



Popular Indian Cinema in Conversation with Reincarnation: Some Aspects

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Abstract

The paper strives to explore various facets of reincarnation as a theme or device in popular Indian cinema. Reincarnation has been a popular theme in Indian cinema since the early days of Indian film industry. The take of Indian cinema on the subject is very different from that of World cinema or Hollywood; its root can be traced back to traditional Indian philosophy professing Karma and the concept of rebirth. The cyclic pattern of birth and death as professed in Indian philosophy is reflected in a number of ways in the reincarnation movies: through the repetitive usage of various tropes of music, image and also by adopting a cyclic narrative structure. Reincarnation as a theme attributes to the scope of retelling love stories and revenge sagas, thus enhancing the melodramatic 'masala' nature of popular Indian cinema. The movies largely dwell upon and invest in the concept of immortality of the soul and eternal love between the lovers spanning over births. Through the revenge theme, violence is again justified on the pretext of Karma and duty towards keeping the natural order intact. Unearthing of the past life takes place by means of recollection of the protagonist's past life memory, which can be triggered by a number of elements ("memory triggers"), and popular Indian cinema employs a number of tropes in this regard. Although largely conforming to the traditional Indian philosophy, popular Indian cinema has not altogether overlooked the clinical and psychological side of revisiting one's past life either. Besides, Indian reincarnation movies have been regarded to be influenced by Gothic romances; but, growing out of that influence, they seem to subsume a number of conventions of literary and cultural Romanticism.

Keywords

Bollywood, reincarnation, past life memory, Karma, romantic tradition

Since long reincarnation and past life memory have carved a unique niche in Indian cinema, gaining enormous popularity in Bollywood as well as in the regional film industries. Long before Hollywood incorporated reincarnation as a cinematic theme, it had been established as a prominent theme or motif in Indian cinema through classics like *Mahal* (1949) and *Madhumati* (1958). The paper strives to explore different facets of the use of past life memory and reincarnation in popular Indian cinema. Although my primary focus would be on Bollywood, I shall probe into the regional language films as well by means of discussing select regional films which incorporate such devices and motifs.

At the onset of the discussion we find ourselves facing a question regarding the very space and importance of reincarnation as a device in relation with movie genres. As N. S. Wright observes, Indian cinema (which has manifested itself in a popular ‘masala-style’) is “at odds with western concepts of genre, which refer to a select category of films distinguished by an often clear-cut set of rules, codes and conventions” (113-4). Here the borders of the sharply defined genres, like drama, thriller, romance and likewise get blurred, and the movies invariably become studded with songs, often leading Indian movies to be categorised as ‘musicals’. It is therefore difficult to segregate films with themes and motifs of reincarnation and past life memory into a separate and specific category or genre. In fact, the past life memory motif has lent a unique dimension to the element of fantasy in the Indian movies which also amalgamate elements from other genres, predominantly from romance, horror, thriller and to some extent from historical too. Yet Wright considers “reincarnation films” as a separate genre of Hindi movies, because there are films which have “a distinctive set of codes and conventions that can be ascribed to a group of film texts” (115). Before delving into the treatment and nature of the trope of past life memory and reincarnation in popular Indian cinema we shall take a survey of such movies.

The promise of reincarnation as one of the popular devices in Indian cinema was first suggested by Kamal Amrohi’s *Mahal* (1949), which climaxes in the revelation that the heroine had lured the hero into the belief that he is the reincarnation of a lover from a legend so that he falls in love with her. Bimal Roy’s classic *Madhumati* (1958) was not only the one to set a benchmark for the later past-life-themed movies, but also defined more than one conventions of the reincarnation genre – most prominent of such conventions being the love of the anterior hero¹ and heroine remaining unfulfilled due to the intervention of a lustful authoritative figure, which leads to the tragic death of the lovers (or at least one of them). From the late 1960s to the 1990s Bollywood prolifically produced reincarnation films, like

Milan (1967), *Neel Kamal* (1968), *Milap* (1972), *Mehbooba* (1976), *Karz* (1980), *Kudrat* (1981), *Janam Janam* (1988; an official remake of *Madhumati*), *Suryavanshi* (1992), *Prem Shakti* (1994), *Karan Arjun* (1995), *Prem* (1995) and *Hameshaa* (1997). In 2000s initially a few past-life-themed movies, like *Ab Ke Baras* (2002) and *Jaani Dushman: Ek Anokhi Kahani* (2002), appeared only to find lukewarm applause. Farah Khan's blockbuster *Om Shanti Om* (2007) once again kindled people's interest in past-life-themed movies. It was followed by *Karzzzz* (2008; remake of the 1980 classic), *Love Story 2050* (2008), *Dangerous Ishhq* (2012) and *Teri Meri Kahani* (2012). The South Indian film industries also have not fallen short of past-life-themed movies. Movies like *Mooga Manasulu* (1963; Tamil, later remade as *Milan* in Hindi), *Nenjam Marappathillai* (1963; Tamil), *Raja Nanna Raja* (1976; Kannada), *Jaganmohini* (1978; Telugu), *Gnana Kuzhandhai* (1979; Tamil), *Janma Janmada Anubandha* (1980; Kannada), *Shravana Banthu* (1984; Kannada), *Enakkul Oruvan* (1984; Tamil remake of *Karz*), *Pillai Nila* (1985; Tamil), *Aatmabalam* (1985; Telugu remake of *Karz*), *Janaki Ramudu* (1988; Telugu), *Yuga Purusha* (1989; Kannada) kept streaming in from South Indian regional language film industries till the end of the 1980s. Although the 1990s and the early 2000s saw a slackened production of such movies (*Naane Varuven* was made in 1992 in Tamil), from the second half of the 2000s reincarnation returned into vogue in the South Indian film industries and till date we have blockbusters such as: *Aadum Koothu* (2005; Tamil), *Vaitheeswaran* (2008; Tamil), *Arundhati* (2009; Telugu, remade in Bengali with the same title in 2014), *Magadheera* (2009; remade in Bengali as *Yoddha: The Warrior* in 2014), *Nannavanu* (2010; Kannada), *Eega* (2012; Telugu), *Manam* (2014; Telugu), *Anegan* (2015; Tamil) and *Nagarahavu* (2016; Kannada).

The position of religion and mythology in Indian cinema can never be equated to the position religion holds in Western cinema; it can be understood only in terms of the unique cultural and religious tradition of Indian. Although Vijay Mishra sees reincarnation theme in Hindi cinema primarily as an offshoot of the Gothic tradition in Hindi cinema (49-51), arguably the theme of reincarnation in Indian cinema has its root in Hindu philosophy, which propounds the theory of rebirth of a soul to fulfil its Karmic debts. Mishra himself also does not altogether overlook this, but he opts for a Western psychoanalytical method to study the theme of reincarnation in Bollywood. The concept of karma is central to reincarnation philosophy – it is believed that as a result of one's good or bad Karma that he or she is reborn as a lowly creature or a person of higher merit. Indian cinema stretches this dimension so far as to state that a soul is reborn to finish his or her unfinished works of the past life, thus

taking part in the eternal Karmic cycle and keeping the cycle eternally moving. With its almost-natural knack for sentimentalism and melodrama, popular Indian cinema plants a sensational act or accident in the life of the anterior protagonist(s) which amounts to violation of the natural orderⁱⁱ, most often manifested in the forms of rape, murder and/or accidental death. Then in order to restore normalcy of the order and thereby settle the accounts the protagonist(s) must be reborn. In this regard, reincarnation movies verily become revenge movies, adopting the stint of the age-old theme of good-vs-evil and showcasing manifestation of poetic justice. In other words, reincarnation movies thus attempt to justify revenge, another act of violence in itself, with the reason of Karma.

This narrative of violation of natural order and rebirth to set it aright provides Indian cinema the scope to be engaged in its one of the most favourite occupation of narrating love story. Since its earliest instances to the most recent ones, reincarnation movies predominantly speak of the unrequited love of the anterior hero and heroine which is resolved when they are rebornⁱⁱⁱ. At the same time this motif invests reincarnation movies with the Hindu philosophical belief of love between a man and a woman spanning over time, space and births. Although the Hindu belief preaches of the love of a husband and his wife married in God's eyes to span over births, popular cinema has extended the horizon to encompass the love of unmarried lovers in this league. In fact the very title *Janma Janmada Anubandha*, which translates as *Bond beyond Births*, suggests it. In *Kudrat* the picturisation of the song “*Humein tumse pyar kitna*” (the male version) subtly hints at the concept of eternal love between a couple. The song starts with the corporeal forms of the anterior hero and heroine; but as the song advances, the transparent, shadow figures of them are seen, embracing each other, moving over the backgrounds of beautiful landscapes, starlit sky (suggestive of the universe) and likewise. Thus the song sequence offers the idea of the souls of two lovers transcending the barriers of time and space. A step further ahead, this picturisation also suggests and reaffirms the concept of perishability of the human body and immortality of the soul, a concept which is one of the bedrocks of traditional Hindu philosophy, as propounded in *The Gita*. A variation of the song even acts as an agonising memory trigger to the posterus heroine – we shall discuss memory triggers in a short while. However, *Jaatishwar* (2014; Bengali) breaks the convention of looking at the concept of eternal, cyclic-patterned love between a man and a woman through different births. Here, though the posterus hero is traumatised by the haunting visions of the tragic destruction of his wife and homestead during his absence in his past life, the posterus heroine neither has any memory of her past life, nor

takes any interest in the posterus hero. She meets him consciously in her posterus life only at the last scene of the movie; the movie ends without uniting her with the posterus protagonist (rather she is united with the second male lead of the movie, Rohit), leaving the audience in the dark as to whether they could at all unite in the posterus life.

It is generally the love-theme that leads to the cinematic tension. The tension of the storyline features sometimes only in the past life (*Madhumati*, *Milan*) and more often in both lives (*Mehbooba*, *Karz*, *Kudrat*). As popular Indian cinema started becoming more action-packed from the later years of 1970s and revenge as a cinematic theme started gaining more popularity, retribution of the violence done in the past life in the hands of the reborn protagonist(s) became more pivotal to the diegesis, and remains so even today (*Kudrat*, *Karz*, *Om Shanti Om*, *Arundhathi*, *Eega* for instance). Taking revenge against the villain, the destroyer of natural order, not only enables the protagonist to reunite with his/her lover, but also to perform one's Karmic duties, which the posterus protagonist does in more than one cases by going back to and taking care of the anterior protagonist's family as well (*Karz*, *Karan Arjun*, *Om Shanti Om*, *Vaitheeswaran*). The (re)union of the lovers and the retribution of the violators of order once again conforms to the cyclic pattern of Karma and rebirth, which reincarnation movies refer to and celebrate through various repetitive tropes and revisiting of memories. It would be an interesting observation to note that thus violence is justified as the upon the posterus protagonist the 'duty' of taking revenge is thrust, and he/she has to perform it in order to restore the natural order; in this way its working conforms to the teaching of *the Gita*, which professes that any act, violent or not, ultimately serves to keep the natural order intact, and therefore one must work stoically, out of the sense of dutifulness and not led by emotions. Thus, we find, reincarnation movies conform to traditional Indian philosophy in another way.

A key element in the reincarnation narrative is the posterus protagonist's recollection of his/her past life. The movies copiously employ various devices or markers that trigger the posterus protagonist's past life memory, alluring him/her to unfold the mysterious and romantic past life, thereby compelling him/her to revisit the past life. These "memory triggers" (Wright 125) can be of visual, aural and even tactile in nature and come in every possible form. It can be a picture (*Madhumati*, *Ab Ke Baras*), a statue (*Neel Kamal*), a musical instrument (*Mehbooba*), a glass globe containing a waltzing couple (*Om Shanti Om*), bangles (*Karan Arjun*), a musical piece (*Karz*) or anything else. Sometimes even multiple triggers are at work – as in *Kudrat*, where a musical piece, a necklace, a wooden cottage, a

clock tower rekindle the posterus heroine's past life memories like pieces of jigsaw puzzle; simultaneously she is haunted by nightmares which are actually visions from her past life. In *Magadheera* the trigger is a fantastic, tactile one: the reincarnated hero ingeniously gets flashes of his past life whenever he gets a touch from the reincarnated heroine. Apart from these, musical tunes or songs rekindling the past memories almost inescapably feature in the movies. The nature and use of these songs or tunes can be interpreted in multiple ways. On an exterior level the songs not only convey the message of eternal love, but also thereby reconfirm the belief that the soul must revisit the Earth time and again to fulfil its unfulfilled wishes (for instance, "Ayega anewala" in *Mahal*, "Aja re pardesi" in *Madhumati*, "Yeh bandhan to" in *Karan Arjun*). Moreover, the musical piece generally comes back in a repetitive manner to trigger the past life memory of the posterus protagonist (in often cases the hearing of the song is subjective to whom). The musical piece professing return of a soul to the Earth to fulfil its desire itself is repeated time and again, and thus this trope communicates to the audience the affirmation of the cyclical pattern of Karma in life. In *Jaatishwar* (subtitled *A Musical of Memories*), however, no such song is repeated ever; but the movie features no less than three songs which celebrate eternal love spanning over births and thus set the tune of the movie. Interestingly, featuring these songs (*Khodar kasam jaan, E tumi kemon tumi, Jaatishwar*) at the title-credit, the climax and the end-credit of the movie once again to the cyclic pattern conventionally followed by reincarnation movies.

Another pivotal memory trigger is the locale of the story, which almost always contains a ruined mansion (a castle-like building in *Madhumati*, a palace in *Neel Kamal*, a bungalow in *Kudrat*, a burnt film studio in *Om Shanti Om*)^{iv}. The locality of the past life (*Milan, Karz, Jaatishwar*) and the building plays an important role in revisiting the past life memories. The protagonist's memories are triggered with a feeling of *déjà vu* in the place – a feeling which later develops into concrete visions of past life. And most often the climax of the movie (suggesting the climax of the posterus life within the scope of the movie) takes place in the same place where the tragic climax of the past life had taken place (*Om Shanti Om, Karan Arjun, Magadheera*). Thus the conventional cyclic pattern, suggestive of Karma, is once again followed. The incident of revisiting the locality of a boy's past life in order to recall his past life memories actually sets the backdrop of Ray's famous thriller *Sonar Kella* (1974).

Snippet vision of the past life is not the only means of the return of the protagonist's past life memories. It is only in the earlier examples of this kind of movies, like *Madhumati*,

that we find a seamless narrative of the past life incident (memories revisited upon a chance visit to the ruined mansion) narrated by the posterus hero himself. As time moved on, characters linking both lives of the protagonists started appearing in the screenplays. These characters would not only confirm the rebirth of the anterior protagonist, but also fill in the gaps in their memories. Usually elderly people, they not only make things clear to the protagonist and help him fulfil his Karmic duty, but also serve as expository devices to the audience. Gauri in *Milan*, Shanta Verma in *Karz*, Saraswati in *Kudrat*, Bela and Pappu in *Om Shanti Om* are characters of the like.

A thorough inspection of Indian reincarnation movies reveals some traits in the movies of this genre which are essentially romantic. One usually finds the anterior protagonists simple folks, with their pristine love being nurtured in the background of lush nature. The act preventing the past life lovers from uniting accentuates the violence destroying the beauty, order and harmony of nature, which is restored in the reincarnation, through a re-living of the protagonist's past life. The posterus protagonist's yearning for the mysterious and blissfully serene past invests the memory of the past life with a romantic view in the literary sense of the term – a view that is infused into the psyche of the audience too, who enjoys the idyllic charm of the physically unattainable past. This urge of returning to the lap of Mother Nature, revisiting the essential simplicities of human life, experiencing the natural harmony and the beckons of mystery may be traced back to the root of reincarnation cinema as having an influence of Western gothic romances (Mishra 49-52). But Indian popular reincarnation cinema has grown out of the 'gothic' garb and encompasses more traditional conventions of cultural and literary Romanticism. We come across in *Madhumati* an anterior heroine as much a child of Nature as Wordsworth's Lucy – an innocent girl whose deflowering by the *Raja* brings down catastrophe. The innocence of the anterior protagonist(s) is often underlined by means of introducing gypsies in the storyline and associating the protagonist(s) with them [*Mehbooba*, *Madhur Milan* (2000/ Bengali)]. Traditionally the nomadic people have served as classical romantic object: they have been conceptualised as children growing up in the lap of Nature, imbibing her pristine beauty as well as fierce vitality, learning simple values of life from the best possible source: Mother Nature. At the same time, as they lead a life of their own kind far from the prying urban eyes, to the urban eyes they appear to be a kind of mysterious Other (to use the term in the sense of Edward Said). Thus, the introduction of the mysterious, close-to-Nature nomadic people enhances the romantic elements in the movie, and the association of the anterior

protagonist(s) with them accentuates the almost primeval innocence of the protagonist(s), which is also essentially romantic in nature. The posterus protagonist's jagged past life memories themselves add to the romantic elements and his/ her re-living the past memories becomes an inward journey, a quest after one's own identity, which once again conforms to the conventions of Romanticism.

This inward journey to seek one's true identity, we can understand, is rooted in Hindu philosophy which professes knowing oneself to become one with *Brahman*. But does popular Indian cinema make use of past life and its memories keeping in mind the ancient religious-philosophical teaching and the Karmic cycle associated with it even in this modern world? No, attempts displaying reconciliation between the age-old reincarnation theory and modern scientific thoughts have also been made. A number of movies explore the clinical psychological perspective to aid the inward journey. In *Kudrat* the second male lead, Naresh, a psychologist, hypnotises the posterus heroine, Chandramukhi, to unearth the past. A same kind of attempt is seen in *Sonar Kella* as well when the fake Dr. Hazra hypnotises Mukul to know the whereabouts of the hidden treasure. *Jaatishwar* is perhaps the movie to look at the severe clinical nature of the psychological problem that a person remembering his/her past life can encounter. The movie comes out of the romantic garb and makes the audience anxious about the clinical danger that invasions of one's past life memories can actually lead to Dissociative Identity Disorder and eventually leave a person a madman.

Over the time popular Indian cinema has blended the elements of reincarnation with different genres, like horror [*Bees Saal Baad* (1988), *Jaganmohini*], fantasy (*Milap*, *Suryavanshi*, *Nagarahavu*), comedy (*Manam*) and sci-fi (*Love Story 2050*). *Eega* goes so far as to tell a revenge-reincarnation saga from the perspective of a house-fly who is overprotective of the girl it loved in its past life as a handsome young man. *Dangerous Ishhq* and *Teri Meri Kahani* feature more than two rebirths of the protagonists. *Love Story 2050* puts the posterus protagonist into a dystopic future world. Newer conventions and styles of representing and interpreting past life have evolved in Indian cinema, which explores the nooks and corners of the theme in various ways, as we have discussed. Considering all these facts, there are strong scopes to believe that popular Indian cinema's conversation with reincarnation and past life memory would take more interesting, innovative and ingenious turns in coming days.

Notes

- i. The terms “anterior” and “posterus” bear the connotations of Wright’s application of them in this context: “anterior” referring to the personality of the previous birth, whereas “posterus” referring to the later reincarnation. (Wright 115)
- ii. Dr. Ian Stevenson, the much debated reincarnation parapsychologist, notes “a high incidence of violent death” of the anterior personality among different cultures in his research report. (Chadha & Stevenson 71)
- iii. *Teri Meri Kahani* (2012), curiously, does not speak about unrequited love, but shows fulfilment of happy love in all the three reincarnations of the hero and heroine. However, the film does employ the narrative structure to lure the audience into believing that in all the reincarnations their love remained unfulfilled.
- iv. The space of the ruined mansion with a history is the primary link between reincarnation and gothic in Bollywood. The prototype was set by *Mahal* (Mishra 52-54).

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