

An Invocation to Royal Memories: Bollywood and its Epic Narratives

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Abstract

As a form of creatively engaging art and storytelling technique, movies continue to reign the arena with their impeccable visual capabilities and extensive narrative practices. Albeit embarking on the journey by eliciting plots from the mythologies, Bollywood, as a part of Indian cinema, has progressed to make movies dealing with contemporary social issues and dominant political ideologies. Nonetheless, the industry that eventually burgeoned has never stopped making movies of historical themes and epic stature. This paper aims to find the reason behind the massive reception of these films and argue that Bollywood, through the representation of royal themes, institutionalizes the imperial memories, gratifies the prosthetic memory of the audience, and significantly contributes to its projection as the residual culture.

Keywords: Bollywood, Epic Narrative, Memory, Prosthetic Memory, Residual Culture.

Introduction

Art records and reflects diverse elements in nature, purpose, and existence, and as a creative endeavor, art sometimes precipitates stories or can even fabricate the existing ones. As a form of creatively engaging skill and storytelling technique, movies continue to reign the arena with their impeccable visual capabilities and extensive narrative practices. Rooted in the manner and style of the revered art form of theatre, cinema is deemed and celebrated as the microcosm of the natural world. At the same time, it enjoys the indulgence of fictitious renderings and a promise of perpetuation.

Indian cinema, with its remarkable contributions, has attained a position of prominence when it comes to the accounting of world cinema and its relevance as an art form. Cinema and its myriad aspects have influenced Indians to a great extent that it finds a reflection in every division of Indian society. As opined by Priya Jaikumar, "film calibrates the lives of Indians who have followed it for years, marking their decades and moods with fashions, dialogues, and lyrics spawned by the mammoth industry." (24)

Films are no longer perceived as a medium of entertainment alone. They are subjected to rigorous critical analyses under

the public purview and are a good topic that initiates dialogues among intellectuals. As a discourse, films are now studied from a multi-disciplinary approach striving to decode its multiple layers and how they affect, mold, and evolve the human mind's numerous perceptions. The Indian film industry has produced some incredible movies discussing royal families. Bollywood tops the list with many blockbusters and critically acclaimed movies as old as *Mughal-e-Azam*, released in 1960 to *Tanhaji* in 2020. The reason why Bollywood makes movies repeatedly on the theme of royalty is something to be probed into, and its effects on the audience are seldom acknowledged. This paper aims to argue that Bollywood, through the representation of royal themes, institutionalizes the imperial memories, gratifies the prosthetic memory of the audience, and significantly contributes to its projection as the residual culture.

Once Upon a Time There Lived a King...

Chronicles of regality and the stories that reflect the trials and tribulations of the monarch, the royalists, or the empire at large have always been a preferred theme among the performing artists and art lovers. From the oral to the literary form and from that to the visual arena, stories of royalty have evolved as a troupe of universal appeal. Despite the problematic definitions of the term *epic*, movies of such grand stature continue to be labeled as epic narratives and produced in different languages. These movies are incredibly appealing to the audience and generate huge revenue. They are two reasons why

production companies and filmmakers choose to make movies that recount such stories. Hollywood films like *Gladiator* (2000), *300* (2003), *Troy* (2004), and many more of it that followed in terms of the grand spectacle and the global impact it created to the popular series running on the different online platforms like *The Crown* (Netflix), *Bridgerton* (Netflix), *The Game of Thrones* (Disney + Hotstar) et cetera vouch on the demand and the marketability of royal narratives.

Andrew B.R. Elliott briefs in the Introduction of *The Return of the Epic Filmon* how *Gladiator*, a movie released in the year 2000, revived the genre of epic in Hollywood after three decades of slumber. (01) The pattern finds a parallel in Bollywood as well. *Mughal-e-Azam*, a blockbuster Hindi film released in 1960, surprised the cinema lovers with its extravaganza in terms of the setting, performance, visual techniques, and the art that went into its making. The film evolved into a cult classic and exerted so much impact on the viewers that the story of the star-crossed lovers Anarkali and Prince Saleem got celebrated as a real one despite proper historical backing. Nonetheless, the Hindi film industry could not produce many such epic narratives till 2000, which marked the beginning of many magnificent royal records in Bollywood.

According to James Chapman, it is "a truth universally acknowledged... that a historical feature film will often have as much to say about the present in which it was made as about the past in which it was

set.” (qt. in *The Return of the Epic*¹⁰) Discussions on the presentism of historical narratives throw light on the myriad ways these stories satisfy the audience and ignite a sense of grandeur and nostalgia. Across the world, stories that discuss the life of kings, queens, princes, and princesses are an essential part of folklore and a crucial part of children's literature. The same stories that we have grown up listening to and reading continue to feed our fancies in adulthood.

The trend trailblazed by the makers of *Mughal-e-Azam* of creating movies based on imperial themes found a progression, especially after the year 2000, resulting in some of the most commercially successful films of the last two decades. These are *Asoka* (2001), *Zubeidaa* (2001), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), *Veer* (2010), *Khushoorat* (2014), *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* (2015), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), *Padmavaat* (2018), *Manikarnika* (2019), *Tanhaji* (2020) and several other movies that are in the stages of pre-production and post-production. As a creative endeavor, the makers usually undertake intensive research to maintain the accuracy of data and avoid any factual fallacy, as any misrepresentation of popular history or of what is perceived as the truth would be regarded as controversial and can lead to much controversy. Notwithstanding this, altercations have emerged associated with the making of some of these films. But that has not stopped makers from working on such themes and viewers from watching them. Reviews on online information databases reflect how the audiences receive these movies and examine them to study the

large ensemble of cast and the many subplots involved.

Memory, Prosthetic Memory, and Bollywood

Remembering is an active process, deeply rooted in the present, that helps one traverse through the labyrinths of the past and attributes and establishes meanings and sustenance to it. As posited by the theorists and practitioners of memory studies, memory can wield the thoughts and perceptions of an individual and can alter the configuration of the connection the person has with the past and the present. In the introductory part of the book *Memory in Culture*, Astrid Erll says,

Memories are not true-to-life images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled. Remembering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present... Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present. (08)

Nevertheless, as a product of mass culture, cinema manifests and commodifies memory in the form of images and incites and shapes the intimate memory of an individual without any intentional act of remembering. Mass media, especially cinema, with its vivid pictorial representations, alluring settings, and its inherent masquerading abilities, leads to a

dream-like experience under the charm of which a person develops empathetic feelings towards the characters and the story. Cinema as a form of mass media, according to Alison Landsberg, generates empathy through the production and dissemination of memory, and a person can experience a deep connection of profound relevance with unlived experiences. This phenomenon, termed 'Prosthetic Memory' by Alison Lansberg, bridges "the temporal chasms that separate individuals from the meaningful and potentially interpellation events of the past." (148)

Mass media, be it in any form, has the strong potential to bring the audience under a single canopy and thus attribute a sense of uniformity and oneness. This is pertinent in the case of cross-temporal dimensions as it is in the case of cross-cultural scenarios. Just the way cinema affects how an individual identifies themselves with the temporal and spatial aspects of what is shown on the screen; it can shape or alter the person's concepts, thoughts, and perceptions and even generate memories. According to Lay Mary, Landsberg argues "that the mass media can alter the way modern audiences construct memories, a process that provides a very different way of understanding and acting in the world." (657). Bollywood, with its mighty canvas and enormous potential, especially in terms of technical particulars, can go into the detailing required to bring royalty and royal life on the screen. Nevertheless, when cinema claims to demonstrate the past that the audience has known only through folklores, paintings,

and photographs, its proclamation of the integrity of the representation has little to do with the evolution of the prosthetic memory in a person.

When memories are derived from the past lived experiences and have an organic nature, prosthetic memories are artificial, as the name suggests, and are created as a consequence of an encounter with the past events through the mass media that assures precision and are realistic. Prosthetic memory is induced while witnessing the replica and not experiencing the actual event. As Landsberg opines,

These mass cultural commodities, these images, and narratives about the past [that] are mediated through the cultural, political, and social worlds of individuals...profoundly [affect] an individual's subjectivity. The radical potential of prosthetic memory derives from the fact that the subjectivities they produce are not 'natural'....(151)

Indians have constantly been exposed to the stories of royal life. The bedtime stories heard in childhood, the first work of fiction read, visits to palaces and museums, and the rigorous discussions during History classes have deeply etched imperial life and its elements in our minds. From these personal accounts of memories, prosthetic memories of royalty emerge from the sense of contiguousness provided by cinematic effects. Bollywood used to score high in terms of cinematic impacts and in the matters of wielding projects that

demanding huge expenses. And these being imperatives when it comes to artworks discussing royal life, Bollywood could afford and complete such films. Unlike the other regional film industries in this country, Bollywood has always had the advantage of the language Hindi, which is relatively known by many. All these reasons have conjured up immense popularity among cinema enthusiasts. Hence, makers find it less problematic a task to invest in Bollywood, thus making it a conducive environment for movies that deal with royal themes.

Of the several Bollywood movies that portray royal life and showcase stories about the erstwhile royal dynasties, some have reaped massive profits, great critical acclaim, and classic cult status. In contrast, the rest haven't received much veneration or enormous budgetary benefits. Despite this, films continue to be made on the same theme, providing a minimum guarantee to the audience and the makers. Cinema can bring temporally, spatially, and ideologically distant subjects to a closer vicinity and present the audience with the exquisite experience of witnessing those events. Palaces and royal sectors have always been closed spaces to which the laypeople never had access. The lofty constructions of the courts and related infrastructures have only aggravated the distinction between the nobles and the laypeople, already defined by the supreme and sovereign powers of the former. When the concrete entities, the glory and the splendor of royal life that one has imagined, heard, or read about are seen on the screen

in life-like proportions, it exerts an incredible impact on the human psyche and leaves an indelible mark on it. The experience of watching an epic narrative that depicts a story that we are familiar with or presents an ambiance that we have always wanted to view and know from proximity adds more details to the already existing repertoire of information and can even be attributed to our intimate memories.

Commenting on the theoretical significance of the concept of 'Prosthetic Memory,' Yi Sou highlights that.

Landsberg agrees that memory is socially constructed but emphasizes that the form in which the past is remembered has been transformed drastically in the recent decades...Furthermore, a memory that does not come from personal experience is more effectively produced and transferred by mass cultural technologies. Even if this type of memory is filled with mediated images and narratives, Landsberg believes it functions as organic memory, configuring and reconfiguring people's understanding of ethical relationships. (131)

This configuration and reconfiguration, in turn, would provide the person concerned with a sense of gratification for what has been perceived as unapproachable is brought to the vicinity of a theatre and through televisions, computers, and mobiles. This sense of

gratification consequently elevates the viewer to a higher pedestal of egoistic satisfaction. When epic narratives in foreign languages come with an estrangement effect caused due to the element of "other" in terms of the cultural and mythical differences, epic records in Bollywood succeed in imparting a feeling of unity by presenting the viewers with recognizable characters and familiar plot and setting.

The Royal Past that Still Breathes

The independence and attainment of freedom from British colonial rule and the subsequent implementation of democracy did not make India forget its glorious imperial past. Amidst the voices that reflected/reflect the atrocities and discriminations of the princely states were/are heard the ones that present the royal past as a time of righteousness and the royal members as highly virtuous people. The theme of royalty and life in the palace has always enjoyed a pre-eminent status regarding the work of art and literature and the society at large. Albeit the political changes that have swept the Indian terrain, the royal past enjoys much recognition. It is often celebrated for its material and ideological contributions to society, thus being a residual culture, if not the dominant one.

As Raymond Williams explains in his seminal work *Marxism and Literature*, "the residual...has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present." (122) While palaces, museums, and other such

architectural and cultural artifacts echo the past from the past, artworks like cinema that probe into the annals of the royal past echo its significance from a point in the present. Royalty and its accompanying elements are always considered analogous to the grandeur and to live life on that scale is something many people dream of. With its meticulous presentation of the setting and ambiance, cinema gives laypeople a model to design their lives on the royal pattern.

Thus specific experiences, meanings, and values that cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture are nevertheless lived and practiced based on the residue...which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture...(Williams 122)

Many grand Indian weddings have espoused the idea of royal themes based on the epic narratives, where the wedding happens against a majestic backdrop inspired by any movie and where the bride and the groom would be in royal attires. These contemporary practices that the royal families once exclusively owned, besides gratifying a sense of grandeur, at least in some people, keep that culture from the past alive. Every time a movie is made based on a historical fact, that part of the history will be revisited at least twice, once before its production by the makers and then by the viewers after its release, for verification. And this is even more crucial when it comes to epic narratives as India is a

conglomeration of many erstwhile princely states. Despite the similarities, these royal families belong to different religions, regions, and cultural milieus, and hence it involves the sentiments and emotions of many.

Any discussion on the royal past foregrounds their inherent relevance, and these discussions are even more popular when they are based on the movies. For instance, the film *Jodhaa Akbar*, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, faced rampant opprobrium from a section of the society for representing a Hindu-Muslim love story claiming an absence of evidence to prove that. Nevertheless, the movie became a hit, and the many elements, including the costume design, garnered much appreciation and became a prototype for many films that followed and for many real-life events. The movie *Padmaavat*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bansali, also had to fight much censure, and these controversies have only made these movies more popular. Every time a film refers to the royal past, however insignificant it is, it breathes life to the royal elements. When people discuss the relevance or irrelevance of such epic narratives, royalty emerges and reinforces as a prominent residual culture.

Conclusion

The concept of royalty is often juxtaposed with supreme power, incredible wealth, and a lifestyle of premier quality and comfort. The terms king, queen, prince, and princess have now acquired the form of an epithet and as words of endearment. This corroborates that royalty and things

correlated to royalty appease the feeling of grandeur and significance in those who have always admired the royal past and their cultural contributions. Cinema has unlatched the doors to the royal world that have been unprecedentedly shut from the familiar eyes. The precise depiction of the royal characteristics that cinema accomplishes with its extensive visual possibilities and narrative methods has drawn more audiences to it. As a popular art form, cinema helps institutionalize the grandeur of royalty and takes it across regions and cultures. Bollywood's epic narratives and movies discussing royalty either highlight a known history or unveil one hidden in the desolate pages of time.

Nevertheless, the way Indian history, however far-fetched it may appear, is received by cinema-goers substantiate the point that it kindles or rekindles prosthetic memories about the royal past that the people of this country have grown up listening to and discerning. The release of such movies regularly maintains the tempo of establishing and reinforcing the significance of the royal past by gratifying the prosthetic memory of the people who prefer to watch epic narratives. Thus, in this democratic country, cinema and Bollywood, in particular, regulate the relevance of this country's erstwhile royal families and the imperial past amidst the many hegemonic voices and celebrates it as a significant residual culture.

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