

POPULAR HINDI CINEMA: NARRATIVE STRUCTURES AND POINTS OF CONTINUITY WITH THE TRADITION

ABSTRACT – In the course of its long history, Indian cinema, and in particular popular Hindi cinema, has seen an extraordinary evolution while retaining, from the thematic and structural point of view, certain specific characteristics and thereby successfully resisting the cultural imperialism of Hollywood. Continuity with the Indian cultural tradition can be seen in manifold aspects, and it is in fact by analysing these connections that we can highlight and interpret the main characteristics of this singular cinematic world. Popular Hindi cinema is often accused of offering a patchy sort of narration with total lack of realism, repetitive plots and critical fire is, above all, levelled at the typical song and dance sequences constantly cropping up and interrupting the narrative flow. These are, however, fundamental characteristics peculiar to popular Hindi cinema, and should be analysed in the light of that tradition. From its very beginnings, Indian cinema has drawn inspiration from the styles, aesthetics and semiotics of a great variety of cultural forms that have followed one upon another in India over the centuries, forming a vast cultural heritage. In this respect, it also proves interesting to look back to the roots of the Indian cultural tradition, beyond the stage of mediation and transposition in written form, seeking out the elements of continuity between the narrative structures of popular Hindi cinema and those typical of oral narration.

Popular Hindi cinema began to attract the attention of scholars from various fields of study roughly as from the mid-1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that such studies acquired a certain academic respectability.

When talking about popular Hindi cinema, we refer to Bollywood that is the term adopted, at the global level by now, to define the prolific production of the cinema and cultural industry of Bombay (the former name for Mumbai), the language being Hindi, or “Hinglish”, as the mixture between Hindi and English is journalistically termed; it is essentially commercial – not «art cinema», that is – and so designed for distribution on a wide scale in India and abroad, although there is an increasing tendency for the connotation to be extended in general to all Indian cinema¹.

¹) The whole Indian film industry includes other production centers which make films in more than 20 Indian languages. Since the introduction of talkies in 1931, Indian audiences

The term itself evidently alludes to an attempt to imitate the predominant model of Hollywood but, at the same time, also seems to have the implicit intention of stressing the differences². The Bollywood industry has played up the name well to give wide circulation to what we might define as a “trademark” recognisable the whole world over, giving direct expression to popular Indian culture.

Actually, however, Bollywood cinema is far from being a “kitsch version” of the Hollywood brand, as it is often summarily defined. Continuity with the Indian cultural tradition can be seen in manifold aspects, and it is indeed by analysing these connections that we can highlight and interpret the main characteristics of this singular cinematic world.

1. *The traditional background of Indian cinema*

In the course of its long history³, Indian cinema has gone through a constant evolution, also undergoing the influence of other forms of cinema but, from the thematic and structural point of view, retaining certain of its own particular and peculiar characteristics.

Scholars concur in recognising that, in general, Indian cinema shows various points of continuity with the cultural tradition⁴. It is in fact by analysing these connections that the major characteristics of this particular cinema have successfully been highlighted and interpreted.

From its very beginnings, Indian cinema has drawn inspiration from the styles, aesthetics and semiotics of a great variety of cultural forms that have followed one upon another in India over the centuries⁵, often integrating them in various ways during the process of evolution, forming a vast cultural heritage. In general the influence of the classical tradition proves of fundamental importance in this process: from the great epic poems, recognised to have left profound traces in popular Indian thought and imaginings, to ancient Sanskrit drama⁶ in which great emphasis was placed on the element of spectacle, with a mingling of music, dance and the language of gesture.

The most direct and immediate connections, however, appear to be with particular traditional forms of entertainment, from the dramatisation of

demanding motion pictures in their own languages. However Bollywood is the largest and most popular sector of Indian cinema, having the biggest budgets and stars. For a detailed analysis of the policies related to exhibition, production and distribution of the Indian film industry see Pendakur 2003.

²) Prasad 2003.

³) The first Indian feature film, a mythological, *Raja Harishchandra* (dir. Dadasaheb Phalke), was released in 1913. For a comprehensive history of Indian cinema see Rajadhyaksha - Willemsen 1999.

⁴) See, amongst others, Gokulsing - Dissanayake 1998; Mishra 2002; Desai - Dudrah 2008; Thomas 2008.

⁵) Desai - Dudrah 2008, p. 4.

⁶) See Byrski 1980.

the mythological epic offered by the story-tellers in the villages to the various forms of popular regional theatre and on to the unique form of spectacle offered by the Parsi theatre, so called because the theatres were generally the property of families of Parsi origin, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From the outset Indian cinema was able to draw upon a vast and original narrative repertory. The authors of Parsi theatre had all the motivation of great enthusiasm and eagerness to experiment. Their surprising creativity generated decidedly eclectic productions, from original adaptations of Shakespeare and Victorian melodrama to remakes of works of the classical Indian theatrical production of Kalidasa, of the epic and of Persian literary tradition⁷. The performances combined realism and fantasy, music and dance, narrative and spectacle.

2. «*Running around trees*». *The song and dance sequences*

One of the major features of Bollywood films is the endless breaking out into song and dance sequences, which give the films a very particular appeal. For this reason popular Hindi cinema is often compared with the Hollywood musical genre. However, it is the general opinion of scholars that no categorisation based on western cinema genres can be applied to Indian cinema, given also the fact that every film contains elements that can be traced back to diverse genres. In any case, the celebrated song and dance sequences of Bollywood show no influence of the Hollywood musical. Indeed, they constitute a peculiarly Indian ingredient, most likely inherited from classical theatre where, as we have seen, music, singing and dancing played a very important part. Musical sequences had, in fact, been an integral part of theatrical performances. After a decline during Islamic rule, this practice was rediscovered by Parsi theatre and subsequently introduced successfully into cinema with the advent of talking pictures⁸.

The song and dance sequences crop up here and there in Bollywood movies breaking every code of continuity in space and time. They take the form of brief digressions from the narrative plot and indeed from reality, the hero and heroine suddenly finding themselves dancing happily alone together against the background of a splendid mountain landscape, or involved in modern choreographies amid hundreds of extras. These spectacular sequences with numerous changes of costume, the dreamlike locations and surreal situations constitute the main attraction of the film⁹.

⁷) Mishra 2002, pp. 8-9. See also Thomas 2008, p. 29.

⁸) Gopal - Sen 2008, pp. 148-149.

⁹) In addition, as argued by Sangita Gopal and Biswarup Sen (2008, p. 151), it is worth noting that the song and dance sequences establish a cultural space which is external to the film and autonomous from it; with songs being played on the radio and CDs and sequences being played on TV, DVDs, as well as in clubs and parties.

And yet, far from being introduced into the film for the sole purpose of spectacle, the musical sequences prove absolutely functional in terms of narration. They perform functions which the rest of the film, i.e. the story, is unable to supply¹⁰. The space they open up within the film makes room for the innermost, subjective aspects; it is a space apart, in which the characters can express their deepest feelings, precisely by dint of singing and dancing rather than doing so explicitly with dialogue¹¹.

This is why the song and dance sequences normally serve to represent feelings of love. In fact, as Rachel Dwyer suggests¹², their most direct function appears to be no less than that of the language of love, in terms both visual (through landscapes, costumes, the physical appearance of the protagonists, certain symbols, etc.) and verbal, in an artfully conceived alternation of Hindi, Urdu and English.

Every stage in the development is marked by a musical sequence. The stage in which feelings are shared, and thus the intensity of emotions of the young couple, is usually represented singing and dancing together happily amid nature. This is the main romantic musical sequence of the film, usually alternating various scenes in which the two young people dance together miming a sort of amorous skirmish consisting in play, feigned quarrels and tender making up, running after one another in splendid natural environments; hence the expression usually used to define these sequences, «running around trees».

Obviously, the situation lends itself ideally to exchange of endearments and amorous effusions, usually finding decidedly innocent expression: there may be the odd chaste kiss, or more often fond embraces of varying degrees of intensity, caresses and sensual movements whose inevitable erotic charge is toned down through integration in the choreography of the dance. The camera rarely dwells on the more audacious scenes, leaving them in abeyance, opting as an alternative for an overview of the lush landscape or a zoom on symbolic details such as flowers, trees or tumultuous waterfalls, each evoking passion in their different ways, bending the strict rules of censorship. This, in fact, is another function of the sequences, constituting distinctly erotic digressions from the main plot of the film¹³.

As in classical literature, and above all in Sanskrit love poetry, description of the landscape, still and silent, or of a sheltered, secluded place, allusively implies that it is an appropriate spot for an amorous encounter, so, too, in popular Hindi cinema nature is the ideal setting for the couple's moments of intimacy. Mysterious faraway places are conjured up, offering the romantic couple privacy in a public space, away from the control of the family who have the final word on romance, love and marriage¹⁴.

¹⁰) Gopalan 2002.

¹¹) Gopal - Sen 2008, pp. 150-151.

¹²) See Dwyer 2000, 2004, 2006.

¹³) Kasbekar 2001, p. 293.

¹⁴) Dwyer - Patel 2002, p. 59.

This is explicitly declared in the song *Hum Tum Ek Kamre Men Bandh Ho* (*You and Me, Shut in a Room*) in the film *Bobby* (1973, dir. Raj Kapoor), a particularly famous family drama revolving around a great love story, fore-runner par excellence of the genre that has enjoyed so much success in the last few years. In the celebrated sequence the romantic couple, Bobby (Dimple Kapadia) and Raja (Rishi Kapoor), are locked in a room and indulge in the fantasy of being alone, while the scene moves from the room to various other imaginary situations where a sort of intimacy can be maintained, including the majestic forests of Kashmir.

Another example is offered by the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham ...* (*Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness*, 2001, dir. Karan Johar) in the song and dance sequence *Suraj Hua Maddham* (*The Sun Has Dimmed*) which follows upon the episode of the first tryst between the two young protagonists Anjali (Kajol) and Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan). Here we are regaled with the daydreams of the young girl who, parting from the young man after a delightful afternoon spent together, and by now head over heels in love, lets her imagination dwell on their love story. The beginning and end of the musical sequence see the girl running happily, creating a continuity with real life – with the girl, that is, running around the alleyways of Chandni Chowk, the well-known crowded neighbourhood of Delhi where she lives – as if by running she crossed through a sort of time barrier, a transition highlighted by the director at the end of the sequence with a beam of light filling the screen.

Anjali's dream is set in natural scenery, evocative and with surreal touches (and, given that the scenes were shot in Egypt, the setting could be defined as exotic for Indian cinematographic canons), alternating the spectacular chalk rock formations of the White Desert with the Giza Pyramids and the splendid beach. In this case, the singular landscape seems to emphasise the dreamlike atmosphere of the sequence, characterised by the white dominating the scene which looks almost like a moonscape and in the costumes, with a number of slow-motion shots in a musical arrangement with particularly intense effect in the use of choruses. Against this background the two lovers meet and dance with a certain sensuality, exchanging somewhat audacious effusions, especially in the scenes in water, the liquid element charging the situation with eroticism. Suggestive scenes of intimacy alternate with images of the future life of the married couple, alluding in particular to acceptance of the young bride in the family.

3. *The narrative structure*

Returning to the narrative structure of popular Hindi cinema, the first element that strikes and confounds western criticism is the apparent lack of a story – or at least narrative coherence – in the film, which usually shows a somewhat fragmentary structure. This, as Madhava Prasad argues¹⁵, is an

¹⁵) Prasad 1998.

aspect that is affected to a very great degree by the production system adopted in the Indian film industry, which sees the various authors (of the story, screenplay, dialogue, song lyrics, etc.) working separately without coordinating their efforts.

Thus the film shows scant consistency in development of the plot. Actually, as Sheila Nayar points out¹⁶, this is a specific characteristic of oral storytelling, and not only in India, which by its very nature is episodic, sequential and additive. Construction of the story does not build up into a sort of pyramidal pattern, but is based on the use of particular techniques such as flashback, thematic repetition and jumps in time. It is only with such techniques that sustained narrative can be handled, simplifying it as far as possible so that it can be remembered¹⁷. Thus Sheila Nayar brings out the basic affinity between the structure typical of oral narration and that of popular Hindi cinema, thus accounting for the relative lack of organic form. As in the case of prolix oral narration, she adds, Bollywood films, too, are characterised by continual introduction into the main storyline of short digressions, with brief scenes involving minor characters which may prove comic, sweetly sentimental or sad, but in any case not usually serving to take the plot forward¹⁸.

The plots tend to be rather obvious and predictable; often, indeed, they are actually remakes of other films with some slight variations, and may more or less explicitly be stated to be such. In popular Hindi cinema, in fact, the plot is considered to be of decidedly secondary importance among the various ingredients of the film: according to the authors themselves, it serves solely as a basis for the representation of emotions as well, obviously, as creation of the spectacle¹⁹. As Javed Akhtar, one of the most celebrated Bollywood authors pithily put it: «the difference between Hindi and Western films is like that between an epic and a short story»²⁰.

Indeed, Harish Trivedi²¹ went as far as observing that for most of the Hindi films the plot is so common and conventional that it is often felt unnecessary to write. Quite simply, he said, when it comes to casting the director recounts the plot of the film to the actors in extremely concise and colloquial terms. Even the dialogue is often written scene by scene and not only the director or actor, but anyone who happens to be on the set during the shooting, feels free to suggest changes, in an atmosphere of total improvisation.

Bollywood film dialogue is never analytic or reflective, nor does the audience expect it to be so. For this reason popular Hindi cinema was defined by the eminent Indian social thinker Ashis Nandy «anti-psychological»²². Amplification and polarisation are essential to the characterisation of the protagonists, clearly originating in the tradition of oral narrative. There could be no

¹⁶) Nayar 2004, pp. 16-19.

¹⁷) *Ivi*, p. 18.

¹⁸) *Ivi*, p. 17.

¹⁹) Thomas 2008, p. 27.

²⁰) *Ibidem*.

²¹) Trivedi 2006, p. 76.

²²) Nandy 1981.

room in this world for quiet, calm, or subtly nuanced characters. As in the oral epic tale recited by heart, they must be presented in such a way as to leave a strong impression on the memory. Thus the protagonists of popular Hindi cinema have very pronounced, often excessive personalities falling into various well-defined stereotypes²³. The hero, the heroine, the villain and the fool are immediately recognisable for the audience, and the actors therefore invariably end up playing the same types of characters, to the extent even of incarnating the characteristics in the collective imaginings²⁴.

What counts for the audience is the emotion, and so not so much “what” happens as “how” it happens, with evident reference to the aesthetic theory of *rasa* (flavour) upon which classical Indian theatre is based. Essentially, the emotional impact of the film does not derive from originality, but from the comforting sense of predictable narrative development, not so much a plot as a conventional succession of events²⁵. The result is often a total lack of realism.

In contrast with western cinema, therefore, in popular Hindi cinema the role of the cinemagoer is completely different, as indeed is his/her behaviour: participation is intense, and the audience applaud, sing, recite the lines of the dialogue together with the actors, throw coins at the screen as a sign of appreciation, share the characters’ feelings, weeping at the moving scenes, or laughing and openly mocking them. The cinemagoers love to see the same films over and over again and it is precisely on the basis of this «repeat value», as it is called, that the film is constructed and the skills of the producers and authors measured on the principle that the key to the success of the film lies above all in the emotion it can excite, in the dialogue, in the choice of actors, in the music and in the spectacle²⁶.

4. *Adaptation, reinterpretation or plagiarism?*

The repetition of elements or themes derived from other movies or traditional tales leads the Indian cinemagoers to experience a comforting sense of “*déjà vu*”²⁷. In this respect, reflecting on the aspects of the oral tradition Sheila Nayar²⁸ observes that the films thus appear to come within the sphere of a collective consciousness, constituting a sort of «public property», upon which to draw and take inspiration perfectly freely for music, lyrics, dialogue, symbolic objects and characters, and even whole plots. In Hollywood this sort

²³) Nayar 2004, p. 20.

²⁴) This is a characteristic that extends to all Indian cinema. Historically it is demonstrated by the great political success of a number of famous actors, foremost among whom the heroes of Tamil cinema M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalitha, who have both had long experience as head of the government of Tamil Nadu.

²⁵) Thomas 2008, p. 29.

²⁶) *Ivi*, p. 28.

²⁷) Nandy 1981, p. 90.

²⁸) Nayar 2004, p. 19.

of behaviour would be considered plagiarism and would certainly have consequences in the courts of law. However, just as the concept of ownership of ideas, and so also of plagiarism, does not apply in the world of the oral tradition, so in popular Hindi cinema “copying” is not only allowed but, indeed, is normally taken as a tribute to the author. And in any case, even in classical theatre and literature traditional tales well-known to the audience, derived mainly from the epic tradition, were taken up and a reworked time and time again and turned into theatrical works.

While we are on the theme of plagiarism, it is worth noting that Indian authors are often accused of copying Hollywood films. Actually, as Rosie Thomas points out²⁹, if many quite openly take the cue from these stories, at times even lifting whole sequences, all is, however, reinterpreted and adapted according to the style and conventions of popular Hindi cinema – were if not so, the film would have no success with Indian audiences. According to the authors and producers of Bollywood, the essence of this work of “Indianisation”, as defined by Rosie Thomas, lies in the way in which the plot is developed, the emotional element always remaining fundamental (foreign films are generally described as “cold”), with an able mix and integration of elements of spectacle within the film, the so-called «entertainment values», mainly song and dance. It is also of fundamental importance to accomplish an “Indianisation” of values with consequent adaptation of the film to all those aspects of Indian life with which the audience can identify, and in particular the religious aspects³⁰.

The film *Yeh Dillagi* (*This Attained Heart*, 1994, dir. Naresh Malhotra), not a great success nor very well-known, is a perfect example of reworking of one of Hollywood’s most celebrated films, *Sabrina* (1954, dir. Billy Wilder). The story follows perfectly in line with the original: the protagonist is a girl of humble origins, Sapna (Kajol), the daughter of a chauffeur of a rich and powerful family of industrialists. From her infancy the girl has been in love with the youngest scion of the family, Vicky (Saif Ali Khan). The Indian authors spice up the original narrative development with zesty «entertainment values»: some action and combat scenes (inspired by Hong Kong Kung Fu movies), subplots of various kinds (developed on the basis of the classical Bollywood formula: dance clubs, villains, vamps ...), comic entr’actes (with regionally stereotyped characters) and, of course, a certain number of song and dance sequences³¹. For example, in the first scene, as the girl, unseen, gazes at her hero, the original elegant dancing party is transformed in the Bollywood version into a modern group dance with the playboy at the centre surrounded by adoring admirers. Again, on returning home from Mumbai (rather than Paris) the girl, now a woman (and indeed a rich and famous model, incarnating the dream of young Indian girls), finds the importance of the occasion sealed by a chance meeting with the young man at the station of Shimla. As they ride

²⁹) Thomas 2008, p. 26.

³⁰) *Ibidem*.

³¹) Nayar 2003, p. 74.

home in the car, the mutual attraction of the two young people is evoked with a song and dance sequence breaking out in the middle of the snow-covered road, a jubilant crowd lined on either side. Interesting, too, is the distinctly Indian moral that rounds the film off. After a series of amorous vicissitudes, also *Yeh Dillagi* ends with the girl reunited with the playboy's elder brother but, instead of the romantic scene on the ocean liner in the original, here the happy end comes after the girl's grim confrontation with her future parents-in-law, and in particular with the mother-in-law, who finally abandons her haughty ways and accepts the girl in the family.

5. *The happy ending*

The traditional happy end in popular Hindi cinema provides the opportunity to extol the traditional values. Here, too, we find reflection of the characteristics of the oral tradition of narrative. As the tale is passed on from mouth to mouth, and passed down from generation to generation, the behaviour and values of the individual in the tale become those of a group. In much the same way, the social order tends repeatedly to be jeopardised in the course of the film, only to be re-established, prevailing over individual needs, just a few minutes before the end. In popular Hindi cinema, in fact, as in oral narration, good always wins over evil³².

With the introduction into Bollywood cinema in the mid-1990s of the modern, globalised hero³³, with an increasing tendency to be NRI – Non Resident Indian, the films are permeated by a continuous tension between the risks of moral decay and adhesion to the traditional values, mostly regarding the unity of the patriarchal joint family. As the storyline unwinds, the heroes are repeatedly called upon to demonstrate their “Indianness”, right up to the end of the film, when the social balance is restored with the customary approval of the marriage by the parents. Such is the case, especially, with the films *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Braveheart Will Take the Bride)*, 1995, dir. Aditya Chopra) and *Pardes (Foreign Country)*, 1997, dir. Subash Ghai).

Otherwise the social balance may be restored by divine agency, as is the case in some films with perfect “deus-ex-machina style”, such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun ...! (Who Am I to You?)*, 1994, dir. Sooraj Barjatya) and *Mujhse Dosti Karoge! (Will You Be My Friend?)*, 2002, dir. Kunal Kohli). In both cases at the very end of the film, as the “wrong” marriage is being celebrated Krishna intervenes, allowing the true lovers to be reunited. In the first case

³²) Nayar 2004, p. 17.

³³) The age of the “angry young man” – the proletarian common man-hero ready to fight social injustices, played by the famous actor Amitabh Bachchan – characterizing the 1970s and the early 1980s has come to an end. The new hero personifies the social and economic change under way in India in the early years of the 1990s and answers to the need for identification of the diasporic audience that has developed thanks to the circulation of Indian movies on the global market.

intervention is achieved by means of a sudden gust of wind, while in the second case Krishna enjoys precious help in the form of a puppy dog by the name of Tuffy. Thus, even in the most modern films the development of the most intricate stories seems to find resolution in terms of the topoi belonging to the long Indian classical tradition, such as the happy end achieved through divine intervention, all at once unravelling a tangle of schemes and misunderstandings that had been gathering ineluctably throughout the entire story.

SABRINA CIOLFI
mail@sabrinaciolfi.com

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