

Emergent Cinema of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT:

Pakistan and India shared a common history, language and cultural values, so the form of the film is also similar. The biggest challenge for Pakistan film industry (Lollywood), since partition in 1947, was to achieve a form that can formulate its unique identity. Indian films had been facing an official ban from 1960s to 2007, which initially had helped the local film industry, as, in 1970s and 80s, it was producing more than 100 films per year. However, the ban had diminished the competition and become the biggest reason of the decline of Pakistani film. The number of films and their production value had been deteriorating in the last two decades. In 2007, the official screening Indian films have been allowed by Pakistani authorities. It, on the one side, has damaged the traditional films, "established cinema", of Pakistan, and on the other side, it has reactivated the old question of distinctive cultural face of Pakistan. Simultaneously, the technology has been shifted from analogue to digital, which have allowed young generation of moviemakers to experiment with the medium, as it is relatively economical. The success of *Khuda Kay Liay* (2007) and *Bol* (2011) have initiated a new kind of cinema, which is termed as "emergent cinema" by this research. This paper investigates emergent cinema to define its elements and to establish its relation with the established cinema of Pakistan. It also discloses the link of emergent cinema with the media liberation Act of 2002, which has allowed a range of subjects.

Introduction

The Pakistan Film Industry, also named as 'Lollywood', had been producing an average of 100 films per year, in the 1970s and 1980s. More

than 125 films were produced in the peak year of 1970 and the number of cinema houses was touching 1,300 ¹. The number of films and their production value had been deteriorating in the last two decades, and the cinema of Pakistan had touched the minimum with not even a single film was screened, in Urdu language, in the year 2012.

The traditional form of Pakistani film is, somehow, similar to the Bollywood 'Masala' genre, which involves a variety of genres, songs and dance numbers, comedy and fight sequences in a single plotline. Bollywood has become the world's largest movie industry in terms of film production ². Indian films have also been doing good business in Pakistan; however, similar kind of films from Lollywood have been continuously losing their popularity, and touched the bottom in 2012, by not producing any film.

In the face of this steady demise, *Khuda Kay Liye* (In the Name of God, 2007) a film by Shoab Mansoor, has shown a commercial success in both, Pakistani and Indian, circuit. The success of *Bol* (Speak, 2011), another film by Mansoor, has further set the tone for a new kind of Pakistani cinema. Both these Films such were not following the established formulas and trends of Pakistani film and have motivated a whole new generation of film-makers. This new kind of Pakistani cinema has its roots in Pakistan television drama serials, pop music and the fashion industry. This research name it 'emergent cinema', as it relates to the contemporary era of convergence; whilst, the traditional *masala* form is named 'established' cinema, as it is more associated with the old media.

A little material is available about the contemporary progressions in Pakistan Film Industry. Mushtaq Gazdar's ³ *Pakistan Cinema*, covers the first fifty years of filmmaking, while Almagir Kabir ⁴ wrote a book about the initial efforts of establishing a film industry and tried to create a realisation about the importance of the field of film. A. R. Slote ⁵ and

¹ Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997*.

² (Taeube & Lorenzen 2007)

³ (1997)

⁴ (1969)

⁵ (1987)

Yaseen Goreja ⁶ compile film directories sharing a record of films, casts and crews. Mazhar Iqbal ⁷ provides an updated online database of past and present releases.

Another concern of the researcher is to define a new cinema which can connect both kind of cinema; however, that is beyond the scope of this paper. Three of the key films; Mansoor's *Khuda Kay Liye* and *Bol*, together with Lashari's *Waar* (2013) are examined against the background of decline of established cinema, to identify the characteristics of emergent cinema. The qualitative data, gathered from semi-structured interviews with key professionals from the film, help to identify the socio-political and cultural settings and their influence on both; filmmakers and their films.

Cinema in Pakistan

Lahore, the film city of Pakistan, in combined sub-continent, had been considered as one of the most significant cultural centers after Bombay. The first feature film from the sub-continent, Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) was produced in Bombay. Shankradev Arya's *Daughters of Today* (1928) was the first silent film produced in Lahore, which means the cinema of Lahore was well established within a decade after its launch in sub-continent. However, the cinema industry of Lahore had to rebuild itself after the partition in 1947. The Pakistani film industry, against all odds, has been showing progress in the first fifty years.

A combine effort to construct a stable film industry has been missing throughout the history. A few individuals has built studios, developed technological resources, and provided openings for the talent to grow. However, the industry failed to make successful teams for a longer period of time. Formation of National Film Development Corporation (NAFDEC) in 1970's, by the first democratic government, is considered one of the constructive measures. However, NAFDEC had also been unable to develop teams, or a process to achieve a sustainable model for film-making.

⁶ (2003)

⁷ Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997*.

The medium of film, to build the cultural identity of the country, has never been fully acknowledged by policy-makers. Indeed, film was exploited by the specific establishments to fulfill the personal agendas. Thus, a censorship control has always been exercised; for instance, the Urdu tradition of critical realism was banned on the big screen from the very beginning. The Martial Law of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq is considered, as one of the biggest reasons for the intellectual and industrial decline of Pakistani film. Zia's regime had introduced policies which were to limit the democratic rights; thus heavy taxation, political and religious censorship, and extreme control had caused intellectual curtailment, and lack of financial investment⁸. The cinema houses were closed down or converted into plazas, which had an inevitable impact on cinema industry.

Indian films, due to their heavy budget the similar language, has always been a biggest threat to Pakistani cinema. Eric Egan⁹ highlights the weaknesses in the policies of different administrations, as these were to safeguard the élite and implemented only to execute control on the film-makers. The film-making and its education has never been institutionalized. Indeed, film education was missing throughout the history. It can be argued that most of the governments did not realize the importance of the medium and did not pursue seriously about the cinema industry. Indeed, the medium of film was always considered as a work of 'lust and lure', or 'boys' night out' kind of activity.

Negligence towards policies and plans for technical and intellectual growth have combined to limit the scope of film. Indeed, no formal education and training in the film-making was available. Cinema was unable to establish its link with the literary tradition of critical realism of Urdu language, so the themes and subjects have been reduced to love stories or to narratives just to show action and violence. As a result the link between established cinema and society has been weakened. The relation was further damaged after 9/11. Established cinema movies were unable to connect to the socio-political actions within the context of Pakistani and global politics.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Egan, "Pakistan Cinema: Between the Domestic and the Regional."

Pakistan is facing the consequences of the global 'War on Terror' on its North-West border since 2001-02. It has a continuous impact on the economy, politics and peace of the country. Economy is heavily damaged, as according to the official record the country has lost up to 5% of its GDP, or \$9 billion per year, which means six times the amount of annual U.S. aid.¹⁰ The terrorist attacks had been shifted towards soft targets, which is adding to the sufferings of the society. Peoples has been dividing on the basis of religious sectarianism or political affiliation. As a result, the 'established cinema' of Pakistan lost its audience and the number of films dropped to zero in 2012.

Act of 2002

'Emergent' cinema, in comparison with 'established' cinema, has chosen a more direct path, and tried to highlight basic social issues, against the backdrop of WoT. Indeed, for film-makers the post-9/11 conditions has been working as a catalyst. For instance, Shoab Mansoor's *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007) is considered to be one of the solidest fictional responses to 9/11¹¹. *Khuda Kay Liye* (KKL) has showed commercial success in Pakistan, at a time when most of the films were failed at the box-office. The film trade with India, after a break of forty years, has also opened with KKL.

According to established cinema practitioners, one of the main reasons of the success of KKL is its professional picture quality and sound. This reasoning indicates that Pakistani cinema industry is lacking in high-end technology, both, for the making of films and for their display. Syed Noor advocated, in interview with the researcher, that every film industry is producing specific formulas, but these only differs in the sphere of technology.

The idea that the technology can work as a solution and can be a help to revive Pakistani cinema is triggered with the accessibility of new and convergent media in the country. The Media Liberation Act of 2002 broke the State's monopoly on electronic media and TV broadcasting. It led to a boom in Pakistani electronic media and gave it new political clout. Only two State-controlled television channels were operating in

¹⁰ Burki, "Pakistan after 9/11."

¹¹ Cilano, "Manipulative Fictions: Democratic Futures in Pakistan."

Pakistan, before the Act of 2002. Now, the number of independent television networks are around 90.

This expansion of television proved to be helpful for the film industry as well, as it has broadened the base of human resource and has given access to the digital technology at relatively low cost. The Act of 2002 has also shown a change in the censor policy and control; thus, allowed to broadcast news oriented programs, which have created public awareness of the major socio-political issues of the day. As a result, it has been broadening the market for the new 'emergent' cinema.

The 'War on Terror'

The 'War on Terror' on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has an impact on the political, social and economic state of the country. It has been constantly influencing diplomatic relations, and one of the key factors in intensifying the tension on the Eastern border with India. WoT has also instigated violence and multiplied the existent issue of society.

Khuda Kay Liye (2007) deals with the sufferings of Pakistani family members in the post-9/11 world at the hands of both Islamic fundamentalists and the U.S. Establishment. This conscious effort to create a link with social reality has an impact on the narrative and form of the film. Its narrative, at times, seems to be taking inspirations from the critical literary tradition of Urdu literature, as it deals with multiple layers of information and knitting drama from reality. This also influences the form of film, at certain points, as it feels that drama is being grafted on to documentary.

The film has been criticised for being too concerned with 'issues', with the characters and the incidents in which they become involved simply used as tools to elaborate specific points¹². For example Mansoor, a music student from Pakistan, interacts for the first time with his American class-mate Jenny:

Jenny: *"So where is your country on the globe?"*

Mansoor: *"My country is called Pakistan."*

Jenny: *"Right, Pakistan. Where is Pakistan on the globe?"*

¹² Bandekar, "Movie Review - Khuda Kay Liye (In The Name Of God)."

Mansoor: "Well let's see. I will just show it to you. Ok. This is Iran, that's Afghanistan, that's China and that's India and Pakistan ... in the centre."

Here, the ideology of co-existence as well as nationalism is tackled with clarity. The film-maker has respect for all the neighbouring countries, but as a true nationalist he places Pakistan right in the centre. He also points to the fact that Pakistanis are fighting the American 'War on Terror', even though Americans are not even conscious of Pakistan's borders or its existence.

These subjects have never been discussed in traditional cinema and cannot be shown in the masala genre. As Mansoor himself explained to the researcher, in a personal interview in 2012, he used the film as a tool to explain obvious issues that have nonetheless been ignored by experts as well as by the masses.

'Established' and 'Emergent' Cinema

Established film-makers mostly learned their art from their colonial predecessors, and transferred these skills and assumptions to their successors. They have been following the old sets of rules and have mostly relied on their hands-on training.

The acceptance of *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007) provided an alternative path for film-making and a new way to link a storyline to actuality. The subsequent success of *Bol* (2011), Mansoor's second film, with its story of a woman sentenced to death and re-telling her life-story, pushed the boundaries further and inspired a new generation of film-makers. It has also aligned the film with the tradition of television drama where acclaimed writers of Urdu language were engaged in producing the entertainment content.

The new generation is also not satisfied with the approach of the international media, because it has damaged the image of Pakistan.¹³ Many young Pakistani film-makers complain about the international media, as it places greater emphasis on the negative extremes of the country, while their concern is to show the 'normal' society of Pakistan.

This desire has also motivated the new emergent cinema to target the global audience and in some cases, English has also been used along with Urdu. *Khuda Kay Liay* is partly in English, while 70% of the dialogue

¹³ Shams, "Young Pakistani Filmmakers Attempt to Revive Cinema."

of *Waar*, the story of a retired security office who returns to save the country from terrorist attack, is also in English.

This has already led to a discussion about the relation of a national cinema to the national language. However, the success of these films, especially the record-breaking earnings of *Waar*, have to some extent answered questions about the audience response and box-office potential of these films in the local market. However, a new Pakistani cinema can be emerged from the blend of Urdu literature with the technology.

Conclusion

A gap - in terms of ideology, practice and addressing socio-political issues - has been observed between the emergent and the established cinema. Shaan Shahid admits that there is a gap between trained film-makers and the educated practitioners and his mission is to bridge that gap. Shahzad Rafique also categorises the films of Shoab Mansoor as representative of a different kind of cinema. Although both these forms of cinema are dealing with the same society and facing the same set of issues, their response towards the issues is distinctive.

For instance, established cinema considers Government support as one of the key factors for revival. In contrast, Shoab Mansoor believes that the availability of the digital technology is what will boost the medium. He predicts that a better cinema will evolve very soon. By contrast, some practitioners consider that 'new' media are simply following the 'old', and that they are in fact doing no more than to refine the same old product. Another concern with modern digital technology is that it has an impact on regional boundaries.

Mansoor's aspiration for what he calls a "bigger cinema movement" with the help of new and convergent media can be fulfilled only if technology is utilised to strengthen the other side of society. Policy-makers and educators should play a conscious role in evolving the art of film-making. Technology in the hands of the common man or woman can broaden the available human resource and can also provide a voice for the majority.

Indeed, there are points of convergence or conjunction that aren't acknowledged in this relationship of old and new styles. This gap needs to be conceptualised at the aesthetic, historical and technological levels. Therefore, the future objective of this research is to observe the newly 'emergent' films in relation to 'established' films and to discover the

concepts and techniques which may help to bridge the gap between the two.

Acknowledgment

I am most grateful to leading figures in the Pakistan Film Industry for granting me interviews in the course of 2012, from which I have quoted here: writer Amjad Islam Amjad, directors Bilal Lashari, Shoab Mansoor, Syed Noor, Shahzad Rafique, director and actress Samina Peerzada and actor, director and producer Shaan Shahid.

