



BOLLYWOODIAN MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

“Culture is the best that has been thought or said in the world” – Matthew Arnold

The definition of culture has been sought and delivered from ages ranging from Cicero’s “cultura animi” (cultivation of the soul) down to postmodern anthropological definition of Tylor of culture to be “the universal human capacity to classify and encode human experiences symbolically, and to communicate symbolically encoded experiences socially”. But, the key problem in understanding the concept of “culture” is its relativity i.e. how the meaning of “culture” tends to shift depending on why one wants to use it. As such the role of the beholder in any form of perception and its interpretation is non-negotiable.

Coming to the field of memory, the key issue is how meaning is reconstructed in narrative and further implicated in notions of self-identity--an identity which, is rehearsed again and again in a narrative which attempts to recover the self who existed “before”. Modern psychologists have proven the fact that the human memory is composed of stratas and that “nothing in the past is lost, all experience is ‘filled away’ somewhere waiting to be rediscovered by the remembering subject which may be both painful (when memories are of trauma or loss) and comforting(wholeness and integration are possible).Moreover, human experience or action takes place under the mark of “what wasn’t known then”: what we remember are events which took place in a kind of innocence. This paradoxical “knowing” and “not knowing” is the position of any autobiographical narrator, who, in the present moment of the narration, possesses the knowledge that he/she did not have “then” in the moment of the experience. All narrative accounts of life stories, whether they be the ongoing stories which we tell ourselves and each other as part of the construction of identity, or the more shaped and literary narratives of autobiography or first person narrative fictions, are made possible by memory: they also reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives to the past.

It is this complex and shifting relationship between past and present selves which I try to explore in the genre of Visual Narratives, particularly cinema. The masalification of Bollywood cinema has been introspected and three particular films have been put under the microscope to look for the basis of treatment of past recollections and memory reconstruction in these films. For this purpose, Vijay Lalwani’s “Karthik Calling Karthik” (2010) dealing with the modern psychoneurotic condition of

“schizophrenia”; Deepa Mehta’s “Midnight’s Children” (2012) and her cinematic treatment of fictionalized historiography narrated through the perforated sheet of subjectivity; Rakeysh Omprakash Mehta’s “Bhaag Milkha Bhaag” (2013) and the remembrance of the traumatic memory of India’s partition through the biographized story of athlete Milkha Singh, have been selected. These films showcase different varied angles of memory and recollection as an alter-ego; as fictionalized history and as trauma. They also bring to light more importantly the Bollywoodian treatment of such a complex phenomenon as “Memory”.

Key Words: Post-Modern Narrative Self, Memory, History, Image, Flashback, Narrative

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives [...] the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language [...] where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?

-Jean Francois Lyotard

Contemporary history continues to witness a series of momentous changes, altering what was only recently familiar ideological, political and economic terrain. These changes have prompted a new awareness of subjective, ethnic, racial, religious and cultural identities and of the ways these are represented or rather re-represented. Recent theory has simultaneously encouraged scepticism towards the supposed authenticity of personal or common histories, making identity the site of textualised narrative constructions and reconstructions rather than of transparent or fixed record. The theorising of the self has itself become more interesting itself with the postmodern turn and within this frame, the self is theorised as relational, fluidic and existing in narrative. The “Postmodern Narrative-Self” counters modern assumptions of self as an autonomous and fixed “internal entity” and brings along with it theory and practise possibilities. In addition, new developments in communication and information technology appear to be altering our fundamental perceptions of knowledge, of time and space, of relations between the real and the virtual, and of the local and the global.

The varied discourses of literature and media culture have sought to explore these changes, presenting life as it negotiated on the borderlines of new, hybridised, performative, migrant and

marginalised identities, with all the mixed potential and tensions these involve. What emerged are new, sometimes contradictory perceptions of subjectivity or of relations between individuals, social groups, ideologies and nations, as the inner and public life are rewritten in a cultural environment caught up in religious and political conflict and the networks of global consumption, control and communication. In these new formulations, memory has become something inevitable which shapes an individual’s identity, marking its distinctions and boundaries based on the re-capitulations and remembrance of one’s past, which can be either subjective or objective history subjectivised through one’s looking lenses.

The debate of memory and identity can be extended to the genre of narrative itself as the articulation of any narrative (a form of discourse) is composed based upon the writer’s identity. This identity is in turn formed by stratas of memory which gets formed due to experiences, present as well as past, which in due time gets transformed into narrative in the form of recollections-traumatic as well as pleasurable. This function has been worked as long as 1690 by John Locke who in a perplexing manner presents an instance and asks that if a person wholly lose the memory of some parts of his life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that he shall never be conscious of them again; does the person loses or have any alteration in his individuality due to that particular incident? Is he not the same person, which did those actions, had those Thoughts that he was once conscious of, though that he have now forgotten them? Consistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the actions and events of the

past, and the experience of the present, are an integral part to a sense of personal identity. Identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives. However, it is not only the content of memories, experiences and stories which construct a sense of identity: the concept of the self constructed in narratives is also dependent upon assumptions about the functions and process of memory and the access it gives us to the past. In everyday social discourse, and in much conventional autobiography, these narratives tend to elide memory as a process: the content is presented as if it were uniformly and objectively available to the remembering subject, as if the narrating "I" and the subject of the narration were identical. The split between the two voices or identities – what Christa Wolf describes as "the memory of ourselves.....and the voice that assumes the task of telling it" – has now been clearly identified within narrative theory, and further emphasised and developed within Lacanian psychoanalysis. When one says "I went to the cinema yesterday" the connection between the "I" who makes this statement and the "I" who watched the film is obvious. When Pip, on the first page of Dicken's "Great Expectations" says: "So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip. I give Pip rip as my father's family name", a complex relationship between "Pip" and the first and second "I" is clearly in play.

Another narrative form i.e. film as regards the incorporations of flashbacks or the use of point of view can prove illuminating. The novel does not necessarily provide a more complex or sophisticated narrative of memory than film, and film has its own range of techniques for evoking the subjective experience of memory loss or recovery. During the 1930-40 new media "irrevocably altered the consciousness of writers' at the most fundamental levels" and in particular, "cinema seemed to rupture the very fabric of the space-time continuum". Both film and photography are often cited as metaphors for how memory works; comparisons that can shed light on attitudes towards memory itself, the medium with which it is compared, and the interaction between the two. In some instances, film and photography are depicted as objective, unchanging and straightforwardly interpretable

images of a past event; the apparent materiality of these images appears to act as a guarantee of their reliability and is more apparent in the way film depicts memory. An introspective into the genre of visual studies leads us to the fact that the act of visual perception actually starts with the optics of viewing, light rays entering our eyes and activating the receptor cells which are then carried forward as electric signals by the receptor cells into the brain for processing. The visuals are then processed through a complex phenomenon of brain processing where at first the brain looks for anomalies and similarities and differences so that it can form a relation with the different information that have already been stored inside the brain due to previous memory and cultural understanding of the outside world. The world is stabilised by negotiating with these relational aspects and we render a meaning of the world through the visuals which we are fed with. Thus, the world of images and its study are an important aspect of formation of the self and the relation of the self with others.

We live in a world of images. The very idea of the self, the ways in which we make sense of the world, the means by which we communicate, have all become invested in, and developed through, the visual. In many ways images have replaced the word as the defining aspect of cultural identity, and at the same time they have become part of the attempt to create a global culture. The rapidly developing discipline of visual culture studies has become the key area for examining the issues of the image. The issues and concepts in critical theory of humanism that have come up in recent times ranging from psychoanalysis, philosophy, cultural theory, postmodernism, feminism etc. have had an interplaying influence on the development of the image and "Visual Culture".

The first consideration is Michel Foucault's ideas on power and formations of knowledge. Reconsideration of Foucault's idea gives us radical perspective on the subject devised through and in power. We can take up these ideas and consider them in terms of the subject as spectator-i.e. the positions of power relations that take place when we look at an image. In this Foucauldian sense what takes place whenever we look at an image is that we are located in a certain way by that image.

Considering the cultural forces at hand in order to form the image and how these forces also operate to create a certain type of (compliant) spectator. The spectator too on his part tries to resist the compliant positioning. The struggle between spectator and image is the fundamental aspect of a Foucauldian reading of visual culture. Secondly, is the significance of the visual to Lacanian theory, in particular the formation of subjectivity, the operation of the unconscious, and processes of desire. These are set against a number of different sets of images, including painting, the body, cinema and the mirror. One of the key ideas is how Lacan explores the reflexivity of the self, and in doing so locates the theme of the mirror as an integral part of the formation of the subject. The visual is an ongoing part of the questioning, assertion, collapse and strengthening of subjectivity. Lacan offers the possibility of understanding what it is to have subjectivity, and how such a status is constantly problematized. Julia Kristeva's particular line of thought of the body and how it functions in terms of the image are particularly concerned with the ideas involving the cultural order and the processes of disruption. These disruptive moments, examined through the body and the visual, are seen as both transgressive and creative; they are the spaces in the cultural order that actually allow change and revolution to take place. Kristeva's dealings with the abject (which is both the unnameable horror and something that is deeply fascinating) and the various systems of disruption shows that images, through visual cultures, do more than act as representations of the body and its various guises (including the abject). Also the very capacity of the image to disrupt and disturb the cultural order, as well as the ways in which it is managed and controlled has also been worked on by Kristeva in her theory on the "abject". Jacques Derrida's notion of the Deconstruction and its various aspects can be applied to the analysis of the image. Derrida's nomenclature of deconstruction in terms of a parasite and a virus can be considered as an analytical technique which is something internal to the discourse of the analysis of an "image" and can be compared to the image in various cultural contexts. The ways in which terrorism and the state vie for the power of the image in the cultural order of things is an example of

Derrida's notion of the parasite and the virus. Moreover, other key motifs like the frame and the double has strong visual connotations. Another two images that seem highly appropriate to the whole deconstructionist method –that is, the spectre and the mirror, makes us examine the idea of unconfirmed status (of ideas, things and subjects) and the forces of relativity. Another prominent theorist which cannot be excluded from the ambit of the discourse of the image is Roland Barthes. His move from a structuralist position (such as the reading of Balzac in *S/Z*) to a post-structuralist one (later book on photography) can be termed as a move from a strongly linguistic and literary position in his early works to a more visually driven one in the latter. Specifically important is two aspects of Barthes that has been crucial in the development of semiotics. The first of these is to locate the cultural contexts of the sign and the signification. Simply put, this is the idea that meaning can only ever operate within a social structure, and that all significations emerge from and return, to culture. The second crucial development in these terms is the idea of the reader/spectator as a creative part of the text. This includes Barthes's ideas on pleasure and *jouissance* (that moment of excess and orgasm that threatens the social order), of the death of the author and, finally, the sites of resistance in reading against the cultural order. We also can take the idea of cultural narratives (i.e. the ways in which a culture is narrativized) as a form of visualizing, which includes the creation of images to form and sustain cultural representation.

Since its inception, cinema has evolved into not merely a reflection but an indispensable index of human experience especially our experience of time's passage, of the present moment, and, most importantly perhaps, of the past, in both collective and individual terms. In the volume "Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema" Russell James Angus Kilbourn provides a comparative theorization of the representation of memory in both mainstream Hollywood and international art cinema within an increasingly transnational context of production and reception. Focusing on European, North and South American, and Asian films, and Kilbourn reads cinema as

providing the viewer with not only the content and form of memory, but also with its own directions for use: the required codes and conventions for understanding and implementing this crucial prosthetic technology as an art of memory for the twentieth-century and beyond. Kilbourn discusses cinema and memory within the context of a society where digital technology and globalisation have become prevalent. In this regard, Kilbourn invokes ideas of ethicality and of cinema as “prosthetic memory”, whereby film images become an extension of an individual’s personal memories. Questions of apprehension are also debated, as many of the films analysed display a “katabasis” structure, within which a hero must undertake an underworld journey in order to gain special knowledge. Concluding his Introduction, Kilbourn emphasises four interconnected but distinct ways in which film engages with memory. The first three are: representation via formal-stylistic features, memory as intertextuality and memory as cultural context. The final point is the impression of cinema itself as memory, or “the totality of signs and meanings that make up a given culture”.

In the course of its long history; the mid 1980’s can be pointed out as the era when popular Hindi cinema attracted scholar’s attention and only during the 1990’s such studies acquired a certain academic respectability. When talking about popular Hindi cinema, Bollywood is the term adopted, at the global level by now, to define the prolific production of the cinema and cultural industry of Bombay. It is essentially commercial-not “art cinema” that is designed and distributed on a wide scale in India and abroad, although there is an increasing tendency for the connotation to be extended in general to all Indian cinemas. Thus extending Kilbourn’s theories into introspecting Bollywoodian films would reveal how though all forms of narration are introspection into memory the act of re-representation has become acutely problematic with the use of technology in the modern era. Memory is now primarily artificial, ‘constituted, legitimized and “naturalized” through and by means of primarily visual media, most significantly cinema’. What can be called ‘cinematic memory,’ at best supplements and at worst destroys “natural,”

human memory by naturalizing the technical and the artificial.

Salman Rushdie believes memory is selective. He wrote in his 1980 novel *Midnight’s Children*, which is now a Deepa Mehta film, “Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies, and vilifies also.” The first and foremost thing in a representation of the book in Cinematic norms is the fact of one’s own memory and knowledge of the source. Rushdie’s “*Midnight’s Children*” brings into introspection the concept of objectified history. If memory works as the basis for self identity then how can the identity of a nation or history be something which can be put forward as objective? The rejection of the post-modern self of grand narratives for localized narratives; and taking into account narratives to be an offshoot of memory, Rushdie questions the logic of memory as collective and terms it as something which is blended by the mixture of personal experiences as well as collective ideologies fed out to them which in turn plays a crucial role in the formulation and promulgation of power politics.

The vital question that has to be answered in the investigation of “*Midnight’s Children*” is how does the medium affect the story and how in turn does the story affects or alters in any way the medium? What difference does it make to use words in a novel to create mental images and the use of visual images to create the same effect in place of words in the case of a film? Though it is a known fact that the impact of a visual is somewhat far more than that of a written word, the essence of the past or the story as an act of remembrance is delivered through the first dialogue of the film delivered by the protagonist when he says that “I was born in the city of Bombay once upon a time. At the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, on the stroke of midnight, I tumbled forth into the world. I, Saleem Sinai was mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destiny forever chained to my country’s and I couldn’t even wipe my own nose at that time”. The title of the film in fact resonates of the one thousand and one children of the story that had been born at the precise hour when India had approached her independence. With some chutnification of magic

realism added, the children could telepathically communicate with each other. The representation of memory in this film could be also added to one particular dialogue delivered at the onset of the film itself that most of what matters in our life takes place in our absence and any meaningful identification that we can make of our self is only through the acts of memory. As such Saleem Sinai's narration of his own life story is a flashback of what he remembers and of incidents which had occurred long before his existence but had shaped his life. As such, identity (even self identity) is an act of remembrance which happens only in bits and pieces. The missing links are filled on by the person as it deems fits to him/her to accentuate his own identity. Salman Rushdie in fact through his novel, which is said to be his love letter to his motherland India, questions the very identity of the country called "India" which can only be derived through personal narratives only in derivative and is not something which can be given an universalistic tone. In fact the greatness of his work lies in the fact that India can be summarised only by gulping the whole of what is called "India"-the various cultures, flavours, customs, and traditions and so on. Putting it in one terminology to be something would be an inaccurate way of looking at India. In the same way, the process of historicization has also been put under the radar. What Saleem remembers lying at the bed after he has lost his memory in the bomb blast that destroyed his whole family is the silver spittoon; the same spittoon that had appeared at the house of the Rani of Cooch Naheen, and follows the course of the narrative almost until the end, where it is eventually buried under the rubble of civic reconstruction by a bulldozer. The spittoon works as a point of return, a reminder of reality that tends to get buried under the sheer variety and volume of the experiences and voices present in the novel as well as in real life in a person's life which threatens to erase one's personal identity under the ambit of the collective. As had been resonated by the poet W H Auden in his poem "The Unknown Citizen" the individual "I" gets erased and amalgamated in the collective "We". As such, memories of the past of a nation in the act of remembrance are recollected only in the form of personal subjective consciousness.

The next film "Karthik calling Karthik" is Bollywood's representation of the human psyche and memory through the case of the protagonist Karthik who is a schizophrenic patient. Karthik, the proverbial loser, would have passed his life unnoticed but for the phone call which changed his life one early morn. The caller, also calling himself Karthik, teaches him how to get the top job, the hot chick, the happening life, until our hero angers him...after which things start going downfall for him. Karthik case is that of the schizophrenic patient who creates an alter-ego to become an adviser to his low self-esteem. The phone calls which he receives are rather his own alter-ego that is more assertive and advises him on how to live life. Karthik would wake up in the middle of the night; leave himself messages as his alter ego, and return to sleep, where he would awake once again at 5am to take his own calls. Karthik's phone calls are a journey back to the inner world: the reconstruction of shattered identity. The transformed internal world is only the first step to identity construction. What is derived from this initial progress is the concern on Karthik's part to see things around him differently, replacing the numb feeling arising from an empty and dull life he has lived. Another device subsequently in use is the memory from which the protagonist fabricates his story. Despite his lack of 'good old days' to be converted into the positive 'site of memory', he is still able to form a new identity again in the form of the invented brother whom he guilts of killing. His is the case of false memory fabricated to create a new identity. Karthik is preoccupied by the desire to immerse himself in a certain time, a memory he can return to and have his alienated self healed. The living spirit is the object on which Kafka projects his unfulfilled desire as well as the medium launching Karthik into a past which is subsequently appropriated as true. In fact he invents a story to satisfy his desire.

"I told you the truth," I say yet again, "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts

someone else's version more than his own." (Rushdie 1981, 211)

The film *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra is a visualistic rendition of the traumatic experiences of the event called Partition in Indian history. While India celebrates Independence every year and Independence history exists publicly, the peculiarities of Partition, the individual and cultural memories of it, is barely spoken or written about. It continues to live in the private, in silence. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is Mehra's exploration of the traumatic underside of the intensely happy and victorious moment of Independence and its cultural remembrance against the background of the biography of India's greatest athlete—"The Flying Sikh"—Milkha Singh.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag is a visualistic apprehension of previously established ideologies that celebrates independence, with state sponsored celebrations, as the culmination of a successful anti-colonial struggle and the birth of democracy. The celebratory narratives have been called into question through the life story of Milkha Singh as he recounts the slaughter of his family in the aftermath of the partition. Milkha escapes the slaughter and finds himself in a refugee camp in Delhi, before discovering the indomitable spirit that transforms a hardened criminal into an international superstar. The intricate detailing of the events of Partition is showcased without any judgemental intrusion in the form of Milkha's friend who chooses another path to escape the violence of partition through conversion; a truth which still counts till date. Moreover, the dangers of channelling out single tunnelled truth are perhaps challenged through the many myriad recounting narratives of the events of Partition. The remembrance actually leads to countless narratives and it is through selection of one of the narratives i.e. of Milkha Singh that the filmmaker tries to look and investigate the events of Partition against the objectified historical renditions of Partition.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag is basically a questioning of the unitary notion of Partition fostered by the Indian nation-state and affirmed by many historians of South Asia. This 'official Partition' co-exists with various other views of the events of 1947. Most obviously, it is explicitly challenged by Pakistanis who frame the events of that year as

marking the achievement of the independence of Pakistan. Both the received Indian and Pakistani historical interpretations give meaning to the events of 1947 by moulding them into a key moment in the realisation of the destiny of the nation-state. However, Omprakash Mehta's film underscores the ways in which these nation-focussed interpretations of Partition sit uneasily alongside the "partition"/"uproar"/"migration" that survivors of 1947 speak of.

Moreover, [M]emories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue; necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning; always pointing somewhere else. Making the past available for the self's future is the process we have seen at work in very different ways in the films discussed. Memory does not lie dormant in the past, awaiting resurrection, but holds the "potential for creative collaboration" between past and present. The work of "memory" also involves a complex process of negotiation between remembering and forgetting, between the destruction and creation of the self. Individual memories of personal histories are constantly reworked and retranslated in the present; so traumatic historical events seem to demand re-representation and re-reading, to resist the memorialisation which is also a kind of forgetting, the forgetting that assumes that remembering is finished.

Through the interpretation of these films on the lines of memory, one observation that comes to light is the fact that the device of memory as shown in these films is always used to re-create the past which gives us an identification or re-creation of the present which in turn is related to the notion of identity. And films, like texts are parts of the discourse which helps in the act of remembrance. Whether that remembrance is for the questioning of objectified history, or the creation of alter ego or as trauma, memory is the first step towards the formation of discourses. And in the words of George Orwell in the novel 1984 "Those who controls the past controls the future....Who controls the Present

Controls the Past". These movies are a perfect narrative vehicle for dealing with identity issues, which is what movies are really, finally about. And the recent craze for movies dealing more on the psychological factor could be about our nagging sense of unease.

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