

## Excavating social accountability at the site of intertext: Analyzing the recent readings of popular cinema in mainstream (print) news media

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**Abstract**-This paper looks at the readings of popular mainstream Hindi cinema in India's English press (largely *The Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India*- two most widely circulated English dailies) and how cinema's drama and filmic narrativity is re-negotiated in the press' own need of affect and entertainment. Looking at a time period (December 2012 to September 2013) that's bracketed by few of the most violent crimes against women that generated a nationwide outrage, the paper attempts to explore how the journalistic 'text' around these events 'quote' the contemporary cinematic narratives and in the process often re-writes them. News values like objectivity and fairness get problematised as the inter-text of cinema and press used to create discourse of activism re-configures the filmic narrative in the public memory and operationalizes rather inventive readings to suit the social (and commercial) context of news.

**Key Words:** Press, popular, cinema, intertext, entertainment, activism, news values, journalism

'It is the textual system of modernity' is how John Hartley, the editor of *International Journal of Cultural Studies* describes journalism in his book *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*. Drawing a connection between popular culture, idea of public(s) and the origin of press, Hartley goes on to describe journalism as an essential mechanism of modern societies, calling it an enabling 'social technology' that is as important as the law and the financial system. Looking at the historical evolution of European press ( specially French and English) during the time of revolutions in the Continent, Hartley makes a strong point about how narrativity and drama remain at the core of any kind of press that attempts to engage with a 'public' to bring about any kind of political emancipation and democratic activism. I found his emphasis on, and study of the 'textuality' of the journalistic discourse and its relatedness to popular culture a useful perspective to be used in the context of the contemporary Indian press.

Popular culture is usually considered to be a domain of leisure entertainment and fictional narrative, while journalism with its claim of objectivity and fairness is often taken to be a part of the democratic process. Interestingly, Hartley proposes that, "The lesson of history is that these are not conflicting attributes, but part of the same generative process, the same realist textual system."

For the researcher, Hartley's emphasis on the 'realist textual system' becomes one of the key tools to help excavate different 'realities' which are being originally constructed by popular culture (mainstream Hindi cinema in my context) and then re-constructed or sometimes deconstructed in the textuality of the press.

Hartley claims that the "most popular journalism remained that which tapped into human conflict (i.e. drama): 'true crimes' and scandalous disclosure (news); ferocity, exploit, and arrested

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development (sport): marriageability and its vicissitudes (human interest). Journalism's special contribution ...was to fuse truth with violence”

This paper looks at examples of this fusion of 'truth with violence' in recent press and how these elements are constantly accentuated through allusions and readings of popular cinema which are invoked as a commentary on the current state of affairs in our society. This mixture of journalism and popular culture generates more political energy and debate than either 'rational' journalism or 'emotional' popular culture taken alone. My reading of this potent mating of journalism and popular culture is not a value neutral textual analysis. It is invested with an examination of such political claims of journalism as social accountability and activism. In recent times, media activism has become almost an essential part of media's ethical manifesto, or at least on the surface it's made out to be so even if deep down it serves more essential economic needs of the media industry.

The researcher is looking at the readings of popular mainstream Hindi cinema in India's English press and how cinema's drama and filmic narrativity is re-negotiated in the press' own need of affect and entertainment. (In referring to intertextuality I am using John Fiske's idea of vertical intertextuality. This refers to the constant reference, and thus interpretation of primary text in the secondary one – cinema being the primary text and journalism being the secondary text in the current chain of intertextuality.)

Rather than presenting a comprehensive analysis of the cinematic text, these readings of cinema are reflective of the press' own social agenda and its own interpretative engagement with a given social situation as it hurtles from one newsworthy event to another. In the process, news values like objectivity and fairness get problematised as the inter-text of cinema and press re-configures the filmic narrative in the public memory and operationalizes rather inventive readings to suit the social context of news.

Take for example the case of a film like *Dabangg 2*. The film had all the trappings of a predictable Salman Khan box-office hit – a big star cast

comprising of Salman Khan and Sonakshi Sinha as the lead pair, Prakash Raj as the arch villain and a catchy 'item' number by Kareena Kapoor. The press around the release of the film in December 2012 was abuzz with all kinds of glitzy and gossip stories and one of the big talking points unsurprisingly was the item number performed by Kareena Kapoor. The item number titled *Fevicol Se* found an inevitable mention in almost every story done around the film during its pre-release phase. The *Hindustan Times* carried almost a story a day for a week in December starting 6th December, 2012. All these stories, whether they were interviews with the actor turned director of the film, Arbaaz Khaan or choreographer Farah Khan or a general review of the soundtrack, Kareena Kapoor and *Fevicol Se* remained a prominent focus. Most of these stories were headlined around Kareena Kapoor even though the leading lady was Sonakshi Sinha.

An interview with the director was headlined “Creative decision to get Kareena in *Fevicol Se* song: *Arbaaz*” (December 6, 2012). Similarly the interview with the choreographer Farah Khan was titled “Kareena's happier after marriage, says Farah Khan”(December 11, 2012). Elsewhere in the press, there were comparisons being drawn between Malaika Arora Khan's performance in the song *Munni Badnam* in *Dabangg* and Kareena's act in *Fevicol Se* in *Dabangg 2*. Meanwhile *Fevicol* had already signed a deal with the makers of the film!

Nowhere in these discussions and stories around the film and the song, were there ever any questions raised over its 'titillating' lyrics and supposed 'objectification of women'. It was variously mentioned as 'already a hit', 'hot', 'fantastic', 'creative', 'different' etc. The *Hindustan Times* in its December 6, 2012 issue mentions “Kareena's item number *Fevicol Se* has become the talk of the town. Arbaaz is happy with the response to it, and said: "The song is fantastic and she has done a superb job in it. The response is overwhelming. It was a mutual consensus and creative call to have Kareena do it.”

In another instance, the paper quotes Farah Khan,

"Kareena has put in a lot of effort. She rehearsed a lot for it. In fact, she let me do whatever I wanted for the costumes and look," said the choreographer (December 11, 2012).

Thus, in its first inter-textual encounter, the song *Fevicol Se* emerges as a winner with all the markers of a well crafted performance that is bound to succeed as everyone involved in it has worked so hard and creatively. Relying on the stardom of Kareena Kapoor the press makes predictable predictions for the song to be a runaway success.

Firmly entrenched in the business of film promotion, the journalistic text woos the cinematic one and goes around hand in hand promoting its behind the screen reality before the film goes on-screen. The film was released on December 21st, four days after the ghastly incident of gangrape on December 16th in Delhi. Suddenly the press had found content that was far more dramatic, intense, violent and real. The coverage of the incident makes for a compelling study but that's for another paper.

In a rare show of persistent country-wide outrage and protest, the 'imagined community' came together as a nation and insisted on justice for the nation's citizens. The modern nation state, enabled by the contemporary 'social technology' of media, pledged to seek justice. The press, while fusing 'truth with violence', also couldn't merely remain a reportage medium. Here was an opportunity for activism, to participate and write a new narrative of justice, equality and above all, democracy.

Judging by its news value, the December 16, 2012 incident became one of the most newsworthy events of the year 2012 apart from all the scams that were either discovered or invented. Suddenly, the press could see and rake out the misogyn 'inherent' in item songs. Suddenly, *Fevicol Se* became a signifier of all that is abominable in our male dominated society infested with deep seated gender bias. In this second inter-textual encounter, the cinematic text was jilted and disqualified as an intellectually stunted candidate that's still trapped in the cave

man's era while the journalistic text had kept up its date with the progressive discourse of gender equality.

The focus now had shifted from the performative exuberance of an item song to its linguistic chauvinism. In the new found vocabulary of media activism, the lyrics became 'controversial', the depiction 'problematic' and the body of the star, Kareena Kapoor, was finally objectified in this magnified intertextuality. In a January 5, 2013 story in *The Hindustan Times*, titled, "Yes, Bollywood commodifies women", the reporter writes "At a time when the entire country is asking for dignity and respect for women after the brutal Delhi gangrape, lyrics of hit Bollywood songs like the one above — *Fevicol Se*, are drawing flak from audiences for objectifying women."

The irony doesn't get starker than this. It took an incident like that of December 16 to make the press notice the lyrics of a song like *Fevicol Se*! Objectivity and fairness surely are the most over-rated media ethics.

Gradually the media reportage around the key events of crimes against women in the country picked up the theme of item numbers to set up discussions around the objectification and exploitation of women. Looking at the reportage around the December 16 incident in Delhi and the Shakti Mills rape case in Mumbai, one can easily notice a cluster of stories that refer to the film narratives and cinematic performances as affective excesses that spill over into shaping the dark reality of our society.

In these stories that try to analyze the social vicissitudes and examine contemporary belief systems, mainstream cinematic texts are used as a convenient lens to look at the society. According to Norwegian media scholar Nkosi Ndlela, by selecting and more importantly, by shaping news, media represent the world rather than reflect it, leading to stereotyped frames. In his article for *Westminster Papers in*

*Communication and Culture*, 2005, Ndlela mentions, “Media representations reduce, shrink, condense and select/repeat aspects of intricate social relations in order to represent them as fixed, natural, obvious and ready to consume”.

With such headlines as 'Rape spotlight on item numbers', 'Let the item song play' etc. ,these news articles that evoked cinema to narrativise the social realities of contemporary India in the context of such sensationalized events, not just simplified the complex social reality but in the process reduced the complex text of filmic narrative into fixed significations, thereby undermining the polysemy of any modern text. The idea of mainstream cinema in itself was reduced and at times made synonymous with these songs. Suddenly all the discussions around other films of 2012 such as *English Vinglish*, *Kahaani*, etc. were obliterated and a completely skewed grand narrative of Bollywood cinema was created and propped up on the excesses of such songs.

In an attempt to 'translate untidy reality' (Curran and Seaton) into neat stories with beginnings, middles and denouements, the evocation of the popular cinema presented itself as a pre-structured text. This then could be gainfully interpreted to prove journalist's own hypothesis about what's wrong with the society. So, in story after story 'item number' got tagged with suggestions of violence against women. On one hand, both *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times* had earlier conducted polls to decide the best item number of 2012 and had asked their readers to participate in voting for the top ten item divas of the year. These polls undoubtedly focused the readers gaze firmly on the body of the female star and highlighted the inter-text's infinite potential to circulate and thus commodify the original text. The same news dailies in their stories around the two rape

incidents in Delhi and Mumbai mobilized the item song and its meanings in a completely different context. The item song now was circulated as a signifier of all that's regressive in mainstream Hindi cinema. In a similar context, a close study of stories around the Jawaharlal Nehru University incident in Delhi, throw up equally problematic readings of cinema in the popular press. On July 31<sup>st</sup>, an undergraduate student in JNU's School of Languages walked into a classroom armed with an axe, a knife and a pistol, asked a girl to walk out with him and, when she refused, slashed her.

Both *Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times* played up the violence and the spurned lover angles in their very first reports of the incident. While *The Hindustan Times* headlined its story as “Spurned lover attacks woman classmate in JNU with axe, commits suicide”, *TOI* presented a catalogue of weapons in the headline that went “Armed with knife, axe and gun, boy attacks girl in JNU, then kills self”. A comparison of these two headlines with that of a more serious paper like *The Hindu* makes the point by itself. *The Hindu* headlined the story far more soberly as “JNU student axes classmate, commits suicide”. Both *TOI* and *HT* played up the affective elements in reporting, and the fusion of 'truth with violence' was far more graphic and visual. The *HT* even carried a graphic strip (Figure 1) to explain the series of events and *TOI* did a plotting of the incident on a daylong timeline (Figure 2).



Figure 1 The Hindustan Times (Front page), August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013





Figure 2 The Times of India (Front page), August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

While quite clearly, both the popular news dailies used a theatrical narrative in a fashion very reminiscent of what Hartley calls the 'textual system' that links the press to popular culture in the ways it dramatizes and sensationalizes stories to attract the attention of readers. Besides these dramatic elements of the news stories, both these papers over the next few days kept evoking the cinematic texts to corroborate their own analysis of the social reality in this context of killing on the campus.

*HT* again was more direct and dramatic in blaming Hindi cinema. In a story titled "Bollywood responsible for crimes of passion?", the writer sets up the tone of the discussion right at the beginning. She writes "Another case of jilted love gone wrong, and another slew of films around stalking. Is there an obvious connect between latest Bollywood releases, including *Raanjhanaa* and *Rockstar*, and Wednesday's incident of a girl in Jawaharlal Nehru University being axed by her jilted lover before he killed himself?" Well, nowhere does the story clarify that the male student who killed his supposed girlfriend had seen either *Rockstar* or *Raanjhanaa*, but it sure does a good job of clubbing the two films and reducing them to

be films about stalking!

Another story in *TOI*, about Delhi University campus and stalking, makes similar linkages – "If one were to watch Bollywood movies, one would think stalking is nothing but an intrinsic part of the Indian courtship ritual, and in cases where the silver screen stalker really gets out of hand, it's seen as a sign of pure, true love (See: *Raanjhanaa*)." Seen as a sign of pure, true love – by whom? – clearly not by the women in any case – nor in the DU campus (as the story itself goes on to establish) nor by the woman in the film *Raanjhanaa*!

Interestingly, even a cursory look at the reviews of the film *Raanjhanaa* (that got released a month before the gory incident happened) in both these papers presents a classic case of how meaning is constructed and magnified at the site of intertext.

The *TOI* review sums up the story in two lines "A Hindu Brahmin boy falls in love with a beautiful Muslim girl from his neighbourhood. Does their love pass the acid communal test?"

The review is quite congratulatory, " *Raanjhanaa* is a love story that has a Shakespearean touch and is mounted on a lavish scale. Set in Benaras, in a sense, the heart of India, the first half in the vibrant city where the Ganges flows, just sweeps you off your feet with its colour and feel. The plot follows Kundan (Dhanush), a Tam-Bram settled in Benaras. A slight vagabond, he falls hopelessly in love with Zoya (Sonam Kapoor), a fairly affluent Muslim girl in his neighborhood. And his feelings are beautifully conveyed through dialogue written by Himanshu Sharma and songs composed by Rahman."

Well, if the film glorifies the menace of

stalking, the reviewer clearly seems to have missed the point. The review, perhaps disappointingly for the reporters doesn't talk about the acid test called stalking!

The *HT* reviewer showering praises on Dhanush describes the film as “This love story is fantastical but these are characters we could know. Their emotions move us — so much so that when Kundan finally breaks down and cries, I wept too”

If at all any of these reviews or reviewers have a problem with the representational issues in the film, it's about its engagement with the student politics that seems to strike a fake note.

Through a critique of readings of a mainstream film like *Raanjhanaa* that got pulled in the vortex of reporting around the JNU incident in popular news dailies, one can explore how embedded narrative possibilities are excavated and narrative text is re-contextualized to suit the self-claimed social agenda of the press. This, in turn, sometimes deflects attention from the accountability deficit of the reporting media itself.

One can clearly see this in the case of *Raanjhaana's* readings post JNU incident. On one hand, through it' glowing film reviews prior to the JNU incident, the press set the agenda of taste and culture for consumers of cinema. However, after the unfortunate incident, in a peculiar case of attribute-setting, the partial readings of the film associated it to the idea of obsessive love and warped courtship, and in turn held it responsible for campus crimes like stalking and even murder. These opportunistic inter-textual references undermined the polysemy of the cinematic text and sealed the meanings of the filmic

discourse for the readers. (Interestingly, both the film reviews and the post-incident coverage , even though presenting conflicting readings of the film, do not really engage with the portrayal of the woman character and the multiplicity of meanings and perspectives that it could generate in the discussions on gender.)

A socially responsible cinema is not an absolute thing in itself. A socially responsible cinema is also a text that is created and corroborated at the site of infinite intertextuality where every press editor, reporter and reviewer participates in co-authoring the social agenda of cinema. Thus, the social accountability of cinema becomes a much refracted virtue that's splintered through the prism of multiple inter-texts in the popular press.

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