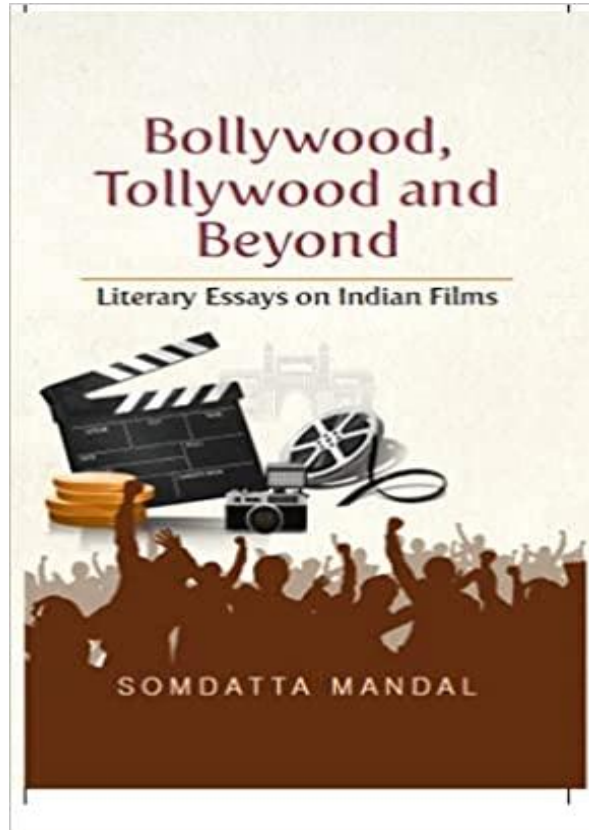


Somdatta Mandal, *Bollywood, Tollywood and Beyond: Literary Essays on Indian Films*. New Delhi, Pencraft International, 344 pp. ISBN 978-93-82178-34-7



Power structures, underlying ideologies, questions of contemporary society, history, politics, identities and economy, and patterns of consumption are read in popular culture. Ever since the ‘art war’ between high art and low art started – thanks to Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Richard Hoggart – the domain of culture has opened up. Among various cultural products, TV and cinema became the subject of serious academic study under the ambit of cultural studies. Initially, there was contempt of the image, both the still image and the moving image, which had influenced the way critics, theoreticians, and philosophers perceived TV and films. Katherine Thomson-Jones and Robert Stam discuss these issues in their works. Filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Weine, Louis Buñuel, Vittorio de Sica, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Aparna Sen, Mani Kaul, and

Kumar Sahani are a few names from a long list who explored artistic potentials of cinema and enriched its aesthetics. Film studies, as an academic discipline, deals with detailed textual analysis, the study of the language and social-ideological value of films; or the questions of philosophy, aesthetics, history, politics, and culture.

Divided into three sections, Somdatta Mandal's *Bollywood, Tollywood and Beyond: Literary Essays on Indian Films* is another serious engagement with films as a cultural product. It is a collection of eclectic essays of film criticism showing the author's academic engagement with cinema. Essays in this book are on varied subjects such as the Partition of the subcontinent, adaptation, the 'Others' of India (Muslims and Anglo-Indians), sexuality, motherhood in the Indian context, and many more. As the author belongs to Bengal, there is an understandable tilt towards Bengali cinema in the collection. The book contains sixteen essays on feature and documentary films.

The first section called "Thematic Studies" contains seven essays, with four essays on the Partition. The author studies the Partition on both the borders – eastern as well as western. The first two essays examine the Partition experience in Bengal. Ranging from Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (195) to Koushik Ganguly's *Biswarjan* (2017), the first essay gives an overview of films "produced both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, made by directors who did not believe in the run-of-the-mill commercial productions of the time" (Mandal 24). The essay engages with the questions of representation and aesthetics while discussing films made by Nemai Ghosh, Ritwik Ghatak, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Tanvir Mokammel, Srijit Mukherjee, Goutam Ghose, and Kaushik Ganguly. The second chapter uses documentaries as the primary source to understand the Partition. That 1947 can still inspire the Bangladeshi film director Tanvir Mokammel to make a two-and-a-half-hour documentary in 2017 by crowd-funding speaks a lot about the cataclysmic event that shook the sub-continent so many decades ago. The third chapter, "Celluloid Representations of the Partition of Punjab," studies the trauma of the Partition, violence, and dislocation with reference to films mostly set in Punjab. Somdatta Mandal takes up two lesser known films such as *Labore* (M. L. Anand 1949), and a Pakistani film, *Kartar Singh* (Saifudin Saif 1959) before deliberating on *Garm Hava* (M.S. Sathyu 1973), *Tamas* (Govind Nihalani 1986), a TV film; *Earth 1947* (Deepa Mehta 1999), *Train to Pakistan* (Pamela Rooks 1998), *Partition* (Ken McMullen 1987), *Khamosh Pani* (Sabiha Sumar 2003), *Pinjar* (Chandraprakash Dwivedi 2003), *Partition* (Vic Sarin 2007), and *Viceroy's House* (Gurinder Chadha 2017). Justifying the title of the book, the author goes beyond the institutions of Bengali cinema and Hindi cinema to include international productions. Most of the films included in this chapter are the narratives of the Partition of Punjab, but for *Garm Hava*, which is not set in Punjab. Moreover, while narrating the struggle of those Muslims who refused to go to Pakistan during the Partition, *Garm Hava* tells the story of migration from the U.P., India,

to Karachi, Sindh in Pakistan. The essay on the representation of the Muslim and the Anglo-Indian as the 'Others' of Indian cinema is an interesting contribution. Contemporary film scholarship has focused more on the Muslim 'Other' of Indian cinema, which is associated with the changing political discourse of the country. However, the author brings in the second 'Other' of Indian cinema in the post-colonial context. Though, as said by the author, the Anglo-Indian identity

became ubiquitous in the cultural representation of Bengal. Here it must be mentioned that this nomenclature was not restricted to being cross-bred descendants of British subjects only, but extended to French, Portuguese and Irish ones too. (Mandal 111)

It is a bit problematic to place all western European identities under the umbrella category of Anglo-Indian, which by its definition refer either to people of cross-bred descendants or of British descent but born or residing in India. The strength of the essays lies in bringing readers' attention to all such minority identities in post-colonial India. In "Opening Up: LGBTQ Issues in Contemporary India Cinema" Mandal is hopeful that queer films in India, which is still in its infancy, will take more time to grow to form its own canon, but she raises the pertinent question about their acceptability by the average viewer, however seriously they might have been made. The last chapter in this section understands the concept of motherhood as represented in Bengali cinema. Tracing the roots of motherhood in Hindu mythology, the chapter engages with the cultural notions of motherhood and barrenness with reference to *Devi*, *Monihara* and *Teen Kanya* by Satyajit Ray, *Chokher Bali* and *Antarmahal* by Rituparno Ghosh, and *Anuranan* by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury.

The second section of the book focuses completely on Bengal. Six essays in this section discuss the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, and Rituparno Ghosh. Tagore is generally discussed as a literary figure as well as a painter. This section brings to light Tagore's romance with cinema. Tagore embraced cinema as early as in 1932 when he directed *Natir Puja*. He also gave permission to "adapt his short stories and novels on the screen, both as silent films and as talkies" (Mandal xiii). That he embraced the new emerging art form of cinema with a lot of enthusiasm, understanding its immense creative possibilities much ahead of its time, speaks of the polyglot he actually was. An interesting fact is revealed when we find that almost all the major film directors in Bengal (and some even in Bollywood), whatever be their point of view, made at least one film based on Tagore's story during their filmmaking career as if it was a kind of rite of passage. Instead of focusing on his major feature films, Satyajit Ray is discussed here as a documentary filmmaker, a comparatively lesser known and researched area of his entire filmmaking career. "The Cinematic World of Rituparno Ghosh" discusses the very promising filmmaker's entire

oeuvre, whose untimely death has created a vacuum in avant-garde Bengali cinema.

The final section of the book is a collection of essays on individual films discussing adaptations from different backgrounds. The section opens with Satyajit Ray's adaptation of *Ghare Baire*. The essay includes Ray's commentary on the novel and his creative inputs during the adaptation, making Ray's adaptation an example of transcreation, a penchant Satyajit Ray had shown while adapting *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* as well. The author's argument moves around adaptation being the meeting point of two creative minds. Such adaptations cannot be judged with the lens of fidelity criticism. The filmmaker's use of symbolism established the film more as Satyajit Ray's creative work than as an adaptation of Tagore's novel. Satyajit Ray leaves his stamp as an auteur in the film. The next essay, while discussing the adaptation of *Devdas*, also brings to the surface the history and contribution of New Theatres, established by Birendranath Sircar. Bimal Roy's *Udayar Pathay* brings in the issue of class and ideal love in the wake of changing Indian society. The film, according to the author, is the "benchmark of social realism in Indian cinema" (293) in which the filmmaker moved away from the form of melodrama in cinema. The author once again discusses Deepa Mehta's *Earth 1947* invoking the history of the Partition and the concomitant communal violence. As the film was a result of international collaboration, the author delves into its aesthetics and ideological underpinnings. As a critic, the author does not subscribe to fidelity in adaptation. The last chapter of the book is on a documentary, *Desperately Seeking Helen* by Eisha Marjara, a Canadian filmmaker and writer. The film weaves into its narratives issues of the search for the self, Indian popular culture, and femininity. The author delves into the filmmaker's discovery of herself; the filmmaker's relationship with her mother, and how Helen is perceived.

Unlike many books which focus on one theme or issue, Somdatta Mandal's book is the result of her musings and reflections on cinema over a long period of time. Written in a simple language, the book offers essays on film criticism; history, culture, and politics of cinema. In my opinion, 'Essays on Film Criticism' would have been a better sub-title of the book. Some essays in the book are very insightful, while other essays are highly informative. This is a book from which a young scholar can pick many ideas to develop into full-fledged projects. The collection contains essays on Indian films, a couple of Pakistani films, and some transnational films. The large frame of the author certainly goes beyond Bollywood or Tollywood. What is interesting about this book is that each essay contains several small black and white pictures either of the posters or of the main characters or of a particular scene that is representative of each film discussed. This additional visual element becomes in a way the USP of the volume, which otherwise would seem slightly over-priced. It can easily find library shelves for itself.

References

- Hill, John and Pamela Church Gibson. *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*. OUP, 2000.
- Stam, Robert. *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Thomson-Jones, Katherine. *Aesthetics and Film*. Continuum International Publishing, 2008.

Vivek Sachdeva
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi
Email: viveksachdeva@ipu.ac.in