutal reality of rural poverty. His brother, Budhia, stands in stark contrast to Natha's predicament. His hardheaded outlook on life mirrors the pragmatism that is often required in rural settings. His character provides complexity to the story by demonstrating the many reactions people have to the problems posed by agrarian crises. The realism of Natha's wife and mother's characters is evident in the painstaking attention to their everyday challenges, emotional responses, and depiction of the subtle dynamics within a family's enduring economic difficulties. The villagers' reactions, which range from genuine concern to opportunistic exploitation, reflect the intricacies of human behavior during a crisis. They contribute to the film's realism by demonstrating the complexities of community dynamics.

The media personnel, portrayed with dark humor, embody the sensationalism and insensibility of certain segments of the media industry. "Dinesh Rathore, GM, of MediaVest, added here, "They have created 'Peepli Live' based on reality, and news channels do behave like that. They sensationalize every small aspect of the news and miss the bigger plot." (qt by Shikha) Political figures are portrayed as opportunistic, using Natha's plight for their electoral agenda. Through its characters, the film effectively navigates the complexities of the media, politics, and rural realities, offering a thought-provoking commentary on the contemporary socio-political landscape in India.

Aesthetic Choices Contributing to Cinematic Realism:

Both "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" share a commitment to cinematic realism through their aesthetic and philosophic choices. These films transcend the glamour often associated with mainstream Indian cinema, opting instead to confront the audience with the unvarnished truth against the backdrop of rural landscapes of India. In "Do Bigha Zameen" cinematographer Kamal Bose employs a stark black-and-white palette to capture the harsh realities of agrarian life. The use of natural light and on-location shooting enhances the authenticity, immersing the audience in rural as well as urban landscapes. Bimal Roy makes superb use of the soundscape in the courtroom sequence in "Do Bigha Zameen" to show the courtroom as an intimidating setting where Shambhu identifies God as his witness, and he is mockingly challenged if he may call him as a witness. The wild laughing of the people, the prosecutor's cross-examination, the quickness of the process, and the judge's lack of

sensitivity turn the judicial verdict into a piece of poison. The camera shots from the description of Kolkata to pictures of the massive Howrah Bridge. Then there's a mishmash of pictures - tramcars, mobs, vehicles — in which the swiftness and changeability of city life are implicitly contrasted with the easygoing and predictable pace of village life.

In another memorable scene where Shambhu has just finished a rickshaw trip when the next customer tells him to chase a rickshaw carrying his fleeing girlfriend (1:28:21). Shambhu runs barefoot in the scorching heat of the sun, trying to keep pace with a horse-drawn wagon. The man then starts gesticulating and vocally coaxing Shambhu in the manner of a coachman lashing his horse, an impression reinforced by the juxtaposition of horse and man on screen (1:28:45). The music becomes more profound as Shambhu desperately tries to catch the rickshaw ahead of him, but just as he does, a wheel falls loose, the world flips upside down, and there was a cut. Roy metaphorically presents the tragedy of poverty by capturing the essence of Shambhu's desperation that drives him to risk his life for a meager sum of money in less than sixty seconds. The scene stands apart as Bimal Roy's crowning protest at unrighteousness and debasement. "Do Bigha Zameen" launched Balraj Sahni into the first rank of Indian actors. He writes, "When, one day, I die, I shall have the satisfaction that I acted in 'Do Bigha Zameen.'" (Sahni 102). Balraj further describes, "Then I, as it were, imbibed the soul of this middle-aged rickshaw-puller within me, and stopped thinking about the art of acting. I think the real secret of the unexpected success of my role lay in this." (Sahni 102).

A mournful orchestral score and austere black-and-white cinematography heighten the emotional effect, producing a cinematic experience that resonates with the severe reality it aims to depict. "This film is not a figment of the imagination of the Director to create an ultimate tragedy, it is a part and parcel of millions who toil in the hot sun every day, gaining very little and often losing everything." (Puru) The narrative unfolded with a straightforward linear structure, emphasizing the protagonist's physical journey and the stark socio-economic realities of post-independence India. Bimal Roy's "Do Bigha Zameen" is hailed as a pioneer in the use of realistic aesthetics, setting a precedent for authentic storytelling. Its influence can be traced in the works of subsequent directors who sought to capture the human experience with similar sincerity.

On the other hand, "Peepli Live," cinematographed by Shanker Raman, adopted the technique of hand-held camera work and dynamic framing to emulate the chaotic energy of the media circus surrounding Natha's predicament. The film's visual language blends realism with satire, effectively portraying the absurdity of the situation. In addition to this, it eschews

glossy visuals for a raw and unfiltered portrayal of rural life. Raman captures the vast landscapes and intimate moments with a documentary-like authenticity. The non-professional actors' unpolished yet impactful portrayals contribute to the overall immersive experience, allowing the audience to connect with the characters on a deeply human level. This choice not only enhances the film's realism but also immerses viewers in the agrarian setting, making them keenly aware of the characters' struggles.

In addition to this, the director's meticulous attention to detail extends to the film's production design. From the cluttered homes of the villagers to the lavish bureaucratic offices in the city, each environment serves as a visual metaphor reflecting the socio-economic disparities depicted in the narrative. Furthermore, the film's restrained use of music is a deliberate aesthetic choice. Instead of employing a conventional film score, "Peepli Live" integrates folk music seamlessly into the narrative not only adding cultural richness but also enhancing the emotional impact of key scenes, reinforcing the film's connection to its rural roots. Anusha Rizvi's directorial finesse in making these aesthetic choices elevates "Peepli Live" to a cinematic experience that resonates in the ears long after watching the movie.

Both films focus on simple set designs that reflect the simplicity of rural life as part of their dedication to visual realism. Both films' costumes, props, and settings indicate a commitment to accurately representing socioeconomic reality. These unifying aesthetic choices add to a cinematic reality that extends beyond the screen, bringing audiences into the films' socio-cultural environments and human concerns. By eschewing cinematic embellishments and embracing authenticity, films like "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" transcend the confines of entertainment, becoming conduits for social commentary.

Cinematic Realism through Philosophical Perspectives:

The philosophical perspectives of "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" are shaped by the societal changes that occurred between their releases. The films' philosophical underpinnings revolve around questions of land, labor, and human dignity in the face of rapid industrialization and urbanization. "Do Bigha Zameen" critically examines the impact of economic forces on individual lives, highlighting the dehumanizing effects of a system that commodifies labor and land. From a philosophical standpoint, it investigates the price of advancement and raises ethical concerns about uprooting people in the name of economic expansion. Shambhu's journey turns into a metaphor for the existential search for purpose in a rapidly changing world. The film serves as a powerful social commentary on the unequal distribution of resources, portraying the impact of economic policies on the agrarian class.

"No film has portrayed Indian social reality in such depth and how socio-economic conditions shape the life of a family." (Thakor) Shambhu's journey becomes emblematic of the larger struggles faced by marginalized communities, laying bare the harsh realities of a society in transition.

In "Peepli Live," Anusha Rizvi tackles a serious national issue with a dark comedy that depicts the struggle between the wealthy and powerful members of the ruling class; politicians, bureaucrats, and the media establishment who have no sympathy or understanding for the oppressed and impoverished farmers who have lost their livelihoods in the name of progress. The narrative becomes a mirror that reflects the absurdity of the values held by modern society when a person's life is reduced only to a spectacle. Thus, "Peepli Live" challenges viewers to consider the moral ramifications of social institutions and how empathy is eroding in the face of sensationalism. The film engaged with contemporary issues of media ethics, political exploitation, and the commodification of rural distress. Natha's existential crisis reflects the sense of meaninglessness and despair prevalent in existentialist philosophy. The absurdity is heightened by the media's sensationalism and political opportunism, emphasizing the absurdity of human actions in the face of societal pressure. The film questions the very nature of truth, justice, and the individual's dignity in a society that often seems indifferent to the plight of its citizens.

Both films touch upon humanism, contemplating the value and worth of individual lives in the face of societal structures. Shambhu and Natha, as protagonists, become symbols of the collective struggle against oppressive systems, embodying the philosophical idea of asserting humanity and agency in the face of adversity. "Do Bigha Zameen" encapsulates the ideals and struggles of just a few years old independent India, while "Peepli Live" navigates the complexities of a rapidly changing, media-driven society of the twenty-first century. The evolution of philosophical perspectives across these decades mirrors the shifting dynamics and challenges faced by Indian society, capturing the essence of each era on the canvas of Indian cinema.

Findings of the Research:

In the analysis of "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live", key findings underscore the enduring relevance of cinematic realism in depicting the socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities in India. It is examined how the two chosen case studies reflect the evolving aesthetics and philosophies of cinema in India over time, and how they challenge or conform to conventional notions of authenticity.

The key findings of the study are as follows:

- Bimal Roy's exploration of land, labor, and exploitation becomes a timeless commentary on the human cost of progress, reflecting post-independence India's socio-economic landscape in the movie "Do Bigha Zameen". Whereas, "Peepli Live," navigates a globalized, media-saturated society, using humor to shed light on the absurdities of prioritizing spectacle over human suffering.
- The research found how media representation, as exemplified in "Peepli Live," influences our perception of reality, especially in rural India, and also, examined the implications of the media's role in shaping narratives.
- Both films offer a critical examination of the human condition, portraying characters grappling with forces beyond their control. Whether it is Shambhu's migration to the city in "Do Bigha Zameen" or Natha's predicament in "Peepli Live," the characters become emblematic of the larger struggles faced by the marginalized communities.
- Both films interrogate the ethical dimensions of societal structures and the impact of external forces on the lives of ordinary individuals.

Conclusion

The present research has contributed to the ongoing discourse on cinematic realism and authenticity, shedding light on the dynamic relationship between cinema and authenticity, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" have left an indelible mark on the exploration of realism in Indian cinema, influencing subsequent generations of filmmakers. Both films share a commitment to cinematic realism through their aesthetic and philosophic choices. Together, "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" form a cinematic continuum, showcasing how the lens of realism can transcend decades, and providing insightful reflections on the evolution of India's socio-economic landscape. In an era marked by information technology and digital media, cinematic realism stands as a beacon of storytelling that prioritizes substance over spectacle. It encourages filmmakers to confront uncomfortable truths and challenge societal norms, fostering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues that shape our communities. As "Do Bigha Zameen" and "Peepli Live" continue to resonate, their legacy underscores the enduring importance of cinematic realism in shaping narratives that reflect, question, and illuminate the world we inhabit.

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