

Contemporary Hindi Films, Indian English Literature and the Consumer Culture

N K Neb

Films and literature are treated as altogether different from each other as forms of art. The difference between these two art forms relates to their techniques of representing life involving their distinct structure, potential and possibilities. The nature of their audience and the response these art forms elicit also varies. A film is supposed to be viewed collectively and is an activity of public domain whereas literature, except drama when staged, is supposed to be enjoyed privately. The success of literature as a form or art providing entertainment and aesthetic pleasure depends on the writer's skill and ability to present the material in a specific way. On the other hand it is the competence and expertise of the actors that finally create the impact through their performance so far as films are concerned. Films carry a more immediacy of response than literary writings and the reading of literature requires a special skill in the form of ability to read. It relates to another difference in these two art forms concerning the question of quality and class distinctions. Literature concerns intellectual classes whereas films are related to the common people. The doctrine of class distinctions in Marxist perspective also relates to the division of society into two major classes high and the low or the capitalist and the workers. Each class develops and nurtures a particular form of culture and specific art forms. The upper classes are associated with works of high academic and artistic qualities whereas popular art forms like films are considered a mark of low or working class culture.

These two forms of art further relate to the ideas of class distinction as art films and serious works of art inform high culture and popular films and literature are considered a part of mass culture. It is evident from the attitude of the academicians towards novels they put into Mills and Boons category and the works of art treated as serious ones. For example, in Hindi film industry Satyajit or Shyam Benegal films are considered artistic, intellectual and part of high culture as compared to them, David Dhawan films and other commercial films receiving immense audience response are treated of low artistic worth. In the contemporary Indian English novel the writings of Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, R. Raj Rao etc. are not awarded the status awarded to the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Desh Pande, Anita Desai, Mukul Kesawan, Arundhati Raoy, Gita Mehta, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry Hari Kunjru, etc. These ideas about art including films and literature also refer to modernist views regarding high and low culture. They point out implications of production and consumption of cultural forms like films and literature. The present paper studies these art forms to explore their relevance and significance in the way they provide artistic presentation to culture and the way different developments in society impact them. In the process it is intended to highlight how these cultural forms come forth as products of contemporary culture and also cater to its demands.

The unprecedented developments in the field of technology coupled with heightened role of capital, rapid urbanization of rural India and coming forward of a

mass culture has impacted material reality immensely. The development of trade centres, MNC culture and mushroom growth of beauty saloons, call centres, internet cafes etc. speaks of a culture where the only consideration in life is money, wealth, personal growth and concern for body with an inveterate consideration for their use value. The speed at which information now travels and the magnitude by which it is available have brought people from different cultures together. These elements and compulsions of new jobs have destabilized the difference based on caste, region and class distinctions. Internet and computer prompted speed has also intervened social and different life situations. The quick results offered by computer generated programmes have enhanced a sense of promptness expectancy in life therefore; everybody expects quick results, prompt solutions and immediate success. Nobody seems to have time even for leisure or entertainment demanding time. The breakneck speed of narratives, quick impact formulas and immediate response informs the nature of entertainment industry including art forms appreciated in contemporary times. It has put heavy demands on the authors and producers to innovate ideas and techniques to cater to the demands of the reading public and the film goers. Coupled with these factors, liberal democratic setup, women - friendly laws and new theoretical perspectives used to make sense of reality around inform the direction of cultural development reflected in films and literature. It can be observed in the way these art forms showcase contemporary reality and the way it has changed the perception of life for men in general and women in particular.

The images of women and family projected in contemporary films and fictionalized in Indian English novel reflect the change informing women's position in society. These images show contemporary Indian women highly modern, liberated, uninhibited and much more vocal than their traditional counterparts. The women one finds in films like *Damini*, *Dhoom*, *Aitraaz* and a host of contemporary Hindi films and novels, particularly by women writers like Shobha De, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Kusum Sawhney, Namita Gokhale are not contented in family life and seek individual happiness and personal success. Divorce for them is no longer a dreaded word. Their attitude towards marriage and family that contests the sacred nature of these institutions reveals the emergence of a woman empowered enough to seek new avenues in life without dependence on man or without bothering about his power and traditionally awarded privileges as the head of the family. Their behavior and attitude towards life is symptomatic of a life that awards much more significance to business, commerce, success, progress and individual growth than purity, morality, social responsibility and community life. Two typical examples of new woman exercising newly acquired power and disregarding traditional norms that disallowed women to use their sexuality as a means to elicit wealth and comforts without a sense of regret or shame can be seen in Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* and Shobha De's latest novel *Sethji*.

These art forms here operate at two different levels. At the one they reflect social life and cultural aspects of life in the contemporary times and the other, they also inform the impact the images of life carried in films and literature have on the social life of the people. For example, Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* adumbrates the emerging cultural scenario through the behaviour of Shagun a modern educated housewife. She

feels empowered enough to leave her husband and children for the sake of her lover , her husband's boss simply because, "her love- making, tender, attentive pedestrian (with her husband was) as so much wasted time". (Kapur 33-34). It also indicates that a life of contented matrimony fails to absorb all of a woman's energies and satisfy her desires. The idea of womanhood established by patriarchy stands contested in the changed social context. It marks the development of a culture in which women no longer stand as, " a signifier for the male other, bound by the symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey 35). The change in the emerging cultural scenario is expressed through the destabilization of stereotypical images of woman presented in films as well as literature. In the same way how images projected in different art forms including films, glossy magazines and advertisements have a sway on the minds of the people is the major concern of De's novels. She rather concentrates on the media generated images of men and women that people tend to imitate and emulate their ways of life. In *Sethji* , one finds Amrita and other characters like her husband , her father-in- law and women like Simran constructed on the basis of the media generated images of such people.

The cultural aspects other than a changed perception about women's life and position in society depicted in films, and literature also challenge the bipolar division of society and culture. Instead of the division in terms of class conflict based on two dimensional reality informing upper classes and lower classes or bourgeois and proletariat, the contemporary cultural system involves horizontal cultural differences. In other words, society or culture is no longer understood simply in terms of high and low culture or art. The contemporary reality considered from new perspectives informs multiple possibilities of life. Therefore, literature and films are no longer limited to and are not supposed to be an expression of class conflict or the struggle between two classes of society. Contemporary reality is now understood as multi-layered and multi-dimensional and the conflicts involving social groups due to a variety of other issues. Consequently, the ideological views concerning different art forms now include other factors like gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc. It has resulted in heightened fragmentation of art into different categories. It relates these art forms to different sub-cultures that involves the expression of even those forms of life in art that were earlier considered unworthy of artistic expression. It also implies that ideology and its functioning is not limited to class conflicts based on means of production and their control only. In other words, the oppressive apparatus of ideology remains active in other forms beyond economic considerations. Its artistic representation can be observed from films and literature concentrating on such aspects of life.

Contemporary films and a number of Indian English novels deal with the assertion of rights of even those people who adopt deviant gender and sexual roles such as gays and lesbians. The films like *Fire*, *Water* and novels like *Strange Obsession* by Shobha De, *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur and Raj Rao's *Hostel Room No. 31* are some of the glaring examples. They point out fissures in the understanding of heterosexuality as the only accepted sexual behaviour. The thoughts that consider heterosexual form of behaviour to be normal and other forms of sexuality as deviant and abnormal are rejected as fundamentalist and essentialist in nature. These art forms rather seem to

present a case for the acceptance of deviant sexual behavior as just another form of behavior. The development of works of art on this pattern can be related to individual freedom that liberal democracy offers and the postmodernist sense of destabilization of stable norms tends to justify. Apart from this, it also speaks of the loosening of the grip of traditional cultural ethos due to the growth of capital oriented institutions that asserts normative understanding of life. In the times of individual freedom ethical norms are no longer treated in universal terms. Their understanding in contextual and provisional terms marks new developments in society that films and different art forms capture.

Apart from this, in the absence of patronage and financial support for artists works of art are now produced like other commodities. A study of different art forms locating them in material context reveals that artists produce their works as artisans, creating works that would sell. Contemporary art forms including films and novels involve publicity machine to reach audience and readers and sell their works like commodities through brilliant marketing strategies that create brand Chetan Bhagat and Shobha De in fiction writing and Dipa Mehta in films catering to the demands of metropolitan audience, blatant consumerism and market. They project images of life that either resonate with the lives of the consumers or correspond to popular forms of life that have a particular appeal for them. For example, large families and markers of class or caste identities are promiscuous by their absence from most of the contemporary Hindi films and Indian English novels. Interestingly, the identities are here more linked to sexual orientations, gender, consumption of goods and ethnicity to show human relationships. These aspects of art also mark an impact of recent theoretical perspectives and postmodern cultural developments in which everything including art is judged and evaluated on the basis of use value instead of ethical, cultural or moral values and aesthetic qualities. It has brought immense change in the fictional works being produced at present. Most of the writers include popular elements and concern themes having mass appeal and contemporary relevance.

The inclusion of popular elements and contemporary issues including historical incidents and events that form subject of discussion in Indian households, public places and academic debates caters to the taste of the casual as well as serious readers. However, the predominance of the popular over the serious also speaks of the interests and nature of readers and film goers. The sections of contemporary Indian society that form this class are usually educated young men and women, traveling businessman and traders, bored housewives and the people impacted by the media-hype created about some films or novels. The main purpose of these people is entertainment and amusement to spend their idle time. Sometimes the treatment of some current issue in art also attracts them to read or watch its artistic presentation. It can be ascertained from a few examples of contemporary Indian English novel, particularly the novels of Shobha De, Shashi Tharoor, Manju Kapur, Kusum Sawhney, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, Githa Hariharan and films like *Arakshan*, *Water*, *Fire*, *Mardani* etc.

Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot* is based on an actual riot that took place in one of the states of India and treats the sensitive issue of Ram Janam Bhoomi / Babri Masjid dispute. The incident related to recent historical time carries a mass appeal for the

people and offers new perspectives for the discerning as well as popular readers. Shobha De's novels, except *Second Thoughts*, highlight sensational startling and altogether different aspects of life and lifestyle of the people associated with Showbiz, rich and powerful politicians and underworld dons. Kusum Sawhney's novels like *Alaya* bring out sexual abuse of children and women at their own homes. Kiran Desai and Anita Desai's novels like *Fasting Feasting* and *Inheritance of Loss*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* are about experiences particularly of Indian Diasporas in western countries. Arvind Adiga's much discussed novel *The White Tiger* concentrates on the way criminal acts result in success and widely prevalent corruption in Indian politics and the business world. Contemporary historical incidents like Babri Masjid, controversy and Gujarat riots form the structure of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* and *In Times of Siege*. {N K Neb's comment about the treatment of such incidents in contemporary Indian English novel are quite relevant, "A renegotiated and revised interest in historical incidents like Indian independence and the partition of the Indian sub-continent form another tendency in Indian English fiction. The way these events have been rendered in fiction marks another element of popular fiction as the novels treating these things tend to offer altogether different and sometimes sensational perspectives about these things" (Neb 2)}. The same kind of developments can be observed in a number of popular films like *Lagaan* about British imperialism.

Coupled with the treatment of popular issues as themes and presentation of sensational aspects of life related to sub-cultures, experimentation with form is another element used by contemporary artists to make their works reader friendly as well as artistic. The time-tested formula of commercial films that mixes social and the popular and innovative ways of narration are a prominent feature of contemporary Indian English novel and films. The three D films and computer generated images in films like *Ra-One* and novels like Tharoor's *Riot*, Shobha De's *Snapshots*, Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, bring out the conscious attempts made to attract the audience and the readers of both the popular and serious. For example, the novel *Riot*, includes multidisciplinary elements like research project, diary entries, poems, accounts of different characters about the same incident and the beginning of the novel like a news paper report asking the reader to go to page no. 266 to see related details function as effective strategies to draw the attention of the reader. In the same way the use of mixed language involving code-stitching and code-mixing in films and novels also has a special appeal for the audience and the reader.

To conclude, the aspects of films and literature discussed above bring out that the nature of these art forms is determined by cultural scenario and in turn they have the potential to reflect the nature of culture that produces them. It reveals that contemporary Indian Hindi films and Indian English novel are the products of a culture in which art is produced as well as consumed like other commodities. Consequently, it seems to serve and is governed by the demands and rules of the consumer culture in which little attention is paid to the aesthetic and the artistic and rather the commercial interests seem to have more significance.

Works Cited

De, Shobha. *Sethji*. Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012.

Kapur, Manju. *Custody*, Random House, Noida, 2011.

Mulvey, Laura. " Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Feminism and Film*. ed., E. Ann Kaplan . Oxford University Press: New York, 2000.

Neb, N.K. "Cultural Dynamics", *Pragati's English Jourhal* Vol. 9 No.1 June 2009.