

**Genre Instability and Hybridization in Bollywood: An Analysis  
of *Sholay* via Alastair Fowler's Framework**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the Bollywood film *Sholay* (1975) through the theoretical framework of Alastair Fowler's genre studies, particularly his conception of genres as mutable and inherently unstable, while also engaging with Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic model and Steve Neale's theory of repetition and difference. By analysing *Sholay*'s hybridity, the study illustrates how the film both borrows from pre-existing genre traditions—most notably the spaghetti western—and simultaneously reconfigures them through indigenous Indian narrative structures, musical conventions, and performance traditions such as *tamasha*, *nautanki*, and the *Rasa* framework of classical poetics. Drawing from a combined synchronic and diachronic approach, the paper situates *Sholay*'s innovations within the broader history of Indian cinema, tracing specific influences from earlier films that shaped its romantic, tragic, and dacoit motifs. Furthermore, it examines how *Sholay* itself became a generative force, influencing character archetypes, dialogue, thematic motifs, and musical conventions in later Bollywood productions. The analysis demonstrates that *Sholay* is not a passive inheritor of genre forms but an active agent of genre transformation, thereby exemplifying Fowler's, Altman's, and Neale's theses that genres evolve through continuous modification, audience reception, and cultural exchange. The study highlights the necessity of viewing genres as dynamic, porous, and perpetually evolving.

**Keywords:** *Sholay* (1975), Spaghetti Western, Genre Theory, Masala Film, Genre Hybridity

## **Introduction**

Genre classification has long served as a fundamental tool in literary and cinematic criticism, offering a framework through which texts are interpreted, categorized, and situated within historical and cultural traditions. Yet, few works resist and reshape genre boundaries as compellingly as *Sholay* (1975), a film that occupies a singular space in Indian cinematic history. Upon its release, *Sholay* was hailed not only for its storytelling and technical innovation but also for its capacity to incorporate multiple narrative modes—action, adventure, romance, comedy, tragedy, and musical—into a coherent and captivating whole. The challenge of placing *Sholay* within a single generic category invites deeper theoretical inquiry, particularly through the lens of Alastair Fowler's theory of genres. In *Kinds of Literature* (1982), Fowler argues that genres are neither fixed nor rigid, but historically mutable and shaped by both convention and innovation. This paper takes up *Sholay* as a case study to explore the fluidity of genres, investigating how the film draws upon and transforms both indigenous and Western cinematic traditions. It also explores how, in doing so, the film not only reflects but actively participates in the evolution of genre itself.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* (1982) remains a foundational text in literary genre theory, particularly for its reconceptualization of genre as a historically evolving and functionally dynamic system. Fowler challenges the classical Aristotelian and neo-classical conceptions of genre as fixed, essentialist categories, proposing instead a model in which genres are "not timeless classes but changing historical phenomena" (Fowler 38). In this view, genres are best understood as fluid conventions, responsive to shifting cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts.

Fowler distinguishes between genres and modes, emphasizing that while genres are historically grounded literary kinds (e.g., epic, pastoral, satire), modes refer to recurring stylistic features or attitudes (e.g., comic, ironic, tragic). One of the most influential aspects of his theory is the emphasis on generic modulation—the idea that literary works rarely belong to a single genre but often combine or modify conventions from multiple traditions. He writes, "Every work modifies the genres it inherits" (Fowler 39), asserting that genre is not a passive container into which

content is poured, but a system actively shaped and reshaped by each new literary contribution.

Fowler criticizes formalist approaches to genre for their lack of historical awareness. He argues that genres are not defined by rigid formal features but by a constellation of conventions, expectations, and readerly competencies developed over time. This diachronic approach allows genre to be viewed as an ongoing negotiation between past conventions and present innovation. As he states, “Genres are not containers but communicative systems” (Fowler 256), suggesting that genre functions as a mediating structure between author, text, and audience.

Fowler's model is also particularly attentive to the role of the reader in genre formation. He insists that readers play an active role in identifying, interpreting, and even retroactively defining genres. This reception-based dimension of his theory anticipates later developments in reader-response and cultural studies. In this sense, genre is not simply a textual feature but a social and cognitive construct, shaped through repetition, recognition, and critical discourse.

While Fowler's work is deeply influential, some critics have found it overly reliant on literary-historical classification, making it less adaptable to contemporary or cross-media genres such as film or digital storytelling. Additionally, his taxonomic attention to literary kinds has been critiqued for leaning toward conservatism, potentially re-inscribing hierarchical literary values. Nevertheless, his insistence on genre's historicity and mutability laid important groundwork for modern genre theory, offering a flexible, nuanced framework that moves beyond prescriptive categories.

Fowler's ultimate contribution lies in destabilizing the notion of genre as static or universal. His theory enables scholars to see genre as a “series of recognitions” (Fowler 37) that evolve over time, dependent on both textual precedent and cultural context. In this way, genre becomes not a boundary but a bridge—linking tradition with transformation, and structure with innovation.

### ***Sholay and Genre Studies***

Released in 1975, *Sholay* is widely regarded as one of the most iconic and influential films in the history of Indian cinema. Directed by Ramesh Sippy and written by the celebrated screenwriting duo Salim–Javed, the film is often credited with redefining the landscape of mainstream Hindi cinema through its unprecedented scale, memorable characters, and hybrid narrative structure. Set in the fictional rural village of Ramgarh, the story follows two small-time criminals, Jai and Veeru, who are hired by a retired police officer to capture the notorious bandit Gabbar Singh. What unfolds is a cinematic tapestry that interweaves themes of justice, friendship, romance, revenge, comedy, and heroism. With its eclectic combination of genres—ranging from action and adventure to musical, comedy, and Western—*Sholay* not only achieved massive box office success but also became a cultural touchstone in India, its dialogues, characters, and music entering the collective consciousness. Over the decades, it has come to be widely studied as a defining example of the "masala film"—a term used in Indian cinema to describe movies that blend multiple genres to appeal to a broad audience demographic.

The classification of *Sholay* within a singular genre presents immediate challenges, as the film defies conventional taxonomies through its complex narrative structure and pronounced stylistic hybridity. At its core is the Western—a genre originating in American cinema—which centres on themes of frontier justice, lawlessness, rugged masculinity, and the moral dilemmas of civilization versus savagery, often set against the desolate landscapes of the American West. The Spaghetti Western, a European reinterpretation of this form, emerged in the 1960s through Italian directors such as Sergio Leone, characterized by morally ambiguous anti-heroes, stylized violence, minimalist dialogue, and atmospheric music by composers like Ennio Morricone. *Sholay* draws heavily from this subgenre, reimagining its aesthetic and thematic elements within an Indian context. Commonly described variously as an action-adventure, a romance, a comedy, a thriller, a musical, and a drama, *Sholay* simultaneously evokes the Spaghetti Western while resisting containment within any one generic label. Additionally, the film's dramatic style, strong emotional moments, and close male friendships have led some critics to view it through queer cinematic perspectives, making its genre classification even more complex. Such multiplicity renders *Sholay* an ideal object of study for an application of Alastair Fowler's theory of genre, wherein he posits that genres are

historically mutable, functionally adaptive, and inherently unstable. Fowler's assertion that genres are not fixed categories but rather flexible conventions shaped by socio-historical contexts finds concrete exemplification in *Sholay*, a film that synthesizes disparate genre elements into a cohesive, though fluid, narrative form. Through a critical examination of the film's multiple generic inflections, it becomes possible to appreciate how *Sholay* not only participates in existing genre traditions but also inaugurates a distinctly localized genre form—the "masala film"—characterized by an intentional amalgamation of varied narrative and stylistic registers designed to maximize popular appeal. In this respect, *Sholay* serves not merely as a filmic text but as a cultural phenomenon through which the instability and evolutionary nature of genre, as theorized by Fowler, may be critically apprehended.

A study of the socio-cultural milieu in which *Sholay* was produced suggests that the film functioned not as a passive participant within pre-existing generic frameworks, but rather as an active modulator of genre conventions. *Sholay* was not constructed through strict adherence to any single genre prevalent at the time; instead, it strategically borrowed elements from multiple genres and modified them, thereby creating a new, hybridized form. The individual narrative and stylistic elements employed in the film were, in themselves, not unprecedented; it was their amalgamation, through deliberate variation and playful reconfiguration, that culminated in the appearance of a seemingly novel genre. As Alastair Fowler asserts, "only variations or modifications of convention have literary significance," a principle that *Sholay* exemplifies with remarkable clarity.

This phenomenon also sheds light on the film's immediate and enduring popularity among a broad spectrum of viewers. Crucially, it points to the active role of the audience in the process of genre formation and classification. It is the viewer who, through processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation, discerns the genre into which a cultural artifact may be situated. In the case of *Sholay*, audiences and critics alike have retrospectively classified the film under the emergent category of the "masala film," a genre distinguished precisely by its eclectic amalgamation of disparate forms. Whether or not the director, Ramesh Sippy, consciously intended to craft a deliberately multi-generic film remains a matter of speculation. It appears

more plausible that the film's generic plurality was driven by an imperative to comprehensively entertain a heterogeneous audience. Nevertheless, according to Fowler's model, it is ultimately the interpretive community—the audience—that legitimizes a text's generic identity. The naming and stabilization of genres, therefore, occur not at the moment of creation but in the subsequent reception and codification by the viewing public.

Fowler, in *Kinds of Literature*, asserts that "every literary work changes the genres it relates to." (Fowler 23) Applying this principle to *Sholay* necessitates first understanding the historical development of the film's genre identity, particularly its classification as a masala film. A purely synchronic approach to genre analysis, examining *Sholay* exclusively within the cultural and cinematic landscape of 1975, would portray the film as an unparalleled work of creative genius. In its year of release, *Sholay* stood distinct; although 1975 witnessed several notable film releases, including Yash Chopra's *Deewaar*—a significant crime-drama—none rivaled *Sholay* in terms of its widespread popular and critical acclaim. Compared to its contemporaries, *Sholay* appears to inaugurate an entirely new mode of filmmaking, necessitating an understanding of its genre not only in relation to its immediate context but also through broader temporal and spatial frameworks.

In this regard, Fowler's insistence that good criticism must avoid the false binary of "synchronicity versus diachronicity" but rather seek to "combine both these opposites" (Fowler 49) becomes particularly salient. A diachronic approach to *Sholay's* genre reveals the film's deep intertextual affiliations with earlier cinematic traditions, particularly the American Western and its Italian variant, the spaghetti western. While the early 1970s Indian film industry was dominated by genres such as romance, family drama, and comedy—as evidenced by films like *Bobby* (1973), *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974), *Johnny Mera Naam* (1970), and *Mere Jeevan Saathi* (1972)—the genre of action-adventure had not yet achieved a distinct foothold. In this context, *Sholay* might initially appear to have introduced and indigenized action-adventure within mainstream Hindi cinema.

However, when viewed diachronically, *Sholay's* engagement with genre becomes more legible as an adaptive appropriation of the Western and spaghetti

western traditions popularized in America during the 1960s and early 1970s. Notably, the film exhibits extensive influences from Sergio Leone's works, particularly *The Dollars Trilogy*—*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)—as well as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). The barren, rocky landscape, the portrayal of a ruthless bandit terrorizing a helpless rural community, the pervading atmosphere of menace and moral ambiguity, the stylized violence, and even specific aesthetic elements such as the haunting swing motif in the background score, bear a striking resemblance to Leone's cinematic world. Furthermore, *Sholay* incorporates structural and characterological motifs from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, including the harmonica-playing protagonist and the prominent figure of a widowed female lead. According to Fowler, such "points of resemblance" constitute the foundational markers of genre affiliation, even as the new work inevitably introduces significant innovations (Fowler 55). In the case of *Sholay*, the transplantation of the spaghetti western genre into the Indian socio-cultural milieu resulted in substantial transformation: the film recontextualized the tropes of the Western within the emotional, familial, and musical frameworks of Indian popular cinema. Thus, while the genealogy of *Sholay* is traceable to American and Italian cinematic traditions, its final form embodies a distinctly Indian sensibility. This process exemplifies Fowler's theory of the inherent instability, mobility, and cultural permeability of genres. As *Sholay* demonstrates, genres are not static categories but dynamic, evolving systems that travel across cultures, adapting and hybridizing in response to new historical and social conditions.

Fowler's emphasis on historicity and mutability provides a flexible interpretive frame, but it is equally valuable to consider Rick Altman's "semantic/syntactic" model and Steve Neale's theory of "repetition and difference." Altman distinguishes between the semantic elements of a genre—its iconography, settings, and character types—and its syntactic elements, or the structural relationships that organise these elements into a coherent system (Altman 27). This model allows us to see *Sholay* not merely as a bricolage of Western tropes and Indian melodrama, but as a text that recombines semantic features (e.g., guns, dacoits, barren landscapes) with syntactic frameworks derived from both the revenge saga and the Bollywood romance. Neale similarly argues that "genres are not systems;

they are processes” in which the balance of repetition and difference maintains both recognisability and novelty (Neale 56). Applying Neale’s framework to *Sholay* underscores how the film sustains audience engagement through familiar masala conventions while simultaneously introducing unexpected tonal juxtapositions and character arcs that prevent generic stasis.

While *Sholay* is not a direct adaptation of any single spaghetti western, it is nevertheless deeply influenced by the genre’s stylistic and thematic conventions. Despite these clear affiliations, several crucial points of departure distinguish *Sholay* from its Western counterparts. Although the setting, iconography, and certain character traits reflect borrowings from the western tradition, the narrative structure and thematic concerns diverge substantially. In *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), for instance, the plot revolves around a ruthless assassin employed by a railroad company to eliminate a widow who inherits strategically valuable land, with her protection undertaken by an enigmatic stranger allied with a group of desperadoes. *Sholay*, by contrast, centers on a retired police officer’s quest for vengeance against the bandit Gabbar Singh, who had brutally murdered his entire family. The officer enlists the services of two outlaws to capture Gabbar, embedding the narrative in a moral framework of justice and retribution absent from the morally ambiguous universe of the spaghetti western.

Beyond narrative divergence, *Sholay* also introduces several additional elements that further differentiate it from its Western progenitors. The romantic subplots involving the two male protagonists, the portrayal of deep male friendship, the integration of song-and-dance sequences, and the inclusion of comic interludes—such as the scenes set in the jail, atop the water tank (the "*taanki*" scene), and within the temple—mark significant departures from the stark, often grim atmosphere characteristic of spaghetti westerns. These additions were likely motivated by commercial considerations, reflecting an astute awareness of contemporary audience expectations in Indian cinema. In an era when melodrama, romance, and musical interludes dominated popular Hindi films, the release of a purely action-driven narrative would have been a considerable financial risk. By incorporating a plurality of genres within a single narrative framework, *Sholay* succeeded in appealing to a broader demographic, ultimately ensuring its extraordinary box office success. As

Tzvetan Todorov puts it, "A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination." (Todorov, 36)

*Sholay* draws not only from international cinematic traditions but also from indigenous narrative and thematic conventions well established in Indian cinema. The subplot involving a protagonist's romance with a widow was not without precedent: films such as *Phool Aur Patthar* (1966) and *Kati Patang* (1970) had previously explored similar themes. Likewise, the intense and emotionally charged friendships between male protagonists had been prominently depicted in earlier works such as *Dosti* (1964), *Sangam* (1964), and *Namak Haraam* (1973). The musical conventions of Bollywood are equally evident in *Sholay*; the inclusion of multiple songs and elaborate choreographed sequences was a normative expectation in mainstream Hindi cinema, and *Sholay* adhered to this formula. The cabaret performance by Helen in the song "*Mehbooba O Mehbooba*" was emblematic of a trend already popularized through earlier songs such as "*O Haseena Zulfonwali*," "*Piya Tu Ab To Aaja*," "*Is Duniya Mein Jeena Ho To*," and "*Aa Jaane Jaa*."

The hybridity of *Sholay* becomes even more intelligible when viewed in light of indigenous narrative frameworks such as the *Rasa* theory from classical Sanskrit poetics, which privileges the coexistence of multiple emotional registers within a single work. The film's seamless oscillation between *śṛṅgāra* (romantic love), *vīra* (heroism), and *karuṇā* (pathos) mirrors the integrative dramaturgy of traditional Indian theatre, from *Nāṭyaśāstra*-inspired folk forms to the Parsi stage of the late nineteenth century. Likewise, the incorporation of elaborate song sequences reflects not only commercial imperatives but also the continuities of performative traditions such as the *tamasha* and *nautanki*, which historically fused music, comedy, and narrative spectacle into popular entertainment.

In addition to these theatrical and folk traditions, *Sholay* draws significantly from earlier Indian films that had already established narrative and stylistic patterns later woven into its fabric. The romantic subplot between Veeru and Basanti, for instance, evokes the spirited heroines of films like *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) and *Junglee* (1961), where female leads combined charm with assertiveness. Similarly, the figure of the widowed Radha resonates with portrayals in *Bandini* (1963) and

*Kati Patang* (1970), where widowhood becomes a site of both vulnerability and moral strength. The camaraderie between Jai and Veeru recalls the intense male friendships depicted in *Dosti* (1964) and *Namak Haraam* (1973), while the tragic undercurrent of revenge and loss parallels narratives from *Madhumati* (1958) and *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* (1971). Even the film's musical interludes, from exuberant dance numbers to soulful ballads, can be linked to conventions perfected in the 1960s Bollywood musicals, ensuring that while Sholay embraced foreign influences, it remained deeply anchored in the idioms, tropes, and audience expectations shaped by decades of Indian cinematic history.

In this respect, Sholay's generic hybridity can be seen as part of a long lineage of Indian performative and cinematic practices rather than merely as a postmodern pastiche of global genres. Thus, *Sholay* emerges not as an isolated innovation, but as a complex cultural artefact—one that synthesizes global cinematic influences with indigenous traditions, selectively appropriating and transforming genre conventions to produce a work that is simultaneously familiar and novel. In doing so, it substantiates Fowler's contention that genres are mutable, mobile, and perpetually reshaped by the cultural contexts in which they are received and reimagined.

Returning to Fowler's assertion that "every literary work changes the genres it relates to," (Fowler 23) it becomes evident that Sholay not only reflects influences from pre-existing genres but also actively reshaped the trajectory of popular Indian cinema in its aftermath. The film's impact extends beyond its initial borrowings; it introduced enduring archetypes and narrative motifs that became integral to Bollywood's subsequent generic landscape. The character of Gabbar Singh, for instance, established a model for the cinematic villain: menacing yet charismatic, brutal yet memorable. Similarly, the portrayal of Basanti inaugurated the popular trope of the vivacious, talkative female protagonist—a characterization that would recur frequently in later films.

In addition to its intertextual borrowings and formal innovations, *Sholay's* genre identity was also shaped by its reception and cultural afterlife—a key element in Alastair Fowler's model of genre evolution. According to Fowler, genres are not

solely constructed at the moment of composition, but are significantly defined and redefined through audience interaction and critical discourse over time (Fowler 23.) *Sholay*'s extraordinary popularity and enduring presence in Indian popular culture have contributed to its retroactive identification as the quintessential "masala film." Audience memory—manifested in the quoting of its dialogues, imitation of its characters, and replication of its scenes in subsequent media—has played a vital role in solidifying its generic status. This highlights the performative aspect of genre: a film does not merely belong to a genre, but comes to exemplify one through cultural repetition, audience expectation, and historical embedding. As such, *Sholay* demonstrates that genre is as much a product of reception and social memory as it is of textual composition.

The cultural imprint of *Sholay* is further observable in the afterlife of its dialogues, which attained iconic status and were referenced, echoed, and parodied in subsequent films such as *Ram Lakhan* (1989), *Maine Pyaar Kiya* (1989), *Main Hoon Na* (2004), and *Musafir* (2004). Moreover, while song-and-dance sequences have long been a staple of Bollywood, *Sholay* introduced the specific motif of Holi celebrations as a cinematic set piece, a tradition that has persisted in popular cinema, appearing in films such as *Silsila* (1981), *Darr* (1993), *Baghban* (2003), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), and more recently, "Balam Pichkari" in *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013). *Sholay*, therefore, stands not only as a cinematic landmark but also as a genre-defining force that fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of popular Hindi cinema. Its innovative integration of multiple genres—action, romance, comedy, musical, and melodrama—became a template for the masala film, a format that would dominate Bollywood for decades to follow. The film's narrative structure, character archetypes, and tonal shifts have echoed in countless productions, from action-packed blockbusters to romantic musicals and revenge sagas. The legacy of *Sholay* is evident in its enduring dialogues, iconic villainy, festive musical sequences, and portrayal of emotionally charged friendships—each of which became conventions emulated and reimagined in later films. More than a product of its time, *Sholay* actively shaped the grammar of mainstream Indian cinema by validating genre hybridity as a mode of mass entertainment. In doing so, it substantiates Alastair Fowler's argument that literary and cinematic works not only inherit genres but modify them, leaving behind new forms that subsequent texts will, in turn, inherit

and transform. *Sholay*, therefore, was not merely a film of influence but a film of foundational genre-making. As director Shekhar Kapur states, "There has never been a more defining film on the Indian screen. Indian film history can be divided into *Sholay* BC and *Sholay* AD."

Scholarly discourse on genre hybridity in Indian cinema has consistently recognised *Sholay* as a pivotal text. Tejaswini Ganti notes that Bollywood's masala format "operates by freely combining elements from disparate narrative traditions to appeal to heterogeneous audiences" (Ganti 143), while Ravi Vasudevan situates such hybridity within the political economy of the Indian film industry, which negotiates between regional tastes, star personae, and transnational influences (Vasudevan 214). By foregrounding these academic perspectives alongside Fowler, Altman, and Neale, it becomes clear that *Sholay*'s genre identity is not reducible to Western influence alone but emerges from a dynamic interplay between global cinematic forms and deeply rooted Indian narrative and musical structures.

### **Conclusion**

*Sholay* exemplifies Fowler's broader theoretical insight: the past shapes the present, yet the present, through its reinterpretations and adaptations, retroactively reshapes our understanding of the past. As later films build upon the conventions inaugurated or popularized by *Sholay*, the film itself is re-evaluated and re-contextualized within the evolving cinematic canon. Thus, *Sholay* is simultaneously a product of its influences and a progenitor of new genre conventions, illustrating the dynamic reciprocity between texts and their generic affiliations across time.

A genre study of *Sholay* therefore illuminates Fowler's central contention regarding the instability and permeability of genres. Genres cannot be conceived as rigid, self-contained categories fixed within a particular temporal or cultural moment. Rather, they must be understood as fluid, evolving, and porous formations, continually reshaped by historical contingencies, cultural exchanges, and audience receptions. To study a genre, then, is to engage with a living, mutable process, one that resists closure and demands an openness to complexity, hybridity, and transformation.

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