

Film studies in India, practiced within a small but robust body of scholars, have been closely attentive to Bombay cinema, contrary to what many outside the discipline might concur. Given the reach, the easy recognisability and the overpowering cultural and visual economy of cinema from Bombay, it is only obvious that such cinema would dominate scholarship too. Not only the more reputable scholars but a significant number of emerging scholars have turned their attention to Hindi language cinema made from Bombay, even when some of them treat the upstart term of 'Bollywood' with disapproval. From a social/Marxist history of this cinema, to a cultural study of its viewership, to studies of its organisation, funding, labour, studios, gendered representations etc, there is considerable work already. Aarti Wani's book is a competent, important addition to this existing scholarship. This is more so because Wani (who teaches in Symbiosis College, Pune) is not updating existing scholarship by applying it to newer specimens that are churned out of the Bombay factory, unflinchingly, each Friday but to a body of work six decades old, a body which one had thought has been hollowed out of any further potential for scholarly interrogation.

Wani's claim is simple. That the articulation/representation/tropes of romantic love in Bombay cinema of the 1950s, which she calls the "fifties moment", have not received the attention that it deserves. This period is at the heart of the newly-independent, partially truncated nation-state and under the shadow of the Nehruvian reconstruction, which was broadly welfarist and doggedly deterministic at the same time. Yet, even a cursory knowledge of cinema of the period will show that romantic love, passionate pairing and coupling, music and songs of romance, patterns of togetherness or longing, acts of intimacy and kissing (or indicative lack of them) etc had been a fundamental preoccupation of film narratives. Wani, in her Introduction, highlights this obvious split. How then, she asks, are we to make sense of this romantic over-indulgence? Moreover, romantic love – a relationship of potential equals, a relationship of defiance and subversion of long-held, familial class and caste institutions, of patriarchal autocracy, of moral gatekeeping etc – is not something that a social history of the period would throw up as normative and habitual. Hence, both as a projection of erotic desire and as an act of individual contingency to the hefty national corollary, romantic love sits uneasy on the time; and yet, it is this love or its various enactments that drove cinema of that period. She ends her Introduction by saying:

The 1950s were engaged in cinematically producing a new understanding of love – a discourse and practice that had very little currency and almost no customs or conventions in the society at large. The fantasy of modernity it produced not only envisioned newer gender identities, but the novel technologies of the self it promised and the experience and affect it mobilized tapped into desires that were barely acknowledged by the new nation in the making. In the context of the fifties, the transformation of the private and the public spaces imagined by its cinema was an instance of radical dreaming in the realm of popular entertainment.

The Fifties moment

Fantasy of Modernity:

Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s

By Aarti Wani

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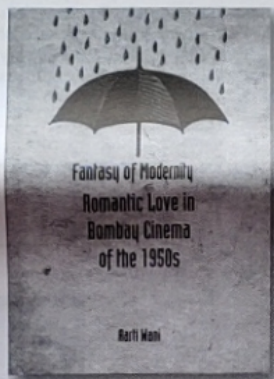
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Wani does not build up her thesis of the "fantasy of modernity" by trying to develop a theory independent of those already in circulation. In fact, she reads most of them as critical interventions, benchmarking them as formative influences into her own thought about her subject. In what is an effective survey of literature, Wani revisits the scholarly work on her subject and regrets the fact that various facets of Bombay cinema

Ghar ke Samne — this catalogue being a small sample of films marked as much by their overarching romantic preoccupation as by the profound diversity of their narrative, plot and style.

Wani, for the rest of the book, closes in on the cinematic city, motion picture soundtrack and the romantic star as "three distinct interlinked sites" (p 184) that have configured romantic love in Bombay cinema in that decade.



The 1950s was the decade following the formation of the newly-independent, partially truncated nation-state and under the shadow of Nehruvian reconstruction, which was broadly welfarist and doggedly deterministic at the same time. Yet, even a cursory knowledge of cinema of the decade that included films such as

Awara, Deedar, Bewafa, Aar Paar, Sri 420, Pyasa, Chaalbaaz, Bambai ka Babu, Tere Ghar ke Samne shows that romantic love, passionate pairing and coupling, music and songs of romance, patterns of togetherness or longing, acts of intimacy and kissing had been a fundamental preoccupation of film narratives. Wani highlights this split and tries to make sense of this romantic over-indulgence — which she calls the "fifties moment"

in that decade have been commented upon threadbare, except the most visible one. She wonders if this is because love as a motif is only seen in terms of its fantastical properties and ignored as one providing traction to any political, social and psycho-analytical armature. Wani's claim is on the contrary. She proposes that romantic fantasy is encoded with the same or similar kinds of registers that inform the bluntly social and political. Also, she adds, romantic love, by providing a series of disclosures that unlock the hidden ethos of condensed individuation, furthers the idea of modernity and in no way betrays it. This is, after all, the decade that produced *Awara, Deedar, Bewafa, Aar Paar, Sri 420, Pyasa, Chaalbaaz, Bambai ka Babu, Tere*

"City of Love" chapter tries to map the making of the cinematic city of Bombay as early as the 1950s. The 'cinematicity' of a the modern metropolis is at least since the spatial turn in social sciences, a major area of interdisciplinary interest and now a wonderfully diverse body of work has tried to look at the city across many cinema-cultures through the work of Walter Benjamin, Christian Metz, Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, among others. Wani's exploration follows similar lines and she continues to highlight Bombay's inexhaustible capacity to become both a site of alienation as well as that of romantic revival. Among the more expected readings of films (*Taxi Driver, Pyasa, Baazi, CID, Solva Saal, Aar Paar*) in this section which are eloquent, what

stands out is Wani's mention of comedian Johnny Walker's "comic and lighthearted courtships" in Guru Dutt films. Johnny Walker's comic genius, she writes, "gave his courtship an easy naturalness as it harnessed streets, parks and even office spaces to mount a spectacle of love as a quotidian possibility." A careful study of such moments reveal that nothing else foregrounds love's ubiquity and modernity in the urban space than these scenes of carefree mobility, unforced laughter and spontaneous camaraderie. Knowingly or not, Dutt managed to project in Walker what he himself, mired in lost and impossible love, could not always achieve — the sheer playfulness of romance.

In the next chapter "The Song of Love", Wani treads on different waters. There is much less scholarship (than, say, the city and stardom) on the uses of music in Indian cinema, which as we all know, is not the same as the musicals in the West. Music in Bombay cinema (as much as in the '50s as before or after) was integral to the film; as much as it could be enjoyed as a free-floating aural or visual machination completely independent of the film it was part of. In other words, the phenomenology of film music is inseparable from the politics of its circulation. Wani follows both ways of mapping the form of music. She is attentive to the nature of producers of music — the lyricist, the singers, the musician(s), the orchestra — trying to understand the composite idea of romance that emerges in the sequence. She also historicises the period, for example, noting factual interventions like the ban on film music in All India Radio between 1952-1957. Either way, music, often without the film as much as often within it, provides layers of context, culled from both their production and circulation to strengthen Wani's thesis of romantic love as foundational to that cinema's self-conditioning to the attractions of modernity.

The final chapter is a study of the phenomenon of stardom, star-pairings and celluloid gossip. Like the cinematic city, star-studies have come a long way since the time it comprised little more than populist hagiographies. Wani taps into the existing work and comes out with her own, sometimes quite insightful, observations. Unlike in Hollywood, where the studio-control of salaried actor's self-management was the key to the origins of the star-system, in Bombay it was in reinforcing the romantic pairing of lead actors through a self-assuaging circulation of film gossip, cinematic melodrama and choreographed self-indulgence of the star's public life. All the major actors and, most importantly, actresses were part of this programmatic appeal that stood outside the actual space of the narrative film. Often however, Wani writes, the discursive space of the cinema-text provided the stars the opportunity to project their off-screen romance into the screen, serving to foreclose the (im) possibility of their affair, at the same time providing the fictional resolution to their romantic fantasy.

Aarti Wani's book is lucid, well-researched and insightful. Her thesis is illustrated with several examples which unfold meaningfully. Much of her observations are likely to have carried on in Bombay cinema through the 1960s and intermittently after that. But as she rightly says, the "fifties moment" is a charming cinematic order, and love as a many-splendoured thing is what it will always be remembered for.