



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

DEATH OF A LOVER: THEORIZING THE CONCEPTS OF IDENTIFICATION AND DESIRE IN THE FILM "RAANJHANAA"

KUNTAL BAG

Research Scholar

Department of English, Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi



ABSTRACT

Ranjhanaa, a 2013 Bollywood feature film was a 'box-office hit' with its release. The films narration starts from Delhi, the capital of India; takes a journey through Banaras, where the journey of the protagonist begins actually from child hood and ends in Delhi, with the refusal of the lover-hero to live further which leads to the death of a self, a desire. In spite of having a tendency of a circular narration, the film appears to be a simple love story with a tragic end, where the protagonist, the lover-hero Kundan dies refusing to pursue his desire. But the story more than just documenting Kundan's journey of love (ultimately leading to his death) reveals a complex structure of desire and identification where the audiences' response is evoked through creating a counter to the fantasy world weaved around the hero. The intended paper will try and analyze the audience's 'identification' with the 'fantasy' world by the dint of post-psychoanalytical formulation of film criticism. This analysis will finally be extended in order to incorporate a cognitive approach to film theory to comprehend the dynamics of the film director's creation of a fantasy world through a narrative strategy the first part of which thrives mainly on the protagonist's formation of desire and obsession a sudden blow or 'tapping' on it, thus, appealing the spectator's cognitive architecture. The ending of the first half and the entire second half act as constant 'tappings' on this cognition. How this process conforms to the whole identification process of the audience will be judged by a raising a few basic questions about the concerned screen-text.

Key words: Lover-hero, desire, audience, identification, narrative, cognitive-architecture, tapping, circular-narration.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

"Audiences across India are going home teary and touched by Kundan's maha 'sacrifice' in the end. Now, if only Kundan had taken the hint and stopped harassing Zoya right at the start, so many lives would have been spared" -this observation on the 2013 Bollywood film *Ranjhanaa* is made by Shobhaa De, a film reviewer, columnist and popular blog-writer in her column 'Mumbai Mirror' in *The Times of India*. She goes on to reaffirm her disdain

for the film in spite of the fact that it grossed a total income of two hundred crores in Indian currency. She identifies *Ranjhanaa* as a 'pretty nasty' film, since, according to her, it attempts to portray 'a selfish', 'immature, 'violent and unstable man' (Kundan, the hero) as a martyr. She gives a clean cheat to the character of the heroine by putting the blame entirely on the hero. She describes the heroine as an 'innocent victim' whose 'peace of

mind' is devastated by a preying lover whom she does not love at all. De also criticizes the three attempts of suicide by the slitting wrists- twice by Kundan, the hero and once by Zoya, the heroine. She considered the whole experience of the film as a 'wretched' experience and in a pungently satirical tone announces "Well, at the end of this wretched experience, I sure as hell was ready to slash mine."

When such allegations are made against a 'box-office hit' film, controversies and a counter argument on the part of the film-maker are unavoidable. Director Aanand Rai defended his creation promptly. By declaring Shobhaa De's claim as 'absurd and myopic' Rai asks about her familiarity with Varanasi (or Banaras), (where most of the incidents take place in the film) - "Has she seen Varanasi, felt its pulse? Does she know what the city is all about? Does she understand the feelings of the young in the small cities where two people still cannot go out on a date?" (DNA-India Website) Rai attributes Shobhaa De's ignorance to her growing-up in metro. According to his claims there are subtle nuance at a small town, which in itself is a different cultural breeding, and which cannot be understood by a metro-city dweller. He emphasizes the fact that as a film maker he is at liberty to treat a theme in a film in his own way: "How I treat the theme of love is entirely up to me. I don't discuss how she (Shobhaa De) treats love in her books and column. For some people smooching even in public is normal. For my characters even saying, 'I love you' is an uphill task." By making this contrast he himself reveals his strategy of putting two contrasting desires at work in his film. He consolidates his claim by addressing the reviewer: "You handle your relationships your way. I'll treat mine the way I want to." (DNA-India website)

From the above argument and counter-argument, one fact stands out clear that both the creator of the screen-text and the perceiver (the audience) of it are at liberty in case of interpretation. Representation of the abstract concept of love is the central theme of this film. 'Desire' is a very crucial factor in case of interpreting the screen-text. The film-maker's interpretation gets reflected in portrayal of love or, so to say, a 'fantasy' world woven out of a character's 'subjective desire'

and it is totally different from the interpretation made by audience-the consumer of the end product(i.e. the film). Now the question is, how this film appeals to such a large audience and becomes a commercial success? It is quite evident that one reviewer's reaction differs hugely from the overall response of the audiences across India. Why the audiences go home 'teary', as Shobhaa De herself claims, in spite of the allegations made by her. It reminds one of the much discussed 'cathartic' effect of Aristotle. (Aristotle 35) But how is this cathartic effect, which works through 'identification' of the audience is achieved in this film? And so far the death of Kundan is concerned, what does his death actually signify? Is he really dead as the gate keeper of the Chandan theatre asks the director of the film (according to the director himself): 'Kundan will come back (na)? He's in a coma? He'll return in the sequel?' what is this assumption indicating at? What are the traces in the movie that emphasizes the death of one lover only and the indication towards the proliferation of the lover figure bubbling with passionate energy through the impingement of traditional transcendental philosophy of ancient India?

Kundan Shankar (role played by Dhanush, a superstar from South-Indian cinema), the son of a Tamil priest based in Banaras falls in love with a Muslim girl named Zoya Haider (role played by Sonam Kapoor) who is from a progressive Muslim family. After a series of persuasion Kundan in a desperate attempt to win some favour on the girl's part slits his wrist in front of the teenage girl resulting in Zoya to fall into his arms. But this happiness does not last since Zoya's father sends her to her uncle's house at Aligarh in fear of losing his reputation in his locality and also in his own community. These two separated lovers meet again after seven years but a lot of water has passed under the bridge. Zoya, now a student of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is in love with a political activist and student from the University, Jasjeet Singh Shergill aka Akram Zaidi. After coming to know this from Zoya, Kundan initially loses his mind but decides to help Zoya in her attainment of love. But the whole story takes a tragic turn when Akram's real identity is revealed by Kundan in the marriage

ceremony. The rest of the story moves in a very complex way including the narration Akram aka Jasjeet and Zoya. Kundan after Jasjeet's death ends up in Delhi to help Zoya. Kundan give a last try to regain her faith. Kundan dies in the end of the story. About the death of the hero in the film, Anand L. Rai, the director film says that Kundan died like a hero. By making this assertion he is putting emphasis on the fact that he deliberately wanted to highlight the heroic quality in his protagonist. He also made it a point that his hero actually lost his willingness to live and to chase his desire and embraced death. (DNA India Website)

To find the answers the questions raised in this paper will intend to look through the whole narrative structure of the film at hand. The concept of 'Identification' as theorized by film critics will be very crucial in this case. While talking about 'identification' Elizabeth Crowe evokes the issue of 'fantasy' that cinema arouses. Cowie observes: "Fantasy involves, is characterized by, not the achievement of desired objects, but the arranging of, the setting out of, desire; a variable mise en scene of desire...the fantasy depends not on particular objects, but on their setting out; and the pleasure of fantasy lies in the setting out, not in the having of the object." (Cowie 133) In contrast to the theoretical proposition of feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' where she attributes the identification with the characters to the male spectators only, Cowie states that the identification takes place not in case of the characters but in the case of the situations only. To put it simply, the spectator does not identify with the characters of the film but with the situations which the characters find themselves in. For many other psychoanalytic film theorists identification is a matter of distortion as the audience identify with the characters who they are not and thus, it gives rise to a peculiar kind of distortion through misidentification. (Mulvey 137)

For Cowie, process of identification through fantasy is not a form of distortion but expressions of deep wishes. It is from two students of Jacques Lacan- Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1986) that Cowie got the inspiration for her formulation on 'fantasy'.

Fantasies do not entail the subject to obtain the desired object but through imagination puts oneself in a situation, a scene where the subject can chart out the possibilities of pleasure. Cowie depends heavily on the Freud's considerations on 'Creative writers and Day Dreaming' (Freud 1985). By following Freud, Cowie claims that for day dreams and other fictional pursuits such as are depicted in novels and films, is not an escape from reality but rather a matter of finding the ways in which fantasies can intersect with reality. Fantasies according to Cowie are very much wishes of change in the reality and what film-makers and other purveyors of fiction achieve is a public expression of ways in which social reality might be different. The central and probably only aim for the writer or film maker is to compose a fantasy in such a way that readers or viewers will enter into the fantasy. Cowie on this aspect of film-fiction notes:

We enter the fantasy structure, and identify as if it were our own. This is not a cognitive mistake, we are not deceived or deluded by the fiction, we have not misrecognised or disavowed the otherness of the film's fiction... we do not take the characters desire as our own, but identify with the characters position of desire in relation to other characters.

(Cowie 137)

In the case of *Raanjhanaa* the audience is introduced to this 'fantasy' world created by the director Anand L. Rai (as he himself claims: 'How I treat the theme of love is entirely up to me') through a much celebrated song song:

"Saanson Ki Zaroorat Hai Jaise/Saanson Ki Zaroorat Hai Jaise
Zindagi Ke Liye/Bas Ek Sanam
Chaahiye/Aashiqui Ke Liye"

The meaning of which as follows: 'like the need of breath is for life/ I just need a beloved for the sake of Love.' This claim is made by a struggling singer in the 1990 Bollywood romantic drama *Ashiqui*. This song which is originally sung by Kumar Shanu (a much reputed playback singer in Hindi films of 1990s) is in itself an emblem of the way Bollywood treats the theme of passionate love. The featuring of this song during the opening-credits and in the

beginning of the opening scene marks the beginning of recurring motif-Bollywood and its treatment of love. Then the spectator is introduced to a voice, the voice of the protagonist Kundan. The screen projects a panoramic view of a Delhi-Street through the rear-view glass of an ambulance. The voice starts narrating his story of ending up in an ambulance and finally to a hospital with a pinching, playful and teasing anecdote; by addressing the audience as 'Vaisaab' (big brother) the voice makes the audience aware: 'a rocket and a girl can take you anywhere'. Thus the protagonist by coming in close contact with the audience takes each member of the audience to the lanes of Banaras and one of its oldest localities-Assi Gahat on the bank of river Ganga. As the story progresses the audience does not identify himself with Kundan but pays attention to the story he narrates and through the narrative tropes enters the 'fantasy' created by the director.

From a semiotic approach to cinema projects a chain of signifiers the meaning of the narrative can be deciphered through these signs. But this approach poses a problem too. It engages one in a close and tiresome analysis of all the scenes and sometimes shot by shot or frame by frame and the complex issue of the signifier and the signified often leads to misidentification which post-psychoanalytic film critics (like Cowie) often tend to avoid. Cowie's argument stands rather in support of the cognitive approach to film. According to cognitive film theorists like Joseph Anderson and Torben Grodal, the activities that characterize film viewing- imagining, emphatic identification, and emotional response can be attributed to the adaptive functions. To move one step further, audience response in the cinema is not attributed to either the spectator or the art work alone, but arises from the direct interfacing of viewer and text. E. S. Tan argues that spectators' response responses are typically aroused somehow, and this arousal is provided by various kinds of stimuli simulated throughout the text, neither the film's patterning of stimuli nor the spectator's activity proceeds arbitrarily. Seeking to elicit certain responses like narrative comprehension, antipathy for an antagonist, a psychological reaction and guided by the assumption that spectators of all cultures share

basic perceptual and cognitive capacities, film makers construct the artwork in ways designed to directly tap the spectator's cognitive architecture. Tan notes: "Although the viewer plays an active role, that role is guided by the film." (Tan 42)

The spectators, thus once entering into Kundan's narration explores the stimulus scattered throughout the text and enter a process of situating oneself inside the situations which Kundan puts himself in. Thus, without disavowing the otherness of Kundan's world, a world of fantasy; the spectators enter into it. The hints of identification or stimulus enhance the scheme of taping the audience's cognitive architecture. Stimulus of identification is provided in the film by the use of old Bollywood songs in the first part of the movie when the audience gets a peep inside Kundan's fascination with Zoya from childhood. Kundan's first appearance in the disguise of Hindu deity Lord Shiva and his last name Shankar indicates strongly towards his identity as an avowed Hindu while Kundan's first identification with his own desire makes him fascinated and aware of the danger at the same time. Kundan attributes to Zoya his first recognition of desire as it gives him a sense of identity also. He himself confesses that his ancestors came from Tamil Nadu and have been living in Banaras for centuries but it was Zoya who for the first time gave him a reason to feel one with the place. It is his recognition with his desire and identification with Banaras that lead the spectators to locate themselves in the locale- Banaras. Kundan shows an indomitable spirit and in the first half of the movie in spite of getting slapped and rejected by Zoya for sixteen times stays confident to get some favour from Zoya. He slits his wrist to persuade Zoya which ultimately leads her father to send her to Aligarh. The character of Zoya conforms to the narrative tendency of a love-story. Up to this point the audience is so engrossed in the teenage love story that they are tapped by the intrusion in the narrative which incorporates Zoya's narration where she confesses her affection for another guy. The shattering down of the first narrative begins. Another intrusion or taping takes place with the narration of Akram aka Jasjeet at his death bed.

The narration of Zoya and Akhtar acts as tapping since the portrayal of their situation is in sharp contrast to that of Kundan whose world revolves round two things only- Banaras and Zoya both are his objects of desire. Zoya's constant insistence on rationality, her pragmatic nature conforming to her referring to Kundan as 'Zahil' (direct translation is 'uncultured') and her relentless try to make Kundan understand their dissimilarities in aspects educational, religious and social status reaffirms the hollowness of Kundan's desire but at the same time makes Kundan more resolute toward the fulfilment his desire. Jasjeet's narration makes Kundan aware of the world outside his own ambit, a world of different and bigger political desire. After Jasjeet's death Kundan becomes aware of the fact that he in his pursuit of his subjective desire has ruined not only his own life but also three others lives and have unconsciously set on destroying their desires also-Zoya, Jasjeet and Bindiya. Bindiya (played by Swara Bhaskar) is a girl from her locality who had crush on Kundan since her childhood and whom he forced himself to get betrothed to after he had promised Zoya to help her marry Jasjeet.

Thus, the cognitive architecture of the audience is captured through a narrative which creates a fantasy by depicting the subjective desire of Kundan. It is Kundan's characterization- his simplicity and ignorance, his simplistic world view and his passion for the desired object that makes him fit into the scheme of a typical lovelorn character, that makes the spectators put him in the row of several other such characters in Hindi cinema. This fantasy world of the protagonist's subjective desire is so convincing that the audience's cognitive power is tapped when they find Kundan struggling to fit into scheme of the other two narratives. The spectators' emotive responses are shaken when they try to locate themselves in the helpless condition of Kundan. Another helplessness is that of Zoya's who also inspite of her attempts to put things into rational perspective (unlike Kundan) fails to fit into the scheme of her own desire. Kundan slits his wrist twice-first time he did it to scare Zoya and after getting to know about Zoya's affair with Jasjeet he does it again. These suicide attempts show the failure of one character to fit into

the scheme of the desire of the other characters. As for the death of Kundan is concerned, Kundan as a character dies but his death reaffirms the desire he stands for and the passion of love that he vehemently strives to represent. The film opens with an objective audio-visual portrayal (as discussed earlier in this paper), Kundan's voice is the voice that the spectators first hear after the song 'Saanso ki zaroorat' and ends with an objective view of a street in Delhi where the journey of Kundan ends. The last scene ends with a fading voice of Kundan accompanied by background music from the film's sound track 'Tum tak', ('upto you') eschewing the lyrics and is visually aided by- a grown up Kundan looking a childhood version of himself at an alleyway of Banaras pertaining to Kundan's last promise for reincarnation. He wants to get reborn just to run through the alleyways of Banaras once again and to fall in love with a girl like Zoya again; the final tapping of the circular narrative takes place to add to the fact that it is just one Kundan and his subjective desire that ended, yet many others are in line.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, J. D. *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*. IL: University of Illinois University Press, 1996. Pdf.
- Aristotle. *On The Art of Poetry*. Trans. Bywater, Ingram and Gilbert Murry. India: OUP, 2009. Print
- Bhatt, Mahesh. Dir. *Ashiqui*. Nadeem and Shraavan, Mus. Dir. India: Vishes Films, 1990. Film.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. London: Macmillan, 1997. Print.
- De, Sobhaa. 'Does Raanjhanaa Glorify Stalking?' (in her Column 'Mumbai Mirror'), *Times of India*. 2013. Website.
- <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Does-Raanjhanaa-glorify-stalking-asks-Shobhaa-De/articleshow/20828098.cms>> (accessed on 16/03/2014, 5:20p.m.)
- E. S. Tan. *Emotion and the structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*. Princeton: Erlbaum, 1996. Print.

- Freud, Sigmund. *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gravidia, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Pdf.
- Grodal, Torben. *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*. MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. Print.
- Laplanche, J and J. B. Pontalis, *Formation of Fantasy*. London: Mathuen, 1986. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- Rai. L. Anand. Dir. *Raanjhanaa*. India: Eros International, 2013. Film.
- Subhash K Jha. *'Shobhaa De's opinion of 'Raanjhanaa' is absurd and myopic, says director Aanand Rai'* Mumbai: DNA India. 3 July 2013. Website.
- <<http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-shobhaa-des-opinion-of-raanjhanaa-is-absurd-and-myopic-says-director-aanand-rai-1856191>> (accessed on 21/05/14, 5:23p.m.)
-