

Certificate of Merit:

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**Lampoon, Excess, and Bollywood's Family Social
Identifying Sociopolitical Quagmire in *Kathal* (2023)**



Universal genre conventions — horror, action-drama, or comedy — were never considered as an undisputed blueprint within Indian cinematic contexts; contrarily, our cinemas have been guided by the principles and codes of the influential poetica, *The Nāṭyaśāstra*. The discovery of the theory of *rasa* has enabled producers and auteurs to remodify genres according to the tastes and palpability of Indian audiences and the aesthetics of Indian dramaturgy, ultimately creating what critics like Rosie Thomas

(2006) and Piyush Roy (2022) call ‘the foundation of *nava-rasa* in entertainment media’. One of the byproducts of this growing conception was the introduction of the ‘family social’ in the cinematic landscape of India, which aimed to juxtapose multiple genres (and, therefore, *rasas*) to provide full-package entertainment and a dash of sociopolitical critique. Films by S. S. Vasan, Manmohan Desai, and even Raj Kapoor may belong to this category; their films push *rasa* discourse towards a compromised position where it

assimilates within the space of *masala films*. Unlike early popular cinema(s) of India — characterised by classics like Baburao Painter's *Savkari Pash* (1925), K. Balachander's *Neerkumizhi* (1965), or Manoj Kumar's *Roti, Kapada, aur Makaan* (1974) which represented public sentiment with a viable jugalbandi of various *rasas* and epimodes — contemporary cinema, especially Hindi cinema, confuses the generic liberty of the family social with the hybridisation of *rasas*, following the same tangential formula exploited by Manmohan Desai or Raj Kapoor.

In recent years, particularly after the monumental success of *Badhaai Ho!* (2018), Hindi cinema seems obsessed with the postmodern idea of the 'dramedy', which combines aspects of comedy, drama, and social satire with minimal success in public empowerment. Various commentators of Indian cinema, including Arindam Basu, have offered highlighted speculation on the trending inadequacy of the family social to raise social awareness — because it seems to concentrate excessively on the narrative's comedic dimensions. By centralising comedy, the narrative loses its critically ulterior motives and sardonic abilities to initiate grassroots changes, defeating the family social's fundamentalist functions. Even though the genre extracts from the western form of family melodrama to represent bourgeoisie sympathies and tragedies, its treatment of *excess* — otherwise a defining tenet of melodrama — is problematic and circles around empty laughter, scattered criticism, and weakened plotlines. Despite being a fascinating and powerful genre, the family social gets defeated by its limitations, and it's within this

context that I aim to reflect on Yashwardhan Mishra's *Kathal* (2023) and how the film emerges as another contribution towards the family social's extant demise.

Set in the fictional district of Moba (apparently geographically affixed in Uttar Pradesh), *Kathal* narrates the story of a "female" inspector's endeavour to find two imported jackfruits — stolen from a local MLA's garden — and how this "high-profile case" not only transforms her outlook towards the system she works within, but also leads her to uncover graver issues pertaining to caste, sexuality, journalism, police brutality, power dynamics, human trafficking, and women's social positioning and subordination. Interestingly, The latter-most point is accentuated within the film's first five minutes, more because it serves as an intermediary bedrock to connect audiences' appreciation of other underlying concerns (mostly towards caste, power dynamics, and gender). As experiencing double discrimination (in terms of gender and caste), the protagonist, Mahima Basor, is not comparatively valued *enough* as a police inspector and thus is asked to lead the jackfruit mystery because her male counterparts do not seem interested (but are politically pressurised to focus on this case); moreover, her sociocultural status as belonging to a lower caste, yet occupying a higher rank within the police force, threaten her personal and professional associations with her team — most of whom bear higher "social" origins. The film, nevertheless, is vigilant about crafting the protagonist's relationship with the only other woman in the team, Kunti Parihar, and treats it albeit idealistically. I reckon it's because *Kathal*

extends its projection and perception of women's acceptance of their decrepit social status via the image of Kunti, if not exclusively deployed, to introduce gender polarities between married vis-à-vis unmarried women. The film's recurrent contrast between Mahima's constant preoccupation with her social role as a police officer and Kunti's bickering about her domestic responsibilities appears both evident and sarcastic, and it helps spotlight Mahima's character as the aspirational model for audiences. In a way, *Kathal* encourages modern viewers to adopt Mahima's outlook towards society and its expectations of women, thereby challenging its orthodox conceptions and values by concentrating on Mahima's character. At some point, Mahima *becomes the film*: part hero, part narrative.

Unfortunately, however, this metaphysical phenomenon of becoming — about Deleuze — fails to save *Kathal*. It's predominantly because it *lampoons*, and not *satirises*, world-views. By nature and literary function, a lampoon is not considered a serious medium towards reformation and was mostly used by the classicists of the 18th century during literary feuds; a satire is a more rigorous, more controlled/austere, more defined literary form used to implement reforms, and thereby is considered a more sophisticated medium to attack (post)modern worlds and its hypocrisies. *Kathal* qualifies as a lampoon because while it attempts to criticise the state of things, the government, or the police, it quickly juxtaposes it with pockets of slapstick comedy. Moreover, unlike in a satirical social, its characters are more caricatured than realistic, and its settings more staged than prone to mishap.

Such scenarios might remind viewers of films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* (2020) or *Double XL* (2022), where purpose is lost in comedy. . . the cinematic motivation drowned in the quagmire of entertainment and business. Akin to such contemporary examples, *Kathal* appears hesitant to make bold statements; it attempts to conceal its critical subjectivities by introducing dimensions of the fake dramedic, thus losing its cinematic appeal as a family social. Simultaneously placed in the film's swaying treatment of social ills and concerns, to the extent that they feature as cameo appearances. For instance, Saurabh's father's disapproval of Mahima as the former's love interest based on her caste (and her higher official rank), or when Saurabh displays police brutality upon a few beggars during a wedding procession — these instances are not sustained, probed into, but seem deliberately stuffed into the narrative to magnify *Kathal* and its multi-perspective address. Indeed, they are written with utmost sincerity and help introduce relatable characters — such as the mimic man, Angrez S. Randhawa — but their effects are lost as quickly as projected. They become obliterated, more so at points where they should become disturbing memories of a haunted political system.

Subsequently, this leads to two repercussions: (1) Mahima's decentralisation from the narrative and (2) the film's loss of centralising attention on one social theme. Narratives like *Doctor G* (2022) and *Darlings* (2022), therefore, succeed in defending their cause because they do not essay diversifying their scope of interest but rather tackle a crucial issue dedicatedly. *Kathal* lacks that sense of dedication because of its

kaleidoscopic attempt to reflect on a myriad of themes, and in the director's attempt to explore (and unlearn) his 'privileges as an upper-caste man'ⁱ, the film ends up painting a half-ruined, half-ended portrait of social debauchery and gender/caste-based anxieties, interlaced with unnecessary comic undertones. I'd agree that the introduction of comedy helps neutralise the acidity of satire. Thus many family socials have deployed this stylistic attribute in the past, but one may wonder: how many of these narratives accomplished their social goals? How many could transform the foundations of convention and dangerous tradition? and if comedy was enacting the role it was supposed

to play? *Kathal* suffers because of this devaluation of genres and, in principle, the idea of (*nava*)*rasa*, if not alone by the excessive injection of comedy. India has witnessed several narratives getting defeated by following these rabid stylistic modes; I'm afraid Yashowardhan Mishra's directorial debut falls into the same trap. Despite having great potential, the film displays postmodern directors' incapacity to repeat the classical value of a Guru Dutt or a V. Shantaram, more because they fail to understand the aesthetics of Indian dramaturgy and the sensibility that comes with it. What *Kathal* communicates, nevertheless, is that Bombay/Hindustani cinema needs to be strongly rethought.

ⁱ A reference from Yashowardhan Mishra's interview, published in *Outlook India* (2023, May 18).

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