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PATHAAN (2023) AND THE CELEBRATION OF STARDOM



Narrative films depend on two basic factors: a story, which follows a chain of cause and effect, and narration, or the way the story is told. These integral components of narrative are put into motion by the use of film language. They work in unison in order to establish a connection between the film and its audience. Be it an art film or a commercial/mainstream film, this model remains intact. But does the commercial film form's treatment of narrative change with the inclusion of a star? And does this, in turn, influence the film's reception? In the context of Indian cinema, this essay aims to answer these questions, delving into Siddharth Anand's film *Pathaan* (2023).

First and foremost, we need to be clear about our usage of the term "star" when talking about the film industry. Journalistic use of this word has made it synonymous to any actor working in any film, but

the star has a very specific meaning and occupies a special position within the film industry (and also in academia). Francesco Alberoni defines the star as someone whose institutional power may be limited, but whose way of life arouses the maximum degree of interest in the common masses. Barry King further establishes the importance of stars by stating how "stars have a major control over the representation of people in society," and thus shape the public. In the context of Indian cinema, however, the relationship that the audience develops with the star is different from how it is in the West (or any other part of the world). Much of this can be ascribed to our millennia-old traditions of deifying men and women of social, cultural and spiritual significance and turning them into figures of worship. Our relationship with film stars should thus be understood keeping in mind this long cultural and traditional history. Larger-than-life

human beings become figures of identification, garnering our love and appreciation, and this involuntarily generates certain feelings of divinity within the collective audience, thereby leading to the creation of a venerable image of the actor. Much of this depends on the actor's charisma, personality, and most importantly, both his or her on-screen presence and off-screen persona. In order to understand the cultural significance of *Pathaan*, its intricate association with the star figure needs to be established first.

From the very onset, popular media outlets hailed *Pathaan* as Shah Rukh Khan's "comeback." Khan had not appeared as a lead in any film in almost five years, and several of his projects before that were commercial and critical failures. But the connection he has maintained with his fans since the 1990s has made him such an integral part of Indian popular culture, that his failures somehow become representative of his fan's failures. Yash Raj Films's Spy Universe films (*Ek Tha Tiger*, *Tiger Zinda Hai*, and *War*) were commercial successes, and putting Shah Rukh Khan into this mix was the right call at the right time. And thus, *Pathaan*'s success was warranted not only by making it a part of a popular cinematic universe but also through the introduction of a new character played by a popular star.

Every film has a target audience. Even the films that are "made for everyone" has a primary target audience. In *Pathaan*'s case, it can be said with certain conviction that its primary audience was Shah Rukh's fans. This film was nothing short of what could be considered as "fan service": the fans had not given up on their star, and so the star returned with a bang, acknowledging their presence. This can be proven by the various self-reflexive moments of the film. Self-reflexivity was one of the most striking uses of the cinematic arts, most popularly employed by the French New Wave filmmakers. But in the present day and age, self-reflexivity has become quite a common feature, especially in the numerous "blockbusters." The self-reflexivity of Indian popular cinema becomes more highlighted with the star's presence. There are scenes in such films where the star communicates directly with the audience, employing such means which would be considered

transgressive within the norms of traditional filmmaking. For instance, in these films, the narrative sometimes comes to a complete halt as the star poses in front of the camera (sometimes accentuated in slow motion and with unusual angles), looks directly at the camera, or performs signature moves that are immediately recognised by the fans, and accepted with cheers, claps, and whistles. In such cases, the actor transcends the boundaries of the particular film, assuming the role of the star figure. Similarly, *Pathaan* has several self-reflexive moments. For example, when we are first introduced to the character Pathaan, we see him in a vulnerable state - bloodied and bruised - bound with shackles. Ironically, though, we hear him deliver some lines that establish him as a tough man, and then, we see Shah Rukh Khan's face in a close-up. This way of introducing the protagonist would typically work for a character who the audience is already familiar with. But this is how we meet Pathaan for the first time ever, in a sequence which shows him performing an act of redemption. This can be taken to be symbolic of Shah Rukh Khan's own "return" to cinema - of his redemption as a star. There are also multiple references to some of his popular films; there is an indirect reference to an infamous scene from *Ra-One* (a film that had failed critically upon its release in 2011, but has since then been reinvigorated by fans on social media), and the reenactment of one of his most iconic and parodied lines: "I love you K-K-K-Kiran" from *Darr* (1993). These are a few instances of how *Pathaan* is less about the eponymous character and more about the star who plays the character.

But *Pathaan* is not merely a self-indulgent film celebrating the star. The primary objective of such a film, we should remember, is to entertain the masses. And in order to entertain, the film's narrative has to be engaging. In *Pathaan*, however, the story is prioritised over the process of narration. As such, several plot holes and narrative discrepancies can be found in the film, but as films like this demand the suspension of disbelief to a larger extent, the logical credibility of its narrative does not really matter much. What matters, instead, is the progression of events that make the goal-oriented, righteous protagonist's journey enjoyable. The story thus

unfolds at a moderately faster pace, where things happen so fast that it allows less time for the audience to sit and ponder over their logical possibilities. The longest segments of the film involve fight sequences and chase sequences that are well-choreographed and use CGI for the sake of creating visual spectacles. It is as if every incident builds up to some kind of a physical confrontation, which, of course, becomes important in the spy thriller/action thriller genre. Inspired by the James Bond (Daniel Craig-led Bond films, in my opinion) and the Mission Impossible films, *Pathaan* ensures that its fight scenes are constructed in such a way that they keep the viewers engaged. And in order to ensure some level of emotional participation during fight scenes, the characters involved need to be motivated, and should establish an intimate connection with the audience.

Pathaan's connection with the audience is established on two levels - first, through the identification of the star by his fans, and second, through the construction of a character fuelled by an unconditional love for his nation. Furthermore, putting the country's security at stake provides an additional urgency to Pathan's mission, making the audience constantly root for the character, regardless of their subscription to the actor's stardom. But what makes the protagonist's journey more gripping and emotionally compelling is the presence of his formidable antagonist, Jim, whose motivations make him an extremely interesting character. Jim's tragic backstory makes him a serious threat, so much so that throughout the entire film, he keeps tormenting both Pathaan and the Indian military. Once Jim's motivations are established, the film shifts from being about an imminent war between India and Pakistan, and becomes the story of a man on a path of ruthless vengeance. Unlike how we are introduced to Pathaan, Jim is introduced in a way that immediately establishes him as a dominant figure. We first see Jim from the back, in a wide shot, as he stands before a large window looking at snow-capped mountains. His black outfit makes him stand out against the white surroundings. The background score adds an additional sense of dread to this character. The sound that is used as his theme music resembles the creaking of a wooden floor or a door being opened slowly. This

sound effect underlines his sinister mind, portraying him as a dreadful entity hiding behind the shadows, waiting to pounce upon his unsuspecting victims. Interestingly, the parts of Jim's and Pathaan's faces that we first see are their eyes, which are shown in extreme close-ups. All the female characters in the film are depicted as strong-willed women, with Rubai also having a tragic backstory, making her motivations defined. She works as a perfect Bond girl-styled femme fatale who has a greater role to play in the narrative than just be presented as eye candy.

Pathaan is a film primarily meant for the theatrical experience. Films like this make full use of cinema's power as a visual medium of entertainment. Often, the social role of cinema in bringing people together reaches its full potential through such films that are primarily consumed just for the sake of entertainment. However, it would be a rather faulty standpoint to think that commercial films have no artistic merit at all. *Pathaan's* use of video game aesthetics is something that gains significance in the contexts of new media and emerging technologies. Commercial films sometimes take liberties with the traditional, established rules of filmmaking, and *Pathaan* is no exception here. For instance, during a confrontation between Jim and Pathaan, an aerial shot of the setting is shown very briefly, which serves no real purpose in the storytelling other than providing some kind of a visual treat when watched on the big screen. Most of the scenes in the film are shot with an unsteady, handheld camera, which helps to add tension into the scenes (even in scenes which do not necessarily demand tension), and also provides them a look of realism. The use of unnatural, heavy dialogues and the one-liners are also things that can be enjoyed more in a public space shared by live spectators (and in this case, in a space shared by the fans of the star).

In an interview after the film's success, Shah Rukh Khan thanked his fans on behalf of the entire Hindi film industry, "for bringing life back to cinema." A few months after that, on a completely different note and in a completely different context, Martin Scorsese expressed his concerns for the future generations due to Hollywood's obsession with making "comic book and franchise movies." Now,

Pathaan is a film that depends on the comic book film aesthetics, and is also a franchise film. And if Scorsese were to watch this film, he would probably compare the film to a theme park ride, and he wouldn't be wrong to do so. But if this theme park is bringing people to the cinema halls and working as a tool of social integration, while at the same time

providing people with pure entertainment, its position in popular culture cannot really be undermined. While art filmmakers may have their doubts with the legitimisation of such films into the more serious discourses on cinema, *Pathaan* becomes an important text in the study of stardom, the aesthetics of commercial cinema, and its future.

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