



Nagraj Manjule's Act of Protest against Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract: In a world where one hears the term Bollywood, one automatically tends to connect it to the notion of Indian cinema without taking into account the other language films that exist in the country. Since Bollywood is one of the largest producers and distributors of cinema in the country, one tends to associate the term Bollywood to the term Indian. Using the film *Sairat* by Nagraj Manjule, what this paper tries to explore is how he uses the elements of Bollywood to protest against it. It also explores the Bollywood remake of *Sairat* and shows the varying effect it has on the viewer as it ends up addressing vastly different ideas.

Keywords: Bollywood, Caste, Indian Cinema, Regional Cinema

When one hears the term Indian Cinema, there is a tendency to think of Bollywood and talk of that as what constitutes Indian Cinema. A possible reason for equating Bollywood to Indian Cinema may be the fact that Bollywood is something that has transcended international boundaries and has reached audiences across the globe. Essentially, the distribution of these films have been far more as compared to other regional films which in some cases may hardly make it to theatres in other states because it would not gross as much as a Hindi film. As much as it may be a good thing that the cinema being made in this country is reaching other audiences across the globes, as a result of just one kind of cinema reaching these audiences, there is a tendency to form stereotypes. For instance, when we look at a film like *Outsourced*, we see the

American coming to India, and when he enters the country, there is this stereotypical music of the strings of a sitar being plucked in the background that is characteristic to Bollywood. Indians in the film are always dressed in the brightest colours, which will make one see it with eyes that are only slightly open, agarbathi smoke engulfing the cars and homes, and aunties speaking in one accent, which is possibly native to that region. India as country is diverse in terms of its culture and in the languages that exist. Films like *Mother India*, which have managed to reach international audiences, do tend to stereotype the country and there is this whole other realm to Indian Cinema which is left in the dark side and that is where films like *Sairat* by Nagraj Manjule reside.

It is only when one traces the trajectory of Bollywood Cinema over the decades does this notion of Bollywood being what it is right now becomes clear. Understanding this clearly requires first the understanding of media in India. Media essentially became the tool by which many political ideologies, and in this case, dominant political ideologies were being propagated. The start of this trajectory is the films that came out during the rule of the British, here the films that came out were highly censored and therefore the genres that most directors played safe with revolved around mythology. The line then tends to curve into the films made Post-Independence, which focused on the development of the nation state. Here is where dominant ideologies such as that of Nehru and Gandhi governed the kinds of films that were being produced and as a result gave rise to films such as *Mother India*, which focused on the romanticizing rural India. In the introduction to the book *Bollywood The Indian Cinema Story* by Nasreen Munni Kabir, she writes that the unique thing about Hindi films lie in

“its innocent idea of romance, emphasis on family values, reverence of old world customs, colourful sets, marvelously moving music and dance, and most importantly its skills in neatly resolving the conflict between the good and the bad- that makes one wish that life was vaguely like that” (Kabir, ix)

The issues that people face in this country such as caste related violence, religious discrimination, and the politics of it all are all over looked when Hindi films are being made. The notion of creating this perfect world can be traced back to the audience that is viewing the film, in that case, a distinction can be made in terms of the kind of film, the first is the art film and the second is the popular film. The art films are the kind that addressed several issues that existed in the country, whereas the popular film on the other hand is one that looks at the fantasized image of a perfect India.

When we take a film like *Sairat*, the first thing that must be noted about it is the fact that it is made by a Dalit filmmaker and hence shows the world through the realm of experience and not mere observation. Although the Hindi remake of this film is one that does not focus mainly on the issue of caste, but on the story of two lovers, it fails to address the consequences of their love, which is rooted in caste violence. When we look at the setting of the two films, it is clear that that the base of the two films is different. The base for *Sairat* is caste, whereas the base for *Dhadak* by Shashank Kaithan is class. Manjule's subtle caste hints include the fact that Parshya's family stay outside the village, that they live in house where the entire family sleeps in the same room and the fact that Parshya has to help catch fish so he can earn some amount of money. Kaithan's film on the other hand, depicts Madhukar's father as a man who owns a rooftop café. It is with the scene where they both dream of their ladies that we see the subtle yet not so subtle hints that Manjule lays out for us. Madhu is someone who can afford to live in a house that has a terrace, this shows that he has economic mobility. Parshya on the other hand is an individual who has to share his room and his space with the rest of his family. The fact that his sister who giggles while she wakes him up show us that Parshya and his family are the kind of people who have no economic mobility because of their social position. There is a fine line, which distinguishes caste and class. As Ambedkar observes, caste is an enclosed class. (Mungekar, 7) It is when one community closed its doors on the others that social

mobility among castes froze and rigid structures based on caste began to emerge. Economic mobility for the castes that were in the lower order were hard but through the battles that people like Dr Ambedkar and Phule fought, some mobility was possible.

What Manjule establishes for the audience through his subtle hints of caste is the fact that this is something people overlook when it comes to what we can call mainstream cinema, and in this case, Bollywood cinema. It is important to note that he does this using his experience to show case what we can call the Dalit narrative. Kaithan on the other hand, comes from a higher order in the social hierarchy and therefore, depicting the narrative of ones in the lower order become difficult because of the mere fact that this depiction is based on observation. It is different when one observes and records the lives of others as opposed to people recording their lives through experience.

Manjule inserts elements of Bollywood into his narrative seamlessly. Whether it is in the introduction scenes of the hero and heroine, the song sequences with bright colours, or the dialogues themselves, he offers the audience the entertainment they want but also at the same time addressing what he wants to address. For instance, the introduction scene of Parshya takes place in slow motion, where he is running through the fields to come save the day and win the cricket match for his team. Into that scene, Manjule slips in caste, where the old woman who comes to chase the umpire says that if he were to play all day, who would man the fields, look after the cattle and feed the house. Another instance of this taking place would be the part where Archi calls him to help her start her brother's bike. Here, her friend who is sitting behind her asks Archi if he would know how to do it and even if he did, why should they ask him. This is a moment of caste, a moment where the issue of untouchability comes into the scene, and is followed subtly by the moment where the hands of Archi and Parshya touch. Taking the same moment in *Dhadak*, we see how the friend is the one who calls Madhu to help start Parthavi's bike but since he is warned by his father to not mingle with her, that moment of their hands

touching is avoided. It is through that simple moment of the hands of Parshya and Archi touching, that we see Manjule address untouchability and the idea of purity and impurity that exists in the realms of caste.

Another striking moment in *Sairat* is when Archi is spoken of as a woman who could put any heroine to shame. When we look the depiction of women in cinema, what we see are women who support the role of the hero, one can term them as the catalysts that help the hero's narrative progress. They are the cause for the hero's rise and fall but the cause in this case is secondary to the journey that the hero embarks on because that is most important. Archi in *Sairat* is a character who shows resilience and is someone who is stubborn enough to get things done her way. She is a strong female character with her feet deeply rooted in the ground and come what may come her way, she faced it head on. Could this one line which is said to describe Archi be a way of Manjule addressing the heroines of Bollywood who were seen as mere decorations. In Bollywood the female character may have developed more layers to her personality over the years, but she is rarely seen as contributing fully to society. (Kabir, 74) Contrastingly Archi is a character who has through her resilience shown that a woman can choose to be with whoever she wants to be with and is someone who with clarity decides to flee home with a bag full of money and some jewellery. Stepping out of the bounds that society has set for her because of her caste, she chooses to be with someone who is of a different caste and does not see it as a barrier but as a mere obstacle that she has to overcome.

The process of remaking *Sairat* in Hindi has resulted in romanticising the love story that the two characters share while sidelining the most important issue that Manjule addresses in his film, caste related violence. Bollywoodising the narrative so to say, has left out the elements that make his film stand out. Going back to the moment in the cricket match where an old woman was chasing the umpire out of the field, we can see that as a moment of caste, reasons for which will be explained later in the argument. When the same moment is remade

in *Dhadak* what we see happening is a man being pulled out of the competition because his wife is in labour and is about to deliver a child. This is a moment of privilege, in that he is a man who has the choice of being at a competition while his wife is in labour and has to be reminded that he has a duty as a husband, this is the duty that resides in the realm of the social. The same privilege cannot be spoken of for the umpire in *Sairat* because what he is being chased into doing, is his job, as a shepherd, if he does not feed the cattle, his family who relies on that cattle for a living cannot survive because the cattle which they graze provides them the money they need to survive.

Manjule's presence in the film in many ways is the man himself guiding the narrative and leading it to a place that he thinks it may go. What he essentially does is take the viewer on a journey, where he holds the hand of the viewer and leads them to believe that everything will have a happy-ending and by pushing the viewer off the cliff, what he does is paint a picture like Da Vinci and in the end pulls a Jackson Pollock. The fact that he stretches the narrative of the film, building on the plotline, letting the audience get familiar with the characters long enough, in many ways can be seen as a way of him allowing the audience to connect to the events that are to unfold on a level that is different from that of Bollywood films. In a Bollywood film, the audience is either fully aware of the kind of character they are watching or are getting familiar with the character that adheres to the notion of the perfect hero/heroine. Therefore, this familiarization allows for them to form the end of the story for themselves, the ending that they want is the ending that is given to them.

This brings us to the way Manjule chooses to end his film. His film ends with a deafening silence and a baby walking away with feet stained by the blood of his parents. The ending is the final act of protest against Bollywood. The viewer here is given an ending which is least expected. What one may think is going to happen may include possibilities like the families accepting each other and fast-forwarding to a few years later where they all live

happily ever after or the fact that they end up fighting and they chase her brother out of the house and go on with their lives. What one expects the least is for them to be lying in a pool of their own blood and have their child walk out of the house with its feet stained in that blood. This moment is symbolic for a multitude of reasons, the first being the fact that this ending was something that people least expected. The second and most important symbolic reason is the fact that it addresses the future identity of the child. Because the child comes from a house of where its mother and father are from two different castes, there is the question of which caste the child is given, because in some regions the child takes on the caste of the mother and in others the father. In addressing the identity of the child, he is also addressing the effect of caste based violence on future generations and therefore looking at the never ending cycle of caste following one throughout their lives.

Drawing a parallel to *Dhadak*, what we see happening there is an alternate ending, where it is Parthavi who sees her son and husband being killed. The implication of this ending is vastly different from that of Manjule's ending for one reason. The reason is merely this, Parthavi is aware that her family is no more because of her actions and because of her caste. The child in Manjule's ending, is not aware of the reason for his parents' death and neither is he responsible for it. By sparing the child in *Sairat* and having him walk into the distance crying, leaving blood stained footprints, is a sign that caste based violence is what has him orphaned and leaves him unaware of that very fact because he is merely a child who has begun walking.

Regional cinema is in many ways something that is looked down upon by many people in the country because it is not as entertaining as Bollywood films and does not always function as entertainment that is enjoyed by everyone. The reason why most people equate Bollywood to Indian Cinema rests solely in the fact that it is an industry that has afforded the ticket that caters to foreign audiences. Whether it is catering to Indians abroad or Indians at home,

Bollywood cinema doesn't address one thing, but a multitude of themes, romance, action, comedy and tragedy to name a few. The problem with this is that in one kind of cinema receiving the spotlight, there is a tendency for other kinds of cinema, which are sometimes better than others, to be side lined. There are many Hindi films, which are remade from languages such as Tamil. Fan followings exist in the country when it comes to regional cinema is something that will not be argued against, but the point being made here is merely the fact that an actor like Salman Khan would be known in parts of the globe that someone like Vijay is never heard of.

When one watches *Dhadak* first, it can be seen as a standalone film, filled with the iconic music, vibrant colours that fill the screen, moments that make one say that this is most certainly a Bollywood film. But, the point of this paper is to show how Bollywoodising the narrative of a film such as *Sairat* results in the issues that it is trying to address take the back seat and have romance be the one that drives the narrative forward. Manjule therefore, by using the elements of Bollywood in his film, chalking out for the audience the perfect picture and then having that image destroyed in a matter of a few minutes, leaving the audience questioning why the film didn't end the way they expected it to end, that everything seemed to be fine just before it wasn't.

Therefore, we can say that the way he chooses to end his film is an act of protest against the happy-endings that Bollywood films generally offer, and in doing so, is attacking this notion of equating Bollywood cinema to Indian cinema. He uses the elements of Bollywood to lure the audience into believing that the ending that he has to offer is the same as any other Bollywood film, but by ending it the way he does, he symbolically slaps the viewers across their faces and wakes them up to the reality of violence and in this case, caste based violence. By muting the audio, all one is left hearing is the ring in their ear, their breathing intensifying and reality sinking in as they watch the ending. His act of protest against the generalized notion

of Bollywood allows the audience to see the real world for what it is and not for what it is made up to be.

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