

Post-National, Global, or Local: Literary Cinematic Responses

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Today's cinema seems to be challenging the established elite cinematic discourse. Causing dents in the dominant discourse, this new cinema hints at, and also, induces change by breaking the mould and effecting reforms simultaneously. The paper attempts to approach Hindi cinema from the margins of global, national, international, post-national and popular. It primarily tells of individuals, and through them, it depicts the collective. The characters are viewed as humans complete with the elemental human nature of anxiety, love, lust, ambition, self, identity and whatnot. An individual's sense of self emerges from various factors like nationality, gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion, sect, etc. The term globalisation brings to the mind the conflict of hybridisation and homogenisation, exclusion and inclusion, global and local, and what should be the concept of nationalism.

As a critique of nationalism, post-nationalism rejects the idea of the nation as the central organising principle. It also calls into question the concept of identity by looking beyond the idea of the nation as a homogenous collective. In fact, post-national as a discourse implies going beyond, transcend and escape the boundaries of master-discourses (nationalism being the one among several others like colonialism, capitalism, feminism, etc.). Nationalism, as a master discourse, presupposes nation as a monolithic structure that does not allow space for plurality.

Nationalism is a mode of thinking that has impacted our social, political, literary, and fictional imagination, even our deepest psychological being – our very sense of personal identity. The nation is the most resilient form of community imagined, and the devotion it elicits from followers is next only to the intensity religion evokes. (Virdi 27)

Virdi argues that nation, an important element of an individual's identity, is an abstract notion that involves several constituents like language, religion, race, geography, etc. It is argued that nationalism emerged in Europe as a potent ideology in the late 17th century arising within a specific social formation and sustained by culture, a force at once cohesive and fractious. The concept of 'nation' spread globally, and it continues as a prime player in contemporary geopolitics. Fictional and mythic representations construct nations in art and literature, spurring nationalist sentiments, while nations popularise and favour

particular myths and fantasies. In the case of India, the society accommodates various cultural units under its umbrella of the nation. This image of a unified nation is nurtured and maintained by Hindi cinema or Bollywood.

However, a sense of unity is derived from various other factors: a state-imposed unified system of law, language, and education; the constitution; one monetary currency; and the creation of a national imaginary. The latter, I contend, is sustained in no small part by the visionary nature of Hindi cinema. (27)

Post-national comes as a counter-discourse; a local, fragmentary narrative against the totalising master narratives that tend to homogenise the national identity taking it as the natural integrating factor of a political community. Indian cinema has responded to globalisation in its own way. Instead of telling stories carrying lofty ideas and ideals, today's cinema has shifted its tone and texture in alignment with the everyday experience of individuals who are struggling with the day-to-day realities.

Newton (2017) depicts a young man's struggle to accomplish his responsibilities/duty despite the odds. *Hindi Medium* (2017) too depicts the everyday reality of India where people are busy in bettering their life according to the needs of globalisation i.e., attaining fluency in English, which is a status symbol not only in India but in the entire third world. *Dangal* (2016) shows the struggle of a man against the realities of his ambition, expectations, and traditions. Other examples are *Pad Man* (2018), *Bareilly Ki Barfi* (2017), *Toilet Ek Prem Katha* (2017), etc. The paper proposes to critically look at how globalisation and post-nationalism work in the realities of today, exploring the concepts through literature and beyond.

Post-nationalism is common men's response in the context of the mundane every day where they make simple digressions from the higher ideas like loyalty, ethics, and morality, etc., without necessarily discarding them. But this innocent tendency is manipulated/hijacked by a section of political thinkers to their advantage and is blown out of proportion so as to affect populace and academia. In order to earn political legitimacy, no efforts are spared to intellectualise and populise the discourse.

David Inglis contends in his book *Culture and Everyday Life* (2005) that 'high,' 'popular,' and 'low' cultures impact everyday life, and everyday life too can impact upon them. The nature of these cultural areas is in the present day rapidly mutating, such that it is difficult to tell that the distinctions in 'low', 'high'

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and ‘popular’ culture have been abolished or the borders between these areas have become more permeable than before. Inglis makes his point by mentioning how, since the 1960s, images and issues from ‘popular culture’ (e.g., Andy Warhol’s use of advertising for Campbell’s soup in his art) have entered into the mainstream art world, such that there has been a blending of ‘high’ and ‘low’ elements, a situation is often taken to be quintessentially ‘post-modern’ in nature. He further mentions the views of Peterson and Kern in this regard:

... that cultural distinctions are not today as clear cut as Bourdieu made out, that classes do not necessarily have ‘their own’ cultures any more, and that people, on the whole, are more culturally ‘omnivorous’, in that they blend and mix together different sorts of cultural forms in new and eclectic ways. (108)

Everyday life is just a continuum of routine day-to-day activities spanning from getting up from sleep to calling it a day – and, of course, while sleeping too. However banal these mundane activities seem to be, every individual is unique to whom this apparent ‘routineness’ of daily experiences is important and special. These ordinary concerns of everyday life are made the focus of mainstream cinema and filmic discourse. Such ordinary and everyday concerns in cinema should be given sufficient academic attention.

Cinema or entertainment might possibly not have been granted the same value two decades before, but today ‘Bollywood’ is perhaps India’s best-known international brand. Internationally people today accept the format of song-and-dance cinema, and more mainstream Indian films get shown at international venues like Cannes. Unlike even as late as the 1990s, when Indian popular cinema was for many a bastardised form of ‘real’ cinema (read: Western realist cinema), today Indian films are, more than ever, appreciated and enjoyed for their difference (*Flashback* 3). Rosie Thomas too comments this regard:

Indian cinema has, throughout its long history, evolved as a form which has registered the cultural imperialism of Hollywood: the form has undergone continual change and there has been both inspiration and assimilation from Hollywood and elsewhere, but thematically and structurally, Indian cinema has remained remarkably distinctive. (Thomas 116)

Talking about Indian identity with reference to hybridity and difference Salman Rushdie, in the essay “India’s Fiftieth Anniversary” (2003) says:

Selfhood of India is so capacious, so elastic that it manages to accommodate one billion kinds of difference. It agrees with its billion selves to call all of them 'Indian'. This is a notion far more original than the old pluralist ideas of 'melting pot' or 'cultural mosaic'. It works because the individual sees his own nature writ large in the nature of the state. This is why individual Indians feel so comfortable about the strength of the national idea, why it's so easy to belong to it, in spite of all the turbulence, the corruption, the tawdriness, the disappointment of fifty overwhelming years. (Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*)

Rushdie further comments that Churchill believed India was not a nation, it is just an abstraction. John Kenneth Galbraith too described India as 'functioning anarchy'. According to Rushdie:

Both of them, in my view, underestimated the strength of India-idea. It may be the most innovative national philosophy to have emerged in the post-colonial period. It deserves to be celebrated; because it is an idea that has enemies, within India as well as outside its frontiers, and to celebrate it is also to defend it against its foes. (Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*)

Rushdie's ideas about creative arts like writing are equally valid for cinematic representation too:

Closed systems have always appealed to writers. This is why so much writing deals with prisons, police forces, hospitals, schools. Is the nation a close system? In this internationalized moment, can any system remain closed? Nationalism is that 'revolt against history' that seeks to close what cannot any longer be closed. To fence in what should be frontier less. Good writing assumes a frontier less nation. Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards. (Rushdie, "Notes")

I think nationalism may also be seen as a development in terms of social, political, and economic prosperity at the collective level, and sense of well-being at the individual level. Indian cinema started with the theme of mythology in 1913 and reached the individual's anguish and concerns today – from *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Bhasmasur* (1914) Indian cinema has graduated to the theme of *Hindi Medium* and *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*. It is important to refer to Dadasahab Phalke's contribution of 125 films in 25 years. Phalke became completely blind for about six months. During the convalescence, he saw the film *Life of Christ* and got inspired to produce films in India. His first full-

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length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), which was 3,700 feet in length and ran for three quarters of an hour, was released on the 17th of May, 1913 at the Coronation Cinema. His other films were *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913), *Satyavan Savitri* (1914), *Lanka Dahan* (1917), *Shree Krishna Janma* (1918) and *Kaliya Mardan* (1919). Till 1937 he produced 125 films with *Gangavataran* (1937) being his last film. Other producers like Imperial Film Company were making 'Arabian Nights type adventure films' 'Rajput romances', 'action films' and 'socials' (*Flashback* 8-9).

Starting off by copying Western cinema in style, technique, and spirit Bollywood has developed its own aesthetics, poetics, and grammar to delineate the nation, its people, anxieties, conflicts, and aspirations through elite narratives, to popular images, to common, vulgar, everyday depiction. This does not stop at just portrayal but takes on the everyday problems by talking about it, dragging them from taboo zones to the normal discourse, suggesting solutions, and assuring common people that they be the agents of change and that their lives are as significant as that of a superhero or a super she-ro. The directors do not suffer from moral anxiety. Cinema has moved from larger-than-life topics on to those that are related to the individual, mundane, and everyday life.

In *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, Pankaj Tripathi, Bitti's sweet shop owner father challenges the traditional image of the father of a girl (beti ka baap) by sharing cigarettes with her and by not keeping a tab on her behaviour and movements. It reminds the earlier images of Nazir Hussain as 'beti ka majboor baap' (the helpless father of a girl). The female lead Bitti Mishra (Kriti Sanon) is an outspoken, angry-young Bareilly girl who is fed up with the society and her mother, having been rejected by prospective grooms' families. She runs away from home and at the railway station comes across a novel *Bareilly Ki Barfi* which she feels is written about her; it reassures her of a boy who would value her for what she is. She is prolific, profound, and whatever the opposite of a diva is.

Newton, India's Oscar submission in the foreign-language film category, is a satire on the democratic process in India. The characters in the film Newton Kumar, Malko, Loknath, Atma Singh all have their problems, and they struggle with the everyday realities. For Newton or Atma Singh, there is no heavy rush of testosterone. *Anaarkali of Aarah* (2017) makes the statement loud and clear, "Don't dare touch a woman without her consent, be it a prostitute, someone less than a prostitute or even your wife." The protagonist is holding her own, asserting herself, commanding, scheming, and yet not trying to look divine. She

is just being herself and says “Ham koi dudh ke dhule nahi hain”. The local ‘item girl’ fights off the harassment. ‘NO means NO’ genre also resonates in *Pink* (2016), where the girls decide to take on the harassers.

The issues of menstrual hygiene in *Pad Man*, of open defecation and use of toilets for the sake of sanitation and self-respect in *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* are everyday concerns. Cinema has great potential of touching the masses with its multisensory effect and vividness as compared to other modes of communication. Hence, such films play a positive social function especially in developing countries like India. In an interview about *Pad Man*, R. Balki says:

I feel that a film’s first job is to entertain. What is entertainment keeps changing from time to time. Today, people want to see things that are relevant to them... Films can choose to take whatever responsibility they want, but the primary responsibility is to entertain. The message cannot overpower the entertainment factor. (Jamkhandikar)

Nandini Ramnath explains in an article how Juhi Chaturvedi’s first penning down of a taboo but very important issue of sperm donation led to the making of *Vicky Donor* (2012), and then *Piku* (2015) discussed themes of “inter-generational conflict, anxieties over ageing and death, the difficulty of taking care of ailing parents, and the necessity of handling bodily malfunctions without emotion or embarrassment” (Ramnath). The winds of change and a conscious shift towards making the everyday worthy of discussion are evident through Hindi Cinema today.

These movies look at the nation through the eyes of real individuals, whether children, youth or elderly, from a point of view that is far removed from the illusions and traditions that have blinded us, cornered to the margins of hypocrisy. The problems raised in two movies, i.e. *Pad Man* (2018) and *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) may not sound real in this country (and many other rich and advanced countries in the West), but these are real problems of poor and rural areas in India and several other countries who are struggling with the basic issues like sanitation and hygiene. Other movies i.e., *Newton* (2017), *Hindi Medium* (2017), *Dangal* (2016), *Bareilly Ki Barfi* (2017), *Pink* (2016), etc. take up the issues of representation, identity, self, and ambition which may exist across class and area. I am genuinely convinced that these issues are present all over the world in varying degrees and variants.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017) is based on the life of Anita Narre. The film talks about the issue of open defecation in India. Anita realises that they do

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not have a toilet at her husband's place and decides to leave her husband's house until the toilet is made. She returned only after the toilet was built. She was later honoured with Sulabh International and awarded rupees 7 lakh. She was also honoured by the President of India. The district administration got a *pucca* toilet constructed at her in-law's place. The storyline has reference to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*. Through Anita, the film represents the misery of countless women in India's rural and slum areas. Anita was the first case in the country when any woman raised her voice for her self-respect and stuck to her mission till she could achieve her freedom from the humiliating practice of open defecation (Bhargava). Another woman, Puja, who in 2014 left her husband's house when her repeated demand to build a toilet was ignored by her husband and in-laws. It took her six months to finally take the step. Despite the intervention of the village panchayat in Bihar that directed her husband to construct a toilet, the deed wasn't done, and therefore, Puja decided it was better that she stayed at her parents' house than going to the open field every day before dawn to defecate. Puja was made a *Swachhta Doot* by her village panchayat (Smrity Sharma).

The film critiques our own way of living and insists that we look inwards and change ourselves according to the needs of the time. The message is loud and clear at the beginning of the film when Anupam Kher's character who is an agriculture scientist says, "I may have a dirty mind, but I have a clean heart." *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* is the story of a bicycle repair shop owner Keshav in a village Mandgaon near Mathura. Already 36, he falls in love with Jaya (much younger to him) and marries her. His village-like several villages in India, follows the practice of open defecation. Jaya, who comes from a modern educated family, does not accept it. She not only demands a toilet in her home, but also raises her voice to inspire other women to stand against the daily humiliation of defecating in the open. With consistent efforts, they are successful in convincing the administration as well as Keshav's father, who would not even think of constructing a toilet inside the house. The movie questions, critiques and interprets *Dharm*, culture, tradition. Characters cite from the *Manusmriti* to bring home the idea of sanitation and hygiene.

Pad Man (2018) was inspired by the real-life story of Arunachalam Muruganatham who when in 1998 saw his wife using old rags for sanitary pads, made a prototype that failed terribly. Thereafter, he used different materials and came up with new models for sanitary pads every month. Since there was a month gap between each prototype tested by his wife, he had no other choice except to ask for a few volunteers from a nearby medical college. Though a

few female students agreed to try them, they were shy to give him the right feedback. So Muruganatham decided to test them himself. It took him two years to find the right material and another four years to come up with a way to process it. The result was an easy-to-use machine for producing low-cost sanitary pads. With the imported machines costing more than \$5,00,000, Muruganatham's prototype came at just \$950. As a result, women's groups or schools can buy his machine, produce their own sanitary pads, and sell the surplus. In this way, Muruganatham's machine has created jobs for women in rural India. He has started a revolution in his own country, selling 1,300 machines to 27 states, and has recently begun exporting them to developing countries all over the world. Today, Muruganatham is one of India's most well-known social entrepreneurs and *Time* magazine named him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2014 ("Think Change India").

Pad Man is the story of Lakshmikant Chauhan from an Indian village who comes up with an idea of producing low-cost sanitary pads in order to improve menstrual health of women. For he has to fight with the taboos and stigma associated with the menstrual cycle (popularly called 'periods'). In fact, this is a problem all over the world:

Many non-governmental organisations around the globe, such as Days for Girls focus on the need for hygienic menstrual products and make and distribute reusable pads. The argument is that the provision of pads enables girls to stay in school. One in four girls in India misses one day or more in school during menstruation. (Kay)

Outright heroic response to a crisis may necessarily not be the forte of the protagonists in today's Hindi cinema, but it upholds their courage to sustain the struggle in quite an unheroic way by often drawing sustenance from equally unheroic individuals who choose to support them. These protagonists are not corrupt, criminals, or sinners, but tend to be vulnerable to temptations. Today's hero is not larger than the life image out to uphold an idealist flag. The protagonists are quite identifiable and their conflicts are easy to relate to. The male protagonist has no qualms in crying on a woman's shoulder, and the female takes tough and realistic decisions. The representations challenge and go beyond the normalisations. They are humanistic representations that go beyond the prejudices and stereotypes bringing in the ideas of neo-masculinity and neo-femininity. These protagonists are not necessarily to be liked, sympathised with, felt pity for or hated. The characters are balanced—they are just let be.

Per capita consumption of cinema has increased enormously. Grand narratives are succumbing to everyday incidents and experiences. One can see a kind of defiance about the young filmmakers who seem to be trying to rescue cinema from the clutches of clichés, formulae and ideology. It is secularisation and democratisation of cinema that has no design to ‘mould’ or ‘affect’ the masses. Stories are cherry-picked from every day of the middle class and below.

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