Mirroring the Perceptions: Escapism in Imtiaz Ali’s Cinema
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Abstract

Indian commercial cinema over the ages has been infamous for taking the escapist route. For the dream sequences, larger than life characters, happy endings et al. For its justification, it portrays the dreams, aspirations and ambitions of the masses on the screen. But the song and drama and the dance sequences depict life as it should be, atleast in retrospective, and not as it is.

On the other hand, reality also finds a depiction in a niche, limited to the fringes of the mainstream cinema, referred to popularly as the art-house or parallel cinema. But the mainstream industry still sells the highly plastered format. Glossed and gleamed over.

Enter a new generation of film makers, trying to build bridges between the parallel and mainstream. One of the new breed, Imtiaz Ali, a film maker of the same generation, tries to take the varnish off the films, like many along with him. He picks up characters with flaws, imperfections and vices. His protagonist is not almighty and neither is his heroine the prettiest swan in the lake, thus mirroring the youth in the looking glass of his films. Soon he is credited to be one of the popular hindi film makers who can touch the raw and throbbing nerve of the younger generation. He is touted to be balancing both the arms of cinema, parallel and commercial, by many.

This paper proposes to find out if Ali is redefining the escapism infamous with hindi cinema or is he actually escaping from it? Does his narrative style transgress into Marshall McLuhan’s ‘Medium is the Message’ or does he restructure the aspirations according to the present generation? His films have been picked up as case studies and studied under a quantified tabular format to reach a conclusion.

Introduction

According to J. R. R. Tolkien, escapism is creative expression of reality within a secondary (imaginative) world. It is a mental diversion created by dissociation from the banalities of daily life. Whether it is fantasy fiction, or theatre, or mere day dreaming, escapism has always given fodder for imagination and driving content for many art forms.

Although common to humans all over, it thrives in societies which are still striving for something or the other. When a civilization is going through a trying phase, that is when reality becomes most unbearable for people, thus looking for respite from any corner. Foremost example being the great depression of the 1923 in United States. While the film industry based in Hollywood had just started to function, the content was primarily driven to divert the audiences attention from the miseries of daily life. This creating a boom in the cinema industry.

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Indian cinema indigenously has always been classified as an escapist’s route to the dreamland. Be it the larger than life dream sequences or the heroicics of the common man, as the Indian masses have always found a great soliloquy in cinema, thus making it immensely popular with the masses. Poor? Watch a SoorajBarjatya saga. Impoverished? Watch a PrakashMehra spectacle. Bored? Watch a ChetanAnand Thriller. Feeling patriotic? The new Manoj Kumar film is out. Restrained anguish? Wait, the angry young man will kick some butt for you!

Thus mirroring the aspirations and fantasies of the common man, Indian cinema has turned films into the greatest industry of the second most populous country of the world. Realism, while finding a large patronizing audience in the European countries, managed to influence a small lot of film makers in India as well, starting with Ray. Jean Renoir’s association with Satyajit Ray resulted in few films India boasts of till today.

But the realistic cinema was always considered the forte of the parallel stream directors, who focussed on what was life like, after washing away all the gloss and glitter. Suddenly the streets were dirty and the sweat smelled and the common man was not your valiant soldier. Not accepted with open arms or fluttering eyebrows, realistic cinema still found deep roots, seeping through the bourgeoisie.

With the era of multiplexes and digital film making, single screens found their own niche audience, and the new breed of directors found their own super speed cult films, like ‘Rockstar’, ‘Paanch’, ‘Omkara’ and ‘Page 3’. These films had the gritty narratives of the real life scenarios minus all the star studded glamour, but soon they did what no Ray or Ghatak was able to do. Glamorize struggle, and loss, and defeat.

Elements on the fringes of society seldom featured as the protagonists, but now suddenly they were demi-gods. Be it Haider from Haider(Vishal Bhardwaj, 2014), or Rani from Queen(VikasBahl, 2013), the protagonist was imperfect, bruised, resilient and still a fighter in many senses of the word.

Many films featured the song and dance routines as usual, but were like vestigial organs, unimportant to the story(KhoslakaGhosla, Dev D etc). The issues were also changing with the times. Fighting against a zamindar was replaced by fighting against self. Somehow losing a battle against drugs and committing suicide became more heroic than living and fighting against it. This was ‘Ashiqui 2’, the musical blockbuster of one year.

The industry and the society is slowly hauling a different type of hero. This hero does not want a degree, or a job, or a romantic interest. This hero basks in the glory of confusion, and loss, and this is followed by a sudden attaining of moksha, most of the times through the better half, if this is supposed to be a happy film. If it is supposed to be a sad one, the hero dies confused. And the way the audience falls in love with these characters, tells many a things about their own psyche, their own lives, their own battles.

Literature Review

Escapism is not new to the society as we know it. Entire industries are rooted and are flourishing in the human desire to remove themselves from the chores of daily life. (1) At times, many daily activities can also become avenues of escapism, when taken to extremes or out of context. But father of psychology, Sigmund Freud considered a quota of escapist fantasy a necessary element in the life of humans. (2) This fantasy has lead to generation of content for many platforms of media.

In today’s times, the virtual world created by media provides for a peek into another vista for escaping. Films, the mass entertainers, the mirrors of the society act as the biggest platforms for projecting the psyche of the masses. Thus escapism finds a strong foothold in cinema. (3)

‘Entertainment is escapist. If escapism is simply thought to be a preference for film with extraordinary situations over films with everyday life situations, then our analysis supports the belief. It is usually thought to be an evasion of substantial issues such as war, social conflict, unhappy personal relationships, etc. There is no reason, in principle, why films with extraordinary situations cant deal with such themes. Indeed war films are a classic example of how they can. It would be necessary to make a different kind of analysis – a detailed thematic one – of the films to establish whether they, in fact, do.’ (4)

Kaufman states that ‘Movies enable people to abandon the hum drum of everyday life and be transported to faantaastic worlds (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In accrodance, Potts et al. (1996) found that one of the main uses of TV was to escape from everyday problems. Thus, screened fiction has the potential to engage our minds and produce altered states of consciousness, an idea put forward by Jung’s concept of ‘active imagination’ (Izod, 2000). People use movies to temporarily switch off and forget their current concerns and worries.’

Lehman and Witty (1928) noted that watching films provides an enjoyable escape mechanism, whereas Hirschman’s (1987) noted that TV watching motives identified escape from reality as a major motive (more common in males than females).

Methodology

Imtiaz Ali takes the escapism already existing in the Indian cinema up by a few notches. His protagonists are the...
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embodiments of the creed which finds running away to be the solution. Ali puts this distance between his characters, and situations, and lets it alter the story. His characters are looking for something always, the eternal search, which leads them away from the centre of their existing lives. Sometimes this departure is conscious (Socha Na Tha, Jab We Met) sometimes forced (Highway). Such common motifs and leitmotifs are found commonly in each film.

Imtiaz Ali began his career with writing and directing television shows like Imtehaan, Naina and Kurukshetra. In 2005, he made his directorial debut with Socha Na Tha, a box office debacle. Returning after two years with the effervescent Jab We Met (2007), Ali had managed to hit the jackpot, and how. Keeping up with Love AajKal (2009) and Rockstar (2011) after every two years, Ali became one of the most popular hindi film makers amongst the youth. His style of portraying anguish and entrapment was followed again with Highway (2014) and Tamasha (2015).

This is the body of work which is studied for this paper. Thematically the films sound the same, but for the purpose of a structured and stratified analysis, following check list was created and formulated in a table. And the table was named as the table of discontention.

### Table of discontention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Protagonists</th>
<th>Who is discontent?</th>
<th>Does he/ she run away/ is made to run away/ kidnapped?</th>
<th>Does running away puts things in perspective?</th>
<th>Are they back in the world they left as better individuals?</th>
<th>Does it end happily ever after?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Socha Na Tha (2005)</td>
<td>Viren &amp; Aditi</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jab We Met (2007)</td>
<td>Geet &amp; Aditya</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Love AajKal (2009)</td>
<td>Jai &amp; Meera</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rockstar (2011)</td>
<td>Jordan &amp; Heer</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Highway (2014)</td>
<td>Veera &amp; Mahabir</td>
<td>Veera</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tamasha (2015)</td>
<td>Ved &amp; Tara</td>
<td>Ved</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Data Analyis

Imtiaz can be found advocating a certain sort of escapism, from life, into a dream of life. The characters find the mundane unbearable, and take huge strides to change it. Ladies and gentlemen, presenting to you, the alluring cinema of Imtiaz Ali.

When Jordan in ‘Rockstar’ sings, ‘Jo bhi main, kehnachahun, barbaadkarein, alfaaz mere’ (Whatever I mean to say, is spoilt by my words) it transgresses meaning from merely the character to the director. Ali’s cinema creates an unbound poignancy, unmatched in today’s time, but the characters strive to break through the shackles in all of them.

Ali’s directorial debut had an effervescent Ayesha Takia and a pragmatic Abhay Deol run away from an arranged match against each other. Only to fall in love. With each other. So running was not such a good idea. Or it was? Maybe it acted as a catalyst to their relationship. But they had to make that sprint to realize their true selves. Hitch hiking over the trucks and state tourism’s buses, the film had an immense fluidity.

Followed closely by Geet, from ‘Jab we Met’, Shahid Kapoor’s character says at one place, ‘Tumhe Bhagne ka bada shaukhaina?’ and the camera follows her to Ratlam and Manali and Shimla before returning to the quintessential gannekekhet.

‘Rockstar’ had a Heer, who had had enough of the miss goody two shoes image, and wanted to run away from that. Helping her was Jordan, who later realized that Heer’s escapades were his own, and while she had found something after that tryst, he had lost it. When Heer runs away from Jordan, on a bridge in Prague, is a leitmotif of all the running about which is happening in the film.

‘Love AjKal’ had two sets of star crossed lovers, separated by distances, one because of circumstances, and other, alas, had run away from each other, following a mutual break up. The boy, played by Saif Ali Khan, wanted to chase his dream to become a golden gate boy, but is easily tired off by the routine, and the distance from the lo, and thus reuniting at the end.

‘Highway’ had a Veera, played by Aliya Bhatt, who, in popular opinion, is a barbie doll. Ali takes a doll, who can not and will not run, and gets her kidnapped. Now the camera has the liberty to follow her wherever she goes,
thus showing us various platitudes of India, and facets of Veera, which were unseen till she was static.

And lastly with the last outing ‘Tamasha’, an indomitable spirit like Ved, stuck in the rut of a routine job which is slowly poisoning his soul and killing him to become akin to a computer. The camera is trapped in his apartment, in the four walls of the cabin, marking a stark difference between the sun and the breeze of Corsica and Ved’s overwhelming claustrophobic personal space. Ved had ran away to corsica, in the first half of the film, only to realize that this is what life is, or could be.

The protagonist here is just one step short of schizophrenia. It was prodromal in SochanaTha(Viren changes his mind a plenty of times). In jab we met, it had suicidal tendencies. In Love AjKal, it was pure denial. In Rockstar, it was angst of repression and complete alienation. In Highway, this alienation leads to the sacred of the sacradest of Indian Cinema, The family! Next stage is obviously confronting yourself. Which clearly happens with Tamasha.

**Conclusion**

Ali’s cinema shows us the stark difference between what is and what could be/should be/ought to be. The cinematography is always glorifying the outdoors, and the music lifts up the courageous acts of breaking away and escaping. The song and dance routines make sure that the audience knows that the characters are having fun, Bollywood style. But is this so simple, really? Where did Geet get money to run away to Manali in those pretty dresses? How did Ved manage a vacation in Corsica, wearing those mustard yellow designer pants? How did Janardhan sell millions of records as Jordan while he was so busy screaming away and lamenting his loss? Is the escapism really an act of rebellion in any of these cases?

Heros are made out of heroic deeds, in times of adversity. Ali marks routine or normal as adversity and choosing rebellion as a heroic deed. But what he forgets is groundwork is required for any type of rebellion. Buddha was a prince, before he renounced everything and wandered in search for knowledge. If he were not a prince, and only a farmer in Vidarbha, he might have committed suicide before leaping onto the search of answers of the faith.

Ali’s characters believe that breaking the rut is the key and off beat is glamorous. So now when you go to watch the next of Ali’s works, remember, it is not only you who is escaping into a film, the characters are also going to escape into something, which is more interesting than their lives. So there goes the common thread between the audience and the characters.

Maybe this is Ali’s interpretation of cinema reflecting the trends in the society. Maybe they are pointing towards the mental health of the collective milieu. Ali is making the same film over and over again for today’s smart phone addicted, impatient, always sinking into depression generation, who needs escapism and escapist protagonists finding solace in escaping.

As the famous German philosopher Ernst Bloch once wrote, ‘The utopias and images of fulfillment, however regressive they might be, also included an impetus for a radical social change.’
References