

Manipulated Childhood: The Representation of Children in Bollywood Films

Yu Zhu*

The Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

zoeYu543@126.com

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Representation of children; child-adult relationship; ideology; desire; five codes

Abstract: Bollywood is one of the largest and most influential film industry based in Mumbai, India, and shows unique characteristics. The portrayal of children and the child-adult relationship in Bollywood have been evolving subjects and have attracted great academic attention. In this article, I will read in detail two Bollywood films and explore the representations of children with reference to the concept of ideology, interpellation, desire, gaze and the tool of Roland Barthes' five codes to test whether the representations of children and childhood are driven by adult ideologies and desires. The case study shows that the whole mechanism of children and childhood representation is fostered by, and in turn, serve the outside world.

1. Introduction

Children in Bollywood films are diverse and multifaceted, ranging from embodiments of innocence and fantasy, to victims of society or agents of change.

In the childhood narrative, the fundamental paradigm is the child-adult relationship. There are various forms of child-adult patterns in movies with children or concerning childhood, whose target audience are mostly adults: the adult saves the child in pain, such as *Les choristes*; the adult and the child improve at the same time in the course of their relationship, e.g. *Like Sunday, Like Rain*; the child saves the adult in a way that evokes the adulthood hidden inside him/her, for instance, *Kikujiro*; and beyond that, from time to time, sexuality may exist between the children and their adult companions, for example, *Farewell My Concubine*. In this article, I will probe into two Bollywood films from the first category: *Taare Zameen Par* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*.

There are two clips of the two films respectively:

A boy, who was naughty but pure and happy, failed the third grade twice and was sent to the boarding school far away from home. Feeling abandoned by his parents, imposed with huge pressure and severe criticism by all the teachers, he became isolated and mute gradually...

A six-year-old Pakistani mute girl went to an Indian shrine with her mother to pray for the speaking ability, but was left alone in India near the border of the two countries by accident. She chased after the train, crying quietly...

As we were all children once, the first sequence may trigger our memory of school and

childhood trauma—strict teachers, endless homework and no freedom. Hence, we naturally feel empathetic about the boy. Meanwhile, we are worried and sympathetic towards the poor girl in the second scenario and eager to help her out. However, both of the apparently natural reactions are exploited, so are the children representations as well as our own recalled childhood. From my perspective, the threads are oriented by ideologies and desires from the adult world.

2. Ideology and the interpellation

Fareed Kazmi^[1] merges Gramsci's explanation of hegemony, Althusser's notion of interpellation and Laclau's concept of populism into his own analysis of conventional cinema's ideological role.

According to Gramsci, the hegemonic class exercises its power and influence not just via economic base but superstructure, not just through coercion but ideological penetration. This permeation is realised by interpellation, to which Althusser refers the cinematic process during which the spectators are aware of that they are the subjects the films are addressing. Laclau's interpretation of populism that effective utilisation of popular interpellation can help the ruling strata develop antagonistic public sphere and draw people into this arena, within which the hegemonic alters the antithesis into a version that conforms to their own worldview and is able to make the masses easily identified with.

Conventional cinema tends to take advantage of repeated themes that are concerned with as diverse audience as possible to make more people interpellated and engaged. For example, the struggle of the suffering, the religion and the nationalism are so often iterated and emphasised^[2].

In addition to the contents, cinematographic technologies should also be taken into consideration when it comes to popular interpellation^[2]. Usually, it is the main characters that carry the predominant ideology. In order to render the viewers centred on the protagonists, when shooting and editing, the camera, the lighting and the sound are collaborating to serve the ultimate objective.

3. Desire and the gaze

Mulvey, following the psychoanalytical path, has defined the pleasure of look in cinema^[6]. Drawing on her viewpoints, the male gaze is dominant and can be classified into two categories^[6]: on the one hand, out of instinct, men are inclined to project their active, primitive sexuality onto the screen and make the female characters the passive targets of their scopophilic desire. On the other hand, inspired by Mulvey's explanation of Jacques Lacan's statement about children's mirror phase, the recognition of the self and the misrecognition of the superego in the mirror—whose physical situation and motor ability can perfectly match—are constructed synchronically^[6]. To apply to the theatrical scene, by identifying with the male protagonists, viewers' desire can be articulated and conducted by their ideal ego—their screen representatives, which can be made feasible by the star system^[6]. Just as Pajaczkowska and Young discuss, through projection, we grant the texts with meaning, while the introjection procedures satisfy the audience's imaginary world^[8].

However, as far as females are concerned, Mulvey believes they function as the passive bearers of the male gaze and are prone to “turn their child into the signifier of their own desire to possess a penis”^[6]. Afterwards, Mulvey expands the theory and takes into account the female protagonists and women in the auditorium in her Afterthoughts^[7].

In exploring Vladimir Propp's folk tale, Mulvey demonstrates two different narrative patterns—for one, “marriage”, which serves as a resolution to the Oedipus complex and the “integration into society”; for the other, “not marriage”, which shows the celebration of the phallic nostalgia^[7]. Then, Mulvey cites Freud's term of “masculinity in women” in their early period “before the development of femininity sets in” (that is, “the phallic phase”). In consequence, female characters are frequently placed in the dilemma of desires between “passive femininity and regressive masculinity”^[7], so are

the women viewers, which, I deem, echoes the “marriage/not marriage” mode. “Not marriage” narrative and its celebration of the phallic period correspond to the repressed masculinity inside actresses, while heroines occupied with passive femininity signify the personification of the “marriage” counterpart and Oedipal moment. As indicated by Mulvey, the “correct” path is “learning a passive sexuality”, i.e. “learning to be a lady”^[7], therefore, the internal desire of female characters can only be pleased in this way.

In the meantime, Mulvey points out that the situation for female audience is more complicated in that their “phantasy action can only find expression...through the metaphor of masculinity”^[7], for which, as explained by Stacey, “in order to identify with active desire, the female spectator must assume an (uncomfortably) masculine position”^[10].

4. Case study

Returning to the two pictures in the Introduction part, the so-called “natural” reactions of the readers toward children’s sorrow and pain conform to what Karen Lury proposes: “the response to children crying, I think, is part sympathy and part empathy”^[4]. Stuart Hanson is aware of that “cinema does not represent reality despite the connotations of the term ‘representation’”^[1], which means the children in films are constructed with given meanings, i.e. the society’s entire connotation system. Accordingly, I will seek out some evidence by reading the two filmic texts in question using Roland Barthes’ five codes of connotations interpretations^[3].

First of all, the Enigmatic Code refers to the mystery set in the first place, and the suspense of the revelation of the enigma gives rise to the whole story; Action Code talks about, in this context, the proper or abnormal activities of children. In the following section, the children’s smile, crying and silence will all be considered; Then, Referential Code is relevant to what we call “popular interpellation” above; Semic Code labels people with their specific traits. For example, cuteness, purity and innocence are the commonest labels attached to children; Lastly, the Symbolic Code is the “play of symbols” and is usually displayed in the antithetic form^[3].

4.1. Taare Zameen Par

As portrayed in the first sequence, a dyslexic child, Ishaan, cannot read or write at the age of eight. In order to conceal his inability, he chose to behave in a naughty way, which made his parents and teachers think it was his attitude that resulted in the failure in study. In the boarding school, though being extraordinarily depressed with stress around, Ishaan met a new art teacher, Nikumbh, who managed to discover the boy’s underlying problem as well as promising potential, and changed Ishaan thoroughly with effective therapies, contributing to the boy’s conquest of shortcomings and improvement of self-confidence.

Before Nikumbh’s debut, two separate layers of space coexist in the scenario: the actual world and the boy’s fairytale world (or his private world). In the real world, the behaviours of children are often seen as indicators of how they will act in the future as adults, leading to the symbol of children as the “national identity”^[4] and the country’s future, because of which, enormous responsibilities are put on the children’s shoulders. In the film, Ishaan’s brother, Yohaam, who does the best in almost every field, is the embodiment of adults’ ideology and expectations, or as what Modleski puts it, the “specious good”—“an ideologically manipulated illusion of taste”^[5]. Thus, by contrast, Ishaan is unqualified and “specious bad”. However, as reminded by Lury, parents are not eligible at times^[4]. Ishaan’s parents fail to locate the fundamental reason for the boy’s problems, consequently, Ishaan feels abandoned after being punished (sent to the boarding school). Overall, this is a world full of adults’ thoughts, and children are marginal—either the bearers or the victims of adults’ will.

Speaking of Ishaan's private world, he then turns the central, standing under the spotlight. Every time when he plays with fish or dogs, when he draws paintings, any sound occurring in that scene, either the call of the school bus driver or mother's dinner bell, becomes the background music. Besides, Ishaan is good at depicting pictures and making up stories in his mind, such as the Math calculation turning into the fight amongst the stars in his fairytale arena. Fairytale, in Lury's description^[4], is "A far from sensible form of story-telling...allows for a temporal dislocation, a validation of sensory experience and a promotion of the irrational to which the child has privileged access".

After all, Hanson tells us that "children are of nature", and they are bound to be more innocent and comfortable after "finding their place in nature"^[1]. So, Ishaan's preference for nature and easy access to the fairytale demonstrate the specific features as a child in him—innocence and purity. Nevertheless, how do we know about the boy's thinking activities and his inner voice? Lury implies that the authors or directors are prone to project their memory of childhood experiences onto the screen^[4], and display the children representation in a mimetic manner to make it vivid, resemblant and credible. As a consequence, the child actors turn out to represent the adults' fears and desires.

Going back to Ishaan's real boarding school life, constant blame and extreme horror push the boy to the edge of collapse. As individuals who once experienced similar suffering, the spectators are interpellated, and the plot promotes their mood to a climax at the same time. They have intense desires to be engaged with delivering Ishaan from his plight when Nikumbh appears and rescues the boy on behalf of them. Nikumbh, played by Aamir Khan, one of India's most influential film stars, serves as the ideal ego of both the viewers and Ishaan. He has set an example for Ishaan, which drives the following narrative, and meanwhile, he channels his values to the audience since they have identified with him.

4.2. Bajrangi Bhaijaan

Following the second plot, the mute girl, Shahida, came across a religious Indian man—Bajrangi, who believes in the Hindu deity Hanuman and prays wherever he sees a monkey. After finding out the girl was in fact a Pakistani, Bajrangi sent Shahida in person to her country with no visa, and succeeded in helping the girl back home to reunite with her family. In the end, a crowd of Pakistani and Indian people gathered near the border fence to support Bajrangi and escort him across the boundary. Shahida stood in front of the crowd, regained her voice and bid farewell to her hero.

At first glance, this film talks about the cliché India-Pakistan relationship and offers a happy closure, during which the narrator (on the Indian side) maintains a seemingly neutral political stance, for there are good and bad people on both sides in the story. The acquisition of speaking capacity for Shahida means that the tension between the two countries is resolved and they begin to "speak" to each other from then on. However, some details suggest the nuanced inequality between the two. For instance, upon witnessing one Islamic priest riding with two women behind him (the women are in reality disguised by Bajrangi and a Pakistani journalist), several Pakistani people teased him by saying "I can't handle even one, and the priest has two", which, to some extent, insults their national religion.

Turning to the little actress, the girl's acting truly impresses me. She stares at or smiles towards the camera firmly, with calm and poise, just like a 20-year-old. Mulvey admits in her 1975 essay that female presence can more often than not freeze the storyline^[6] and leave room for masculine gaze (not just from male spectators, women as well). There are several times, in the film, when the girl's face is in close-up, for example, initially, Bajrangi took Shahida to the police station to ask for shelter, the policeman made a comparison between the girl's face and the criminals'.

Honestly, I do not feel Shahida is as innocent as how children are usually coded to be. On the contrary, Bajrangi appears to be purer as a result of, possibly, his proximity to monkeys (nature). Every time Bajrangi failed to tell a lie or hide the truth, Shahida acted to be rather disappointed about his integrity. Also, she stole the vendor's bracelets and the policemen's handcuffs. Even more, Shahida cooperated with the Pakistani journalist to cheat a man of a lift. It is her impurity that paves the way for the sexuality existing in the narrative.

Tracing back to the moment before Shahida's birth, her mother was watching a cricket match between India and Pakistan on television. In acclaiming the excellent shot of the Pakistani player Shahid Afridi, Shahida's mother decided to name her child after the player, tacitly believing that she would give birth to a boy. Therefore, in the first place, Shahida is transformed by her mother into "the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis"^[6]. Mulvey hints that the mother should either surrender to the patriarchal law or struggle with her child in the fascination. From my perspective, Shahida and her mother opted for the second route.

After encountering Bajrangi, his girlfriend, Rasika, functioned as an obstacle between Bajrangi and Shahida to impede Shahida's realisation of Oedipus complex, which put the girl in the trap of the phallic stage. Hence, in order to explore the "correct" track of "femininity", they have to go to a distant place without the presence of Rasika, which was Pakistan in this context. In the process, sexuality came into being. As we know, "a folktale story always revolves around conflict between hero and villain"^[7]. Although growing up learning wrestling, Bajrangi, in most cases, felt itchy and was quickly thrown to the ground in the wrestling area. However, his masculinity erupted twice, and he defeated the bullies right in front of Shahida, both of which took place when Shahida's sexuality was threatened: when the Indian travel agent attempted to sell Shahida to a brothel; when a Pakistani police officer happened to know Shahida's muteness and forced her to open her mouth.

To the end of the film, Shahida and her father joined the farewell ceremony crowd. The girl got rid of her father's arms and ran to Bajrangi. While she was running, there were intercutting shots between her father and Bajrangi, which "reactivated the Oedipal moment"^[7] and gave way to Shahida's passive femininity. After being given the legitimacy, Shahida, then, was granted the right to speak.

The second level of interpretation of the movie also provides evidence for the actually superior position of the Indian side over Pakistan belonging to the first level. Shahida, the symbol of Pakistan, needs the acknowledgement from the dominant masculinity of Bajrangi, who represents the Indian, to restore her speech.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Within the genre represented by *Taare Zameen Par* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, the narrative is unfolded step by step, surrounding the enigma of "what is the children's pain and how to save them?"

Following this thread, the spectators are manipulated in two ways. First, childhood is our collective experience, and children, according to Lury, are "perfect victims" since they are vulnerable to injury and are "blameless". Feeling sorry for them puts the audience "in a superior position" and renders them satisfactory morally^[4]. Thus, the viewers are easily interpellated and actively involved in the sphere upon capturing films with or talking about children. Further, due to physical limitation, people in the auditorium tend to project their desires of accompanying or protecting the children onto their omnipotent screen agent and identify with the superego altogether with his values and ideology simultaneously.

As I said earlier, children on screen are constructed, and this transformation is also twofold: we now know that the scripts spoken from the little actors' mouths are, in effect, voices and ideas

formed in the mind of adults pretending to be children. Therefore, the representations are “selected and selective”^[1], and are “anthropomorphised to fit the political and emotional agenda of the interested adult critic”^[4].

Some may argue that child actors are performing themselves, for example, Sadr expresses that children in their non-acting style were themselves, and what they present to us is genuine and the authentic reflection of their own life^[9]. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the editing procedure. With the help of cinematic technologies, all the raw materials are at the mercy of the directors or producers.

To sum up, it is so far clear that the whole mechanism of children and childhood representation, and its influence on the audience, is fostered by, and, in turn, serve the adults’ ideology and anticipation from the outside world. In the future study, more films with different child-adult relationship in Bollywood will be investigated to further examine the opinion in this research, and more socio-cultural background of India will be taken into account to make the discussion more comprehensive.

References

- [1] Hanson, S. (2000). *Children in Film*. In: Mills, J. and Mills, R. W. (2000). *Childhood studies: a reader in perspectives of childhood*. London: Routledge, 145-159.
- [2] Kazmi, F. (1999). Chapter 2: *Understanding Conventional Films: In Search of an Analytical Framework*. In: *The Politics of India’s Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- [3] Lesage J. (1976). *S/Z and RULES OF THE GAME*. In: *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media 12-13*(Winter 1976-77), 45–51.
- [4] Lury, K. (2010). *The child in film: tears, fears and fairy tales*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- [5] Modleski, T. (1986). *The terror of pleasure: The contemporary horror film and postmodern theory*. In: *Studies in entertainment: critical approaches to mass culture*, 155-166.
- [6] Mulvey, L. (1975) ‘*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*’. *Screen* 16(3), 6-18.
- [7] Mulvey L. (1981). *Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun (1946)*. *Framework*, (15), 12.
- [8] Pajaczkowska, C., and Young, L. (1992). *Racism, representation, psychoanalysis*. In: Donald, J. and Rattansi A, (eds) (1992). *Race, Culture and Difference*. London: Sage, 198-219.
- [9] Sadr, H. R. (2002). *Children in contemporary Iranian cinema: When we were children*. In: Tapper, R. (2002). *The new Iranian cinema: politics, representation and identity*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- [10] Stacey, J. (1987). *Desperately seeking difference*. *Screen*, 28(1), 48-61.

Appendix

Filmography

- [1] Bajrangi Bhaijaan (Brother Bajrangi, Indian drama film) Kabir Khan, 2015.
- [2] Farewell My Concubine (Chinese drama film) Chen Kaige, 1993.
- [3] Kikujiro (Kikujiro’s summer, Japanese film) Takeshi Kitano, 1999.
- [4] Les choristes (The Chorus, German-Swiss-French drama film) Christophe Barratier, 2004.
- [5] Like Sunday, Like Rain (American drama independent film) Frank Whaley, 2014.
- [6] Taare Zameen Par (Like Stars on Earth, Indian drama film) Aamir Khan, 2007.