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Gender, Genre, and the Idea of the Nation

“Reading” Popular Cinema in an Indian Classroom

Saradindu Bhattacharya

The discipline of English studies in India, with a history that dates back to the colonial period, is one that has been integral to the idea of India as a nation. If Lord Macaulay's introduction of English (replacing Persian) as the East India Company's official language in 1835 was directed at more effective and uniform administrative control over the “natives” of a colonized nation, it was the same language that became, a century later, the medium of creative expression for a pioneering generation of Indian writers who were trying to envision a nation with its own set of values and problems. As Meenakshi Mukherjee (1993) has observed, authors like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan were playing a role somewhat similar to the British novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in consolidating an essentialized idea of the nation through themes, characters, and settings that were recognizably pan-Indian. Following the independence of India in 1947, English became, almost by default, one of the official languages of education and administration in a multilingual, multicultural society, and it continues to be the language of social aspiration and success in the age of globalization. Teaching English in India is, therefore, an enterprise that must engage with issues of national culture and identity, especially at a time when the discipline of English studies in the country is fast evolving beyond the traditional limits of Eurocentric literature and incorporating texts and methods from various other cultures and domains of study. It is with this awareness of the shifting contours of “doing” English in India that I introduced an open elective course titled Nation, Media, and Popular Culture for postgraduate students of the Central University of Tamil Nadu (located in southern India). While the course itself was offered on behalf of the Department of English Studies, it was not restricted to students from within the department: any student, irrespective of the discipline to which she or he formally belonged, could enroll in it. The idea behind introducing such an interdisciplinary course was not just to expose students to a greater variety of textual and methodological perspectives but also to examine how narratives across various genres, media,

and cultures operate to construct certain ideas of collective identity. Thus, at the beginning of the term, when I faced a motley group of young students who not only spoke different languages but also came from diverse disciplinary persuasions and cultural backgrounds, I knew that the challenge of teaching a class such as this lay not only in bringing in texts that generated enough interest and discussion across the board but also in managing to integrate the insights offered by the students into a critical understanding of how we participate collectively in acts of “imagining” the nation.

The course included primary texts from various genres and media, ranging from poetry and fiction, patriotic music videos, films and ad campaigns, to tourism brochures and internet memes. The underlying assumption behind the choice of texts was that the nation is not a fixed political or geographical entity but a discursively constructed category that can be examined through a sample of narratives cutting across various domains of popular culture. This seemingly random selection of texts also had the additional benefit of reassuring students from other disciplines that they would not be at a disadvantage for not having any formal training in literary methods of reading. In this context, I found it particularly rewarding to use films as illustrative texts, drawing the students’ attention to the fact that cinema, like any other type of narrative, is essentially a form of storytelling that requires a close examination of its constituent elements. I chose to screen and discuss Meghna Gulzar’s *Raazi* (2018) as a case study in the role cinema plays in constructing and contesting popular ideas of nation and nationalism. Set in the historical backdrop of the escalating military tensions between India and Pakistan in the early 1970s, *Raazi* traces the journey of Sehmat, a twenty-year-old Kashmiri girl who is strategically married into the family of a high-profile Pakistani brigadier in order that she may pass on crucial information across the border to the Indian intelligence service. Since many of the students in the class were not native speakers of Hindi and had not seen the film before, they expected (from a cursory reading of the synopsis and watching the trailer) that it would turn out to be a straightforward spy thriller set within the all too familiar historical context of India’s troubled relations with Pakistan. It was only as we “read” the film’s text closely in terms of its narrative structure and located it within the larger formal and cultural contexts of representing wartime experiences in cinema that the significance of its subtle departures from convention became evident. The rationale behind introducing a Hindi film as a text in an “English” class was twofold: 1) cinema, especially mainstream Hindi cinema, has been historically one of the most popular domains in which the idea of the nation has been constructed

and disseminated in India; 2) the English film in India, though notable for its experiments with form and content, remains a niche category targeted mostly at an urban, upper-class, elite audience and is not necessarily representative of popular modes of imagining a national identity.

Watching the film in early 2019, when tensions between India and Pakistan had flared up yet again after a bloody terrorist attack on Indian police forces in the Pulwama district of Kashmir, the students found it “tame” and “slow paced” in comparison to the regular action-packed, melodramatic fare they have come to associate with Bollywood, especially in films that deal with the themes of nation and nationalism. *Raazi* offered a point of entry into discussing the role cinema plays in India to popularize discourses around nationalism, as well as to explore the formal and ideological shifts possible within this popular medium with regard to those discourses. My attempt in the classroom was not just to generate a discussion around what the film’s “message” is but also to engage students in analyzing how the narrative is structured to convey that message effectively. *Raazi* invokes and combines staple themes of the spy thriller and the war film—risk and danger, pain and sacrifice, duty and honour, faith and loyalty—within the larger context of nation and nationalism, only to unsettle the narrative expectations they generate in an audience accustomed to the conventions of these genres.

One of the students, from the Department of Media and Communication and a purveyor of mainstream Hindi cinema, was quick to point out that *Gadar: Ek prem katha (Revolt: A Love Story)* (dir. Anil Sharma, 2001) and *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (dir. Anil Sharma, 2003)—both starring (perhaps not so incidentally, the said student drily observed) Sunny Deol, an actor known for his hypermasculine roles—are instances of Bollywood’s usual hyperbolic mode of dealing with the theme of cross-border rivalry and conflict, even when it is combined with commercially salable elements of romance. Popularly known as *masala* (literally, spice) films in India, these “commercial” ventures are formulaic in terms of themes, plot, and treatment and geared toward a mass audience, as opposed to “art cinema,” which is supposed to have more refined aesthetics that appeal to a niche audience. *Raazi*, the student felt, did not quite fit into the same category of cinema, even though its subject matter was essentially the same as these other films’. I initiated the discussion from this point by remarking that the film’s nonconformity to the standard Bollywood formula of depicting wartime history in jingoistic terms of masculine heroism and sacrifice was precisely what garnered favorable reviews from most critics. Film reviewers have pointed to the director’s conscious humanization of the characters involved in cross-national

strife and to the consequent stylistic and philosophical revision of the popular category of the war film. Uday Bhatia (2018) describes it as “another kind of infiltration . . . of what has become a hyper-nationalistic, triumphant genre by a more humanistic, shaded kind of filmmaking.” Similarly, Rahul Desai (2018) observes the lack of moral posturing or caricature in the characterization and identifies a “duality of conscience” at the core of the film. This survey of criticism got the students wondering whether it is possible for a mainstream Hindi film to revise and critique the way in which themes of national security and pride are represented through formulaic genres like spy thrillers, especially when popular cinematic adaptations of specific historical instances of war already abound in the immediate context of India. India’s history of constant military tension and conflict with Pakistan—the two countries have engaged in full-scale war thrice since their independence from the imperial British rule in 1947—has been the subject of numerous films like *Border* (dir. J. P. Dutta, 1997), *Mission Kashmir* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000), *LOC Kargil* (dir. J. P. Dutta, 2003), *Lakshya* (dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2004), *Deewar: Let’s Bring Our Heroes Home* (dir. Milan Luthria, 2004), and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (dir. Aditya Dhar, 2019) in recent times. One of the students, with a background in political science, offered an interesting insight into the distinct spike in the number of commercial Hindi films made on the theme of Indo-Pak wars since the late 1990s: that this popular trend neatly coincides with the rise of right-wing fundamentalism in mainstream Indian politics that actively promotes and demands an aggressive, militaristic version of nationalism. It is important, therefore, that we understand exactly what *Raazi* achieves by revising the terms in/on which we popularly imagine the nation and examine how the cinematic text employs narrative elements, at the level of plot, character and action, to that effect.

I proposed that *Raazi* presents a critical and ideological counterpoint to the generic conventions of the spy thriller within the larger sociopolitical context of the Indian subcontinent in which ideas of nation and nationalism are becoming increasingly coded in rigid binary terms of “us” versus “them.” It does so by means of presenting an unlikely female protagonist as both the physical agent and the psychological subject of the violence integral to the action of an espionage film. The film also interrogates the oppositional relation between the patriotic “self” and the foreign “other” that lies at the basis of the militaristic conception of the nation and ultimately reveals the shared human vulnerability of both to the traumatic effects of pursuing the idea(l) of nationalism at the expense of individual moral integrity.

From the outset, *Raazi* subverts the expectations of an audience used

to the predictable course of action of a Bollywood espionage film set in a time of war. Unlike its cinematic predecessors, in which women silently suffer the tragic loss of their sons, husbands, and lovers in the background while heroic men fight a difficult battle in the forefront, *Raazi* does not present an overtly masculinist account of war and its effects. In a class where a majority of students happened to be female, this point was quickly recognized as a significant break from the tradition of Indian war films, which almost always relegate female characters to the background and render their actions (and emotions) inconsequential or at best secondary to the main action of the narrative carried out by the male protagonist(s). Numerous instances were promptly offered by the students—from the classic black-and-white tragedy *Haqeeqat* (dir. Chetan Anand, 1964) based on the Sino-Indian war of 1962 to the genre-defining, multi-hero *Border* (1997) based on the 1971 Indo-Pak war. In fact, in terms of her gender and demeanour, the protagonist of *Raazi* is a stark contrast to the testosterone-driven heroes of earlier war films. The film also avoids projecting Sehmat either as a “tough chick” or a “sexy siren,” as so many thrillers with prominent female leads tend to do. One of the male students cheekily observed that Sehmat is the exact antithesis of the glamorous “James Bond girl”; others pointed out that she is unlike any other contemporary female spy in Bollywood too: she is neither the swashbuckling Zoya of *Tiger Zinda Hai* (dir. Ali Abbas Zafar, 2017) nor the seductive Ruby of *Agent Vinod* (dir. Sriram Raghavan, 2012). Sehmat’s delicate femininity, accentuated from the very beginning of the film, sets her apart from other female spies on-screen. Her natural, selfless empathy for living beings, announced somewhat obviously in an introductory scene in which she saves a squirrel from coming under the wheels of a vehicle, and her outward physical fragility, indicated through her inability to look at blood from a minor cut and her aversion to injections, are broad strokes of characterization that position her as an unlikely choice for the demanding task of espionage. The intensive training she undergoes before she gets married hints, however, at an inner core of strength and intelligence she possesses; moreover, she positions herself consciously in the patrilineal tradition of idealistic patriotism, identifying her own duty to the nation as an honorable legacy—one that her father and her grandfather also performed in their time.

At this juncture, contesting viewpoints emerged on the issue of the gendered nature of the patriotic subject. One of the students suggested that Sehmat’s gruelling training, involving various kinds of physical and armed combat, as well as her willing acceptance of a familial/national duty typically reserved for sons, is part of the evolving discourse of women’s equality

with men in contemporary India. Another student observed that, despite her initiation into the “masculine” domain of purposive action, Sehmat is not defeminized; rather, it is her femininity (as a passive, domesticated, young bride) that she must learn to use as a ruse to gain access to secret military information and thereby serve her nation.

As a set-up for the action that is to follow, this narrative exposition builds up in the audience an expectation to see Sehmat put her training to good use, as well as enlists their emotional investment in her success and well-being precisely because she faces such monumental odds. A cursory knowledge of the conventions of the spy thriller, both in fiction and cinema, is sufficient to suggest that this narrative structure of expectation and involvement is at the core of the aesthetic pleasure the audience derives from reading/watching texts of this genre. The appeal of the genre, as David Seed (2003: 117) observes with respect to early British spy fiction, is its “promised . . . access to processes taking place behind official history.” This behind-the-scenes account of history typically highlights the spying hero’s crucial role in uncovering and transmitting secret information, most often to defend the interests of the nation. Many of the students observed that the thrill they get out of watching such films is indeed because of the risky nature of the hero’s enterprise and that they root for his success because his “heroic” acts are directed at saving the good guys from the bad. Yet, as we follow Sehmat through her increasingly perilous inroads into the military plans of the Pakistani army within the outwardly safe, intimate spaces of family and home, the film consistently undercuts the assumption that her success as a spy is concomitant with the realization of her idealistic goals of defending the nation against its enemies. The “enemy,” as Sehmat discovers, is a set of individuals much like herself and her parents—a family that warmly accepts her within its fold, offers her affection and respect, and is just as committed to the idea of serving the nation (in their case, Pakistan) as she is.

The formulaic opposition between the hero and the villain that Umberto Eco (1987) identified as the basic structure of the James Bond novels is subverted in a narrative in which both the protagonist and the antagonist are interpellated within the same ideological framework of the nation. One of the students from my own department pointed out (much to the delight of the inveterate English teacher in me) that the filmmaker effectively employs dramatic irony to bring out the tragic poignancy of Sehmat’s position: in a particular sequence in the film, she trains a group of army school children to perform onstage a patriotic song at their annual day ceremony while she sings the same lines to herself from the wings. The student found the sequence

particularly moving because both Sehmat and the school children express the same sentiment of love for the nation through the song, the only difference between the two (as we, the audience know exclusively) being the object of that sentiment. Another student observed that the conflict here is not merely dramatic but also ethical, as the narrative draws attention to the similarity of the ideological positions held by “enemies” across the borders of two warring nations rather than the specific differences between their respective military strategies. As an aside, the student, who belonged to the Department of History, also added that the couplet with which the song begins and ends is derived from a prayer penned by Muhammad Iqbal, arguably Pakistan’s most celebrated national poet who also composed one of India’s most popular patriotic ditties, *Sare jahaan se accha, Hindostaan humara* (“Our India is better than the rest of the world”). The inclusion of this couplet, the student suggested, could be read as a metatextual reference to the interlinked history of India and Pakistan and a sign of the irresolvable moral dilemma that a character in Sehmat’s position must face.

Even as the film takes us through a series of risky adventures full of plot twists typical of the genre of the spy thriller—deceit, narrow escapes, secret messages, murders—it simultaneously focuses on the traumatic impact each of these actions has on the protagonist’s psyche. It is this fine narrative balance between outward action and inner turmoil that sets up the central conflict of the film as one between the political idea(l) of the nation and the ethical concept of humanity. As Sehmat proceeds to perform her tasks as a spy with greater skill and daring, her inherent sense of loyalty and kindness to others concurrently suffers mounting strain, rendering her emotionally and morally vulnerable to the effects of her own actions. Her “transformation from an innocent girl into a weaponized instrument of nationalism” (Qureshi 2018: 68) is effectively conveyed on-screen in an instance of narrative recall when, in grim contrast to her introductory scene, she repeatedly runs over the loyal servant of the household who has discovered her true identity. The students identified this particular scene as a turning point in the film—one that revealed the extent to which Sehmat must compromise her own moral integrity to achieve her goals and made them question their own assumption that everything she does to ensure the successful completion of her mission must be good for her and her country.

Sehmat’s growing awareness of the violence and inhumanity endemic to the militaristic imagination of the nation—one that is predicated on the identification of and opposition to an “other”—marks her shift from naive patriotism to disillusioned questioning. Thus the film’s climax brings this

conflict to its logical apogee, when Sehmat's near-miraculous return from an aborted escape attempt coincides with her complete emotional breakdown under the burden of the guilt, shame, and horror of her own actions. The students felt that this scene was indeed the most powerful one in the film, as it brings to culmination the traumatic conflict between Sehmat's final "success" as an agent serving the nation and her utter psychic disintegration as an individual who has committed heinous crimes against her own human(e) nature. Here, one of the students, from the Department of Social Work, intervened to question if the film does not fall into the trap of essentializing gender identities by depicting the female protagonist as emotionally weak and unable to cope with the challenges of performing her duty to the nation as well as her male counterparts in other films are shown to do. Another one, with an eye for minute detail, added that the film opens and closes with a frame narrative of sorts, in which Sehmat's son with Iqbal (her Pakistani husband who is killed trying to save her) is one among a group of young Indian naval officers being addressed by a senior commander and told the inspiring story of the brave twenty-year-old girl who became a "casualty of war." The continuation of the patrilineal tradition of service to the nation, the student argued, is thus ensured (and voiced) by figures of male descendants but to the exclusion and silencing of the female parent/protagonist. Even the patriotic number, observed a student from the Department of Music, that Sehmat taught and sang earlier in the film is now rendered in a male voice (joined this time by an adult male chorus) as the final credits roll. These paratextual moves, the student argued, indicate the film's ultimate espousal of the cause of the nation despite its narrative focus on the traumatic effects of surreptitious combat on those who engage in it. To this, another student responded that the filmmaker deliberately chooses to include these framing shots as a way of addressing the dominant—and admittedly masculinist—discourse of nationalism and then subverts it by means of introducing a female protagonist whose narrative function is that of an ambiguous outsider-insider, both within the text and the genre. This ambiguity, I speculated, could be due to the film's commercial nature (it was produced and marketed not for a niche audience but as a mainstream venture) and that, perhaps more importantly, it was at the core of its message—that the received ideas of nation and national duty must stand compromised, though not overtly rejected, by the emotional and moral fallout of their relentless pursuit by the individual human subject.

The ultimate physical immunity of the protagonist, a key ingredient in the spy thriller measured in terms of her successful completion of a dangerous

task and safe return to a “normal” order of existence, is shown in the film as being implicated in disruptive violence against one’s own humanity and that of others, and therefore coincident with traumatic moral compromise and collapse. Though Sehmat’s journey can be charted in terms of the predictable narrative trajectory of a spy thriller, her final return to home (literally to the territory of India) is one that marks her irreversible alienation from the familiar/familial order of the nation. The willing sacrifice of the individual “self” to the cause of the nation can no longer serve as the guiding principle that Sehmat embarked on her journey with; the “self” must also be defined and recognized in terms of the essential humanity it shares with the “other,” and the traumatic effects of dissociating the two in defense of the idea of the nation must be acknowledged. Thus, while the film ends with a dedicatory postscript remembering “the bravehearts who are anonymous in the history of our nation,” the final image we are left with is that of Sehmat sitting by herself in a bare room and looking out the window vacantly. As far as visual symbolism in cinema goes, this is an apt conclusion to a film that employs the generic conventions of the spy thriller to reveal the moral pitfalls of the project of nationalism in times of war. In choosing to humanize and remember one of those “anonymous bravehearts” in the very terms of the dehumanizing consequences of her implication into the goals of war, *Raazi* offers a subtle but significant critique of the dominant discourses of nation and nationalism.

Thus a close reading of the film’s narrative structure and conventions, as well as a critical engagement with the historical context of its production and reception, turned out to be a pedagogically fruitful way of understating and critiquing the processes through which the nation is collectively imagined into being. This collective “reading” of the film helped students understand the crucial role narrative plays in constructing ideas of the nation and the individual “human” within the nation through popular genres and media, and gave them a means of locating revisionary texts like *Raazi* within larger cultural and political debates about the implications of war and its “collateral damage” at a time when national identities are becoming increasingly polarized across the world.

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