

Article

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## Reconceptualising the Hero in Tinsel Town: A Study of New Bollywood



*Masaan*

In India *Hatke* cinema is challenging the normative Bollywood of the present but also perhaps unconsciously the Bollywood of the past, which has rendered the reigning texts of romance or revenge sagas almost obsolete. These earlier films portrayed a world that was at once black or white with no shades of grey in between, at the same time portraying a world that had lost touch with reality. On the other hand, *Hatke* cinema provides records of the barely perceptive changes in people's daily experiences, rather than landmark events. Also, the directors of these films are free to experiment with their ideas without giving into too much of commercial pressures with the result that they are penning some unusual and bold storylines, sometimes with the marginalised figure of the woman replacing the man as the 'hero' of the film. The New Age Hero figure in Bollywood is the common man/woman and the perspective is largely a Subaltern's.

The arrival of *Hatke* cinema on the Indian screen dealt a blow to the normative Bollywood of

black and white - the hero vs. the villain, the romances as well as the middle-class cinema of the earlier years. No longer niche, it has come to occupy an important place along with the commercial films. What *Hatke* cinema did was firstly to change the way the audience looked at the construct of the hero prevalent in Bollywood for so long - either the patriotic kind as demanded by a nationalist cinema of the 50s or the 'Angry Man' kind in the 70s and the 80s popularized by Amitabh Bachchan, followed by the quintessential chocolate boy hero that Amir Khan or Salman Khan or Shahrukh Khan represented in the 80s, the 90s and even beyond into the 2000s.

In the 1950s the 'hero' in Hindi films acted as the crusader figure for the nation and was hopeful about his future - the enemy was the villain - a stereotyped figure again, who stands in for the nation's problems. Along with the changes dealt to the hero figure, the villain figure too underwent changes as did the national problems in these formula-based films. The ideal male hero rescued the

nation from imminent danger and in his personal narrative the nation and the family coalesced into one. In these films, sometimes these enemies took the form of unprincipled profiteers as in the 50s, foreign aggressors in the 60s (read China and Pakistan which led to a number of wars for the fledgling nation India), smugglers in the 70s, separatist terrorists and politicians in the 80s and the authoritarian patriarchs in the 1990s.



*Sholay*

Like all mythic heroes, the typical hero of Hindi cinema upheld the law and was on the side of the “good”, or sometimes he was the heroic outlaw who undertook dangerous journeys (to cite an example, Jai and Veeru’s in the 1970 blockbuster *Sholay* in which they aided the handicapped *thakur saab* Sanjeev Kumar, to fight the exploitative and evil dacoit Gabbar Singh) who took risks and battled evil forces to return victorious, not only winning glory but romantic love as well-read Veeru’s character in *Sholay*.

Raj Kapoor’s *Sri420* is an outstanding example of this formula used by Bollywood to the hilt in the 50s. The film upheld the Nehruvian vision which was robust and vital at that time and which held out a lot of promise. The hero singlehandedly solved the nation’s crises by displaying physical and moral courage. Shyam Benegal one of the iconic directors of art cinema in India is of the opinion that a sense of idealism pervaded Indian cinema right up to the 1960s.

In the 1980s Bollywood came to be dominated by the ‘Angry man’ phenomenon made hugely popular by the star persona of Amitabh Bachchan. In fact, the two are so interlinked and intertwined that one finds it difficult to read the two separately. He is described as the “first urban-

industrial man in Indian popular cinema, one who made the earlier chocolate pie heroes obsolete.” (Mazumdar 2007: 9) Javed Akhtar who along with Salim Khan scripted most of these angry man films attributes the genre’s success to a breakdown of the Indian legal system and also of a traditional lifestyle in India which was slowly giving way to urban sensibility, not acceptable to many. It is the quintessential sense of loss that drives these narratives forward along with the absence of the father figure and the son’s deep love for the mother in which he inevitably either rescued her from being humiliated by the father figure or avenging the wrongs done to her by society in the absence of a protective partner.

But the ‘hero’ in these newer films and I’m referring to *Hatke* cinema here is not a formula based hero, he or she’s even less a nationalist angst driven one, in fact, he/she is a marginalised figure - almost an antihero - a figure who earlier could not have been conceived to be a hero in a film releasing to the national audience. In other words, *Hatke* cinema put an end to the stereotyping of the hero figure in Hindi cinema.

The antihero can be seen as a performative figure that emerges from a cynical political culture in which the division between “good” and “evil” is becoming increasingly blurred. Elin Diamond (1996: 6) suggests that performance “could produce consciousness, make meanings, provokes contestation.”

To produce new sites of contestation it becomes important not only to read the context within which the production and reception of the films are entrenched but also to make sense of how the socio-cultural milieu is being made use of in these narratives. These films are no longer the romanticized versions of reality as depicted on celluloid, eagerly lapped up by its audience for portraying non reality and used as a means of escape by its audience. The dialogues in these films are sharp and hard hitting and are not synthetic in nature, instead idioms and everyday language is used and spoken by common men and women. There is the spatial positioning of the hero through which the exploration of the hero’s internal thoughts and conflicts are enhanced by

camera movements, also bettered to a certain degree through dialogues as well that interlock the external and the internal worlds. These films turn out to be sites in which there is a connection between the political life which also spills over into the social text.

What is also interesting is the fact that these films make a bid to look and feel different too-usually a mainstream hero is never seen to play the lead character in these films, instead the heroes are nondescript looking men – if we go back a little in time Irrfan as Paan Singh along with Nawazuddin Siddiqui as Faizal Khan in *Gangs of Wasseypur* might match our conception of what these films are all about or who they come to represent. In both *Kahaani* and *The Dirty Picture* the woman is the protagonist - both played by Vidya Balan with elan.

In a paradigm shift, even if mainstream actors like Vidya Balan and Akshay Kumar (in *Special 26*) play the lead, they play roles that are largely deglamourised ones. The soundscape of these films is different as well, with regional languages such as Bundeli and Bhojpuri challenging the hierarchy of the dominant discourse of Hindi and replacing it, but still playing to packed audiences and garnering rave reviews. Gali galoj and folk tunes are also a part of these films as also are gunshots and violence.

And as far as aesthetics are concerned, in a reversal of sorts, commercial film heroes with conventional good looks are not chosen to play the lead character in the films so integral to the genre of *Hatke* cinema. These scripts are written with certain film heroes in mind, with their particular looks often playing a big role in the scripting of these particular stories. These films come with bold and unusual storylines and without exception they have all proved to be interesting watches.

The New Age Hero in Hatke cinema is largely a marginalised figure - the common man/woman and it is purely his/her story that forms the narratives in these films. One could even say that these films present a subaltern perspective. These heroes are presented as real people with a fair share of both virtues as well as vices. In no way are they romanticized unlike earlier film heroes who were always the epitomes of virtues and whose victory over “evil” was always seen as a victory of morality.

These characters have come to represent reality and as such are realistic depictions which make it easier for the audience to be able to identify with them. We get to see the society from their POV instead of a stylised unreal world. These characters reflect our middle-class aspirations and, in our struggle, to break free of the system or even in fighting it. They have now come to represent our alter egos at whose triumph we naturally feel happy. In this paper I will be discussing films such as *The Mountain Man* (2015), *Masaan* (2015), *Qissa* (2015), *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2016) which are more recent renditions of the *hatke* variety.



*The Mountain Man*

Dashrath Manjhi the protagonist of Ketan Mehta's film *The Mountain Man* is born into an extremely poor family of a rat eating community in Bihar. The first half of the film traces his courtship of Phaguniya, a spritely doll-maker, whom he sets eyes on after he comes back home for the first time as a grown man, having run away from his home when still a child to avoid being bonded to the upper caste landlords in his village, from whom his father had borrowed money. As the narrative continues, we find out that Phaguniya happens to be his childhood bride who is in danger of being married to a boy from the town in exchange for more money; bride price being a norm in that community, in those times. This sets into motion a dramatic love story as Dashrath Manjhi promises to claim for himself what is his own. This comes as a relief after the first couple of shots in which the village upper caste landlord played by Tigmanshu Dhulia and his greedy son played by Pankaj Tripathi watch a lower caste man being

punished, for daring to wear shoes, by having nails driven into his feet.

Manjhi's dreams of living a simple life, but one full of love, is shaken up when his pregnant wife slips off the mountain leading down to the fields where he is employed as a labourer. His wife dies as a result of the injuries (having reached the hospital too late) but the child, a girl, miraculously survives. Manjhi gives her to his father to bring up, as he does his son too. He challenges the mountain and with rather simple tools sets about breaking it. Nawazuddin Siddique as Manjhi is convincing and powerfully alive but Mehta's treatment lets him down at times.

There are some serious social issues which Mehta touches on in this film too, much like in his earlier film *Mirch Masala* (1989). Issues of caste, gender, Naxalism, criticism of the state at the very beginning of the film – in the form of the local leader who watches calmly the man being punished as nails are driven into his feet, only gently rebuking the mukhiya, "Don't do it in front of me, he is still a vote for me," or the visit of Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister to support her candidacy in the upcoming elections and who fails to commit to a road being built to connect the village to the outside world, bureaucratic corruption, Manjhi's march to Delhi on foot after he is thrown off the train to have the Prime Minister redress the wrongs – all find a place in this film, but are dealt with rather hurriedly and haphazardly. Much like the mountain man, Mehta too seems too intent on cracking open for all to see the all of the outer life, the context, of Dashrath Manjhi's labour of love. For instance, the story of Manjhi's youngest uncle, whose wife is picked up and then raped by the landlord's son and henchmen as an act of revenge for being beaten up in the local marketplace for molesting Phaguniya, who then sets fire to his house and the dead body of his wife and walks away from the village, only to return as a Naxal leader later, to punish the oppressors by hanging the older landlord (Dhulia), who seems only too eager to be hanged, as he neither protests nor puts up any struggle, and which could have made for another narrative instead of being dealt with so casually in this film. In the face of such violence only Manjhi

seems to show some sense as he says, "Do you think it's being manly if you hold a gun?"

What stays with us right to the end is one man's lone journey, his labour of love, which literally began with his wife's death but becomes a kind of social work that stood to benefit not only his village Gehlore but other neighbouring villages as well. His struggle becomes all the more important in the face of caste oppression, feudalism, which is a part of everyday life in Manjhi's village.



*Masaan*

In a world that is already connected by the internet and mobile phones, a young couple is concerned with something as old-fashioned as caste, but this is still the truth in India where modernity is but a mistaken one. This, however, is the territory in which director Neeraj Ghaywan and screenwriter Varun Grover have set *Masaan*, where the old and the new are constantly clashing with each other. *Masaan* revolves around the lives of five ordinary people living in present day Varanasi, the city considered by many to be one of the oldest cities in the world. Deepak, one of the protagonists, is a bright engineering student from the dom community, living off the dead on the many ghats of the city, who falls in love with Shalu a Hindi-Urdu poetry spewing upper caste girl whom he meets in a chance encounter as one of his friends try to reach out to one of Shalu's friends. It is liking at first sight for both these young people, if not love at first sight. By employing Facebook, one of the many gifts of modernity, Deepak befriends Shalu and soon a beautiful romance seems to be in the offing. However, standing in striking contrast to Deepak and Shaalu's pristine and pak romance (if I may use the word) is Devi's (played by Richa Chadda) lust, when she decides to have sex

with her friend Piyush because, as she tells the police later, she's curious to know what it's like.

The pristine romance of eye contacts and endearing looks and balloons flying away and but a teeny weeny kiss is set up against the lustful and bold sexual encounter initiated by Devi, the woman, as binaries, through which the film will try and work itself out. Both plans, as the film's beginning shows, and as the narrative unfolds, goes awry when the police break into the couple's room, in a raid of the shady and seedy hotel and the director trapped in age old ideas finds himself unable to depict whatever it is that he had set out to do.

The voyeuristic and greedy Inspector Mishra (Bhagwan Tiwari) takes a video of a barely-dressed Devi and threatens to put it up on YouTube as a means of shaming the girl, if Devi and her elderly father Vidyadhar don't agree to give him a hefty bribe within three months. When Devi's partner in crime, Piyush Agarwal is threatened with the same, he slashes his wrists open with a razor in a locked bathroom. He is soon dead, while Devi trudges alone the bylanes of her dark life in Varanasi, guilt gnawing away at her insides, as she tries to make it up to the grieving father, and at the same time trying to flee from Varanasi.

Vidyadhar Pathak (played by the excellent Sanjay Mishra), Devi's father and also one of the five protagonists of the film, is a retired Sanskrit teacher who now sells religious bric-a-brac on the ghats to make a living. His only means of earning that huge sum appears to be the little orphan boy Jhonta, employed by him, who offers to win Vidyadhar some cash by entering a dubious diving competition at which he excels and saves the day for both father and daughter. Vidyadhar, as an initial reaction to the apparently shameful act by his daughter does beat her, but comes across as quite a progressive man, conscientious and affectionate in the latter half of the film. The director could have etched out his character a bit more.

*Qissa* ("fable"), Anup Singh's second directorial venture (2013; released in India in 2015), deals with many issues at the same time, with all its characters equally important. But this film belongs to the Sikh Punjabi character Umber Singh (played by

Irrfan Khan). Beginning in the present, the film visits the past through a long flashback and comes back exactly where the film begins. Umber Singh, as we learn, is a native of Panjab but with the Partition of 1947 his village simply ceases to be and comes to be occupied by Pakistan where the Sikhs and Hindus do not feel safe. Both groups decide to move east towards the newly created state of India. But before the journey, Umber Singh has to deal with the birth of his child: he eagerly awaits a boy, only to be told that it is a girl yet again. He firmly tells his wife that he's seen enough girl children. He is bitter and in desperation takes his wife and girls away to leave behind everything that he has worked for in his life. He even poisons the well in his courtyard by dragging a murdered Pakistani and dropping the dead body into the well. Next, he breaks the shelves standing outside his home and locks the doors. He knows that he will never be able to visit it again.



*Qissa*

When we see him next, he is in India where he narrates the story of having taken the better part of four years to set up his timber business where he is doing well, though his bitterness lingers. Incidentally, the narratorial voice belongs to him. His wife is expecting again, and Umber Singh tells his wife in a menacing tone that he knows this time it will be a boy. While there have been some films revolving around partition, most of them heart rending, *Qissa* is comes with a twist. It moves way beyond the themes of partition to grapple with issues related to gender, identity, and self. The child is soon born, but before the mother or the audience can determine its gender it is snatched away by Umber Singh, swathed in clothes and pronounced as a son. We know something is wrong as his wife Meher, played by Tisca Chopra,

cloud over in doubt and anxiety as she says half fearfully, “It were better to have killed the child.” But Umber Singh is jubilant; he has finally got his son, the prince of his dreams and even names it such: Kanwar (Panjabi for ‘prince’).

*Qissa* is a powerfully haunting, well-crafted film about the fluidity of identity and sexuality not seen in India in a long, long time. We are asked what constitutes one’s identity. Does it stem from a culture or a place that one is born in? Is it just one’s gender, sexuality, or simply the environment in which one is raised or the experiences that shapes oneself? These are some of the questions which the film tries to raise. Umber Singh, a patriarch dealing with the scars of the India-Pakistan separation which continually haunt him, raises his fourth girl child as a boy, unwilling to accept her as a girl, unwilling to make compromises this time, remembering only too well the last time he had had to make one, which uprooted him and his family from his native place. He also tries to cement his being though in a most unrealistic fashion.

All the three women actors in *Qissa*, Tisca Chopra (the mother/wife Meher), Shome (the ‘son’) and Dugal (the ‘son’s’ lover/wife/friend) have pulled off complex roles with a great amount of sensitivity and understanding. Chopra is a helpless mother reduced to silence, while her youngest daughter, forced to playact the role of a man, is curious about her body in a silent way and yet drawing comparisons with her sisters and Neeli, the young girl in love with Kanwar whom she thinks of as a great catch. Meanwhile Umber Singh silently witnesses it all and seals his son/daughter’s fate when he agrees to get her married to Neeli.

Not very often do we have sensitive films on LGBT issues by Indian filmmakers; most of the scenes, though haunting, are crafted with passion and bear witness to Anup Singh’s uncompromising vision and decade-long commitment to bringing his script alive. *Qissa* could have been a fascinating tale but for an unusual second half where the director seems to lose his way in the mire of too many issues and complexities. He leaves some of the scenes too open for interpretation, choosing to employ magic realism in them, especially in the scene where Kanwar, having been discovered for who she is by the

villagers, runs for her life and is apparently swallowed up by the soul of her dead father.

Anup Singh’s film also tries to explore as to how much of a difference sexual body parts contribute to the makeup of a person’s psyche. Throughout the movie, Umber Singh utterly neglects questions related to Kanwar’s sexuality, which makes the woman inside Kanwar very lonely. Umber Singh even appears deranged at times, for at one point he promises to gift Neeli all the jewellery in a shop they visit, after her marriage to Kanwar and her discovery of his ‘impotency’, a tale Umber Singh concocts at the drop of a hat – if only she will gift the family an heir! Again, a male heir, of course. The woman Kanwar could have been but cannot be, ever, is not that different from the lonely ghost that longs to be seen or set free.

A lesbian romance between Kanwar and Neeli is only suggested, whether purposely so as to avoid controversies or as per the demands of the script one doesn’t know. One can only say that much could have been explored on that front and also made for a bold move. *Qissa* leaves one disturbed in bits and parts. Irrfan Khan is especially powerful in his depiction of the willful, selfish, but strangely lonely patriarch and lends to the film much of its magic and haunting quality.



*Lipstick Under My Burkha*

Alankrita Srivastava’s *Lipstick Under My Burkha* looks at the lives of four women who live in Hawai manzil: Bua ji, who has forgotten her own name as no one calls her by that name anymore; Leela, who works in a neighbourhood beauty parlour and soon to be married; and two Muslim women – the young Rehana who works in her father’s tailoring shop by night, attends college, and aspires to fit in with her peers and sing in the college band, and the

hard working salesgirl Shireen, who has a control-freak Saudi based husband. In a prelude of sorts we are introduced to all four protagonists in the first ten minutes. And as the narrative unfolds their stories too take off.

Shireen wants to assert her identity as a woman in a relationship where she is mostly dominated by unwanted pregnancies and pills brought upon by her husband. A talented salesgirl who is awarded by her employers, she is unable to tell her husband that she works and contributes to the family income. Very soon she finds out that her husband is unemployed and has a mistress. In the end as she confronts her husband with the truth that she has found out about his unemployed status and his cheating, to boot, and that she wishes to work full time, he rapes her brutally and dismisses off her claims by saying, “Just because you have earned a few rupees, don’t try to play the role of the husband in the relationship. You’re a wife; remain that way.”



*Lipstick Under My Burkha*

The second story that touches your heart is that of the young wannabe Rehana, the college student who steals clothes from malls from the trial room smuggling them under her burkha in order to find acceptance in her peer group. She adores Miley Cyrus and in the secret confines of her room, hides the stolen stuff and posters of her idol and dances to the western songs otherwise forbidden in her conservative and claustrophobic house. Eventually – Spoiler alert! – the police trace and arrested her for theft.

The third story is that of Bua ji, who expresses her suppressed sexuality by reading racy novels and engaging in a sex chat every night with the swimming coach Jaspal, whom she fancies as her prince charming. As a counterpoint Shrivastav brings in the story of a fifty-five-year-old man who has recently been widowed and whose sister is looking for a bride for him of thirty-five to forty years of age. The director tries to question the hypocrisy prevalent in Indian society and the difference in treatment for a man and a woman whose sexuality is determined by his/her gender. While a man’s sexuality is permissible at fifty years of age and even beyond, a woman of the same age must focus on her family and religion. So, in the end Bua ji is discovered, punished, and thrown out of the house by her family. While the house and sweet shop are hers, and the family earns its living from both, the family finds it easy to throw her stuff out of the second floor and humiliate her publicly because she is a woman.

The fourth story is that of Leela, who is in love with a photographer and aspires to be an entrepreneur in partnership with her lover. She visits travel agencies and offers an innovative package for newlyweds on their honeymoon. She imagines her lover capturing their special moments as they pose for photographs, while she does the makeup for the woman. She is also not happy that her mother is planning to get her married off much against her desire. In the end she too is caught by her fiancé and disowned by him.

All four women are punished for their forbidden desires. Shrivastava shows their unity in despair as they gather around in Rehana’s father’s shop and wordlessly share stories of their plight. There, Rehana reads the end of the racy novel which speaks of a happy end for the novel’s heroine, Rosie. While the director explores the secret lives of all four, nonetheless she withholds in granting them a definitive ending.

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