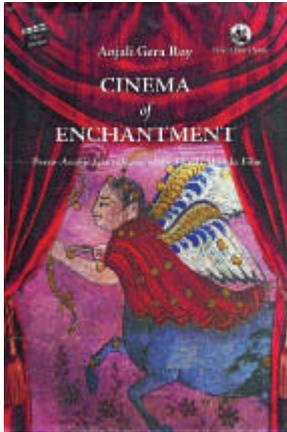


The Magical Heritage of Hindi Movies

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Cinema of Enchantment: Perso-Arabic Genealogies of the Hindi Masala Film

Anjali Gera Roy

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In Salman Rushdie's *Shame* the narrative epicenter is a mysterious town called Q where three mysterious sisters give birth to a son called Omar Khayyam who, rather accidentally, goes on to meddle in the military affairs of Pakistan. The magical son of a-unit-of-three-mothers, Omar keeps claiming himself as a peripheral man, yet finds himself in the political mire notwithstanding the aesthetic reputation of his Persian namesake. While the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality is common in texts that espouse magic realism, seldom do we get to find serious academics adopting a “fantastical” approach in their critical analysis of real life phenomena. Anjali Gera Roy's search for an Arab-Persian tradition in Hindi films exemplifies one such attempt.

Roy reminds us of a town that is located across the political border of India and has a name that begins with Q. Qissa Khwani Bazaar is a town in present day Pakistan that houses the birthplace of three legendary figures of Bollywood: Raj Kumar, Dilip Kumar and Shahrukh Khan. Roy's 2015 book, *Cinema of Enchantment*, sets out to trace the magical origin of Bollywood movies. The illusion with which Hindi films enchants us all, according to Roy, has a secret recipe of *tilism*, an occult practice. Roy concerns herself with the import of Perso-Arabic genres of *Qissa* (orally narrated stories) and *Dastan* (stories), which have been indigenized to fit into the Bollywood mode. Her method may be guilty of harping the orientalist stereotypes, then again she has enough narrative examples to substantiate her claims. In particular, she is interested in the way the Mughal Muslim tradition has permeated into popular imagination and contributed to a technique of creating a spellbound impact on the audience: “Tilism-e Hoshruaba,” or “enchantment that steals away the

senses.” She is careful to point out the subdued role of *Dharma* (religious) and *Darshan* (philosophic) tradition of Hinduism in mainstream Hindi movies. The central argument of the book follows the trail of thought that recognizes Hindu narrative and visual genres as the basis of iconography and ideology of Indian cinema, but finds in Persian-Arabic tradition its fantastical emotion and in Urdu its language of expression. The author goes a step further to identify the Arab Qissa and Persian Dastan as the plotting style to observe: “As opposed to the lens of fantasy through which the illusionism of Hindi cinemas been traditionally perceived, the book suggests that tilism [enchantment] might provide a demotic framework for examining its magical universe” (4).

After reading the book, Roy’s claims do not seem completely out of place. The tradition of *dastangoi* (narrative style) was already injected into the Lakhnavi tradition of theater. In the nineteenth century, the Persian narrative style was both incorporated in and appropriated for the local theater by Mir Ahmed Ali and his fellow dastangos (professionally trained narrators) Amba Prasad Rasa and Hakir Asghar Ali Khan of Lucknow. The tradition was enriched by the inclusion of local practices that initiated a new and distinctively Indian chapter of the Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah that eventually found its way in Hindi film industry.

Roy divides her book into nine chapters. The first chapter introduces *Bhakti* and *Ashiqi* as two diametrically opposite trends; the former resonates with the Radha-Krishna motif, while the latter pursues the Laila-Majnun one. According to Roy, the infidelity and incestuous elements in the Radha-Krishna plot make it an uneasy candidate for *bhakti* (spirituality), allowing the *Ashiqi* (devotional love) tradition of Laila-Majnun to thrive in Hindi movies. The attenuation of religiosity can also be caused by Bollywood’s reservation against restricting itself to any “monolithic theological constructs” (14).

For a large multi-ethnic, and linguistically and culturally diverse country, India has traditionally maintained its syncretic heritage. Hindi films therefore depict the cultural and linguistic adaptability. The popularity of Urdu Sha’ir, Sha’iri and the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb (Culture) informs the book’s third chapter. The large scale migration of the educated middle class Munshis (writers, clerks or accountants) supplied the movie scene with a culture that contributed to the demand and acceptability of Urdu as the filmic register. Whether Roy will make a similar claim under today’s political climate in India is an entirely different issue.

Roy’s scholarly search has been on the sematic and symbolic codes of Hindi movies that can be traced back to the Persian Arabic tradition. She scans the plots of many films to identify the *Qissa-i-Laila Majnun* tradition that valorizes *Isbq* (love) as a type of spirituality which can be viewed as an alternative *dharma*. Similarly, in the fourth chapter, titled “Shehzadas, Houris, Divs and Djinnis,” Roy finds a connection between the paradoxical “virtuous seductress” on screen and their supernatural counterparts in the Middle-Eastern lore.

The central argument of finding the presence of the Oriental narrative style is present in Chapter Five where *Dastan* is presented as the filmic formula involving love, beauty, warfare, and trickery. The thematic idea of destiny is pursued in the next chapter where the formulaic representation of *waqt* (time) is dealt with. These themes are the building blocks of “Filmistan” (the title of the seventh chapter) which offers a respite from everyday troubles for the viewers. The attraction of

fantasy is the subject matter of the eighth chapter where Roy reflects on a wide range of story-telling devices. She touches upon the Western mimetic trend that has given birth to the realistic notion. The problem of using folk motifs within the modernist frame is also discussed before tackling the postmodern question. Roy's final verdict rests with the conviction that Hindi films should be called "Cinema of Enchantment" (18). In the last chapter, she expands the scope of enchantment to label it as an "Alternative Aesthetic of the Hindi Masala Film."

Roy uses ample secondary sources to forward her ideas. The use of scholarly references allows Roy to probe into the commonplace assumption that Hindi movies are formulaic or "bad copies" of Hollywood movies. She ends up outlining a formula of her own, but not without the academic backing of others, before tracing its originary moments in Persia and Arab. At times, it seems that she is too cautious in making an independent claim. At a time when history is being rewritten with prescriptive agenda, Roy's careful treading is understandable. On a separate note, Hindi films in recent times have a new mode of expression and an international audience. Today's audience is much more diverse than the mutually intelligible linguistic groups of the region. More and more we get to see films involving expats and a westernized hybrid generation who have little concern for the Hindi/Urdu debate. Hinglish is here to stay.

At the same time, the screen size of Hindi films demands this new mode of expression and cultural resonance. The introduction of live-streaming and cine-plexes are cases in point. Movie makers are torn between the challenges of addressing an audience who would like to watch movies in both small tablets or mobile phones and large screens with surround sound and 4D effects. How do you find enchantment when technology is creating the ultimate space of simulation? Roy's book is a valuable historical document to identify different fissures behind the genealogy of Hindi films. The book is important because it deals with issues that are easy and convenient to forget, especially in a culture that is making a quantum leap.